

Lindgren at the North Fork of the American River, near his home in Northern California

photographs by CAYCE CLIFFORD

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Expedition kayaker Scott Lindgren knocked off first descents of the most remote and dangerous rivers on earth, from the Himalayas to the Sierra. He paddled with an aggro attitude and saw weakness as an unforgivable trait in himself and others. But when a brain tumor started to derail his athletic performance and threaten his life, everything changed. BY SCOTT LINDGREN with THAYER WALKER

The worst part about paddling Uganda's Murchison Falls section of the White Nile wasn't the rapids, even though the 50 miles of Class V whitewater is bookended by a pair of unrunnable waterfalls. It wasn't the threat of disease, even though during my first visit to Uganda, in 2000, I slipped out of the country just before an Ebola outbreak. It wasn't even the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the brutal rebel force that had been kidnapping, conscripting, and killing children in northern Uganda for decades and called this region home. No, the worst part was the hippos, among Africa's most dangerous animals, thanks to their enormous size and rude temperament. They were everywhere, and they did not appreciate our intrusion into their world.

Dozens of them pooled in flatwater beneath rapids. They erupted from the depths without warning, sometimes just a boat length away, presenting the bewildering reality that a 5,000-pound animal could move with the silence of a minnow. Initially, I thought the whitewater might provide refuge, but then

I watched a hippo swim straight through a Class V rapid. And there were crocodiles, too, almost as numerous and only slightly less ill-mannered. It couldn't have been a worse place for me to start falling apart.

It was August 2007, and I was there to make a film about Steve Fisher, a rambunctious South African and world-class paddler. Fisher had been part of an expedition I led in 2002 to complete the first successful descent of the Upper Gorge of Tibet's Yarlung Tsangpo River, which is considered one of the most difficult kayaking feats of my generation. During high school, when I first got a taste for whitewater as a raft guide in California's Sierra Nevada, this was the kind of opportunity I dreamed of. But now, on the red banks of the Nile, at age 34, it was all becoming a nightmare.

I FELT TERRIBLE. My energy level was so low that sometimes it took me 30 minutes to get up in the morning. In 2004, after a weeklong first descent of China's Class V Upper Salween River, my vision blurred temporarily.

I had attributed it to the hangover following the usual post-expedition bender. That was the drill back then: drink when you're up, drink when you're down, and spend the rest of the time sending it on a giant river in the middle of nowhere. But the Nile was no place for a beer cooler, and I was still having problems seeing, thinking, and paddling straight.

In addition to Fisher and me, there were five other river runners on this trip, including South African Hendri Coetzee. We traveled with an 18-foot support raft—helmed by legendary explorer Pete Meredith—because its size served as a (minor) deterrent to crocs and hippos. My younger brother, Dustin, sat in front, alternating between filming and paddling. Dustin and I grew up guiding rafts together in California, and as a cinematographer, he's worked on many of my expeditions including the Tsangpo.

Trouble started at the put-in. Crocs greeted us in the flatwater, and after only a quarter-mile, the support raft flipped. I fought back a flash of panic when I saw Dustin swim, not because he was in danger of drowning but

because in the water he was bait.

I paddled to the raft, where Dustin and I locked eyes, reading each other's minds: *Nothing about this feels right. We can still go back.* That fleeting moment of vulnerability was quickly beaten back by a philosophy that had guided my life since I was a little boy: Harden the fuck up.

It was a lesson I'd learned during a tumultuous childhood, and it kept me alive on the mean streets of San Bernardino, California, where my walk home from school routinely ended in either a fistfight or a thousand-yard sprint to the front door. It was a lesson drilled into me as the youngest guide on the Colorado River, and one that pushed me to bag more than 50 first descents on three continents over two decades and make dozens of adventure films. Now that mantra was going to get me down this hellacious river.

I paddled badly over the next five days. I was tentative, avoiding every obstacle I could, searching for Class IV sneak routes rather than running the guts. Even then I'd miss my line and get flipped by some junky feature that I'd normally blast through. I never had to swim—a dangerous predicament that occurs when an upside-down kayaker fails to paddle upright and has to slip out of the boat—but I had trouble keeping my balance. When I did find myself upside down, I was completely disoriented. My roll, the foundational technique of whitewater kayaking that rights a flipped boat, felt like a beginner's frenzied groping.

At one point, a teammate pulled me aside and let me have it. "You're paddling like shit," he said. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You're jeopardizing this whole mission." He wasn't wrong or particularly out of line. That was just how we communicated.

The worst of it came during a portage on our third day. Given the difficulty of carrying all our gear and the multitude of dangerous creatures along the banks, it was sometimes safer—and easier—to run a giant rapid than to get out of our boats. But in this case we didn't have a choice. Hippos and elephants had stomped out a network of tunnels through the dense jungle, which Fisher and I followed in search of a way around. Dustin broke down the raft for transport.

Suddenly, we heard low grunting, followed by a crashing sound that grew louder and louder. We never saw the hippo, but from the safety of a nearby tree, we watched the brush collapse in its path as the beast ran toward the river—and my brother. Dustin jumped into the raft, dodging the lumbering animal by inches. By the time I got to the river, I could see only the back of its head as it swam away.

I turned toward Dustin and let out a deep sigh. I didn't realize that my fuzzy vision and

weakness were symptoms of something far more serious than the standard case of expedition exhaustion. I had no idea that this trip would be my last time in a kayak for almost ten years. All I knew was that we had 1,500 pounds of gear to haul through the jungle before we could put back onto a river full of things that wanted to kill us. I clipped on my helmet and considered that mantra one more time.

Harden the fuck up.

I SPENT MY childhood bouncing around California's Central Valley, far from any whitewater. My father, Craig, was a traveling salesman who sold everything: agricultural products, building aggregate, computer hardware. My mother, Mary, raised Dustin and me. We drifted through the hot and arid inland capitals—Visalia, Merced, Fresno—in a

I barely recognized myself. Sometimes I'd sleep for 15 hours straight, only to wake with blurry vision and fuzzy thoughts. I hardly had the strength to lift my kayak into my truck. Was I suffering from Lyme disease? Malaria? Concussions? I felt like I was chasing a ghost.

series of moves that would shape my passion for a nomadic lifestyle.

My parents were irrefutable proof that opposites attract. Mom is the most disciplined, organized, and sensible person I know. Dad will be a wild man until the day he dies. He introduced us to the mountains, taking us skiing and backpacking for the first time. A former Marine, he lived fast and loose. He loved drag boats and kept a beautiful flat-bottom V-drive named *Love Me or Leave Me* in the garage. Bins of empty beer cans were in there, too, and Dad concocted a thrilling if mildly delinquent method for their disposal. Dustin and I would line them up on the street, a runway of Coors stretching hundreds of feet. Then Dad would get in his flatbed truck, crush them, and let us pocket the refund.

One Christmas morning, after my brother and I opened our presents, my parents told us they were getting a divorce. Before we knew it, Dad was gone. I was seven.

Suddenly my mom, at 32, had two kids to raise on her own. Eventually, we moved to San Bernardino, where she enrolled at Cal State to study accounting. The city's early economy was built on agriculture and pros-

titution, and little seemed to have changed when we moved into a modest house off Church Avenue and Base Line, a strip that was infamous for drugs and hookers.

While mom supported us on student loans and part-time work, Dustin and I were learning lessons of a different sort. In sixth grade, two of my classmates got pregnant. There was an acid bust. I got suspended for smoking cigarettes and fighting.

I had been in plenty of scraps before, but living off Base Line taught me the true meaning of savagery. One afternoon I was walking home when two kids threw me to the ground and started stomping me. As I got up, one of them stabbed me in the left shoulder with a pocketknife. I managed to escape and patch myself up so that when my mom got home she wouldn't have a clue. Amid all the chaos, she was killing herself

taking care of us. Keeping my troubles quiet was my way of taking care of her. Besides, I was having a pretty good time.

Money was tight, and Mom had to buckle down to finish her last three semesters of school. I've always excelled at sports—I played soccer, swam, and ran competitively—and she was concerned that I was going to find the kind of trouble that would jeopardize all that. So when I was 13, she sent us to our dad's place in the Bay Area suburb of Pleasanton. Life there was a different scene entirely. Kids had stable families and got allowances. There I was, a little hoodlum in training, dropped into a town so lovely that it literally named itself pleasant.

When I wasn't playing sports, I ran hustles, positioning myself as a middleman and convincing our new pool of friends to cough up their allowances to buy weed and beer. Dad, meanwhile, continued his hands-off approach to parenting, leaving us free to do as we pleased.

In eighth grade, I was handcuffed and detained by the cops for possession of alcohol. Mom reintroduced some structure into our lives when I started high school. She'd gotten an accounting job, met a guy, and moved



Lindgren running California's Upper Heath Springs Falls

us to Rocklin, a small town in the shadow of the Sierra Nevada. It was our last move, and it probably saved my life.

WE LIVED TWO doors down from a raft guide named Doug Stanley. When I was 15, I took my first trip with Doug's business partner, Roger Lee, down Giant Gap, a 14-mile Class IV–V section of the North Fork of the American River. As soon as I got home, I begged my mom to let me attend Doug and Roger's guiding school. I was barely passing my classes, and she'd only let me go if I managed a B average. That spring, I brought home my first 3.0.

I was 16 when I completed the course. No one on the American would hire me because I was too young, so I cold-called John Vail, the owner of Outdoors Unlimited, which ran trips through the Grand Canyon.

"Did you learn how to row?" John asked. I told him I did, which was almost true.

"Can you get here tomorrow?" he asked. I wasn't sure I'd heard him right.

"Excuse me?"

"I need you here tomorrow," he said. Forty-eight hours later I was on the Colorado River, a 135-pound kid with barely a week of experience, pushing a 2,000-pound gear-filled oar boat down one of the most remote and iconic stretches of whitewater in the country.

The river sang to my heart. I'd been fighting my whole life—kids, teachers, cops, parents—and here was a force so powerful that my only choice was surrender. I recognized the river as a teacher, offering me a gateway to the world. It channeled all the energy that was going to get me locked up or killed into something productive. I couldn't get enough.

When I wasn't making money as a guide, I was spending it kayaking. I went to Idaho's North Fork of the Payette when I was 20 and met Charlie Munsey, who knew where to find some of the biggest rivers of them all: in the Himalayas. A few months later, during the fall of 1992, I went on my first trip to Asia and completed a descent of the 30-mile Class V Tamur River, where I learned a les-

son that would reinforce my approach to expedition kayaking.

By the time we got off the Tamur, I had a raging fever, a sore throat, and an ear infection. Sitting in the bus station, staring down a 35-hour ride back to Kathmandu, I told Charlie I felt like I was dying and considered staying in a hotel room for the night. But the river never stopped and neither would we. I sucked it up, and several days later we were attempting a first descent on the Thule Beri.

The nineties were a golden age of white-water exploration. Paddlers had been sniffing around the Himalayas' great rivers since the seventies, but an evolution in boat design and materials, and a natural progression of skill and ambition, launched a revolution. At the time, a gradient of 60 feet per mile was considered extreme for a high-volume river, but in British Columbia, Charlie and I were running some of the Stikine River's steepest sections at 100 feet per mile. How much further could we push it? We'd roll out the topo maps and spend weeks debating what was doable.

In 1994, I started a film company that would eventually become Scott Lindgren Productions. My office in Auburn, California, became a kayaking mecca because of its proximity to world-class whitewater and the potential for hungry paddlers to get in a movie. We had athletes coming in from everywhere (New Zealand, South America, Europe) and sleeping anywhere (in my closet, in my front yard, or on any unclaimed inch of couch or floor space). I negotiated six-figure budgets to make adventure films; picked up a slew of sponsors, from kayak brands to Detroit automakers; and helped my friends do the same. I even won an Emmy for cinematography. I wasn't getting rich, but I was making a living doing what I loved, and that was enough.

"HARDEN THE FUCK UP" became an underlying theme of my trips. I had learned to smell fear and weakness during my street-fighting days, and as soon as I caught a whiff on the river, I would crank up the intensity. On one trip down California's Middle Kings, a friend brought along his brother, who couldn't keep up. Rather than slow the pace, I sped up. Hard lines, long days, no rest. I knew he'd eventually make it down, but by the end he was crushed. He never paddled with me again. It was a harsh code, but the consequences were too severe to play Mr. Rogers. Too many of my paddling friends had died in river accidents, and that was a brand of suffering I couldn't take.

In 1997 alone, seven kayakers I knew died in a matter of months, including my best friend, Chuck Kern, at 27. Chuck was our

North Star. He gave our crew direction and ran the stoutest whitewater. He was always out front, pushing our pace, our lines, our very concept of the sport.

That summer, Chuck and I had been making the rounds at the semiannual Outdoor Retailer trade show in Salt Lake City. After it wrapped, Chuck and his two younger brothers, Willie and Johnnie, drove to Colorado to paddle the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. They invited me along, but I had to get back to Auburn to edit a movie. I wasn't home for more than a day when I got a call from Johnnie. "We lost Chuck," he said.

I jumped in a van with my production partner, Mark Hayden. We drove 15 hours straight. Standing on the canyon rim, looking through binoculars, I could see the tip of a kayak pinned under a rock. Chuck was still in his boat. The Gunnison is dam controlled, and the next day they brought the water down. I'll never forget the sight of his slumped, lifeless body being pulled out, so different from the friend I knew. It tore all of us apart.

It also crystallized my commitment to kayaking. What else was I going to do? Push rubber down the Grand Canyon again? Get a nine-to-five? I began to fixate on the most audacious idea I'd ever heard, proposed to me by Charlie Munsey: paddling the four rivers of Mount Kailash. In a region defined by spectacular mountains, Tibet's Mount Kailash is unique. The 21,778-foot pyramid-shaped peak stands alone in the interior of the Tibetan Plateau and is considered a holy site by four religions. A quartet of great rivers—the Karnali, Sutlej, Tsangpo, and Indus—flow from the mountain in four cardinal directions. No one had run all four. Charlie suggested we become the first.

After Chuck's death, I poured myself into the project, first making the 32-mile circumnavigation of the mountain on foot, a pilgrimage that Buddhists believe washes away a lifetime of sin. By 2002, I had descended the Karnali, Sutlej, and Tsangpo. Only the Indus remained.

My expedition teams were built with rigid rules. Outsiders were untested and therefore unwelcome; emotional weakness was stomped out, usually with a verbal dig or a physical feat. I shunned any hint of vulnerability, because if the river—the strongest force I knew—didn't hurt us, nothing else should.

To a degree it worked. I've known more than 35 people who have died kayaking, but over the 20-plus years of leading expeditions, everyone on my team has come home alive. I pray that never changes. Still, as I watched friend after friend drop away from the sport as a result of substance abuse, trauma, or the responsibilities of adulthood, the tools

I'd developed to survive on the water left me dangerously ill-equipped to navigate the challenges of everyday life.

AFTER RETURNING home from the hippo-dodging fiasco in Uganda in 2007, I needed a break. Adrenaline was the only thing that kept me going on the White Nile, and once I got back to Auburn, I collapsed. I planned to take three months off from the water, edit the movie we'd shot, then get back to paddling. Three months turned into nearly ten years.

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dition caused by a drop in hormone production in the thyroid gland, slowing metabolism and other critical functions.

I threw myself into researching the condition. I tried Western medicine and alternative treatments and followed a strict diet but experienced only marginal improvement. I lived cheaply and took filmmaking jobs, but I wasn't planning projects of my own. I didn't have the fire.

Asking for help had become antithetical to my self-image, so when I got sick and really needed it, I didn't know how to find or receive it. I went from being at the center of everything for 20 years to feeling entirely alone. The phone went silent. I didn't have the energy to maintain relationships with my kayak buddies or my sponsors, and they fell away. I abandoned my dream of running the Indus and completing the four rivers of the Kailash. As my mid-thirties rolled into my forties, I figured this was how careers ended. It had been a good run.

Then, on Christmas Day in 2014, I got my first splitting headache, followed on New Year's Eve by a triple-vision-inducing skull crusher that left me blacked out on the

bedroom floor. An MRI finally revealed the source of all this misery: a brain tumor.

I never thought I'd be happy to find out I had a brain tumor, but the news lifted my spirits. I wasn't just tired; I hadn't simply lost it. I had a growth a shade smaller than a baseball wrapped around my right carotid artery, a vascular superhighway that carries blood to the brain. Called a pituitary adenoma, it was pressing on my optic nerves, causing the blurry vision, and my pituitary gland, accounting for my low energy. My neurosurgeon, Brian Jian, suggested it may have been there for 15 years, making it entirely possible that I carried it down the Tsangpo. Suddenly, I had something tangible to fight.

I had surgery a month later. Jian slid a toolbox of sharp, foot-long instruments up my nose and cut through my septum and sinus into the center of my skull, where he

scraped out a tumor with the form and consistency of a lump of cottage cheese. Embedded in my cranial vital parts, it was too risky to remove entirely. Eventually, he told me, it would start growing back.

Within a month, I was experiencing sensations I'd long forgotten. Everything seemed sharper—smells and sounds, my visual and mental clarity—and I was more energetic than I'd been in years. Physically, I was healing. Emotionally, I had a long way to go.

I told only a few people about the tumor and swore them all to secrecy. I perceived it as a form of weakness, a giant neon sign announcing my vulnerabilities to the world. I'd already lost my identity as a kayaker—now I was the guy with the brain tumor? Who could ever love someone like that?

I isolated myself in a prison of my own making and hit rock bottom in September 2015, seven months after the surgery, when I was arrested for my second DUI in four and a half years. I stumbled out the back door of a bar and into my car when a cop appeared. A drunk driver had just killed someone down the block, she said. I was arrested and processed, and eventually I ended up in a holding



Clockwise: Lindgren on the Indus River; with Aniol Serrasolses; with Charlie Munsey (center) and Gerry Moffatt, 1995

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKE LEEDS PHOTOGRAPHY; CHARLIE MUNSEY; MIKE DAWSON

cell next to a guy in his early twenties, dressed for a night on the town. He looked crushed, slumped over with his elbows on his knees, his face resting in his palms. I noticed a rap sheet next to him—he was the other drunk driver, and now he was facing charges for vehicular manslaughter. I was fortunate that my actions resulted in only a ten-day sentence in the Sacramento county jail.

In January 2016, I met Patricia. She was strong and beautiful, worked in the wellness industry, and had spent a lifetime practicing and studying emotional growth. We fell in love hard and fast and bought a house in Truckee. For the first time in years, I thought I was in a healthy relationship, until she told me that she was struggling to stay with me.

It's the tumor, I told myself. She thinks I'm weak. After collecting my thoughts, I asked her why.

"You're not emotionally available," she said. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Not emotionally available?" I replied. "Take off your clothes, I'll show you what emotionally available looks like."

She hit back like a 20-foot wave. "That's exactly what I'm talking about, Scott. You have nothing to offer other than physical responses, to everything. You need help." In other times, I'd run from a situation like this—to the river, to the bar—but I'd sworn off drinking and hadn't touched a kayak in years. I couldn't escape the truth she was forcing me to confront.

Patricia had a strong set of emotional tools and started showing me how to develop my own. I began therapy, reading books, meditating, and writing. She suggested I take a weeklong course in Napa designed to help people build the skills I was lacking. She stuck with me and promised that if it got too intense, she'd come and get me.

"Do you know how much suffering I've done?" I scoffed. "I can handle anything for seven days." A few hours into the program, I realized that I was starting a Tsangpo descent into my own psyche, down a river that never ends. It was one of the hardest journeys of my life, one that forced me to confront behavior that had shaped my first 44 years. I began to understand that knowing how to harden the fuck up didn't make me strong, and that being emotionally vulnerable didn't make me weak. Learning to talk about the pain inside helped me let it go, so I wouldn't need to bury it in a river canyon or a bottle of booze. By the end of the week, I was hopeful that the next time help arrived, I could be vulnerable enough to receive it.

TOWARD THE END of 2015, I got a call from an old friend and kayaking buddy named Gerry Moffatt. I'd met Gerry in the early nine-

ties on the North Fork of the Payette River in Idaho. We'd run a number of big rivers in the Himalayas together and completed the fifth self-supported descent of the Stikine in 1995. He was turning 53 and planning to run it one more time. "I want you there with me," he said.

I had no illusions that I was ready to tackle a river like that again, but Gerry's call motivated me to relearn the sport I'd nearly forgotten. I started on the rivers in my backyard in the Sierra. I was a shell of the athlete I'd been. I felt so demeaned; after two decades at the top of the sport, I was back at the bottom, the weakest link, the kind of boater I would have ostracized before. But I kept forcing myself out of bed, calling only my closest friends to go kayaking with me as I tried to puzzle my way back into the world of dangerous whitewater.

In June 2016, I traveled back to Idaho to ramp up my training on the Payette. In Boise, I ran into Aniol Serrasolses, a 28-year-old from the Catalan region of Spain and one of the best kayakers on the planet. He needed a ride to the Payette and, after hopping in my truck, asked about the Tsangpo. I told him about the expedition, about my dream to paddle the four rivers of Kailash,

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and how all those plans had been derailed. Instead of judging or ostracizing me after I poured out my soul, this guy I hardly knew did something I never could have imagined. He offered to help.

"What's your fourth river?" Aniol asked.

"The Indus," I replied. Aniol smiled.

"You know, we're running the Indus this fall. You should come."

I wasn't sure I'd be able to run the Stikine, let alone the Indus, but the fact that Aniol would consider inviting an old broken-down boater into his world blew me away. He was offering me something I never would have offered anyone in my condition when I was his age.

We paddled Upper Cherry Creek and I swam. I swam on the North Fork of the Mokelumne and on a familiar backyard run on the North Yuba. It didn't seem to matter

to anyone but me. Technique had evolved over the decade I'd been away, and Aniol was relentless in his coaching. "You're not paddling hard enough," he'd tell me. "You're sitting too far back in your boat—drive!"

Aniol wasn't the only person willing to help. The more open and vulnerable I became, the more people wanted to paddle with me. The kids didn't just teach me how to kayak again, they helped me open my heart.

I didn't go to the Indus that fall, but I did run the Stikine with Gerry, a trip that revealed both my potential and my limitations. I made two runs down the 60-mile canyon, half of which is Class V whitewater, but ended up in surgery for a hernia I'd suffered on my second lap, when a boil sucked my boat underwater and tore my stomach muscles. As I recovered, Aniol reached out with good news: the Indus had been a success, he was going back in a year, and he could help me with the visa process for Pakistan. Suddenly, my dream to complete the four rivers of Kailash was back on the table.

I spent the next 12 months kayaking five days a week. I started running barefoot, conditioning my body for impact. The training was exhausting, but no matter how sore I was, I'd go kayaking, do yoga, or hit the

gym. For the first time since I was a teenager, the river filled my soul without condition. I wasn't thinking about the next movie or a big drop that would make my sponsors happy. Hell, I didn't have any sponsors. The only thing I had to focus on was my love for the river.

In the spring of 2017, after a routine checkup, I got the call I'd been dreading since brain surgery. My tumor had grown, and the doctor wanted to treat it with radiation. The course would be five days a week for six weeks, and it could increase my chances of developing dementia later in life. Most immediately, it would probably end my shot at the Indus.

I skipped radiation, canceled my doctor appointments, and channeled my energy into training for the Indus.

The renewed focus came at a cost. Patricia



"Learning to talk about the pain inside helped me let it go, so I wouldn't need to bury it in a river canyon or a bottle of booze," says Lindgren, seen here below a rapid called Scott's Drop on the North Fork of the American River that he was the first to run.

and I had stayed together, but there were still complications. The Indus expedition forced our hand. Among other things, she thought I was going to get myself killed, either on a river or by neglecting my illness. She didn't want to ride that roller coaster. I had to choose between the relationship and a 20-year dream. We broke up, and I went to Pakistan.

THE INDUS GAVE rise to the Harappan civilization, one of the most advanced societies in the ancient world, and today it's the breadbasket of Pakistan, transforming arid plains into an agricultural heartland. The river falls some 2,000 miles from the Tibetan Himalayas to the Arabian Sea, and its upper reaches present some of the riskiest whitewater in the world. The Rondou Gorge section we were focused on consists of more than a hundred Class V rapids, making the river a more or less continuous 85-mile stretch of deadly whitewater.

Our team couldn't have been stronger: Aniol, Rush Sturges, Mike Dawson, Ben Marr, and Brendan Wells. I was the gray-beard of the group, 13 years older than the next-youngest paddler, Rush, who at 32 was starting to wonder how much longer he would push the edges of our sport. Dur-

ing my last trip to the Himalayas, to run the Tsangpo, I was the alpha. Now I was just hoping to keep up with the kids—and grateful for the opportunity to try.

The Indus is runnable only at its lowest flows, so we started in November 2017, once the monsoon floods had subsided. The river quickly demonstrated who was in charge. Just below the put-in, Aniol, who had run the Indus twice without major incident, was pushed into a river-wide hole that tore his helmet from his head, pulled his body out of the boat, and dragged him underwater for 40 yards. He emerged with a tweaked shoulder that would plague him for the rest of the trip. That was rapid number one.

Everyone recognized that we'd all have good days and bad days, and that there was no shame in scaling it back when we weren't feeling 100 percent, physically or mentally. The approach helped me measure my kayaking—and my life—not in wins and losses, but in whether I showed up with an open heart. If I had a bad day, I told myself it was my turn for the universe to kick my ass. If I had a good day, I enjoyed the flow of life. It was all so simple.

As we pushed deeper into the Rondou Gorge, the canyon walls and the whitewater

grew bigger. Navigating became a constant struggle between holding our lines and the river's irresistible effort to push us where it pleased. There was one rapid, Zero to Sixty, that had been on my mind since the put-in and would test my limits.

The entire river pinches through a narrow gap, creating a three-story hole on the left that could eat a house. The only way through was to drive my kayak down a narrow ramp of water at the center and paddle like hell to hold my line. Aniol went before me, hit the bottom of the ramp, and was launched 20 feet into the air. I followed, paddling furiously to get onto the ramp. As lateral waves battered me, I slid down the ramp's tongue, hit the bottom, got flipped, got pounded, and rolled back up. A good day.

After a white-knuckle week, we reached the confluence of the Gilgit River, where the canyon walls gave way to a wide plain. I was overwhelmed: by the massive mountain peaks and the equally massive river; by the decades-long dream I'd just realized; by the sheer impossibility that I'd even had the opportunity to do so; and most important, by my gratitude to this next generation of paddlers for helping me rebuild my life. I leaned forward, put my head on the deck of my boat, and wept.

Three days after returning home, I was back in the hospital for an MRI, prepared for the worst. "The tumor has stabilized," Jian told me. "No growth." The results shocked us both. "What did you do?" he asked.

"I went kayaking," I replied.

"Well," Jian suggested, "maybe you shouldn't stop?"

AT 47, SCOTT LINDGREN (@SCOTTLINDGREN) CONTINUES TO FIGHT HIS BRAIN TUMOR AND KAYAK THE WORLD'S MOST DIFFICULT RIVERS. LEGACY, A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT HIS LIFE DIRECTED BY RUSH STURGES, WILL PREMIERE IN 2020. CORRESPONDENT THAYER WALKER (@INKDWELL) PROFILED BIG-WAVE SURFER MARK HEALEY IN 2016.

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