

## The Proverbial Rabbit Hole

by Barry Sherwood

Outside the cockpit window the blue reverberating glow of the hyperspace field disintegrated, to reveal the black void of space. After the bus sized spaceship re-entered normal space, sensors in the front section beeped and whined. Only a few minutes passed before a pink and purple striped cat hopped up onto the helm terminal that wrapped around an empty pilot's chair. Lazily the cat walked to the other side of the console and pawed at several buttons and switches to end the annoying noises.

"Good morning, Cheshire."

"Hatter, I thought you were some advanced onboard artificial intelligence system. Why do you have me waking up from my nap to turn off these alerts?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were still alive." Cheshire cleaned himself while the onboard Hatter began the automated start up processes. Lights throughout the ship flickered online as the ship's interior heated up to a temperate seventy-two degrees. The smell of freshly brewing coffee filled the air. In the corridor which ran the length of the ship, a small pod descended from the ceiling.

"Alice should be awake momentarily."

"Good, hopefully this star system is more interesting than the last." The synthetic feline stretched and yawned as he roamed the inside of the claustrophobic interior. Alice's life pod uncorked which sent an ear popping sound throughout the tiny vessel. She would lay there for several minutes as her normal bodily functions revived her. Cheshire jumped onto a kitchen

outcropping only a foot from the pod. “Time to get up! I’m not going to feed myself, so chop chop blonde.”

“Jesus Cheshire. You know. When my sister told me to get a space cat, she told me they were funny, charismatic, but the best part was the synthetic cats could feed themselves.”

“Weird. That part of the warranty must have expired,” he sneered. Alice sat up and stretched while Cheshire sat with his fluffy tail dangling off the small countertop. For a few minutes he sat quietly and watched Alice finish her normal revival routine, exiting her pod in a form fitting silver body suit. He wondered why she bothered to cover up. It seemed pointless to wear clothing being the only human at the edge of unknown space. He had broached the subject once before but learned that Humans found it to be a sensitive topic.

“Hatter, how’s my White Rabbit holding up?”

“Good morning, Alice. The ship systems are optimal. We’ve reached system U-823 with no issues. I have begun a detailed scan of the star system. Internal sensors indicate no complications with the revival process. You’ve been asleep three years, nine days, two minutes, and eleven seconds.”

“Good. By the way thanks for the coffee.” Barefooted Alice walked over to the kitchen and opened two small compartments. She took a small metal cup and placed it under the built-in liquid dispenser that immediately poured in coffee. Simultaneously, she placed a metallic colored cube next to Cheshire, who immediately devoured it. Savoring the smell of Carmel mixing with the artificial creamer, Alice meandered over to her pilot’s seat. Behind her Cheshire remained seated and watched the life pod lift itself back up into the ceiling. Using the now warm cup to heat her hands, she simply glanced around at the different monitors. Hatter’s sensors continued to update the displays with sensor data while Alice enjoyed the few minutes of silence.

“Wow, a septenary star system.”

“Yes, I believe this is the first confirmed system of its kind. My sensors are also picking up several planets, moons, and a blackhole.”

“How long until the blackhole compromises the system?”

“By my calculations the singularity will devour the system in roughly one million years-” Hatter paused. Suddenly, exterior metal window curtains on the outside of the ship slammed shut. Consoles, terminals, and displays around the cockpit turned off moments before the ceiling lights flickered off. Cheshire’s purple stripes started to glow as an automated response to the blackout. While the dim light illuminated a majority of the small interior, it was enough for Alice to continue working around the cockpit. Meandering over, Cheshire jumped back to his usual spot on the helms console while Alice tinkered with buttons and switches.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. Hatter is completely offline.” After she tapped several more buttons, she sat back in her chair. “I need to manually reboot the system.” Alice leaned over the right side of

the pilot's chair and opened a small panel on the floor. She cranked a yellow lever in the compartment multiple times before the fusion reactor kick started. A familiar hum followed by the normal ship vibration returned. Cheshire looked to a nearby intercom as a static voice spoke gibberish.

"Well, its official, Hatter's gone mad."

"Shh, I'm trying to concentrate." Alice scrolled through code displayed on one of the screens while sensor readouts populated on another monitor. "If I'm reading this right, a powerful energy signature from the fourth planet blasted the ship just before Hatter went offline."

"Seriously? Did we just find intelligent life?"

"We?" Alice turned and gave Cheshire a raised eyebrow.

"I mean, I am here, right? Wait a second, I thought you were trying to figure out what broke this heap."

Alice turned back to the monitor, "Yeah, yeah, quality save. I don't think anything is broken, and my ships not a heap. It's like something scrambled Hatter's code and he's trying to reroute his programming." She swiped through several screens before a red light beeped. Before she could react, a terminal displayed their position within the star system.

"Um, are we supposed to be headed directly towards the blackhole?"

"What do you think?" Alice grabbed the stick and tried to turn the ship. She quickly realized the helm was unresponsive as the ship continued its present course.

"My apologies, Alice and Cheshire, but I am afraid we're headed on an adventure."

"Hatter?" Alice and Cheshire said simultaneously.

"Affirmative. Unfortunately, a caterpillar virus has infiltrated my systems. During my standard reboot processes, it managed to take control over several key systems, one of which being navigation. My assumption is the aliens who sent this burst signal don't want to be disturbed and they are using the blackhole as an interplanetary defense system." Alice leaped from her chair and rushed to the rear compartment. She pulled a panel off the wall and started to rearrange chips and wires. The ship started to shake as an annoying beep hollered from the front of the ship.

"That can't be good."

"You are correct Cheshire. That is the proximity alarm. The ship is now caught within the gravitational tides of the blackhole. Alice's attempts to reroute thruster controls will be unsuccessful. I calculate we only have a few minutes before the ship enters the event horizon."

Alice slammed her fist against the wall, "Damn you Hatter."

"What happens then Alice?"

“We die.”

“Alice that is an incorrect assumption. My database indicates it is unclear what will happen, it is possible we will die, but it is also just as likely we could emerge on the other side. Either way, I would recommend entering your pod for the remainder of this trip.” Hatter lowered Alice’s sleep pod as she leaned against the wall in the rear compartment. She closed her eyes and tried to remember what her pilots training had taught her. The ship shook as it passed through another tide.

“I’ll miss you, Alice.” Cheshire laid down on the helms console.

“Alice, it will take my system forty-two seconds for the pod to complete its sleep process, I suggest you enter it right away.”

“No. I enlisted to explore.” Alice walked past the pod to her chair. Once seated, she tapped on several keys near the arm rest. In seconds, belts crossed her chest, waist, and legs. A three-piece helmet wrapped around her head from the chair. Only her arms were free as the rest of her body was immobilized.

“We are entering the event horizon. I am going to power down. Hopefully, it will prevent any long-term damage to my programming. Cheshire, please take care of my Alice.” Once again, the ship went dark. Seconds passed as the ship began to shake violently. Cheshire scurried into Alice’s lap.

“Alice. Just in case, I need to confess something to you.”

“What’s that?”

“I sort of chewed up your favorite bra while you were sleeping.”

“Are you serious?!”

The End.