

# **Ascent**

By Matthew Willis

## Stefan

The mountain took its revenge on Stefan that day. He stared into its icicle-spiked eyes, heard the howl of its hurricane-force laughter. It showed him the corpse of his hero. Then it destroyed his marriage and took his son from him.

But he didn't know that then. In the first days of his family's holiday in the summer of 1935 he was just a ten year old boy who dreamt of climbing Alpine peaks. He closed his eyes and saw himself standing in the blue sky surrounded by mountaintops poking through the clouds, holding his ice axe aloft in triumph as eagles wheeled far below.

The week that changed everything for him had been a turning point in so many ways. But Stefan's little life barely registered next to the great events moving so irresistibly.

As it began Stefan could hardly believe his luck. On the very week his family had come to Grindelwald for their annual holiday, news had began to drift around the hotel that an attempt was to be made on the Nordwand. The North Face of the Eiger. The single Alpine face that had not yet been conquered, or even attempted. And he had a front row seat. He felt his blood thumping in his veins just thinking about it.

Stefan had been to the Grindelwald before, and other Alpine resorts too. From the first moment he had seen those peaks he had been amazed that anyone could possibly climb them.

Look at them! he had thought. Immense towers scratching the sky. Monsters of granite and ice. They weren't meant for living things.

Yet men had come to climb them, armed only with ropes, axes and a few other rudimentary bits and pieces. He had been baffled by it, then scared of the idea of finding himself so high with nothing but tiny toe and fingerholds. And eventually, he was filled with curiosity, and then excitement.

It wasn't always plain sailing. To his horror, his first trip on a rack railway revealed crippling vertigo. As the car swayed in the wind and bounced over the rails, he was seized with a horrible certainty.

The car would throw him out! Feel how it wobbles - it was going to fall.

In his mind the car plummeted into the valley. He felt the wood and glass splintering around him while everyone else cooed and ached over the view. Were they mad?

He attached himself to the handhold pole in the centre of the cabin and refused to let to come to the window. His father took him gently by his shoulder and tried to usher him to the front to see the view, but Stefan's hands refused to unclench though his palms were wet and slippery on the metal. His brother Tomas, delighted at his fallibility, taunted him as a coward. He felt the blood rush to his face, but even shame could not overcome his irrational fear.

Yet as he looked out over the Alpine landscape from the viewing point at the end of the railway, he was assaulted with another sensation that would affect him for the rest of his days. As he stood on the heights, looking across at the distant peaks, a sensation started to burn in his chest. It trickled through him like warmth penetrating into every corner of his soul so that after a few minutes he felt he was made of joy and peace.

It felt like... God smiling at him.

With the solidity of the mountain beneath him, his fear shrivelled away.

The stillness of the mountaintops despite the wind whipping around and the distant clank of the railway was something he always remembered and never again experienced.

This time his parents held his shoulders trying to draw him back from the edge. Again, he would not be moved. After that, he immersed himself in the world of the Alpine climbers. Even the language it had created felt special. Words like 'serac', 'arête', 'couloir'. He learned them and pictured himself tackling them all, scaling a difficult overhang, conquering his fear and winning the reward at the climb's end...

So it was that when he heard that two young Germans were to climb the Nordwand, he felt that his whole life had been bringing him to this point - and that his life from then on would be irrevocably changed. The climbers - fellows by the name of Sedlmeyer and Mehringer - tried to keep it quiet, but something as monumental as the Nordwand would not stay secret.

At first light, Stefan pulled on his clothes as quietly as he could, and snuck out of the room. He crept down to reception, where the night porter had to let him out because it was still so early. The excitement of it! He felt all but alone in the world.

The air was fresh on the verandah. It burned his lungs cleanly. He hurried to the nearest telescope - there were several mounted on the railing so holidaymakers could enjoy the scenery all the better.

Breathlessly, he scanned the base, but saw nothing. No climbers preparing for the ascent, no helpers bringing equipment up. Even the little tent they had pitched was gone. He felt hollow with disappointment. They had given up and gone home! There would be no assault on the Eiger during his stay. It was like having Christmas taken away for ever.

But what was that? His eye caught something. Some tiny movement or flash of colour. He swung the telescope, carefully panning to cover the whole of the lower rock face.

There! They had already begun! Two tiny figures, so small upon the vast rockface as to be insolent. They had climbed perhaps a few hundred feet, and must have been going for a few hours already. Stefan knew little of rock climbing techniques, but there was something assured and confident about the way they moved up the rock in a sort of relay, one going up trailing a rope behind him which the other would use to help him climb that section, and then swapping places. Their rucksacks looked huge and heavy, as well they might with six days food and all the tools they might possibly need in them. On the more difficult sections, he saw them climbing without the packs, and hauling them up after them on ropes. He smiled at the simplicity of the idea.

And it wasn't just the steep face, the overhanging rocks and treacherous ice they had to worry about. Every so often, with a boom like cannon, a rock or ice slip would detach from high on the slopes and hurl itself down towards the two climbers. More than once he saw them pressing themselves anxiously to the face, protecting their heads with their packs.

But it was turning out to be a beautiful day. The sun rose over the mountains behind Grindelwald, over to the right, and soon the ice fields in the face were sparkling.

It was all Stefan's family could do to tear him away from the telescope. He enjoyed nothing else those days but the time he could escape to the verandah and see how high Mehringer and Sedlmeyer had reached. By the time the sun set on the first day of climbing, they had covered nearly 7,000 feet.

But on the second day, their progress slowed. After watching them inching up a rock belt for what seemed like hours, he let out a long, involuntary sigh. What happened if he was off on some stupid family trip when the two men reached the summit?

"It's not a surprise you know. They are meeting new conditions with every step."

Stefan looked up. It was a grizzled mountain guide who had been almost as frequent a sight at the telescopes as he had.

"It may still happen that they find some impassable feature that's not apparent from the ground and have to turn back," the guide said. "That stretch of rock doesn't look too high but it must be around three hundred feet, totally vertical. Once they manage that, there's a huge ice-field to scale - and that's only the first of three or four they need to cross."

Stefan gulped. He felt himself there with them, hanging in the sky. In his dreams that night he was an eagle, clinging to a crag near the top of the mountain, gazing down into the broad valley with the twinkling lights of the villages as distant as stars.

On the third day, the Eiger bit back. A weather front blowing along the valley hammered into the vertical Nordwand and created one of the strange, vicious blizzards that seemed to sit only on the face of the mountain while all around was clear.

With his heart thrumming and the world seeming to swing about him, Stefan saw the clouds swirl and thicken on the mountain until not a thing could be seen. The Eiger might have been encased entirely in cotton wool for all that could be seen.

His family tried to draw him away. His father sat with him and talked about the Grand Prix and the new speed record Ernst Udet had set in his Messerschmitt. Stefan listened, mute. His mother tried next promising him another trip up to the viewing point. Tomas pleaded with him to play hide and seek.

Nothing they did or said could help. Stefan continued to stare up at the cloud.

"It'll be tough on there, like you couldn't imagine," the guide said.

"What's it like when the weather's like this?" he asked.

"Cold. Freezing cold, and the damp from the cloud gets into your clothes and into your skin and you feel as though you could never be warm again. You can't see a thing, so you daren't move. The winds can bring down rockfalls and avalanches, and the first you know of them is when they hit you."

"Can they make it do you think?" Stefan thought his voice sounded small in his ears. Pleading.

"They might. They're good climbers. I take my hat off to them. But they're in for a difficult time all right."

The storm blew for nearly a week. From time to time the mountain would seem to roar behind its cloudy mantle, and Stefan's heart lurched, because that meant there had been an avalanche. He tried to picture the choking mass of snow barreling down the mountainside.

Stefan couldn't eat. His sleep became a fitful pattern of dozing and terrified wakefulness. Dumbly, he heard his parents arguing about whether to cut the holiday short.

And then the storm began to lift. By the time it ended, the only people still watching the mountain were Stefan and the guide.

With a burst of joy, Stefan saw Mehringer and Sedlemeyer were still alive! More than that, they were still climbing, and moving fast. His joy evaporated when he saw the hard-set expression on the guide's face.

"That's good, isn't it?" he asked. "They're still trying for the summit, not going back?"

"Yes, yes, it's good," said the guide. He pursed his lips slightly.

"You're just telling me that 'cause I'm a kid!" Stefan snapped.

"All right then, little man," the guide frowned. "They have to keep going. With all the avalanches and rockslides it would be far too treacherous on the lower slopes. The rain will have made everything slippery as glass, and there will be much loose material. Their only hope is to keep going and hope for the summit. They are trapped on the mountain."

Stefan continued to hope. But later that day, another storm blew in.

For days and days he stared at the mountain. If he gave up on the men, that was as good as killing them. He searched for any break in the cloud. He prayed to God when the avalanches boomed invisibly over the distant rocks. The hotel staff and guests would hover at the edge of his vision, wondering about the strange boy with the macabre obsession. He ignored them, as his family had taken to ignoring him, perhaps in the hope that he would run back into their loving embrace.

Not while Mehringer and Sedlemeyer were on the mountain.

And then it happened. The cloud began to break. He fixed himself to his telescope. Hours passed until...

There! At the top of the third ice field. He had been rewarded! The men were all right! It was going to be...

Just then the sun shone through the gap in the clouds, onto the mountain. Through the telescope, through the clear, sharp Alpine air, he saw what he had thought was a man. It had been a man, once. Blank, sightless eyes stared back at him across the gulf. The black mouth,

hanging open, screamed soundlessly. It was standing, facing outward, held in position because it was frozen to the rock. It was buried up to its knees in snow. It had been unable to move, and died in the trap the mountain had set for it.

Karl Mehringer's skin, pure white, twinkled in the sunlight, before the gap in the cloud closed and he was once more lost to the world.

## Michael

First, thinks Michael, you climb away from the ground below, then you start to climb above the lower slopes around you. Eventually you can see over the tops of the highest peaks around, and the world begins to appear as though it is spread out beneath. And still you keep on going, into the sky. Sometimes you climb way above the clouds, and there are little fleecy puffs hurrying along seeming much closer to the ground than you are to them. It's the sort of view you would only otherwise get from an aeroplane, but here you aren't sealed up in a metal tube and peering through thick glass. You're breathing the thin air and feeling the sunlight right on your face. Those are the good days.

This is one of the other kind.

But the good days have been so very good. He's just a human being most of the time, but not during the good days. When he stands on a summit, looking down at the whole world, feeling peace coursing through him, he feels more like an angel. He briefly thinks back to his father, and everything the man had done to rob him of that experience.

Moving the family to the flat, soulless plains of endless agricultural land as soon as Michael had shown an interest in hill walking and a bit of rock climbing. Forbidding him from going on any school trips where they might be near any sort of ascent. Refusing him money for membership of climbing clubs and even walking clubs. Michael's uncle Tomas has tried to talk to him about why his father feels the way he does about the mountains, but Michael doesn't want to know. He doesn't blame Mum for walking out.

The challenges have only made him more determined. There has always been something about a difficult rock face that makes him want to scale it. Something about a peak spied high above the land that makes him want to see the world from up there. The amount of work you have to put in is phenomenal. The care and attention you need. It drives everything out of his mind except him and the mountain. The only peace he has ever really known has been on the mountain. Away from his crazy father.

But for every day like that you have to face one, or two, or a hundred like this.

It isn't considered a particularly difficult climb these days. The truth is that he'd considered it as a trial run for his expedition to Nanga Parbat in the Himalayas. Nearly forty expeditions have successfully climbed the Eiger Nordwand. Nobody's died in years.

But now he is hanging onto the edge of an overhanging ice chimney on the third ice field, watching the piton he has just driven in moving alarmingly. He drives his ice axe into the surface and tries again with the piton. Johan is below waiting for him to belay. Michael finally hauls himself over the edge. The piton seems OK. It's the only one he has left. Just then, a

rumbling sound reaches him but he can't tell where it's coming from. The mist is so very thick and he can't see any more than a few yards.

It could be below, or off to one side...

A cascade of rock and water thunders past. He flattens himself to the wall, shuffling to find a slightly more secure spot, and watches his ice axe tumbling down into the void.

Shit.

The rockfall fades, and the last of the sound echoes into nothing.

Johan's taking his time.

Tentatively, Michael leans over the edge. Johan has vanished.

Shit.

He carries on, kicking steps into the new snow with his boot, finding what grip he can with his gloves, but his fingertips are already getting numb. This is bad.

It's at this point that his hand closes over something that isn't rock or snow. It's rope, frozen solid. He clears some of the snow away. There's a tangle of rope here, and God be praised, an ice axe. Some poor bastard left this here. Years ago too. It's an old, old ice axe. Wooden handled with a forged steel head.

They don't make them like this any more, but it's lucky for me they did.

He wonders which of the failed expeditions this had belonged to. Well, there are a few candidates. That Italian fellow three years ago who had to be rescued, and the other one who died. But they would have had newer equipment than this.

Surely not the Toni Kurz expedition? No, they hadn't quite made it this high. The very first attempt then. He tries to ignore the rust-red smudge on the handle. It was around the top of the third ice field they had last been seen. 'Death bivouac'. Great. Not an omen I hope.

The weather has other ideas. Michael bivouacs at that awful place, roping himself to the mountain. The weather has closed in and is blasting snowflakes horizontally at the face. He starts to lose sensation in his fingers and toes but he daren't let himself shiver. Shivering uses up energy and even though it would warm him up a little, that's energy he can't spare. The blast of snow thickens. He can feel it building up around him, between his arms and his torso, up into his hood, around his feet...

His body begins to function at a glacial pace. In his mind now, there is no future or past, just forever. The black void is there and it's coming for him. He is standing on the top of the Schreckhorn as the sun sets over the Alps and everything is the colour of new copper. He is pleading with his father to be allowed to go to Grindelwald with his schoolfriends. He is storming out of his house and vowing never to speak to his parents again. He is a schoolboy reading *The White Spider* under the covers with his torch. He is laughing with Johan on the flanks of El Kapitan in California. He is an angel made of ice.

## Jens

Jens hunkered down as the 500 mile an hour winds whipped around him on the face. This was the final stage. The air was thin but at those speeds it still battered him. He looked up at the last stretch of the mountain.

Far, far above and a little to the right, the packed nitrogen snow radiated out in the cracks from the body like a spider's legs. Before that was a jutting ramp which projected out from the face. It would take some climbing but he could do it. The surface bulged alarmingly - he would be climbing backwards into space. There were no ropes from above to climb up. He tapped the sensor on an ice piton and drew its point across the surface. At the place where the ice was most secure, the sensor reacted and the tiny repulsor in its haft buried the piton's nose into the surface.

He could not resist a look back. The precipice fell away behind him. He was in the sky. The lights of the settlement down in the valley twinkled coldly. For a moment, he seemed to float while the universe revolved about him.

He dug his crampon into the ice and felt for a handhold. A thick icicle protruded from the surface. He put his weight on it and gradually drew himself up, next swinging his ice axe. The point dug well in and he hauled himself up by it, bringing his feet up to new grips with the crampons carefully. Handhold? Ah, another icicle. He grasped it, and it snapped. He tumbled and fell back. The piton held but the rope swung him against the rock face and he felt bone graunching. Gravity might be low, but damn it he still had mass. His heart rate spiked, and for a moment he thought he was going to pass out. He felt his lungs trying to punch through his chest.

Even in this gravity, even with his enhanced bone repair hardware, if the piton didn't hold, a fall would kill him. A lot.

Jens righted himself and shuffled back to the step. His shoulder was screaming. He double-blinked up a status report which revealed that his left shoulder was chipped and the collarbone cracked. That would take an hour to fix. He didn't care. It could have been the end.

He chewed on a piece of Kendal high-carb slab while he tried to slow his breathing down and the nano-mites burned in his shoulder, knitting buckystrands around the bone. Maybe he should have gone for the full carbon skeleton treatment before. No - his mountaineering heroes had had no such advantages. He had to do it as much as possible in the way they had.

A display popped up to inform him that his realtime virtual ratings had broken the previous record. Nice to know people were watching down there. He grinned, and composed a quick status update. Time to go again. This time he found an icicle that had fused with the ice below and formed a solid handle. It got him past the worst of the bulge, and, panting, he shuffled his weight onto the lip at the top of the ramp. It was only a few inches wide. Nowhere on this confounded mountain was there a ledge big enough to sit comfortably.

Soon though, there would only be the spider to deal with. It took a delicate ice-dance. He moved upwards, sometimes having only a few millimetres grip from the toe crampons, sometimes having to cut steps gingerly with his axe, but managing not to fall again.

Triumphantly, he traversed right from the ice-slope along a crumbling belt of rock, then into a crack which he shimmied up, hauling his rucksack behind him. The spider lay before him, and after that, the summit.

The spider saved the worst for last. A quake thrummed through the mountain and a deluge of rock and frozen nitromethane shook loose. As it rushed from above, Jens with horror saw it funneling down the legs of the spider, focussing the avalanche towards the point where he hung from the mountain. He put his head down and held his breath while the spill battered him. At the end he was still clinging to the rock but just as the worst subsided, a boulder smashed into his arm. He bellowed in pain, and his ratings jumped another 10,000. He almost passed out but clung to consciousness. He was not properly secured and if he let go... His universe telescoped into his fingerholds. For an instant, there was no past or future.

The repairs took hours. Then, he climbed on, rope after rope, and late that day finally reached the summit cornice. This was the source of all the avalanches - new snow that hadn't cohered with the frozen stuff that had long since bound itself to the mountain. There were many slips and many second attempts. Eventually, he came to a ridge which ran up to the peak. Dully, he clambered the final yards. A tiny camera drone was waiting for him at the summit. He smiled and waved, and told it to get lost. The drone dipped and buzzed away the way he had come, doubtless capturing B-roll. It had probably been following him half the way up.

At first, all he felt was tired. Then he felt a strange sensation. Peace and stillness. Then a sort of quiet joy. Then something like divine revelation. He gazed out over the immense sinuous arêtes that criss-crossed the surface of Ganymede, and began to feel a little more than human. There were forces at work that had led him to this point. Several thousand years ago, an asteroid, caught by Jupiter's gravity, had slammed into one of these titanic rocky zig-zags and formed a crater. The crater was ideal to base the first terraforming colony, as when the atmosphere started to thicken, it would settle first in the base.

But there was another consequence. Where the crater wall met the lines of ridges, it had formed a vast, vertical face with three pointed peaks in a row. The first men who had come here had named those great peaks the Monk, the Maid, and the Ogre. Mönch, Jungfrau, and Eiger. They were visible from the colony, and the men and women had looked up at those three peaks in awe, wonder, and ambition.

Jens grinned.

We made it fellas!

His mind went back to the night he had sneaked into the admin office and read his genetic records. When the humans who would terraform Ganymede were designed, the colonisation authorities had gone back to first principles. It would be a tough place to live, and every day would be on the edge of the possible. They needed people who would delight in the challenge, who would push themselves and their compatriots. Who above all would place the advancement of the colony above their own lives.

Jens knew they had scoured the millions of genomes that had been sequenced from the history of mankind, and combined the best elements into a team of explorers, scientists and survival experts.

Until that night, Jens had no idea who his progenitors were, but something in that sequence of genes did. It had drawn him, more than anyone, to this mountain. When he found out who his sequence had been drawn from, he thought it must have been created by a colonial geneticist with a taste for the poetic. The genetic blueprint had included material from one Michael Langer whose body had been recovered from an icefield after an attempt on the Eiger Nordwand in 1967, and a tiny fragment of viable genetic material adhering to an ice axe that Langer had still been holding when his desiccated corpse was finally uncovered in the 2200s.

That was how, in 2438, a little of Karl Mehringer finally reached the summit of the toughest mountain face in the solar system, and a little of Stefan and Michael Langer, the boys who had once idolised him, stood there too.

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