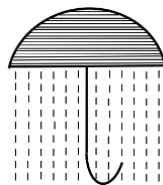


# Lost on Kepler 852-b

Jordan Coleman



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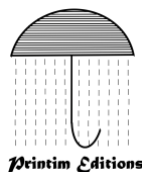
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events or locales, is entirely coincidental.



# Chapter List

- 1) Shipwreck
- 2) Descent and Discovery

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# Shipwreck

I woke up in a pile of rubble 1,602 light-years from earth.

Son of a slitch.

My last memory was during the descent when something collided with the spacecraft. My wife and I ran to the emergency-landing chambers, like we had learned during training. I was locked in mine and I looked at my wife's face one last time, before there was another collision and everything went black.

My landing chamber must have separated from the rest of the ship. And I must have inhaled some leaking anesthesia by accident because I feel dizzy, sick, and thirsty enough to drink torch fluid or that nasty medicine the NASA scientists made us take for interstellar travel. Around me there's a thick jungle with twisted trees like I've never seen before, even in the voyage briefings. Where are the others? Where's the rest of the ship?

My vision is blurry and my mouth is desiccated: first, before the finding the others, I need water.

I turn over and crawl to the edge of the rubble, hacking up a lung. My throat feels like it's been scratched by sand-paper. But the NASA scientists were right, I can breathe and the atmosphere and the gravity are like earth. Kepler 852-b is located in the "habitable zone" of a star practically identical to our sun in the "northern" part of the Milky Way Galaxy. I find my survival kit, take out a metal water bottle, and chug.

Thirst quenched, I verify that my survival kit is fully stocked and take stock of my situation. Amongst all the passengers aboard the ship, United Republic Migration #2, there is no doubt that I am the least qualified to be alone on this planet. When I was on earth I was a janitor at a high school who wrote a sci-fi blog on the weekends. On a whim, I applied, with my wife, for the lottery to be a part of The Great Migration to Kepler-852b. NASA wanted to include all members of society on the spaceship, which would carry 300 passengers, and not only the elite. My wife and I were chosen to represent "the common people" who also deserved a chance to live another life on another planet. I bet NASA just did that for positive publicity and to receive more public funding. In my application essay for the lottery, I wrote that my wife and I had couldn't have children and dreamed of leaving on this great adventure. That must have pulled the heartstrings. In any case, they chose us, my essay was published in major O.I.O.s (online information outlets), and now I'm here. Hooray. Lots of other passengers weren't prepared to survive alone which is why everyone was equipped with such a good survival kit. But still, I think I'm the worst. My specialized skills include knowing the right cleaning liquids to remove graffiti from bathroom stalls and how to fix a toilet. I don't even know how to make a fire.

Nobody was expected to survive alone. The spaceship was going to land near a place where the first spaceship, United Republic Migration #1, had landed a year ago. A city was supposed to have been under construction which I was going to help clean. I wonder if our vessel went far off course. I wonder what hit us in the sky. I wonder if I'm the only one who survived. I think about my wife and I feel a pain rise in my chest, contracting my lungs and gripping my throat. No. She's still alive. I don't know why I know this, but I know it.

I have to find my wife and the others or I'm a dead man. I take out my axe and tie the sack on my back. It's then I hear an ominous clicking in the jungle around me. It sounds like an insect. Son of a slitch, I hope it's not a giant insect.

I walk in the opposite direction of the sound and make a path through the jungle. The leaves are soft like silk, some of them are blue, and the light sparkles on the smooth trunks (as if they were sanded) of the trees. I would say the place was beautiful if I wasn't trying not to die.

The jungle becomes thicker with crisscrossing branches and I use my axe to chop them. As I cut through the wood-like material (it breaks more easily than wood and emits a minty smell), I feel a rumbling in the ground and hear a peculiar noise, like pressurized air passing through a tube. This makes me nervous and I start bushwhacking faster. The noise becomes louder. I approach a trembling wall of foliage. I push through the leaves and fall off a ledge.

The air rushes past me and I blindly search for anything to grab a hold of. I grab hold of a root that protrudes from a rock. My survival sack slips off my back but I'm able to just snatch a handle. I swing in the air.

After pulling my sack over my shoulder I just swing there for a minute, my heart pounding in my neck, my breathing ragged and heavy. I look down and see jutting rocks, maybe five hundred feet below.

I look up and see that there is a network of intertwining roots, all the way up to the ledge. The foliage forms a thick wall on the edge of the cliff.

I climb up the hanging roots, then drag myself and the sack on to the cliff. I sit down and wait for my breathing to settle. Dying from falling off a cliff. That would have been anticlimactic. Cross the Milky Way to the constellation of Cygnus and then stumble over a ledge and splatter on some rocks.

I get up, carefully push a few leaves aside, and look out.

Yeeup, my emergency landing chamber landed on the top of a cliff, a mountain, on the edge of a vertical drop. Looking down, I see that beyond the roots is a practically vertical rock face with small ledges and protruding slabs. I gasp as I peer into the distant valley.

The spaceship. It had crashed in the grassy-like valley below.

No wonder I woke up alone. The survivors of the ship would never have climbed this steep mountain looking for me. They must still be down there. The ship was filled with all our provisions. They probably formed a base there, then sent out scouts. I couldn't see the ship's details from afar. But I knew I had to go.

For the next two hours I wander around the jungle, attempting to find a path off the cliff, but it's a steep drop all around. Weird. And unlucky.

I discover the source of the clicking. In the middle of the jungle there's a deep, wide hole that reminds me of a volcano. The clicking is coming from there. The hole is so deep that it's black at the bottom, and the sides are smooth like the trunks of the trees, impossible for me to climb down without sliding into the abyss. No clicking abyss for Walter Wanky. Yes, that's my real name. Since my name was entered into the GlobalDataBase, I've been destined for great, heroic things.

Those things aside, it looks like I'm going to have to find a way to descend the cliff.

Problem is, I'm scared of heights and I don't know how to rock-climb, or rock-descend, or whatever they call it.

But if I don't get off this cliff and find help, I'm a dead man.

Fuck.

# Descent and Discovery

So now I gotta descend this massive cliff. Problem is... ever since I fell through a roof when I was eighteen while trying to impress my girlfriend with a rooftop picnic with scattered flower petals I have a visceral fear of heights. My limbs start shaking violently while I look over the edge.

Second problem is that I've never done any serious rock climbing in my life. When I was twenty-nine, I took my future wife to one of those indoor rock-climbing places on one of our first dates. We did something she called, "Free soloing," climbing without ropes. She looked sexy as hell as she kicked my ass, navigating those colored, amoeba-handles like a monkey. I had already started falling in love with her by then. I'm fairly strong, but I learned an important lesson that day when it comes to rock-climbing: it's more about technique than brute force. Better to stay close to the wall, be patient, and take your time. I also learned: don't climb too aggressively or your hands and limbs will get sore, become useless, then you'll become careless. Carelessness is bad.

My fear of heights and my lack of climbing skills means that I don't want to be climbing when it's dark, and I don't want to construct one of those suspended-sleeping-hammocks in the middle of the cliff.

I need to figure out how much daylight is left and how fast I climb. If I don't have enough daylight I'll descend tomorrow at the crack of dawn.

While these thoughts rush through my head I realize something that fills me with terror: the clicking has stopped, my surroundings are now completely silent.

With shaking hands I pull out of my survival sack a battery-powered, Kepler 852-b star-powered tablet, find a rock nearby, walk to the edge of the cliff, then press 'start' on the tablet stopwatch as I simultaneously drop the rock. I wait and listen for the faint impact: 5.6 seconds. I do this five more times and take the average: 5.4 seconds. With this information my tablet can do some physics...

I verify that this planet has about the same gravitational field as earth, causing objects to fall at the rate of 9.8 Newton/kilogram (there must be a built-in gravimeter inside it). Assuming that Kepler 852-b also has the same air resistance (please Space Jesus make this be true, please), I enter the information into tablet and type in the command bar: *find the distance*.

*142 meters / 465 feet*

With the help of the trusty tablet I can determine how much daylight remains.

Unlike earth, which rotates once every 24 hours, this planet rotates once every 48 hours. I found an application on the tablet called: "Determine Time of Sunset on Foreign Planet." It instructed me to take a video of the planet's horizon then to shift up to the planet's sun. While I am doing that I see the tablet calculating the angle. Then I have to type in my latitude location (assuming the crashed ship didn't land too far off course, I use the latitude that we learned in the voyage briefings: 31 degrees). Okay, so the application determines that I have about 10 hours of daylight left. My tablet pops up a warning: due to this planet's relatively large tilt (44 degrees, almost double our Earth's tilt of 23.5 degrees) and fast revolution (1 full rotation every week), the seasons change much faster than on earth, but I'll worry about that later (the temperature has been getting steadily colder). This planet's equivalent winter should arrive in 28 hours.

Final step: let's see how fast this little boy can move.

The 300 yards of iron filament and 30 yards of rope that NASA gave me has little marks every meter. Thank you, NASA, for thinking of this detail.

If I can descend an average of 20 meters/65 feet per hour, I should be able to make it to bottom before sunset with some time to spare (3 hours to reach the ship). But that's probably giving me more credit than I deserve.

Now, another challenge: how to descend with all of my shit. I type into my tablet search bar: *how to descend a cliff*. Yes, I'm an amateur.

From the voyage training, my tablet was programmed to know that I'm a visual learner. A video pops up labeled: Rappelling basics 101. I type in a search bar next to the video: what's rappelling?

*Descend a rock face or other near-vertical surface using a double rope coiled around the body and fixed at a higher point; also known as abseil.* Knowledge!

Looks like I'm going to have to make a harness using the iron filament and the net. This is going to crush my nuts. But better to have crushed nuts and continue being alive.

Also, I'll need this rappelling/abseil thing to be retrievable. I watch another video on *How to Rig A Retrievable Rappelling Anchor*. Yes, these tablets have millions of videos. Thank you again NASA, you intelligent, resourceful motherfuckers!

I have to construct a Ghost Knot, which is a knot that will keep me from falling down the cliff as I descend, but will also be retrievable if I pull hard on it a bunch of times...

I immediately create an anchor at the top by cutting then tying long strips of the iron filament to two trees, creating a triangle (to distribute the weight that will pull on it during the initial descent). These iron filament strips will have to be left behind.

I take the center part of the rope, which I've doubled up in the shape of a 'U', and wrap it around the anchor, so it is in the shape of a candy cane. Then I take one of the ropes of the 'U'



(the two are parallel to the candy cane) and thread it through the bottom of the ‘U’ candy cane, simultaneously pulling on the other rope to form the knot. I do this eight times. Ghost Knot...complete. When I want the rope back during the decent I’ll have to tug on one of the ropes repeatedly, waiting to feel a ‘pop’ as each knot breaks, until all the knots are popped and the rope falls down to reunite with daddy.

But now I need to create something to relieve the tension of the rope as I descend, so I don’t undo the Ghost Knot unintentionally as I climb down the cliff. I’ll be trying to limit how much I pull on the rope by holding on to the crevices and rocks, but looking down I see that the cliff doesn’t always have places for me to hold on to, so I’ll have to rely on the anchor at the summit (or wherever I tie myself to later on) to support my body and supplies.

I type into the tablet: *essential rappelling supplies*. I find something that resembles a “belaying device,” that looks similar to something attached to my multi-use knife. I’ll use that. I thread my double rope through this. I’m shaking again as I do this.

*Remember Walter: always keep yourself perpendicular to the rock. Don’t waste energy. Track your progress.*

In order to prevent the iron filament and net from cutting into my groin, I will use my sleeping bag as part of the harness. Ah yes, much better. My nuts will be saved! I cut up a bunch more of the iron filament to create five, make-shift carabiners, which will lock me into the rope. Let’s do this...

*6 hours later...*

I moved faster than I thought I would, perhaps because I was terrified, fast enough to justify a descent today instead of waiting until tomorrow. But that wasn’t fun and I’m exhausted. The Kepler 852-b star is about to set and I’d like to reach the ship before nightfall. I eat an energy tube as a reward (29 left) that tastes like bubble-gum cough syrup (maybe NASA didn’t think of everything, unless there’s a trade-off between taste and dense caloric content?) and jog in the direction of the ship. My surroundings are still soundless, as if I’m walking through a verdant vacuum.

The terrain is similar to earth’s grasslands, with a few rocks here and there. After two hours of jogging, I see something that looks like a piece of the ship, a wing, jutting out of the ground. The ship was transporting 300 humans: the thing’s fucking huge.

I arrive at the ship, stupidly expecting a welcoming party. But there’s nobody here. It looks like the thing has been gutted. While wandering around yelling, “Is anyone there?” I see something that makes me fall to the ground, to my knees...

Bones. Human bones. But not the kind of bones you’d expect, with remnants of bodies on them, but shiny-white bones, as if they were sucked clean after a chicken-wing eating contest. They are scattered throughout the wreckage. What the fuck happened?

I barely make out what the ship used to look like. Something really big must have attacked this ship after it crashed.

I have to hope that some people escaped. There are a lot of bones, but not enough for 300 humans, I think. I have to alert the survivors that I'm still alive. I have to make a fire.

What I'll do is that I'll make a fire and hide in the wreckage. That way if a monstrous alien comes back to eat me, I'll be hiding, and hopefully be safe.

I scout the wreckage and find a little cavern high up in a pile of rubble. I hide all my supplies there, then I look for flammable things. After an hour of searching I find some books (the ship contained a hard-copy library). There are also some twig-like sticks on the ground outside the perimeter of the crashed ship. After watching a short tutorial on: *best way to construct a fire*, I tear out the pages (The Martian by Andy Weir, required reading for all passengers) and shove them under a little twig-hut. Then I make the fire using the iron bar, also called a ferrocium. The alloy (70% cerium and 30% iron) gives off sparks when scratched by my carbon-steel blade. The tiny shavings are oxidized as I scratch, ignite the paper, and voila: fire. But the fire is green and smells like trash. Hmmm, does that mean it is toxic? I run back to my hiding place. The sun has completely set. Time to wait.

For twenty minutes I stare at the little green fire, praying to Space Jesus again, watching the smoke twist up into the star-filled sky. Thankfully, the twigs (I typed in: *what is green fire?* into my tablet: *potentially contains copper sulfate or boric acid*) burns slowly. Please let a human see this and know I'm alive. Please let me wife see this, if she somehow made it out....

I hear a bizarre sucking, slithering, clicking sound at the edge of the shadows. The clicking and sucking sounds just like the noises that I heard at the top of the cliff where my part of the ship crashed. I hold my breath.

Something massive emerges from the shadows. I do my best not to scream in horror.