



Dangerous Liaisons
by John Climaco

Foreign climbers who venture to the Himalayas have long depended upon porters and other local inhabitants to help them achieve their goals. Climbers often must accept the supervision of "liaison officers" assigned by the host country's bureaucracy. A liaison officer can make or break a trip, as John Climaco (b. 1968) and a partner learned on a 1995 expedition to Pakistan's 25,112-foot Chogolisa.

The guns pointed at me were not toys and the soldiers holding them, despite their mismatched uniforms, were not clowns. I hadn't expected AK 47s to be the biggest danger on the Baltoro, but then nothing on this expedition happened as I expected. When our liaison officer finished screaming at me and the soldiers finally left, I sat down and held my head in my hands. The expedition had gone down the drain, I was going to jail, and we hadn't even reached basecamp.

Suneeb, one of our porters, sat down next to me. "This liaison officer," he said, "is a crazy man, very bad man." I nodded. "You," he continued in a different tone, "are a good leader for us, care for the Balti people. He has insulted you, so tonight, *Inshallah*, we shall kill him. We will slit his pig throat."

I can pinpoint exactly when the mess that became our expedition to Chogolisa began: October 24, 1993. I was sitting below the west face

of Cholatse, having just made the second ascent of that peak's Southwest Ridge. I was feeling pretty good about myself, a little too good in fact. I wished in my journal for a bigger, harder version of what we'd just done, something like Chogolisa.

Eighteen months later Andrew Brash and I were in Rawalpindi sitting face to face with the man who over the next two months would turn my wish into a nightmare: Captain Mohammed Ayub, our liaison officer. Ayub immediately informed me that in Pakistan his army rank meant great status, something I could not possibly have as a civilian. "You," he said with an extravagant wave of his hand, "are nothing here." Captain Ayub had just returned from six months duty on the Siachen Glacier, the front line in the border war with India, the highest battleground in history. It is not what military men consider a choice posting, and I had to wonder privately about Ayub's real status. He made no secret of his displeasure about returning to the "God-forsaken hell of the North," as he called the Karakoram Range.

"Many peoples have died in these snows," he explained while Andrew and I unpacked the \$2000 of kit the regulations required we buy for him. "They are having parts of their bodies chopped off due from cold. This, I think should not be happening to me." Reasonable enough. "So these," he continued as he pushed away a pair of brand-new plastic boots, "are substandard. I will not go to the mountains in these. And this," he held aloft a new down jacket, "have you not brought another color? I am captain in Pakistan army. This is not smart looking." Andrew rolled his eyes. Though we'd only known the captain for ten minutes, things already looked bleak. Then, dismissing our carefully thought out schedule, Ayub announced, "We cannot possibly rush up into the mountains tomorrow. I must have perhaps one week to buy the proper equipment, which you will pay for. Then, perhaps, we shall move from this place."

As Ayub stood there with his scrawny arms akimbo, I felt the Italian temper that has caused so much trouble in the past welling up inside me. With a conscious effort of will I controlled a feeling I would come to know well in the weeks ahead: the desire to throttle Captain Ayub.

Instead, I pleaded that the current good weather would enable us to fly to Skardu and thus avoid the death-trap Karakoram Highway. I suggested that the extra cost of the hotel, food, and of course the captain's extra salary during the delay was more than we could afford. "Rule and regulation clearly tell expedition to come prepared to stay in Rawalpindi for two weeks," barked Ayub. "Two weeks! If you have not brought sufficient funds, then the expedition must be canceled immediately." I shut up.

I for one was not spending even one week in the sweltering hell-hole of Rawalpindi and I had only to glance at Andrew's widening eyes to know how he felt about the matter. We mentioned to the captain that we wanted to go to Peshawar and play tourists. He replied that we could not leave the hotel without his permission, and that visiting Peshawar, about four hours west toward the Afghan border, was totally out of the question. Again came the urge to throttle. I said nothing until the next morning when I asked permission to go shopping. After noting his benevolence, Captain Ayub gave his blessing; we promptly left the hotel and went shopping . . . in Peshawar.

Andrew was nervous about Peshawar from the beginning. A worker at the U.S. consulate there had recently been held at gunpoint for an hour in broad daylight and was only saved when her captor, still holding the gun to her head, was shot by a USDEA sniper. In Peshawar, the conduit for weaponry heading to the Afghan freedom fighters, every type of artillery and ammunition known to man is freely available on the streets. I thought it would be exciting, though I had second thoughts as we passed signs at the entrance to the city announcing, "You are now leaving the area where the Government of Pakistan can guarantee your safety."

Smoggy, crowded, and even hotter than Rawalpindi, the city itself turned out to be dull. The taxi ride home was not. Our driver was fluent in English and we took the opportunity to whine about the asshole ruining our trip. "I hate the army, the police, the ISI (Pakistan's KGB)—all of those hooligans," the driver announced. "They killed my brother because he refused to pay their bribes. Would you like to see a photo of him?"

As we pulled into the police checkpoint, and the machine-gun-toting officer approached the car to demand his bribe, the driver handed back a photo. His brother, lying on a steel table, was missing the back half of his head, his eyes and much of his chest. We didn't leave Rawalpindi again.

About a week later Captain Ayub finally exhausted his last excuse to delay us. Of course, the stable high pressure that had been parked over Pakistan since our arrival was also exhausted. As the rain poured down in sheets, flights to Skardu were grounded, which meant only one thing: the Karakoram Highway.

Careening through rain-slick turns 500 feet above the Indus River, I thought over all I'd read about the highway. Some have written it is the most beautiful road in the world, winding as it does past Nanga Parbat. Others have said it's the most exciting, entertaining part of an expedition to Pakistan. Those people are idiots. In many places the "highway" is nothing more than a shelf blasted into the sheer wall of the gorge. More than once a timely deceleration saved us from being crushed under a falling boulder. This I can only attribute to divine intervention, since in his hash-induced trance our driver seemed unable to locate the brake pedal. It appeared at times as though he was trying to physically outrun Death up the highway. I suppose in a race like that, the speed limit is simply as fast as whatever grossly overloaded vehicle you're unlucky enough to be in can go. As it turned out Death must have taken a rest day during our 24-hour heat. Judging by the number of burnt buses scattered below the highway, it was well earned.

Arrival in Skardu was hardly a release from our troubles. On a bed at the K2 motel we spread out what was left of the expedition finances. Thanks in large part to Captain Ayub and his at-our-expense account, our once Himalayan pile of rupees was down to a molehill. We'd been informed that the road to Askole—dubious in the best conditions—had been wiped out in 14 landslides triggered by the continuing rain. With Jeeps trapped between some of the slides, it was conceivable that we could shuttle loads over the debris. We figured we could afford two extra porter stages and still get back from basecamp. The porters, now

camped outside the gates of the motel, would be our responsibility as soon as we started walking and we had to pay them every day whether we covered any ground or not.

When to leave Skardu thus became a critical decision. Captain Ayub, interested only in lounging about the motel as long as possible, was of no help. After conferring with Phil Powers, leader of an expedition to Hidden Peak, and Issaq, our cook, we agreed to caravan the two expeditions together and make a dash for Askole the moment the rain stopped.

About the time it seemed we'd be taking an ark to Chogolisa, the rain finally turned to drizzle. Two hours later eight climbers, 90 porters, three cooks, two liaison officers, and 2,250 kilos of stuff were on there way to Askole.

"Have you any dynamite?" Captain Butt asked me during a fuel stop.

"Why?" I asked.

"To blow up the road, of course," he laughed as he walked away to buy some. Captain Monte Butt, the Hidden Peak liaison officer, was the antithesis of Captain Ayub. Monte, who spoke flawless English, became our source for advice on everything from handling the porters to fixing the road. As the five Jeeps rumbled along, Monte kicked back on the roof of one, grooving to London techno on his Walkman, while Ayub sat in the cab barking orders at the driver.

Caravanning worked well. The extra manpower allowed us to quickly fix bits of the road and keep moving. Our only significant delay was at the final police checkpoint at Dasso, a windblasted cluster of police barracks sitting next to the last road bridge over the Braldu River. "This is bogus!" the officer yelled as he thrust my peak permit for Chogolisa back at me. "You have made this up on your typewriter in America. You must go back to Islamabad and get another." I thought I was about to have a seizure and Andrew looked like he was ready to slit his wrists before following that order. It was, of course, a subtle way of requesting compensation for his plight, stuck guarding Dasso Bridge. Captain Ayub spotted this amateur quickly and stepped in to settle the matter. If any money was to be bled out of the Chogolisa expedition, it was going into his pocket, not some bridge guard's.

Shortly after Dasso we came to a landslide that no amount of effort was going to fix. Monte surveyed the scene and walked away in defeat, holding his dynamite like a child with a broken toy. We'd made excellent progress in the Jeeps, but it was still three-and-a-half extra porter stages to Askole, one-and-a-half more than we could afford. That was a problem. Fortunately, it was one we wouldn't have to deal with until later. We started walking the next day in steady rain and pounded our way to Askole. Along the way we crossed paths with a soaking wet Alan Hinkes, just returning from the summit of K2. "You should bloody well turn around now, lads," he said bitterly. "There's nothing up there worth this fucking walk." It was the best advice anyone could have given us. Of course, we ignored it.

The first few days of the approach proper turned out to be beautiful. We'd split off from the Hidden Peak expedition at Korophon, wishing them well and promising to visit them at their basecamp. The rain had finally abated and as we followed the Braldu River toward its source at the Baltoro Glacier, we actually began to feel as though our luck had changed. Of course, we were still in Pakistan, so when a porter carrying kerosene burned all the skin off his back, I was up all night cleaning what was left of his skin, dressing up his wounds and trying to explain to him that if he carried his load the next day he would die. Ultimately, only the threat of arrest from the irredoubtable Captain Ayub sent this man and his son packing toward the hospital, four days down valley. Still, this and other ongoing catastrophes—like the fixing rope some soldiers relieved us of at the Drumordu River crossing—failed to dampen our new enthusiasm.

"This is a disgrace to Pakistan army," Ayub announced when we reported the rope incident to him. "Why have they not come with rope of their own? And this bridge man; he has no right to charge a toll whatsoever. I will write each one of these men in my report and *Inshallah* they will be hanged for this." Capital punishment seemed a bit stern to me but who was I to question Pakistani justice. After all, Captain Ayub for once seemed to be on *our* side.

Two days later we reached the campsite of rDukus, where the view

across the Baltoro toward the Trango group is surely one of the most impressive in the mountain world. Unfortunately, we couldn't sit outside and enjoy it because of the flies attracted by the stinking heaps of excrement and garbage dumped there. As we camped in what amounted to an open-air toilet, the phrase "Throne Room of the Mountain Gods" took on new meaning.

rDukus is important for another reason. When you step off the grassy moraine onto the ice and rock of the Baltoro, it is likely the last step you'll take on solid ground until you return. This is especially significant to the porters, who usually insist on a cash payment in lieu of foam pads, shoes, or other equipment. They march onto the glacier unequipped to live on the ice, though large numbers suffer hypothermia or trench foot. It is not surprising then that the porters prefer to spend as few nights camped on the Baltoro as possible, which was fine with us. We decided to follow their pace to basecamp, having no idea when we left rDukus how much this choice would affect us.

On the six-hour walk from rDukus to Gore II, an army camp on the glacier and our destination for day eight of the approach, we were awestruck. Masherbrum, Gasherbrum IV, Broad Peak, and Mustagh Tower all came into view. The weather was brilliant and Andrew and I lagged behind the porters and Captain Ayub, absorbed in a photographic orgy. After about four hours of the walk we met one of our porters coming down the glacier from Gore II. He proudly announced that all the loads had reached Gore II and, as it was still early in the day and they were running low on food, the porters requested permission to continue on to Concordia. We sent him back to deliver our permission; this would mean reaching basecamp a day early and that would save the porters an extra night on the ice and, we hoped, prevent them from going hungry. It seemed like a great idea, so we were surprised to find all the porters sitting next to their loads when we reached Gore II.

The mystery cleared itself up when I saw Captain Ayub's feet sticking out of his tent, the only one set up. Gore II is at roughly 14,000 feet and he was totally spent from the walk. Whatever bullshit he was about to offer, this was the real reason for not moving on. Captain Ayub rose

from the tent and announced, "We will only be doing whatsoever-absolutely it states in Rule and Regulation. You have said we will be camping at this Gore II and this is where we will camp."

"Yes, but the porters have said they are running out of food and need to get back home quickly," I offered in response.

"This is not *my* fuck-up!" Ayub snarled. "This is *your* fuck-up." Of course the one English phrase we'd added to his lexicon was "fuck-up." How appropriate, I thought. "Who are you? I have told you, and told you that you are nothing." I felt my violent urges returning. "These Johnnies"—he waved toward the porters—"they do not know what is good for themselves." Beating his chest, he said, "I know what is good for them . . . and if I have to beat them to make them do what is best then I will beat each and every one of them."

After an hour-long harangue, I finally managed to slip my copy of the dreaded Rule and Regulation book in front of the captain, wherein he read that if I, as leader, put my reasons for disagreeing with him in writing, my decision was final. We were going to Concordia.

Or so I thought. I walked back to the porters and announced my victory. "Now it is too late John," Issaq told me. "It will be dark soon and there are crevasses. We will go tomorrow." I threw up my hands, and turned around to go tell the Captain. He was busy supervising the disassembly of his tent when I told him we'd be staying at Gore II.

For a moment, there was silence. He stood up, turned around, and stared hard at me. In that instant my whole world collapsed to the small place between us. Then he started to shake; they were small tremors at first, but soon his whole body vibrated. His eyes bulged, his teeth started to gnash, and he seemed to transform into pure hate. I was scared.

"You-are-joking-with-me!" he screamed. He was beating his chest. "I am captain in Pakistan Army. Government of Pakistan has given me three stars. You do not treat me like slave!"

Spit and foam flew from his mouth as he continued screaming and beating his chest. Captain Ayub had gone insane. I tried to explain that I was only doing what the porters wanted. "It does not matter

what they want. Why have you not asked me?" he spat his response. "Always asking this cook or Butt, never *me*. I am Liaison Officer. I am in command."

His screaming was so loud that our audience of porters was soon joined by a group of soldiers, from the nearby army camp. They hadn't left their guns behind. Ayub saw them before I did and after a quick order they surrounded us and those guns were leveled in my direction.

Suddenly I had no desire to argue. I felt sick. My mind was filled with images of a taxi driver with half his head blown off. Was Ayub angry enough to kill us? There was no one for a hundred miles in any direction to stop him. I apologized but it was too late. The soldiers stood by as he continued his tirade. "You will not be allowed to leave Pakistan until the ISI has interrogated you about your crimes."

"Crimes?" I asked.

"You have called Pakistan Army a disgrace at the Drumordu River. You have photographed army camps and this is a treason, a violation of Official Secrets Act. This-is-punishable-by-death."

It was Ayub who'd called the rope-theft incident at the Drumordu River disgraceful, and the photos I'd taken were of mountains near various army camps. That was the truth, but we stood in a world where truth didn't matter. "I will now write your confession and you will surrender all of your film to Pakistan Army," Ayub said.

While I waited for my "confession" to be drafted, I returned to my tent and spooled up some unexposed film. I might have been terrified but I wasn't stupid: Somewhere in the 50 rolls I'd exposed there was sure to be something objectionable, and I couldn't take any chances. When I returned, the captain was still quivering with anger and he handed me the most bizarre document I had ever seen. Written in the first person in my name was a confession of several crimes against Pakistan. I was supposedly admitting to photographing military installations, bridges, and aircraft. I had repeatedly insulted the Pakistani Army, the Government of Pakistan, and Islam. I had disobeyed direct orders from a Pakistani Army officer. At the bottom was a space for my signature. It was tantamount to a death certificate.

"I can't sign this," I said shakily. "It's not true."

"It is true," Ayub replied. "I have said it is true, so it is true. You will sign!"

"No, I will not!"

During the tense hour that followed we went back and forth repeatedly. Finally, when the soldier's guns began to droop and Captain Ayub felt he was losing face, he snatched the paper and announced he would sign it for me. I watched in stunned silence as he put my name to the paper, folded it up and walked away toward the army camp to have tea.

I sat down and tried to clear my spinning head. What had just happened? How had a simple misunderstanding spiraled into a confession of *treason*? What was going to happen next? It wasn't long before Suneeb sat down to answer my last question. *Murder* was what was going to happen next, because the expedition was completely out of control.

I'd been thinking it might come to this from the moment the guns came out. Ayub was serious, and seriously deranged. If he chose to, he could kill Andrew and me and the only thing our families would ever know was that we disappeared while attempting Chogolisa. It wasn't so far-fetched. People disappear every season in the Himalayas. It would have been easy for him to kill us.

Or, I began to think, for us to kill him. The thought scared me. I was seriously considering killing Captain Ayub. It was insane: the whole place, the whole situation, and I had absorbed some of it. Ayub must have sensed this. He came back over and tried to make me sign a contract taking full responsibility for anything that might happen to him, including accident or poisoning. He knew we couldn't stay camped next to his soldiers forever. I thought I recognized some of my fear in his eyes. Again I refused to sign.

The expedition, as far as I was concerned, was over. The only way to solve our problems was to return to Islamabad and get inside the U.S. Embassy as soon as possible. Andrew was disappointed but he understood: It wasn't his name on the confession.

"We're going back to Islamabad tomorrow," I announced.

Ayub looked surprised. "No, we must continue. Fuck-up is finished. ISI will deal with you when you return."

Why was he arguing to continue the same expedition he'd done so much to destroy? Andrew figured it out: Ayub was being paid by the day. Inadvertently, I'd called his bluff and now had a bargaining chip.

"Tear up the confession," I said, "and we continue."

"Not today," Ayub answered, "but if you behave on the climb I will return your film and rip up your confession." It was a bizarre blackmail deal, but it defused a situation where violence still hung in the air. It is disturbing to admit now, but I wasn't thinking of killing Ayub as right or wrong. It was a purely practical decision. There was a chance that we could get out of our mess peacefully, and a dead liaison officer would mean a lot of questions. I decided, at least for the time being it wouldn't help. "Please don't kill him tonight," I told Suneeb later. "Wait."

The next day we reached Concordia, where we ran into some trekkers on their way out of the mountains. I decided to dispatch a letter with them. I didn't want to alarm my family but at the same time I wanted them to take some precautions for me. If I was tossed in jail when we returned from the mountains, I didn't want to spend one extra minute there. Captain Ayub was suspicious of everything, so I waited until dark before quietly slipping the letter to a beautiful Swiss woman named Maria, and told her to mail it from Geneva. It was ridiculous; I felt like a B-movie James Bond.

The following morning the laziest of the porters started suggesting locations for basecamp only 30 minutes out of Concordia. Andrew and I used every bit of charm we had to coax six hours of walking out of them. When they finally refused to go any further without pay for a full extra stage, we established basecamp. Of course, this meant it was time to face up to an old problem: money, or more specifically, the lack thereof. At Concordia we confirmed our earlier suspicions that after paying these porters we wouldn't have enough cash left to pay for the return trip to Skardu. The concept of credit does not exist on the Baltoro, and if even one of our porters found out how broke we were, no one from Baltistan would come and retrieve us and our gear.

The payoff went smoothly except for the moment when I saw Ayub stuff a wad of our rupees into his pocket. He just didn't quit. When

questioned he insisted it was his money, but offered no explanation of how it came to be in *our* pile of porter wages. As soon as the porters were paid, they took off down the glacier, apparently unsuspecting that they had our last rupees.

I woke up early the next morning to have a look at the spot that would be home for the next month. Though I couldn't see the northeast face—our proposed route—Chogolisa's summit was clearly visible 9,000 feet above. I started daydreaming about walking across that perfect flat summit ridge at 25,000 feet.

Issaq was soon standing next to me and brought me back to reality by handing in his resignation. I had never heard of a cook *quitting* an expedition, throwing away what might be his only opportunity all year to earn hard currency. Issaq claimed he was ill but it was clear that he just couldn't take another minute of Captain Ayub. When Ayub heard of the resignation he realized he would soon be in a camp alone with Andrew and me, and immediately announced that it was his duty to leave and find another cook. An hour later, Andrew and I were alone.

That afternoon Andrew also decided to leave, but only to visit the Hidden Peak team for a couple of days. I stayed behind to start a recon, while carrying gear up to the base. When I reached the bottom of the face the next morning it looked huge, and totally different from the ten-year-old photos we had. It looked suicidal. Andrew came to the same conclusion at Hidden Peak basecamp, and both of us started looking at the Northeast Ridge, an elegant line that had only seen one ascent, a huge siege that used 10,000 feet of fixed rope. An alpine-style ascent would be incredible.

Andrew returned two days later, as did Captain Ayub with our new cook, Gulham. I was a bit suspicious of Gulham, whom Ayub had found just hanging around Concordia. When I went to shake Gulham's hand, he thrust out a page from Jim Curran's book *K2: Triumph and Tragedy* that had his picture on it. The caption read, "Gulham: film porter impossible, opportunist." I'd had Curran to my house for dinner years before and remembered a story of a porter in 1986 who'd tried to slip out of K2 basecamp with Kurt Diemberger's tent and per-

sonal belongings after it was assumed, wrongly of course, that Kurt was dead. *It can't be the same guy*, I thought.

A week later, when Gulham's kitchen contained, among other things, one of my sleeping bags, a pack, my spare boots, Andrew's ski poles, spare hat, socks, gloves, and down jacket, I revised my thinking. Of all the men in Baltistan Captain Ayub could have possibly found to replace Issaq, he picked the only one documented in mountaineering literature as a kleptomaniac.

Despite Gulham's best efforts, Andrew and I were able to scrape together enough of our equipment for our first attempt on August 13. The unlucky date lived up to its reputation. At our bivy at the bottom of the route the stove refused to light. After four hours of effort Andrew booted it across the ice and we returned to fetch the spare. We spent the 14th in basecamp under crystal-blue skies. It was the best weather of the trip and, looking at the summit of K2, we were sure that people were going for it. What we didn't know was that seven people would die for it that day, among them one of Andrew's good friends, Jeff Lakes.

The spare stove also refused to work and so on the 16th we were back at the bottom of the route with a fire-spitting conglomeration of every working stove part we had. It was dangerous as hell but at least it burned. We'd planned to climb at night, so just as the sun set we started through the icefall. It was such a chaotic mess that there was no way we could reach the clean northern branch of the ridge taken by the Spanish in '86. We opted instead for the southern branch and its 6,000 feet of virgin terrain.

The initial climbing was easy and straightforward. We found a great bivy on the ridge proper and spent the day looking up at what we figured would be the crux of the route. Three thousand feet above, at about 20,000 feet, the ridge rose dramatically into a vertical ice cliff. There seemed to be a way around it, by threading through a narrow slot between an ice cliff and a huge serac hanging off the ridge. Barring that, it would be a direct attack.

The next night, as we set out, the moon was a little smaller, the air a

little colder, and we found some of the scariest terrain either of us had ever encountered. Somehow the ridge itself was split by crevasses every hundred meters. We'd never seen anything like it. Climbing along a 60-degree arête of rotten snow we'd suddenly find our tools and feet popping through into space. The view through the holes to the glacier below was sickening. At one point I had to tunnel more than a body length into the slope to find ice for a screw. All Andrew could see from 50 meters below was the weak glow of my headlamp coming out of my little mineshaft. The pitch after that, he tried a similar belay excavation, and tunneled right through the ridge into thin air.

It was 2 am before we reached the bottom of the ice cliff. We reckoned it was near vertical for close to 400 feet without any appreciable breaks. Andrew leads Grade 6 water ice, so when he said forget it, I forgot it. The alternative didn't look much better. We headed for a slot we'd seen from below, a huge partly-filled crevasse formed by a serac that had calved from the ice cliff. Andrew led a brilliant pitch across a gaping crevasse which split the ridge with a hundred-foot deep gash. He swung his way over stacked blocks and an overhanging snow mushroom to gain the slot. I led across the floor of the slot next, expecting every step in the deep snow to collapse. At the end of the rope I saw a small gap in the ice cliff and began to head toward it. The snow was terrible and we were moving at a crawl. Soon it became apparent that in order to reach the gap we would have to spend an hour or more wallowing away under some enormous overhanging seracs perched above the ice cliff. It was too dangerous, but it was also too late. It was 3:45 am, we'd been climbing for 11 hours, and we had to find a bivy. As we couldn't get out of the slot and onto the ridge above, the only option was to bivy *on* the serac. We climbed up, chopped out a platform, and crashed until 10 am. When we awoke we had a whole day ahead to sit on our little perch. Looking around, we realized we occupied the only island of safety on the entire slope below the ridge.

After a nerve-wrecking day waiting for *something* bad to happen, we finally started climbing at about 6 pm. The plan was to regain the ridge via a diagonal end-run around the ice cliff and the seracs. After eight

steep pitches, we regained the ridge—and the crevasses. Andrew stepped through the ridge crest into a gaping hole. The hard work of slithering across the slot was followed by the even more tiring climb up the steep, sugar-snow arête on the opposite side. We continued upward on the ridge for another three or four pitches of terrible snow to a small, filled-in crevasse, where we prepared a bivouac without discussion.

When we woke later in the morning it was snowing, and clearly had been since we'd gone to bed. If there was one thing the Northeast Ridge of Chogolisa didn't need, it was more snow. The following morning, August 18th, it was still snowing and a thick fog had rolled in from Kondus Saddle. Was this the same fog that engulfed the Duke of Abruzzi in 1909, the same fog in which Herman Buhl disappeared in 1957? It sure was the same mountain in damn near the same spot. We were getting scared.

At 2 pm, we tuned in our radio and caught Phil Powers' end of a call to Broad Peak. I heard Phil's voice crackling, "can you tell us about the accident." We jumped into the conversation. Seven people were dead. Jeff Lakes was dead. It was the final blow.

Jeff had really wanted to go to the Karakoram that year and asked Andrew if he could join us. We'd politely turned him down: we wanted to try as a team of two. So Jeff found his way onto a K2 expedition.

It didn't take a lot of talking to decide our climb was over. Descending what we'd climbed was impossible with our three screws and three pickets, forcing us onto the concave face between our line and the Spanish route. It took two days to get down, and the day after we reached basecamp the entire face slid, scouring clean all of our tracks.

During the six days we were gone, Ayub and Ghulam had been falling over each other to see who could steal the most. The shortwave radio, a camera, medicines, boots—they'd grabbed it all. We had to politely ask for individual items back as we discovered them missing. The only thing we really wanted now was to get the hell out of the mountains, and we sent Ghulam to find some porters. Not wanting to be alone with us, Ayub also took off for Concordia, promising to return with porters.

Ten days later the porters arrived, and two days after that I was again walking past Gore II, revisiting all the bad memories of that place. I couldn't wait to reach a shower and a bed, but I wondered if I'd be enjoying those amenities in a jail cell. As I passed by the last of the rag-tag army tents, a lone porter, coming up the valley, stopped me.

"Mr. John, from Chogolisa expedition?"

"Yes?"

"I have Federal Express for you." He pulled a large red, white, and blue box from his pack. It was probably the highest and most remote delivery in the company's history, and certainly the most important package I'd ever received. Beside *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines was a letter from my father. My letter had reached him from Geneva just the week before, and per my instructions he'd contacted my friend Eshun Khan, son of retired Admiral Sahid Khan, former Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Navy and currently Pakistan's Ambassador to the Hague.

According to the letter, Admiral Khan was mad as hell that we'd been treated so disrespectfully. He expected a phone call as soon as possible. I was laughing like a lunatic before I'd finished reading.

We broke the news to Captain Ayub that evening by asking him if he could help us arrange a trip to Karachi, where the Admiral lived. "It is much too dangerous there," he told us. "You cannot go."

"I think my friend can ensure our safety," I responded, handing him the letter. I watched the color drain from Ayub's face as he scanned the page.

"Admiral . . . Sahid Khan?" His voice quivered.

"Yes," I explained, "his son and I were great friends at university."

Ayub looked ill. He retired to his tent and we didn't hear from him until the next morning when he woke us with breakfast in bed. It was pathetic. The entire journey back to Skardu became one attempt after another by Ayub to make up to us.

When we reached the road, we told the porters we were broke. They took it surprisingly well; Ayub appointed one porter as representative to go with us to the bank in Skardu for the porters' money. The day after we arrived in Skardu, one seat opened on a flight out. Andrew

and I agreed that I should take it and call the ambassador. I walked out onto the tarmac, leaving Ayub screaming at airport security to stop the plane.

"What would you like me to do to this man?" These were the first words I heard through the phone receiver after I finished my story. The casual power in Ambassador Sahid's voice stopped me cold. As soon as he'd answered my phone call, I had felt safe. The passion and urgency of the days on the Baltoro evaporated. On the verge of winning the game of Pakistani justice that I'd been preparing for two months to lose, I hesitated. Captain Ayub had stolen from me, threatened me, and in many ways he'd ruined our expedition. But was that reason enough to do to him what I suspected the ambassador could do? The silence on the line began to be uncomfortable.

"I just don't think that he should be allowed to do this again." That was all I could say, and as the words came out of my mouth I felt sorry for Captain Ayub.

Seven months to the day after leaving Pakistan, I was tromping down from Point Five Gully on Ben Nevis, Scotland, and ran into an English climber I'd met at Concordia at the end of our expedition. He filled me in on what happened to Captain Ayub.

"It was in all the papers after you left. Dishonorable discharge, lost his pension, court martial. Probably in jail by now."

I shook my head and kept walking. So that was it, the end of the story. It wasn't the way I'd have chosen to win.