

THE SUMMIT SUMMONS

On a glacier hanging 21,000 feet above sea level, the darkness before dawn is filled with frightened wishes.

Anne Parmenter, a climber and guide, is praying for sunny skies and calm winds for her push to the top of Ama Dablam, a 22,494-foot Himalayan mountain.

But Heidi Blum, the client Parmenter is to help to the summit, hopes the dawn brings clouds, or wind, or snow. Anything that might force the team to rest a day in the high camp. Anything but get colder.

She's had frostbite before and, in the darkened tent, she described the surgery to her feet.

“If it's too cold,” she says, “I'm going down. I'm not losing my toes on this mountain.”

But the cold is not the only thing that's chilling her fire for the summit.

Her intestines are churning. Three days of rock, ice and snow climbing have left the entire team drained, and the lack of oxygen keeps them from sleeping.

Still, Parmenter knows Blum's legs and lungs are strong enough. It's her will that's flagging. She also knows that the only thing besides a storm that will keep her from getting to the summit herself is Blum giving up.

“You're strong, Heidi,” Parmenter coaches. “You've worked so hard to get here. Just one more day. We can do it.”

Rest is pointless anyway. Every day they spend above 19,000 feet will make their bodies weaker.

And each of those days will be spent at the mercy of a hundred tons of ice. The hanging glacier beneath them is, in effect, a trap

door. The one above them is a guillotine blade. Both drop blocks of ice the size of buildings every year. The climbers don't want to be here the next time that happens.

In the end, the debate on whether to climb is just a way to pass the time. The final decision belongs to the mountain.

At dawn, clear skies and calm winds make the announcement. It's summit day.

Blum is the first climber out of the tent and onto the steep cliffs of blue ice. But Parmenter knows her client's eagerness masks uncertainty. Jim Williams, the expedition leader, is bringing up the rear, so Parmenter needs to catch up quickly to keep Blum's resolve from withering.

The ice cliffs outside the tent won't let that happen.

Parmenter's ax bounces off the blue, steely ice. Her crampons -- metal spikes on her boots -- won't bite into the mountain's frozen armor. She curses as her feet paddle like a rat on a wheel.

It's taken months of training, weeks of hiking and three days of climbing to get this high on the mountain. Now, only a few hours from the summit, the mountain is trying to drive her back to her tent.

The summit that Parmenter has been gazing at for the past two weeks is now blocked from her view by the massive glacier that hangs above her. But when she closes her eyes she can still see it. She'll give just about anything but her life to get there. Down is not an option.

Blum, meanwhile, isn't wasting her time kicking footholds into the ice. She's hauling herself up the ropes that the Sherpas have fixed in place and is already a hundred feet above her guide.

In the frigid shadow of the hanging glacier, both climbers' feet go numb. Parmenter is betting that the sun will thaw them when she climbs on top of the glacier. But, by the time she catches up,

Blum's already made up her mind. She's going down.

“You're so close,” Parmenter urges. “Just a little higher. The sun will warm us up.”

But Blum's no longer looking up the mountain. She turns her head away from Parmenter and looks down toward Camp Three. Her summit bid is over.

And someone must lead her down.

Until they reached this narrow ledge of ice, the two women's dreams of climbing Ama Dablam have been tied together. Now Parmenter fears that their climbs will end together. Williams, as the expedition leader, will decide who is going up and who is going down. Parmenter steps silently from foot to foot as she waits for Williams to arrive, tugging against the responsibilities that keep her from climbing on.

“Is Jim coming?” she asks impatiently. “We can't wait here for long.”

When Williams arrives he can see the resolve in both climbers' faces. He doesn't waste time trying to send either one of them in a direction they don't want to go.

“I've been on top of this mountain before,” he says. “Anne hasn't.”

“I'm going to the summit,” Parmenter shouts, as Williams takes Blum down the fixed ropes to Camp Three.

Parmenter climbs like a dog let off its leash. In two hours she hacks her way up the glacier, across the bridge of hardened snow that spans the giant crevasse at its top and onto the final headwall below the mountaintop.

But a few hundred yards from the summit, the rope yanks her back hard. She falls 15 feet down the mountainside.

Below her, climbers are screaming for help.

But down is the wrong direction. Parmenter struggles against the rope, furious at being held back. She isn't about to turn around.

“I'm busy,” she thinks. “I'm going to the summit. Deal with your own problems.”

At the other end of Parmenter's rope, Brendan Cussick is fighting for his life. The guide, a veteran of dozens of high-altitude peaks, was climbing the route solo while he waited for the rest of his team to adjust to the altitude. But the snow bridge between the upper glacier and the summit head wall collapsed as he crossed it, dropping him into the giant crevasse. Parmenter's rope is the only thing between Cussick and an icy death deep inside the glacier. Another climber with her team is struggling to pull him out.

Parmenter awakens wide-eyed from her oxygen-starved drunkenness and summit fever.

A life is at stake.

But with Cussick's weight on her rope, going down is harder than going up. And the screws that anchor the ropes above the crevasse are pulling out under the strain. Parmenter hangs her life on the shaft of an ice ax driven into the snow above the crevasse, constructs a hoist and starts pulling.

An hour and a half after Cussick fell into the slot, Parmenter and her teammate pull the battered, terrified climber back into the world. The fall has broken his thumb, shredded the nerves in his arm and crushed his confidence. He heads down the mountain, climbs into Parmenter's tent at Camp Three, and weeps.

His rescuers are now playing against the clock. They have less than five hours to reach the summit and return to camp before nightfall brings sub-zero temperatures and jet-stream winds back to the mountain. Parmenter doesn't wait around to do the math.

She claws up the last 500 feet of the mountain an inch at a time. It's more like crawling than climbing. Her arms and legs move with underwater slowness. Lungs pump in empty air with frantic,

futile, rib-bursting gulps. Every willful step leaves her as winded as a sprint.

Parmenter has finally found her rhythm. Step, stand, suck in air.

Slowly, she runs out of mountain. She steps alone onto the summit. And five of the six tallest mountains on the planet rise up to congratulate her. Makalu. Lhotse. Kangchenjunga. Shishipangma. Everest. They had hidden behind Ama Dablam while she was climbing. Now they stand entirely before her, as big as planets. At her feet, a tiny plastic Pokemon toy pushed into the snow marks the top of Ama Dablam. 22,494 feet. The picture is so big, she has trouble seeing it.

“Take this all in,” she reminds herself. “I’ve worked all these weeks to get here, and I’m only going to have a few minutes to be here.”

She hugs the other climber from her team tightly when he reaches the summit.

“We made it!” she shouts into his ear between gusts of frigid air. “But it’s almost four o’clock. We’ve got to get down.”

The brutal cold and fierce winds are monsters of the night. And the sun is setting.

The orange light that wraps around the climbers as they slide down the ropes would be the most beautiful sunset of Parmenter's life. But here, dangling from ropes high above the clouds, it is a terrifying alarm. Night is coming. The darkness falls over the mountain like a shroud. In just minutes, the temperature plunges below zero. Each blast of wind is stronger than the last.

Lights warm two tiny tents hundreds of feet below her. Beside them, a silhouette standing motionless in the brutal wind gives her hope. Williams, her mentor, is watching.

Half an hour later she collapses into her tent. It took eight hours to crawl from Camp Three to the summit. It took less than two for

gravity to carry them back down.

Blum helps Parmenter remove her crampons and boots, then guides the guide into a sleeping bag and wraps her in her arms. Now it's Blum's turn as caretaker.

“You're amazing,” she says, as she tries to coax her guide to eat something. “I can't believe you summited after pulling that guy out of the crevasse. He was so lucky you guys were there.”

In the warmth of her sleeping bag, in the safety of her tent, in the care of what are, for now, her best friends in the world, Parmenter weeps.

“I never cry,” she whispers between sobs.

Later in the night, she will remember that the summit is only halfway through the climb. And fear will replace her tears.