

# Trails and Runners

## *Ni'vim POV*

**T**oday, my father took me to a medium named Sha'ra. Sha'ra wore a robe of bright, lustrous scarlet that glowed like the blood of humans. As it draped down beneath her, one could see her old, haggard body, having been ravaged by the ceaseless march of time. Her face, very aged, had crevasses that branched like rivers upon her forehead and cheeks. Her feathers were a pale azure mixed with green, and she had eyes glowing with a sheen of amethyst. However, her forehead was very high, misshaped, but exuded rays of wisdom from the tiara of gems she adorned.

My father walked outside, the curtains hanging until only the shimmer of orange flowed through.

"The Ra'sha Lree," she said. "Your father has told me about this. It's a rare trait."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Those with it may see what few people may see. The glints of wisdom are mere shades of dull gray to most. But for those with this, they gain a vaster capacity to philosophize."

"That sounds vague."

"Most people are content with living just a normal life, where the mundane comprises the mere passage from one day to another. You're different. You would tire of the mundane and seek the mystical and spiritual."

"I don't see it," I said, voice growing fainter. "I only desire to grow but to no greater than the perimeters of the blue lands."

"That's not what I'm talking about. It's something tangible that you would soon desire to seek."

Silence loomed before us.

"Ni'vim," said Sha'ra, as she held a pair of chopsticks above my hands and swirled it as though stirring a cauldron of broth. Her divination gifts were unique, for I needed to speak not before she could peer into the darkness looming ahead of the present. "Right now, you know not of your current purpose, for you are young and callow. It need not matter. Sometimes, you do not have to search for meaning in life."

With eyes closed, the sides of her face twitched, and furrows appeared between her eyes. Concentrating hard for several seconds, she twirled the sticks again.

"To do so is an act of contrivance – it is not natural. Poets do not need to seek the final theorem that presides over all mathematics, as it is not their nature. They only need to reach for a brush and sink it in sepia. Then, they only need to compose their poems with ink," she said.

"But how does this pertain to me?" I leaned my head forward, limbs fidgeting with eagerness.

"Fate and free will work in tandem together, Ni'vim." The sage closed her eyes, pausing for several seconds, before staring vacantly ahead. She then spoke again. "Neither can work without the other. Free will without fate is like a marathoner roaming about with no direction. He may travel a thousand miles, but only in circles. It needs a trail before him to span."

"What about fate?"

"Likewise, fate without free will is like the path without a runner. It would serve no function. You, Ni'vim, will one day embark upon a journey that your soul has chosen for you as part of a pre-life agreement."

"A pre-life agreement? Rebirth? How could I have chosen my current life? I do not believe that the soul exists." My head looked up, and I gasped deeply before exhaling in a loud huff.

"You chose it to be the trails that you would eventually run over. You are the marathoner. However, the path is not fixed; only its generals are vaguely defined. Some paths will cross into one another, and others will branch out. The whole is determined, but the specifics are not. There lies the glint of free will, ready to be kindled for the journey ahead."

"So there is still free will?"

Closing her eyes again, a silence spread between us for an ineffable period. Opening, her eyes glinted with insight.

"Yes. The irony of free will is that it must coexist with fate."

"That's strange! I thought they are different things!" I smiled and frowned, holding back my laughter as I reflected on the irony.

"Without fate, free will is indefinite. Indefinite things do not have forms. They do not have limits. And thus, being infinite, they cannot choose specific paths. That is not free will. That is omniscience. If the past and future are known, you cannot choose. It is only from the darkness that your light glows the strongest."

"And so what is this journey which I will embark?" My head tilted to my right, breath growing heavier with both zeal and jitters.

"The specifics are hazy," she said while folding her arms and leaning back. "However, much loss you will endure. How you deal with it will define your future and that of Leea'doch. It is not static; it can be changed."

"I hope so. The prospects of an unchangeable life are threatening!"

"Only probabilities I see, but nothing concrete or fixed. You will, in time, need to put together something important – something so vital that it would shape the philosophical view of this world," she said as her voice dulled into an ominous tone.



## *Spiritual Tenet*

*Life needs to have mysteries to be meaningful and exciting. You can only experience the thrill of growing into something new just once. So why rush?*



"What is this thing?"

"I know not either – something beyond words, numbers, equations, concepts. But the truth lies not in these themselves. It lies in how you see through it. Reality is not the former. It is the wielder."

There was little reason to doubt Sha'ra. After all, her gifts of divination were without equal. My village often had a form of lottery called Ka'su. We would hurl dices and place them within a box before shaking it. From it, we would derive four numbers from a permutation of ten thousand. Without fail, Sha'ra would always predict the numbers by some supernatural gift. Doing so would mean that some things are fated.

"It's strange," I replied. "Don't your gifts at predicting Ka'su show everything is pre-determined?"

With a final exhalation, she looked up and said, "No. No. It's not what I meant. Rest assured, for free will still burns within us. Consciousness is too complex. Ka'su is run by

deterministic laws. But it is not consciousness. You cannot reduce the latter to the former."

I hope she is right. Regardless, I hope that a day will come when I will discover this journey before me. I wish, genuinely, however, that the tracks are not fully fixed. After all, I still covet the incandescence of that flame glowing within me – the fire of free will.

"Now," she said. "The Ra'sha Lree does not make you any better. It is what you do with your abilities that matters. Do you possess the strength to make use of them?"

"I don't know."

Sha'ra got a glimmering orb that shone with shades of black and gray at me. It was smooth, but every gaze into it was an ache within as its shadows blistered with an unspeakable evil.

"Place your hand atop it."

I placed my right hand on it. A deep quiver gushed out of the gemstone and sent tingles throughout my body. My heart hastened until every throb was a deep drumming I could not cease.

"What? *What are you doing?* I cannot remove my hand!" I said.

"The task is simple: endure the spell that I'm to cast on you, no more, no less."

An ineffable evil exuded from her mouth, with every muttering a stab within me.

*Gushing shadows and sharp pangs.*

Trails of malignant black gusted from the orb and turned into threads that encircled us. With every whirl of the filaments, the surroundings turned into a cyclone, with me staring at Sha'ra. I looked down, and the shadows crept up my body, obscuring my limbs until only pure darkness remained. A terrifying chill shuddered my body, and none was more apparent than the nothingness within.

I gasped, screaming within but muffled by an invisible force that stanchied any call for help.

Wasting darkness engulfed me, with only a crescent of silvery-white looming ahead, like a half-moon frowning at me. Every passing second was a winter within and my limbs thawed until absence replaced numbness. All around, the shrieks and wails of the unborn echoed, and none was there to offer the simple grace of relief to answer my unheard calls.

Seconds dragged into minutes, and minutes into hours, until every shudder within me morphed into desolation spread over an uncountable number of days.

I felt not my breath, for I had none remaining, only an empty chill lurking within. *But it was not me.*

Slivers of white light flashed before me.

Darkness again overtook me.

White light again glittered, and I beheld the contours of a blurred image where I could not see their corners or edges.

The shadows became the boundaries of my world again.

"Did you really have to go that far?" said a masculine voice.

"She had to be tested," replied an old woman's voice.

Silence became the only melody I heard, followed by a timeless era where every second in between was uncounted.

"She has passed the test," said a hoary and feminine voice.

"She has the resolve and endurance to overcome the travails and goals of her life. *The rest is on her.*"

"Then, let's hope it is enough. After all, it is the plan that I've sworn to *her*," said a familiar male voice.

The sound of nothingness overtook me again until I awoke a day later, observing a plate of Sunnu next to my bed.

Sunnu never tasted so sweet.