



3001

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3004

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First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
The Book Guild Ltd
Pavilion View

19 New Road Brighton, BN1 1UF

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Typeset in Bembo by Ellipsis Books Limited, Glasgow

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

A catalogue record for this book is available from The
British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84624 560 2

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1

Kayleb awoke feeling extremely drowsy. His head ached severely, and he felt like somebody had inserted a lead weight into his skull, making it impossible for him to lift his head off the ground. He decided that he would lie as he was for a while and get his bearings. Wherever he was, it didn't feel pleasant. Kayleb opened his eyes and blinked. He couldn't see. He hoped that his eyes would become accustomed to the dark, that his surroundings would become familiar and he would feel a sense of relief as the walls materialised – he would find himself, he hoped, back in his bedroom the last place he remembered being. Kayleb waited, staring up into the inky air. Anxiety crept into his soul. He felt like a trapped deer watching a puma sliding menacingly through the long grass towards its prey.

Kayleb tried to turn his head, so he could see the ground where he lay, but it wasn't possible. He felt the ground with his finger-tips. It was damp and smelt very tinny. He could almost taste the metal on his lips; it was like biting a dry teaspoon. His teeth tingled as he thought about this. Kayleb heard a scuffling sound. He knew he was not alone; something or someone was moving nearby. He heard a groan and then coughing. Just to be safe, Kayleb managed to slide back, away from that someone, in case he or she was dangerous. There was another groan and then a sharp exhalation of breath.

'Is someone there?'

Kayleb recognised the voice, even though his speech was a bit slurred. It was Rowan Gellpen. He was in Kayleb's class. Kayleb would have been happier if it

had been somebody else. Rowan and he were not exactly the best of friends. Flashes of inexcusable incidents involving taunting and humiliation lit up the darkness around him, like an old-fashioned slideshow in front of his eyes, each and every image pressing hard on the emotional scars that had been left behind. Kayleb was feeling anxious. This all just had to be in a nightmare and at any moment he would wake up.

‘It’s me ... Kayleb Heinz. Are you all right?’ Kayleb was surprised with himself for being concerned about Rowan. Really Rowan deserved to be left in the dark, so to speak.

‘It’s so dark. I can’t see a thing. Where are we? ... Oh my head!’ groaned Rowan.

‘You’ll feel better in a moment. The pain will start to subside. I think we were drugged,’ replied Kayleb. He was not going to give Rowan a chance to belittle him.

‘Great! This is just what I needed!’ Rowan said sarcastically.

Rowan was tall for his age. He had short fair hair and was quite muscular. Rowan always spoke his mind; speaking without thinking had got him into trouble in the past but because of his good looks and his way with words he somehow always managed to come up smelling of roses. Rowan slowly sat up. His head was beginning to feel more like part of his body now.

‘I’m pretty sure it’s just us two down here?’ whispered Kayleb.

‘Do you think this is our task? To get out of here in one piece?’

‘It might be but my mentors always tell tales of us outwitting dangerous beasts and meeting our worst nightmares face to face,’ Rowan replied.

Kayleb felt that he had already met his.

‘We’re probably in a lair,’ said Kayleb, feeling the ground around him to see if there were any bones.

Immediately he placed his hand on a smooth twig, only to find that it was, in fact, some kind of bone. Kayleb sat up with surprise.

‘There you go, a bone!’ he said triumphantly. But the reality of their plight was beginning to sink in.

‘Great!’ exclaimed Rowan again groggily, he had been sent to do his task much earlier than he had expected. ‘I think it is time to make our exit,’ he added unenthusiastically.

There was a moment’s silence while the two boys contemplated their situation. Kayleb was the first to speak. ‘Have you got anything that lights up on you, Rowan, a flamer perhaps? I don’t suppose you’ve got any infrared eye plants, have you?’

Rowan felt for his pockets. He had no pockets and he sighed irritably when he found nothing. ‘No I haven’t. We’re in our night things, aren’t we? We’re not likely to take flamers to bed, are we? They can’t just throw us down here with no way to get out, surely? Infrared eye plants indeed! Have you got any!?’

‘No ... I just wondered, that’s all.’ Kayleb didn’t like Rowan’s tone.

‘There must be some way of getting out?’ said Rowan. ‘Have you felt around to see if there are any passages or doors? Perhaps we’re in a cave or a dungeon.’

Kayleb looked around him but couldn’t see anything, not even his own hand in front of his face. He was as good as blind. ‘No not yet, let’s try and feel for a way out. I can’t help thinking that at any moment we are going to be something’s dinner.’

‘It’s a pleasure to be doing this coming-of-age task with you, Kayleb. You’re a laugh a minute!’ Rowan said crossly.

Kayleb shuddered. His resilience to Rowan’s mean streak was beginning to crumble and he felt uneasy.

Cautiously, with arms out in front of them, Rowan and Kayleb edged their way slowly to the walls of their prison and discovered that the walls were made of stone and felt cold and slimy. The slime was thick and oily and stuck to their fingers; it smelt of mould. They curved round and no opening of any sort could be found. A couple of times they bumped into each other. Their hearts were now pounding. Kayleb had the distinct feeling that he was going to get punched if he trod on Rowan's feet again.

'What do you reckon?' Kayleb asked Rowan cautiously.

'I'm not sure. I think this pit is definitely man-made. It feels like we're in a cylindrical tower, but there's no door, is there?'

'At least nobody can get in,' said Kayleb, sounding relieved.

'I suppose so,' replied Rowan sulkily.

'What time do you think it is? I don't think we were in bed long and then, all of a sudden, we're down here. It can't be morning yet. Maybe things will look better in the morning,' said Kayleb brightly. He wasn't going to let Rowan know he was scared of him.

Rowan didn't answer.

Kayleb was starting to get on his nerves. Here he was, stuck down in the bottom of nowhere with the class weed, an asthmatic who was always studying. Things couldn't get much worse. He hadn't realised that Kayleb had turned sixteen. He was always on his laptop or sitting alone somewhere daydreaming. The only contact they had was when he felt like annoying him. Kayleb didn't look sixteen to him, more like twelve. Maybe there had been a terrible mistake. Usually boys were taken to do their task a month after they were sixteen, not actually on their tubeyday. If it was past

midnight then he had only just turned sixteen. Life was so unfair.

There seemed nothing else to do but wait. Kayleb and Rowan both sat back down on the floor and waited for inspiration, for some brilliant idea to come to them that would get them out of this pitch-black world which smelt of rotten vegetables and rusty nails.

The minutes ticked past and slowly the darkness began to fade. At first they thought it might have been a trick of the eye but ever so gradually the boys began to recognise each other's silhouette. Far above their heads was a pinprick of light, almost like a star; it grew brighter as every minute passed.

'I think it's morning,' Kayleb announced eagerly. 'The only way out is upwards ... that just has to be daylight.'

Rowan jumped to his feet and stared up at the beam of light.

'How on earth are we going to get up there?'

Kayleb stood up too and stepped forward to try and get a better look. Rowan hastily moved aside and the side of his head hit a metal object. It clanked and swung around his head and then finally stopped, smacking him on the ear.

'Ouch!' Rowan clenched his teeth in pain.

'What was that,' squeaked Kayleb, breathing heavily.

Rowan caught hold of the swinging object and for the first time, for a while, he felt hopeful.

'It's a ... it's a bucket attached to a rope. We're in a well, Kayleb. This has got to be a dry well. How are you at climbing ropes then?'

Kayleb gulped. He wasn't that strong and had always failed miserably in the outdoor tournaments. Ropes were not his thing, heights were not his thing and climbing was *definitely* not his thing.

‘How far do you think it is?’ Kayleb asked doubtfully, staring up at the tiny dot of light.

All Kayleb’s fears were confirmed.

‘It’s going to be a long, long climb and it’s not going to be easy.’ Rowan said each word slowly, sensing that Kayleb was not enjoying the prospect of climbing the rope at all. He revelled in Kayleb’s anxiety. ‘Cheer up! At least we won’t have to kill a ferocious beast with our bare hands! All we’ve got to do is climb a rope. We’ll be home by sundown.’

Kayleb’s first problem was actually getting onto the rope. The bucket was head high and Kayleb, not being as tall as Rowan, could only just reach the bottom of the bucket. After Kayleb had tried many times to jump up, Rowan realised that he was going to have to help Kayleb get onto the rope. He crouched down and let him climb onto his back so that Kayleb could pull himself up onto the rope.

Eventually, after several attempts to stand on Rowan’s back, Kayleb managed to attach himself to the rope and began to climb up very slowly. He had only gone a few arm lengths and already every muscle in his body felt painful. Rowan, however, had gained on him and was at his heels.

‘Come on, Kayleb! I thought you’d be near the top by now.’

Kayleb pulled himself up a little more but Rowan was becoming very impatient.

‘It’s no good. I’m going to have to try and get past you,’ said Rowan. ‘Lean back from the rope a minute.’

With trembling arms, Kayleb leaned back and Rowan climbed past Kayleb with ease and continued upwards. Soon Rowan was so far ahead that Kayleb could only feel a slight vibration on the rope. Suddenly he felt as if he was all alone. At least the darkness was fading but he felt like he was never going to reach the

surface. It was as if he was in a dream – like somebody else was feebly trying to climb the rope and he was just an onlooker. Each effort he made to pull himself up the rope was getting weaker and he knew he was getting nowhere. He was climbing in slow motion.

Kayleb stopped for a second to let his muscles recover, when all of a sudden the rope dipped downwards. Kayleb nearly let go, but just managed to cling on. All sorts of thoughts whirled through his head. Was the rope about to break? Was Rowan at this moment hacking at the rope strands with a sharp rock, hoping that Kayleb would plunge to his death and that he, Rowan, would return home and receive all the honour and glory when he got back to their home city? It was quite obvious that this was Rowan's plan. Rowan liked being the centre of attention; he was always in the middle of a crowd with everyone looking up admiringly at him. Why did nothing go wrong for Rowan? He deserved to be eaten alive.

The rope jerked downwards again. Kayleb didn't know what to do; he felt so helpless. Kayleb was still travelling downwards. He tried to climb the rope but his muscles hurt too much, his hands were blistering and his chest hurt. All of a sudden Kayleb's descent stopped and surprisingly, much to his relief, he felt himself being pulled upwards.

This can't be happening, Kayleb thought. Rowan was actually pulling him up. He took back everything nasty he had just thought about him.

Progress was slow. Kayleb couldn't believe how far Rowan had actually climbed. Gradually, the top of the well came into focus and it was wonderful to see the blue sky. The sky got closer and closer; there was not a cloud to be seen. It was one of the most amazing sights he had ever seen. He had to squint his eyes, the morning light was so bright. Kayleb reached the top and saw

Rowan turning the winding handle. Rowan was sweating and looked really red.

‘Quick, get off the rope! I can’t hold you much longer,’ Rowan said in a strained voice.

Kayleb cautiously clambered onto the rim of the well and fell over the side onto the sandy earth. He had made it. The earth was dry and powdery and fell through his fingers like flour. ‘We did it! We didn’t die! We’ve made it!’ Kayleb called out happily.

Rowan looked down at Kayleb lying beside the well. It had been so tempting to leave him in there. Kayleb was going to be such a nuisance.

‘I don’t think our task is quite finished,’ said Rowan. ‘We seem to be miles from anywhere. There’s nobody here and not a drop of water to be seen.’

Kayleb sat up. All around him was dry scrubland, boulders, a withered bush here and there, and no signs of water or life anywhere.

‘I think our troubles have only just begun,’ said Rowan, scanning the barren landscape.

The sun was high in the sky and the warmth from the sun was quite pleasant, not as hot as it had been over the past few months. Kayleb and Rowan sat lazily on the side of the well wondering what to do next. They both half hoped that their task had ended and somebody might come and collect them. Kayleb knocked a pebble over with his toe and disturbed a small lizard. The lizard scurried away and dived into the shadows of a withered bush.

‘Used to keep one of those as a pet,’ said Rowan, standing up.

‘Didn’t last long though. It sort of dried up.’

Kayleb looked suspiciously at Rowan. He couldn’t quite work him out. They were in this together and, like it or not, they would need to depend on each other. It was quite obvious their task was not yet over.

‘Were you going to leave me in the well?’ Kayleb asked Rowan cautiously. ‘Only, if you were, then I don’t think it’s a good idea if we do this task together.’

Rowan looked uncomfortable and was silent for a moment. He looked down at the ground to avoid Kayleb’s eyes. He wished he *had* left him behind.

I ... wasn’t sure which way to turn the handle. The rope was all knotted up.’

Kayleb looked at the rope attached to the bucket. He was confused. He wasn’t sure if Rowan was telling the truth. It was probably best if they stuck together; after all, there was supposed to be safety in numbers and Kayleb did not really like the idea of being left in the wilderness on his own. He would just have to be wary.

Kayleb bent down and opened a pocket on the leg of his trousers and produced two chews. He was really thirsty and he knew that Rowan would be too. 'Would you like a chew? It will help ... until we find water.'

Rowan looked up at Kayleb. The awkward moment had passed.

'Sure! We'll have to find water soon though. The sun is getting hotter.' He looked Kayleb up and down as Kayleb handed him a chew. Kayleb wasn't wearing bedwear but had on utility trousers and a T-shirt. His trousers had many bulging pockets filled with all sorts.

'How come you're dressed, Kayleb? What have you got in your pockets?'

Kayleb smiled. 'I've been ready for weeks. I was sixteen last month and from all the e-books I've read I know that anything can happen during our task. I realised it's best to be prepared for any situation. The only thing I forgot to bring is a flamer,' said Kayleb, looking a bit crestfallen. 'Shoes might have come in handy too but I didn't think we'd be drugged. I thought you'd have been ready though.' Kayleb surveyed Rowan's nightwear with a critical eye.

'Well, I would have been, only I didn't expect the task to take place today,' said Rowan angrily. To think! Thought Rowan, Kayleb was already sixteen, sixteen before he was! Kayleb was the sort of boy that kept things to himself. He was a loner and had no friends ... well, none that he knew of. Kayleb was possibly of mixed descent. Helen, one of Kayleb's mentors, had come from the wilderness, the very place where they were now marooned. Kayleb's other mentor, Commander Heinz, worked for the law enforcement agency and was laboratory-reared. Unusually, though, Commander Heinz's stature was of beastlike proportions and he was much feared, as he upheld the law with an iron fist. It was surprising that Kayleb had

not been given similar genes, but then Helen, it was rumoured, had been pregnant when she entered London and had secretly given birth to Kayleb. The thought of pregnancy and birth made Rowan shudder. Laboratory incubator birth was so much cleaner and much more civilised. Helen had become Commander Heinz's companion and he had adopted Kayleb as if he had come from the laboratory.

'Why weren't you ready? You knew you would have to do the task when you turned sixteen,' asked Kayleb.

Rowan looked a little embarrassed and picked up a small stone and tried to skim it along the ground. 'It's my tubeyday, all right!'

'Oh ... I see! Happy Tubeyday then.'

Things were a bit quiet for a moment and then Kayleb dived into a hip pocket and produced a small silver case. 'Happy Tubeyday! You can have it ... I've got two.'

Rowan took the disc-shaped box from Kayleb, turned it over in his hands and wondered what it could be. It caught the sunlight and immediately a small screen appeared. The words 'YOU ARE FACING SOUTH-WEST' appeared on the screen.

'Thanks, Kayleb.' Rowan was genuinely pleased. 'This is really going to help. 'Which way is London then?' The screen flickered a little and the message 'LONDON UK IS NORTH' appeared.

'This is brilliant! Come on, let's go,' said Rowan, swivelling around to the right until the screen typed up the words 'YOU ARE FACING NORTH.'

'OK, but I think we should take this bucket and a good long length of rope,' said Kayleb, looking at the well. Kayleb got out a penknife and set to work, hacking at the rope that had brought him up from the dry well.

Rowan had gone off ahead and Kayleb had to run to catch him up. The bucket and rope were heavy but he was sure that they would be very useful.

Rowan and Kayleb walked along silently. The ground was quite hot to walk on and the sun looked as if it was going to get hotter. As they travelled, there wasn't much change in the landscape; it was very barren and quite unattractive. Through the heat haze they could see hills ahead and they looked a bit more inviting. Perhaps they would find a village or some water. The chews had gone but Rowan was convinced that they would find food and shelter when they reached the hills.

A couple of hours passed and the ground had become more gravel-like, which was very difficult to walk on. Kayleb stopped many times to inspect the soles of his feet. It was incredibly hot underfoot, too, but the lure of the cool hills, and the thought of water, spurred Kayleb and Rowan on up the side of a hill.

After they had reached the summit of the hill they found that the track they were following seemed to fall away down into a valley. It did look much greener down there. They eagerly followed the track down into the valley, desperately searching for any signs of water.

Kayleb became aware that all around them had become soundless. The birds had stopped singing and it was almost as if time was holding its breath. There was an eerie silence. Warily, Rowan and Kayleb walked on further into the valley. The ground was now less uneven; it felt so good to feel grass under their feet rather than stones.

'We're going to have to get some shoes,' announced Rowan. 'We could travel much faster if we had shoes.' Rowan was interrupted by a loud screech and they both stopped sharply and looked at each other. The ear-piercing sound had come from nearby. The bushes in the valley were much larger and could, without doubt,

conceal something. Rowan looked uneasily at Kayleb. ‘What was ... ?’ whispered Rowan. Another screech shook the ground. Some kind of creature was only a hair’s breadth away. Rowan looked wildly about him.

Kayleb stood rooted to the ground, his eyes transfixed on a rock ahead of them. Some inner voice told him to lie flat on the floor – maybe he would become invisible that way. Kayleb dropped to the ground. Rowan did the same just as a huge eagle-like bird with the body of a tiger, at least two men high, strutted boldly out from behind the rock and then sped across the path and into the undergrowth opposite, its sharp talons tearing up the grass as it went.

The bird had mercifully not noticed the boys but it was minutes before Kayleb and Rowan felt brave enough to move. Kayleb was quite sure that the monstrous bird *wasn't* a vegetarian. Kayleb scuttled over to Rowan who had rolled into a ditch next to the path. Just as he reached him, they heard angry shouts and fierce barks and then saw a band of ragged men run across the track with their dogs. They seemed to be after the bird that the boys had just seen. These men had crazy bloodthirsty eyes. They held home-made weapons – bread knives tied to broom handles and sharpened struts from railings – over their heads ready to attack the bird. Fortunately, the men and the dogs disappeared into the undergrowth, too, and did not notice Kayleb and Rowan lying in the ditch.

‘Did you see them?’ whispered Rowan. ‘I’m glad they didn’t see us. They all looked like madmen. They’ve got to be *wasters*. They must be the criminals that have been thrown out of the cities. We’d better avoid them if we can. Come on, let’s find a hideout for a while and find something to arm ourselves with,’ said Rowan, standing up.

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