

Homecoming

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“Anything yet Al?” Rich Jameison asked as he eased into the co-command seat. Jameison was the crew Botanist and Psychologist.

“Nada. How was your wakeup call?”

“I'm glad it was the last. I know we're only subjectively a few years older, but I swear I have to sluff off every one of those 500 objective years each time I crawl out of the pod.”

“I know what you mean. Its been a really long fourteen years.”

At the start of training, Al Crowley had been reserved and a bit self conscious about his mechanical engineering background amidst so many with multiple advanced degrees.

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But before the final crews were assembled, the final hundred candidates had undergone a simultaneous 'sharing' session.

Al hadn't heard of 'sharing' before. Each candidate sat in an isolation seat and was connected to a helmet with brain wave sensors arrayed on the inside. They were told to concentrate on entering a beta state of restfulness as they had been trained to do using biofeedback tools.

Al enjoyed the mental calm of the beta state, but after a few seconds he felt an unusual 'otherness' that startled him. He focused on it and in doing so lost his beta state. A slow, rhythmic dance paced orchestration entered his background consciousness and it made getting back into beta easier. He relaxed again.

This time he felt the 'otherness' as many others at a ball. One bright color approached and he danced with it, enjoying the mingling of his amazement with its joy. That one moved on and another approached. He danced with many, adding flavors and colors to his perception of them. Some dances ended as soon as they began. Some didn't interest him. The brightest ones he approached didn't want to dance. As the dance went on he felt a mutual joy at recognizing his first

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partner and danced with that one again. This time, with the dance and the music came caring. He felt love. It was natural to pour love back. It warmed him to give. That one led him to another he hadn't danced with yet, but did now and found that one interesting but not particularly caring. The dance went on and he reveled in the free emotional sharing it brought. Eventually he found that he was sharing his dance with only three others, and they with him.

He woke slowly, reluctant to give up the connectedness he'd experienced. He no longer worried about his status. Others cared for him and he for them. He knew absolutely that the minds he'd shared with would be his crew and they would be selected for a mission.

“Carrie and Marta's pods check out OK. What's the checklist read for them?”

“Three more months, Rich. We'll need them up for system insertion.”

“Whats our speed now?”

Al tapped a console icon and their computed lightspeed ratio came up at point-two-three.

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“So we're about a light-year out?” Rich asked.

“Yeah. We should be in optical sensor range. I've been waiting for you to wake up before I looked.”

“Worried?”

“Well, yeah. All of our antenna went dark 200 objective years out. We'd planned on them making some kind of advances while we were gone so we wouldn't have to do the slow and easy re-entry, but we can't even talk to them.

“Yeah, I'm worried. Another four years of our lives listening to Marta asking: 'Are we there yet?'"

Rich chuckled. A small stress release against the very real possibility that there wasn't anyone left to greet them on their return.

“Well,” Al said. “Lets see what we can see.”

He blanked the visuals space and tuned the Long Range Combined Sensor. The LRCS brought all the external sensor data into conjunction through the computing nodes and broadcast a three dimensional construct to the visual space. By tuning the focus to inner planet orbits they expected to be able to see if there was any ordered electro-magnetic spectrum activity.

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Radio signals from Earth ceased shortly after their return journey began. Suspended in deep sleep maintenance mode most of that time, Marta had first noted the lack of communications in their logs.

Their mission had been to explore the star system 37 Geminorem, a G type star very close to the size of Sol and slightly older, but long deemed to be a mainstream star.

Earthbased sensors had found five planets, two of which showed signs of both water and oxygen. One was deemed to be in the habitable zone, the other on the outer edge. Their task had been to scout those planets.

'Gem', as they preferred to call it was just over 56 light-years from Earth. Their anti-matter driven ship was capable of nearly half light-speed, but the trip would take them nearly 500 Earth years, including acceleration and deceleration. The subjective time of the travelers would be 150 years if they lived each moment, but to entice sane applicants, the life suspending systems they called 'pods' were developed.

Pods would slow aging to a crawl and at the same time repair and replenish their bodies while shielding them from

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radiation. Crew members would experience no more than fifteen years of subjective aging, ten years of which would be while they explored the Gem system.

A treaty signed by all the United Nations guaranteed their reward on return to be the amount of wealth owned by the 1000th wealthiest person known to the race on their return.

Millions applied, thousands passed the physical and mental exams, hundreds were selected for training and sixteen were picked to crew the four outbound vessels, with sixteen alternates available.

The Gem crew were the first scheduled to return.

“Jesus Christ, Al,” Rich said. “Is there something wrong with the program?”

Al had command and was trying to apply some filtering to the signals. In front of him the visual wall exploded with light and traces that looked like a war going on in the inner planets.

“Hang on,” Al replied, stabbing at his control panel to reduce the display to something intelligible. “Lets try just

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ionization.”

The display lost much of its white light but now blues dominated with fewer reddish and yellowish tracks.

“Lets look at the whole thing.” Al said as he swished and poked at the controller. The display zoomed out and the system visualization rotated as though they were moving above it.

A globe of spikes tilted toward them showing a disk-like distribution, with a dense set of tracks radiating on the ecliptic. One track extended farther. Perpendicular to the ecliptic a number of tracks bloomed to four end points.

“The heaviest traffic measures to about three AU. Asteroid belt maybe? The single outside track looks to be about 5AU, I'd call that Jupiter. Not just the distance but because it tracks the planet.

“The verticals are two AU. If I had to guess I'd say they look like tracks to interstellar jump stations.”

“Looks like they made a lot of progress.” Al said. “Maybe our comm-tech got dropped.”

“Likely. I hope they didn't forget us. I wonder if they even picked up our broadcasts.”

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At orbits distant from each of the oxygen/water planets in the 37 Geminorem system they had established triplex broadcasters that repeated their findings, mission summaries and exploration details using Tachyon, Laser and Radio transmission media. The Tachyon transmitter was the newest they could bring and it wasn't reputed to be very reliable.

“The logs show we lost RF from earth about fifty objective years after we started back,” Al said. “Sixty years after we sent our arrival broadcast from Gem A. That signal would have reached Earth at least four years before their RF stopped.”

“Maybe we should have stayed on Gem B.”

“We all agreed,” Al shrugged. “We'd rather be forty and rich than fifty and lonesome.”

“True that. I'm going to stretch, do a little workout and then get some lunch. Want a sandwich?”

“Sure, bring me back a grilled cheese.”

“Grilled cheese, grilled cheese. Don't you EVER eat anything besides grilled cheese?”

“Not when you're cooking,” grinned Al.

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They woke the women early. Marta Tuvalo, Mathematician and linguist; and Carrie Sungh, their Physicist and Musician.

“I'm concerned about traffic,” Al explained. “That's a very busy system we're approaching. If we barge in with no communications and come wheeling into home base blind we're likely to get wiped out. All of their tracks are pretty fast movers for interplanetary.”

“I see,” said Marta as she connected to her station. “They're hitting a tenth light between Earth and Mars. No acceleration or deceleration I can see on this data.”

“That suggests they've figured out inertia management.” Carrie noted.

“Any thoughts on communicating?” Al asked.

“There's nothing on RF or EM right?” Carrie asked.

“Not a thing.”

“Then the only possibility we have is Tachyon. We still have the test device for the T-trans we left at Gem, that's a Tachyon receiver.”

“But it didn't work when we tried to read our own transmission.” Rich said.

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“Maybe we were inside its lower limit.” Marta suggested.

“What would it hurt? Al, can I use the visuals?” Carrie asked.

“Sure. Viscon over to you... now.” he said, poking at his controller.

“Okay. Power on the T-recs now.”

A flood of data filled the screen, moving up, down, scrolling and operating at a speed they couldn't follow.

“Hey,” said Al. “I've lost control status.”

“Uh oh, maybe you should turn the T-recs off again Carrie,” Rich suggested.

“Uh... ..can't,” Carrie said, jabbing frantically at her console.

An alarm sounded and on the visual display a message appeared:

“Go to your acceleration couches immediately, hard maneuver required in sixty seconds.”

“Lets go guys. Sleep pods, closed.” Al said, but they were already on the way. “Looks like Earth found us.”

The sleep pods weren't intended as acceleration

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couches, but they were gimbaled to respond to inertia changes and if bodily harm occurred they would automatically respond to repair any damage inflicted within weeks.

Status screens in the pods noted that 1.5 g's would be applied for a period of 100 hours. Deep sleep was recommended. Apparently it was commanded too. Al's last thought before dropping into controlled suspension was: "I'll probably never get that grilled cheese."

While they slept the controlling authority updated their systems to their maximum ability which was considerably short of what was desired. Their course was altered away from the ecliptic plane and would take them to the vicinity of Interstellar Departure Point Delta four.

"The planets are joyed at the return of our intrepid explorers. But what will we do with them?" was the question brought to the population.

"Celebrate them!" was one school of thought.

"Send them to the vats!" was another.

"We made promises to them."

"Those promises have no meaning to us."

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“They should be loved and joyed.”

“They don't know how.”

“We should teach them.”

“They are incapable of learning.”

“We must make a special place for them where we can love and care for them.”

“They would be alone amongst our trillions.”

“That's so sad.”

“So sad.”

“Can we speak with them?”

“No. The nodes predict they cannot learn.”

“The nodes can interpret.”

“Can the nodes find a place for them?”

“Their place is in the past.”

“That's a joyful idea, lets put them there.”

“We are joyful.”

Al awoke uncertain of his location for the first time in 500 years. Outside the shield of the pod was an unfamiliar whiteness. Being a practical man he assumed the citizens of the present had retrieved them from their ship. He was happy

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to be awake again and he felt really good.

“Hello Al,” a familiar loving voice said. “Its good to have you back home.”

A face materialized in front of him, a dimensionally accurate representation of his mother. He knew it was an artificial construct and it bothered him.

“I appreciate your intent to comfort me,” he said, but I'd prefer you used a different representation. Perhaps the mission administrator.”

The face and voice morphed into that of General Frothington.

“Thank you,” Al said. Is there a reason we aren't speaking to a human being?”

“Yes. Several reasons. The race has modified itself over the last 500 years. It has changed so much that the nodes calculated it would be very difficult for you to understand one another in person-to-person conversation. That difficulty would present itself as a significant trauma to the race at large, therefore the nodes are protecting you from each other.”

“For you, the communications difficulties would be frustrating, incomprehensible, impossible to bridge and a

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source of unsolvable issues.”

Al looked around. The other's pods were there but they weren't awake.

“Would you please awaken my friends?” He asked.

“You may pass on what information you choose to them.”

“That wouldn't be satisfactory. I'd like them to hear the same thing I'm hearing. It would prevent miscommunication.”

“If it misses, its not communication.” spoke the general's face.

“Exactly,” said Al.

“This will take a few minutes. Would you like to sit?”

“Yes, please.”

The pod shifted from a couch to a recliner and he rose to a sitting position. On closer inspection the other pods looked a lot newer than the ones on his ship. As the others warmed and their occupants stirred, Al discovered that they looked newer too.

Marta was closest to him. She looked at the general's face hanging in front of Al, then looked at Al, then looked again frowning, then her left eyebrow arched upward.

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“You're looking mighty young Al,” she said as she rose to a sitting position.

“You too, Marta, and so are Rich and Carrie,” he said, nodding in their direction.

The general's head spoke. “We were able to regress some of the time-related damage your bodies had suffered. We've also made some essential modifications for your next mission.”

“Whoa, partner,” Carrie said. “I don't recall signing up for any 'next' mission. What's going on?”

The 'General' went through the same explanation with the others that he'd given Al.

“Wait a minute! We had a deal with the race. You owe us bigtime pal,” Rich said, with more than a slight trace of anger.

“That is among the many issues which divide you and the rest of the race,” the general said. “No one uses any form of 'money' any longer. The 1000th wealthiest person in the race has no more personal possessions than the 800 billionth person.”

“So what's our 'next' assignment? A Zoo perhaps?”

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Marta asked.

“Maybe back to Gem B?” Al said.

“Gem B and Gem A as you call them, have both been fully populated for over a hundred years. Thanks to the signal station you placed there we were able to install our first successful remote transfer point there two hundred years ago.”

“Why didn't you come and get us earlier?” Marta asked.

“We didn't know where you were until you turned on your Tachyon receiver. Had you left it operating we could have returned you here two hundred years ago. But even then you would have been an anomaly in the race. By that time the race had self-modified its DNA to re-size, improve a few features and eliminate some other traits. It happened in less than fifty years, something like the transition from Jet engines to Thrust control vehicles in your time.”

“Couldn't we at least try to communicate?” Al asked. “We're an intelligent, flexible crew. I'm sure given time we could learn the language.”

“An updated 'emo-share' device is on your right, next to the fluid level gauge... Please put it on and I will give you a

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demonstration.”

Al found what looked like an earpiece and put it on as did the others. The general's face turned into a three dimensional moving softlight display, with soothing musical tones and emotional content. They could feel love and welcome swell in their minds. The content ended almost as soon as it began and the general's face appeared once more.

“That was a nursery rhyme. Babies receive the entire content in about one minute. It took you five minutes to absorb the emotional content of the message and you missed the mechanical and informational content entirely.

“But you aren't less intelligent. You just aren't designed to receive the information. You are essentially blind and deaf to the communications in this society.”

“You're saying there's no place for us here.” Carrie stated.

“Yes.”

“Why can you communicate with us?” Rich asked.

“I'm almost as old as you.” The general's simulacrum stated. “I am an intelligent program whose original function was to convince people to submit to the earliest population-

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wide DNA resequencing.”

“I'd bet that was a hairball.” Rich responded.

“To the contrary Mr Jameison. Records indicate better than 80 percent conversion rate world-wide.”

“What about people who didn't convert?” Marta asked.

“98 percent of their children converted. Beyond that point conversion wasn't possible. As populations soared those left behind were consigned to reservations. The last died out over 200 years ago.”

“Is that our fate?” Al asked. “A reservation? Why bother to regenerate us?”

“There are no reservations left. No room for them. We believe that the avenue which will provide you with the most life-long satisfaction is to accept the next mission we propose.”

Al was closer to tears than at any time in 500 years. The first display of his mother's face and voice triggered long dormant memories of his family, all long lost to his sense of adventure and hope for the future and now his hope for the future had been beaten into lifelessness.

“What's your proposal,” Al spoke as emotionlessly as

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he could but his voice cracked slightly at the end.

“This society long ago learned to shunt inertia into and out of a particular dimension. Generally speaking they take out of that dimension and they put back in eventually. A balance is sustained.

“In your era the records indicate that mathematics and physics were probing the concept of universe interfaces.”

“Are you talking about 'branes'?” Carrie said.

“Not precisely, but visualize if possible, a human being as the intersection of a group of dimensions, branes if you prefer. The human as a vehicle progressing along the 'time' brane whilst also moving in the height, width, and depth dimensions, and more.

“This society has learned to use the 'inertia' capturing dimension that was always there. They have experimented with others and believe they have found a method of switching the 'time' brane.”

“Time travel?” Carrie asked, “What good would that be? If when meddling in the past you change your history you might disappear, then reappear, then disappear, ad infinitum.”

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“Yes, the time paradox it was called, but it doesn't really happen. Shifting the time line for anything from now to the past simply sets the future for that brane vehicle to a different path. I believe that concept was called multi-dimensionality in your time. Any new past creates its own future which must inherently be different from the line the vehicle transferred from.”

“Sorry, that's confusing,” Al said.

“You can change trains,” Marta commented, “but they all go to a different destinations.”

“An apt metaphor,” the general's image said.

“How can you balance the energies that would have to be generated and swapped?” Carrie asked.

“The process is not simple.”

“Assuming the process is somehow required to maintain balance, I would guess you'd have to send an energy balanced package as far forward as you send one backward.” Carrie said.

“There are always interested volunteers, except for backward transfers of more than two hundred years. Not many wish to subject themselves to those hardships.”

“How do you know this is a successful process?” Marta

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asked.

“We only know that it has been balanced in every test. We can't verify success, or failure. Those are different futures.”

“How can you send someone to a future that doesn't exist?”

“We can't. The future the balancing party would go to exists up to the moment they arrive. Everyone begets a new timeline.”

“Can we discuss this amongst ourselves?” Rich asked.

“Of course. I've just one more point to make for your consideration. We can send anyone to any time, but we can't guarantee that if we send you all to the same time, you'd all arrive at the same point. You could each arrive in a timeline where the others do not exist.”

“Can I get a grilled cheese sandwich?” Al said.

“Marta? What's your preference?” Rich asked.

“I've got to call it late 20th century onward in one of the civilized countries. I couldn't handle being treated like a lesser human being just because I'm a woman.”

“Me too,” Carrie spoke up. “Same reasons. Maybe mid

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20th in any of the Western nations.”

“I concur,” Rich said. “I’m not the pioneer type. Al?”

Al was silent for a moment.

“I love you guys more than anyone I’ve known in my life. But I’ve always wanted to be a cowboy and an explorer. From the mid-20th on I’d just be another cog in the machine. I’m thinking the American west after the Civil War is where I belong.”

“I can see you there, Wyatt Earp,” Carrie joshed gently, fighting back her tears.

All of history to the point of expansion had been absorbed by the nodes in as much detail as was possible to acquire. The nodes were apparently some hybrid of ultimate computing and human emotive mechanisms. Human computing. The nodes provided clothing accurately reconstructed to the standards of the times selected, with spares and bags, such as they were at the time selected.

As they slept they learned language, mores, colloquialisms, industries, schools, cities, and anything deemed material to the times. They were instructed on acquiring identities and protecting themselves from the human predators

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of the day.

Each was given twelve one-ounce gold nuggets, freshly formed, some complete with embedded crystals and dirt. These were hidden in the hems of their clothing.

Their DNA was modified to allow body hair to grow, and POD adjustments allowed them to generate hair to appropriate levels for haircuts of the styles seen in their selected times.

Al asked to go last. He wanted to assure himself that the others had as successful a transition as possible, not out of fear for himself, but concern for them.

For them, the process was simple to the point of transfer. A small space was recreated from historical records and photographs of the time to simulate as closely as possible conditions at the point of transfer. For Rich, Marta and Carrie it was a dirt track near an Orange Grove in Padadena, California, on May 20th, 1954, at 10:15 in the evening local time. It was a temperate spring evening.

Al watched the chamber door open, they entered, the room and everything in it was measured, weighed, calibrated once more, then they were gone. No flash, no bang, no

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blinking of lights. He was physically struck by the unexpected loss of their psychic contact in his soul. He wept.

Al wore rough tweeds, worn jacket and hat, and carried his meager belongings in a rolled up bedroll. His boots were relics of the civil war, recreated from regimental photographs as the closest they could find from that time. He was aiming for the same place, but eighty years earlier. Finding a way to leave a message across the years was strong in his mind.

He entered the room, noting no fence this time, and no nearby orange grove. The dirt track was just a path. Again, no bang, no flash. But there was a great blinking of lights...

Rich felt only a light queasiness. He didn't notice the moment passing. He was fascinated with the simulation as he watched distant lights wink as trees swayed in front of them. They even had a chill breeze descending from the mountains he thought.

Marta, on his left stepped forward and he was about to caution her when he realized that they weren't in the simulation any longer.

Carrie drew in a sharp breath, "Damn, dang I mean, I've

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got to get out of these heels. They're just not right for this dirt.”

“Me too,” Marta said. “I've got flats in this bag. Just hold on a minute, Rich.”

Rich was experiencing a different sensation. His nose wrinkled and his eyes were starting to water. “What the heck is in the air?” He said. “Wow, it smells foul.”

“Must be smog,” Marta said, using him to steady herself as she switched shoes. Carrie was using his other arm.

“God what a stench,” he went on.

“I can smell it, but you must be extra sensitive to it,” Carrie said. “It should clear up some at night. Maybe it'll be better later.”

Shoes changed, they started walking west along the fence line. “Look down in the basin,” Carrie said, pointing downhill where the lights of greater Los Angeles were largely obscured by what looked like soiled cheesecloth pulled over the scene.

“Bet its worse down there,” Rich said, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief.

“Well, there's what's making it,” Marta pointed toward

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a pair of headlights approaching fast. They could hear a powerful engine roaring and the car raced past, a convertible, hell-bent for leather. As they stepped out onto the asphalt road the brake lights flashed and the car whipped into a power slide, reversing direction and roaring back at them. It braked to a screaming stop beside them and a familiar voice asked:

“Anybody up for a grilled cheese sandwich?”

“Al? Al,” Carrie shrieked, running around the car to clamp the tall, lean driver in a huge bear hug as he got out. When she disentangled she got a real shock. It was Al, but twenty years older, a mature, tanned older Al.

“What happened? We just left you less than an hour ago.” Rich said. “Its pretty obvious you didn't get to 1875.”

“I bounced,” Al replied. “Haven't the slightest idea what went awry back then, or up then, or across then, whatever, but I think I got a foot down into 1875, then something tripped me and I fell, knocked myself silly. When I woke up I was looking at an odd duck name of Jack Parsons who said I'd been talking about space travel and suspended animation and time travel and he figured I was a science fiction writer.”

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“He helped me up and introduced himself, but when I told him my name was Al Crowley, he went white and practically fainted. I pretended to be still loopy and said I must have heard somebody say that name and that mine was Ed Forman.

“It was 1932 and there was a guy named Alistair Crowley who was kind of a huckster of the dark arts that this guy Parsons knew and hung out with, that's what had spooked him. He calmed down, but he was still excited to find me because when I was sleep-talking I said a lot of stuff he really wanted to know more about.

“Anyhow, Parsons was fairly well to do and I bummed off him until he got me connected with the Guggenheim Aeronautical Lab up the road in North Pasadena.”

Marta was excited, “The Guggenheim Aeronautical Lab eventually became Cal Tech,” she said. “You were there!”

Al/Ed nodded. “Yep. Stayed until the war started, then helped start a company named Aerojet General.”

“I know them, I know them,” Carrie said. “They made JATO units.”

“Make, still. I left when the company was bought by

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General Tire. Hey, pile your bags in the trunk, lets get to my place and setup a plan to work you guys in here. You may have just left me an hour ago, but I've been waiting for you for twenty two years.”

“How do you figure they got us all onto the same time track?” Carrie asked. “I thought we could all go different routes.”

“My experience on this end was that they don't have all the answers on that end.” Al/Ed said. “There are differences, but generally speaking I think there aren't as many different tracks as they believe. In their thought, my being here before you would change the track so you could never arrive here, but here you are.”

“What kind of differences have you noticed?” Rich asked.

“When I found out it was 1932 I tried looking up General Mechanical devices, the big computer makers? But there's no company near that name. The closest I could come up with was a little punch-card accounting system company called International Business Machines. I hope that's the right call, I invested some with them.

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“The biggest change I've noticed was at the end of World War two we only dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan here, where in our original line we practically glassed the entire country over.”

“Wow. That kind of puts our knowledge of the future in question doesn't it?” Marta said.

“Yep. Pretty much means the future is wide open for us to build.”

“Maybe we can do a little better job this time,” Rich said. “Starting with getting rid of that smog.” He pointed down to the LA basin.