

# Of Presence and Absence

## *Ni'vim POV*

The problem of having to resolve the philosophical quagmire given to me by the phantasm has never left. For the longest time, I thought I knew what freedom meant. The zelkova has shown me it is always possible to use freedom to overwrite the threads of fate. However, my recent encounter has shown that the former's specifics have so far denied me.

I returned to the Tsa'mar again. Today, something was amiss. A blaze of crimson red had engulfed the structure. Frills of jagged, bloody red pierced the air, and a malignant tornado gyred around it. As I approached, its scarlet strands blended into a malefic glaze of orange. The luminous ethers merged into a being whose eyes gazed at me with a blinding gold. It was not the former guardian I once faced. It whirled around me, and the air grew humid. Sweat dripped from my clothing.

"So ... this is the young Ul'taran my sibling has told me about!" said the being in a feminine voice.

"Who ... who are you? Where's the other?" I asked.

"Oh, we are both numerologists. My name is Is'varah. On even days, he would preside over this realm. On odd days, I would."

"Then, I've come to pass the trial again. I demand to face it with my newfound wisdom."

"Wisdom! Wisdom!? Wisdom?! Hohoho!" the being chuckled. "My dear friend. You don't know what wisdom is until you've experienced and practiced it. Otherwise, it's all armchair philosophy."

"Regardless, I must try!"

"Very well." The being swirled into a miasma of choking pink. Then, its gaseous body dimmed into an eternal nightfall where dark slivers jutted from her. A serpent made of smothering smog emerged and whirred around me. The air was an ironic fusion between warmth and cold. Three pairs of scarlet eyes blazed with fury at me. Its maw was an inverted crescent, and every gaze at its frown was a nightmare within me.

"Young ... young one," said the serpent. "You would dare proclaim you have got the means to resolve the anguish within me!?"

"What?" I said. "I don't understand."

"Oh," said Is'varah. "It's like this. I've kept this dark serpent on a leash for centuries. He embodies everything contrary to what freedom stands for. You, blue one, must extinguish the darkness in him."

"What!? How!?" I yelled.

"Hohoho! I thought you were so sure of yourself! Turning back now?"

"No ... I will try my best."

"There is no try. If you're trying, you're not doing your utmost best. Now, *do it.*"

The shadowy visage curled around me and morphed into a cascade of tragic black. A dark flame burst from its whirl and scathed the crust below. I reached for a piece of fabric from my pouch and covered my mouth, eyes squinting as the haze stung them. Then, before I could react, dozens of threads gushed from the creature's cyclone. They pierced into me, and the air resounded with my shrieks.

The being coiled its tethers around me and held me up, gazing at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Thousands of years ago, I was a king. A king of much power. But they called me corrupt. Despotic. Insane. How would a fledging soul like you do anything to help me?" he asked.

"Freedom may never be resolved or earned through power," I said. "I've recently learned that. One must tame the mind."

The being's eyes opened and unveiled its swirling irises. They spun until they morphed into a hypnotic circle. Every gaze into them caused the surrounding contours to wane into a blurred visage. I was hurled into a dark realm, where an eternal night reigned. My limbs were again free of shadowy graspers.

Two shadowy orbs emerged from the bottomless ground. They swirled around me and exuded jets of black fog. Then, my body instinctively rolled over the dark crust. Thousands of threads jutted from them; each turned into sickles that pierced the earth.

I chanted a spell, and a verse of Luu loomed. Many magical symbols swirled around me and cast daylight onto the ground. Some were from the chapters of *Thus Spake Oneness* I had so far deciphered. The mending verses streaked through the air and smote the two beings. Dozens of golden chains held them to the earth. Then, I approached them and cast Vi'hara Os'lara Qu onto them.

"These memories," I said. "You're a tragic soul ... years of being shackled to a cycle of revenge and hatred begetting more fury. Years of avarice, where your troves glitter with gold,

silver, opal, jade, and amethyst. And the smell of jasmine oil and cinnamon ... all stolen from your conquered slaves ..."

"Nonsense! You know nothing!" the serpent's voice thundered.

Then, with a chink, the two orbs broke free and jolted around me. They whizzed so quickly that their afterimage became an incarnation of night. Dozens of dark threads again lunged at me, but I summoned a luminous bulwark. Clangs echoed as they pounded my shield.

"Su'riyo ... Ely'soro," I said. "I see it now ... you're entrapped in the cycle of illusion and karma ..."

"You *don't* know me!"

With a murmur, Luu symbols gushed from my palms and formed a jet that blitzed at the orbs. They lashed at them and chained them to the earth.

"Please! Let me mend you!" I said. Dozens of newly-unraveled symbols gushed at the being. Darkness gave in to day, and the wintry air grew warm with lustrous, golden flames.

The contest between foes continued for many minutes until sweat drenched my clothing. My arms held onto the golden tethers, and I muttered many words into my enemy. Then, with a clangor, the chains shattered, and their shards nearly pierced me. My body roiled over the crust, and I felt a thud on my back.

I thought the worst was over, but a burst of darkness pounded on my body. Dozens of tendrils wrung themselves around me, and blood must have gushed to my head. Their horned spikes pierced into my skin, and warm blood trickled from it. The dark serpent's diabolical eyes gazed at me. I could not look away. Its every stare made me as still as stone, yet as helpless as one. Hundreds of the king's memories intruded into my mind. Its memories formed a vignette of images spanning from left to right. Time was no longer a second in the present. Instead, it was a spaciousness where every second lived by my foe was realized in the now.

I coughed out blood and phlegm from the ongoing barrage. The being's memories pierced into my psyche, and for some moments, we had become one.

"Stop! Stop!" I screamed. "Don't ... why ... are you doing this!?"

"Had enough?" said the serpent. "How does it feel to *become* me?!"

"I'm not you!"

"What he means," said Is'varah, "is you can't understand someone unless you've been through what they have!"

"Let me go!" I yelled as the shadowy tentacles tightened around my neck. As I choked for breath, my body's warmth plunged into a coldness below those of an icy sierra.

I sank into a whirlpool of voracious black until the last vestiges of sunlight left my eyes. With every drag into the bottomless abyss, the serpent's cursed history brimmed before my eyes. Tears trickled from my eyes as I beheld truths so bitter that only inexistence could justify them. He had a life cursed beyond the horrors of any haunted catacomb. Crimes so vile that I could not speak of left me quivering with dread. My body roiled over the earth's jagged granite until I felt a thud.

I awoke and held my hands before me. They trembled and sweated with such terror that I quickly threw out into a nearby lake. The acid sting of my vomit left my tongue poisoned. Water splashed onto my face as I sank my head into it.

Darkness overtook me.

Then, I awoke to find Is'varah gazing at me.

"Awake yet?" said Is'varah.

"I ... couldn't," I said.

"Ely'soro. Su'riyo. Looks like you're on track to unraveling my sibling's trial. But still not enough."

"What isn't enough?"

"You speak in theoretical terms, but you don't know the specifics of how to apply them!"

"Then, I'll be back again."

With a puff, Is'varah's nebulous form burst into a sparkle of white light. It again dimmed into nothingness. Only a sprawl of overgrown thickets and shrubs covered the entry to the Tsa'mar.

I will be back.

*I will be back.*

I pondered how to defeat the two guardians until ignorance overtook me again. It's exactly as the old woman had counseled me: I can't do it alone.

I need someone's guidance.

The next few hours did not bode well for me. Why do I have this insatiable thirst to bask in the troves of all things glittering? Why do I seek the solace of those at the brothel? Why do I itch for the desire to run a blade through my enemies?

I collapsed to the nearby lake, and my reflection gazed at me with bloodshot eyes.

For hours, I limped home. My Ul'taran gifts could not afford me the luxury of levitation. Once home, an atrocious rage left my palms sending trails of fiery red to the nearby forests. The trees wept as they adorned a glaze of brimming gold. And the surroundings abounded with the chirps of dozens of fleeing birds.

I shifted between light and darkness for many minutes until I saw Shanyrria dashing at me.

I felt a pang on my head until my body rolled over the earth. Darkness overtook me.

Once I woke, Shanyrria gazed into me and collapsed beside a nearby log.

"Where ... what ... what happened?" I asked. I tried moving my arms but found them bound with ropes to a wooden chair. "Ma ... master?"

Shanyrria got up and staggered toward me, saying, "You ... you've been infested ..."

"By what!?"

"Dark memories. The same as ... what once happened ... to me."

She cast a spell, and a coldness bit into my body and shuddered down my spine. She gestured many times, whirling her hands in an unusual choreography. With every chant, the dark memories I once had waned.

A shadowy tendril wrapped around me and nearly choked me of breath. Pangs gnawed into my body, and tears streamed down my eyes.

"Rah Kimdu," she said. "Darkness against darkness. That's how I normally heal people. I rarely use Luu ... these days."

Then, she collapsed to the ground, soaked in sweat.

"That's why," she said, "you've to ... pass the test I've arranged for you at the mountain first to graduate. Dark Kosh'reea. They gnaw into your memories. They turn you against you. They make you stab yourself!"

"I couldn't have fathomed the task to be so difficult!"

"Neither did I. I thought the Tsa'mar I've sent you to was safe."

"From what?"

She gazed at me with fire setting ablaze her stare and said, "Yourself ... yourself."

I spent the next few days meditating for hours each day. Purging myself of the evil thoughts and memories was difficult. Shanyrria would tether me with a magical lasso to a large boulder. Whenever I lost control and channeled my rage into fiery spells, the chains would drain me of Vi'la. The onslaught between vice and virtue continued for many days.

"Ni'vim," Shanyrria said. "Focus on pleasant thoughts whenever you face a dark Kosh'ree that threatens to take over your sanity. It's hard, but you must if you are to take on the Tsa'mara on your own."

"Too rushed as usual," I said.

"You tend to rush into something when you aren't ready. Remember when things went crazy months ago during the drama with Tema?"

"Yea. It's a lifelong struggle."

"Regardless, you don't have to do it alone. Meet Nochol. I'm sure he has some way to help you."

I spent the entire day healing.



A new day arrived.

Today, the weather was fortuitous. The blue lands radiated a tinge of glistening dew following a quick shower. The ominous gray of the skies had cleared completely, and above me was a ray of multifarious light. The heavens gleamed with the seven colors of the rainbow, like a celestial bridge formed over the continents beneath. Flocks of birds gushed over the rainbow as though eager to enter the kingdom that awaits beyond the mortal coil. Despite such, I was not ready today to make my entry into such.

It has been a while ever since I have last spoken to Nochol. While resting outside of my mentor's lodge today, his sudden visitation surprised me. Shanyrria and Nochol embraced, muttering a litany of words that I could not hear. As they concluded their conversation, I, at last, convened with the chieftain.

Nochol dressed in tatters today. A dull gray was arrayed over his entire body, down from his hood to this cape and trousers. Jettisoning his usual bonnet of vibrant feathers today, he could easily blend into an agora. No one would ever mistake him for anything more than a mere proletariat. He held himself erect with a walking stick made of dark pine wood with his back slightly hunched.

"It has been a while, Ni'vim. How has life been treating you?" Nochol asked.

"I'm fine. But I'm also surprised. You know of Shanyrria's secret?" I said.

"Yes. Her secret is safe with me. I am only here to bring some provisions for her. After all, it is my role as chieftain to see to everyone's well-being."

We both ventured to the plains before us and watched as the winds gently kissed the grass. To me, it was a serene experience.

The best of friends are those where we no longer feel the passage of time in each other's company.

Both Nochol and I sat cross-legged before the pastures, gazing into the mountainous ebbs until time no longer existed.

He held a single chime in his hand, and he struck it. I heard the crescendo of a single ring within my ears. It is the sound of stillness – something that had long been deprived from me.

He said to me, "Many people of the east, these humans, have often conjured systems that measure time. They believe that time is money and effort. Thus, they spend every single moment of their life aspiring for riches and gold. But they have fixated their presence into the future."

"It was one of Yao's most important lessons when she was living. Unfortunately, she can only live in the past now."

"No. At all times. Memory is timeless."

"I can only remember the past and spare myself of the future." I looked at Nochol, maintaining a stare that was rare amongst people. After all, I no longer had to put up a pretense of strength before him.

"Well, the future and the past both do not exist. We can only experience the present. To them, the sound of a chime goes like this: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. To those who appreciate the present, a chime is a crescendo, a rupture, an eruption. In their zeal for the future, they have given up their presence for absence."



Nochol struck the chime again and the surroundings reverberated with its ringing. Loud yet silent, eternal yet existing only in the present.

"That is so true. There is something disturbing me of late," I said.

"What is it?" He looked at me with a smile that paralleled the glimmers of sincerity in his eyes; I looked back, never turning away.

"I've heard of the great sage, Dio'phra, who lives within our town. I have not seen him at all. But word has it, he is one of



the best enlightened of all peoples, having gotten the greatest freedom within life. Yet, he lives in a large pot and spends much of his time reveling in the luster of the suns. He owns nothing and has nothing. What makes him so joyful and free?"

"My friend, sometimes, it is easy to judge a person's level of freedom just by superficials. You gaze at him and evaluate him based on what he already has. Yet, the greatest truths are unraveled only by noticing what he is not doing. Only through absence that you may seek what you need."

"How may I study this absence?"

"By studying someone who personifies the opposite. Observe their actions and see the dreadful consequences of such on their lives and others. Why do you ask?"

"It's the Tsa'mar." I swallowed and paused. "I need to resolve a philosophical conundrum that it poses to gain entry to it."

"No worries. I will speak to your mentor about it. I know of someone you may study to resolve this problem."

Once the skies flowed with clouds that sheltered me again, I met up with my mentor for a discussion after Nochol left.

"That is most intriguing," said Shanyrria. "For a Tsa'mar to present such a challenge. I suppose you are adamant about finding the answer. However, you do not know the way. Therefore, I shall show you the gateway, but it is you who must walk through it."

My tutor led me to the village's central hub, renowned for the merriment that often happens at night. In my town, there is a man named Ur'shree, one of the wealthiest folk in the vicinity.

"So, that's Ur'shree," I said.

"Known for his extreme epicurean pleasures. Or notorious, I would say."

As we passed by and looked inside, the interiors of his mansion glistened with the shine of marble and alabaster. His ceilings and wooden floor were lacquered with sprinkles of gold. Likewise, his furnishings were exorbitant, for there was embroidery woven by the finest tailors. Throughout his home, the furs and leathers of rare creatures glazed his walls. Paintings and murals decorated his living and dining rooms.

Therefore, to utter his very name is to be eponymous with wealth.

The gift of Vi'hara Mara Skree is one gift given to us Ul'tarans. Combined with Kimdu, one can perceive through another person. People said that this skill gave us powers of unparalleled espionage in ancient times. In modern times, it is more of a trifle. However, my mentor had no qualms in asking me to employ it today.

Soon it was night, and we hid behind a thicket next to the central hub. In it was a tavern where the lewdest and most uncouth of practices would take place. If the country's forum is the epitome of cultured exchange, this tavern would undoubtedly be its antithesis.

I glared through a faint slit of a wall and beheld the bawdiest merriment unsuited for the eyes of youths. Before me lay Ur'shree, surrounded by a harem of several women folding their arms around him. With this, I invoked the spell of Vi'hara Mara Skree.

My eyes gazed into a reality in which I was no longer myself. My arms and legs assumed the stockiness of a man's. My stomach bulged until its torso ballooned through my apparel.

Around me, the warmth of feminine arms wrapped. I beheld a bitterness in my mouth – the rancidity of liquor poured in vast amounts until it had overflowed. The stench of clothing draped in rum diffused throughout the surroundings. Lips pressed against my lips, and I felt the moisture of their mouths.

Tongues interlocked in osculation. My arms wrapped around the girth of my fellow companions in embrace.

Such an exchange was not the only taint that besmirched me. As Ur'shree continued with his acts, his thoughts oscillated between extremes. I probed his mind, beholding only nothing but thoughts that bore the greatest narrowmindedness. Bigotry, racism, and prejudice resounded within him. His was a mind of a philistine – with nothing more than pursuing pure hedonism to ease his boredom.

As his eyes rolled upward with mucus in his nose and spit dripping from his maw, I could only reveal the greatest of pity toward him. His is a soul so bogged down by pleasures that the highest echelons of pursuits were denied to him. Compassion, altruism, love, humor, witticism, charity – none of it exists within him. His is one where he has only enough room for one and no other. Despite the glitter of his jewels wrung around his neck and arms, there is nothing within.

He is a soul doomed to forever assume nothing more than the life of a boar. The intoxication of wine. The inhalation of incense. The mere pursuit of gambling. Although riches he has plenty, the limits of his worldview have become his very prison. With no other interest other than sensual pleasures, I could not envisage what would lead to his eventual demise.

After my mind had left, my mentor once more talked to me as we strolled along the boulevards home.

"Ni'vim, do you now understand what it truly means to be free? Or at least, to be not free?"

"I thought this man had everything – wealth, women, a fancy manor, gold, jewels, and the merriment of his fellow men. Unfortunately, the price is too high to pay." Chuckling, I half-smiled, trying to conceal my weakness.

"You understand better now. Indeed, prosperity is not a function of the glittering troves of treasure that one has."

"Agreed. No amount of power in the outside world can ever be a proxy for that sliver of light that glowers deep within us. I see now that we cannot define freedom as the absence of darkness that encircles us." A blanket of relief spread over me and left tingles throughout my chest.

"Indeed, it would be pointless to think that absence can be a substitute for presence."

"The presence of mind. The presence of the resplendence that glitters within us."

The truth then dawned upon me like the radiance of a thousand suns. I gazed high into the heavens and beheld the night skies. There were hundreds, if not thousands or millions, of my stellar companions high above! They all shone with the majesty of angels! It was then that I realized that none of us can ever be complete until we have joined them. No one is ever complete if he or she merely basks in the collective splendor of the stars above.

A person doing such would at most trail in the shadow of others and not its light. We would contribute to nothing in the cosmos. One can only be complete until one has blazed with a light so fervent that its luminous rays have spread across all regions of the known universe! To be a star high amongst the celestial arms of the galaxy – that is true freedom!

I had been misled into the grandest illusion of all time, believing that only its converse could define freedom. Confidence brewed within me. I now know what else I must do before I revisit the Tsa'mar.

The dark serpent king I faced at the Tsa'mar – I shall free you.

After learning my lesson from Shanyrria and Nochol, I returned to the infirmary again. It was the third time this week.

The musk of medication was rich in the air, lightened only by the soft whimpers of patients. About four lay in their beds, most with their faces pale to the point of weakness.

"Ni'vim! You're back as you said you will!" whispered Zaza in my ears.

"People need me. People wish to count on me just as I've once counted on you now."

I had dressed in a cloak that covered the whiteness of my curse. A layer of blue paint formed my camouflage and shield from the world's judgment. I strolled toward a young Sha'reeni girl whose eyes stared vacantly. She was in catatonic shock; her body shivered while saliva dripped from her mouth. I placed her in my hands and summoned a puff of luminous Luu from my palms. The golden mist wreathed her, and she nestled in my arms. Then, I opened the sacred compendium, and out came the spell I had blended with Ei'lara.

"You're ... fine," I said as I felt her vitals, "on the outside, your pulse and breath are shallow, but your organs are alright."

"Oh, I've tried to mend her for a while," said Zaza. "Her name's Sil'pho. Something traps her from within. We all think it's a demonic possession."

"Demonic? That's only a point of view." I touched her again and pressed my fingers along her spine and meridians. "Ah, fear. I can taste it whenever it is close."

"Fear?"

"She's afraid ... of rejection ... from someone she adores ... no ... she's already rejected ..." I applied a gust of Luu into her head. The symbols from the sacred tome opened, and the signs for fear and freedom coiled around her. Dark frills flowed from her and entered the former symbol. Then I brought the symbol outside where the earth became a scorched remnant of a prior evil with a blaze of Pho. Ashes and smog had purified the wickedness within.

I watched as she lay in Zaza's arms, finally speaking.

"Thank you ...," said Sil'pho. "I feel much better."

I placed my hands on her shoulders, saying, "The agony has been soothed. The sickness was from within. You've grown attached to fear."

Another patient lay on his bed. His feet had turned black from gangrene, and the smell of its festering spoiled the air. I flipped him to gaze at him. What horror! Is that you, Un'shrele? One of those who had treated me poorly during Tema's time?

Wrath gripped me from within until a gulf of many awkward seconds divided us. But I shall no longer allow walls to divide us!

I opened the tome, and the symbols for freedom and karma flowed around me. I summoned a puff of Rah, and dark Vi'la flowed from me until they gathered around the latter symbol. The cold

blight of hatred dimmed with every exorcism until it was a mere, harmless scar. The symbol blistered with scarlet red, and I brought it outside. Suu gushed from my palms with a chant, and a deluge brought the sign to a watery grave.

I had purged the evil within me.

I walked back slowly, feeling the warm gusts and sunshine.

Life never felt any greater.

As I returned, I cast a burst of Luu into Un'shrele's wounds, and his flesh no longer decayed. It had again adorned a layer of healthy, blue skin, and his feathers were vibrant like a Ka'frey's. He smiled, but I looked away, continuing to mend the other patients. With every healing, the vices that once constricted me within faded into obscurity. An inner radiance shone within, and I felt its warmth. It was the life blossom of summer, the healing fountain of peace, and the whisper of the winds.

After I ended, I carried the compendium and touched the zelkova symbol at its front.

Life was never freer.