Zion Solo

Bridging the gap between work and life

by Amanda Tarr

I emerged, coughing, from a confused sleep. Rolling off the old itchy sofa cushions on the floor of my office, I oriented on my computer's blinking light, crawled to my desk, killed the screen saver and turned on a full-spectrum grow light, my best approximation of a sunrise at three in the afternoon.

With a strict deadline approaching, I'd slipped into this-less-than-ideal schedule for the final push. Through my more difficult university classes, and on into my career as a senior software engineer at a video game company in Boulder, Colorado, I had discovered that my peak mental hours are between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. I'd been working double time on that schedule for the better part of two weeks, fueling myself with greasy Chinese takeout and the bitter food-service quality coffee that the company keeps in constant supply. It was the final day of work before the product demo would be burned onto a gold CD for the annual trade show. Soon, my colleagues would be flying over the patchwork quilt of the American Midwest on course toward Atlanta, Georgia. The trade show promised to be a mélange of flashing lights, skinny pale-faced teens, and scantily clad "booth bimbos" hired to make video games seem glamorous. I was gladly trading this experience for a trip to Zion National Park, where I hoped to finish a solo first ascent I'd abandoned between Christmas and New Year's. I'd spent the intervening five months contriving elaborate excuses for my failure, and I needed the opportunity to return and free myself from my self-imposed obligation. I proceeded mechanically through the final polishing of our software and, with dawn approaching, guided my truck through the nearly deserted streets of town.

By mid-morning, I cleared the tunnel leading into Zion Canyon. The panorama was awe-inspiring, and my breathing stuttered as it has every time I've broken out of the relative darkness of the narrow passage through the cliff onto the steep slope of the canyon wall. Prior to my first big wall solo, the *Moonlight Buttress*, I was paralyzed with fear at first sight of the walls; I had nearly decided to go backpacking instead. While my respect for the high places has remained unchanged over the years, they have become more familiar to me. The fear has been replaced with a feeling of anticipation and nervousness, much the same as one feels when they step off a plane from a faraway destination into the arms of a loved one whom they haven't seen in months: a warm familiarity is there, but mixed with it is the nagging worry that things may have changed, never to be rediscovered.

The traffic in the canyon was stop-and-go, differing from rush hour on the Colorado Front Range only by the scenery and the percentage of RVs. Not wanting the spell to be broken, I turned up the music and looked at the walls, the budding trees, the river still swollen with spring runoff, anything to remove myself from the similarities to my stressful career-oriented life back home. It was Memorial Day weekend, and I waited for two hours for a bivy permit as the hordes scrambled to get wilderness permits when they discovered that the drive-in campground was full. The campsites closest to the highways filled first, and there was heated competition for the last remaining spots. Finally, I obtained uncontested permission to sleep on the sandstone wall overlooking Emerald Pools.

Amanda Tarr at home in Boulder, Colorado. PETE TAKEDA

I packed the first of my loads and started up the trail. Ahead of me, a nearly continuous line of tourists meandered up the trail. They stopped repeatedly, oblivious to me staggering behind with a load that I could barely balance. After an "Excuse me," the most polite phrase I could muster, the dawning of recognition for what I'd said seemed to spread across their shiny, sweat-streaked faces with the speed of a glacier creeping down an alpine valley.

At long last, I was able to strike up the hill, left with only my own scent and the smell of the earth that each of my steps released as I struggled up the soft dirt slope. I dropped my cargo and returned to the trailhead as quickly as possible. I wanted to get my second load up to the base of the wall with time to examine the route with binoculars before the sun left the canyon, taking with it the contrasting light by which I could pick out corners, cracks, and other features.

Looking through the binos, I was suddenly washed with doubt. I desperately wanted someone to talk to, even for a moment, about my uncertainty. I'd never done a first ascent alone, and the consequences of a mistake seemed enormous. There would be no hope of immediate rescue; the top of the cliff was an extremely forbidding slab, and the only access would come from climbing up the vertical wall below. In addition, I was concerned with my descent options. Rappelling would probably be as arduous as climbing up the wall: the buttress was overhanging for at least half of the route, and the features on the vertical or slabby sections traversed too much to facilitate an easy retreat. I needed a familiar face to reassure me, but in the midst of the biggest crowd I had ever seen in Zion, I felt completely and horribly alone.

Desire to get off the ground had me nearly running with my third and final load up the trail to the base of the route the next morning. I quickly set to preparing myself for a solo aid pitch, methodically stacking the ropes, setting an anchor for upward pull, and putting myself

on belay with a clove hitch through two locking carabiners on my harness. The sun line had already crept most of the way down Lady Mountain before I set off on the string of birdbeaks that carried me into the vertical world. A cool breeze blew up from the vicinity of the natural spring below. During the previous winter, the only sound breaking the silence had been the periodic crashes and tinkles of ice falling from the overhang above the Emerald Pools. Now the wind carried murmurs of conversation and the megaphone of a tour bus droning on with various trivia and an inaccurate description of big wall climbing.

I'd completed the first two pitches on my previous attempt, and without the uncertainty of the unknown and the hassle of drilling bolt anchors, I moved with relative self-assuredness. The beak seam led to an awkward squeeze chimney capped with a roof. As I struggled and thrutched my way up through the confining walls, I cursed myself for not leaving the pitch fixed the previous winter. I'd decided against it, because I was afraid that the tourists might notice my rope if the sun struck the wall at just the right angle. With access problems proliferating due to the increasing popularity of adventure sports, our actions can no longer go unnoticed. A rope left in laziness so that I might avoid 200 feet of climbing later on could negatively impact our collective climbing opportunities for years to come.

While exhausting, hauling my bag presented none of the usual complications. I've accustomed myself to the sinking feeling that comes when the haulbag catches under a roof or in a tight chimney. Solo climbers are well acquainted with having to repeatedly rappel down to the bag, free it, and jumar up to resume hauling. It becomes part of the game, just like having to rappel and clean every pitch after the lead, but I find myself fervently hoping during each haul that the bag will reach the belay unhindered.

Good fortune spared me any unwanted difficulties, and I took the opportunity to set up my bivy early. As I lay on my ledge, soaking up the late afternoon sun and rehydrating, I reflected on my life over the last couple of years. There was a clean line that split my experiences between those in the working world and those in the climbing world. The characters I played in each half of my life seemed to be entirely different people. One was driven by security, intellectual achievement, and the desire for the finer things in life. The other wanted only to climb at her limits, travel the world, and absorb the fullness of life gained by living on the edge. Spanning the vast gap between the two, I noted only my relationships with the people I love and a need to achieve.

The next couple of days flew by as I lost myself in the task of climbing upward. Dry air filled my lungs and blew across my face as the sun cooked my shoulders. My lips grew parched and cracked, and my fingers became chapped from the constant work with rough rock and dry nylon ropes. Unlike most desert climbs, the features on the route were delightfully varied, from a parallel crack through a stunning roof to more devious feature systems splitting the otherwise sheer sandstone face. The end of every pitch brought me remarkably to a reasonable ledge. It became a game of wondering when my luck for finding belay stances would run out and I'd be stuck monkeying around on hanging belays.

I had debated whether to set completely or nearly completely natural anchors on the route. While it was a feasible option for me climbing alone, I opted for drilling two-bolt anchors after every pitch. I believe that, at least in an accessible locale such as Zion, new routing is as much a service as an adventure. While I am a proponent of the notion that the character of the pitch may be as difficult or as dangerous as the first ascensionist desires, I also believe in setting anchors that will not only work for me, but also be safe for three heavier people and their corresponding gear.

LEFT: Leaving Llamaland *on Emerald Star Mountain.* PAUL HORTON

When I awoke on my third morning on the wall, the wind was howling fiercely, but I decided to leave my ledge set up anyway in the event I needed to make a hasty retreat to the belay. I set out, placing cams in horrid flaring cracks, praising the designers of modern climbing gear when they miraculously bit into what looked to be impossible placements. Following the flare, a series of beak seams shot off in a traversing line to the left. Placements were found by searching out miniscule plants (usually amounting to a single hair-width stalk) that protruded from the crack. They were my only hope of finding a break in the calcified seam.

The seams gave way to small edges on the face, and as I was on my fourth tenuous hook in a row my portaledge below began to beat violently against the rock. Seconds later the wind gust slammed into me, and it was all I could do to maintain balance. A small edge under my right foot bore a bit of my weight, and when it fractured off, my foot plummeted a couple of inches into my aider step. I wobbled and the hook teetered. I could sense my pupils dilating with adrenaline, and all the world snapped into focus around the tiny square centimeter of soft sandstone supporting my weight. A million thoughts slammed into my head at once. I knew from drilling the belay anchors that the rock was universally permeated under a quarter-inch shell of dry rock. Immediately I thought down to the single solid cam placement between me and the belay. Shaken by my precipitous teetering, I imagined that there was no way the cam could hold in the water-weakened sandstone. I froze with fear. I wanted to reach for my drill. A bolt would change the pitch forever, but I would be able to move on in relative self assurance. I waffled between giving into my fear and continuing on.

Ultimately, I believe it was laziness rather than bravery that allowed me to move on without placing the bolt. The thought of standing high on the hook and drilling was too much for my aching back, and I managed to do as I should and sort out a series of hook moves and shallow beaks to take me to the next substantial feature. It was a flared and hollow crack formed from the convergence of two semi-detached flakes, but in relative terms it was far more confidence-inspiring than the climbing below. I quickly moved up it to drill the only hanging belay on the route.

Finally getting the bivy set up offered minimal relief. My kidneys ached, and blinking my eyes felt like rubbing fine-grained sandpaper over their surfaces. My thumbs and the first three fingers of both my hands were going numb, the onset of carpal tunnel syndrome. I wanted off. Night was no respite; I was tossed about as if I were sleeping in the back of a pickup truck as it sped down an unimproved dirt road. The wind had returned, perhaps perturbed that it hadn't knocked me off the route earlier in the day. I closed the rainfly over my ledge to keep my face from being pelted with any more flying sand, and finally dozed off during a lull in the storm.

Shortly thereafter, I was awakened. The cramped quarters of my sleeping bag had caused me to roll over on my already injured wrists, cutting off further the nerves and tendons that run through the carpal tunnel. I swallowed an emergency painkiller from my medical kit and curled into a small ball. Comforted by my own closeness, I dropped off into an otherwise uninterrupted sleep.

In the morning, it took 15 minutes of concentration to close my hands into loose fists. The connection between my brain and the mechanical motion of my digits was temporarily severed, and I had no perception of their orientation without looking directly at them. Once I fell into the rhythm of climbing, however, full mobility returned and the lingering feelings from the night faded away. I began traversing left, coming closer to the exit chimney I believed would take me off the route. I pendulumed to unprotected, slabby free climbing, but the chimney eluded me, and I only managed a pitch of climbing. The next morning I repeated the staring contest with my fingers, silently pleading with them to function so that I could get to the top.

The final pitch was mostly free, and quite good climbing, terminating with some gymnastic but easy moves up overhanging huecos in the shiny black desert varnish.

Finally, I pulled onto the summit slab and attempted to let out a little whoop, my mood being only slightly damaged when I managed a pathetic croak instead. The only flat spot within a quarter mile in either direction was 400 feet away, so I quickly shuttled my gear over, looking forward to taking off my harness for the first time in days. I spent the afternoon leaning against a lone tree, reading through a mindless fantasy novel that I remember nothing about.

Throughout the climb, I'd been afflicted with a pervasive nervousness about the descent. The summit slabs resemble Boulder's Flatirons, but covered with manzanita, sand, and loose rock. I scurried back and forth, fixing a line to insubstantial shrubs and an occasional tree in order to give myself a measure of security as I lurched across with my overfilled haulbag. After half a day of toiling, I reached the end of the slabs and began drilling 60-meter rappels down the face. I worked with stern concentration; a stuck rappel in the middle of the blank face would have left me hanging like a forgotten wind chime in the door of an abandoned building, my only recourse being a jumar back up on whatever unknown blockage had stopped the rope. Finally, I came within striking distance of the ground, and I was able to truly relax for the first time since I had begun days before.

Later that evening, I relaxed on the tailgate of my truck, nursing a beer as I chatted with friends I'd run into in the parking lot. I felt disconnected, and my thoughts wandered to the days ahead. I would soon have to return to work, to exchange the feeling of empowerment and freedom of a solo climb for days in front of the computer screen. I used to hope that, through creating a fantasy world in a video game, I might enable someone else to temporarily leave behind their personal world of stress and obligations. I don't doubt that this is possible, and I'd like to think that this same belief is what drives many people in the entertainment industry to push themselves to succeed. Unfortunately, I always have a hard time coming back, as if I can only pursue this ideal with half my heart.

In the slang of many online video game players, a llama is someone who appears lost and not at home with their virtual surroundings. The term is somewhat derogatory, and in a sense it's often how I feel about myself as I try to fit into the career-oriented life. When I was on the wall, I felt at times lonely and tired, afraid and timid, but I never once felt that I didn't belong there. So I gave the climb a name that may be a bit of a mouthful, but certainly expresses what it meant to me: *Leaving Llamaland.*

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Zion National Park, Utah

NEW ROUTE: *Leaving Llamaland* (V+ 5.7 A2+, 1,000') on Emerald Star Mountain (two buttresses right of the route *Emerald Star Majesticus*), May 30-June 3, 1998, Amanda Tarr, solo