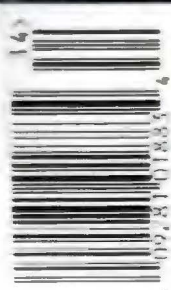


ANNAPURNA SOLO UELI STECK

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RAPHAEL SLAVINSKI **CHANCES K6 WEST**  
DOUG ROBINSON **TIPTOES UP DOMES**  
MOLLY LOOMIS **FORETELLS THE PAST**  
JEREMY COLLINS **FALLS IN LOVE**





## The Invitation

**ANDY IS NOT SUPERSTITIOUS.** That's what makes what happened so strange. In the dark purple of twilight, we squinted through binoculars, piecing together a line out of a jumble of ice: two pitches that trended right, up a shattered white staircase cracked by crevasses; one that cut back left over a snow pyramid that rose in crystalline geometry; and one that traversed to the base of the Lowe Route, an ice ramp that ran for eighteen pitches, as consistent as the long shave of a carpenter's plane, to the top of Peak Free Korea, in Ala Archa, Kyrgyzstan.

As Andy coaxed kerosene into the stove, I walked to the edge of the deserted moraine where the river of the Ak-Say brushed the broken granite shore. The cold shadow of Free Korea stretched toward me across the smooth carpet of snow. Almost thirty years ago, a crowd of men stood here, dressed in faded

down and nylon, listening to the sound of Russian military boots crunching on the snow, inhaling the nicotine that hung heavy on the air, and watching George Lowe—just a distant speck—scale the ridgeline. It was the first time Americans had climbed here. Lowe and Henry Barber soloed the peak one after the other while participating in a Soviet mountaineering camp during the Cold War. To me, the long crest of Free Korea still seemed to glimmer with the brief, creative freedom of that moment—a reminder of all that a climb can trigger and reflect, of how much more complex ascent is than simply moving up a mountain.

Andy called me to dinner. Shadows descended across the glacier as the earth rolled away into the dark. That night, we lay awake counting the drops that fell from the leaky roof of the Korona Hut, their pace slowing as the air grew colder and the water froze into tiny glass beads. Andy mumbled something about not being satisfied with our ice-screw selection. He talked me into changing plans.

I didn't understand, but it was late (or all too early), and I relented.

At first light, we turned away from Free Korea and toward Korona Peak instead. By 7:15 a.m. we were halfway up its sweeping flank when the sound of thunder ripped through the brilliant blue sky. I spun toward the noise: waves of seracs collided down the north face of Free Korea, scouring the route we'd contemplated so carefully. It was just the hour we would have aimed to be there—when the sunlight had not yet scrubbed away the shadows. My stomach twisted, and I imagined what it would be like to be whirling in that washing-machine tumble of white, if I'd even feel anything at all.

When the debris cloud settled, the pinnacle we'd planned to traverse was gone. Tons of snow and ice blocks clawed out toward us with long, skinny fingers of glittering white.

More than once, I've wished for a crystal ball. Not one that tells the future, but one

that reveals visions of climbs past. Through its hazy surface, you'd be able to see just how many times you'd barely missed, without even knowing it, a life-altering injury or death. And you might glimpse the hidden reasons. Was it premonition, skill or simply dumb luck that made the difference?

As I turned to climb again, I began replaying in my mind all the near misses I could remember from other peaks—the too-thin snow bridge that almost collapsed beneath me, the anchor that I was too distracted to clip (fortunately I didn't lean back), the slope that softened just enough so I could self-arrest before a rockband. If luck is some sort of cosmic commodity, I'd just drained my account. For now, the gentle angle of Korona seemed perfect, the beauty and the joy that I felt in the improbable shapes of its snow, in the gentle tug of the rope—everything appeared amplified, more than enough. But a burden underlay it all like an unstable, brooding storm. I tried to push it to the periphery. Did I owe some unknown force, like Tengri, that great white Turkic goose god who reigns over these mountains, for protection? Was that a debt I could ever repay?

From the summit of Korona, the Tien Shan's bric-à-brac pattern of summits unfolded before us, appearing endless. While we rested, Andy quietly admitted he'd been dreading the Free Korea route for days. "I didn't know why," he said, looking across the valley, shading his eyes with his hand, as if the answer were hidden in the glare of the sun. "Something kept not feeling right."

Years later, I still see that fan of icy fingers and hear the snow's roar. I keep wondering how the ending might have been different if I'd pushed or pleaded. Maybe the avalanche wouldn't have happened. Maybe we would have already climbed high enough on Free Korea to miss it. Of course, we'll never know. But I'm more aware, now, of all those small and seemingly trivial decisions we make with our partners—of how such moments have, ultimately, more significance in our lives than the fantastic feats that make for great stories. I was lucky that day. I was with a partner who listened. Not to me and to my unmet desires, but to silent shifts in snow and sky, and to the subtle message from some unknown cellar of his psyche that the disquiet he felt wasn't just pre-climb jitters. It was Andy's listening that saved us.

—Molly Loomis, Victor, Idaho