

Strange Attractor

By Mataki Wolf

<This is a NOTICE. Planetary Extirpation Procedure Omicron commences in 30 minutes. All personnel will check in when their station is operational. REPEAT. This is a NOTICE...>

Thaxter stirred in his sleep, hands clutching at the pillow covering his head. His alarm was unusually loud this morning, he thought, and as he moved the pillow aside, the notice's repetition blared into his ears. Jolting fully awake, he gasped and looked at his wrist. 1030 hours! How had he missed his wake-up ping? Why hadn't he set an extra one? In a whirl, he dashed out of bed and rapidly began assembling the pieces of his uniform, cursing himself for not setting a stronger alarm. *Hell, I should've set **five** of them*, he thought as he hopped on one foot, getting his pants on and threading his long, striped tail through a hole in the back. *Late on my first demolition, they'll have me cleaning the canteen floor for a month if they don't just shoot me toward the nearest star.* Giving himself a brief once-over in the mirror and making himself as presentable as possible, the raccoon made a quick exit from his quarters.

Turning to hurry down the hall, he failed to put on the brakes in time to avoid running into a tall, black feline wearing a pink bathrobe. With a surprised yelp, a sheepish look, and a mumbled "pardon me," he darted around her as she grinned down at him. Picking up his pace again, he found himself careening back to the right side of the hallway to dodge a wolf chasing a border collie with a wet towel. *Lucky third-shifters. Wish I was going back to bed after a nice shower.* Having made it past the animated obstacle course of his shipmates aboard the Adephagia, Thaxter reached the lifts to the upper decks. Spying an open car, he rushed in and pressed the button for the bridge repeatedly until the doors whooshed together.

In the lift, he had a few moments to collect himself, and Thaxter allowed his frantic mind to come up with all manner of scenarios in which he would be sneered at, embarrassed in front of the team, lectured, and yes, maybe even court-martialed for failing to show up on time for his very important job of...watching. He took a deep breath and chuckled to himself. *Yeah, they probably won't court-martial you for showing up too late to observe everyone trying to look busy while the computers run through all the final checks. Relax. Worst you'll get this captain's version of the "ships live and die by their schedule" speech you heard at academy.* As he finished downgrading his self-judgement to match probable reality, the lift reached its destination, and Special Ensign Thaxter Bassari walked onto the busy bridge.

This trip had been a long time coming. Thaxter's childhood interest in astronomy led him to study astrophysics at university in the hopes of someday being able to see all the things he loved in the cosmos close-up. As he progressed through his graduate studies, he found great satisfaction in learning the rules of the universe, and he developed an intense curiosity for the objects that seemed to break those rules. These attributes served him well, and his work was rewarded with greater opportunities to research, and finally to explore. When a chance to work in his field on the Adephagia was made known to him two years ago, he jumped at it. While the rigor of training to meet the requirements caused him to curse the decision during a few late-night self-pity sessions, he knew that was where he wanted to be--on a ship where he could explore the depths of space, see its wonders, and put his knowledge to use. And finally, as of a week ago, after graduation, training, security clearance paperwork, and the months-long journey just to get to where he could rendezvous with the ship, here he was.

Star systems were often filled with troublesome asteroids and comets whose orbits would eventually impact the habitable worlds and make them distinctly less livable for anything larger than a microbe for millions of years. Smaller bodies could be dealt with easily, but the bigger ones that measured dozens or hundreds of kilometers across required a more innovative solution. That's where the Adephagia came in. The ship was host to an experimental bulldozer of sorts that was meant to deal with these potential problems for planets where colonies were planned. The method of demolition being tested involved the use of a singularity--a black hole. That was precisely the reason why Thaxter was so eager to be stationed aboard, the chance to see such a force of nature in action. It was with great anticipation, then, that he looked around the bridge, lingering on the viewscreen as it showed him the subject of today's experiment--a grey and brown-mottled sphere, half-lit by its sun.

It was a planet, almost the size of his home world.

Thaxter stared in wonder at the half-moon image for a moment. *They're up to planets already. Wow.* The chatter of the team preparing for extirpation filled his ears as he spied an empty chair he marked as his.

A purring voice called out the planet's stats. "Final scan of sector ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha. Planetary body Tau Ceti I. 0.92-terramass, iron-nickel core. Projected probability of planetary disintegration within next 50,000 years: 31.3%." The snow leopard's pleasant-sounding report caught Thaxter's attention as he walked toward his station. The planet had a good chance of breaking up and slingshotting chunks of itself around the sun and throughout the system for a quite a while. *Unless we vacuum it away first*, thought the raccoon, finding his seat next to a porcupine whose name tag identified him as Pinback.

Pinback gave Thaxter a measured look before giving his own report in a less pleasant-sounding drawl. "Life scan negative. Again. This rock's half-melted, what's gonna live down there?"

Yeah, I know, ten checks to be sure. Well, this is the tenth and it's still barren city." Looking at the raccoon again, he added with a grin, "Nice of you to join us, rook. You wanna take a trip planetside and make sure there's nothing crawling around so we can finally get rid of this thing?" Thaxter managed a smile as a few titters followed. The lioness captain soon cut it short, however.

"That's enough. It looks like everything checks out. We have a viable target, so let's give our late arrival something to observe. Dr. Schwarzschild, are you in position?"

Another deep purring voice flowed through the comm speaker. "Yes, captain. Coordinates loaded and verified. Ready for transport."

The captain nodded. "Acknowledged. Power teleporter and begin extirpation procedure when ready. Good luck, doctor."

"Thank you. This one should be...fun. Schwarzschild out."

Thaxter shivered a bit at the voice; he always had a thing for those feline trills. As he looked around, however, he became confused by the apparent lack of activity now that the mission had begun. Everyone seemed to have their attention drawn to the viewscreen where the planet gently turned during its last moments. *Where's the singularity station?* After a moment, he mused it must be off-ship. That would make sense--in case of a mishap, the main ship had a better chance of escaping to safety. As he joined the crew in their rapt study of the viewscreen, however, he didn't see any vessel. After a minute of this, and despite his earlier ribbing, Thaxter asked the porcupine next to him. "Er...how do they deploy the singularity? Is Dr. Schwarzschild in a mobile lab somewhere closer to the planet?"

Pinback turned toward the raccoon with a big smile on his face. "No one clued you in about how this works? They really do keep this hush-hush homeworld! Wow, I don't know who to watch now, you or her." He turned toward the screen for a moment, squinting as he studied it thoroughly. With a laugh and a gesture of one spine-covered arm, he pointed at the image. "There you go, rook, watch that little gap in the background stars. Oh, this is gonna be **good**."

Thaxter saw it himself after squinting for a bit. There was indeed a small gap in the stellar background, almost as if part of the viewscreen itself had stopped working. He focused on it, and after a moment, blinked with surprise.

It was moving.

The nothingness in the stars moved slowly toward the planet, a coordinated twinkle of a million points of light. Upon reaching the edge of the planet, however, the dark patch disappeared, melding with the blackness of the nightside surface.

"Helm," the captain said, "move us so that the sun is behind the target planet. Let's see the show."

The otter at the controls obeyed, and the perspective of the viewscreen shifted. The bright yellow star Tau Ceti moved into place behind its closet orbiter. Filters dimmed the sun's brightness, but for a long moment nothing was visible.

"Magnify southern hemisphere, eastern quadrant. That's where she was headed."

The bottom right half of the planet filled the viewscreen, its curved surface resembling an exponential function graph. Very close to its edge, about halfway down, a small bump could be seen. It caught the attention of the captain.

"More magnification, please. I think that's her."

Again the screen zoomed in. The bump resolved itself into many streams of material flowing up from the surface of the planet, all meeting at a point. Slowly, a shape grew at that point--a shadow that lengthened and twisted, showing arms and legs as it moved and expanded. The larger it became, the more streams rose up to meet it. Soon, the shape was large enough to identify as feline, and the head and tail gave it a teasingly familiar form.

"Is that...the singularity?" he finally asked. "Or is that...Dr. Schwarzschild?"

"Yes," replied Pinback in a soft voice.

As he continued to watch, Thaxter thought about the scale of what he was seeing. Those were no mere pieces of dust being ripped from the planet; they had to be huge chunks of the crust, many meters across. More and more of them flowed into the expanding feline shape. With those curves, there was no doubt that the feline in question was a she, and her size soon grew to fill a good portion of the magnified screen. Fiery rings showed through cracks in the planet's crust, radiating outward from where she was drawing material from its surface. As the growing feline danced and stretched in space, the red-hot concentric circles grew in number and brilliant intensity. The smooth curve of the planet became jagged, spiked with shards of rock jutting upward from the surface, pointing accusations at the greedy shadow that spirited away their comrades.

"Previous magnification," the captain requested in a voice much like Pinback's.

One-fourth of the planet could again be seen, a big chunk of it missing where Dr. Schwarzschild did her work. It looked like someone had taken a bite from a cosmic cookie, and as the silhouette continued its enlargement, the bite followed suit, as if a still larger invisible giantess were out there consuming the world with a gargantuan maw. The shape grew faster, arms stretching out toward the planet as if to beckon it toward her. As she performed the gesture, the fissures of flame flared throughout the hemisphere closest to her. Most unsettlingly to Thaxter, the shape of the planet became noticeably less round, taking on an ovoid form that skewed toward the curvy singularity.

“She’s...uh...getting big. Should we be this close?” Thaxter asked nervously, leaning back from the viewscreen unconsciously.

“Relax,” responded Pinback, still without his previous needling manner. “She’s growing by the same amount that the planet’s shrinking. There’s a constant mass out there all the time, just more and more of it’s...her.”

The viewscreen supported Pinback’s summary. The still-growing feline completed her embrace of the planet, arms and fingers outlined by the fire-laced crust in cataclysmic turmoil on its surface. Like a mouse trying to hug a basketball, she pressed herself against the world, but as the proportion of felinoid to planet continued to change, her embrace encompassed more and more real estate. Thaxter could see one long arm stretch westward across the poor ruined planetscape, its hand sinking into the liquified crust, consuming it in a vast sinkhole..

As the process began to draw to a close, Dr. Schwarzschild looked like she was squeezing the air from a large balloon. Arms of unimaginable size and strength drew mass from what was left of the world, cradling it to a chest that gave neither consolation nor comfort, only further absorption. With a final squeeze, the planet fragmented into a million fiery coals, and the last vestiges of Tau Ceti I found their way into her body.

She floated there in space as the remaining embers blinked out of sight, a being the size of the planet she just consumed. The edge of her shadow was fuzzy and indistinct, an effect of the light being bent around her as she pulled even the photons from the sun toward herself. As Thaxter continued to stare, however, her outline sharpened to clarity, a jarring effect that made her seem much closer to the ship. He leaned back in his seat quickly again, and Pinback chuckled.

“Get it together, rook. That means she’s done.”

Verifying this, the shadow slowly gave a thumbs-up gesture in profile. The stations on the bridge came to life once more, a stark contrast to the silence that had accompanied the show outside.

“Verifying gravity loss simulation. No anomalies found. Remaining planets stable ten million years out.” reported a black wolf on the other side of Pinback. “OK to signal for mass storage.”

The captain nodded. “Helm, signal the doctor to begin mass storage. Transport team, keep a lock on her position and beam aboard when she’s back to normal.”

She’s holding the mass of a planet, and we’re beaming her back on board?? Thaxter was eager to see what sort of magic trick would make this possible, and he soon got his wish. Lights flashed on the hull of the ship, and the titanic figure eclipsing the sun nodded. In another disorienting optical illusion, the feline shape diminished, seeming to fall in toward the sun as her shadow grew smaller and smaller, eventually shrinking back into a featureless dot on the viewscreen, then disappearing altogether. Thaxter watched the sun for a moment before the announcement came.

“Dr. Schwarzschild is aboard. Says she could go for dessert.”

The captain chuckled. “Acknowledged. Extirpation Procedure Omicron complete. Good work, all.”

As the crew began to rise and chatter, Thaxter remained seated. He’d been trained in the study of black holes; he’d seen the theories that they could be harnessed, made to do everything from power starships to remove obstacles as he’d just witnessed. They’d been the objects that fascinated him most during his studies, and he’d been looking forward very much to seeing one up-close and personal.

He hadn’t expected his first one to be so attractive.

Thaxter replayed the events of that morning over and over in his mind for the rest of the day. He wasn’t sure how to reconcile what he’d seen with what he thought he knew. Black holes were collapsed stars; how could one be alive, have a shape, have a name? *No, she must be something else. How could they let her back on the ship after she consumed an entire planet?* As the questions whirled in his head, the need for answers only grew. He wasn’t used to not having access to answers, and he could only think of one way in this case to get them. She was on the ship somewhere; maybe he could find her and talk to her. He was sent to observe, after all, and what better observation point than at the source?

He realized he hadn’t been on a ship this far out before, one with living quarters and amenities for the crew. He assumed one of those amenities might be a bar, further assumed that people would congregate there, and flat-out guessed (and hoped) that she might be one of them. That evening he set out looking for it. If nothing else, he figured, it would be a good excuse to explore the vessel that would be his new home for the next few months.

Thaxter wandered through the walkways of the Adephagia, gradually recognizing a general flow of crew members in one direction, and he followed their lead. Sure enough, he was soon greeted by the noise of conversation and music, the smell of food. Phase one of his mission was a success!

He stayed back by the door for a few moments, scanning the bar for any large, black felines. After dismissing a few candidates, a realization hit him. What **did** she look like, exactly? He had only truly seen her silhouette; at best, he had a shadowy notion of her shape, but not her true height, color, or even species. Nevertheless, he continued looking, and his eyes stopped on a likely match: a tall black panther sitting at one end of the bar itself.

Seeing no one else in the place that satisfied his mental image of her, Thaxter summoned his courage for phase two. He was shy by nature, dreading the awkwardness that always seemed to accompany his conversations, but here he allowed his curiosity to drive him, and he approached the bar. A yellow Labrador and a squirrel who had been sitting next to the panther got up and headed to the dance floor, giggling and holding hands as they passed him. Thaxter quickened his pace in order to prevent the seats from being taken, and before he was quite ready, he found himself taking a seat next to her.

She was tall, indeed, well over two meters. She swiveled back and forth slowly on her seat, rolling an empty glass between her hands in matching rhythm. After a moment, her ears rose as she sensed Thaxter's staring presence, and she turned to look at him with bright green eyes.

As he took in her feline features, Thaxter realized he didn't have the slightest idea what to say. Simply spouting a barrage of questions would be uncouth, he figured, and he still didn't know if she was really who he was looking for. "Uh, hello!" he began. "I'm sorry to bother you, but are you...er..." *Pardon me, are you the lady who ate a planet earlier today? No, you can't say THAT...*

The panther smiled a little as the raccoon stumbled out of the gate. "Am I the person you ran into this morning on your way out of your room? Yes."

Thaxter's eyes widened in surprise as the realization hit him, her words jogging his memory. She **was** the one he collided with this morning! "Oh...oh! That was you? I'm s-so sorry! Yes, I was running late and in a hurry and...I, uh, certainly didn't mean to run into you! I...gah." Closing his eyes for a moment, he got control of himself, took a deep breath, and began again. "I do apologize, Miss...?" He didn't quite dare to guess her identity, trailing off in a question instead.

The tall woman smiled a bit more. "Portia. Portia Schwarzschild. It's nice to meet you, Mister..." She looked down at his chest, leaning toward him a bit. "Bassari. Apology accepted."

Thaxter looked down at his badge and realized he was still in uniform, while most of the bar was not. *Niiiiice. Not sure how many more ways I can look like an idiot here, but hey, we just started. She's going to think I'm some weirdo now, asking personal questions after...wow, I actually touched her when we bumped into each other this morning. I wonder how she can turn it on and off like that?*

Portia watched the raccoon lose himself in his train of thought for a moment, then broke it with a purring chuckle. "This is where you could offer to buy me a drink as an apologetic gesture. I'd say yes. You might want one yourself, Mister Bassari, if you're off-duty."

Thaxter blinked again as he returned from his thoughts. "Oh, sure! Sorry! I'd love to get you something, Doctor Schwarzschild. What would you like? And call me Thaxter, please."

Portia raised her eyebrows at the honorific. "Portia, if you please, Thaxter. I leave my shingle at the door when I'm in here, and a rum and Nozz-a-la would be quite nice, thank you." She rolled her glass slowly between her hands again as Thaxter ordered her drink and one for himself, smiling once more as the raccoon turned back toward her.

Thaxter looked up at her. "So...I was hoping to find you this evening, Doct--I mean, Portia. Today was my first extirpation, and it was something I've wanted to see for a long time. I, uh, didn't know what to expect, but I surely didn't expect to see what you...did. Heh. I've been studying astrophysics at the academy...I hope to get my doctorate myself soon, and I...just wondered if I could ask you some questions?" *Good. Not too weird. Very professionally curious.*

The drinks arrived, and Portia took a long sip of hers, running her tongue along her lips afterward. She regarded the raccoon for a few moments without speaking. "I'd kinda guessed you hadn't come here to apologize for our meeting this morning, and I bet you have plenty of questions. A lot of new people do...I'm always surprised and impressed how well they manage to keep all this secret off-ship." She glanced at his badge again and grinned. "Pretty high clearance, so you must've had a front-row seat." Taking another drink, she looked at Thaxter for a long moment again, sizing him up. Finally, she nodded. "Well! Since you've been so cordial and forthcoming with drinks, I don't mind a few questions. Let's go to a table, though, and keep it private." Taking her glass, she stood, walking toward a less-occupied section of tables at the back of the bar.

Thaxter followed behind her, tasting his own drink for the first time as he celebrated a successful phase two. It was more alcohol than he was used to, but he didn't make a face, lost in thought again. *She walks like anyone would. She's affected by the ship's artigrav. She doesn't fall through the floor. She can touch things, and they don't get...sucked in. How can she be so normal?* After Portia selected an empty table with vacant neighbors to each side, he sat across from her. He felt excitement building within him, that hungry need to know and to understand

coming forward in his mind, and he took another sip of his drink to keep it from blathering its stream of queries like a precocious five-year-old.

Portia had finished her own drink at this point, putting the glass on the table with a loud clunk. “So...what’s got you curious, Thaxter?” A subtle emphasis of the second-person pronoun hinted this wasn’t the first time she’d had this conversation.

Thaxter licked his lips, grabbing a question from the rotating hopper of them bouncing around his brain. It was really the only one he could start with. “Well...I’ve been trying to figure this out all day, and I can’t. What...exactly did I see today? Was that really you out there?”

Portia chuckled. “Yes. That was me. You saw me perform my primary duty aboard this ship, to serve as a tool for the disposal of dangerous celestial objects. I have, as you also saw, become a rather dangerous celestial object myself. I really did consume that planet, and I really did grow to a planetary size myself in the process.” A rather predatory grin followed that statement. “It was by far the biggest...” she paused, clucking her tongue once. ‘...target I’ve taken care of,” she added with a proud purr.

Thaxter gulped as the hopper of questions stopped, his mind instead replaying the earlier spectacle along with her new commentary on it. *It sounds like she enjoys it. Hell, I enjoyed watching her, so that makes sense.* The self-admission surprised him a bit, but he didn’t have time to reflect on it now. More questions came, and he wasn’t able to stop them.

“But...HOW?? How do you control gravity? Where did all the mass go? How are you able to...even exist in space? And be...as big as you were and still look so...” Thaxter’s skin flushed, the redness visible in the lighter fur patches of his face, and he took his own turn to edit his thoughts mid-stream. “Er...still k-keep your shape, I mean. Gah, I’m sorry...this is just...melting my mind a little.”

Portia’s smile softened again at his questions. “I’d be kinda surprised if it didn’t, seeing that without knowing beforehand! I’ll explain what I can. First, I think you need another one of these.” She stood up from her chair for a moment to wave at the bartender, holding up two fingers before seating herself once more. As Thaxter emptied his first glass with a gulp, the panther began her story.

“I was on the Cygnus, a deep-space science vessel. We were way out toward the far edge of the Oort cloud, what we considered a safe distance from everyone back home. We were trying to create a small singularity through mass compression and maintain it for more than a fraction of a second. After a few weeks of near-misses and outright failure, we managed it. The black hole around our singularity was barely visible, less than a millimeter across, and it had to be contained in a field that used up a tremendous amount of energy, but we had succeeded! We

kept it in existence for a whole minute, and then an hour, and then a day. We couldn't interact with it much; pulling down the field to throw something into it would have been a very bad idea, but we could look at it under magnification. It was weird seeing something so black...and so round. It really was a hole punched in the universe itself, unsettling but fascinating to observe."

The drinks arrived, and Thaxter put his glass to his lips without taking his eyes off the storyteller sitting across from him. *Yeah, I know what that fascination is like.*

"We grew **too** fascinated with it. The hole became almost like a pet to us, a fish in an aquarium we kept wanting to visit as the days piled on. We should have tried the dispersal protocols soon after we created the thing, but we were too proud of and intrigued by what we'd accomplished. We thought we were in control, and when the inevitable power blip in the containment field occurred, we at least didn't have a lot of time to discover how much we weren't."

The raccoon gaped. "It...failed?" His fingers twitched a bit on his glass as they helped deliver another sip of his drink. "What happened?"

Portia nodded. "Yes. I was at the observation window when it happened. Something made the main power supply fluctuate, and the backup system only lasted a few seconds before the load overwhelmed it. It was long enough to realize what was happening, but not long enough to build up enough panic to run." She chuckled. "Not that that would have helped. When containment finally failed, all I can remember is that the hole was suddenly...everything. The ship's mass wasn't enough to make it much bigger at all, so we all must have just been drawn into it."

Thaxter stared at Portia, neither moving nor making a sound. The panther smiled and waited for a question, perhaps an exclamation of disbelief, but none came. She continued.

"I don't have any explanations for why or how it happened, but I survived. I was just...sort of a consciousness for a while. I couldn't see or hear or feel anything. I couldn't move; there was nothing **to** move that I could sense. I could simply think. There was no one, nothing else, so I was alone, just a series of thoughts--thoughts about what must have happened. I was inside the black hole and still conscious somehow, but I had no idea how to get out. How could I get out of something that light can't even escape?" Portia began to roll her glass between her hands again, the rhythm growing faster and faster as she continued. "That was the worst of it, the thought of there being no hope, that I was the sole inmate in the ultimate prison. That ate at my sanity as time went on, compounded by the sensation that time itself was something I could barely sense. I grew more and more desperate for something to see, something to feel, shouting my thoughts into the void as hard as I could, pleading with and then cursing anyone that might be there to hear them. After a while, I decided no one could." The glass came to a stop as her paws halted their routine, and as she pulled them away, it followed her right hand as if drawn by a magnet.

Thaxter finally found his words. “Oh...my. I...I can’t even imagine what that must have been like. I mean, I always wondered what the inside of a black hole is like, but to hear you describe it..it sounds like a version of Hell. But...you’re here now. You discovered a way out.”

Portia looked down at her glass, blinking at the puddle of liquid she’d spilled on the table. She took her hands off the table completely, looking at Thaxter again. “I didn’t. I finally realized I wasn’t **in** the singularity. I **was** the singularity. That knowledge seemed to allow me to begin to sense my surroundings. I was floating in space amongst familiar constellations. There was no sign of the Cygnus, of course. First, I began to learn how to move, to drift in a direction I chose. Icy chunks of rock fell into me occasionally, and over time, I grew. I could feel when mass and gravity flowed through me, and I slowly learned how to control that flow. There seemed to be another ‘side’ to me somewhere else that collected everything I consumed, and I soon found that I could make that mass and gravity go either direction. I could be bigger, smaller, more or less dense. As more time passed, I grew larger still, and I found I could manipulate my shape with some effort. It was easiest just to be a sphere, but I knew if I wanted to get back home, it would help to look something like I used to. I learned how to redistribute my mass to resemble my previous self and how to turn the gravity down to nearly nothing. I practiced all of these things, and after what turned out to be...a very long time, I got back homeworld.”

Thaxter listened to the story, taking in every word, ears perked forward. “So...you can control the flow of mass and gravity between...two universes? Two realities?”

Portia nodded. “I think so. I’m afraid I don’t know much about what’s...inside me, or where the other part of me is. Maybe my consciousness only latched onto this universe’s end of things. It’s frustrating, the number of things I don’t understand about all this. One reason I’m here is to try to learn more.”

Thaxter considered that for a moment, smiling and relaxing a bit at the familiar sentiment toward lack of knowledge. “Wow. This is such a trip. I still don’t think I’d believe any of it if I hadn’t seen it all for myself this morning. Even if I could tell people back home about you, they’d all think I was as crazy as old Captain Fyerser going on about giant space sirens. Speaking of which, how did you explain all this when you got back home? Didn’t someone try to...er...contain you, like your science team contained the singularity?”

Portia grinned as she chuckled with a purr. “The thought occurred to the people I revealed myself to. I was much too big by that point, though. All the material I consumed out in the cloud made me grow at least 100 times the size of the hole we’d created originally. It took some doing and some...demonstrating, but I convinced enough of the right people who I was and **what** I was. The project that eventually led to the Adephagia was started, and here we are. It’s worked out well. They get to study a controlled singularity, and I can have some companionship while I learn more about myself.” The smile widened. “And I get all the space junk I can eat.”

The raccoon looked at the panther for a long time, formulating his next question with care. Her story made him realize that he now occupied her place at its beginning, staring in wonder at a deleterious delight. "You convinced them you're safe enough, but you thought your singularity was safe. Are we...am I...in the same danger?"

Laughing, Portia flicked her tail back and forth under the table. "Oh, much more. There's nothing between you and me but this table, after all." Reducing her mirthful expression to a simple smile after reading Thaxter's expression of earnest concern, she continued. "That was a joke, Thaxter. I know this is all a lot to take in at once, but there's no reason to be scared. I'm not about to go off and suck everything into myself, either on purpose or accidentally, if that's what you're worried about. I'm in control, and I know what I have to do to stay in control. My more-frequent-than-I'd-like psych profiles prove I'm no crazier than whoever wrote the questions, and I don't enjoy the thought of annihilating people. Just the thought that someone might go through what I did after the accident is haunting enough. I've never absorbed a living thing apart from my shipmates aboard the Cygnus, and after hearing my story, I hope you won't blame me for them."

Thaxter winced, his apprehension instantly replaced with regret. "I'm sorry...that was stupid of me to ask. Of course not. I just..." He looked at the panther. "I truly apologize."

Portia smiled in the moment of awkward silence that followed. "Apology accepted...again. You're going to owe me half the bar if we keep talking much longer, though. Speaking of which..." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "My presence will be required elsewhere in a few minutes. Let me leave you with this. I think I know why you came to talk with me tonight, Thaxter. It's the same reason I went to stare at that little black dot every time I could. I wanted to be around it, to look at the danger and be thrilled by it. I couldn't chat with mine, though." She winked. "I don't want to rob you completely of that thrill, so I'll give you another piece of the puzzle before I go." She smiled and stood up, leaning forward over the table as she put her hands on top of it.

"I realized once I got back home that if I didn't...eat...every so often, I began to lose control of myself. I found it more difficult to move my mass back and forth. I found it harder to keep my shape, and I feared if I went too long without consuming something, I'd revert back to my pure singularity state, pulling in everything around me. I didn't want that, obviously. I made do with garbage for a while, but as my mass increased, I needed even more than they could easily give me without arousing suspicion as to where it was all going. Imagine keeping garbage disposal a secret! That's when the Adephagia got fast-tracked, and I was sent out among the stars to find...bigger things to eat." Throughout her speech, the panther slowly slid toward Thaxter, and as she paused to take a breath, he realized she wasn't just leaning closer.

Oh God, she's growing again.

Portia's face brightened as she saw the look of realization on Thaxter's. Green eyes seemed to sparkle as she continued. "And as I found those bigger things, I grew. And grew. And grew." Each repetition of the word saw those paws cover more of the table as they continued to slide toward the raccoon. "That part of it **does** enthrall me, the idea that I'm growing. I don't wish to harm you or anyone else, but I do want to be big. You saw me eat a planet today, add its size and mass to my own. Mmmm...imagine how big I must have been already, Thaxter, to be able to do that, and now I'm even bigger."

Her hands grew over the edge of the table in front of Thaxter, and she grasped it with huge fingers. Her face was just centimeters from his now, filling his view as her words filled his mind. "Planets are good for now, but someday I'll need more. Don't worry, though. The universe is a big place, and there's more than enough to keep me sated for millions of years." With a final rumble, the huge cat's nose just touched the raccoon's snout. "Before I leave, tell me. Was I mistaken about the reason for our impromptu rendez-vous tonight?"

He could feel her gravity himself now, her physical pull adding to the emotional attraction he'd felt since he sat next to her. With little more than a hoarse gasp, he answered her in the negative, and with a flick of her tail and one last Cheshire grin, the tall cat took her leave. *She may or may not be dangerous*, he thought, once thought was again possible, *but my God is she a tease. She can't turn that all the way off either.*

Thaxter sat at the table long after she left the bar, staring at the empty glasses while his brain slowly processed their conversation. He knew what she was now, but she still didn't make sense. How could a force of nature wrap an intelligence around itself and guide its own development? It was unsettling to consider, as were all the things she claimed. He had no reason to doubt her, and he now realized he didn't want to. The ability to read him was also among her talents, and she was right to guess that his fascination was rooted in her size, her form, her danger. Their discussion had turned that fascination into infatuation, and his infatuation focused on the last slice of danger she'd offered him. How long could she keep this up? In millions of years, she'd be impossibly big, able to rival the size of a galaxy, perhaps. And later? She'd consume whole lifeless galaxies of dead stars as the universe aged, eventually rounding up all the other black holes into herself after all the light faded for good. She'd be the ultimate garbage collector, the custodian at the heat death of the cosmos, there to turn off the lights and close the door at the end of everything.

But before all that, hopefully there'd be a few more nights for drinks.