

The Eiger and Various Side Quests

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For every mountain there is to climb, there is a veteran mountaineer out there to chide wide-eyed would-be climbers on the dangers of the sport. Reddit is full of people who climb things calling other people who climb things reckless idiots from the comfort of their own sofas. Worse, at some point, those in both groups—the reckless idiots and the namecallers—have been guilty of sandbagging. The most popular climbing meme of the moment comes in the form of a comment on videos of other climbers' sends: “*that's a V2 in my gym.*” The line between easy and dangerous is a very thin one to walk indeed. You can do all the preparation in the world, check all the right boxes, but often you won’t know you’re out of your depth until you’re already there. And, as much as we want to argue otherwise—that it’s the crisp air that pushes us to get two hours of bad bivvy sleep with a rock in the spine that turns into a morning of hauling a load of gear up an icy cliff—mountaineering is a sport of ego. And it was most likely ego that planned our most recent trip, leaving us blindfolded and bound in a chair in the corner while it filled out a gear list spreadsheet and booked flights.

Our original objective for the trip was to climb the Eiger via the Mittellegi Ridge and the Matterhorn via one of the two *vie normali*

(Italian or Swiss) unguided, back to back, within a week. It was meant to be an athletic challenge and a good old-fashioned slog: two of the Alps’ greatest pyramids ticked off in quick succession.

But as the trip approached, reality started to intrude. It was becoming clear that we’d probably only have the weather window for one objective, not both. We’d known this was a risk; booking the trip in early September was pushing our luck. We’d chosen it deliberately, reasoning that it’d be cold enough to climb without having to dodge much rockfall and late enough to avoid one of the Matterhorn’s biggest objective hazards—other people.

So we picked one. It had to be the Eiger. The Matterhorn is a (delicious, chocolatey) logo, but the Eiger is a test. Plus, we weren’t keen on the conga line of guides hauling clients up the Hörnli Ridge, and the Carrel Hut on the Liongrat route was closed for renovation. Getting to the Italian side would’ve added a whole extra day of travel. The Eiger, by comparison, was logically elegant.

So that was the plan. We’d wait for the first good weather window on the Eiger, book the Mittellegi Hut, then spend the rest of the trip climbing in the French Alps, training, acclimatizing, pretending to rest, while staying with Will’s dad and brother at their place in Les Gets.

The time of the trip arrived after months of building practice anchors and swing leading on our makeshift home hangboard, hours on the Stairmaster, and many nuts and cams placed and removed in good old British limestone.

We rolled into Les Gets, France late on a Friday night, bleary and buzzing, and immediately started refreshing the five separate weather apps installed on my phone.

The forecast for the weekend was clear in Grindelwald and atop the Eiger. Sunday looked like the window, summit Monday. So we booked the Mittellegi Hut for Sunday night, and crossed our fingers at our great luck.

This left us a whole day to go climb something else. With that, we decided to head to Chamonix— the spiritual Disneyland of alpinism— to get in a bit of a warm-up, stretch the legs, test the gear, and, as it turned out, test our precious luck just a little bit further.

When we arrived, Chamonix was heaving. We didn't have our cable-car tickets (sold out online, which, in retrospect, should have been a red flag), and the lady at the kiosk told us, with the calm of someone who had certainly said the same sentence about a hundred times in the past hour, that the next available ascent to the Aiguille du Midi wouldn't be until three o'clock. We needed to get up high and begin to acclimatize for the coming days' climbs. With the first Eiger stretch booked for the following day, we were under a time crunch. We'd have to go on foot.

So we decided to walk and climb up as far as we could in the direction of the Aiguille, or at least the Plan de Aiguille. We'd done the hike once before, a few Januaries ago. Back then it had been four feet of snow and snowshoes and no clearly demarcated path, all of which made us feel epic and slow. This time, with bare rock and summer dust and lungs full of ambition, we figured: easy. Let's whip up there.

And we did, sort of. The trail wound through scrub and scree, and we continued up toward the slabs and easy rock routes above the Plan station, hauling our full alpine kit (which was, allegedly, for "training," though it was probably mostly to feel legitimate). We practiced exposed scrambling to vaccinate ourselves with vertigo and get our heads

straight for the real climbing in a few days. To our luck, we even spotted two marmots and a chamois on the way back to the cable car station.

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The next morning, in Les Gets, we woke up early and eager, with the morale of two golden retrievers in harnesses, only for my phone to buzz at 7:30 a.m. with a Swiss number. It was the Mittellegi Hut. They were very polite about it: weather turning, hut closed, even the guides were canceling. Did we still want to try our luck? We said no, obviously, without even a second thought. *We're not reckless idiots.*

I pulled up the MétéoSwiss app with the practiced despair of decisiveness. Thursday and Friday actually looked good. The weather might really be cooperating! Hope reemerged. I asked to rebook. They said it was no problem and that they would confirm our booking soon. And, of course, like today, they would contact us if conditions took a turn.

So, restless and prematurely caffeinated, we decided to head back to Chamonix. Everything was so last-minute that there seemed to be no beds left to book in any of the huts within a reasonable distance and at sufficient altitude. But we were stubbornly committed to climbing something near the Aiguille area, so we stuffed some bivy gear into the van and mentally prepared for a frosty night on the glacier.

By the time we'd re-arrived in Chamonix, prepped our kit, and ascended in the cable car, it was late-afternoon. We meandered off the cable car and into the tourist center on top, up a crammed elevator, and breathlessly panted (*oh no, already?*) up a flight of stairs to the viewing platform. Amid



Will and his dad on the scramble above the Plan de Aiguille.



One of the marmots we spotted.



Singers atop the Aiguille de Midi station.

the evening's last few straggling photo-snappers, a choir sang what could only be described as a dirge—hauntingly, ominously? and in Provençal was it?— with voices drifting across the glass viewing platform and into the abyss.

Cold wind blew in lifts up the side of the two-mile-high spire. The evening weather was turning frigid and our sleeping bags were flirting with their temperature limits, so I figured I'd give the Cosmiques Hut one more ring, and in a portent almost as blessedly obvious as the choir's accompaniment, the glacier gods granted us two available bunks for the night.

We set off out of the man-made dragon's lair of the tourist center and onto the blinding snow of the glacier, spirits high, crampons crunching, and stomachs dreaming of a dinner grander than the crushed cheese sandwich at the bottom of my bag.

That night, the sunset bled into a magnificent moonrise, orange giving way to pale blue and silver that lit the glacier so brightly it was almost day. The next morning's sunrise repeated the performance in reverse. The mountain was showing off.

Around 6am, we finished our hot chocolates bundled up on the porch of the Cosmique Hut and geared up for a climb up and over the Arête des Cosmiques. I'd lead the first half, Will the second. The climb is mostly a scramble with bolts here and there, more exposure than difficulty (Will insisted that we take a few detour routes to “peer over the edge,” and this literal exposure therapy felt a bit masochistic to me). But the only real challenge of the route was social.

We were one of maybe two or three unguided parties on the route that day, and our egos went on whispering, “faster, you need to *win*,” until we reached the inevitable

abseil-point bottleneck: twenty-five minutes of waiting and pretending to enjoy the view. That's when a French guide and his visibly distraught client caught up. The poor client, breathless and dismal, reeled that he didn't know what he was getting into, and insisted again and again (rhetorically? to the guide?) that there must be some easier way down. The nothing-less-than-ornery guide ignored the pants and hauled him upward in fits of Gallic exasperation. Aside from empathy for the climber (it was only two weeks earlier I was crying on a sketchy trad route on the Welsh coastline, well above my grade, pumped and pleading with Will to set up an anchor and let us rappel to the beach below) watching this dynamic was both comic and relief—it reminded us why we'd decided against the Hörnli Route on the Matterhorn, famed for its traffic jams and, as one post on Reddit suggested, required the skill of being able to “fight three angry Swiss guides at once.”

We peeled up the crux and away from the symphony jingle of quickdraw-laden harnesses and the scratches of crampon on bare rock to reach the end of the route—climactically (or maybe extremely anti-climactically, for a climber) a ladder. You literally climb a ladder back onto the deck of the tourist center and into a crowd of day-trippers with cameras, who cheer and snap photos as if we'd just returned from the moon. And for a brief windburned second it felt like maybe, just maybe, we had.

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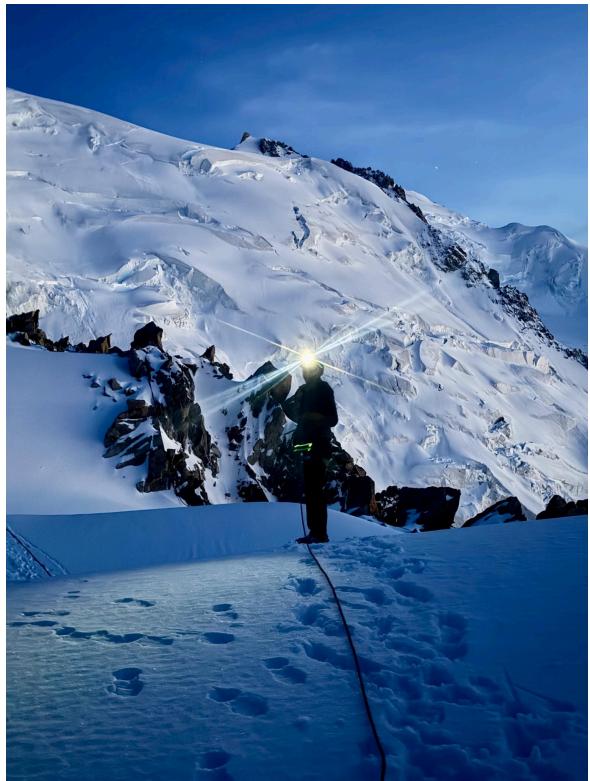
After our fun little jaunt up the Cosmiques, we had well and truly come down with the alpinism bug (it's actually more of a chronic illness for us at this point) and had a



Stepping out of the Aiguille de Midi tourist center.



Dancing on a detour in front of the Cosmiques Hut.



Nighttime walk with Mont Blanc behind.



Sunrise from the Cosmiques Hut.



The moon from the Cosmiques Hut.



Will on the Arête des Cosmiques with extra bivvy kit.



On the Arête des Cosmiques.



Topping out on the route.

few more days to kill before our attempt at the Eiger.

We returned that evening to Les Gets, only to decide to go back again to Chamonix the next day in search of whatever ice climbing the French Alps could manage in early September after a summer of record heat.

We'd been there before (in fact, this is where we learned to ice climb for the very first time) and remembered the hiking route down to the Mer de Glace—a serpentine trail of switchbacks and squishy mud. Except now, when we arrived at the top, the old route seemed to be erased in a pile of rubble, sludge, and caution fencing. The new route, as it turned out, was less of a hike and more of a via ferrata (*oh, that's why there were all those harnesses and helmets lined up near the trailhead!*), which was essentially a bunch of rebar stapled directly into the cliffside as ladder rungs.

Because we'd arrived late—we're pattern creatures, and “late start” seems to be our ritual offering to the mountain gods—we ended up jogging the last few kilometers across the glacier. Picture three (Will's dad was again convinced to join, as long as he didn't have to ice climb) figures half-running, half-sliding across the Mer de Glace, dodging meltwater streams and hopping boulders, gear clanking, the rope swinging atop Will's daypack like a badly tethered child.

We eventually found a small, stubborn patch of ice that hadn't yet surrendered to global warming and threw together an anchor in record time. Both of us got to climb one route—one brief, shining moment of pick-swinging redemption—before realizing we were in an actual race against the last train back to Chamonix.

The sprint that followed consisted of human-sized gear racks bounding down the

glacier, cursing at crampon snags on trouser legs. But we made it—of course we did—not only catching the train, but arriving a full 30 minutes early and wishing we'd done a few more laps on the ice.

*

A few days and many, many pounds of consumed fondue later, arrived Thursday morning. The sun was shining for our early wake up, and the weather on the Eiger looked calm and clear. We'd received booking confirmation from the Mitteleggi Hut a few days prior, and with no calls from them about cancellations, and only voicemail when I attempted to phone them in the early morning, we set off for Grindelwald. By noon we were geared up and ready for the most expensive public transit journey (about 30 total mins. in motion for about £170 each person) we've ever taken.

We hopped off the train at Eismeer station and found our way through the dark tunnels and out several false exits, bits of light shimmering through old wooden doorways that when opened, momentarily blind you before revealing nothing but a sheer, 70 meter drop on the other side of the threshold. We wandered through the bowels of the Eiger like trolls in a fairytale mine shaft, past a sign dubbing one corridor “Hotel Rat”, and the singularly grimdest toilet I've ever seen.

Down a few more dark, dripping staircases, the blinding light emerged once again. We stepped out into it, latched ourselves into a bolted anchor, and abseiled down onto the glacier. At that point, we still heard no word (which we took as a good sign post-confirmation) from the Mitteleggi Hut. But to our absolute delight, there were sets of fresh footprints across the Eismeer, along with



Staples via ferrata to the Mer de Glace.



“Completely un-posed, legit ice climbing top rope photo.” Or, “I love the taste of aluminum.”

bright glints of yellow jacket on the distant mountainside. Other groups on the route. Everything was surely going to plan.

The first day's glacier traverse and climb (which apparently included the crux of the whole route) felt like a breeze, aside from two key moments. The first was an unexpected ladder over a crevasse the likes of which you'd expect on the Khumbu ice falls, but certainly not at 2000m in the Swiss Alps. Will crossed first, but when my turn came, the ladder had sunk deep into the melting slush. The whole contraption was attached to an anchor at the top of the gaping crevasse. But one leg had already come loose on the bottom, and the other was holding on for dear life. We judged that it probably had one more crossing left in it after my own—maximum. Once the other leg gave way, gravity would do its job and the device would be left dangling from a rope on the hut-ward side. We agreed that we most likely wouldn't be able to safely backtrack to Eismeer Station if we needed a contingency. But the day was bright and sunny, and we were fresh on the route and fresh out of £170 each, so we continued onward.

At the foot of the rock route, where glacier meets cliffside, we passed underneath an inverted bathtub of a serac that seemed to trigger a ripple of primal unease in our otherwise placid mental ponds. At the top of the climb we paused as much to enjoy the view as to stuff away some of our excess gear and our mouths with snacks.

That was when we heard it. A sonic boom blasting louder than an engine on the Concorde. We couldn't see anything, but surely a supermassive serac had collapsed, its roar echoing off every frozen crystal and moraine pebble on the Sea of Ice. A few smaller booms dotted the rest of the afternoon. I looked down the route to see scoured lines and glinting balls

of snow below—the bathtub we walked under was surely among those.

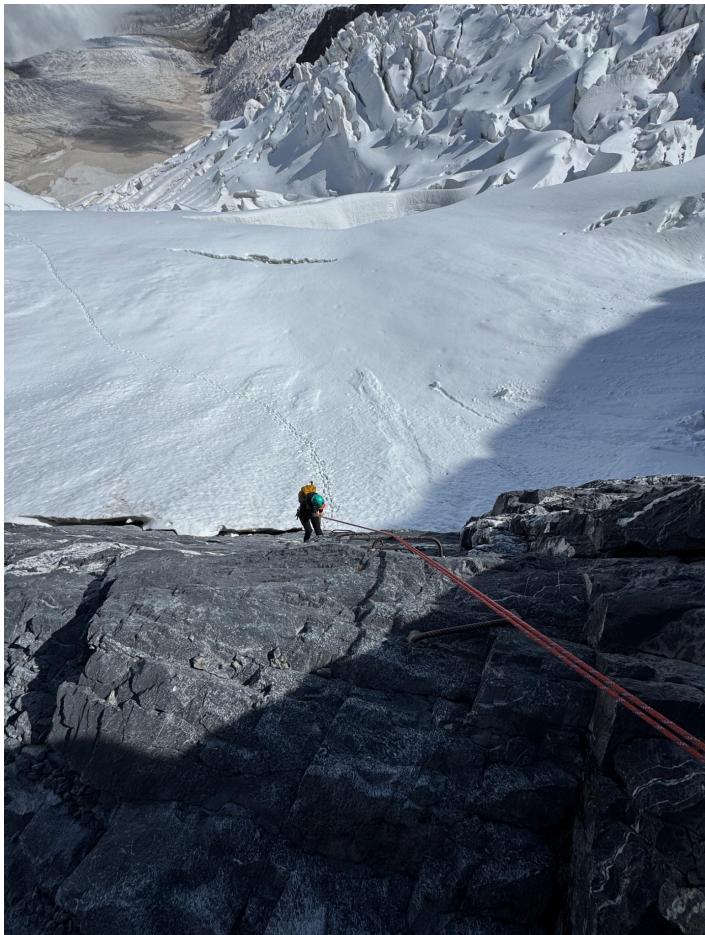
Onward, we scrambled across an exposed face with endless paths to choose from, all leading to the wooden hut perched perilously atop the ridgeline and glinting in the afternoon sun.

Two bundled figures greeted us—just two. They looked concerned.

The hut was closed, they said. Or at least, no one showed up to open it. Thomas, an extreme-ski mountaineer from Slovakia, and Senta, a climber from Czechia had arrived at the hut an hour before us and immediately phoned hut management upon finding the door locked. *They just forgot to tell us?* Apparently, the morning's fog made helicopter travel up the mountain difficult, and by the time the sunny afternoon rolled around and only four climbers arrived, the trip to open up the hut was no longer worth the hassle. It was a Thursday in September and no guided groups had booked. They were sorry they forgot to contact us.

We had to get thinking, or more aptly, start improvising. There was a bivvy hut nearby, so that was now Plan A, B, and C. Inside, we discovered the remnants of ambitions past: one large, half-empty bag of pasta, two cans of pesto, three bags of tea, a gas stove, and a box with exactly two matches in it. Not exactly the hot dinner and breakfast we'd been promised, but we were well past the stage of being precious.

Normally we'd be happy enough to stay in a bivvy hut, which is a five-star upgrade from my punctured sleeping mat that deflates no matter how many times I mend it, but the fact that no one had told us the main hut was closed lent the evening a particular kind of irritation. Still, we melted snow for water, cooked our honestly very satisfying improvised



Rappeling onto the Eismeer.



Crevasse ladder.



Crux pitch.



Abseil point.

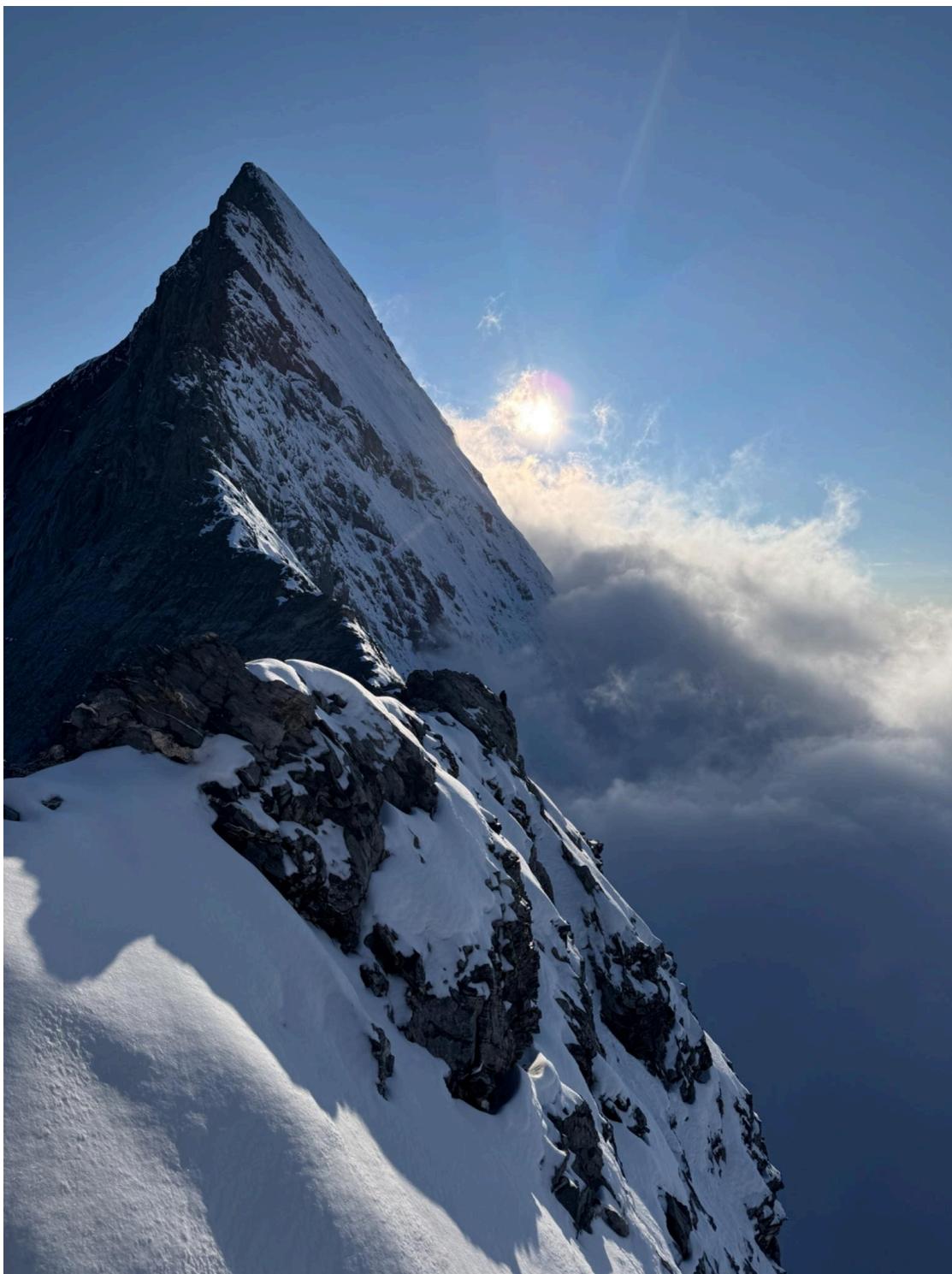


Mitteleggi Hut.



Bivvy hut.

The Eiger from the Mitteleggi Hut.



pesto-pasta dinner, and found a collapsible table, which we set up on the rocky landing overlooking the Eiger's famed North Face, the Eismeer, and the Monch and Jungfrau peaks in the distance. It turned out to be a truly spectacular meal.

After dinner, we needed to assess and plan. We were hoping to get up-to-date information on conditions and route beta from whoever staffed the hut. Routes change year-to-year and only those who have climbed recently know things like which sections have crumbled to rock fall or where things are particularly icy. But with our would-be informants grounded somewhere below, we had to rely partly on our own reasoning and partly on a furious Google search.

It looked snowy. Most of the pictures we'd seen of the route showed bare rock on the lower ridge and only a light dusting across the North Face. Not this time. We had checked the hut webcam many times in the days prior, and the mountain certainly looked whiter, more frigid, winter-ier, in person than it had on the screen. It wasn't a great sign, but turning back wasn't going to be so simple with the whole crevasse ladder issue. So we agreed on two simple limits for the next day's climb: (1) if we didn't reach the first set of fixed ropes within an hour of the start, we'd turn back—too slow; and (2) if those first ropes were iced over, total no-go.

The next morning we woke at four. We packed up, ate a baguette, candy, and gels breakfast, roped up, and put on crampons right there at the hut. A little before five, we set off with Thomas and Senta just behind us.

Forty-five minutes later we reached the first fixed ropes—a hopeful sign—and though they were snow-dusted, they weren't frozen solid. The weather was still holding: pink-blue-gray dawn, still air, the faint sense

of being allowed. Tomorrow, we knew a storm was coming and 10–20 cm of snow was forecasted, but today was looking good.

So we pushed on. And on. The exposure was real and needed to be ignored. The focus required was so total it erased everything else: no time, no fatigue, just movement and solving one tiny problem after another, one hand at a time, one foot in front of the other.

Snow and black ice coated everything. We were clicking axes into what should have been rocky jugs, excavating grips out of powder and verglas, chipping ice off bolts buried in white crust. On one side, a one-kilometer drop. On the other, two. At some point I wondered, not for the first time, whether this was actually supposed to be a mixed climb. Had I misunderstood the grading? Surely this couldn't still be AD+/D? Each time we cleared one punishing section, another appeared immediately. I don't remember anything ever feeling so relentless.

For a good portion of the route, we followed intermittent footprints, most likely left by a wayward hare. It somehow hit like both a benediction and a mockery.

Hours went by. We moved upward in minuscule increments. Finally, we reached the big gendarmes section—long fixed ropes running up steep, ice-covered stone. We found a bolt just before it and anchored in to recon. But getting to the ropes would mean crossing another snow ridge unprotected, and the rope wasn't long enough for one of us to belay from the anchor while the other reached the start of the fixed line. The alternative was to rappel to a dubious halfway point and simul-climb unprotected to the base. In photos we'd seen fixed ropes here, but they must have been buried quite deep and would need to be dug out.



Dinner with a view.



Eismeer at night.



a rare snow-free fixed rope.

Will on



Looking down at the exposure.



Rabbit tracks.



Digging holds out of snow and ice.

That's when Will turned to me and said, flatly, "We need to decide if we're calling it."

Until this point, I hadn't even realized that was an option. I looked at my watch: eight hours of climbing already. The summit push was supposed to take four, maybe five. We still had a couple hundred meters to go.

Continuing meant being benighted on the Eiger for sure, but worse, the descent route might be in poor condition too.

The descent had multiple rappel points, but given how much snow had buried the ropes and bolts, the idea of finding and trusting them in the dark, or in the forecasted storm, seemed unrealistic. Tomorrow's weather would close the window entirely.

So we made the one rational decision left: anchor in and wait for Thomas and Senta, who were about two hours behind (though at this glacial pace, two hours meant only a few rope lengths). After an hour they were within earshot. Thomas, with the calm of someone who'd been in this scenario before (as he later told us, he had, in fact, been rescued once while facing bad weather on a ski mountaineering trip), made the decision so we didn't have to. "We're gonna call the helicopter," he shouted across the rocky expanse. "I can't really see another way out." He was probably right. We had left the idea of backing out of the route behind completely about three snow-covered anchor points ago. It was impossible in these conditions and with the gear we had.

This was going to mean failure for us. It seemed so stupid. We'd been training for months, we were in the best shape of our lives, we'd done more difficult, more technical climbs than this one. We weren't going to get either of the objectives we'd originally set out to do on this trip. And our friends, family, the

grant committee that funded our trip, would know we failed. We would know we failed. Anyways, we would *probably* be okay if we kept going, *right?*. Plenty of climbers have been benighted in worse places, *haven't they?*

But this wasn't the point, *was it?* We would like to say we don't climb for clout (also, asking then why we even chose these objectives in the first place would be a good question), so what would it matter if we took the safe option? What about having to be rescued was so intensely *embarrassing*?

Even though we don't do our best thinking at altitude, or after hours and hours of climbing through snow and ice, the same doubts cast their shadow at sea level, even months after the climb. There are a million different ways we could rationalize how we got to that point: we can blame ourselves, the conditions, the hut management, the mountain, *that damn agile hare*, but at the end of the day we just had to decide if we were going to keep going. And honestly, we needed to reckon with the fact that sometimes perseverance isn't a good thing.

There are a few golden rules of mountaineering: the climb is always harder than it looks; leave no trace; use your feet, not your behind; the list goes on. But the most golden of all may be that the mountain will always be there. It will be there a hell of a lot longer than you will. And deciding to turn around will often be a lot harder for a climber than carrying on through a push that's out of their depth. *So we took the helicopter.*

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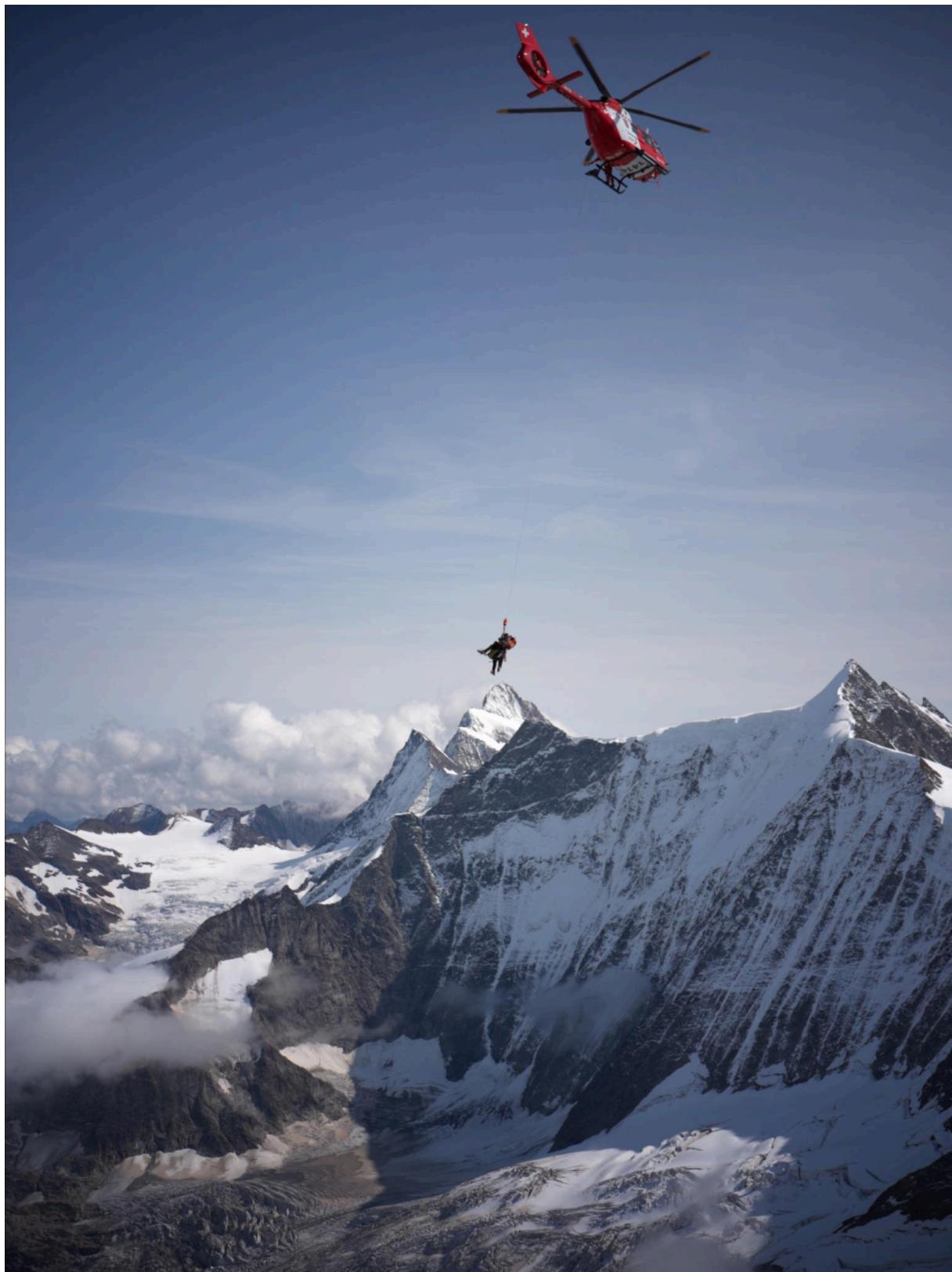
What I didn't realize about helicopter rescue is that you don't actually get in the helicopter. Instead you get dangled out the



Will on the ridgeline.



Awaiting helicopter pickup.



Helicopter rescue. This is Thomas and Senta, who were picked up first. We were carried the same way.

bottom on a wire like a slimy piece of bait on a fishing line.

Thomas and Senta were picked up first. I'd been too exhausted and focused all day to feel nerves, but now that we were stationary they really started to kick in. It was so windy. All I could think about was a big gust of wind coming along and being squashed like a bug against the side of the mountain, swinging around uncontrollably on that little fishing line.

Our rescuer was named Johannes. He was calm and moved very fast. We were packaged up in seconds. As we waited for the helicopter to drop the others off and come back for us, he reassured us that we shouldn't be embarrassed. "You made the right choice," he said. "I'm a mountain guide and I wouldn't climb the route with this much ice. I don't even climb if I need to put my crampons on before the last long fixed rope section. The descent would have been a nightmare." (That last long fixed rope section was where we were being picked up from and we'd been wearing our crampons all day.) We told him about the hut being closed, and about the collapsing crevasse ladder.

As the blades of the helicopter pounded overhead, Johannes clipped us in and told Will and I to wrap around each other in a bear hug. "Hold on tight, it's really windy!" And with that the two of us were zipped into the air. We whirled in a tight circle high, high above the glacier and swung back over the Mitteleggi ridgeline, clenching while trying not to stab each other with our crampons. We fluttered in loops straight down the North Face, the mountain's façade glowing in high definition, closing in on the doll-like Grindelwald a few kilometers away.

We were flying and we were safe. We were dancing a thousand meters above the

ground and clinging onto each other for dear life, and for joy, and for sorrow.

We touched down on the sea of wind-flattened grass before the chopper. Under the deafening drone of air hitting blade, mountain rescue unstrapped our harnesses and pulled us onto the sidewalk. Tourists crowded to take photos. I slunk onto the concrete steps, opened my bag, and took out my cheese sandwich.