



The Line of Control

Bouldering, big-walling,
and international conflict
in Indian Kashmir

By Micah Dash
Photos by Jonny Copp

Micah Dash climbs a 5.11 finger crack into the lower buttress of Shafat Fortress on day one, with remnants of the shrinking glacier's old bergschrund visible above.



Jonny Copp (left) and Dash scope lines on the Shafat Fortress during a recon and acclimatizing mission.

“Hey, Jonny, look over yonder,” I said, pointing at distant figures across the Lang Lang Meadow, our little slice of heaven in Indian Kashmir. We — Jonny Copp and I — came here in July 2007 to try a 3,500-foot unclimbed granite wall on an unclimbed peak. Our basecamp, nestled in this grassy meadow, had freshwater springs on two sides and amazing granite bouldering. For a week, we’d lounged in the sun like fat marmots, eating well, “acclimatizing” (camp lay at 13,000 feet), and reading Cormac McCarthy westerns... which left us talking like cowboys.

“No way—you reckon that’s another climber?” he asked. “It can’t be,” I responded, opting to take the optimistic approach for once. “Probably just trekkers. Looks like they got a few ponies with ‘em.”

Jonny, my friend and climbing partner from Boulder, Colorado, who has adventure coursing through his veins, had launched us on this trip. We’d begun planning in January 2007, after he’d noticed a photo of a giant, smooth wall—what we would later name Shafat Fortress—in an advertisement for the American Alpine Club’s grant programs. The title of the ad was “Unnamed and Unclimbed”.

I was psyched to be Jonny’s partner and had always considered his and Mike Pennings’ 2000 sendfest of the Trango Valley to be one of the most amazing alpine-rock-climbing accomplishments of all time. In three weeks and climbing alpine style, they made the first ascent of East Cat’s Ears Spire, via the most proud and

direct line on the wall (*Freebird*; VI 5.11d A1). They also made the second ascent of Hainabrakk East, with *Tague It to the Top* (VI 5.11 A1), as well as the first alpine-style ascent of Shipton Spire, via the second ascent of *Inshallah* (VII 5.12 A1), up one of the biggest rock faces in the world. When we arrived at Lang Lang Meadow, we were relieved to have escaped the chaos of the Indian cities of Kargil and Srinagar, both only a few miles from the “Line of Control” with Pakistan. Kashmir, a mythical region, has been at the heart of the Indo-Pakistan conflict for six decades, a fact of life that has kept visitors away... though it had done little to deter our new arrivals at basecamp (or, as we’d learn, some friends of theirs who’d attempted the wall the year before).

We walked over to the large pack team, which must have crossed the river a few miles south. The ever-friendly Jonny approached a man who seemed to be the group leader, a George Clooney look-

alike standing in a bright-yellow jacket. Jonny extended his hand, but the man didn’t respond; he just turned his back and started brusquely away.

Then I noticed the bold embroidery on his shell: **Kashmir Expedition 2007. We’re screwed**, I thought. Trying to be as friendly as possible, I asked, “Where are you from?”

“*Italia*,” he responded coldly. “We have permit for this peak, not you.”

“Permit? I reckon we don’t need a permit for this peak—it’s under 6,000 meters,” Jonny said evenly.

“We have permit,” he said once again, and then walked off for good. I reminded Jonny that he’d told me we wouldn’t need a permit; my worst fear was that Clooney would try to shut us down. We’d been dreaming about this expedition for months and traveled thousands of miles over seven days to get here, so damn if we weren’t going to climb something.

“We don’t—not for anything under 6,000 meters,” Jonny

the sole patent for using and installing bolts.

“No, actually, those are ours,” I said, pointing to a half-drilled quarter-incher. Jonny again tried to make small talk, but to no avail. The Italians pretended we weren’t even there. I went over and introduced myself to Raju, a Hindi man from central India with bright eyes, a big smile, and a missing front tooth. He quickly reassured me that he didn’t care what we climbed so long as we asked the Italians first... thus sidestepping the conflict altogether.

Classic, I thought later, as I looked up from the door of our two-pole, Boy Scout-style tent, which also doubled as a sleeping tent for Purtemba and our assistant cook, Depess. With square mile after square mile of good camping in the area, the Italians decided to set up their two massive cook tents and nine sleeping tents fewer than 50 feet from us. I asked Jonny what he thought.

“We should head up and avoid any other conflicts,” he said soberly. “Let’s climb now, and deal with the consequences later.” I agreed, so we collapsed the tent, packed our bags, and

Since 1989, there has been a growing and often violent separatist movement fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir. In the early 1990s, the Al-Farhan, a militant organization, kidnapped a group of Westerners trekking in Pahalgam. They were never seen again.

reiterated. “If you needed a permit to climb under 6,000 meters in these parts, then every goat herder in the Himalaya would need one.” Somehow, these guys didn’t look like goat herders.

“SIR, MANY PEOPLE COMING OVER THE RIVER,” our cook, Purtemba Sherpa, said, as, on edge, we arrived back at the tent. Meanwhile, the new arrivals had split into two teams, sending one member, with a team of Kashmiri horsemen, to cross farther downstream while the rest of the team looked for a spot closer to us.

“How many?” I asked.

“Many sir, very many. They have LO from IMF with them... his name is Raju.” I could hear the stress in his voice. Raju, from the Indian Mountaineering Federation, was the group’s liaison officer.

Jonny and I headed over to the long Tyrolean traverse we’d established over the rapidly moving, glacier-fed Suru River a week earlier. Setting it up had been no easy feat: Jonny had to swim across a 150-foot section of unbelievably cold water with a rope tied loosely around his waist. When the shore cut out from under his feet, all I could see was his head and arms moving with wild abandon. To set the traverse, we’d drilled a few bolts, and then using some old ropes we’d scored on the way, pulled them tight. Now the massive Italian onslaught—11 people total—crossed with ease... on our cords.

“You use our spits,” one of the Italians said—as if Italy had



Dash traverses toward the bivvy ledge on day two.

started up the 3,000-foot talus cone to the glacier and base of the wall. If we went for it and missed, we knew that the Italians, with seven climbers and untold spools of fixing rope, might summit before we did.

“I love Italians,” I said cynically, huffing with exertion while I schlepped my 35-pound pack up the talus. “I love Italian food, Italian cars, Italian shoes, and Italian women.”

“Me, too, and I’m glad they’re here,” said Jonny, sincerely enough. “It just spotlights the ol’ style debate. Anyway, I think we’ll all be friends soon, and I’m sure they’ve got some good Italian meat and cheese down there. We can share our rum.”

Then it hit me: our new goal was not only to make the first ascent of this walled mountain but to share food and drink with the Italians and resolve our issues. “Now that would be proud,” I told Jonny. We laughed at this. The Italians wanted us arrested and taken to some godforsaken Kashmiri jail, to be banished from climbing forever. But Jonny and I kept pouring on the love for all things Italian—in order to face the mountain safely, we needed to rid ourselves of the bad energy that had driven us up the hill. For the rest of the evening, “I love the Italians” became our mantra.

“TENT OR SLEEPING BAG?” asked Jonny, as we dangled 1,500 feet above the Lang Lang Glacier.

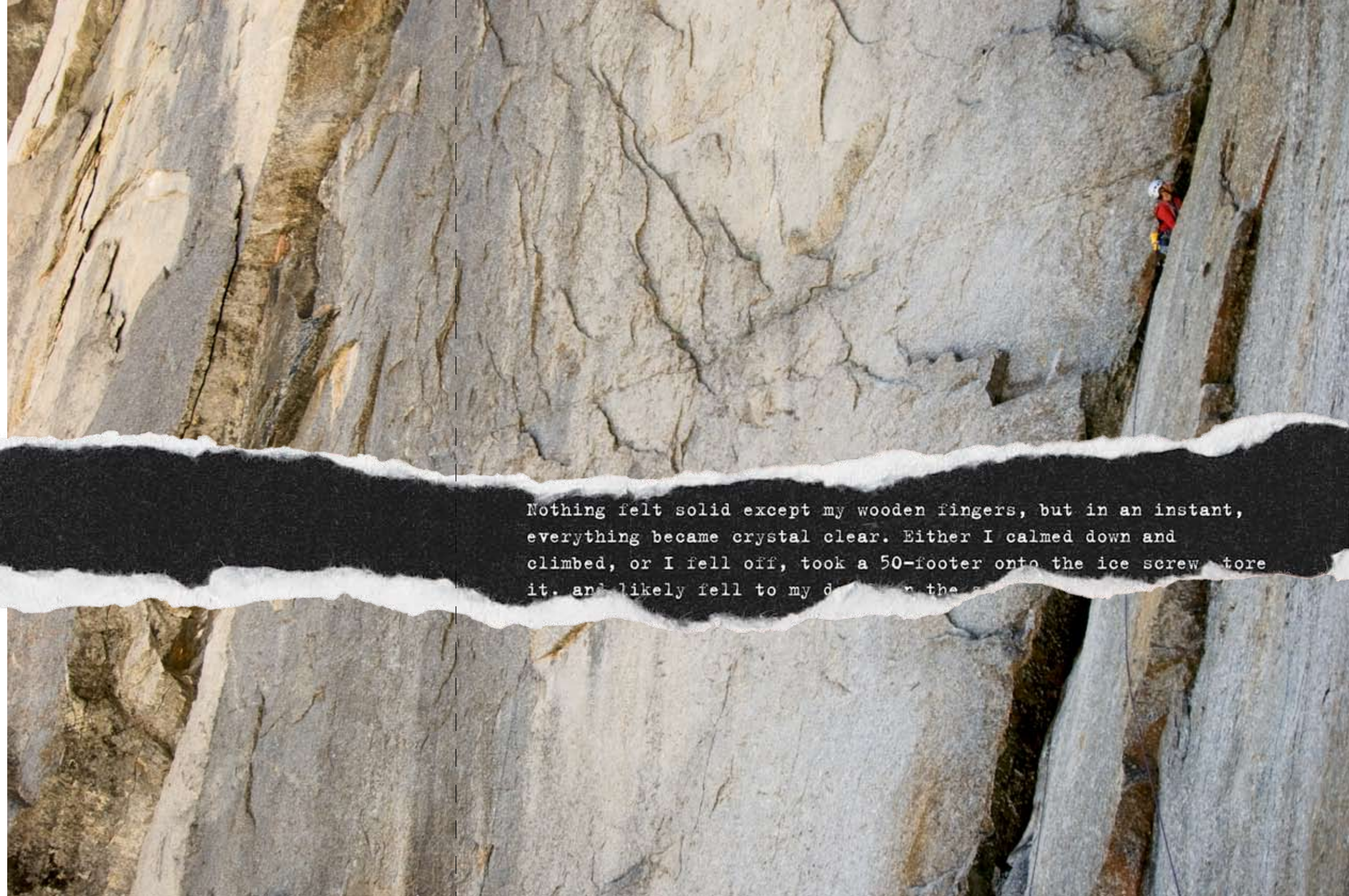
“Tent’s fine,” I replied. Careful not to crush the one-by-two-foot, chiseled ledge of ice that would be his bivy for the night, Jonny reached gingerly into our single 40-liter pack, to hand me the tent shell. I pulled it down to my equally meager stance and wrapped

it around me. We were 12 pitches up the Shafat Fortress, our first night on the wall and only 20 hours after leaving the Italian-occupied basecamp. Our route followed a continuous and obvious dihedral system—a line that shot out of the glacier like an arrow. For the most part, it seemed to be the only obvious crack system, though one section—a gaping offwidth three-quarters of the way up—concerned us.

Despite our precarious position, we laughed and sipped hot pea soup. An hour before, Jonny had led an impressive pitch of mixed ice on poorly protected ground to reach our tiny camel’s back of an ice perch. But, unable to see around the corners and buttresses in the dark, we stopped around 17,700 feet and prepared to shiver until morning. Sitting there, I wondered how we were lucky enough to have ended up on an unclimbed big wall in the Kashmir. I realized, however, that it wasn’t by chance.

Kashmir was disputed even before Pakistan won its independence from India, in 1947. Since then, the territory has been the flashpoint for two of three Indo-Pakistani wars. (The third came in 1999, when India fought a brief but bitter conflict with Pakistani-backed forces that had infiltrated Indian-controlled territory in the Kargil area, only a few hours west of our first basecamp.) The area was virtually cut off to Westerners until 1980, and since 1989, there has been a growing and often violent separatist movement against Indian rule in Kashmir.

En route to the Lang Lang Glacier, we’d passed through the city of Srinagar, a recent hotbed of violence in which tourists have



Nothing felt solid except my wooden fingers, but in an instant, everything became crystal clear. Either I calmed down and climbed, or I fell off, took a 50-footer onto the ice screw, tore it, and likely fell to my death on the

been prime targets. In the early 1990s, the Al-Farhan, a militant organization, kidnapped a group of Westerners trekking in Pahalgam. They were never seen again. In 2000, only seven miles east of us, rebels killed three monks. Until as recently as 2003, the valley itself was closed numerous times due to rebel activity. Despite the tumultuous history, the people of Kashmir always greeted us with smiles, kind eyes, and warm tea.

Day three:
Dash begins
his life-or-
death offwidth
struggle on
the first of the
“Shaft” pitches.

LONG BEFORE WE LEFT BOULDER, we knew that to climb the wall in alpine style, suffering would be mandatory. Our first night proved the point, and the next morning’s skies revealed bad weather coming in fast. Fortunately, we spotted a small ledge 100-odd yards to our right. After some wild pendulums, we were there, on a small stance big enough for our tent and protected somewhat from the now-constant rock and icefall. Between snow squalls, we stared up at the corners and cracks that seemed to lead to the summit, many pitches away.

On morning of our third day on the wall, under a cloudless

sky, the sun beamed across the valley, triggering a series of rock avalanches that came within inches of our bivy. We waited out the storm, slurping warm water because we were already running low on food. By 9:00 a.m., the rock had dried and we were on the move again, leading in blocks for efficiency.

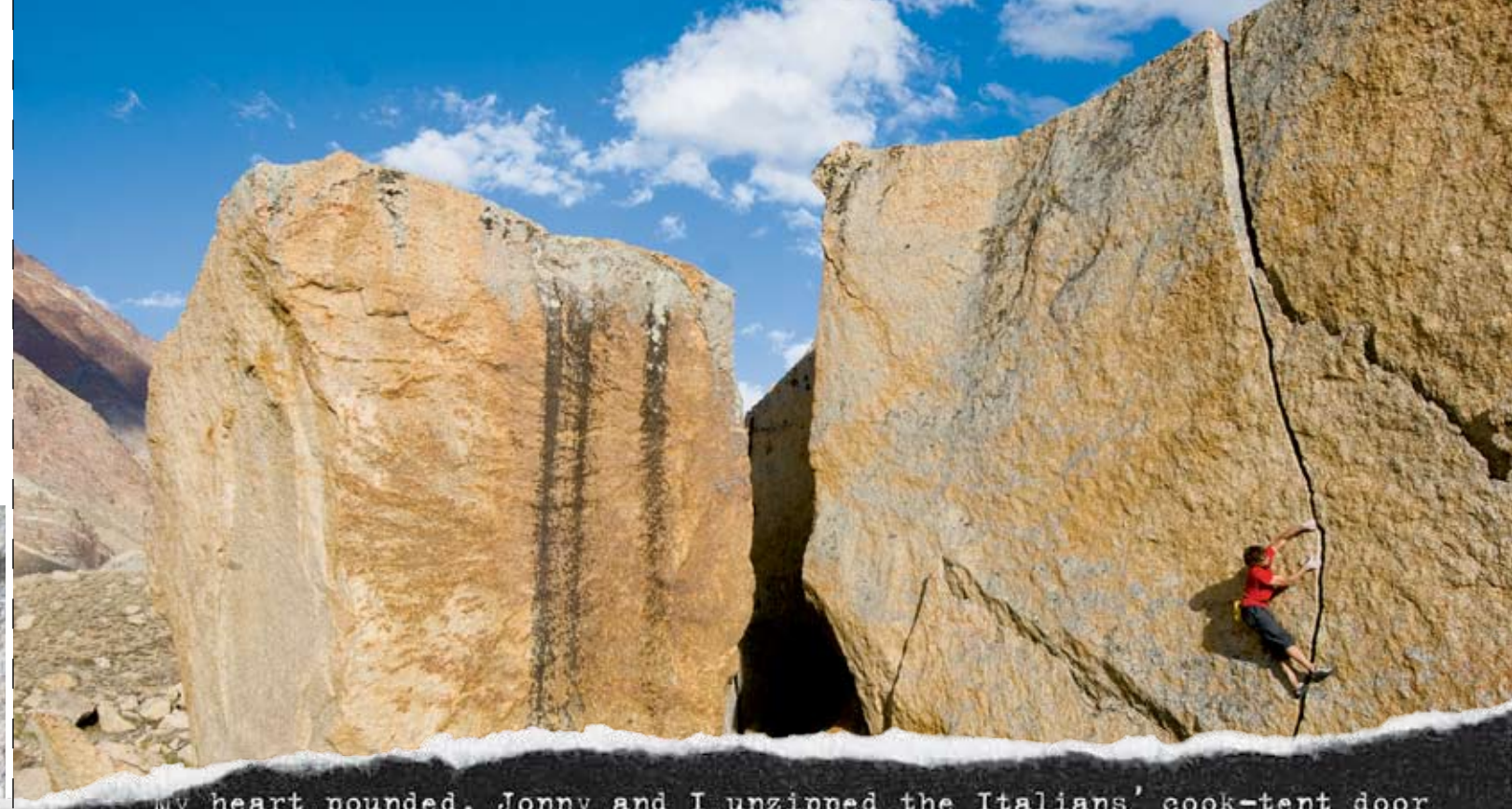
One of the most important aspects of a partnership, especially in alpine climbing, is doing your part. Sometimes that means melting ice for drinking water, sometimes that means cooking dinner, and sometimes that means leading your pitches. Jonny had done an outstanding job on his block, leading both ice and

FACING PAGE: Copp enjoys some high-altitude bouldering in Lang Lang Meadow.
AT RIGHT, BELOW: A frozen Dash atop the Shaft.

rock, at one point even running it out 15 feet over an equalized beak and micronut on a 5.11 thin-face section. In fact, after a few straightforward pitches off the ground, the climbing had become increasingly complicated and delicate—the rock was chunky, and we had to take great care not to knock down any of the massive blocks. It was, as Jonny would say, “blue-collar climbing.” About halfway up the wall (1,700 feet off the deck), we hit the offwidth feature —what we’d later call the Shaft—an ominous, wide, and

climbed, or I fell off, took a 50-footer onto the ice screw, tore it, and likely fell to my death on the ledge below.

After a few more feet and at the end of the rope, I found a small stance and concocted an intricate nest of RPs and small TCUs. My hands and feet were completely numb, and my clothes were soaked, but I wanted to go up. I fixed the rope, and within minutes, Jonny was there. He handed me the rack; it was still my block. The next pitch was wetter than the first... but easier. A good 130 feet higher,



My heart pounded. Jonny and I unzipped the Italians’ cook-tent door and stepped inside. We all stood face to face. Jonny and I, elated by our first ascent, had yet to wipe the grins off our mugs. The Italians instantly picked up on this.

wet crack. It was my block. I looked up from the belay, hoping to find a way around. There wasn’t one.

For me, alpine climbing is a vision quest. It’s an artificial war of sorts. It requires my total attention and dedication, and provides opportunities to see who I really am. The offwidth that loomed above was one of those opportunities. The first few pieces were solid, but soon the crack widened. Instinctually, I pressed myself into it, my right foot heel-toeing on the outside while my left side pressed against the icy, crumbly inside wall, which grew wetter by the minute. Soon I was soaked from head to toe. My hands and feet were frozen, and hypothermia slowed my progress. After a miserable hour and a half, I’d probably only gained 100 feet, and except for the first few nut placements, the gear lay slotted between loose blocks in the back of the crack. My brain would tell me to go, but 30 seconds would pass until I moved. I tried to weasel in a few pieces, but they were no good and merely slowed progress. Eventually, I settled for a screw in an aerated ice amoeba.

Not far above, the rock seemed to kick back, so I punched it 25 feet above the screw to a point where the fissure pinched down. On the wall behind me, I spotted solid, though very wet, handholds... and maybe even some decent gear. “I need to switch sides!” I yelled to Jonny. But, 150 feet below and under a roof, he couldn’t hear. Twenty minutes later, after tinkering in a small wire, I took a deep breath and switched sides, only to watch the piece pop. I screamed — “a scream of true animal terror,” as Jonny later recalled. Nothing felt solid except my wooden fingers, but in an instant, everything became crystal clear. Either I calmed down and

after a few desperate moves, I stopped at a dry stance.

Again, Jonny reached the belay in a flash. It was nearly 2:00 p.m., I had spent three-plus hours on two pitches, and the summit lay at least 1,600 feet above. Jonny rummaged through the pack, trying to find some dry clothes for me. Our fate quickly became clear, as my shivering grew uncontrollable. We were not going to summit that day—an open bivy in my condition was out of the question. Like a robot, Jonny fixed our rope, and moments later we’d rapped 400 feet to our bivy ledge. There was no mention of our decision, no second-guessing—the judgment was clear. Going up would have been dangerous—lethal, even.

“Boy, I reckon you got a bit cold up there,” Jonny told me in his best cowboy impersonation, pulling out the stove.

“Yeah, I feel like I been rode hard and put up wet,” I said. “You got a smoke?”

“Roll it yourself, pardner,” Jonny replied, handing me the tobacco. “I’m gonna make us a hot brew.”

I rolled a smoke and, with it hanging from my lips, set up the tent and got inside. Jonny passed me the single sleeping bag, and then some hot water. After a few hours in the bag, I began to warm.

The next morning, we woke at 1:00 a.m. and drank some soup, leaving us with two Clif bars each. We jugged the thin ropes back to our high point. Jonny took the lead, efficiently climbing around ice and loose blocks under clear-blue skies, the Karakoram Range spread out before us.

“I need my boots and crampons,” Jonny yelled, halfway through

a rock pitch. He pulled them up, and the rope began to move again, but this time more slowly. I knew it had to be hard and held the rope saying nothing, just as Jonny had done for me the day before. The pitch looked intricate and loose, forcing him to climb difficult stretches of rock between large ice smears in the steep corner.

We had spent nearly four days on the wall. As I started up from the belay on the 21st pitch, a microwave-sized block of ice and snow plummeted from the summit, hitting Jonny on the head. “Are you OK?!” I screamed. There was no reply. I yelled again.

“Yeah, I think I’m OK,” Jonny at long last replied.

The massive chunk had brought the indestructible Jonny to his knees, knocking him out for a second, but he shook it off. I continued leading, reaching the summit ridge moments later.

Jonny jugged up. His face was pale and sweaty as he pointed to his cracked helmet. We said little else about it. I re-racked and led the final chimney pitch, to the summit. It was the first time I’d summited an unclimbed peak. I stood atop Shafat Fortress with my hands stretched out in front of me, taking in the landscape as the thin air and cold wind surrounded me. Jonny joined me moments later, hollering like a cowboy. He took a few pictures, and we began the descent.

We didn’t want to rap directly down the corner system, to avoid rock and ice fall, opting instead to gun 15 feet to its side... which required us to be crafty. At one point, Jonny equalized a RURP and a half-beaten-in, 3/4-inch angle backed up loosely to a blue TCU. When it was my turn to rap, I pulled the TCU and descended—damn if we were leaving any booty.

A DAY AND A HALF LATER, we were back on the glacier, tired to our cores. In an almost hypnotic fog, we staggered back to our initial basecamp, Campo Italiano. There were no congratulations or traditional celebration. Rather, Purtemba told us that the police had come and that we needed to visit the local station, seven miles away. The Italians, it seemed, still wanted us arrested. After a few days rest in camp and some more bouldering (and no trip to the police), we decided to confront them.

“I love the Italians,” Jonny said, as we headed toward their cook tent. “All we can do is be friendly.”

My heart pounded. We unzipped the tent door and stepped inside. We all stood face to face, and Jonny and I, elated by our first ascent, had yet to wipe the grins off our mugs. The Italians picked up on this and instantly changed their tune—one minute cold and unfriendly, the next slapping us high fives and sharing their food. *Did I just miss something?* I wondered. We sat, our hands still cracked and bleeding, as they cut a slice of ham for each of us. I glanced across the small camp table at Jonny and smiled bigger. We had fulfilled our first goal. A few nights later, like old friends, our egos drowned by rum, we all drank and danced under the Himalayan sky. ☞

Micah Dash and Jonny Copp, recipients of the 2007 American Alpine Club Lyman Spitzer Cutting-Edge Award and WL Gore’s Shipton/Tilman Grant for the trip, spent the following three weeks in basecamp bouldering. The Italian team, meanwhile, reached a high point 650 feet up the wall.