



## AAC Publications

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### **Rappel Failure — Dropped Rope**

Utah, Castle Valley, Castleton Tower

**On February 6, Clarissa Fortier (29) and Ariel\* (32) climbed the Kor-Ingalls Route (4 pitches, 5.9+) on Castleton Tower.** Ariel was an Israeli living in the United States, and Fortier was an American with six years of climbing experience throughout Colorado and southeastern Utah. Fortier had climbed Kor-Ingalls twice previously.

The morning forecast was good for the south-facing Kor-Ingalls: highs in the 40s F, sunny, and no wind advisory, according to Fortier. The team discussed rappel options and decided on a single 70-meter rope to descend the north face rappel route. On pitch two, they considered bailing due to cold and high winds. They chose to continue, as the climbing was well within their abilities and they had sufficient clothing. They summited at 2:30 p.m. in high winds and were eager to descend. Ariel got to the rappel station and began untangling the rope.

At that point, the pair had a miscommunication. Fortier, having experienced stuck rappel ropes on other desert routes, suggested saddlebagging the ropes due to the high winds. Ariel, eager to descend, proceeded to set up the rappel and threw one side of the rope down before locating the middle mark. This particular rappel station had larger than typical rap rings. After failing to locate the middle mark, Ariel took the other end—shorter in length than the side that had already been tossed—and released it. At that point the longer end was picked up by the wind and sucked through the anchor. The climbers had tied knots in both ends of the rope, but the stopper knot was pulled through the large rappel rings. The two climbers found themselves ropeless on top of the 400-foot tower.

Fortier recounts, “We had a phone and an LTE signal, so we called a friend in Moab.” After waiting in vain for a party they’d seen below and realizing their friends would not reach the base until dark, Fortier was encouraged by friends to call Grand County police around 3:30 p.m.

With the wind gusting over 50 mph, a helicopter circled the tower, eventually landing on the summit around 5 p.m. to drop two rescuers. The two rescuers waited atop Castleton while the climbers were helicoptered to a spot about a mile from the Castleton parking lot. They were driven to the Castleton trailhead and then hiked back up to the base of the tower in their socks, as their approach shoes, climbing packs, and car keys were all at the base of the tower.

[\*Not the climber’s real name.]

### **ANALYSIS**

Fortier says, “There are quite a few lessons to take away from this event. The greatest one: We should have secured a part of the rope to the anchor or to ourselves, because it is possible to drop the rope at the anchor station, especially in the high winds. She adds, “Another aspect of this event is that Ariel and I did not have clear communication, and I allowed the eagerness of getting off the tower to take precedent over my desire to rap using saddlebags. This event was a textbook example of how rushing can lead to situations that are unsafe. Thankfully, we got out of this situation safely, but I have a better understanding of how poor weather conditions, as well as fatigue and hunger, can cause key

elements to go overlooked or get skipped altogether.” (Source: Clarissa Fortier.)

## Images



Saddlebagging, shown here in the Wind River Range, is a useful technique for the first climber down to keep the ropes under control while rappelling in windy conditions.

## Article Details

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