

# Twin Flames, a Hundred Shadows

*Ni'vim POV*

To accomplish anything in life, one needs two things: a plan and not quite enough time. Fortunately, both factors aligned with our goals today.

Shanyrria looked up at the sky, but I knew her eyes had focused on nothing beyond her thoughts.

"According to the War'Sckotoa, the Yen'shir is somewhere beyond here," I said. "But that's just a rough estimate."

It was a mystery that could only be unraveled by traveling to a mythical sierra. Within days, we arrived.

I gazed into the cumulus clouds above. Puffs of heavenly white glazed the skies, and the winds abounded with turbulence. Although twin suns were blazing high above, their radiance did not comfort us. For before us stood the legendary Fu'shaya mountains. A sierra of menacing white scowled at us while the winds bellowed with shrills and howls. A stretch of cirrus clouds wreathed its crested peaks and jagged slopes. They swirled into thin crescents, each with the sharpness of scythes. And from afar, the forests' whispers were a distant reality.

I stared at my mentor. She could not hide her feelings, for her limbs were already trembling.

"Why do we have to do this?" I asked.

"A hundred *Lu'ra* of pure *Luu*," she said. "That's what we need to invoke its prophetic powers to locate the Yen'shir."

"That's impossible."

"Impossible? You" — she patted me on my biceps so hard that I shook — "gathered and deciphered much of *Ei'lara* on your own. You changed me. *Don't* tell me it can't be done."

"Is there another way?"

"Do you want to face a dozen *Rah Kosh'reea* instead?"

The contest between my mentor's resolve and mine had ceased.

But something else gripped me from within. Although no one could bend my resolve, none was more apparent than the deep drumming of my heart plunging my will into the void. Deep in the recesses of our minds, we both knew it was a path of no return.

A forward thrust into a future where every conceivable path may bend into oblivion.

Sheer terror. Crippling defeat. And a lacuna that, once crossed, could never be reversed.

But we would do it anyway.

For three days and nights, the passage of seconds felt like the sharp pricks of the sierra's rocks into our flesh. If the sheer crackling of lightning from the skies did not cower us, I knew not what would. Every second was hell brought to earth: an eternity neither of us could endure. When the winds were shrill and nights were moon-starved, *those things* would emerge from the shadows. The cold sickle of death and its shadows arising from the mountains. Every wail of theirs might as well be those of a hellspawn from Sckogol.

"Don't disturb those things," Shanyrria said. She grabbed me by the biceps and pulled me into the cavern where the darkness was infinitely brighter than the night. "Rah Kosh'reea. A single stare into their eyes may be your first and last."

By the fourth day, we arrived at our destination. I thought the infinite girth of our god, Os'los, was one too broad to fill my eyes. I was wrong. Before us loomed a majesty of pure whiteness whose very shades matched the glitters of moonshine. The lunar glint. The celestial sparkles. They were beneath the creature we saw. Large flakes of crusted white peeled off its skin, and its eyes were two caverns gazing at us.

Then the earth shook. The being's breath was a hurricane, and its stomp was an earthquake. The tremors of my heart as they raced to beat their last lest it was the end. The being opened its eyes, and the air rumbled until a stony silence loomed.

"Who ... dares ... awaken me ... from my eternal slumber?" asked the being.

"One who is here to revel in your majestic presence," Shanyrria said. "One who is here to cherish the light of Luu before the eternal night."

"A glib tongue. Wise words. But I don't so easily yield to demands."

"We aren't demanding," I said. "We're asking. Politely."

"And what" – the being raised its mountainous limbs, and the earth shook with waves ending in thumps – "do you want from me?"

"Your generosity," said Shanyrria. "A hundred Lu'ra of pure Luu for the goal of saving the lives of thousands."

"Gifts do not come free these days. I've slept for so long as the world is alive. Every day of its existence is *my dreamscape*."

And my every waking moment carries the glint of a thousand years." The creature roared.

"Then, please name the price, and it will be yours."

"A thread for a thread. A life for a life. And in our case, a glint of wisdom for another."

"What do you want?"

"Answer me, mortals: what is the meaning of *the eternal reflection*?"

Shanyrria gazed at me with stupor in her eyes. No, she won't know. I sighed, saying, "It's an endless cycle that my father has tasked me to discover. But no one, even my deceased people, knows its secrets."

"A tragic choice of words." The creature's limbs resounded with an earthquake, and the air echoed with thunders. "A glint of wisdom for one. And the bane of ignorance for another."

The earth rumbled. Within moments, it wore the crests and troughs of the seas, and its waves bent to its malice. The world's horizons leaned into diagonals, and its crusts crisscrossed into blades of gray and white. Shanyrria and I dashed behind a boulder as the sierras assumed the fury of the ancients. She summoned a lasso of lustrous gold and wreathed it around us and the rock. Then the skies wore a layer of fire, and meteoric streaks of gold blazed across the heavens. A whir in the air and the world's winds swirled into a vortex with us at its center. Up we looked, and the skies rampaged with volleys of silvering white as the clouds blended.

"A temporal storm," said Shanyrria.

"A what!?" I asked.

A crack in the air and a massive chasm cleaved the air asunder. We fell *upward* with the rocks, sprigs, branches, and twigs. The earth became the sky, and the sky, the earth. As the sinuous winds dragged us up, the world shimmered with glints of magenta and pale purple. Then, a thud on the ground, and we again landed on the earth. By now, the skies abounded with a fiery wreath of hellish purple. A shrill echoed throughout, and the world's fringes bent into a realm I couldn't have been mistaken.

*Sckogol.*

I clasped a nearby rock and summoned the element of Luu. The chains wrapped around the boulder, and the air buzzed with a horrific shriek.

Time.

If a clock-smith from Yertia could measure its immeasurable span, now would be ripe. The flow of every second passed like a river next to me. Merciless. Unfazed. Unrelenting. My memories

morphed into a trail of glistening red and blue. All around, every second of my life blended into a brook where I could see its whole with a glance. Slivers of pale white gushed past me like the foam of an ocean. I knew not how many seconds, minutes, hours, days, or weeks had passed.

All that was left were the whispers of the forests, the sough of the seas, and the chirps of birds from afar. I opened my eyes, seeing Shanyrria lying on the ground next to me. Day had yielded to night. And the autumnal air must have given in to winter.

"Ni'vim?" asked Shanyrria as she turned to me, arms trembling. "How ... how long?"

I grabbed my Vi'laton of time from my belt. It glowed with a pale white wobbling up and down its body.

"Can't be," I said. "It can't be."

My mentor snatched the watch from me, and her eyes gleamed with fear. Absolute terror. Splintering suspense.

"Te ... ten ... ten days!? No ... more than that. We lost two weeks!" she said. "No. No. No! That ruins everything!" She got up and kicked a nearby rock until it cascaded over the land. "A temporal storm! If only Romanus was here! His gifts in *Concuti Tempa* would have saved us!"

"That's too much time lost! We must hurry! Those ... things ... those demons will attack the other villages at any time!" I got up and flourished my arms.

"We've three choices." Shanyrria closed her eyes to think. "Go back to face the creature – which we can't defeat. Or ..." – she unfolded a scroll from her pouch. It gleamed with many golden symbols – "harvest one hundred Lu'ra from the mountains ... yes, we could scrape that godly creature's craggy surface. It won't know if we do it quietly."

"How long?"

She paused. "Two ... no ... three months ..."

"No. That's way too long. Is there another way?"

"One way. But you will not like it." She then pointed to a nearby mountain's peaks. A glaze of ominous black shrouded its tip, and the winds howled like ravening werewolves. "Don't you see that? Rah Kosh'reea."

"We need Luu, not Rah."

"The rite of *Rah Tra'la*. Transmutes Rah into Luu. A thousand times more effective than the other means."

"Wait ... please don't tell me ..."

"For the location of the Yen'shir to unveil itself precisely, we need to get the essence of Rah Kosh'reea," she said.

*Absolute lunacy.*

I tilted my head to watch the white-crested clouds surf over the mountains. An expanse of pure white loomed over us – every shade symbolizing the sheer crux of ignorance I could not traverse. Shanyrria and I set up a campfire, and its embers left a trail of glimmering gold up the skies. And the twin suns were setting – every moment of sinking into that irreversible realm where all could not be undone.

“That’s impossible!” I yelled as she brought up the matter of the Rah Kosh’reea again.

“Don’t tell me it’s impossible. You’re the only one holding yourself back.”

“If I die, I’ll never unravel *the eternal reflection.*”

“Ni’vim. The worth of a single life is measured not just by how many things one can achieve. It’s the number of lives one impacts that matters the most. You showed me this. I was brought to the edge of death, but you showed me the value of life. And you wish to retract now?”

The winds breezed over me and swept away the tingles on my body. Every moment reminded me of an oath bound to my father’s will. But every second rekindled a duty bound to a greater chain of being that transcended my self. I gazed at Shanyrria, but she looked away.

After several days, we arrived back where we had started.

A dismal, dismal circle.

A circle bending to mere futility.

Just like the circular track of life leading toward death.

As I had already tasted first-hand, a battle against a single Rah Kosh’ree is nothing trifling. For the uninitiated, a fight against one would lead to death. And if one should survive, paralysis and grief may cripple one for the rest of one’s life.

I agreed at first, only because it was the moral choice.

But Shanyrria’s prior estimate of the number of Kosh’reea was an understatement.

“Madness!” I cried. “I have survived the onslaught of about a dozen of them before and defeated them. You speak of what? A few dozen at once?”

She grinned at me with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes, arms folded insistently. Exhaling a puff of smoke from her pipe, she said, “Dozens? No. Absolutely not.”

“Fifty?”

“A hundred. Our mission mandates it.”

“By Os’los! What are you thinking?!” I flung my hands wildly before me, protesting on the outside while raving inside like a

lunatic. "Please reconsider! My oath to my father cannot go unfulfilled! Many will benefit from the teachings!"

"And now you've regained your humanity. What a convenient excuse. Every twitch of yours might as well be you crying inside."

"I *still* feel for others." My eyes widened, and I gazed into hers, defiant. "But if I die, I can't preach the philosophy of the sacred teachings to a million others."

"Sacrificing the plum for the peach?"

We gazed at two nearby trees. A plum tree was next to a peach tree. Their fruits gleamed with shades of vibrant red. Worms crawled into the former's fruits, gnawing into their insides. All that was left was a putrefying glaze of black. The plum tree was ossified in time, with the peach tree beholden to the former's sacrifice.

"No ..." I wavered. "I didn't mean to say my people are inferior plums. But ..."

"But, for a moment, the teachings are the superior peaches to you? So, life has become no longer sacred, isn't it? I thought you showed me the meaning of life."

Shanyrria withdrew her gaze from me, burying her face deep in her palms. It was quiet, and I could hear her heart's throbs and the heaviness of her breaths.

"It's the white malady, isn't it? Must be a burden," she said.

"No. No. I won't let that define me."

"Then, we will see what happens when you meet Raielas again. Will you yield to the flames of vengeance?"

"Please do not bring *her* up!" A flurry of trots stomped the crust beneath.

"Tell me, will you let your surrounding peers die just to kill her?"

I remained silent.

"Sometimes, the cosmos does not view anyone as sacred or exceptional. You may not want to bring her up, but fate may not agree with your desires," she said. "But whether to save our people or kill her is yours."

"No." I gazed at her with fury. "I won't sacrifice the plum for the peach."

She smiled back.

I had no choice.

It's either my people or me.

Time is running out.

I *cannot* abandon the former.

Regardless, work still had to be done. She turned at me again, eyes in deep thought.

"About the Rah Kosh'reea ...," I asked.

"Our combined powers would be enough. We need their essences to find the legendary fortress of Yen'shir."

Within days, we made our way to the fabled mountain of Shan'Mrra. Once there, my eyes gazed upon a maelstrom of shadows swirling around the mountain's peak. Although it is Rah'Sore, a cold autumn with a quarter night and an eighth twilight, hail and permafrost did not spare the apex.

Traversing up the mountains, our bodies quivered despite the layers of fur covering us. The path to the crest was not an easy feat. As we scaled the mountain's inclined slopes, hail from a terrible blizzard pelted us.

Nothing, however, would stop us from obtaining our goal.

Once we reached the top of the mountain, a whirlpool of stygian darkness greeted us.

Even though the battle had yet to begin, I found it strange. It was such for a glaze of cold sweat doused my back – even in the cold. The visage of darkness spiraled around us with such spite and revulsion that nausea gripped me.

The spectral creatures beamed before us, not with radiance but with the chills of an eternal night. The surrounding air thawed to a frigid cold that left my limbs bereft with spasms. A sinister shadow loomed ahead of us, assuming globular forms that swirled like the spiraling arms of a vortex. With each, I beheld only the soft contours of some skeleton where a nightmarish black glazed its bones. The air around us whimpered, almost as though fearing what reprisal loomed ahead. However, we could only attest to one thing: it echoed with a melody synonymous with death and sickness.

"Who is this, who dares venture into our realm?" bellowed the Rah Kosh'reea.

"We will both be forthright about what we wish to gain," said Shanyrria.

"We will need to siphon your essences. Then we will convert them into Luu Vi'la, to direct us towards the sacred fortress of Yen'shir, to save our people," I said.

"Well, you are truthful regarding your intentions, unlike the previous ones who have come before us. Do you know what has become of them ever since?" the shadowy cloud asked.

"We do not."

"Over many centuries, hundreds of brave warriors have attempted to procure our essences. They did this for the sinister

arts, such as Kron'ilos Re or Ma'katon Re. None have ever returned to tell the tale of their sorrows. And where are their corpses, you may ask?"

I remained silent but felt the throbs of my heart deepen.

"None. All of them have disintegrated and turned into shadowy ethers. They have all witnessed something far greater upon the conclusion of their missions. They have witnessed perfection. They have all become a part of us. Even as we speak, we can hear echoes of their imprecations, as their tortured souls scream within us all," it said.

"Then, we will also free those wretched souls from their misery." I clasped my magical scrolls.

"We will not bide time. There is simply no time to waste. Our people are at stake," echoed Shanyrria as she unveiled several Akortosh scrolls before her.

With an invocation, a vibrant glow shone from the runes, engulfing the air around us. A resplendent luster of gold exuded out and dispelled the terrifying shadows from beyond.

"Insolence! Your souls will make a wonderful addition to our kingdom!" thundered the fell creatures.

A swathe of undying black besieged us. Formerly, the light of the suns could trickle through gaps within the dark clouds around us. Now there was utter darkness. The lights from my mentor's Akortosha, once glowing with vivacity, dimmed as the shadows devoured us.

A memory stirred in my mind. A crippling horror had infused into me, and my limbs grew gravid with fear and tremors. Nausea overtook me as memories of my sinister past were evoked.

"You were a murderer, having butchered the lives of two innocents not long ago," echoed the Rah Kosh'reea. "You vow to uphold the sacred tenets of the teachings – of the tome given to you by your father, of your village's sacred religion. But all we sense is hypocrisy."

"Silence, you demons!" I yelled.

"No, you listen! The excerpts spoke of life as sacred. However, not only have you killed, but you also scarred the faces of many others."

The elementals could not be any less pertinent. Vignettes of that fateful day continued to play in my head repeatedly.

Imperfections and vileness.

They are still a part of me.

"Murderer!" echoed my foes. "Murderer! Failure! Weakling! Not only have you failed to uphold the teachings, but you've also failed to care for those around you when they've been imperiled!"

Nausea overtook me. With increasing unease, my breaths grew heavy until the sourness of acid glazed my tongue. The meal I consumed just hours ago gushed out like a river. Looking at my hands, rashes of deep scarlet marred my skin. Then, a profusion of boils and tumors appeared all over. A cacophony of ruptures echoed. The carbuncles popped and oozed a stench that left me stricken with disgust and horror. Looking down, my legs trembled until their skin peeled, stinging me with sharp pains and revealing the pink of my flesh. A deluge of my pure, merciless blue blood trickled out of its wounds. It surrounded me until I choked with the saltiness of its brine.

I sank deeper and deeper into the ocean of voracious blue. Coughing, I choked as though a pair of arms had clenched firmly around my neck.

### *Shanyrria POV*

I was doing no better compared to my protégé.

The spiraling shadows morphed into a bleak sea of tendrils and tentacles that besieged me within seconds. I desired to invoke a Kar of Vi'la Re against my foes. However, before I could pronounce the first syllable, a pair of arms clasped around my mouth. I could not speak further, and soon, the arms clenched tightly around my neck with such strength that I gasped helplessly for air. A sudden sensation of falling prevailed as I sank ever deeper into the cloud of shadows.

Memories of my previous failures flashed before me.

My shortcomings during my crisis with Ni'vim reverberated. Memories of the wretched day where I siphoned the spirit of my first victim to obtain that person's memories loomed. The attempts, where I failed to control my rapacity, leading to further consumption, echoed.

*They haunted me.*

"You are nothing more than a farce," thundered the Rah Kosh'reea. "Everything that you've lived for is a lie. A living lie! Strip away all of the fake memories and personalities you've siphoned from others, and you are nothing within."

My foe could not be more correct. Indeed, I am little of what I have sometimes professed. Many were borrowed memories – all filling the void, which was me. Cast that aside, and I may be nothing more than a wretched soul. I was but a stricken mess – burdened by sorrow and cowardice.

"You and your shadowy half took the lives of others to assume their roles. And you did this because you cannot overcome the weaknesses of your real self." The being's words were nightfall personified.

"No! No! No! Stop this!" My heart raced.

"The truth hurts, isn't it? You have to fill the void within because without this Ul'taran gift, you are nothing. Just a cluttered mess – a vortex of worthlessness and pain."

Every insult spoken was a funeral within. However, I could not speak. I sank ever deeper into the spiral miasma of shadows enveloping me. It kept pulling me down into a vortex of no discernible bottom.

### *Ni'vim POV*

Closing my eyes, the verdant fields that my father and I used to stroll along appeared. Those peaceful times before all was lost – I remembered them now. My father used to tell me of an adage that would be helpful in the times to come. He said that everything in the universe is impermanent. The only permanence is change.

Thus, every glitter of gold, everyone we love and hold dear, would decay under the ongoing march of time. No matter how powerful we are, we are not gods. We are mere mortals, doomed to forever wither under the decay of time. My father's words echoed in my mind:

"What can one do when one has lost nearly everything? Move forward. One does not progress if one stays chained to the past. The darkness cannot cure the darkness. Only the blazing light of a single candle can."

That is correct – I remembered it now. It is always better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

"You are wrong," I bellowed against the Kosh'reea. "I am not powerless. I am not a failure. I am not merely a murderer."

"What do you mean?" they asked.

"It may be true that life has pressed me against the dirt of the soil, but I've learned from my experiences that this is not the way to go. Let's face it, Kosh'reea, you are envious of us."

"Of what?"

"You all have remained hidden within the mountains for centuries, seeking to steal the essences of your victims. But all you all do is wallow in their misery. You all have done

nothing to evolve beyond the shadows. That is who and what you all are – abject failures!”

A crescendo of clangors ruptured all around me. Their almost mechanical and lifeless voice reverberated until I could hear its shrills and dins mix. The cacophony rang, almost shuddering my eardrums. Every shriek was an earthquake within me.

“That is not true!” Their screams left an ear-splitting pain in my ears.

“You all are envious of us Sha’reen. And that is because no matter how many times we have been pushed to the edge of oblivion, we will always move forward. We may take two steps back, but we will always take another three steps forward. That is our legacy. That is who we are.”

“Nonsense! Nonsense! Say no more!”

“Shut it and listen! We are sentient beings, and thus, we must always evolve. You are envious because you all do not possess this gift. Thus, you must suppress your victims to quell the darkness within because there is no light of your own.”

A crescendo of shrieks echoed before me. They were so deathly that the surroundings rippled with the wane of decay. As my foes coalesced into a shadowy visage, I could not help but gaze upon them with pity.

## *Shanyrria POV*

Opening my eyes once more, I blazed with a clarity that at once realized the depths of this situation.

Who am I?

Some say we are mere stardust, doomed to forever maunder on in the infinite darkness of space and nothing more.

They are wrong.

Spirit exists beyond and cannot be reduced to anything simpler.

I still shoulder the light of consciousness in me to accept my limitations and weaknesses and grow out of them. I might have erred in life many times, but my sins do not doom me to perdition. I can still change.

I will.

I will.

*I will.*

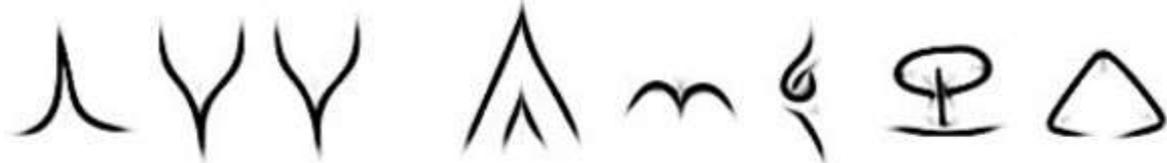
“You all are wrong, Kosh’reea,” I said. “I am not nothing. I command the gift of sentience, and even if I am a wretched mess now, it will not be the case ten years from now. I will

eventually outgrow my weaknesses and become something far more. We evolve, Kosh'reea. We all do. But you all have not for many centuries. Let us face it; you are envious of us."

"That is not true!"

I invoked an Akortosh that was tattooed to my left hand and cast the spell:

*Luu Fri'ga*



An explosion of light rippled outward like the crests and troughs of the ocean. As it radiated outward, I could hear the screams and shrieks of my enemy resounding to where they nearly deafened me. My foes were not ready to submit – with every cascade of light, their shadowy forms expanded for the last time. They grew until they formed the arms of a cyclone, revolving with such might that they siphoned nearby leaves and twigs into them.

My thigh muscles tightened, and I stood my ground as the darkness prevailed before me. They swirled with greater celerity until their shadows morphed into a tornado. With a last burst of Vi'la, the darkness expanded, threatening to dim the lights I had just summoned.

The surroundings thundered with a racket so loud that they sounded like the shrieks of banshees. Winds howled and gushed around me until I summoned another bout of Vi'la. Rivulets of light shot outward and pierced into the shadowy spawns. With one thrust after another, the resplendence grew and, like a maw, surged forward and devoured my foes. The cataclysm caused the air to thunder until only the faint whimper of serenity loomed before me. The air cracked with their desperate cries but soon faded into silence.

Within moments, the unending night around me vanished. The glint of the twin suns' rays had pierced through the darkness surrounding both Ni'vim and me. I gazed upon the faint shimmer of the suns from afar. They sank slowly into the horizons, bathing the skies with lustrous pink. Beside me stood Ni'vim, who had likewise dispelled the illusion cast upon her.

I channeled the shadowy miasma into a Vi'laton at my disposal with another spell. The undying shadows spiraled into the prism.

They did so with such celerity that the nestling warmth of the twin suns displaced the darkness.

Standing side by side, Ni'vim and I stood near the edge of the precipice and gazed together at the setting suns. For while the evening suns were wondrous and beautiful, the greatest caveat was their transience. They would sink again into the horizons beyond within mere minutes.

### *Ni'vim POV*

Once the cover of the night had set upon us, Shanyrria at once began her ritual. Under the shimmering glower of golden light from our campfire, I sat beside her. She placed the Vi'laton upon a rock and cast an ancient incantation into it:

### *Luu Igra Pla Ga'shi*



Light sprung forth from the once blackened gemstone, morphing into a rainbow. It glowed blindingly for a moment. Soon it transformed into a deep, golden luster that was still warm to the touch.

"The ritual has concluded," said my master. "Now, we can summon what lies within."

Rubbing her hand against the prism, a trickle of etheric gold permeated from it. Then a heavenly entity loomed. A vapor besieged us, which glistened brightly like speckles of gold dust. As it swirled majestically around us, we could see no smidgen of what the original vile Kosh'reea was. Its transformation from Rah to Luu was now complete.

As the ritual concluded, the creature burst into rivulets of golden rays. They went high into the heavens in a giant pillar of radiant light. The surroundings echoed with a melody of such euphony that no doubt it was the voice of angels or, more precisely, the souls once trapped within. They were all freed at last.

"Thank you for transforming us to this form," echoed the Luu Kosh'reea. "We owe you all a great depth for freeing us from what was formerly our only way to exist."

"Your gratitude can wait," said Shanyrria, her sentences transitioning into swiftness with every word. "There is something that we wish to beseech you all to help us with."

"Speak freely. If our guess is correct, the Yen'shir's location, is it right?"

"Yes." Shanyrria's eyes sparkled with zeal.

"Ah, yes, before you even divulge your secrets, we can already read your mind. We will direct you two to a location where the light from an eclipse will shine upon an area."

"With our thanks."

"There is one more critical condition to be met. Once the eclipse occurs, we must channel our energies at that spot. We will then show you all the whereabouts of such."

Thus, our journey continued, knowing the perils of biding our time for too long. A greater stake awaited us, and we could not doom our people with our sloth.



## *Spiritual Tenet*

*Our past sins do not define us. They give us a chance to grow out of them.*

