

Unit 9

Night's profile defines itself in many ways; such is the variation of weather on Earth. There are certain times, when one could look up at the night sky to see a dense layer of clouds; grey, looming shapes that warn of inevitable rain. The night is angry, despairing, turbulent. The air is heavy, suffocating. On other occasions, delicate, wispy clouds scud across a hazy background, framing the pristine features of the moon. Peaceful. Gentle, comforting. And sometimes, there are clear nights. Skies of glorious India ink. Sprinkles of stars, pinpricks of light, piercing the darkness. The moon glows with a constant brilliance, face turned towards the planet. It is silent, but the silence speaks louder than words.

As I look out from my bunker window, I see that it is one of these nights. I remember them from my childhood, when the sky was nothing but a beautiful view, a way to see the universe that we live in. I remember my life before I joined the airship- before the sky became a hunting ground and these moments became something to be celebrated, a chance to rejoin life on Earth. But for now, reminiscing is trivial. A waste of time. The only thing that should be of importance to me, a Hawaat Al-sama- a Fisherman of the Sky- is succeeding to catch my prey.

The airship cruises gracefully through the clouds as I make my way onto deck. I look up at the moon through the glass ceiling, shining in all its serenity. Its presence is immediately effective, calming me through desperation and impatience. It will guide me for another hunting night. I look beyond it, at the swirling masses of stars. The

nebulae are clear, and planets can be seen. It is a rare occurrence. I whisper a silent prayer, in faith that someone is listening.

“Take me to the Sky Whale tonight. Let every hunter return to the Earth. Find me peace, and find me security.”

None of us want to be here. None of us are here by choice. Our only hope of standing on firm ground is the Sky Whale, and tonight, we may find it.

An automated voice wrenches me from my thoughts.

“Units 7 to 12 to proceed to designated pods. Units 7 to 12 to proceed to designated pods.”

The voice blares instructions, as the room's energy shifts. The small groups that were just laughing and gossiping disperse, leaving people standing solitary, apprehensive and uneasy. The atmosphere is stifling, pulled taut with tension. The automated voice cycles a final time, leaving an uneasy silence in its wake. Around me, the heavy footsteps of soldiers and hunters snap me to reality. I am Unit 9. The time for dwelling on the past is over; the hunt is beginning.

And how I prepare will determine whether I succeed.

I break into a brisk walk, and head for my pod, navigating swarms of people hurrying to their launch bays. I snatch my gun off its hook on the wall. In its transparent chamber, suspended in liquid nitrogen, I can see the minuscule, razor-thin splinters of solid mercury. The moonlight glints on the lethal slivers. Mercury is the only known

substance that harms the Whale, here on Earth. It solidifies at extreme temperatures, and is deadly to humans as well. The guns are volatile weapons, if used irrationally. When handled by an expert, they're worse.

The firearm rests at my hip as I duck down to enter Pod 9. The change of environment is slightly unsettling; cramped, and industrial. It feels cold somehow, even if the temperature is so warm. My thermal regulation suit clings to my body, and a bead of sweat rises and trickles down my forehead. I wipe it away quickly. My exterior is cool, hard, and composed. I see my helmet on a shelf, and pull it over my head, sliding the visor shut. The glass is opaque from the outside, and this provides some sense of security. Like I can now interact with people, without the fear of being looked through.

My crew consists of 4 people, but today, i'm early. I look up to see my pilot. This is my first time alone with the man; an old, weathered veteran hunter named Kael, who has seen the whale multiple times. He's working now, already strapped into the pilot's seat, his knuckles whitening on the thruster controls. He slams the manual lock shut behind me, cursing the airship, the mission, and the sky under his breath. "Another suicide run," he mutters darkly, shooting me a callous stare. "We're chasing ghosts in the dark."

He cannot see my eyes behind the visor, but I close them for a moment. I choose my words carefully.

"No," I shake my head slowly. "We're chasing hope."