

Raider GL

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Nüb

Prologue

The base was a crude but functional fortress set against the stark, surreal landscape of the second dimension. Here, colors didn't exist. Black and white formed every shade and shape, a realm that stretched endlessly, full of jagged terrain and geometric structures. Inside the base's mess hall, the soldiers of Echo Squad sat around a table strewn with ration packs and discarded wrappers, their voices low and tense.

"Can you believe it? A year here and now this?" muttered Corporal Haines, his face etched with frustration. He was a burly man with a scar running down his cheek, a souvenir from one of the earlier skirmishes. "Locals were supposed to be docile. That's what Command said."

"Yeah, docile until a handful of them decide we're invaders," retorted Private Jackson, a wiry man who always seemed on edge. "Can't say I blame them. We're the aliens here."

Sergeant Morris leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "Enough. We've got a job to do, and whining won't change that."

"Where's Armstrong?" another voice chimed in, this one belonging to Private Diaz, the squad's sharp-eyed sniper. "Haven't seen him since the briefing."

"Scouting," Morris answered curtly. "Checking the left approach. Said he'd be back by now."

"Think he's okay?" Diaz pressed, her concern barely masked.

Before Morris could answer, the base's alarm blared. The squad sprang to their feet. The walls trembled as explosions rocked the perimeter.

"Ambush!" shouted Haines, already grabbing his rifle. "How the hell did they get this close?"

Chaos erupted. The locals, once thought to be harmless, swarmed the base with an intensity none of the soldiers had anticipated. They were smaller and wirier than humans but fast, their makeshift weapons surprisingly effective against the squad's defenses. The twelve soldiers fought valiantly, but the sheer numbers overwhelmed them.

One by one, Echo Squad was subdued. Morris was the last to fall, dragged down as he tried to hold the doorway to the base. The attackers ransacked the base, leaving nothing but wreckage in their wake.

Hours later, Armstrong returned. The sight that greeted him froze him in his tracks. The base was unrecognizable—a ruin of shattered walls and burnt-out equipment. Spent shell casings littered the ground, mingling with bloodstains and the charred remnants of gear.

He crouched, picking up a shell casing, his knuckles whitening underneath his bodysuit as he clenched it in his hand. His squad was gone. He knew it before even checking the barracks or the comms.

Armstrong didn't waste time mourning. He scanned the terrain, the jagged expanse of black and white stretching infinitely onward.

"They'll be holding them somewhere," he muttered to himself, voice steely. His pistol felt heavy at his side, the weight of it both reassuring and sobering. He checked his magazines—just three left. It would have to be enough.

With a final glance at the ruins of the base, Armstrong set off into the unknown expanse, a lone figure against the alien horizon, determined to bring his squad back or die trying.

1

Armstrong adjusted the strap of his holster, ensuring his pistol was secure at his side. The black and white horizon stretched endlessly, the jagged peaks and twisting paths appearing like a surreal ink drawing. Every step he took felt purposeful, the heavy crunch of his boots against the cracked terrain grounding him in the otherwise otherworldly silence.

The first path presented itself as a narrow gorge, its edges sharp and unforgiving. Massive slabs of geometric slab jutted out from the walls at odd angles, forming a gauntlet that would have tested anyone's nerve. Armstrong didn't hesitate. His eyes scanned the obstacles, calculating distances and timing. He leapt onto the first slab, his boots landing squarely, and then he propelled himself forward, weaving through the treacherous terrain with the practiced ease of a man who had spent years perfecting his craft.

A gust of wind howled through the gorge, threatening to unbalance him. Armstrong crouched low, one hand gripping the cold surface of the slab beneath him. He waited for the wind to subside before moving to the next platform, his movements precise and unyielding. His breathing was steady, his focus absolute.

"Just like training," he muttered to himself. "Except no drill sergeant yelling in my ear."

The path twisted sharply, leading to a narrow bridge of brittle, jagged slab. Below it was a chasm so deep that even the black and white hues faded into an infinite void. Armstrong tested the first step carefully; the bridge groaned under his weight. His instincts told him it wouldn't hold for long. He didn't waste time debating—he sprinted across, his boots barely touching the fragile surface before it crumbled behind him.

At the end of the bridge, Armstrong paused to catch his breath. Sweat trickled down his brow, though the temperature was eerily cool. He took a swig from his canteen, the lukewarm water doing little to calm the tension in his muscles.

The next stretch of the path was a maze of towering, spiraling columns that seemed to shift subtly when he wasn't looking. The spaces between them were narrow, and the shadows they cast made navigation difficult. Armstrong moved cautiously, through the tight gaps. His training came through again—staying aware of his surroundings, anticipating movement, keeping his breathing steady.

He reached an open area, only to find the ground pockmarked with pits of jagged spikes. Armstrong crouched low, studying the layout. He spotted a pattern in the way the pits were arranged, a rhythm he could exploit. Timing his steps perfectly, he darted forward, sidestepping and jumping over the traps with a precision born of years in the field. Each leap was measured, each landing controlled.

Finally, the path opened up into a vast plateau. The expanse was quieter here, though the silence was far from comforting. Armstrong scanned the area, noting the unusual stillness. He took a deep breath and pressed forward, his eyes constantly shifting, searching for any sign of movement or danger.

The plateau led to another passage, one that disappeared into a series of twisting tunnels carved into the jagged terrain. Armstrong hesitated for a moment, his hand brushing against his pistol. The tunnels would be claustrophobic, offering little room to maneuver, but there was no other way forward.

“Keep moving,” he told himself. “They’re counting on you.”

With a steely resolve, Armstrong stepped into the next set of challenges, the shadows of the tunnel swallowing him whole.

2

Armstrong pressed on, his silhouette a stark contrast against the strange, monochrome terrain. The path before him, his fourth trial, was a sloping incline littered with jagged, irregular slabs. The incline seemed endless, its crest disappearing into the black-and-white of the horizon.

He paused briefly to tighten the straps of his boots, then began his ascent. Each step required balance and focus as loose slabs shifted beneath his weight. The climb didn't faze him. His mind, sharp and steady, drifted to his squad.

Are they ahead of the extraction point, or did the enemy pull them back behind it? The thought was clinical, a tactical consideration rather than a worry. Armstrong had long since learned that panic was useless in situations like this. Still, it gnawed at him, the question of their whereabouts.

His boots scraped against the slab as he reached a plateau. He paused, scanning the horizon again, though the featureless mist yielded no answers.

"Eighteen months," he murmured to himself. That was how long their tour in this bizarre dimension was supposed to last. Six months, and they'd have been home, debriefing and packing for leave. A faint smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "I'll have you back way before then, you'll see."

The thought gave him strength as he pushed onward.

The fifth path loomed ahead: a sprawling canyon filled with precarious ledges and narrow walkways carved into the sheer black walls. The wind howled here, funneled through the tight spaces, and the ledges seemed to shift ever so slightly underfoot. Armstrong crouched low to keep his balance as he moved carefully from one ledge to the next.

The drop below was dizzying, an endless pit of jagged black lines slicing through the whiteness. He didn't look down for long—there was no point. Instead, he focused on each step, trusting his instincts and training.

"I wonder if Diaz is thinking about home," he mused aloud. "Probably already planning that fishing trip she's always talking about."

His voice echoed faintly in the canyon, a small comfort in the oppressive silence. His thoughts turned to Haines, Morris, Jackson—the rest of the squad. Each of them had been through thick and thin together, and he trusted them completely. They were alive. He could feel it in his gut.

The ledges eventually opened up into a steep stair-like formation, carved into the canyon wall. Armstrong ascended quickly, his muscles burning but his determination unwavering. He reached the top and paused, catching his breath as he surveyed the next challenge.

Path six was a labyrinth of towering black towers, their bases uneven and sharp. The ground between them was cracked and uneven, with sharp outcroppings that could easily pierce his boots if he wasn't careful.

Armstrong knelt and studied the terrain, plotting a route through the jagged maze. He moved with precision, darting ahead and leaping over gaps when needed.

As he neared the end of the path, his thoughts wandered again. *Maybe they've already figured out how to signal me. Morris is good at that sort of thing.*

The end of the path revealed another open expanse, this one lined with strange, geometric formations that jutted out at unnatural angles. Armstrong stopped and wiped his brow, taking another sip from his canteen.

"They're counting on you," he reminded himself, his voice firm. "One path at a time."

With renewed resolve, he squared his shoulders and continued forward, the expanse stretching endlessly ahead of him.

3

The seventh path stretched ahead like a jagged scar across the monotone world. Armstrong broke into a steady jog, his breathing even, his pace unyielding. His hand rested on the cold steel of his pistol, a standard-issue **M17**, its familiar weight both reassuring and daunting. With each stride, he brought it up, aimed at an imaginary target ahead, and dry-fired. The faint metallic click echoed in the stillness, a sound that sharpened his focus.

Fifteen rounds in the mag, he thought, his thumb brushing against the pistol's grip. Two more mags in my pouch. That's forty-five total. Will it be enough?

The question hung in his mind as he vaulted over a series of jagged slabs that jutted out like the teeth of some great beast. The terrain shifted beneath him, loose slabs rolling away, but his balance never faltered. Training had burned the instinct into his muscle memory—feet light, eyes forward, mind clear.

Another click. He lowered the pistol, ejecting the magazine before reinserting it in one fluid motion. His thumb flicked the slide release, chambering an imaginary round. He didn't need to check the weapon; he knew it was in perfect condition.

If they're still alive—and they are—then those bastards who took them have our gear. Rifles, grenades, maybe a couple of M249s if Haines had his way. If I can get close, I can take what's ours back.

The thought spurred him on. The seventh path opened into a series of steep terraces, each one as black as the one ahead. Armstrong didn't slow, his boots gripping the terrain as he scaled one terrace after another. He leapt from one edge to the next, his movements fluid and efficient, the M17 clicking in rhythm with his thoughts.

Forty-five rounds, he repeated in his mind. Forty-five shots to free them, to get them home.

The eighth path was a winding chasm, its walls tight and oppressive. Armstrong jogged through without hesitation, the walls scraping faintly against his shoulders. The air here was dense, the silence heavy. The black and white hues seemed to pulse faintly, as if the dimension itself were alive and watching him.

Click. The sound of his dry fire cut through the tension.

What if they're hurt? What if they can't fight when I get to them?

He shook the thought away, his jaw tightening. *Then I'll fight for them. Hell, if it's just me with forty-five rounds and a squad's worth of stolen weapons, it'll be enough. It has to be.*

The chasm opened into a narrow bridge—a sheer drop on either side leading to nothingness. Armstrong kept his pace, his boots thudding steadily against the precarious surface. Below, the void seemed to call to him, a faint hum vibrating in his chest. He ignored it, his focus locked on the path ahead.

By the time he reached the ninth path, his arms and legs burned, but he didn't stop. This stretch was a field of jagged monoliths, each one casting long, black shadows that danced as he moved. He weaved through them like a shadow himself, his pistol clicking with every few steps.

They've got to have set up somewhere, he thought. A camp, a holding area. They wouldn't drag prisoners across this hellscape without a plan.

He holstered the M17 briefly, rolling his shoulders to loosen the stiffness setting in. His hand brushed against the extra magazines at his hip, and he couldn't help but count them again in his mind.

Three mags. Forty-five shots.

He pulled the pistol free again and resumed dry firing as he ran. The weight of the weapon was comforting, but it also reminded him of the stakes. Each shot had to count. There would be no second chances.

The ninth path ended in another steep incline,. Armstrong climbed it without hesitation, his movements as sure as ever.

At the top, he paused briefly, looking ahead at the next set of challenges that awaited. He clenched the M17 in his hand, his thumb brushing the slide.

"They're out there," he muttered. "And I'm coming."

With that, he pressed forward, his boots crunching against the alien terrain as he continued his relentless advance.

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