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by

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"Computer," Charles Arthur said, "how much longer until you shut off?" He leaned back, one leg thrown over the arm of his plastic eggshell chair. His silver jumpsuit glinted in the overhead lights and he threw a casual glance at the giant screen behind him.

There was a click as the computer's speaker came to life, then a distinct pause, almost as if the computer was sighing in disgust. "That won't happen for a little while yet, Charles Arthur."

"Computer," Charles said, not listening to the entire answer as he trampled over the computer's last few words, "I've decided I don't like you calling me by my full name anymore. In fact," the leg slung over the arm of the chair kicked a few times and Charles leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, "let's go with something entirely different. Something regal and commanding. You know, like Commander Blap, or something." Charles clenched his fists and flexed his arms as he stressed the name, attempting to add machismo to it through forced body language. "Can you come up with something like that?" Charles lolled his head around to look at the computer screen.

Again there was an audible silence from the computer screen. "How would Gestault Weinschmidt suit you?"

"No."

"Oscar Mayer?" the computer asked hopefully.

"No."

"Excalibur?"

"Oooh, I like that one. Where's it from?"

"It dates back to the mythology of the mother planet. Earth."

"You mean Sol 3?"

"Earth," the computer repeated. "The lost planet from whence our entire universe's civilization came from. It is said that everything we are was once contained on a small backwoods planet orbiting a-"

"Who was Excalibur?" Charles said, not listening anymore.

Another nasally sigh. "It was a sword."

Charles nodded his head, liking this new name, "A sword. Right. And what's a sword?"

"It was a weapon of sorts."

"Right, right. Got it. Excalibur," Charles said the name with relish, savoring nothing but how it sounded. "Excalibur," he said again, breathy and hitting the hard consonants. "I like it. It's sort of retro."

"Yes. Seeing as how the word Excalibur is approximately three point two billion years old, yes, it could be considered retro."

"It's perfect."

"It's a dense piece of metal," the computer muttered inaudibly, "so I happen to agree with you."

"What?" Charles turned and asked.

"Nothing," the computer replied, perfect innocence.

"Okay then. From now on I shall be referred to as Excalibur."

There were a few seconds of silence while Charles idly ran a finger over the armrest of his chair. "Excalibur wishes to view the outside world! Windows!" he shouted, clapping his hands loudly.

"I have to strongly recommend that I not allow you to view the decay that currently surrounds-"

"Windows!" Charles shouted again with an attempt at sounding threatening.

Three of the larger screens at the front of the room slowly faded into transparency to reveal a sterile landscape of dull stars, lifeless planets and empty darkness. Charles stared out with excitement fueled entirely by his orders being followed, but this soon faded into a jaundiced sadness as he looked at the corner of the universe he used to call home slowly dying.

"Shut them," he said softly.

The screens returned to their original blank white. "I told you not to look," the computer said. "This part of existence has expended all of its energy. There's nothing there worth seeing. Everything of value is on board this ship."

"Right," Charles said, slowly recovering from his view of eternity winding down. "You've got the smartest and the brightest on board here."

"Correct," the computer responded. "All of the top scientists and leading researchers in every field are currently in suspended animation in the cargo hold."

"And we've got you, right?" Charles said, giving a jaunty point towards one of the computer's screens.

"Correct," the computer said. "I have in my data files the entire wealth of knowledge collected from all of history from quantum physics to hound dogs."

"And we've got me," Charles said.

The computer remained silent.

Charles cleared his throat. "And," he said emphatically, "you've got me."

Still there was no response.

"Excalibur demands that you acknowledge him!"

For a moment it seemed as it there would be no reply, but then the computer began speaking in a labored voice. "Yes. While others were busy studying the universe and all the wonders it had to offer, you were spending your time playing video games and pretending to pilot fake spaceships around giving you a bizarre talent that nobody has ever needed until now, when it was determined that traveling through a wormhole would briefly knock out all of my navigational abilities for a time requiring us to bring you along and giving you importance for the first time in your life."

Charles nodded his head slowly, thinking this over. "Excalibur detected a hint of sarcasm in your response but he's going to allow it."

"You're a colossal moron," the computer muttered to itself.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," the computer answered in an overly chipper tone.

"Right," Charles said. "That's better. Now how much longer until this trip starts?"

"It takes time," the computer said, "to even determine where it is we're going to go. I have to scan a vast array of spacetime in order to find a section of the universe where particle motion is still alive and well indicating an abundance of energy."

"So, what, like another hour or so?"

The computer sighed. "Yes. Sure. Another hour or so."

"And where is it we're off to again?"

"I don't know," the computer answered with pixilated irritation. "I haven't figured that out yet. All I know is it will be a long way from here it's even possible that we'll be traveling through time for all I know. Wormhole manipulation is a science still in its infancy."

"Still," Charles said, "seems like you could make it go faster."

"I have an idea, why don't we switch roles? I'll be the one who moves a couple of sticks around and makes sure we don't hit any planets for a few minutes and you can be the one who accelerates quarks to near the speed of light, collides them, gathers the sagans that emerge, accelerates them to near the speed of light, collides them, and so on past gravitrons and thornes until wormholes begin to appear at which point you can gather one of them and stabilize it and expand it and then pass the entire ship through-"

"I'm bored," Charles said, yawning. "Set up a fantasy hologram for me and leave me alone for a few hours."

The computer remained silent for a very long period of time, as if forcing itself to count backwards from a dizzyingly large number to zero. "Of course. I'll get right on that," it said.

"See that you do," Charles said, sitting back into his chair and slinging a leg over the armrest. "Until then I'll be right here napping." And with that he closed his eyes.

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Charles woke up as the lights all turned on to full power. He blinked his eyes and looked around, opening his mouth wide and stretching.

"Charles?" the computer said, then quickly corrected itself, "Excalibur?"

Charles looked around, his eyebrows drawing down slightly at the computer's almost friendly tone. "Yes?"

"It's it's time."

"Okay then."

Two steering controls emerged from the sides of his chair and the screen in front of him slowly dissolved into a wide array of dials and instruments. Charles sat up and gripped the two controls. His eyes wandered over the screen. His body relaxed.

"Are you ready?" the computer asked.

"Yes." Charles answered.

"Don't forget to compensate for possible temporal displacement once we're out."

"Yeah," Charles said, nodding his head quickly, the comment so obvious to him that he barely paid it any mind. "I know."

"And you know that you're not supposed to actually fly us anywhere."

"Yes."

"So you're ready?"

Charles breathed heavily out of his nose and turned to glare at one of the computer screens. "Do you mind?"

"Okay, okay. Sorry. So here we go," the computer said. One of the monitors changed to show an external shot of the ship. There was a large metal ring suspended by two beams extending out in front of the nose. There was a flicker in the middle of the ring, a blink and flash of light appearing from nothing but empty black space. Then a spinning form began to appear and it slowly grew into a circle with lightning arcing across numerous times every second, the circle growing and detaching from the metal ring to float a few feet in front of the ship and grow to over twice the size of the large vessel.

"Don't look at the walls of the wormhole," the computer said, "it'll only confuse you."

"Yeah," Charles said, ignoring the voice. He eased the controls forward and the ship moved towards the glowing circle, the nose disappearing inside, more and more of it floating out of existence, until the entire ship had passed through and with a flash the hole blinked, then shrank into nothingness, leaving only empty space behind.

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Charles sat on the grassy hill, his back to the shipwreck, ignoring the whining piercing voice that was shouting behind him.

" I mean, what the hell happened?" the computer was asking, it's voice mottled and crackly from a broken

speaker.

Charles sat diffidently still and refused to answer.

"How did you hit a planet? You realize that the entire cargo bay caught fire. All human specimens have been destroyed. Completely. All gone."

Charles traced a line in the grass next to him and stared at the horizon.

There was a rumble and a roar and smoke began billowing from somewhere deep inside the ship. A burst of sparks arced through the air.

"I'm suffering any number of coolant leaks and mainframe failures and and what the hell happened!"

"Look, I hardly think this is my fault. We came out of that hole hurtling full speed towards this planet," Charles looked around. "Frankly I'm grateful that I managed to land as softly as I did."

The computer only remained silent as another burst of sparks shot out of somewhere towards the rear of the ship, casually lighting a dangling bunch of wire on fire.

"Okay," the computer finally spoke up. "What's done is done, right?" it said in a not very convincing voice. "We have to make the best of things here. So here's what you're going to do. You're going to sit there and do nothing that's what you're going to do. And here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to do some serious thinking through the night. For one thing I'm going to try and map out the starlight pattern in order to figure out where, and maybe when, we are. Okay? Okay," it finished without waiting for Charles to respond.

Judging by the way Charles was staring sullenly out at the horizon it wasn't very likely he was going to respond anyway.

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"Charles?" the computer's voice said softly. "Charles? I've figured out where we are. Charles?"

Charles sat up, wiping some sleep out of his eyes. "That's not my name," he mumbled with a degree of fatalism.

"Fine. Excalibur. I know where we are."

There was a new tone in the computer's voice and Charles paused a moment to try and name it. "You don't sound angry. In fact you sound nice."

"I've come to the conclusion that you might not have actually done anything wrong. It's possible that all of this was exactly what was supposed to happen."

Charles stood up and stretched, then walked up to the top of the small grassy hill and stared out over the horizon again as an angry burst of sparks sputtered out of a nearby part of the ship. Charles glanced back as this happened. "You haven't finished fixing yourself?"

"I'm fine," the computer said as a small fire flickered into existence where the sparks had been. "I'll give myself as complete an overhaul as possible once we finish one thing. I was too busy figuring out where and when we are to worry about myself."

"And?"

"And we're on Earth."

"Really," Charles said, looking around, not even remotely impressed. "Okay then. Now what?"

"Charles," the computer began, some hints of its old attitude returning, "Earth was lost to existence millions of years ago, it never mind. Where we are isn't nearly as interesting as when we are."

Charles didn't respond, he only looked around at some bugs skittering across the little grassy hill. The computer waited, an attempt at showmanship demanding that it at least try and engage Charles in this conversation. Neither said anything for a while until Charles turned back around. "Hey, that's great," he said, not having noticed that the computer had never said anything. "Fascinating."

"You're an idiot," the computer said before plowing on without audience participation. "We're on Earth roughly three billion years ago. Do you understand? We've gone completely back to the beginning. We're at the point in time when sentient thought first appeared in the universe. And it's possible that we were supposed to crash land here because we are supposed to be here. I have come to believe that we have an important role to play in all of this."

"Okay," Charles said with questionable amounts of understanding.

"There is a group of humanlike animals gathered in a colony over on the far side of that field to the north. We have only one chance to make our first impression upon them. The exact sequence of actions and words we use to interact is of the utmost importance. We have the chance, here and now, to provide the foundations of conscious thought that will grow to impregnate the entire universe. Do you understand?"

Charles looked off to the north and a grim look came over his face as his eyes narrowed and acceptance of his task settled onto his shoulders. He nodded. "You want me to have sex with all of their women," he said.

The computer didn't respond.

"Right?"

There was a discernable gap of silence before the computer finally managed to speak. "Shut up and do what I tell you. I need you to arrange the beginnings of a bonfire. When the time is right tomorrow night I'll call them to us and ignite the fire and you will read, word for word, a carefully crafted speech that I will give you. It is in that first minute of their conscious thought that all of history will be shaped. Do you think you can do that?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. Then let's get to work."

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In the middle of the dark night a bright beacon of light shot out of the roof of the ship, blazing into the starry sky. There were noises on the horizon as Charles waited and attempted to squint into the darkness, unable to see anything but with every one of his other senses telling him that a crowd was gathering.

"Okay," the computer whispered, "now."

Charles triggered the incendiary device and the bonfire burst into flames, casting a warm orange glow over the

faces of hundreds of humanlike forms that were gathered all around. Their sloping brows and hairy appendages made them look animal, their rudimentary attempts at clothing and upright appearance made them look human.

"Okay," the computer said again, "it is time. You must read them what I have written."

Charles gave a solemn nod and picked up the handheld monitor and moved to the top of the grassy hill. The computer did what it could to arrange the ship's lighting to lend gravitas to Charles' form.

Charles looked out over the crowd, apprehension growing in his heart as the faces in front of him stared, wavering between awe and dangerous fear. The monitor he held at his side glowed softly, its words neatly arranged in a compact paragraph.

Suddenly there was another burst of sparks from the inner workings of the ship, more ferocious than any recent outbursts, and unseen by Charles the small screen he held flashed a crazy mix of lines and digital static before the words reappeared, clunky and mismatched.

Charles held the screen up and, in a booming commanding voice, began to read. "You," he shouted, his eyes flicking from the little screen to his audience and back again, "ain't nothing but a hound dog!" He froze, staring in disbelief at the words in front of him. The audience wavered, sensing his anxiety as he stood for a few seconds saying nothing.

Charles cleared his throat. "I," he plowed on, "am Excalibur, and I come to you to the origin of the species from a beagle!" he forced seriousness into his voice and attempted to sound commanding, holding his arms up for a second before whirling around and whispering frantically to the computer. "What the hell is this?!"

The computer only responded with three more bursts of sparks and a lot of crackling.

He spun back around quickly to avoid seeming confused. "But," he yelled, his voice wavering and lilting as he tried to read the words out loud in a natural rhythm, "soft. What light through yonder window breaks?" For no reason he held his arms out away from his body in an attempt at a "Ta-da!" motion.

"Code monkey like Fritos," he read quickly, hoping to move on to a line that made sense to him. The grizzly human figures were beginning to grow agitated, moving around, hooting and gnarling with every moment of silence.

Charles caught sight of a phrase he understood and raising his arms over his head he managed to regain some degree of solemn aura. "My god," he intoned, nodding his head slightly, pausing with perfect tempo, he lowered his hand and read more out of the corner of his eye. "They killed Kenny. You bastards," he mumbled, his voice cracking. He smiled at the audience then turned to give another ferocious look back at the computer.

The audience was spinning out of his control now, creatures less animal and more human leaping and screaming around the bonfire. With a halfhearted effort Charles read the last line on the screen. "Run for your life it's Godzilla." The crowd erupted into frenzy.

Charles turned and walked over to the computer. He smiled and nodded. "And what in the hell was that?" he asked.

With a final burst of crackling the computer got itself under control. "What did you do?!" it shouted.

"Me?" Charles asked, pointing at himself, "I read that raving nonsense you gave me."

"That was a glitch, this is what you were supposed to read," the computer said, erasing the little monitor and rewriting the speech.

Charles looked down and slowly read it over. "Oh," he said with complete understanding, "well this is much better."

"Yeah." There was a resigned silence from the computer. "Well," it said, "there's nothing for it now. That was our one chance. The seed has been planted."

Charles turned and looked back at the delirious celebration that was now beginning to take place around the bonfire. One of the computer's cameras turned to watch as well. They both stared in silence for awhile, lost in thought.

"You know, it really explains a lot, doesn't-"

"It really does, doesn't it?" Charles said, agreeing so emphatically he trampled over the computer's sentence.

"Yeah," the computer agreed.

"Now what?" Charles asked.

"I need to do some more repairs. But we could play a game with my remaining processing power. Do you like chess?"

"Nope," Charles said.

"3-D chess?"

"Nope."

"Well what do you like?"

"You ever played rock, paper, scissors?"

"I'm not playing that game. It's moronic."

"But I like it," Charles said, defensively.

The two bickered into the night as the triumphant yells of the humans on the other side of the hill spiraled up into the heavens along with the smoke and ash from the bonfire.

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About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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