

# SPiRiT LAD

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### Chapter One

#### The End

Watertown, New York, in the year 2,020, was definitely not the place it used to be. With several threats of war after the big conflict a few years ago, most of the buildings had been redesigned to be built underground, with only one or two stories up above. The city seemed a dingy, depressing place. Even when the sun was shining most of the residents journeyed about with heads down, scurrying toward their destination, ignoring everything and everyone they did not have to see.

On the outskirts of the city near a large, green field was the building that aroused the attention of everyone in The United States. It used to be a grade school, and still appeared as such....red brick with white trimming. but inside was the potential hope for Earth's future. This place was now The Gray-Lockmore Institute Of Scientific Research. In the top security wing's huge laboratory The Rapid Matter Transport Project, the government's top secret effort, was slowly, meticulously being brought into existence.

Dr. Matthew Cooper had been appointed it's Supervisor. He was a determined, seemingly tireless man of great intelligence, who didn't appear the role, or, wish to. At age forty-five he was roughly handsome with curly brown hair which never seemed combed, he kept cut to his collar. He had brown eyes that twinkled when he smiled, accented by deep set crow's feet. At six feet he presented a strong, slightly overweight, clean shaven image, though his clothes were usually rumpled as he wasn't married and usually slept in them, concentrating on his project.

This is the way Dr. Cooper looked, then, hands stuffed in his pants pockets under his winter coat, dark scarf draped around his neck blowing in the slight breeze as he made his way to the lab this special morning. His quarters were near the lab so he always preferred to walk.

This was the day the R.M.T.P. was to be tested at last. Cooper had been informed by his superiors the device would be used to set up a moon base, to be used if there was a war. It HAD to work properly. He hated the thought of another possible war. Having served as a medic in the last one and it had unnerved him to his very bones, he'd sworn he would not take part in another one...never again serve on the battlefield. He would never see his son grown up...if he'd had one. The violence of the recent past had kept Cooper awake nights, which did not serve his project well at all. But now R.M.T.P. was his "baby," and he wouldn't give it up for anything.

Until he'd begun this project transporter devices had only been something from nostalgic sci fi video broadcasts. Now R.M.T.P. was again proving how science fiction dramatically affected science fact.

As Dr. Cooper made his way down the hall toward the lab he felt so alone, though he knew the rooms nearby were filled with people. He loved to concentrate on the day's schedule as he walked this hallway. but today his mind wandered to the past. How he wished he'd dared to start a family. But his work always got in the way. He couldn't serve both well. His most special dream was to have a son. Could it ever be at his age? He sighed at this thought and was returned to the present by the familiar voice of the security officer, John McCree, as he neared the lab's huge, double doors.

"Good mornin' sir!"

Cooper inwardly grimaced. He could scarcely breathe on his own since the young, handsome Scotsman had been assigned here. His accent grated on Cooper's nerves!

Snapping out of his deep inner thoughts, Dr. Cooper turned to see Officer McCree hurrying to his side out of the adjacent corridor. His brown uniform appeared so neat it looked to be starched! McCree was young, handsome, and knew his job well.....too well, as far as Cooper was concerned. He gave McCree a grumbled reply and a wave of his hand, the closest thing he felt to a salute.

"Are you feeling alright, sir?" John asked. "You look sort of pale. Not sleeping well, I take it?"

"I sleep as well as can be expected, son. I've got a lot on my mind right now, and with the world the way it is....."

"Oh, no need to explain further, sir. I know what you mean. And I can imagine your Project is going fine, too. You must be worried sick, that it won't work, sir, but have faith, friend. I know it will!"

"How much DO you know about what I'm doing, John?" Cooper asked cautiously. It was too early in the morning for heavy conversations!

"Just that your project may save the world some day, and that it's called R.M.T.P., sir. True, I've been in your lab a few times, sir, but I don't know a....a....beaker from a hole in the ground! I wouldn't know the facts if someone paid me to tell them about it."

"What a relief!" Cooper thought. If he'd blabbed everything to him in a fit of anger....they paused a moment near the entrance.

"Oh, sir, have you seen that new kid that's working here yet? I think his name is Bill....er, no, it's Mike, Mike Montaine, that's it."

Dr. Cooper thought a moment. "I don't know. What does he do?"

"He was hired from the job pool, sir. I think he's the new janitor. Great guy! Friendly, helpful, and not only because it's his job to be, either. He likes working and helping

people. Doesn't say an unkind word to nobody! He's only been here a few days. Says he was supposed to go to college, but he couldn't keep up with the curriculum, so he quit!"

"I don't believe we've met," Cooper replied with a negative shake of his head. "Usually the cleaning crew doesn't hit the lab until after hours, but I'll be sure to speak with him if we're introduced.

"I mentioned him, sir, because you don't see many friendly faces around here, and if you ever need a friend to talk to, Mike's the person to keep things confidential. I liked him the minute we met....good vibes, I guess. But there's something else about the guy that gives you the funniest, dark, foreboding feeling. I guess it's because Mike's not really satisfied with his life, though he's pleasant enough, and likes to laugh a lot. Hey, Doc, maybe you could cheer him up, huh?" John chuckled, and they continued down the corridor the short distance left to the laboratory.

"Yeah," Cooper replied sarcastically, "Sure! Me cheer somebody up?"

"He wants to be a scientist some day. Maybe you could teach him, huh? He's only nineteen. You know how young folks like us learn fast! Maybe you could become friends and kind of like a second father to him."

"What about his own family? Aw, why am I asking all these questions anyway? I've got to get to work!" Putting a hand on the left side of the doors of the lab, Dr. Cooper pushed it a quarter of the way open, then paused as McCree replied, "His mother was killed in The Food Riots, and his father disappeared afterwards. He's all alone, Doc. I think he needs someone like you to look up to. As a matter of fact, he even looks something like you!"

Cooper's eyes widened. He wouldn't let on, but he liked John's idea of helping the newcomer. He needed a friend, too. His was such a lonely life. Many people liked him, but he feared making too many friends, for security's sake. Perhaps it was getting too late, after all, to father his own child, but now was not too late to help someone to realize how he'd lived his life was partially wrong. The same shouldn't happen to one so young. To teach someone the ways of science.....He knew he would love to meet Mike Montaine. His eyes held a special shine and he smiled back at John McCree.

"Tell Jeanie I'll see her at lunch," John added, blushing at the thought of Cooper's attractive lab assistant.

"I'll try to remember," Cooper told him, "but you know how it is with 'old folks like me!'"

"Huh?" the security man gasped in surprise at the comment, then smiled as it sunk in. "O.k., Doc, I'll be just out here, in case you get in any trouble in there."

"Just make sure no unauthorized personnel gets through this door!" was his order. "We've got important testing to do today!"

"Yes, sir!" McCree snapped a perfect salute and Cooper entered the laboratory at last.

Pausing to breathe a heavy sigh, he was almost run into by the young lady John had issued the parting message for....Jeannette Margaret Hall. She was holding the usual clipboard, looking at readouts, charts and other informational data. Looking as beautiful as ever, even in her white lab coat and matching coveralls she smiled up at her boss with large blue eyes twinkling. She blushed, a bad habit she and Officer McCree had in common.

"Oh, excuse me, sir!" she gasped, "I was just going out to look for you! We are almost ready for the big test you've been waiting for so long. Sorry about the holdup, but there were a million minor details to be seen to. We treat ol' R.M.T.P. here, just like a baby!"

"And today it'll take its first steps!" Dr Cooper grinned. "Well, shall we get to work?"

"Of course, Doctor!"

The lab room they occupied was huge compared to other rooms in the Institute. At the wall opposite to the door Dr. Cooper had entered, stood R.M.T.P. There were two or three steps before it that led to a platform connected to the rear wall, and, two walls especially erected which slanted sideways to give a better view of the area between them. Between them, evenly spaced out on the floor platform, were four medium-sized circles of a special plexiglass material, tough enough to hold more weight than a large man, but almost transparent so you could see machinery right through. Above this, attached to the ceiling, was a hanging duplicate of the floor platform, the only difference being the circles overhead were suspended about three inches from the ceiling with a black, plastic-like material which surrounded them and protected the delicate insides of the valuable equipment. The operating panel, itself, was a few feet away, enclosed in a booth surrounded with a bullet proof glass. This panel stood waist high to a man, and held an assortment of computerized buttons which were color coded with identifying lights. It also held the Activation Switch. The wall behind The Transporter hid intricate wiring and tubes almost no one out of this room knew anything about. The interior of The Transporter itself, was about the size of a theater stage.

Dr. Cooper donned a lab coat, leaving it unfastened, and gave Jeanie a nod. He then proceeded into the safety room and studied the operating panel and a clipboard he'd found on a table beside it. He knew all the operating instructions, but there was no room for error. Beginning to re-read them, he took his wire-rimmed glasses out of the coat's left breast pocket and put them on. Thank goodness he was only supposed to wear them for close work! Cooper hated the things! As the Doctor did this, some technicians wheeled a huge cement cubicle in on a dolly. The first experimental test to take place, was to consist of this object hopefully being transported from the platform to a twin transporter which acted as a receiving station. This twin was located to the left of Dr. Cooper, on the other side of the room, behind a concrete wall. The cubical, after a lengthily struggle, was placed on end, over one of the transparent beam circles.

The technicians had cleared everyone from the room except for the necessary help. A few of the personnel were at a nearby table when Dr. Cooper set off the alarm bell which sent everyone there running for the protective control rooms. Jeanie joined him, along with two of the four male helpers. How well everyone knew the warning one of the machines would be activated! There could be any type of danger from then on!

Three buttons were pushed, each making an individual musical sound, and a switch was thrown, sending crackling energy and sparks practically up Cooper's spine. His expression registered surprise, as the proper lights above the cement cubicle flashed as planned, then, going out of control, wildly. The form on the circle faded from view slightly, then reappeared again, as tiny colored dust particles. Soon it was gone again, but just as quickly back, to explode into a million various-sized pieces which literally shattered the lab!

Dr. Cooper, Jeanie and the others ducked under the control panel, as huge chunks of debris battered the protective window. They weren't taking any chances! Cooper's glasses were knocked to the floor, but not broken, in the excitement. He just barely managed to reach his hand up to depress the 'off' button. The transporter made a defeated sighing sound, then, all was silent.

"Do we dare look?" Jeanie asked, and after her superior's painful affirmative nod she poked her head up for her first glimpse of the disaster area. "What a mess!" she gasped. Pieces of cement and glass were everywhere. Tables at the other end of the room were overturned in an erratic display of unnatural havoc. even the safety glass before her was slightly cracked! She looked to the right and saw Officer McCree just inside the front door.

"What in the hell was that?" he managed to yell, then stared in shock at what lay before him, mouth open wide. "Dr. Cooper," he finally called out, "are you o.k.? Is EVERYONE in here o.k.? Did you people do this, or did somebody drop a bomb in here?"

"WE did it!" Cooper told him while struggling to his feet. He had been knocked over onto his back before he'd managed to shut the transporter off. "Oh!" he moaned, feeling dizzy. He shook his head as if snapping out of a nightmare, and how he wished he was! Satisfied with the news everyone in his charge was safe, John exited with a heavy sigh. Jeanie moved to Cooper's side and held onto his arm. "Must be a short circuit somewhere in the receiving station," he spoke up. "What a shock I got when I threw that switch!" He turned to the two technicians behind him as Jeanie handed him his glasses. "You two get to work on finding that right away. I'll join you in a few moments."

The men immediately ran off to the appointed place.

"Can I get you something, sir?" Jeanie asked, trying to get her boss to take a seat....somewhere.

"No! Er, a glass of water, perhaps. But watch your step, young lady! Hopefully all the damage that will be done today has already been done."

She left his side somewhat reluctantly, to fulfill his request.

"All my work! But I'm not through with you yet, you damned machine!" Cooper said aloud. His head ached. Defeat would not come this easily. Right now they needed a person from the janitorial office to help clean up. He went to the phone and pushed the correct buttons to call them. "Send someone up here to The Security Wing Lab, immediately! We've got a big job to be taken care of," Cooper ordered.

"We will send up our new man as soon as possible," answered the pleasant-voiced receptionist. Dr. Cooper hung up the phone without another word. His mind was engaged in deep thought. As he surveyed the disorder around him, he did not realize with such an everyday action as picking up a receiver, R.M.T.P. was on its way to becoming more of a success than he'd ever dreamed.

About ten minutes later Jeanie was returning from the cafeteria at the other end of the building with a pitcher of ice water on a tray and several glasses. As she was approaching the adjacent hallway where Cooper had met McCree earlier, she became increasingly curious as to the cause of the rattling and clanking noises she heard from around the corner. Rattle! Clank! Whistle! Had a guard robot escaped from security? Guard robots didn't whistle like a man! Finally reaching the half-intersection she discovered the source of the clamor. A young man was whistling, pushing a large janitorial cart filled with all the tools of the trade, toward her, and supposedly, the laboratory. The funny, long-handled push brooms stood, handles down, in the racks on each side of the cart, making the clanking sound Jeanie had heard; the wheels had made the rattling. She gave the newcomer the once-over as he got close to her to turn the corner. He was approximately her age, which was nineteen. His slight, handsome form looked great in casual jeans, blue and white checked shirt with rolled up sleeves, suede shoes, and leather hand-designed belt. His hair was black, and grown just below collar length, which curled naturally, toward his oval face, in disarray. Large brown eyes twinkled out from under floppy bangs he'd parted in the middle. His skin was fair, but slightly tanned. He had a shy look as he smiled at Jeanie. She had never believed in love at first sight until that moment! Somehow she knew she had to formally meet this five-foot-eight-inch wonderful hunk of stranger and get to know him very well! What luck! Jeanie discovered he was going to the lab after all! She smiled at him as he began to turn the cart at the corner, and blinked coyly. He grinned back and nodded politely. Jeanie fell in step behind her new acquaintance, not saying a word until she had returned to her job.

Things were going quite well for Dr. Cooper. He and the technicians had discovered the problem in the Transporter's receiving station and had hopefully adjusted the circuits to their proper working order.

They were checking the control panel's insides one more time there, as Jeanie finished her short talk with the new janitor. She had not dared disturb Cooper in his few moments of glory in finding the error, so she gave the instructions for the cleanup herself. They were standing in front of the Transporter, and the man was leaning on the push broom he held with both hands. She had introduced herself as Cooper's assistant, but as they turned to continue their work, Jeanie added with a smile,

"You can call me Jeanie....everyone else does!"

The man turned to look at her from the second step to the machine platform and put up his right hand, as if to wave.

"Oh, er, sorry, I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Mike...Mike Montaine!" He gave another nod and a huge grin, and tugged on his pocket identification card as if she could read it from there.

"We'll be talking again, soon, Mike, I'm sure. Good luck with this chaos. Remember, Dr. Cooper wants this area spotless! It's important that this property be tested today."

Then she was gone to find the others. Mike wanted to ask what the 'property' was used for, but figured he wouldn't get an answer anyway. He reached the platform and with hand on hip, viewed the main part of the disaster area. He shook his head. "Whatever happened here, I'm sure glad it's not my fault. Well, better get started somewhere, and looks like this is the place!"

He moved to the right rear circle, and began sweeping as fast as he could, being careful to get all the finest bits of concrete. He pushed the debris toward the front circle on the same side.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the lab Dr. Cooper had ordered technician Larry Daniken, a handsome, blonde youth, under the control panel with a hand held computer called an Electronic Circuit Monitoring Device. You could only see Larry's legs as he lay on the floor on his back, checking out the wiring one more time.

"How's things look under there now, Larry?" Cooper called to his helper.

"There's lots of noise in here, sir!" came the muffled reply. "Sounds like a hive of angry bees! There's got to be another problem I just don't understand. It doesn't register on the monitor, Dr. Cooper, whatever the cause is. I've never heard of or seen anything like this in my life!"

"O.k.," Cooper called to him. "Come on out, Daniken, I'll have a look. Maybe if I activate the switch we'll locate the problem in no time; again."

Larry was glad to pop the upper half of his body into the open once again. He had worked with many experimental devices before, but this one gave him the creeps. When he was underneath it, he felt sick and terribly light headed. He was absolutely



awed and confused by the new device. There was no radio-active substances involved in its makeup. Why did he feel this way near it? Larry shook his head as he stood up, to clear it of the buzzing sound that wouldn't leave his ears.

Cooper noticed him do this.

"You all right, son?" he asked his young helper.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"O.k. Then move over. I'll do the final check. Hopefully we'll accomplish our goal some time today."

Knowing he sounded too gruff and uncaring in such a situation new to everyone, he moved to put a hand to Larry's shoulder. "You did fine, son. Don't worry. No one really understands this thing yet; not even me. That's what we're here to do...understand more about the unknown and develop what we can to put our knowledge to good use. Here, let me just turn 'er on here, and see what I can see with those circuits."

The Doctor turned on the machine and instantly everything went wrong a second time. Sparks flew back and forth over the panel, singeing his hand.

Everyone jumped back, startled. The transport sequence seemed to activate itself. The lights over the platform flashed wildly. The warning alarm rang and rang.

"It's a good thing no one's in the other device!" Cooper barely managed to whisper. "God knows what will happen next! Everyone! Keep back as far as you can! We'll just have to ride out the storm, now! Maybe she'll burn herself out."

\* \* \*

Little did Dr. Cooper know, there WAS someone in the other device! Mike Montaine was just finishing sweeping up the transporter platform. He'd pushed all the concrete pieces and dust toward the front, and had made a pile of it before the forward beam circle.

"Boy, it's hot in here!" he was saying, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. The broom was now leaning against the wall beside him, and he was standing directly in the center of the beam circle on the right! Mike looked up at the machinery over his head. "Hmmm...wonder what this thing does? I wish it was a shower! I sure could use one about now!" Then he laughed and put his hands on his hips. "Hey! I know!" he cried, "Machine, take me to my dustpan!" Laughing again at his thoughts Mike began to walk toward the steps, but as he took his first step, the lights on the ceiling started to flash rapidly. Looking at them again, startled, Mike froze in his tracks. It was like he was being kept in the strange circle by an invisible energy force.

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Before he could yell "Hey, I'm no burglar!" thinking he'd activated a new kind of alarm system, a terrible humming surrounded Mike that almost caused him to black out. He was forced to cover his ears, but nothing helped. Deciding to try and relax, he put his arms down to his sides. As he did so, colored light particles engulfed him and seemed to penetrate his entire being.

Mike could then neither speak nor see. He felt completely paralyzed and terribly ill. A ripping pain shot through him beginning at his stomach, then, mercifully, consciousness left him. Jeanie, who had been standing near the control panel, watching it, and, Mike's almost every move, screamed as loudly as she could and covered her mouth in shock as her new friend disappeared before her very eyes.

"Dr. Cooper! Dr. Cooper!" Jeanie screamed as she joined her friends in the other protective room.

"Yeah, we know!" Cooper gulped, now busy with the panel since it had begun to cool down a bit. "There's somebody coming through the thing! What happened? Who in the hell is it, a man from outer space or something? That area was clear when I left it. Of all the...." He gently but quickly adjusted the stabilizer. The colored particles appeared on the receiving station but with the outline of a person sketched into them, then faded.

"Jesus!" Cooper swore, fighting desperately to solidify the particles back into who or what they were supposed to be. After tense moments everyone in the room sighed in relief as the form brightened to clarify almost perfectly the body of Mike Montaine on the exact beam circle he'd left on the other transporting station. He faded one second more.

"Who in the hell IS that?" Cooper yelled.

"It's the new janitor, sir," Jeanie stammered, shaking all over beside him. "his name is Mike Montaine."

Cooper's lips formed a perfect 'o' as he pieced the name and his earlier conversation with McCree together. Mike then fully materialized on the platform. The lights, noise and particles vanished as quickly as they'd come. The boy had disappeared in the process of falling in a faint. His eyes were still open, and his pupils rolled up into his head. He fell forward like he weighed a ton, completely missing the steps. He fell off the platform, his face smashing into the concrete floor below.

"Oh, no!" Cooper gasped. He ran out from behind the glass room and bent down to check the boy's pulse. He looked up at the others rushing to help; "And I think I've killed him!"

"I'll call the clinic, sir!" Jeanie managed to say as she ran to the phone, in tears.

Dr. Cooper bravely choked back a sob as he knelt by Mike's pale form. It seemed the entire future lay on the floor beside him.

The room came alive with activity as each member of the staff fully realized what had just happened. Jeanie, although in a state of shock, was first to reach the phone. Using the inside emergency line she called the clinic for the medical team. Larry managed to ask Dr. Cooper if he needed any help, as he watched him move swiftly to begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Kneeling down beside his boss, Larry could feel the tension and fear in the air! It was like static electricity surrounding them. Sweat beaded on Dr. Cooper's brow as he worked frantically on the boy, giving life-saving breath. "Come on, son, LIVE!" Cooper begged aloud, then thought to himself, "I hope all those years of scientific research hasn't made me too rusty at this!"

The emergency team seemed to take forever in reaching the lab. Cooper continued the CPR treatment. Moving swiftly, the stretcher was taken down the corridor to the clinic. The room was very busy as machines were being readied for use. The janitor was quickly placed from the stretcher to a bed and all necessary monitors were put in place. Dr. Cooper stepped back as the chief physician came in to take over treatment. The whole procedure was to remain strictly confidential. Shivering, he watched as the men huddled over Mike, hoping that all his efforts were not for nothing.

As the monitors were hooked up to Mike, a very faint brain wave was beginning to register on the EEG machine. Jeanie arrived at the clinic just in time to hear the good news. Although she had not fully recovered from the shock, she was feeling more herself. Dr. Cooper was the first to notice her as she entered the room. He helped her to a chair where she would be able to see the procedures as they tried to diagnose the janitor's condition. After taking her vital signs, he knelt down beside her and in his most reassuring tone of voice told her all that he knew at that time.

"Dr. Horton has just discovered Mike still has a chance. They are doing everything they can for him. Why don't you stay for a minute, then head on down to the emergency crew's overnight dorm? You really need some rest, young lady! You've been a great help today! This has been quite a shock for you. I can tell you were quite taken with that young man; it's understandable. Now please, do as I say. You need the rest!"

Jeanie nodded in agreement, a tiny smile bringing a slight blush to her pale cheeks.

As Dr. Cooper turned his attention back toward the bedside, he saw Dr. Horton was now holding a long needle filled with adrenaline, readying it for application. The supervisor patted Jeanie's shoulder and rushed to join his colleague. Horton raised the needle, and with the experience gained from years of practice, shoved it with enough force to penetrate Mike's bare chest. But suddenly, Mike's chest was no longer there!

It was replaced by a milky-white glow through which the needle passed to penetrate the mattress beneath him! "Huh?" gasped Dr. Horton. A look of great surprise came on his face as he turned toward Cooper. In silent disbelief he withdrew the needle, and Mike's chest reappeared. "That DIDN'T happen!" he whispered, "It couldn't!" He threw the useless syringe onto the tray.

"Try his arm," said Cooper.

Horton grabbed another syringe that had already been prepared. Removing the plastic cap, he held Mike's arm and tried again to inject him. The needle seemed to penetrate, but when the doctor squeezed the syringe, the liquid squirted out of Mike's arm into a wet blotch on the bed! Horton again stared, bewildered, at Cooper.

"What do we do now?" asked Cooper.

"There's not much we can do," Horton replied. "He doesn't seem to want us to do anything. We can only wait and see what his body does. It's all up to him now. Right now, I'm on my way to check on some other important matters in the building. If you need me, please have me paged."

He walked to the opposite side of Mike's bed in his slow manner that came with age. He pulled the white curtain around Mike's bed, a little more toward the end of it. The lab door had been left open by one of the techs, as usual. He, of course, wanted his patient's condition to be kept under top security precautions.

"Would you kindly escort my assistant, here," Dr. Cooper said and pointed to Jeanie, who was now standing nearby, "to the emergency dorm for me?"

"Of course! I would be pleased to offer such a pretty young lady a hand! You're going to be staying a while, I would assume?"

"Yes, I need some time alone with the boy, to think and meditate. I'll be glad to keep an eye on things for you, while you're gone."

"Good! Excellent!" Dr. Horton smiled. "You may use my phone anytime you wish. Take care, Matthew. I'm sure things will be all right. So many strange things happen in the world today, and most seem to turn out for the better."

"Mmmmmmm," mumbled Cooper. He was already in deep thought.

"Come along, young lady! I can see you've had a difficult time of it all. You need some rest!" Horton called. He held out his left arm to her.

Before leaving with him, she couldn't resist rushing to her boss' side and giving him him a quick hug. She had never seen him so worried! Feeling very heartbroken, Jeanie joined her older escort and left the clinic silently.

Matthew Cooper seemed frozen where he stood. Everything was so quiet here. The only faint sound was the hum of Mike's EEG machine. This noise snapped Cooper's mind back to thoughts of the lab. He hunted for the telephone and noticed the nearest one on the wall near the bedside.

After he'd pushed the proper buttons to call there, he was pleased to hear Larry Daniken's voice answer at the other end of the line. His normally cheerful tone was shaky and weak, but the report on the work being done was good. The techs had begun to finish Mike's cleaning job with his janitorial supplies. Progress was slow, however. Everyone was disheartened by the accidents, and Larry shyly reported to Dr. Cooper he'd been sick after helping with Mike. He still felt horrible, and not understanding the cause, was worried. Cooper wondered to himself if he might be suffering from a touch of radiation poisoning from the transport beam. He asked what his badge registered, and thankfully it was colorless. That eliminated one cause.

"God!" he thought, "If we hadn't all been inside the control booths we all would have been dead as Mike fell! There's enough radiation in the residue of those beams, when they're activated, to fry a man in seconds, if he's not directly behind the glass or on the transport circle!"

Cooper thought again, and told Larry to take it easy, he would send someone to check him over as soon as possible. If possible, he should come down to the clinic immediately. But the young man would not leave the lab. He had automatically taken over as supervisor on Jeanie's absence since everyone had been confused and was now dedicated to seeing their present chore was completed satisfactorily. Cooper admired his dedication. He had always thought of Larry Daniken as one of his best workers. Now he prayed nothing was terribly wrong with him.

Cooper issued orders for no one to touch the Transporter Machine for any reason. He wished to check it over later and maybe get a clue to what had gone wrong with it. To this, Larry heartily agreed, and would pass the word on. He now feared to even get close to R.M.T.P.....for a while, anyway!

Cooper then reported Jeanie would be staying at the emergency dorm for the night.

"Keep up the good work as much as you can!" he told Larry. As the supervisor hung up the phone a heavy forlorn feeling crept over his soul like a dark shadow. He pulled a chair to the bedside and sat down where he could keep a close watch on Mike's head and relax a little to begin what may become a long and hopeless wait.

## Chapter Two A New Hope

After thirty minutes of sitting, thinking, and praying, Dr. Cooper got up and searched through the room for a clipboard and paper he could use. After locating one at the bedside stand, he returned with it to his chair and began to take notes on the morning's activities. Every small detail was written down, no matter how meaningless it seemed. Diagrams were drawn of dial and button positions in the control room. The Transporter STILL must be a success. (and made that way with no more accidents!) This went on for a few hours until the doctor could not concentrate any more. He leaned back in the chair to write more, but to his disgust, found himself nodding off to sleep.

About an hour later he was awakened by the ring of the security installed door buzzer. Shaking his head, Cooper mumbled something, checked Mike quickly, then stepped out from behind the curtain to see who wanted him. It was Officer McCree and Larry Daniken looking for Dr. Horton. Larry appeared drained and dizzy. He was having trouble standing. The Security Officer braced him with a hand around the technician's shoulders.

"Dr. Cooper!" The Guard was trying to yell softly. "What the devil's been goin' on here? Here's a wee lad that needs seein' to. Terrible sick he is. Here, boy," he added to Larry while ushering him to a chair, "sit down and take it easy, now. The Doc will have ya fixed up in no time. Wait and see!"

Larry held his head in his hands. "I'm sorry, sir, but I feel like I've had the flu for a week. Do you suppose that's what's wrong, sir? Oh, my stomach!" he gasped in pain, and bent over at the waist.

"What's been your problem, son?" Dr. Cooper asked. "Dr. Horton is out for the moment. I can have him paged, but I'll do my best to help you until he arrives."

"I'm sure it's nothing serious, sir, just nerves or something like that, but I can't seem to settle my stomach, and I can't seem to stay out of the men's room."

"Hmmm," Cooper frowned, "severe vomiting and diarrhea."

Larry blushed as he checked his pulse, blood pressure and temperature. "You've got a slight fever. Are there any other problems? Did this start after the accident?"

"Yes, sir. I did the best I could to clean up the lab, and it looks almost as good as new, now. Mr. McCree helped me. He called another security officer to take his place so I could come here. My legs are so weak I could hardly walk. If anything goes wrong in my absence, sir, I'm willing to take the responsibility. If there's anything you're not pleased with, I...." he coughed a bit.

"Easy, son," Cooper soothed, rubbing Larry's shoulder. "I think you HAVE got just a bad case of nerves, but if you

become worse in the next couple of hours, be sure to come back here, I'll get Dr. Horton to come back and check you out before you leave, though. It's been many a year since I've hung my certificate on the wall, so to speak!" He showed Larry where the bathroom was just in case he needed it, and called for Dr. Horton. In a few moments he arrived. Larry was taken to an adjoining examination room in case Mike's presence would have any effect on his condition. Miraculously, Horton's diagnosis matched with Dr. Cooper's'; the older doctor gave Larry a tranquilizer, and he was sent to the emergency dorm with Jeanie, for the night. The lab would be closed for the day, and he could hopefully keep Jeanie company, to cheer her up some. Both Horton and McCree helped Larry to the dorm after the older physician popped another tranquilizer into the pocket of his loose fitting lab coat for Jeanie.

"Watch over the boy and keep the faith," Horton said to the downtrodden Cooper. "What that young lady of yours down in the dorm needs now, more than this tranquilizer, is some good news about Mike's recovery. Don't give up hope, whatever you do. Don't forget that marvelous sign we witnessed earlier. Perhaps it's a sign of slow recovery."

"We've waited so long for him now, I'm beginning to believe that Mike Montaine's dead and gone," Cooper replied softly, "that the sign meant his soul was leaving for good."

"No more talk like that!" admonished Dr. Horton. He always had such a kind manner his words seemed to warm Cooper's heart.

"You watch. Maybe you'll see." Larry moaned softly from his chair. "We've got to get this boy down to the dorm," he added. "Hope, Matthew, hope!" And the three men were gone as quickly as they'd come, the only difference being Larry was taken out of the clinic in a wheel chair.

Matt Cooper let out a deep sigh. He was alone again, so he decided to keep up his vigil. His pride would not let him leave the bedside now. He stood and placed both hands on the bed rail, then looked down at Mike's peaceful features as if in prayer. He spoke aloud.

"I don't even know you, son, yet we stand here so dependant on each-other's future. I've heard you're alone in the world. Come back to us, Mike, and you never need to be alone again. I want to help you; be like a father to you, help you grow. But most of all, I want you to wake up; be healthy. Please just open your eyes and hear me call you 'son!'"

Not being able to contain his grief any longer, the supervisor wept quietly. He was ashamed of himself for doing so, but also wondered how long it had been since he was able to let his feelings out completely, like this. Cooper's deep but muffled sobs quieted after a few moments, and he took a deep breath, before beginning to speak again.

"I'm sorry for whatever I've done to you, Mike. I'll try to make it up to you...to everyone I've hurt today. Just live, son, please live! Let me know I'm not a complete failure....that I am still a fair doctor, and not a murderer, that there is still a chance for things to go on."

He took off his glasses, wiped his face dry with his right hand, and stood silently for a moment more, gazing at the boy. "Oh, how I wish I could take your place," he added, "but I know that's impossible. After all I'm their only hope for a decent future. That's a laugh!" Shaking his head, Cooper moved around to check the monitors, as usual, then a startled look came over his face. He checked them again, and felt a quiet inner peace. It was unbelievable, but not only did a slight brain wave register on the screens, a faint heartbeat had appeared, also! "Hallelujah!" Cooper whispered in disbelief and the wonderful ecstasy that comes with the joys of the medical profession. He suppressed the urge to call Officer McCree and tell him he'd been blessed by one of the Scottish Saints. "Come on, Mike! I know you can do it!" Moving around the bed, he paged Dr. Horton at the emergency dorm, where he had decided to stay, and watch Larry and Jeanie. It didn't take him long to answer the page, and was thrilled to hear there had been an improvement. The two doctors talked for a moment, then the older man rushed to join his colleague at the clinic. After a thorough check on their patient, and the improvement had been affirmed to be a permanent one, it was time to relax a bit. Of course it was still not known if Mike would regain consciousness or, if he did, there was no way to tell whether his entire mental or physical capabilities would be intact. But with the way things were now, he had a good chance at pulling through. His life signs seemed to be re-registering on the EEG machine monitors one by one. They were of course, weak, but constant.

Dr. Horton felt he was witnessing a miracle. Cooper was speechless. He looked at his watch to jot down the time on Mike's chart, and nearly fell through the floor...he had just spent twelve hours on his lonely vigil by Mike's bedside, with nothing to eat. He faintly remembered a slice of toast and coffee for breakfast somewhere around six a.m., and his stomach began to growl and feel mushy. Seeing him stretch then rub his belly, Dr. Horton suggested he take a break. "Great idea!" Cooper smiled. "I'm starving!"

"Why don't you go to the little lounge area and grab a snack? I believe the cafeteria's closed by now. You'll find the vending machines a couple of doors down to your right. Enjoy yourself You deserve it! I'll keep watch here for you. You know you can trust me! There's something I want to check on with Larry Daniken, anyway," and he removed Larry's radiation tag from his pocket.

"Sure, Phil, you and your crew are the best! Thanks for all you've done so far, and your confidence in the boy's recovery. Sorry I've been somewhat of a pest, underfoot."

"That's all right, Matthew. I can always use your assistance and advice. Don't worry about being in the way here. Your bedside manner is always welcome. Now go and rest a bit before I DO kick you out of here!"



Both doctors laughed, and Cooper washed his hands at a nearby sink, then went quickly out the door. Just the short walk to the lounge seemed to revitalize his soul. He found the room empty and went directly to the vending machines. After finding his wallet in his back pocket, Dr. Cooper took out his computer card and placed it in the slot of the sandwich machine. He pressed the proper buttons to order a ham and cheese on rye, and the sandwich neatly appeared on a plastic plate out of the large slot under the glass display window. Removing his card, he moved to the next machine and did almost the same for a cup of hot, black coffee. He consumed these quickly, being one used to eating in a rushed atmosphere, hardly using the small table nearby. Then, on his way out, he got a slice of apple pie with whipped cream on top to finish off on his way back up the corridor. This was kind of a private celebration on the boy's behalf. He prayed there had been more improvement during his absence.

"How are things progressing with Mike?" Dr. Cooper asked when first entering the door. He saw Dr. Horton still studying the monitors and writing rapidly. His friend was silent, but gave him a reassuring smile. Cooper had always felt actions spoke louder than words. He nodded back his approval then turned toward the sink and dropped his plate into the wastebasket underneath.

"I take it you had a good meal," Dr. Horton spoke up, "and whipped cream with dessert! You had better watch that waistline, son, or I'll have YOU for a patient in this bed! Give me your radiation tag, will you?" he ordered. Looking sheepish, Cooper wondered how Horton had known about his special indulgence. When, as he moved his right hand to pick up a pencil from a metal table, he realized it was all sticky with whipped cream! Being most unprofessional about the situation, he put the hand to his mouth and sort of chewed on its first two knuckles to keep the whipped cream from dripping on the floor.

"I'm being careful," Dr. Cooper half mumbled passed his fingers. He removed his radiation tag with his other hand, and passed it to Horton. Wondering why he was speaking so strangely, Dr. Horton turned and couldn't help but laugh at his partner's actions. "Thank you," he managed to say after accepting the tag.

Turning slightly red, Cooper added, "I think I'll go wash my hands!"

When he'd finished at the sink he told the man he was ready to take over again for him if he wanted to rest. He noticed his partner had been quite busy by the radiation detector reader, and was curious as to what was going on. Neither man noticed the dim light that flashed twice behind them, or that it radiated from Mike's body.

"All right," Horton agreed. "I need to check up on Jeanie and Larry again, anyway."

"How are they, by the way? Sorry, I forgot to ask earlier, but Mike...."

"That's all right. Jeanie will be fine. That boy Larry- he has the worst case of nerves I ever did see, if that's all it is. But he should be back to work in a couple of days or so. My tranquilizer barely had any effect on him! Funny, he's never seemed like the high strung type. Jeanie is sleeping like a baby, but I must go check on that boy!"

"Make sure you tell Jeanie about Mike's condition. Tell them I hope to see them tomorrow, if all goes well."

"Will do, if she's awake, Matthew! Take it easy, here!"

"I plan to be here all night."

"Good luck! You know how to reach me."

In seconds Dr. Horton was gone. Dr. Cooper read over Mike's chart, then checked the machines to satisfy his own curiosity. Everything had improved now, almost back to normalcy. He studied Mike's overall appearance then stared at his chest, which again rose and fell rhythmically. His facial coloring appeared normal. Going to the right side of the bed once again, Cooper touched Mike's arm. It was as solid as his own flesh. He contemplated readying a shot to see if what they had witnessed before was an illusion, then dismissed the idea, not wishing to waste unnecessary medications. Suddenly, Mike lit up with a soft light that just seemed to surround his body for an instant, then disappear. Cooper rubbed his eyes, thinking it was an illusion caused by his own worry. He sat down again in his uncomfortable chair, to re-read his notes and wait. It was nine p.m..

It was an hour later when Dr. Cooper felt something was happening. He had drifted off to sleep again, and was having a strange dream. In the dream, he was witnessing Mike's accident all over again, but in slow motion. He tossed around a little in his chair. Then, in his dream, he saw Jeanie standing beside him in a wedding gown. It was the most beautiful one he'd ever seen! She was smiling up at him and he was wearing the clothes of a groom. Then, Jeanie was kissing him before a church altar. After the kiss she stepped back.

"What about Mike?" Cooper heard himself say in the dream.

"Mike?" she asked in return, with a look of great question on her pretty face. "I don't know anyone named Mike."

Then in his dream, the form of the minister vanished and the shadowy form of Mike Montaine, enveloped in fog, approached him out of the darkness beyond the altar. Jeanie seemed to be unaware of his presence, but Cooper could see him, and hear him speak.

"She does not yet know me, but I am to be your new son, Mike Montaine. I am the invisible new hope for the universe."

In the dream Cooper went to touch Mike's arm, but when he reached for him, he was gone. Just the fog remained. He called and called to Mike, but no answer came. He was in a panic.

In his chair in the clinic, the sleeping Dr. Cooper became so restless the clipboard fell with a loud crash, onto the floor from his lap.

"Mike! Mike Montaine! Your new son, Mike Montaine!" he moaned aloud, moving his head from side to side. Then, he came awake rudely, opening his eyes with a start. He gazed around the clinic before moving, then stood up rapidly to check on Mike.

He was in a cold sweat and shivered, wondering what his nightmare had meant. Still, all his signs were the same...almost normal, with some fluctuation at times. Cooper sighed in relief. He then rushed to the rear of the clinic to use the men's room, then back to write on Mike's chart. There was something new happening. Mike was looking like he would come out of his coma! He was beginning to move his head from side to side the same way Cooper had while waking from that dream! Very slowly Mike moved his head. Matt Cooper was so excited with this he forgot to page Horton, but he stayed by the monitors and watched Mike's face. Suddenly the head movement stopped. Mike remained quiet again. He paged Horton again, and quickly told him to get down there. Mike's actions were somewhat like someone experiencing the rapid eye movement stage of sleep.

Cooper returned his attention to Mike's bed. Suddenly something started to happen. Mike's mouth slowly opened and a beam of light like a neon bulb began at his toes and moved up his body. The first one was white, the second one was purple, the third one was blue. As each band of light passed over Mike's head, he spoke a single word; the first was "Om," and then came "Trace," "trim" and "tro".

Mystified, Cooper began to walk closer to the bed. Suddenly a strong hand grabbed him and hauled him back. "No!" Horton said, "Get back! It might be dangerous!"

This strange phenomena continued until it ended with a black beam of light, and the word "Norm." "What in the hell was that?" asked Cooper.

"I think," said Horton, "we've witnessed something very rare; the full range of psychokenitic energy transmitted into visible light! Those words he was speaking are from an ancient text of Zen. They're supposed to be the energy gates of The Afterworld!"

Cooper was puzzled for a moment. Then, he remembered Horton's interest and expertise in nonChristian religions. Mike began to stir. He wiggled his toes, his fingers; he flexed his elbows and knees. His eyes slowly opened, and Cooper rushed forward, but again, Horton restrained him. "Don't rush him," he said, "Let him come back at his own speed. He's been very far away."

Mike slowly turned his head in the direction of the voices, and his eyes met Cooper's.

"Hi, dad," he said. "Man, have I got a headache! What happened? What am I doing here?"

"It's alright, son," said Cooper. "Why don't you go back to sleep, and we'll talk about it in the morning?"

Mike yawned. "Good idea!" he said. "By the way," he added, "best men wear tuxedos, too!"

"Oh!" said Cooper, "So they do!"

Mike closed his eyes and seemed to be instantly asleep. Horton stared at Cooper. "Dad?" he asked, "Son? Best Man? Tuxedos?"

"I'm not sure," said Cooper, "It was a dream." He quickly explained to the doctor.

"Oh!" said Horton. "Dream unity. Yes, I'd suspect something like that." Without a word he removed his radiation tag, and went over to the reader. Shoving it in, he adjusted the controls. Cooper went over and looked. The screen was divided into three sections; yellow, orange, and bright red. The orange and red were empty, but in the far left of the screen a dark line went three-quarters of the way up through the yellow. "What's that?" asked Cooper.

"Feeder rays," said Horton, "the lowest radiation we can detect, the weakest radiation known. If you were exposed to a very strong source for a year, that line should be just visible."

Cooper looked at his friend and back to the screen. "But that line's almost at the top of the screen," he said. "Where in the hell's the source?"

Horton turned around and looked at the young man sleeping in the bed. "Right there," he said. "I've only recorded one other source that strong," Horton announced.

"And what was that?" asked Cooper.

"A Faith Healer from Canada," Horton replied. "For brief moments while he was healing, he gave off bursts of that energy. But Mike is giving it off constantly, in high levels every second."

"What does it mean?" asked Cooper.

"I haven't got the faintest idea," Horton answered, "not the faintest!" he stopped for a few seconds to take a good look at the supervisor. "I DO know that right now we have to get some rest. Matthew, I must say, you look terrible! So, if you're still determined to stay the night here, either you stretch out in that chair there, or use the second bed. But GET SOME SLEEP, or I'll order you to complete bed rest for twenty four hours! I know you wouldn't like that any more than I would enjoy having you for a patient!"

Cooper took his eyes away from Mike long enough to ask, "What about you? Where will you sleep?"

"I'll be down with Larry and Jeanie in the dorm. I do hope that boy is asleep by now! I'll send one of the technicians to check on you both in the morning, before I return. Good night, Matthew!"

"Good night, sir!" Cooper watched Dr. Horton leave the room, shutting the door behind him. He sighed, and yawned. Tomorrow could prove to be an even longer day.

### Chapter Three Stranger Things Happen?

"Well, good morning!"

Dr. Horton was all smiles, looking fresh and well rested when he finally returned around eight a.m. the next day. What he discovered truly surprised him. The boy's appearance was normal, and his dark eyes even twinkled when the two were formally introduced by a slightly disheveled but revitalized Dr. Cooper.

"Hi, Doc!" Mike mumbled cheerfully through a mouthful of scrambled eggs. He waved his fork.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Horton asked, staring in disbelief at the person he could hardly believe had been practically dead for twelve hours.

"Great!" Mike replied, swallowing, "But I sure am hungry! Got any more of this stuff around to spare?"

"But son, that was your third helping! You ought to rest awhile, or you'll make yourself sick," Cooper protested.

"I-I DON'T think so," Mike firmly disagreed, with a far-away look.

Cooper gave Horton an exasperated glance.

"Don't be so worried," Horton whispered. "There may be some reason for this we don't understand at the moment."

To cover up their speculations, Cooper sighed heavily. "God!" he said to no one in particular, "What will ever become of this younger generation? They're always getting their own way!"

Mike laughed.

"Don't panic, son, I'll order up another plate of those eggs for you in a jiffy!" Cooper turned to the phone.

"Thanks, Doc!"

While Cooper phoned the cafeteria, Dr. Horton went to the machines, then to the young man in the bed. Since Mike was finished with his recent meal, he pushed the bedside stand away, and got him to lie back for a quick exam. There was no sign of protest. There was such a peaceful, indescribable feeling of loving innocence that enveloped Mike now. Dr. Horton wondered if what had caused this transformation with him was proper. Would Mike ever be able to fight back in a tight situation, or had he become too "perfect" for his own good?

"Why all the checks, Doc? I'm getting kind of worried. Is there something really wrong with me?"

"Just routine exams, Michael. No need to worry. You had a horrible accident yesterday."

"You're a very special person! Not to frighten you, you understand, but I have reason to believe no one else would have survived it."

"Oh," he sort of half gasped, and moaned. "Then I must be in pretty bad shape!"

"No, not at all. Tell me EXACTLY how you feel."

Mike took a few deep breaths and thought a moment, his pupils active and bright. "Why, fine!" he replied, staring at Horton.

Dr. Cooper was finished with his call, and rejoined his friends, so The Chief Physician's answer was only an affirmative nod, and a smile. Mike's confused stare was turned to his 'adopted' father.

"All set!" Cooper grinned. "The cafeteria will send up your order right away. But they only had leftovers. Breakfast cooking is finished for the morning. Sorry!"

"Oh, that's fine," the boy acknowledged. He appeared engrossed in thought, staring at the foot of his bed.

"Cheer up, son!" Dr. Cooper told him, thinking he was disappointed about the announcement.

"I want to know everything that happened to me, and everything that's wrong with me NOW!" Mike ordered.

"You will. Soon you must tell us everything you remember about the accident, if it doesn't make you ill to recall it.

Now, you just need your rest. You will know everything, in good time."

Horton's bedside manner was strained, but kept as professional as possible as he faced the new situation. He put Mike's stand back before him, as he noticed the kitchen worker entering with his new tray. The boy's gaze focused on him once again. He could seem to feel his eyes piercing his brain. The feeling with this wasn't hostile, but questioning, as if Mike was searching so hard for answers he was trying to read men's minds. Could Mike somehow have gained that power?

The doctor immediately called on his psychic training, and set up a mental block in his mind to repel any possible psychic probe. He watched his patient's expression closely, from the corners of his eyes. Mike blinked, brought his head back to his pillow and shook it, sharply. To the doctor this was confirmation of his suspicions.

Cooper noticed this action, and swiftly went to his side.

"Oh, son, I hope you're all right! Did your headache come back? You don't feel sick after all, do you?"

"No, no need to fuss over me. I just don't understand- I feel fine, but so DIFFERENT! I can't explain it. I'm so confused!

Oh, just won't someone tell me something about what's happened to me? Please, Doc?..."

"All right, here," Cooper soothed, "eat what you can and I'll be back soon. I just have to check on a few things

at the lab....some final notes to take. Then we can talk. I can help you understand some of what has happened. It'll be o.k., just you wait and see. See you later, son. Be good to Dr. Horton for me, huh?"

"Yeah, sure," Mike couldn't help but grin, as he watched the curly-haired doctor leave the room; then turned back to his tray.

"He's a great guy!" He told Dr. Horton who still was nearby. "But I'm sure to lose my new job now! Then what will I do?"

"I'm glad you like my partner," Horton confided in the boy, "and don't worry about your job. We've notified your boss and everything will be waiting for you when you're back on your feet."

"Fantastic!" Mike was ecstatic. He ate like he'd not seen food for a week.

When Matthew Cooper reached the lab John McCree was already on duty protecting the front entrance. His face lit up like a light bulb when he saw him approaching.

"Good morning, Doc!" he cried, saluting. "Are you feeling better now? How's the boy that was hurt? Shameful, it was, to happen to him. How's the wee Larry Daniken? I'm hoping everything's fine now, is it Doc?"

Cooper tried to ignore so many questions, but felt he had to let the guard know something.

"I'm happy to tell you Mike Montaine is doing fine, now. His injuries weren't as serious as we'd assumed. About Larry- I'm not sure. He's Dr. Horton's patient, officially, and I regret to say I forgot to ask his condition this morning. You'll have to excuse me, John, I'm still not myself. That was a bad scare, and I had little sleep. Forgive me if I'm not very good company this morning, o.k.?"

"Yes, sir! It's safe for you to go in now. We guarded the place and buttoned it up tight as a drum all night. Nobody touched anything inside or out, after your crew left."

"Very good! Let's keep it that way. If you'll excuse me, sir..." and he entered the lab.

When Matthew Cooper walked through the lab door he got the worst chills he'd felt in years. The techs had done a wonderful job....everything was cleaned up and spotless. Someone had even ordered new test tubes and equipment from the supply room. Some were set up already, on the tables, and there were more boxes stacked in a nearby corner. He switched on the brighter lights, hoping they would chase away the feeling that evil lurked around every corner, in there. Slowly he proceeded to the control panel which had caused the accident. It was just the same as before. Cooper took out his glasses and put them on. He studied the notes on a clipboard he'd brought with him. No matter how long he studied and examined R.M.T.P., it could not be understood what went wrong. He was standing in front of the sending device, quietly, when a voice out of nowhere scared him out of his wits.

Cooper jumped, almost losing his glasses. Turning he breathed a sigh of relief to see the welcomed figure of Jeanie standing by a table. He took in a deep breath, and put a hand over his heart. "Jesus!" he whispered, then said aloud, "Jeanie! It's good to see you're feeling better now. You scared me half out of my wits! I didn't know anyone else was in the room."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Cooper. I was in the supply room and didn't know you were here, either. I didn't mean to frighten you. Here, let me get you a chair."

She found one nearby, but Cooper protested. "Thanks, but I'm alright. Don't worry, young lady, I'm not as fragile as you might believe! I am thankful you care a lot about me, though.....I don't know what I'd do without you, as a matter of fact. Did you set up these supplies just this morning?"

"Yes. I knew you'd be pleased! I....I couldn't stay at the dorm any longer. I've been so restless, and so worried about Mike. Dr. Horton mentioned something about his condition improving a bit, but when I awoke, he was still asleep, and I didn't wish to disturb him to ask how things were. Mike.....is he....?"

"I'm happy to tell you, Jeanie, we pulled him through! He's going to be fine!"

Jeanie stared in disbelief. "But he was....how...what happened? What did you do to help him?"

"It's a long story, Jeanie, but Mike did most of the work himself!"

"You mean...he is conscious? He can do everything....I mean, he's NORMAL now?"

"Yeah. As soon as you're finished here, you can go see for yourself. I'm sure Dr. Horton wouldn't mind."

"OH!" Jeanie sighed. She felt like jumping with joy! Mike's full recovery was unbelievable to her. It seemed like she was always hugging her boss, but she grabbed Cooper and squeezed him hard! She didn't want to let go. Tears of joy ran down her cheeks.

Dr. Cooper felt a twinge of pride in himself, then silently reprimanded himself for this. He hadn't done much to bring about Mike's recovery, but then again, perhaps because of his and Larry's quick action with the CPR treatment, his brain had stayed functioning long enough for the boy to accomplish the rest. Cooper's mind and emotions were so confused, his brain felt like it was caught in a whirlwind. But Cooper was not so out of things he did not enjoy the girl's attentions. He felt a familiar stirring within, and knew he had better untangle himself from her strong embrace soon. He needed to keep his thoughts on the present puzzle of R.M.T.P. and the last thing he needed at the moment was a romantic entanglement with someone less than half his age; a woman who should remain a daughter's image in his mind. He gently pushed free of her touch, but kept her close to him, and she became nervous,



rubbing her arm, looking embarrassed for her emotional display.

"Why don't you go on ahead, Jeanie! There's a few more checks I have to make, here, then I'll be right behind you. Oh, and thanks for the hug," he added. "God knows, I really needed one today! I'll notify you of your future duties here. I'm still not sure what I want to do next."

"Thank you, sir, thank you!"

In seconds Jeanie was racing out of the lab toward the clinic.

"To be young again!" Cooper said to himself, and for the first time in hours HE smiled.

Jeanie tip-toed into the clinic as if she was walking into an intensive care unit. She saw the curtain was still pulled around Mike's bed and expected it was because he was still sleeping, or something. When she could not find Dr. Horton, she brought herself to peek around it. She went very slowly to the edge of the curtain. Mike was sitting in a chair beside the head of his bed, reading the newspaper. Though he was really engrossed in an article, he suddenly felt a strange awareness that someone had entered the room. He hadn't heard a sound, but just KNEW there was someone else there. He sighed, and moved the paper just enough to see the curtain. Although there was a light on his side of the curtain, there was none on the outside, but suddenly Mike could see the outline of Jeanie's form on the other side of the partition, as if a bright flashlight shone directly on her from behind, projecting her outline as if it was a movie screen!

Mike stared, not truly surprised for some reason, but waiting with fascinated amazement to see what happened. Jeanie had her hand on the edge of the curtain preparing to look around it. Mike put the paper up again, so that just the top of his head appeared, and she saw him immediately. Surprised at his improved condition, she managed a smile, and said "Hi!" She could tell he was grinning by the sparkle in his eyes.

"Hi!" he repeated enthusiastically, and put down the paper, folding it neatly, to his bed. "It's good to see you! I knew someone was here, but I thought it was Dr. Horton with some more of those horrible tests for me! Come on in and find a seat! Sit on my bed if you'd like." He stood up to stretch and Jeanie was pleased to see he was only clad in pajama bottoms and slippers. She couldn't hold herself back from staring at his handsome body. Mike seemed to ignore this, but he sat down quickly, not wishing to let her know he was nervous at her gaze. He fought back a blush, and Jeanie moved closer to the opposite bedside where the now silent machines stood.

"I didn't expect you'd be awake, so soon after...." she began.

"Oh, yeah," Mike nodded, looking down at the mattress. "I WAS pretty sick, wasn't I? Well, that's all over with, now, Jeanie, and I'm sorry if I scared you yesterday. I'm much better now, as you can see, and I'm very glad you came to see me! You know, you're my first official visitor!"

Jeanie found herself speechless after listening to Mike's voice. "I-I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" she managed to say.

"Aw, no! I was just reading the paper for something to do. It's so boring around here even the tests are sometimes interesting! Hey," he added, noticing her blush, "don't be afraid of me! I'm glad you came, honest! Look, pull over a chair and relax. You make me feel like a privileged character, being 'entertained' by a beautiful girl!" His laughter was contagious, but it didn't take long for Jeanie's seriousness to return.

"L-look, I just came to apologize."

"Apologize for what? You haven't done anything wrong, I hardly know you!"

"It's all my fault....your accident, I mean."

"What in the world do you mean by that?" She had all his attention, now. He was flabbergasted by her statement and wished a full explanation, in a hurry.

"If I'd have notified Dr. Cooper you were cleaning on that platform, you wouldn't have been hurt! I didn't want to interrupt him while he was working in the safety room. I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you, for all you've been through? I never realized they would turn on the switch without checking with me first. I'm sorry, Mike...."

"Don't be." Mike was taken by her honesty and kindness. He had never met a woman like Jeanie before. It was hard to find the words to cheer her, to make her understand he didn't hold anything against her. As a matter of fact, he remembered something about a dream he'd had that made him want to become good friends with Jeanie, perhaps even make her his steady girl. He noticed one tear on her cheek, and boldly reached over with his right hand to caress it away.

"There," he said, after drying the tear with just a touch of his finger, "now please, Jeanie, don't think this way. My accident was just that....an accident and nothing more. It was nobody's fault. I'm here, aren't I? I'm o.k.. That's all that matters now. Why, if it hadn't been for the accident I wouldn't have met you!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right, after all, I guess I'm just being silly. Thank you for being so kind. Can I see you again? I might as well tell you right now, while I feel very brave, I think you're wonderful!" Jeanie giggled, as she watched Mike's expression change to a playful smile. He chuckled. He was thrilled and embarrassed at her statement. It was his turn to be speechless. His face turned fire red.

"Thank you, Jeanie!" He finally said. "No lady's ever said that to me before. I think you're pretty special, too. And SURE, you can see me again. I should be going home soon, but you can visit me as much as you want to, and we'll see what happens after that. How does that sound?"

Mike's smile just about made Jeanie's heart leap into her throat. She nodded in agreement. She didn't know why, but she felt his eyes could look clear through her!

But that was impossible, wasn't it?

"Great!" she told him, not taking her eyes off his face.

There was a few moments of silence, where both felt awkward, but pleased with their accomplishments in cementing a relationship that each hoped would last forever.

"Er, where's Dr. Cooper?" Mike asked. "Haven't seen him since first thing this morning."

"He's back at the lab, trying to find out what went wrong yesterday. He'll be along shortly. He stayed with you all night, you know."

"Oh! I'll have to thank him for that when I see him again."

"That should be VERY shortly," Jeanie said, then asked cautiously, "what is your opinion of him?"

"I think he's a great guy! He's been like a father to me, the way he cares, but don't tell him so. I'll break that news to him when I'm ready. I don't know how he'll accept that information. He seems like a pretty dedicated scientist. Maybe he wouldn't enjoy having a 'son' around."

"Don't you think he wouldn't. He's pretty lonesome, Mike. No one is supposed to be able to tell that, but I can read my boss like a book! He practically died, himself, when he saw what happened to you. He likes you, Mike. If you can, will you at least visit us? Dr. Cooper would be tickled pink if you would even if he acted ugly as a bear while you were there with him! Look, I should be going. You need your rest. How are you doing now?"

"Everybody's askin' me that this morning! I haven't felt better in years!"

"Not even a pain?"

"Not even a little twinge! I really don't understand it myself, but Dr. Horton and Dr. Cooper are going to speak to me about what happened as soon as they can. I'm sort of looking forward to it. I'm sort of confused. My head is spinning with questions! I'm just glad it isn't my stomach that's spinning, instead!"

"Ech!" Jeanie gulped, "Yeah, like poor Larry Daniken's! But that's another story. I....."

Mike looked puzzled at the mention of the blonde tech's name, but Jeanie never finished her sentence. Dr. Cooper came in, looking more frustrated than ever, his hair looking funny, since after much rubbing it was frizzy on the end of many curls, right on the top of his head! He managed a smile when he saw the two young people together, and threw his clipboard on the head of Mike's bed. It slid across the pillows, stopping just inches short of Mike's knee. He almost forgot himself and began to swear.

"God damned son of a.....Oh!" he gasped, catching himself just in time. "Excuse me, Jeanie, I didn't mean to curse like that, but it's just so frustrating a day I could scream! No answers! More questions! Not a blasted clue to the whole situation. Mike, son, I'm sorry, but I just don't understand at all, what happened to you. I hope Phil...that's Dr. Horton, by the way, will be able to tell you something so you won't be so in the dark.

I know you must be pretty angry with me right now."

"Not at all....Doc. Oh, you don't mind if I call you that, do you. sir?"

"No, that's what everybody here calls me. I swear, most don't even bother to learn my name, but I don't mind. It's kind of nice to have such a title! I hope you don't mind my 'son' business. It seems to be a bad habit I've acquired over the years, calling younger men that. I just seem to be older than everyone else here, except my partner! Oh!" Cooper gasped, grabbing his right leg, "Man, my legs are stiff! I guess sleeping in a chair doesn't agree with my old bones!"

"Doc, I want to sincerely thank you for all you've done for me. I'm sorry I kept you up all night. I can't imagine how I'm going to repay you...all of you, for what you've done for me. My bill must be tremendous!"

"Don't think about it, son. I'm sure when the government finds out what happened, it'll take care of all the expenses! Right now, all you have to do....."

"Is rest! I know that by heart, now! Thanks, Doc, I'll rest for a little while, but I've got to get back to my job. One thing I've never been good at, is staying in bed," Mike teasingly eyed Jeanie up and down, "unless there's been a pretty girl to keep me there!"

He laughed. Jeanie looked away, pretending to be ignoring his remark, but loving every minute of his teasing. She had the feeling Mike hadn't had much of any experience with girls, and little did she know, she was right. He had been on a few dates, but most had turned out poorly. They had found him too dull for their tastes.

"Jeanie, we may have to issue you an order like that to keep him where he belongs for awhile!" Cooper told her, and everyone laughed. Jeanie made a funny face at this statement, which started everyone into tension releasing hysterics. Their fun was interrupted however, when Dr. Horton returned, pushing Larry Daniken in a wheel chair. He was so weak, he could hardly sit up straight in the thing. Dr. Cooper caught his breath after seeing Larry's poor appearance, and noticed, too, that he was breathing laboriously. Larry managed a weak wave at his boss.

"God!" gulped Cooper.

"Hi, Doc!" Larry said, trying to sound cheerful, but failing at the task miserably.

Jeanie just stared at her friend. Mike looked nervous for a few seconds, but then shook his head and smiled at the man in the wheelchair.

"He's not doing any better?" Cooper confided in Horton after he managed to speak to him alone by the doorway.

"No, I'm afraid to report. He ate little breakfast, but I can't imagine how long he'll be able to keep it down. He's dehydrating terribly. Nothing seems to stop either the vomiting or the diarrhea. That's why I brought him back here. I want to try a little experiment."

"What?" Dr. Cooper whispered back, not imagining what his colleague had in mind.

"Just wait and see. It has to do with Mike."

When they joined the others again at Mike's bedside, Dr. Horton took Larry to the men's room upon his request, and when they returned a few minutes later, Larry was placed by the end of the metal table and Horton walked to the end of the bed to speak to Mike.

"I would like to try something," he said, smiling. "Michael, would you mind coming over here to Larry and putting your hands on his shoulders?"

"No, not at all."

The boy stretched and went the short distance to his new acquaintance. He took a deep breath, and gingerly placed his hands on the weakened tech's shoulders from in front of him. Larry looked ready to pass out, and was mumbling something, but at the janitor's touch, tried to sit up straight.

"Hey, I don't feel so good!" Larry moaned. "Watch out, I may be contagious!"

Mike felt like two jolts of invisible electricity fled down his arms and went into Larry's body simultaneously, through his fingertips. Those watching could only see a faint glow around both as the contact was made.

Larry opened his eyes wide, smiled and brought himself straight in his chair. Mike hadn't even blinked his eyes through the whole thing, and he just stepped back, smiling.

"W-what happened?" Larry managed, surprised. "I feel better. I DO feel better!" His big blue eyes gazed up at Mike.

"Hey, what ARE you, some kind of faith healer or something? I mean, I'm sorry, but I haven't been to church in years! But thank you; whatever you did worked, somehow."

Larry carefully stood up. His insides still were a little shaky. Other than that, and a very sore backside, he felt like he could do a good day's work with no complaints! There was so much positive energy flowing through Larry's body it seemed to touch everyone in the room in the form of joy at the occurrence. Jeanie beamed and stared at the two men. Dr. Cooper cleared his throat.

"Well," he exclaimed, looking at Dr. Horton. He could find no more words to say.

Mike just stared at Larry, then at the others, in question. "What did I do?" he asked, astonished. "Did I do something?"

"Well," Doctor Horton seemed to be an echo of his partner, "that seems to help a lot, and, answer at least ONE of our questions."

"What is going on? Will someone kindly explain?" Mike asked the doctors, shrugging. He held out his arms before him in exasperation.

"In time, dear boy, in time. We can't tell you what we don't know ourselves, but I CAN tell you right now, your accident has blessed you with the psychic ability to heal. Have you ever had this power before?"

"If you're talking about the so-called 'laying on of hands,' no. I've never done anything like that before. Do you mean THAT is what I've done to Larry?"

Larry's eyes were big as he paused from stretching his legs and leaned against the table behind him. He wondered even more what had happened with his body.

"Hey, guys," he put in, "will I be o.k.? Is this thing you're talking about SAFE?"

"Perfectly!" Horton chuckled at everyone's innocence in the matter. He debated with himself silently on how to explain the effect. "When someone has the ability to heal with their hands, alone, it is like when they touch the ailing person the 'patient' gets an invisible shot of energy from the person's very soul, and additional doses are passed along through him, with help from The Spirit World. Spirit Guides and Spirit Healers help purify Healing Energy before it is given, to strengthen its power. Now do you understand? Something within the transporter beam during the accident apparently has magnified Michael's power to do this thing, and possibly ALL his psychic senses have been magnified."

"Wow!" Sighed Mike, looking down at his hands. The rest were still speechless. Larry looked more relaxed.

"We are not sure WHAT Michael can do, but we do know he's pretty special to us, and possibly, the world!"

"And remember," Cooper finally found his voice to put in, "don't breathe a word about this accident or what you've seen today, to anyone. Don't forget who you're working for. This is something very important."

"Come along, Larry!" Dr. Horton called to the amazed technician. "I want to give you a final check up, though I'm sure you'll get a clean bill of health." He went off toward the adjoining exam room.

Larry started after him, then paused. He went over to Mike and touched his arm, to get his attention. After Mike faced him again, "Look, I really mean it...thanks!" he told him, staring into Mike's eyes earnestly.

Mike smiled and nodded. There was no need for further words. Larry rushed off after his doctor. Jeanie, Dr. Cooper, and Mike were finally left alone.

"Gee," said Mike, "What else will I be able to do, Doc?"

"I have no idea, Mike," Cooper answered. "Horton is the authority on that mumbo-jumbo stuff. To tell you the absolute truth, I've never believed in any of that stuff. Must be my family upbringing. My mother used to say all our problems are God's punishment for not doing things His way."

"Yours too?" asked Jeanie. "Mine said almost the same thing! It's really going to be interesting, though, to see what you can do, Mike. I saw a medium once make a table rise. I wonder if Mike can do anything like that?"

I saw a medium once make a table rise. I wonder if Mike can do anything like that?"

Mike laughed. "Next thing," he said, "she'll be expecting me to fly, like you-know-who!"

"No, who?" said both Cooper and Jeanie in unison, and everyone began to laugh. Just then Horton and Larry emerged from the exam room.

"No, I'd really prefer you take it easy for a couple of days. Go back to your apartment...catch up on reading, and relax. I'll let you know when you can go back to work," Horton was saying to Larry.

"O.k., sir," said the reluctant technician, "but I feel kind of foolish doing nothing with the lab such a mess!"

"Don't worry about it," Cooper told him, "we'll be weeks just tearing the components apart, and your assistants can do that! I won't need you 'til we start the microscopic examination of the chips to see what damage has been done. I bet there's a lot of it! But take a couple of days to rest. You're not going to get much when we start the re-build!"

"O.k.," Larry shrugged. "I need a brush-up on that matter dispersal theory, anyway! Four gray walls, here I come!"

"At least yours are gray!" Mike soothed. "Mine are chartreuse pink! And you know, it's impossible to get any paint!"

"Well, you can bear with it a few more weeks!" Horton encouraged. "I want you to take it easy, too. You can stay in your own quarters, but I want you in here daily for an afternoon progress report.

Now, how about everybody clearing out? I've got some research to do!"

Cooper looked at Horton in disbelief. "You're sending Mike home?" he half shouted. "It's too soon! You should keep him here, watch over him!"

"I don't think," said Horton, "Mike needs any watching over. He's perfectly fine now. He can take care of himself and I can't spare a nurse to go with him. I'm sure Jeanie and you will check on him from time to time. Now come on, everybody to their appointed places! There's things to be done!"

"Where are my things?" asked Mike.

"Locker A," Horton explained, "right in there. I got you a clean set of underclothes earlier and sent the others to the laundry. Your shirt and pants seem clean enough, so I suggest you get dressed and get out of my clinic! Everybody out!"

Reluctantly everybody headed for their assigned places. Mike dressed, went by the lab just to peek inside, and headed for the stairs. He could take the underground tunnel to his apartment, but he hadn't seen the sun for ages, and somebody'd said it was a clear day. So he climbed the stairs and stepped out into the sunshine. One moment he was fine, the next he was dizzy and weak. He staggered a couple of steps before he regained his senses.

"What to hell...." he said. In a few moments he regained his strength, or, most of it, and continued on his way. There was virtually no traffic on the road. "What a shame!" he thought. The United States had spent billions of dollars on its road system and now they were virtually unused. A few large trucks hurried to and fro and a few people were lucky enough to buy or build little electric runabouts, but there was virtually no fuel for anything else. He remembered hearing a young soldier say that the only time he'd driven his tank in his three years of service, was once a month to move it twenty feet forward and back, so the gears wouldn't freeze up! He wondered how many pilots had ever been off the ground. "You never see a plane anymore, or anything."

His leisurely walk brought him to the entrance of his apartment house, and he descended the stairs. The minute he entered the shadows his full strength returned, and he turned around and stared back out into the sunlight. "Weird!" he said. "I've got to tell Horton about that. I've never been sun sick before!"

He descended the four flights of stairs to his apartment, entered the little livingroom, and looked over to the kitchenette. None of the presealed dinners in the cupboard appealed to him, so he sat down in his most comfortable chair and stared at the room. There wasn't much in it; the chair he was sitting in, the small couch over which hung his proudest possession...an old movie poster that had belonged to his mother. Mike didn't know what the movie had been about, but it must have been interesting. On the poster were two men holding shining swords and behind them a weird looking creature with big ears and eyes. "It must have been fun," thought Mike, "to be able to hop in a car, drive several miles, just to see a movie!" They were lucky if they got a new film twice a year, to show in the cafeteria. Then it was a cheaply done, poorly acted government job, but he supposed they were better than nothing. T.v. wasn't much better. It was only on four hours a day, and an hour of that was news! He did enjoy old travel logs, though, as everybody else did. "Journeys To Adventure" was the most popular show on Saturday nights! Even if you'd seen them twenty-five times you still watched. He wondered if Australia and all those other places were still different. He remembered the kangaroos he'd seen on one show. "Hey, that's it!" he said, "I'll sketch a kangaroo. Maybe I can sell it and get some spending money."

Mike was not a great artist, but his sketches were fair, and people liked them as decorations. His problem was to get paper and pencils. His janitorial job had proved a bonanza in this department. He had managed to find some crumpled up paper in a packing case which he had carefully pressed smooth. And in a waste can he had found a couple of pencil stubs for which he had fashioned a holder. He remembered the paper was in the binder he had made under his chair, but he couldn't find the



pencils and their holder anywhere! He searched the room fruitlessly. Finally he stood, frustrated, in the middle of the room. "Dammit!" he said, "Pencil, come here!"

Silently the pencil rose from beneath the seat cushions where it had fallen, floated through the air and bumped Mike lightly on the back of the head. Startled, Mike turned around, and stared at the pencil floating in mid air! Half in a dream, he reached out and took it. "Oh, my God!" he said, "Oh, my God!"

Out of nowhere a soft voice answered, "Not mine!"

"Huh?" said Mike. There was a soft and gentle laughter as Mike sat down. "On, no," he thought, "I'm going crazy! I'm hearing things!" Mike was practically unaware that he had flipped open the binder and he was drawing, but it was not a kangaroo. In a few moments his eyes fell on his work. he had drawn the Earth and the moon, as seen from space, and between them was a strange object....a short cylinder with six bumps on the front of it. When he finished, he signed the picture, but not with his own signature. In the left-hand corner he wrote, "Galileo."

He replaced the pencil in its appropriate place in the binder and stared at the picture.

"Bureaucrats!" he cursed, shut the binder, and hurried from his apartment. In a few minutes he was in Horton's office telling him what happened.

"What's the matter, Doc?" he asked, "Am I freaking out?"

"Hardly," said Horton. "You've demonstrated the powers of levitation, a Spirit has spoken to you, and you've made an automatic drawing." He went over to the phone and called Cooper, and asked him to come to the infirmary. In a few moments Cooper arrived.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," said Horton, "Mike just drew this. Is that an MLC?"

Cooper took the picture and stared at it. "It sure looks like it," he said. "Where did YOU ever see pictures of an MLC?" Cooper asked Mike.

"I've never seen pictures of one," answered Mike. "I don't even know what one is."

"An MLC," said Cooper, "is a Multiple Launch Cluster. They were the last things the space cranes took up before the shuttle program was shut down. The United States has two-hundred of those babies orbiting the Earth. Each one holds six warhead injectors, and each of these injectors carries three warheads. When the government knew they weren't going to be able to maintain the old underground silos any longer, they dismantled the rocket and put all the warheads in these launch clusters, and put them in orbit. They're supposed to be fool proof and fully automatic. If their sensors detect warheads coming at the United States, they automatically zero in on the country of origin and fire their warheads. Result- no more country of origin, even if there's no more United States to protect! Stupid, huh?"

"Yeah," said Mike, "stupid! And what if something goes wrong with one of those things and it just launches its warheads?"

"They've got all kinds of built in fail safes," said Cooper, "they're supposed to shut down before they malfunction."

Mike looked at Horton, completely perplexed. "But I don't understand! Why am I drawing pictures of one?"

"I don't know," admitted Horton. "We'll probably find out eventually." He went to his desk and opened a drawer. He took out a stack of forms, looked at the backs, and opened another drawer, withdrawing two pencils and a pen. He brought them over to Mike.

"Here," he said, "the back of these are blank. If you feel like drawing anything else, go ahead, don't resist it, just let your hand draw. Go on home, now. Oh, wait a minute!" he said. He picked a small notebook up off the desk. "If you hear that voice again write down anything it says."

"Sure!" Mike agreed, as he headed out the door, "Whatever you say, sir!"

"Hey, Mike!" called Cooper, "How 'bout joining Jeanie and I for supper tonight? I've got a real ham and some potatoes, and I'm looking for someone to share it with! Say....six o'clock?"

"REAL ham?" Mike cried, "Off a REAL pig? You bet, Doc! You couldn't keep me away!"

"Fine!" said Cooper. "See you then!"

## Chapter Four Picture Puzzles

The dinner at Doctor Cooper's that evening turned out to be a fantastic time. The food was great, and the company, especially Jeanie, more than pleasing. Mike marveled at the difference between the supervisor's large, beautiful apartment and his own efficiency just down the road....even the soft and colorful furnishings there looked almost new! Cooper even had a conference room in the back of his home for business meetings. His kitchen proved to be small, but extremely neat for a single man's, and Mike guessed it must be taken care of by the maid service provided for high ranking government personnel. He felt comfortable there, nonetheless, and the friends talked and joked all through dinner.

Mike was thrilled to discover some of Dr. Cooper's most prized possessions were an old console stereo kept in almost perfect condition, and, a collection of records from the late 1960s and 1970s era. "Good old rock and roll!" he called the music, and it all sounded so ancient! It got Mike to remembering an photograph he saw as a child of a then ancient record player called a "gramophone," which sported a large horn-shaped speaker on its top. He enjoyed the music, all through the dinner, and hoped he could remember some of the tunes.

Mike was very musically inclined, it seemed like he was always whistling or humming wherever he went when he was in a good mood, and he could read music, or play a tune by ear on his old guitar. He couldn't wait to try some of the ones Dr. Cooper had played him, when he got home. It would take a while, though, to dig through all the clothes and junk at the bottom of his livingroom closet to find his prized instrument. Mike had never been a good housekeeper. Everyone left Cooper's apartment around ten p.m.. For a change Mike was SO tired that he took the shortest way home through the underground tunnel and quickly made up his sofa bed. He even amazed himself by changing into some blue pajamas he had packed away in the back of a drawer. It was his custom to sleep naked, or just in his underclothes, but as Mike thought about it a moment, he DID seem to feel a certain chill in the air that radiated even into his livingroom. "I guess winter's coming after all!" he said, aloud. He laid down, snuggling under the covers, and almost drifted off to sleep, but was startled awake by a feeling that someone was hovering over him, and tugging on his exposed left sleeve. "Oooooooh!" he moaned, disgusted that his most deserved rest had been so rudely interrupted. He suddenly knew what the unseeget his art supplies from the kitchen table. He sat back down on the edge of the bed,n "visitor" wanted, and quickly went to get his art supplies from the kitchen table. He sat back down on the edge of the bed, making a mental note

to keep the binder and writing utensils on the floor near him every night, from then on. He readied the pencil he'd chosen and as soon as he placed it on the paper it seemed to take off, sketching on its own! Mike had all he could do to hold the eraser in his left hand!

The "Spirit", if that's what it was making the pencil work, seemed to impress upon the boy an urgency to convey a message of importance. And though Mike relaxed and did everything he thought would possibly help things to happen correctly, the finished product in seconds, was revealed to be the same as the other he'd done earlier. It was still the old MLC! Mike shivered after he'd finished. There was something creepy about something you couldn't control, whether it was your own hand, or a far-away weapon.

"Damn!" Mike swore softly, to himself, as the chilled feeling left him as quickly as it had come. He once again made himself comfortable for the night. "What have I gotten myself into this time? What does all this mean...my accident, my strange powers, and all these picture puzzles?" He felt a blanket of depression overtake him as he pulled the material ones up to his chin....but why? He'd had a wonderful night, and wasn't TRULY worried about anything.

"Doc, I can't wait to see you tomorrow," he sighed, "Maybe someone can find the answers. If anyone does, it's GOT to be you!" Mike fell into a deep, calm sleep as soon as he'd shut his eyes.

Mike woke feeling in a better mood the next morning. He noticed with a glance at his old alarm clock he'd managed to awaken the usual time he did on a work day. "Oh...." he shrugged, "so what?"

After a quick shower in the shared bathing room down the hall, and a fast breakfast of cereal, he dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans, threw on a light jacket, and rushed off toward Dr. Cooper's lab. The fresh air felt good, even though it was a dark and cloudy day. Mike noticed that he didn't feel as weak this morning, as he had the others. Maybe the results of the accident were wearing off.

Mike was so engrossed he didn't see or hear the speeding truck until it was almost on top of him, then the blast of an air horn brought him back to the present. He instinctively leapt back, as the massive vehicle roared passed.

"Phew!" he gasped, "Haven't seen one of them in ages! Must be some research supplies coming in!"

As Mike started off across the road again, he noticed something gleaming in the sun, and reached down to pick it up. It was three links of chain, the kind they used to tie down cargo on a truck. They looked strange, as if they had struck something very hard and hot, and been fused together.

"Hi, Frank!" Mike cried, and grinned as he saw the guy's shocked expression and pale color.

"W-what the hell are you doing here?" Frank gasped. "I thought you were recuperating from a terrible accident...it was so bad the government's going to pay all your expenses!"

Mike was at a loss for an explanation then nervously added, "Yeah, well, you know how some people exaggerate on details! The government IS going to pay for expenses though. After all, I am their trusted employee." Then he couldn't help but laugh at his companion.

"What's so funny? You just scared the-er-hell out of me, for God's sake! The explanation I was given of your reason for absence made it sound as if you were almost dead. When I saw you come in, I-

"Ever since I met you, Frank, I've always wanted to scare you really bad!" Mike teased, "Now my wish has come true. You'll be seein' me a lot until I come to work in a few days. Got some new friends in the lab and have to see the Doc for check ups. Sorry I had to come in on you like this, but I couldn't resist it! You always seem like nothing phases you. Now I know better!" he chuckled.

Frank looked embarrassed, then brightened. "Well, good luck with your recuperation!" he added, looking up at his friend. "Now you'll have a chance to drive all those ladies wild!"

"Only one," Mike replied over his shoulder as he opened the door to leave, "and her name is Jeanie Hall!"

Frank smiled and nodded. After Mike had gone he said, "Name sounds familiar!" Then went back to his work, busily getting some business forms from his desk drawer.

\* \* \*

It was only a few moments before Mike found the lab and was happy to see Dr. Cooper at a table with Jeanie beside him. Both had their backs to the door and didn't see who had come in.

"No, I don't think we should," Cooper was saying as they looked over diagrams and components. "This has all got to be taken down and rebuilt, remember? If we do as you suggest-

"It will take too much time, and probably be for nothing!" Mike put in, boldly. Both Cooper and Jeanie turned to see their visitor simultaneously.

"Oh, MIKE!" Jeanie gasped, then gave him a big smile, "Hi!"

"Hello, son," Cooper nodded, and after a minute of studying the boy, "What's wrong? You look, pardon the expression, like you might have seen a ghost!"

"Oh!" Mike shook his head. The end of his friend's sentence finally had penetrated his brain through the wonderful haze Jeanie seemed to arouse as he stared at her. "Just barely escaped being clobbered by one of the big rigs out front, sir.

You mentioned something about a ghost?"

"Yeah, you looked like you'd seen one! Is there something else bothering you?"

As a matter of fact, there is! That's why I'm here." He put his binder down on the table Cooper had been working at and opened it to the sketch. He took it out and quickly handed it to the supervisor.

"Another MLC?" he asked, then sighed. Cooper rubbed his nose in thought, and leaned back on the table edge, concentrating on the drawing. "Looks about the same as the other to me, but from a different angle. I wish I could give you a clue to why you're doing these.

"I don't know WHY, but whoever's trying to get the message across, was very upset last night that we didn't understand. The damned thing's urgent! There's something wrong somewhere, and I can't find it, Doc! I'm supposed to help someone, somehow, but HOW?"

"Now, now!" Cooper soothed, going over to rub Mike's shoulder. "Take it easy, son. I'm sure we'll find out the secret soon. Don't get so upset. I worry about you, you know."

Mike rubbed his forehead. He felt he would burst with curiosity. Even more, he also felt alienated from everyone by his new abilities. Would anyone ever understand him? If Dr. Cooper didn't know the answers to it all, then who would? Most of all, would he ever understand these things himself?

Jeanie broke the silence. She had gone over to Cooper's side to see what was being made such a fuss over. His blue eyes glowed when she saw the drawing.

"Oh, Mike!" she gasped again, "It's beautiful! You know, you're surprising me every minute! I didn't know you could draw! Why, what other hidden talents do you have? I'll bet there are several!" She went over to the boy and put her arm around him. He almost blushed.

"Er.....I can play the guitar," he explained, "that's about it!"

"That's IT?" Jeanie cried with joy, "That's wonderful!"

"What's all the racket about?" came a familiar male voice as the lab door opened and slammed shut again. "Just thought I'd stop by to see what's going on, and to tell you where I'd be if you need me, sir."

Of course the visitor was Larry Daniken.

"Hello!" Dr. Cooper cried. "What IS this, old home week? Good to see you. But you're supposed to be resting, son, you know that. I swear, you people would come to work on your DYIN' BREATH!"

"Aw, Doc, please don't start on me! Let's face it, there's nothing else to do! I've been bored stiff up at my place, and I'm just looking for a little action."

"Ha! That'd be the day! YOU looking for a little ACTION? You've got girls begging to go with you!" Jeanie half joked! Larry gave her a disgusted look. "Not THAT kind of action!" he said, "But thanks for the compliment about the girls. I HOPE I'm not interrupting anything, Doc. Hey why does everyone look so discouraged?"

"Oh, no reason in particular, just have too many mysteries to solve, that's all, especially about Mike's picture, here." Larry looked at it quickly, then screwed up his handsome face into the funniest expression!

"What the hell....." he laughed. "haven't seen anything like that since I saw one of those runabouts crash on the main road years ago! What is it, a screw, or some nuts and bolts?"

"How you ever got to be a technician amazes me sometimes, son," Cooper teased. "That's neither. It's an MLC, one of our great American defense systems. But it's too long a story to explain again. It's just that Mike's been drawing it and he doesn't know why. He's never even SEEN one! If you have any clues, let us know. So far I don't believe there's an answer in THIS world!"

"You give me the shivers, Doc!" Larry replied. You could see the goose bumps appear on his bear arms. He hadn't been as conscientious about the weather as Mike, and wore his short-sleeved shirt, as usual, with his favorite tight blue jeans.

"I'd like to give you guys a good boot out of here!" Cooper said, looking at Larry and Jeanie. "I think it's the only way I'll get you to do what you've been told."

Mike laughed, Jeanie moved away from him with a disappointed look, and took her sweater from the nearby coatrack. While the others were talking something on the workbench caught Mike's eye. It was an odd-looking thing. It looked like two old-fashioned-old-fashioned car transmissions put big end together. As Mike looked at it he realized it was hermetically sealed.

"Hey, Doc, what's this thing?" he asked.

"That," said the Doctor, "is the main element of The Matter Dispersing Unit. That's what is supposed to spread the atoms in the object out, so they can be drawn into The Transport Beam! I sure would like to get it apart, but it's vacuum sealed. I've got to send it to the big shop down south to be disassembled. That's the only piece that's got the hydraulic equipment strong enough to pull out that valve and let the air in. Then it takes a pretty good machine to pull the two sections apart."

"Oh, you mean this little thing here?" Mike asked, putting his finger through a ring-like fixture on the side of the device.

"Yes," said Dr. Cooper, "but you couldn't budge it...no human being could."

Mike put his other hand on the device and pulled gently on the ring. It withdrew about a quarter of an inch,

and there was a loud hissing sound. When he released it, it stayed out.

"Must've been something wrong, Doc," Mike announced. "That was easy!" He grasped both ends of the device and pulled. there was a POP, and the two sections slid apart. "Guess you can work on it now, huh, Doc?"

Cooper, Jeanie, and Larry stared in stunned disbelief. Cooper and Larry came over, pulled the device apart, and examined the inner works.

"Completely fused!" Cooper announced. "The chips are all disintegrated. All the wiring's melted, and flowed down into the bottom unit! It must have been the first thing to go. It's a wonder Mike ever dispersed! The basic flaw had to have been in this unit. Once IT went, it started a chain reaction through the whole system. But what's causing it? Where is the extra energy coming from that's blowing out the units?"

Mike was standing on the platform by the wreck of the transmission unit. "It's the force field, Doc," he said. "It just won't work. When you turn on the force field it acts like a magnet drawing every bit of loose energy out of the atmosphere. It feeds it DIRECTLY into your circuitry, bypassing the circuit breakers! You've got to get rid of the force field and use some kind of non-conductive substance...maybe GLASS! Then you'll lick it!"

Mike turned around and looked at Cooper and his assistants. They were all standing, transfixed.

"Something wrong, Doc?" he asked, coming back toward them.

"How did you KNOW that, Mike?"

"Know what?" Mike asked, 'Did I say something?"

"About the force field burning out the circuit."

"I don't know, Doc! I just knew it. When I was standing there I could just see it all happening."

"My God!" cried Cooper, "That could be it! It really COULD be it! The transmission of the receiving unit might still be good, but the design of the whole rest of the system is gone. It was all built around the force fields." His eyes almost seemed to twinkle as he headed towards his drafting board. "Everybody OUT of here!" he said. "Go find something to do! Find McCree! Have him station a guard outside that door, and don't let ANYBODY disturb me for ANYTHING! Out! Out! All of you OUT!"

The three younger people hurried from the lab as Cooper began to work furiously at his drafting board like a man possessed. He stopped for a moment and called after the others.

"Hey!" he said, "Don't tell ANYBODY what Mike did! None of it! It never happened, do you understand?"

"O.k., sure Doc!" Larry replied.



"Yes," muttered Jeanie.

"Sure, Doc!" added Mike.

They stepped outside and shut the door.

"Is he alright?" asked Mike.

"Yes," said Jeanie, "but I've got to make some arrangements. You won't get him out of that lab now, for ANYTHING! It took him two weeks to draw up the first set of plans. I think he got forty-eight hours of sleep in that whole time! It's the way he works, Mike. We're going to have to make sure he eats and rests SOME. But he won't stop until the plans are finished, and he can start building the new machine. Oh, Larry....guess what? Mike plays the guitar!"

"Really?" asked Larry, "Is he any good?"

"I've never heard him," Jeanie told him, "but we're going to! Come on! Let's find McCree and get that security guard up here. Then, we've got nothing else to do....we'll see how well he plays!"

"Great!" Larry cried. "The store just got a shipment of root beer and potato chips; REAL potato chips! Mr. Rafferty is holding a six pack and has a bag of chips for me. It'll take all my spending money for this week, but it'll be a treat! I'll go get them!"

"Well, I could bring my popcorn popper," Jeanie thought aloud. "I've got a little popcorn left. We'll make it a real party, just like the old days."

"Boy," said Mike, "I wish we could have some ice cream! I had some once. There was a place in our town that used to make it. They had a dam and their own generators so they didn't have to worry about power rationing. They had these old machines. You put cream in the top and flavoring and stuff, left it for a while, then when you pulled up the handle on the bottom, ice cream came out!"

"Boy!" sighed Larry, "It's been a long time since I had any of that! When I was ten my mother got some for my birthday party. A neighbor made it in some kind of thing you cranked. Boy, was it GOOD!"

"Oh, will you two shut up?" Jeanie snapped.

"What's the matter, Jean?" asked Larry.

"She's never had any ice cream," said Mike, "Every time she's had the opportunity something's gone wrong and she's missed out."

"Oh, it's nothing!" said Jeanie. "I'm sure it's not that great, anyway!"

"Oh, YES IT IS!" said Mike and Larry in unison. Everybody burst out laughing.

"Come on, let's find McCree!" Jeanie managed, "And get out of here!"

A few hours later they gathered in Mike's apartment. Larry had picked up a young lady from the kitchen named Susie, who had commandeered some sandwiches, fruit punch, and strange-looking little green cookies.

"I hope they're supposed to be this color!" said Jeanie, taking one out of the package and sniffing it.

"Well, everybody in the cafeteria's been eating them!" Susie told her. "Nobody's got sick yet! And you're damned lucky to get anything. We have to use maple sugar to sweeten our beverages now. We haven't seen any white sugar in six months!"

Mike dragged his guitar out of the closet, took it out of its bag, and dusted it off.

"I sure hope I don't break my strings," he told them, "because I haven't got any to spare. There's some broken ones in the bottom of the closet there, somewhere, but I haven't been able to find any new ones for years!"

He tuned the instrument and said "Here goes nothing! I hope I don't disappoint you

people too much." He remembered one of the songs on Dr. Cooper's records and played a few bars to see if he remembered the tune, then started to sing "You Ain't Nothin' but A Hound Dog" When he was finished he found the others cheering and clapping.

"You're FANTASTIC, Mike!" screamed Susie. "Play something else!"

The rest of the afternoon just seemed to be a happy blur as they ate, sang and danced. But Mike was getting very confused. And why did his voice seem to change so many times when he sang different songs? It was scaring him, really scaring him.

## Chapter Five

### The Stuff That Heroes Are Made Of

The next morning Mike arose so well rested he had a hard time getting out of bed. His head began a dull throbbing, however, as soon as his feet hit the floor. Painfully rubbing his eyes, Mike pulled on his bathrobe and tied his belt tightly around his waist.

"What did I do yesterday?" he moaned. "I feel awful! I guess something didn't agree with me at the party!"

He went to the sink in his small private bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. This made the pain die down a little, so he went to force down his coffee and a couple of boiled eggs. His kitchen was a disaster area! The girls had tried to neaten it up, he noticed, but had given the idea up as a lost cause. As Mike eyed the sink, or, the area where it was under the sloppy pile of dirty dishes, his emotions were a mixture of embarrassment and guilt.

"I guess if I'm going to have friends over, I've got to keep this place neat and clean! Boy! Jeanie must be some mad at me right now....what a mess this kitchen is! I'll have to tell her I'm...."

Mike's words were interrupted by a sharp pain racing through his temples. He bent over at the waist and put his hand up to his forehead, instinctively. The room was whirling, and his stomach, too.

"Oh!" he moaned, "What hit me? Maybe I'd better go lie down!"

Making his way to his still unfolded sofa bed, he almost fell onto it, face first, as he tripped over something on the floor. Landing in the bed on his left side, Mike looked to see what had caught his toes.

"Hey!" Mike gasped, in surprise, this time, "My notebook!" He slowly sat up to retrieve the binder. "I hope no one's messed with my stuff!"

It practically fell open to a page in its center when he put it on his lap. "Oh, my God!" he whispered. "Wow!" as he studied the new drawing he saw on the page before him, "I must have done this last night, but...but I don't remember!" And the harder he tried to remember what had happened, the worse his headache became. "Oh," he breathed. The picture was the mysterious device, again, but this time a section of the outside metal had been left out so its intricate internal wiring could be seen and studied. The drawing was so well done it looked like a picture out of a service manual! Mike's eyes wandered over the page slowly and carefully in awe. Then, he noticed beside the usual signature there were other words printed in large, scrawling letters. Mike sharply took in his breath. He was almost afraid to read them.

"HELP ME STOP MLC," the message said. He read it aloud again, slowly. Could one of the others have written it yesterday, while he was singing? But no...he remembered hiding the binder carefully, out of plain sight.

"So that's it!" Mike said. "Damn!" He fell back on the bed in amazement, stretching his arms out to either side of him.

"But how? Why? I've got to tell the Doc about this, and, last night!"

Quickly pulling on his clothes he grabbed his jacket and the binder again, and prepared to leave for the lab. It was eight a.m.. As he turned out the lights he added aloud,

"Sorry, Jeanie, I'll clean up later. Right now I've got more important work to do! That seems like the story of my life!"

He sighed, shut the door, and locked it tight.

\* \* \*

Mike had almost been able to ignore his headache since he'd found the drawing, but it returned with a blinding fury once he'd gone outside. The day was partly sunny and the air was very cold. It felt like snow. The boy wished he'd worn a sweater under his jacket. Flannel shirts were nice, but they didn't help much against this type of biting cold. Mike stopped to look up at the sky. He could see the top of the sun just peeking out from behind the dark clouds.

"That's it!" he thought through the pain, as he briskly walked along again, "The sun is making me sick again! I'll bet I feel so bad because I was outside in the sun a lot yesterday getting ready for the party! I'll never do that again, you can bet on it!"

There weren't even other pedestrians on the roads that morning, let alone trucks or runabouts, and Mike reached the Institute in good time. Someone had turned on the heat in the building so he rested a minute to get warm, then sped off toward the lab.

As he reached the door to the lab, a young guard he didn't know was standing there.

"I have to see Dr. Cooper," he said.

"No, way!" snapped the guard, "I have strict orders. Nobody can see Cooper for any reason whatsoever, unless he opens that door and lets them in. You'll have to go to the switchboard and have them call him. I don't open that door unless a bomb goes off in there!"

Mike knew it was useless to argue with a security man, especially when he was holding a Remington Assault Gun! So he headed for the reception desk.

"Sorry," said the attendant, "I have strict orders not to disturb the doctor. He's working on something big, and the security chief said no interruption."

Mike returned to the hall and stared at the lab entrance.

"I'll wait a few minutes," he thought, "and maybe Jeanie will show up and can wile her way through the military!" As he stared at the doors they seemed to fade away. He could see Jeanie and Cooper inside, in a strange stereo image. Cooper was at his drafting board and Jeanie was standing in the middle of the room with a push cart.

"Come on, Doc," she told him, "Take ten minutes to eat! You've been at it all night. I'll bet you SLEPT in that chair!"

"I'm really not hungry!" argued Cooper.

"Oh, bureaucrat!" swore Jeanie, "You are so! It's not going to do the project any good if you get sick, and I'm not leaving 'til you eat. It took me enough trouble to get in here! I practically had to promise McCree I'd go to bed with him!"

"YOU DIDN'T!" Cooper cried.

"I said PRACTICALLY! He says I'm going to make a wonderful mother some day! I'm getting plenty of practice with you! Now, come on, Doc, eat!"

"Oh, I suppose," agreed Cooper, distastefully.

"Well!" thought Mike, leaning with his left hand against the wall, "I'll just have to wait until Jeanie comes out. Maybe THEN I can get in. Boy! I wish I could just walk through this wall and be in the laboratory!"

There was a loud THUD and Mike found himself lying on the laboratory floor! Jeanie let out an ear-piercing scream, Cooper spun around with such force that he fell off his swivel chair with a loud BANG, onto the floor. Mike sat, dazed, as Jeanie ran over to him.

"What happened?" he asked, "How did I get in here?"

"I don't know!" Jeanie gasped, "All of a sudden you just seemed to appear out of thin air, and BAM, hit the floor!"

The laboratory doors burst open and the young security man charged in.

"Freeze, feller!" he shouted, "Don't even breathe! Are you all right Doctor?"

"Yes," Cooper replied, picking himself up off the floor. "It's all right. He's one of my assistants. You can leave."

"But how did he get in?" asked the security man. "I was in the hall. I looked away for a second and he was gone, then I heard the lady scream!"

"Don't worry about it," Cooper told him, "If your superior has any questions, have him talk to me, I'll explain it."

"O.k.," said the security man, "you're the General!"

He left to return to his post. Mike was still disoriented.

"How did I get in here?" he asked again.

"I'm not sure," Cooper explained, "but I think you fell through the wall."

"Wow!" Mike gasped, "I think I'd better talk to Horton! That's weird! That's just weird!"

"It's also frightening!" Jeanie told him, "DON'T do it again!"

"I'm hungry," Mike added to no one in particular, still somewhat dazed. "I think I'll go to the cafeteria and get something to eat!" He rummaged through his pockets. "Damn! No money!"

Cooper took a twenty from his wallet and handed it to him. "Here, son," he said, "eat like the brass!"

"Thanks, Doc!" said Mike, not believing the amount he'd been given. "I'll pay you back later, somehow!"

"Better go with him, Jeanie," ordered Cooper.

"But I still have work to do!" she argued.

"Forget it!" Cooper replied. "See that he gets to the cafeteria and then down to see Horton."

"O.k.!" Jeanie gave in. In reality she was grateful to accompany Mike. She was worried about him.

"What did you WANT, Mike?" Cooper asked.

"Oh!" said Mike, looking around for his notebook, "I drew another one of those pictures. I thought you'd better have a look right away."

He found the notebook in the corner, picked it up, and handed Cooper the picture. Cooper looked at it carefully.

"Hmmmmm!" he said, "Interesting, but I still don't see what the matter is. There's not enough detail in the circuitry!"

"Damn!" Mike cursed. "It seems to be so urgent!"

"I'm sure," Cooper told him hopefully, "we'll understand the whole thing in good time. Now run along. Get some rest."

The cafeteria wasn't very full when Jeanie and Mike arrived there. Mike wondered why, then noticed it was only 9:30 in the morning. He still felt shaky and confused. Jeanie had to brace him with her gentle arm a few times on the way.

"I feel so awful, but why am I so hungry?" he asked his companion.

"I don't know, Mike," Jeanie replied, "but you'd better hurry and find a seat before you fall down. Please tell me- you do feel able to hold something down, don't you? I wouldn't want you to be upset about wasting Doc's money."

"Er....." Mike thought about it a moment, wondering if he would be all right, himself, then said, "my stomach will be o.k., as soon as I get something in it. I haven't had any breakfast, you know!"

"Oh! No, I didn't! O.k., come on, let's order!"

They made their way to the counter, and Mike ordered a huge plate of pancakes and hot drink. Jeanie got some

scrambled eggs with her own money.

"You're going to eat all that by yourself?" she asked, when they'd found a table to themselves.

"I sure am going to try!" he grinned. And she couldn't believe her eyes as he did! What shocked her even more was when he announced, "Boy, that was good, but I'm still hungry. Wonder what's for lunch?"

"What's gotten into you, Mike? I'm speechless!"

"Nothin' that I know of. Must be the fresh air, I guess! You want anything else?" He looked at her plate and noticed she hadn't even touched her food. "Oh," he said, "I guess not. I'll be right back."

Jeanie almost fainted when she saw him return with a full steak dinner complete with tossed salad!

"Time for lunch, Mike wolfed down the second meal with relish...literally! He ate the entire bottle on the table! Jeanie looked like she would be sick when he poured it over the steak and potatoes! When he was done he looked towards the dessert case.

"NO!" cried Jeanie, "We're going to see Horton, RIGHT NOW!"

"Sure!" agreed Mike. "Nothing looks very good, anyway!"

The doctor was treating someone from the town when they arrived, but the patient soon left.

"Who was that?" asked Mike.

"Oh, some farm boy from down the road," Horton answered, "broke his toe with a hoe! Don't ask me how, I'm still trying to figure it out, though he explained it to me four times! What have you two been up to?"

"Oh, nothing much," Jeanie explained, "Mike just appeared mysteriously in the laboratory through a solid wall, and just ate enough for three men!"

"Pass that by me again," ordered Horton, trying to listen more carefully.

Mike explained his extraordinary entry into the lab, and about his mysterious appetite, also about the headaches when he'd been out in the sun. "Hmmm," replied Horton, "dematerialization, and matter consumption! Interesting! Have you shown any other abilities?"

"Well," said Mike, kind of embarrassed, "I don't know if I imagined it or not, but I could have sworn I saw Jeanie and Doc talking in the laboratory right through the wall! Not only could I SEE them, I could hear what they were saying!"

"Hmmm!" the doctor said, "Telepathic empathy. You're going through every ability in the manual!"

"What manual?" asked Jeanie.

"This one," Horton told them, picking up an old battered black book from his desk.

Jeanie read the faded title on the cover.

"A Guide To Spiritual Powers And their Usage; A Worker's Manual.' Oh, that's only fakery and stuff," she scoffed, "there's no such thing as mediums and fortune tellers and stuff!"

"No?" Horton challenged her. "Mike would you kindly step out in the hall but keep an eye on what Jeanie and I are doing?"

"Sure, Doc!"

Mike went out into the corridor and the doctor shut the door. The doctor motioned her into the far end of the room.

"What's your favorite color, Jeanie?" he asked.

"Blue," she answered.

"And your favorite flower?"

"Rose," she responded.

"What's your favorite drink?"

"Cinnamon tea," the girl whispered.

Horton took a note pad off his desk, wrote on it, "The Generals chew bubble gum," and showed what he'd written to Jeanie. Then he held his finger up to his lips so she wouldn't speak out loud.

"O.k, Mike, come in," Horton ordered in a low voice.

Mike entered with a broad smile. after I rest a little!"

"Blue," he recalled immediately, "rose, cinnamon tea, and The Generals chew bubble gum, but you didn't say what flavor!"

Dr. Horton chuckled. "At least you could wait until I ask the questions!" he teased.

"Oh, my God!" Jeanie gasped.

"Unfortunately I don't think He has anything to do with this!" Horton told her. He and Mike grinned at each other as Jeanie turned a little pale at his remark.

"This is great, doc!" Mike said, "What else will I be able to do?"

"That's still a pretty tough question to answer, Mike. As I have said, your powers are going pretty much by the book, but there could be some surprises. You could begin to do some things impossible for most human beings! Sorry, son, I can't tell you more. Don't force your powers. Relax and wait. See what happens. Run along now, I've got plenty of work to do, but don't forget to report whenever necessary!"

"O.k., doc!" Mike nodded in agreement.

"I've got to get home and get ready for my date tonight!" Jeanie exclaimed. "I'm going to a country and western concert up the main road with Arthur Moore, one of the security men. It must have taken all of his father's influence to purchase the

tickets! They were practically sold out, and harder than anything to get. They cost a fortune! The group will only be there two nights, then start down the coast again,



so I can't wait to catch one of their performances! It should be very exciting. I can't wait to go!"

"I can remember," Horton told them, "when groups used to come up here and stay a week, drawing such big audiences they could hardly fit in the auditorium, then continue their tour and circle the country, sometimes, the world!"

"Will things ever be that way again, doc?" Jeanie asked, sadly.

"Well, maybe, if this fuel problem can be licked by that machine you young people are working on. I still find it hard to believe that the whole world was brought to a standstill by a little bug no one can see or hear! Good thing the bacteria the Soviets invented to destroy oil only liked crude instead of the refined stuff! What they didn't count on, was it destroyed their supplies, too, after it was accidentally released in their atmosphere!"

"Wow!" said Mike, "History sure is terrible, but fascinating. Right now, though, I'm hungry! I think it's time for a snack before I go back home!"

Jeanie shook her head in exasperation and disbelief. "See you later," she told them.

"You sure you're all right now, Mike?" Horton asked as Jeanie went out the door.

"Yeah, don't worry, doc. I'll check in with you later, as usual."

When Mike finally reached the cafeteria and at last managed to sit down with his heavy tray, he discovered he was sitting beside an older woman Jeanie knew from the housekeeping department. They talked a while, and Mike asked her if she knew Arthur Moore, and what he was like.

"Oh, don't know much about that man, just heard of his bad reputation with women. Don't have no respect for them, that one!" She shook her head back and forth slowly and clicked her tongue against her cheek in disgust.

"Well, he'd better get some if he's going out with Jeanie!" Mike growled. "If he doesn't, I could fix it so he doesn't have any more dates!"

The woman chuckled. "Now, now!" she said, "Don't get too carried away, young man!"

"Don't worry," he answered her, "I won't, but Arthur might!"

They both burst into laughter at the thought.

"See you later," Mike told the maid after he'd finished his meal. "I've got to go clean up my apartment, and it's going to be quite a job."

"I know all about it," the woman said, "the majority of apartments I clean up around here are bachelor apartments, and they all look like disaster areas when I get there every week!"

Mike sighed when he finally shut the door of his apartment behind him.

"Well, here goes nothing!" he said aloud, after glancing at the clock. He started doing the dishes, scrubbed the sink, the counter, his cupboards, cleaned out his kitchen drawers, scrubbed the toilet and his little bathroom sink, wiped his mirror spotless,

swept and mopped the floors, washed the walls and dusted. After straightening out the livingroom, Mike collapsed into a kitchen chair. Everything was so clean it sparkled! The place looked great; better than when he'd moved in. He was proud of himself, indeed!

"Boy, is it hot in here!" he said. "Wonder if my thermostat is out of order again? I'll have to have the maintenance man check it later." He went over to look at the room temperature on its gage. It read seventy-five, but to Mike the room felt like it was ten degrees hotter. Turning back to the kitchen, Mike glanced at the clock, and his mouth fell open in shocked disbelief. "Only twenty minutes?" he gasped, "It couldn't have taken me only twenty minutes to clean up this whole place! It's impossible!"

When he had gathered his wits about him once again, he sped off to Dr. Horton's to report his new discovery.

"Hmmm!" Horton smiled, "A new power for the books! This one's not in the manual, Mike! Here," he said, taking a pocket watch from his lab coat, "do you know where the ferryman's wife sells little handmade dolls from the pier we frequent in the summer months?"

"Sure, doc," Mike nodded, "they have a little store right on the waterfront."

"Well, I want you to run down there for me, buy me a doll from the ferryman's wife, and run back here with it, as fast as you can. I will time you." He handed the boy two dollars.

"Aw, doc, that's a mile or two away from here! It'll take me all afternoon just to get there. I'll be exhausted!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Just do as I say and we'll see. Don't start off until I say 'go,' then I'll start the clock."

Mike did some heavy breathing for a few minutes, then Horton cried, "ready, set, go!" and he was off. He did not realize it until a few seconds later that something amazing was happening to him...he was running down the corridors and noticed everyone he passed seemed to be literally standing still! Afterwards, things began to blur and warp out of proportion. What was in front of him seemed normally shaped, but as he passed them, blurred and grew huge in size. Mike would have felt dizzy but he concentrated on his destination, and reached the pier all right. He purchased a doll from the kindly ferryman's wife as instructed, briefly touching her hand as he took the little bag that held the miniature from her. She smiled. Then, he was off again as quickly as he'd come, experiencing the same visual distortions as before. He finally stood before the elderly physician again, quietly, thinking it strange he didn't feel out of breath.

"Here you are, doc!" Mike said, handing him the bag.

"What?" Horton gasped, "But you didn't even leave the room!" He glanced at the watch. "That only took you three seconds, Mike!" He looked pale. The boy was speechless.

"You ran a mile in three seconds! Let's check you again to make sure all was in order here." He listened to the watch and shook it to make sure it was going. It was running like a charm. "You know that huge pine tree on the hill in the field out back of this building?" he asked.

"Uh huh," Mike replied, "you can see it for miles!"

"Would you run to that tree for me, pick up a pine cone from it, and come back here as quickly as you can, son?"

"All right."

Horton gave the signal again and Mike sped off. He reached the tree in a flash, scooped up the largest pine cone he could find from the ground underneath it, and hurried back to The Institute.

"Unbelievable!" Horton cried. And Mike explained what it felt like and what he saw when he ran. "The space and time ratio must be distorted when you move so rapidly. You bend light. Mike, you must travel beyond the speed of light! You're incredible!"

"I don't mean to interrupt our visit, doc, but do you know what time it is?" Mike asked, seeming occupied with other thoughts.

"Sure, Mike, it's one p.m.."

"Oh! Excuse me, then, I have to be going now. See you later!"

Mike was off in a flash. He got to the hallway of Jeanie's second story apartment in minutes, knocking heavily on her door. Inside, Jeanie was dressed in her long robe and slippers, and had curlers in her hair.

"Be there in a minute!" she called out, beginning to walk from her kitchen door.

Mike ran down the hallway and outside again. He had a hard time remembering the route to his destination since he'd only seen the little store while coming into town a few months ago, on the bus, but he got there just fine, taking a short cut on one of the side roads. It only took him a few minutes to purchase what he wanted, then he reappeared in Jeanie's hallway again. Jeanie was just opening the door for him. She held it open a crack, leaned against the door sill and smiled.

"Oh, hi Mike! I can only talk for a minute. I'm awfully busy!" she said.

Mike smiled back. "Yeah, me too, but here, this is for you. I thought you might like it!" he told her and handed her the large bag. He blushed and she thought he looked very sweet, but she didn't even get to say thank you before he headed off, and up the stairway to the front door. She shrugged and went inside to put the bag on the table. "Oh, Mike!" she sighed, as she removed the pint of chocolate ice cream from the package. "But how....where?" Jeanie went and got a spoon from the kitchen drawer and tasted the treat. "Mmmmmm!" she mumbled, "It's wonderful, after all!" Then

she re-wrapped the box and put it in her freezer and went to her phone by the livingroom couch. She immediately dialed the number to Horton's clinic.

"Doc, have you seen Mike today?" she asked when he immediately answered.

"Why, yes, he just left here seconds ago! Why, is anything wrong?"

"I'm not sure! He just did something very strange...showed up at my door with a pint of ice cream! I can't figure out where he got it."

Dr. Horton burst out laughing. "Oh! Now I understand! Don't worry, Jeanie, nothing's wrong! As a matter of fact, everything's just fine! Just fine, indeed!"

Horton hung up the phone leaving the dismayed Jeanie staring at the receiver on the other end of the line. He chuckled. "Young people today!" he said aloud, and went back to work. It wasn't very often Dr. Horton had a good laugh, and this was one of those rare times he could enjoy himself.

At her apartment Jeanie finally hung up the phone and went to finish preparing for her date. She was smiling dreamily, and for just a second she thought of telling Arthur she wouldn't be going with him, but then she shook her head as if coming out of a dream, and began to take the curlers from her hair.

Mike casually walked home from Jeanie's after the incident. He discovered the clouds had grown considerably darker, and it had begun to snow. It fell in large, sticky flakes so he knew the storm wouldn't last long.

"Maybe it'll snow just enough so Jeanie will cancel her date tonight!" he thought. "Fat chance!"

When he reached his apartment building he found someone had propped the front door open with a large rock, and it had stuck in that position, letting a large amount of snow blow in on the first landing. He pulled and pulled on it until it finally closed, then he went to descend the stairs. Unfortunately, as he began to take the first step down, he slipped, having caught some snow on his heel, and began to fall to the next landing. To Mike's amazement, he found himself pausing in mid air as he tried to balance himself, then, floated the rest of the way down! He landed with a soft 'bump' on his bottom, unharmed, surprised, and a bit shaken. He slowly stood up and turned around.

"Oh, my God!" he gasped, "I don't believe this! I think I can fly!" He faced forward again, eyeing the third landing on his floor. "Well, I may be crazy, but here goes nothing!" he said.

Mike walked backward a few paces then ran forward, taking a flying leap off the first step. Once again, without even trying, he slowed down and sort of glided to the bottom! This time, he landed on his feet, totally unharmed.

Mike spent the remainder of the afternoon jumping off taller and taller buildings, practicing his new power of gliding. He even tried to jump from the highest building in town, the water tower, with complete success, before he began to feel exhaustion overtake him.

He headed home again, ravenously hungry and in need of a good nap. After he'd finished his quick meal, the need to draw came over him, and he scooped up the binder, sat down on the edge of the sofa, and sketched another MLC for Dr. Cooper. Then, he practically blacked out into a deep, calm, sleep.

\* \* \*

When Mike Montaine was able to wake up and turn on his kitchen light, he was shocked to discover he'd slept until nine o'clock in the evening! His first thought was of Jeanie. She must be at the concert by this time. It made Mike feel ashamed of himself to admit it, but yes, he was beginning to get jealous of her when she went out with other men. However, as minutes passed, he became so totally enveloped with a sense of dread and approaching disaster it distracted his mind from the more basic emotions. He felt thoroughly uncomfortable! In a way of saying it plainly, the mood "gave him the creeps," as Larry Daniken might put it, and so badly he found himself making his way to the clinic, though it was highly doubtful anyone would be there until morning. He simply didn't want to be alone. Maybe talking would soothe his nerves, and though he knew Dr. Cooper was still tucked away in the lab, Mike brought the new sketch, just in case he saw him.

The light in the clinic was on, to Mike's joy, and Dr. Horton was puttering around the room, straightening up after a busy day. They chatted until around midnight, when the older man yawned and stood up from his comfortable chair. "Well, Mike," he said, "I hate to admit it, but I'm not as young as I used to be, and not used to keeping such late hours. I'm sorry, but I think I've got to go home now and get some rest."

Suddenly Mike stood up so rapidly his folding chair fell over backward, his handsome face was twisted in anger. For a moment Horton was afraid he may have said something wrong, and froze, holding his breath, but then Mike cried out, "Why that no good rotten bastard! He ripped her dress!" and was gone again, in a flash. Horton assumed Jeanie was in trouble, but was surprised Mike had been able to detect it so easily. He decided to wait and see if the boy would return with news, as long as he could.

Mike began to follow The Main Road north, from the air. He was unsteady in his flight, having no practice in long distance air travel, so instead of flying with his arms stretched out in front of him like a comic book hero did, he held his arms out at his sides, thinking this would help him with balancing. It did help, a little. But Mike still had scary moments where he thought sure he'd crash! The strong feelings of fear Jeanie broadcasted to him led him to a side road quite a few miles from town. The dirt road was in a heavily wooded area, difficult to spot from the sky. He didn't really think about what he was doing, or, how he was doing it, he just knew his dear friend had to be rescued from the violent advances of an almost complete stranger. Landing near Arthur's parked runabout just around a grove of trees, Mike ran at normal speed to the electric car. As he reached the trunk and stopped, he heard Jeanie scream, "Arthur! Please! For God's sake, get your hand OUT of there, and leave me alone!"

Anger saturated Mike's being in a warm wave. He threw back his head and let out a terrible roar that could be heard for miles! Then, he leaped atop the vehicle and with all his strength began to rip the top of it completely off! "What the....." Arthur gasped, trying to see who or what was demolishing his prized possession, without success. Jeanie just cowered inside, terrified of the whole incident. She was desperately trying to cover herself with the piece of cloth Arthur had torn from the breast area of her new dress.

Mike tossed the top of the car away, grabbed the screaming Arthur after tearing off his door, and tossed him behind some nearby bushes, then he ran to open Jeanie's passenger side door. He ripped off one of the hinges in the process, gently picked up the trembling girl in his arms, and flew back to the Institute. They appeared in the clinic, startling Horton, and Mike gently placed Jeanie on an exam table. She was in tears.

"There, now you'll be all right," Mike softly soothed her. She managed to sit up and put her legs over the side to face her two companions. Horton handed her a tissue, and she immediately dried her face, appearing calm.

"Are you all right?" Horton asked, terribly concerned.

"Yes. He didn't hurt me, thanks to Mike, here, just ripped my dress."

"If you would like," Mike put in, "you could give me the keys to your apartment and I could bring you back some more clothes."

"Damn!" Jeanie said softly after looking around the table, "I can't! They're in my purse, and I left that in Arthur's car!"

Mike disappeared without a word and reappeared by the car again. He reached inside and got the purse, and noticed Arthur just climbing out of the bushes as he left. He stopped at Jeanie's apartment and picked up her fresh clothes, and was back to her side before anyone could move.

"Thanks, Mike!" Jeanie said as she took the outfit from him. "I'll just go back to the rest room and change, if you don't mind, doc. Be back in a minute!"

"Sure, go ahead!"

Mike excitedly explained to Dr. Horton what had happened to him, and the strange ability which had drawn him to the girl in danger. Horton was most fascinated with his physical strength, which had not shown itself since the day he'd pulled apart the hermetically sealed object in the lab.

"Er, Mike," Horton added, dreading the question he was about to ask, "what did you do with Arthur?"

"Oh, I just threw him in the bushes so he could cool off! Didn't hurt him any, maybe just gave him a few bumps and bruises!"

"Good! But remember, next time there's trouble like this where you have to use your physical strength, be very careful! You could kill someone and not even realize you were harming them! You must promise me you will be very careful not to let this happen!"

"I promise, doc!" Mike agreed, shocked at the thought he had such ability. "But if I ever see that Arthur Moore again, I'd like to...."

"Oh, no you don't!" Jeanie chimed in. She came up looking fresh and wonderful again. "Whatever you have in mind, forget it! I get first cracks at that jerk, no matter what!"

"All right, agreed!" Mike told her. They all laughed.

"Seriously, Mike," Jeanie added, looking Mike straight in the eye, "I want to thank you for saving me, my spirit lad!" She stepped forward, put her arms around his neck, and gave him a long, tender kiss on his lips. "I don't know what I would've done without you!"

Mike's face turned beet red.

"But I'll tell you right now," she announced, "you're a terrific guy, but you scare the hell out of me!"

Mike stared at the floor.

"It's his powers that scare you, Jeanie, and without them he couldn't have helped you. Isn't it wonderful? Mike's learned to fly!"

"Yeah, and without a plane!" Jeanie teased. "But I can't fly. I'm glad you're strong enough to carry me, Mike!"

"We've also discovered his powers may be transferred to the person he's touching or in the same room with. That may be one of the reasons you got here so easily!"

"I was so upset at the time I truly don't remember how I got here, just that I'm here!"

"Well, I suppose I've got to call McCree and tell him something. There'll be lots of questions. What are we going to say?"

It was Jeanie who came up with the answer, and it was a good one, too.

John McCree and a couple of his men were part way to the site of the 'accident' when they came upon Arthur Moore,

stumbling along the side of the Main Road, headed back toward town. They stopped their jeep beside him. His clothes were a mess and he appeared dazed.

"Need some help?" McCree asked.

"Oh! It's you!" Arthur gasped, "Could you give me a lift? My car's totaled! I'm not sure, exactly, what happened, but I was out with Jeanie, and something tore my runabout apart, and now Jeanie's disappeared!"

"She's all right," McCree assured. "her dress was torn, but she made it back to The Institute o.k.. A bear chased her, or so she says! Must've been what ruined your car!"

"Oh!" Arthur smiled. "That's where that terrible roar came from! Hmmm...guess tomorrow I'll go back and look for some bear tracks! In this light coating of snow they should be easy to find!"

"Maybe," the security chief replied. "Climb in!" he told him.

They drove a ways in silence, then McCree put in, "Yeah, Jeanie told me her dress was ripped. I don't want to hear about any more young ladies' dresses being ripped that have been out with you, do you understand me? Or there'll be big trouble!"

"O.k.," Arthur told him, "I'm sure you won't."

Arthur was taken to Horton for a check up. Thankfully, Mike had walked Jeanie home and was tucked safely in bed after having a huge midnight snack! As imagined, the man was in good condition, and taken home. Fortunately, in time to come, Arthur would keep his word to his superior, and there was no trouble from him ever again. He also kept a good distance from Jeanie, which pleased Mike to no end.

Mike rested well that night. Though his new powers were great, he had no idea what excitement lay ahead for him. Things were changing so rapidly, he dared not even imagine what would happen tomorrow!



## Chapter Six

### You Haven't Seen Anything Yet!

Things ran smoothly for Mike Montaine for a few weeks after his gallant rescue. His recuperation period ended and he went back to work happily, doubling as Cooper's lab assistant besides doing his janitorial chores. His relationship with Jeanie improved, and they became very close, almost to the point where she could easily be called his steady girl. They went out often, and she was impressed with the way he accepted the wonderful abilities being bestowed on him. Mike never bragged to all in the lab of how he'd become, though it amazed and shocked him at times. He was just the same old Mike she'd met on that fateful day he'd come to clean the lab. Larry Daniken began to secretly put Mike on a pedestal as his hero, and the two young men got along famously. Many people in the building thought they were brothers!

Jeanie began teaching Mike gymnastics, and he also took a course on the martial arts, which he loved. He was becoming very skillful and strong in his own physical makeup. He felt wonderful!

Dr. Cooper's plans were turning out very well. He still spent most of his time in the lab, but did not work as feverishly as before. One morning he called a meeting there of his close-knit staff.

"O.k, people," he began, "we know the basic problem we had with the first R.M.T.P., so our next job will be to dismantle her, see what parts we can save for the new machine, and what we'll have to order. We'll have to work as long and as hard as we can, because the brass will be asking questions if we don't show any progress soon. Please report for work the usual time, tomorrow."

Everyone in the room looked anxious to get started again, except Larry, who squirmed in his chair, knowing he'd get the most difficult part of the task. He would be the one to get the closest to the machine, and actually be the first to remove any components. No telling what would happen, he thought, but he couldn't give up.

Mike gave Larry an understanding look. Somehow he was beginning to be able to read his friend's mind. And somehow, he had the feeling everything would be fine.

When Mike arrived at the lab to see Cooper the next morning, it was beginning to look like an automobile garage. Larry was lying on the floor before the sending platform in the middle of thousands of mechanical parts! Mike went over to speak with Jeanie and Cooper. He hung around the lab for a few hours, then was called to do a cleaning job.

"Don't forget our date tonight!" he reminded Jeanie before he left.

"Don't worry," she called, "I can't wait to see the circus! I've been counting on going for months!"

"I'll be at your place at seven!" Mike cried, hurrying out the door.

Mike met Jeanie at the appropriate time, and they really enjoyed the circus. While they were watching the acrobats and trapeze artists, Jeanie told him,

"I'll bet you could do better than they ever could!"

With a shrug and a smile Mike dismissed the compliment. He did not know that later on in the evening he would discover this to be true!

After the circus Jeanie gladly went to Mike's apartment for a lengthily visit. After enjoying a hot cup of coffee the young couple settled themselves on the sofa. Mike had never felt so wonderful in his whole life. He bravely reached out and put his right arm around Jeanie. It seemed as if she could read his thoughts when she put in,

"I don't know why I want to tell you this now, Mike, but I'm not the kind of girl everyone thinks I am! I haven't been out with many guys, and there was only one I got serious with, and that was years ago. Then, we didn't do very much, physically. To tell you the truth, Mike, I'm afraid." She folded her arms in front of her breasts, protectively.

"Well, you don't have to be afraid with me! I won't hurt you. I won't even touch you, if you don't want me to!" he replied. He sounded a little hurt, but meant every word he said.

Jeanie couldn't believe her ears. At last she was with this wonderful, handsome young man, and he really cared about her as a person, not just her body. She felt very mellow inside, and beautiful.

"Oh, Mike, I love you so!" she sighed, and relaxed her arms as he turned to embrace her. She practically melted as their lips met in Mike's first passionate kiss. She was about to wrap her arms around him so the kiss would last the slightest bit longer, when he leapt from the couch. Mike glanced around the room, appearing terrified, as if he was seeing something Jeanie could not.

"Oh, no!" he gasped, "They're hurting her! I've got to help!" He walked swiftly toward the front door.

"Who?" Jeanie managed, "What? Where?" She turned herself around without getting up, following him with her eyes, but by the time she'd turned to look for him behind the sofa he was gone from the apartment. The front door was left open. Jeanie sighed and went to shut it. She would wait for him to return as long as possible, then go to The Institute. Most likely Mike would go there after any important incidents.

When Mike got outside the building, his psychic senses automatically took over. He was still clearly locked on to the invisible vibrations he'd come in contact with when he'd sensed danger. He was in the air as soon as his feet left the first step, and flying toward the lake. When Mike could see the ferryman's house, he breathed a sigh of relief. Here was his destination, but when he landed near the front yard, he finally understood what was wrong.

The driveway was filled with seven motorcycles belonging to the feared local gang called "The Black Avengers." Using his great speed and skills, Mike rushed to the bikes and dismantled four of them, then chained two together. He was about to tackle the one in the lead position when he heard a commotion from inside the house. Mike was actually able to see what was happening because the scene taking place in the livingroom was appearing in his mind as the fear of the ferryman's wife grew stronger.

The leader of the motorcycle gang had the woman backed up against a table, and was threatening her with a bike chain. The rest of the group surrounded them in a half circle so she couldn't escape if she could get away from him. Her husband lay face down on the floor, nearby, and somehow Mike knew he was dead. He could hear the leader say, "Come on, lady, we haven't got all night! Just tell us where the rest of your treasure is hidden, and we'll leave you alone, unless you want to end up like your husband, there. I know there's too much to this story for it to just be a rumor. I've heard about it for years. NOW WHERE IS THE TREASURE HIDDEN?"

Mike gulped and shook his head to rid his mind of the picture. He had to help. Not really thinking clearly about the whole thing, he took a deep breath, then ran toward the house and jumped right through the front livingroom window! Glass shattered everywhere, and Mike landed on his feet in the circle of men. The bikers barely had a chance to see who was there before he attacked them with a strength he had never known. It took all he could to remember his promise to Horton, and went easier on his punches than he wished to, as a terrible fist fight ensued between himself and the leader. The woman rushed to safety behind the table. The rest of the gang instantly jumped into the fray, eager to protect their comrade, but Mike did not spare them from his fury. With a right cross he quickly knocked out the leader, then sent the first man behind him flying with a good kick in the groin. The man went down screaming, in agony. The rest of the group made a circle around him, preparing their attack. One man broke from it to pounce on Mike. They struggled a while, and Mike knocked him senseless. Another moved in, while the man closest to Mike in the circle quietly drew a gun. Mike had just disposed of his opponent temporarily, when he spotted the weapon. His instincts told him what to do...he stood up straight, and made his whole body relax.

The man fired. Mike's body became a milky white substance, surrounded by a bright glow, for just the instant it took the bullet to pass through his chest and out his back.

then, his flesh turned solid again, revealing Mike to be unharmed. The man who had fired the shot stared in disbelief as the biker behind his target fell, dead. Mike did not notice this, as he was again pounced upon, his battle continuing. When he was able to

look around him, there were two men left conscious in the room...the leader, who had regained his senses, and the biker with the gun. These two let out a frightened

yell and ran outside, with Mike right behind them. The relieved woman went to phone the police.

"Oh, no! Look at the bikes!" the man with the gun cried, in shock. A porch light revealed the yard to be littered with disassembled motorcycle parts.

The leader rushed to his motorcycle and drove it away. Mike chained the other man to the handlebars of the remaining bikes, then he was instantly in pursuit. The other man tried to escape without success. Vision was difficult from the air because of the trees covering the road nearby, but finally Mike spotted the bike speeding along. The man kept looking behind him. Mike cast a strange shadow on the road in front of the traveler with help from the bright moonlight, and scattered streetlights along the way. The biker kept looking up, trying to see his pursuer, not having much success. Soon Mike landed a few feet in front of the speeding vehicle, his feet apart, hands on his hips. Standing this way reminded him of an old super hero program.

"Stop now, and go back where you came from, or I'll take you to the police myself!" Mike called out as loud as he could. He had to yell the warning three times before the bike screeched to a stop just inches before him, and turned around. Mike flew behind him to make sure he reached the house, and was pleased to see the police cars pulling into the driveway just ahead of their soon-to-be prisoner. The man was immediately taken into custody, and the one that was left behind stood nearby in handcuffs. Now he knew things were safe once again, Mike soared off towards The Institute. Jeanie was already with Dr. Horton. She'd figured there would surely be something to report.

"This is hard to believe," Horton smiled, "a real hero right in our midst!"

He immediately phoned Dr. Cooper, who rushed from the lab to join them. The four settled into a small conference room to discuss the evening.

"I'd better go check the local reports from the radio stations, and the police bands," Cooper added after Mike had explained what had happened. "Be back as soon as I can. Relax. I've got to know if you were recognized, and how the reports check out with yours."

He re-entered the room about fifteen minutes later with a pleased expression.

"Everything's fine!" he told them. "The six bikers are in jail, their most serious injury a broken arm!" Noticing Mike's startled look, Cooper asked him what was wrong.

"Remember, Doc, I told you there were SEVEN bikers in all. What happened to the last one?"

"There were SEVEN bikers?" Cooper repeated. "I'll go check with McCree a moment and see if there's been more reports."

Cooper stepped outside again. When he returned about five minutes later, he looked worried. Mike tensed, waiting for the verdict.

"Well?" he asked.

"The reports say one man was killed by the mysterious flying stranger that saved the ferryman's wife."

Mike jumped out of his seat. "It's not true!" he cried, "I didn't kill anyone! I was careful, Doc, just like I promised! I was careful! I DIDN'T kill anyone....I couldn't."

He sat back down again, and Cooper noticed the tears running down the boy's flushed cheeks. Putting a comforting hand on his shoulder, he told him,

"Don't worry, son, I believe you. We'll just have to wait until tomorrow when we can find out the whole story. Relax. Go home, now, and get some rest. I'll surely check into this!"

Mike felt terrible inside about the news. How could it have happened? Jeanie refused his offer to walk her home. She could see he was exhausted, and she hoped, for his sake, the report was someone else's mistake.

## Chapter Seven

### The Mercy Mission

Mike spent a sleepless night worrying and wondering; pondering over again and again what had happened. He became so frustrated he threw a drinking glass and smashed it against the wall around three in the morning, then went to lie down to give sleeping another try.

"I just knew something would go wrong!" he said aloud, "I knew everything that's happened to me was too good to be true! There had to be a- a catch someplace! I'm not so great after all. Why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn't I have just died, in the first place, like anybody else would have? I HATE myself!"

Mike hid his head underneath his pillow and sobbed until he drifted off into restless slumber. When he opened his eyes again, it was five a.m., and he discovered his notebook open on the floor containing a new sketch of the MLC.

"Oh, Bureaucrats!" he softly swore, and slid the open book across the table top. Thankfully it didn't fall on the floor, and Mike went to the shower, then dressed in a crisp new set of jeans and red plaid shirt. He didn't feel like seeing anyone that day. As a matter of fact, he didn't feel well at all. Looking in his shaving mirror it reflected his ghostly complexion and a disgusting mop of matted brown hair. It looked like the reflection of someone who had spent the whole night getting drunk!

"Oh, God!" Mike sighed, then went to gobble up three bowls of corn flakes and two cups of coffee. He hoped Dr. Horton would be able to explain something to him if he would ever see him again. It seemed every time he used his new powers for any length of time, his stomach became very upset. Sometimes this condition got so severe, Mike felt he wouldn't be able to keep anything down...but mysteriously enough, the worst never happened! This particular morning the condition was particularly disquieting, and he wished anything would happen to make the waves of nausea subside, and even more he wondered why he was plagued with it in the first place. Before the accident certain foods had bothered him, but now, because of one of Dr. Horton's tests that was to see if these allergies had improved, Mike found he could eat anything he pleased and not regret it. Was it a loss of psychic energy or power that made him feel sick? Eating always helped, some. It was a miracle in itself he could even LOOK at breakfast. He couldn't wait to know the answer...somehow. The feeling was entirely different than when he was bothered by the sun.

"Guess I'll have to stay home today. What have I got to lose?" Mike thought, still feeling sorry for himself. "A day's pay? Big deal!" He shrugged and went to the front

door to pick up the morning's paper, then sat down to read it, after making up the sofa bed. It was about seven-thirty. "Maybe I'll find something about me in here!" Mike said, barely glancing over the front page.

In about five minutes there was a knock on his door. Mike tensed. he tossed the paper onto the sofa and leapt up. He had never had a visitor at that time of the morning!

"Oh, no!" he gasped aloud, putting a hand up to his head. Then, he realized he'd never combed his hair! What if the visitor was Jeanie? Then again, what if it was the police? He waited to hear the knock again, then went over slowly to answer it. To his surprise, Dr. Cooper stood in the hallway, his expression one of worryment and fatigue. When he saw Mike, a hint of a smile crept across his lips.

"May I come in, son?" he asked, staring at the boy. He'd never seem Mike looking so dejected.

"S-sure, Doc!"

After Mike closed the door behind Cooper they both walked toward the sofa, but neither sat down. The doctor glanced around for a moment, and seemed pleased with the condition of his apartment. This was great, since it was his first visit there.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to work today," Mike clumsily apologized when their eyes met again, "I don't have a phone, so I couldn't call."

"That's perfectly all right, son. I've got some news for you. You don't have to worry any more. You didn't kill anyone last night!" Cooper announced.

"OH!" the boy's eyes grew as big as saucers.

"They did an autopsy last night on the dead biker, and discovered he was killed by a bullet from the same gun they confiscated from the man who tried to shoot you! You're safe...and, no one recognized you."

"Oh, Doc!" Mike breathed, "Thank you so much for coming to tell me that. Hmmm. The bullet must've hit that guy after it passed through me! They were all around me, and there was only one shot fired. Well, before I forget my manners, would you like some coffee or something?"

"No, thanks. Got to get back to the lab. Are you all right, son?"

"Yeah, now that I've got your news! I'm still not feeling too good, though. So tired!"

"Don't worry about it. Take the rest of the day off. You deserve it. I'm very proud of you! You fought a small war last night!" He picked up the newspaper and showed Mike the front page. "I wish you could do something about this!" Mike read over the headlines. "King of Shandu And Brother Split In Dispute Over Modernization Plans For Home Country. Preparations For War Evident."

Dr. Cooper pointed to the picture of King Ali Siad, and his rebelling brother, Abu.

"Would you believe I know them both, and they're wonderful men. I was doing a research project for our government in Siad after the last war, before their father died. That's when I met Prince Ali, was introduced to his brother, and we became good friends, but now they're fighting each other over stupidity!"

Now it was Dr. Cooper's turn to be depressed, but he didn't let it get to him.

"I don't know what I could do, Doc, but I'll try to think of something."

"Just rest, son. I know you need it. We don't need you sick now. You're a big help to us. We don't know what we'd do without you!"

"Tell Dr. Horton I'll be in to see him, and soon. I've got something to ask him; something important, about my powers."

"All right," Cooper beamed from ear to ear. "Take it easy, son!"

"Oh! I've got something for you!" Mike added, and brought him the new MLC drawing. Then he was gone as quickly as he'd come. Mike sighed deeply, and sat on the sofa again. He picked up the paper and stared at the main article for a long, long time. "I wish I could help so much," he said aloud, "but there's nothing I can do."

"Who said there's nothing?" came a deep male voice, out of nowhere.

Mike jumped and looked behind him. There stood the form of a man wearing the costume of someone from the mid-east countries, one of the desert people. He was a handsome, middle aged man, with a full gray beard. There was a certain glow around him that made Mike realize this person must be a spirit, like Horton always talked about. After all, there was no way a flesh and blood human being could have entered the apartment without Mike's knowledge of it. He had done a security check on the place when he'd moved in. It was perfectly all right.

"Who are you?" Mike asked, awed by the vibrations of the noble appearing stranger.

"My identity is not important," the spirit said, "many people followed me in my lifetime, and I did many mysterious things that would put even your abilities to shame. I am he who speaks for Allah."

"I think I know who you are! But why do you visit me? I've never seen a spirit before. I'm not afraid, just confused. Is it about something I've done?"

"In a way. You wished to help those men in the other country to stop the war. I have come to help you fulfill your wish."

"Really? How?" Mike was amazed. He felt like Alladin in possession of the magic lamp! This was fantastic!

"Just come along, and fly with me. I will guide you to the places you seek, and the people you should speak with. I will also tell you what you need to say, and you must do exactly what I tell you to succeed."

"How should we start?"



"Just touch my arm and we'll be off. Remember, we'll be air borne, so follow me. Keep me in your sight at all times!" When he did as he was told, Mike noticed he no longer felt ill. All he could see was a bright flash of light, then they were outside, high in the sky. He flew as fast as he could to keep up with the Spirit companion. Everything blurred as they flew, but some skylines could still be distinguished. When everything slowed down, Mike knew they'd crossed an ocean, because they were flying over a beautiful castle. He recognized it from the news reports on television....the castle of Ali Siad. Surprisingly, they didn't stop there, but Mike was led to a marketplace in the nearby town. Though it was early in New York, here, it was nearly dusk, and they landed in an alleyway beside a building which Mike thought was very quaint.

"Follow me," instructed the spirit, and proceeded to walk straight through the white wall of the shop! Mike began to follow, then stopped short, just inches from the obstruction.

"Hey!" he called out, "I can't walk through walls! What do I do? Go find the door?"

The spirit popped the upper part of himself outside again. "No, we must remain unnoticed, as much as we can. Take my arm, then walk."

Mike obeyed, and found himself inside of what proved to be a used clothing and costume shop. Thankfully, it was closed.

"Here's what you need!" the spirit told him. He was standing by a rack of men's outfits, pointing to a black one that looked like the one he wore, but had a covering for the lower part of his face, common for the desert folk. Mike put the clothes on over his own. "You forgot something!" the spirit called from around the next clothes rack. When Mike quickly found him, he was pointing to a sword hanging on the wall by its beautifully designed scabbard. When Mike took it down and examined it, he saw its blade was sharp and gleaming. He quickly tucked the scabbard belt around his waist, hoping he wouldn't have to use any violence in his mission. Mike had never handled any type of weapon, and didn't wish to start now. His fists could cause him enough problems!

Then, the spirit led Mike outside the same way they'd entered, Mike still hesitantly taking his friend's helpful arm. Then, they were flying again, arriving at the castle Mike had seen on his way there. They hovered over it just high enough so the boy could not easily be seen from the ground.

"Circle the courtyard there, and call out the things I tell you to," the spirit told him.

"All right, here goes nothing!" Mike flew lower and circled the open yard. Many people could be seen scurrying about on their daily duties.

"Good people of Shandu, hear me and listen well!" he yelled, "I am sent by him who

speaks for Allah, the dark spirit mentioned in his holy words, to deliver you from evil! King Ali Siad, come forth!" Everyone outside stopped in their tracks and stared upward into the setting sun, straining to see the mysterious visitor with hand-shaded eyes. Mike was glad his costume was long, and hid his sneakers! They would certainly have spoiled the whole authentic effect! He couldn't believe how his voice echoed from the castle walls, making the scene doubly eerie. Some of the palace guards rushed inside to tell their King, and he hurried to see what all the commotion was about. A spirit wanting to see him? How was it possible? It must be some kind of a joke!

"Here is our king, Ali Siad, to see you!" called out one of the trembling guards. The king shook when he saw the air borne stranger land a couple of feet before him. He pulled his gun from its holster and aimed it at Mike. He ordered the guards to stay back, but to stand by in case of violence.

"I must take you with me to help bring peace to this land!" Mike explained, "You must put down your weapon!" The king would not obey. Mike was told by the spirit to draw his sword and when he did so, the king stepped forward with his gun, ready to fire. Instantly a beam of heat, red like fire, leapt from the sword blade! It struck the gun and knocked it from Ali's hand! Mike seemed more startled than the king, but managed to put the sword away as soon as he found it wasn't hot, and took advantage of the moment.

"You will come with me," Mike told him, "and not be afraid, because you will come to no harm. I will bring you back soon. I have come to help you assure peace."

He rushed forward to seize the other man and the pair became air borne. The people in the courtyard could only watch them go in shocked concern.

The King could speak English, but just kept stammering and covered his eyes. Mike was afraid his passenger would become airsick, so he sped to a faraway mountain, sitting the king down on a grassy ledge near the top. The scenery there was beautiful, and it wasn't a cold climate.

"Stay here and in a while I will return. Do as I say!" Mike ordered.

Mike followed the spirit again, this time to the army campground of Abu Siad. Mike called out the same orders here, but Abu Siad was very stubborn. He remained sitting in his tent.

"Tell him to go away!" the rather large brother cried to the guards. "I am busy!"

At last Mike was told to fly down and challenge the guards to let him pass. When he swooped down to land, however, they brandished machine guns and looked fierce, indeed. They moved forward and tried to shoot him, but he quickly became transparent, the bullets passing directly through him. The guards stood paralyzed with shock, then one turned and ran away, screaming. Mike had free entry to Abu's tent. He walked easily passed the remaining guards to confront him in the doorway. He had come out to see what caused the commotion, and had witnessed the end of the shooting, and, its results.

"I believe you ARE for peace!" he said, reverently.

With a gasp Abu Siad was taken into the air in Mike's strong grasp. He did not say a word, but covered his eyes all the way to the mountain top. When they landed, Abu took his hands from his face and was amazed to see his brother before him. He looked around, then began to shake Ali, yelling,

"What is this, some kind of trick you are playing on me just to frighten me into getting your own way? Well, it won't work!"

"That's enough arguing!" Mike told them sternly. "Come over here and sit down. We must talk. the one who speaks for Allah is here to give you wise counsel."

When the three were seated comfortably in a half circle the spirit appeared in the empty space before them. Because of Mike's magical presence, the brothers could both see and hear him well.

"You are a spirit?" Ali asked, amazed. "Why do you show yourself to us and offer us help? There are many other countries in trouble now."

"I have come to show you that Allah has not deserted his children as many now believe. And you, being very important people now, are the best ones to relay that message; if you can settle your differences and not bring war to your land."

"Spirit, what of our current problem? It seems we cannot find a solution, and do not wish to believe either one of us is right. Can you tell us? I believe to modernize our country is good for our people. It would help them in many ways, but my brothers says to do such would be blasphemy against Allah. We should leave everything the way it is because it is His Will, and the best way. Who do you believe is correct? Surely Allah will speak through you now, and tell us His Will."

"I do not care if a man wears robes, or wears a suit, rides a camel or drives a car. What matters is within his heart. If he believes what is good, and does it, and respects the ways of his fathers, that man will see Paradise. This is all that I can tell you. You must make your own decisions and I hope they will be the correct ones."

The spirit vanished. The brothers stood up slowly, thinking about all that had happened, and the spirit's words.

Mike took them back to King Ali's palace, since he noticed it was almost dark. He carried them one by one again, but the journey was easier since both wished to cooperate with him on this flight. When all were safe in the courtyard, Abu was smiling, at last. The King smiled back. They embraced warmly, and each brother kissed the cheeks of the other in the traditional greeting.

"Long live the King!" cried Abu, sincerely.

Realizing this meant their troubles were half over, Ali nodded affirmatively and patted his brother lightly on the back.

"And may he always have his brother's wise counsel!"

Mike said good-bye and leapt into the air, following the spirit home. He knew

everything would be all right now, and there would be no war in the future of Siad, at least for a long, long time! Mike was completely worn out when he found himself in the apartment, but wonderfully enough, his upset did not return that day. The spirit bade him a fond farewell, then vanished. It was after working hours at The Institute, but Mike rushed as best he could, to inform Dr. Cooper of his adventures, and that his friend would be all right. He knew it would make the doctor's work easier and his own night restful, indeed!

"That's wonderful news, son!" Cooper cried, when he was told in private what had gone on. He was so pleased his eyes literally twinkled with glee! "You don't know how happy this makes me! Thank you for telling me tonight! God, you don't know how much I appreciate it. It's almost unbelievable that you've helped so, and the world will probably never know the part you played in all this! You'd better go get a checkup from Horton, and tell him all this. And, take care, o.k.? Thanks again, for helping, my friend."

Horton was amazed with the news, and in the morning announcements of the peace settlement were all over the front page of every newspaper in The United States, and everyone at the lab except Dr. Cooper spent the early morning wondering why Mike Montaine was in such a terrific mood!

## Chapter Eight

### Danger On The Water

The next morning at work, Mike reported to Dr. Horton at the clinic, as he'd promised the night before. He had agreed to participate in some tests especially devised by the older physician, to officially record his special strength and speed. They climbed into the jeep Horton had rented from the car pool and headed off toward the lake, taking a road that led to the west shore, opposite the side where the ferryman's wife lived. The quite lengthily ride was a beautiful one, through the mountains. Mike loved the scenery, and was glad he'd dressed warmly that morning. The snow had melted, but the air was very crisp and there were hints of another storm. It was rather clear and the sun was only hidden by a few small clouds.

Surprisingly enough, Dr. Horton's planned testing area was a long deserted resort area right on the beach. It had once been a thriving tourist attraction for the extremely wealthy from all over the country, until the troubles began. The final blow to the business was the gas shortages, so now the few lakeside cottages that remained looked like dilapidated old shacks ready to fall down with the next strong gust of wind. They seemed to be silent guardians to the lake, staring out over the water with blank, but sad eyes. There was a small island in the middle of the lake which held an abandoned rock quarry that had been dug deep into its lonely mountain. This would be the perfect spot for Mike to demonstrate his new abilities! There were no people for miles, the only other buildings being the abandoned homes in the small empty tourist shopping area nearby. When Dr. Horton and Mike finally arrived the jeep was parked on the beach, and Mike helped unload the funny looking scientific gadgets from the back. He was instructed to place the less expensive equipment on the pier that reached quite a distance over the water.

The first test the boy completed was one to record his flying speed. Dr. Horton attached a watch like device around his left wrist and told him it would relay the information he needed to his main panel on the beach. he was to fly in a straight line directly across the lake and back as fast as he could. On the signal he was gone, as if in a flash, and back in seconds! Horton was shocked at the readings. Then, he was told to run as fast as he could down the shore as far as he could go, and back. The results on this effort were amazing! Then, to test Mike's strength, Dr. Horton handed him a metal golden ball, with a computer device inside.

"What do I do with this?" he asked, trying to see if it would open up.

"I want you to fly out to that island, turn around, come half-way back, turn around, and throw this ball as hard as you can to the other side of the lake. It has a machine inside that will show how fast it goes. All right?"

Mike understood. He waited for Horton to adjust his control panel, then took a running leap from the end of the pier. He zoomed out over the water just a few feet above it, and easily circled the island. He turned around, and hovered for a moment, then heaved the object as hard as he could towards its destination. The throw turned Mike half way around as the ball zoomed out of sight.

Flying leisurely back to the beach Mike judged he would easily reach Dr. Horton before the time the object would land on the opposite shore. He was almost there when suddenly there was a terrible sound like an explosion, and Mike found himself in the water! He was gasping and flinging his arms around trying to become steady enough to swim.

When his eyes cleared from the wave that had engulfed him, he was horrified to see the beach was a mass of destruction! The most terrifying sight of all was that the pier was no longer there, and Dr. Horton had disappeared! The cabins and the rock cliff near them were rubble, some of the debris had been blown down covering the sand completely. Even the equipment was hard to distinguish in the mess. Mike swam as fast as his powers would let him.

"Dr. Horton! Dr. Horton! Where are you?" he cried, so frightened he barely noticed the water was chilling him to the bone. By the time he reached the area where he determined the man would be located, he found a mess of logs and rock built up in a pile out over the top of the water.

After frantic searching and throwing debris Mike finally heard a faint voice from under a pile of rubble. He rushed to check out the spot, upon removing a board discovered his friend's head sticking up from the mess. He was barely conscious, and a mass of scratches and bruises, but just kept repeating "I don't believe it! It's impossible!" over and over again. Mike was in tears. "The ball landed and exploded!" Horton mumbled. "He doesn't know his own strength! Even the island is under water!"

"Don't worry, I'll get you out, doc!" he gasped, digging out the rocks and grime as rapidly as possible. He was worried what he'd find underneath.....what condition his friend would be in, and didn't really know what he should do. There wasn't a hospital for miles, the nearest one being his own clinic, and not a telephone to call for medical aide. It would be very dangerous to move Dr. Horton when he finally uncovered the rest of him.

"I've got to get you some help right away!" Mike said aloud, trying to wipe his cheeks with a sleeve he found to be soaked also. "There's only one thing I can do...I can't leave you for a minute!"

After scooping up Dr. Horton in his arms as carefully as if he was picking up an infant, Mike flew to the jeep...it was totally inoperable. The hub caps had been blown off and the tires loose.

The transmission had been blown clean through the floor of the vehicle so there was one final choice Mike had. He ran and jumped into the air with Horton still in his arms. "You've got to make it, Dr. Horton, you've just got to!" he whispered as they sped away. It seemed to take hours for Mike to reach the clinic, but he made it in moments appearing in the middle of the lab. Jeanie screamed, being the first to see the pair, and dropped her clip board. Dr. Cooper turned quickly and his face turned pale. "Oh, my God!" he gasped, "What happened?" He immediately began examining the doctor before he could even be put down.

"We were out by the lake, and he was doing some special tests on my powers! He had me throw this thing, and everything exploded! I-I don't know exactly what happened....the jeep was totaled. I had to fly him here, and I was so scared to move him!" He was still shaken and crying.

"You did the right thing, son!" Cooper told him. "Let's get him to the clinic, fast!"

Mike disappeared and reappeared in the clinic, lying Horton on one of his own exam tables. Cooper was there in minutes with the techs. Son they knew that Dr. Horton needed an emergency operation for serious internal bleeding. Dr. Cooper, of course, was the nearest government-employed physician qualified for the surgery. He reassured Mike that things would be all right before he went to prepare for his grueling task ahead.

"Don't worry, son," he told the boy when he found him still standing just inside the clinic door, "I've taken care of patients in worse shape than our friend here. He'll soon be up and around, with us for a long time, yet!"

Before he'd completely turned away, heading for the supply room, Dr. Cooper noticed the tears on Mike's cheeks. He went back to his young friend's side, and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. Looking straight into Mike's eyes he sincerely said, "It wasn't your fault! Try not to worry too much and get some work done. I'll be sure to notify you when the operation's done. You can pray for us there, in the lab, just as well as here. God knows, I'll need any help I can get." Mike smiled and reluctantly went to help and console a worried Jeanie and Larry.

Three hours later Jeanie answered the lab phone and heard Dr. Cooper's voice on the other end. The news WAS good. Dr. Horton was out of surgery and resting comfortably. He wasn't completely out of danger yet, but Dr. Cooper felt it was safe now to leave him with one of the med techs for a while until he awoke. It was going to be very uncomfortable for Dr. Horton through his recuperation period, since both of his legs had been broken, along with his left arm. Dr. Cooper told Jeanie that now he would find out what it was like having a doctor for a patient! He'd heard it was one of the worst things in the world! There were some important matters to discuss, too, and Cooper would be in the lab as soon as possible.

"All right, if you're sure you're up to it, Doc," Jeanie told him, then hung up the receiver. "Dr. Horton's fine!" she cried to everyone in the room. "Better get picked up some. The Doc's going to be here any minute for an important discussion. Oh, Mike! Everything's o.k.!"

Mike, who had been depressed all the time Cooper had been operating, sighed deeply, and looked so relieved with the news Jeanie thought he'd faint away! She ran and gave him a hug, and Larry cheered as he got up from his new usual working place...the floor!

In a few minutes Dr. Cooper was back, looking very tired but pleased. Everyone continued working as they talked.

"All right, people, what are we going to tell Officer McCree about what happened?" was the question of the hour.

"We could always tell him a meteorite hit up there. That's easy enough for anyone to believe!" Larry told him.

"Yeah, but what happens when scientists start coming up here doing tests, trying to find meteorite fragments? There's not even a crater visible where one could've landed," Dr. Cooper logically added. "They wouldn't find a thing to prove it, and might find something that would make trouble for us."

"Oh, no!" Mike gasped, looking pale. "How do we explain what happened to the jeep? It's still up at the lake, wrecked! It's about the only evidence they'll find of us ever having anything to do with the disaster!"

"I don't know!" Cooper sighed, puzzled.

"I could always go back and drop it into the middle of the lake," Mike announced, bleakly.

"That does sound like the best idea for that part of the problem, but still, what do we tell McCree?"

They hadn't heard the door open and close a few moments before Dr. Cooper's last remark, and didn't notice the figure of a man standing before it, just in the shadows of the entranceway. But they did hear his footsteps as he approached them, and they didn't turn around until they heard the familiar voice of Officer McCree from directly behind them.

"What do we tell McCree about WHAT?" he asked sternly, his hands firmly on his hips.

Dr. Cooper swallowed hard, and he slowly put the delicate instruments he held down onto the counter. Mike nervously came to Cooper's side.

"Would you like me to go and take care of that matter we discussed now, Doc?" he managed to say.

"No, son," was his answer, "I've made up my mind. I believe we have quite a bit of explaining to do, and right now!"

"Huh?" Mike gasped, his face white. He had a feeling he knew what Dr. Cooper was up to, but couldn't believe he'd actually reveal any secrets to



anyone, let alone Officer McCree. But he just stood by with his two friends, as Dr. Cooper made the man promise not a word he said would leave the room without his permission. Then, he was told all about the accident, the explosion, the jeep, and most important of all, about Mike's powers, and how they had come into being.

"So you see why we've been fearful of telling anyone this information," Cooper added, "we don't think the world is ready yet to know about Mike Montaine. The government would surely want to use him for some kind of secret weapon, bringing the country closer to war. We want to fight for peace, as Mike does, that's why we are working here, after all! And right now we desperately need your help! Remember at all times, that you gave your word you won't tell anybody the boy's secret!"

"Yes, I will. Anyway, as Chief Security Officer I've taken an oath of secrecy as part of my government employment. I am also sworn to report all important incidents during my working hours to my superiors. But you don't have to worry. Mike's secret is safe with me! I understand your reasoning and respect it. I also understand why you now need my help! About that jeep you mentioned....."

"Don't worry about that problem. I think Mike can take care of that quite easily, the way he suggested. Mike, why don't you go out to the lake and dump that jeep into the deepest water you can find?"

"O.k, Doc, it's almost dark....the perfect time to do it! See you later!" And he was gone in an instant.

"All you have to do," Cooper continued to McCree, "is take care of explaining the loss of the jeep to the car pool, and think of an explanation of the disaster for anyone who asks."

"I sort of like your meteorite theory the best!" McCree told Larry. "I'll try to elaborate on that a little."

"Thanks!" Larry told him.

Before he left, McCree shook his head back and forth still in disbelief of the whole situation. "The poor wee lad!" he mumbled about Mike, "Such a thing to happen to one so young! But don't worry; everything will be all right, now you've got my help!"

"Oh!" Cooper cried, remembering something to ask, "Why did you come in in the first place?"

"Just wanted to ask you if you'd heard about the explosion at the lake, and to investigate a report of a missing jeep whose last whereabouts was with your unfortunate friend, Dr. Horton. Good thing you did that quick explaining!" Even though the lab crew still had doubts about John McCree's honesty about Mike's abilities, everything was all right. Most who wanted to visit the area of destruction were turned away by security personnel, and the scientists who did get through to inspect the area were soon discouraged with their task, and wrote the incident off as some sort of natural disaster, unexplainable as the reasons behind the Bermuda Triangle was after all their years of investigating it!

Well, Mike thought to himself, the world needed a new mystery; something to keep their minds off fighting, at least! The next afternoon while Mike finished his lunch in the cafeteria, McCree slowly walked over to him and spoke almost in a whisper.

"Here's something that might help you if you ever have to use your new abilities in public." He pushed a small paper bag into Mike's left palm under the table, as if he was handing him something illegal.

"Don't look at it until you get home!" he was instructed.

"O.k., sure!" Mike told his new friend. He obliged by hiding the bag in his back pocket. The suspense was killing him! As soon as Mike was outside The Institute on his way home for the rest of his noontime break, he made sure no one was around and looked to see what McCree had given him. It was a black hood, something like the skiers used to wear!

"It's a mask!" Mike whispered to himself. When he got inside his door he immediately headed for the full length mirror on the inside of his closet door. After pulling the mask over his head he took up a bold pose, and cried out in a deep voice, "Behold! The Masked Avenger cometh!" then broke out in hysterical laughter! He removed the mask quickly and decided to keep it handy, in his back pocket in case of emergencies. Later, when he showed it to Jeanie she couldn't help but laugh at the thought of her masked hero!

On the first day Mike was able to visit Dr. Horton, Cooper told them both something they would remember well and do from then on.

"When will you ever remember to leave the experiments to the scientists?" he asked. "If you had asked for my help or advice, this whole thing might not have happened. From now on, before you do any more experiments, DOCTOR, if you do any more, tell me about them! Or next time you may not be so lucky!"

Dr. Horton's health improved rapidly....so well, as a matter of fact, it was both doctors' theory that Mike's healing touch had played a big part in the man's recovery. Dr. Cooper said that the condition of his colleague's wounds upon his arrival at the clinic showed definite signs of medical attention, though he had not been treated by anyone, just carried in Mike's medically untrained hands. The older man did his paperwork from his hospital bed, and kept busy throughout the recommended time, giving Dr. Cooper just a small amount of trouble to keep up the proper image. In a few weeks he was able to get out of bed and take over a few of his everyday chores once again. This was a happy and most productive time for everyone in the Institute. Mike was so enthused with his work he did not notice the dark cloud of approaching danger on the horizon, or that vibrations told of a terrifying threat of possible destruction meant just for him.

## Chapter Nine Terror In The Sky

The next few weeks seemed to fly by as Dr. Horton fully recovered. Mike worked exclusively in the lab, helping Larry dismantle and examine the last of R.M.T.P.'s components. In preparation for the reconstruction job ahead, Dr. Cooper had acquired three new lab techs, and this meant the regulars would have to be extremely careful with all conversations concerning Mike's special powers when they were present. There was always that underlying fear between Cooper, Larry and Jeanie...the fear that someone would notice the slightest little difference in their friend, and begin to ask questions that would be impossible to answer. It was beginning to become very difficult keeping Mike's tremendous appetite undercover. It became worse every day. Dr. Cooper helped his young friend out in this matter, by privately asking Larry and the other regulars to pick up extra meals for him at lunch, alternately, when he needed them. This way would even curb the suspicions of the cafeteria's counter attendant, who was constantly badgering Mike about either wasting food, sneaking it for others, or getting too much on one pass. This worked out well, until one day as Mike ate with Larry and the new techs, one said,

"You know, Mike, I've never seen anybody eat as much as you do in my whole life! I don't know how you do it! And, come to think of it, I've never seen you even go near the men's room during working hours. Wow! You must really be able to hold it in!"

As the others chuckled, shaking their heads back and forth, Mike felt his face become hot with the beginnings of a blush. He silently finished his meal. But his mind was whirling with worry. He was shocked with the sudden recollection that he hadn't needed to use the bathroom since before the transporter accident! The busy schedule he'd kept after going back to work left him no time to think much about daily habits, and now he regretted being the type of person who didn't fuss over the need for daily nutrition and scheduled routine biological functions. Of course he'd realized something was odd when he'd felt ill, but nothing seemed seriously out of order until that moment. Mike's scalp and spine tingled with an odd feeling as he finished cleaning off his tray. He knew a visit to Dr. Horton for an exam was what he needed next, but he was frightened that the diagnosis of his problem would bring him terrible news. He asked Dr. Cooper if he could speak with him alone, and they went to a quiet corner of the lab.

Dr. Cooper seemed extremely concerned after Mike explained what was wrong. He had overheard his conversation with the technician, and, the remark.

"If it's been THAT long since you used the bathroom, you should to see Horton right away for a check up. No telling what's the matter. If you're not feeling any discomforts, maybe the condition that coincides with your "new self", but we can't be certain. We can spare you for a little while, here. I don't want to scare you, but get down to that clinic, NOW!" Mike nervously stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He swallowed hard. "Yes, sir!" he said and made his way to Dr. Horton's office.

After Mike had explained everything about his condition once again, while Horton took notes, the man merely raised his eyebrows in amazement. Then, he ushered the boy to the x-ray machine for several pictures.

He also did the routine exam and took a few samples that he could usually get from his patient's elusive metabolism.

When the x-rays were ready, Mike felt a bit more confident to see the doctor was smiling when he came out some time later to give the diagnosis.

"Well, from what I've seen from these x-rays, son," he was told, "the reason that your body isn't functioning in its usual manner is that it doesn't have to any more! Some effect of the transporter malfunction has made it so when you eat your food and drink, they are almost immediately absorbed and turned into energy for you to use. This is what helps you to perform your tremendous super feats. Your body has great difficulty keeping up with the amount of energy you use, that is why you have to eat so much, and, so frequently. I'm not sure if this condition is permanent, however, so....." Dr.

Horton went over to the top drawer of a metal storage cabinet and removed from it a transparent bag which held some clear sterile plastic specimen containers with covers. "If anything ever does happen, would you please save me some samples? This is very important to me, so I hope you will remember it if the time comes."

Mike found himself speechless at his elder's words, so he managed a nod of agreement.

"Oh, my God!" he finally whispered after a few moments. Then, after he'd somewhat composed himself he explained, "Doc, I never thought much about this when it all started, but when I found out I could fly, that I was stronger than other people, my other powers, I didn't really feel that different from everyone else. But now that you've told me this; I mean, it's just not human! I don't feel human any more! What else won't I be able to do? Will I be able to lead any kind of normal life at all? It's getting so hard to keep my secret in the lab. And what about my future plans? I guess this means I won't be able to get any closer to Jeanie. Oh, doc, I don't know if she'll have anything to do with me when she finds this out. How do I know if, when it's time, I'll still be able to.....?"

Dr. Horton knew his young friend's meaning immediately. He walked back and forth at the end of the exam table Mike sat on, then stopped at his left side. He chuckled.

"Oh, I don't think you have to worry about anything in that department, son!" he said. "From the times I've had to examine you before, I've noticed the way your physical appearance has improved on all counts. Jeanie should be well pleased, indeed! Relax. Go ahead with whatever you have planned. I'm sure everything will turn out just fine, indeed!" As Mike got up to leave, thanking the doctor for his help, he was asked to report back the following afternoon to participate in a scientific test which Dr. Cooper had said was safe enough for them to conduct. The boy agreed, and hurried back to the lab. There wasn't much of a work day left, but enough to get a little bit done to earn his pay. He had to tell Cooper the news. When Mike found his friend, he looked exhausted. He had spent the entire afternoon tearing apart quite a large piece of machinery. Cooper moved away from the workers to a nearby table when he noticed Mike was back. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief when he heard the news.

"I'm so glad you're all right, son!" Dr. Cooper said, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "I guess the only solution to your problem now, is to keep up with your appearances more often."

"Huh?" Mike asked, his mind half on other things. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, to keep our young employees quiet, you'll have to go comb your hair off and on during the day, and you know where our only mirrors are located! Get a drink in there, anything you like when the others are busy, to calm all suspicions about you. I'm pretty sure everything will be o.k. then, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Let's put it this way, Doc....I hope it will, with all my heart"

After everyone worked a few hours more, Mike went home for a good night's sleep. He had no idea how well prepared he needed to be for ordeal that faced him.

When Mike reported to the clinic the following day at the appointed time, he found no one there. Deciding to wait a few minutes, he was examining some test tubes filled with odd colored liquids when he heard someone enter the room from the supply closet. He turned and was surprised to find Dr. Horton pushing a wheelbarrow, which held a large black box of a machine.

"If you're ready to leave," he said, "would you kindly help me get this into the back of our jeep? I could never dream of lifting it! It took five of my young helpers to get it in here for me!"

Mike obligingly did as he was asked. Horton was amazed to see him lift it into the vehicle as if it was as light as a feather! There was snow on the ground that day, and it was heavily overcast. As usual, the doctor had planned an out-of-the-way spot in the woods for their experiments.

"What you are to do, Mike," the older man explained, "is to take the machine and fly as high as you can. It is to judge how high you can go without being affected by the sun's rays." Dr. Horton walked over and pointed to a red button on the top of the device. "This is a safety device. If you get in trouble and decide you must drop the machine, push this button first. It will store the information we need, plus activate a homing signal so we can locate it easily later on."

Mike was pleased to find an indentation on either side of the device for handles. He grasped them as best he could, and waited for the signal to start. No wonder Dr. Cooper had approved of this test. It was so simple! Mike's only thought as he flew straight up into the air was that he couldn't wait to see how high he could go. Higher and higher he flew. Soon Mike found himself passing through the heavy cloud cover. It was an odd feeling to fly through it, and the humidity dampened

his clothes. He had never flown this high before, and enjoyed the way the clouds billowed around him, looking like puffs of gray smoke. His nose began to itch, and he concentrated on looking up for awhile until the irritation went away, and it did, very slowly. It seemed like minutes later he was above the clouds and could see the bright sun to his right. He turned a little, so it wouldn't be directly in his eyes. His clothes dried rapidly at this level. "Just a little bit more," he thought aloud. "I can do it!"

Mike was getting dizzy. The direct rays of the sun were beginning to take their toll on his sensitive body. His strength was quickly ebbing away. He flew with a final burst of power about a mile higher, then felt the machine slipping from his hands.

With great difficulty Mike managed to reach the red button and depress it before it plummeted toward Earth, sending him falling out of control, in the same direction! He was heading toward the ground at top speed. Desperately trying to slow down, the terrified Mike discovered this effort merely sent him spinning. He managed to change his direction by some stroke of luck, and found himself whirling to the right. Landscapes changed. There were fields and rivers below him. He knew he wasn't in New York any more. No matter what he did, he just kept speeding on and on, his arms and legs flailing about. It seemed like time was dragging by. Suddenly he was heading toward a range of mountains. Instantly Mike found himself in the center of a severe electrical storm. The thunder and lightning were deafening! A lightning bolt struck him in the leg. It burned quite a large hole in his pants, but barely scorched his flesh, making him cry out in shocked surprise. Another bolt hit his left side, causing the same outcome. Mike was practically unconscious. He began to fall to the ground, and crashed into a mountainside. The rain fell in torrents as the boy rolled and slid a few feet to a rocky ledge. Though merely scratched and bruised, he had never felt so weak and disoriented in his life. Soaking and shivering, Mike crawled around, trying to stand, without success. With his last ounce of strength gone, he collapsed, and a black velvet wave of unconsciousness overtook him.

Mike Montaine awoke in a shallow puddle of water. The rain had stopped. He discovered he was still weak, but felt quite a bit better. Upon sitting up, he discovered a slight pounding in his temples. There was one thing Mike was extremely aware of....the fact that he was starving! He had to find food, and fast, if he ever wanted to get home again. He shakily stood and looked around. After mentally preparing himself, he headed off in the direction he'd come. There would be farms there. With the thought of food, Mike broke into a run, since he knew it would be the best for him not to fly, just yet, anyway. "Where am I?" he wondered.

There was a small town directly in Mike's path. It had started to rain once again, so he stopped to wait for the storm to pass in a small grocery there. As he went inside, he noticed a sign tacked under the cash register onto the long check-out counter. "WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA!" it read in pleasant looking bold letters. Mike gasped. "I've gone clear across the country?" he thought to himself. He felt numbed with this sudden awareness. This thing that had happened to him was

incredible! He stood watching the rain for a couple of hours through the large display window in the front of the building. The old gentleman at the cash register eyed Mike suspiciously. Finally, he said, "Strange weather we're having, isn't it?"

His only reply was a nod of agreement. A bit later the rain slowed down enough for Mike to be off. On the edge of the town he found an old farm. No one was outside, so upon exploring the grounds he discovered the storage bins were full of corn from the recent harvest. With tremendous speed he began devouring it raw, shucks and all, until the entire bin was empty. Then, to pay for it, he plowed the field, and repaired the fence. With partially renewed strength, Mike rushed down the country road. He found another farm, this one with a load of harvested turnips in its bins. He gobbled these up, skins and all. This farm was in very poor condition. The barn and outbuildings needed quite a bit of serious repair work. Mike quickly discovered a hammer and some nails in the work shed, and completed these repairs at super speed. Again, everyone was inside because of the weather and did not come out to see what was happening. The owners would be quite surprised when they found his work!

After resting a moment, Mike was finally heading toward New York again, and the comforts of Dr. Horton's clinic. He knew his friends would be terribly worried about him. Half the afternoon had passed when Mike appeared in the clinic. "What on Earth?....." Horton gasped when he heard a noise near the front doorway. He rushed from the back chemical lab area. "Mike! It's you! You're back!" he cried, when he discovered the boy propping himself up on a bed. Mike looked over to him with a sheepish grin.

"Oh, Bureaucrats!" he said, trying to sound cheerful, "I wanted to surprise you!"

"Don't worry, you did! Are you all right, son" What happened to you? You look terrible!"

"It's a long story, doc," Mike explained.

"You'd better hop up on this bed before you tell me about it. And I'd better let Cooper know you're here before he does something drastic!"

When Cooper arrived seconds later, Mike explained what happened to him as quickly as he could, while Dr. Horton gave him a thorough examination.

"You actually got struck by lightning twice?" he was asked by the amazed physician.

"Yeah, and would you believe I think that's what saved me and gave me enough energy to come to and get to that farm? I felt strange surges of power when that happened, different from anything that's ever happened before. The holes in my pants will show you it's true." The boy shivered, just thinking of the experience.

"Hmmmmmm, of course. Natural electricity acts like a battery for you, with energy similar in power to what the transporter provided in the burst that gave it to you. The sun may hurt you, but lightning helps you. It's a good thing to learn and remember, but if I were you, I wouldn't plan to get too close to many more storms like that!"

"Don't worry, I don't intend to! What about your machine?"

"It will be recovered shortly. The homing device you activated is coming in handy. The search party I sent out in a jeep have radioed me that they're in its proximity right now. I'm sure it'll be intact and we can gather the information from it safely."

"What matters the most is that you're intact, son!" Dr. Cooper added, smiling so broadly it appeared he was blushing.

"We couldn't very well send out a search party for you, since we didn't have the foggiest idea where to begin looking! I wish your first trip to California had been under more pleasant circumstances."

"You're lucky, Michael," Dr. Horton told him, "you'll be all right. You've got some pretty bad scrapes and bruises, but the worst thing you're suffering from is a terrible case of exhaustion. You'll have to have complete bed rest for a few days to fully recover, and regain your strength."

"Ooooooooooh," Mike moaned. He put a hand on his stomach and stared at Cooper, wondering about the lab work.

"Everything's o.k., son. We'll take care of everything," Cooper told him.

"Excuse me, Doc," the boy said, "but there's something I have to take care of right now. Dr. Horton, may I please have the bed pan? I think I'm gonna give you those samples you asked for the other day!"

Cooper noticed Mike was blushing furiously. "See you later, son!" he told him, and headed back to the lab. Dr. Horton got Mike what he'd asked for, and after he was taken care of, he fell into a deep, uninterrupted sleep for a long, long time.

The next day Dr. Horton called Dr. Cooper to the clinic. He had an important question to ask him.

"I want to talk to you about those samples Mike gave me yesterday," he began. "How do you study something that's nothing?"



"What?" Cooper gasped, completely confused.

"How do you study something that doesn't register as matter by any tests I've given it? And how do you keep samples that won't be contained in normal laboratory containers? It looks like matter, but it isn't...at least as we would describe it. Doesn't even have any odor."

"Interesting!" Cooper replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "If you won't keep it in ordinary lab containers, where is it now?" "Oh, I've got it in a specially coated jar and test tube. Glass seems to be one of the only things it doesn't dissolve quickly. Let me show you something."

Horton went to a table and picked up the cleaned bed pan Mike had used, from it. There was a hole completely through the bottom of the pan!

"This happened the moment the stuff made contact with the metal!" he explained, putting his fist through the hole.

"The stuff must be made of material no one has come in contact with before. But if it disintegrates anything it touches like that, I wouldn't keep it around for long."

"Yes, I've already decided to get rid of it as soon as possible...but how?"

"My best suggestion would be to wait until Mike is well, then let him take it to the nearest volcano and drop it in. To me that would be the most logical way of disposing of it. The tremendous heat of the lava will destroy almost anything. I'm sure it will do its job on this very well. If it doesn't that's the place where nobody will be harmed by it."

"That seems to be the best decision," Horton agreed.

Cooper said hello to Mike then was gone again.

"Busy man, indeed!" Horton said to himself, then went back to his daily medical tasks.

Mike enjoyed his chance to rest, and caught up on his reading. He studied more laboratory papers Dr. Cooper had given him to look over about the project. The only things he really missed were his dates with Jeanie and, being outside in the fresh air. He had several visits with Jeanie, Larry, and, Cooper, usually, individually. It felt so good to be able to sleep late and not have to worry about cooking or putting up with getting food from the pesky cafeteria crew. Dr. Horton was having truckloads of fresh vegetables and fruits brought in for his patient. It was difficult to find explanations for the use of them, but they managed. Since the incident at the farm Horton and Cooper found this the best way to satisfy Mike's appetite and the quickest way to bring him back to its normal level for his metabolism. He gobbled everything down like it was going out of style. A whole load of food would disappear in fifteen minutes, but at least Mike was happy and getting well. Dr. Horton seemed interested in learning how his body reacted during recuperation. Mike kept his usually routine days busy, indeed.

One afternoon Mike awoke to find Dr. Cooper standing at the foot of his bed looking the most depressed he'd ever been. Mike told the man to sit down, and after Cooper gently placed himself on the lower left side of the mattress he was asked to explain what bothered him.

"The last few nights I've been going over your MLC sketches, and think I've solved the mystery of them at last. From what I have observed from that last one you made with the section removed, we are in grave danger. Unless you can do something to help, the missiles are going to be accidentally launched, the world will be destroyed, and I'm not sure of the amount of time we have before this happens!"

"What?" Mike cried. "But what about the safety devices you mentioned? I thought the MLCs were made so accidental launches could never happen!"

"That's what I'm trying to explain, son," Cooper continued, "from what I can gather, your sketches are telling us something is wrong with these failsafe devices. What are we going to do, Mike? Here we are working to save the world, and the very thing that's supposed to protect us is about to destroy everything!"

"Hmmmm," Mike said, "I don't know if I can fly in space yet. My only known problem would be getting beyond the sun with no bad effects. I'm sure we'll find some way I can get by that without much trouble. If you and Dr. Horton talk this over, I'll bet you can come up with some ideas for me that will give me a way to fly as high as I want, and not be bothered by the sun's rays."

"I'm glad you have so much confidence in yourself, son," Cooper complimented, "but to tell you the truth, I'm scared to death you won't be able to help in time. I'm scared to death!"

## Chapter Ten

### A Solution Is Found?

Mike was fully recovered from his accident two days after Dr. Cooper told him the news. Later that week as he worked in the lab with just Larry, Jeanie and the supervisor present, they discussed his need for some kind of protection from the sun's rays. It was then that Larry came up with something Dr. Cooper was seriously interested in.

"You know, I wish we could get our hands on one of those old style space suits the astronauts used to wear. I'll bet that would be just the thing to help him out!" the blonde technician put in as he pulled his head out from under the transporter platform.

"Hmmm!" Cooper mumbled, thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. He paused a moment from signing the form Jeanie was holding for him on a clipboard. "There's only one thing wrong with that suggestion, son. The only place we'd find anything like that nowadays would be in some museum, somewhere, I don't even know where that would be, or how we'd go about borrowing one, let alone keeping it!"

Larry propped himself up on his elbow and thoughtfully turned the wrench in his hands. "You know, my father used to work at NASA. Before he died, he was developing a new material that would later be used in making space suits for the astronauts."

"Wow, really?" Mike cried in excitement.

"You know, with all the connections Dr. Horton has with them, I'll bet he could get us some of that in no time, and we could make our own type of costume for Mike with it," Cooper told him. "I only hope it works."

"Oh, it worked, all right, but there's one problem," Larry explained. "When it was being sent from the factory to NASA aboard a ship, the ship ran into a terrible storm and it sank! The cargo could never be recovered. They lost all hands. We always suspected the Russians had something to do with the "accident", but could never prove it. They were getting desperate to delay us in the space race any way they could."

"Damn!" Mike cursed. His whole appearance changed to be the picture of disappointment.

Larry looked at Mike's face and noticed it was illuminated by a bright, white glow. No one else mentioned it, so he blinked to see if his eyes were playing tricks on him, but afterwards the light was still there. He had a feeling this meant Mike was up to something special by way of using his powers, and, in a second, as the light vanished he found this to be true.

"Doc, can you ask Dr. Horton if he could call someone and find out the last known position of that ship? I've got a FEELING Larry's just put us on the right track of something big, that will help solve all our problems!"

"I sure can ask, son!" Cooper nodded. "It won't hurt anything, I suppose."

He immediately went to the phone and asked Horton to call NASA.

"I haven't spoken to my old friend Hal that works there in years!" Horton chuckled to Cooper on the other end of the line. "I sure will give him a ring and try to find out what you need. I'll get back to you as soon as I can, Matthew!"

In about a half hour they knew what they wanted was just a few miles from the Massachusetts coast.

"See you guys later!" Mike told his friends. "I've got some work to do. Be back as soon as I can."

Everyone looked at each other as Mike disappeared, wondering what would happen next!

When Mike reached the Atlantic Ocean he landed on a short pier behind a large city's factory. As he stood looking out over the calm water, the realization of its great size filled him with awe and a sense of failure. Where would his search for the cargo even begin? Would his powers work under water?

As Mike stood contemplating these questions, he felt a presence beside him, and turned looking right, to find a spirit there. It was the spirit of a Scotsman, wearing complete Scottish regalia. The man smiled at Mike through his bushy red beard, and the boy wondered if he had the temper to match his fiery hair.

"You have a problem with navigation, do ye, laddie?" the man asked.

"I sure do!" Mike nodded with a sigh.

"I know of what you seek. Can ye swim?"

"Why yes, I can, or I wouldn't have come."

"Ye'll have to be quick about this, now. When I dive into the water, just stay by my side and I'll lead you to your treasure."

"All right, I hope I'll be able to stay under long enough."

"Don't worry about it. Everything will come natural to ye."

The spirit leapt into the ocean, and Mike followed. It was a unique feeling for him, diving deeper than any human being could without a suit. The spirit had been right! Mike swam and noticed he had no problem staying under, and the journey to their destination was swift and uneventful. When the sunken ship was in sight, Mike saw it lay embedded in the sand on its left side, and there was a huge hole straight through it!

"No hurricane did that!" Mike thought, and discovered the spirit could hear him using telepathic contact.

"One of those metal fish that carries men shot a tremendous cannonball at her. I do not think that the attacking vessel was one of your peoples'."

"The Russians DID have something to do with this, after all," Mike thought, then thanked the spirit for his help. The man vanished. Carefully going

inside the shell of the vessel, Mike found the cargo hold. To his joy, he discovered what he searched for had been stored in large, round, metal containers. The half dozen of them had been able to withstand their submerged existence without much wear and tear, and Mike could easily read their bold labels. Now, he had to concentrate on getting them back to The Institute. He pulled one of the tins loose from the sand that had accumulated around them, and since it was too wide for him to wrap his arms around, he found an old piece of cable and tied them together with it. He then towed it to shore, being careful to hide them in the shallow water near the pier until he could return for them all. Then he hoisted up his first load of them and took off flying, for The Institute.

When Mike finally got the material into the lab, and told his friends that there was more to come, they could hardly restrain themselves from opening them immediately, but waited the few minutes more that it took Mike to go back and retrieve the rest he'd found so Dr. Cooper could check them out for possible radiation.

"However did you find it?" Jeanie asked.

"Oh, I had a little unexpected help!" Mike said, teasingly.

After Mike pried the lids open, Jeanie and Cooper inspected the material.

"Look! This is black!" Jeanie cried, removing the bolts of stuff and testing its weight with her long, slender fingers.

As they dumped out the other container, Cooper cried, "This stuff's gold!"

"Hey!" Cooper exclaimed, after he reached into the bottom of one tin, "Here's the fixative we need to glue seams together instead of sewing everything. They say it was the strongest adhesive in the world! We'll soon find out if it's true, won't we? Does anyone here have any experience with sewing?"

"I have," Jeanie quickly replied. "I don't do very well, but I know the basics. I took a course on it in high school."

"Great! Would you be willing to spend most of your time for the next few days putting together a special suit for Mike? You could design it yourself, and everything. Surprise us with the results. I'll even provide you with the space to work on this, right here in the building."

"I would love to do it!" Jeanie agreed, beaming from ear to ear.

While the pair were talking Mike had taken another tube of adhesive from the barrel and was carefully reading the instructions on the back of it. "Hey!" he called out, "I won't have Jeanie working with any of this stuff! It's toxic! See, Doc?" he handed Cooper the tube.

"Hmmm, you're right! It's a good thing you're more observant than the rest of us today, son! How should we go about using it?"

"If it's all right with you, Doc, I could help her. She could do the designing and cutting and I could put it together. It wouldn't bother me, especially with my super speed."

"Good idea! You and Jeanie can work together. She'll need to have you for measurements and fittings, anyway. Let's just hope our results prove worthy of our work."

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"Good idea! You and Jeanie can work together. She'll need to have you for measurements and fittings, anyway. Let's just hope our results prove worthy of our work."

For the next few days Jeanie and Mike were secluded away from the others in one of the large chemical labs on another floor of the building, measuring, cutting, and gluing. They were having a wonderful time! Jeanie was doing a wonderful job.

Larry and Dr. Cooper were working diligently four afternoons later when there was a steady knocking on the lab door. When Larry opened it, Jeanie came in.

"Are you ready for the unveiling, Doc?" she asked. "Mike's suit is finished."

"FANTASTIC! Of course I'm ready!" Cooper cried.

Larry was surprised to hear this. He stood nearby, watching Jeanie, looking tired.

Jeanie went to the door. "O.k., Mike, you can come in now!" she called.

When Mike came in, he was covered with a long lab trenchcoat and anti-contamination boots. He held the coat tightly about him.

"Well, here goes!" Jeanie said, and Mike took off the coat and dropped it to the floor, then bent over and removed the boots.

"Ta da!" he cried, spreading his arms out and turning around slowly, until he again faced his friends.

Dr. Cooper could only stare at him in amazement and admiration of a job well done.

The top half of the one-piece costume was made out of the black material. It had a gold collar and matching gold gloves. Its long sleeves were silver, and the tights matched them. There were gold boots which came half-way up to Mike's knees. There was a silver design on his chest.

"What's that?" Larry asked, pointing to it.

"Oh, that's an ancient design representing a spirit," Mike explained. "Jeanie thought it would go good."

"I like it!" Cooper beamed.

"But Mike," Larry put in, "did you have to make it so tight? That outfit doesn't leave anything to the imagination! Don't you want to leave the girls SOMETHING to wonder about?"

Mike blushed. "It's this darned material! No matter how we adjusted it, it still wants to cling to me. It's very embarrassing!"

Jeanie had moved slightly away from Mike, and was eyeing his slim form with great pleasure, unaware anyone was noticing her doing so. She heard

Larry's remark and frowned, pretending to be disgusted by it. The guys laughed.

Then, Mike reached up and began unfastening his collar in the front. Dr. Cooper noticed it attached to the shoulders of the garment with small snaps. As he unrolled it they could see it was being made into some kind of hood! When Mike slipped it over his head, they were surprised to see it covered his face down to the end of his nose. There were a type of goggles made right into the hood, so he could see clearly. It looked funny to Dr. Cooper, so Mike explained.

"This is for when I fly at higher altitudes closer to the sun. Good thing I don't have claustrophobia!" he added. "It's really a tight squeeze in here!" He started to flip the hood back again, but Cooper stopped him.

"Why don't we test it out now?" he asked, excitedly. "The sooner we know if it protects you, the better."

"But it's cloudy outside, Doc," Jeanie reported. "It looks like more snow."

"That doesn't make any difference where I'm going!" Mike laughed. He headed for the lab's rear service entrance.

"Oh!" Jeanie mumbled, following a distance behind him, "That's right!"

Cooper was right at Mike's heels. "I forgot to ask if you're sure you're ready for this. I don't want you to be hurt again, so soon after your recovery, son."

"Don't worry, I'll be o.k.."

"We'll be waiting right here for you."

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

He took off running and zoomed straight up into the overcast sky above The Institute. Cooper watched him go for a moment in ecstatic anticipation, then went back inside and shut the door.

Mike felt great as he soared higher and higher through the clouds. "Yahoo!" he cried, feeling the best freedom in the world. He went quicker than before, confident in his new-found protection. He emerged into the bright rays of the sun and grinned at it over his right shoulder. "Bye-bye!" he called cheerfully, waving his hand at the huge orange ball.

Mike went higher than before, but as he continued upward toward the edge of the atmosphere, he started to become weak. Just after crossing the border into dark, endless space, he realized he had to start back before anything went wrong once again. He could report that though slightly disturbed the suit was serving its purpose...but he still needed extra aide from the direct rays above the clouds, to reach his goal. Feeling a tinge of depression overtake him, Mike landed and hurried back inside the lab. The first thing everyone was after him, asking questions.

"What happened? Are you all right, son?" Cooper was the first to ask.

Removing the hood and folding it back up again, Mike nodded in the affirmative.

"I'm o.k., just a little weak!"

"Then the suit did help you?"

"Yes."

The others cheered and clapped their hands. When they'd stopped, Mike explained,

"The suit helps tremendously, Doc, but I still can't get up out of the atmosphere high enough. I did leave it, though. It was a fantastic experience! The stars were so bright!"

"One giant step for us," Larry chered, "toward a future for mankind!"

"Someone here, I'll bet, could also come up with an idea for what Mike needs now, something to totally block the strongest rays of the sun to get deep into space!" Cooper speculated. There was a certain twinkle in his eye.

"I've figured maybe some kind of a shield would help," Larry told him.

"All right, since you came up with the idea, I leave you the responsibility of developing it. Remember, we don't have much time for this, but it'll give you a good chance to exercise your imagination!"

Mike had confidence in Larry. He just knew he would come up with something.



## Chapter Eleven

### The New Deal

Mike wore his new suit home under his street clothes that day, and this gave him the idea to continue wearing it this way during the week, to see if it allowed him to stay outside in the sun longer. It worked, and Mike spent many pleasant hours with Jeanie and Larry out of doors both during lunch breaks, and after hours. To celebrate his new-found freedom, he decided to have a party at his apartment, one night, exactly a week after his discovery. Larry was bringing his girlfriend, a pretty blonde young lady named Susie, who worked in the laundry. They'd been seeing each-other quite a while. Jeanie was excited about the small affair and made Mike promise to sing there. The four were walking to Mike's from the Institute on the appointed evening, when Larry suddenly thought of a fantastic idea concerning the construction of the shield. The setting sun was shining so brightly over the nearest mountain, it made them cover their eyes and have to squint to make their way to the main road, and Susie had mentioned there was a house on that mountaintop. Her parents had known the people that lived there before the place had been turned into a solar generating station. Life up there had been simply unbearable on certain times of the day. They were heartbroken at the thought of leaving their family's house behind, and didn't know what to do until a man from the government had heard about their problem and confronted the couple with the idea of turning the area into the station. He offered them the amount of money for their property that suited them for the deal, and moved to a safer place in town. Larry could see the huge solar reflectors just barely, from where he was, and this is what triggered his thoughts that excited him so. Mike was chatting a mile a minute, keeping the girls' interest quite well, and Larry could not seem to get his attention, no matter how hard he tried! Finally, he waved his arms wildly at the risk of Susie thinking him a complete idiot, and Mike finally glanced around while Jeanie and Susie continued talking to one another.

"Got a great idea!" he told him telepathically. "It's about the shield. It's quite complicated to explain, so I guess I'll have to tell you later."

Mike's curiosity was terribly aroused, but he didn't want to keep up their psychic contact for long, or Susie would get suspicious something unusual was happening "On target!" he communicated back. "Can't wait to hear it!" then turned back to the girls.

Mike was pleased with the young technician's ability to receive his thought transmissions when directed to him. He'd always suspected Larry of being naturally psychic, and after recent tests by Dr. Horton proved he could become an expert at telepathic communication if he had proper training, the two friends conversed this way often. The only drawback with it was it didn't work well if the two weren't looking directly at each other while sending their messages.

Mike knew this problem would be overcome in time, and they would be able to reach one-another automatically, no matter where they were, or what they were doing. Mike hoped this would happen soon, in case of danger!

"Hey!" Susie put in, sounding both irritated and amused. "Did you ever feel like you were being ignored? What's going on here? I asked you something three times, Mike, and you didn't answer."

"Ooops, sorry!" he told her, "I...er...was just daydreaming!"

Larry couldn't help but burst out laughing at the sheepish grin on Mike's face. They made it to the apartment without further incident.

Mike brought out his guitar after a quick supper, and had a good time singing a few of his friends' requests. Then, he just played some slower old songs, while Larry took turns dancing with Susie and Jeanie. After a while Larry thanked Mike for a wonderful evening, and escorted Susie to his own apartment. Mike said good night to them at the door with the guitar still in his hand. After he'd shut the door once again, he turned back to Jeanie, who sat on the sofa.

"They make a nice couple, don't they?" Jeanie asked.

"Yeah. I've thought that, ever since I first was introduced to Susie. But speaking of couples, right now I'm going to play you a song I know you'll love....a nice romantic song."

Mike sat down next to Jeanie and began to tune the instrument. After he'd played the first few cords, one of the strings snapped right in half!

"Oh, damn!" she cursed. "It was beautiful! Now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. This is one of the most important strings on my guitar, and, one of the hardest to find in the stores. It costs a fortune to order them!" Mike unhooked the broken pieces and held them up before him, one in each hand, with the top ends just barely touching. "I wish I could just hold them together like this, and say, 'Be fixed,' and it would happen, but it doesn't...."

Suddenly, a bright white light flashed in front of Mike. Jeanie gasped, startled. It vanished in seconds.

"Hey! What was that?" he asked, completely shaken by the surprise. Then, he went to separate the broken guitar string to put it in a safe place, and to his amazement, discovered it WAS indeed, whole again! Mike pulled on it to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, then let go of one end. "Look! It worked! I DID fix it!" he cried, in a shocked tone of voice.

"Oh, no! Oh, my God!" Jeanie whispered, then she yelled, "Oh, DAMN!" and spun away from Mike, angrily, walking a few steps. She stayed standing there, her back to him, looking like she was in tears.

Mike put the repaired string down by the kitchen table and went to her, slowly. He rubbed her shoulders with his left hand, as he spoke.

"What's wrong, Jeanie? You seem like you're angry about something. Did I do something wrong?"

He sounded so adorably innocent she tried to let the anger go out of her voice.

"No, not really, Mike. It's just me. As you know, I haven't, until now, had much luck with men. Ever since I was a teenager my dream has been to some day settle down and have kids. Dammit, after all, Mike, under the scientific, logical shell you know every day at work, I am a woman, you know! And I've always wanted to marry a special, loving, home-spun guy like you....a normal, good-looking guy." She turned to face him, almost in tears.

"I try to fool myself, you know," she continued, with great difficulty, "Things with us are so perfect and wonderful I forget that you're different, you're not normal, and have special powers. You're just the guy I've always wanted....then, BAM, something like this happens, and it scares me, Mike, it terrifies me down to my very bones! I don't want to lose you, ever, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to get used to your powers. I've always been weary of psychic phenomena because of my upbringing. You're so different. I know it's not your fault, but I want to get MARRIED some day, Mike. You can't do this, you can't do that, you don't know what else will happen to you....why; get MARRIED....you don't even know if you can....and I'm a woman, I...."

"I know you are, darlin', I'm well aware of that fact every time I'm in the same room with you! My body won't let me forget it! Anyway, you don't have to worry, I've already asked Dr. Horton about that, and he says everything's o.k., to go ahead with any plans I have that include you. He even took some tests and they came out fine."

"I don't know, Mike, what's going to become of us, but I DO know that I'm going to need a little time to think things over, alone, before we continue our relationship. I'm sorry, Mike, but I....think we should separate for a while, then sort out our feelings."

Mike was flabbergasted by Jeanie's outburst. He thought they were getting along excellently, and he never suspected she felt so strongly about this. He wished with all his heart at that moment, they'd have talked more. With a horrible sinking feeling he whispered, "If you think that's what's best. I- I don't want to....hurt you.....ever."

Jeanie's expression changed instantly as she watched him, to one more relaxed. She felt like a balloon that had just lost all its air.

"Oh, bureaucrats!" she cursed, "Why should I say all this and hurt you? Why should I fight it? I know we were meant to be together from the first time I saw you! Forget everything I've said tonight about us."

I couldn't be apart from you for long, and you know it! Oh, Mike, I'm sorry I've been such a fool. I love you with all my heart, and I don't want to think of leaving you ever again!"

Mike took her in his arms and held her close, stroking her soft, blond curls.

"All right," he soothed, "it's all right, you don't have to."

Their lips met in a passionate kiss, with Jeanie wishing it would never end.

Jeanie spent the night at Mike's apartment, and as Dr. Horton predicted she was well pleased. The next day, as mutually agreed upon, she moved in with him, with Larry's assistance. It just seemed meant to be. No one at The Institute ever questioned her reasoning. She was the happiest she'd ever been in her life, and Mike felt terrific about the whole new deal. He was in love, and the fact someone like Jeanie loved him in return, despite all his faults, was wonderful!

## Chapter Twelve Leave It To The Generals!

"I don't believe I did that!" Mike said to Dr. Cooper one afternoon in the lab. He was holding two small metal bars that he had just fused together with his bare hands!

Mike took one from him that looked like copper and the other some kind of aluminum alloy.

"O.k., here goes nothing!" he sighed. He held them with their facing ends touching, and closed both his hands around the ends that met. As he pressed on the metal lightly, a glow appeared around his hands for a few moments. When it disappeared, he closed his eyes, and leaned back on the table edge for a second. Then, he opened his hands. A single metal bar crashed to the floor! Cooper bent down to pick it up and studied it, in awe. He touched the fused section, and brought his finger back quickly, feeling the heat from it.

"How do you DO that?" he asked.

"I don't know," Mike honestly explained, "I just think about them melting together, and they DO it!"

"Are you getting tired, or would you like to try some more I have here?"

"I'm fine," the boy assured him. He rubbed his hands together rapidly. "I'm anxious to find out what else I can do.

What's next, Doc?"

Dr. Cooper rummaged through a pile of assorted metal bars and what looked like junk on the table behind them. He found two bars that interested him, and gave them to his companion.

"If you can fuse these, I will certainly be amazed!"

Mike relaxed again, and was beginning to do as he was asked, when the sound of a man shouting made him jump and drop the metal.

"What the...." Dr. Cooper gasped. A technician ran in, calling for him.

"Dr. Cooper! There's been a special announcement on the radio, telling everyone to turn on their televisions to the Special Emergency Channel for an important message!" The man cried. "I've been telling everyone I can about it. It sounds like something really serious!"

"O.k., I'll be down to the cafeteria in a minute. Go on ahead. Thanks for letting me know."

"Yes, sir!" the man smiled, and left.

"Come on, people!" Dr. Cooper instructed his workers, "Let's all go and see what this is all about. Everyone meet me in the cafeteria!"

Mike composed himself from the scare, and followed his boss. Jeanie and Larry joined them after they'd found a table to themselves with a good view of the small television which sat on a table in the corner of the room. After a moment of silence the screen lit up with a live picture of a young, uniformed army officer.

"Please stand by your television sets," the man said. "In a few moments you will hear an important message from General Ebenezer Gauge, of The United States Army."

The screen went blank again for a few minutes, then it was filled with the oppressive form of the general. His appearance was that of a middle aged, slender man, with graying hair. His face was well lined from worry, and it looked like he'd never smiled. In short, he looked like the bringer of trouble; lots of trouble, indeed!

"Good afternoon," he began, "as you probably know, the violence in The United States Of America is growing in monstrous proportions every day, because of present conditions. I, as well as all of you, am getting sick and tired of it, and most of all, certain people in our government that promise fervently they will do something to curtail the havoc, and never keep their promises. Therefore, I have taken over for The Joint Chiefs Of Staff, and have decided to form my own organization against crime and violence in this country. There are now hundreds of servicemen from all branches of our military fighting for peace under my control. Our forces will be known as United Rebels For Peace, and many cities are supporting our cause. We have men stationed everywhere, and will handle violence with the only unfortunate method of punishment we know to succeed in helping the community....violence in return. We will be forced to shoot to kill anyone taking part in a violent act, or, initiating violent acts within our territory. It is the only way to handle our society.

I now have The Pentagon and other government buildings surrounded by my people. The Joint Chiefs or any other law enforcement personnel will not interfere with my plans whether they are military or civillian. They are all in my power. That is all I have to report right at the moment, but to stay tuned for any further messages. And remember....I will keep my promises! This is General Ebenezer Gauge of The United Rebels For Peace, signing off."

Dr. Cooper leaned back in his chair, looking like he was going to be sick. Mike stared at him, stunned by the news.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get to my office and make a phone call," Cooper finally managed to say. "I want to find out exactly what's going on, and how many people are in on this fiasco!"

"Right! Go right ahead, Doc, we'll meet you in the lab!" Mike told him.

"What the hell is this world coming to?" Larry snapped, as he stood up and angrily tossed his pencil onto the table. He spun around on his heel, stopping to face Jeanie as she touched his arm.

"We've all been wondering that for years," she said. "Take it easy. When Doc gets done with his call, we'll know the whole story of what's happening!" She lowered her voice and added, "Hopefully it won't be something that Mike can't handle alone!"

They relaxed for a few minutes, talking to some of the others in the room, then hurried back to work.

It didn't take long for Cooper to join them. The other techs had remained in the cafeteria, so he was free to explain what he'd learned.

"We're in luck!" he said, "This Gen. Gauge isn't as powerful as he's trying to make us think! His headquarters are in Chicago. His forces have the control of the east coast cities of Chicago and New Orleans, and on the west coast, Los Angeles and San Francisco. There are a few small detachments of his elsewhere, but these are his bases of power. The most important fact to remember now, is that he has The Joint Chiefs held prisoner deep inside The Pentagon, in a place called The War Room. Their rescue is our only hope for The United States to keep any trace of what our ancestors fought for, alive. We must stop that monster from doing any more damage." Dr. Cooper placed a couple sheets of paper on the nearby table where he'd been working with Mike, earlier. "Here's a sketch of what the Pentagon looks like, and where The Joint Chiefs are being held, as given to me by my friend in Washington, D.C. that I just talked to." He spread the drawing out with his hands and then leaned forward on it so it wouldn't curl up again.

Mike studied the thing over his left arm. "Do you think you can help, Mike?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm pretty sure I can, Doc. I've got to leave right away. Is there anything else I should know first?"

Cooper handed him the second piece of paper he held. "This is a sketch of the inside of Gauge's headquarters that might be handy!"

"Oh; yeah!" Mike grinned, "Thanks!" He studied it quickly then tucked it inside one of his gloves after folding it as small as he could. "See you guys later! I've got a job to do!"

"Good luck, son!" Dr. Cooper said, waving. "We'll be waiting for you!"

Mike removed his clothes in the mens' room and quickly hid them in the lab. He ran out the service entrance at super speed, and zoomed into the air, heading for Washington, D.C..

When he reached the capital, he noticed some small battles had broken out between the army and the rebelling forces around The Pentagon, and the other old buildings and monuments. They were using heavy artillery and large tanks.

"Hmmm," Mike thought as he flew over, "I know just how to stop those big fellows!"

He dived toward the tanks and at such a tremendous speed no one could see him, he turned all of them upside down, leaving the men inside unharmed but terrified! Then, he took the cannons and buried their barrels in the ground! Mike made a quick patrol of the city and did the same with all the artillery he could find, then, headed back toward The Pentagon.

There he saw the building was well guarded, and decided once again to use his abilities for speed to the best advantage. He landed near the front of the building, well out of sight, then ran as rapidly as he could, inside, to the door of The War Room.

When he stopped and was visible once again, he found himself standing between two guards.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, matter-of-factly, took a step backwards, then knocked the men out by bumping their heads together! They folded up into a neat little pile, to the floor. Mike dusted off his hands.

"I've always wondered if that really worked!" he said to himself, then hurried inside to find The Joint Chiefs. The five men were standing near the huge oak conference table, talking. When they saw Mike enter they spun around and became quiet, until one of them decided to call out,

"Who are you, and what do you want with us?"

"I'm a friend who wants to help you get out of here safely."

"How can we believe you're not with the rebels?"

"Watch this," Mike told them. He knew very soon more guards would come to see what had happened to their companions, so he went back to the metal double doorway and locked it. He had the impression to put his hands up to where the doors joined, and did so. Immediately his palms began to glow, as if they were on fire! Mike flinched a little with the tingling sensation the glow produced, but knew instinctively, what to do. He ran his hands up and down the crack of the doors and did this until the doors were sealed...fused shut!

"There!" he sighed, rubbing his hands together, amazed they weren't hot to the touch. "The guards won't bother us for a while, anyway. Would someone that was against you do that to protect you?"

"Well, I guess not," The General Of The Army replied, "unless you wanted to destroy us first, in your own unique way."

"I would never think of it. Look, I can get you out of here, and to the safety of your nearest Army command post, if you're willing to cooperate and do as I ask. Are you with me or against me?"



"What have we got to loose?" asked the youngest of the men who was General over The Air Force. "If he's lying, we'll probably die anyway. I'm for taking the quickest route!"

They gathered in a circle and discussed the matter in hushed voices. Mike went back to the door. He could hear shouting in the hallway now, and running footsteps. He waited a few moments for the men to talk. As he turned back to them, there was a loud banging on the door, and a man's voice ordering to be let in.

"You'd better make up your minds in a hurry, 'cause it looks like we're gonna have company!"

"But how will we get out now?" The Commander Of The Coast Guard asked. "The only exit is blocked!"

"I'll simply have to make another one," Mike explained, "like this!" And he flew right up through the ceiling, making a large opening in it, big enough for a man to fit through. He kept flying until he made the hole directly through each floor above them, and out the roof of the building! When he returned back through, he could hear someone working with a blowtorch on the door, and was almost through it.

"A flying man!" The General Of The Air Force gasped.

"Let's get out of here!" The General Of The Army shouted.

"Then, I guess we all agreed that going with you is best," The General Of The Marines laughed, "but how do we get up there?"

"There's no time for me to fly you out individually, but the best way I can think of is, when I rise up off the floor, to your height, grab my ankles and hold on as tight as you can. Then, I'll rise up again, and someone also will do the same with your ankles, and so on, until you're all holding on to each other's ankles, and then we'll be flying high! Are you ready?"

Mike did as he'd explained, floating just over The General's head. The man hesitantly grasped his ankles. Each man obeyed the instructions. The General Of The Air Force was last to go. He took ahold of his coworker's ankles very hesitantly.

"This is one type of flying that wasn't in the manual!" he said nervously, "I hope I'll be able to handle it!" And as soon as he was ready, they were all air borne, and just in time. Just as The General Of The Air Force's toes cleared the edge of the opening Mike had made, heading toward the building's higher levels, the rebels burst into the room, guns armed and ready to shoot on sight.

"Where did they go?" the soldiers gasped, "There's no other way out!"

"I guess there is now!" another exclaimed, pointing to the ceiling in amazement.

The guard leader radioed the men stationed on the upper floors to position their people around each gap in the building they found, but their period of suspenseful waiting would come to naught. Mike accelerated his speed once again to faster than the human eye could see, and found himself

safely in the open air, with his passengers a bit shaken, but safe.

Mike soared as high as he could over the city. He asked for exact directions to the nearest command post, and after one of the men told him, he raced there, giving his companions the ride of their lifetime!

"This is the only way to fly!" gasped The Air Force General, "The view! It's fantastic! I've never realized all someone missed when they fly in a plane! How do you do this?"

"I'm sorry, but that's classified information, sir! All I can tell you is there's no strings attached!" Mike shouted over the wind.

They safely reached Virginia, The Joint Chiefs being deposited one by one, side by side in front of the brick building. Quickly recovering from their speechlessness, they immediately consoled and dismissed a guard who ran up, rifle ready.

"We're o.k.....everything's o.k.!" they told him, after explaining who they were. "This is our friend. He rescued us!"

As the guard left, they discussed with Mike how they should take care of the rebellious General Gauge.

"I thought, if you agreed, I could go to his headquarters, and bring him here, so you could take care of his punishment."

"I like your idea, son!" The Commander Of the Coast Guard said.

"I would like that, too," said The General Of The Army, "then I could shoot him down myself, the minute I laid eyes on him, that no good traitor!"

"If you do that, I can't help you. You'll have to give me your word you won't kill him, before I leave."

"All right, I give you my word. What do you say, gentlemen? Are we all agreed on Gen. Gauge's fate?"

All were in agreement, and Mike took off remembering the directions Dr. Cooper had given to the office building in Chicago. Mike appeared in the lobby of the old style skyscraper and though he was alone at the moment, he rushed to a side corridor and removed the map from his left glove, to study it. Having the directions to his destination well memorized, he flashed out of sight and reappeared upstairs in the center of Gen. Gauge's plush office. This was fine, until Mike saw the man was conferring with a soldier at his desk. He was hoping to catch him alone, and his arrest would be an easy one. The pair had their backs to their visitor.

"All right, General Gauge, you're coming with me!" Mike said, sternly. "You're hereby under arrest by orders of The United States Government!"

The pair turned quickly, simultaneously, startled at the sound of his voice.

"Who are you? How did you get in here? What right do you think you have to order me around?" Gauge spat.

"It's not necessary for you to know my name, and as far as getting in here goes, I did it like everybody else....through the door! All you do have to know is that I've been sent by The United States Government with orders from The Joint Chiefs, to take you into custody for rebelling against them, and the laws of this country."

"I'm telling you one more time," Gauge growled, "you will leave my office immediately, or I will call the guards, and if I do, I cannot guarantee your safety if you wish to remain."

"I'm not going anywhere until you're with me!" Mike firmly stated.

"I'm not leaving with some maniac dressed like a fool who tries to give me orders! You have no proof you're with the military! Now get out, or I'll shoot!"

Mike did not move so the General drew his pistol and fired two shots at him, which of course passed directly through him into the wall! Gen. Gauge's face paled.

"Get the guards in here!" he cried to the terrified companion, "Tell them to bring any weapons they have! We have an intruder!"

After the man had rushed out of the room, Mike's calm appearance aggravated the General's temper and, fear.

"Why didn't you try to stop him?" he asked the boy.

"I'm not afraid of your weapons! You just saw what happened when you fired at me. I can do many things to stay out of danger!"

Several guards appeared at the door carrying machine guns, and other large fire arms; any weapons they could carry.

"Leave, or I'll give the orders to fire!" the General shouted, pointing at the guns.

Mike made no move to go. He just floated up to the ceiling near the outside wall of the building and hovered there!

Shocked, Gauge yelled "Fire!"

The guns went off with a deafening roar. Some of the bullets passed through Mike, but they all blasted a huge hole in the ceiling. He hoped there was no one in the office above them! The soldiers were terrified when they did not see their target fall dead!

"Bring in the laser gun! Maybe that will stop him!" were their orders. "What kind of a man are you?" the General whispered.

Seconds later someone rushed in carrying the strange looking gun. It was long like a rifle, but made from a modernistic design, reminding Mike of something he'd read about in one of his favorite science-fiction stories written in the nineteen seventies. Mike prepared himself for the impact of the shot, but he had no idea what it would be like.

"Fire!" the General shouted again, and a bright red beam of pulsating energy no bigger than the lead of a pencil shot out from the special gun.

It made a strange sound as it whizzed toward Mike. He decided to move, but not soon enough.

The hot beam struck his left shoulder, knocking him back against the wall. Thankfully, he stayed air-borne, but discovered a numb feeling in his left arm. He tried to lift it, and found it was paralyzed! Feeling slightly drained, he forced himself not to panic, then floated to the floor, to save his energy.

"Get him! Get him! Now!" someone shouted, and Mike found himself fighting off guards who had shot at him. He had no worry of killing anyone accidentally in this battle. His strength seemed to be slowly ebbing away ever since the laser shot hurt his arm. After approximately ten minutes of fighting, the guards lay, unconscious.

"Stay back! Back, or I'll...." Gen. Gauge cried, standing in a corner.

"No, you're leaving with me no matter what you do or say."

"You foolish idiot! Nothing can stop me! My forces are everywhere!"

"We'll see about THAT!" Mike said sarcastically. He floated a bit into the air then swooped down and grabbed Gen. Gauge, his functioning right arm around the man's waist. Then, he was off so quickly he was outside the building in no time, and back to the command post. His passenger had been quiet during his flight, and Mike had wondered if he'd been unconscious, but he was shouting insults, one after another, as they landed outside at the same spot Mike had left The Joint Chiefs. The Chiefs rushed outside to meet them.

"Here's your traitor!" Mike cried, holding him as tightly as possible.

Guards were summoned to take the man into custody.

"You are now under arrest officially, by The United States Government," The General

Of The Army told him. "Do you have anything to say before you are taken into custody by the guards?"

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for that no good bastard of a punk that thinks he's some kind of hero!" the General growled, pointing to Mike.

"He doesn't THINK he's a hero, he IS one!" one of The Joint Chiefs replied. "Get that man out of here before I do something we promised not to!" he ordered the guards, then when he was gone, "We want to thank you, son, our COUNTRY wants to thank you for what you've done. What can we do to repay you?"

"Nothing....there's nothing...." Mike mumbled, feeling dizzy. He staggered back a few steps, putting a hand to his forehead.

"Are you all right?" The General Of The Army asked.

"Er, I need food, lots of it. I've been hurt, and food is the only thing that will restore my energy enough for me to get home. You don't have to worry about if it's cooked. Could you bring me lots of food?"

"Sure! We'll see you get it!"

The orders were given, and trays upon trays of edibles were brought to Mike. With what energy he had left, he ate everything as quickly as possible. The men around him stared, not believing how rapidly he could gobble everything down with just one hand! After he was done, he rested a few minutes, sitting, chatting with the men!

"You've never told us your name," The Commander Of The Coast Guard said, "What do we call you, and where can we reach you if we need your help again?"

Mike was lost for a moment on what to tell him. He knew he couldn't give his real name, and wanted a special one, one to match his special powers and costume. Thinking this over he remembered something Jeanie and John McCree had said, then decided to speak.

"My name is Spirit Lad," he said, proudly, "and if you ever need me again, just ask for my help by sending a special message over the television and radio, and I will hear it and come to help."

"Thank you again, from the bottom of our hearts!" The General Of The Army said, saluting to him as he stood up to leave. As Mike soared toward The Institute he felt his strength renewed, but not the use of the paralyzed arm. It was difficult for him to keep his balance in the sky. When he got to the lab everyone couldn't wait to hear the news of what had happened. They were thrilled.

"You're a real hero, Mike!" Cooper said. He patted him on the back, beaming from ear to ear. Larry was beside himself with questions, and couldn't keep still, but Jeanie was in tears when she saw his injured arm, and with Cooper's urgent pleas ushered him to the clinic. Dr. Horton was surprised to hear what had happened with the laser beam.

"What do you think, doc, will I be all right?" Mike asked nervously.

"I'm almost certain the effect will wear off very soon, now. Don't try to put any pressure on it to force the arm to move. When the time comes, you will know it's safe to use. The laser beam acted as a concentrated sunbeam, the speed that it was directed at you was what did you the most harm. I hate to think of what would happen if you'd been hit by a bigger beam! Beware of lasers in the future, son. They are your only known man made danger."

As usual, Dr. Horton's diagnosis was correct. That night Mike's arm was well again. He and Jeanie spent a quiet evening watching the news report about the rescue on television. It said that a mysterious flying stranger known as Spirit Lad, had rescued The Joint Chiefs from the Pentagon and brought General Gauge to justice. Soon everyone would be safe. Jeanie laughed as she lay on the sofa with her head on Mike's lap.

"It seems so funny for you to be called Spirit Lad!" she commented with a chuckle. "It sounds silly! Why didn't you think of something more creative, like Wonder Man?"

"I remembered you'd called me that when I rescued you from Arthur Moore," he said with a far-away expression.

"I thought you'd like it."

"Oh, I do!" Jeanie sighed, and caressed Mike's face. "But you won't be a lad for long. Soon you'll be a man....and, WHAT a man! What will you call yourself then?"

"I don't know," he told her staring down at her soft, tempting lips. He lifted her up just enough to comfortably give her a tender kiss. "Why don't we think about it for a while?"

"Mmmmm," Jeanie nodded her approval, and she kissed her hero again.

The rest of the night seemed like a wonderful dream to Mike, as the young people enjoyed being alone together, in each-other's arms. He would soon learn to value these times with Jeanie even more. Now that he was known to the public as Spirit Lad he would discover just how popular, feared, and, hated his new identity could become.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Outer Space Connection

The next morning Dr. Cooper was searching for some important charts in his office when he was confronted by Larry Daniken, who was anxious to report the ideas he'd gotten for Mike's shield.

"Don't say anything until you fetch Mike!" Cooper told him.

Larry was headed out the door when Cooper said, "This is fantastic! I can't believe you've come up with something so soon, and I want his opinion before I o.k. anything from you."

Larry rushed to the lab just a few steps away and shortly he and his friend were seated before Cooper's cluttered desk in anticipation of his approval. Cooper had always disliked the small office; he guessed it was because his touch of claustrophobia, and decided to remain standing as he talked. He slipped his glasses out of the pocket of his wrinkled lab coat, and put them on.

"Let's get on with the matter at hand," he said, "What did you come up with?"

And Larry explained everything he had in mind.

"You know, that sounds fantastic, son!" was the reply at last. "There's only one problem....where do you boys propose to find a solar panel? You know how scarce they are, with the recent energy shortages everywhere. I would imagine what's left would cost a fortune."

"I thought you might be able to help in that department," Larry explained. "Maybe make a few phone calls and see if you can come up with any clues where we might find one."

"Sure, I'll help in any way I can, but don't get your hopes up too high. Meanwhile, you two keep your eyes open in the papers. Maybe something will show up. I'm willing to risk some of The Project's funds, but I don't want to be too extravagant. There'd be too many questions as to where the money went. So take it easy. Report to me whatever you find, huh?"

"Of COURSE we will!"

With all agreed the young people went back to work, with Mike teasing Larry about being a genius.

It was two mornings later before Dr. Cooper was able to tell them any news.

"I'm sorry, boys, but I've checked into all the possibilities I know of, and I haven't had any luck with the solar panel search. I don't know what to tell you for any other suggestions. But it looks like we're going to have to start from scratch again, with our ideas."

Larry sighed heavily. Since he was in a terrible mood, the news was the last straw to ruin his day. He stayed standing at the end of the table, looking like he'd lost his best friend. A moment later he looked up and added,

"Oh, I saw an article in a magazine at the commissary the other day. It was about a solar generating plant in Antarctica, that had closed down a few months ago. It was abandoned because it was costing too much for upkeep and not doing well. Too bad it's so far away, huh?"

"LARRY!" Mike cried joyfully, making everyone jump, "Why didn't you mention this before? You forget that I could get there in minutes and find what I need, if nobody's taken off with everything, already!"

"I don't think they have. Now that I think about it, I believe the magazine said the weather was so bad many things were just abandoned."

"Oh, Mike, do you think there's a chance...." Jeanie chimed in.

"The least I can do is look," he said. "If I have your permission, Doc. It will be quite a risky trip."

"I'm pretty certain you'll manage o.k.. The only thing that worries me is the tremendous strength of the sun's rays when you cross the Earth's equator," Cooper told him.

"The suit will protect me. I'm pretty sure of that....and if I find what I'm after, and it's right, I won't have any worries on the return trip, will I?"

"Definitely not!" Larry replied, all smiles again.

"When do you think you should leave?" Dr. Cooper asked.

"How about right now? It's as good a time as any."

"How about after lunch?" Jeanie teased. "We had a date, remember?"

"Oh, that's right! After lunch, then, Doc?"

"Sounds fine with me!"

And lunch was only minutes away. After everyone had satisfied their appetites, Mike changed and kissed Jeanie good-bye. Dr. Cooper told him the easiest route to his destination.

Mike crossed the equator safely, as he'd predicted, and reached Antarctica shortly after, landing in a snowbank near the deserted plant. Snow whipped around him from a terrible blizzard, but Mike was able to make his way to the huge place.

He searched the outside of the building on foot, as not to miss anything, and there, around a final corner of the structure, he found what he was looking for! Mike lifted the panel over his head, and in a flash was in the air, heading home, very pleased with himself. The panel was large, but not as big as some he'd seen. It could easily be reconstructed into the shield with just a few minor alterations.

When Mike reached the lab, he was instructed by Dr. Cooper to take the panel into

The Institute's observatory and hide it. The supervisor had opened the large dome for his easy entry, and he slipped in, unnoticed. There was a fairly large, unused broom closet in a small rear corner of the room where the prize would be perfectly hidden. Mike left it there



behind some tall boxes which original parts of the telescope had come in. It would be completely out of sight. Dr. Cooper spoke privately with him after he'd been able to put his street clothes over the costume, and had rested in the lounge.

"I'm going to arrange it so you can have the observatory all to yourself for as long as you need it, to build your shield. I will speak to Officer McCree today, I want you to concentrate on that job alone, now. I'll keep what you'll be doing a secret so no one will pester you. It'll be a big surprise when it's finished. All right, son?"

Of course Mike agreed, and went to work at his task as soon as he had Dr. Cooper's o.k.. It seemed so odd for Mike to work alone. He'd grown so accustomed to the constant chatter in the lab, and couldn't believe how he'd grown to hate loneliness! It was easy for him to get any tools or parts he needed on the project into the building without anyone seeing. Working on this in both the day and the evening hours Mike had it fully completed in less than a week's time. Dr. Cooper was very pleased with the shield. It was shaped like a rectangle with rounded corners, the center of which protruded slightly from the rest. Of course it was large enough to block the sunlight from his entire body, curved enough, to send it directly behind him. There was a black, thin frame around the inside edge of it, made of something that looked like clear, hard, plastic. There was an inner rectangle of this material surrounding the protruding center of the shield which held six handles, and there were wires crossing the center of it, to each handle, with one through the middle and two through the side corners as support for the frames. Mike had definitely thought ahead and added a leather like harness to hold the shield to his waist. This was also attached to parts of the center frame to be used when he had to have his hands free to disarm the MLCs.

"I'll go and tell Larry and Jeanie to meet us down here," Dr. Cooper said. "Congratulations son, you've done a fabulous job!" He patted Mike's shoulder and rushed off to the nearest phone. Shortly, the others arrived with Dr. Horton in tow. When everyone saw the shield, they were extraordinarily impressed. Jeanie laughed.

"So this is what you've been spending all your time alone with! Thank goodness! I was beginning to get worried!" She walked slowly around and around the shield touching it gingerly, inspecting it. Larry stood back with his arms folded across his chest. His first and only comment was "Wow!" He couldn't believe his idea had become such an immediate reality, and viewed it as if it was a masterpiece of great artwork. Dr. Horton was pleased.

"You've done wonderfully!" he praised Mike, bubbling over with glee. "Do you feel up to testing it now?"

"Now? Well, yeah, sure. Excuse me. I'll undress into my suit," Mike told him.

And since everyone in the room knew he was Spirit Lad, he merely turned around to unzip his jeans and was out of them, his shirt and shoes, in seconds, his suit shining with the bright lights as it emerged from underneath the clothes.

"Well, I'm ready to go!" Mike announced. He unfastened his collar and flipped the protective covering over his head and face. He went to the shield and lifted it easily by the center handles.

"Take it easy, son!" Cooper told him.

"Please be careful, Mike!" Jeanie cautioned, and gave him a good luck kiss before he floated up and out of the opening in the dome, soaring casually passed the huge telescope.

Minutes later Mike was passing through the cloud covering again, holding the shield steady before him. As he reached the point where the sun had begun to bother him while testing the suit, he passed by it easily, feeling as strong as ever.

"Yahoo!" he yelled, and felt absolutely no discomforts while leaving the Earth's atmosphere. "It works! It works!" he cried out as he flew higher among the stars. It was a wonderful feeling, being easier to maneuver about. After staying for about five minutes in space, Mike couldn't wait to report his project a success. Descending was rapid, and playfully Mike stuck out his tongue at the sun as he passed it again on the way down.

"Ha, ha! I've found the secret! I've conquered you!" he shouted.

Just as Mike was beginning to enter the air space where he could be seen faintly from the ground, something zoomed passed him at a tremendous rate of speed.

"Huh?" he gasped, and paused in mid-air, but as he looked around to get a better view of the thing, it sped out of sight, soaring up into a cloud bank. "Oh, well, if it was anything important, I'm sure I'll see it again, sometime," Mike said, aloud, then headed for the observatory.

When he landed inside, his friends were hysterical with joy as he told them, "It worked! It worked! I went up quite high into space and hung around for awhile before I couldn't wait to tell you IT WORKED!"

Dr. Cooper was speechless, then he said, "Now comes the hard part of our attempted rescue of the world."

"What's that?" Mike asked.

"You will have to practice disarming the MLCs from down here on Earth. I've got the equipment handy to make a mock-up of a full sized MLC, and I'll patch it together in one of the lower level labs so you can learn the procedures with no one bothering you. And I'll start on that today. It won't take me long to complete. For now, why don't you take the rest of the day off to rest? We've got just a few odds and ends to catch up on, here. We'll need you tomorrow, though, son. How does that sound to you?"

"Great!" Mike grinned. "I needed that news! Thanks, Doc! And thanks to the rest of you for your support in regards to my test today. I'm grateful for the patience you've had with me while I've been working here and had to do my share in the lab. And Jeanie, that especially goes to you. I apologize for giving you the wrong idea, but we decided to make the shield a surprise to cheer you people up; raise your moral a little!"

"It sure worked!" Jeanie replied, hugging him. "Now we have a small margin of hope for the future, anyway! Oh, Mike, I just know you'll do the job! I'll just be glad when it's over!"

"Me too, darlin', me too," Mike sincerely said.

In fifteen minutes after the praises from his co-workers were done, Mike lay on his sofa just dozing off for a nap. He'd just gotten fully to sleep when he was startled awake by a presence he felt in the room. It was like someone was watching him; someone that was not human, but not a spirit, either.

"Jeanie, is that you?" he called, thinking she'd come home early to check on him. As he sat up slowly, shaking his head, Mike noticed a small form beginning to take shape as his vision cleared. He couldn't believe what he finally saw!

Between him and the table stood a little, brown-skinned man dressed in a shiny blue garment that had the appearance of a space suit, and a uniform combined. He was about two-and-a-half-feet tall, and looked like a human male, except for the fact he had large, black eyes which took up most of his face, and a small nose. His mouth was very thin, with almost no lips, and he had no visible ears. From what Mike could see under his helmet he was bald. The man's arms and legs were terribly thin. He had less than five fingers and wore white gloves. Mike knew this wasn't a being from Earth, if such a thing was possible.

"Who are you? What do you want? How did you get in here?" Mike shouted.

"Where origin place?" the little man asked in a thin, high voice.

"What do you mean? You didn't answer my question. Who are you?"

"Where origin place?" the stranger repeated. "I must know. Is this origin place?"

"I...I don't understand what you mean. What do you want with me?"

"Name not important, but mission here is. If this is not your origin place, you will be in grave danger of being terminated by my people."

"Why? Who are your people?" Mike was getting more upset by the minute by the stranger's elusive replies. He thought a moment, then said, "I am from this planet, if that's what you mean."

"I do not know whether to believe you," the man said. "After what I witnessed you do today. Now tell me the truth. Is this origin place?"

"Yes!" Mike yelled. "I was born right here in The United States Of America, my mother was killed and later I moved here. Will you please tell me what the hell you're doing here, and why I am in danger?"

He got up from the sofa and took a step toward the man, but was repelled from going any further by an invisible wall of a force field which surrounded the being. Mike took another step toward him, but the man removed a tiny white box from somewhere in his garment, and aimed it at Mike.

"Do not come closer," he was warned, "or I will be forced to destroy you."

"I'm not afraid of that thing," Mike said, but he was, just a little bit worried that it may be a laser type weapon, so he kept his distance.

The little visitor suddenly rose a few feet off the floor, floated passed Mike, and hovered behind the sofa with his back to the front door.

"I alone not mean harm," he explained. "I come from another origin place, another....world. My people aboard our ship which you saw today, patrol this air space of this world. We protect it from other beings who may wish it harm. The First Law Of The Galactic Council who rules us is, no one under their rule, which includes all The Milky Way Galaxy, may in no way, interfere with the development of other races. We may observe them, but not disturb their development, in any way. The function of my vessel now is to seek you out, as I have done, and learn your place of origin. And if you are not from this place, take you to our council for judgment of violations of The First Law, the punishment of which is usually termination."

"You mean I would be killed?" Mike cried. "But I already told you, I AM OF THIS WORLD, and I don't think you could do me any harm anyway. You see, the reason you saw me flying around up there today, is because there was an accident in the lab with the Transporter device, and I was changed into a man with super powers, and I am using them to try to help this world so it won't be blown up into space dust! Don't you understand?"

"A transporter device...how primitive a mode of travel! Are many of these here?"

"No, this is the first one. It blew up while I was in it, and...." Mike was stammering now.

"I not believe. Will report this to my Council and return later with decision. I know not of anyone else from this world who fly. Not from this origin place! Perhaps you can think of someone that will prove your origin place by then."

"I'll try!"

"Good-bye flying man. Until later."

A strange glow enveloped him, and he disappeared from Mike's livingroom.

Mike shook his head as if coming out of a trance. "What next?" he sighed aloud. "Space cops! I've got to tell the doc about this one!"

He threw on his coat and rushed to The Institute through rapidly falling snow. After he'd explained what had gone on as best he could, his friends gathered in the clinic.

"You mean there are really UFOs, Mike?" Larry asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

"Yes, there are, I have to confess...unfortunately in this case!"

"Hmmmm! The way you describe how he disappeared from the room sounds like they use a sophisticated model of a transport mechanism," Cooper added. "Wish we could learn its secret!"

"Surely there's something you can say to them that will convince them you're from Earth!" Jeanie said. "When are they coming back?"

"I don't know. Whenever they feel like it, I guess."

"What about your accident? I'm sure they'd believe you if you explained it to them!" Jeanie told him.

"Remember, I already did," Mike replied, "and he didn't."

"Your birth certificate?" Jeanie asked.

"I don't even think I've still got it. It may have been lost when we moved around during the food riots."

"I wouldn't worry about it son," Cooper comforted. "I'm sure you'll find some way to convince them when the time comes. If they won't believe you, just send them there to me. I'll tell 'em a thing or two! Now let's get back to work, shall we?"

"Did the ship really look like a saucer?" Larry was saying, as the young people left the clinic.

"I didn't get to see it all that well...."

Dr. Cooper turned to Dr. Horton and sighed heavily. "What in the hell will happen next?" he asked, looking totally exhausted and perplexed.

"You never can tell with a hero around!" Horton chuckled. "Take some of your own advice....don't worry, and, take it easy or you'll overdo it again."

"Thanks, doc!" he nodded. "I'll try to remember that." As he headed back to work he mumbled, "Space ships! Aliens! How did I ever get into this mess?"

What worried him most, was the speck of doubt which crept into his own mind. Would Spirit Lad be around long enough to stop the MLCs? It seemed like every time he silently questioned his young friend's powers, and abilities, Mike would do something fantastic to assure the faith he had in him. Time was growing shorter, and Dr. Cooper had almost completed the model in the basement and used up all his spare time for the past two weeks there. His faith in Mike would be renewed soon, however, as the boy would be called on a mission which would challenge his whole being in a desperate search for the truth.

## Chapter Fourteen That Which Was Lost

Anyone walking by Mike Montaine's apartment door the following Thursday afternoon would have thought there was a wild party going on inside. It was his and Jeanie's day off, and they planned to spend the entire day alone, together, taking it easy. The portable radio was turned up rather loud, and Mike was engaged in tickling Jeanie as she lay on the sofa. They were both giggling hysterically and as she tried to catch her breath to speak, Mike sat up on the edge and bent to give Jeanie a romantic kiss.

"Mmmmm," she mumbled, and threw her arms about his neck, fairly melting in his embrace. When they finally came up for air, she pushed herself up to lean back on the sofa's arm and looked into Mike's eyes. "Do that again!" she said, seductively, and he more than willingly obeyed, feeling passion envelop him in a warm wave. He felt his face turning red, as Jeanie's soft hands caressed his body all over. When they parted she took in a long breath and giggled again as she saw he was blushing.

"You think that's funny, do you?" Mike growled in false anger. He was about ready to grab her when the music on the radio was interrupted by a special announcement.

"Attention, everyone, attention!" the man's stern voice said. "I have a special message from The Joint Chiefs Of Staff in Washington, D.C.. I repeat, I have a special message from The Joint Chiefs Of Staff in Washington, D.C.. If Spirit Lad can hear my voice, he is asked to report to General Pick, General of The U.S. Marines, immediately. Spirit Lad, report to General Pick at his office as soon as possible. Thank you."

The music resumed. Jeanie gave Mike a disgusted look. Mike frowned.

"I've got to go, and you know it!" he told her. "I'm sorry, honey, but it must be something very important or else they wouldn't have called me."

"Oh, I know. But it seems like we haven't had a chance to be alone for ages, and I was just beginning to enjoy myself."

"Me too. We'll have more of a chance....you'll see. Especially after the MLC business is over."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Be back soon, won't you? Please?"

"I'll try with all my heart."

Mike gave her a hug and was into his costume and gone in seconds. He appeared in The Pentagon in the hallway outside Gen. Pick's office. A young man wearing a uniform came up to him.

"You must be Spirit Lad," he said with a smile. "Follow me."

Mike was ushered into the office and immediately recognized the General at the desk before him. He went to shake his hand.

"Am I ever glad to see you!" the man told him, and dismissed his escort.

"I figured the reason you called me was you have some urgent business for me to take care of."

"Well, it's more family matters than business, unfortunately."

"What do you mean, sir?" Mike asked.

"It's my son. He's a Major in The Marine Corps, you know. For the passed few months we've been having problems with equipment and supplies being stolen from our base in Florida. Five men have been sent there to find the cause of the problem, but he is the only one that has disappeared right off the face of the Earth. He checked in for his quarters all right, but after that....gone. My son was the last man sent down. He volunteered to investigate the disappearances. His last report was about something to do with a lead concerning a certain Col. Bristol, an officer at the base, being in on the thievery plot. Then, Chris was gone. I wanted to ask you if it is at all possible for you to go and search for my son. You told us if there was anything you could ever do to help us, just ask."

"I surely will help! Just tell me what I'll have to do."

"I have another agent stationed on base. He will be acting as a guard near the main gate." The General took five by seven photos of the young man in question out of his desk draw, handed them to Spirit Lad, and ordered someone in with a Marine uniform, which he also gave him. "Now I hope you have a good memory, because your code phrase that will identify you is 'The lad from Washington is here.' You are to make contact with our inside man as soon as possible, and he will give you any reports that have come in on our progress with this case, also the whereabouts to my son's quarters. After that you may do anything you legally can to find my son and return him to me, dead or alive. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Mike nodded.

"Be very careful. We are almost certain that he is missing because he's discovered too much about the thieves. We don't want to lose you, too. You're our only hope!"

"Don't worry, I'll be careful!" Mike assured.

"Oh, before I forget," The General added, "the agent's assumed name for this assignment is Green."

"Thanks!"

"Good luck! I'm counting on you!" the older gentleman said with a glimmer of pride in his eyes.

With the folded uniform in a briefcase held tightly in his left hand, the form of Spirit Lad disappeared from the building leaving the General blinking in surprise from the flash that always accompanied the boy's vanishing. He sat at his desk and stared lovingly at his son's photograph for a moment, then left the room and headed back to work.

Mike reappeared in Florida on a deserted country road. The base was still about a mile away. At the left side of the road was a gas station. It looked as if it had been deserted, but as Mike walked over to peer in the front window, a man in his late fifties came out to greet him, staring, open-mouthed, at his costume.

"Excuse me," Mike said politely, "but do you have a rest room I could use?"

"S-sure, son, to your left. Y-you're welcome to it!" was his answer. The man was praying this wasn't a robber confronting him.

"Oh, may I have a drink of water first?" he added, pointing to a hose lying on the ground.

The man nodded, and the hose was turned on. Mike picked it up and drank in huge gulps for about five minutes, then laid it back down. The attendant had been watching from nearby. After he'd shut off the water he ran up.

"How do you do that?" he stammered. "All that water! You've almost drained my well!"

"It's not easy! Now excuse me, please! I have urgent matters to attend to!"

"I should think so, after all that!"

Mike rushed off to the rest room, got the uniform out, and put it on over his costume. Before he put on the cap which was a size too large (he noticed by a tag inside,) he stared at his reflection in the dusty, full-length mirror on the inside of the door. Not bad! The fact that the uniform was slightly big on him didn't matter; it still looked neat and freshly pressed. But when Mike looked closer to straighten his hair a little he almost fainted away! His hair had turned blonde! Since Jeanie hadn't mentioned anything this morning he decided it must be an effect caused by putting on his costume. Other times he'd worn it, no one had the chance to notice any difference in his hair....either because of his hood, or, the fact he'd always been in such a hurry to leave.

Finally putting on his cap he said, "Hm, I wonder if blondes DO have more fun?" then dashed out the door, and became air borne. The attendant watched him go in fear and wonderment, from just outside his front door. Then he fainted.

When he awoke a while later he blamed his weird memories of a flying man on sunstroke, and swore the encounter never happened! The briefcase was thrown in the trash can with no second thoughts of its reason for being there.

Mike landed a few feet from the gate among some trees. He walked up to the guard's station.

"Good afternoon, sir!" the guard said. "Where did you come from? I didn't see a jeep drive up!"

"Oh, some of my friends let me off just down the road so I walked the rest of the way. Nice day, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sgt., er, White," the other said, reading Mike's name tag, "but may I see your identification now, sir? I can't let you in without it."



The guard was wearing a cap too, the visor shadowing his face, and Mike couldn't tell if it was the agent he'd been shown in the picture.

"Oh, yes!" Mike told him, "Of course!" He reached in his pant's pockets and to his relief found a black leather wallet with some phony identification papers and a card in it. The guard studied them for the longest time, then said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'll have to verify this with the main security office. We've been having trouble here on the base and all newcomers have to be thoroughly checked out before given permission to enter."

Mike tensed, trying not to show it physically, but before the guard went into the white booth to use the phone he turned around enough so Mike could read his name tag clearly. It read Sgt. Green. Before Sgt. Green could touch the telephone, Mike spoke up.

"The lad from Washington is here!" he said in a low voice.

Slowly, Sgt. Green turned back around to face Mike. "All right, sir, everything's o.k.," was his reply. "I'm glad to see you've arrived safely."

"How is everything going as far as any clues are concerned?"

"Not good at all. We haven't come up with a thing yet. We've been hoping you can find something new."

"I'm going to try my best," Mike replied.

Green gave him the directions to Chris Pick's quarters so Mike hurried there next, almost getting lost in the maze of apartment buildings set up specifically for service personnel. Finally, a couple of young marines who had been friends of the missing man met Mike and gave him exact directions to his destination. Once inside the small apartment, he searched for an object which he could hold easily in the palm of his hand to "home in" on Chris' vibrations with. At last he discovered the laundry bag, hanging half full, from the lower bed post. The clothes would give Mike the best lead ever. He dumped its contents onto the rug and found the usual things....t-shirts, shorts and socks. Mike finally picked up a t-shirt and held it tightly to his chest, between the palms of his hands. The vibrations with it were strong. It must have been the last thing he wore before he disappeared.

When Mike could feel the vibration without having to hold the shirt, he vanished from the room and sped toward the place it seemed to be drawing him. When the vibrations felt the strongest, he reappeared again and found himself, of all places, in an orange grove. After a small search of the place, he was pleased to learn he was alone. The only building nearby was a small shed used to store tools and other equipment. There were many oranges rotting on the ground as if the grove had been neglected for a long, long, time, and he noticed the ground had been disturbed in several places. The vibrations led him to one of these places underneath a large tree. Mike had a sinking sensation come over him, and stood at the end of the square of freshly dug earth, staring at it. Then he shook himself, and rushed to the tool shed, finding a rusty shovel.

He took it back to the place, and started to dig as fast as he could. He was almost in tears when a quarter of the way down he threw aside the shovel and began to dig with his hands. The uniform he wore was getting filthy but he didn't care. About three feet under he touched something that felt like human flesh. Swallowing hard, he brushed away the soil from what he found to be the body of a man, and looked at it in horror and revulsion. It was the body of Chris Pick, but it showed the signs of having been tortured in almost every manner possible, the final cause of death being strangulation with a rope, which still hung around the blonde youth's neck.

Mike gingerly brushed more dirt from what had been Chris Pick's face, so identification would be a certainty.

"My God! How COULD they.....how could anyone do this to another living being? How could they?" Mike managed to say, that sick feeling enveloping his entire soul. Having touched the body, he could feel and see everything that happened to Chris Pick that led to his death. He trembled and felt the man's shame as he was tortured, the rope tighten, and his last futile gasps for breath. The feelings running through him were so overwhelming they brought more anger than tears. Mike climbed to the lower edge of the grave. He flung his cap to the ground, then raised his arms out to his sides as if begging for an answer from The Hereafter.

"Why?" he screamed at the top of his lungs, "Why? How could they do this to anyone? Why?" After a few minutes Mike knew exactly where he had to go and what he must do. He went back to the shed and dug out a large piece of tarpaulin used to cover the orange trucks. He brought it back and wrapped the body in it carefully. After replacing his cap on his head Mike picked up the bundle, cradling it gently in his arms. He flew off toward the base. Landing at the gate, he found Green was still there.

"What've you got there, son?" he asked.

"It's the body of Major Chris Pick. You'd better send word to Washington that I think I've solved our mystery. I'm on my way to clear things up now. Do you have a vehicle on its way to the Commander's office? I need a lift."

"Yes, sir! I have someone right here who can drive you!"

There was a large supply truck ready to leave the area, but the driver was ordered to take Mike and his grim cargo to the office. He placed the body in the covered rear of the vehicle and they were off.

The driver left Mike alone to go for lunch, after parking at the curb in front of the building. Luckily, for him, his passenger thought. Green must've called ahead to tell the Commander he was going to have a visitor. One of his aides was outside in no time.

"What've you got there, son?" the middle aged, mustached man asked, hurrying to the rear of the truck.

Mike leapt up on it and went to the bundle, the officer following. "It's Maj. Christopher Pick, sir, or, what's left of him." He pulled down the tarpaulin exposing the top half of the body.

"Oh, my God!" the man gasped. The odor of decay was overwhelming in the confined area. He didn't say another word, but gagged and rushed to lean out the rear of the truck to vomit. Mike covered Chris once again and went to check on him.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked, rubbing the man's shoulders.

"Yes, I think so!" he told Mike, catching his breath. Jumping down, the officer noticed two MPs arriving at the command post. "You two!" he cried, "Whatever you were doing, forget it! Take your weapons and stand at attention by the back of this truck until relieved."

A look of surprise came across the mens' faces, but they snatched up their weapons and hurried to obey.

"Where is Col. Bristol's office?" Mike asked him, trying to remain calm.

"On the other end of the base. I can show you."

"Good! If you will come with me, I need security men to place him under arrest, and mainly to protect ME from doing what I feel I should do to him! Can you help me?"

"Yes, sir! Let me leave orders with my assistant."

"That's fine!" While he was gone, Mike leapt into the truck again, to strip off the Marine uniform for good. He pulled on his hood and emerged just in time for his partner to meet him.

"Is that you in there, Sergeant?" the other asked, staring at the costume.

"No time for explanations now, sir!" Mike told him, "Let's move out!"

In seconds they were off down the road in the MPs' jeep, Mike's new friend driving. They rushed into Col. Bristol's office, which was located on the first floor of the two story building.

"What the hell's the meaning of this outrage?" the Colonel screamed as Mike and several security personnel burst in, disturbing his paperwork. The others lined up on either side of the door and held their guns at the ready.

"You know very well what!" Mike snapped in a loud voice. "I know what you've been doing....what you're up to! How could you do something so horrible? You're scum, do you know that? Filthy no good scum! I touched him.....I.....I touched the body. I know what you did to him.....everything! I touched him! I know! Now tell me," he cried, letting anger overcome him. Grasping the Colonel by the collar Mike pushed him against the rear wall, lifting him off the floor.

"Where is it? Where are you holding them?"

"I don't know what you mean!" Bristol choked.

"TELL ME!" Mike screamed, banging him against the wall, almost knocking him unconscious.

"All right!" he finally answered, then gagged. Mike lessened the pressure on his collar a little. "The old abandoned command post near the edge of town. You won't find it unless someone takes you there."

Everything went so fast after that Mike hardly remembered the drive to the huge old underground bunker. As they drove up in front of it, it appeared deserted with a stick put through the handles of the huge double doors, to hold them shut. When they stopped, however, many marines leapt from their hiding places to surround them.

"No one can enter here. What's inside is government property."

"Lot of respect you have for government property!" Mike said, sarcastically.

Then, the MPs pulled up nearby. Mike guessed someone had been thinking ahead! All the better for him.

"We have orders to search this property. For your information your friend, Col. Bristol's under arrest. You've no need to disobey orders any further."

A terrible fight ensued between the MPs and the other marines. Mike managed to slip away from the battle and get through the doors. In one half of the building he found various government vehicles and supplies. In the other half was a huge room in the center of which stood a large operating table with different odd looking implements hanging from the ceiling all around it. He saw the walls of the room were lined with people chained to it by their wrists. Some were local residents, their tanned bodies slumped to the floor, if possible. They were all in the nude. Two uniformed men were dragging a prisoner to the table. Mike casually went over to them and knocked them unconscious with one blow. Then, he went over to the nearest prisoner. It was a young boy, his body beaten and bruised, and he trembled as Mike came near.

"Don't be afraid," Mike said as he turned around in a circle trying to face everyone. "I've come to help you....to get you out of here."

He went to some of the prisoners and pried their bonds open quickly, with his bare hands. they looked at him in wonder, as if they were terrified to test their new freedom. Most wouldn't budge until Mike showed them all the evil men in the immediate area were out cold, or, taken prisoner. MPs came in with the key, at last, and they were all wrapped in blankets then led out into the open until another truck would come along to transport them to a place where they could be treated to medical care and given fresh clothes, then, they would be taken to the police to testify against their captors.

As they led one woman outside, she had to pass one of the evil men who were handcuffed and held at gunpoint near the entranceway. She rushed to one man and beat on him with such fierceness, knocking him to the ground, tearing at his eyes and shouting something to him in Spanish, the MPs had to drag her away before she killed him!

"I don't blame her," Mike said, "after all they've been through!" Then he was finally able to explain who he was and who sent him to the officer.

"We thank you, Spirit Lad, for helping solve the worst criminal puzzle to hit here in years!"

"You're very welcome, sir, but if you'll excuse me, I have another task awaiting me at The Pentagon...one that I wish I didn't have to contend with."

"Oh, er, yes....I wish you good luck on all your endeavors, and please give Gen. Pick my condolences."

"I will!" Mike saluted the best way he knew how, and flew off toward The Command Post. He gingerly lifted the body once again, and vanished, reappearing in Gen. Pick's office almost instantly. He was surprised to see another General at the desk. The man sat up in surprise.

"Oh! You must be Spirit Lad!" he said, "I'm Gen. Firestone. Gen. Pick is out on official business. What do you have there?" "This, I regret to inform you, is what is left of Maj. Chris Pick, sir. I have found him, as ordered by his father. I don't know how I'm going to break it to him. I've never had to do this before."

"Here....put him down on the desk here. Don't worry about breaking the news to him....Gen. Pick and I have been close friends for years. I'll do it for you if you'd just give me the preliminaries of what happened to him, son."

"Thank you very much, sir. And tell The Generals if they need anything else done I'll be available. They know the procedure to reach me."

"All right, I will. And many thanks, Spirit Lad. I wish things had gone better for you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sir," Mike saluted again, and was gone. Mike made sure the coast was clear, then appeared in the clinic. He and Doctor Horton talked for awhile as the boy explained his mission and how he was able to contact the vibrations of the dead man which had led him to the grave and helped him solve the crime. He seemed very tense, and of course, upset by the incident, as if he would burst into tears at any moment. Finally he said in a choked voice,

"I don't know if I can ever forget anything that ever happened today. It was so terrible. The shame and hatred I felt after I touched the body....the last things he felt before he died...I....I....don't know what I'll ever do if anything like it ever happens again. I can't shake the memories. If this is a curse that goes along with having these special powers, I don't want them."

"Don't worry, son. They'll wear off in time."

"But how long will it take, doc?" Mike managed.

"I have no idea, absolutely no idea," Horton explained sadly.

It was then when Dr. Cooper walked in. Mike pushed himself off the exam table and ran to him. He embraced Cooper tightly, put his head on his shoulder, and began to cry, his shoulders heaving with the deep, heartbreaking sobs. Dr. Cooper looked at Horton in wonderment, but held the boy as long as necessary, rubbing his back.

"It's all right, son," he comforted softly, "it'll be all right."

When Mike's tears finally stopped, and they stood apart, facing one another, Mike said, "Thanks, dad, I'm sorry I startled you like that. I've had a rough day."

"It's all right, son," Cooper assured him, patting his right shoulder. "Anytime you need a shoulder to cry on, you can use mine."

"Well, guess I'll be seein' you tomorrow, then. The doc says I should go home and relax tonight. I think I'll be o.k.."

As Mike headed for the door, Dr. Horton remembered something he'd read and called out, "Oh, Mike! My advice is to go straight home and as soon as possible, make love to Jeanie!"

"What the hell?" Cooper gasped, shocked at his colleague's words.

"I'm sure she won't mind, and don't worry. Afterwards she'll understand, I'm sure of it. That is, if she's the kind of person I believe she is."

Mike began to blush, but agreed. "All right, doc. It might not help, but it certainly won't hurt! I'll do as you say!"

And then he was gone, managing to whistle as he went down the corridor. Cooper turned to Horton.

"I don't know what you're trying to do to my people, giving them orders like that! But I guess prescriptions sure have changed over the years!"

"You'll see. Tomorrow Mike will be as good as new."

Dr. Horton was right, as usual. Later that night Mike noticed the bad memories had all but vanished from his mind, and what remained quickly faded away. Jeanie HAD understood, and after that night her relationship with Mike improved greatly, though they could never understand why.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Preparing

"You're doing great son!" Dr. Cooper told Mike as he finished disarming the MLC model for what seemed the thousandth time that day. He smiled at his supervisor and floated down from his advantage point near the control panel which was only a few feet off the floor. Cooper held up a stop watch so Mike could see it when he walked over to him. "You did it in seconds, but I've discovered some interesting information. After the initial panel is opened on the real thing, you'll only have one-three-thousandth of a second to disconnect the automatic launching device, and that's in zero gravity conditions!"

"One three thousandth of a second?" Mike gasped. "That's going to be very tricky, Doc! Remember, I've only been in space once, and that wasn't for long!"

"Relax. I think I've found the answer to your training problem already. I've managed with great difficulty to rent the weightlessness room at Hermetaseal, the factory just north of here that makes hermetically sealed equipment like we use in the Transporter Device. Remember the thing you pulled apart for us in the lab a while ago? That's where we would've had to send it if you hadn't come along. We have a week for you to get the procedure straight, and we'll be leaving next Monday. I wanted to give everyone a chance to settle any personal matters, like paying the rent and so forth, before we leave. Does that sound all right to you?"

"Yeah. I just hope I'll be able to move fast enough and do it carefully enough to get it right! I won't have a second chance, you know!"

"Oh, I know it too well, son! I have confidence in you to accomplish what seems the impossible. You've done well up until now. And once I get through drilling you, you'll wish you'd have joined the Army! They'll be no rest for the weary next week!"

Mike laughed. "I don't think things will be THAT bad, Doc!"

"Oh, you might be surprised! It'll take about a day and a half to get to the factory by jeep. We'll have Larry, some techs, and security men with us. Make sure you get enough rest so your energy will be at its peak. Practice makes perfect, you know! We won't be needing you in the lab. We've started building processes now. As Larry would say, it's really a drag, until we get our new machinery in, but I assume you'll be by a couple of times to practice until the model's dismantled to be ready for transport!"

"Don't worry, I will be. Besides, I'll have to check up on you to keep you out of trouble."

It was Cooper's turn to laugh. "You'd better believe it!" he said. After one more test Mike went home with Jeanie for lunch.

"You know," he told her after their meal was done, "I've been thinking of starting a project of my own, now I have some time on my hands."

"What's that?" Jeanie asked, beginning to clean the table.

"I've been thinking about starting daily patrols....you know....flying across the country, helping people in danger, now that everyone knows I exist," Mike explained.

"Sounds like a wonderful idea!" she surprisingly said.

"I'm glad you think so. I think I'll start out right now."

He stood up and gave Jeanie a hug. "While I'm not needed in the lab, might as well make myself useful."

"Just be careful!" she warned. "You know a lot depends on you!"

"Yeah. I know too well!"

It felt good to Mike to be in his costume and have a few minutes to enjoy himself as he soared across America, seeing sights he would normally have missed and only dreamt of before his accident. Before the day was out he had to save a man from being run over by a truck, a lady from jumping off a bridge, stopped some bank robbers from getting away with their loot, and even helped a cat down from a tree! On his way back home, Mike decided to stop in at The Pentagon and check on Gen. Pick. As he neared the building, he noticed the gaping hole he'd left in the roof was boarded up, and repairs had begun on it. He couldn't believe the extent of the damage he'd caused by rescuing The Joint Chiefs! He landed, disappeared, then reappeared in the hallway of Gen. Pick's floor. It seemed there was no one around this time, so he knocked on the door. A young sounding male voice called, "Come in!" and Mike obeyed.

When he entered, he saw a handsome, dark haired Marine stand up at the desk eyeing him warily, ready to reach for the phone.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but I am Spirit Lad, and I came to check on General Pick and give my condolences on the death of his son."

"Oh, yes, Spirit Lad! I'm sorry I appeared startled, but I wasn't expecting you! I've heard all about you from everyone I know here. Let me introduce myself...I'm General Highpoint. General Pick is out on leave. He was terribly upset by what happened, so he was granted a little time to get over the shock. But I'm glad you came! I have something for you!" He called the security officer and a guard came up in a few minutes with a huge sack of mail!

"This was all sent here addressed to Spirit Lad, after the announcement you allowed us to make on t.v. for any correspondence written to you to be mailed to The Pentagon. We checked some of it out for security precautions, you know, to make sure there were no bombs and so forth, inside. They seem to be mostly requests for your help with every sort of problem you can imagine! Hope you have fun figuring them out!"



"Don't worry, I will. Thanks for saving them for me. I'd best be going, now. Hope I'll see you again sometime!"

Mike saluted and prepared to leave, sack in his right hand.

"I can see you've never been in the service!" Gen. Highpoint said with a smile. "Oh, no offense meant, but here...let me show you how to salute properly!" He saluted back, and Mike copied the move exactly.

"Excellent!" he was complimented. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Spirit Lad. If you're ever here again I would like to speak with you when I have more time."

Then Mike was gone. By the time he reached his apartment he was exhausted. Jeanie was already in bed, asleep, so he hid the mailbag in the closet. Thankfully, she'd made him clean it out after she'd moved in! Then, he undressed, showered, and got under the covers, cuddling Jeanie. She didn't even stir. Mike fell asleep immediately, well satisfied with his day.

Mike was startled awake very early the next morning. Looking around he immediately discovered the reason. Jeanie had left the bed, and, the room. He was becoming very worried about her, since she had frequent complaints of an upset stomach, mornings. Sure enough, the bathroom door was shut, and he could hear noises from inside. Rolling over, Mike forced himself back to sleep so he wouldn't have to fight the urge to open that door, and be assured Jeanie was fine. She valued her privacy too much during times like this for him to even consider such, and he didn't wish to make a fool of himself if everything was safe and sound.

Two hours later he finally awoke for the day, and was surprised to see Jeanie standing at the table, dressed, with a handful of letters in her hand. Mumbling, Mike pulled himself out across her side, and grabbed his robe from the chair. As he fought his way into it, Jeanie laughed at his disheveled hair and crooked underwear. It tickled her to think that even a super hero couldn't look good the first thing in the morning!

"What're you doing?" Mike finally managed to ask as he tied the robe's belt around him.

"I found these this morning," she explained, "and decided to sort them out for you according to categories and matters of importance."

"This morning?" he groaned. "What the hell time is it, anyway?" Glancing over at the clock he nearly fainted. "TEN O' CLOCK!?" he shouted, "I've got to get going...check out the lab..."

"No you don't, remember? Doc said you don't have to come in until next week for your trip!"

"Why are you home so late?" Mike asked, going to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"I didn't feel well this morning, so I didn't go in. Must be coming down with the flu or something. I went over and told them about it already. Doc says for me to get some rest, too. I'll be o.k.."

"Let me see some of those," Mike told her.

"Here's some of the one's that seemed the most urgent."

The first ones Mike opened were asking help to find a missing husband, a missing child, a lost daughter, and a teenager who seemed to have vanished off the face of the Earth.

"Well, I'd better get started," he sighed, "after breakfast."

After eating several slices of toast, juice and coffee, Mike put on the costume once again, and flew toward another part of New York. His first mission was to seek out the lost daughter, since the location where she last was seen happened to be nearest of the four locations he sought. After stopping and speaking with the girl's mother, Mike had an excellent clue....the address of where the girl in question was last headed before she'd disappeared two weeks ago. It happened to be the address of a computer dating agency the police had been suspicious of since it had opened. Mike landed at the large office building, with the subject's picture in his hand, and found the floor he wanted listed on the wall chart just inside the lobby. Going to the second floor he discovered there was no one in but the secretary and decided to do a little exploring on his own. The cellar was a good place to start. Mike rode on the elevator as far as it would go down, then discovered some carpeted stairs. Tip toeing on these he came to an unlocked door at his right, and upon using his powers, he was able to see right through it. Sure enough, inside was a large table with at least a dozen lovely ladies sitting around it and, a middle aged man at its head. Mike saw the one he searched for at this table on the right, near the door. And the women didn't look at all happy to be there.

"Tonight we will be preparing you for your trip," the man was saying, "to meet your future husbands. Yes, you will be well worth the price they've paid us to find you...well worth it!"

"What?" Mike thought to himself as the picture faded from his mind, "Mail order brides? That's illegal! And I'll bet half of those girls were kidnapped! I've seen their pictures in the paper! If only I could find some evidence against this guy I can have him in big trouble. HmMMMMM."

Going back the way he'd come, he found a door in the wall on the same side as the steps, that blended in so well with the paneling he hadn't noticed it before. As Mike pushed on it, it swung open. Thankfully the tiny room was empty. It contained a metal file cabinet and a counter with a phone. He went to the two drawer file and hit the jackpot...a file with the girl's name, date she'd supposedly entered into the program, and other information that would be very valuable to the police. They even held signatures that could be forged. He grabbed a handful of them and took off for the nearest police station.

"I'm Spirit Lad," he said, dropping the files on the main desk, "I need someone at the address on these as soon as you can,

to arrest Mr. Devlin for kidnapping. There's a few other charges we can tack onto that, too, if the women will be your witnesses."

"Kidnappin's all we need right now to arrest him!" the police officer told him. "I'll have some men over right away!"

"All right! See you there!" Mike cried, and was gone.

When he got back to the building he noticed a large truck at its rear entrance, with its trailer doors open. He knew he'd have to hurry and do something before it was too late....the girls would be rolling down the highway in the back of that thing, terrified, in the dark. He materialized in the secret office again just in time to see Mr. Devlin trying to leave with a briefcase and a large box containing files in his arms.

"Hold it right there!" Mike shouted. "Just what kind of business do you think you're running here, mister?"

Devlin jumped, almost dropping the box. His face was etched in fear. He didn't dare turn around.

"You saw the sign," he stammered, "I'm in the computer dating business. I've got all my papers....perfectly legit. Want to see them?"

"Not right now. What I want to know is what you're doing with those girls you were speaking to in that room over there."

The man was becoming frustrated. He couldn't understand how anyone could have seen them in the room! No one could possibly have!

"Oh, they're just some satisfied customers who are getting married soon. Yes, very soon, indeed. We found their perfect matches."

"You mean you were paid big money to find THEM! You know, Mr. Devlin, that's against the law. I recognized some of those women from their pictures in the paper....kidnapping victims. And if your company is legitimate, why are you right now, preparing them to ride in the back of that vehicle parked in the back lot? Why should you hide them? I think, Mr. Devlin, you're in big trouble. You see, I know all your little secrets! You can't escape now. Soon the police will be here and they'll put you and any of your friends where you belong....behind bars!"

Mike loved the suspense...liked to make the guy sweat for a few moments wondering who it was telling him all this.

Then he said, "You'll never forget the day you met Spirit Lad!"

Devlin turned sharply and saw Mike hovering in a rear corner of the room. He panicked and fled still holding the things in his hands. Mike disappeared. He knew exactly where the man was headed, and hoped the police had arrived. Sure enough, when Mike appeared over the back lot, Devlin was running toward the truck. The girls were already being herded into it. Swooping around to the front parking area, Mike saw four police cars pulling in, and flew down far enough to tell the lead driver to pull around back. He nodded in disbelief of seeing a flying man, and obeyed.

Then he hovered over the lot until they were able to park, then landed by Devlin, grabbing him so he couldn't open the passenger side door to the vehicle.

"Here's your man, and, your evidence!" Mike called to a cop who'd begun to run toward him. Another officer had come up and was helping the girls out of the truck. They bundled their coats around them. Though the winter was officially over, there was still a terrible chill in the air, and a touch of snow on the ground.

"Are you girls willing to testify against this man?" the former captives were asked.

Most agreed. Mike went over to the woman he'd been sent for, and explained who he was, and, his mission.

"Oh, thank God!" the woman cried, and gave him a big hug. "I just want to go home, right now!"

"Is it all right, sir?" Mike asked. "I can take her....it's not far from here."

"Yes. Go right ahead, son. But miss...just make sure you come down to the station to fill out a report tomorrow, all right?"

"I won't forget!" she replied, tears in her eyes, "I want that creep put away for awhile!"

"We'll take the rest of the girls home after a short time at the station."

"All right," Mike told her, "I hope you're not afraid of heights. Is it all right if I pick you up carefully? Then, we'll be off."

She thankfully obliged, and in a very short while she was having a tearful, pleasant reunion with her mother.

Spirit Lad was thanked continuously for his help. He left refusing reward for the rescue; seeing their happy faces was surely enough. The other requests did not have so pleasant an outcome. The missing husband was just the usual case of a vanishing husband not wishing to be found by his nagging wife. The missing child incident was really a mixed-up situation. The mother had given Mike a picture of the little boy, and said she'd last seen him over a year ago. He asked if she had a piece of clothing that her son used to wear, and she gave him a little shirt, which he promptly got vibrations from. They led Mike to a pleasant little white house in a rural district of a mid-western town. A boy the approximate age of what the one he sought would be then was outside, playing in the large front yard, but when he landed, a dark haired, middle aged woman rushed out to send the child scurrying inside. Mike explained why he was there.

"No! You can't have him!" the woman snapped. "He's ours!" Then, she seemed to weaken, and told him, "I've always feared someone would come for him, but we legally adopted him a year ago! The adoption agency said both his parents had died in an auto accident!"

"His mother is very much alive, I'm afraid, and wants him back. That's why I'm here, as I've told you. I guess my

only solution to his problem is to do something about arresting those people from that adoption agency, then you and the boy's biological mother will just have to fight the custody case out in court. I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you this news," Mike apologized.

And he did find the adoption agency owners, and made sure they were put in jail, assured of a fair trial for dealing with kidnapping and the black market.

The vanished teenager mystery was certainly an unusual one for Mike to solve. Once again he was led to the countryside of a mid-western town. This time he landed in a sunny, huge field. He was drawn towards a grove of small trees which grew inside a white, wooden fence near the dirt road. There was a huge, old, red farmhouse in the center of the field many feet away. There were no other homes for miles around. Mike noticed where he stood he was hidden from the road. As he looked around the general area, he discovered what looked like a row of graves, at his right. He counted them. There were seven in all. He sat down on a nearby tree stump with the photograph of the missing teenager still in his left hand. What to do? Mike knew one of these graves had to belong to the youth in the picture, but he was afraid to dig and prove this. He did not want to suffer the agonies of final horrors relived. There was absolutely NO way he would be put through that again! As Mike sat pondering over what he should do, a spirit appeared before him...and when he looked up, he was startled, to say the least!

"I am the one you are looking for," the dark-skinned newcomer said.

Mike looked at the spirit then back at the picture he held. "Yeah, but you're.....you're down there!" he said, pointing to the graves, not really wanting to find this to be the truth.

"My physical body is, my shell, but as you can see my soul continues on. I seek a better life in the Spirit World, but as you can see, I am bound here on this plane, until I can let someone know that my unfortunate companions and I are here....that our killers can be properly put away so they can never do this to anyone again."

"What happened to you?" Mike asked. He was in awe. Talking to this young man was as if he was still in his physical body, that is how clear he appeared to him. "I came here searching for work. The old couple that own that farm hired me as one of their new field hands. There were a few other guys working here at the time. One day I was on my way to finish some chores when I heard some strange noises coming from the slaughterhouse. When I went to look inside, I was horrified to find the old man cutting up the body of a human being as if it was a cow at the butcher shop, wrapping the pieces of flesh and storing them in his freezer! I ran, but one of the other workers was ordered to stop me. I ran as fast as I could

across this field, and when I was half way to the road, I heard a gun shot, and this is the last thing I remember. Then I fell, face down, on the ground. Later, when I realized what had happened, I watched them bury my body here, with the rest of these men who had discovered the couple's secret. If you will go to the barn you will find another spirit there. There are several more bodies buried under the barn. I'm so glad you came! I have been waiting a long time. Please do something to help us. You are our only hope. And do not worry about touching us. We will help neutralize the effect of the vibrations from The Spirit World."

"Don't worry....I'll do my best to see these people arrested."

The spirit disappeared again as Mike headed for the barn. There, as he'd been told, another teenage boy's spirit appeared and showed him the spot where, under the floorboards, he could find some more victims, and told there would be more in back of the barn.

"Better go and tell the sheriff," the spirit said. "I know he won't believe it at first, but you'll have to make sure he brings his men out to dig."

Mike flew off and soon was back with the whole police force from the town following him.

"But I've known those people for years They're wonderful old folks who would never harm anyone," the sheriff told Mike. "They wouldn't kill anybody."

"I have been instructed to tell you to dig under here," Mike told him, pointing to the floor boards, "and, out in the back; plus, up by that grove of trees there's some graves."

"Oh, if you insist, Spirit Lad. I'll do as you say. I've got the search warrant right here in case there's any question. I'll have one of my men go and see if these folks are in."

They couldn't get anyone to come to the door, but saw the occupants peeking around curtains trying to see what was going on.

"O.k., do it anyway!" the sheriff ordered, and after an hour's time they found all the evidence they needed....the skeletons and remains of fifteen young men in all. Mike knew the spirits were finally happy. He even helped dig, and found the spirit's words were true. He felt no ill effects from encounters with remains.

After all the remains were uncovered, the police broke down the door of the house and took the couple to jail. The sheriff stood on the front steps of the house, in tears.

"I just can't believe it!" he sobbed. "Cannibalism in this day and age! Why would they do such a thing?"

"I guess after all the troubles some people just can't seem to adjust. They probably have been doing this since The Food Riots," Mike explained.

"And they belonged to the local lodge, too!" an officer said.

With the second spirit from the barn's help, Mike was able to give the sheriff a list of names and addresses of most of the deceased. They thanked him, and then at last Mike flew home. When he got back it was getting dark.

Jeanie was relieved to see him.

"Oh, by the way, Larry and McCree were here this afternoon to see you," she said. "I told them about the letters and they said we needed a place to hide them. Notice anything different?" she asked, going toward the kitchen table.

"No, not a thing."

Reaching just under the table's edge, she pulled, and out came a good-sized wooden file drawer, in which she'd filed all the mail in the order they were in earlier! Mike was pleased, and, proud. There was no way anyone could see the difference in the table. As he gave her a hug, he jokingly said,

"You'd better watch who you're keeping company with while I'm gone! Can't be gone five minutes unless you're entertaining men!"

"Oh! You!" she giggled, and hugged him harder.

Mike didn't have the heart to spoil their pleasant evening with the bad news of what had happened that day. He just wanted to relax through supper with Jeanie, and go to sleep. Anyway, he didn't have to say a word. It was in all the papers, directly on the front page, the next morning. Jeanie was both horrified with the report, and proud that he'd been able to help and had done well. They enjoyed what they could of the night together, both unaware of some surprising news they would hear tomorrow

## Chapter Sixteen

### A Little Problem

The next morning Jeanie went to work feeling fine again, and Mike tagged along to visit his friends. There was a strange vibration in the air that day, though the weather was lovely, and Mike just knew he was in for some sort of surprise. Everything was fine in the lab. The rebuilding job was almost completed, and the most time that morning the four spent working on readjusting the controls of the sending device, talking about Mike's MLC mission, its problems, and, solutions.

"Larry's come up with an interesting idea for you," Dr. Cooper told Mike after a while.

"Oh, now what!" Mike teased, sounding disgusted.

"Well, I've been pondering over what you're going to do with the missiles you disarm, and whatever you decide to do with them, you'll need some way to move them without much difficulty or loss of time, to the place you want to leave them. So I've designed a carrier that will enable you to lift them all at once. Here's a drawing I made for you."

Jeanie watched in disbelief as Larry pulled a folded piece of paper from the left rear pocket of his jeans. She couldn't understand how he could feel so comfortable in such tight clothes! He handed the paper to Mike.

"That's a great idea!" Mike cried after studying it a moment. "I'll get to building it as soon as I can....should have it done before next week. Thanks, Larry, I don't know what we'd do without you for a friend!"

For the first time since Mike had met him, Larry blushed, and looked at the floor to try and hide it. He grinned, and they all laughed. "Must be catching!" Cooper chuckled. "And I thought you'd be resting this week!" he told Mike, shaking his head. "Don't worry. You can gather the materials to build and assemble them in space just before you disarm the MLC. Right now we should discuss what you're going to do with those missiles. What do you young people suggest?"

At first the most popular idea was burying them under the ocean, but there were too many dangers with that. They discussed leaving them to float in space, but that was a definite no-no. Radar devices would spot them too quickly and the whole mission had to be kept from the government. They wouldn't know anything was different with the MLCs until they tried to launch them. And there would be too much chance of a collision with satellites, and other space going equipment. The final and best choice seemed to be the idea of burying them on the dark side of the moon. Jeanie had picked up a magazine from a nearby table and was studying a particular section with great interest. When the guys finally noticed she'd been quiet for too long, they looked around for her, and asked what she was doing.



"I found an article in the science magazine that says there'll be an eclipse of the sun in two weeks, and it has a chart of other eclipse times scheduled. I was just wondering....wouldn't it help Mike a great deal to go up and bury those devices during that eclipse? Wouldn't it give him the most protection from the sun?"

"My God, Jeanie! You know, I think you've found the key to our success on this mission!" Dr. Cooper went over to look at the article, too, and put his arm around her. "Mike, you're lucky to have such a wonderful lady! She is right. During the eclipse WOULD be the perfect time to go up. We'll have to get our timing down pat....how long you'll have up there. But if you agree, I do believe we've got a deadline, and it's not very far away!"

\* \* \*

During a later break time, Jeanie met Mike in the hallway.

"I'm sorry, hon," she explained, "but I'll be late coming home for lunch. I've got a friend that had to go to Dr. Horton for some very important tests the other day, and I promised her I'd stop in today and pick up the results. But I'll be home, soon, for sure."

"That's all right with me. I'll just stay here awhile, or start an early patrol. Thanks for letting me know. I hope your friend has good news awaiting her"

Mike did stay at the lab, and had a good time helping Larry, who kept teasing by calling him "Ol' what's his name." When He finally went home, he was surprised to find Jeanie had company. With her was Larry's girlfriend, Susie, who had obviously been crying just before he'd walked in the door. After Mike said hello, Susie nodded in acknowledgment then rushed in the bathroom, slamming the door behind her!

"Of course, you remember Susie," Jeanie said with a strange tone of voice.

"What's wrong? Is she in some sort of trouble?" Mike asked.

"Yes. She's pregnant. Her father's quite a prominent businessman in this community, and he's threatened to personally have the hide of whoever's responsible. She's really scared, Mike."

"And you think Larry's responsible?" he asked.

"Definitely!"

"Ooooooh!" Mike breathed, then he got a huge smile on his face. "That carefree, happy-go-lucky sex maniac is a father? I don't believe it! He's finally gotten himself in a super sticky mess. How's he going to squirm his way out of this one?"

"I don't know how to help Susie unless you speak to Larry. I mean, after all, you're his best friend. Maybe you can find out what he plans on doing.....let him know....."

"Sure. I'll talk to him. This is going to be difficult, but I'll talk to him."

Susie emerged from the bathroom looking totally embarrassed and drained. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and came over to Jeanie. Putting her hand on Mike's shoulder, Jeanie said,

"He knows, and he's going to talk to Larry. Don't worry. If anyone can help you, he can."

Mike was out the door in no time, walking to The Institute. He found Larry still working away on some detailed equipment inside the control panels, so he went to the rear of the lab and asked Cooper if he could borrow the blonde tech for a few minutes.

"What's up?" Cooper asked. "Larry in trouble?"

"His girl just showed up at my place. Said he's in three month's worth!"

The look on Cooper's face was priceless. He grinned, "You mean she's.....and he's.....and he doesn't know....?"

"Yes!" Mike grinned back.

"Sure, take him outside for a few minutes.....as long as it takes, to give him a good talking to. Put in a few words for me, will you? I've always known someday he would get in over his head if he didn't cool down a little. But for his sake, don't be too harsh on him, alright? He'll probably be in shock for the next few days."

"Don't worry, I won't bruise his ego if I can help it!" Mike nodded, smiling. He went over and tapped Larry on the shoulder.

"Doc says you can take some time off for awhile. I need your help with a project I'm working on at home, o.k.?"

"Yeah! Great! Be with you in a sec!" the other said as he tightened something with a wrench on the top of the main console. When he was finished he threw the wrench down, grabbed his navy blue wind breaker from the coat rack, and the two friends headed out of the lab together. They were half-way down the corridor when finally Larry spoke again.

"What you havin' trouble with, friend?"

They were alone there, so Mike stopped so Larry would face him.

"I might as well give it to you straight, Larry. I've never kept anything from you, and I don't intend to start now. It's not a way to keep a friendship going. I don't have a problem at home, you do. It's Susie. She came to Jeanie in tears this morning. You see, she doesn't know where to turn, and wanted me to speak with you. I'm sorry I'm the one to tell you, but she's pregnant, Larry, and she says you're the father."

It seemed time froze for a few moments. Larry was so taken aback with the news he couldn't even open his mouth, but the expression in his eyes told how he felt. He was shattered, and felt as if he could fall to the floor in a pile of tiny glass pieces. When he was able to move again, he spun himself all the way around on his heel, slapping his leg angrily, and shouting, "God damn!" When he finally faced his friend again, he added,

"But I can't be the father, I.....I.....didn't do anything...."

"Aw, come on Larry, we all know you too well! You're no virgin, that's for sure! Has Susie gone out with anyone else since you've known her?"

"Hell, no...she's only been with me whenever she's gone out. She wouldn't see anyone else. She told me. Damn-" Larry was almost in tears. "She told me she's using one of those "dia"...things, that nothin' could happen! Oh..."

The young man was gone, running toward the main entrance, pulling on his jacket as he went. Mike rushed after him to make sure he didn't do anything foolish. Larry went around to the rear of the building, across the parking lot and the grass to a wooded area where the friends usually had picnic lunches. They ran down a path through the tall grass, and before a clearing Larry stopped, to sit down on a large, flat topped rock, with his back to Mike. Mike stopped a ways back to give him a few moments alone, and was thankful he did, because Larry suddenly buried his face in his hands and burst into heavy sobbing. This only lasted a very short period of time. When Mike saw him attempting to dry his face with his sleeve he went over and put a hand on his shoulder. Larry looked around, embarrassed, knowing his best friend, the hero, had seen him so upset.

"I'm sorry, Mike," he said, "I HAVE to be the baby's father. But what am I going to do? I really care for Susie, alot, but the thought of marriage just hasn't crossed my mind! We have such an uncertain future, I haven't made it a point to commit myself to a permanent situation like that. My career is the most important thing right now. If I'm not successful in that, no one has a future. I'm just not ready to settle down. Believe me, I didn't plan it this way!"

"But you should have thought about it before you two jumped in the sack together! You have had your fun, now you're paying the consequences for not taking better precautions. What do you intend to do about this? If you're the kind of person I think you are, you'll do the right thing. Susie needs to know what you have in mind right away, and I thought you had more faith in me than that....about the success of the MLC mission, I mean!"

"God! I don't even know if I could grow to love her. Marriage....why.....Aw, HELL, Mike. Who am I foolin'? I DO love Susie! I want to make a better future for us because I know there will be a future, because you will disarm those missiles. I really believe that, friend!" Larry was quiet for a moment, then, he said, "Y'know, Mike, you should have been a preacher! You've sure straightened my mind out some good! Come on! Let's go tell Susie the good news!"

"She's still at my place," Mike explained as Larry got up and started racing toward the lab.

"Great! Then we'll both go and take care of her father....tell him he's not going to have my so-called family jewels for souvenirs hanging on his livingroom wall!"

Mike laughed. He was thrilled the way everything was working out. He was so glad Larry wasn't angry with him!

They reached his place in a hurry. Jeanie and Susie were sitting on the sofa. Susie had stopped crying and looked frightened when she saw Larry enter the room, but he rushed to her, took her in his arms with a gentle bear hug. She was puzzled.

"What's going on?" she asked, laughingly. He kissed her.

"You don't have to worry any more, darlin'!" Larry explained. "We're going to go see your father, explain everything, then we can start to make our wedding plans! How's that sound?"

Susie was speechless, but only for a second. Then she yelled, "GREAT!" and hugged him back. She was giggling so much she got everyone in the room laughing.

"Wait! Wait!" Larry cried. "First of all, I have a very important question to ask." He put his hands on Susie's arms and turned to her so he could look down directly into her eyes. "Will you marry me?" he asked in a serious tone of voice.

"Yes! Yes! Of course! Of course I will! I love you so much!"

As she hugged him tightly, Jeanie laughed once again as she saw Larry roll his eyes, hoping he wouldn't have any broken ribs when she let go.

As they were preparing to leave, Larry told Mike, "We'll make the date for about a week or so after your mission. Maybe we can even have a double wedding with you and Jeanie, huh?"

"We'll see! I haven't even gone up, yet! You two had better get going! We've got a lot of work ahead for us!" Mike replied.

"Yeah. Come on, baby, let's go face the lion in his den! Don't worry, Susie, I can explain everything!"

"Thank you, oh, thank you!" Susie managed as they rushed out the door.

"Did you really mean that about a double wedding?" Jeanie asked as she embraced Mike.

"I can't promise anything right now. Just have to leave it at that.....we'll see!"

"Oooooo! You meanie!" she growled, pounding lightly on his chest with her fists. He bent down and scooped her up to cradle her in his arms.

"Now, how about that lunch break?" he asked.

"There's sandwiches in the fridge, just for you."

"Hmmmmm, I think I'll start with dessert!" Mike said, with a certain twinkle in his eyes, and he carried Jeanie to the sofa, sat her on it gently, and gave her a tender kiss.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Practice Makes Perfect

The weekend proved a long and pleasant one for Mike Montaine. Of course he went out on patrols, but other than that, lounged around the apartment. He did a few sketches, practiced playing his guitar, and had a rare chance to read a little, but he found he could never totally relax. Jeanie became frustrated when she couldn't get him to 'just lie down' after his adventures. At last Monday morning came, and it seemed activities would never stop as everyone rushed around the large trucks packing things inside, and readying the jeeps to do so. Mike was terribly disappointed to hear Jeanie would be staying behind to mind the lab.

"Be very careful of hijackers," she warned, at the rear door, "I've heard there's plenty of them along your planned route. There was a robbery up north of here just last week!"

"Don't worry, I'll be keepin' a lookout. We'll come back safe and sound!" Mike promised, and held her in a warm embrace. Dr. Cooper nervously broke the silence.

"Thanks for taking over, Jeanie. I'll be counting on you to keep these techs in line and working until I get back."

"You won't have to worry, Dr. Cooper, I'll keep them going, and, in perfect working order!"

Mike gave her a disgusted look, then winked, as he turned and walked to Cooper's truck which was at the head of the convoy. It was a cloudy but warm day and Mike was glad to finally be heading out. He rode in the cab with Cooper and the driver for a while, then at one of the rest stops, as they sat waiting for the driver to return from the little store there, he asked permission to ride the rest of the way in the back. With the canvas covering he would be kept fairly cool there, and the rear flap would conceal him if a disappearing act was necessary to leave on a patrol. Cooper agreed, wholeheartedly.

"But before you go anywhere, and get involved in too much excitement, remember that you have to be back in about forty five minutes for the next rest stop!" the supervisor told him.

"If you'll excuse me," Mike put in as the driver came over and climbed back into his seat, "I think I'll go take a nap in the back of this baby." He faked a gigantic yawn, and stretched. "See you guys later!"

Hopping up he found a comfortable place to relax among huge boxes, until they were on the move again, then he changed and was gone so fast no one saw him flying westward. He'd made quite a few rescues, and was right in the middle of catching a woman in a skimpy dress as she jumped off a bridge, when the feeling that something disastrous was to happen to Dr. Cooper very soon overwhelmed him.

"Damn!" he swore aloud. As Mike left the girl safely with some local police, a picture of Cooper's truck came into his mind. It had been stopped by robbers with guns who had set up a road block.

"Oh, I hope I can get back in time to help them!" he thought. When he reached the scene, Cooper and the driver were being forced out of their seats at gunpoint. The angry look on the supervisor's face made Mike want to smash those half a dozen no good bastards to bits. He let out a roar that could be heard for miles, then was on them like wildfire before they could even look up to see what hit them!

Larry, who was by then, standing up in his topless jeep and leaning on the windshield, jumped up, waving his fist in the air as soon as he could see what had happened.

"Go for it, Spirit Lad! Get 'em!" he shouted gleefully. You could hear the cheers from the rest of the men down the line. When the dust finally cleared after the short battle Matt Cooper couldn't believe his eyes! There, in the middle of the road, was a large tangled mass of unconscious men, their guns twisted around their arms and legs, then tied in knots to hold them together so they couldn't escape!

"I'll send the local authorities here as soon as possible!" Spirit Lad yelled as he took off again. "Sorry about the delay!" Larry couldn't resist waving to him as he flew away, pretending to be so amazed with his presence and rescue. Actually, he WAS amazed with it, but had to make the others believe he'd never seen Spirit Lad before. Apparently, he was a good actor.

Mike flew to the center of town and got the sheriff and his men to hurry off and apprehended the criminals. He took his time getting back, checking for other unsavory characters along his way. He saw a big rig parked at the side of the road and landed to make sure everything was o.k. with the driver. As he approached the cab he saw the driver was a pretty young blonde woman. She turned at the sound of his footsteps.

"Oh, hi! You're not the one Jake told me he'd send, but come on, hop in! We've got a pick up to make right now, just down the road from here. Why the strange get up, anyway?"

"Never mind, just get going!" Mike snapped, leaping up beside her and slamming the door.

"All right, all right! We're going!" She professionally started the truck, and sure enough, drove right to the place the police now held the robbers safely.

The lady was furious when she slammed on her brakes. Mike motioned two policemen over to the driver's side. "Grab her!" he cried, "She's with them!"

"I should have known there was something fishy about you!" she screamed as the two cops helped her out of her seat.

"Thanks for the ride!" Mike told her with a grin.

"Well, if it ain't sweet little ol' Mary Lou!" the sheriff chuckled when she was brought before him.

"I should have known the entire Claybourne family would be in on this hijacking deal!" He turned to Mike who had come up behind them. "Thanks a million, son! You sure have saved us a lot of time and a lot of folks a lot of trouble by catching this bunch of no goods! We've been trying for months now!"

"Anything to help clean up this country! It's a pleasure!" Spirit Lad said, "I'd best be going now!" and he soared away after shaking the sheriff's hand. Dr. Cooper sighed heavily and looked around him for any hint Mike may have returned, but not finding any, he readied himself beside the driver and the convoy was off again. Mike somehow managed to land, and faster than the speed of light got into the rear of the truck again without being seen. He changed and by the time of the next stop was fast asleep, his head on some small boxes, not to awake until an hour later.

When night came, they pulled over into a countryside clearing and sat up tents for the night. As they sat around the campfires the crew couldn't stop talking about the excitement of the day. Mike, Larry and Cooper were sitting side by side, as usual, as a young tech came up.

"Gee, Mike," he told him, "you missed the whole thing! Spirit Lad was here and rescued us all, and you were asleep the whole time! Boy, it was great! I still can't believe I really saw him in person!"

Mike and Larry nodded, trying not to burst into laughter. Larry's face was redder than the reflection from the firelight.

"That's all right," Mike said, "I'm sure I'll see him another time. It's more fun to hear the story from you people!"

The next morning they were off again at five o'clock and reached Hermetaseal around noon. The attendant that showed them around and brought them to the zero gravity room was pleasant, and understood completely when Dr. Cooper explained that he needed complete security precautions because there would be testing for a government top secret project. They were assured it was fine to have government security guards take over. The equipment was set up in no time. He was instructed in the use of the control panel to the anti-grav chamber. Mike didn't take much time getting used to maneuvering in the zero gravity conditions. He felt a little dizzy at first, but that cleared up quickly. By mid afternoon, after twenty or so attempts with the MLC mock up, Cooper pushed the button to the intercom microphone on his control panel just beside the glass window through which he could see the boy floating beside the model, and called to him.

"All right, Mike, come on down. You can take a break now. Come on out, I want to talk to you about something very important!"

As Cooper pushed the button to open the door to the room and walked away toward a nearby bench, Larry and his co-workers busied themselves resetting the controls for the next try.

It was a terribly hard job to keep every knob and button tuned to perfection. As Mike approached him, Cooper motioned for him to be seated.

"You're doing very well, son, but you need to step up your speed a little. I wanted to tell you about another problem you will have with these babies...the automatic defense mechanism." He pulled out a diagram of the device that had been rolled up in the left pocket of his lab coat.

"I believe it's about here," he said, flattening out the scroll in his lap. He pointed to a small area near the top of the MLC.... "I'm not exactly sure how it works, but I know it could be deadly! So keep low, please!" He put the picture away. "Right now we have one large problem!" Cooper added. "We're not exactly sure where the MLCs are located, and we need you to go up and scout for them. Think you can manage it tomorrow? You've got more practice runs today."

"MORE, Doc? Well, yeah, sure. I'll give it my best shot!"

"Wonderful! If you're doing o.k., let's get back at it!"

Mike was totally exhausted when they got back to their new hotel room that evening. Unfortunately for them the factory was located in a small town, where as usual, all newcomers were the star attraction. They ate in the motel's restaurant, and everyone around them at the time wanted to hear all the gossip about the big city and the project.

The ladies adored Mike and Larry, but couldn't understand Mike's huge appetite! When they asked how he could eat so much, Mike just told them, "I've got a tape worm," and that shut them up, for a while, anyway! It was a good thing only the regulars that knew about his secret were present! The guys told the people all they could, about the project and town events. Then, Mike retired for the night, falling into a restless sleep in his very comfortable bed, even with Larry, his roommate, snoring softly in the other bed.

\* \* \*

The next morning Mike saw Cooper at the factory then was flying back to The Institute for his shield. He was anxious to be soaring away into the darkness of space on that great 'MLC Hunt'. From the layout which Dr. Cooper had described with his vague idea of what the government had done with placing them, Mike was sure he would be able to locate the first one almost immediately. Secretly checking the lab, Mike found everything to be safe and sound there, then hoisted the shield and was up and away. He loved the wonderful feeling of leaving the atmosphere. So far out there he hadn't needed to be concerned about lack of oxygen. Somehow, he was able to store enough with his special powers automatically to last as long as he needed it. But he didn't know how long it would hold out. This was sort of scary for Mike



to think about at the moment, so he just concentrated on reaching his goal. As figured, he reached the first MLC almost immediately. As he flew near it, he was amazed to find how large and black it was, and cautiously approached it from the left hand side. He paused by the control panel, and as he touched one of the arms holding the missile launchers, a bright yellow beam of energy shot out from the upper dome of the machine, startling Mike with its short rapid burst that looked like laser fire. He ducked behind one of the projectiles holding onto it with one hand for support, and found he was out of range. It was then he noticed a strange clicking and whirring noise coming from the panel. Wishing to learn what was wrong, Mike closed his eyes and put his palm on the MLC, trying to telepathically get a clear mental picture of the insides of it. As he did this, he got the picture all right, and something he hadn't bargained for! Mike removed his hand from the machine, as if it had become blazing hot, and hovered just inches away from it, with an odd expression on his handsome face.

"Oh, my God!" he gasped. "It hasn't been a spirit sending me those messages for help and the sketches all along! It was the MLC itself! It's like it has its own personality....like it's alive! It's calling for help, and we haven't got much time left before she's ready to blow! I've got to tell the Doc....and fast!"

As Mike flew off, searching for the remaining devices, he was partially in shock from the discovery, but completed his job satisfactorily. It was then he sped back leaving his shield at The Institute. He changed his clothes when he reached the factory, then frantically hunted up Cooper. "That is almost unbelievable, but definitely not out of the realm of possibility," the supervisor explained. "Computers have been known to develop personalities of their very own, though cases of this happening are exceptionally rare. But I suppose, with the combined energies of all the devices put together, they were able to send you that telepathic message for help. Some scientists have speculated whether certain computers' mechanisms such as robots can even develop their own souls. I agree that it's possible. Anyway....that settles it! We have to work faster somehow; really push it to the limit with our training. I hope you can take it son, and will forgive me someday for working you this way."

"Don't worry, Doc, I understand."

"Then, let's get back at it!" Dr. Cooper said, and with a pat on Mike's shoulder, returned to the control panel. Mike sighed forlornly, and followed.

The rest of the week went fantastically well, though Mike felt at times, he would lose all his energy and he would drop. Their timing in the disarming was as perfect as could be expected. Now all they needed to do was wait in suspense for the following Wednesday when the real disarmament would take place, then later when Mike would be flying off to the moon, at last.

## Chapter Eighteen The Closest First

Mike Montaine soared through the stars and approached the first MLC. As he touched the control panel, the entire device exploded into blinding white light, sending razor edged pieces through his body. Mike cried out in agony, and put his hands up to his eyes. Feeling a warm, wet stickiness on his face, he brought them away again, and discovered they were cut and bleeding, as was his face. He found himself falling toward the Earth and as he fell he saw Earth no longer existed. He heard himself cry out as he fainted into a welcomed blackness, darker than space could ever be. Then, he was somehow sitting up, and opening his eyes. Terrified, it took Mike a few moments to realize he was in the darkness of his apartment, in his own bed, that the horrible events just passed were only illusions from a horrifying nightmare!

He sat trembling, for a few minutes, feeling the fear from the dream still clinging to his vibrations like morning dampness clings to the grass. There was something unusually realistic about this one, and he hoped with all his heart, it wasn't prophetic. Horton spoke to him once about the symbolism of dreams, but Mike remained too shaken to try and decipher the meaning, if any, of it. Jeanie had been stirring, feeling his uneasiness even in her own deep slumber, and he knew it was best not to wake her. Finally able to get up, he stumbled to the kitchen and switched on their small night light. "God damn!" Mike whispered, as he was able to see the clock. It was four a.m.....Tuesday morning....the morning of May 10, 2021, when he would finally go up to disarm the MLCs.

Knowing further sleep was an impossibility, he grabbed his robe, washcloth, and towel, and headed for the shower. About half an hour later he returned feeling a little better, dressing in his best pair of jeans and a plaid summer shirt. The desire to leave before Jeanie awoke became his priority goal for the early morning hours, knowing she would be emotionally shattered with thoughts of his unsure return. At last he was ready to head out for The Institute. Finding it difficult even to take hold of the doorknob, Mike paused, swallowing hard, and turned to stare at Jeanie, who still slept comfortably. He felt like bursting into tears, but somehow kept his emotions in check.

"I love you so much no words can tell....you.....how....aw, hell, Jeanie, don't worry, I'll be back....I'll be back!" he managed to whisper before going out the door and shutting it quietly behind him. It was dawn by the time he reached the Observatory and was surprised to find Cooper there on the steps, waiting for him. Mike could imagine what had been going through his mind!

"Hello, son!" Cooper said with that smile he could manage through his sleepy look.

"Couldn't sleep, big day and all. Guess it must be catching, huh?"

"Yeah! I guess so. I just had the worst dream, Doc! I just hope it doesn't come true!" Mike explained. "I couldn't get back to sleep!"

"You think you're all ready to go up, son?" Cooper asked, nervously, overlooking the remark.

"Sure, Doc, any time. The sooner the better. I want to get this part over and done with."

When the pair were inside and Mike had changed from his street clothes into Spirit Lad, Dr. Cooper looked him straight in the eye.

"I want to tell you something, Mike, before you go. I want you to know how much we've all appreciated your work at the lab. You're a wonderful friend and helper, and I can see you've learned and matured a lot during the time you've been with us. Please, come back to us safe and sound. We love you son. Good luck!"

It was an emotional scene as Mike was caught up in Cooper's arms and given a heart felt bear hug, along with a hearty pat on the back.

"Thanks, dad, I'll try my best. Don't worry too much about me, o.k.?"

"Please, don't let this be the last time I see you, son. Be careful. Be careful, but the most important of all, make it work!"

There was a tear in his eye.

Mike was definitely nervous, but not so much that he wouldn't notice the beautiful scenery. The dawn was gorgeous. Jeanie would be up by now, he thought. He was sure she'd understand his early absence....God! He hadn't even left a note!

Climbing through the stars of space, he came again to the first MLC. The carrier was floating nearby in the spot he'd left it after it was constructed. He fastened the shield to his waist on its harness, and kept it at his back, so his hands would be free to accomplish their task. Then, he floated himself very carefully, over to the door to the control panel, successfully avoiding the ever watchful electronic eye of the protective device. With his acquired speed and superb skills with the switches and knobs, his fingers flew beyond the speed of light, and when Mike was finished, he was well satisfied to hear the proper click, and see the red operating light which told the hundreds of seconds to launch blink off, meaning the death machine had been properly rendered harmless.

"Phew!" Mike breathed aloud. He sighed heavily and let his body sink down a bit. "I can't believe it! I DID IT!" Then, realizing there wasn't much time to finish the job, flew the missiles to the carrier practically one at a time, placing them gently in their individual circular niches at super speed.

After that the rest of the disarming seemed to go smoothly, until Mike reached the fourth from the last device. As he went to remove the missiles he noticed they felt different from the others....lighter and not as smooth.

"Why, it's made of wood!" he gasped in surprise, running his gloved hand over it. "I'll bet they used it for a decoy...that the builders ran out of government materials so they had to fill in the empty places with something so the enemy

wouldn't be too tempted to sneak an attack through! Well! Saves me some time with my work! Wait 'til the Doc hears about this!"

He made sure there was no real active missiles in that MLC, then went on to the next, where he did find some. As Mike prepared to unhook the final connection there was a movement nearby that disturbed his concentration. In the next second three things happened so rapidly nothing could have stopped them, not even Spirit Lad. A small meteorite fell toward him from behind, passed directly through the precious shield on its left side, almost to its rim, leaving a hole directly through the top of it, then it bounced off the MLC, ricocheting through Mike's body. Thankfully it passed through him without causing any physical harm, however it caused the worst to happen....Mike was jarred by the meteorite's contact with the object, and missed disconnecting the last two wires he'd had in his hands! He looked in horror at the MLC's digital timer, for it was microseconds until launch, and then it read zero! The last two operative missiles were launched, racing toward Earth!

"Oh, my God!" Mike gasped aloud, "I've got to do something to stop them!" and he was zooming off to try and catch them.

Coming up beside the first missile he grabbed it, turned, and paused, flinging it with all his might off course into deep space. It disappeared from view. Not even stopping to think, Mike fled after the second. It seemed time was running in slow motion to Mike, as he pursued his deadly quarry. He finally was flying side by side with it, and grabbing it, he gave it a mighty heave after its predecessor. With the missile on its way to nowhere, Mike turned to continue his mission, but as he did, there was a terrible explosion, and a blinding light lit the entire area, also penetrating the hole in his shield.

A numbing, searing pain raged through Mike's entire body. He felt the shield slipping from his hand, but for some reason could not move his arm to grasp it. It fell away, being pushed by the force of the explosion, and burned up as it reentered the atmosphere. He panicked for the first time in ages, as he discovered he could not move any part of his body. It was totally paralyzed by the light and radiation from the missile!

As Mike began to fall toward Earth's atmosphere, his only thought was, "But there's two MLCs left! I can't fail now! I've got to stop them!" He blacked out, not being able to fight unconsciousness any longer. He thought he saw a small, silver disc approaching him.

At least Mike's vision hadn't been impaired by his accident. The disc that happened to be a little space vessel, followed Mike into the atmosphere. When he was about a thousand feet from the ground then a yellow beam appeared from the front of the disc, engulfing him in its glow. He was held steady by it, and drawn closely up underneath the disc for protection from the sun, then carefully, slowly it lowered him to Earth, where it gently released Mike to land, face down,

from a few inches above the ground.

About fifteen minutes later Mike painfully began to open his eyes. As he blinked them clear, he could tell he wasn't dead and he could feel the ground beneath him, see the green grass that almost blocked his view of the area. He was obviously lying on his stomach, arms and legs spread out and bent, his head resting on its right side, as if he'd fallen asleep there, that way. He could move his head and his arms a little, but the rest of his body was still numb. Lifting his head so his eyes were above the level of the grass, Mike saw he was on the deserted shore of a lake, and surrounding him were several little alien beings resembling the ones he'd seen in his apartment. That particular alien was standing directly in front of him. They were all studying him with great curiosity. Lifting up his head, Mike gasped.

"Ohhhhhhh! Where am I? What happened?" He noticed the little space ship near his feet.

"We helped you reach Earth without injury," the one he knew explained, "with our holding beam, and put you in this isolated place until you are well. Are you well now?"

Mike stayed quiet a moment, assessing his physical feelings. In no way was he well, let alone the fact he couldn't even sit up, his stomach was doing flip flops and he was exhausted. He gulped, and told them,

"I need rest....and, lots of food; plenty of food, to be well enough to fly up and finish my job. I've GOT to go back up there as fast as I can! I know it doesn't mean much to you, but I've got to save my world from destruction!"

"We now understand," said the little man, "I wish to apologize. With what we have seen today, I now believe you ARE from this origin place. You need have no fear of us. We wish to be your friends. By helping you we have violated our own First Law of non-interference. So what can we do to help you?"

"Just bring me food....as much as you can. Please?"

"Will see what we can do!"

Mike put his head back down on the ground and immediately fell into a deep, restful sleep. The space ship took off with all crew members aboard. While they were gone, Mike awoke again quite a time later. Slowly, the feeling returned to his arms and legs and by the time the visitors returned he was sitting waiting for them.

Somehow, they had found enough food for twenty banquets! They carried it out to him....breads, meats, fruits, vegetables....the fresh vegetables they just rolled down their boarding ramp to him! They watched in awe the way he ate.

When Mike was done with the food, he cried, "Water, I need water!" and the little man brought out some sort of hose and pumped the water out of the lake to him. No wonder he didn't drain it dry, his thirst was just so great!

By this time he was able to stand and walk around, feeling practically normal once again.

"I don't know how to thank you for all you've done for me...why, you've saved my life, now I want to repay you. You said awhile ago, you've broken your own law...what will happen to you now that you're free to go home?" he asked their leader.

"We will be put on trial, then probably banished from our world....at least our job, barred from space travel. Because you have saved this planet there should be some hope from us. We couldn't let you die, because you were its only chance for survival."

"Surely that will console your judges and they won't be as harsh on you."

"I do not know. Now we have a slight problem," the visitor told him.

"What's that?"

"While rescuing you, one of our main engines was damaged by our rough entry into your atmosphere. We cannot return to Mother Ship without it."

"Hey!" Mike cried happily, startling the man. "I can help you with that...I may not be able to fix your ship, but I can fly up half way to the other and give you sort of a boost!"

"It sounds like a promising idea...if you think you are strong enough to fly!"

"Sure! I'll manage it! Just give me a few minutes. I don't have my shield any more, so I'll have to be very careful. You'll have to tell me when to let you go, somehow."

Minutes later, Mike was flying once again, his strength partially returned, the little disc in his left hand. When he got to a certain height in space, a light on the disc blinked and he drew back his arm and slung the vessel in the proper direction, which they'd given him over an intercom system as he flew. "Good-bye! And thank you!" the little voices cried over the speaker. When they were out of sight, Mike flew toward the last two MLCs once again, just before his strength began to totally leave him, he finished disarming the last one so he quickly returned to The Institute, suffering terrible discomforts because of the missing shield. Before he took the missiles to bury them, he would have to construct another one, but there would be a few days to do that before the eclipse took place. Right now, he just wanted to let everyone know he was still alive, give his report, and return to the clinic for exams and deserved rest.

Cooper was still at the observatory when he returned, peering through the telescope.

"Oh, son, you did it!" he cried with glee. There was a huge grin on his face, and a tear in his eye. "I saw two explosions over the scope, but didn't know what they meant! I, of course, imagined the worst. What happened?"

Cooper saw the distressed look on Mike's face, and rushed him to the clinic. During his exam Mike explained everything to him. Jeanie was notified of the mission's success, and she and Larry joined them to congratulate their hero. Dr. Cooper wasn't surprised when Mike told him about the decoys.

"With all the shortages going around, I can understand the reasoning behind them, but my only thoughts besides the obvious, are of the government. What would they say if they knew what we're up to? They'd blow their stacks!"

Everyone laughed, then he added, "Remember, though, it's not over yet! Mike's got until Monday to get ready for that eclipse that afternoon!"

They all knew about it too well. As Mike recovered from his ordeal he couldn't help but wonder what had happened to his alien friends. Had they gotten back to their own planet safely? And, if so, what would the outcome of their trial be? He wished the range of his telepathic contact was such that he might learn something, but he guessed he would never know.

## Chapter Nineteen A Trip To The Moon

At last, by Monday, Mike was set to go again. His new shield worked perfectly, rebuilt from parts that he'd made a return trip to Antarctica to get. It had been a miracle he'd been able to find another solar panel there. Everyone thought it was a good sign. Mike was tremendously nervous, but he kept most of it inside, not letting it show. Larry, on the other hand, was such a nervous wreck Dr. Cooper threatened to call Horton down from the the lab with a tranquilizer meant just for him. "And I'll make sure you get it right where you sit down!" Cooper pointed out, emphatically, a devilish grin on his handsome face.

Mike couldn't help crack up as Larry turned pale and moved around so he was completely facing Cooper and said, "D-don't worry, Doc, I'll be fine....just fine. Wait and see!" and put his hands in his back pockets. He still couldn't calm down, but Cooper never carried out his threat, either! At least the teasing kept tension down, a bit!

Jeanie was terribly worried, too, but she buried herself in her work, concentrating on readying the completed Transporter for its big moment. They had had a difficult time installing the glass around each individual transport circle, as Mike had instructed. This would stop destruction caused by the feedback from the controls being bombarded with rays from the transport beam. But now the circuits needed checking, knobs and switches calibrated to perfection. Jeanie did say, however, that she felt she could die a thousand deaths before she knew if Mike had completed his job and was home safe and sound! Dr. Cooper seemed the only sane one of the bunch that day.

Mike went to the observatory in the late afternoon, to prepare the shield for use, and wait for the right moment to leave. He had almost two hours to wait until 4:45 p.m..

Larry stopped in after work and talked for quite a while. After he left, Dr. Horton came in carrying an odd-looking helmet, similar to what the astronauts used to wear, and a small tank of oxygen. "What you got there, doc?" Mike asked, touching the smooth material of it gently, curiously.

"It's an astronaut's helmet I got from a friend at NASA. Since we have no idea how long you can stay in space without air I thought I'd ask you if you'd use it. There's a special slot by your mouth through which you can eat some special astronaut's food I also got my hands on." He drew a small silver tube out of his lab coat pocket. It was about the size of a toothpaste container. "See? You just take the cap off, put it in your mouth, and squeeze gently from the bottom. I don't know how it tastes, but it's nutritious. Would you use these so you won't run out of energy and to give your superior peace of mind, son?"

"All right, doc. Here, let me try it on!"

Horton laughed when he saw how Mike looked in the black and white thing. Mike felt funny in it, too!



funny in it, too! He was showed how to hook up the air hose and fit the tank on his back so not to disturb the shield when it was there.

"Perfect fit, doc!" he complimented. "Good thinking on the small tank! I don't think I'll need it, but once and a while up there, I will use it for a pick-me-up, so to speak."

"Can you carry a large box of food?" Horton asked. "I'll have it delivered to the door."

"No problem, doc! Probably be all gone by the time I get to the moon, anyway. Thank you for thinking of me!" Mike acknowledged.

The old man hugged him as if he was his grandson.

"Good luck, Michael. Just take it easy, and I'm sure you'll do fine! Just fine!"

"Thank you for all you've done for me, sir!" Mike sincerely told him, feeling like he could burst out crying. He couldn't believe how everyone there cared for him...it was like having a family all over again.

Dr. Horton left. Mike was alone for a while with his thoughts. He noticed a crowd had started to gather outside the observatory of city people, hoping to get a better view of the eclipse.

Soon security increased their guard and McCree himself, came out to take care of dispersing them. This worked to clear the area.

About a half hour before Mike was to leave, Dr. Cooper came in to check on him.

"How're you doing, son?" he asked going over to him, walking behind the huge shield.

"As well as can be expected, Doc!" Mike replied. "Look what Dr. Horton brought me!"

He went through the routine of showing him the helmet and tank and as they were talking about it a tech delivered on a dolly a large box half his height and twice his width. It was definitely tubes of food!

"That's a load off my mind!" Cooper exclaimed after the man had gone. "I won't worry about you running out of air or energy for a while, at least. Thanks for agreeing to use it, son!"

"Anything to help," Mike replied.

"Remember, we love you, and we're counting on you!" Cooper gave Mike another of his strong bear hugs. When he let go he added, "Oh, Jeanie said to give you a message...she said 'See you later, DARLING!'"

Mike turned slightly pink and looked away from him, embarrassed with the use of the endearment.

"Sure thing, Doc!" he said, then hugged Cooper in return. "I'm not so good with long good-byes, as you know by now, but thanks for everything, Doc. In case you don't see me again, you know I love you, dad, with all my heart. If it wasn't for you, I would've been nobody!"

"Thanks, son. Look. I've got to go." Cooper told him, as they finally separated. "Good luck, huh? I'll see you later, too." Mike was alone again. It was fifteen minutes before he went up. This time passed swiftly as he changed, hooked his shield with the harness to his waist, moved the box of food near his launch area, and opened the dome for take off. As Mike watched through the telescope the sky became darker as the eclipse began near five p.m. It was a strange, more immediate darkness than what took place normally, at a later hour on spring evenings. Mike moved away from the telescope, properly put on the tank and helmet, and just as the full eclipse happened he was away, and no one was the wiser. He stayed in the Earth's shadow as much as he could. Every few minutes of his decided schedule Mike turned on the air. Three quarters of the way to the carrier's known location, he decided to try some of the food.

"Wonder what it tastes like?" he asked aloud, and popped in a tube. The cap automatically removed and he squeezed out a drop into his mouth. "YUCK!" he gasped, "That stuff is HORRIBLE! I pity the poor astronauts that had to eat this for days! No wonder, it's been stored away for so long! Aw, well, guess it's not that bad, and it does seem to renew my strength a bit. Well, here goes!" And he finished off the tube with a few noisy slurps. "HMMMMM! Guess I'll have another!" And he did.

He located the carrier in no time, and was off to the moon, being thankful, indeed for the supplies he'd been given. His strength started to weaken, so he ate some more and kept the air going full time. It helped one hundred per cent.

Reaching the moon, he circled around to the dark side, landing where mankind couldn't hope to go for thousands of years; the freezing temperatures yet to conquer. By luck he landed by a range of lunar mountains, and on the side of these mountains was a naturally formed cave, near one of the huge craters.

"Perfect!" Mike thought as he sat the carrier down just inside the door along with the empty box from his food. Then, not far from either, he found two large boulders apparently knocked loose by a meteorite. He moved them both to the cave door. Placing his hands near the top left hand corner of the door, he made them radiate tremendous heat, as he'd somehow done at The Pentagon, and welded the "door" tight to the mountainside. Still not quite satisfied with the safety of the place, Mike raised his hands over the door and carved the permanent warning into the rock. It read-

"This area contains nuclear missiles. Explosives. Danger. Do not enter."

He wrote it many times, and twenty times each for all known languages! Then, standing back, seeming satisfied, with his hands on his hips, he nodded, then flew off. He was planning on going directly home, as to keep well in the Earth's shadow on the way back,

but having an idea that intrigued him, he soared off, toward the other side of the moon, now holding his shield. Soaring over The Sea Of Tranquility, Mike was awed by the beauty of the place, serene and still, and well understood why the first American astronauts landing there named the area this. At last he approached what had been the landing site, seeing the American flag still standing, and the lunar terrain device left there by those so long ago, looking like toys from his advantage point. It filled him with pride to know that he had been the first human to see this site with the naked eye, and that now his job was done, all historic places like this would be preserved for others to see in the future....perhaps after he had ceased to exist, and they would never know the danger they'd been in....how close to annihilation by their own defenses.

Mike enjoyed a safe flight home, feeling he had enough energy for three more moon flights! He flew in the dome to a big welcome from all his friends! He was bounced around like a ping pong ball between them, as they shook his hand, kissed him, and patted his back. Even McCree was inside by this time, with the tech that knew his secret. Somebody brought out a bottle of champagne and opened it, spraying the group with its sweet foam. There were yells of surprise and enjoyment at this. Jeanie gave around paper cups and everyone was poured some of the bubbly beverage. Mike couldn't believe it all. It was finally over! he could relax now. The world was safe....for the time being!

"A toast!" Dr. Cooper cried, and everyone lifted their glasses. "To Spirit Lad!" and they drank, Larry guzzling his down like it was going out of style, with a slightly plump Susie under his arm.

"Take it easy, son!" Cooper warned him, "Tomorrow's a work day, you know. It's our turn for a try at success!"

It sure was! The testing of The R.M.T.P. once again! But Mike never had so much fun in his life! Jeanie had brought his guitar from the apartment, and after he'd put on his street clothes he sang for them, the party not breaking up until ten p.m..

Jeanie went to sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, feeling the effects of just a little too much to drink. The day's excitement left Mike exhausted, but he couldn't bring himself to fall asleep for quite some time. There were too many thoughts running through his mind. He had actually see the site of the first moon landing....not in a picture or on a film, but with his own eyes....and not from a space ship! It was too incredible! It couldn't have happened. But it had, and he was a hero....Mike Montaine, of all people! He felt great; and it wasn't so bad being different after all!

## Chapter Twenty The Beginning

The following morning everyone reported for testing in the lab as scheduled. Even Dr. Horton was there with Dr. Cooper, Jeanie, and a technician at the control panel for the sending device. Larry was stationed at the receiving panel with two of his young helpers. Mike had overslept a little, but hurried in just in time to join Cooper and the others as they sounded the warning bell to begin their experiment. They were to transport another concrete block, and there it sat, in the front right hand tube, waiting to determine the success or failure of all present. As the bell stopped ringing, the friends exchanged hellos, then Dr. Cooper yelled "Ready!" Hands flew over the panel. Mike felt an odd sensation envelope him. This was a scary experience, watching the machine that had almost killed him, in action for the first time from a safe advantage point. Lights overhead flashed all colors imaginable, the slab slowly faded from view into a sparkle of minute dust like particles. After a few moments the activity stopped. Cooper shut off the main switch, and was thrilled to hear Larry yell,

"It came through! It's all here and in one piece! We did it!"

They ran over to look, and sure enough, there it was, safe and sound! There was a lot of congratulatory hugging, then everyone returned to positions.

"But Doc," Mike asked, "that experiment proves the machine works transporting objects, but how will you know if it works on living things?"

"I've already thought of a way to answer that question!" Cooper told him, and motioned to Horton. The older man went to a nearby table and picked up a small, square object that was covered with a black cloth, from it. He brought it up to the others. Sitting it on the floor he pulled the black cloth away to reveal a cage filled with two guinea pigs,, announcing,

"It's time for Gertrude and Heathcliffe!"

"Ooooh!" Jeanie cried, thoroughly charmed by the little creatures. "They're sweet! You want me to put these adorable little things in there?" she asked. She had taken one of them out and was patting it, holding it close to her breast.

"Yeah. Don't worry," Cooper said, and she replaced the furry creature into its cage, and sat that on the floor inside the transport tube beside the one where the slab had been. The beaming process was repeated, and, another success was reported by Larry.

When this was over, Jeanie returned the cage to the lab table, but it remained uncovered so Horton could examine its contents. The rest watched and were thrilled to hear the little animals were fine. They went happily back to their stations to take notes and make equipment checks. One of the techs stayed behind for a few minutes to keep an eye

on Dr. Horton's pets. In a short time he startled everyone by yelling, "Dr.

Horton! Come here, quick! Something's wrong!"

As the doctor rushed over with Jeanie, Cooper and Mike in tow, the man explained,

"See what I mean? They're acting crazy! They were fine for a minute, then they started acting crazy! I think they're sick, or something."

As they all peered into the cage they saw the guinea pigs appeared agitated, running around and leaping over one another.

"They're not sick!" Horton said with a smile, "They're playing! I believe they liked their little trip! This is the happiest I've seen them in ages!"

There was laughter all around. Then, Mike asked, "But Doc, you've tested your machine on these two things, but how do you know for sure it'll work on humans, that they'll be o.k.?"

Dr. Cooper opened his mouth to reply, but before he could Mike continued, "Why don't you use me as your first human subject? I've got the suit on under my clothes. If anything does happen, I'm sure I wouldn't be hurt THAT badly. I want to volunteer for the job!"

"I think all this hero business has gone to his head!" Jeanie said, "But I think he's right. He'll be o.k.."

"But son, you've done this once....no, you've been through too much all ready! I couldn't bare to see you hurt again! NO, I won't be responsible! Absolutely not! No!"

"I hate to tell you, but I think it's the only way to really find out if the Transporter works!" Dr. Horton put in.

"Well....I suppose....if I have your o.k. on this, and Jeanie agrees, you can do it, son. But BE CAREFUL!" Cooper finally consented. With a pensive look he readied the machine to go the third time.

Mike grinned, turned and went up the steps to the platform, advancing to the tube where the guinea pigs had been. He slid open its glass door, stepped inside, and let the door slide freely shut behind him. Then he turned to face the tense Dr. Cooper, and forced himself to relax. It WAS kind of scary in there. The flashbacks of what he remembered from his accident were beginning to get to him as they raced through his mind, and he wished someone would hurry and hit the switch. Jeanie was staring tearfully at him, as if this would be her last sight of him. Larry was still at the receiving controls, but Mike knew telepathically that he felt as terrified as everyone else in the room. "Ready!" Cooper yelled, then turned on the juice. Mike felt a tingle, braced himself for the worst, then faded from view. Everything was working normally so far, as the lights overhead blinked. It was like Mike was in the darkness of starless space. For a moment

he wondered if he was dreaming, and, if he was really dead. He was beginning to believe anything that had happened after his transporter accident had been just a dream, or an illusion, until he began to feel a tingling sensation, something like unconsciousness, then he heard a loud noise, which seemed to surround him. First, Mike felt cold, like ice, then a wonderful warmth as he began to materialize and saw the figure of Larry standing before him behind his protective booth. At last he was able to take a breath again. He looked down and stretched out his arms as far as he could, while in the tube, testing them out, seeing if he was whole, and everything was well attached.

Jeanie, Cooper, and the two techs with them held their breaths for a few moments until they heard Larry yell back, "Perfect shot, Doc! He's coming through, now!"

It was a successful transport! Larry couldn't believe it had really worked! He ran to grab Mike by the shoulders as he came back down the steps from the platform.

"Are you o.k.?" he asked, shouting with glee.

"Yeah! Great! Fine!" Mike shouted back.

"Yahoo!" Larry yelled, and went back to deactivate his console. Cooper and Jeanie ran over to see what was going on, and when they were satisfied with the outcome of their test Dr. Horton was asked to do an exam on Mike. After the usual heart, eye, ear and blood pressure check up, along with his temperature taken, and pulse, Dr. Horton announced everything was normal to Mike's standards, and there was more shouting for joy.

Jeanie hugged Mike so tightly he almost dematerialized, so she wouldn't break any of his ribs!

"Now, everyone has to quiet down," Cooper announced, "it's time to notify The Commander Of The Army and tell him the good news. Three successful transports should be proof enough for the Government to approve our machine!"

"Let's make SURE we have enough proof for them!" Larry cried. He grinned. "I'll go through myself!"

"All right!" Dr. Cooper told him.

"And I'll go with him!" Jeanie bravely announced.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Dr. Horton asked her. Mike felt there was a more than usual concern involved with the man's question, but with all the happiness going around he just shrugged off any worry that might overshadow their day.

The two walked up the steps together, as one of Larry's assistants went to fill in at the receiving panel. They were transported successfully, also. Then, two of the other techs went through.

"Now it's time to call!" Cooper said.

"Oh, no it's not....not yet!" Jeanie told him with a mischievous tone in her voice. "You come right over here, Dr. Cooper!"

He gulped, knowing what she had in mind. A trip through his own invention? He'd never thought of trying it himself. Wouldn't it be too dangerous? After all, if he was killed.....

"Dr. Cooper!" Jeanie snapped playfully. He still didn't move, so Larry and another tech came over and gently escorted him to a tube. Another successful transport! The look on Cooper's face was priceless when he materialized in the receiving station! Everyone made sure they were there to meet him. Everyone couldn't help but laugh.

Then Dr. Cooper rushed to the phone and pushed the buttons for the long distance number to The Pentagon rapidly, but carefully. He waited for a few rings, then answered to the reply.

"Hello, this is Dr. Matthew Cooper, Supervisor of The R.M.T.P. Project. I would like to speak to the Commander Of The Army and report we have a green light on our baby! All systems go!"

After a short pause, the Commander answered the phone.

"Sir, yes! R.M.T.P. is a complete success. We've made several successful transports with it just moments ago, the final ones were human subjects, who were pronounced safe and well by our resident physician. How long before they can be tested for long distance usage? Perhaps two or three months yet. You have? That's just fine, sir! Thank you! Thank you for your patience with us! Good-bye!"

Cooper was starry eyed with joy. "Whenever we're sure we've got all the bugs out of the old girl for long distance usage we've got a manufacturing plant that's waiting to sign contract with the government for mass production! Then, the transporter's next stop.....the moon base!"

"Fantastic! We're really rolling!" Larry shouted. "I guess the most of the job is out of our hands for now."

Suddenly feeling too confined, Cooper said, "I could sure use some fresh air! We've been stuck in this place in the dark for too long! Let's go get some sun!"

Even Mike was agreeable to the idea, since he would be quite protected for a while outside, so he followed Cooper, Jeanie, Larry, and Susie, out the back door. The spring air felt wonderful as they walked to a nearby field behind the great building. They could hear some boys playing softball nearby. The friends stood in a circle, talking and joking. Jeanie stood beside Mike, who had his arm around her, and Larry and Susie were placed next to Dr. Cooper on his right side. Dr. Horton and the techs had stayed inside to complete some chores.

"What will we be doing now that our jobs here in the lab are done?" Larry asked.

"Yeah. What will we do? Will the government just dump us? What will happen now that most of the final testing is in their hands?" Mike wanted to know.

"I don't imagine the government's done with us yet!" Cooper replied. "There's other projects, you know, other dreams. We still have other things to do with our baby before she's out of our hands for good!"

"But things will never be the same," Mike put in. "What if we get transferred and have to move? You're all like my family here. How will we keep in touch? Dumpy though it may be, I've grown kind of attached to my....er....our little apartment. Until Jeanie and I can make some better arrangements for a bigger and better home, I like it here. And if we do have to leave, how will we keep in touch? How will we have any more good times together?"

"I'm sure we'll find some way," Larry added, "If I am all done here, I think I'll be stayin' in this area, too, unless I change my mind again and decide to go back to school. One can never learn enough, you know!" He held Susie close. "But Susie's family's here. Her father's finally decided I'm not such a bad guy after all. It would be kinda hard for us to ever leave them now that we're beginning to be just one big, happy family!"

Dr. Cooper was beginning to feel a change in things, too. What WOULD he do once R.M.T.P. was over? Things had turned out so well with this project, if the government asked him to do another job for them, he knew he wouldn't be able to resist the offer. He felt so pleased, yet, melancholy at the same moment, he was at a loss for words. The mood he was in reminded him of what he'd felt like at his high school graduation. In spite of himself he had a tear in his eye.

"Well, I guess this IS the end of it, after all," he managed.

Jeanie leaned closer to Mike's right side and put her hand on her belly.

"No," she told them, "it's not the end, it's just the beginning!"

## THE BEGINNING



## AUTHOR'S NOTES

Spirit Lad was made into a hit movie in The Spirit World after this book was written, in the 1970s, and afterwards became a very popular television series there which lasted for several years. The lyrics to Theme Songs of both the movie and the series are published below, as channeled through Speakers Gerald & Linda Polley.

### SPIRIT LAD

The Movie Theme

(Music similar to the "Land Of The Lost" t.v. theme.)

Young Mike Montaine  
working in the laboratory  
where the first transporter's being made,  
When something it went wrong,  
he journeyed through the air,  
and came out more dead than alive.  
And so was born Spirit Lad!  
And so was born Spirit Lad!

### SPIRIT LAD

The T.V. Theme

(Music similar to the "Spider Man" t.v. theme.)

Spirit Lad, Spirit Lad,  
he's the incredible Spirit Lad!  
He laughs at danger, ("Ha, ha!") look at him!  
There's nobody quite like him,  
Spirit Lad! Spirit Lad!

When danger threatens he's not slow,  
it's 1, 2, 3, and away he goes!  
Evil men had best beware,  
when that Spirit Lad is there!  
Spirit Lad! Spirit Lad!

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