

Section 1:

#1 There was a cold clarity in the mountain air that morning, the kind that stripped away pretense. Mara tightened the straps of her pack and stared up at the ridge line, where the snow was already blowing sideways. The trailhead sign read "Summit Ridge Trail – 14.7 miles" in faded lettering, and below it, in red: "Difficult. Expert hikers only."

Strengths: Your vivid sensory details create an immersive opening scene. Your choice of "cold clarity" effectively establishes both the physical setting and emotional tone.

Lack of character context → Your opening lacks sufficient personal details about Mara to help readers connect with her immediately. While you mention her actions, you don't give readers any sense of her appearance, age, or initial emotional state beyond the physical setting. ***Mara tightened the straps of her worn backpack, her thirty-year-old frame still adjusting to the weight she'd carry both physically and emotionally up the mountain.***

#2 At mile ten, snow began to fall. The flakes were large and silent, erasing her boot prints as fast as she made them. The summit was still out of view, hidden behind jagged teeth of stone. Her calves cramped. She chewed on frozen trail mix and stared at the whiteness, wondering if this was bravery or just her own kind of madness.

Strengths: Your use of contrasting imagery between the silent snow and "jagged teeth of stone" creates powerful tension. You effectively blend physical discomfort with emotional questioning.

Limited sensory range → Your description focuses primarily on visual elements but misses opportunities to incorporate other senses that would deepen the reader's immersion. The paragraph lacks sounds, smells, and tactile details that would make the setting more three-dimensional. ***Her calves cramped as the scent of pine and cold stone filled her lungs, and she chewed on frozen trail mix that crackled between her teeth while staring at the whiteness.***

#3 Each step after that was a small rebellion. Against pain. Against the voice in her head that whispered "you can't." The wind screamed. Her muscles burned. She climbed.

Strengths: Your powerful use of short, declarative sentences creates an excellent rhythm that mirrors Mara's determined climbing. The metaphor of steps as "rebellion" effectively ties physical action to emotional state.

Underdeveloped inner conflict → While you mention the voice telling her "you can't," you don't fully explore the specific doubts or fears this voice represents. This limits the emotional depth of her struggle and the satisfaction of her eventual triumph. ***Each step after that was a small rebellion. Against pain. Against the voice in her head that whispered "you can't" – the same voice that had told her she***

*wasn't enough when her marriage crumbled, that she was foolish to think she could stand on her own.*

■ Your piece shows great potential with its emotional journey and vivid setting. To improve its substance, you could add more specific details about Mara's background earlier in the story. For example, in the second paragraph, you could include a brief flashback showing a specific moment from her marriage breakdown rather than just mentioning "empty boxes." Also, the middle section of your piece could benefit from more dialogue or internal thoughts to deepen Mara's character. You might include moments where she speaks to herself or remembers conversations that motivated her journey. The ending feels somewhat abrupt—consider expanding the summit moment with more specific details about what "weightless" means to Mara. What exactly has she let go of? What does she see in her future now? Adding these concrete elements would give readers a more complete emotional experience and strengthen the connection between Mara's physical journey and her inner transformation.

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**Score: 45/50**

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Section 2:

There was a cold clarity in the mountain air that morning, the kind that stripped away pretense. Mara tightened the straps of her pack and stared up at the ridge line, where the snow was already blowing sideways. The trailhead sign read "Summit Ridge Trail – 14.7 miles" in faded lettering, and below it, in red: "Difficult. Expert hikers only." #1

She had never considered herself an expert. But here she was, boots worn, body lean, and hands calloused from months of preparation. The idea had come in the aftermath of her divorce, somewhere between empty boxes and nights spent lying awake listening to silence. She had needed something to conquer — something real.

By mile three, the forest was already thinning. Her thighs burned from the climb, and sweat gathered under her wool layers. The wind spoke in groans through the pine trees, reminding her how far she was from anyone or anything. Her phone was off. This was supposed to be unfiltered, uninterrupted.

She pressed on.

By mile seven, the trail became a scramble — narrow switchbacks and loose shale, each step a test of balance. Her breath came hard and ragged, fogging the air. She slipped once, catching herself with a scraped palm, blood beading in the cold. She laughed dryly. "Good," she muttered, "still awake."

At mile ten, snow began to fall. The flakes were large and silent, erasing her boot prints as fast as she made them. The summit was still out of view, hidden behind jagged teeth of stone. Her calves cramped.

She chewed on frozen trail mix and stared at the whiteness, wondering if this was bravery or just her own kind of madness. #2

Then came the whiteout.

The trail disappeared beneath her. Wind howled like something alive. She hunkered down beneath a boulder, hands trembling from cold and fear. The mountain didn't care about her reasons for coming. It didn't care about her grief or her rage. It offered only one question: Can you keep going?

She closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her lids, she saw the last time she cried — really cried. On the floor of her kitchen, back against the dishwasher, still wearing her wedding ring like a wound. She saw herself standing again. Packing. Training. Walking through forests alone until the weight of silence stopped feeling like loss and started feeling like space.

She stood up.

Each step after that was a small rebellion. Against pain. Against the voice in her head that whispered "you can't." The wind screamed. Her muscles burned. She climbed. #3

At the summit, there was nothing grand — just grey sky and a brutal wind and an empty cairn stacked by other fools like her. But Mara stood there with her arms outstretched, tears freezing on her cheeks, and laughed.

Not because it was over. But because she had made it.

And for the first time in years, she felt weightless.