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Sanctum

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1) Finally, you reached your destination, accompanied by a drizzle and the fading light. However, no amount of rain can rinse away the fear. You're old now. The arrogance of youth is gone; replaced by humility and a pinch of desperation. You stare up towards the basalt cliff and the stairs leading to the carved gateway and the inner sanctum beyond it. With the force of will alone, you make your feet move towards the opening. As you pass under the arch you notice that it's unsurprisingly dark inside. Luckily you brought a kerosene lantern. Lighting it up gives you a moment of reflection, and with a resolved mind you enter. (Read verse **10**.)

2) As you walk into this room you hear a scraping noise behind you. A stone door in the southern passage has blocked the way back. This room is more of an elongated rectangle, a corridor with one exit on each end. It's relatively clean in here, as someone has been sweeping the floor on a regular basis, but still there is a smell of moldy old paper. The separate walls are covered in reliefs, and on the left side various people are depicted building instruments, doing experiments, and gazing towards the stars while taking notes. The right side details numerous versions of prayer and worship. Monks meditating, priests praying and holding mass, rituals of sacrifice, people building temples and so on. On each of the sides at the northern exit is a lever. You can't find anything else of importance in the room. (If you wish to go through the north exit read verse **14**, if you wish to pull the lever on the right side before continuing read verse **15**, if you rather wish to pull the left lever before proceeding read verse **3**.)

3) This room is the largest you encountered so far, and much colder than the previous ones. Anxiously you descend down a couple of stairs to its floor, mindful of what it means to slip on a wet step in your advanced age. The room is at least 30 feet wide, with a high marbled domed ceiling and has a pungent aquatic aroma of dead fish and rotten seaweed. Littered across the entire space are lifelike statues of a diverse representation of people, from different eras, as well as cultures. Their faces seem frozen in horror. Dominating the room is an elevated circular platform, with a single large crude monolith at its center, made in a green mineral unfamiliar to you. As you approach it, there is a sudden burst in your mind, like someone took a large glowing iron needle and forced it through your eardrums. Falling down on one knee you hear a voice inside your head "SPEAK". Filled with dread you stutter out your reasons for being here, the fear of death, and the hope for eternal life. The voice is silent, as contemplating, but finally answers "TRUTH...ETERNAL...LIFE. GIVE. PRIZE. PAY. ACCEPT?" (If you wish to accept the offer read verse **12**, if you rather wish to reject the offer and die of old age read verse **13**.)

4) As you walk into this room you hear the clanking of chains behind you and a heavy thud. A massive stone gate has been lowered and blocks the passage you came from. This room is more of a narrow rectangular shape, with an exit on each end. It's relatively clean in here, as someone has been sweeping the floor on a regular basis, but still there is a smell of moldy vegetation. The walls are also covered in reliefs. The left side depicts various people building instruments, doing experiments, and gazing towards the stars while taking notes. The right side details numerous versions of prayer and worship. Monks meditating, priests praying and holding mass, rituals of sacrifice, people building temples and so on. On each of the sides at the northern exit is a lever. You can't find anything else of relevance in the room. (If you wish to go through the north exit read verse **15**, if you wish to pull the lever on the right side before continuing read verse **3**, if you rather wish to pull the left lever before proceeding read verse **14**.)

5) As you walk into this room you hear a scraping noise behind you. A stone door in the southern passage has closed and the way back is now blocked. The room takes the form of a huge square, on closer inspection a regular quadrilateral one, with an exit on each wall. Above each exit is a word: To the left *Honoris*, in the middle *Pulchritudo*, and to the right *Victoria*. There are intricate geometric patterns all over the walls, and though heavily faded, there are indications that they have once been colored. Looking at them makes you dizzy and you avert your gaze to the floor. Standing still you notice the musky smell of decay. Glancing around for its source, you suddenly see small mushrooms growing in the corners. Besides that, you can't find anything else of importance in the room. (If you wish to pick some mushrooms read verse **16**, If you wish to go left read verse **8**, if you wish to proceed through the middle read verse **9**, if you wish to go through the right passage read verse **11**.)

6) As you enter this room you hear the grinding of stone behind you and a loud thud. A stone gate has risen from the floor and blocks the passage you came from. The walls of this small round room are barren and the floor is covered with fine gray gravel. It smells intensely of iron here and something about it makes you acutely aware of the weight of your advancing years. To the north is a single exit with the words *Portare peccata vestra* inscribed above. There is also a stone cylinder in the center of the room, around half your height and as wide as your head, with engraved images of men and women carrying heavy loads up a mountain, where a beautiful palace resides on the top. A couple of steps inside the upper exit you can see two circular recesses, each with the depth of an outstretched hand. In front of the left one is the image of a knight carrying a similar cylinder as in the room, the right hole has instead an image of a knight followed by a pageboy carrying the cylinder. You can't see anything else of relevance in the room. (If you wish to go through the north exit read verse **15**, if you wish to lift and place the heavy cylinder in the left recess before continuing read verse **2**, if you rather would like to place the cylinder on the right side before proceeding read verse **14**.)

7) As you walk into this room you hear the clanking of chains behind you, while a grinding sound gradually becomes louder. A massive stone gate has been lowered and blocks the passage you came from. There is a strong smell of sulfur and a sense of foreboding doom here, like the small round room is holding its breath for what's to come. The floor is covered in ash flakes that quietly whirl up when you enter, and there is a single exit in front of you. On the sides is a battle between a white and dark knight engraved, fighting to the death in a mirror image of each other. The left side depicts the white knight winning and boastfully striding forward, leaving the body of the opponent behind. On the right the dark knight is victorious and falls to his knees in thanks the powers beyond. A single phrase is inscribed above the exit: *Sapientia per humilitatem*. (If you wish to walk proudly through the exit read verse **14**, if you wish to crawl on your knees in thankfulness read verse **4**.)

8) As you enter this room you hear the clanking of chains behind you. A portcullis has been lowered and blocks the passage you came from. The way back is now shut. The room in itself is round and just a couple of meters across. Two exits dominate the upper part and there is a compact layer of odorless dust on the floor. However, this isn't thick enough to hide the words *Media vita in morte sumus*, engraved in the heart of the room. Over the exits are two words: *Fortitudo* to the left and *Pulchritudo* to the right. As you turn around, you also notice carvings on the wall. On the left side a knight in full armor ascends a broad road towards a castle and on the way the populace celebrates her. The right side depicts a knight that step-by-step removes his armor. The knight is alone, on a narrow road towards a similar castle. You observe the faint outline of a skeleton waiting in the gate of the right castle. There is nothing else of interest in the room. (If you wish to go left read verse **6**, or if you rather wish to go right read verse **9**.)

9) As you walk into this room you hear a scraping noise behind you. A stone door in the southern passage has blocked the way back. You're standing in a large rectangular room, with the wider sides to the north and south, and three unknown exits waits in the upper part. It reeks of perfume here; rose petals, vanilla and something else you can't place. The floor is relatively clean and in the center of the room are the words *Quod fuimus, estis; quod sumus vos eritis* engraved. Likewise you can see words inscribed above the upper left and right passage: *Intellectus* and *Sapientia*, respectively. The wall engravings depict beautiful men and women dancing, drinking and making love. The closer the images gets to the northern wall the more decrepit and old the men and women become, until their bodies fall apart into piles of rotting bones. The middle northern passage is a closed stone door with complex geometric patterns, and an image of a man and a woman in unison eating small mushrooms, with the words *Vita aeterna* underneath. Otherwise the room is empty. (If you have the mushrooms and wish to eat them read verse **17**, if you wish to go left read verse **2**, or if you rather wish to go right read verse **4**.)

10) This fairly big room is round with four exits, including one to the south leading to the outside, and has a stale smell of wet stone. To the north there are three passages leading further into the structure. On the walls around you are ancient reliefs of everyday activities, from all aspects of society: a farmer ploughing, a priest holding mass, an army marching, children playing and more. Carved into the floor are the words: *Libera me de morte aeterna*. Above each opening to the north is a separate word inscribed: To the left *Honoris*, in the middle *Claritate*, and to the right *Victoria*. Otherwise the room is empty. (If you wish to go left read verse **8**, if you wish to proceed through the center read verse **5**, if you wish to go through the right passage read verse **11**.)

11) As you walk into this room you hear the clanking of chains behind you. A portcullis has been lowered and bars the passage you came from. The way back is now blocked. The room in itself is round, a couple of meters across, and has two exits towards the north. Atop the exits are two words: *Pulchritudo* to the left and *Misericordiae* to the right. There is a faint sweet stench of rotting meat in the room, and engraved in the floor are the words *Misericordes filii Evae* and the worn outline of bones, skeletons and skulls. The walls are decorated with scenes of grisly battles, with their commanders standing on top of immense piles of bodies, completely impartial to the carnage. Besides the exits there is nothing of relevance in the room. (If you wish to go left read verse **9**, or if you rather wish to go right read verse **7**.)

12) You made your choice long before you arrived in this chamber. "I accept whatever prize I may pay for a chance of eternal life!" you state to the monolith. It doesn't answer you. But you can feel the crackling of energy creeping up from your feet, through your body, and out to your bent old fingers. Youth, power, life...everything will be yours, the entire world within your grasp. Wait. Something is very wrong...you suddenly can't move and your extremities feel heavy, and hard. A sudden insight fills you with absolute dread, and finally you understand why this room is filled with statues. You try to scream, but there is only the faint sound of grinding stone. With this petrified body, your final thought, "It's not supposed to end like this", will last you forever. As generations pass away, and mountains are worn down to dust, you will still be there in the inner sanctum, stuck in a moment of horror. Eternally, not dead but neither alive...

13) Looking around you at the lifelike statues, you're hit with a sudden creeping insight. A slow emerging revelation, which as it gradually rises up to the consciousness surface, turns into outright horror. Is this the eternity that is promised? Is this the prize to pay? "I reject your offer!" you scream. However, the voice is silent. Before something happens, before doubt changes your mind, you quickly turn your back to everlasting life and haste back through the sanctum. No doors or gates are there to stop you anymore. Nothing halts your return to safety and an understandable uncertainty. (Read verse **18**.)

14) The passage is narrow and eerily still. You can see cobwebs in the corners, long since abandoned. All of a sudden you notice a soft puff of wind in your direction. Something is wrong, you think, and in the corner of your left eye you can see a large but thin blade slowly fold back into a panel in the wall. You notice that you can't move and panic grips your soul as the kerosene lantern drops to the ground. The last thought you have is "It's not supposed to end like this", before your body tumbles to the ground, its head severed from the carcass. You're now dead...

15) The corridor feels cramped and there are strange dirt marks emanating from the walls. Something is off, even uncanny, and your claustrophobia starts bubbling up to the surface. You need to get out. Right now. As you turn back from where you came you suddenly hear the soft grinding of stone. Are the walls getting closer? You start running towards the exit, but the passage is indeed getting smaller. You can see the outline of the doorframe when the walls start crushing your body. The last thought you have is "It's not supposed to end like this", before that which was you turns into nothing more than bloody pulp. You're now dead...

16) You gently pick a handful of the small mushrooms. They are very delicate, and loosen easily from the ground. You carefully wrap them in some linen cloth and add them to your knapsack. The three exits await your choice. (If you wish to go left read verse **8**, if you wish to proceed through the middle read verse **9**, if you wish to go through the right passage read verse **11**.)

17) Deciding to eat the mushrooms you unwrap the linen package and stuff them raw into your mouth. The taste is not unpleasant, however quite earthy, with a hint of sweet grass that makes you remember playing in the fields as a child. Running mad over the hills in celebration over summers that seemed to last forever. Where did time go? All those years are now behind you and your childhood friends long since dead and forgotten by the world. In the corners of your eyes there are flashes of color, transforming into abstract diagrams and movement. Noticing your increased visual acuity you stare at the door. The geometric patterns are fading together and squinting with your right eye you can surprisingly see a passage behind. Awkwardly standing up, you stumble forward, and with the world spinning around you, you slide through the stone door like a ghost. (Read verse **3**.)

18) The sun is rising. It's going to be a clear and beautiful day. The opening to the sanctum is gaping wide open behind you, reminding you of a hungry mouth. Awaiting new victims to swallow, victims that with certainty will come one day. However, you are not one of them, and will never be. You made your choice. It's the right one, you hope. The valley awaits your return. With its sprawling meadows, emerald green forests, and your nagging, over-protective but loving family. Perhaps dying in your own warm bed, surrounded by their worried faces is preferable, than the kind of eternity offered by the sanctum. Reminding yourself of your grandson's excellent cooking you hurry your steps. You're still alive, but at some point in the future, you will die. Maybe, there is enough life left in you, to be home in time for supper...