

Prologue

+ = + = +

The smallest kid in her class, Jen Marov was known as “Monkey Girl” among her friends. She liked *Monkey Girl* way more than “**Flores, Hobbit,**” a spiteful tag that some classmates whispered behind her back.

<**Flores** is an Indonesian island where archeologists have found 50,000-year-old midget-sized protohuman skeletons.>

She may've been compact and petite, but she was no freak. Jen had clear brown eyes, high cheekbones, full lips and periwinkle chin that topped a fine physique. “Monkey Girl” described her perfectly when she scrambled across gabled roofs, scaled vertical cliffs or rescued skittish kittens from tree-branch redoubts.

She drove her parents to anxious worry, for they didn't appreciate how careful and cautious she was. Jen weighed all possible slipups before leaping from one rooftop to another. While flirting with peril, she learned from mistakes and swaggered after close calls like a skateboarder flaunting scabs on her knees. Yet she faded away before emergency-response crews could arrest her for public mischief.

Jen kept her climbing feats in low profile. She hated to hobnob with adults, especially teachers who seemed forever stuck in authority-figure mode. Few adults understood her need to push the envelope. Nor did they allow for her exceptional muscular control. Nor did they credit her uncanny instincts when it came to taking

risks.

During phys-ed classes, Jen held her best stuff back. The last thing she wanted was to get singled out. “Special” kids were often hustled to secluded camps that molded them for Olympic-style tournaments. Playtime after school was another matter. The class superjock once challenged her to a contest of chin-ups. He was broad-shouldered and muscle bound, yet his arms gave out after 126 chins, whereas Jen continued at pace as if performing aerobic two steps.

After that showdown the guys welcomed her to cross-gender games of ice-pond hockey and pickup basketball. Chumming around with athletic hunks upset the clique of regnant gals, even though Jen didn't flirt or offer come-ons. To keep the peace, she hung out with outsiders like herself. An eclectic bunch of gamers, hackers, shoplifters and wannabe cat burglars. They idolized Jen as the ultimate daredevil.

However tempting were the offers from gang leaders, she never used her skills for criminal deeds. If the exploits had appealed to her sense of fairness, she might've followed the crooked path that led to prison cells. She was saved from that fate when her parents won an expense-paid vacation to Paris.

The contest rules stipulated two hours a-day to record the lucky family using the sponsor's products. In practice the vidcam quorums stretched to four then six hours. The vid crew was

apologetic but firm, citing the need for facial poses that were carefree and candid. Jen knew what they really wanted were consumer-happy smiles.

Mama and **Otêts** accepted the meddling with stoic goodwill, but Jen snickered when the vid crew caught her chatting on the loaner vidcom. She bristled as everyone piled in & out of the sponsor's hybrid sedan for the umpteenth time. She rolled her eyes when the handlers interrupted museum tours for canned poses in front of antediluvian artworks. Ivan, her kid brother, strutted around like a pop celeb or prize ham. He played his role so well the crew gave him a brand-new **prompter**.

<**otêts** (quasi-phonetic Russian) father.>

<**prompter** is a mobile computing device (laptop) with all the bells & whistles.>

The day they toured the Eiffel Tower, Jen almost jumped for glee. She fell in love with its awesome height and splendor, its ancient elegance and grace. Some buildings in her hometown of Yakutsk posed tougher challenges for climbers, but they had nowhere near the **phat**. The tower's diagonal spars promised awkward staging for short limbs. Not that it mattered. It was a climb she couldn't refuse. One way or another, she vowed to reach the pinnacle.

<**phat** (short-form slang) Pretty Hips And Thighs. More generally, phat means attractive, shapely, endearing.>

Later at night she climbed a tree near the tower and spied with opera glasses that Ivan had scrounged from a curio shop. She learned a watchman would cover the perimeter grounds every two hours and sweep his searchlight at the four arched legs upholding the 1st-floor. If she approached after the walk-around she'd have enough time to climb above the search beams.

After she returned from her vigil, Ivan went online with his hacker buddies. They managed to swipe the sobriquet of a watchman who was ogling a porno site. With ID in hand, they extracted the Eiffel Tower's security codes and then loaded them in a mobile transponder that would fool the site sensors to take her for valid personnel.

Jen stalked her prize through islands of shadows, thanks to a burned-out streetlight which Ivan had managed to snuff with a pellet gun. She prowled across manicured grass as softly as a panther. Then came the ritual 1st-touch, her fingers greeting cold iron like a lover's caress. She sprang into motion, 3-point, 4-point, 3-point, her free limb reaching for the next purchase. She kept a dogged pace, 3-point, 4-point, 3-point.

Her packsack held a large orange brassiere, which would be affixed to the pinnacle. She didn't like this chore at all, but it was the price she paid to get the services of Ivan and his buddies. She knew how they'd laugh when they saw the orange flag on **WHV**.

<**WHV** (acronym) Web Holography Viewer. WHV signifies the output mode received by user devices like holojamborees or 3-D flatviews. It often refers to the audiovisual experience as well as the webcaster's broadband potential, which may combine holographic, audio and nasal cues. Her own breasts looked flatter than roadkill, magnifying her tomboy image and giving the creeps another reason to rhubarb her gender.>

The balustrade of the 1st-floor gave pause to a 15-year-old who was short for her age. A sturdy rope and grappling hook might've come in handy, but extra weight would've bogged her down.

Mountaineers who deployed safety lines were worthless cheaters in Jen's universe. She relied on fingers and wrists, both of which had grown strong from squeezing a solid rubber ball 20 minutes a day, ten minutes for each hand.

Once she got a grip on the top lip, she raised her leg, planted a foot and brought thigh muscles to bear. With a grunt and thrust from her abs, she was up and over the flatiron porch.

Jen scrambled up the next stage and mounted the 2nd-balustrade with equal aplomb. She paused and sipped from her water bottle while the summer breeze cooled her brow. At 120 meters above ground, the view was spectacular. The city boasted a broad array of building blocks and crisscrossed avenues. Cleaning beetles trundled across the near-deserted **ruex**.

<**ruex** (French) streets. where they gobbled food wrappers, paper cups and dog do. The Parisian streetwalkers were nowhere around.>

Already gone to soft beds,
cashing in on dress rehearsals,
bringing the puppies home.

She'd always got along with boys, their physical strengths, their dogged desires to compete. Guys were such blatant liars it was easy to gauge their intentions which were seldom romantic or laced with sexual innuendos. No surprise, for Jen squashed those come-ons in the bud. She was Monkey Girl, a self-reliant no-nonsense virgin. Popular media drove other gals to splurge over fads and frills, to fuss over makeovers and boyfriends, to hock their dreams for a Trekkie holoflick or a closetful of **superfly** clothes. None of that suited Jen.

<**superfly** (slang) elegance, polish. >

+==+==+

At 250 meters she yawned and rued the lack of sleep. The climb had spent her early enthusiasm, exposing raw toil and fatigue.

She glanced up at the 3rd-floor observation bubble, the last obstacle before the pinnacle spire. Her fingers and palms were sore inside her gloves. Too many pauses to drink from the water bottle, and now there wasn't time to plant the orange brassiere and climb down before sunrise. She could descend and concede defeat. But setbacks were nowhere on her agenda. She gritted teeth and resolved to reach the pinnacle, no matter what.

Wrought-iron spars crisscrossed the bubble. The cagelike framework was there for visitor safety and to deny suicidal swans and reckless stunt girls like herself. The underside gridwork entailed a three-meter traverse. It offered no easy handholds and no useful footholds. Jen surveyed the overhang and how to surmount it.

No need to rush or force

a dumb move that could
send me crashing far below.

She tightened the wristbands of her mountaineer gloves. They eased the soreness of contact but couldn't prevent blistered calluses. She vowed to find or make better gloves as she tightened the laces of her gripfast boots.

A chill in the air triggered sudden dizziness. Synapses ricocheted like broiled popcorn. Her heart thundered inside its cage. A sidelong glance showed palsied fingers shaking.

To hell with my alter ego
and my curse of vertigo.

I'm the best climber there is.

Minutes passed before her heartbeats slowed and calm returned. She reached for the 1st-handhold and then the second. Arms glistened with sweat. Two arms bore the weight while footholds held her torso still. As she fished for another handhold, triceps, biceps and rhomboids strained to keep her aloft. Just then a foothold slipped loose. She dangled from one arm before her free hand grasped the next perch and clamped down hard.

She grunted joyously as she gained the outer facing. It was vertical and ladderlike with sharply canted rungs. Her leg muscles could share the load.

Jen surmounted the bubble's slanted roof, then paused and surveyed the pinnacle. The spire had plenty of indents for wedging hands and feet. It was scalable until it narrowed to the lightning rod. The wind had picked up, causing more vibrations in the structure. The longer she waited, the more risk of getting caught up in a gale.

Just do it and be done.

She climbed to the lightning rod and attached the brassiere. Fatigue overwhelmed a brief flush of triumph. Her descent bogged down with frequent pauses and involuntary yawns. By the time her boots reclaimed the slanted roof, she was dead on her feet.

No choice but anchor down and fall asleep.

+ = + = +

Loud thumping sounds roused her to daylight. She glanced up and spotted a chopper with bright decals and vidcams arrayed on outstretched booms. "Trafic Surveiller" appeared on the chopper's side. Ivan's buddies must be glued to the news feeds. They're laughing like chimpanzees at the orange bra on the tallest flagpole in town.

Shadows moved across her legs. Jen craned her neck and eyed two security dudes whose faces looked neither friendly nor kind.

"You're trespassing, young lady," said one of them in cryptic *Français*. "Get inside now. Better hope you have answers for our questions."

Jen caught the gist as she was ushered through the maintenance

hatch and surrounded by more uniforms. One of them seized her water bottle. He scanned it with a sensor wand, unscrewed the cap and sniffed. "It's water," he announced.

The dude with leadership insignia on his tunic cleared his throat. "Nice girls don't poke fun at their mother's clothing. It's no laughing matter, young lady. Tell me how you managed to elude the sensors."

I stashed the remote inside a nook

on the 2nd-floor balustrade.

Ivan promised to retrieve it later,

during a lull in the tour.

Jen stared the **inspecteur** in the eye. "Dunno. Maybe I'm a small target with a soft step."

<**inspecteur** (French) inspector.>

The inspecteur scowled and turned to the uniform on his right. "Take her downtown."

Ten hours later, Jen was released from custody with a reprimand. After all she'd caused no serious harm, and foreign tourists were seldom charged for littering. The sponsoring corporation jumped at the publicity angle. The vid crew draped Jen in designer clothes until she resembled a splendid knight in branded armor. They walked her through the press conference and 15 minutes of fame.

+ = + = +

Baileg Barnov came to **Yakutsk** two weeks after the family returned from Paris. He had a charismatic smile and 10,000 reasons why Jen should join the Imperial Circus, which he described as one happy family that toured cities on six continents. Barnov was certain Jen had the right stuff to perform spectacular aerial feats. He praised her chutzpah and cunning.

<**Yakutsk** is the capital city of the Sakha Republic in eastern Russia. It has a population of 500,000, circa 2074.>

Barnov spent the mornings discussing buckwheat recipes with Mama till he charmed her cheeks pink. In the afternoons he worked on Jen, spinning tall tales and homey anecdotes. He described dozens of high-wire challenges that whet her appetite. He promised good pay for doing something she loved. In the evenings he sat with *Otét's* and extolled the advantages of circus life, especially the educational benefits, for the circus brought tutors wherever it traveled.

Otét's worried about money sharks who'd sink their teeth in his daughter's newfound wealth. Barnov agreed to set up a trust fund that paid weekly allowances but kept the bulk of her earnings in reserve till her 18th-birthday. Jen would get psychological counseling if needed and health supplements amended by topnotch immunologists.

Baileg Barnov proved a man of his word. The circus was indeed one happy family. Even the headliners pitched in when the carnies folded the "bigtop" and moved on. Jen got along with the

children of headliners and carnies, and later she formed more tentative bonds among the headliners and carnies themselves.

Sometimes her old nemesis vertigo would reawake before she launched somersaults from the high trapeze or when she walked the tightrope amid ribbons of colorful silks. Her remedy was to focus on immediate tasks, such as fingers on the trapeze bar or soft soles on the tightrope. She blotted the ground below till her qualms withdrew like vampires to coffins at sunrise.

She grew stronger and wiser, learned to work the crowd and make her stunts seem more spectacular than they were. She found pleasant ways to brush off guys who tried every sort of lusty come-on. Only once did the lion tamer step out of line. Drunk as a skunk, he tried to exploit Jen's petite size, but he got a sprained wrist and bruised testicles for his trouble.

On her 16th-birthday she earned top billing. **Jenna Marov**, Aerial Acrobat. Two years later, she transferred her trust fund to a Swiss bank account that grew rapidly from interest and surplus wages. Jen was no spendthrift. She bought clothes from the bargain bins and took special care of the glittery costumes she wore for marquee stunts. She avoided parties and shenanigans, for drugs and alcohol didn't mesh with her daily exercise routine.

<**Jenna (Jen, Pix) Marov**: rundog. Born 2037 in Yakutsk, Russia. Adult height: 150 centimeters; weight: 44 kilograms; brown eyes, black hair. Climbs the Eiffel Tower in 2052. Joins Imperial Circus in 2052. Earns top billing as aerial acrobat 2053. Quits Imperial Circus in 2059. Climbs the Andes until falsely arrested for theft in 2061. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2061.>

At 22 years old, circus life had become all too predictable. Her breathtaking feats had been done so many times they'd become routine. There were no challenges on the horizon unless she volunteered to get shot out of a cannon or sawed in three pieces by Merlin the Magnificent. She wiled her spare moments online, visiting travel destinations. The circus had given her firsthand views of the world's largest cities, but she longed to explore the rural hideaways and quaint villages at the foothills of mountain ranges, and then to climb the snow-capped summits.

The Andes intrigued her most of all. Its majestic peaks offered another way to challenge her vertiginous nemesis. The Andes stretched from the equator to the southern latitudes, so there would be worthy climbs all year round. She began to assemble the equipment needed for solo assaults. She took a Spanish immersion course via **HOAM** and so added her 4th-language. All that remained was a facedown with the boss.

<**HOAM**[®] (acronym) Hyper-Optional Appendant Marketplace. HOAM facilitates sharing and barter among linked computers. Computer owners get virtual credits by allowing 3rd-parties to use idle processors.>

Baileg sat at his traveler's desk, a makeshift card table cluttered with vidcoms and gadgets. He looked up from his prompter. "Our ads feature Jenna Marov for the next six months," he growled, his brows converging like storm clouds.

"No prob. I'll go on, same as always till the Beijing stopover."

< **prob** (short-form slang) problem >

He glanced at the performance schedule. "Till July," he murmured and sighed. "You're breaking my heart, y'know."

"Gotta recharge my batteries. Be back before winter sets in," she fibbed.

He stood up, reached out and grasped her hands. "If you must, you must. Remember, Jen, the circus is truly your home."

Jen smiled and felt like a rat jumping ship. But other challenges beckoned, and she dared not delay her escape.

No more glamorous posturing.

No more headliner pettiness.

No more jitters of celebrity.

+==+==+

17 years later in Kuala Lumpur.

Thursday, 12 May 2076, 12:15 a.m.

Brakes squeal. The undercarriage groans as the van clamors to a halt.

Jen cheers the stillness. For the last half-hour she has gotten jerked around like a medicine ball, where she hides under bundles of clean linens, whose pungent odors are twitching her nostrils. The long stoppage means the van has arrived at the subbasement of Petronas tower 2.

She hears a whistled tune and footfalls beside the van.

Please, no guards, not now...

If they spot me under the laundry

the mission will end before it starts.

Footfalls stop at the back door. Hinges scream as the door opens.

"**Kawan**, must go now," says the driver's familiar voice.

<**kawan** *kuhwun* (Malay) friend.>

Jen breathes a sigh of relief and pops her head above the bundles. "Is the lift open?"

"Yah."

<**yah** *YUH* (Malay) yes.>

She crawls out of the van and marches to the elevator where she glances back. "Thanks, Yen."

"No problem." He matches her smile and waves farewell.

+==+==+

Jen reaches up and wedges gloved fingers inside a horizontal crease. She fits toes between another crease and hoists herself off the footstall until she's astride the slab like a dogged spider on the wall.

When the elevator doors close, she's blinded in pitch-blackness. Moments pass before her nightvision adapts. Faint glows from the status LEDs highlight the dark trenches that border slabs of ferroconcrete. LEDs shed enough light to mark the next hand- & footholds. She climbs to the 2nd-floor then third and fourth, her matte-gray attire blending with the shaft's dim features.

Nonslip gloves are banded above her elbows to minimize slippage. Simple tabi boots cover her feet. The low-rise boots have concentric rubber vees on the soles whose bottoms and sidebars are budded with suction cups for better traction. Extra length laces are wrapped in helix fashion along her calves and then secured to a nonslip band below her knees. Gloves and boots react to her refined sense of touch, while other senses are tensed at fever pitch. Jen can't afford stray thoughts, the bane of careless climbers.

If events go as planned the elevator car will stay at the 41st- & 42nd-floors where **Po Ling** is doing the biannual overhaul and fumigation, yet she has primed her senses for a descending car. Jen doesn't relish the thought of several tonnes coming down like an avalanche. In which case she must find the nearest maintenance indent where she'll press against the wall. Her backpack, which holds the tools of her trade, fits snugly in the small of her back. With luck it won't inflate her girth, and she ought to avoid contact by a hair's breadth.

<**Pol Ling** is a janitor at Petronas Tower 2. He owes favors to Ahab & Absen Ho who have worked as security troubleshooters based out of Singapore.>

Jen is aware of how vulnerable she would be if discovered by security guards who can use overrides to open the elevator doors. She ascends the wall that hosts the doors, a strategy that may foil slipshod guards. They'll lean inside and make a cursory check of the shaft. They won't crimp their necks and likely miss a lone climber on the fringes of their peripheral vision.

As she reaches the 20th-floor, a sudden downdraft stops her

cold. Chills run down her spine. She glances up, her muscles tensed to dodge a plunging elevator car. The black square remains unchanged, neither growing nor moving against the dim collage of LEDs. A temp-control gauge must've triggered the draft. There are no infrared sensors in the #3 shaft, unless her recon data is out of date. If body heat has triggered the airflow, security monitors could be flashing alerts.

Nothing I can do about that.

Just climb and hope for the best.

The ascent in the elevator shaft marks the easier part of tonight's work, but she places each hand- & foothold as if it's her last act on earth. Deep breaths maintain her aerobic balance. Few athletes could equal her level of fitness. Fewer still could match the relentless pace without wilting or cramping. She grasps another handhold and hoists her center of mass, an action so smooth it mimics a virtuoso cellist strumming bold arpeggios.

When she gains the 40th-floor rendezvous, she forces a plastic strip between the doors. The thin wafer is colored bright red, a signal for Po Ling to let her out. Moments pass like glacial epochs. If she pushes the strip too far, a roving security dude may spot it instead.

What's keeping Po Ling?

There's no time to spare.

Jen bristles and readjusts her 4-point. She has climbed mountains and achieved acrobatic stardom, but the scourge of vertigo remains in the shadows like a mugger ready to pounce. The fear of falling is lodged like radium ore in the flesh of her soul.

Stay calm, girl.

Breathe deep; hang tough.

Keep muscles from cramping.

+==+==+

The next 15 minutes seem to last hours before the doors rumble open. The red strip slips free and down the shaft. She curses herself for daydreaming. Fortunately the strip lacks her fingerprints or DNA.

“Sorry for coming late.” Po Ling looks shaken. “Special guards ask questions. I joke, say nothing. They go away.”

Roosters aren't supposed to be checking this far down. She prays **Po Ling** hasn't let the cat out of the bag.

<**Pol Ling** is a janitor at Petronas Tower 2. He owes favors to Ahab & Absen Ho who have worked as security troubleshooters based out of Singapore.>

She draws a deep breath. “Do they know?”

“Not them.”

Relieved, she drains her lungs. “Is the portal open?”

“You come. I open.”

She follows him down the hall to a storage room. Bolts and wall panels are strewn across the floor. Metal lats of the window frame have already been removed. Only a plastic cowl holds the glass in place. “Has anyone seen this?”

“No. I was alerted.” He grins and pulls out a palmslate. “This tells me when guards coming down stairway. They see me buffing floor.”

“Smart move, Po Ling. Once your shift is over, take the train to **Singapore**. Ask for Aseem at the southeast pier. He'll find you work at the spaceport.”

<**Singapore Spaceport** is located near Singapore Island at the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula. [2° 15' N, latitude; 103° 30' E, longitude]>

“Good idea.”

“Can we remove the cowl without leaving marks?”

“Should be,” says Po Ling. “Tools in tin box. We pry out.”

Jen opens the lid and spots two long-handled chisels. Together they dislodge the cowl, leaving no visible scratches. Po Ling sets cowl and window on the floor while Jen rummages through her backpack. She pulls out two armguards. The “hand” portions are “fingered” with elastic loops to keep digits from slipping.

“Very brave climbing KLCC with no ropes,” says Po Ling.

“I’m not the first. Alain Robert did it way back in ‘09.”

Jen snugs fingers inside the loops then tightens the straps. The armguards cover the soft sides of forearms and bulge like pillows at her elbows.

After snugging the footgear, she pushes out. 200 meters above the ground, her legs dangle free in open space. She twists and wriggles her torso until boot soles touch the rounded ledge.

“Go ahead and replace the window, Po Ling. And thanks again. When your shift ends, head straight for Singapore. See you on the other side.”