

How many steps

Imagine a barren wasteland — with neither day nor night, no sun or moon. Tall creatures lumber across the plain. No arms, no bodies — just legs and a head on top. Hills tower like giants on the horizon. Small, faint lights are sprinkled like dust over the ground. Those lights lead to perfect worlds, where your wildest dreams come true. The closer you are, the brighter they become. But they are moving further and further away. And what's worse is that you have a limited number of steps to chase them.

Claude's head popped out of the ground. He looked around. Tall spikes that stood straight and proud were everywhere. Behind those spikes were enormous hills. The sky was a black ocean glittering with tiny white stars, but no moon. Claude felt so small compared to all these things. He was just a speck in this world. That's when another person popped out of the ground.

The person was shorter than he was, with skinnier legs. Claude realised that a number was hovering above their head. The number read: 8. Claude was confused at first. Then, the person began walking. 7, 6, 5. The number was going down. 4, 3, 2, 1. But what would happen when it reached zero? The person took one more step. 0. Claude watched, aghast, as the person crumpled to the floor and turned to ashes. That was when he looked up and saw his own number: 20.

Claude realised, in that heart-sinking moment, that he was going to die. He took one small step forward. The number above him instantly dropped down to 19. He almost collapsed in fear. He stood motionless. Others passed him. Some were taller, some shorter. Most had numbers between 10 and 15. He was one of the luckier ones. They

all seemed to be walking in the same, pointless direction. At least, that's what he thought. Peeking around one of the stone spikes, he saw a small, shining light.

The light seemed to pulsate. Claude could almost feel it like his own heartbeat. The light gave Claude a sense of hope and happiness. He desperately wanted to get closer. To his desires, his dreams. The light was already becoming smaller and smaller. Claude took ten steps forward. Just enough for the feeling to surround him. Maybe this way, he could live forever.

When he awoke, the light was just a small dot in the distance. He could no longer feel its warmth. Claude finally perceived the truth: *he needed to use his steps*. Carefully, he took step after step, getting faster and faster. 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Claude leapt — but it was too late. 0. He felt the tiniest bit of warmth on his face, then crumbled to ashes. Claude was gone. But the wind blew his ashes into the night sky, where he became a star — not with his light, but with so many others.