

## AFTERSHOCK

*By Sheila Paulson*

The familiar blue light surrounded Sam Beckett, presaging the end of a leap and the start of a new one, but this time, it was different. In the midst of the blueness were sudden brilliant white globes shooting past his field of vision so quickly he wasn't sure he'd seen them only to return from a totally different direction and pass him again. He tried to call Al's name, but the hologram could evidently see nothing different for he was calmly pushing buttons on his handlink to open the 'door' to the project, and had not noticed Sam's predicament. When Sam tried to call Al's name, his vocal cords refused to function and he saw Al fade away as the strange effect blurred his surroundings and whisked him away. Trapped in the blue leap effect, frozen in time, only his eyes could move and they followed the white lights, the effect strange and hypnotizing. There was no pain at first. There wasn't even any fear. Caught in a strange and childlike wonder, Sam could only gaze in disbelief as the lights coalesced, surrounding him, enveloping him. They grew so bright he had to squeeze his eyes tightly shut against the searing of his eyelids and in the process, consciousness deserted him....

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, if he had been unconscious for hours or if the effect had been instantaneous, but there had been a hiatus in his awareness, and now he lay flat on his back on a hard and unyielding surface. He sensed brightness on the other side of his closed eyelids, but he heard no sound, nothing to give him a clue as to his present location. Sam tried to concentrate, to think clearly, but it was difficult to reason through the disorientation. Gradually as he lay there his senses stabilized and he realized he was alive and breathing.

Slowly Sam opened his eyes, uncertain of what to expect. He stared up at a white ceiling high overhead and when he turned his head, he found himself alone in a huge chamber, lying in solitary splendor upon a table-like bed. The nearest wall to his bed contained shadowy geometric patterns at an angle as if the wall itself had been thrust abruptly out of solid earth. In the other directions the walls were further away and Sam couldn't tell if they were blurred because of whatever had brought him here or draped with insubstantial coverings. There were a few pillars but they held a strange, unearthly appearance.

Shaking his head, he pondered the mystery, unable to recognize the room or its function, unable to compare it with anything that made sense. He knew he sometimes failed to remember things because of his Swiss cheese brain, but this time it was different. The other times contained a feeling of familiarity as if he'd once known but had forgotten. This was all new.

*Where am I? This isn't the Project. If I were home there'd be people all around, running tests . . . Al? Al, what have I leaped into this time? It looks like a science fiction movie, this huge place. It makes me wonder . . . I can't hear anything, no sounds at all, just a hollowness. If I'd been picked up by little green men, I'd feel something, wouldn't I? Some vibration through the floor, white noise at least as the ship moved. This silence isn't natural.*

A swish of moving white out of the corner of his eye made Sam put aside his pointless speculation and sit up easily, turning in that direction. No one was there now, but surely someone had been, a white robed figure. Perhaps this was a hospital after all. Maybe he was--dead. Maybe it was the morgue.

"I'm not dead," Sam said aloud and took his pulse to be sure. He could feel it beating steadily and normally beneath his fingers, only slightly elevated by his alarm at the weird leap. He was alive. He simply didn't understand where he was. Until he learned more, he'd have to play this like any other leap. Maybe he was on a movie sound stage? Did that make sense? Did anything?

He looked down at himself and discovered he was wearing his white leap-suit. Testing the material between his fingers confirmed it. That had to mean he was back at the project, didn't it? Yet this room was no part of the site that he could remember. Sam didn't think he could be home because he knew his memory wasn't back. He still couldn't recall where he lived or much about his past.

The table on which Sam sat was positioned upon a raised dais, with ramps rising to meet it from all four directions. Everything except the shadows were white, so bright it almost hurt his eyes. Could he be dead after all? He'd read a ghost story once that insisted there was no death, merely another dimension for those who had left the normal one behind. In such a place, would the traveler breathe and move like a living person, even believe himself still alive? Sam didn't know.

Where was AI. If this place were outside normal time, could AI even come to him? Maybe those moving lights he had seen had swept him away into another, more remote, time, into a different place, the future, even the dimension of the dead. Maybe he wasn't even on earth any more. Could he leap into an alien being? Someone on another planet? How could he help someone like that even if it were within his own lifetime?

"Where are you, AI?" he asked under his breath. He might feel more comfortable if AI arrived and started feeding him information gleaned through the handlink. Unless this place was too far away--unless Ziggy couldn't find him...

"Rest, Doctor Beckett. You are quite safe."

The voice was all around him yet it was not hollow and echoing but quiet and tranquil, reassuring. In spite of the attempted comfort, Sam began to shiver. Maybe this was no place on Earth but no place on another planet either. Maybe he hadn't simply leaped that last time. Maybe he had *died*.

"Am I dead?" he asked the bodiless voice. He wasn't ready to die. There were too many things unresolved in his life, too many things forgotten. If he were to die, it wasn't fair he'd go not knowing everything that was his to know, his family, his past, his life, friends. Not without AI or others who mattered to him, not without saying goodbye. "It's not fair," he muttered in a much lower voice.

"You are not dead, Dr. Beckett," the voice assured him. "You are merely--suspended in transit, in a dimension apart from your own. There is something to be accomplished before--"

"Before I go home?" Sam demanded eagerly.

"Not yet. There is still a purpose for you, still people who need you. Do not worry. Your 'leaping' is not without end. You *will* go home, and go home fairly soon. But not yet."

Sam shivered. He could feel power in that voice, though he was halfway sure it was not a malevolent power. Maybe this was the place where it all happened, the place where the power AI sometimes called, 'the man upstairs' directed Sam's leaps. Ziggy had theorized that God or Time or some power they had yet to understand had selected Sam when his first leap had gone wrong, chosen him to be the instrument of that power, to 'put things right that once went wrong.' Unless it happened between leaps, leaving him with no memory of the event, Sam had never before encountered the one who directed his leaps and chose their purpose. Why was it happening now?

"Are you the one who leaps me around?" he demanded.

"The one?" the voice chided gently. "You assume there is but one?"

So it would choose to be mystical and difficult, giving him no real answers. Was this a test and if so, what was the correct answer? "One of them then," Sam persisted. "Where is this place?"

"It is, as we told you, a 'world' apart from your own. Its location is not consistent, not as you understand space and time."

"Is this a spaceship?" Sam hazarded, looking around for a trace of hidden speakers, for doorways, for concealed figures, but he saw only the white room.

"Spaceship?" the voice echoed, a gentle amusement in the near androgynous voice. "It is all a matter of perception, isn't it, Dr. Beckett? Suppose powerful aliens visited a primitive culture and used their scientific devices to do their work. Might not the pastoral natives assume them to be powerful sorcerers using magical charms?"

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?" Sam asked. He couldn't remember if he had that quote exactly right or even if it was a quote, but it seemed appropriate.

"If you can understand that concept, perhaps you can see that many of your questions cannot be answered with words that will make sense to you, Dr. Beckett."

"Okay, forget where I am. Let's try why?" Sam asked.

"That is somewhat easier, though you must find the true answer yourself. You are of great value to us, Dr. Beckett. Your tolerance and willingness to care for other people, even those who are strangers to you, is rare. We

sensed that in you long ago, before you developed your project. We encouraged you to continue it. You are very valuable to us."

"You helped me?" Sam asked suspiciously. Were all his achievements boosted by the people of this place, instead of his own?

"No, Dr. Beckett. You helped yourself. We merely saw that, from time to time, you found a willing ear to listen, a willing hand to help. To do more would have been wrong. Your choices have always been your own. We would not take away free will."

Sam didn't know that he believed the voice, but he could do nothing about it now. "Why can't I see you?" he asked.

"It is our privilege to choose whether we appear to you or not. For now, it is better not. I can sense your next question. Why have we brought you here? You are here to put right a wrong, as you do on all your leaps. This time, however, the wrong is not a conscious one, and the one who has committed it does not even understand it exists. Yet its effects could damage all your future leaps and eventually prevent your returning home."

Sam stared at him, horrified. "If it's not a conscious wrong, how can I understand it?" he asked.

"You are a wise man, Dr. Beckett. It is important that you continue as you have been, doing good in your world, saving lives, making small changes for the better, for it is only through small changes that bigger ones may come. It is only through better understanding and better sharing that true fellowship will not die." The voice was silent a moment but before Sam could ask any of the questions that were trembling on his lips, the voice began to speak again. "You will not be disturbed. We will allow your observer to join you, and between the two of you, you will put right what once went wrong. Only when that is done will he return to the 'Project' and you begin to 'leap' again."

"How will AI find me?" Sam asked, craning his neck to look around, hoping to spot the being, lurking behind a pillar or a curtain, moving in the distant background. This didn't sound like one of the places Ziggy could pin down. If the voice knew him as Sam Beckett, perhaps he was here as himself, in his own body, in his own clothing. If that were so, was there anyone in the Waiting Room for AI to question? And without a body in the waiting room, AI must be going crazy, trying to understand what had happened to Sam. He must believe--all of them must believe--that Sam was dead.

"He will find you because we will permit it," the voice said with gentle reproach. "You do not doubt us, Dr. Beckett?"

"I don't understand you," Sam replied. It was hard to doubt this unlikely setup but it could be a major hoax. Perhaps a foreign power was experimenting with time travel and had hooked in on whatever energy frequencies were present in a leap.

Laughter filled the room, warm and amused but not malicious. "A foreign power, Dr. Beckett? Perhaps you have read too many 'spy novels.'"

"You can read my mind!" Sam blurted out, jumping to his feet and backing up against the table as if at bay. He didn't like this at all.

"Of course, Dr. Beckett. We always have. Surely now is a poor time to try to defend against us. Had we meant you harm, you would be long dead."

"So you say."

"I cannot convince you of our sincerity. So I will give you proof that at least some of what we say is true."

The familiar sound of the 'door' to Sam's own time sounded and, out of a square of light stepped Admiral AI Calavizzi, clad in a white blazer and glittery white pants, handlink tightly gripped in one hand, his face white and shaken. Instead of glowing with a myriad of colors the way it usually did, the device was as bleached of color as everything else about this place. Even AI's dark hair had a strange cast to it as if a mist overlaid everything and made it glitter with a translucent sheen. AI raised his hands and stared, frowning, at the sleeves of his jacket, at the handlink. The frown deepened as he hit it with the heel of one hand. As if he'd sensed another presence, or at least a threat, he looked around wildly and saw Sam.

"Al," Sam began eagerly, but before he could continue, Al lunged at him and paused a foot away, as if he didn't dare come closer for fear he would try to touch Sam and fail. Al rarely forgot he was present as a hologram and not in a physical body, though Sam occasionally caught himself with an aborted movement toward his friend.

"You're alive!" Al burst out, his eyes glittering so brightly Sam thought he was on the verge of tears. Gnawing on his bottom lip, Al raised thumb and forefinger to pinch at the bridge of his nose, spreading them wider to dash away any suspicious moisture. "We thought you were *dead*, Sam. You leaped and vanished. No one's in the waiting room, Ziggy shut down without cause. Gushie's nearly torn out all his hair trying to get her up again. We couldn't track you, and no one took your place. We've spent the past four days tearing everything apart, trying . . . And here you are--and you're *you!* You're in your own body. Damn it, Sam, what's going on?" He looked thoroughly shaken. "You've been gone *four days*," he repeated accusingly as if Sam could speak a magic word and change the time span.

"Four *days!*" Sam burst out in astonishment, realizing the circles under Al's eyes and the desperation in his face had been put there by a good cause. For four days Al must have believed him dead, and even now the observer had no way of knowing what was going on or why this leap was different from all previous ones. The ivory white hand link wasn't blinking. It didn't even look activated, though Al kept trying, keying in different buttons in hopes of a response--or perhaps to give him something to do with his hands. "I'm sorry, Al. I couldn't help it. It seems like a few minutes to me . . ."

"Four days," Al repeated, his voice gravelly with emotion. "I don't think any of us have had more than six hours sleep the whole time and none of that at a stretch. Gushie's had Ziggy in pieces and put together again, and I've started hiding when I see Beeks coming for fear she'll drag me off and try to get me to 'talk about it', and D-" He broke off, alarm on his face. "You okay, kid?" he demanded anxiously, his eyes raking Sam up and down. "You're not hurt, are you?"

Sam couldn't remember seeing such concern on Al's face since--since-- His swiss cheesed memory wouldn't let him remember but a sudden vivid image of Al, desperation written on his face, pleading with Sam to do something, ran briefly across an empty page of Sam's memory. The concern should have been a comfort, but somehow it wasn't. Sam said flatly, "I'm fine, Al."

The project observer pulled back slightly as if Sam had struck him, then he gathered his emotions inside and turned instead to survey the vast white room. "This is a *weird* place, Sam," he observed uneasily as if the otherworldliness had unnerved him. "I'll have you know this jacket is purple and my pants are silver. Somebody's been messing with my color scheme."

That explained the glittery sheen of the trousers but it didn't explain Sam's near-hostile reaction to Al's earlier concern. He said quickly, "I know, Al. It is weird. Somebody talked to me before you got here. I don't know who he was--I couldn't see him. He said he'd arrange to bring you here."

"I *thought* Ziggy couldn't have managed it. I was in the Imaging Chamber just now. I've been half *living* in the place. We were gonna try again, even though we couldn't really find anything to link into. Gushie and Doc Wade theorized that since our brains were linked, especially since we swapped places, that powering up might bring me to wherever you were."

"You didn't even know it would work and you were still going to try?" Sam asked, horrified. "Al, you could have been transmitted anywhere. You could have been trapped in the Imaging Chamber."

"No, we took care of that little flaw in your original design," Al said quickly. "We figured it would either send me to you or not work at all, and I was willing to take that chance."

"I still think it was too dangerous," Sam said, worried about the risk. "This isn't our world, Al. He said it was a world beyond ours. Another dimensions." He glanced around. "Ordinarily I'd be fascinated by the whole setup but--Al. He said they were the ones who control my leaps."

Al's eyes widened so much that Sam could see the whites all the way around them. Casting a nervous glance over his shoulder, the Project Observer seemed to grow even more pale than the place made him appear. "I don't *like* this, Sam," he said in a low voice. "I don't like it at all." Al had never been comfortable with things that extended to the eerie side of the norm.

"It makes sense, though, Al," Sam said. "We've encountered other evidence of power in my leaps. Remember when I leaped into Joshua Ray? We encountered our adversary there. I don't remember every detail, but it was real, Al, more than a dream. Maybe this will seem like a dream when it's finished, but it's real now. Alia was real, too. If she has encountered the power that sent her out, why shouldn't we?"

"Because it's not *natural*, that's why," Al insisted. His fingers moved deftly over the non-responsive handlink as if he could punch in a code and transport both of them back to the project. "This is creepy stuff. I don't like it. I want to get out of here."

"It isn't, really," Sam said. "I never felt threatened, not really. I think whoever belongs here wants to *help* us."

"Not only is your brain swiss cheesed, Sam, it's starting to go funny around the edges. Help you? Bring you here and keep you here for *four whole days* while we thought you were dead somewhere! That kind of help, I *don't* need."

"He said I was here to put something right that had gone wrong," Sam said. "This may be weirder than my usual leaps, but it's still another leap, and there's still something I'm supposed to do before I can leap out of here."

"Great, Sam. Ziggy's fried, the handlink won't even bleep at me, and we don't have a clue where you are. How can you put something right here without knowing what went wrong?"

"He said it wasn't a conscious wrong and the one who did it didn't even know about it. He said I had to figure it out because if I didn't it would affect all my future leaps. This is weird, Al. I don't even know where to start. How can I help someone I don't even know? How can I help--" he gestured wildly at the huge room--"this?"

"I knew I didn't like it," Al said with complete certainty. He shook the handlink one final time and stowed it in his jacket pocket. "I'll probably start bumping into walls in the Imaging Chamber or sinking through the floor. Ziggy keeps me stabilized within the hologram I see."

Sam knew that, yet as they moved down the ramp toward what looked like a distant door, Al's feet seemed to stay right on the level. He wasn't sure he'd paid much attention before, except for those times when Al had walked through such things as jet planes and the sides of automobiles and through closed doors. "What happens if Ziggy can't reposition you?" he asked.

"We'll have to stay right around here," Al said. "I'm not sure I can contact Ziggy anyway." He was clearly unhappy with the experience. "This is creepy, Sam. We don't have a clue where we are. Scientifically I shouldn't even be here."

"I'm just glad you are," Sam replied. "I'm going to have to wing it this time, without knowing what's wrong or how to fix it. I know how much I rely on you to get me the information I need, but most of the time I guess I take it for granted. Times like this it really hits home."

Al's eyes brightened momentarily at the praise, then his shoulders slumped again. "How can you put something right for somebody who isn't even here, Sam?"

"I've been thinking about that, Al. It doesn't make much sense, does it, yet they wouldn't have brought me here if it were impossible. What would be the point--unless they wanted me to learn I couldn't always succeed on a leap--and I have learned that. I've always leaped out before, but once in awhile it didn't work out for the best for everybody concerned. I *know* that. Besides, that's not something to fix. That's just a fact."

Al chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully, his eyes pensive. "Maybe you're supposed to do something for yourself, Sam," he offered, folding his arms across his chest and studying Sam's face. "Did you ever think of that? Maybe it's the only thing that makes sense."

"Or for you!" Sam realized. "I didn't even think of us. That's against the rules, using leaping for personal gain."

"I hate to remind you of this, Sam, but you've done that more than once--remember your brother Tom . . ." Al let his voice trail off. That leap was bound to bring back a lot of bad memories for him, all tied in with his POW days in Vet Nam.

Sam was silent a minute, remembering not only Tom, changing history so Tom would live, but an earlier leap. He had obstinately refused to change Al's history when Al had asked him to for Beth, the time he'd leaped into Jake, the cop who had encountered Al's first wife in 1969. Was it possible Al still blamed him for it? Yet in the case of

Tom, Sam had acted to save a life, and in the instance of Beth, Sam would have been trying to save a marriage that looked like it was almost on the rocks already. Al might have come home to Beth if Sam had done that leap differently, but it would have been to a marriage that both of them had outgrown. Al had clung to the memory of his first marriage so strongly that it had affected his whole life. Had he come home and found Beth waiting--and found her wanting--would he have been able to go on with his life more openly, found a second wife who would have stuck by him?

Sam frowned. If so, would it have affected his own relationship with Al, with the Project, even with Quantum Leaping? Had Sam selfishly refused to do something that might have benefitted Al simply because he didn't want to risk losing his friend? Was that the wrong he was supposed to put right?

"I know," he said half-guiltily. You were upset with me, weren't you? Because I broke the rules for myself when I wouldn't break them for you?"

Al was silent a long moment, then he shook his head. "Yeah, I guess I was kind of upset at the time, but in the long run I think you did me a favor, Sam. Maybe it didn't do any good for me to have the image of Beth the way it might have been, but at least I had that. If I'd come home to her and we'd grown apart, it would've been a helluva lot harder. It would have been worse to watch it fall apart gradually and know most of it was my fault. This way, she thought I was dead. I can't blame her for doing what she did. She had to get on with her life." He took out the handlink again and started playing with it idly and without response, his eyes avoiding Sam's. "I looked her up, Sam. After you leaped into Jake, I tracked her down. I pretended I was in town by chance and had accidentally encountered her. She was *happy*, Sam. She glowed with it. She wouldn't have been like that with me." He lifted his eyes, vulnerable eyes, and said quietly and reluctantly, "So I guess you did it right then, Sam."

For Al, that was one of the most major concessions Sam had ever heard. The memory of Beth and Al's supposed one shot at True Love had colored his life from the time he'd returned from Vet Nam in 1973 and didn't find her waiting for him. It had made him rush into four other marriages, marriages without commitment, because he didn't expect a commitment from any woman, because he couldn't make one himself. Now it sounded like he was beginning to learn from what had happened. It might be a long time in coming, but Sam felt a quiet happiness to know Al was coming to terms with Beth's memory. This must not be the wrong he needed to right or they'd already be on their way home, but Sam was still glad of it.

"If I did, I'm glad, Al," he said, and the two of them shared a smile. Then Al, who sometimes backed away from such intensity of emotion, broke the look and started prowling around the vast room, looking here and there as if the answers were carved on the alien walls.

"This is a crazy place, Sam," he said at length. "I can't make any sense of it. I think your friend from before is keeping me positioned here. He put out a hand toward the wall and drew it back again as if he feared he might actually touch the unfamiliar substance and find himself trapped here. "Maybe the craziest you've ever come to."

"I don't know, Al," Sam said lightly, trying to think of a quip to distract Al from his uneasiness. "What about the time I leaped into Joshua Ray? That was pretty strange. You weren't even there. It was these people's opposite number."

"You said you thought I was there," Al reminded him.

"True, but I should have known better. You weren't acting in character at all. You choked on your cigar. You didn't use the handlink. You weren't afraid of the 'spooky stuff'. It's just when he looked like you and I expected to see you . . ." He shook his head. "That was pretty strange. But I guess it wasn't as strange as this."

"How did it all get so out of hand?" Al asked involuntarily. Then he shook his head. "It's always been weird right from the first."

Sam thought of something. "Are you mad at me? Because I went into the Accelerator when you weren't there? Without telling you?" he asked.

"Hell, yes, I was mad at you--at first," Al admitted unhesitatingly. "I could've wrung your neck. Then I track you down and you didn't even remember me." He grinned wryly. "There were a few times when that really hurt, Sam."

Something about this strange place seemed to encourage confidences. It had been a long time since the two of them had simply talked, working their way through problems together that didn't involve leaping and some stranger's need. Sam felt closer to Al than he had in a long time--and when had they begun to drift apart? He

*needed* Al, needed him to be a link with home and sanity, to be a familiar face in a series of constant strange situations, to make him smile and laugh, to tease him and tell him tall tales about his love life, to provide a distraction when the burden of leaping became too much, but more than that, needed him because Al was his friend and the bond between them was the strongest one Sam could remember. They had always been in tune, ever since that first meeting long ago on Project Starbright when he had happened upon an intoxicated Al beating up on a vending machine. Sam hadn't remembered immediately but there had been long hours on the project, the two of them happy and comfortable together, listening to "Man of La Mancha" on tape as they worked into the night. Sam *needed* Al, yet there had been times lately when he'd felt a growing frustration with his partner. He'd been quick to find fault with Al when information was not readily available. He hadn't been as welcoming as usual. When and why had that happened? Was that the wrong he was meant to make right?

Looking at Al's wary face now, Sam said quickly, "I'm sorry, Al. I knew I had to try it or they'd shut it down. I thought if I gave them a *fait accompli* they'd have to keep the money coming. But I knew you'd stop me if I waited until you got back."

"Damn right I would have stopped you," Al burst out. "You could've beamed yourself into oblivion, kiddo. That was a stupid risk. I was calling in favors, making sure the funding wouldn't be cut. You should have given me a little more time."

Sam bowed his head. "I didn't know," he said. "But I think I would have gone anyway. Everything in my life built up to the Project and I was afraid if we were shut down my whole life would be meaningless. I *had* to go, Al. Yes, it was a stupid risk, and there are times now when I would give anything if I hadn't done it--" But that would have meant sacrificing all this, the scientific experience of a lifetime, all the people he'd met, the places he'd been, his brother's life--a rare and precious gift, chances to see his father again and spend time with his family. Then there were the people whose lives he'd saved, the experiences he'd never have been able to live if he hadn't taken that risk. "You're right, Al," he admitted. "It was a stupid risk, but I can't be sorry, not when it's done so much for so many people. Think of it. Gloria, Jimmy, Jesse and Miss Melanie--so many people, Al." He looked around the vast room, a smile on his face. "If these people are the ones behind it, I owe them more than I can pay--and they say I'll be going home soon, Al. Not after this leap but soon."

"Soon," scoffed Al, rolling his eyes skeptically. "They owe you, Sam. They've put you through all kinds of nasty stuff. You got *shot* a couple of times. You nearly got thrown out of a ship in the middle of the ocean, you got arrested, nearly got caught by a mummy--you had to have *electric shocks*, Sam." He lowered his eyes as if he would have given anything to take those last words back.

Sam tensed as if Al had hit him across the face. He still had muddled memories of his experience when he'd leaped into Sam Biederman, a mental patient, and a sadistic aide had given him an electric shock, confusing his mind and forcing him to relive the lives of some of the people he'd leaped into before. He had *become* those people, as assuming their voices, mannerisms, attitudes, memories. He had nearly lost Sam Beckett for good when that happened. He had-- The memory blurred and Sam turned away abruptly, unwilling to meet Al's eyes. Out of the turmoil of confusion that still fuzzed the edges of his memory came one clear image, Al's voice, insisting he have a second electric shock.

"You made me go through it," he accused in a low voice, turning back to confront Al, shocked at the hurt and anger and helpless rage that churned through his body as he glared at his friend. "You did it. You--you hurt me." His voice wobbled. It didn't fade into Jimmy's the way it had on that leap, but it sounded desperate and childlike and miserable. Al had hurt him. Al was his best friend and Al had hurt him.

Al couldn't have looked more shocked and hurt if Sam had slapped his face. He jerked back, eyes widening in horror. "God, Sam," he burst out in disbelief, "I *had* to. It was the only way to get you out of there. We were *losing* you. We were losing touch. We'd never have gotten you back if you hadn't done it. You'd have been lost forever." He raked his fingers across his forehead, through his dark hair, his eyes full of pain. "It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, Sam, to make you go through that pain again. It was even harder than Vet Nam. I knew I could live through that, but I didn't know if you--God, Sam, I might have been *killing* you."

"It felt like it," Sam said coldly through stiff lips. "It was you--you made me do it." For the first time he faced the Project Observer as if he were an adversary.

Al opened his mouth but at first no words came. "You . . . hate me," he breathed after an endless and ghostly silence that Sam couldn't have filled if his life had depended on it. "That's why--"

"Why?" Sam prompted coldly. He couldn't cross the gap that had suddenly sprung into being between them, a gap of misunderstanding and pain, and he knew, suddenly and surely, that this was why he was here. How often since then had he belittled Al's help on a leap, ignored Al, kept him at a distance? He remembered once, at the tomb of Ptah-Hotep, he'd told Al he was useless. How could he have done that? Yet now, every time he looked at Al, the memory came back: Sam helpless, confused, full of Jimmy's awareness, trapped on the table while Al insisted remorselessly that Sam must have a second electric shock. A part of Sam knew there had been nothing remotely remorseless about it. He could see Al's face, full of shock and pain and self-reproach as he forced Sam to endure something that was beyond endurance. It had half killed Al to insist on that, but Sam couldn't bring himself to care. He spun away from Al and walked back toward the table, his mind full of seething bitterness. This was crazy. Al had done it to save him, not to harm him, but the memory of that moment, of the impossible fear, the complete confusion, the overpowering and incomprehensible loss he felt, the loss of self and soul, all pressed down upon him and he was stunned to feel the violence of the antipathy he felt toward Al for insisting he endure the anguish of the second electric shock treatment.

Sam put both hands on the edge of the table and leaned over them, feeling himself shake with the reaction there had been no time to feel in the heart of the crisis. Some dazed part of his mind had twisted it all around, limited by what little understanding Jimmy's mind would place on the incident. Jimmy had trusted Al completely, but Jimmy wouldn't have understood the reason for the pain.

"Sam?" Al's voice held a wretched note that the time traveler had never heard there before. "Sam, you've got to know why that happened."

Sam shook himself. He was alive right now, himself right now, because Al had been forced to implement that action. Without Al he'd be dead or trapped irretrievably in the past, possibly in the mind of another man, forever. Without Al, Sam would not even *be* Sam any longer, yet the sharp torment of the memory blocked it out.

"Leave me alone," he blurted out, a part of him shocked at his implacable attitude, another part relieved to have this out in the open when it had festered inside so long. He was lancing it now, but he wasn't sure if that would be enough, if it would help either of them.

Al's voice was unbearably dry as if he had to keep it that way or fail to speak at all. "I think we've found the reason you're here," he said. Underneath that rigid control, Sam heard sheer grief, yet it was held so tightly in place that a stranger might have heard Al speak and fail to realize how distressed he was. Only Sam knew because he and Al were closer than brothers, and Sam's words and actions were erasing their closeness as if it had never been. Sam had a brother in blood but this man, so different from him, and yet, in a manner so alike, had become as close to Sam as Tom was, even in some ways closer than Tom. Al had been a part of Sam's life for a long time, a part of his work, his hopes, his aspirations, his dreams.

And Al, the frivolous playboy on the surface, the chauvinist, the sexist, was more deeply able to care than almost anyone Sam had ever met. Al wasn't physically present on Sam's leaps. Except for the odd instance where he could be seen by a child, a mental patient, he was invisible to everyone Sam helped. He never interacted with them, but he cared what happened to them, and he was in there pitching for them, willing them to succeed, willing Sam to succeed for them. Al cared for more abstract causes too, civil rights, the environment. He could have coasted through life but he hadn't. He'd fought his way up from an orphanage, through a POW camp, into Outer Space and high military rank, always driven to achieve more, to do more than the next person. Without his drive, there had been times Sam might have let the weight of impossibility that most people believed hung over the project bow him down and force him to give up. But Al had been there, bouncing around in his corner like a one-man cheering section, bolstering Sam when he needed it, warming him with ceaseless support.

Then, when Sam was trapped in the body of Mr. Biederman and in danger of losing his very self, Al had never faltered. He'd done everything possible and more to save Sam, to bring him back to himself, even though the task had been as hard on him as it had on Sam. Beckett knew with sudden fierce clarity that for every iota of pain he had suffered, Al had suffered an inner agony that was just as great as his own. There had been no other choice, but Al had made it happen, and Sam realized with a stunned blaze of awareness that Al had blamed himself, not for Sam's salvation, but for Sam's suffering, ever since.

The crusading zeal that spurred Sam through near-impossible leaps had been deeply buried by the hidden resentments he'd had no chance to face, but now it flared back to life like a rocket blazing across the sky. He lifted his head, turned.

Al was standing at the foot of the ramp. He had one of his cigars in his hand and he was staring at it as if it held the answers to the riddle of the universe. Head bent and shoulders slumped, he looked like a whipped creature, hurt and confused, and Sam's heart squeezed painfully at the sight. He had done this. He had reduced Al to this unhappiness, and it was past time he put it right.

As he watched, Al heaved a great and shaky sigh and flung away the cigar. It hit the ramp midway up and rolled slowly down again toward his feet. Both men watched it without really seeing it.

"God, Al, I'm sorry," Sam blurted out, helpless to do more than apologize. "I--I guess I never faced it, never looked back. I could barely remember for a long time, and then, some of my memories of it started to come back. I--I halfway remember we switched places--you went back in time yourself, further back than I'd ever gone, and I got to be the hologram, but I can't remember leaping home. I must have done it, but I. Just. Can't. Remember." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Al. Please. Look at me."

Al's head was still bent, his eyes fixed on the cigar. Slowly he lifted his head. His eyes were too bright, glistening with tears he refused to allow to fall. "Sam . . ." he began, his voice drawn out and reluctant.

"Don't say it, Al. I was a bastard. I had no right to say that. You did what you had to do. There was no choice. You did it *for me*, and then I blamed you for it."

Al looked at him levelly for a long time, his eyes holding Sam's with a quiet intensity as he read the truth in Sam's expression. "If there'd been anything else to try . . ." he began

"There was nothing else," Sam replied, reaching a hand toward Al and halting it in mid-motion. "I know that. You did everything you could. You and Beeks worked it out. There was never another choice and you knew it."

Al nodded once. "Yeah, Sam, I knew it. I didn't know this would happen, that your confusion would make you bottle it up and turn it back at me, but even if I had, I would still have done it because it was the only way to save you."

That was the truth. Al could handle impossible odds, choose pain and suffering for himself if it meant something better for a friend--for Sam. He'd chosen to save Tom's life in Vet Nam when a simple hint would have put Sam in the middle of an even more impossible choice. He had been able to alter his own past, to delete the most painful time of his life, but he had known he could endure it because he *had* endured it, so he'd given Sam his brother back. Now Sam wanted to get this brother back.

"I know, Al," he said softly. "It's all right. I do understand. What I can't understand is how I could have been such a jerk and treated you so badly."

"Beeks talked to me about it once, after it was all over--after one of your leaps when I was beating my head against the wall because it wasn't *working* the way it was supposed to," Al admitted. "You know how she is, always trying to drag somebody off and make them spill their guts. I worked out all her usual routes through the Project and figured out how to dodge them and still get where I needed to go. She caught me a couple of times. She said you'd probably work through it eventually, but you didn't seem to be bothered--and the damn thing is I should have known, but I--" He chopped off his words.

"Al," Sam urged, "it's okay. You can say whatever you like to me. You can kick me all the way across this place, and I wish you could."

Al's eyes gleamed. "I wish I could too, Sam," he said with a spark of returning mischief to his eyes. He looked away at once. "Beeks said I probably wouldn't notice if you treated me badly because I'd think I deserved it. She told me it was stupid to feel like that--well, she didn't say 'stupid' but that's what she meant." He grimaced. "I don't like all that psychobabble anyway, but I think she was right this time. Why is it women and shrinks--and women shrinks are the worst of all--always want people to *talk* about it?"

;Sam grinned. "They do, don't they? Come on, Al, they're right this time. Yes, I blamed you, but I wasn't in a fit state to understand what was happening. After it was over, I wouldn't let myself remember it. I understand now, and it's all right--if you can forgive me for the way I treated you?"

Al grinned back, the tension leaching out of his stiffened shoulders. He squared them with his old energy. Momentarily embarrassed at the emotions he was revealing, he dropped his eyes and noticed his abandoned

cigar. "Now you've got me throwing away my best cigars, Sam. I may never forgive you for that." He poked it with his toe.

As Sam's eyes focused on the cigar, he stared at it in disbelief. He'd been so upset during their confrontation he hadn't realized one very important fact. When Al carried something into the Imaging Chamber, Sam could see it only when Al was holding it. He had to touch it, flesh against the object, because when he let go of it, it would vanish from Sam's sight. Al enjoyed producing objects out of thin air: the music for the Carnegie Hall concert, the script of "Man of La Mancha". When Al had tossed the cigar away, it should have vanished but it hadn't. It was still there. Mouth hanging open, Sam looked from the cigar to Al's face.

Al followed the motion, then his own jaw dropped. "You can see that cigar, Sam!" he blurted out. "You can see it!"

"I shouldn't be able to see it," Sam replied, "not unless--it's really here. Not unless--*you're* really here!" He shot out a hand and dropped it on Al's shoulder, his heart lurching again when he felt solid bone and muscle beneath his hand. "Oh, God, Al, you're really here!" he cried, jubilant and thrilled. He didn't hesitate and Al didn't either. As one, they lunged at each other, engulfing each other in a hug so tight it nearly drove the breath from their bodies. They had come too close, been in danger of losing both their lives and their friendship. Now they had both again, secure in the knowledge that if they could weather this storm they could weather anything.

Sam bent his head against Al's dark hair and clung for all he was worth. It had been so long, so long since he'd known the touch of home, the reassuring feel of a friendly arm around him that was meant for *him*, for Sam Beckett and not the person he'd displaced. He didn't think he could move and if he could, he wouldn't.

"You're really here," he breathed against Al's hair.

"Yeah, and they must be going ca ca back at the project," Al said, his voice muffled against Sam's shoulder. "First you vanish then I do. Gushie's shorts will be tied in knots and Tina will be frantic." His voice held warm satisfaction rather than fear of this new development and he showed no signs of letting go. "God, Sam, I missed you," he said, and Sam knew the words meant not only Sam's leaping but the estrangement that had crept between them in recent leaps. It was all right now.

"Dr. Beckett." The voice of the controller of Sam's leaps made him jump and loosen his stranglehold on Al, though he didn't move apart from him, simply turned in the direction of the voice, draping an affectionate arm around Al's shoulders. Al jumped, eyes widening, and the arm around Sam's waist tightened momentarily in superstitious unease.

"Who's that, Sam?" he asked.

"You know who I am, Admiral Calavizzi," the voice intoned. "You know why you and Dr. Beckett are here. You were brought together because this face-to-face contact in a place where you were both physically present could enable you to face your problems and rise above them. We believed you would do so. We find you both very valuable."

Al cocked his head in the direction of the voice. "If we're so valuable, how about sending us both home?" he prompted.

"I know you miss him, Admiral," soothed the voice. "Do not fear. Soon you will be together. But there are still tasks for Dr. Beckett to accomplish, people in jeopardy that only he can help. Would you deny them their chance?"

Al looked like he'd deny them anything as long as Sam could come home, then he hesitated. "You did something for us," he admitted. "But you could do something more for Sam. He has people at home who miss him, and a life he can't control. Isn't it time for somebody else to take a turn?"

"Others have had their turns," the voice pointed out. "Dr. Beckett is not the first person we have used to achieve our goals, and he will not be the last. We help in many ways. Always we fight the adversary, the dark-bringer, the one who would deny people choices."

"Seems like you denied Sam a choice," Al shot back stubbornly, unwilling to yield.

"I had a choice, Al," Sam said quickly. "I chose to step into the Accelerator, and by doing so I accepted the consequences. I didn't know these would be the consequences, but I knew *something* would happen. As long as I know it's not forever, I can do it. As long as I know you'll be there helping me through the leaps, joking me out of bad moods, reminding me how lucky I am to have such a good friend, I can make it."

Al's eyes warmed. "I'd rather have you back where I can keep an eye on you, Sam," he confessed. "You're a magnet for trouble. Just come back one day."

"Just be there when I leap," Sam returned. "That's all I need."

They looked at each other with satisfaction and hugged each other once more. Then, sensing this time was at an end, They exchanged a quick, intent gaze as the 'door' to the Waiting Room opened.

"Goodbye, Admiral," the voice said. "You will see Sam soon."

Al stepped into the light reluctantly, still gripping Sam's hand as if he could pull him through, and Sam wondered for a delirious moment what would happen if he jumped through the 'doorway' after Al. Would he fall flat on the floor the doorway blocked out or would he crash into the Waiting Room, intact and home. He'd never dared to try it and he couldn't start now. Besides, as Al stepped into the white light, Sam felt the leap effect start. "I'll see you soon, Al," he burst out, fingers squeezing Al's a final time before the Project Observer turned into a hologram once more and they were unable to touch. The white light shrank down and vanished, and Al was gone.

"Good luck, Dr. Beckett," said the voice as Sam's leap began.

"I won't forget this?" he demanded anxiously.

"No, Dr. Beckett. It is important that you remember."

He had to be content with that. With a sigh he let himself flow into the leap, blinking as a different reality came around him. He found himself standing on a raised platform with a crowd of men in suits gathered below him, some with slightly old-fashioned cameras, others with notepads and pens in their hands. As he glanced around to get his bearing, Sam saw on the wall behind him a familiar Seal.

"Mr. President," the reporters began to cry, trying to get his attention. "Mr. President, Mr. President, Mr. President . . ."

Sam's eyes widened in horror. "Ohhhh boy," he moaned as he turned to meet the press.

the end.