

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES MAGAZINE

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Judgment day

BY CHAD OLIVER

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

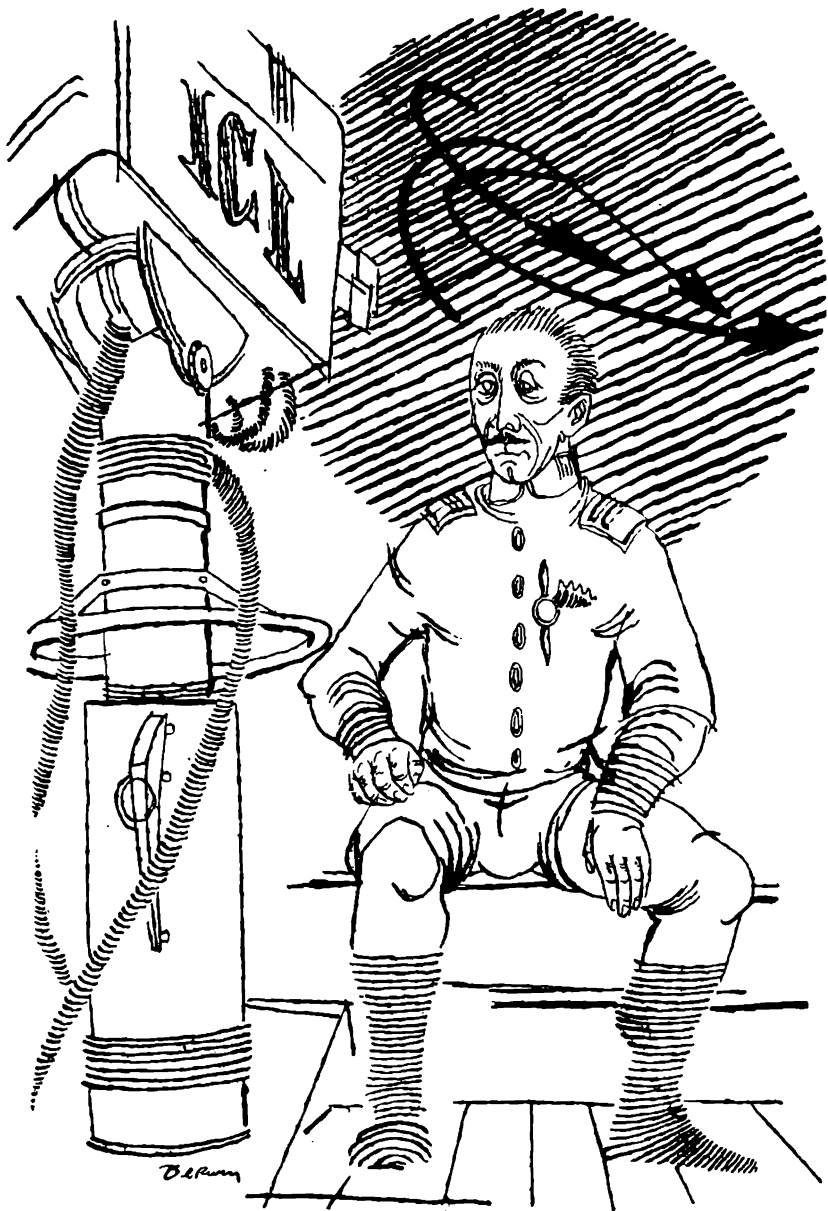
Bobby's father thought he had found the flaw in his son's dreams of TV spaceships. After all, in space, what could the rocket push *against*? But Bobby still knew that Captain Jet had a real ship out there!

A quarter to five, Earth time. The black spider's legs of night squat behind the hills near Centerton, ready to march.

D-Day minus three. The silver spear of the *Titan* swims through velvet in the Sol system, between Mars and the Earth. A picked crew prepares to go into action, and a man in an oddly melodram-

atic uniform checks a code message for the last time.

Six units, Galactic Standard Time. The great, lumbering behemoths of the Occupation Fleet roll lazily through space, far beyond Pluto. Tight beam contacts flash through nothingness. Culture area experts pore over charts in silent planning rooms.



Two spacemen laugh softly at some secret jest and wonder about home.

Night on Nrando, Galactic Communications Center. A club, bathed in semi-darkness. Music. The tinkle of glasses. A faint, curious air of impatience, of annoyance, of waiting. . .

"Fantastic that it went on so long."

"Good that they caught it in time."

"Confounded nuisance, that's what I say."

"How can people be so stupid?"

"Danger Potential One—too close for comfort!"

"Oh, I do hope this doesn't drag on like that Procyon affair. . ."

"Psychotic. . ."

"Training. . ."

"Oh, listen! That's our song. . ."

"Earth! Of all the crazy foolishness! Robbing the taxpayer's money, that's what it is. Who ever heard of Earth, that's what I want to know. Where in the hell IS it?"

A quarter to five, Earth time.

Bobby Carter glanced at the clock and swung off the bed with a thump, knocking his decoder button to the floor. He picked it up and put it in his shirt pocket. A quarter to five

—he'd better hurry or he'd miss it. He hid his special assignments and operational charts away behind the magazines in his closet—not that they weren't in the secret code, of course, but it wouldn't do to have them found by just *anybody*.

The Old Space Ranger said so. "Bob-by!"

Mom. Why couldn't she leave a guy alone? Probably wanted him to do some fool thing just when the Old Space Ranger was coming on. Parents never understood anything—fortunately.

"Coming," he muttered, charging down the stairs. Mrs. Carter was waiting in the kitchen—a bad place—and she was tapping her foot. Bobby braced himself for the attack.

"You look here," she launched herself. "You march right back up those stairs and get your room cleaned up this minute. It's a disgrace, that room is, and I'm hot and tired and I will *not* clean it up again. We can't afford a cleaning robot like the Bensons have, not on the wages your father makes, but let me tell you—"

"Not now, Mom," Bobby pleaded. "The Old Space Ranger is on."

"I don't care whether your space ranger is on or off, and I'm sure he can struggle along without your help just this once. And

must you wear that infernal cap pistol around the house?"

"It's not a cap pistol," Bobby said levelly. "It's a paralysis gun."

"I don't care what it is, take it off. Now you get upstairs, you hear me?"

"No," said Bobby Carter

His mother glared at him.

"You don't understand," he tried to explain. "I'd lose my commission and space rating and miss out on the code message."

"My heart bleeds for you," his mother said without conviction.

"*Listen* to your Old Space Ranger, then. But when it's over you're going to clean that lovely room of yours!"

Bobby was already out of the kitchen, hardly giving the electric eye time to open the door before him. "It's a *crummy* room," he shouted to no one in particular. "All fixed up like a sailor's cabin and everything. A *sea* sailor, suffering jets!"

He raced across the living room. Just in time! Breathlessly, he switched on the TV set.

The big white screen flickered briefly and there he was. Not the Old Space Ranger yet, of course. Just Captain Jet, his assistant, in that swell silver and black uniform.

"Howdy, pardners," drawled Captain Jet, smiling lazily with

his famous crooked grin. "I know all of you cadets are anxious to get on with the Old Space Ranger's story of how he brought law and order to the galaxy, and to get your orders for today—super secret orders this time, so be ready with your decoders!—so old Captain Jet won't take much of your time. Nossir, it's just like it was down there in Texas, where I hail from. You don't have to *tell* folks down thataway how good those two jet-propelled breakfast foods are, not by a long beam! You just set a heaping bowlful of Puffed Atoms or Martian Mush down on that old table, and *they'll* do the talking for us. The Old Space Ranger and I know that you cadets wouldn't eat any other kind."

"Of course not," Bobby agreed indignantly, hitching up his paralysis pistol.

"And that's just the scientific thing to do, friends," Captain Jet said easily. "The Old Space Ranger and I have *proved*—you saw the tests yourselves, and you watched little Johnny rip into those space pirates after a heaping bowlful—that after a long, hard space flight there's just nothing like Puffed Atoms or Martian Mush to pick a fellow up. Remember, Martian Mush is grown right on the planet Mars, and Puffed Atoms are a product

of good old Earth. You make sure Mom's got a good supply on hand." Captain Jet winked broadly. "You know what to do."

"You bet," Bobby Carter said, fingering his paralysis pistol.

"And now—stand by!" Captain Jet was suddenly grim-faced and stern again, the way he had been when he had tangled with the Spider-Men of Neptune. "Cadets, attention! Here are your orders for today."

Bobby Carter held his breath, pencil poised above his order book.

"Key 7-F," Captain Jet said clearly. "Ready? Here we go. Four, sixteen, eighty-one, eleven. . ."

The numbers came steadily out of the TV set and into the living room. They were loud and plain and undisguised. Bobby got them all down, and then replaced the order book in his pocket. Business being over, he sat forward as though glued to the TV set for twenty thrill-packed minutes while the Old Space Ranger raced over the system in his special ship, the *Titon*. Boy, what a ship! It had atomic engines and light drives and obliterators and *everything*. It was the real McCoy, all right. You couldn't fool a kid on anything like that. It made the studio ships on the other programs look silly and

childish—but then, of course, that couldn't be helped. They didn't have *real* ones.

You must always try to be fair—that's what the Old Space Ranger said.

After the adventure, the Old Space Ranger himself came forward to talk to him. Not just to him, not really—but it always seemed that way. He was tall and lean with iron gray hair and eyes the color of deep space. He talked softly, with conviction. There was no posing, no ham. He talked straight, and what he said was right. You *knew* it was right.

Bobby smiled happily, his heart thousands of miles away. Just think—he'd get to meet him someday, someday *soon*, get to shake his hand and ride in the control room and learn all about outlawing war. He could hardly wait. But he must be patient, of course.

That was one of the rules.

"Well, cadets," the Old Space Ranger said, looking Bobby straight in the eye, "the big day isn't far off. You decipher your orders and report to headquarters and your chance will come. We're counting on you, and we know you won't let us down—won't let *yourselves* down. Now, more than ever, we must stand together. So let's all repeat the pledge. Cadets, *attention!*"

Bobby Carter got to his feet and stood at attention. Mrs. Carter peered in from the kitchen and shook her head sadly.

Slowly and with feeling, Bobby Carter repeated the Old Space Ranger's words: "As a loyal cadet, I pledge myself to guard the secrets of the Space Ranger Club from all outsiders. I will be honest and brave and work to make a better world. I will study my lessons and do my best to understand, without prejudice and without fear. In so doing, I dedicate myself to the stars."

"That's all for today, friends," said the Old Space Ranger, smiling at him. "Clear jets!"

Bobby Carter switched off the set.

"Bob-by!"

But Bobby Carter was already in his room, busily decoding his orders for the day.

One day passed, and night came again.

"Harold."

Harold Carter looked up from the sports page of the *Evening Sentinel*, his frown seeming to extend in folds all the way across the top of his shiny bald head.

"Harold, I was reading."

"Good," said Harold Carter, reburying himself in his paper.

"I was reading where television and funny books and that

new tri-di thing are taking the modern child away from his parents," Mrs. Carter went on doggedly. "I've been thinking, Harold. Bobby's seemed so strange lately—so different. He's so *sure* of himself, and we never see him or play with him or anything. Harold."

"Ummm."

"I'm worried about Bobby. What's he like, what's he think about? I'm sure I don't know. He gets all his ideas from that Old Space Stranger or whatever he is. All he does is study those silly charts and codes and plans and goodness only knows what else. And he never goes anywhere without that cap gun of his—he even sleeps with it under the pillow. Harold."

"Oh, it isn't anything, Ida."

"I just don't know, Harold. Bobby seems to *know* so much, and all that funny talk of his about a better world and peace and equality—he takes it all so seriously, Harold, he *believes* it. It's all right to talk about those things in Church, or make speeches about them, of course, but after all. . ."

Harold Carter, sensing defeat, reluctantly put down his paper. "Look Ida," he explained patiently, "It used to be Hopalong Cassidy, and before that I guess it was Buffalo Bill or King Arthur or Adam. Kids are just

kids, that's all. I used to have a decoder button myself, and I used to lug around a Buck Rogers disintegrator pistol that was almost as big as I was. It's nothing to worry about."

"I just don't know, Harold. The boy knows so many facts. . ."

"Facts!" snorted Mr. Carter, pausing to fire up his pipe. "Why, he even thinks he can fly to another planet in a rocket ship! Let me tell you, this is 1995 and not the year 3000. All that stuff may come someday, but it won't be in *our* lifetimes." He blew a cloud of smoke at Mrs. Carter, probably accidentally. "Now, I'm all for this peace and equality stuff just the same as anybody, but there's a time and a place for everything. There have always been wars, and there always will be, whether we like it or not. I'm just as broad-minded as the next man, but I think that the sooner Bobby learns some of the practical facts of life, instead of all that hooey about the stars, the better off he's going to be."

"I just have a feeling," began Mrs. Carter.

"We all have feelings," Mr. Carter told her. "They come from the nervous system." He picked up his paper again.

"Please, Harold—put the paper down for just a minute."

"Why?" he asked her.

Mrs. Carter, unable to think of a good reason, retreated into the ancient wisdom of the race. She began to cry, softly at first, but working up to a first-class moan.

"Damn it," Harold Carter said without passion. He tossed his paper down on the floor and folded his hands. "Stop it, Ida. Please."

Mrs. Carter sensed a momentary advantage, and long experience had taught her to make good use of it. "The least you could do," she sniffed, "if you still loved me, would be to go upstairs and see if Bobby cleaned out his room like he was supposed to. He was out last night to a Space Stranger meeting, and he's out again tonight. I'm so tired from tubing groceries all day. . ."

"Never mind the routine," Harold Carter said, with all the resignation of a martyr taking a swan dive into the lion pit. "I'm going."

Mrs. Carter sighed.

Outside, the winds whispered softly in the trees, and the stars twinkled silently in the night.

His son's room was trim and shipshape, with the brown bunk bed neatly made and the floor swept clean. The mariner's desk was tidy for once, and the photograph of the Old Space Ranger hung straight on the nautical

wallpaper. Even the clothes were hanging properly in the closet.

"Well," said Harold Carter.

Curiously, he pawed through the stacks of magazines on the closet shelves—they were all science fiction, naturally—and exhumed a rash of space ranger materials. Kids always thought they were being very clever in hiding things like that, but then they weren't the first kids ever to come into the world. Harold Carter smiled and carried a pile of the papers over to the desk. He switched on the small ship lantern so he could see more clearly, and sat down on the undersized, frankly dubious chair.

He couldn't make head nor tail of the complicated diagrams and operational charts, and all the messages were in code. But he did find a duplicate decoder button and an important looking leather-bound booklet with the code key still visible where it had been inexpertly erased on the flyleaf.

"Son, son," murmured Mr. Carter sadly, "a fine secret agent you are."

What the devil, he thought. It was better than going back downstairs to the Inquisition; Ida would have to have her cry. He hesitantly began to decode the first page, which was in elaborate script and seemed to

be a directive of some kind. It took time, but it wasn't overly difficult.

He opened the window by his side, letting the wind whisper into the room. Half unconsciously, he listened to the city around him. He heard the hum of helicopter blades, the rustling of leaves in the big trees that lined the street outside, the buzz of a robo-prowl car. There was soft summer laughter from a porch two houses down, the far-off whistle of a mail rocket, the clatter and bang of the kids riding their jet cycles over on Edmonds Avenue. How many years, he wondered, how long a time, between man and boy? Almost, it seemed that he were young again, in his own room. . .

But the mood wouldn't stick. The years were there, and he couldn't erase them. He finished decoding the page and read the translation, smiling to himself.

Of all the nonsensical stuff—

But he kept on decoding.

Nine o'clock, Earth time. A silver moon shines down on the hanging lights of Centerton.

D-Day minus two. The *Titan* floats between Mars and the Earth, a beehive of activity, getting ready.

Eight units, Galactic Standard Time. The black fish of the Occupation Fleet slither through

the deeps off Uranus. Signals flash and hum.

Midnight on Nrando. A brightly-lit, official looking room. Two men sit alone at a long table, talking. They seem tired and both smoke too much.

"Well, the children are only a small part of the operation."

"I hate to use them at all; they're such a bother to work with."

"It's necessary, I'm afraid. We've got to begin with the children, because the older people are too set in their ways to adjust to the problems of non-Earthly civilization. The children must be trained, must be made to understand, must be educated to realize that our way is the only civilized way, must be taught that Earth is a barbaric planet—that must reform. They are the ones that must take over the Earth eventually, when our work is done. This way, perhaps we can accomplish it in a single generation."

"Sometimes I almost think it would be better to let them alone, let them work things out in their own way. . ."

"Their own way! What way is that, may I ask? Our tests show that they've got nuclear fission and are on the verge of space travel—and at the same time are still on the brink of warring with each other! No one muddles

through with that kind of a situation, my friend, and they have no plans. It just takes one mistake."

"But we know so little about them, really. And when I look at what we've done to Procyon—with the best intentions in the world, of course—I can't help wondering. . ."

"Don't question the Plan, my friend. You know that it is the best, the only scientific way. We are right and they are wrong, and that's all there is to it. It simply won't do to let a backward planet like Earth get into space with nuclear fission and primitive war patterns. They are incapable of controlling themselves, and this is only self defense on our part—preventive war, if you will."

"That isn't all, of course."

"No. They'd blow themselves up eventually if let alone. But we are not savages, my friend. We are civilized, and therefore it is our duty to save them from themselves."

"And confer upon them the ultimate blessing of being just like we are. It seems sort of egotistical."

"Nonsense. This is all planned with the utmost care for their benefit. You seem to be questioning the Plan again, my friend."

"Sorry. No offense. Come on, my friends, it's getting late."

"Yes. It's getting quite late."
Nine o'clock, Earth time.

There was a sudden electric swish as the door flew open.

"What are you doing at my desk?"

Harold Carter turned around, the leather-bound booklet still in his hand. Bobby stood in the doorway, very pale, his blond hair touseled, grease marks on his clothes. He was breathing too fast.

"It won't work, you know," Harold Carter told him quietly. "It won't work at all."

Bobby tensed in the shadow of the doorway. As though suffering from shock, he backed a little into the hall. One hand uncertainly brushed the butt of the paralysis gun at his hip. His forehead glistened with sweat.

"What are you talking about?"

"This," said Harold Carter, indicating the pile of papers on the desk. "It's hopeless."

The black shadows choked the hall behind Bobby, waiting to grab and tear at him. His heart pounded in his throat.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, son," said Harold Carter, getting slowly to his feet and moving toward him, "I think you'd better forget it."

Bobby tensed, not sure of how to proceed. His father came closer, his hand extended. He

touched Bobby's shoulder. Bobby could feel the ice sliding through his veins.

"Forget? Forget *what*?"

"Come now, son, be reasonable. Don't play dumb. *Spaceships*, of course. What else *would* I be talking about after reading all that stuff?"

"Spaceships?"

"Of course. Now look here, son. I'm not trying to be cruel or anything—you understand that, don't you?—but it's time you faced up to some of the practical realities of this world you're living in. I've got just one question to ask you, and you can't answer it. It's the key to the whole thing."

"Question?"

"That's right, question. Now, spaceships are propelled by rockets, just like the mail rockets, right?"

"Well—"

"But they're supposed to go through empty space, right?"

"I suppose you could—"

"Very well, then. *What do they push against out there?* There isn't any air in space—let me tell you, you're not the only one around here who knows something about science."

Bobby Carter stumbled over and collapsed on the bed, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

"There now, son," said Harold Carter, patting him on the head.

"Don't take it so hard. You get a good night's rest, and you'll forget all about it in the morning. Good night, Bobby."

"Good night, Dad."

Harold Carter left the room. He could hear Bobby coughing and gasping on the bed—crying his eyes out, the poor kid. He hated to do that to Bobby—but he had to learn sometime.

Another day passed, and night returned.

Bobby Carter took off his space ranger uniform cap and wiped his forehead, pushing the damp hair out of his eyes. It was hot in the club house they had built from plastic Martian Mushroom boxes in the big empty lot next to Fitzgerald's. The little hanging light in the center of the room was off-center and shifted uncertainly up and down and around and sideways, throwing grotesque shadows on the uneven walls.

"I guess that about does it," Bobby said, pushing back the last of the reports they had been working on.

"We're all ready now," said Dave Toney.

"Ready for the *real* contest tomorrow!" beamed Jim Walls, downing a bottle of Luna Cola at one gulp.

"Boy," exclaimed Dave Toney, wiping the grease off his hands

on a grimy shirt-tail, "just think—"

A little red light flashed over the door.

"Someone's coming," whispered Bobby Carter.

They listened. Big, heavy, adult footsteps crunched down the path. A pause. Mr. Fitzgerald, big and burly in his trim business cloak, stuck his head in the door.

"What's going on in here?" he boomed. "You kids been working like beavers all night. Not up to anything, are you?"

"Gosh, no," Bobby told him. "We're just carrying out our secret orders and everything."

"I see. What's that thing in the corner? It looks expensive. I wouldn't want you boys stealing anything, you know."

The little group was pale and tense under the hanging light.

"That's a communicator to send in our reports with," Bobby Carter said steadily. The Old Space Ranger said that you must never lie. "We got it by sending in our box-tops."

"I see!" chuckled Mr. Fitzgerald tolerantly.

"We're just getting ready for the invasion," David Toney could not resist adding.

"Well, well, that's fine," boomed Mr. Fitzgerald. "Fine. Good night!"

"Good night, Mr. Fitzgerald."

Mr. Fitzgerald left and his footsteps crunched away up the path. The red light went out.

Everybody laughed.

"They just don't know *anything*," said Jim Walls.

"They can't help it," Dave Toney said seriously.

"That's it then, until tomorrow," Bobby Carter said. "You all know what to do when it happens?"

A chorus of excited yesses.

"Let's go home, then."

They fled out into the darkness, climbed on their jet cycles, and clattered away through the night. They banged down tree-arched streets under the hanging lights and lurched across dim short-cuts invisible to the untrained eye. They waved to the live policeman on the corner of Edmondson Avenue and vanished down the busy street, laughing and shouting in the summer night.

One week passed. The battle, such as it was, was over. The outcome, of course, was a foregone conclusion. Nothing in their training, history, or experience had prepared the vanquished for the forces arrayed against them. And, the victors assured themselves, it was all for the good of Earth itself.

Nothing had changed, outwardly. That was part of the

plan. The people of Earth, most of them, were not even aware that anything had happened. But a few knew, and waited for the inevitable.

Bobby Carter knew.

It was ten o'clock, past his bed-time, when the knock came at the door.

"Who's that?" asked Harold Carter, peering over his paper.

"Callers—at this hour?" questioned Mrs. Carter, half rising.

"They've come for me," Bobby Carter whispered, his eyes glowing. "They've come for *me*."

The knock at the door came again.

"What the devil," said Mr. Carter, standing up.

Bobby pressed the release, and the door swished open. A man walked into the Carters' living room, but he was no ordinary man. He was not of the earth.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Harold Carter, dropping his paper.

The man smiled. He was a tall man, tall and lean, with iron gray hair and eyes the color of deep space. He was dressed in an oddly melodramatic uniform of black and silver. He should have been absurd, standing there. He should have been like Santa Claus walking in on Christmas Day, just a gag.

But the Carters looked at his eyes and were unable to laugh.

"I've come for Bobby," the man said softly, "if he wants to go."

"If I *want* to go!" gasped Bobby, trembling visibly. "If I *want*—"

Harold Carter opened his mouth and nothing came out. He stopped, swallowed, and tried again. "Just a minute," he said, and his voice was a little too loud. "Just a *minute*."

The man smiled at him, his gray hair almost white under the light.

Confronted with an utterly, fantastically unprecedented situation, Harold Carter was at a loss for words. What *did* you say when Buck Rogers, or whoever he was, walked into your living room and announced that he had come for your son? He thought of several things, and finally settled for, "Who in the hell do you think you are, Mac?"

"Dad!" Bobby looked shocked.

The man in the uniform raised an eyebrow. "My name is Leighton," he said patiently, as though he had been through this many times before and was enacting a role that was somewhat tiresome. "May I sit down?"

"No," said Harold Carter firmly, rapidly losing what remained of his temper.

"Of course the man can sit down, if he's a friend of Bobby's," Mrs. Carter corrected him.

"Where are your manners?"
"Manners?"

The tall man sat down.

Harold Carter choked up again, stamped his foot, and forced his voice down to an audible frequency. "If I may be so crude, may I ask just what in the name of the seven blue blazes is going on in here?" he asked in a low, husky voice. "Of course, I just *live* here, that's all, and if I'm inconveniencing this gentleman from Mars . . ."

"Please," said the man softly, raising his hand. "I assure you that I'm not from the planet Mars, and—"

"I don't care *where* you're from," Harold Carter interrupted him bluntly, "but I hope they catch you and take you back."

Surprisingly, the man laughed. It was a good laugh, and everyone relaxed a little—everyone, that is, except Bobby, whose eyes were bigger than he was. "Evidently there's been some misunderstanding," the man said. "My apologies, sir, for an overly dramatic entrance. I assure you that it was not done intentionally." He glanced at Bobby reproachfully. "You see, I was under the impression that you had already been prepared for my coming."

Harold Carter shook his head. "Only in nightmares," he said,

and then lit his pipe for want of something better to do.

"I couldn't tell them," Bobby spoke up. "I just *couldn't*. They would have laughed."

The man shook his head. "Sometimes a man has to be laughed at, Bobby, if what he believes is worth believing."

"Yes, sir," said Bobby, ashamed.

"Look," said Harold Carter, a vein throbbing visibly in his forehead. "I like plays and all that, but I like to know when I'm *in* one. What are *my* lines?"

The man named Leighton sat back in his chair and lit his own pipe, which was somehow reassuring. At least he didn't just squirt flame out of his mouth, Harold Carter thought. Not yet, anyway.

"I think perhaps that I'd better begin at the beginning," the tall man said.

"By all means," Harold Carter approved. "Start with Adam, make yourself at home for a year or two, and bring us all up to date."

The man's eyes narrowed.

"Dad, Dad," Bobby whispered, a terrible fear in his voice. "You don't *understand*."

"No," the man said softly, "your father doesn't understand." He eyed Harold Carter evenly, and Mr. Carter looked away. "You see, Mr. Carter, I

have the advantage here. You know nothing about me, evidently, but I know everything about you. I know what you're thinking, what you will think, what you are going to say when I'm through, and what reasons you will have for never speaking of this visit to a living soul."

There was a long silence.

"I'm listening," Harold Carter said. "Give me the Word."

But for the first time, he began to doubt.

"You must first understand," the man began, "that six days ago an event took place that will have far-reaching consequences for this planet you live on. The event was long in the planning, and was executed with precision and dispatch.

"You see, the planet Earth was invaded from Outer Space."

Mr. and Mrs. Carter just stared at the man.

"I know that this is impossible for you to accept at the moment," the man called Leighton continued, "but positive proof will be forthcoming shortly, if it is needed. This is real, I am not a lunatic, and the sooner you face the facts the easier this will be for all concerned."

Harold Carter was suddenly conscious of the night wind outside, and he remembered with a cold shock the papers he had de-

coded in his son's room. *Could it possibly be . . .*

"It's quite true," the man said, reading his thoughts. "I see that you are more disposed to listen now. Very well. I will give you some facts, and you will do well to follow them carefully."

Bobby Carter listened intently, although he had heard all this many times before. It was the old story that the man from space told, the one they all knew by heart . . .

The planet Earth had achieved deadly potentialities too early, long before the bulk of the population was ready for them. It was one thing to fight little wars with each other, however senseless. It was something else again to blow up a planet or to carry your destruction away from the Earth to other worlds that lived in peace.

These were new problems that the Earth had to face, and new problems called for new solutions. It was not enough to merely pass laws and mutter pious proclamations. An entire new generation had to be trained to cope with a new world, a world living in an inhabited universe.

Secrecy and care were essential, of course. One mistake could be the last one, the only one. The new powers must not get into the old hands. A new people, a young people, must be educated

to guide the Earth out of chaos. There was only one new people on Earth.

The children.

The children had to be trained to face the future. They had to learn at last to avoid the old mistakes, the mistakes that could no longer be tolerated. Everyone agreed to that, but no one was willing to *really* do it.

But it had to be done. And it had to be done in a way that the children would understand and accept. It had to be presented to them in their own terms, and it had to be done fast. When the time came, the juvenile focus could be replaced with formal training, but the children had to *want* the training.

The older people, born and raised and moulded into the old patterns, didn't understand that their world was different, totally different. They *couldn't* understand. Their whole mental set was wrong, and could not be revamped overnight. Blunt, open action would have brought rebellions. Reformers, impractical idealists, were not the answer.

The techniques of science, of subtlety, had to be tried. It was necessary to discard what had proved to be impossible. It was necessary to try the possible, however fantastic it seemed to the mind of the layman.

The alternative was destruction.

When a boy had shown, by the reports he had turned in, that he was ready, that he really *understood*, it was time to give him a chance for formal training, so that he could take the lead in the world of tomorrow.

That was why the man had come for Bobby.

Bobby Carter could see his father and mother sitting entranced in the spell of the tall man's words. The man had been trained for his task, and he knew his business. His words, soft and even as they were, flowed together and became more than words. They became a picture, a living picture. They were alive, and they carried the Carters back.

Back to what had happened six days ago, far out in space. Back to the Occupation Fleet and what had brought it across the light years to Earth.

Bobby could *see* it, *feel* it, *hear* it. And he knew that the others could too . . .

Midnight, Earth time. Center-ton sleeps under a starry sky.

D-Day minus one. D-Day when an Earth clock ticks once more. The *Titan* hovers far above the Earth, waiting.

Ten and one half units, Galactic Standard Time. The Slim

cruisers of the Occupation Fleet bore past Mars, in normal space, bearing in for the kill. Men joke tensely or sleep fitfully in their bunks. The first few weeks are always hard . . .

Early morning on Nrando. An orange sun floats just below the horizon, turning the dawn clouds to flame. Men sit expectantly around a communicator, waiting.

"It's rather curious, you know. Barbaric as they are, they have one concept that exactly parallels what is going to happen to them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. An idea of infallible justice, that every man must one day face."

"And we are infallible justice, eh? What do they call it?"

"My friend, they call it Judgment Day."

D-Day.

The *Titan* swings into action, and she is not alone. From behind the silent moon, shadow shapes fall into position on white tongues of flame.

The confident cruisers of the Occupation Fleet decelerate in sudden uncertainty, just beyond the orbit of Mars. Ship commanders stare into their viewplates and do not believe what they see.

This is not part of the Plan.

The heavy equipment of the

Titan comes to life. A message electrifies the space between the two fleets.

The Occupation Fleet listen, incredulously:

"To the men of Nrando the men of Earth send greeting.

"We have long been expecting you.

"We desire no conflict, but tell you frankly that the scout ships of Nrando have been observed by this planet for fifty of our years. We tell you that we know why you have come.

"We tell you also that you must leave, on pain of death.

"The men of Earth have had spaceships for forty of our years, and the light drive for ten. Most people on our planet know nothing of this, nor do they know now what happens in the sky above their heads.

"What you have thought about us is true in part. We are young, and many of us are foolish. But the men of Earth have always solved their own problems, and will continue to do so. We will tolerate no invasion, whatever your intentions. Nor will it be possible for you to land on this planet at this time.

"We extend our pledge to you that man will never spread war to the stars from the planet Earth. That is our duty and not yours. We tell you further that we will speak of joining the Fed-

eration when we are ready for it—and when you are ready for it.

"We suggest to the men of Nrando that a civilization that is positive that its ways are right and all other ways wrong is not a civilization. You are not qualified to pass judgment, any more than we are.

"We tell you now to leave in peace.

"We will meet again.

"The alternative is death."

For a long, long moment there is nothing. The two fleets face each other in space, waiting. An invisible beam licks out from the *Titan* and a neat circle of blue energy flares into life before the invading cruisers.

The Occupation Fleet wavers. They are unprepared for what has happened. The Plan is no longer valid.

Slowly, carefully, the dark fish of the Occupation Fleet turn in a tight circle. Jets flare, and then the gray nothingness of the overdrives.

The Occupation Fleet is gone.

Morning on Nrando. The men by the communicator stare at each other blankly.

"It can't be, it can't be, it can't be."

"I'm afraid it is."

"It's impossible."

"It happened."

"But we made a mistake, a

mistake! Nrando does not make mistakes. We were doing it for them!"

"Not much of a mistake, my friend. Only a small mistake. It was as you said—Judgment Day. But it was not for Earth. It was for us."

On Earth, it is early morning.

"You have heard the story from the beginning," said the man from space. "I think you will understand now."

Mr. and Mrs. Carter jerked back to the present again with a visible effort. They were stunned, and their voices were gone. Doubt was forgotten now. There were some things in life that you *knew* were true.

The tall man smiled at them and got to his feet. "I see that you need no further proof," he said quietly, his strange dark eyes holding them like magnets. "And yet you will have your proof." He paused. "The decision, of course, is up to you. If you think what we have to offer is the life for your son, we will train him with us to be a leader in this new world we're living in. You yourselves will be taken care of, of course, and you will be able to see Bobby every summer. If your answer is still no, we will not trouble you further. And we would advise you not to speak of this to your friends, unless you

too wish to be thought insane."

The Carters couldn't answer that one, but the man's smile took the sting out of his words.

"You need not give me your answer now," the tall man said. "I will be back. And now, if you would be so kind as to accompany me—"

They followed him to the door and out into the night. Bobby stayed as close to the man as he could, hoping against hope that he would not be left behind.

"I'll be back, Bobby," the man said again.

A taut hum filled the air, very low, almost inaudible unless you were listening for it. A black shadow detached itself from the other shadows of the night and hovered down almost to the ground. There was a hiss and a portal opened. Yellow light splashed out into the darkness. The tall man stepped inside, waved once, and the portal hissed shut again. The shadow hummed and was gone.

There was silence.

Bobby held his breath for what seemed to be an infinity, waiting for the shuttle to join the mother ship. Perhaps, if he were lucky, he would be able to hear it when it happened. His parents stood behind him, waiting for they knew not what.

Would they let him go?

There! Suddenly, wonderfully,

he saw it. A tiny flash of flame, far, far above him. He didn't breathe, waiting. There—the sound and the feel. A faint roar lost in the night, and a wrench at his heart as the ship lifted upward into the starlit night.

Would they let him go?

Bobby knew that he had to go. One battle might send the Occupation Fleet back, but it could never hold them, unless there were other men trained to take up the job of protecting Earth. There were real ships up there and trained men in them who had been boys once. But more and more were needed.

Other mothers and fathers had decided, of course. They had been told the facts, and at least some of them had been willing to let their sons go out where Bobby wanted so desperately to join them.

But he remembered his father's amusement, and the way his mother had treated his need to watch the television regularly. Would they believe it all, even now? And if they did, would they give their permission? The cadets were told that most parents did, but his mother and father . . .

He turned and read the proud answer in their eyes.
