

DIMENSIONAL

“Climber One, do you copy?” Static echoed back across the line. “Climber One, this is Sierra Base, Dimension 19, do you copy?” The static continued. Lieutenant Mercer turned to look at Commander Urtz, and shook her head. She placed her hand to the comms system in her ear and whispered, “Be safe, Furyk,” not knowing if her message would be heard or not.

“How could we lose him?” asked Urtz loudly from the back of the room, facing the five-member team outfitted in matching black uniforms with blue and white “Sierra Base” patches on the shoulders. “We’ve made it through 22 dimensions together,” he said, lowering his voice. “We’re not going to lose him now.”

The room remained silent. Mercer turned to look at Chang and asked, “How are his vitals?”

“They’re all over the place,” the medic said, watching the holographic readings of Furyk’s vitals glitch rapidly before fading. “I can’t get a clear reading.”

“Whitby, what’s going on here?” shouted Urtz, his irascible nature coming to the fold.

The navigator turned around and pushed his black glasses up on his face, “one-second sir,” before turning back to an array of dancing light emitting from his promitor, a meter-long levitating disc. A huge map appeared which Whitby expanded with a quick swipe of his hand. All eyes in the room were now focused on the blue 3D light that showed a topographical view of a huge city.

“We were able to track him up until this point, sir,” said Whitby, as a white dot appeared on the map, “and then, he just vanished.”

Degen Hill

“Did he make a successful climb or not?” barked Urtz, his white mustache stark in comparison to his black uniform.

Whitby looked over to the rest of the team before facing his commander, “I dont know, sir.”

“Chang, keep an eye on his vitals. Mercer, if there’s even the slightest noise among that static, I want an update. The rest of you, figure out just where the hell Furyk went. If successful, we’ll be the first team in over a decade to have climbed to Dimension 23, but it doesn’t mean a goddamn thing if we can’t pinpoint his location and make contact.”

His team turned back to their stations and went to work. Urtz let out a sigh. He refused to believe that something terrible had happened to Furyk, the same man who had perilously climbed 22 dimensions, continually pushing the physical and metaphysical properties of Earth. Technically, Simulation Earth, he remembered. He knew Furyk was capable and could handle himself alone in another dimension, but as his commander, he still worried about him. As thoughts about Furyk’s location continued to rush through Urtz’s head, Larson, the team’s climb technician, turned to face him.

“Commander, you’re going to want to take a look at this.”

All eyes shifted to the holographic image next to Larson. “Typically, to climb from one dimension to another, we manipulate the particles around an object that is showing signs of wear and tear.”

“Usually it’s a glitch, a lag – something that allows us to create an opening between dimensions long enough for us to pass through.” As she spoke, she moved her hands to show holographically rendered clips from previous climbs. The climb to Dimension 13 was displayed, where Sierra Climber One had passed through a glitching tree.

Degen Hill

“Our simulation is old, and we’ve been able to take advantage of the outdated tech to allow Furyk to make the climbs,” she continued.

“We know how it works,” growled Urtz impatiently.

“The climb to 23 was different. The properties of Dimension 22 weren’t as we thought. Something interfered with Furyk’s attempt to open a glitch on his way to 23.”

“What do you mean properties?” asked Chang.

“That’s what I’m trying to work out,” replied Larson. “Maybe we went too soon. It’s likely we didn’t truly understand Dimension 22 before attempting the next climb.”

“Maybe as we get closer to the Edge, the effects from the natural world, if there even is one, affect dimensions differently than those closer to the Core,” added Whitby.

“No one knows how close we are to the Edge,” said Urtz. “It could be Dimension 23, or Dimension 230.” He knew his team was anxious to have a climber make it out of the simulation, but in reality, no one knew how many dimensions there were to go. Now he needed to keep them focused on the task at hand – finding Furyk.

Mercer walked over to the hologram. “Here,” she said, swiping her hand back. The light flickered and then showed a tall man in his early 30s with broad shoulders and a grizzled beard walking towards a red door.

“This was the last footage we have of him before he...”

“Disappeared,” finished Chang.

Team Sierra stared at the light coming from the promitor, showing Furyk walking towards the door, opening it, firing his hologun through the open space until a bright light appeared, and then stepping across the threshold and into the dark building as the light faded.

“That’s when communication cut out,” said Mercer.

“Was it the door, or the building itself?” asked Urtz, trying to work out which object had been the gateway to the next dimension.

“We’re not sure, sir,” said Whitby, who was frantically pulling up the digital blueprints of the building and running scans on every object in it.

“Mark the glitch and send it to HQ. They can get started sorting out just what the hell happened and get a portal established for when Core Evac Protocol kicks in. Right now, our priority is Furyk. He’s out there, somewhere,” said Urtz. “It’s our duty to get him back.”

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The room was dark except for a white light creeping in through a scantily covered window in the corner. Furyk closed his eyes and then blinked several times, trying to let them adjust to the dark. He glanced down at his hand and opened his palm, but no digital reading came up. He placed his hand to his ear but heard only static.

“Goddamn technology,” he muttered. He ran his hand across his hips to make sure his gear was still there, feeling for his hologun, first-aid kit, roto-drone, and meal supplements. The air in the room was dry and cool. In his black jacket adorned with the Sierra Base patch, he stood still, keeping his left hand on his hologun, listening for something, anything. Only silence. He breathed a sigh of relief as he thought back to his climb to Dimension 11, immediately ambushed by an unruly mob who didn’t take kindly to his sudden appearance amidst their “ritual” or whatever they had called it. He took his hand off his gun and scanned the room. His ret-lens, a digitally implanted retinal scanner, hadn’t identified any signs of life or visible threats, but he remained focused on the small area where the faint light was trickling in.

## Degen Hill

Every time Furyk climbed he was apprehensive. A climb for him was exciting, but it also brought with it very real dangers – dangers that neither he nor his team could have imagined. Extreme temperatures, violent inhabitants, or strange metaphysical elements could make navigating a new dimension a veritable nightmare. He walked towards the window and moved the ragged curtain aside. Quiet streets and seemingly uninhabited buildings stared back at him. He closed his eyes and then opened them again, not fully comprehending what he was taking in. Something was different; and then it hit him – everything was colorless. With the curtain drawn back, he looked down at his right hand, seeing his red bracelet on his tanned flesh. He quickly looked back outside, having never experienced a dimension quite like this. The black, white, and shades of gray seemed to engulf him as he ripped down the curtain and the white light filled the dilapidated room in which he now stood. Another anomalous world.

*Is this it?* he thought, *is 23, a world without color, the last dimension?* For him, the Edge had always been something to strive towards, like being healthy or optimistic; he'd always believed it to be a continual pursuit, not an achievable reality. Since the discovery of other dimensions, navigators had claimed that the Edge would be a prime number. Something to do with an algorithm based on the Sun, Furyk never quite understood what they had meant. But with each new prime dimension he climbed to, his faith had wavered. 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, and 19 hadn't felt like victories, instead they had chipped away at his belief that he would be the first climber to find the Edge – his only opportunity to live a normal life instead of one spent in perpetual pursuit. He knew what he had signed up for when committing his life to be a Sierra climber, but he was losing faith. Now in 23, another prime, another possibility, the small voice of hope in his head conflicted with his black and white surroundings that seemed to taunt him,

## Degen Hill

slowly draining his hope the same way it had drained the color. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them, trying to adjust to the subtle shades of gray.

He placed his hand to his ear again, “Sierra Command, this is Climber One do you read me?” Static shot through his ear. Alone, in a new dimension, Furyk had been in this situation before, but this time something felt different. Communications were down, but his feelings of isolation felt stronger than just the silence. He knew his team was back in Dimension 19, as they were only permitted to establish a base in the furthest prime number dimension they had climbed. *Four dimensions away*, he thought, *but how many more to go?* He shook his head and brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

He turned to face a table in the corner of the room and from his hip, tossed his mini-promitor, which is about the size of a small coin, onto its surface, which opened up a holographic map. Slowly, Dimension 23 began to materialize in its blue light. Buildings, small houses, shops, trees, sidewalks, skyscrapers, everything appeared ordinary to Furyk minus the lack of color. He spotted an elevated area a few kilometers east and knew he had to make it to higher ground to gain a better vantage point. Understanding his surroundings had been critical for his survival in past Dimensions. From the table, he grabbed the mini-promitor, placed it back on his belt, and made his way out of the house and onto the street.

The stillness was the first thing he noticed, which seemed to overwhelm the colorless hues of his surroundings. Furyk could feel an uneasiness building within him. He’d gotten used to the chaos of other dimensions. The noise, extreme temperatures, and unruly inhabitants were things he had come to expect, but now, standing alone in the middle of the street with no way to contact his team, for the first time, Furyk felt he was truly alone.

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A faint noise came from Chang's station. The subtle green spikes of a heartrate flickered across the display, accompanying the beeps. All eyes in the room turned toward the medic.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Urtz.

"It's weak, but it's a signal. Furyk is alive," said Chang. Urtz closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd commanded Team Sierra since its inception several decades ago and had lost a lot of good climbers. Furyk had led them into uncharted dimensions, and the faint signal of a heartbeat was enough to quash the feeling in the back of his mind that all was lost.

"Let's get a position on him."

"Working on it, sir," said Whitby. "But there seems to be some interference."

Larson looked up from her station, "Something between Dimensions 22 and 23 is preventing Furyk's tracker from transmitting the signal. Vitals are coming through, but I can't lock on to his position."

"Figure it out," barked Urtz. "Mercer, how are comms?"

"Still down for the moment, sir. I'll see if I can send him something in Morse code. Digital isn't working, but analog might."

Urtz turned his attention back to Furyk's vitals, which were displayed in light blue above Chang's desk.

"It's not over yet," he said, watching Furyk's faint pulse steadily beat in flickering beams of light.

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New dimensions always brought new challenges, and Furyk had anticipated for there to be something else, something more to Dimension 23. So far, there was nothing. The temperature was stable, allowing him to deactivate his thermal suit; there were no signs of life except for the plants and trees whose grey branches and leaves fluttered in the soft wind. Furyk had been walking for over an hour now, keeping an eye out for anything that seemed strange, anything out of place. His eyes had adjusted to the lack of color, but a feeling of emptiness, as if something weren't quite right, remained with him.

As he walked through the streets, he thought of how easy his first climb had been. Urtz had done his best to train him, but nothing could have prepared him for what it felt like to climb to another dimension. Between the point of firing his hologun at the exact moment an object glitched and stepping through to the next dimension, he felt like he was suspended in cool water, weightless, caught between two worlds. The feeling didn't last long, and in an instant Furyk had found himself in Dimension 2, one in which time was reversed. In the course of the six months it took him to climb to Dimension 3, where he had watched trees shrink and turn into seeds and buildings slowly become unbuilt. He had traversed dimensions that looked like an MC Escher painting and dimensions with zero gravity, dimensions that had robotic societies and dimensions with only animals. Each was unique and each had a way out, and it was his job to find it.

Memories continued to flood his mind and he wondered if his travels through dimensions were quixotic in nature. Under his feet the black and white terrain carried him forward, as the silence continued to dominate his senses. He walked on, with each step his thoughts continued to weigh down on him. Tired, Furyk paused for a moment to take in his surroundings. He found himself on top of a hill overlooking the grey-washed city sprawled out before him. Mid-modern,

Degen Hill

probably a decade or so more advanced than what most people considered “reality” in Dimension 1. He’d fantasized about staying in other dimensions, about giving up the endless pursuit for the Edge. He’d argued that life is where you make it, regardless of whether you knew it was a simulation or not. Authorities in the Core prohibited such actions. The Dimension Climber Protocol mandated that no dimension other than the Core or the Edge was to be inhabited and that any resources from other dimensions were only to be taken back through previously climbed portals to fuel the Core.

He touched his temples with his pointer fingers and his blue eyes turned black as his retinas slid into place. He blinked, and the optics zoomed in as he scanned the city, looking for anything, a sign, a clue – a way out. Black walls seemed to mix with gray streets and white signs. If Furyk didn’t focus it would be easy to get lost in the swirl of the city below him.

He touched his earpiece and said, “Commander, come in; this is Climber One.” Static echoed back, but this time he heard the faint sound of a woman.

“Climber One.... This is Sierra...” The words were fragmented, but Furyk knew who had broken through.

“Mercer!” he yelled. “Mercer, do you read me?”

“Bad signal ... hard to ... safe?”

“I made it Dimension 23, no signs of life. It’s colorless here, except for me. Temperature stable, vitals stable. Searching for the key to 24.”

“Copy ... be safe ... out.” Mercer’s voice went silent, and Furyk breathed a sigh of relief, happy to know he wasn’t alone. Just as his nerves were starting to settle, he noticed movement below. He blinked twice, and his lenses zoomed in.

## Degen Hill

His eyes focused on where the flash had come from, a side street between two giant glass buildings. What stood out to him hadn't been the movement itself; it was the color. A flash of red had appeared, unmistakably. His eyes followed the street and continued to scan the area as he took out his hologun.

"We've got something here," he said through his comms, with nothing but static echoing back. His heart began to race. *Alone again*, he thought.

In his peripheral, he saw the red flash again before it disappeared behind a building. He twisted his head and blinked three times in rapid succession, turning on his thermal lenses. The cityscape changed to cool hues of green and blue and as he shifted his gaze slowly to the right and noticed a red object standing directly in his line of sight, a few hundred meters out. He blinked again to turn off his thermals and saw what looked like a man in red, although at a distance it was hard to make out precisely what he saw. Suddenly, as if in slow motion, a blue beam ripped over his shoulder. As it neared the tree behind him, the beam stopped in midair and a swarm of particles lit up around it and exploded, sending chunks of tree in all directions just as he jumped behind a small rock wall.

"Shots fired. Hostile forces. Blast looks like it came from a Holo," he shouted into his comms. He didn't have time to wait for a response. From his belt, he grabbed a roto-drone about the size of a grape and threw it into the air. He squinted his left eye, and the stream from the drone came into view. The small ball flew towards where the shot had come, but Furyk couldn't see anything except black and white buildings. Controlling it with his left hand, tilting it side to side, the drone weaved in and out of the city below him.

Furyk clenched his fist, and the drone hovered as he pondered his next move. He likely wouldn't be able to find where the shot had come from, and even if he did, a shot from this

## Degen Hill

distance would come down to luck. Furyk wasn't certain who, or what, had shot at him. Friend, foe, or something else. He was accustomed to the fear of the unknown, but each time he felt it, the feeling in his stomach was as real as anything else. He thought for a moment, took a deep breath to calm his nerves and turned on the drone's speakers, allowing his voice to echo throughout the city. "To seek the truth, ever forward, ever upward, we climb."

Suddenly, he saw a figure in red emerge from behind a corner, look up at the drone, and point his finger to the sky – the sign of a climber. Furyk flipped his hand over to recall the drone and stood up. Again, he placed his finger on his ear and said, "Mercer, we've got a situation."

Having made his way down into the city, he now stood about 100 meters from the man in red. At this distance, he could make out a gray beard, but his eyes remained hidden by a red baseball hat. Slowly, the two men made their way towards each other. Furyk spoke first.

"I'm Zane Furyk, Climber One for Team Sierra." The man's green eyes stared back at Furyk in a sense of wonderment, as if he were some strange creature in a zoo. His fingers fidgeted with his hands by his side.

"I'm Frank Higgins, Climber One for Team Alpha, or what's left of it." He spoke slowly but clearly.

Furyk stuck out his hand and Higgins' eyes stared at it before he extended his.

"Your color... its so... its been so long since I've seen any other colors," muttered Higgins, a sentence Furyk wasn't sure was meant for him or if the old man were speaking to himself.

"How long have you...?"

"30 years, 7 months, and 23 days," he replied. "And sorry for taking the shot. Can never be too sure what's out here in these dimensions."

Degen Hill

Furyk stared at him in shock. “Is this the Edge?” he asked.

“Very well could be. But even so, what’s the point? We’re never getting out of here.

When Alpha Team told me they were getting shut down for ‘a lack of verifiable or substantial progress’, I guess I was just considered an expendable asset. They thanked me for my service, closed the portals I had traveled through and disabled comms. Just left me here. And now, three decades later, you. No one, no climber, no team has ever made it this far, except for you. Who’d you say you were with? Sierra, let’s see, that makes you the 19<sup>th</sup> team to climb, and you only just managed to show up.”

“The dimensions, they take time, you have to understand, we had no idea you were here. I’d heard about Alpha’s shutdown, but the Dimension Climber program was reinstated a few decades later as the Core continued to deteriorate. There were rumors of climbers getting lost, but we didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m sure I was erased from the database since no one came looking for me,” Higgins said. “And to answer your question,” gesturing to the black and white surroundings, “this is a pretty bleak dimension if it’s the Edge. I’ve searched for 30 years for a way out. I’ve had several roto-drones searching non-stop for color, physical anomalies, glitches, signs of life; you name it – there’s nothing.”

“So, you’re saying this is it?”

The old man looked directly at Furyk, “I’m saying I have no reason to believe otherwise.” He broke eye contact and then looked up at the sky, “But I can’t be sure.”

*Hopeful conjecture*, Furyk thought. He took a deep breath and looked around. He could tell that ennui had gotten to Higgins, but knew he wasn’t crazy. There was no reason not to trust the old man, but no matter how long Higgins had been here searching, Furyk wasn’t ready to

accept that this was the Edge, no matter how badly he wanted to. Something in his gut knew there was more out there. If this was the final dimension, the Edge, it didn't inspire much.

"What now?" asked Furyk.

"I've been asking myself that for decades," Higgins said with a defeated look in his eye.

"Our only shot now is to get your comms up and running, and prepare Dimension 1 for immediate evacuation as stated in the Core Evac Protocol."

"Once the Edge has been found and proved beyond a reasonable doubt, all beings must climb to the final dimension," said Furyk, repeating the first line from CEP. "I don't think we're ready to initiate that protocol just yet."

"You don't believe me?" asked Higgins incredulously. "What do you think I've been doing here for the past three decades? You think if there were a way out, I wouldn't have found it by now?"

"I want to believe it just as much as you. We'll have to get advanced climber teams here first to test, but if what you say is true, that this is the last dimension, then we've conquered what no one in the past 3,000 years has been able to."

"Life finds a way," said Higgins, looking around at the colorless landscape. "Let's get to high ground and get those comms working. If we really did it, there's a lot of work to be done."

Furyk looked up into the gray sky, wondering if this could truly be the Edge, the one thing he had devoted his life to finding. In the back of his mind, he couldn't help but wonder if there was something more out there, more than just the dimensions, the endless layers of Earth through which he had climbed. *And for what?* he thought. So he could be happy? For the survival of the human race? To satisfy his desire of needing to know the truth? The gray sun warmed his face and Furyk, questioning reality as he had done before, paused for a moment to

Degen Hill

appreciate the fact that maybe he had made it out, and that, just maybe, he had accomplished his life's purpose.

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“What's the count?” asked one being.

“23,” said another. Members of the galactic council looked at Furyk and Higgins talking, simulated by an array of moving liquid that floated above them in the middle of the room.

“3,000 years, and only 23 dimensions,” said another. “And I thought the Berk species was slow. Simulation Earth has how many dimensions?”

“2,371. At least the humans were right about ‘the Edge,’ as they like to put it, being a prime number.”

“What's the verdict on the meatbags?”

A delicate mass of swirling gray vapor spoke, “Humans, as a species, at this point in time, are unfit to join our council, which oversees the domain that they call ‘The Local Group.’ As such, any and all communication, interaction, or intervention with humans will be prohibited, and, until their species makes their way out of the simulation and proves themselves worthy as a member of our galactical group, they will have no access to our shared technology and knowledge as well as no say in how their galaxy unfolds.”

“We just let them struggle?” asked a member from the other side of the room.

“Humans are a unique species,” the vapor said as it swirled and floated in its place. “And perhaps one day, they will be fit to join us. Until that day, they must continue to persevere to find their way out of the simulation. As a species, in their current state, I have my doubts about what

Degen Hill

theyll be able to achieve ; however, I also believe they have great potential, and it is up to them and only them to achieve it. Each and every one of our species struggled with our own tests to prove our worth. So too must humans.”

The room was quiet for some time before a small creature looked around and said, “4,000 vaporcoins at 20 to 1 odds that humans don’t make it out within 500 years.”

The noise in the room exploded as beings from different planets and galaxies began placing and taking bets on Earth’s humans, a species that had so far failed to push the boundaries of its capabilities as well as the dimensions of the simulation it now found itself in.

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