

*A Sky
with
No Light*

Khaoula Hamdi

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Printed in Egypt

General Supervision :

Mohamed Gameel Sabry

Neven Eltohamy

The General Egyptian Book Organization Deposit Number:

I.S.B.N : 978-977-820-269-4

GEBO Deposit Number : 33025 / 2024

Kayan Publishing

www.Kayanpublishing.com



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Khaqula Hamdi

DEDICATION

To the indigenous peoples of the world.

(1)

DAY ONE

The sky—it had vanished.

As he opened his eyes, its absence struck him. Lying on his back, his head cradled by a soft, sand-like surface, its fine, grainy texture brushing against his fingertips. Drenched and submerged in saltwater, waves ebbed and flowed, immersing him up to his chest before receding. His lower half soaked like a pickle. Occasional tingles pricked his feet, perhaps from scratches stinging in the water.

It took him several minutes, or perhaps even longer, to grasp his whereabouts because his sense of time had become distorted. He lay on a beach. The roar of the waves—which change in height but its deep whisper remains constant despite the different shores—reminded him of a distant memory from his far-off childhood, when his family lived in a house on the coast. He would wake up in the morning to that enchanting melody of water hitting the sandy expanse next to it, feeling refreshed and filled with the desire to run outside.

He shook off the memory that held his attention for a moment. He had made it.

Except for the rhythmic crashing of the tide against the shore, there was an eerie quietness. And there was no sky. His eyes aimlessly scanned the space above his head. The sky was unlike anything he had ever seen before. He was accustomed to the usual weather transitions—from clear, blue skies to scattered white clouds, and then to the ominous, dark gray masses signaling rain and storms. But what loomed above him at that moment was entirely different.

A surging wave engulfed his head, jolting him upright, coughing and spitting, fighting suffocation. Once he caught his breath and the air resumed its normalcy, he surveyed his surroundings. The sand behind and beneath him presented a dull, silvery-gray hue. Despite nervous blinks, the color remained unchanged. The water lapping at his feet and below his hips mirrored the sand's dark shade, almost indistinguishable if not for its liquid form. Only the white foam, a recognizable natural color, served as a boundary between the broad silver surfaces. Testing the water with his fingers and letting it trickle through, he sighed. Apart from the unusual coloration, its density, fluidity, and gravitational effects seemed entirely natural.

A dense forest of towering, dark trees loomed dozens of meters away, dominating the landscape and seeming to embrace the unconventional sky.

This sky, unlike any other, held a multitude of light, low-lying clouds extending endlessly. While 'clouds' were the nearest term in his vocabulary to describe these formations

that commonly occupied the sky and blocked the sun, this fog-like mass was distinct—an extensive, uniform patch devoid of holes or variations in color, thickness, or density. Its proximity was striking, closer than any other cloud he had seen. He mused that, with a slight stretch on tiptoes, his fingertips might graze its damp surface, almost sensing its softness against his skin.

There, in the near distance, the tree tops dissolved into the vast, sprawling cloud, their branches seemingly reaching out to the concealed sky, stretching upward in search of a glimmer of light in the lofty heights. Yet, above this cloud, the true sky persisted. Maybe, at some point, the cloud might disperse, unveiling the familiar blue, white, or gray sky and welcoming the sun. However, this awaited shift was yet to occur.

After the initial shock, his searching gaze darted in all directions until it stopped abruptly, scrutinizing desperately. Then, a glint of recognition lit up his features as he spotted a dark mass tossed by the waves in the distance. With effort, he mobilized his stiff muscles, planting his feet firmly, harnessing his knees, and leveraging his palms to rise to a standing position. It took multiple attempts, each healthy but swollen bone protesting audibly. Bracing himself, he cautiously took a step, testing the tolerable pain, finding solace in the absence of any apparent fractures. Gradually, he gained smoother movement as his feet acclimated to the soft, wet ground.

Drawing nearer to the figure, his stride quickened into a trot, recognizing familiar features. He gently shook the prone body.

“Dad, Dad!”

His voice quivered with a blend of excitement and panic, prompting him to clear his throat before calling out again. Kneeling beside the figure, he listened intently for a heartbeat. The rhythmic rise and fall of the chest brought reassurance—his father was still alive. Now, he was pining to see him open his eyes.

The way anxiety clenches the chest in crucial moments, as if the person, once inconsequential, suddenly becomes the most vital being on the planet—it’s uncanny. He’d recently wished for a switch between his parents, his father confined while his mother embarked on overseas trips. Their closeness had been lacking, evolving into a distance that made him a mere stranger, often arriving home briefly before setting off on another ‘exploratory trip.’

“How?” he pondered. How did his conscience bear the weight of that prolonged absence? He had left behind an ailing wife, battling an advanced malignant disease, and a son raised without the presence of his father, all to chase some elusive island across oceans. The notion of his own clandestine wish materializing troubled him deeply in this moment. He rested his hand on his father’s shoulder, craving for his awakening.



The old man blinked, coughed, and upon locking eyes with the young man hunched over him, a smile graced his lips. Their shared joy at this reunion was palpable, a connection they hadn't experienced since the young man's childhood.

Leaning on the young man's forearm, the elder maneuvered to sit upright on the beach, gasping for breath. The young man noticed the elder's labored breathing and sensed a weightiness in the air within his own chest. The elder turned to survey the stretch of land where the waves had cast them, a quirky and excited glimmer shining in his eyes.

"Adam, my son...we're here!" his voice was hoarse, filled with emotion.

Professor Ashraf Safi dedicated fifteen years of his life to the pursuit of the elusive island. His journey began long before he attained the esteemed title of professor. Climbing the ladder of academic research, publishing paper after paper, he eventually earned recognition in the scientific community. However, his fervor for the island never waned; it remained his personal 'Atlantis.'

The enigmatic 'Devils' Island' made its debut on European world maps in the early sixteenth century, positioned off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. Its moniker stemmed from tales of malevolent spirits purportedly inhabiting its shores. In an era of evolving navigation techniques and explorer accounts shaping

map revisions, the addition of new territories wasn't uncommon. Yet, Devils Island fell into a category of areas known as 'phantom islands'—unverifiable lands with unstable data and coordinates, charted on maps despite lacking tangible evidence of existence. These ambiguous spaces were defined not by physical proof but by myths, legends, sailors' anecdotes, mirages, exaggerations, deceit, and erroneous coordinates.

Phantom islands underwent a cyclical presence on maps, appearing and disappearing as explorers refuted their existence or as legends faded from collective memory. However, this phenomenon challenges the conventional understanding of cartography as an abstract, objective, and unchanging representation of the world—highlighting its historical inherent trait of 'transforming tales into reality.'

Professor Ashraf recounted his narrative numerous times, yet found no audience willing to lend an ear. He found himself amidst the Indian Ocean, situated between the Maldives archipelago and the African coast. Stepping onto a substantial, solid ground unlike any he had encountered in his youthful travels, he had embarked on the journey himself and safely returned home. However, his cherished 'island' remained absent from any maps—neither old nor new.

He never deemed his island 'imaginary' in any sense. His focused mind and vivid experience had etched an undeniable impression on his consciousness. However, his tale stood as an anomaly. Despite his unwavering

conviction, he failed to uncover even a fleeting reference to an inhabited island—be it named or unnamed—in that specific geographical region within atlases or the annals of explorer history, ancient or contemporary.

Some researchers he consulted on the matter posited that it might be an undiscovered part of the Maldives archipelago or an annexed island linked to the Arabian Peninsula. He remained resolute in his assertion: the yacht sailed northward from Male, the capital of the Maldives, for an uninterrupted two-day voyage, eventually reaching land, a significant distance preceding the Arabian Peninsula.

Throughout his years-long quest, he held firm in the belief that he wasn't the sole witness to its existence. As references to phantom or lost islands piled up on his desk from historical accounts, a friend jestingly suggested he publish academic research on the subject. What started as a lighthearted joke spiraled into an extensive, intricate research journey. It propelled him into a select handful—a rare breed, specializing in a distinct branch of geographical investigation. Initially aiming for deeper knowledge, specialization only added layers of hypotheses and unresolved queries to his pursuit.

This journey acquainted him with the *creme de la creme* of researchers and saw him lecturing at prestigious universities globally for over a decade. Every chance encounter with an explorer or a sailor was an opportunity he seized eagerly. Yet, his most fervent desire remained unfulfilled. Despite his endeavors, he never attained what

he yearned for the most.

Professor Ashraf, leaning on Adam for support, struggled to his feet and stumbled onto the sand. Despite his haste, his body felt like a malleable mass of flesh and bone after the violent fall they had endured. Between gasps, he exclaimed, “The inhabitants, we must find the inhabitants!”

Adam noticed the pronounced limp in his left leg and bent down to examine it anxiously. There was a shallow, vertical cut and some swelling in the ankle. At least his father had managed to keep his shoe on him. The professor murmured, hurrying:

“I’m fine; we need to keep moving.”

He urged them forward toward the trees, while Adam’s anxious gaze lingered behind them. He disliked the idea of crossing the dark forest, recalling scenes from one of his favorite shows, *Lost*, where the heroes found themselves stranded after their plane crashed on an unknown island. The forest might hold unpleasant surprises, and the safest option seemed to be staying close to the shore, searching for the plane wreckage, and trying to contact the ship.

Finally, Adam voiced his concern, “The plane... shouldn’t we be looking for it?”

“Later. If we want to survive, we need to find inhabitants first,” the professor insisted.

He didn't dwell on it for long. His father's certainty made him pause. Yet, the ragged breaths hesitantly rising and falling in his father's chest cautioned against further explanations, sensing the toll it might take on his dwindling energy.

As they reached the borders of the Black Forest, Adam was struck by its sight. He had named it so because the leaves appeared darker than any other foliage he had come across. Under the low skies, there were more nuances of color. He contemplated if this was the extent of the difference—just a contrast in color—or if more disparities would surface in the moments to come.

As they ventured a few meters into the bush, the air grew thicker around them, heavy with humidity. It felt as if the earth itself, along with the tree bark and foliage, exhaled deep breathes of hot air into their faces. Adam swiftly noticed his father's struggle to keep pace, his lungs faltering. Labored and shallow breaths betrayed the old man's physical collapse. Adam doubted crossing the forest was the wisest choice, but the elder expressed no inclination to return to the beach.

Adam found himself in an unprecedented physical proximity to his father—leaning against each other, shoulders touching, arms intertwined. He could feel his father's pulse beneath his palm and hear his breath echoing in his ear. In those moments, his father seemed remarkably aged, a stark contrast to the vivid image of the daring professor etched in Adam's subconscious.

When discussions about fathers arose at school, Adam brimmed with pride. His friends and teachers' eyes sparkled with excitement and curiosity whenever the encyclopedic man, a frequent guest on television programs, was mentioned. His father, a well-known academic figure, commanded universal respect and admiration.

However, Adam's sense of pride had dwindled in recent years. His mother's illness necessitated constant care in a sanatorium, yet the brilliant man didn't slow his relentless pace of travel to prioritize his family. In fact, his journeys seemed to multiply and stretch, to the extent that Adam saw him only once a month.

As they walked together along the dirt road within the dense tropical forest, Adam sensed none of the greatness his mother often spoke of, nor the pride he once held for his father. Instead, a profound sense of compassion filled his chest.

It became evident to Adam at some point that his father chose to escape, evading the pain in his wife's eyes and the perceived blame in his young son's gaze. For years, his father seemed to disregard their predicament. Surprisingly, his mother never harbored resentment towards him. Even when Adam criticized his father, her serene smile never wavered.

"You don't understand him," she'd affectionately say, "One day, you'll realize what a great man he is."

Yet, in that moment, amid the shadows of the tropical forest, Adam found no semblance of the greatness his

mother extolled. Instead, he saw a man who had devoted his entire life to the pursuit of an island, finally reaching it, and appearing utterly shattered. He had never seemed more miserable than he did at that moment.

The professor came to an abrupt halt, a sudden pang of pain gripping his chest, signaling the aftermath of the catastrophic helicopter crash. Assessing the internal damage was challenging. It was clear they needed rest; further movement would only exacerbate their condition. Adam felt a dryness in his throat and tasted a strong saltiness. If he had been thinking clearly, he'd have sought out water or scoured the bushes for edible fruits.

“Sit here while I search for water and food,” he urged.

Guiding the old man to lean against the sturdy trunk of an ancient tree, Adam felt his father grip his arm, speaking in a strained, intermittent voice, “No, no water or food yet. Above all, we must find the inhabitants!”

He reluctantly acquiesced to his wishes. Stretching out on the grassy ground, he gazed at his father’s unmoving visage. The older man’s breathing was labored, his parted lips chapped and dry. They urgently needed water. Survival without it seemed bleak. Yet, against all reason, his father persisted in prioritizing the pursuit of his research glory, even if it meant endangering his own life.

Adam speculated the approach of nightfall. Considering natural light only, discerning the time was impossible. In the presence of the sun, he could track its movements and distinguish morning from noon and afternoon. But now,

all he had was speculation. If they were fortunate, perhaps they still had a few hours to locate water and sustenance.

As he observed his father's slumber, Adam sensed his own fatigue intensify. Firm in his resolve, he surveyed their surroundings. Marking their location and leaving a visible trail became imperative to avoid getting lost. He stooped to gather a few white pebbles but quickly realized their insignificance against the thick and tall grass if darkness descended.

He felt tingles in his bare feet after losing his shoes in the sea. He checked his legs and found no traces of scratches, although he felt a numbness like a tick on his skin. He suddenly noticed the shiny silver mud that stuck to it. Gathering a handful of the sandy clay, he applied a muddy trace onto the trunk of the tree where his father rested, a subtle grin forming on his face. The clay shimmered, offering a visible marker in the impending darkness.

With his gaze fixed on his feet, he cautiously advanced, leaving mud marks on the tree trunks along the path. He would pause from time to time, listening to the stillness of nature. Fortunately, all he could hear were birds and the buzzing of insects around the grasses. There was no sign of any fierce creatures lurking nearby. Finally, a distant murmur signaled the presence of flowing water. Without hesitation, he hurried toward the nearby stream, bending down to scoop water with his palms. The touch of the water against his tongue revealed its sweetness and freshness, prompting him to drink eagerly. He quenched

his thirst for an extended period until finally feeling satiated. Afterward, he washed his face and limbs, relishing the revitalizing sensation that ensued.

As dusk hadn't settled in yet, he cautiously raised his eyes and spotted wild bushes bearing fruits resembling those he recognized as edible from home. Picking a dark red berry, he sampled it. Though sour and spicy, its taste pleased him. Continuing to gather the berries, he occasionally indulged in one. Observing the collection amassed in the cradle of his lifted shirt, he deemed it adequate for the moment. He moved deliberately, ensuring the berries remained secure, while contemplating how to procure water for his father.

With determination, he plucked a broad leaf from a nearby tree and skillfully fashioned a deep cup out of it. Dipping the makeshift cup into the stream, he carefully filled it with water, preparing to return.

Walking cautiously, he ensured not a single droplet escaped the improvised leaf cup, balancing it in one hand while holding the hem of his shirt, carrying the harvested berries, in the other. Tracing the marks he had left on the tree trunks, the journey back felt more arduous and tense. An exhale of relief escaped him when he finally glimpsed the sleeping figure of his father, undisturbed from his position.

Adam, concerned for his father's well-being, sat beside him, moistening his lips with water before carefully administering small sips down his throat, which the old man eagerly accepted in his sleep. Ashraf was still resting

with his eyes closed. Adam gently squeezed a berry, letting its juice trickle into his father's mouth. Softly, he whispered, "Dad, you should eat."

Suddenly jolted awake by the taste of something sour, Professor Ashraf spat out the fruit in a panic. His voice trembled with alarm as he exclaimed, "What did you do? Didn't I tell you not to eat anything?"

Confused by his father's sudden outburst, Adam stared at him, puzzled by the reaction. He had acted on his survival instincts, but his father's response wasn't what he expected. The professor's strangled voice echoed once more, filled with frustration, "You're not listening! When will you start paying attention to what adults say?"

Adam who recently turned twenty-three, had crossed into adulthood not long ago. He prided himself on his maturity, intelligence, and intuition. However, despite his growth, his father, the esteemed professor, didn't acknowledge him as an 'adult' and failed to treat him with the respect he believed he deserved. Disheartened, he shook his head in dismay.

His father's voice, tinged with resignation, reached him once more: "Pray... Pray that we find the inhabitants before we die!"

The ship 'The Legend' left the shores of the Red Sea in mid-September, heading south. Except for its crew, there were only a few passengers on board. Its owner, Mike Russell, and his young daughter Manuela were among the travelers this time.

Traditionally, the vessel's route spanned from the Red Sea to Asian coasts, encompassing India, China, and Singapore, facilitating cargo operations at various ports over a month. However, this journey was unlike any other.

Mike, a shrewd investor, was quick to seize opportunities that presented themselves. When Professor Ashraf approached his office, Mike recognized a unique prospect. His crew was accustomed to navigating the Indian Ocean, but embarking on an expedition across its vast expanse without clear coordinates in search of a lost island seemed ludicrous! Yet, Mike was the kind of individual who could discern opportunity even in the most improbable circumstances.

Before securing an agreement with Mike Russell, Professor Ashraf had attempted various cunning methods. Despite the glory, recognition, and social status attained through his academic career, it didn't yield wealth. Even after twenty-five years of dedicated work, his savings were inadequate to finance his expeditions. The advent of satellites, radars, and GPS devices had dissuaded government agencies from investing in quests for undiscovered islands, which the obsessed professor believed existed, yet remained uncharted by anyone else.

During his prior voyages, Professor Ashraf had ventured alongside bounty hunters. These individuals sailed freely, scouring the depths of the ocean for ships and planes. While on these expeditions, he couldn't dictate the course but was content to accompany audacious ships, hoping they might venture close enough to his elusive island.

Though his journeys with bounty hunters resulted in little progress regarding his personal quest, they unveiled to him the hidden wealth concealed beneath the world's seas. A staggering fortune amounting to 32 billion dollars lay submerged in the ocean depths, remnants of ancient ships lost centuries ago. Reflecting on this, he pondered that had he not spent his youth in pursuit of his island, treasure hunting might have been a more financially viable pursuit. Perhaps the discovered treasures could have provided ample funding for his ongoing search. However, everyone charts their unique life path, and for him, the journey unfurled through the portals of maps and exploration.

Finding sunken ships proved as challenging as locating hidden land. Often, the expeditions would return empty-handed, or merely recover the worthless wreckage of some commercial aircraft. However, Captain Sinclair would endlessly lament his greatest missed opportunity.

He recounted the tale of the 'Flor de la Mar,' a Portuguese warship that had returned from a campaign in Malacca, a prominent trading port in southwest Malaysia, in 1511. Laden with spoils of war, including treasures looted from the Sultan of Malacca's royal palace, the ship encountered

a severe storm. Legend has it that around four hundred men perished, and an estimated eighty tons of gold and other valuables, valued at two and a half billion dollars in today's currency, went down with the vessel.

Sinclair had undertaken efforts to extract the spoils in 1992, but the Indonesian government intervened, prohibiting the removal of gold from its waters, "They kept demanding higher and higher percentages of what we'd recover," Sinclair explained, "and it just wasn't financially viable. We had a good idea of where the ship was, but it was like preparing oyster stew and realizing we had a very hungry friend waiting."

Adam found himself seated in a comfortable chair on the roof of 'The Legend,' attempting to unwind. While the boat wasn't a luxurious tourist cruise, his third-deck cabin sufficed. His choice to embark on this journey wasn't entirely voluntary. It was his mother's persistence and plea that urged him to do so. After a fit of coughing, she softly advised, "You should get closer to your father. Learn about him and his interests. If I depart one day, you'll only have each other!"

He found it challenging to leave her alone, but she insisted, "Two weeks. In two weeks, I'll be waiting for you! I promise you won't regret it!"

However, since stepping aboard the ship, he seemed to accumulate a thousand regrets! After traversing the waters from the Red Sea through the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden, and into the Arabian Sea, 'The Legend'

finally entered the vast Indian Ocean. They had been sailing in the middle of nowhere for a while. The water's color grew deeper and denser, hinting at unseen depths. The sun's rays failed to pierce the lower layers, where mystical and unknown worlds lay hidden. As the ocean stretched endlessly, devoid of land or visible life, a sense of both boredom and terror enveloped him. It felt as if they were utterly alone, facing the capricious water monster.

He dreaded the sea monster. Deep down, remnants of an old experience from the days at the beach house still influenced his decisions. Sailing contradicted the internal warnings that echoed insistently in his ears. After his mother, Manuela was a decisive factor in his adventure.

The foreign redhead had come as a visiting student to his university two years ago. Her appearance naturally drew attention to her, but it was her personality that made her popular both inside and outside the lecture halls. Manuela loved traveling. She was a seasoned traveler who visited half the countries of the world before she turned twenty. While Adam prided himself on his father's status and expertise in geography, Manuela knew the world map like the back of her hand, based on her rich personal experience. The young traveler was following in the footsteps of her Portuguese explorer ancestors, Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan, with steadfastness and determination.

He couldn't deny being captivated by her youthful, vibrant image. He approached her just as many of his

classmates had. However, he managed to get her attention not because of his unique qualities, but because of her interest in his father's work! Most of their conversations revolved around her past or upcoming trips, and his father's research.

He admitted to himself that she wasn't his favorite type of girl. But his determination to maintain their friendship had a different motivation. He couldn't help but feel curious about her. Wasn't she the ideal daughter that a researcher like his father would wish for?

Finally, it was she who suggested the meeting between the two men. Thanks to her relentless efforts, Professor Ashraf found a ship to take him to his research area.

He could hear his father's footsteps approaching. Despite the purpose of the trip being to grow closer, they had exchanged only a few sentences in the previous two days. The professor had been engrossed in extensive discussions with the investor and the captain, explaining approximate coordinates, sketching charts, and formulating an improbable combing strategy. Adam blurted out, "Is it truly that remarkable... this ghost island?"

Ashraf smiled and began his explanation, as if delivering a lecture: "This type of island, often referred to as a 'phantom island,' is one that sailors once imagined to exist, only for modern maps to later amend and remove it. Others are known as 'lost islands' because they existed and then disappeared due to natural causes. Rising sea levels are anticipated to cause the disappearance of several

islands in the Maldives archipelago within the next few decades. Efforts to halt the tide and save the land persist, although the solutions are contentious. They are extracting sand from the lagoon's floor to fortify the land and prolong the lifespan of threatened islands by 50 or 100 years! Additionally, there are 'seawalls,' actual permanent concrete barriers erected around the islands to mitigate the impact of storms and wave assaults!"

Adam dismissively waved his palm, "Whatever." He had no interest. He was fed up with enduring a ridiculous journey after what he considered a worthless illusion. However, it seemed that Mike Russel was insane enough to believe in his father's naive dreams. Both researchers and adventurers, in Adam's eyes, exhibited a degree of insanity and naivety. You must be naive to believe that there is a place in the world that no one has discovered before you, and insane to spend large sums of money and years on this illusion.

"However, this island... I'm sure it hasn't vanished... yet! It has a large area with mountainous heights and hills... It cannot vanish so quickly!"

Adam's gaze shifted to the horizon. Listening to his father's tedious lectures wasn't the kind of closeness he'd hoped for. His mother had encouraged him to understand his father better, so he was trying. But his father's intense obsession with a fantasy world was getting on his nerves! At least his mother and he were real. Yet, the professor seemed oblivious to them, lost in his own illusions. More important things seemed to occupy his aging mind, eroding

away his once-sharp intellect.

“Have you ever heard of Atlantis?”

Adam’s attention snapped back to his father, “Are you talking about the mythical treasure city that’s been the inspiration for countless films and shows?”

Ashraf nodded, continuing, “Yes, precisely. The Greek philosopher Plato referenced Atlantis in ancient texts, describing it as an island that once existed. Some scientists propose it might have been in southern Spain, noting that satellite images of the region match Plato’s descriptions in ‘The Utopian City.’ They speculate it was destroyed by floods between 500 and 800 BC. Additionally, historical accounts suggest that Columbus’s maps prior to his voyage to the Americas included a large island that no longer exists, possibly Atlantis itself... As you know, the legend has captivated minds and found its way into literature and drama for centuries!”

Adam shook his head in resignation, then bantered again, “So, does this island of yours have a name? Is it in Greek or Roman mythology somewhere?”

Ashraf smiled warmly, “Maybe I’ll be the first to name it and document its details. In time, researchers and sailors will seek it out, and storytellers will craft tales around it!”

“Regarding the satellites, if they found Atlantis, shouldn’t they have spotted your island’s location too?”

Professor Ashraf’s eyes briefly darkened before he shrugged, “I’m not certain! It has a mysterious and elusive quality. It doesn’t show in satellite imagery, radar scans, and

you won't know it's there until you stumble upon it!"

"An elusive island!" Adam quipped sarcastically.

Ashraf smiled and nodded, "A fitting name, indeed. I might add it to my list of potential names."

He dozed off. He found himself roused from an unintended slumber, startled by the sudden onset of night on the island. Contrary to the expected dense tropical forest darkness, the night wasn't enveloped in pitch black. Perhaps low-hanging clouds diffused the moon's radiance, creating a delicate layer of natural nocturnal luminescence, yet he didn't think the moon alone could produce such a glow. Behind the thick layers of clouds, the light turned into something resembling a candlelit evening or a shimmering silver aurora. The sand beneath his feet retained its bright quality, casting a soft, reflective glow.

He shifted his gaze to his father, now resting in a gentle and deep sleep. Studying his wrinkled face, graying head, pale skin, yielding limbs, and his heavily rising and falling chest, he felt a pang of regret for their argument hours ago. He wanted to prove himself and be helpful, but nothing seemed to satisfy his father.

His stomach grumbled angrily. He was in a lot of pain; it was the stomachache that had woken him up. He hated admitting that his father might have been correct. Perhaps his father indeed knew more about the secrets of the wilderness than he did. He had heard about poisonous mushrooms and herbs before. He shouldn't have eaten

anything in an unknown ecosystem. Locals would undoubtedly be aware of which species are poisonous and which are edible. He now felt ill, as if he had eaten spoiled food.

He knelt abruptly and began vomiting violently. His stomach clenched painfully. He had consumed a large quantity of berries! The sticky red mass he expelled resembled blood, mixed with regret and anguish. He stared at his vomit in horror, unsure if it was blood or solely the fruit. Panic loomed as his pupils dilated, breaths becoming labored. But the spasms didn't stop, forcing him to bend over again, clutching his stomach in agony. He expelled yellow, bitter digestive fluids, streaked with red. His stomach continued to contract violently, tormented by the fears of the night.

When the vomiting episode ended, he was sweaty and completely drained. He felt a sense of emptiness and vulnerability, as if his body was a fragile shell devoid of anything inside. The bitter taste lingered in his throat like a long, sharp thorn, increasing the dryness in his mouth. Water. He needed water. The marks he left on tree trunks still glowed in the darkness of the night. He straightened up and walked quietly, tracing the winding path through the trees once again until he reached the pond. A sigh of exhaustion escaped him as he replenished himself with fresh water. He spat into his palm cautiously after rinsing thoroughly. He feared the sight of blood in his saliva, but it appeared clear.

Once more, he fashioned a leaf cup, filled it with water for his father, and returned to him. His mind raced with questions: How long could they endure without encountering anyone? Could people be a mile away, further, or closer? Which direction should he choose? His old theory resurfaced: maybe returning to the beach to search for the plane's wreckage would lead him to a way to contact the ship or find safe supplies.

Placing a drop of water between his father's lips, Adam noticed signs of dehydration in the old man. Anticipating the need for another trip to the stream to replenish their water supply, he inadvertently brushed his father's neck with his fingertips and flinched in shock. He pressed his palm against his father's forehead, immediately struck by the heat radiating from his body—clear signs of a fever.

Adam moistened the hem of his shirt and delicately wiped his father's face. It was then that he spotted small pimples on the top of his father's chest and along his neck. His eyes widened in surprise. Could his father be experiencing an allergic reaction, perhaps to the berries?

The fever and blisters were clear signs of a food allergy, but there were no anti-allergens or fever-reducing medications available in the wild. Nervously wiping his own face, Adam felt the weight of responsibility after his father's fall. If only he could receive instructions somehow. What would Professor Ashraf do if he were in Adam's place? Would he venture back to the plane?

Then it hit him—he had already been given instructions: “Find the inhabitants!”

The ship was engulfed in fog. When Adam woke up in the morning, visibility was almost zero. A dense white fog had stealthily descended upon the sea, and darkness seemed to shroud his vision entirely. Mystery hung in the air from all directions, obscuring the view of the endless ocean.

Adam quietly left his cabin and walked to the deck to assess the situation, his heart filled with apprehension. The ship’s engines were silent, and the anchor was already deep in the ocean. The captain, understandably, wouldn’t navigate through such weather unless certain of the destination. Yet, this was an aimless quest—a search through the endless expanse for an island not yet identified.

His father engaged in a heated discussion with the investor at the bow of ‘The Legend.’ Curious and doubtful, he approached the scene. Mike Russel wore a frown while Professor Ashraf attempted to convince him of something.

“I can’t risk it. The pilot won’t agree to take you,” Mike declared firmly.

“I don’t need the pilot,” Ashraf asserted, then added obstinately, “I have a license!”

They both turned to Adam, who couldn’t contain his laughter. With a touch of sarcasm, he chimed in, “A driving license, Dad? It’s a helicopter!”

Ashraf glared at him, visibly irritated by the jest. The young man's attempt at humor fell flat and didn't amuse the professor. He pulled a card from his leather wallet—a personal photograph adorning it. Mike inspected it before Adam snatched it from his palm in sheer surprise: a private plane pilot's license. This unexpected revelation left Adam stunned; he hadn't anticipated this level of surprise from his father.

“When I was a visiting professor in the United States, there was a helicopter transportation service for exploring nearby islands,” Ashraf explained, “I found it practical to obtain the license... for convenience in transportation. It allowed the option of chartering a plane for the weekend.”

The look of astonishment in Adam's eyes didn't fade as he returned the license to his father.

Mike interjected sharply: “But I'm not going to rent you the plane! Flying in this weather is too risky!”

“I'll pay you,” Ashraf insisted.

“How will you pay? Do you know the cost of this type of plane?” Mike countered.

“I'll pay in a rare currency. One you won't refuse,” Ashraf stated confidently.

Mike's eyes glinted with avarice. He seemed to grasp the nature of the currency Ashraf meant. Sighing, he relented, “As long as you're determined.”

The professor descended to his cabin and reappeared a few minutes later, clutching a palm-sized wooden box.

Mike meticulously opened it and inspected its contents, then gestured toward the helicopter stationed on the landing pad on the roof, stating, “The plane is at your service.”

Ashraf nodded in gratitude and turned to address Adam, hesitating for a moment. He was fully aware of the risky nature of this expedition, “Adam, would you like to accompany me?” he asked with gentleness.

Adam parted his lips to apologize, but then he noticed Manuela approaching to join the three of them at the front of the ship. The idea didn’t appeal to him, yet he acted rashly without reason. Was he trying to impress the redhead girl? To prove his worth? Certainly, her perplexing glances played a role in his hastiness, and he knew immediately that he would regret it soon.

He nodded as he followed his father’s lead. On the landing platform, a gray two-seater, ultralight Cicaré 8 was waiting for them. A sarcastic smile touched his lips as he settled into the co-pilot’s seat. An adventure like this might just bring them closer: a helicopter ride across the fog-covered ocean!

Ashraf took command. He familiarized himself with the keyboard modules in front of him and above his head, mentally rehearsing the stages of take-off.

“Sure, all planes are the same, just like cars!” Adam muttered sarcastically. Soon after, the helicopter’s engine roared to life, and the propeller began spinning, “Perhaps they are the same, after all!”

His stomach lurched as the helicopter lifted off, veering in a drifting pattern. Dizziness and terror gripped him; he'd never flown in a helicopter, especially not one piloted by his father. Nervousness consumed him as he tightly gripped the fuselage with calloused fingers. The last thing he saw through the helicopter's side window before it ascended and was enveloped by fog was Manuela's tense smile. She waved at him, a farewell wave. He didn't know what was going through her mind at that moment. Did she wish she were in his place? Or perhaps she pitied him for the uncertain fate that awaited him?

His father, however, focused and composed, remained undeterred. Adam plucked up the courage to ask, "What makes you insist on taking off in this weather?"

Ashraf replied swiftly, eyes fixed ahead, "The fog!"

This was not the response he anticipated. Yet, he refrained from interrupting his father's concentration again, resigning himself to the unexpected journey—first aboard a ship traversing the aimless ocean and now within a metal box carried aloft by two rotating blades.

After some time, Ashraf broke the silence with an explanation, "Didn't I tell you? It's a deceptive island. Its visibility isn't immediate, especially when actively sought. It has its own cloaking methods. That's why I believe the fog signals our proximity to it. I need an aerial perspective to look down and spot any indications that may guide us in the right direction."

Adam mumbled incoherently, battling the urge to vomit.

Outside, the propeller spun furiously, tearing through the thick fog and causing the helicopter's frame to shudder against the resistance of the air. Where pilots saw risk, Professor Ashraf saw potential. Adam hoped fervently for the trembling to cease, longing to return safely to the ship's deck after a short reconnaissance flight. His stomach couldn't endure any more strain for a considerable time.

The buzzing and shaking abruptly ceased. For a fleeting moment, Adam entertained the thought that his prayers had been answered and the sky's conditions had somehow stabilized. However, the plane began to descend at an alarming rate. Ashraf's terror-filled scream pierced the air: "Hold on tight!"

So, Adam gripped on tightly. Yet, his grasp failed to anchor his body from rising, experiencing an anti-gravity sensation, as the plummeting helicopter collided with the water's surface. A deafening, violent crash assaulted his senses, and his vision blurred.

After that, he didn't feel anything else.



كيان للنشر

أفضل دار نشر مصرية ٢٠٢١

أفضل ناشر عربي ٢٠٢٣

للتواصل معنا :

kayanpub@gmail.com

info@kayanpublishing.com

أو زوروا موقعنا:

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وللاتصال الهاتفي:

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