

Progress should be optional!

VERTICAL

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Progress should be optional, he considers, letting his hydraulic limbs sucker hard against the pneumatic girders of the 724th floor of the Industry's newest troposphere-scraping building. The clouds wisp into candy-floss bunches miles below his feet.

No software upgrade can stop the agonising thump of blood curdling in the hollows of his ears. Bright fingers of light slice the building's silver sheen burning through his VisiGard© and tricking his eyes to narrow slits. God makes retinas, but the Industry makes materials that reflect, cut and burn. Eyes are no longer enough, he thinks - that is what progress has done. He tries to concentrate on his upward movement but is distracted by the pain in his ears, his eyes, his whole head. His body is fine. His body's exo-skeleton has been upgraded until it is more diodes and Carb-wire© than muscle and bone. Climbing five miles above terra firma is a doddle: The ability to cling to the side of a gigantic, immobile structure with nothing but bilious gasses buffering your descent, a piece of piss. That is what technology has given him, given everyone: Anthropodic armoured shells and computerised limbs that make movement a thing of the future and immobility an obsolete antiquity. Any one can work the building sites of the new age. Progress you see. Upward progress.

Sveltebug© Taxis whizz and buzz beneath him picking up and putting down all over the city. A girl in moulded carbon cladding the colour of charcoal catches his eye. She is an improbable undulation of peaks and troughs. She is consumer-friendly perfection. He whistles under his VisiGard©. He wants to take time to study her and contemplate how much real, fresh flesh exists behind the big red smirk. He hasn't the time, though. Another day he would take a moment to distance himself from reality and dream her into his Pod. But not today – today he has a key zero mission to complete. He must keep climbing. He lets his right arm extend and seal itself to the surface. His right leg follows, then his left arm and finally his left leg. Progress is slow, but it is steady and it is sure. And it is safe. Ever since Incident (B) and the compulsory over-ride upgrade 0.17 to all Industry Grade 0 Maintenance Suits there has been no further 'un-authorized detachments'. The Industry,

he concedes, was quick to react: Thousands of tech-bots worked through the night and by 07.00 hours the following morning every single Exosuit had its Internal SafeSet© Grading Software modified, updated and installed.

“So, up you go Phillips,” Bartrum had said. “All safe now. Safe as houses. Whatever that means.” His boss had sucked on a light pen as he spoke, “a ridiculous phrase I know, but still. What is a house, anyway? Still it’s safe and that’s all you need to know.” And so he had climbed the very next day, like he did every day. Because he had to – because that’s what he did. Bartrum had been right, of course, it had been safe. And that day, the day immediately after Incident (B), he had installed twenty-four Higher Z Illuminants and two Roster Scopes© single-handedly.

That night, though, he had lain awake staring at the moons through the ceiling of his Pod so scared he couldn’t move his arms – even though for the first time that day he had had the power to do so by his own thought-pulses alone. He felt as though his base suckers were clamping him firmly to his mat.

It is cold at this height and he is grateful that ice hasn’t the ability to form at this altitude. Something pings off his helmet and he instinctively wants to raise his hand as a shield. But the newly installed override codes won’t let him. He would have to manually reinstall his password in triplicate to do such an action. He shakes his head and refocuses on moving upwards. There are tablets for brain pressure, of course, but he doesn’t take them. He would rather maintain some control in his head. It is one thing relinquishing the power in your limbs to the Industry, it is quite another giving up your mind. He can’t see the top of the building and he has no idea how many floors he must climb to get there. The Industry is determined to ensure this is the tallest building in the Sector when it is finished, but there are other buildings in the Sector twice as high as 724 floors, so he has a way to go he can assume. He isn’t sure whether he needs to climb all the way to the top, it is only a sense of duty that compels him; an Industry-instilled pride in his job. Bartrum gives out stars. Through his work as an Industry Maintenance Engineer his boss has awarded him over 7,500 stars and he is proud of each and every one of them. There are staging platforms at regular intervals, so maybe this one time he might pause his work there. A Mono Drone buzzes 360 degrees around him, capturing the update video it needs and zips off into a small approaching dust cloud of earth-bugs. They stick to its arms like welded snot.

After Incident (B) Bartrum had been sympathetic of course. But then, as an

Industry Staff Welfare badge-holder he has certificates in sympathy. The appropriate words had come from his boss's mouth but, for the first time in his Industry life, he didn't believe a single one of them and it scared him. "The Industry sees incidents like Incident (B) as an opportunity." Bartrum had gone on to explain to the team. "As an opportunity to develop understanding. It is only thanks to a few – and I must emphasise it is just a very few – broken eggs like the egg that was Incident (B) – that we can make any kind of omelette – let alone the magnificent and, should I say tasty, omelette that we are making here." His boss's staff talk had made him feel hungry, but not comforted. He had woken every morning since the incident coated in a sweet smelling sticky sweat that moulded his sleepwear to the contours of his body. He felt like he couldn't breathe and it made him panic. He also wondered if he had wet himself. It made him think of those debilitating illness of old. Nasty diseases that made people's hands shake, made them forget their partner's names and made them urinate uncontrollably. So, he checked his pants using his portable HealthScan© and was relieved to find no sign of urea compounds on his skin. Is this progress, then, the reliance on technology to confirm whether he had pissed himself? The progress where everything is possible and where every risk is removed? He can no longer tell if that is a good thing. Safety when maintaining Higher Z Illuminants is good, no longer being able to pass solids from your own bodily waste tube, maybe not so much so. He used to love a good shit.

He has been crying. His VisiGard© is damp. Maybe he should make his destination Platform South Tower 3 after all. Really what was the difference between Platform South Tower 3 and the very top? The mess at the bottom would be the same. Progress had got him this far, but progress wouldn't be able to stop the total annihilation of his body and its Industry modified exo-attachments that jumping from Platform South Tower 3 would create.

He sits at the edge and looks down through the sulphur clouds that kiss his feet. He programs in his passcode for a third time and unfastens Locking Pads A1, D2 and O5. He likes the yellow colour of the sulphur and wonders what it might taste like sucked through his nose. It would be an easy flight down. Progress isn't just forwards. Vertical isn't just up. What is he doing then? Anti-progress. He likes that, there should be more anti-progress. Maybe he could advocate an Anti-Progress Division in the Industry. But, no, it is too late for dreams. Too late for change or upgrades or improvements or developments or...

It isn't like flying and he doesn't feel like a bird. He falls - thanks in some part to the weight of his Industry Exosuit - at a rate that alarms him more than he expected. There isn't time to look at the bemused faces as he passes each window and his life doesn't pass in front of his eyes like he was told it would. But there is one feeling - other than the mind-crushing pain inside his VisiGard© - that overwhelms him. The feeling of total and undeniable relief. The relief that he is finally no longer the servant of vertical motion and progress makes him want to scream with delight.

The landing isn't what he expects either. He expects it to be hard and unforgiving and really rather painful. He expects bits of him and his suit to fly off here and there. But, to his surprise, they don't. Instead he feels like he has fallen into a warm pool of gooey VitaGel©, the stuff they pump between the girders of the new buildings to protect against the freezing troposphere 724 floors up. The sudden shock of immobility is immediate yet tempered by the pleasant sensation of everything wrapping around him, as though hundreds of small furry creatures have clambered all over him and are hugging him tightly. Slowly his heart steadies to 'an acceptable Industry-standard working rate' and his breath stops gasping and just lightly gulps.

"Thank goodness we upgraded those Safety Zone Pool Scopes©" Bartrum announces later as he pulls him back to his feet and claps him back into the Industry building. "I said to the Industry Board, I said a stitch in the building's base back up will save nine, or in this case Incident (C)." The team laugh politely and Bartrum feels like giving out stars. Bartrum lightly squeezes his arm. "That my friend," he smiles, "is the wonder of progress."