

DIMENSIONAL

by Degen Hill

“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 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 stayed silent. Mercer turned to Chang. “How are his vitals?”

“All over the place,” the medic said, watching the holographic readings flicker and fade. “I can’t get a clear reading.”

“Whitby, what’s going on?” barked Urtz.

The navigator pushed his black glasses up his nose. “One second, sir.” He turned back to his promitor, a meter-long levitating disc emitting an array of dancing light. A topographical map expanded with a quick swipe of his hand, filling the room in blue.

“We tracked him to this point,” said Whitby, as a white dot appeared on the map. “And then he just vanished.”

“Did he make a successful climb or not?”

Whitby glanced at the rest of the team before facing his commander. “I don’t know, sir.”

“Chang, stay on his vitals. Mercer, any noise in that static at all, I want to hear it. The rest of you – find him.” Urtz scanned the room. “If he made it, we’ll be the first team in over a decade to have climbed to Dimension 23. But that means nothing if we can’t reach him.”

His team turned back to their stations. Urtz let out a slow breath. He refused to believe something had gone wrong with Furyk, the same man who had climbed 22 dimensions without ever losing his nerve. He knew Furyk could handle himself alone out there. Knowing that and feeling it were two different things.

Larson, the team’s climb technician, turned from her station. “Commander. You’re going to want to see this.”

All eyes shifted to the holographic image beside her. “The climb to 23 was different from anything we’ve logged before. The properties of Dimension 22 weren’t what our models predicted. Something interfered with Furyk’s attempt to open a glitch on his way through.” She pulled up rendered footage from previous climbs as she spoke – the climb to Dimension 13, where Furyk had slipped through a glitching tree on a quiet street. “Our simulation is old. We’ve always been able to use the degraded tech to our advantage. This time, something pushed back.”

“What do you mean, pushed back?” asked Chang.

“That’s what I’m working out,” said Larson. “My best guess is we moved too soon. We didn’t fully understand 22 before we attempted the next climb.”

“Maybe the closer we get to the Edge, the more the dimensions resist,” added Whitby. “Like the outer layers are protecting whatever’s beyond them.”

“No one knows how close we are to the Edge,” said Urtz. “It could be 23. Could be 230.” He knew the team wanted to believe they were close. They always did. Right now he needed them focused. “Find Furyk first. Everything else waits.”

Mercer walked to the hologram and swiped back through the footage. The light steadied on a tall man in his early thirties, broad-shouldered, grizzled beard, moving toward a red door.

“This is the last image we have before he...”

“Disappeared,” said Chang.

Team Sierra watched in silence – Furyk approaching the door, raising his hologun, firing until a bright seam of light tore open in the air before him, then stepping through as the light collapsed behind him.

“Comms cut the moment he crossed,” said Mercer.

“Was it the door or the building?” asked Urtz.

“Still running scans,” said Whitby, pulling up digital blueprints. “Can’t say yet.”

“Mark the glitch and get it to HQ. They can start working on a portal for when Core Evac Protocol kicks in.” Urtz looked around the room. “But right now, Furyk is out there somewhere. It’s our job to bring him back.”

* * *

The room was dark except for pale light pushing through a ragged curtain in the corner. Furyk closed his eyes, opened them, let them adjust. He looked down at his palm and opened it – no digital readout. Hand to his ear, nothing but static.

“Goddamn technology,” he muttered.

He checked his gear by feel – hologun, first-aid kit, roto-drone, meal supplements, all there. The air was dry and cool. He stood still in his Sierra Base jacket, left hand resting on the gun, listening. Nothing. He exhaled. His ret-lens, the digitally implanted retinal scanner layered over his left eye, showed no signs of life, no threats. Still, he kept his eyes on the strip of light along the floor where the curtain didn’t quite reach. Old habit. In Dimension 11 he’d stepped through a glitch into the middle of a

crowd mid-ritual and barely made it out intact. He'd learned to give a new dimension a minute before he trusted it.

He crossed to the window and moved the curtain aside.

Quiet streets. Empty buildings. And then it registered – everything was colorless. He looked down at his right hand. The red bracelet on his wrist stood out like a wound against the gray. He looked back outside. The world was black and white and every shade of gray between, and it sat on him with a weight he hadn't expected. He pulled the curtain down entirely and let the pale light fill the room, turning slowly on the spot, taking it in.

Is this it? he thought. Is 23 the last one?

The Edge had always felt like something theoretical to Furyk – the kind of destination you point yourself toward without ever expecting to arrive. Since the earliest records of dimensional theory, navigators had argued the Edge would fall on a prime number, tied to some solar algorithm that Furyk had never fully understood. What he understood was the feeling each prime dimension had given him: not triumph, but erosion. Dimension 2, then 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19 – each one had taken a small piece of his certainty. Each prime had felt like a door that might be the last, and each time he'd stepped through to find another world, another layer, more distance to cover.

Now he was in 23. Another prime. Another possibility. The gray around him seemed to press in from every direction. He closed his eyes, then opened them. Time to work.

He crossed to a table in the corner and tossed his mini-promitor – coin-sized, clipped to his belt – onto the surface. It opened a holographic map and Dimension 23 began building itself in blue light: streets, houses, shops, skyscrapers, parks, all of it ordinary-looking and utterly drained of color. He spotted elevated ground a few kilometers east. High ground first, same as always. He pocketed the promitor and

headed for the door.

The stillness outside hit him before anything else. In every other dimension there had been something – noise, weather, inhabitants, some kind of ambient chaos to orient himself against. Here, nothing moved except the gray leaves in a soft gray wind. The silence wasn't peaceful. It was the silence of a place that had been emptied of something, and whatever that something was, its absence was everywhere. Furyk had spent years learning to navigate chaos. He wasn't sure he knew how to navigate this.

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A faint sound came from Chang's station. Green spikes stuttered across the display, slow but regular, and the soft beep that accompanied them brought every head in the room around.

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

"It's weak," said Chang. "But it's a signal. Furyk's alive."

Urtz closed his eyes. He'd commanded Team Sierra since its first climb and had lost people he'd thought were untouchable. The faint green line on Chang's display was enough to push that feeling back where it belonged.

"Position?"

"Working on it," said Whitby. "There's interference. Something between 22 and 23 is scrambling the tracker. Vitals are coming through but I can't pin him down."

"Mercer – comms?"

"Still down digitally, sir. I'm going to try Morse. Analog might punch through where digital can't."

Urtz looked back at the display, watching the faint pulse hold steady in flickering blue light. "It's not over," he said. Mostly to himself.

* * *

Furyk had been walking for over an hour. The temperature was stable enough that he'd deactivated his thermal suit. The only signs of life were the gray trees, their branches moving in a wind he could feel but not hear above the silence. His eyes had adjusted to the absence of color, but the sense that something was fundamentally wrong had not.

Walking helped him think. He found himself going back to his first climb – how Urtz had tried to prepare him, how no amount of training could replicate the actual sensation of passing between dimensions. Firing the hologun at the precise moment an object glitched, feeling the world dissolve, hanging suspended for a fraction of a second in something that felt like cold water, weightless, caught between two states of existence. Then the snap of arrival. Dimension 2 had been time-reversed. He'd spent six months there watching the world unmake itself – trees shrinking back into seeds, buildings slowly unbuilt brick by brick, people walking backward through their days with expressions of strange contentment, as if the world going in reverse was the more natural direction. Getting out had taken everything Urtz's training had given him and a fair amount of luck besides.

After that it had never gotten easier, only more familiar. He'd moved through dimensions that bent geometry the way a fever bends thought – stairways looping back to their own beginnings, corridors that folded in on themselves without end, cities where every right turn eventually brought you back to where you'd started. He'd navigated dimensions with no gravity, where you learned quickly that momentum was everything and stillness meant drifting until something stopped you. He'd moved through societies run entirely by machines that paid him no attention and vast silent expanses populated only by animals that watched him pass with a calm that felt almost like recognition. Each dimension had its own logic. Each had a way out. Finding it was

the job.

He'd thought about not finding it, more than once. Staying somewhere. Building something. The Dimension Climber Protocol was clear – no dimension other than the Core or the Edge was to be inhabited, and any resources recovered were to be funneled back through established portals to sustain the Core. But the rule had always felt thin against the reality of standing in some other world, breathing its air, watching its light. He'd argued with himself about it in quiet moments between climbs. Life is where you make it. Whether you knew it was a simulation or not, the experience of living it was real enough. He'd never acted on it. He wasn't sure if that was discipline or fear of what stopping would say about him.

He crested the hill and the city opened up below him – gray-washed, mid-modern, maybe a decade ahead of what people in Dimension 1 called the present. Tall glass towers, wide streets, transit lines running between districts. A functioning city, or the shell of one. He touched his temples and his blue eyes went dark as the ret-lens slid across them. He blinked and the optics focused, sweeping slowly across the buildings below. Black walls, gray streets, white signs with gray lettering. Without something to anchor on, it would be easy to get lost in it.

He tried his earpiece. “Commander, this is Climber One. Come in.” Static, and then, underneath it, something else.

“Climber One... this is Sierra...”

“Mercer.” He said it louder than he meant to. “Mercer, do you read me?”

“Bad signal... hard to... safe?”

“I'm in 23. No signs of life. Colorless except for me. Temperature stable, vitals stable. Looking for the key to 24.”

“Copy... be safe... out.”

Her voice dropped away. He stayed still for a moment, letting the relief settle. Then something moved below.

He blinked twice. The ret-lens zoomed in on a side street between two glass towers. What he'd caught wasn't the movement – it was the color. A flash of red, unmistakable against the gray. He tracked the street and pulled out his hologun.

“We've got something,” he said into the static.

The red vanished behind a building. He blinked three times fast, switching to thermal. The city shifted to greens and blues, and there – a few hundred meters out – a single red mass stood directly in his sightline. He killed the thermal and made out what looked like a figure in red. Then a blue beam tore over his shoulder.

It stopped in midair just before it hit the tree behind him. Particles swarmed and detonated, shredding the trunk in every direction. Furyk was already behind a low rock wall.

“Shots fired. Holo-based. Hostile or unknown.” No response. He unclipped a roto-drone from his belt – grape-sized – and tossed it into the air. Squinting his left eye, he picked up the drone's feed and steered it down toward the street with his left hand, weaving between buildings. Nothing. Whoever had fired was gone, or staying still and waiting.

He hovered the drone and thought. A shot from this range in these conditions came down to chance. He didn't know if he'd been fired at by something hostile, something frightened, or something else entirely. What he knew was that he wasn't alone, and alone was what he'd been most afraid of since crossing through.

He activated the drone's speakers and let his voice carry across the city.

“To seek the truth, ever forward, ever upward, we climb.”

A figure in red stepped out from behind a corner, looked up at the drone, and raised one finger toward the sky. The sign of a climber.

Furyk recalled the drone and stood up.

By the time he'd made his way down into the city, they were about a hundred meters apart. Close enough to see a gray beard and a red baseball cap pulled low over the eyes. The two men closed the distance slowly. Furyk spoke first.

“Zane Furyk. Climber One, Team Sierra.”

The man's green eyes moved over him with an expression Furyk couldn't quite place – not hostile, not relieved, something closer to disbelief, like a man who has stopped expecting something and then sees it anyway. He fidgeted with his hands at his sides.

“Frank Higgins. Climber One for Team Alpha.” A pause. “Or what's left of it.” He spoke slowly, choosing words carefully, like someone remembering how conversation worked.

Furyk extended his hand. Higgins looked at it for a moment before taking it.

“Your color,” Higgins said quietly, his eyes moving over Furyk's jacket, his bracelet, his face. “It's... it's been a long time since I've seen any other colors.” He seemed to be talking to himself as much as to Furyk.

“How long have you been here?”

“30 years, 7 months, and 23 days.” He said it without hesitation, the way you say a number you've been counting so long it stops feeling like a number and starts feeling like a fact about the world. “And sorry about the shot. You learn not to trust what you can't identify out here.”

Furyk stared at him. Thirty years. “Is this the Edge?”

Higgins looked out across the gray city, taking his time. “Might be. But it doesn't matter much if it is, because we're not getting out. When HQ shut Alpha down – ‘lack of verifiable progress,’ that was the phrase they used – they closed my portals, killed my comms, and went silent. Just like that. Thirty years ago.” He turned back to Furyk.

“And now you. The 19th team to climb, and it took this long.” There was no bitterness in it. Just fact.

“We didn’t know you were here. I’d heard Alpha was shut down but there was nothing in the records about a climber left behind. The program was dormant for years – reinstated when the Core started deteriorating again. If there was ever a file on you, it’s gone.”

“I figured,” said Higgins. “Easier to close a program if the personnel are accounted for.” He said it without expression. “As for your question – I’ve spent three decades looking for a way out of this dimension. Roto-drones running around the clock. Every anomaly, every physical irregularity, every object showing the faintest sign of degradation. I’ve mapped this city street by street, building by building. There’s nothing. No glitches. No lag. Nothing that would let you open a climb.”

“So you’re saying this is it.”

Higgins looked at him directly. “I’m saying I have no reason to believe otherwise.” He held the look for a moment, then broke it and turned his eyes upward. “But I can’t be certain. That’s the one thing thirty years has taught me – out here, you can never be certain of anything.”

Furyk let that sit. He looked at the old man – the careful way he held himself, the patience in his voice, the green eyes that had been staring at a colorless world for three decades – and understood that this wasn’t someone who had given up. This was someone who had run out of things to try. That was different, and it scared him more than the shot had.

“What did you do?” Furyk asked. “All that time. What did you do with it?”

Higgins was quiet for a moment, looking out across the gray rooftops. “I mapped everything. Every street, every building, every variation in the terrain. I ran systematic searches on a six-month rotation for the first decade, then switched to random pattern

sweeps when the systematic ones stopped turning up anything new.” He paused. “I kept a log. Every day. Still do. I built routines because without them the days blur into each other and you lose track of who you are.” He paused again, longer this time. “I talked to myself a lot.” He said it without humor, and somehow that made it land harder than anything else he’d said. “After the first decade I stopped expecting rescue. After the second I stopped hoping for it. By the third I’d made my peace with the idea that this might be where I ended.” He looked at Furyk. “And then you showed up.”

Neither man spoke for a moment. Above them, the gray sky sat flat and featureless.

“What now?” asked Furyk.

“First we get your comms working. Analog might break through where digital can’t – if your team is running Morse through the static, there’s a chance.” Higgins’ voice had changed slightly, something coming back into it, a purpose that the conversation had stirred loose. “If this truly is the Edge, the Core Evac Protocol kicks in. Every being in Dimension 1 climbs. That’s not a small operation, and it doesn’t happen fast.”

“Once the Edge has been found and confirmed beyond a reasonable doubt, all beings must climb to the final dimension,” said Furyk, the first line of CEP surfacing automatically. “We’re not at confirmed yet. I’m not saying I don’t believe you. I’m saying we need more climbers here to verify before we move on something that size.”

“You think I haven’t verified it?” said Higgins, and for the first time there was an edge in his voice.

“I think you’ve done everything one person can do alone. That’s not nothing – that’s thirty years of work, and I mean that. But CEP requires more than one climber’s assessment, and you know that.” Furyk held his gaze. “If what you’re telling me is true, then we’ve done something no team in 3,000 years has managed. We do this right.”

Higgins studied him for a long moment. Something in him seemed to ease slightly, like a tension he'd been holding so long he'd forgotten it was there. He nodded. "Fair enough. Let's get to high ground and see if we can reach your team." He turned and started walking. "If we really did it, there's a lot of work ahead."

Furyk fell into step beside him. He looked up at the gray sky, at the pale sun sitting distant above the city, and tried to decide what he actually believed. Something in him still resisted the idea that this was it – not out of hope exactly, but out of a feeling he couldn't quite rationalize away. The Edge, if it was real, if it was here, should feel like something. An ending or a beginning. This felt like neither. It felt like a gray city on a gray afternoon with a man who had been waiting alone for thirty years.

But Higgins was walking beside him, and Higgins had been here for thirty years, and had run every search pattern Furyk could think of and a hundred more besides, had kept records through a decade and then another and then another with no one to show them to. Furyk trusted what thirty years of searching looked like more than he trusted the feeling in his gut.

The gray sun warmed his face as they climbed. He thought about Sierra Base four dimensions back, about Mercer's voice cutting through the static, about Urtz standing in the back of the room refusing to believe the worst. He thought about every dimension he'd passed through to get here – the reversed world, the folding corridors, the machine societies, the animals watching him pass – and what it had cost to keep moving through each one without stopping. Whatever this was, Edge or not, he'd made it. He'd kept moving. That still meant something. He wasn't sure yet what, but it meant something.

* * *

"What's the count?"

“23,” said another voice.

The members of the galactic council observed the two figures moving through the gray city, their forms rendered in slowly shifting liquid hovering above the center of the chamber. The image was crisp and detailed – two small men climbing a hill together in a colorless world, one of them having waited thirty years for the other to arrive.

“3,000 years,” said a third voice, “and only 23 dimensions. The Berk species cleared 400 in half that time.”

“The Berk species had a more cooperative social structure from the outset,” another replied. “And they weren’t starting from near-total resource depletion. Humans have been running their simulation on fumes for centuries. The fact that they’ve made it this far is not nothing.”

“How many dimensions does Simulation Earth have in total?”

“2,371. At least the humans were correct about the Edge falling on a prime. Their navigators worked that out relatively early in the process.”

“Small consolation,” said the first voice, “given where they are.”

The chamber quieted as a mass of swirling gray vapor moved to the center of the room. When it spoke, the other voices went still.

“The assessment is unchanged. Humans, as a species, remain unfit to join this council or to participate in the governance of the region they call the Local Group. Communication, interaction, and intervention are prohibited until such time as they demonstrate the capacity to find their own way out of the simulation. They will have no access to shared technology, no representation in this chamber, and no voice in the future of their own galaxy until they have earned it.” The vapor drifted. “This is not a punishment. It is the same test every species in this room has faced. Some passed quickly. Some took far longer than expected. A few did not pass at all, and their

simulations were quietly closed.”

“And if humans don’t?” asked a voice from across the chamber.

“Then they don’t,” the vapor said simply. “We do not intervene. We observe. Humans are an unusual species – resilient in ways that are difficult to model, self-destructive in ways that are equally difficult to predict. They have shown, in the span of their simulation, a remarkable capacity for both extraordinary cooperation and catastrophic failure, sometimes within the same generation. Whether those qualities cancel each other out or compound into something worth admitting to this council is a question only they can answer. The potential is there. Whether they reach it is up to them and no one else.”

The chamber was quiet for a time. The image above the center of the room continued to shift – two figures, still climbing, still moving through the gray.

Then a small creature near the back spoke up. “4,000 vaporcoins. 20 to 1. Humans don’t clear the simulation within 500 years.”

The room came alive. Voices from a dozen species, wagers in currencies that had no equivalent in any human language, the collective judgment of civilizations that had long since solved their own simulations now turning its full attention to the two small figures still climbing through a colorless city, four dimensions from home, not yet knowing how far they still had to go.

END