

## The Cliff's Edge

by Sheila Paulson

July 19, 1969

*One thing about this Swiss cheese memory of mine is that I can never tell when I'll remember something vividly. It might be important or it might be a bit of trivia that never mattered one iota, but when it happens, it always surprises me. Such as this time when I leaped and found myself across a desk from a face that was familiar to me from a dozen late movies. Mirabel Thorn. She had been in the heyday of her career about the time I was born, along with such stars as Ava Gardner, Lana Turner, Elizabeth Taylor, Lauren Bacall. Several times wed, Mirabel Thorn had lived her life in a blaze of publicity and had ended it with--something dramatic. My memory stopped there. Once again I couldn't remember.*

*But here she was, waiting expectantly, a hand outstretched as if to receive something. Hastily I looked down to try to guess what it was and saw bare knees in fish net party hose. Oh no! I was a woman again. Not that.*

Please, not that. Dr. Sam Beckett grimaced expressively and tried to get his bearings. He was growing better at it all the time, but the first moments after he leaped were always disorienting and it took a little time to catch on and fit into his new role. He wondered how long it would take AI to pop in and fill him in this time.

"I am waiting, Lynx," Mirabel Thorn said impatiently.

*Lynx! I'm a woman named Lynx! Oh boy.*

"I'm sorry, Miss Thorn," he said quickly. "My mind wandered. What did you ask me?"

"You *are* in a daze, aren't you, dear child." She didn't take offense, smiling maternally instead. "How soon will it be before I meet this young man of yours?"

*Oh no. I've got a young man.* Sam's heart sank.

"I'm not sure, Miss Thorn."

"Soon, I insist. But now I want the party list, please." Sam glanced down at the desk, saw a list of names and passed it to her with relief. "Here. I'm sorry."

She perused it a moment, giving Sam time to collect himself. What was he, a social secretary to a famous actress? He'd met a few famous people since his time travel experiment had backfired and he'd started bouncing around time within his lifetime, but they'd usually been peripheral. He had seldom leaped in to help one of them. Staring at the woman, he realized that this was no longer the goddess of the silver screen his father had so admired. She was older now and there were a few strands of silver and the glorious red hair. He estimated she was pushing fifty. Let's see. Going by that and the miniskirt he was barely wearing, this might be the late 60's, early 70's. The days of the student protests.

Mirabel Thorn threw aside the list and shrugged her shoulders as eloquently as any Frenchman. "Oh, God, Lynx, why do I do it?" she burst out. "Why go through the rat race again and again? You know they're saying I'm planning to marry again. They love it. If I spend time with a man, they have me married to him. I couldn't stand the thought of a fourth marriage."

She broke off abruptly, eyes wide with a horror Sam couldn't understand. "Oh my God," she wailed. "Third marriage, damn it." Her eyes grew bright with unshed tears.

"Fourth marriage?" Sam echoed tentatively, feeling his way. There was more to this than a temperamental fit.

"I knew someone would find out someday," she sobbed.

Sam believed she wanted to be found out. That dramatic statement about a fourth marriage was in the nature of a large Freudian slip. Whatever troubled her was pushing at her inside like steam in a pressure cooker. Unless she released it, she might explode.

"I think you'd better tell me about it, Mirabel," he said quietly.

"Oh God, Lynx, I can't tell you. You'd despise me. Everyone would despise me. But never as much as I despise myself." She buried her face in her hands, shoulders quivering, and wept, loudly and messily, all the while moaning something that sounded like, "My baby, my baby, my baby."

Sam went around the desk, awkward on the clunky platform heels that Lynx had been wearing, and put his arm around her shoulders. "Please don't cry like this. You'll make yourself ill." When that failed to produce a response, he tried another tactic. "Your make up will run and your eyes will swell up and..."

She collected herself at once. "Damn you, Lynx, you know me far too well." But the eyes she raised were hollow with pain. The memories hadn't gone away.

"Tell me about the baby," Sam urged gently, sitting on the edge of the desk beside her.

"Oh, Lynx, I gave him away. I gave away my little son. David's son."

Could it have been an unwed pregnancy? Back in the 40's, there had been considerable scandal attached to such things. Of course she'd talked about a fourth marriage, so maybe the first one had been a clandestine one. Yet why give away a legitimate child?

"What else could you have done?" he asked, hoping the question would produce the right answer.

"I could have stayed and Faced it. Other women bore it. But I couldn't. David forgave me, I think, before he died, but how do you imagine I could face my child and tell him what I'd done."

This was nothing to do with an unwed pregnancy. Sam derailed the train of his preconceived ideas and started again. "I can't help you unless you trust me, Mirabel. You know I'll do what I can for you."

"I know you will, sweet child." She patted Sam's hand. "But not even you with your vast tolerance could forgive me. I think I must simply live with my guilt. It's the price I'll pay." She glanced over Sam's shoulder, gave a cry of horror, and put up her hands to her cheeks. "I've got to fix my face. Finish typing up the lists for me." She fled quickly, her emerald skirts swishing around her knees.

Sam turned to watch her go, and halted, arrested, at the sight of the mirror. Looking back at him was a young woman in her middle twenties. Her hair was long and perfectly straight, confined by a headband around her forehead with a peace sign on it. She wore a fringed leather vest over a blouse bright with small pink flowers. The miniskirt was black leather.

"Oh boy. I'm a hippie."

"And a very fetching one, too." Al popped in, grinning broadly as he looked the body Sam now wore up and down. "Very fetching."

"I hate it when you do that."

"Aw, Sam," said Al with mock disappointment, though his eyes held a twinkle at his friend's involuntary annoyance. "But that skirt's distracting. Maybe you should see if she has any granny dresses in her wardrobe. Those legs..."

"Never mind about these legs," Sam returned, tugging ineffectually at the skirt. "Tell me why I'm here. I think I have a good idea already. Do you know who I work for? Mirabel Thorn."

Al put a hand dramatically over his heart. "Ah, the days I used to sneak into the theater to watch her movies. I knew every way there was to avoid paying at the Orpheum. Those were the days. I remember how glorious she looked in *Blood and Fire*. My first love."

"I thought you started younger than that," Sam returned wryly. "When is this anyway?"

"July 19, 1969," Al replied enthusiastically. "Just think, Sam. Tomorrow, men will walk on the moon for the very first time. I'm coming back for that, no matter what else is--I missed the moon landing," he added in a quiet

tone, distracting Sam from the abrupt break in his speech. The reference to his POW days could have been prompted by the year, but Sam couldn't help thinking Al had done it deliberately to make him forget what he'd begun to say.

Al had been a POW in Viet Nam in 1969. He couldn't have known about the first moon landing until he was repatriated and returned home. The space program had to mean a lot to Al, the ex-astronaut, but he'd missed its most important moment. 'One small step...'

Sam winced. "I'm sure I'll be able to turn on a TV for you," he volunteered quickly. "Even Mirabel Thorn is bound to watch the moon landing."

"I wouldn't count on it, Sam. It's the moon landing that's brought out all her memories. Her first husband, David, was obsessed with the thought that one day man would walk on the moon. It was his dream that he live to see it."

"And he didn't?" Sam asked, certain of the answer before he put the question.

Al turned to his link with Ziggy and read the data displayed there. "No, he died of pneumonia in 1944."

"Then what happened to her baby?" demanded Sam. "That's what I'm here for, isn't it? To help her find the child she gave away?"

"That's it, Sam. When man first walked on the moon, it brought everything back to Mirabel Thorn and the guilt destroyed her. She became so despondent that she had too much to drink and ran her car into a ravine in the Valley. She was dead when they found her."

"So she needs her son. Where do I find him?"

"I wish I could tell you that, Sam. But Ziggy doesn't have any more information. There was a child, we know that much. We know she was desperate to find him because when she died, her great-aunt told a reporter that it was her grief over that long ago tragedy that had led to the accident." He whacked the device with the side of his hand, eliciting a peep of protest. "Her name is Mary Thorn. She might be able to help you."

"Great. I'll contact her. How long have I got, Al?"

"Two days. She died on July 21st."

"That doesn't give me much time."

Al had glanced away as if speaking to someone, and Sam's protest turned him back again. There was a sort of nervous energy about the project observer that was different from his usual bubbling enthusiasm or his concern when a leap showed signs of proving difficult. He seemed absent minded as if whatever had distracted him held him more strongly than the danger to Mirabel Thorn did.

"What's wrong with you, Al?" Sam asked, eyes narrowed in concern. "Something's up, isn't it?"

"The only thing wrong is that in two days Mirabel Thorn is going to drive her car over the edge of a cliff," Al insisted. The effort with which he collected himself wouldn't have been obvious to a stranger, but Sam happened to know him very well. He couldn't remember every detail of their friendship, but he recalled enough. Since he'd begun ricocheting about in time, Al had been his rock, the only solid base of his life. He knew something was wrong. What he didn't know was how serious it was.

Al didn't intend to let him know either. Instead he made a great show of walking around Sam and inspecting his outfit, grinning all the while. Typical. Al's pursuit of the opposite sex was legendary. This was one of the times when Sam was glad that Al was here only as a hologram.

"What else should I know about?" Sam asked. It was plain he'd learn nothing about Al's problem yet.

"You'll like this, Sam," Al replied, his grin turning purely lecherous. "You're Lynn Adams, and Mirabel Thorn calls you Lynx. Lynn Adams has a boyfriend, a Gary Sato. She met him two weeks ago on a protest march and he's been pursuing her ever since."

"I don't suppose Ziggy has any *good* news for me?" Sam asked sourly. The last thing he wanted was to fight off an ardent boyfriend. He'd had to face a lot of things since he'd stepped into the Accelerator, but a boyfriend was something new.

"I'll let you know the minute something comes up. Never mind that now, Sam. Turn on the TV and let me see what they're saying about Apollo 11."

Sam located a small portable television set and turned it on. It didn't take much channel changing to find an update on the Apollo mission.

Al moved steadily closer to the screen, his eyes lighting with enthusiasm. Remembering how he had sat enraptured before his own TV set while Walter Cronkite poured out his eager news reports, Sam smiled fondly at his friend and watched him instead of the news update until regular programming resumed.

"I'm due back now," Al explained, glancing at his watch and opening a door in the air. "Watch yourself, Sam. Beware of Gary Sato."

"Oh, thanks." But Sam's eyes narrowed. He didn't like the feel of this. Al wasn't supposed to reveal things that Sam couldn't remember, though he'd bent that rule more than once for his friend. But this was different.

There was nothing he could do about it yet. "I'm supposed to type some lists," he told Al. "I don't suppose I know how to type."

"The way you handle a keyboard, I'd be surprised if you didn't." Al sketched a mock salute and pulled the door closed behind him. Feeling strangely bereft, Sam went over to the manual typewriter and set to work.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Mary Thorn was easy to find. All I had to do was look in the address book lying on my desk. I telephoned her and made an appointment to see her at three o'clock. She didn't seem surprised at the call. Mirabel was an easygoing boss and sent me off with a careless wave of the hand, informing me that she meant to have a facial and rest as she was dining with the Hestons. I went out to inspect my transportation options.*

Sam Beckett was not really that surprised to find himself confronting a Volkswagen bus adorned with peace symbols and flower decals.

"This is really nice, Sam." Al arrived hastily and closed the 'door' behind him. "Flower children and all that."

"Protest marches," Sam reminded him. "I thought you'd hate that. You were over there--" He stopped abruptly. The last thing he meant to do was remind his friend about those times. But the year he'd leaped into made it inevitable.

Al's eyes were grave, but he just shrugged. "What have you found out?" he asked abruptly. Too abruptly. It might have been the memories of those years as a prisoner that did it, but Sam didn't think it was. Al was...distracted. He wasn't acting normally at all.

"Not much." Sam pulled a crumpled envelope from his purse. "I had some time this noon and I went through all those files." The envelope was yellowed and worn, the writing faded but still barely legible. It was made out to a Mrs. David O'Hara, with a Glendale address. "All I've learned is his last name. I can't make out the postmark, but it looks like 1940. It's been nearly thirty years since all this happened."

"Then you've got to hope Mary Thorn will tell you what's happening. I'll come with you." He walked through the passenger door and made a great show of settling himself in the van.

Sam shrugged and started the engine.

The trip to Mary Thorn's Bel Air home was enlivened by Al's stories about Mirabel Thorn, the plots of all her movies, and denials that anything was wrong back at the Project. When Sam pushed, Al gave an elaborate shrug and admitted carelessly, "There're a few protesters around."

"Protesters! What are they protesting? They can't know about the time travel experiment?"

"No. They're claiming we're risking nuclear contamination."

"But that's impossible."

"Short of the entire project being blown off the face of the earth, yes."

"Well, if they're environmentalists, that's the last thing they'd try."

"Ah, Sam, you expect logic from people. When you've been around as long as I have, you'll realize that fanatics are seldom logical."

"They're not any threat to you, are they?" Sam worried. "Al, Level with me. I want to know."

"No. They can't get close. Security can contain them."

"Sure?"

"Positive. What do you take me for? If I get sloppy, I'm the one who has to justify it to a Senate subcommittee. You know how much I like that sort of thing."

"You put on all your medals and call in every favor you can manage. You love throwing your weight around," Sam told him, grinning. "I can remember that."

"Too much for your own good, sometimes. Turn here, Sam. Pay attention to where you're going."

"I could concentrate better if I didn't think you were holding out on me."

"I've told you what's going on."

"No, Al. You've told me part of what's going on."

"I think this is the house," Al returned evasively. "Oops, gotta run, Sam. Tina wants me."

"I thought," Sam returned, "That it was the other way around."

"Oh, that was low." Al grinned at him. "Good luck with your long lost son." He was gone before Sam could question him further.

*Blast it, Al, thought Sam in frustration as he wriggled out of the car, trying to keep the miniskirt from riding up any higher than it already was. I know you're in some kind of trouble. And there's not a damn thing I can do about it.*

Mary Thorn was an elegant, sophisticated woman in her middle 70s, her hair a lovely shade of white, her eyes vivid blue and penetrating. She ran them over Sam critically, wincing a little at the sight of the love beads. "Perhaps I do not move with the times," she said, "But I can recall the day when one wore a hat and gloves for a call. Today's younger generation is so sure they know all the answers, when in fact, they haven't paused to listen to the questions." She smiled unexpectedly. "Come in, dear. I, too, was once a rebel in my own way. You'd never know it to look at me now, and you wouldn't believe me if I told you that in another twenty years you, too, will be a part of the system."

"I don't think I would," Sam replied, as she expected. "But that's not why I came."

"No, you came about Mirabel. At least you sounded worried on the phone. What is it, child? Tell me. I'm her only real family these days. Is something wrong?"

"Apollo 11," Sam said quickly, watching her to judge her reaction. His guess was right, for she winced.

"Oh, my dear, I never realized. After all this time, too. I never knew David, of course. One didn't." The snob factor was clear in her tone. She had not considered David O'Hara worthy of her niece.

"Why not?" Sam challenged hotly, impatient with her prejudice even though he didn't understand it.

"Ah, child, all men are your brothers. It was not the same with us. How much has Mirabel told you?"

"She told me about her husband and that they'd had a son."

"No more than that?" The woman's eyes narrowed slightly as she considered. "What do you know of David?"

"Only his name, David O'Hara, and that he's..." Sam's voice trailed off as denial flashed across her face.

"Mirabel never told you," the older woman snapped. "You've got your information from someone else and you're pursuing it out of curiosity. I have half a mind to tell Mirabel you've been snooping."

The envelope in Sam's purse confirmed the snooping, but he couldn't begin to guess what had led her to that speculation. "Miss Thorn, it's true that Mirabel didn't tell me much. She said she'd given away her son and that the boy's father was named David."

"David...O'Hara, you said?"

"David," Sam repeated. "I found this." He held out the envelope. This woman would never help him if he wasn't entirely honest with her.

She took it warily, then her face relaxed a little. "Oh. I see. My apologies, child. I do believe you mean well by my niece." But she hadn't before. What had been different? Why should the mention of David O'Hara's last name make such a difference? Was it a false name? Had there been a Witness Protection Program back then? Was that why she'd left him and run? It made as much sense as anything and it explained why she felt the search for her son a hopeless quest.

"I don't think I can help you," Mary Thorn continued. "Some things are better left alone."

"Not this, Miss Thorn. You haven't seen Mirabel today. You don't know how strongly she feels about it."

Miss Thorn's face was thoughtful. "Perhaps you're right. Mirabel would never discuss it with me. She knew how much I disapproved. You, of all people, might understand Mirabel best right now."

"Why me 'of all people'?" Sam wondered.

Miss Thorn shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't feel it ever helps to dig too deeply into the past. Once this moon landing is over, Mirabel's memories fade again. Much better that way."

"No, Miss Thorn, I don't think so."

The woman's face hardened a little at Sam's presumption. "That will be enough, child. I appreciate that you are concerned for my niece, but I have no intention of resurrecting memories of that place and those experiences. Better that Mirabel forget." Determination etched itself upon her face in unyielding lines.

"I don't think Mirabel will ever forget," Sam replied as she shoed him in the direction of the doorway. "I only hope you don't regret what you're doing now."

That finished it as far as Miss Thorn was concerned. Her face closed away completely. Unable to tell her that her niece might be dead in two days, Sam turned away helplessly. There must be another way to begin the search. But at the moment, he didn't have the least idea what it was.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mirabel Thorn returned from her dinner with the Hestons in fine fettle, and only someone who was looking for it would have seen the grim unhappiness in her eyes. Sam, who had waited for her in the elegant salon just off the main hall, watched her breeze into the house and pass her wrap to the maid who had been waiting for the sound of her car.

Waving the girl away, Mirabel turned to Sam. "What, Lynx? No Gary?"

"Not tonight. I haven't heard from him." *Which suits me just fine.* He hadn't heard from Al either, though, and that did worry him.

As if summoned by the thought, Al appeared in the shadows at the far side of the room, watching Mirabel Thorn with the look of someone who had been a fan for years. The distraction that had plagued him earlier hadn't gone, but he shunted it aside as he approached.

"This is great, Sam," he exulted, his eyes never leaving the actress. "Mirabel Thorn. What a woman she was--and still is."

"A pity you're a hologram," Sam muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"What was that, dear?" Mirabel asked as she prepared herself a martini at the bar in the corner.

"I asked if you'd had a good time."

It didn't sound the same, but she accepted it. "Yes, it was pleasant enough. But look at you. That's a truly significant look. You haven't spent the day worrying about my little outburst, have you?"

"How could I help it? I'd like to help you, Mirabel."

"I don't think you can. You should be out with your young man. Aunt Mary says she met the two of you last week."

"Did she?"

"She wouldn't say anything about him. Is he one of those long-haired types you see on television?"

"What's wrong with long haired types?" Sam stalled. "It's just a form of self-expression."

"I wonder. I fail to see what can be expressed by the cultivation of deliberate filth."

The doorbell chimed. "You get it, dear," Mirabel urged.

"This should be interesting, Sam," Al chipped in. He had been too quiet. Usually ready to comment on everything around him, he had listened to the exchange between Sam and Mirabel in utter silence, as if concentrating on both Sam's reality and his own.

"Interesting?" Sam echoed.

Al walked through the wall and stuck his head and shoulders back in again. "It's Gary Sato," he announced.

"Oh boy," moaned Sam as he went to answer it, leaving the actress staring after him in perplexity.

Gary Sato was the long-haired type after all. He was tall for a Japanese American, his hair was down past his shoulders and he wore bell bottomed pants, a flowered shirt and sandals. "Lynn," he greeted Sam cheerfully, leaning forward to give him a light kiss before Sam realized what he was doing. Backpedaling wildly, he came to a halt as he collided with Mirabel in the hallway.

Gary didn't look especially surprised, though Sam saw Al chuckling at his discomfiture. Instead the young man stared at Mirabel Thorn with wide, amazed eyes. Another fan, Sam realized, wondering if Lynn Adams had been encountered deliberately to give Sato a chance to meet the actress.

"This is Gary Sato," he introduced. "Mirabel Thorn."

Since Mirabel had expressed an interest in Gary that morning, Sam expected her to do the polite thing and invite him in. Instead, she stiffened a little, drew back as if she had been accosted by an obnoxious autograph hound, and said coolly, "How do you do."

Gary tensed up, too. Sam stared at Mirabel, wondering if he was being treated to an example of racial prejudice or if the woman simply didn't like having her privacy invaded.

"I don't like the look of this, Sam," Al piped up. "She isn't acting now. She's really upset."

Caught in an awkward situation, Sam said quickly, "Maybe we can offer Gary a drink?"

"Fine," Mirabel replied. "But I'm tired. I'm going to bed." At the last minute, she turned to Gary, put out a hand to him and gave him a warm smile that was only slightly forced. "Pardon me, but I am very tired. This has been a trying time for me. I hope you will forgive my bad manners."

"Of course, Miss Thorn." What else could he say?

When she had gone, the young man's eyes narrowed. "What kind of scene is she into? She looked like I spooked her. I didn't mean to do that."

"I don't know. She's been edgy about something today. It's not personal. I'm worried about her. I think it might be better if I didn't go out tonight."

"That's telling him, Sam. You haven't much time. Finding Mirabel's son is the most important thing and you've got less than two days to do it in."

"I know, Al, but where do I look?"

Gary gave him an odd glance.

"I was thinking of something else," Sam defended himself. "She's misplaced something."

"It must be something important to get her all riled up like that."

"It is." He walked out with Gary, deftly managed to avoid another kiss, and shut the door with relief.

"Now what, Al?" he demanded. "Where do we go from here?"

"The late news," Al replied predictably, grinning. "The Apollo mission."

"Right." In spite of everything, Al wasn't distracted enough to have forgotten that.

Al's knowledge of the space program filled in some gaps for Sam: he wasn't sure if they were memory gaps brought about by leaping or if he had never known, but enough of the scientist remained for him to enjoy himself immensely, and the two of them sat talking companionably for nearly an hour before something back at the Project claimed Al's attention. He paused as if listening, nodded once, then turned back to Sam.

"Trouble?" the time traveler asked, noting the way Al's shoulders sagged as if with fatigue. He'd long wondered if Al had time to lead a normal life between appearing to Sam and helping him work his way through crisis after crisis.

"Nothing we can't handle," Al replied evasively, then he registered the intensity of Sam's stare and shrugged. "At least we hope not. Commander Ames--remember him?"

Sam closed his eyes, concentrating. "Tall man with a mustache?" he hazarded.

Al nodded. "He's Naval Intelligence. They think they've found a leak. The demonstrators are a cover. I've got to go back. I'll see you in the morning." He stepped into the doorway of light, turned and looked back at Sam.

"Al?" Sam clasped his hands behind his back in an effort to avoid the futility of reaching out a hand to his friend. "Be careful."

The older man nodded once and pulled the 'door' closed behind him.

*I hadn't thought of an easy solution for Mirabel by morning, though I lay awake for hours running various ideas round and round in my head. It might have been easier if I hadn't been so worried about Al and the Project. He'd kept it from me when we'd been in danger of losing funding, and he was keeping it from me now, minimizing the danger because there was nothing I could do about it. Frustrated, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep until the wee hours of the morning. When the alarm went off at seven I groaned and pulled the blankets over my head, unwilling to face another day as a woman. I had to save a woman who was ashamed to let me help her while my best friend faced danger I couldn't help him with.*

*There must be a way to find Mirabel's son. I hadn't yet been pitch forked into a situation I couldn't handle, though I'd had to wing it more than once. This time, though, I think Ziggy was tied up with other, more immediate crises than a middle aged woman in 1969. If worse came to worst, I'd stick with Mirabel all day on the 21st. If I*

*was in the car with her, I could prevent the accident. Al hadn't said anyone was with her. That one change might make the difference and give me more time to track down the long lost O'Hara boy.*

*If nothing else, I could avoid miniskirts today. I donned a pair of blue jeans and a sweatshirt that read 'We Shall Overcome' in large red letters. At least I wouldn't have Al leering at me the way he had yesterday whenever Lynx's looks had caught his attention.*

When Sam came downstairs, Mirabel was standing hesitantly before her television set, her hand stretched out toward it. As he watched, she drew back, then reached out again. The networks would be full of Apollo 11 coverage, and Mirabel would use the landing as something to hang her guilt upon.

Maybe confronting it directly would help. Sam reached past her and switched it on. "Are you excited about the landing?"

"It's a part of history," she said coolly, then her face crumpled. "Oh, God, Lynx, David would have loved this. I thought him mad to be so obsessed with going to the moon. It was nothing but science fiction then, and I never dreamed it would come in our lifetime."

"He would have wanted you to see it for him," Sam suggested tentatively.

"We used to go stargazing," she went on, caught up in the memories. "They let him bring his telescope, and we spent many a night watching the moon's craters and the rings of Saturn and Jupiter's moons. It was so beautiful. If we could have gone off alone, just the two of us, and left it all behind, I think we would have been happy."

"Why couldn't you, Mirabel? What do you mean, they *let* him bring the telescope?" It was a strange way to put it. He wondered once more about the Witness Protection Program. Surely during the war, other considerations had been more important.

She shuddered and turned to the television set, letting Walter Cronkite's enthusiasm distract her from the questions. Finally she said, "I don't want to tell you. You've never experienced anything like it. You, with your passion for freedom and causes, would never understand why it happened--why we let it happen. It was different then."

"Tell me, Mirabel. I want to help you. I know you mean to, eventually. All this--" a gesture at the screen--"has reminded you of David. It's better to face it. You paid for it long ago. No matter what it was, it couldn't be worse than the hell you're living in now."

She opened her mouth to speak, then shook her head. "No. I couldn't bear to see you turn away from me, too. We'll sit down together and watch men walk on the moon, and that's it." She gathered her sorrow and guilt within again and the moment passed.

When Al arrived, he looked as if he hadn't slept at all. His eyes were smudged with exhaustion and his step lacked its usual bounce, but when Sam, with a cautious glance at Mirabel, opened his mouth to comment, the project observer shook his head.

"Not now, Sam. Did I make it in time? They're not down yet?"

"Nearly down," Sam explained. Mirabel looked at him but didn't seem to suspect anything.

"Oh, this is great," Al exulted, 'sitting' on the couch beside his friend and leaning toward the screen. He started to call encouragement to the Eagle, and echoing the astronauts' words to Houston as if he'd memorized the transcript of the mission. Sam was taken back to his own memories of staring enraptured at the screen while man set foot upon another world for the first time. It didn't feel like a rerun now but as if it was happening again all over, still new. Al's delight made it all the more fun.

When the Eagle touched down, Al sprang to his feet, waving his arms in the air in triumph, and Sam, caught up in the moment, copied him.

Remembering Mirabel, he turned to her, to share his excitement. She sat unable to tear her eyes from the screen, tears slipping silently down her face. There was a quiet joy in her expression that overwhelmed the unhappiness and the guilt, though Sam suspected they would return once this special day was over.

Just after Neil Armstrong made his 'giant leap for mankind', the doorbell rang and Sam went to answer it. It was Gary Sato. "I heard it all on the car radio," he said. "I saw them land but something told me to come over here. I hope you don't mind."

"Come and join the party " Sam preferred to deal with Gary Sato in company.

Mirabel stiffened when Gary came in, but relaxed again when he started babbling about the landing. "It's great! I never thought we'd do it, did you? I've been watching the space program since the beginning. Since Sputnik, even."

"Sputnik?" Sam echoed doubtfully. That was another one lost to his memory.

"Tell you later," Al said. Now that it had happened, he was distracted again, his attention back at the project.

"Yeah, even that long ago," Gary replied. "My dad was a space buff. That's why I got into it. This is what we should be doing with the money they're putting into Viet Nam. The space program. The technology they're developing can do all kinds of things. Heart research, agriculture, communications. Use it for peace rather than war."

"I hate to think what this kid will make of SDI," Al muttered to Sam.

"Did you enjoy it, Miss Thorn?" Gary asked her.

She hesitated. "Yes. I...I did. Seeing you and Lynx enjoy it so much means a lot to me. My...first husband was a...space buff, as you put it. I was watching as much for him as for myself."

"Yeah," agreed Gary gruffly, as if trying to hide the fact that he was moved.

"Sam, I've gotta get out of here," Al said with sudden urgency. "Make an excuse and go outside." He melted through the wall.

Sam did, quick, and though the others stared after him in some astonishment, he fled outside where he found Al waiting for him.

"It's gotten out of hand, Sam," Al said quickly. "I might have to leave you on your own for a few days."

"You mean the Project is compromised?" Sam demanded urgently. "Al, get out of there. Don't worry about me. I'll be safe here. Don't risk yourself."

"We can't let them destroy Ziggy and the Accelerator," Al insisted. He slid a hand inside his shirt and pulled out a gun.

Everything happened at once. Al turned, shouting at something Sam couldn't see, started to run. Then his body jerked and he staggered, catching himself with an effort. Blood seeped through the side of his yellow and green shirt, a lot of blood.

"Al!" screamed Sam, grabbing for him automatically and futilely. His friend swayed, started to fall, jerked to a stop at an angle as if someone had caught him. The 'door' slid shut behind him and Sam was alone.

"Al!" he cried once more. "Damn it, Al, don't you dare leave me here like this."

Helpless to aid Al, Sam raised his eyes to heaven. "You got me into this," he accused. "You did it so I could help people in trouble. Well now my best friend is in trouble and I'm stuck here. Let me leap back there, even if I can't stay. Al needs me right now. He needs me more than Mirabel does." His hands clenched into fists so tight that his fingernails--Lynx's sharp scarlet fingernails--drew blood from his palms. "I'll do anything," he vowed, a solemn oath he would never break. "Take me home. Al needs me."

He closed his eyes, but the sensation he had come to recognize, the prelude to leaping, didn't happen. Instead Mirabel and Gary ran toward him, shouting Lynx's name.

*Oh, God, what do I do now?* Sam thought helplessly. How could he stay here without knowing if Al were even alive. He batted away Gary's hands.

"What's wrong, Lynn?" Gary demanded urgently. "You were talking to someone named Al last night. Who is he? Where is he?" He looked around as if expecting to see a rival boyfriend lurking in the shrubbery.

Mirabel rose to the occasion. She peered at Sam's face and then she put her arms around him. "There, there, dear child. Don't cry. Tell me what's wrong?"

Cry? Sam hadn't realized there were tears in his eyes, compounded of fear for Al and frustration at his inability to go to him. It was hard to stand passively accepting comfort as Lynx would have done if she had been in crisis.

"I think she's got a kind of psychic linkage," Mirabel said to Gary. "She's always had ESP. The Ouija board works for her. I don't think Al is here now. It's someone who matters to her. She can sense him across a great distance."

Lynx was psychic? Sam wasn't sure he believed in that, but he wished he'd known earlier. It might still help, though he couldn't concentrate on Mirabel's crisis at the moment. But when they went indoors and Mirabel insisted on forcing some brandy down Sam's throat, Al still hadn't returned. It looked like he was in for a long wait.

If Al--if something permanent had happened (he couldn't think the final words), if the Project were destroyed, he might never go home. He didn't know if he'd be stuck here or not. *Please, not in a woman's body forever.*

The Apollo landing had lost its magic, and no one objected when Gary shut off the television and sat down beside Sam. When Sam shuddered and pulled back, Gary respected that.

"I'll stay, but only if you want me to," he offered. "I can tell you don't want me to touch you or even hold your hand. Is Mirabel right? Is it some psychic thing? Can you tell me?"

Sam nodded. It was as good an excuse as any, and, thanks to Ziggy, he might have passed off his knowledge as a psychic gift. "Sometimes, I'm in touch with someone who isn't here, not in this time. I don't know if you can believe that or not."

Gary looked skeptical, but Sam's frantic yells must have been convincing.

"Mirabel knows," continued Sam. "And if she believes, maybe she'll believe it when I tell her she can't go off alone tomorrow. Mirabel, it's to save your life. Will you listen to me?"

"Of course, dear child. I'll stay with you and take care of you. I won't go anywhere tomorrow without you. Will that do?"

Sam nodded, startled to feel sluggish, groggy. He forced his head up and looked at her accusingly. "What have you done?" he asked through thick lips.

"Something to make you sleep. I think you need it."

"No!" cried Sam, attempting to struggle up, though he went limp against Gary's shoulder. He was only vaguely conscious of being carried upstairs and put to bed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sam spent an uneasy night trapped in the depths of sleep, ever struggling to awaken. He was subliminally aware of the others taking turns sitting with him and once he heard them arguing about calling a doctor. Mirabel insisted that he would be fine in the morning but Gary insisted he'd never seen Lynn look so upset. He implied, however delicately, that her problem might be mental rather than a psychic feedback.

"Nonsense," cried Mirabel high-handedly. So accustomed was she to having her own way that her assurance carried the day--or night--and Gary backed down.

"But one of us should stay with her," he argued.

Having won her point, Mirabel was conciliatory. "True. I'm sure you're worried about her. So am I. Shall we divide the night between us?"

Sam tried to protest the need for someone to sit with him, but the sleeping draft Mirabel had put in his drink had done its work well. He could hear them, but he couldn't fight past it.

Neither could he sleep completely. His adrenalin had kicked in, or something had, and his nerves jangled with tension, prohibiting the deep sleep that the drug was meant to induce, leaving him in a strange limbo. When one of them spoke to him, he would mumble an inarticulate reply, but he couldn't keep up a conversation.

The limbo state induced confidences, for Mirabel talked nonstop as she sat by his bed. Sam wished he could concentrate, for she discussed David, their life together, their marriage in November, 1940, all their plans and dreams.

"Of course Pearl Harbor finished it," she concluded in a tight, controlled voice. "It had to."

The war. Sam hadn't allowed World War II into his equation. David O'Hara must have gone into the service. Where had he been stationed that he would have taken his wife with him? Sam tried to reason it out, but it wouldn't come. Her words ran together for awhile as he slept more deeply, and he came out of them to hear her still talking.

"...David would take the baby. Without my son, I could go home. David agreed. He knew I didn't belong. I'd gone only for my love for him, my loyalty. But I was so out of place. Oh God, Lynx, we fought the Germans and their concentration camps. They were death camps, it's true, but how holy we pretended to be when we were little better. Paranoia is a vicious disease."

That struck a chord in Sam's mind, but he couldn't focus and it went away again. When next able to concentrate on anything at all, it was Gary's voice, going on and on in a reluctant apology.

"...never meant to hurt you, Lynn. I don't know if you can forgive me. It's true that I believe in what we're doing, the marches, the causes. It's true that I would have been there that first time anyway. I might not have looked for you, though. It was for her. Call me what you will, but I wanted to see her."

His hand grasped Sam's. "But then I got to know you. So it was more than just using you. You've got to believe that." He raised Sam's hand to his lips.

Sam drifted back to sleep again, a sleep filled with nightmares: of AI, lying bloodstained and dead, of the Project, destroyed and abandoned, of himself bouncing back and forth in time forever. He had never leaped into his future. If the string theory meant he could leap anywhere within his lifetime, it might mean his life never went past the day he stepped into the Accelerator and vanished into the past. How could he go back if it was all destroyed?

*Oh, AI, he thought helplessly, and woke.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*It was morning and I was alone. I lay there, groggy and slightly disoriented, then I groaned and forced myself to get up and take a shower. The water sluiced away the last of the cobwebs that had clogged my brain and I remembered that this was the day Mirabel Thorn had died. I had to stop her.*

*Even worse was the feeling I had missed something important that would put everything into perspective. I tried to remember the nighttime monologues but all that came was the knowledge that Gary had used Lynn to meet Mirabel. Mirabel had talked, too, bitterly. Something about the Germans? It wouldn't come clear, but I knew it was important.*

Gary and Mirabel were seated at the dining table together playing with their food as if neither of them had an appetite. They looked up, startled and guilty, as if they had secrets together, but Sam realized that their secrets were not shared ones. Mirabel looked ten years older than she had two days ago. She had eschewed

make up today, and the bags under her eyes were as dark as bruises. Her expression lightened momentarily when she saw Sam.

"Lynx. Are you all right this morning?"

"I'm all right." Sam wondered if it was true. Al hadn't come back. Time was running out for Mirabel and Al hadn't come back. Al was hurt. If it wasn't serious, he'd have moved heaven and earth to come back, but he wasn't here.

"You look like you didn't sleep a wink all night," he told them both. "I didn't need to be watched."

"We thought you did." Gary jumped up and pulled out a chair for Sam. "You scared us yesterday." He bent and kissed Sam's cheek. Sam flinched slightly.

Gary seemed to expect that. He didn't look offended. Resuming his own chair, he said, "I've got to go to work today. I had yesterday off so I could see the moon landing but today is back to the grind." He jumped up, grinned wryly at Lynx, bobbed his head at Mirabel, and departed in a hurry.

Reminded of Apollo 11, it was Mirabel's turn to flinch. Sam felt trapped in the middle of secrets, secrets he could bring into the open with the right word. But the right word was imprisoned in his confused memories of the night and nothing came.

The maid brought him his breakfast and he eyed it with distaste. His mouth tasted like the bottom of a bird cage and he had no real appetite, so he sat pushing the food around on his plate just as the other two had. Where are you, Al? Are you all right? Are you even alive?

\*\*\*\*\*

Al might have doubted it at first, for when he finally opened his eyes, everything blurred before them. Pain dug talons into his side, but movement beside him and the prick of an injection took the worst of it away. There were nearby voices, but he didn't concentrate on them at first. Then as the pain let up and he found the ability to think of something else, memory came back. Sam. The lab. Someone in a Naval uniform going berserk with a gun, breaking into the Imaging Chamber.

"It was just one man," explained a familiar voice beside him. His eyes narrowed, trying to focus on the tall, mustached figure sitting beside his bed. "They forced us to bring in the extra security because they had a man planted there, but we got him. The ringleaders are being rounded up now. It's all over."

"Harry?" Al was still floating a little but he could see the sheepish look on the Commander's face. Ames had been assigned to the project for six months now and Al liked him. "What about the Project? Sam?"

"Nothing's been damaged and Gushi has Ziggy working double time to find more information for you. We've picked up a lot more that'll help."

"Then we need to get it to Sam." Al tried to sit up only to fall back as a wave of dizziness swept over him.

"Not so fast. The doctor says you need to spend three days flat on your back and that's a conservative estimate." Ames grinned. "Alone," he added with a twinkle that brought out his dimples. No man in his middle forties should have dimples like that. Tina spent a lot more time than Al liked eyeing the Naval Intelligence officer.

"That's worse than being wounded," Al objected, but he let himself be pushed flat again. "How long have I been out?"

"Nearly a day. It's not serious but you lost a lot of blood and you're weak."

"Well, if I can't get up, I want to see what Ziggy's got. Now," he added urgently when Ames seemed disinclined to obey.

Heaving a sigh, the younger man passed over his hand link and Al held it up--surprising how much effort that took--and read the data. What he saw was as far from reassuring as it could get. "Do you know what this means?" he demanded, forcing himself up on one elbow with will power alone.

"You can't get out of bed," Ames said wearily. Al doubted he'd got any sleep since the incident began.

"Then wheel me there on a gurney. Ziggy says that Lynn Adams was in the car with Mirabel Thorn and she died in the accident, too. Sam doesn't know that. He probably thinks if he's with her, he can change things. We've got to tell him." He hit the side of the device to make the data flow. "Now we find out about Mirabel's past," he exclaimed in outrage. "A fat lot of good it does me to know who Mirabel's son is if I'm stuck here. Why couldn't we get that yesterday or the day before? Where's Gushi?"

"Off duty," Ames replied. The corners of his mouth curled up beneath his mustache. "He probably knows you'll be out for his blood. I went over the data, though. If you try to get up now, it'll set your recovery back and it'll mean even more days in bed."

"It won't kill me, though," Al replied. "I don't have to do a strenuous workout. I just have to talk to Sam. At least get me a wheelchair, Harry. Come on, do it. Get me a wheelchair. If you don't Sam could die."

When Ames still hesitated, Al drew himself up with what little dignity he could possess in a hospital gown and said, "I outrank you, Mister. Get me a wheelchair right now and see if you can't find my clothes. We've got to get to Sam before that accident happens." He felt himself starting to sag again and he caught the IV stand to hold himself upright. "I suppose this has to come too?" he asked with irritation.

"You're as stubborn as they come," Ames replied. "I've rarely met worse, and they didn't pull rank." He grinned. "All right. One wheelchair coming up, but if the doctor finds out I had a hand in this, he'll skin me alive."

"He won't hear a word of it from me."

Al waited with growing urgency. It seemed like Ames was away a long time, and Al couldn't help wondering if he'd gone while the getting was good. He wouldn't do that to Sam, though, at least Al hoped not. Gradually he got his balance, but he was abominably weak. He hadn't felt this bad since Nam--and that was one memory he didn't want to resurface. He shunted it aside and concentrated on Sam. He was out there trying to work with incomplete information. He had seen the shooting too and been powerless to help. For a doctor, that would be hard. For a friend, even harder.

He had to struggle to stay awake, but eventually he was rewarded. Harry Ames returned with a wheelchair. Draped over one arm was a paisley robe and he had a pair of slippers tucked under his arm. Deftly, he helped Al into the robe and seated him in the chair. He unhooked the IV bag from its stand and fastened it to a post at the back of the wheelchair. It seemed to take forever.

Al seethed with frustration. "We don't have all day," he snapped. "Where have you been?"

"I routed Gushi out," Ames replied. "He's getting everything set up now. We'll need to center you on Sam wherever he is."

"Right." Al felt a wave of gratitude for this man's support, but he couldn't really think past it. Sam was out there, heading into danger without knowing the right answers. It might already be too late. "Just hurry. Get me to Sam."

\*\*\*\*\*

*I think July 21, 1969 was one of the longest days I'd ever spent. Mirabel was uncommunicative. She watched moonwalks on television with a grave face, and when she wasn't doing that, she was watching me. I knew she'd said something important to me while I slept, but it wouldn't come clear. She was afraid I remembered it, too. But the drug was every bit as good at Swiss cheesing my brain as leaping was. Something about the Germans? No, that wasn't quite right. Paranoia? She'd mentioned paranoia. Damn it, I needed to remember.*

*But every time I tried, I saw Al take that bullet, saw him fall, saw the spread of blood. Depending on the angle of the bullet, he might not have been too seriously hurt--if he got treatment. If terrorists had taken over the Project, treatment might have been the last thing on their minds. Where are you, Al? I thought helplessly as I tried to make Mirabel talk.*

"Mirabel, I'm worried about you. You look terrible."

"Remember my vanity, child. That's not the right think to say to me."

"I want to talk to you about David's son. I know how upset you are by all of this. I know Apollo 11 has brought back a lot of memories. Help me help you. Where was your baby born?"

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You've been talking to Aunt Mary, haven't you? I suppose she told you." She spun around and mixed herself another drink. It was her third one. When Sam tried to talk her out of it, she went cold and said stiffly, "I think you forget yourself."

Sam let it go. Maybe he couldn't stop her drinking, but he could stop her driving, even if he had to take her car keys away. "Yes, I talked to your aunt, but she didn't tell me anything."

"She must have told me something. I thought you knew the other night, but I was wrong, wasn't I? It was only a coincidence."

"What was a coincidence?" She refused to answer. "I can't stay here, Lynx. I can't sit watching television. I want to get out into the fresh air. I want to take a drive."

"You can't," Sam objected involuntarily.

"Can't I?" Sarcasm cut through her voice like a knife. "Why, precisely? I think you forget I'm your employer and not the other way around."

"Then let me drive," Sam insisted. "It's only common sense, Mirabel. You've had too much to drink. You don't want to drive into a telephone pole. Think of the bad publicity."

"I suppose you're right. All right, child. We'll go out and find our fresh air. It will clear my head, not that that will be any great advantage."

"We can take my van," Sam urged. That would be another difference. It might be the one factor that could reverse her fate.

"What, ride in the Peacemobile?" Mirabel's eyes twinkled briefly. "Well, why not? I can't let myself become set in my ways." She tossed off the rest of her drink. She wasn't drunk, but neither was she in full control. Humming to herself, she went to put on her public face.

Sam got his car keys, sure that trouble was waiting around the next bend.

*If I did the driving, Mirabel couldn't run the van off the cliff. She sat beside me humming and singing little snatches of song on the car radio. Together we harmonized on Those Were the Days and Hey Jude. But when I tried to point the van toward more populated city streets, she gave me wrong directions and I found myself heading out along a two lane road that wound in and out among the trees as we headed further into the hills.*

Mirabel fell silent as the trees closed around them. Her face was remote, and Sam, who kept glancing at her, knew he was running out of time. "This can't go on," he told her. "It's eating away at you. You've got to let it go, tell someone about it."

"I can't Lynx. I just can't." She turned her face away, then she gasped and put her head into her hands.

Following her gaze, Sam saw nothing more threatening than a high barbed wire fence running along the edge of the road. Something about it reminded him of a prison, but that surely wouldn't have upset Mirabel. She had talked of concentration camps. But she had never been in one any more than she had been in a prison.

Then it clicked in his head. There had been camps in America at the time of Mirabel's brief marriage to David. They had been established after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. 'Of course Pearl Harbor finished it,' Mirabel had said in the night as she bared her soul to the sleeping Sam. After Pearl Harbor, with the threat of a Japanese invasion looming large, the government in its 'wisdom' had interned Japanese American citizens in camps. Suppose David O'Hara was really David Ohara, Nisei. Suppose Mirabel had gone with him into the camp. Sam's unreliable memory produced the information that a Japanese American woman married to a Caucasian man would be allowed to stay out of the camps, but a Japanese American man married to a Caucasian woman was forced to go. If Mirabel had loved her husband, she would have gone with him.

The life would be hard for anyone; the confinement, the suspicion of the general public, the close quarters. But for Mirabel, alienated by cultural differences and perhaps resented, it would have been even harder. If Sam was right, he could begin to understand why she might have fled the camp as soon as possible, even if it meant leaving her child behind.

Thoughts of the child recalled the other late night monologue--Gary Sato, the right age to be Mirabel's son, confessing he'd scraped an acquaintance with Lynn Adams to meet Mirabel Thorn. Yet he'd displayed no typical groupie behavior, no autograph demands, no requests for photos. Gary's interest in Lynn was perfunctory, or he would have tried harder to understand Sam's attempts at distance. He must have known who his mother was. Perhaps a relative of David's had raised him, someone who had known his mother's name.

So far, it was all speculation so Sam decided to test it. "What is it, Mirabel?" he asked gently. "Does that wire remind you of Manzanar or whichever camp it was?"

Her head came up out of her hands so fast she risked whiplash. "How did you know?" she demanded, stricken. "Lynx, how did you know?"

"You told me, in the night. Not everything, but enough for me to put the clues together. Your husband was David Ohara. He was Japanese American."

"Yes," she admitted, avoiding his eyes. "You've guessed it all. I went with him into the camp. We were newlyweds and I loved him too much to stay behind. He said what mattered was being together, and I agreed, but die more time passed the harder it became. The others were decent to me, but I was different. I didn't fit in. I started to resent David and he me. We began to grow apart. When our son was born, I knew I couldn't stay. Without the war, we could have overcome our differences and been happy. But the war bred suspicion. There were even people in the camp who thought I was a government spy, there to report any treason. There was no treason, of course. It wasn't like that. But the war finished it for us and I left. I gave David our son. When he died, his sister must have taken the boy. I never heard her married name."

"I think," Sam said cautiously, "that it might be Sato."

"Your Gary?" she demanded urgently. "Oh, Lynx, no. When he first met me, he seemed to hate me."

"He doesn't know you, Mirabel. All he knows is that you gave him up. He can't love you without knowing you. But I think he arranged to meet me because I worked for you. Someone must have told him or else he researched you. He wouldn't have bothered if he hadn't wanted to know you."

"Do you think so?" She looked at him gratefully. "Oh, Lynx, I must talk to him. All I want is that chance."

"You talked to him during the night. How did he behave toward you then?"

"We mostly talked about you. Do you know, I thought he seemed rather guilty about you. Oh, Lynx, I think you're right, that he got to know you to meet me. I hope you're not heartbroken."

"I don't seem to be." Sam wondered what the real Lynx would feel, but Gary had not been surprised when Sam held him off. They had only known each other two weeks. Maybe Gary might come to care for her after Sam leaped--if he was able to leap again.

"That's good. But maybe when Gary and I can talk he can give some thought to you."

"I can wait," Sam assured her. "You're the one who matters now. Let's go home and I'll call him."

"All right." She sounded afraid, but determination had begun to creep into her voice. "Two miles further on, this road joins a main one. Keep going and I'll point you home."

"No, Sam, don't keep going," an urgent voice sounded in his ear. "You've got to stop right now. Don't drive any further. Hit the brakes."

"Al?" Sam nearly sprained his neck looking over his shoulder. Al was sitting in the back of the VW bus. He was wearing a robe over a hospital gown and an IV was attached to the back of his hand. He was pale and the effort it took him to sit up was so visible it hurt. But Sam had never seen anything more beautiful in his entire life.

"Al! Thank God you're alive!"

"Never mind that now, Sam. Stop the van. Stop right here. Pull over. Lynn Adams was in the accident with Mirabel and she died too. Stop!"

Sam hit the brakes as hard as he could--and the pedal went loosely to the floor. There were no brakes! Trying to pump the pedal, Sam knew a moment of sheer panic.

"Turn it off, Sam. Use the emergency brake!" Al was shouting now, waving his arms around. "Coast to a stop. Hurry. There's a steep downgrade coming up."

Instinct took over, and Sam obeyed, working the emergency lever as he shut off the bus. It didn't want to stop. He could see the start of the hill ahead. He steered onto the grass verge of the road, hoping the additional friction would complete the process. Beside him, Mirabel sat frozen, realizing the brakes had gone. She bit her lip and offered no extraneous advice, but her hands clutched the door frame and the dashboard, her knuckles white.

They were only a dozen yards from the top of the hill when the VW finally coasted to a halt. Sam closed his eyes for a moment, slumping over the wheel, then his head came up and he clambered into the back of the bus. "All You're alive!" He made to grab his friend in a fierce hug, stopping inches away, lowering his arms helplessly to his sides. That was one of the worst things about leaping about in time. Al came to him as a hologram. They could never touch.

"I know I am, Sam, but I wasn't so sure about you." Al looked shaken at the nearness of Sam's escape. For a moment, they stared at each other intently, then, with a grin, Al broke the tension. "I think you're in trouble. I can't imagine what Mirabel thinks of you right now."

"She thinks I'm psychic," Sam replied easily, dismissing Mirabel for the moment.

Al was momentarily distracted. "You know, Sam, you're right. Lynn told me in the waiting room that she was communing with spirits. Something about voices from beyond." He chuckled. "She wanted Tarot cards and she asked me to get her a Ouija board." His grin was a pale imitation of normalcy.

"You look terrible," Sam burst out fiercely. "You should be in bed."

"That's what the doctor said," agreed Al lugubriously. "He said three days. Three days *alone*. Sam, that's cruel and unusual punishment."

"That's beside the point. You're about to collapse. I hope somebody's looking out for you."

"Dr. Wade just came in," Al replied mournfully. "He'll haul me off in a minute."

"How bad is it? What about the Project? Is everything all right? What about you? You scared the hell out of me, Al."

"You! Try being there." He waved a hand dismissively. "This is nothing. I've known worse. And it's all over back there. We got them all. Forget about it. No," he added over his shoulder. "Not yet."

"Maybe you should go, Al. Get your rest. I've found out about Mirabel."

"Gary Sato," Al corroborated. "Ziggy finally came through with the data."

"I thought so. Mirabel drugged me and--"

"She *drugged* you?" Al's eyebrows shot up. "Are you all right?"

"They heard me yelling when you were shot and they thought I was losing it. She put something in my brandy to make me sleep."

"You hate brandy."

"She was very insistent." He grinned. "But she talked to me while I was asleep, and so did Gary, and I finally put it together just now."

"Good. You get them together and I'll see you later. They're starting to get testy. You'd think I could pull rank on them. What's the point of being an Admiral if you can't have things your own way?"

"As a doctor, I have to agree with them. Go to bed, Al, even alone. That's a medical order."

Al slid backwards before his eyes. "Later, Sam," he called before he vanished.

Sam turned cautiously to Mirabel. The actress was regarding him with great interest. "A doctor?" she prompted.

"In another life," Sam told her with a grin, expansive in his relief. "Reincarnation, Mirabel."

"I'm not sure I believe that. But I've seen you do stranger things. Finding lost items, predicting the future. Why shouldn't it surprise me that you talk to someone named Al from another time? I can only be glad he survived. Someday I hope you'll tell me the whole story." She collected herself as Sam got out of the bus and opened the door for her. "Now, I suppose we shall have to hitchhike home? Another new experience. Maybe I can use all of this in a role one day." She joined Sam on the road.

"You don't have to do it in platform heels," Sam replied, looking down at Mirabel's sensible footwear. At least his prospective blisters wouldn't leap with him.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Being a mother means more than simply giving birth, and there's more to being a son than the simple fact of being born. But when I phoned Gary Sato to come over and meet with his mother, I could sense that both of them wanted the meeting, even as they feared it. Mirabel had never paid her dues: she hadn't seen Gary through his childhood diseases or car-pooled him to school and scouts. But the tie of blood meant something to both of them. I'd never seen two people so nervous.*

Al arrived just before Gary did, looking marginally better. This time it didn't take all his strength to stay conscious. He waved at Sam with the calm lethargy of someone on pain medication. "So did I make it in time for the big reunion scene, Sam?"

"Barely," muttered Sam in an aside. "You've got no right to be here. Why aren't you in bed?"

"I got around the doctor. Just long enough to see you through tonight until you leap." He donned a wounded expression. "You wouldn't make me miss the good part, would you, Sam?"

"I thought the good part was the Apollo landing," Sam remarked just before he pulled open the door to admit Gary Sato.

"She knows about me?" he asked uneasily. "I didn't think she would."

"She didn't until I put two and two together," Sam explained. "But she wanted to find you. She was worrying herself sick about it."

"Apollo 11?" Gary asked. "My Mom--well, Irene Sato, my aunt, really--she told me about Mirabel. She told me about my father too, and how he'd dreamed about man in space. I've been out here a couple of years now--I grew up in Illinois--but I never thought of looking up my real mother, not until the Apollo 11 moon landing. I didn't know if it would matter to her, or if she'd even remember. God, Lynn, you must hate me for using you to get to her."

"Don't worry about that." Lynn could have done no more than Sam had about being used. With any luck, she'd soon be back, ready to fight for her own rights.

"After I got to know you, it wasn't really using you. Please, say you believe that."

Sam nodded. "I do. But right now, she's more important. Come on, Gary, I'll take you to her."

Al came, too. "This better work out, Sam. I think you have to reconcile them in order to leap out of here."

He grimaced, imagining weeks in miniskirts trying to make peace. But Gary appeared to want it, and Mirabel did, too. That had to be enough, didn't it?

Mirabel had been pretending to read a book, but when Sam ushered Gary into the room, she tossed it aside and rose abruptly. The color seeped from her face, leaving her bright red hair and her green eyes vivid against pale skin. She stretched out a hand as if expecting it to be slapped aside, and said doubtfully, "Gary?"

"Come on, Gary," Al rooted from the sidelines. "Do the right thing. Give her a fair shake."

Almost as if he'd heard Al's encouragement, Gary squared his shoulders and took a step forward. "Mirabel?" he began, then he shook his head impatiently and corrected himself. "Mother." Ignoring the outstretched hand, he swept her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

Her face crumpled and she wept soundlessly against his shoulder, her face shining with relief.

Sam discovered he was smiling broadly, and he turned away to catch Al grinning from ear to ear. Al enjoyed moments like this, though he didn't especially like admitting it. The old fraud, Sam thought fondly.

"I knew you could do it, Sam," Al told him.

"Then why am I still here?" The answer came to him before his friend could offer it. "I'm here to tell you to go back to bed and stay there until the doctor lets you up," he announced. "You still look terrible. The next time I see you, you'd better be rid of that IV."

Mirabel and Gary drew apart and he led his mother to the sofa. "We've got a lot to talk about," he told her.

"That looks like your cue to get out of here, Sam," Al remarked.

Since the newly reunited mother and son were ignoring him completely, Sam grinned and said, "I'm ready. Go to bed, At. Just be glad I can't come and tuck you in."

Al's eyes twinkled. "I just might let you," he announced and keyed himself a door just as Sam felt himself begin to leap. Where would he go this time?

With any luck at all, he'd be a man again. He just wasn't cut out for miniskirts.