



# THE SLEEPING PINES

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Islamabad sits nestled below a ridgeline in the western foothills of the Himalayas known as the Margallas. The city's residents have varying relationships with the flanking hills, most simply admiring them from the comforts of their overlooking balconies and flooding multiple social media platforms with clichéd captions under pictures of its' steep green faces on a rainy day. In contrast, my experiences have been a little more visceral.

The sport of rock climbing is a strange endeavour, but to some, its' allure is irresistible. At first glance, it looks like a dangerous and pointless pass time, but upon closer inspection, it provides experiences like no other sport or hobby. A deep connection with nature, an endless pursuit for self-improvement, resilience to the elements and character building come part and parcel. Then there is the most crucial element of trust: rock climbing is done in pairs, with the utmost dependency on your partner. Friendship and camaraderie become the by-products of climbing with a partner. You have your life in someone else's hands.

One experience that left a lasting impression was in the summer of 2020. The story starts with my friend Aadil, and me tied to the ends of a climbing rope on a 'small' north-facing slab. The exposed piece of limestone, referred to as 'Music Lounge' by the initiated, is aptly named if one gives a lot of leeway to the word 'lounge'. The rock is perched about two-thirds up the hills, surrounded by pine forests at higher elevations. Access is via a small game trail starting from an inconspicuous turning on the road to Pir Sohawa. The trail is narrow and steeply climbs the ridge cutting through overgrown thickets. It becomes imperceptible at various points, where the forest reclaims its lost territory, only to reappear a few meters down. After winding up and over the

After winding up and over the ridge, the trail descends into a valley, and the crag soon appears on the right. It is evident from its state that the narrow pathway is only frequented by nearby residents, climbers, and the local wild boar.

As the sun dips below the western mountains, the evening light illuminates the surrounding vista. A minor, almost invisible, increase in the wind makes us aware of the shifting scenario. A simple nod of acknowledgement, and we start our descent rituals. Abseil down - remove gear - coil rope - stuff rucksack - put on rain shell. We had been here before; by now, it is a standard procedure.

'No gear on the wall.'  
'No gear.'

It shouldn't take more than a few minutes, and it doesn't. But by the time we reach the trail, the breeze has turned into a howling gust as the valley funnelled the surge into tight corners. The clouds are in a hurry to empty their contents as fast as possible, and the dying light that lingered in the valley is pushed aside to make room for the encompassing darkness. The entire forest around us fights the occasional buffeting of the wind. The gale scoops the falling rain and slams it against the swaying flora, even the large pines prostrate before the sudden force of the stream.

We keep moving—no need to panic.

As navigation difficulties increased, thunder and lightning cracks joined the fray. The booming sound of the colliding clouds continually resonates in the valley. We stay true to our course until we reach our first impasse. The steep ridge that was a descent on approach now towers before us in the dark.

The wind quickly swallows up the few words of communication, and we decide to find shelter, hoping to wait out the storm before attempting the ridge. A wise decision, but for the lack of shelter anywhere. Surrounded by unending forest, straying too far from the already faint trail would be folly.

We crouch under a large pine tree. It hardly provides any respite, as the severity of the storm only increases with each passing moment. The otherwise seemingly static woods are jostling to the whims and directions dictated by the turbulent air. It is wetter under the tree. The excess water falls from the canopy, flooding the already saturated ground. Our headlamps struggle to pierce the downpour and darkened evening. It isn't long before we are reassessing our available options. My attempt to collect my thoughts and communicate with Adil is suddenly interrupted by an impact squarely aimed at the top of my head.

Now time to panic. The object was light enough to bounce off my head but heavy enough to shake my confidence in our current 'shelter'. I am not staying any longer—time to brave the ridge. We start moving and begin the short but steep ascent. As we emerge over the ridge, we are met head-on by another forceful gust constricted by features on the other side. We keep moving. Even at arm's length, the trail is hard to discern, but we have trodden this path before, and we know where we're heading. The process is simple. You look down, identify the trail for a few meters, look up, move, and repeat.

However, the storm is not done with us just yet.

We come to a grinding halt. In front of us lies a dead end. A colossal pine has been felled by the rising winds and lies where there was once a path. The branches spike out like sharp battlements pointing to the sky, taking the trunk's former posture. The bulk of the pine spreads infinitely to our sides, blocking all hopes of circumventing the obstacle. More decision-making amid the storm; our headlamps cannot illuminate anything other than the surrounding thicket.

'The trail must continue on the other side of the tree'.

Trying to traverse the tree feels akin to squeezing through barbed wire; the storm shows no signs of abating.

We emerge on the other side after an immense struggle. There is no trail. Instead, we find ourselves in a gully funneling the flooding stormwater.

We must go back. 'Hop' over the obstructing pine again, and we return to square one.

Silver lining? Our orientation is still fairly accurate, and we determine that our salvation is close. We start breaking the trail along the tree, hoping to meet the lost trail. We struggle through the encircling shadows and shrubs to find the trail again. Stepping on the small path on this occasion gives us a welcome dose of endorphins. We are almost there. With a few quick strides powered by adrenaline, the barely audible sounds of cars breaking through the storm provide the motivation for the remaining stretch.

Driving back into the city, the carnage inflicted by the storm

is evident. The proud Islamabadi landmark Centaurus has lost some roofing. Many trees that line the streets of Islamabad have found new resting places on the roofs of cars and the trending topic of those who experienced it on flatter terrain is the severity and sudden onset of the storm. The Pine Tree still sleeps there, serving as a new landmark to the seldom-visited trail. Locals have harvested its branches for firewood.



Figure 1. Abseiling a route in the Margalla

You may ask why we keep returning to the rocks. Some may view being forced to battle a storm as traumatic, but to me, it speaks to our place in the world. How small we are when we are measured against the might of nature. A climber's relationship with the wild is not antagonistic and competitive but aims to develop a symbiosis. Learning the language of the mountains comes with experience, and you set out not to conquer nature but to participate in its great dance.



Figure 2. Climbing steep terrain

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