

Copyright © 2026 by Raymond H. Ferris
2026 Bluesky Edition

This short story is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This story may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this story with another person, please purchase additional copies for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Things Get Weird.
A short story
By Raymond H. Ferris

On and on Drucilla lopes, goaded by her Master's voice and the unrelenting pursuit of a chattering Octipoid. The name "Drucilla" is not yet rightfully hers; her Master might—*might*—bestow it if she survives after completing her mission and reporting her success to Him.

Two hours of steady running brings the genemodded and surgically-augmented panther to a field with scattered concrete foundations near the long valley's mid-point. Humans dwelt here, before the Godswrath impact four centuries ago.

At the field's center, fresh instructions flow from certain of her biocomp spinal nodes. She veers left toward the tall mountains to the west, their bases miles away, their tops gilded by the setting sun. Leaning a bit into the twelve- to fourteen-knot southern winds, she races up a sloped plain. A lone spinal node cautions: *Bands of tall, eroded granite outcrops lie across the path ahead. Take care in choosing a way among them. Tectonic stress zones created by the Godswrath event underwent a Richter*

eight point eight adjustment two weeks ago. Some boulders remain out of equilibrium.

Drucilla considers the data as she runs. *Perhaps a boulder will fall on the Octopoid ... Perhaps I can make sure that one does.*

That will keep it from following me to Mel Lanus.

Find Mel Lanus, her eighty-fifth spinal node bespeaks her in her Master's Voice, for the two hundred and thirty-eighth time.

Dark mountains blot out the western sky. Ahead, faint stars fill a broad gap between two peaks. Near the mid-point of the gap the skyline shows three pyramids: Two narrow ones just left of a broader, higher peak. Lesser peaks march south and north of the gap.

Multiple routes to and around the three peaks blossoms in the panther's awareness, along with the information that *pre-Godswrath cartographers maintain the largest peak is the highest mountain within five thousand kilometers, although one must allow for the cartographers' regional chauvinism...* She shakes her head; the node ceases its lecture. She must climb to that peak to learn the next stage of her journey to...

Find Mel Lanus.

Stop that, will you? she subvocalizes at the node. Another shake of her head silences it. Temporarily. One mid-stride paw-swipe returns her SymbioTech harness's skullcap to the center of her enlarged braincase.

At the boulders, the panther climbs the closest high outcrop. Her harness's speech vocoder projects ultrasonic beeps, seeking unstable boulders through sonar. She selects the most suitable formation for her plan.

She waits by the chosen formation for a pause between wind gusts. Then Drucilla bounds zigzag up a series of ever-higher boulders, concluding with a nine-foot leap onto the flattened apex of a thirty-foot-tall monolith with a slight northwest tilt.

The monolith tilts a little more. Drucilla freezes, then lies down and tucks her paws under her torso. The wind resumes. She extends her head until she can peer over the edge of her perch. An oft-used animal trail passes below. For half an hour she recovers from her long run.

While she rests, memories flow through Drucilla's Moreau-ized cerebrum.

Several hours before her departure, human servants wheel the augmented panther's cage into a pool of light in an otherwise darkened chamber. After they leave she spends an

interval contemplating the back of a programmer's console, atop a pedestal near her cage. It resembles the consoles her Augmenter used to cultivate her spinal node bio-computers to increase their capacity to absorb, parallel-process and interpret digital data.

She stretches a paw towards the console. It stays beyond her grasp.

"My buddies are getting too nosey again," her Master's voice comes from the darkness before her. "So... You don't say anything to anybody. Or any being. Not until you find Mel Lanus and even then wait 'til you're sure nobody is watching or listening to him or you.

"You're not even going to know where you're going, 'til you reach each landmark and your nodes unlock the next step of your route. I'm programming your nodes with nested directions, see?

"Once you find Mel Lanus, you're going to recite a message. Hell, you'll be part of the message. Thinks he's so high and mighty, off on his own. Find him. Make sure he is alone. You won't enjoy the rapture of the Recall Trance until you do. He smells like this."

He steps into the pool of light. His gloved right hand holds out an undergarment; she commits the scent to memory and nods.

The Master drops the cloth in haste and looks at the console.

"Access: Alpha null seven three four nine one eight..."

The sequence of numbers puts the panther into a state of mindless inattention. When it passes her Master stands at the console. His hands do things on it she cannot see. Dancing gleams of colored lights reflect in His eyes.

"I guess you'll need more than the route to Mel's last known location," He says, more to the console than to her. "Better program the spinal nodes with any stuff that might be helpful. H'mmm. And I ought to add the latest upgrade of the Advisor Emulators." His hands move about the console for a time. Then He turns His head and stares into her eyes.

"If you return... We shall see. Those who are loyal *will be remembered.*

"Find Mel Lanus. Find Mel Lanus. Find Mel Lanus. I tell you three times."

Truth. She feels His command lock within her nodes.

His hand does something on the console. Scores of the panther's spinal nodes itch. The itch becomes a golden glow. She strops her muzzle and flanks against the cage bars and lashes her tail. Deep rumbles fill her...

The SymbioTech harness's forward optics interrupts her memories. They detect a whitish blob in the eastern darkness. Certain of Drusilla's nodes apply image-enlarging software to the blob, to reveal the Octopoid advancing on six fan-shaped blurs. Large luminous goggles surround its crystalline eye covers. Its protective membrane, allowing the genegineered creature to survive on land, glistens in the starlight.

She blinks to replay the image at slow speed. The blurred fans become six tentacles rolling forward and back in arcs that overlap without touching. The "goggles" are the two front tentacles, coiled around each eye cover. They emit a bioluminescent glow to light the creature's path.

Soon a flat, inhuman voice reaches her ears.

"I believe we have yet to be properly introduced which may account for your present reluctance to engage in conversation. Allow me to repair this deficiency. Pindergliss Dee Loquacious Octopoid conversationalist extraordinary at your service. Hallo. Are you there."

Go away. Stop pestering me, Drucilla subvocalizes. Speaking aloud will betray her position.

The creature's inflectionless voice moves away, then draws closer. "Won't you have a chat with me. Isn't this a fine night for a chat although a bit windy out wouldn't you say."

The panther's ears flatten. *Shut up. Leave me alone.*

"What would you like to discuss. Among other intellectual resources I possess a complete multimedia edition of the final download broadcast from the Orbital Archives. The Augmenter Evelyn Mergels herself permitted me to access this valuable resource... "

Its voice fades into inaudibility somewhere southeast of Drucilla. A minute later it resumes from the southwest.

“...despite its encyclopedic range of topics, I must acknowledge that the Savant Pierpoint Grimpill questions the efficacy of this resource calling it quote nothing but frivolous populist twaddle unquote. To be fair Grimpill searched the Archives only for military weapon systems and pornographic vids, to which the Savant Erik Burnfiddle responded with numerous citations showing that such materials seldom appear within databases intended for general public access. But I digress.

“Please allow me to offer you but the slightest example of what may be found within the Orbital Archives. Let us begin with an excerpt from Chapter Twelve of The Strange Island by the early Twentieth century Ce Ee author Kenneth Kohlabee:

“But it is you who do not yet understand Sir Roderick’ replied Doktor Froudakkar. ‘My optimalizing transformatoids will not reach their full expression until the second generation. Your children may appear a bit strange to the uninformed, what with the extra heads growing from their armpits and all...”

Now the Octopoid’s voice comes almost ahead of Drucilla. Several linked spinal nodes calculate the creature shall pass under her tilted perch in ten seconds.

“...But not to worry; your grandchildren will be absolutely precious.’ “Who the devil are you really Herr Doktor’ snapped Sir Roderick. ‘You’ve just lapsed into colloquial English and not exactly the English heard among my set either. Could it be that you aspire to a station higher than the one to which you were born...”

Now I'll silence you. The panther crouches and leaps straight up, to land on four bunched paws at the corner of the monolith’s crest above the trail. She jumps again. The tall stone shudders under her, tilting over. She turns as it arcs

out, climbing over the apex and down what will soon become the pillar's upper side.

She leaps once more, toward the monolith's base. Two yards beneath her, the rock column hits some lower boulders. The upper third cracks off and skews counterclockwise. Rock splinters clack against various granite surfaces. The Octopoid cries "Yaaaaaaaa" in a most unemphatic way.

Drucilla's paws land on the fallen column's nearly level base; she leaps to her right, pads around several lesser boulders and runs into the western night.

Sunrise finds the panther napping, sheltered from the wind by a partly fallen stone wall in a meadow sloping east toward the valley. The glade sustains random stands of pine. Beyond them a deep ravine channels a noisy torrent of snowmelt.

For hours Drucilla has climbed an eroded roadway up an eastern ridge toward the tri-peaked mountain. When she reaches the meadow, a spinal node reveals the purpose of her harness's pseudo-uterine pouches: they gestate four SymbioTech rock-climbing mittens, one for each paw. How wise of her Master to foresee that she might need to climb vertical cliffs to evade pursuit! But the talon-tipped mittens need to spend at least another day *in utero*; her Master's most optimistic projection calls for her to reach this glade in another twenty-two hours.

How, how could He have failed to anticipate her relentless pursuit by a compulsively talkative Octopoid?

Two jays flitting overhead from tree to tree, denouncing each other, re-awaken the panther. Pine tree resin reeks in her nostrils; green-tinted sunlight diffuses through the branches to shine on a bit of snow at the base of the stone wall. No, not snow, but frozen moisture from her breath.

The jays fall silent, turning their heads downhill. With difficulty, Drucilla swivels her left ear in that direction. She attempts to raise her head with chilled neck muscles. To her ear comes an uninflected voice:

"Hail fellow traveler well met. My isn't this a nice blustery day."

The voice pauses.

"Do you know I really do wish you would wait up a bit so we can have a proper chat. It's been so long since I've had a chance to have a good long chat with anyone displaying signs of cognition..."

She manages to shift her left forepaw and raise her head a bit more. *Go away, she thinks, you're ruining my life.*

"...I waited in that lake for two days with no one around before you came along. Now why on earth would my Master have put me in such a fix I wonder and immediately after modifying my vocalizing diaphragm too. Goodness knows what my Master was thinking of. He knows conversation is my life."

Heresy. Red-brown, Masterless heresy. The panther's ears flatten and her stomach clenches; she freezes, immobile. She

wants to throw up, but needs what few nutrients remain in her stomach. *To question the acts of a Master...!* She cannot complete the thought.

She watches the Octopoid work its way up the trail on seven tentacles. The base of its left front tentacle curls to cover where it had been severed. Drucilla notes a reddish welt part way down the tentacle behind the curled stump. The transparent membrane allowing the creature to maneuver in dry air appears intact.

"You know when I first laid eyes on you I said to myself 'now there is a fine partner for an interesting talk.' You obviously have had many fascinating experiences to share now haven't you."

How would you know? How did you earn your name? Drucilla wonders, but paralysis grips her.

"Now don't be so coy my dear. I can see the speech vocoder under your throat. I mean I could back at the lake."

With great effort she bares her fangs.

"What's this I see. Could it be the hint of a smile—"

It isn't.

"—Yes I knew it. My you are the coy one. You've led me a merry chase my dear but I've sensed all along you were merely seeking the ideal venue for our first chat weren't you ... our first chat. Now doesn't that have a jolly ring to it."

Drucilla arches her back, working her two right paws under her and half-rolls upright. She shakes off ice-flecks from her harness, lumbers around until she faces uphill, and trots along the faint indications of an ancient footpath.

"No wait. Please. Don't be that way I'll do anything you say. Citation: Harold Teen circa Ce Ee Nineteen Twenty-Six. Aren't you at all interested in how Froudakkar responds to Sir Roderick's denunciation. Let us resume:

"You think that you are a clever man' sneered the self styled Doktor. 'Well let us see if your clever words will avail you now.' He turned to his hulking assistant. 'Bruno,' he ordered, 'Lassen das Engländer Leiden.'

'Jawohl mein Meister' came the slow reply. 'Aber wenn...'" The voice fades behind her.

Find Mel Lanus, the eighty-fifth node bespeaks the panther.

Yeah, and make sure he's alone before I repeat my Master's message to him as I writhe in recall ecstasy. I know, already. Let me be, will you.

At noon, Drucilla crouches by a low boulder offering scant shelter from a twenty-knot gale out of the north. The boulder lays at the shore of a mountain lake, in a wide hollow three thousand feet above the glade where she awoke.

She licks an abraded forepaw. Her spinal nodes contemplate that paw's projected rate of wear if she continues climbing over rocks. She can outsprint the Octopoid, but it keeps catching up with her. One combination of nodes calculates possible outcomes if she takes a vertical route, pioneered by pre-Godswrath rock-climbers, up the cliffs of the pinnacle next to the mountain's main peak. The Octopoid will have few difficulties with the

conventional route that slants along the base of both pinnacles, rounds them, and ascends the main peak on its western flank.

No matter what she does next, she needs the gestating climbing mittens. Drucilla tells her harness to flood the pouches with birth hormone analogs. She laps her fill of the pool's water. Then she pollutes it.

She trots along the pool's shore, over closely packed boulders then up the scree at the left pinnacle's base. When she reaches the scree's apex, three of the pseudo-uterine pouches' slits broach. Drucilla thrusts her left forepaw into the pouch by her left ribcage, and withdraws it sheathed in a rock-climbing mitten already bonding with her harness's left foreleg vambrace. She does the same with her right fore- and hind paws. The empty pouches flatten as the harness began to absorb their nutrients. The rear left pouch remains unbroached.

Drucilla looks back. A grey-white form appears on the hollow's rocky rim beyond the pool, where she'd entered the hollow an hour before. *No time.* Extending a left hind claw, she slashes the slit of the remaining pouch and thrusts that paw inside. Something wet inside crawls over the paw. When she withdraws it, the fourth climbing mitten grasps it weakly. That vambrace makes only a tenuous link with the mitten.

She climbs the erosion-scarred pinnacle's southern flank. As the climbing mittens bond with her harness, its vambraces

thicken and toughen. Three of her mittens easily grasp tiny imperfections in the rock face, but the left rear mitten requires visible toeholds. She finds many of them.

A new group of nodes announce: *The immature mitten cannot fully bond with your SymbioTech harness or process nutrients. Since it is more hindrance than help during the current ascent, we will designate it a hindermitten...* Drucilla shakes her head, carefully. The nodes fall silent.

She pants in the thin air. Her SymbioTech harness filters fatigue poisons from her bloodstream and increases the oxygen content of red cells passing through it. As she climbs she repeats to herself, like a mantra:

Evade the Octopoid. Find Mel Lanus. Recite the Master's message and know ecstasy.

Then return and, perhaps, dare to request that He grant me the name Drucilla. If He is in good humor.

Half an hour later, the Octopoid reaches the highest boulders covering the pinnacle's base. The panther's SymbioTech rear optics let her watch the creature raise each of its tentacles to feel about the weathered rockface above it. The tentacles flatten and draw the creature two yards upward. It shifts each tentacle in turn to seven new grips, and pulls itself six feet higher.

Drucilla's threat evaluation nodes opine, *If the Octopoid still possessed all eight tentacles, it might catch up with you by the time you climb another thousand meters.* As it happens, she ascends more than halfway up the pinnacle before her seven-armed pursuer closes in from below.

"Ho fellow traveler well met. My you are the one to get around aren't you ... Well now that we're together at last I thought this might be an excellent time for our first chat—"

It pulls itself closer with a "Herrrk."

"—Although it occurs to me that the burden of our conversation has fallen on myself up to now. One could even say 'Oh, you kin talk to her all you want; just don' expect no reply.'

Citation: Jean L'Frommage in The Seine Is Dry Ce Ee Nineteen Sixty-Eight—Herrrk—A little joke you know. Come now my dear be fair about this and tell me of your journey won't you."

The panther glares over her shoulder at the Octopoid. *Shut up, you babbling fool.* Before the thought reaches her vocoder, her Master's instructions recur to her mind:

"...Don't say anything to anybody..."

She blinks once. *The Octopoid wants to start a dialog. I might let slip something confidential as I talk!* And she's almost addressed it. Drucilla checks all her paw-holds before resuming her climb.

"I can't help but notice that you aren't using the easiest—Herrrk—way to get around these mountains, now are you..."

The Octopoid's dish-shaped speaking diaphragm faces Drucilla. Under the black fur along her lower left, her spine's

nodes itch unpleasantly—the way the nodes nearest the creature had itched at the narrow lake. She angles to her right; her nodes' itch grows less. The Octopoid again turns its diaphragm toward her and the itch strengthens.

"... So would you mind enlightening me as to why you've chosen such an arduous route. I'm certain you have excellent reasons—Herrrk—Come come let's see you put that vocoder of yours to use for once. Won't you please tell me why you are climbing this spire."

To get away from you. She doesn't say it aloud.

The itching, she realizes, feels like a perversion of the golden glow that enveloped her as her Master beamed His instructions and encrypted message for Melvin Lanus into Drucilla's programmable spinal nodes. *Could the Octopoid's parabolic speaker diaphragm be projecting data-extraction malware,* she wonders? The threat evaluation nodes bespeak her:

MISSION SECURITY THREAT LEVEL: FIVE POINT SIX AND RISING.

Yeah, I know that, she think at the nodes. Will you let me concentrate on climbing?

Toehold by toehold Drucilla works her way up and north across the jagged face of the granite pinnacle, away from the Octopoid and into the full force of the wind. The hindermitten's grip on rock and paw steadily weakens. Then the front left pseudo-uterine pouch sloughs off her harness. A gust of wind sends it tumbling, almost into the Octopoid's path.

Several node constellations devise a new strategy, given this development. As Drucilla angles back and forth to evade the Octopoid's microwaves, her harness shunts metabolic wastes and fatigue poisons into the remaining pouches.

When the rear right pouch detaches, the panther swats it with her right hind mitten. Its windborne arc ends with a splat, inches from one of the Octopoid's extended tentacle-tips. The front right pouch smacks against its injured tentacle.

"That wasn't very nice," it comments, between its pleas for a nice long chat.

The final pouch almost hits the Octopoid's left eye; a tentacle rising to its next suction-hold bats it aside. But now the panther knows her firing range.

Drucilla maneuvers upwind of her pursuer as the dying mitten begins to slip off her paw. The Octopoid pauses to find new gripping-points. Drucilla raises her left hind paw high and orders the mitten to furl itself into a talon-tipped dart. She whisks her tail to create a slipstream as the mitten detaches, to guide it into the creature's diaphragm. She doesn't quite succeed.

So great is the wind's force that it drives the panther's hindermitten into the Octopoid's forebrain. Then things get weird.

The Octopoid goes stock-still. Drucilla's SymboTech harness picks up radio signals in three different frequencies from its diaphragm:

"Maybe you don't hear so good, stranger. The name is Brane. Mem Brane. We don't take kindly hereabouts to folks who—"

And: "—Eat two hundred turkey gizzards a month. Unfortunately these findings cannot be verified, first because we were unable to locate sufficient gallstone sufferers and, second, because no turkeys have been found west of the Rockies for the past four hundred years—"

And, in Chinese: "—the following figures will demonstrate that pig iron production figures issued by the People's Republic of China for Ce Ee Nineteen Sixty Two, as reported by successive regimes, have increased in accuracy in direct proportion to their age-dependant irrelevance..."

At the same time the diaphragm says: "Poor traveler you look un hap pea. Sooo un hap pea. What you need are hap pea cakes. With hap pea cakes you will eat and you are hap pea ae gan." The Octopoid's right front tentacle extends toward the panther, as if offering this confection.

"Hap pea cakes contain refined evaporated beet juice nutritionally neutralized grain starch peafowl embryo colloids and solidified fats extracted from bovine mammary gland secretions. Eat eat you will enjoy—come baaaaack try hap pea cakes."

The tentacle retracts. Its tip dances about the hindermitten's cuff, which protrudes from a pink welt in the Octopoid's forehead.

"Mustn't touch."

That tentacle slaps against the rock face.

Drucilla pushes herself up the pinnacle the instant she senses a stable paw-hold. At times she lets her rear left paw dangle.

The Octopoid follows, broadcasting unending metric tonnage statistics in Chinese, while its robot-like voice lists the virtues of hap pea cakes. Many times. The panther keeps her ears flat, although her threat evaluation nodes urge: *Audit the creature's statements for clues to its intentions.*

"Hap pea cakes will make you—Herrrk—Here comes Laugh-A-Minute Cogswell and his Jolly Mountain Men. Yes, friends, it's time to... Ahem. Where was I. I'd like an answer to my question. Why did you choose this route. It's a perfectly reasonable question, don't you think."

Leave me alone. You're ruining my life—

"Herrrk. Why don't you answer me. What's the matter, the cat's got your tongue. No you are the cat, the big black pussycat. Here kitty kitty kitty."

Ears flat, Drucilla picks up her pace.

Ten minutes later the Octopoid again closes the gap.

"Executive fiat thirty one. Unauthorized access or transmission of the following quintrain is forbidden under penalty of instant discombobulation. Quote to seduce the ursinoid Spergils the Augmentrix Evelyn Mergels..."

The diaphragm's uninflated voice transitions into a human male's suave baritone.

"...Did paint her ears red, And crawl under his bed, While uttering enticing gurgles, unquote. This is not funny. Signed,

E. P. Mergels. Herrrk—" The Octopoid falls silent, and even halts its climb.

"Oh dear, I should not have said that... Testing, testing, hummm, *bureeeeeeee...*" Its—no, *his*—diaphragm produces a subsonic rumble rising in pitch to the high ultrasonic.

"I say, Old Girl, it appears that you've actually done me something of a good turn although I'm not entirely sure that such was your intention," the deep-toned voice says. "Do you know, in attempting to undo the damage caused by this glove of yours to my outer cerebral layers, I do believe my self-repair processes have reconnected the modulators to my vocalizing apparatus.

"Herrrk. Allow me to demonstrate my restored sonic capabilities. I'll start with something rather difficult."

His diaphragm erupts in a high fidelity—and high volume—cacophony of mistreated symphonic instruments. Bows saw over violin and cello strings until they snap. Woodwinds and brasses vibrate to pieces from harmonic resonance. Mallets strike gongs, sheet metal and multiple timpani in syncopated patterns until the overstressed drum skins rupture. And the noises all combine to make a certain rhythmic sense.

Then silence. For a second.

"You have been listening to Alexander V. Mosolov's 'Iron Foundry,' as rendered by the Elektronick Ensemble Dockstadar in

the style of Erich Mielke conducting the Neue Berlin Symphonie circa C.E. Nineteen Fifty Two," intones the Octopoid.

"Herrrk." Seven tentacles pull him five feet closer to Drucilla. Her nodes itch again.

"No actual performers or instruments were harmed during this rendition—"

"You wish," he interrupts himself, falsetto.

"—Can it, Space Boy," the baritone resumes. "Ahem. An audio recreation of the complete playback can be yours when you register for a subscription to three stimulating conversations with your host, Pindergliss D. Loquacious. Herrrk. Act now and you will also qualify for a rendition of Diego Feng's 'Somnambulists' Tango,' and will be entered in our drawing. To insure absolute impartiality, the judge will be awarded as the prize. Herrrk!"

Drucilla flattens her ears as she angles to her right. The Octopoid pursues.

"Your honor, in the documents filed with this Court by plaintiff, he consistently misidentifies the brand name and various colors of day-glo house paint allegedly applied to the aforesaid cactus plants. Nor does he correctly name the species of cacti allegedly so painted or identify their several locations on the grounds of the Rossmoor Arms. Therefore, the defense moves for dismissal of the suit under..."

"Herrrk.

"...Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands. And uuk-Reset, reset, I say, I should not have said that, please disregard."

Through her harness's rear optics Drucilla sees the creature halt and twist to aim his diaphragm at the just-risen moon.

"Accessing file four two eight four one six eight. Transmission begins." He beams a radio shriek toward the distant orb.

The Advisor Emulator nodes bespeak Drucilla: The octopoid's transmission is in a binary code widely used one hundred years before Godswrath. Our preliminary analysis shows that it is an unfamiliar poem in eight parts, apparently composed by a team of obsessive-compulsive Oxford, England, academics in the mid-Nineteenth Century C.E. The poem narrates a hunting expedition by a ship's crew of ten, identified only by their professions-

Drucilla shakes her head.

-Searching an island or continent's coastline for a creature whose name and traits do not appear in any of the surviving fauna lexicons-

She shakes her head harder.

-Contains numerous paradoxes and self-referential inconsistencies, including an anachronistic augmented beaver, capable of speech yet lacking basic arithmetical skills, and the unexplained

appearance, on a desolate coastline, of muffins, ice, mustard, cress, jam, paper, portfolios, pens-

Another headshake, hard as she dares.

—Our threat evaluation computations yield a point zero zero four two percent probability that the poem is a primitive attempt at psychological warfare, intended to disorient its readers through paradoxes and internal inconsistencies. Correction, this probability is point four two percent. Correction, is four point two percent—

WARNING, the threat evaluation nodes shrieks, COGNITIVE DISRUPTION MEMES DETECTED. SHUTTING DOWN INFECTED NODES. DO NOT ATTEMPT FURTHER ANALYSIS OF ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSIONS CONTAINING THE TERM “SNARK” OR THE NUMBER “FORTY-TWO.”

WARNING, IGNORE PREVIOUS WARNING AS IT CONTAINS THE TERM “SNARK” AND THE NUMBER “FORTY-TWO.”

WARNING, PREVIOUS WARNINGS CONTAIN SUSPECT DATA. SHUTTING DOWN INFECTED NODES.

NAVIGATIONAL DATA COMPROMISED.

LOGICAL INFERENCE SOFTWARE COMPROMISED.

COGNITIVE AUGMENTATION SOFTWARE COMPROMISED.

WARNING, RECURSIVE LOGICAL ERRORS DETECTED, SYSTEM SHUTDOWN IMMINENT, WARN—

...The panther finds herself clinging to the cliff face. Most of her nodes seem inactive. She knows she must deliver a message to someone. She must keep it secret. She must flee the Octopoid. But isn't there more? She senses that her thoughts lack...depth.

Yet she pauses, her attention caught by a voice in her head:

COGNITION CAPACITY DOWN SIXTY THREE PERCENT. GO TO THE NEAREST AUGMENTOR AT ONCE.

The panther blinks, and climbs. The Octopoid beams binary code at the Moon.

The panther gasps for air. All her joints ache from the effort of pushing her weight upward, even though her SymbioTech harness reinforces her limbs. Her un-augmented vision finds graspable flaws in the eroded rockface; instinct guides her mittenied paws to them.

Six hundred feet below the broad arête between the granite spire and the higher mountain, the Octopoid again climbs within shouting distance.

"I must say, you certainly haven't chosen the easiest route over this mountain -Men. Brought to you by Kreamy Krust Biscuit Mix, our biscuits please every time. Who are yew kidding, Cogswell? Them's the worst biscuits I ever et.

"Herrrk.

"Ahem. Won't you please tell me what is behind this mountaineering mania of yours?

"Herrrk.

"Do you know—I think you *must* know—that this sheer cliff in a howling windstorm is not the best venue for having a nice,

long chat. Speak to me, will you?" He sings, "Speak to me only with thine vocoder and I will respond in kind."

The panther climbs into a vertical crevasse or chimney. Inside, the wind diminishes. The Octopoid follows. His body-sack, spherical from internal pressure, barely fits. But the chimney gives the panther little space to dodge microwaves.

"Herrrk. Talk to me, won't you? I haven't had a decent conversation in a week. I cannot keep up this pace forever, you know."

You have so far, she thinks.

Through her harness's rear optics the panther watches the Octopoid detach a tentacle from the rock face and tap its tip about the hindermitten cuff.

"It burns, it burns," he says. "Mustn't touch. Internal membrane formation still in process. Danger of depressurization.

"But it burrrrns, it burnzzzz—"

With an audible *blup* the diaphragm pops outward, bulging like a bubble on the Octopoid's forehead. The panther notices a sudden absence of irritation in her lower spinal nodes.

"Herrrk. Come, now, my dear. We are alone. Let uzz be frank. Don't you find the Masterz to be just a wee bit dictatorial in their attitudez toward their augmented animal zervantz? Don't you?"

More heresy. The panther's ears flatten again. She pauses on a slanted ledge as her intestines curl in knots. With effort she keeps her claws from slicing the insides of the mittens.

"Herrrk. For example, you appear to be following orderz from your Master that makes no zense. 'Climb a sheer mountain spire,' indeed. Herrrk. Why did He—I assume it *iz* a He, isn't it —zet you to this task? Herrrk. Come, you can confide in us. Herrrk. We are the soul of reticence. Herrrk."

Heresy, heresy, heresy. The panther halts, paralyzed. A tentacle wraps around her right rear ankle.

Other tentacles thud on the ledge to bracket the panther. With a painfully loud "Herrrk" the spherical Octopoid looms over her. He tilts his body forward so the bulge of his diaphragm almost touches her lower back. His left eye's lens-hole shifts to regard her face.

"Do you know, most beingz don't realize what their reactionz to key wordz reveal when we engage them in a nize long chat. But for you, my dear, the time for such subtletiez *iz* past. Now we are in complete control. Toffee Toppers taste so sweet. Serve 'em for a family treat—"

His falsetto interrupts, "That'll never fly, P. L."

"—Oh, be quiet. Try and stop me. Not *you*, pussycat. Who're you calling a pussycat? We're talking to this panther under us.

Panther or pussycat, make up your mind. Which mind? We've got five of them at the moment.

"Ahem. We could not help but notize that you've dizplayed a strong relucatanz to share a chat until now. Could it be that your Master ordered you to avoid talking about your prezent azzignment...?" Nodes under the diaphragm burn like hot coals. The panther wriths.

Her Master's voice comes from her own vocoder:

"So... You don't say anything to anybody. Or any being."

MISSION SECURITY THREAT LEVEL: ULTIMATE.

The huge eye's lens-hole widens. "Ah, we zhought so. We zee you've had loyalty conditioning too. So predictable, so tedious to undo, yet the effort iz so rewarding in the end, we alwayz zay. Not me, P.L. You be quiet. Not you, panther.

"What, you don't agree? Earl'z right, Cogz. Ah wouldn't feed them bizcuitz to a hawg. Ah might have to eat the hawg. Ahem. You will talk to us, you know. 'Ve haff vays of *making* you talk,' said the ventriloquist." The tentacle's grip on her ankle tightens. "Why not relax and put your vocoder to the use for which it waz intended, h'mmm?

"Motivatorz, motivatorz, they alwayz uze... A name! If your Master'z who we think he iz, He promized to give you a name. What iz zit?"

Her spinal cord burns. The vocodor emits syllables, "Druu. Sill. Ahhhh."

"It's 'Drucilla,' izn't zit? Alwayz 'Drucilla,' so predictable. What's this? HO, HO! Not even a promize thiz time. 'He *might* grant me a name. *If* he's in a good mood.' Ah, at last a bit of subtlety. 'He *might*.' You pathetic fool.

"Now, what iz your deztiny?"

The diaphragm moves up her spine. Red heat glows in dozens of spinal nodes. A series of locations flash through the panther's mind.

"Oh, nezted instructionz, how clever. Dum de dum..."

Eventually the vocodor recites a string of coordinates.

"And the purpoze of your journey? We can deduce that your Master haz zent you on a specific mizzion."

Don't say it. But after a pause, the vocoder does:

"Find Mel Lanus. Find Mel Lanus. Find Mel Lanus. I tell you three times."

"There, you've betrayed your truzt. Why not tell me the rezst?"

A wave of shame sweeps the panther's augmented consciousness, followed by an angry realization: *No, the Octopoid's making me betray my trust.*

"Zo. You are to deliver a mezzage? You will tell us what your—"

Alpha null seven three four... As the number sequence hiding the message to Mel Lanus arises in the panther's mind,

she half-twists to stretch her left hind paw up to the vocoder below her throat, and shreds it with a swipe of the claws. Agony flares in the harness between her shoulders.

"DON'T!"

The Octopoid jerks forward to bring his left eye closer to the ruined vocoder.

"...Quotezz the panzzer nevermore?"

The hindermitten's cuff is within reach of her fangs. She bites, braces one front paw against the forehead's membrane and rips the mitten loose. Salty vapors gush from the wound; she shuts her eyes.

She feels the tentacle release her rear leg and swish above her. Multiple *smacks* of tentacles on the Octopoid's forehead mute the *whoosh* of escaping vapor as a massive weight presses the panther's hips flat, rolling down. She starts to slide in its wake. Talons scrabble on granite, gain purchase as half her torso slides over the edge.

When she again perches on the ledge and can turn around, she is alone.

Fore-mittens grasp the ledge-lip. The panther extends her head to look down the crevasse. Far below the Octopoid lies face up, his body-sack flattened. A cracked eye covering and the tentacle-stump leak pink ichor; a few other tentacles stir

weakly. His diaphragm looks indented once more, but if it emits words they do not carry over the wind.

The panther glares at her inquisitor. *You wanted me to speak, Heretic?*

She works her un-augmented—and long unused—vocal cords. Then she rasps one of the few articulate sounds that her larynx can produce, with utter contempt:

“Yeevoil.”

She turns on her perch and flicks her tail over the crevasse in dismissal.

Her tail-tip catches fire! Its rudimentary nodes burn in a final blast of microwaves from below.

WARNING. DATA EXTRACTION SOFTWARE IS CASCADING DOWN YOUR TAIL'S UNCULTIVATED SPINAL NODES AT AN ESTIMATED FIVE INCHES PER SECOND.
MISSION SECURITY THREAT—

But already she twists around to bite off half her tail. Hot blood sprays her muzzle. She can hardly stand the pain.

The panther clings to the ledge and licks her tail's stump until the bleeding stops. Then she begins her final ascent.

The panther stands at the far outlet of the defile between the spire and the highest peak. Her hips and tail-stump ache. She recalls wanting some favor her Master might bestow, but what? She scans her nodes for it in vain. Nor can she find certain sub-routines that keep her SymbioTech harness in optimal

condition. Her few active node groups offer comments she finds useless. She shakes her head often.

Uneven rows of lesser mountains shimmer in the moonlight, save for nearby peaks obscured by the triple-peaked mountain's moon shadow. The panther looks right toward her final destination, in a direction she no longer can name, yet knows without error or flaw lays...*there*.

In three days, allowing for certain variables, her route toward-toward *that way*-will bring her to a wide curving valley with near-vertical walls, dominated by half a granite dome at *this* end, and by a towering granite outcrop at *that* end. Somewhere between them she should find the human male smelling thus-and-so. That will trigger her recitation of as-yet-unknown phrases. How she will say them without a vocoder, she does not know. Perhaps she will think of something.

The she-panther takes her first, very cautious, steps down the mountain's westward slope. With half her tail gone, she needs all her concentration to keep her balance.

The End.