

## TOP NOTCH

Fredrik rocked on his skis, balancing on the razor's edge of the the granite peak. The rugged Alps sprawled in every direction without limit. He felt on top of the world where nothing could bring him down. Except Antoine. He could hear the filmmaker's helicopter clattering above as if Antoine was tapping his shoes, beside himself at his star's plodding pace. It was time to begin.

"We take one practice run," Antoine ordered earlier after they had worked out the ski route down the virgin slope. They were walking across the light snow to the helipad, Antoine taking nimble, hurried steps, Fredrik loping alongside, towering over the short, anxious director. Both were closer to middle age than youth. Both had remained single, dedicated to their calling. They were work friends, never socializing outside a project.

"I don't need a trial run," Fredrik said. He had performed in a number of films but he yearned for the World Cup competitions where he hoped to one day make his mark on the sport, to earn that scratch upon the face of anonymity.

"I need the trial run," Antoine said, sharply. "The film needs the run to get it right." His dark, ferret eyes peered at him with a natural arrogance. He liked Fredrik

and respected his talent. But he couldn't shake the regret that he had not hired a famous talent, one who could take his work to the next level.

"Whatever you need," Fredrik said. "I can ski all day."

Antoine shook his head in exasperation and waited for the tall, blonde Norwegian to climb past the camera gear and into the helicopter. Even this simple act seemed to take Frederik longer than most.

After they had agreed on the route down the mountain, Antoine pointed out the marks the skier had to hit for the camera. Antoine repeated them far more than he had to do.

"You must not deviate. *Comprende?*"

"Got it, *monsieur.*"

Fredrik ignored the condescension but, for the first time, guessed the source of the director's attitude might be their similarity, not their differences. Antoine had produced and directed many ski films but no blockbuster, nothing to put his work into the top realm.

Fredrik finally checked the fit of his goggles and gave a thumbs up. Still he hesitated, adjusting one of his gloves. He couldn't help savoring the pure, unblemished beginning. This was free-style. He saw the helicopter buffeted by a gust of wind. The delay was getting dangerous. No more waiting. He took a quick breath of the ice cold air and pushed off.

Far above, Antoine was hunched over his camera rig, suspended just outside the open door of the helicopter. The thin air was blistering cold. He peered into the viewfinder, the reflections off the snow like looking into the sun itself. He blinked from the momentary blindness. He avoided sunglasses when filming because they distorted the image.

Antoine was relieved to witness Fredrik push off. The athlete's form was as good as anyone he had ever filmed. He had to admit the Norwegian was talented, no doubt. Antoine also recognized he framed the shot a little wide in the viewfinder, dwarfing the skier in the sea of jagged peaks. He zoomed in slightly as Fredrik approached a hulking granite boulder, gleaming like a raw jewel in the bright light. Next time, Antoine told himself, he would not get in quite so close.

Fredrik cut a sudden knife-like turn, spraying a sheet of thin snow into the air. Nice visual but Antoine was shocked and angered, not impressed. Fredrik had made the wrong turn. He had not followed the simple directions. The film maker would have been even more furious if this weren't a practice run.

On the impossibly steep slope, Fredrik didn't know he had made a mistake. At first. He was getting into a rhythm, feeling the exhilarating turn, intoxicated. No skier had ever been on this mountain. It belonged to him.

Suddenly the cliff loomed ahead. The edge of the snow covered peak. For a split second, the thought it was a trick of his mind. But he knew. He had made the

wrong and worst turn imaginable. There was no stopping at this speed or height. He was going over that cliff.

The terror shot through him. His body crouched without him, preparing for a jump. Frederik didn't quite believe what was happening. He felt the air rush up under his flat skis, the back edge catch for an instant on the rock, before he was launched. Again, his body worked without him, legs keeping the tips of his skis up, as the wind rocked him.

He was going to die. Frederik never imagined or conceived this moment. The shock dumfounded him. Then he railed against his own predicament. He was too young to die, there was too much he had to do. No, this was a mistake. He couldn't die from a mistake. It was stupid and impossible. People didn't die like this.

In the helicopter, Antoine recognized a rare opportunity, one unlike any other. He zoomed in tighter as his star flew off the cliff ledge. It was terrifying to watch and record, knowing what was about to happen to a man's life. But beautiful and remarkable, too. No one had ever filmed anything like this.

But no sooner had Fredrik launched than the path of the helicopter was blocked by the mountain peak itself. Antoine could not see him fall, what he was doing in the air. The camera recorded only a wall of grey rock.

A chasm opened beneath Fredrik, one deeper than any he had ever dared. It was as though he were looking down from the helicopter or the top of a skyscraper.

He let his poles go without thinking. They flew away and vanished. He was picking up speed. Soon, he knew, he would lose control.

But Fredrik's training went on without him. By professional habit, he was steering himself out of his crouch, laying down in the air as if on a floating mattress. If he landed on top of his skis, it would shatter his legs like two dry twigs. He had to get himself into position to land parallel if he would have any chance of surviving.

Antoine's pilot had seen the skier go off the cliff, too. The peak from which he launched blocked their view of his fall. So the pilot deftly spun the helicopter around it within seconds. Still, it was too long a gap. Antoine didn't find Frederik in the viewfinder until the instant Fredrik hit the mountainside. There was a faint puff of smoke at entry like a bullet shot into the deep snow. Then Frederik was gone.

*"Descente, descente,"* Antoine pleaded.

The pilot slowly lost altitude, bouncing in the air from the crosswinds. Antoine held his camera lens to focus in on a close-up of the entry area. But the telephoto lens gave no sign of Frederik. Antoine patted the shoulder of his pilot and pointed down with his index finger.

The pilot shook his head. "No closer or we start an avalanche," he said through the headphones. But they didn't have much time if Fredrik was down there. He was an idiot, the filmmaker thought, shaking his head.

“Get me as close as you can,” Antoine ordered. He felt resigned to what he had to do.

“This is it,” the pilot said. He sounded nervous. The helicopter was bobbing like a life raft on the sea. “What are you going to do?”

“I will meet you further down,” Antoine said and pulled off his headphones. The pilot watched with alarm. Antoine nodded to say it was OK, no big deal. He was angry at Fredrik, more than he had ever been. He should never have hired him. He was sure of that.

Antoine jumped out of the open door. He waved his arms like wings as he fell, boots pointed at the snow. He watched the mountain come towards him. He sank almost to his waist in the snow after he hit.

Antoine exhaled in the sudden silence. The helicopter was gone. He spotted the cliff edge where Frederik launched, towering in the cold blue sky above him. Antoine estimated the fall to be nearly three hundred feet. The world record was two hundred. Antoine climbed out of his foxhole and slogged through the dry, light snow towards the hole Frederik had blasted. It wasn't deep. Antoine began digging with both hands.

One of his hands slammed into a block of ice. Antoine winced from the pain. He hesitated until he realized it might not be ice at all. He felt the contours and immediately, a sense of dread sickened him. It was the shape of a human skull. But

there was no blood. He yanked on the block but it didn't budge. He cleared away more snow, digging like a dog with both hands.

Calm, stay calm, he told himself. But Frederik was locked inside the snow like a straight jacket. He'd heard the muffled sound of the helicopter rotors. They were looking for him, he decided. He hoped they were. But he couldn't hold his breath for too long. He needed to buy time so that he wouldn't drown before they found him.

Frederik peered through his goggles but there was only darkness. He felt his lips on the snow and took a small bite. He did it again, clearing a tiny cavity around his nose. He sniffed the air and held his breath again. He wouldn't be able to last long. He willed himself calm. Panic would kill him. But he didn't want to suffocate. He couldn't.

It was then something dug into both sides of his face.

Antoine was sick. He feared he had his gloves on Frederik's shattered skull. He pulled gingerly on it, not wanting it to collapse. He dug away more snow before he was startled to see black plastic. It took him a moment to realize it was the top of a ski helmet. He dug around it faster, giddy like an explorer finding a sunken treasure. He felt the face then the shoulders. Frederik. Intact.

Finally, Antoine hooked his own arms underneath and yanked on his skier, digging his feet in as leverage. Frederik rose out of the snow, stiff as a mummy, the momentum throwing Antoine on his back.

Fredrik rolled off of him clumsily, gulping the air. He pulled his legs and skis out of the snow. Antoine watched in disbelief as Fredrik deliberately snapped off the bindings and sat on the snow, his face turned to the sky like he had merely finished a taxing run.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Antoine asked, finding the Nordic blue eyes inside the goggles. Their focus sharpened.

“Two,” Fredrik said.

“What is my cat’s name?” Antoine asked. It was an unexpectedly tender question. Frederik loved his cat who ruled the chalet where Antoine lived alone. Neither man had partners or family. They were focused solely on their professions.

“Godard,” Frederik said, smiling with his thin lips.

They looked at one another like two wanderers washed up on a deserted island. Fredrik glimpsed something he had never seen before in Antoine’s gaze. It surprised him into silence.

A gust blew across the mountain, whipping a veil of snow over them. They had to descend.

“Do you think you can ski still?” Antoine asked. “It’s the only way down. I can’t carry you.”



Fredrik checked the slope where the helicopter had landed, its blades spinning lazily. He took a breath and nodded yes to skiing on his own. Then he gazed up at the cliff where he had launched.

“How high do you think?” Fredrik asked.

“No idea,” Antoine lied.

“The world record is 205,” Fredrik said. “More, yes?”

Later, as the helicopter flew to a small hospital near the resort of Chamonix, they began talking about the wrong turn. Frederik did not know why he had made the mistake or even how. Antoine listened impatiently with growing anger.

“Maybe I knew. Maybe I needed to do it,” Fredrik said, suddenly. “Do you understand?”

“No,” Antoine said. “You are lucky to be alive.” But Antoine did agree with the skier. As a rule, free-stylers were crazy enough to try anything even if it might kill them. Frederik was driven, feeling, like him, the relentless approach of age and the shrinking opportunities to make one’s mark.

They walked to the hospital together, not speaking. The Alpine sun warmed them on the helipad. As Fredrik went inside to be looked over by the doctor, Antoine hesitated by the glass doors when he caught the reflection of the mountain peak. The summit was visible in the distance and he could trace the approximate position of the ledge. A world record, by far.

Antoine relived the fear and disbelief he felt the moment Fredrik turned the wrong way, the seconds stretching into what seemed like minutes before skiing over the mountain cliff. The crazy, lethargic Norwegian, was making a spectacular accident. Antoine remembered, with a start, that he had missed capturing the actual jump, the skier flying, swooning earthward. A moment like no other, missed forever.

Antoine muttered to himself angrily as the glass doors slid open into the triage area. They had made history in their own way but no one would ever know.

Fredrik sat in a hospital bed, fully clothed, as the filmmaker entered the white walled room. The doctor was holding a chart and chatting amiably. Frederik was pale now, his blue eyes curiously flat and disoriented.

“His liver,” the doctor said before Antoine even spoke. “Internal injury.”

“How bad?” Antoine asked, irritated.

The doctor searched him, surprised by the friend’s attitude.

“It will heal. He’ll have to remain at home a month or more.”

“And then?”

The doctor sighed. “I don’t recommend him skiing any longer.”

Antoine and Frederik met one another’s glance. Nothing was hidden; not the fear, the disappointment, the anger. For his part, Frederik wasn’t thinking about skiing or jumping. He was grateful to be alive and more than amazed.

“He saved my life,” Frederik said. The doctor turned to Antoine, his face full of admiration.

“Yes I know,” the doctor said. “It was very brave. Uncommonly so.”

Antoine shrugged and avoided their eyes. He’d been acting on instinct, doing what he had to do. He didn’t consider the rescue particularly brave. But it was something.

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