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Opening extract from

The Everest Files

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The Everest Files
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Kami got a day's 'rest' after that first round trip through the icefall. He spent it running from one chore to another as Tenzing kept him on the go. In the morning he sharpened crampon spikes with a whetstone and sewed up some damaged wind suits. In the afternoon he peeled forty kilos of potatoes and helped rescue a yak that had fallen into a glacial stream half an hour down the glacier.

He did the work with good grace but his mind was distracted with the delicious prospect of going back on the mountain. Back up high. The taste had been intoxicating. He was waiting for someone to tell him if he was needed for more porter duties.

Alex Brennan and the other Westerners had come back down after their acclimatisation stay in Camp One and the next push would go up higher.

'Will you take me back up?' Kami asked Jamling eagerly that evening, when nothing had been said all day.

Jamling laughed. 'Don't worry. You'll be going up and down like an idiot before long.'

He was right. Brennan called the whole team into the yurt at eight the next morning.

'We're going to film in the icefall today,' he said. 'Going to get a killer sequence for the news outlets. I'll need at least eight porters for all the equipment. We're taking the mini crane, the whole shebang.'

Much to his delight, Kami was picked as one of the carrying team. He was paired up with Nima and instructed to follow the film crew, lugging the extendable crane arm up into the icefall. The metal structure weighed a hefty thirty kilos and was a cumbersome body length long.

Nima was in a grouchy mood.

'We'll be hanging around all day up there,' he complained to Kami, 'waiting for lumps of ice to fall on our heads while they mess about with the cameras.'

'Maybe they'll get it done fast,' Kami suggested, at which Nima gave a sarcastic snort.

The morning dragged by, bitterly cold and windy, as shot after shot got ticked off the sequence list. George and his sound recordist set up a whole bunch of positions in and around the spectacular ice formations, shooting Alex as he made his way through the seracs.

'They're making it look like he's on his own,' Kami remarked.

'Pah!' Nima was contemptuous. 'That's typical. It's us guys that do all the donkey work but you watch that film in the end and there'll hardly be a Sherpa in it.'

A huge ladder crossing came next, Kami and Nima performing a sort of high-wire double act as they shouldered the crane arm across. They got a round of applause from the waiting team and Brennan told them, 'You guys are going to get a bonus for this. This is service beyond the call of duty.'

Kami was pleased to hear it. Every dollar he could earn was a dollar close to paying off his marriage contract.

Lunchtime passed with no food; the afternoon was drifting on and there were still shots to do. The temperature had dropped by about five degrees and everyone was getting increasingly chilled from standing around. Brennan began to talk with George about the final shots which would be filmed from the bottom of a crevasse.

'I want you to get down that slot,' the boss requested, 'get me crossing from below.'

'Great idea!' George was all for it.

'You'll need protection,' Tenzing said, 'we'll get a couple of the lads to rig you up a ladder at the bottom so you can move around safely.

Nima walked to the edge of the gaping crevasse with supreme confidence. He abseiled into the gaping void with the practised air of someone who had done it a hundred times before.

Kami took the plunge next, less confident, but still managing to do a good job of it as the rest of the team looked on.

The temperature shift was shocking. The interior of the crevasse was way colder than up top. Kami felt himself shiver and wished he had thought to put on an extra layer.

Ten metres down. Fifteen. Kami felt he was descending into a bizarre blue universe as the glacial ice of the walls gradually tapered to a sinister, body crushing 'V'.

'Lock off the line,' Nima told him. Kami slipped the rope over the descender and stabilised himself. He looked up, seeing the row of tiny faces peering down at them. He tried to guess how deep they were; twenty metres, perhaps more?

Deep in the belly of the monster. His breath was freezing on his lips.

'OK. Send it down,' Nima shouted.

The single length of aluminium ladder was lowered down and Nima explained the plan.

'We'll wedge the ladder across the gap,' he said. 'The camera guy can use it as a platform.'

Kami quickly saw the logic of the plan. The length of ladder was just right to form an impromptu bridge across the narrow part of the slot.

They cut some grooves in the ice, smashing with their axes at the rock hard surface, sharp blue chips tumbling down into the depths. Next, they swung the ladder into position, the legs slotting into the holes neatly.

'You see?' Nima said, tapping the ladder proudly, 'He can sit on it, stand on it. Do what he wants.'

The bulky silhouette of George soon appeared over the lip, swinging out over the drop. He didn't look too comfortable, his feet kicking clumsily at the wall as he went down into the abyss.

'Man, it's like the lost world in here!' he shouted up. 'You guys don't know what you're missing.'

‘You’re welcome to it,’ Brennan called down.

The ladder creaked as George’s weight came onto it, but the ice slots looked solid and safe. He kept his life line on for good measure though as he set up for the shots.

Kami had noticed before that the filming always seemed to take an age, but this time was worse than ever. The two of them were shivering non-stop now the cold had really got to them.

George was better equipped in a down suit and he hardly seemed to be feeling it.

Boom! A huge retort rendered the frigid air of the crevasse. It really sounded like a cannon going off and Kami felt himself jump with the shock of it. He looked at Nima for reassurance but his friend also looked freaked by the noise.

Small stalactites of frozen ice fell off the crevasse walls as the ground shook. Something huge had fallen … somewhere.

At long last George pronounced himself ready.

‘Get Alex to go across on his own,’ he yelled up. ‘I’m running.’
‘OK!’

Brennan started to make his way across the ladder. Kami could see that the shot would be special.

‘Epic!’ George yelled up. ‘Now get him to go back again and do it again a bit slower.’

Then came the tight shot. Then he changed the lens for a super wide angle. Fifteen minutes after that he was done. The camera was hauled up and a pair of jumars – special clamps that enable climbers to move vertically up a rope – were sent down so they could escape the crevasse.

‘Let him come up first,’ Tenzing yelled down to the two Sherpa lads, ‘There’s some sunset shots they want to do back at Base Camp and we’re running late.’

‘OK,’ Nima agreed. Kami’s lips were chattering so hard he couldn’t have replied.

George began the climb and Kami realised straight away that he wasn’t going to be fast. He lunged up in a clumsy style, pushing the jumar clamp up in small, inefficient bursts of energy.

‘He’s taking forever,’ Nima whispered. Kami felt the tip of his nose going completely numb.

Half an hour went by. Another half an hour for the cold to penetrate a little deeper. Half an hour for fingertips and toes to succumb.

Finally, George got close to the top; two pairs of hands reached over the lip of the crevasse and he was dragged out on his belly.

‘At last!’ Nima exclaimed. ‘Now hurry please! Send down the gear, we’re freezing down here!’

A further unexplained delay occurred. Kami guessed they were filming something up top. The crevasse gave out a few more ghostly groans as the ice flexed – it really was getting Kami quite spooked. Then, finally, the gear was sent down to the two boys.

'You want to go first?' Kami asked his friend.

'Of course I *want* to,' Nima snapped, 'but you go.'

He handed the kit over. Kami stamped his feet on the ladder, trying to shock his toes back into life. Then he strapped on the chest harness and began to ascend the rope. He felt his hands begin to thaw out, the dull pain of the hot-aches causing him to swear beneath his breath.

'Come on! We have to get out here!' Nima urged him.

As Kami ascended he noticed something curious; he could no longer hear the voices of the others up top. He figured they must be filming.

Nima was now a tiny figure beneath him, little more than a dark shadow really at the bottom of the slot.

'You OK?' Kami called down.

'No.' Nima uttered.

Kami summoned some more energy from somewhere and put on a burst of movement. He hauled himself up the small overhang, rolled onto the ice and rested for a few seconds as he looked around in surprise.

There was no-one there at all. The whole team had hurried back down to Base Camp.

It wasn't what he expected. He had thought Tenzing would leave at least a couple of his men to help them. But no. There was no welcoming voice to greet him. No friendly hand to help him up.

The sun had long since crashed below the ridge. He reckoned there was just an hour to dusk. He couldn't even hear the voices of the descending team. The icefall felt desolate and threatening.

'They've all gone,' he yelled down the crevasse.

'Whatever. Just send down the gear,' Nima's voice was curiously thin, and Kami thought he could detect a tinge of desperation in it.

'OK.' He unclipped the jumar clamps and the chest harness, but his fingers were still partly frozen and he messed up.

'Look out!'

The two jumars slipped out of his grasp, bounced once, then slipped down the angled ice into the crevasse.

'Catch them!' he yelled.

But it was already too late. It had all happened too fast. The gear had dropped in a flash, out of Nima's reach, through the narrowest part of the fissure and into the dark interior of the glacier.

‘Was that what I think it was?’ Nima called up. There was a hollow ring of despair in his tone.

‘Yes, I … ’

Nima bawled him out with a vicious string of swear words. He raged and cursed Kami in a way that he had never been cursed before. Kami listened, aghast. He had never felt so clumsy and hamfisted.

‘I’m so sorry … ’ he stammered.

‘Try and pull me up,’ Nima cried. He tried to climb hand over hand up the rope, his crampons kicking hopelessly into the steely ice wall. Kami clutched the rope and bent his entire force to the task, but was unable to pull his friend up even a single metre.

Nima called for him to stop.

‘You’ll have to catch them up,’ he yelled. ‘Get some more jumars. Quickly, Kami. Quickly!’

Kami yelled some words of encouragement to Nima and started to race down the icefall.

He knew he was taking risks but what choice did he have? Every extra minute that Nima was imprisoned in that ice was a minute in hell.

Would Nima get frostbite down there? Hypothermia? Could he even freeze to death? Kami pushed himself to move faster and faster, sliding down the vertical ladders, crashing into the soft snow at the base, rushing across the crevasse bridges without even tying on.

He was pushing his body too hard. A sort of oxygen deficit began to set in; he felt giddy, sick with a toxic concoction of hypoxia and fear. He experienced an urgent need to stop and defecate but that was out of the question.

The awful moment went round and round in his head. How had he ever been so stupid? So ham fisted. Dropping those jumars over the edge revealed what he really was; a hopeless beginner, the worst type of amateur.

He stopped for a beat, let out a cry: ‘Tenzing! Stop!’

A fractured echo bounced back mockingly from the west flank. No response. He began to move again. Following the wands. Jumping the smaller slots. Taking chances that the snow bridges would hold. Feeling the treacherous bounce of the ladders as the depths yawned beneath.

Every time he rounded a serac he expected to see the retreating figures of the expedition. But they had half an hour’s head start on him and were moving fast. The maze was empty and time was racing with unreasonable speed.

Then he saw them. Just a few hundred metres from the rocky edge of the glacier.

‘Hey!’ Kami screamed. He put so much force into the yell he thought his tonsils might get blasted out of his throat.

Tenzing turned. He waited as Kami caught up. The team gathered round as he gasped out the story.

Then Kami felt his vision narrow in the most disturbing way. Flashing shapes were gathering in at the edges of his world. The glacier was actually turning black. Someone offered him a water bottle but he couldn't co-ordinate his arm to reach up and grab it.

Kami fainted there and then, flat out on the ice.