

SPACE CINEMA YAMATO

Twenty-five years from the time that the mighty ship first set sail on Japanese broadcast TV, Patrick Macias reflects on the larger-than-life legend of *Uchû Senkan* ("Space Battleship") *Yamato* and takes you on a cinematic tour of its various feature film incarnations

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The 25th anniversary of *Yamato* is loaded with significance. Not only was the original series a superlative creative achievement for producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki (*Triton of the Sea*), co-creator and designer Leiji Matsumoto (*Galaxy Express 999*), and episode director Noburo Ishiguro (*Macross*), but it was also the moment when science-fiction anime began to take itself (and be taken) seriously. *Yamato* would eventually become the original breakthrough hit that brought anime kicking and screaming into the Japanese mainstream, leaving behind a trail that anime such as *The Princess Mononoke* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* were later to waltz down.

Despite producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki's recent legal woes (which include bankruptcy and the loss of the *Yamato* license), the franchise is healthier than it has been in years—in spite of the fact that there's been no new *Yamato* anime proper since 1983 (the failed OAV series *Yamato 2520* hardly counts).

Although today's Japanese animation probably owes more of a debt to *Yamato* than to any other single show, Japan's observation of the series' quarter-century mark has been fairly subdued. So far, few celebrations seem to have been planned for *Yamato*'s 25th anniversary (in complete contrast to the Sunrise/Bandai frenzy of events and re-releases surrounding *Gundam*'s 20th). There are the inevitable LD re-releases. There's a new Japan-only *Yamato* PlayStation game, featuring stunning new animation, based on the original one-year mission to Iscandar. There's been a re-release of the classic 7" die-cast metal *Yamato* toy from 1979 in a new Leiji Matsumoto-designed box. The space battleship *Yamato* itself can be seen popping up with some regularity in the new *Galaxy Express 999* manga (serialized monthly here in ANIMERICA). And yes, there's been talk of an all-new animated feature film in the works, picking up soon after the not-so-final-after-all events of *Final Yamato*.

But what's really remarkable is *Yamato*'s continued influence on Western science fiction. After several nods from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the notion of *Yamato* American style is currently being pur-

sued with a vengeance. The Internet is buzzing with (as yet unconfirmed) rumors of a Walt Disney-produced live-action *Yamato* film that might drastically alter, and perhaps betray, the original source material (for instance, the Japanese flagship *Yamato* is said to be rechristened as a more stars-and-stripes-friendly battleship *Arizona*!). And the new *Babylon 5* spin-off show *Crusade* bears a nearly libelous resemblance to *Star Blazers*, with an "all-new" space cruiser on a long journey to restore a dying Earth armed with a super-weapon that's decidedly "wave-motion gun."

But, like they say, ain't nothing like the real thing. And that's why we're now going to have some chocolate cake, drink some spring water (or *sushi* and *sake* as *Yamato* fans would have it), and take a look at perhaps the least known and most representative products of the *Yamato* saga—the movies.

Yamato first arrived in the U.S. as *Star Blazers*, a riveting exercise in science-fiction television. *Star Blazers* gave American anime fandom, still in its infancy, a very major shot in the arm. Without it, could there have been *Robotech*? Anime fandom as we know it today? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But in Japan, *Yamato* found its greatest success through the cinema. In fact, it could be said that the *Yamato* craze didn't really begin until the 1977 debut film became a surprise hit, and it didn't really end until the last reel of 1983's *Final Yamato*. Make no mistake about it, these were event films and were routinely greeted with media blitzes, high audience attendance, merchandising frenzies, and box-office grosses that easily rivaled the original *Star Wars* trilogy. And not unlike the *Star Trek* films (another series more successful in its movies than in its initial broadcast form), the *Yamato* movies possess a fondness for revisionism: killing off key members of the crew, resurrecting them, and blowing up the main space starship, er, battleship, all in the name of dramatic effect.

Although *Star Blazers* itself has been available on videotape for quite a few years—all three TV series, including the little-seen third season, were initially released in the '80s through Kidmark and are now available in economical collectors' box sets from Voyager Entertainment—fans of the series still pined for the day when they could see the big-screen adventures of their small screen heroes. Now they can—all of the *Yamato* movies are currently available in Japanese with English subtitles from Voyager Entertainment. So, in honor of *Yamato*'s 25th anniversary, grab your VCR and a Kleenex box and get ready for a ride to the farthest reaches of the galaxy.

THE YAMATO MOVIES

SPOILER ALERT! DEATH, DESTRUCTION, PLOT TWISTS—WE GIVE IT ALL AWAY!



1. Space Battleship Yamato a.k.a. Space Cruiser Yamato (1977)

A compressed version of the original, seminal, 26-episode TV series, the first *Yamato* movie is essentially a "greatest hits" package. For the sake of a reasonable running time, much of the characterization and interplay—as well as the theme of surrogate families—that made the TV story so revolutionary is gone. By default, the *Yamato* itself becomes the main character, taking its first steps like a child and growing up through combat to master basic skills like warping and firing the wave-motion gun. But even minus the details, the sweeping romantic atmosphere of the series

still remains in abundance. Not only is the *Yamato* launched for the first time, but so are many of the series' conventions before the recyclings (see our *Yamato* movie key at right) turned them into clichés. Even for those who've made the longer journey to Iscandar, the film restores two essential scenes cut from *Star Blazers*. There's a flashback to the sinking of the original seafaring battleship *Yamato* in the final days of World War II and another sequence in which Kodai and Yuki are overcome with remorse for having turned the enemy homeworld, Gamilus, into a graveyard. They realize far too late that, in war, *good* and *evil* are highly subjective terms.

MOVIE KEY

Blue-Skinned Bad Guys
Original flavor, blue Gamilons from planet Gamilus (although they sport mysteriously Caucasian skin tones in the early part of the film).

Mysterious, Alluring Space Women
Queen Starsha of Iscandar, and her expired sister Sasha.

The Ship, Destroyed!
Not in the maiden voyage, but check back next time.

Crew Members, Killed!
According to the final tally, 47 crew members are killed in action, but none of the primary cast are rubbed out, excepting invalid Admiral Okita. But does he really count (see *Final Yamato*)?

Resurrection Day
Kodai's brother, Mamoru, presumed dead, is found alive and well and living on Iscandar.

Technical Ecstasy
A sunken WW II battle cruiser is given an engine of extraterrestrial design and becomes an amazing space battleship.

Kleenex Factor
3 or 4 hankies at the most. Despite the loss of Admiral Okita, Kodai's stirring antiwar speech, and Starsha's last-minute admission of love to Mamoru, this is the triumphant story of the *Yamato* kicking butt and saving the Earth.

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Mysterious, Alluring Space Women
Queen Starsha of Iscandar, and her expired sister Sasha.

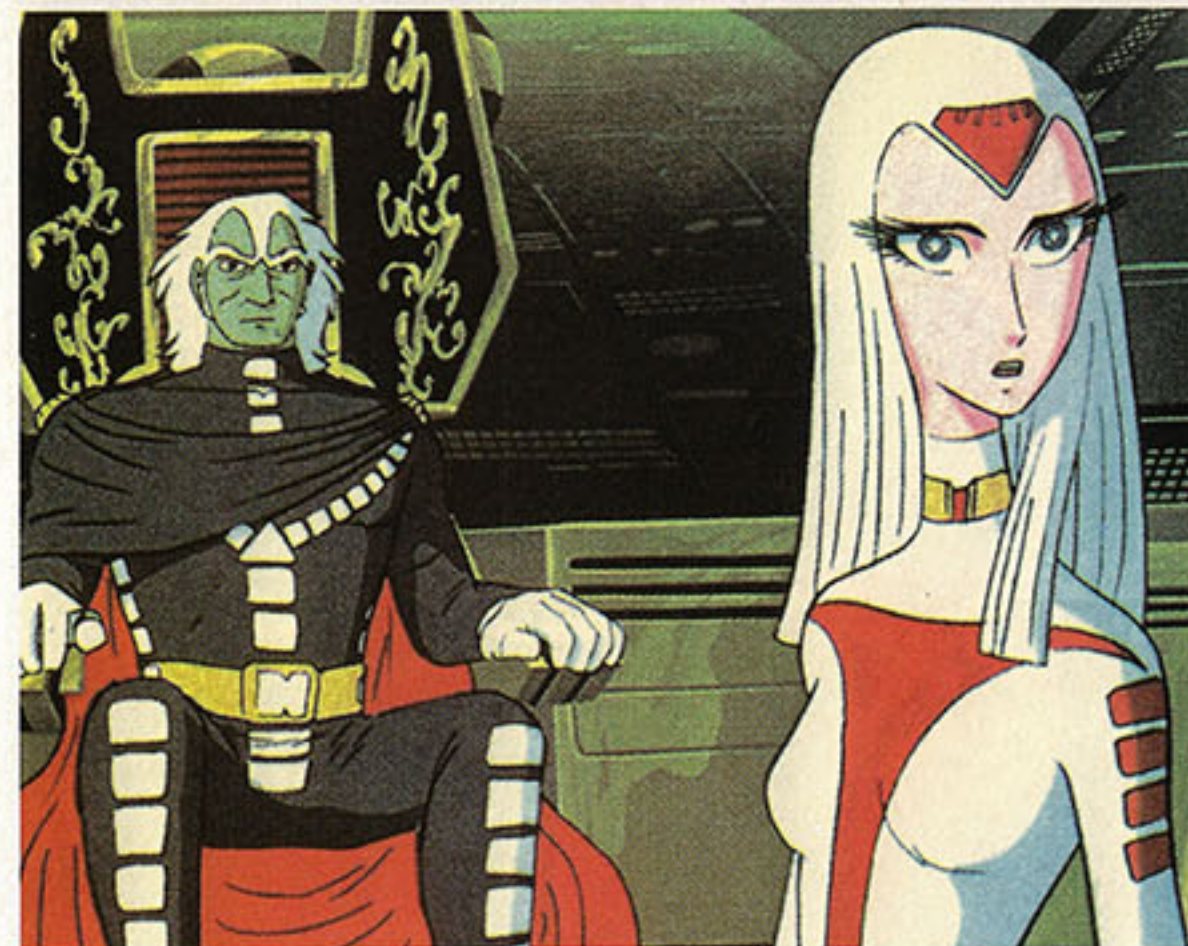
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Not in the maiden voyage, but check back next time.

Crew Members, Killed!
According to the final tally, 47 crew members are killed in action, but none of the primary cast are rubbed out, excepting invalid Admiral Okita. But does he really count (see *Final Yamato*)?

Resurrection Day
Kodai's brother, Mamoru, presumed dead, is found alive and well and living on Iscandar.

Technical Ecstasy
A sunken WW II battle cruiser is given an engine of extraterrestrial design and becomes an amazing space battleship.

Kleenex Factor
3 or 4 hankies at the most. Despite the loss of Admiral Okita, Kodai's stirring antiwar speech, and Starsha's last-minute admission of love to Mamoru, this is the triumphant story of the *Yamato* kicking butt and saving the Earth.



2. Arrivederci Yamato a.k.a. Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato: In the Name of Love (1978)

At the feverish peak of the *Yamato* craze in Japan, *Arrivederci Yamato* (the original international title) did the unthinkable. It destroyed the *Yamato*, killed the primary crew, and presumably killed again the entire franchise. But instead of going down as the final chapter, it was only a pitstop before the *Yamato 2* TV series retold the story, sans much of the sacrifice. Unlike the first *Yamato* movie, *Arrivederci* was built to run feature length, so detailed characterization is again the norm. There's a rebellious streak running throughout—

between the crew and the Earth Defense Command, in Kodai and Yuki's relationship—a theme that always seems to bring out the best in Leiji Matsumoto's work (the first *Captain Harlock* TV series, for instance). Actionwise, it's simply one highlight after another while director Toshio Masuda, one of the unsung heroes of the *Yamato* saga, winds us up emotionally for the mournful, yet still very triumphant, climax. The White Comet Empire gives us truly scary unstoppable villains, Dessler's final scenes are deserving of an Oscar, and if we were giving out prizes for best all-around *Yamato* movie, *Arrivederci* would take the cake.

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The denizens of the White Comet Empire are actually an exceptional shade of pale green, although Dessler and his minimal staff are indeed blue.

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Teresa of Telezart, the antimatter girl.

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With kamikaze gusto, our hero Kodai as acting captain.

Our Heroes, Killed!
I'm afraid for the sake of space, we're going to have to list the survivors: Shima, Aihara, Nambu, maybe 18 others.

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The spirit of Okita gives Kodai an inspiring lecture about sacrifice. Ghostly, smiling apparitions of dead crew members fill the bridge as Kodai sits next to a cheerful Yuki (even though she's dead!). Sorta creepy, actually.

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The Earth Defense Forces' budget seems to have gone to the new flagship *Andromeda*, with its too-cool double-barreled wave-motion gun. Meanwhile, that old bucket of bolts *Yamato* is due to be put out of commission. *Urrrrrr!*

Kleenex Factor
10+. They don't make 'em or kill 'em like this anymore. But really, how sad can you be when there's still three more movies to watch?

3. Space Battleship Yamato: The New Voyage (1979)

A 93-minute made-for-TV feature, *The New Voyage* was conceived as a prologue to the then-in-production *Be Forever Yamato* movie, injecting new blood into the crew and introducing new enemies. The animation is on-par with an average episode of the *Yamato 2* TV show, although there are a dizzying number of battles filling up the relatively brief running time. Opening with the destruction of Gamilus, which is basically Dessler's own fault, the now *de rigueur* traumatic soap-opera elements are pumped up something fierce for the third act. Even so, the war-crazed Dark Nebula Empire doesn't make much of an impression, save for its impressive battle stations. There are some nifty reversals going on. Instead of traveling to Iscandar, the runaway planet travels to the *Yamato*. Instead of focusing tightly on the *Yamato* crew, *New Voyage* is essentially Dessler's show from beginning to end. And while it may not hold up well as a stand-alone movie, it wasn't really meant to. Instead *New Voyage* exists to bridge the gap between *Yamato 2* and *Be Forever*, and—with the twin destruction of Iscandar and Gamilus—to close the book on the first half of the series.

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The soldiers of the Dark Nebula are blue, and nary a hair on their heads. They pass on the opportunity to tell an irate Dessler, "Hey! We're both the same color! Can't we work something out?"

Mysterious, Alluring Space Women
Queen Starsha of Iscandar, and her infant daughter Sasha.

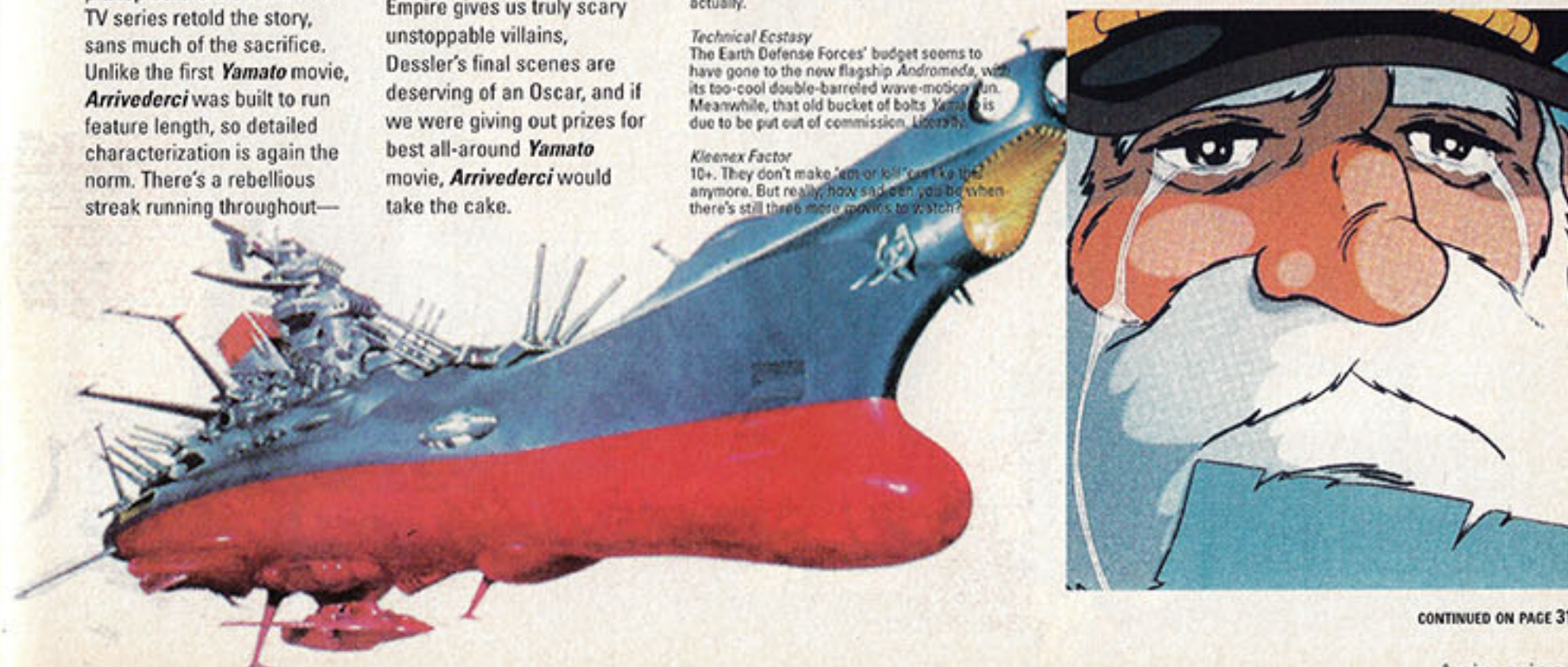
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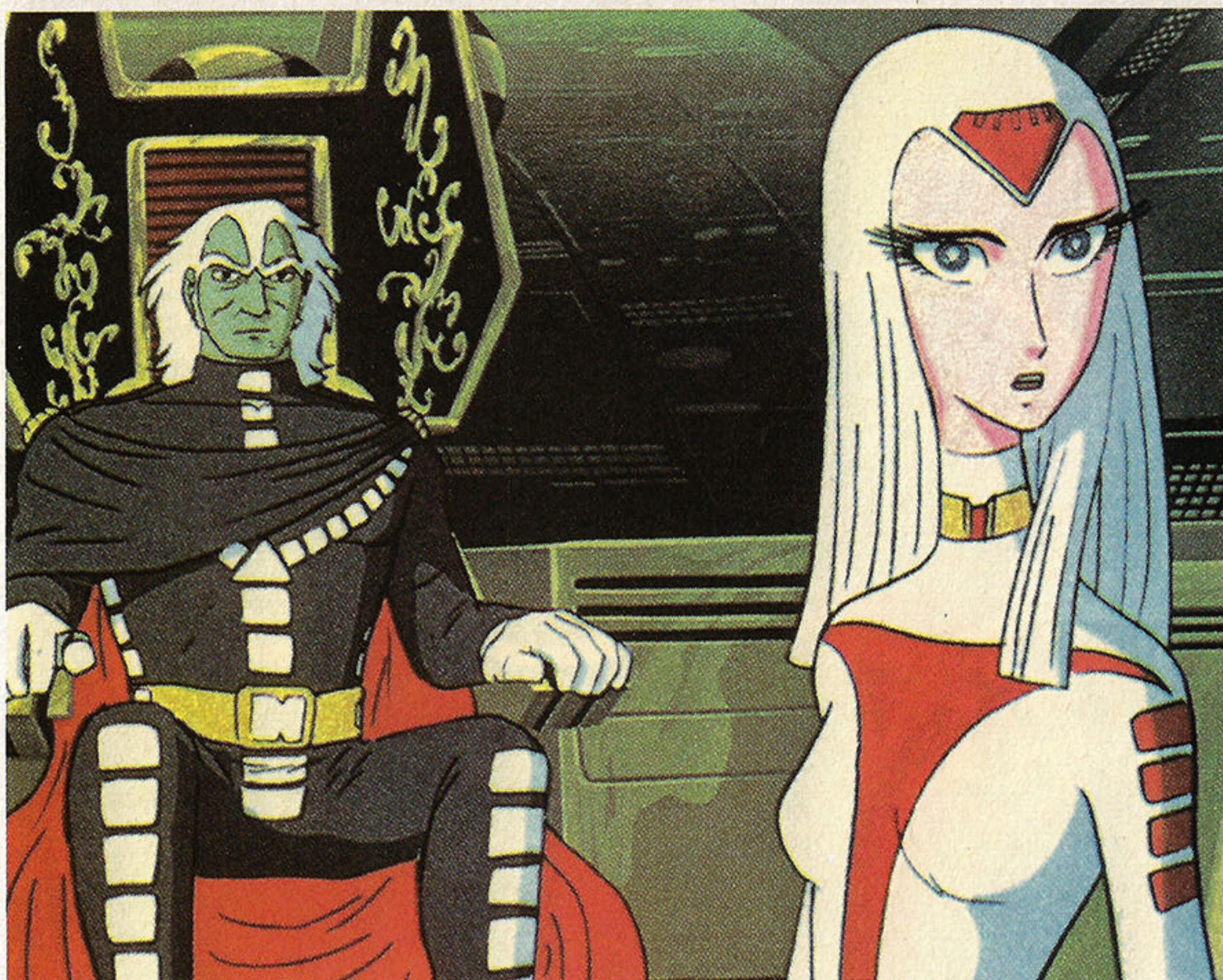
Resurrection Day
Last-minute cameo from the spirit of the recently deceased Starsha.

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The *Yamato* is now a training vessel for wide-eyed cadets (shades of 1982's *Star Trek II—The Wrath of Khan*).

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7+. It's a very bad day for Dessler, who loses what's left of his planet, admits to being in love with the suicidal Starsha, and attempts a kamikaze attack on the enemy. Mamoru Kodai loses his common-law wife and surrogate homeworld. The final images of a crying Yuki holding cute little baby Sasha are bound to get you all misty-eyed.



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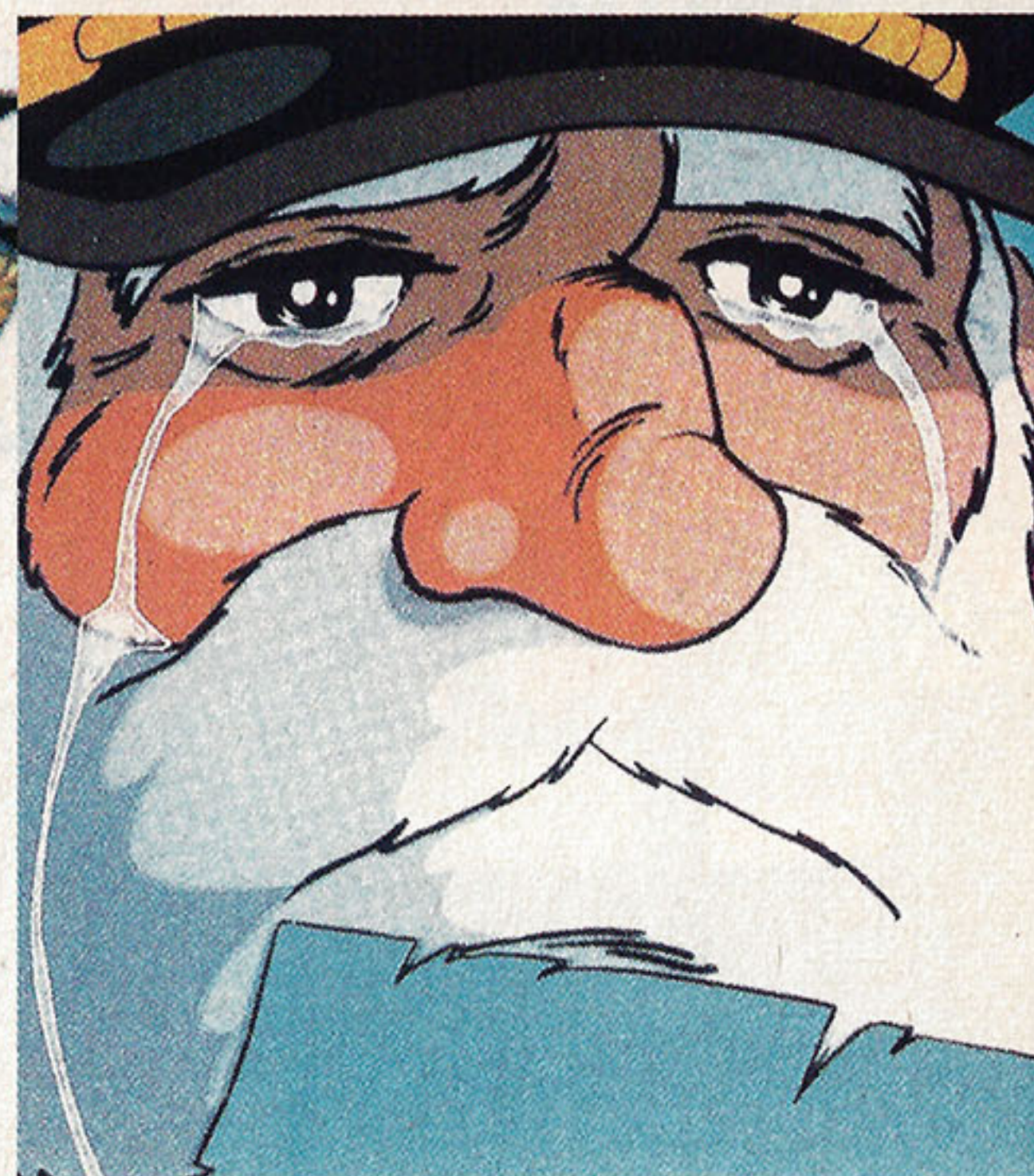
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4. Be Forever Yamato (1980)

At best, *Be Forever* is space opera at its most grandiose and spectacular. At worst, it's *Yamato* at its most overlong and manipulative. The seizure of Earth by the invading Dark Nebula Empire forces makes for a spectacular opener, but by the time the *Yamato* arrives at the enemy homeworld, which is disguised as Earth 200 years in the future, things have gotten a bit confusing in the science-fiction department. What helps to make it palatable is the fact that *Forever* is pure eye candy, gorgeously animated, topped off by what must have been an awesome sight in the theater; Ninety minutes into the show, as the *Yamato* superwarps to the outskirts of the Dark Nebula, the screen expands into widescreen format! Without the "we-gave-all" sacrifices of *Arrivederci* and *Final Yamato*, dramatic tension falls squarely on Kodai and Yuki as their fidelity is tested by new would-be romantic partners Alphon and Sasha—who's Kodai's niece! (Yikes! Calling Dr. Freud....) Yet both rivals are eliminated by circumstance, rather than through Kodai's and Yuki's choice, which makes the emotional side of the journey ultimately feel a bit inconsequential.



MOVIE KEY

Blue-Skinned Bad Guys
More blue meanies from the Dark Nebula Empire.

Mysterious, Alluring Space Women
The grown-up (and very fast too!) Sasha, and a last-minute appearance by her mother, Starsha.

The Ship, Destroyed!
Blown up by the Dark Nebula Empire in the year 2402. But wait! It's only a hoax!

Our Heroes, Killed!
As if in a game of Clue, Mamoru Kodai by bomb, Admiral Yamanami (we hardly knew ye) by a building-sized missile to the *Yamato's* bridge, and Sasha by laser gun.

Resurrection Day
Speaking parts for the ghosts of Sasha and Starsha. Separated by light years, Kodai and Yuki presume each other dead. Neither are. Montage of happy, smiling, dead crew members as the *Yamato* sails back home.

Technical Ecstasy
How sweet it is! Wave-motion bullets for the shock cannons, a new spherical radar system, wave-motion engine upgraded for extended warping. The film itself goes widescreen midstory.

Kleenex Factor
6 1/2. Kodai and Yuki's romance is put to its ultimate test. Presuming each other dead, they're free to fool around with the innocently incestuous Sasha and handsome enemy cyborg Alphon, respectively. The heroic death of Kodai's brother is, comparatively speaking, hardly milked at all.



5. Final Yamato (1983)

A better title would be "Space Encyclopedia Yamato," as it parades nearly every precious plot device in the book for one last curtain call. The launch of the *Yamato* is visually identical to a scene in *Arrivederci*, Earth is partially invaded just like in *Be Forever*, and the bad guys blue have a very familiar motivation. This is a B-I-G story, opening humbly enough with the creation of the solar system, the formation of Earth, and the sight of future galaxies in collision. Our narrator is no less than famed actor Tatsuya Nakadai (*Kagemusha, Ran*), and our captain is no less than the safely-presumed-dead Okita. The animation, particularly the background art, is the best of the series. Running a hearty 163 minutes (the Japanese laser disc runs 175 minutes and contains two different endings; the one featuring the series' biggest questionable creative move—showing Kodai and Yuki graphically consummating their marriage, albeit behind a misty fog—is *not* on the Voyager tape!), *Final* was sold on the image of an exploding *Yamato* and The Grim Reaper lurks around just outside the frame, making it in some ways a very exhausting experience for characters and viewers alike. It's only fitting then that it should have some of the best characterization since *Arrivederci*. At the end of the saga, Kodai possess a remarkable sense of self-awareness, even referring to Okita as his father. And just as the series gets back to its own original strengths, it really is the end.

MOVIE KEY

Blue-Skinned Bad Guys
The aqua-skinned citizens of the planet Denguil.

Mysterious, Alluring Space Women
The matronly spirit of the water world Aquarius.

The Ship, Destroyed!
You'd better believe it, chum!

Our Heroes, Killed!
Shima has a sloooow and talky death. Admiral Okita (again).

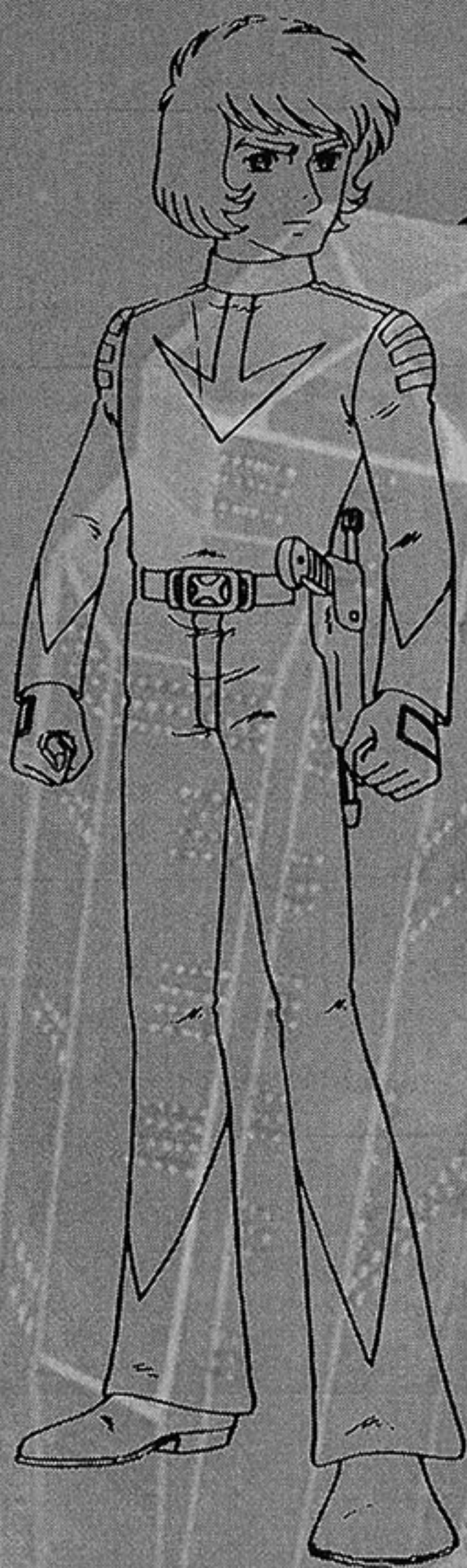
Resurrection Day
Admiral Okita? Is that really you? It is? Well, you'd better stay behind and blow up the ship then.

Technical Ecstasy
Wave-motion gun circuits reversed for internal explosion (read: self-destruct). Anti-hyper-radiation missile ray gun (say it five times fast).

Kleenex Factor
Off the scale. You're going to need the whole gosh-darn box. (Although, if you're hopelessly jaded by this point, you won't need any.) The crew is feared dead from radiation sickness. Yuki comes within inches of committing suicide. The ruthless Lugal guns down his own son. Kodai and Yuki finally tie the knot. Okita comes back and says good-bye. The *Yamato* goes ker-boom.

The first names given are from the *Yamato* series in Japan; the names in parentheses are those given in *Star Blazers*.

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Yoshinobu Nishizaki • Voyager Entertainment.



Susumu Kodai (Derek Wildstar)

Kodai starts out as a reckless teenage cadet before maturing to adulthood as an essential member of the *Yamato's* crew. His hot temper and clenched fists, the results of having lost his family in the Gamilus-Earth war, are put to good use when he is made weapons officer of the *Yamato* and squad leader of the Cosmo Tiger fighter planes. When Admiral Okita becomes incapable of command, due to radiation sickness, he makes Kodai acting captain of the *Yamato*. As the series progresses, Kodai grows into adulthood and eventually forms a loving relationship with Yuki... although his inclination for rash action still surfaces on occasion.

Wave-Motion Gun

The *Yamato's* signature weapon. After storing up enough tachyon particles, the entire ship becomes a devastating energy cannon.

Main Guns

These devastating shock cannons send many an alien attacker to the cosmic junkyard.

Main Bridge

The odds are you'll spend at least 70% of an average *Yamato* TV episode or movie right here.

Captain's Quarters

Admiral Okita's residence and a good place for a hearty toast and cries of "We will return!"

Rocket Anchor

An old-fashioned leftover from the *Yamato's* WWII battleship days, this mariner's tool comes in handy for fastening to asteroids and enemy ships.

Catapult

Kodai's personal launching pad for his sleek one-of-a-kind Cosmo Zero fighter plane.

Wave-Motion Engine

What you need under the hood for long-range subspace warps.

Third Bridge

The part of the ship most likely to be bumped around, blown up, and melted off. No wonder the crew is seldom seen aboard.

Yamato

Renamed the *Argo* for its American incarnation as *Star Blazers*, the mighty space battleship in both versions was rebuilt from the hulk of a WWII battleship, and refitted with a state-of-the-art wave-motion engine, the specs of which are provided by Starsha to allow the people of Earth to travel to her planet of Iscandar and collect the Cosmo Cleaner (a.k.a. Cosmo DNA) to cleanse the Earth of its Gamilus-inflicted radiation poisoning.

Yuki Mori (Nova)

Blond, beautiful Yuki bears a striking resemblance to the Mysterious, Alluring Space Women that populate the *Yamato* saga. Her multiple duties on the ship include acting as head nurse, radar operator, and chief of human services. One of the few females aboard the *Yamato*, Yuki is initially at the center of a love triangle between Kodai and Shima. She eventually sides with Kodai, and their love for each other eventually inspires Dessler to finally cease his war against humankind.

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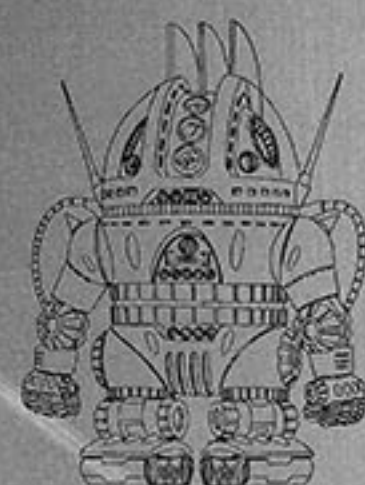
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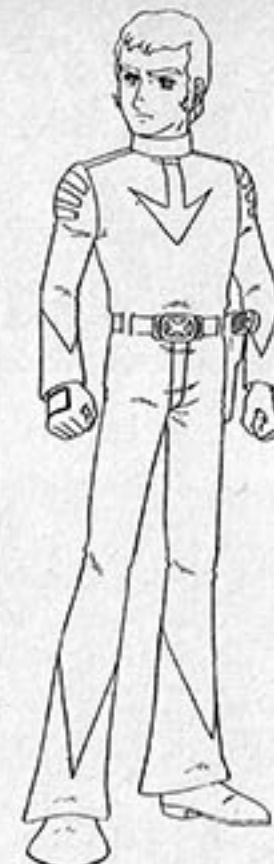
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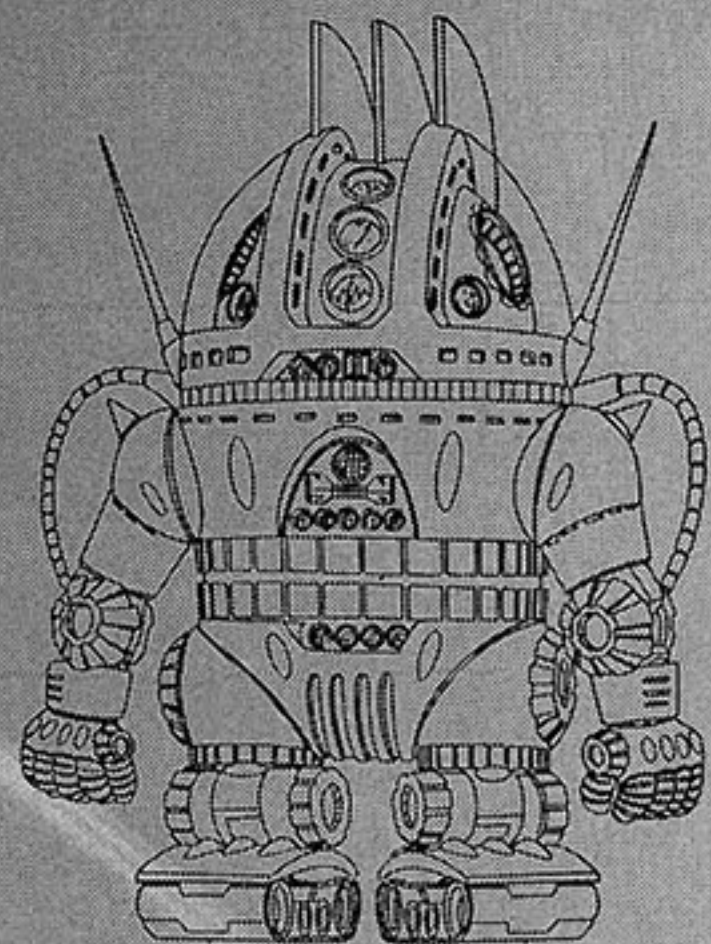


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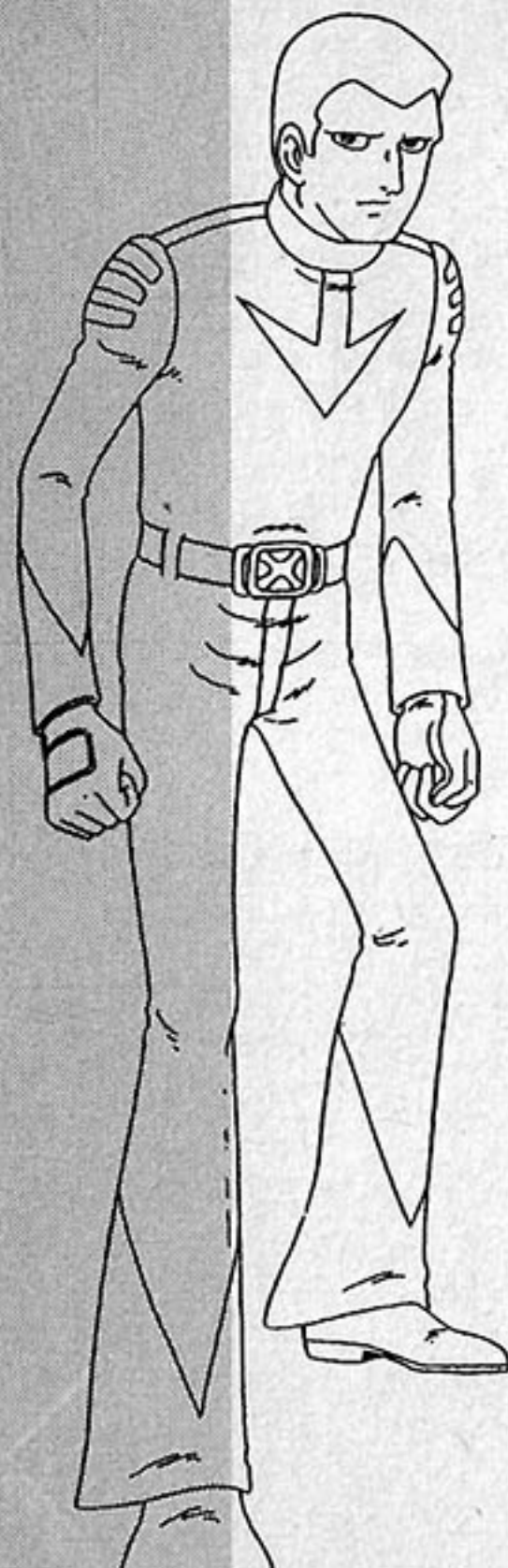
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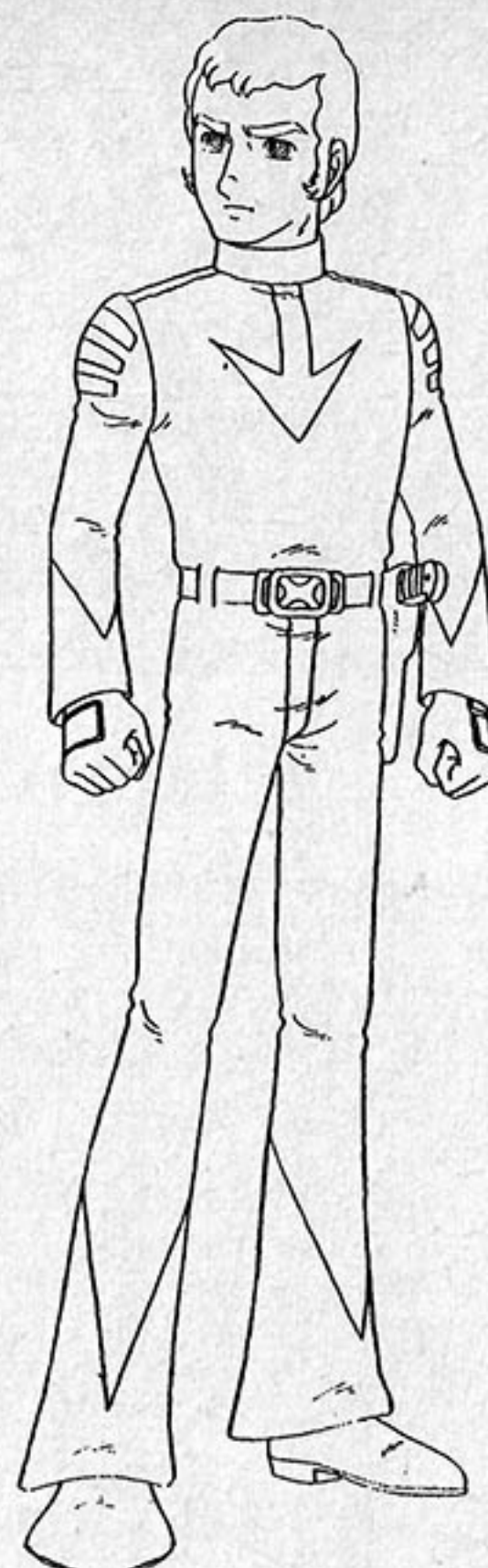
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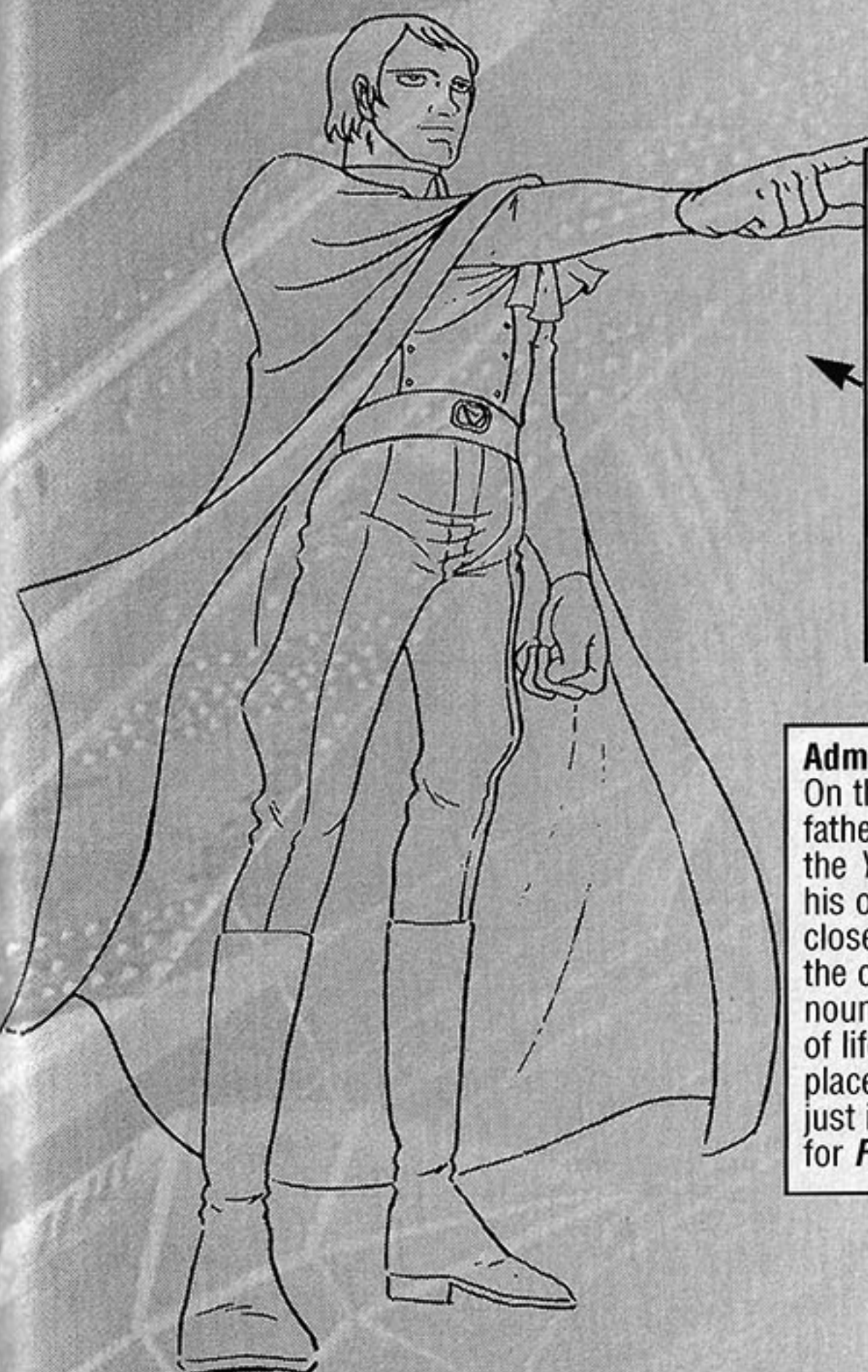
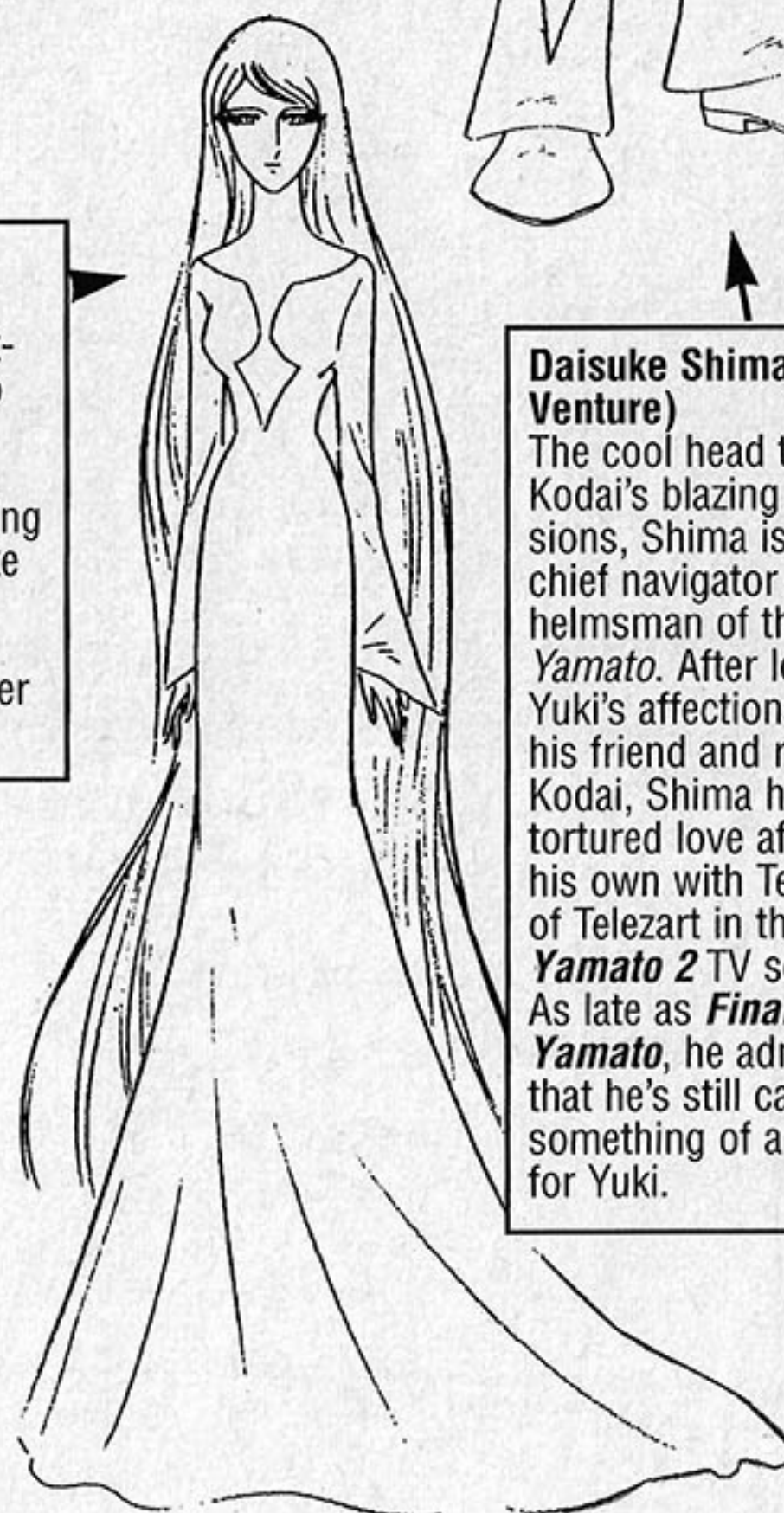


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