



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Loose Rock, Descending Unroped

Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Gate Butte

On March 29, Emir Alikadic (38) and Thomas Gappmayer (27) had just finished climbing Tingey's Terror (5.7), a multi-pitch route on the Gate Butte. After having lunch on top, the two decided to descend via a rappel into Green Adjective Gully, a popular cragging zone on the west side of Gate Butte. The two traversed toward a set of anchors reached by a short, easy downclimb to a ledge. Just before Alikadic reached the ledge, the large flake he was holding for balance pulled out. He managed to push it out of the way of his chest and legs, but lost his balance and started tumbling backward. He desperately tried to grab rocks or trees as he fell, but to no avail. After falling approximately 50 feet, just before he went over the lip of the cliff, the rope he was carrying on his back in a mountaineer's coil snagged a feature on the rock and caught him.

Alikadic managed to grab a tree and pull into an alcove just below the lip of the cliff. This alcove contained anchors for the route Mother of Pearl (5.11+), which a party had just finished climbing, leaving a rope through the anchors. He assessed his injuries and found a swollen ankle, blood on the back of his head, loss of skin and bleeding on the hands and forearms, and broken fingernails from clawing at the rock as he fell. The rope suffered multiple core shots and the sheath was melted in several sections, even fusing two strands at one point.

Since Alikadic was conscious and felt he had full mental function, the two decided to self-rescue. Alikadic rappelled the rope set up on Mother of Pearl and got down into the gully, while Gappmayer descended with the help of another climber.

Alikadic was met by several others at the base of the cliff, one of whom happened to be an EMT. She assessed his injuries and suggested he wait for emergency services, but he decided to continue the descent unaided. The climber scrambled and hiked down to the parking lot, where he was met by police and EMTs, who released him after examining his injuries.

ANALYSIS

The fact that this incident didn't end in a fatality can largely be attributed to luck. The fall could have been mitigated or avoided by roping up for the easy yet semi-technical downclimb to the anchor. The flake that pulled out was identified by the victim and his partner as potentially unstable, mere moments before the accident. His instincts had warned him against touching it, and he had avoided stepping on it, but he didn't think it would dislodge with the minimal force he placed on it for balance. Whenever there is doubt about scrambling unroped over exposed terrain, or if low-quality rock is present, don't hesitate to belay a short section.

Alikadic was not wearing a helmet at the time of the accident. He and his partner had taken them off while having lunch, and he had never bothered to put it back on. (It was clipped on the back of his harness and was broken during the fall.) Though his head injury was fortunately only a minor laceration, it could have been avoided had he been wearing his helmet. Rappelling is a frequent cause of rockfall, as climbers move over the rock and maneuver the ropes. Keep the helmet on until safely out of any rockfall zone. (Source: Emir Alikadic.)

Images

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