

A Lone Pilgrim's Ascent

Written by Animus

An elder approaches the mountain summit. His long, grey beard partially insulates gaunt cheeks from bitter cold. Breath short, light-headed, and exhausted from a long journey by foot culminating in his ascent of the ancient 75,025 stone steps, he turns back to view his path for the first time since *her* death. A vast landscape outlines the pilgrim's stone path to the south, where the Exquisite Sheyhem Tri-Pyramid Complex of Phoenix breaks the horizon. He has never experienced a view provided by the arid climate at such an altitude – *no one has in this epoch*. Red skies on the western horizon accent overwhelming elegance and beauty, just as he has read in *forbidden scripture*. His belly warms and *heart* races; *Mania* sets in. He has trained and prepared *or, more appropriately perhaps, is training and preparing*. It is difficult to be certain of anything *Now*. He sits on the final step for a moment to rest and meditate before adventuring on.

Close your eyes, beginner mind. A crisp breeze bites at his exposed cheek as a gentle Wind whispers the Truth of Mortality in a desolate, frozen land.

Slow down. His *heart* begins searching for a normal cadence.

Silence. *Well, not quite*: his body hums a gentle melody of disobedience.

Darkness. The world closes rapidly around him as he exists solely within himself for a short while.

Peace. His *heart* rests as the melody changes tempo and structure.

Hope. An easy find for a steady, full *heart* on a warm belly. *Also, a Dangerous One*.

"This is not my end," he mutters confidently.

Upon resuming motion his aged knees, hips, and back scream -- *of a full lifetime embodying action and service* -- as he stands: a dull roar by comparison *and worth it... this time, maybe*. *Impossible* is just a *word*, after all. He turns to face the ancient Temple of Aaloosífid carved into the snow-white mountainside.

A massive structure awaits. Three levels of exquisite geometry and sharp edges highlighted by delicate, snow-crusting layers covering all flat-rock surfaces. Three levels of wide, drift-washed stone steps provide the only path to a small, arched entrance at the top. The path spans a – *let's say* – *less than desirable distance given the circumstances*: a long day's journey to the summit leads a *diminished, insane* pilgrim to this moment. At night in the desert, temperatures plummet as the Sun falls below the horizon: *colloquially this place is known as the Palace for Ghosts*. *Keep moving*.

Midway through this final leg of the next steps in our pilgrim's *improbable* path, he looks to the stars for guidance. A crystal-clear sky provides an unmatched view of the heavens in all the world. No moon tonight. *Keep moving!* His body begins to hum an ancient melody of danger.

He reaches the arched entrance, *not so small now* – the opening standing *about twice his height* before rounding. Water vapor from his breath has formed tiny icicles on the whiskers surrounding his mouth. His body is conceding to the frigid temperatures despite all his thick layers and preparation, starting with

his cheeks and hands. He is beginning to freeze to death *and he knows*. He turns back to view his path once again, *no warmth now*. *Louder*, as an ancient melody begins to take his mind.

He turns to refocus on the path ahead, *no mediation now*. Starlight is not enough to illuminate what lies beyond the chamber's archway. Ancient Secrets *and bitter, cold darkness* lie ahead. *Fear* for Eternal Darkness sets in. His *heart* shutters. *Take the final steps, coward*.

He stumbles across the empty, hidden room *surprised to find floor with each step*. He discovers a wall directly across from the archway a few paces in. He examines the wall in the pitch blackness *for information*. He discovers *something* etched deep into the stone through his gloves. While following the etches with his hands, in an act of desperate *psychosis* he removes one glove to feel the ice-cold stone. He immediately finds *soft edges* everywhere he feels, *then regret*. His *heart* sinks with the fading sense in his fingers. He rests his head against the etched structure. *Alone, defeated*. Scripture ends long before now.

Then *something* changes...