

PEACHES FOR MAD MOLLY

by

Steven Could

Sometime during the night the wind pulled a one-pointer off the west face of the building up around the 630th floor. I heard him screaming as he went by, very loud, like this was his last chance to voice an opinion, but it was all so sudden that he didn't know what it was. Then he hit a microwave relay off 542 ... hard, and the chance was gone. Chunks of him landed in Buffalo Bayou forty-five seconds later.

The alligators probably liked that.

I don't know if his purchase failed or his rope broke or if the sucker just couldn't tie a decent knot. He pissed me off though, because I couldn't get back to sleep until I'd checked all four of my belay points, the ropes, and the knots. Now if he'd fallen without expressing himself, maybe?

No, I would have heard the noise as he splattered through the rods of the antennae.

Stupid one-pointer.

The next morning I woke up a lot earlier than usual because someone was plucking one of my ropes, adagio, thrum, thrum, like the second movement of Ludwig's seventh. It was Mad Molly.

"You awake, Bruce?" she asked.

I groaned. "I am now. " My name is not Bruce. Molly, for some reason, calls everyone Bruce. "Shto etta, Molly?"

She was crouched on a roughing point, one of the meter cubes sticking out of the tower face to induce the micro-turbulence boundary layer. She was dressed in a brightly flowered scarlet kimono, livid green bermuda shorts, a sweatshirt, and tabi socks. Her belay line, bright orange against the gray building, stretched from around the corner to Molly's person where it vanished beneath her kimono, like a snake hiding its head.

"I got a batch to go to the Bruce, Bruce."

I turned and looked down. There was a damp wind in my face. Some low clouds had come in overnight, hiding the ground, but the tower's shadow stretched a long ways across the fluffy stuff below. "Jeeze, Molly. You know the Bruce won't be on shift for another hour." Damn, she had me doing it! "Oh, hell. I'll be over after I get dressed."

She blinked twice. Her eyes were black chips of stone in a face so seamed and browned by the sun that it was hard to tell her age. "Okay, Bruce," she said, then stood abruptly and flung herself off the cube. She dropped maybe five meters before her rope tightened her fall into an arc that swung her down and around the corner.

I let out my breath. She's not called Mad Molly for nothing.

I dressed, drank the water out of my catch basin, urinated on the clouds

(seems only fair) and rolled up my bag.

Between the direct sunlight and the stuff bouncing off the clouds below the south face was blinding. I put my shades on at the corner.

Molly's nest, like a mud dauber's, hung from an industrial exhaust vent off the 611th floor. It was woven, sewed, tucked, patched, welded, snapped, zipped, and

tied into creation. It looked like a wasp's nest on a piece of chrome. It did not blend in.

Her pigeon coop, about two floors lower down, blended in even less. It was made of paper, sheet plastic, wire, and it was speckled with pigeon droppings. It was where it was because only a fool lives directly under under defecating birds, and Molly, while mad, was not stupid.

Molly was crouched in the doorway of her nest balanced on her feet like one of her pigeons. She was staring out at nothing and muttering angrily to herself.

"What's wrong, Molly? Didn't you sleep okay?"

She glared at me. "That damn Bruce got another three of my birds yesterday."

I hooked my bag onto a beaner and hung it under her house. "What Bruce, Molly? That red tailed hawk?"

"Yeah, that Bruce. Then the other Bruce pops off last night and wakes me up so I can't get back to sleep because I'm listening for that damn hawk. " She backed into her nest to let me in.

"Hawks don't hunt at night, Molly."

She flapped her arms. "So? Like maybe the vicious, son-of-a-bitchin' Bruce gets into the coop? He could kill half my birds in one night!" She started coiling one of her ropes, pulling the line with short, angry jerks. "I don't know if it's worth it anymore, Bruce. It's hot in the summer. It's freezing in the winter. The Babs are always hassling me instead of the Howlers, the Howlers keep hassling me for free birds or they'll cut me loose one night. I can't cook on cloudy days unless I want to pay an arm and a leg for fuel. I can't get fresh fruit or vegetables. That crazy social worker who's afraid of heights comes by and asks if he can help me. I say, 'Yeah, get me some fresh fruit.' He brings me applications for readmittance! God, I'd kill for a fresh peach! I'd be better off back in the house!"

I shrugged. "Maybe you would, Molly. After all, you're getting on in years."

"Fat lot you know, Bruce! You crazy or something? Trade this view for six walls? Breathe that stale stuff they got in there? Give up my birds? Give up my freedom? Shit, Bruce, who the hell's side are you on anyway?"

I laughed. "Yours, Molly."

She started wrapping the pigeons and swearing under her breath.

I looked at Molly's clippings, bits of faded newsprint stuck to the wall of the tower itself. By the light coming through some of the plastic sheeting in the roof, I saw a picture of Molly on Mt. McKinley dated twenty years before. An article about her second attempt on Everest. Stories about her climbing buildings in New York, Chicago, and L.A. I looked closer at one that talked

about her climbing the south face of El Capitan on her fourteenth birthday. It had the date.

I looked twice and tried to remember what day of the month it was. I had to count backwards in my head to be sure.

Tomorrow was Mad Molly's birthday.

The Bruce in question was Murry Zapata, outdoor rec guard of the south balcony on the 480th floor. This meant I had to take the birds down 131 stories, or a little over half a kilometer. And then climb back.

Even on the face of Le Bab Tower, with a roughing cube or vent or external rail every meter or so, this is a serious climb. Molly's pigeons alone were not worth the trip, so I dropped five floors and went to see Lenny.

It's a real pain to climb around Lenny's because nearly every horizontal surface has a plant box or pot on it. So I rappelled down even with him and shouted over to where he was fiddling with a clump of fennel.

"Hey, Lenny. I'm making a run. You got anything for Murry?"

He straightened up. "Yeah, wait a sec." He was wearing shorts and his climbing harness and nothing else. He was brown all over. If I did that sort of thing I'd be a melanoma farm.

Lenny climbed down to his tent and disappeared inside. I worked my way over there, avoiding the plants. I smelled dirt, a rare smell up here. It was an odor rich

and textured. It kicked in memories of freshly plowed fields or newly dug graves. When I got to Lenny's tent, he came out with a bag.

"What'cha got," I asked.

He shrugged. "Garlic, cumin, and anise. The weights are marked on the outside. Murry should have no trouble moving it. The Chicanos can't get enough of the garlic. Tell Murry that I'll have some of those tiny muy caliente chilis for him next week."

"Got it."

"By the way, Fran said yesterday to tell you she has some daisies ready to go down."

"Check. You ever grow any fruit, Lenny?"

"On these little ledges? I thought about getting a dwarf orange once but decided against it. I grow dew berries but none of them are ripe right now. No way I could grow trees. Last year I grew some cantaloupe but that's too much trouble. You need a bigger bed than I like."

"Oh, well. It was a thought." I added his bag to the pigeons in my pack. "I'll probably be late getting back."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. Better you than me, though. Last time I went, the Howlers stole all MY tomatoes. Watch out down below. The Howlers are claiming the entire circumference from 520 to 530."

"Oh, yeah? Just so they don't interfere with my right of eminent domain."

He shrugged. "Just be careful. I don't care if they want a cut. Like maybe a clump of garlic."

I blinked. "Nobody cuts my cargo. Nobody."

"Not even Dactyl?"

"Dactyl's never bothered me. He's just a kid."

Lenny shrugged. "He's sent his share down. You get yourself pushed off and we'll have to find someone else to do the runs. Just be careful."

"Careful is what I do best."

Fran lived around the corner, on the east face. She grew flowers, took in sewing, and did laundry. When she had the daylight for her solar panel, she watched TV.

"Why don't you live inside, Fran. You could watch TV twenty-four hours a day."

She grinned at me, a not unpleasant event. "Nah. Then I'd pork up to about a hundred kilos eating that syntha crap and not getting any exercise and I'd have to have a permit to grow even one flower in my cubicle and a dispensation for the wattage for a grow light and so on and so forth. When they put me in a coffin, I want to be dead."

"Hey, they have exercise rooms and indoor tracks and the rec balconies."

"Big deal. Shut up for a second while I see if Bob is still mad at Sue because he found out about Marilyn's connection with her mother's surgeon. When the commercial comes I'll cut and bundle some daisies."

She turned her head back to the flat screen. I looked at her blue bonnets and pansies while I waited.

"There, I was right. Marilyn is sleeping with Sue's mother. That will make everything okay." She tucked the TV in a pocket and prepared the daisies for me. "I'm going to have peonies next week." I laced the wrapped flowers on the outside of the pack to avoid crushing the petals. While I was doing that Fran moved closer. "Stop over on the way back?"

"Maybe," I said. "Of course I'll drop your script off."

She withdrew a little.

"I want to, Fran, honest. But I want to get some fresh fruit for Mad Molly's birthday tomorrow and I don't know where I'll have to go to get it. 9'

She turned away and shrugged. I stood there for a moment, then left, irritated. When I looked back she was watching the TV again.

-The Howlers had claimed ten floors and the entire circumference of the Le Bab Tower between those floors. That's an area of forty meters by 250 meters per side or 40,000 square meters total. The tower is over a kilometer on a side at the base but it tapers in

stages until it's only twenty meters square at three thousand meters.

Their greediness was to my advantage because there's only thirty-five or so

Howlers and that's a lot of area to cover. As I rappelled down to 529 I slowly worked my way around the building. There was a bunch of them in hammocks on the South face, sunbathing. I saw one or two on the east face but most of them were on the west face. Only one person was on the north side.

I moved down to 521 on the north face well away from the one guy and doubled my longest line. It was a hundred meter blue line twelve millimeters thick. I coiled it carefully on a roughing cube after wrapping the halfway point of the rope around another roughing cube one complete circuit, each end trailing down. I pushed it close into the building so it wouldn't slip. Then I clipped my brake bars around the doubled line.

The guy at the other corner noticed me now and started working his way from roughing cube to roughing cube, curious. I kicked the rope off the cube and it fell cleanly with no snarls, no snags. He shouted. I jumped, a gloved hand on the rope where it came out of the brake bars. I did the forty meters in five jumps, a total of ten seconds. Halfway down I heard him shout for help and heard others come around the corner. At 518 I braked and swung into the building. The closest Howler was still fifteen meters or so away from my rope, but he was speeding up. I leaned against the building and flicked the right hand rope hatd, sending a sinusoidal wave traveling up the line. It reached the top and the now loose rope flicked off the cube above and fell. I sat down and braced. A hundred meter rope weights in at eight kilos and the shock of it pulling up short could have pulled me from the cube.

They shouted things after me, but none of them followed. I heard one of them call out, "Quit'cha bitchin. He's got to pass us on his way home. We'll educate him then."

All the rec guards deal. It's a good job to have if you're inside. Even things that originate inside the tower end up traveling the outside pipeline. Ain't no corridor checks out here. No TV cameras or sniffers either. The Howlers do a lot of that sort of work.

Murry is different from the other guards, though. He doesn't deal slice or spike or any of the other nasty pharmoddities, and he treats us outsiders like humans. He says he was outside once. I believe him.

"So, Murry, what's with your wife? She had that baby yet?"

"Nah. And boy is she tired of being pregnant. She's, like, out to here. " He held his hands out. "You tell Fran I want something special when she finally dominoes. Like roses."

"Christ, Murry. You know Fran can't do roses. Not in friggin pots. Maybe day lilies. I'll ask her." I sat in my seat harness, hanging outside the cage that's around the rec balcony. Murry stood inside smelling the daisies. There were some kids kicking a soccer ball on the far side of the balcony and several adults standing at the railing looking out through the bars. Several people stared at me. I ignored them.

Murry counted out the script for the load and passed it through the bars. I zipped it in a pocket. Then he pulled out the provisions I'd ordered the last run and I dropped them, item by item, into the pack.

"You ever get any fresh fruit in there, Murry!"

"What do I look like, guy, a millionaire? The guys that get that sort of stuff live up there above 750. Hell, I once had this escort job up to 752 and while the honcho I escorted was talking to the resident, they had me wait out on

this patio. This guy had apples and peaches and cherries for crissakes! Cherries!" He shook his head. "It was weird, too. None of this cage crap." He rapped on the bars with his fist. "He had a chest high railing and that was it."

"Well of course. What with the barrier at 650 he doesn't have to worry about us. I'll bet there's lots of open balconies up that way." I paused. "Well, I gotta go. I've got a long way to climb."

"Better you than me. Don't forget to tell Fran about the special flowers."

"Right."

They were waiting for me, all the Howlers sitting on the south face, silent, intent. I stopped four stories below 520 and rested. While I rested I coiled my belay line and packed it in my pack. I sat there, fifteen kilos of supplies and climbing paraphernalia on my back, and looked out on the world.

The wind had shifted more to the southwest and was less damp than the morning air. It had also strengthened but the boundary layer created by the roughing cubes kept the really high winds out from the face of the tower.

Sometime during the day the low clouds below had broken into patches, letting the ground below show through. I perched on the roughing cube, unbelayed and contemplated the fall. 516 is just over two kilometers from the ground. That's quite a drop--though in low winds the odds were I'd smack into one of the rec balconies where the tower widened below. In a decent southerly wind you can depend on hitting the swamps instead.

What I had to do now was rough.

I had to free ascend.

No ropes, no nets, no second chances. If I lost it the only thing I had to worry about was whether or not to scream on the way down.

The Howlers were not going to leave me time for the niceties.

For the most part the Howlers were so-so climbers, but they had a few people capable of technical ascents. I had to separate the good from the bad and then out-climb the good.

I stood on the roughing cube and started off at a run, leaping two meters at a time from roughing cube to roughing cube to roughing cube moving sideways across the south face. Above me I heard shouts but I didn't look up. I didn't dare. The mind was blank, letting the body do the work without hindrance. The eyes saw, the body did, the mind coasted.

I slowed as I neared the corner, and stopped, nearly falling when I overbalanced, but saving myself by dropping my center of gravity.

There weren't nearly as many of them above me now. Maybe six of them had kept up with me. The others were trying to do it by the numbers, roping from point to point. I climbed two stories quickly, chimneying between a disused fractional distillation stack and a cooling tower. Then I moved around the corner and ran again.

When I stopped to move up two more stories there were only two of them above me. The other four were trying for more altitude rather than trying to keep

pace horizontally.

I ran almost to the northwest corner, then moved straight up.

The first one decided to drop kick me dear Jesus through the goal posts of life. He pulled his line out, fixed it to something convenient and rappelled out with big jumps, planning, no doubt, to come swinging into me with his feet when he reached my level. I ignored him until the last minute when I let myself collapse onto a roughing cube. His feet slammed into the wall above me then rebounded out.

As he swung back out from the face I leaped after him.

His face went white. Whatever he was expecting me to do, he wasn't expecting that! I latched onto him like a monkey, my legs going around his waist. One of my hands grabbed his rope, the other punched with all my might into his face. I felt his jaw go and his body went slack. He released the rope below the brake bars and started sliding down the rope. I scissored him with my legs and held onto the rope with both hands. My shoulders creaked as I took the strain but he stopped sliding. Then we swung back into the wall and I sagged onto a cube astride him.

His buddy was dropping down more slowly. He was belayed but he'd seen what I'd done and wasn't going

to try the airborne approach. He was still a floor or two above me so I tied his friend off so he wouldn't sleepwalk and took off sideways, running again.

I heard him shout but I didn't hear him moving. When I paused again he was bent over my friend with the broken jaw. I reached an external exhaust duct and headed for the sky as fast as I could climb.

At this point I was halfway through Howler territory. Off to my right the group that had opted for height was now moving sideways to cut me off. I kept climbing, breathing hard now but not desperate. I could climb at my current speed for another half hour without a break and I thought there was only one other outsider that could keep up that sort of pace. I wondered if he was up above.

I looked.

He was.

He wasn't on the wall.

He didn't seem to be roped on.

And he was dropping.

I tried to throw myself to the side, in the only direction I could go, but I was only partially successful. His foot caught me a glancing blow to my head and I fell three meters to the next roughing cube. I landed hard on the cube, staggered, bumped into the wall, and fell outward, off the cube. The drop was sudden, gut wrenching, and terrifying. I caught the edge of the cube with both hands, wrenching my shoulders and banging my elbow. My head ached, the sky spun in circles and I knew that there was over a kilometer of empty space beneath my feet.

Dactyl had stopped somehow, several stories below me, and, as I hung there, I could see the metallic gleam of some sort of wire, stretched taut down the

face of the tower.

I chinned myself up onto the cube and traversed away from the wire, moving and climbing fast. I ignored the pain in my shoulders and the throbbing of my head and even the stomach churning fear and sudden clammy sweat.

There was a whirring sound and the hint of movement behind me. I turned around and caught the flash of gray moving up the face. I looked up.

He was waiting, up on the edge of Howler territory, just watching. Closer were the three clowns who were trying to get above me before I passed them. I eyed the gap, thought about it, and then went into overdrive. They didn't make it. I passed them before they reached the exhaust duct. For a few stories they tried to pursue and one of them even threw a grapple that fell short.

That left only Dactyl.

He was directly overhead when I reached 530. I paused and glanced down. The others had stopped and were looking up. Even the clothesliners had made it around the corner and were watching. I looked back up. Dactyl moved aside about five meters and sat down on a ledge. I climbed up even with him and sat too.

Dactyl showed up one day in the middle of Howler territory. Three Howlers took the long dive before it was decided that maybe the Howlers should ignore Dactyl before there were no Howlers left. He's a loner who does a mixed bag: some free ascent, some rope work, and some fancy mech stuff.

There was something about him that made him hard to see, almost. Not really, but he did blend into the building. His nylons, his climbing shoes, his harness were gray like the roughing cube he sat on. His harness was strung with gray boxes and pouches of varying sizes, front and back, giving his torso a bulky appearance, sort of like a turtle with long arms. He was younger than I'd thought he'd be, perhaps twenty, but then I'd only seen him at a distance before now. His eyes looked straight at me, steady and hard. He wasn't sweating a bit.

"Why?" I said.

He shrugged. "Be natural, become a part of your environment. Who said that?"

"Lots of people said that. Even I said that."

Dactyl nodded. "So, like I'm doing that thing. I'm

becoming a part of the environment. One thing you should know by know, dude . . ."

"What's that?" I asked warily.

"The environment is hostile."

I looked out, away from him. In the far distance I saw white sails in Galveston Bay. I turned back. "What did I ever do to you?"

He smiled. "You make it too personal. It's more random than that. Think of me as an extra-somatic evolutionary factor. You've got to evolve. You've got to adapt. Mano a Mano shit like that."

I let that stew for a while. The Howlers were gathering below, inside their territory. They were discussing something with much hand waving and punctuated



gestures.

"So," I finally said. "You ever walk through downtown Houston?"

He blinked, opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. Finally, almost unwillingly, he said, "On the ground? No. They eat people down there."

I shrugged. "Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. Last time I was in Tranquillity Park they were eating alligator tail with Siamese peanut sauce. Except when the alligators were eating them."

"Oh."

"You even been down below at all?"

"I was bom inside."

"Well, don't let it bother you," I said as I stood up.

He frowned slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I grinned. "It's not where you were born that matters," I said. "It's where you die."

I started climbing.

The first half-hour was evenly paced. He waited about a minute before he started after me and for the next seventy floors it was as if there was an invisible fifteen meter rope stretched between us. About 600 he lowered the gap to ten meters. I picked up the pace a little, but the gap stayed the same for the next ten floors.

I was breathing hard now and feeling the burn in my thighs and arms. My clothes were soaked in sweat but my hands were dry and I was in rhythm, climbing smooth and steady.

Dactyl was also climbing fast, but jerky, his movements inefficient. The gap was still ten meters but I could tell he was straining.

I doubled my speed.

The universe contracted. There was only the wall, the next purchase, the next breath. There were no peaches, no birthdays, no flowers, and no Dactyl. There was no thought.

But there was pain.

My thighs went from burning to screaming. I started taking up some of the slack with my arms and they joined the chorus. I climbed through the red haze for fifteen more stories and then collapsed on a roughing cube.

The world reeled as I gasped for the first breaths. I felt incipient cramps lurking in my thighs and I wanted those muscle cells to have all the oxygen I could give them. Then, as the universe steadied, I looked down for Dactyl.

He wasn't on the north face.

Had he given up?

I didn't know and it bothered me.

Five stories above was the barrier—a black, ten meter overhang perpendicular to the face. It was perfectly smooth, made of metal, its welds ground flush. I didn't know what was above it. There were rumors about automatic lasers, armed guards, and computer monitored imaging devices. I'd worry about them when I got past that overhang.

I was two stories short of it when Dactyl appeared at the northeast corner of the building.

Above me.

It wasn't possible. I almost quit then but something made me go on. I tried to blank my mind and began running toward the west face, doing the squirrel hopping from block to block, even though my muscles weren't up to it. I almost lost it twice, once when my mind dwelt too much on how Dactyl had passed me and once when my quadriceps gave way.

I stopped at the corner, gasping, and looked back. Dactyl was working his way leisurely after me, slowly, almost labored. I ducked around and climbed again, until I was crouched on a roughing cube, the dark overhang touching my head. I peeked around the corner. Dactyl had paused, apparently resting.

I took off my pack and pulled out a thirty-meter length of two-ton-test line, a half-meter piece of ten-kilo-test monofilament, and a grapple. I tied the monofilament between the heavier line and the grapple.

I peeked around the corner again. Dactyl was moving again, but slowly, carefully. He was still two-hundred meters across the face. I dropped down two meters and stepped back around the corner. Dactyl stopped when he saw me, but I ignored him, playing out the grapple and line until it hung about fifteen meters below me. Then I started swinging it.

It was hard work, tricky, too. I didn't think I had the time to rig a quick belay before Dactyl got there. At least the grapple was light, three kilos at most, but as it swung wider and wider it threatened to pull me off at each end of its swing, especially as the corner formed by the barrier concentrated the wind somewhat.

Finally the grapple raised far enough on the swing away from the corner. As it dropped to the bottom of its swing I began pulling it in. As the moment arm decreased the grapple sped up, gaining enough speed to flip up above the edge of the overhang. I had no idea how thick the overhang was or even if there was something up there for the grapple to catch on. I held my breath.

There was a distant clinking noise as it struck something and the rope slackened. For an instant I thought it was dropping back down and I was scared because I was already off balance and I didn't know how far Dactyl was behind me. Then the rope stopped moving and the grapple didn't drop into sight.

I risked a quick look behind. Dactyl was still a hundred meters away. I took the rope and moved back around the corner, pulling the rope cautiously tight. As luck would have it, with the line pulled over, Dactyl wouldn't be able to see any part of the rope until he rounded the corner.

It took me two minutes to tie the lower end of the rope around a roughing cube and then to two more cubes for backup. Then I recklessly dropped from cube to cube until I was three stories down and hidden behind a Bernoulli exhaust vent.

He stuck his head around the corner almost immediately. Saw the dangling line

and tugged it hard. The ten-kilo test line hidden above the barrier held. Dactyl clipped a beaner over the line and leaped out, almost like a flying squirrel, his hands reaching for the rope. He was halfway out before his full weight hit the rope.

The ten kilo test snapped immediately. I heard his indrawn breath, but he didn't swear. Instead, as he arched down, he tried to twist around, to get his legs between him and the face as he swung into it.

It was only partially successful, slamming hard into the corner of a roughing cube, one leg taking some of the shock. I heard the breath leave his lungs in an explosive grunt and then he was sliding down the rope toward the unattached end, grabbing weakly to stop himself, but only managing to slow the drop.

I moved like a striking snake.

I was already lower down the tower from where he'd hit the wall and took three giant strides from cube to cube to get directly beneath him. Then he was off the end of the rope and dropping free and my hand reached out, snared his climbing harness, and I flattened myself atop the cube I was on.

For the second time that day I nearly dislocated my shoulder. His weight nearly pulled me off the tower. The back of my shirt suddenly split. I heard his head crack onto the cube and he felt like a sack of dirt, lifeless, but heavy as the world.

It took some time to get him safely onto the cube and lashed in place.

It took even longer to get my second grapple up where the first one was. It seemed my first attempt was a fluke and I had to repeat the tiring process six more times before I could clip my ascenders to the rope and inchworm up it.

The building had narrowed about the barrier, to something like 150 meters per side. I was on the edge of a terrace running around the building. Unlike the recreation balconies below, it was open to the sky, uncaged, with only a chest high railing to contain its occupants. Scattered artfully across the patio were lounge chairs and greenery topped planters.

I saw a small crowd of formally dressed men and women mingling on the west terrace, sheltered from the northeast wind. Servants moved among them with trays. Cocktail hour among the rich, the influential, and the cloudy.

I pulled myself quickly over the edge and crouched behind a planter, pulling my rope in and folding MY grapples.

The terrace areas unsheltered by the wind seemed to be deserted. I looked for cameras and IR reflectors and capacitance wires but I didn't see any. I couldn't see any reason for any.

Above me, the face of the tower rose another five hundred meters or so, but unlike the faces below, there were individual balconies spotted here and there among the roughing cubes. On more than one I could see growing plants, even trees.

I had more than a hundred floors to go, perhaps 400 meters.

My arms and legs were trembling. There was a sharp pain in the shoulder Dactyl had kicked, making it hard for me to lift that arm higher than my neck.

I nearly gave it up. I thought about putting down my pack, unbuckling my

climbing harness, and stretching out on one of these lounge chairs. Perhaps later I'd take a drink off of one of those trays.

Then a guard would come and escort me all the way to the ground.

Besides, I could do a hundred stories standing on my head, right? Right.

The sun was completely down by the time I reached 700 but lights from the building itself gave me what I couldn't make out by feel.. The balconies were fancy, sheltered from the wind by removable fairings and jutting fins. I kept my eye out for a balcony with fruit trees, just in case. I wouldn't climb all the way up to 752 if I didn't have to.

But I had to.

There were only four balconies on 752, one to each side. 'Mere were the largest private balconies I'd ever seen on the, tower. Only one of them had anything resembling a garden. I spent five minutes looking over the edge at planter after planter of vegetables, flowers, shrubs, and trees. I couldn't see any lights through the glass doors leading into the building and I couldn't see any peaches.

I sighed and pulled myself over the edge for a closer look, standing upright with difficulty. My limbs were leaden, my breath still labored. I could hear my pulse thudding in my ears, and I still couldn't see any peaches.

There were some green oranges on a tree near me, but that was the closest thing to fruit I could see. I shivered. I was almost two kilometers above sea level and the sun had gone down an hour ago. My sweat soaked clothes were starting to chill.

Something was nagging me and, at first, the fatigue toxins wouldn't let me think clearly. Then an important fact swam into my attention.

I hadn't checked for alarms.

They were there, in the wall above the railing, a series of small reflectors for the I/R beams that I'd crawled through to enter the balcony.

Time to leave. Long past time. I stepped toward the railing and heard a door open behind me. I started to swing my leg up over the edge when I felt something stick me in the side. And then the universe exploded.

All the muscles on my right side convulsed spasmodically and I came down onto the concrete floor with a crash, slamming my shoulder and hip into the ground. My head was saved from the same fate by the backpack I wore.

Taser, I thought.

When I could focus, I saw the man standing about three meters away, wearing a white khaftan. He was older than I was by decades. Most of his hair was gone and his face had deep lines etched by something other than smiling. I couldn't help comparing him to Mad Molly, but it just wasn't the same. Mad Molly could be as old but she didn't look anywhere as nasty as this guy did.

He held the taser loosely in his right hand. In his left hand he held a drink with ice that he swirled gently around, clink, clink.

"What are you doing here, you disgusting little fly?"

His voice, as he asked the question, was vehement and acid. His expression didn't change though.

"Nothing." I tried to say it strongly, firmly, reasonably. It came out like a frog's croak.

He shot me with the taser again. I caught the glint on the wire as it sped out, tried to dodge, but too late.

I arched over the backpack, my muscles doing things I wouldn't have believed possible. My head banged sharply against the floor. Then it stopped again.

I was disoriented, the room spun. My legs decided to go into a massive cramp. I gasped out loud.

This seemed to please him.

"Who sent you? I'll know in the end. I can do this all night long."

I said quickly, "Nobody sent me, I hoped to get some peaches."

He shot me again.

I really didn't think much of this turn of events. My muscles had built up enough lactic acid without electroconvulsive induced contractions. When everything settled down again I had another bump on my head and more cramps.

He took a sip from his drink.

"You'll have to do better than that," he said. "Nobody would risk climbing the outside for peaches. Besides, there won't be peaches on that tree for another five months." He pointed the taser. "Who sent you?"

I couldn't even talk at this point. He seemed to realize this, fortunately, and waited a few moments, lowering the taser. Then he asked again, "Who sent you?"

"Get stuffed," I told him weakly.

"Stupid little man." He lifted the taser again and something smashed him in the arm, causing him to drop the weapon. He stopped to pick it up again but there was a streak of gray and the thud of full body contact as someone hit him and bowled him over onto his back.

I saw the newcomer scoop up the taser and spin sharply. The taser passed over my head and out over the railing.

It was Dactyl.

The man in the khaftan saw Dactyl's face then and said, "You!" He started to scramble to his feet. Dactyl took one sliding step forward and kicked him in the face. The man collapsed in a small heap, his khaftan making him look like a white sack with limbs sticking out.

Dactyl stood there for a moment looking down. Then he turned and walked slowly back to me.

"That was a nasty trick with the rope."

I laughed, albeit weakly. "If you weren't so lazy you would have made your own

way up." I eyed him warily, but my body wasn't up to movement yet. Was he going to kick me in the face, too? Still, I had to know something. "How did you pass me down there, below the barrier? You were exhausted, I could see it."

He shrugged. "You're right. I'm lazy." He flipped a device off his back. It looked like a gun with two triggers. I made ready to jump. He pointed it up and pulled the trigger. I heard a chunk and something buried itself in the ceiling. He pulled the second trigger and there was a whining sound. Dactyl and gun floated off the floor. I looked closer and saw the wire.

"Cheater," I said.

He laughed and lowered himself back to the floor. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

I told him.

"You're shitting me."

"No."

He laughed then and walked briskly through the door into the tower.

I struggled to stand. Made it. I was leaning against the railing when Dactyl came back through the door with a plastic two-liter container. He handed it to me. It was ice cold.

"What's this?"

"Last season's peaches. From the freezer. He always hoards them until just before the fresh ones are ready."

I stared at him. "How the hell did you know that?"

He shrugged, took the peaches out of my hand and put them in my pack. "Look, I'd get out of here before he wakes up. Not only does he have a lot nastier things than that taser, but security will do whatever he wants."

He swung up over the edge and lowered himself to arm's length. Just before he dropped completely from sight he added something which floated up with the wind.

"He's my father."

I started down the tower not too long after Dactyl. Physically I was a wreck. The taser had exhausted my muscles in a way that exercise never had. I probably wasn't in the best shape to do any kind of rope work, but Dactyl's words rang true. I didn't want anybody after me in the condition I was in, much less security.

Security is bad. They use copters and rail cars that run up and down the outside of the building. They fire rubber bullets and water cannon. Don't think this makes them humane. A person blasted off a ledge by either is going to die. Security is just careful not to damage the tower.

So, I did my descent in stages, feeling like an old man tottering carefully down a flight of stairs. Still, descent was far easier than ascent, and my rope work had me down on the barrier patio in less than ten minutes.

It was nearing midnight, actually lighter now that the quarter moon had risen,

and the patio, instead of being deserted, had far more people on it than it had at sunset. A few people saw me coiling my rope after my last rappel. I ignored them, going about my business with as much panache as I could muster. On my way to the edge of the balcony I stopped at the buffet and built myself a sandwich.

More people began looking my way and talking. An elderly woman standing at one end of the buffet took a long look at me, then said, "Try the wontons. I think there's really pork in them."

I smiled at her. "I don't know. Pork is tricky. You never know who provided it."

Her hand stopped, a wonton halfway to her mouth, and stared at me. Then, almost defiantly, she popped it into her mouth and chewed it with relish. "Just so it's well cooked."

A white clad steward left the end of the table and walked over to a phone hanging by a door.

I took my sandwich over to the edge and set it down while I took the rope from the pack. My legs trembled slightly. The woman with the wontons followed me over after a minute.

"Here," she said, holding out a tall glass that clinked. "Ice tea."

I blinked, surprised. "Why, thank you. This is uncommonly kind."

She shrugged. "You look like you need it. Are you going to collapse right here? It would be exciting, but I'd avoid it if I were you. I think that nasty man called security. "

"Do I look as bad as all that?"

"Honey, you look like death warmed over."

I finished playing out the rope and clipped on my brake-bars. "I'm afraid you're right." I took a bite out of the sandwich and chewed quickly. I washed it down with the tea. It wasn't one of Mad Molly's roast pigeons but it wasn't garbage, either.

"You'll get indigestion," the woman warned.

I smiled and took another large bite. The crowd of people staring at me was getting bigger. There was a stirring in the crowd from over by the door. I took another bite and another swig, then swung over the edge. "We must do this again, sometime," I said. "Next time, we'll dance."

I dropped into the dark, jumping out so I could swing into the building. I didn't reach it on the first swing, so I let out more rope and pumped my legs. I came within a yard of the tower and swung out again. I felt better than before but was still weak. I looked up and saw heads looking over the edge at me. Something gleamed in the moonlight.

A knife?

I reached the wall and dropped onto a roughing cube, unbalanced, unsure of my purchase. For a moment I teetered, then was able to heave myself in toward the wall, safe. I turned, to release one end of the rope, so I could snake it down from above.

I didn't have it. It fell from above, two new ends whipping through the night air.

Bastards. I almost shouted it, but it seemed better to let them think I'd fallen. Besides, I couldn't be bothered with any action so energetic. I was bone weary, tired beyond reaction.

For the next hundred stories I made like a spider with arthritis, slow careful descents with lengthy rests. After falling asleep and nearly falling off a cube, I belayed myself during all rest stops. At one point I'm sure I slept for over an hour because my muscles had set up, stiff and sore. It took me another half hour of careful motion before I was moving smoothly again.

Finally I reached Mad Molly's, moving carefully, quietly. I unloaded her supplies and the peaches and put them carefully inside her door. I could hear her snoring. Then, leaving my stash under her house as usual, I climbed down, intending to see Fran and make her breakfast.

I didn't make it to Fran's.

In the half dark before the dawn they came at me.

This is the place for a good line like "they came on me like the wolf upon the fold" or "as the piranha swarm." Forget it. I was too tired. All I know is they came at me, the Howlers did. At me, who'd been beaten, electroshocked, indigested, sliced at, and bone wearified, if there exists such a verb. I watched them come in dull amazement, which is not a suit of clothes, but an amalgam of fatigue and astonished reaction to the last straw on my camellian back.

Before I'd been hurt and felt the need to ignore it. I'd been challenged and felt the need to respond. I'd felt curiosity and felt the need to satisfy it. I'd felt fear and the need to overcome it. But I hadn't yet felt what I felt now.

I felt rage, and the need to express it.

I'm sure the first two cleared the recreation balcony, they had to. They came at me fast unbelayed and I used every bit of their momentum to heave them out. The next one, doubtless feeling clever, landed on my back and clung like a monkey. I'd passed caring, I simply threw myself to the side, aiming my back at the roughing cube two meters below. He tried, but he didn't get off in time. I'm grateful though, because the shock would have broken my back if he hadn't been there.

I don't think he cleared the rec balcony.

I ran then, but slowly, so angry that I wanted them to catch up, to let me use my fists and feet on their stubborn, malicious, stupid heads. For the next ten minutes it was a running battle only I ran out of steam before they ran out of Howlers.

I ended up backed into a cranny where a cooling vent formed a ledge some five meters deep and four meters wide, when Dactyl dropped into the midst of them, a gray blur that sent three of them for a dive and two more scrambling back around the edges.

I was over feeling mad by then and back to just feeling tired.



Dactyl looked a little tired himself. "I can't let you out of my sight for a minute, can IT' he said. "What's the matter? You get tired of their shit?"

"Right . . ." I laughed weakly. "Now I'm back to owing you."

'Mat's right, suck-foot. And I'm not going to let you forget it."

I tottered forward then and looked at the faces around us. I didn't feel so good.

"Uh, Dactyl."

"Yeah."

"I think you better take a look over the edge."

He walked casually forward and took a look down, then to both sides, then up. He backed up again.

"Looks like you're going to get that chance to repay me real soon," he said.

The Howlers were out there--all of the Howlers still alive---every last one of them. In the predawn gray they were climbing steadily toward us from all sides, as thick as cannibals at a funeral. I didn't think much of our chances.

"Uh, Dactyl?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think that piton gun of yours can get us out of here?"

He shook his head. "I don't have anything to shoot into. The angles are all wrong."

"Oh."

He tilted his head then and said, "I do have a parachute. "

"What?"

He showed me a gray bundle connected to the back of his climbing harness between batteries.

"You ever use it?"

"Do I look crazy?" he asked.

I took a nine meter length of my strongest line and snapped one end to my harness and the other to his.

The Howlers were starting to come over the lip.

"The answer is yes," I said.

We started running.

I took two of them off with me, and Dactyl seemed to have kicked one man right in the face. The line stretched between us pulled another one into the void. I was falling, bodies tumbling around me in the air, the recreation deck growing in size. I kept waiting for Dactyl to open the chute but we seemed to fall

forever. Now I could see the broken Howlers who'd preceded us, draped on the cage work over the balcony. The wind was a shrieking banshee in my ears. The sun rose. I thought, here I am falling to my death and the bloody sun comes up!

In the bright light of the dawn a silken flower blossomed from Dactyl's back. I watched him float up away from me and then the chute opened with a dull boom. He jerked up away from me and there came a sudden, numbing shock. Suddenly I was dangling at the end of a three meter pendulum, tick, tick and watching four more bodies crash into the cage.

The wind took us then, far out, away from the tower, spinning slowly as we dropped. I found myself wondering if we'd land on water or land.

Getting out of the swamp, past alligators and cannibals, and through the Le Bab Security perimeter is a story in itself. It was hard, it took some time, but we did it.

While we were gone there was a shakeup in the way of things. Between my trespassing and Howlers dropping out of the sky, the Security people were riled up enough to come out and "shake off" some of the fleas. Fortunately most of the victims were Howlers.

To finish this story up neatly I would like to add that Molly liked the peaches-but she didn't.

It figures.

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