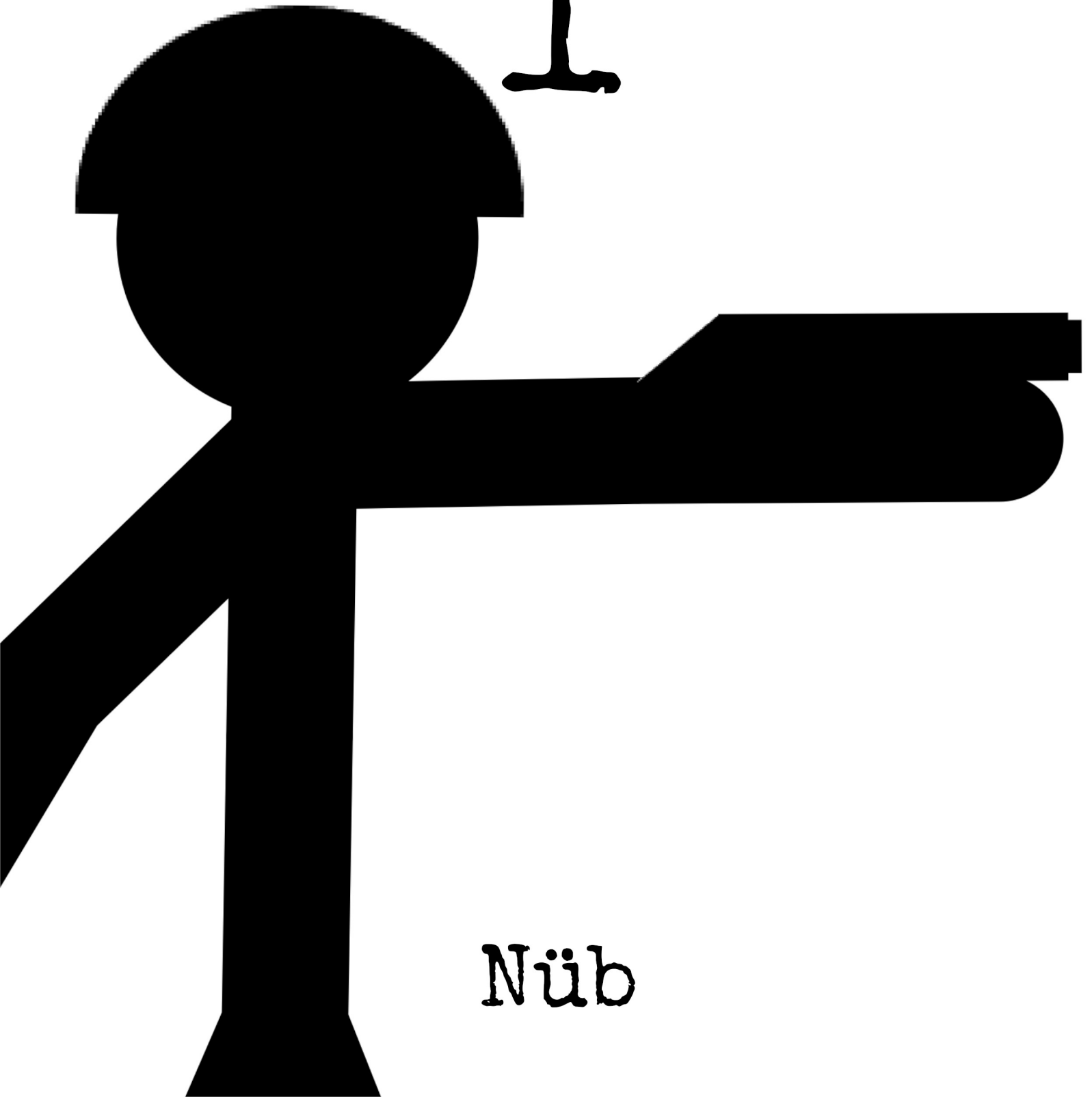


MACHO

1



Nüb

Prologue

The air crackled with an unnatural hum as the squad stepped into the insertion zone, crossing the threshold into the second dimension. It was a world devoid of color, a stark contrast of black and white that played tricks on the eyes. Jagged landscapes stretched endlessly. For the elite unit of Dimension Extraction Command (DEC), it was just another mission: secure and extract.

Max "Macho" Chopard, the squad leader, barked orders over the comms as they reached the designated mining site. His team moved with precision, their full-body suits adapting seamlessly to the bizarre physics of the dimension. The extraction was smooth, almost too smooth, the kind of mission that left a seasoned soldier like Macho uneasy.

"Wrap it up," Macho ordered, watching his squadmates secure the last of the extracted resources. "Extraction zone's a click out. Let's move."

The team arrived at the extraction zone, a jagged outcropping marked by a prior mission. One by one, the squad activated their suits' extraction modules. In a flash of light, they vanished, returning to the safety of the third dimension.

Macho was the last to go. He tapped the panel on his arm, initiating the extraction process. The suit hummed... and then sputtered. A sharp beep echoed in his helmet, followed by a system error message. Panic surged, but he forced it down. "Malfunction? Great," he muttered, slamming his fist against the control panel.

He glanced around, hoping for a solution, but there was no tech support here, only an endless expanse of hostile territory. His suit diagnostics confirmed his worst fear: the extractor was offline. The rest of the team was gone, and he was alone.

Macho took stock. His suit's systems were operational, but supplies were minimal. The mission had been routine—there was no need to pack heavy. His only weapon was a prototype hand cannon, designed for resource extraction, not combat. It hummed with untested energy.

The monotone world around him seemed to shift, the oppressive silence broken by distant, guttural growls. Shapes moved at the edge of his vision—predators, drawn to the scent of an outsider. Macho tightened his grip on the hand cannon, his breath steady despite the adrenaline coursing through him.

"Alright," he muttered to himself, eyes scanning the alien horizon. "Fix the suit, survive the locals, and get the hell out of here. Easy."

But he knew it wouldn't be easy. It was kill or be killed in this relentless, monotone void. And as the first shadowy figure lunged from the darkness, Macho's fight for survival began.

1

Macho adjusted the fit of his helmet, the filtered air hissing softly as he exhaled. The black-and-white landscape stretched endlessly before him, a jagged puzzle of shifting terrain. He scanned the immediate area, his HUD marking no immediate threats. His objective was clear: navigate this hostile terrain, find a safe location to recalibrate his suit's extractor, and survive long enough to do it.

The first path rose before him—a narrow, winding trail edged by sharp, obsidian-like cliffs. A faint wind howled through the canyon, carrying with it an eerie, distant hum that set his nerves on edge. Macho squared his shoulders and pressed forward, his boots crunching against the rough surface.

The terrain was punishing. Massive gaps riddled the ground, some wide enough to swallow a man whole. Macho barely broke stride, vaulting over the gaps with practiced ease, his muscles remembering the countless drills that had prepared him for moments like these. An overhang of spiked formations loomed ahead, their tips gleaming. Dropping into a crouch, he maneuvered beneath them with fluid precision, avoiding even the faintest scrape against his suit.

Each step demanded focus. The landscape wasn't just treacherous; it felt alive, as if the terrain itself conspired to hinder him. Massive edges jutted from the ground, their surfaces slick. One wrong move could send him tumbling into the depths below. Macho used his hand cannon to steady himself, tapping the barrel against the slabs as he climbed. His breath was steady, his movements efficient.

Halfway up, he paused, taking a moment to assess his situation. Sweat beaded on his brow despite the suit's climate control. His hand slipped to the pouch at his hip, where a meager supply of c-energy pellets rested. He pulled one out, turning it over in his gloved hand.

There were only three left.

Macho grimaced. c-energy pellets were a lifeline, a compact source of sustenance designed for long missions. But this mission wasn't supposed to last long. He'd brought just enough for what was supposed to be a quick in-and-out op.

He slid the pellet back into its pouch, his jaw tightening. Every calorie, every ounce of energy would have to be rationed. He couldn't afford to be reckless. Not here.

Pushing forward, he reached the top of the climb, where a narrow plateau stretched out before him. The wind was stronger here, whipping against him as he moved. The ground beneath his boots cracked and shifted with each step, but he didn't falter.

A narrow crevice up ahead seemed to lead to another path. Macho adjusted his grip on the hand cannon and approached cautiously, his movements deliberate. He slipped through the tight space, emerging into a larger area, where a new set of challenges awaited him.

The ground dipped sharply into a series of jagged terraces. Macho slid down the first incline, his boots skidding before catching a grip on solid ground. He leapt to the next terrace, then the next, his training guiding his every motion.

As he reached the bottom, he allowed himself a moment to breathe. His body ached from the exertion, but his mind remained sharp. Checking his surroundings, he took another glance at the glowing display on his forearm. The extractor's diagnostic readout was unchanged—still offline. Still broken.

"One problem at a time," he muttered, clenching his jaw.

Ahead, the path narrowed again, winding deeper into the monotone wilderness. He tightened the strap on his hand cannon, adjusted the pouch of pellets, and pressed on.

2

The second dimension's stark black-and-white expanse felt unrelenting as Macho moved through paths four, five, and six. The air was cold, heavy with an electric tension that seemed to cling to his suit like a second skin. His boots crunched against jagged terrain, each step calculated, each breath measured.

Path four began with a steep descent into a labyrinthine canyon. The jagged walls seemed to close in as he navigated the narrow trail, the blacks growing denser the deeper he went. Macho's HUD flickered occasionally, struggling to keep up with the ever-shifting terrain. Still, he pressed forward, his movements smooth and deliberate.

As he trudged on, his mind wandered back to the mines—those infernal, sprawling tunnels where his team had spent hours extracting the dimension's mysterious resources. The place was a natural death trap, but it held one vital thing: energy pellets.

Should've grabbed extras while I could. The thought gnawed at him. He hadn't expected to need more than the standard loadout. The mission was supposed to be simple: secure, extract, and return. Now, with only three pellets left and no timeline for getting home, the mines were his only hope.

Macho's jaw tightened as he climbed a jagged wall. He hated the idea of backtracking. Every soldier knew the rule: forward was survival. Going back was as good as admitting failure. But this was different. Without pellets, his suit's energy reserves would drain too quickly. He needed to eat. He needed strength.

The climb leveled out into path five, a windswept plateau pockmarked with deep craters. Macho carefully navigated the narrow ridges between the pits. The plateau stretched endlessly, a stark reminder of how alien this place truly was.

You've been in worse spots. His inner voice was gruff, a faint echo of the drill instructors who'd shaped him into a soldier. *One step at a time. Stay sharp, and you'll make it.*

The sixth path loomed ahead, a daunting series of steep inclines that zigzagged up a jagged cliff face. Macho paused at the base, taking a moment to assess the route. The hand cannon, slung across his chest, felt heavier than before. He adjusted its strap and began the climb, muscles burning with each pull.

The cliff's surface was uneven, its sharp edges cutting into his gloves as he gripped and pulled himself upward. His breath came in controlled bursts, each inhale calculated to conserve energy. He paused halfway up, wedging himself into a narrow alcove to rest.

His thoughts returned to the mines. The resources there were dangerous to extract, sure, but they were essential. The energy pellets they produced were like lifelines in this desolate place, condensed nourishment that could sustain a soldier for days. Macho didn't like the idea of going back, but the choice was clear: risk the mines or starve.

"First, survive the paths," he muttered to himself, his voice muffled inside his helmet. "Then, worry about the rest."

The climb continued, the path growing narrower the higher he went. His heart pounded, but his hands were steady, his movements precise.

At the top of the cliff, Macho pulled himself onto solid ground and rose to his feet. The monotone expanse stretched on, another treacherous path waiting in the distance. He took a deep breath, wiping a gloved hand across his visor.

The mines could wait. For now, he needed to keep moving forward.

3

The seventh path unfolded before Macho like a cruel joke, its sharp angles and jagged terrain daring him to falter. He adjusted the strap of the hand cannon across his chest and pushed forward, his boots finding precarious purchase on the uneven ground. The monotone landscape was silent except for the crunch of his steps and the faint hum of his suit's systems.

As he climbed a sloping ridge, his thoughts drifted back to the mission's purpose. The squad had been here before, in these same trails, working toward the same goal: extraction. The resources pulled from the mines of this dimension were unlike anything found in the third dimension. Rich in dense, unyielding energy, they were essential to slowing down the resource depletion that plagued his homeworld.

Macho reached the ridge's peak, pausing to catch his breath and survey the horizon. The terrain ahead seemed endless, a bleak, alien maze. *All this trouble for the survival of a dimension that doesn't even know what it costs.* The thought was bitter, though he quickly pushed it aside.

He and his squad had spent days deep in the mines, navigating claustrophobic tunnels that twisted in impossible ways. They'd faced the harsh, monotone elements and worked tirelessly to secure the precious materials. It was grueling work, but it mattered.

The third dimension was dying—slowly, silently. Over-extraction of natural resources had pushed the world to its limits, and without a lifeline, collapse was inevitable. The second dimension provided that lifeline, a strange, black-and-white realm where the rules of nature seemed rewritten.

Macho adjusted his grip on the hand cannon as he descended into the next stretch of the path, a narrow trail flanked by sharp, obsidian towers. *We took what we needed, but at what cost?* he wondered, the question gnawing at him. They had succeeded in their extraction, yes, but the world they left behind—the second dimension—was a hostile place. A place that seemed to resent their presence.

The eighth path was no easier. A labyrinth of jagged slab pillars stretched out like a broken chessboard. Macho weaved through the formations with practiced efficiency, his military training kicking in. He leapt over crevices, his boots skidding slightly as he landed on the smooth, glossy surfaces.

This mission wasn't supposed to be different. It was supposed to be routine. Macho and his team had done this before—slip in, secure the resources, and get out. The difference this time wasn't the terrain or the dimension itself. It was him. Alone.

A flicker of anger bubbled beneath the surface. He was the squad leader, responsible for every decision, every move. Now, stranded and cut off from his team, that responsibility burned.

By the time he reached the ninth path, Macho's legs ached with the strain of endless climbing, jumping, and balancing. The trail ahead sloped upward, a sharp incline littered with debris. He tightened his jaw and pressed forward, planting one boot in front of the other with unwavering determination.

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