Long Fall on Ice – Unclipped from Anchor

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Icefields Parkway

Two climbers (male, 33, and female, 36) left their car at 5 a.m. on March 25, planning to climb Polar Circus, a long ice route above the Icefields Parkway. The risk of an avalanche was rated “moderate,” and during the previous evening the team had discussed trying to get up and down the route by about noon in order to minimize exposure to wet slab avalanches.

Approach conditions were slow, with crusty post-holing, but the approach ice pitches went quickly, and the pair reached the start of the guidebook pitches at about 7 a.m. After guidebook pitches one through three, there was another long, slow stretch of post-holing to get to the upper tiers.

Climber 1 attempted to link pitches four and five but came up short of the bolted belay. This long pitch took just over an hour to lead. Climber 2 then led a short segment of ice and slogged through snow to reach the belay atop pitch five. When the first climber arrived, she pointed out that it was nearly 11 a.m. and the slopes above the climb were now in the sun. She indicated the team should turn back, as per the previous evening’s conversation. Climber 1 responded that the team was “two pitches from the top” (not true) and he “didn’t come to Canada to turn back now.” He started up pitch six, climbing quickly and placing minimal protection. He attempted to link pitches six and seven with their 60-meter ropes but did not reach the belay stance, and the belayer declined to simul-climb due to the lack of protection. Therefore, the leader built a belay one bulge below the snow ledge that marks the top of pitch seven. The anchor had no ice screws, using only the leader’s ice tools.

Climber 2 followed the pitch and continued up past Climber 1’s belay onto the snow ledge. She found the two-bolt anchor, clipped her belay device to an equalized sling, and began to pull up the ropes. She felt resistance and inserted the ropes into the belay device. Her partner then yelled, “They’re tangled.” Climber 2 continued to pull up rope until she had about six to eight feet of slack in her hands. Meanwhile, her partner had gotten uncom- fortable at his hanging belay, and he unclipped from his anchor and stepped up to reach the tangled ropes. After Climber 2 pulled up a few more feet of rope, her partner’s feet suddenly blew and he fell about 50 feet because of the slack still in the rope tangle. He stopped on a sloping ledge. Up top, his partner tried to hold the ropes in her hands, but they burned through her gloves until her partner weighted the belay device clipped to the anchor.

Climber 2 yelled down to her partner, but he was unresponsive, so she escaped the belay and began to descend the unweighted strand of their half ropes. However, she soon realized there was a massive core shot in the rope, so she stopped and tied off the damaged rope with an overhand on a bight. She could now see Climber 1, and she coached him through building a screw anchor and unweighting his rope. She then reascended to the anchor using prusiks and prepared to rappel, using a knot block so she could descend the single undamaged rope and pull it down with the core-shot strand. In similar fashion, the team descended the rest of the route with 11 rappels and post-holing. They made it back to the car by about 6:30 p.m. Climber 1 had a possible concussion, a fracture in one arm, and a possible back injury.

ANALYSIS

Climber 1 (the climber who fell): “My comfort in such terrain led to complacency, the most dangerous thing of all. Under no circumstances should one ever unclip from an anchor until they are on belay.”

Climber 2: “Clear communication between partners is a safety concern. Turn-around times and belay expectations should be discussed and agreed to before “summit fever” takes effect. In addition, any climber embarking on long, remote climbs should not only be knowledgeable in self-rescue but also practice those techniques regularly, so that they can perform without hesitation in the event of an accident.” (Report source: Climber 2.)

Images

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