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IMAGINATION

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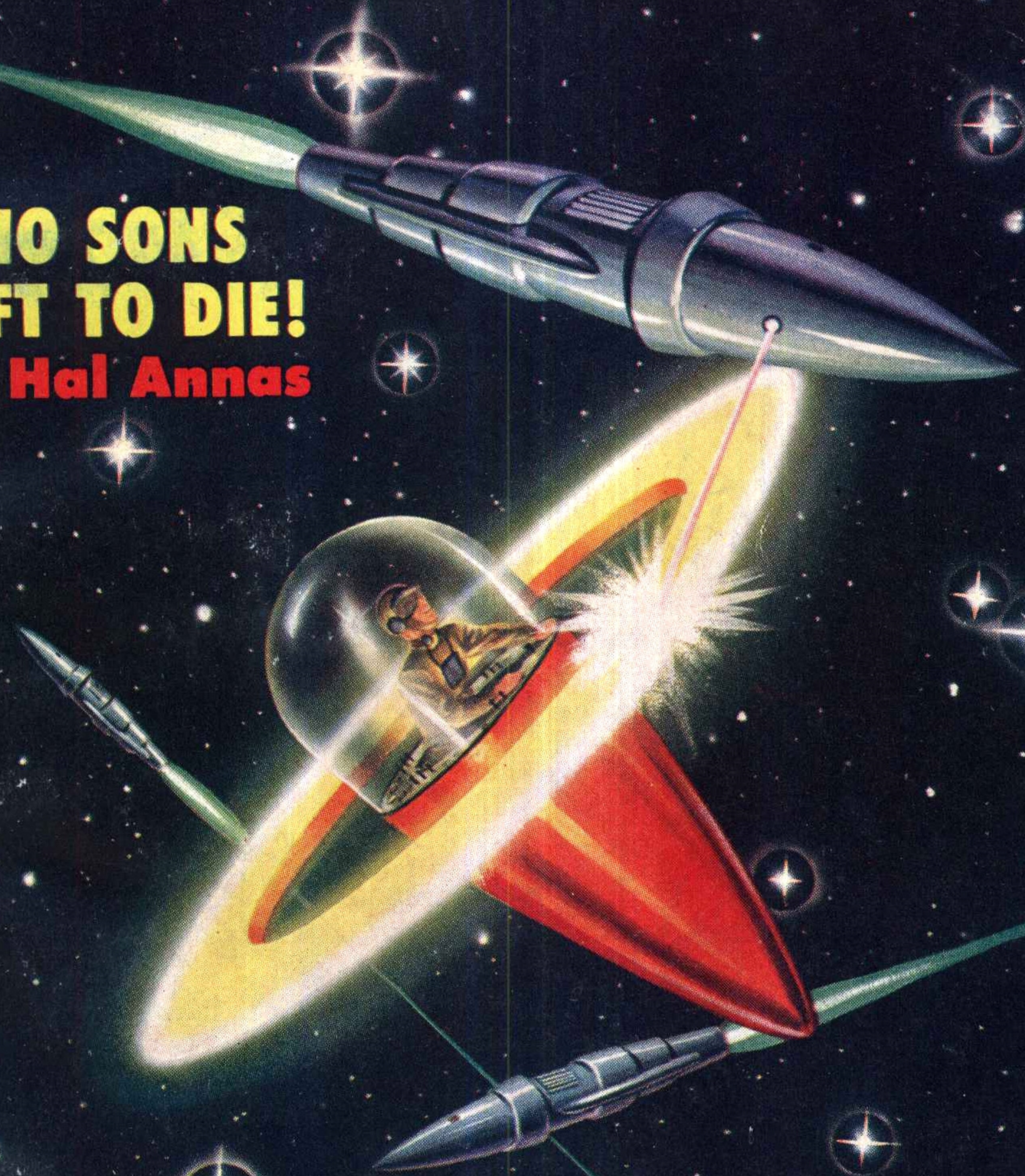
IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

SEPTEMBER, 1953

35¢

**NO SONS
LEFT TO DIE!**
by Hal Annas



... a great **ROG PHILLIPS** novel—**THE CYBERENE**

Introducing the

AUTHOR



★
Hal Annas
★

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC sketches are considered apologies or alibis by the cynical.

Well, I've always needed an alibi and I might as well fix up a good one to cover all circumstances.

I was born in a house beside a stream of red mud connecting two cottonmill hamlets in the Bible Belt of the South. I was young and adventurous and soon moved to a house on a hill overlooking a cornmill.

The mill had a big waterwheel. It was about as tall as a corncrib after the hay has been gathered into the barn. On the same shaft was a wooden pulley. It was bigger than a henhouse even when the hens are setting. Around the pulley went a rope belt and on to a smaller pulley. This powered

the whole works.

To the mill would come rosy cheeked girls in overalls carrying a sack of corn and leading a cow. The cow would eat the husk on the spot and the girls would have to carry only the ground meal back home.

Also would come, astride flop-eared mules, redfaced young men, a shotgun under one arm, a pair of brass knucks in the hip pocket, and a sack of corn before and aft.

The corn would be emptied into the hopper. Everybody would get ready, sort of holding his breath. The miller would climb upon a box and push upward on the scantling that ran through the roof. That would lift the floodgate.

Water would come rushing down
(Concluded on Page 36)

IMAGINATION

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of Science
and Fantasy*

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Volume 4

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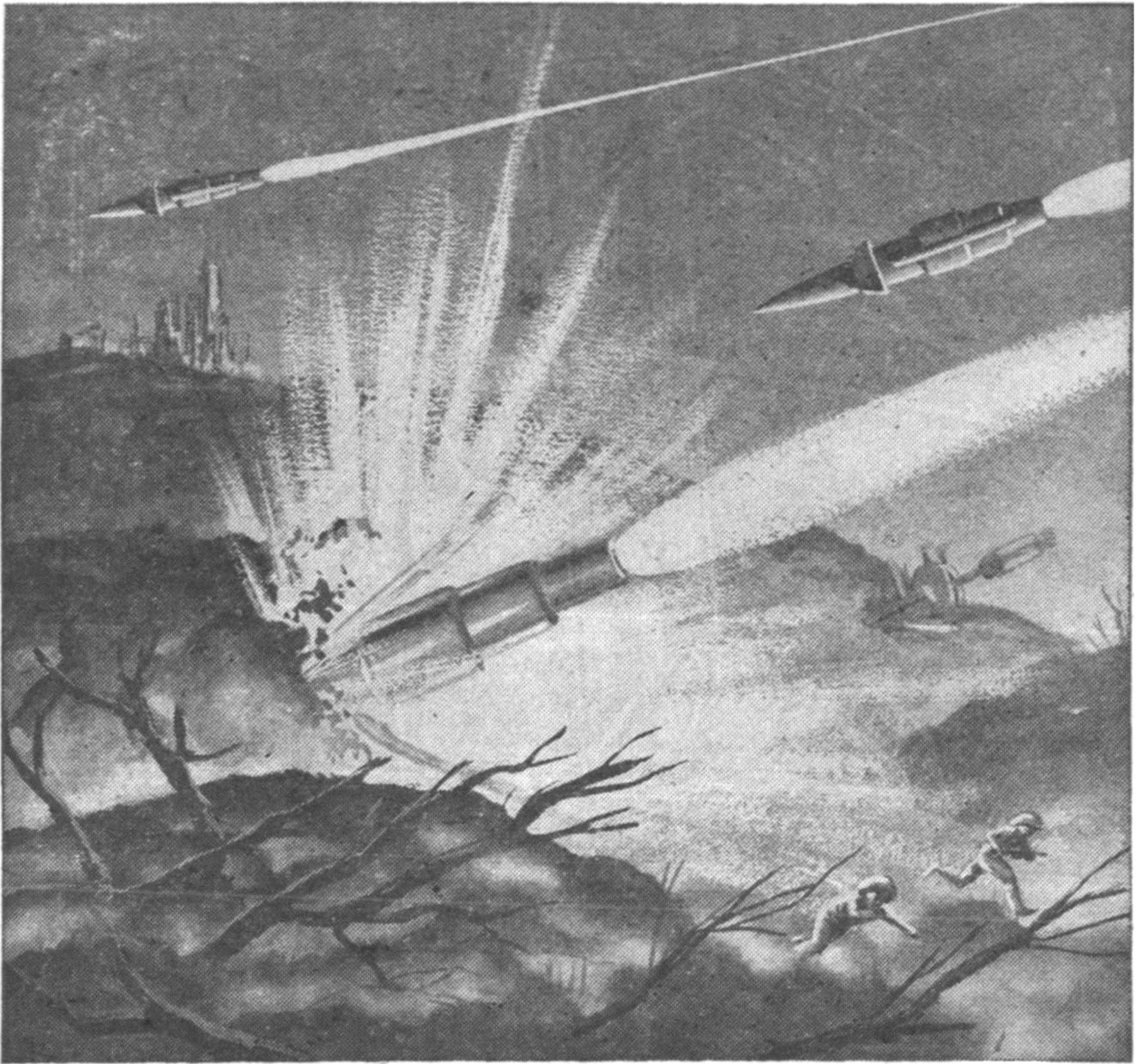
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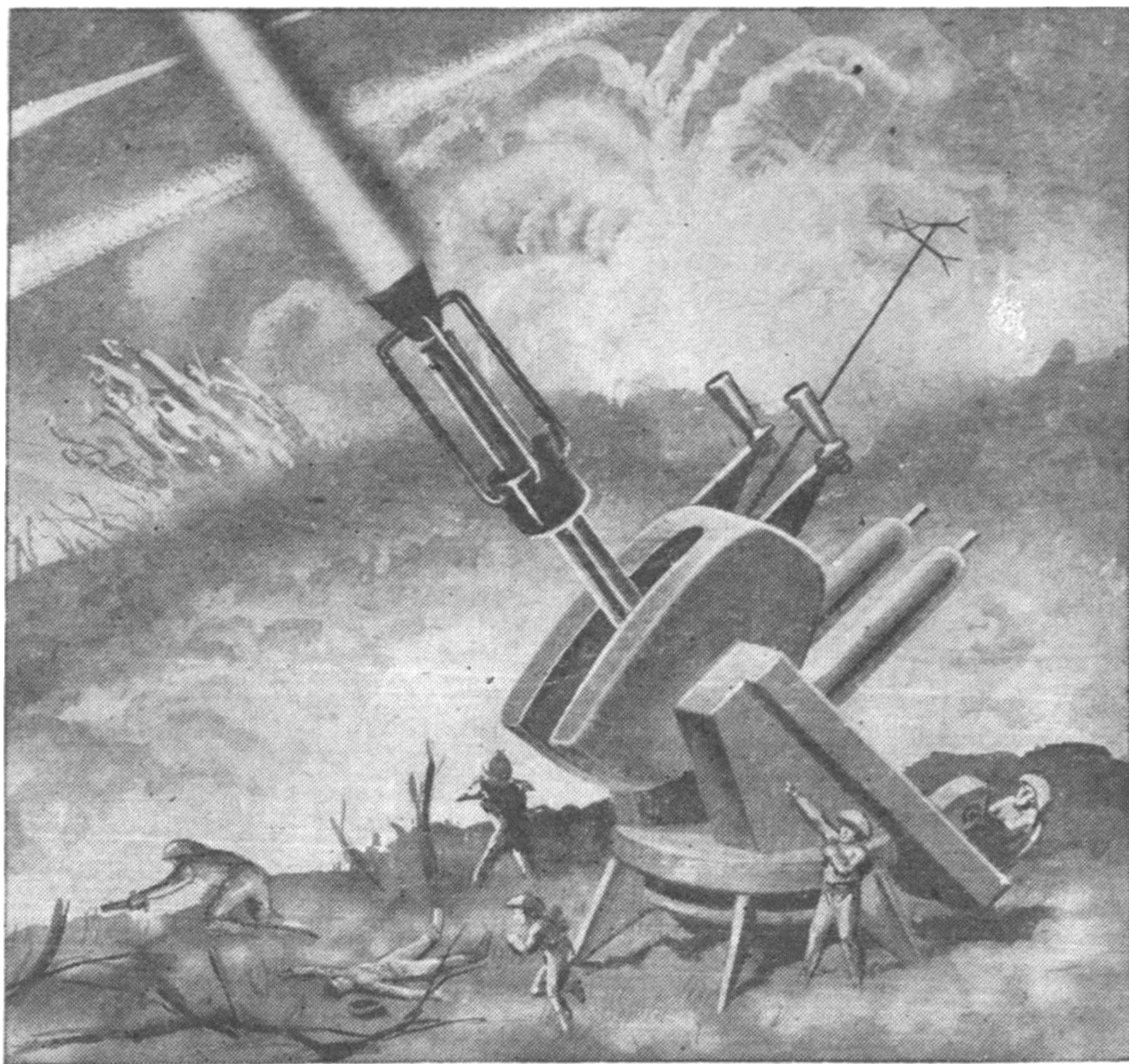
Front cover by Malcolm Smith, illustrating NO SONS LEFT TO DIE! Interior illustrations by Malcolm Smith, W.E. Terry, and H. W. McCauley. Cartoons by Ludwig, Glueck, Gekler, and Kohler. Astronomical photo, back cover, courtesy Mt. Wilson and Palomar Observatories.



Could mankind hope to survive a galactic war that left boys aged cripples in a few short years? Who would replace them when there were—

NO SONS LEFT TO DIE!

By
Hal Annas



SUSAN Wildress knew that what she was about to do might mean death.

She stopped eating and stared at the ration of ground cedar bark, rabbit, and a hydroponic which tasted like eggplant. She pushed back her plate and glanced around at the tense girl faces in the huge dining hall. She lifted a small strong hand and ran it inside her sweater. She brought out a locket,

snapped it open.

The flesh grew tight around her dark brown eyes and in her olive cheeks. The memory was still as clear as the day it happened. Three years. She was just fourteen, sitting in the groundcar and watching the preparations which were always dramatic.

Darth Brady had lied about his age. He was supposed to be nineteen but was just past seventeen.

She had known and so had everyone else, but the Centers needed boys, needed them desperately.

She remembered how her face got wet as she watched him go out to the ship. He looked very tall and broad and strong, a man. His jaw was firm and his features grim. He looked toward her but didn't wave, for, since she could first remember, there had been a stringent rule against making close ties with boys at the Centers.

Replacing the locket, she rose and walked casually to the exit. She glanced right and left, hurried to the entrance to the factory, reached down her time card and punched in. Then she hurried back across the space to the dining hall, around behind it and on out to the rows of cedar trees.

The penalty, she knew, might be endless restriction, even death, but she didn't hesitate. With trees concealing her movements, she hurried along to the dormitory groundcar ramps. She went more cautiously now.

A moment later she heard masculine voices and a shiver ran down her spine. It was not the voices themselves, but the words they used. *Zeehites*. She had heard the term many times, never without a shudder. Men could be put to death for discussing the *Zeehites* around women or children.

Moving quickly, she slipped be-

tween two cars, slid into the control seat of one. With infinite care she backed it out, rolled it as quietly as possible a hundred yards before setting in motion the vanes that would lift it. She brought it down again in a clearing in the wood at the edge of the heat-blackened plain.

For a time she remained undecided. A score of ships were out on the plain. She had seen from the air scores of others on other plains. Nowhere had she seen one bristling with full armament and scars of battle to indicate it to be the *Ida Bella*, *Nucleus*, *Trilogy* or *Firelance*.

SHE thought of binding her dark wavy hair tight against her head. The thought, she knew, was idle. Nowhere on the planet could she pass as a man, dressed as she was in denims and sweater. Young men wore purple uniforms; those in logistics wore brown.

Dismissing caution, she walked rapidly toward the buildings of the Center. And now she became very careful of her thoughts. She knew that youths developed remarkably at the Centers. They had to if they were to survive out among the stars in that long chain of ships stretched across the course of the *Zeehites*. The boys were said to be telepathic. She didn't know for sure. She knew only that girls had

to be careful of their thoughts around boys.

Pausing between two buildings, she glanced apprehensively at the open compound. Nothing stirred there but she had the eerie feeling that eyes were on her. It was too late to turn back. She started across to the main building.

Young men in purple uniforms materialized from every direction. They neither laughed nor talked; moved with hardly a sound. They completely surrounded her, pressed close. They were tall and broad and she could not see beyond them.

Susan trembled. She started to run, to break out of the circle, but powerful and yet gentle hands restrained her.

"It's a girl from the factory," one said. "Make it casual. Don't crowd. We'll have to get her out of here."

A brief order was snapped. The men moved as one. At the center of the group she was carried along. She knew when they entered a building, but uttered no sound. The men fell back. She waited, trembling.

"Girl," said one, "do you know you could be put to death for coming here?"

Susan stopped trembling, held herself rigid. Long ago she had learned not to cry. There was no excuse for breaking a rule. Her mother had once told her that

things had not always been this way; that if everyone worked hard enough things would soon be again as they were in that bright and free past. To break a single rule was to commit a crime against everyone on the planet and delay that bright future. She waited.

"You're working dayshift in the factory?"

She nodded.

"How many hours?"

"Twelve."

"If you want to make a complaint you have to take it to the Council."

A man who looked older than the others advanced. On his shoulder was the emblem of the crossed pens, indicating he was an instructor. He glared around at the others. "You know better," he said, "than to sneak a girl in here."

Somebody chuckled. "She was on the compound. Did you want her to be discovered and maybe get permanent restriction? We'll get her out safe somehow."

The instructor turned back to Susan. "You'll have to keep mum at the factory," he warned. "A single word and you'll have the Council on our necks."

"But I have to find someone," she said. "From Firelance."

"Oh!" Glum looks spread.

"His name is DARTH Brady," she went on quickly. "He trained here. He went out three years

ago."

"Darth Brady!" somebody said. "That gibbering cripple—"

"Quiet!" ordered the instructor. "The next man that mentions a forbidden subject will go before the Council." He turned back to Susan. "We must get you back to your place."

"But I have to find Darth Brady."

The men turned away, shook their heads. Susan felt a cold numbness growing in her body and limbs.

"You, Carson," the instructor ordered, "get passes for yourself, Merritt and Saxon. I'll issue the order via wrist communicator. Get two groundcars. Wait in them outside the compound. You others form a ring about this girl. What's your name, girl?"

"Susan Wildress. My identification number is on the back of my sweater."

"I'm Alfred Wilson. The boys will walk out to the groundcars. You walk in the midst of them and try to look like a boy. Get in the first car and stay out of sight."

ON the way Sue had an opportunity to study the boys. Most of them were younger than her seventeen years. For their age they were unusually tall and broad. Few were under six feet. Their purple uniforms were emblazoned with a

single splash of white in the center of the back, in the shape of a burning sun.

She slid into the car, remained quiet. Alfred Wilson got in beside her. A moment later the car rose gently, accompanied by another off to port.

Sue pointed to the wood and explained that her car was there. Wilson spoke into his communicator and the other car descended in that direction.

"They'll return it to the dormitory," he said. "My job is to get you back without creating an emergency."

"Why are you doing it?" Sue asked. "Why don't you turn me over to the Council?"

Wilson set the robot controls and turned to face her. "Nobody wants to punish you girls," he said softly. "Members of the Council least of all. But they have to maintain discipline. It's the only way we can get the big job done."

She understood. She had heard it all a thousand times before. No one's feelings, nothing, neither life nor death, must be allowed to halt or hinder the big job, the job that was to bring that bright future.

"Can you tell me anything about Darth Brady?" she said.

"I can tell you only that he wears two ribbons and three stars."

"Two ribbons?" Sue gasped. "Is he dead?"

"No." Wilson's voice was deep, controlled with effort. "No. Darth Brady isn't dead. But, Sue, you must not think about him. You know the rules."

The tight knot in Sue's breast worked up into her throat. She blinked rapidly and squeezed the flesh around her eyes to keep the moisture back. "I know the rules," she said.

Wilson tuned the communicator to the factory. "Tube department foreman," he said, but didn't cut in the viewplate. "Al Wilson, from the Center," he went on. "Sure, Mom, I'm fine. I've borrowed one of your girls. Don't let it get talked about. Will have her back soon."

"Your mother?" Sue asked.

"Yep! A fine girl. She works fifteen hours a day and still finds time to keep records for the Council."

"I thought Mrs. Wilson's boy had gone out. When I was eleven I heard her say he'd already entered the Center. That's six years ago."

Wilson's features clouded. "They won't let me go. Made me an instructor. If the chain breaks—But that isn't a subject to discuss with a girl. Look below. That lake! Know what made it?"

"A strike. My mother said it came before I was born. She said we'd been lucky; that the planet

has been struck thousands of times; that the moon and Mars have taken an awful beating."

"We set up decoys," Wilson explained. "They draw the strikes when a break-through comes. But sometimes a factory gets knocked out."

"I know." Sue nodded. "We know what to do. We've drilled over and over. And most of the factory is under ground."

"Part of it, the brick part, was once a school. I went to school there eight terms before I entered the Center."

"And I went three terms. That's when they converted it and we had to study in the dorm. Kids study in the nurseries now."

"How long have you been working in the factory?"

"Since I was nine. Only had to work four hours a day then. Now children begin work at eight."

"How many hours does your mother work?"

"Fifteen."

"And when you're eighteen years old you'll go on a fifteen-hour shift?"

"Of course. But I'll have three days vacation when I get married."

"Did you know the Center is taking boys thirteen now and next year will begin calling them at the age of twelve?"

"All the girls know about it."

The boys are glad to get out of the factories. They talk about nothing else. And they say the age to go out is going to be lowered to eighteen and maybe seventeen."

"Yes. We're learning better and faster ways to make men out of kids. And the numbers in the crews are being cut down. The ships are better. One man now can perform all the operations three did a few years ago."

"The training? Is it very hard?"

"No. It's just necessary. We know we have to learn and develop in order to survive. It's just like growing up."

SUE hesitated. "Is it true—" She paused again, cheeks coloring. "It is true that you can read a girl's thoughts?"

Wilson grinned. "Don't worry about it. Those things have been exaggerated. We get flashes under certain conditions. If your emotions were in perfect accord with your thoughts, as ours are supposed to be, we'd know what you're thinking. It's our one superiority over the—" He halted, clamped his lips tight. Sue knew he had been about to say, "Zeehites."

"We don't really read your thoughts," he went on. "If it was necessary, and we concentrated very hard, we probably could do it."

"Try just once to get the pic-

ture I've got in my mind."

"That's easy, but you shouldn't have thoughts like that."

She blushed crimson. Now she was positive. She had held an image in mind of his features, and he had known, known especially that her thoughts were of him. Confusion and discomfort settled over her. She tried to get her mind on work, but the thought wouldn't come. Darth Brady's image, as in the locket, appeared before her. And she was certain that that, too, was known to Wilson. She was hardly aware of what he said from then until the car landed.

Other girls watched her enviously, and yet with trepidation, as she returned to her machine. At every pause in the work they asked questions. "How did you get out?" "Where did you go?" "Will you have to appear before the Council?"

She hated to be cattish, but she couldn't confide in them. She invented a story which was reluctantly accepted. She said she had suddenly become ill and gone to the dorm.

The day wore on. After supper she visited her mother in the older women's dorm. She didn't stay long because Mrs. Wilson studied her with too much interest.

But she had asked, "What do two ribbons and three stars mean,"

and her mother had replied, "The first ribbon is for courage and conduct beyond the call of duty. The second is generally a posthumous award. If the wearer is alive, it means he has done something wonderful indeed. The stars, of course, denote the number of years he has spent in the void."

"Any word from Dad?"

"No. Communication channels are overloaded. He wouldn't ask for a priority unless it was an emergency. I think he's setting up a plant near those new mines on the Gold Coast. Then he'll have to go to Mars. They're crying for logistic experts. I'm hoping he can spend a few hours with us, though."

"How about uncle Bob and uncle George?"

"Sue, I was hoping you wouldn't ask that. George has been moved out of the Fourth Sector. You know what that means? His ship will be in the midst of the fighting. And Bob's ship hasn't been reported in months. They were operating in Sector One. It's out near the rim of the galaxy, but has been drawn back billions of miles in months. The losses in the withdrawal were terrible. All I can learn is that the full extent of the losses won't be known for weeks."

"Why do our ships keep on pulling back? We always lose so heavily at those times. Cousin Breck-

enridge gone; Cousin Allison came back a wrecked old man at the age of twenty; dozens of boys I used to know, broken or dead. And now uncle Bob."

"Hush, Sue. The final word hasn't come yet."

"But it will. And then it will be uncle George. And the Supreme Council keeps calling for more ships, better armament, and, above all, more men. Did you know they're lowering the age at the Center?"

"Those things are necessary, Sue. They mean survival. We're not supposed to talk about them. And we're supposed to go to bed earlier because food rations are to be cut again and we must conserve our strength."

RETURNING to her section of the dorm, she passed a knot of girls whispering in the corridor. She caught the words "*Ida Bella*" and "*Trilogy*." Then "*Old men. They look ninety and most are crippled. And not a one is over twenty-two.*"

Hurrying, to keep pace with her heart, she went on to her room. As she slipped out of sweater, denims and briefs, she thought, "Darth Brady was on *Firelance*. Maybe! Maybe—" She knew she was not supposed to hope, neither despair. Nothing that happened must halt or hinder.

The stars beyond the window were bright and close. She thought she could see the rings of blue with white dots in their centers which were said to be visible through a powerful telescope when the fighting was intense.

Next day she applied for an issue of clothes. The elderly woman smiled and shook her head. "You're very pretty. You wouldn't be beautiful but you'd certainly be lovely and feminine in a dress. Wish I could issue you an outfit."

"But I haven't drawn any clothes in over eight months," Sue said. "We used to get clothes four times a year, then twice. Now—"

"It can't be helped," the woman explained. "They've cut production to put more labor and machinery in the heavy industries. Even the boys at the Centers aren't getting as many uniforms as they were. And they'll get fewer next year."

"Oh!"

"If your denims and sweaters have been damaged—"

"No. I've three of each. They are just worn."

"Then you'll have to make out. The less we have here the more the men can have when they go out. You understand?"

SUNDAY she took advantage of the shorter working-day to go

with her mother to the vale between the cultivated rows of cedar and the woodland. She had come here at every opportunity since she could remember. It was here she had been taught that there was something beyond the transient physical life.

Today they walked on through the wood to a point where they could see the lake which had been made by the strike so many years ago. It was more than five miles across and was said to be half a mile deep.

Coming back, they saw a number of uniformed men in the vale. They were gray and wrinkled and some were crippled. She felt her mother's fingers close tight on her arm, but curiosity wouldn't allow her to stop.

She stared. He was stooped, his face a mass of wrinkles, his hair snow-white. And he was gibbering. He seemed to recognize no one.

She was suddenly seized with a tremor. A wild raging impulse surged through her. Blindly and without thought, she ran, heedless of bushes, briars and stones. She didn't stop until she reached the dormitory. She fell face down on her bed and dug her nails into her cheeks and into the flesh about her eyes to make it contract.

Darth Brady was just past twenty, she knew . . .

Night brought a full silvery

moon. She could see it from the window as it came above the wood, bright and giving no hint of the ships and activity on its scorched airless surface. Sleep was out of the question.

Slipping into her clothes and with shoes in hand, she swung across the windowsill and lowered herself to the ground. Like a wraith she moved among the cedars and on across the vale and into the wood.

The sound of the machinery in the factory behind her faded. The night was quiet but lustrous with tinted moonlight. It seemed that peace had come, that nowhere in the universe could there be strife. But as she looked at the stars and imagined the rings of blue and white dots, she knew.

Beyond the wood the water in the lake was amber in color, and as she approached, it flashed an image of the heavens and took on a darker hue, almost blood red.

She stood on an outcropping and listened to the sounds of crickets and frogs and thought she heard long sighs like breathing. She thought she saw something white flash on the surface, then dismissed it, tilted her head back and breathed deep of the clean night air.

It seemed that she was alone on a tiny planet which brushed against a bejeweled velvet curtain. She indulged the dream, and when

reality began to force itself upon her again she quickly slipped out of her clothes and judged the distance to the water below.

For a moment she stood there, arms raised, body poised, the moon painting her figure a rose pink. Then she dived.

The water was warm, caressing. She came up, tossed her head back to get the shoulder-length dark hair out of her eyes. And then she was certain she heard an exclamation.

PANIC ran through her as it had earlier in the vale. She twisted and turned to look in every direction. Then a head bobbed up in front of her.

"A beautiful dive," he said. It was Al Wilson. "I was about to warn you and then I couldn't bear to spoil it."

She was treading water, confused, not knowing what to do.

"Do you come here often?" he asked.

"No. But you knew I would come soon. I was thinking about it when we flew over, and you knew."

"Is it so bad?"

"No. But having you read my thoughts—" She turned swiftly and swam hard and strong. The panic was in her again. She felt that he was looking right inside her, noting the quickening of her heart

that he himself brought.

It was impossible to escape. Like all men trained at the Center, he was superbly muscled and seemed tireless. With ease he kept pace with her, ignored her confusion, talked on.

In desperation she clung to a rough stone protruding from the bank, started to climb out, dropped back into the water and fought to hold back the tears.

He said, "There's an easier place to climb a few yards ahead. I'll go back the way I came and meet you up on the bank."

Relief came as she watched him swim away, watched the long muscles ripple on his back and shoulders. But it did not last. In feverish hurry she climbed out and twisted and squirmed to get into her clothes. She had hardly got the sweater over her head and her hair brushed back when he appeared.

"Those clothes don't do you justice," he said.

Confusion came again.

"But the time will soon come," he added, "when our girls can have all the fine things written about in the old books."

"How can you say that," she asked, "when every report brings news of another withdrawal, another terrible defeat? We've lost so many stations among the stars, there can hardly be any left."

He looked down at the weed-grown earth, and she instantly became contrite. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know I'm never supposed to lose hope."

He studied her eyes until she looked away. His hands found her shoulders. "Sue, there are forces at work about which you've never even dreamed. We need time. We need more manpower. We have to go on working. The only thing that can defeat us ultimately is here on this planet. It is our morale. As long as it is high we'll keep on sending ships out. The moment it breaks we are lost."

Sue had noticed the tension and constraint in his voice that she had come to associate with the talking of men among themselves when they thought no woman or child was within hearing.

Always they stopped talking when a girl approached, and put on a cheerful front. She wondered if they knew of some dark terror yet to be faced, so horrible that it couldn't be confided to their women and children. Would a knowledge of that dreadful thing, she asked herself, break the morale on the home planet?

Wilson had changed the subject. He told her about the fine things he had read in books and heard from older men of that past before the beginning of the struggle. It reminded her of the fairy

tales she had read as a child. It seemed impossible that a girl could have fine clothes and a house and a husband and children all her own. She couldn't grasp it. She felt that she wouldn't know how to live if there weren't rules to go by. She remembered vaguely when she was very small, that her mother prepared meals in a big white kitchen, but there was little reality in the memory.

He accompanied her back to the dorm and on the way talked of things that stirred forlorn unrest in her body. It was a sense of tingling, suppressed under memory of DARTH BRADY.

Lifting her to the windowsill, he pressed his lips against her ear and whispered, "I've made another request of the Council to send me out." His arms held her tight enough to stop her trembling. Then he released her and was gone.

FOOD became scarcer as summer became fall and fall became winter. Monkey meat was served twice a week. Hydroponics were the main diet and the bulk had to be made up of edible leaves and woodfibre.

First news of the big breakthrough came on Christmas Eve. The bulletin was not supposed to go up until all in the factory had had an hour to sing carols or do whatever they wished. But some-

body made a mistake. Under the wreaths of holly on the bulletin board it told in a few words how Sector One had been breeched. It told of withdrawals, reorganization and shortening of defenses.

On Christmas Day the story was worse. It was not definite as bulletins usually were, but it gave the information that Sector Two was crumbling.

Two days after Christmas she overheard men talking at the groundcar ramps. Their voices were tense, restrained. They said that the links of the chains were snapping and that a strike was sure to come. They talked hopefully of new weapons, better ships that would swing the balance of power in favor of Earthmen.

Sue had heard talk of new weapons and ships many times before. They always seemed to be in the future. She slipped away from the ramps and volunteered an extra hour's work in the factory.

Next day there was a general increase in hours. Girls under eighteen went on a fourteen-hour shift. Eighteen to thirty-five, they worked sixteen hours. Under the age of fourteen, none was allowed to work more than ten hours, but girls and boys of eight and nine could volunteer to work seven hours. Their shifts called for six.

The age for admittance at the Centers was lowered to ten. The age to go out was seventeen, but, as the new classes came along, would be lowered to sixteen and fifteen.

The strike came on New Year's Eve. There was ample warning. Word reached Earth before daylight that a major break-through had occurred. The Fourth Sector couldn't halt it, but forces were being drawn back from Three and Two to close the break.

The news was tempered with assurances issued on a global scale by the Supreme Council. It said that their labors and sacrifices had not been in vain; that thousands upon thousands of Earth warships still stood between the planet and the onrushing enemy. It said that the stations on Mars and the Moons of Jupiter were still intact, as well as on Earth's Moon, and that hundreds of man-made stations were beyond the orbit of Saturn.

The day was one of feverish excitement and at every opportunity fearful eyes turned toward the blue and seemingly placid heavens.

Calculations of when the first blow would come were checked and rechecked. It was expected soon after evening twilight.

News of expressions of confidence among the Upper Councils of the peoples of the planet were

bulletined to still unrest. The Orientals could put aloft better than ten thousand ships in the last hours. The Europeans could do about the same. The Africans had a new ship not intended for service until further tests had been made, but which would be used to meet the emergency. North and South America had more ships than crews, and Arabian boys were being sent to man them.

Sue couldn't understand how her mother could take the news so calmly.

"I've lived through strikes before," she explained. "Besides, your father always comes home to make sure I'm all right afterwards."

AS the sun went down and the first twilight appeared, streamers of fire became visible in the sky above. They crossed and recrossed, endlessly, numbering tens of thousands, and resembled falling meteors.

"I've never seen so many at one time," Sue's mother said.

"What are they?" Sue asked.

"Our ships, of course. From every part of the globe. They'll circle the planet constantly. They are the final inner ring. Under them is nothing but the ground defenses."

"Are there more ships farther out?"

"Certainly. Those up there are comparable to the Fourth Sector on a cosmograph. Sectors Three, Two and One will extend out beyond Pluto's orbit. They are probably fighting now. Listen! There's the warning. We must go to the shafts."

At that moment Alfred Wilson appeared. She understood that he had come to say goodbye to his mother. He came straight toward her, and then Sue realized she was alone. Her mother, with an understanding smile, was already on the way to the shaft.

Sue thought that he had never looked so tall, so strong, so confident. She was certain he had his orders to go out.

He stood before her. His jaw was set, his expression grim. Then his lips parted and he spoke very softly:

"Don't take any worries with you down in the ground," he said. "We'll never let them get a foothold on Earth." He paused. "Sue, don't think about me, don't think about love, don't think about anything—but just one kiss."

She clung to him, giving of her lips, of every thought, of every heartbeat. It seemed to her that it was the least she could do. In another hour he would be out there between her and the Zeehites.

The second warning sounded. She ignored it, still willing to give,

to sacrifice herself if necessary, but he unclasped her hands and brought her arms from about him.

He looked once more into her eyes and then hurried toward the groundcar, walking very straight. He didn't look back and at last she turned and ran to the shaft.

THE trip down required nearly ten minutes. The deceleration began long before the car stopped. She knew that her mother, and other older women, wouldn't be sent down this far, but that children would go much farther.

She hoped she would be put off at a level where there was machinery, where she could work, where there would be something to do to keep her mind off the coming terror.

As she came out of the car in a huge padded vault she was given a container of liquid and told to drink it quickly. Somebody whispered that it was to make them immune to what would otherwise be unbearable pain.

A speaker amplified a voice from the surface. "Girls above the hundred and fiftieth level should lie down or sit down," the voice said. "At lower levels it is safe to stand or walk about as you choose. Those on the upper levels will please get into their shock suits. And please be calm. We'll keep you informed of events

as long as possible.

"The Supreme Council has authorized me to say this: that the strike is going to be unimaginably heavy, but never has Earth been better prepared to withstand one. Each of you has given of your labors to make this preparation. You are each one a part of our combined effort at this crucial moment. Take heart. Remain calm."

Broken sobs came from behind her. Sue turned and saw that they were coming from a girl who couldn't possibly be more than fifteen and didn't belong on this level. An older girl led her away.

Sue thought of Darth Brady, but his image wouldn't stay in her mind. The blue eyes and blond hair of Alfred Wilson were there before her. She imagined him manning a ray-weapon in a ship above Earth's atmosphere. And then memory of the returned men of *Ida Bella*, *Nucleus*, *Trilogy* and *Firelance* sent a tremoring wave of nausea through her.

The speaker blared, "You have a few minutes. Choose your places and lie down or sit down. Remain calm."

A girl nearby muttered. "How do they know for certain? They figured early today exactly when the strike would come. And yet our ships were out there to stop it. How did they know our ships wouldn't stop it?"

A calmer voice said, "Maybe our ships purposely let them through. It may be part of one vast operation. I've heard older people say that something like it happened years ago. They let a whole fleet through and then trapped it between Sectors Three and Two. It was Earth's first big victory."

"But this time they've broken through Sector Four. They can't reach Earth until they're past Sector Four."

"It may be part of an even bigger operation."

"But why let them strike Earth? Don't they care about us?"

"Oh, hush! I have two brothers out there. I'd hate for them to learn girls didn't have confidence in them."

"Attention!" the speaker called. "In forty-five seconds the ground defense will be zeroed in. Please do not get panicky when the earth begins to shake. Lie down or sit down and draw your knees up against your chest. There may be pressure waves. Use your ear-protectors and keep your mouths open. Remain calm."

Silence settled, to be broken by deep breathing, then Sue heard the restrained voices: "God, grant that we shall continue to possess life"

The earth shuddered first one way and then the other. It rocked

back and forth; it rose and fell.

Sue felt the blood hammering through her temples. The muscles in her body strained to hold her knees against her chest. She heard screaming, knew that some of it was coming from her own lungs.

The earth rocked.

Sue felt that she could not possibly endure it longer. She was flung this way and that, bounced as a rubber ball. It went on and on. The girls about her seemed dazed, stricken.

The speaker ordered, "Prepare for pressure within ten seconds."

The earth rocked and then came a jolt that made all the preceding seem as nothing. It came again and again. And then the pressure.

She couldn't breathe. She knew this couldn't go on. It was more than a mortal could endure. Vaguely she wondered how anyone on the surface could possibly be alive. It was unimaginably horrible down here; it could be nothing less than an inferno of death above.

Merciful darkness came down.

THE sheets on the bed were white and crisp and cool. Several moments passed before she understood. She had never been here before. Through the huge windows came bright sunlight. Far out beyond, the ground was covered with snow.

Sue sat up abruptly. A nurse came, lifted back the sheet, checked the identification number tattooed on her hip. "Susan Wildress? Factory Eight Hundred Ninety-six?"

Sue nodded. "My mother?"

"Just a moment." The nurse went away and came back with a memorandum. "Betty Wildress is listed as age thirty-six. That would put her on the eightieth level. None survived above the hundred and seventeenth."

Sue buried her face in the pillow. She had held back the tears so long that now they would not come. She thought of her father and turned again to the nurse.

"Craig Wildress?" the nurse said. "Logistics? Just a moment." She checked through records. "He was here two days ago, stayed by your side. He received a high priority message, had to leave. He left word for you that he would be on Mars for some time."

"Alfred Wilson?"

"Your betrothed or kin?"

Sue shook her head. "An instructor at the Center. He went out the night of the strike."

"There are many Centers. Many went out that night and not so many came back. You will have to inquire of the Council."

"This place? Where am I?"

"Recovery Fourteen Hundred One."

"Is it near—?"

"Site of Factory Eight Ninety-six? Yes. About a hundred and twenty miles east. You must rest now. Girls from devastated areas are to go to factories in the East. You must regain your strength quickly."

From the local Council she learned only that the full extent of the losses would not be known for weeks. Fighting had been intense between Earth and the orbit of Mars and there was still some confusion. It appeared that Mars, the Moons of Jupiter and the stations beyond Saturn's orbit had suffered heavily. The brunt of the strike, she was told, had been absorbed inside the orbit of Mars, and Earth and its satellite escaped what might have been fatal blows.

That was as much as the Council could tell her. No one should expect them, they explained, not without sympathy, to halt assessments and try to learn what had happened to one man in a cosmic operation.

They denied her permission to return to the site of former Factory Eight Ninety-six. They pointed out that such excursions were morale-shattering and that she was needed immediately in the East. Production had to be increased in preparation for further strikes.

They did permit her to view the site on a screen. And then she was

sorry. Where the factory, the dormitory, the cedars, the vale, the wood had been was now a crater twice as large as the lake.

As she studied the scene, an uncontrollable surging rose in her breast. At last tears came. She hardly remembered going out to the atmosphere craft that was to take her to the eastern factory.

The craft was jampacked with girls and older women. Their talk was puzzling.

"Do they lose their spirit out in the void?"

"Maybe it's that stuff shot into them at the Centers."

"But that stuff makes them stronger. Besides, it isn't their strength. Maybe it's us. Maybe we have some hidden psychological reason not to bring more children into existence."

"When I was growing up," said an older woman, "boys and girls were expected to fall in love. Now they discourage it. You can't expect the laws of nature—"

"But that," another pointed out, "is to prevent heartbreak. When a girl is madly in love and the boy goes out and doesn't come back or comes back gray and wrinkled and broken—"

"It isn't our problem," somebody said peevishly.

"If bearing children isn't our problem, whose is it?"

"I meant fertility."

Sue hoped that it was just girl talk, and tried to dismiss it, but half-formed thoughts stirred restlessly and plucked at the strings of some dormant longing inherent in her sex. With the others she wondered.

The new factory differed from the old, and it was several days before she became adept at operating the improved machines. The Center was closer and work was going on to merge the two dining halls.

Word spread that romance might no longer be discouraged. This made her wonder more.

ON the first day of spring a thin blonde girl at the next machine fell unconscious. As Sue rushed to help her, she saw the two ribbons clutched in the thin hand. A chunky brunette whispered, "Her husband's posthumous award. She got them last night, probably didn't sleep."

Work on the dining halls was finally finished. When young men milled into the vast room the girls were silent and shy. The boys likewise. It was the first time many of them had ever eaten in the presence of the other sex.

The shyness wore off and they mingled. It was then that Sue learned that men were fed differently. They got more meat and heaping portions of vegetables. She

no longer wondered why they grew so big and strong.

The men stared at what the girls were eating and seemed to lose their appetites. Finally one offered to share with a girl and then others, all over the room. For the first time Sue tasted beef.

Then a rule was posted that food was not to be shared. The men ignored it, but the girls, fearing both for themselves and the men, stopped sharing.

Word spread that the men had complained to the Council and that something was to be done. Days went by and the men grew irritable. One day the men, looking grim and determined, got their plates and each sat at a table with a girl. When the meal was over they marched out, and not a man had touched his food.

The instructors at the Center declared an emergency, issued orders superseding the local Council that the same food was to be given both workers and trainees. They justified it on the grounds that it was to sustain morale.

Men were allowed in the dorm two hours a day. Sue took the opportunity to ask one how ships were able to traverse vast distances in comparably brief time. His explanation was incomprehensible. Finally he paused, studied her wondering features.

"Oh, I see!" he said. "You girls

don't take much math. Think of it this way. Time is a concept of motion in relation to motion. Picture a motionless planet in a void. There is no motion on the planet or off it. Without motion, plus a concept, there can be no time. Now give the planet motion. Nothing else but the planet is moving in that void. There is nothing to which it is relative. So it can move billions of miles in time zero. Am I making it clear?"

She nodded. She hadn't begun to grasp it, but knew that she would in time.

"So actually we effect a displacement," he went on. "It is something like moving into another dimension, but it isn't precisely that. In reality it is a different kind of motion from motion as we know it ordinarily. But here comes the dorm mother to send us back to the Center. Tell you more next time."

SHE tried time and again to get news of Alfred Wilson, but didn't know what ship he was on and couldn't learn even what Sector he might be in.

All of the sectors now were between Earth and the nearest stars and news of the fighting came more often. There was talk that Sector Four might pull back within the Solar System, and its vast chain of defenses, and thus release

thousands of ships to build Sector One back up to strength.

News from her father came indirectly. A Tibetan sent word from halfway around the planet that he had worked with her father on Mars and promised to bring a message to her. He was in good health and thought of her daily. He was leaving for the vicinity of Jupiter and from there would go to the stations beyond Saturn. He hoped to see her before winter and bade her be of good spirit and firm faith that the big job would soon be done.

Early in June one of the girls on the overlapping shift told her that a man in uniform had asked for her. She couldn't imagine who it might be, for the men she knew at the Center were aware of her hours and would look for her in the dining hall.

Crossing the distance to the hall, she studied the tall man in the worn uniform who stood near the entrance. The hair at his temples was gray and he wore a single ribbon tied at his throat. As she drew near, she saw the light of long and terrible experience in his eyes.

For a moment she could hardly stand. Black spots came before her eyes and the world seemed to spin beneath her. Then she knew she was rushing to him.

A minute passed before he spoke.

"I've had a devil of a time finding you. Searched half the continent."

"Al," she breathed and couldn't say any more.

Lunch was forgotten. She wouldn't have returned to work if he had not insisted.

That evening he ate with her in the dining hall and afterwards led her out to a groundcar. In the car they rose above the factory and up through a snowbank cloud. When they broke clear and could see Luna at thirty degrees in the southeast and Venus sparkling like a jewel in the west, he set the robot controls to hold the car motionless.

After a long moment of gazing at her he said, "I thought of you a lot up there." He pointed toward Saturn. "Long hours of waiting for orders to move to counter some other move. The realization of the vastness, the inconceivable immensity, of space, and how tiny and feeble man is. It made me wonder why the breath of life had been breathed into my body, and I thought of you, and I think it made me understand that our Creator intends for life to go on and upward, and because of that He endowed us with love."

She moved closer to him, but he remained silent so long that she felt a need to bridge across. She said, "Tell me about the night of the strike."

Lines of pain came into his fea-

tures. "Don't ask me about that, Sue. So many of the boys I had trained died that night."

"Oh!"

There was a longer silence. At last his arm came about her. Moments passed and then she understood that no bridge would ever be needed. Words were no longer necessary. She no longer tried to guard her own thoughts.

And when he asked the question it brought no new excitement. She had known that he would ask it, and gave the answer with her lips against his.

"And the date?" he said.

She counted on her fingers. "My birthday comes on the fifteenth. I'll be eighteen. Is it too long? Girls eighteen get special training to prepare them for marriage."

"I can't imagine what sort of training," he said. "Besides, I don't think you need it. Nobody taught you to kiss like that. I've a hunch you have some special aptitude for being a wife. But if your heart is set on waiting—"

"It won't be long. Let's set the date for the twenty-fifth of June."

"It's pretty long for an old spaceman, but maybe I can hold out if I can see you often enough."

"Every evening—"

Sue hardly slept that night. At first she planned not to mention it, but the excitement of keeping it to herself was too much. She

told her roommate.

"You shouldn't have made him wait," said the girl. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"That Sector Four is moving back into the Solar System with headquarters on Earth. That means a lot of ship movements here. He might be called back to his any moment."

"And I didn't even ask him the name of his ship!"

IT was well into the morning when sleep came and then she awoke long before daylight. She studied the bulletin board early and was among the first in the dining hall. She asked a man from the Center what the movement of Sector Four meant.

"It's like this," he said. "All sectors move in perfect coordination. Four is the Supreme Command and Strategy Sector. Planning is done there and the Supreme Council on Earth is kept informed. If they pull back to Earth they can use the ships kept in reserve to protect this planet and release many of the Fourth Sector ships to replace losses in Sectors Three, Two and One. And it is a wise move. Fighting has been extensive of late and more strength is needed far out."

"Does it mean that men on leave may be called back suddenly?"

"Never can tell. Men on leave are always subject to immediate recall."

It seemed that the morning would never pass. At lunchtime she ran out of the factory, looked everywhere, waited at the entrance to the dining hall. At last she went in and ate.

The afternoon dragged. She hardly dared hope when she came out. Then she saw him.

He hadn't priority for a car tonight, and as they sat in a corner of the lounge of the dorm she tried to think of some way to tell him. For a time she hoped that he would bring up the subject, but he didn't, and at last she made up her mind.

Then he said "Sue, you've forgotten so soon that your husband-to-be has a special faculty. You were in so much confusion I couldn't make out what it was at first. But now it's fairly clear. We'll make it tomorrow or next day or any day you wish."

Her cheeks stung so that she was afraid to look up. Finally she said, "Monday. That's three days from now. And Sunday is a short working day. It will give me time to adjust my thoughts to the idea of being your wife."

"Sure. And I understand they give you three days for a honeymoon."

She nodded. "I've been won-

dering what it will be like to be free for three days."

Sunday came. They spent the meditation hours together. The news on the bulletin board was ignored.

In the evening he seemed preoccupied. "They have begun calling men back," he explained. Then: "But don't think for a moment that I'll let them call me before we're married. Still, I wish I hadn't studied up so on the new weapons. They're putting the new ships in service, and—But I'm not supposed to talk about it."

Early Monday morning she drew her wedding issue of clothes: tan linen blouse and slacks; nylox underthings and pajamas; woven sandals and nylox anklets.

As she dallied under the shower she felt guilty, for production had to go on, and every moment she lost had to be made up somewhere.

He came for her at mid-morning and they went before the Council and said their vows. Afterwards they flew above plains and ruins until they reached a city that had not been wholly destroyed. She waited while he filed their identification with the Council and the command post, and then went with him to a huge building which seemed almost devoid of life.

Their suite was luxurious beyond her imagining, and it increased the sense of guilt and unrest in her be-

ing. During the next day and part of the third, as they wandered through galleries and planetariums and stellar-domes, she thought often of the girls at the machines in the factories.

His orders came in the afternoon. She returned to the factory alone.

If such were possible, she worked harder now. Her birthday had come and gone and she was on a sixteen-hour shift. She didn't mind because she wanted the men to have everything they needed to win and hasten the day when the big job would be done.

Food rations became less each day. At first there was grumbling among the trainees, but it died out in the knowledge that sacrifices were necessary and that boys and girls were sharing alike.

The uniforms of the trainees began to look worn. The men no longer seemed quite as big and handsome and vital as they once had.

And then the orders came for clinical tests. The Supreme Council sought an answer to why children were not being born.

THROUGH June she had hoped, and again in July, but in August she was convinced that she wasn't going to become a mother. And when the request came for volunteers to work eighteen and

twenty hours, she took twenty. There were times when she couldn't sleep and wanted to be doing something. This feverishness was shared by others. They seemed almost hysterically eager to produce more, to provide everything the men needed.

The man who registered the volunteers was grim and his eyes were blood-rimmed. As she came out she heard him mutter to another, "There's a breaking point somewhere. We're driving them far beyond their strength."

The other came back, "It's that or death—maybe both."

She got her test in September. It said simply that she was fertile.

Christmas came again, but this time there was no free hour to sing carols. It was like any other day, and the meditation hours on Sunday were discontinued.

A series of strikes came in quick succession, but the protection was better and there was insulation against the pressure. She spent long hours with others huddled in padded dungeons a mile below the surface. She got so she could sleep through the strikes when they were not too close to the factory.

Alfred came back in February. He looked much older, but his hair was not totally gray and his features were not wrinkled. He arranged for special accommodations, and late that night when he took

off his clothes she saw the scars. It was the first time she had cried since her mother's death.

He chuckled her under the chin and said, "This is nothing. You should've seen me before the surgeons got through."

The Council and the Center clashed over the rule that girls should not be permitted to work more than sixteen hours when their husbands were on leave. The Center won, claiming it was a morale factor, and she went back to a sixteen-hour shift.

The age to go out was lowered to fourteen and a half and it was announced that the next class would be thirteen and a half. Boys now were going out with half the training earlier ones had had.

When it was announced that production was catching up and that girls might be permitted to volunteer for training she mentioned it to Alfred. And that was the first time she ever saw his features show fear.

"No, Sue," he said. "Don't even think of it. You can't conceive of what it is."

In irritation she demanded, "Tell me about the Zeelites."

He looked startled. "You mustn't think about them. That's why we are fighting, so our women won't ever have to see one."

"But I have to know."

He understood her thoughts, as

he had in the past, and finally said, "I shan't describe them because there is nothing on Earth to compare them with, and a picture of one would give you nightmares. They have remarkable minds but no emotions. They can concentrate on a single objective and persevere toward it with unbelievable endurance. They are almost incapable of suffering pain and as a result are cruel beyond imagining. They hardly know fear and are terrible fighters. Because they lack a faculty for caution we can trick them, and often we pick up their thoughts and know their plans in advance. Those are the things that have enabled us to survive, for they seem to number as the stars."

"Where did they come from?"

"Andromeda, originally. We know that they spread through the Milky Way millions of years ago. They wiped out life in their paths and colonized. There is evidence to indicate they struck the Solar System at that time. There are things to show they denuded Mars and attenuated its atmosphere. Earth may not have been sufficiently developed then to interest them. We don't know. We know that when Earth began colonizing the planets of other suns in our own galaxy the Andromedians didn't take much notice at first. But as our strength grew they decided

we were a threat. More than a quarter of a century ago they struck suddenly and wiped out hundreds of colonies.

"We were weak at first and our expeditionary forces were annihilated. But we were fast building strength and when they turned toward the Solar System we met them well out. They had not expected so much strength and were turned back.

"Then the race began to build up, and the struggle has been going on since. The tide has turned first one way and then the other, but the populace of Earth has slaved and starved itself to produce ships and man them, and to make better weapons, and the time is drawing near—Sue, I'm not supposed to talk to you like this."

"But, Al, I've heard all those things before: that all we need is just more time, more work and sacrifices."

"Sue, there are forces at work—"

"I know. You've told me that, too, that there are forces at work I don't know about."

The lines of pain showed in his features. Suddenly she realized she was on the verge of tears. She put her arms around him and murmured, "Al, I'll never say anything like that again. I promise."

"No, Sue, don't promise that. Just promise you'll never volunteer to go out, and try not to think of

the Zeehites."

"I promise."

When his orders came and she moved back to the dormitory and went back to the twenty-hour shift, she cried again. It was the third time since the big strike and she began to wonder if she was weaker than others.

THE Fourth Sector established headquarters on Earth and by the middle of April she began to see more men, black, red, yellow, white. All spoke the same language, but their dialects and intonations varied extensively.

She learned to distinguish the guttural of the Teutons, the clipped speech of the Norsemen, the rolling, laughing talk of the Eskimos, the singsong of the Chinese, the jerky tongued-tied speech of the Japanese, the soft tones of the Latins, the softer still of the Africans, all in some way differing from the even, forthright but restrained, speech of the North Americans.

She was particularly fascinated by the Indians. Many were taller and broader than the Americans and were said to be good spacemen and courageous fighters.

They were free to go anywhere when on leave, and nearly a hundred were assigned to the factory-Center dining hall. They were friendly, didn't mind the crowding, and told strange stories of their

homelands. Sometimes they spoke of space battles, but generally were as reticent on this subject as the Americans.

As time went on Sue lost weight. The curves of her willowy figure became less noticeable, and toward June she became more introspective. One day she came out of a reverie to realize she had been staring at a boy across the table. He was small, dark and had noticeably bright brown eyes. His lower features, his slender neck, his undeveloped arms and shoulders told her that he couldn't possibly be over fourteen.

This was not what held her attention. She was staring at the two ribbons tied at his throat and the two stars on the breast of his uniform. As she studied his eyes again she was suddenly shocked into the realization that, however many years he had lived, he was a man full grown, aged by experience out in the void. What his eyes had seen had burned into his soul.

She was ashamed of her own weakness, and determined henceforth to keep her hands from trembling to remain more alert and to make her machine produce more.

Soon after she went back to work a man came and handed her two ribbons. She stared unbelievably, murmured, "Al," and then it seemed that the floor came

up to meet her.

She awoke in her own bed in the dormitory and remained there. The dorm mother came to talk, told her she must rest for another day.

"Al," she breathed, dry-eyed and feverishly. "Al."

The woman explained that the ribbons were not for Al, but for her father who had died somewhere out near Pluto.

She rolled over on her face, but couldn't cry. There were no tears left in her.

A doctor came and gave her an injection and the following day she went back to work.

She got word indirectly that Al was back. A girl told her that she had heard it from one of the boys from the Center. "They carried him out of the ship," she said.

Sue refused to believe it. She set her jaw firmly and determined to wait. Late in the afternoon a man with a groundcar came and told her she was wanted at Recovery Seven Oh Six.

She still couldn't believe it, but went with him calmly.

They told her at Recovery that Al would someday walk again and that they would give him a new left arm, if not of flesh, then mechanical. His lungs had been crushed by pressure, but such was the fire of life in him that he would live and maybe fight again.

SHE went forty-eight hours without sleep in order to be with him all of the time she wasn't working. On the third day his lone good arm came round her and drew her down on the bed, and she slept on his shoulder.

From time to time she overheard nurses and doctors talking. The talk was usually about a subject that would always stir a woman.

"If no babies are born," one said, "for fifty years—"

"That's the length of time it's calculated to work," a doctor explained. "It's devilship. We've prepared surprises for them, but they've given us the worst. It doesn't kill the sperm, it paralyzes it or puts it in a sort of suspended state. Think of it! A boy two years old now will be infertile until he's about fifty-two. Then, if he's healthy, the sperm will revive. Our studies indicate he will be perfectly able to become a father. But by that time hardly a woman on Earth will be able to produce the ovum. Some rare cases, but mankind will vanish anyway."

"The women are fertile now?"

"Yes. And will be until they reach the menopause. But all of them will have passed it before men become fertile again."

"Isn't there some way to delay the menopause?"

"Everything will be tried, of

course. But the cellular breakdown and many other factors have to be taken into account. It's well-nigh hopeless. But somebody might eventually hit on something to revive the sperm earlier, though it's likely the Zeehites made certain it can't be done."

Sue asked the doctor if Alfred was suffering. He shook his head. "No pain whatever. We've taken care of that. And he'll soon be up. Has a fierce determination to live, and, looking at you, I understand why."

She asked other questions. His replies were abrupt and reflected his exhaustion and preoccupation with matters of broader import.

Commuting between the factory and Recovery was time-consuming and tiring and she was forbidden to visit Al more than once a week. She told him about it. Strangely, he made no protest, begged her to get every moment of rest she could.

She asked for audience with the Council. Days passed and no word came. She tried again, and when they received her she understood the delay. They were hardly able to keep themselves awake.

"Babies," one mumbled. "Everybody has some answer to the problem. Worthless. But say what you have to say and if it has any merit we'll pass it to the Upper Council."

"I don't have the answer to babies," she said, "but I think I understand why people die."

They showed interest.

"They get tired," she said. "That's all. They just get tired. That's what breaks down the cells and makes them die."

They looked at one another, back at her. "We know all of you girls are exhausted. It can't be helped. We have to work on. We need time. Just a little while longer."

She tried again, explaining over and over, trying to make them understand why people die, and why they might remain young longer if things were different. They shook their heads. Finally she flared, "Send it on to the Upper Council as I've explained it."

That brought an inkling of a smile. "That's the spirit," they agreed. "We can never lose while we have that spirit."

They agreed to send her idea, however worthless, up the line.

EARLY in the fall Alfred was up and able to come to the factory dining hall. He hadn't got his new arm yet, but his leg worked fine and he seemed to have no trouble at all with his breathing. His hair was iron gray, but he was still handsome, his features unwrinkled. He wore two ribbons, was shown deference by high ranking officers,

and at times went away on mysterious errands.

Three men came while he was away and handed her a paper. It read merely: "Presence required at Nether Polaris."

She asked questions, but the men shook their heads, seemed impatient, urged her to hurry.

She went with them in a ground-car to a blackened plain. Memories rushed back and brought terror, but they paid no attention, led her to an atmosphere craft. They flew high above the clouds for hours, and when they came down and broke into the clear she could see nothing but endless reaches of gleaming white. The positions of the stars told her she was somewhere near the North Pole.

The craft landed near a dome which gleamed like the remainder of the expanse. They bundled her in thick heavy furs, hurried her across the snow to the dome, then removed the wraps.

It was like summer inside the dome, and she went with the men to a shaft and got into a car which carried them miles down through the frozen ocean and into the earth. When the car stopped and they came out she held her breath. The place looked like a beautiful painting of a sparkling city that had never known war.

The final surprise sent tremors through her. They told her she

was going before the Supreme Council.

In a large plastic hall she stood before the twelve and an array of advisers. Not a one looked more than forty, but the hair of most was white and in their eyes was that look that told her they had been out in the void.

"Wilson Wildress Rover Alfred?" a man inquired.

Sue admitted that was her name.

"An idea you have suggested may be of great value. We have brought you here to discuss it further."

She was dumbfounded.

"It seems that you may have found an answer to cellular breakdown which brings on age. Will you give us your impression of why men die?"

She groped for words. "They just grow tired," she said. "I asked the doctor at Recovery why men die. He said that medical science had not found the answer. He said that the body was able to reproduce every cell of itself and did that many times during one lifetime. But eventually men grow tired and die."

"And what was it that you concluded made them tired?"

"Gravity," Sue said simply. "That constant pull we fight against. It—"

"Wait!"

There were hurried movements.

A comfortable couch was pushed forward.

"Will you please relax, Mrs. Wilson? We have your complete record. We know exactly how you've worked."

Sue shook her head. "I'll still be tired, no matter how much I relax. Gravity still goes on, pulling us down. One day I'll die, not because I'm old, but because I'm tired."

"One of you gentlemen please place another pillow behind her," said a Councilman. "Now, Mrs. Wilson, we are going to place this matter in the hands of our scientists. We want you to remain here."

"But I have to go back. I'm needed in the factory."

"They'll make out, Mrs. Wilson."

"But I know those machines, just as our men know their ships. I can make them produce. I'm valuable in the factory."

"You are indeed, but we have another task for you."

"But Alfred? He'll—"

"Your husband is waiting for you in a ship which is almost ready to go out."

"Out? But Alfred? He mustn't ever fight again. You can't make him do that. Send me instead. I promised him, but—send me in his place."

"We are sending you both, Mrs.

Wilson. And I think it is proper to assure you that the tide has turned."

"Oh!"

"Just a little more time. Just a little more work."

"Oh!"

"For nearly two years the balance of strength has been swinging in our favor. We have purposely let ships through in the later years, but those that got inside the orbit of Uranus never got out again. The attrition has at last given us overwhelming strength, for we have produced."

The man paused. Sue sat numb.

Another spoke: "We have been building up a Fifth Sector, part of it on Earth and part near Polaris. It has been the best kept secret of the age. But the Earthside part of it has been in action. It can no longer remain a secret. We are going to strike. We are going to lure the enemy in close and then envelope him. It will be much like the big strike which occurred nearly two years ago. But this time we will crush him. We have finally produced the new weapons."

"Oh!"

"And now, if you are ready, the men will take you to the ship."

SUE moved in a daze. Somewhere up the shaft toward the surface they changed to a car that ran horizontally on a rail. They

came out, miles away, in a huge dome in the center of which was a converted warship.

In the ship she found Albert. He had his new arm and held her close for a long moment.

"I know the machines in the factories," she said. "I've lived with them most of my life, but I won't know how to operate the weapons. You'll have to show me."

"Huh?"

"You'll have to show me how to fight, Al. I've thought about it, but I just can't understand it."

"Fight? Sue the fighting is almost over. I couldn't tell you. It's been a secret. The last battle is in the making now. You can't even dream of the forces we've assembled. They can jolt planets out of their orbits, burst suns. This is the beginning of the future I've wanted to tell you about."

"I'll do my best, Al. I'll try—"

"Sue, look at me. You're not going to fight. Neither am I. This ship is going into an orbit about the planet."

"The lower ring, the last one before the ground defenses?"

"No, Sue. Open your mind just a moment and let me see inside you."

"Hold me."

Finally he understood and explained: "This ship is to go into an orbit to nullify gravity. Science

doesn't have to depend on trial and error. They can calculate a thing mathematically and predict the results. They worked out your idea that gravity is what breaks down the cells. The answer is that the body will not age so long as it replaces its cells and gets rid of its old ones. To free the body of gravity will slow down the cellular breakdown. In ten years you won't age as much as you would in one in a field of gravity. Is it clear?"

"Will that postpone the change of life?"

"Medical science is certain that it will. It devolves upon aging."

"Does that mean that I'll —"

"It does, Sue. It means that about fifty years from now when the sperm revives in men, you women will have children again."

"But Al, we'll be—"

"No, Sue. We'll feel and look about as we ordinarily would in our twenties. And thousands, millions of ships, will soon be released to be converted. A whole populace will live in ships—at least until children begin being born."

"Will we—"

"Yes, Sue. We'll have a few ounces of weight in the orbit. Our cells will more than replace themselves. We'll adjust to it, carry along hydroponic plants and everything we need. We'll be strong and vigorous, with nothing much

to do but study, work out new things in the arts and sciences, and—"

"And what, Al?"

"Make love."

"Oh!" she said. "Deep inside me I've always believed in that

bright future. I was trying to remember that each tomorrow would bring it closer."

"The big job is almost done, Sue. Let's keep on remembering tomorrow."

"Hold me close, Al."

THE END

INTRODUCING The Author

★ *Hal Annas* ★

(Concluded from Page 2)

the millrace, bringing ducks and fish, and pouring into the buckets of the waterwheel. The wheel would creak and groan and strain and labor and begin to turn. The wheels inside the mill would go faster and faster, the grinding stones would begin to sing, the millhouse would shake, the ducks would quack, the fish leap.

The corn would be crushed by the whirling stones and the meal would come out and go through the sifter, separating the husk. The miller would then take his share, as toll for the grinding, up to the house on the hill where his wife would make part of it into cornbread and where he would make the remainder into a mash that would later become a nourishing liquid. Thus he lived off the

fat of the land, always with plenty to eat—and drink.

This Golden Age was in some dim past—the first year of my life! The remainder can be summarized briefly.

It is customary to list schools attended. I never was very ignorant and didn't need to go to school. I did go five years, though, and became marble champion.

We were told then that boys that got educated would become president. It was a responsibility I didn't want. I quit and went to work. I've been working at one thing and another since, mostly news reporting.

That ought to be alibi enough for just about anything.

—Hal Annas