

# Reforged

## *Ni'vim POV*

The winds wove into a lullaby of soft brushes that swept over the many dandelions and lilies before us. Many fronds and pollens drifted over the earth. They carried a scent that allayed every tension in my body as we arrived. The first sun had risen from the skyline from afar, bathing everything with a lustrous orange. The clouds were its gauze; the birds were its songs, and the winds were messengers. And we were doubtless its audience.

We traversed an ebb and flow of hills bending into brooks and lakes alike. We felt the sough of the winds as they grazed the lands. Its warmth wreathed us like the embrace of a loving mother. Shanyrria and I stood at the cliff's edge, watching the clouds surf over the skies. Beneath it was a mountain range, a sierra of infinite suspense whose white-crested peaks were a marvel of creation. The twin suns blazed high above, and the heavens chanted the echoes of the mountains.

We sat down and started a campfire. Its embers and ashes blazed, and we nestled in its warmth. I sat cross-legged and stared at the mountains. Seconds drifted by, and I blended into a flow where only the present remained.

Only the mountain and I remained.

And we were both one.

Shanyrria took out a lute from her satchel. She ran her fingers along its grooves and touched its strings. A verse left her mouth and resounded with the lute's melody. For a moment, the winds' whispers had joined us. And every second felt like a crescendo: a moment of reprieve where the world's problems no longer weighed us down.

We gazed at the mountains, and moments later, it replied with an echo. It was at first soft, but soon after, it resounded like the verses of joy setting alight our hearts and minds alike. Then, it faded, just like how life wanes into death. Shanyrria and I turned to look at each other; the grimaces on her face could not conceal her fears and terrors within.

I've felt it.

We both did.

She told me she wished that time was like a palimpsest, one whereby we could wipe every bitter memory off its slate. Yet,

its slate was eternal, and none could reverse the merciless flow of time.

The rivers before us meandered into bends and twists. The winds were soft on our skins, and the warmth was gentle. The brooks flowed ahead, ferrying every seed and creature downstream.

They never turned back.

"Master," I asked, "do you believe in the existence of our god, Os'los?"

She smiled and turned away, grabbing her lute again to pluck its threads. And then, a verse of the most soothing rhapsody drifted over the lands and brought relief to the meadows, still coated with morning dew. She raised her voice, and her song blended with her lute's melody:

"Life's an undying echo.  
An eternal rhythm not to be seen,  
not to be heard nor felt,  
but one where one may only sing to it.

Life's a great mountain range.  
Its every echo resounds with our wails,  
or the deep drumming of our hearts,  
and the quavers of our cords.

Or it could likewise be enchanted  
with the sweet lullaby of solace,  
with the chants of our eternal joy,  
and cries, cheers, and laughs of glee.

Every laughter or wail is an echo;  
an echo ablaze with our thoughts.  
The mountain answers our call,  
with its echoes bearing our hearts.

An undying, undying echo."

The verses drifted over the lands and brought solace to my face. Within moments, the sierras answered back with the beats of an undying echo. I basked in its melody, watching as the clouds surf over its gray slopes.

Then, Shanyrria turned to me with her eyes brimming with the radiance of the twin suns above. She said, "No. No, Ni'vim. I don't think there's a need for that hypothesis."

I turned to the mountains again and raised my voice. Within moments came an undying echo, reflecting my every cry and laughter.

We doused the campfire and continued our journey afoot. Soon, we reached a realm where the thin veil between dreams and reality were as fickle as our imaginations. A whirl of twisting winds bearing the black of midnight swirled in opposed directions from afar. A blanket of nimbus wrapped everything in a dismal gray. And the skies crackled with rhythmic bursts of thunder, followed by the faint sizzle and afterglow of embers. My heart pounded as I gazed into the whirling vortex: a terror no less than the ones I shoulder within me.

"That's odd," said Shanyrria as she took out a map. "According to the map, this should be where the ruins lie."

"No one ever steps into the same river twice. Just as no map ever stays the same after many centuries. Perhaps it was just outdated?"

Shanyrria approached the maelstrom. By now, its infernal darkness had wreathed the surrounding crust with a glaze of midnight. It brought down the nether to this world, and its shadows married the earth in an unwilling union. But something swept over us, and I now rode over a surf of wind. The world twisted around me, and I saw only a blurred afterimage. My fingers clenched and gestured something, but its Vi'la merely flickered, and nothing came out. The winds carried me onto its surf and dragged me into a tornado filled with debris.

As I rode atop its waves, daylight became no less than an aberration: a faint flicker amid the backdrop of an eternal night.

Soon after, the shadows adorned tendrils and limbs, molded into an abomination that dispelled the placid ignorance and bliss once within me. My heart throbbed as I gazed into a horror where voids were its eyes, and its voids carried the sheer bane of nothingness. Every look into its hypnotic gaze unearthed memories once hidden within. The tumbling of heads off their shoulders. The detachment of limbs off their joints. The gushing of blood. And the fires that lit ablaze my village. The memories of that fateful massacre spanned my mind. And my cries were like a requiem ushering me to the realm of the undead.

My cries, an undying echo.

But none of my memories make me who I am.

Only I do.

Only I do.

I clasped my hands again, and a burst of luminous gold came out. They blended into the vortex, and soon, day and night battled each other. The sunshine then ended the night, and the shadows waned into nothingness. The world's contours were no longer hazy, and the twin suns soared above. The chirps of passing birds. The trickle of nearby rivers. The lullaby of the winds.

And the undying echoes of the mountains.

Shanyrria was beside me. She had likewise dispelled the illusion.

Before us were brilliant strands of light woven into a tapestry of cosmic wisdom. The words chimed like bells and left a blessing on the ground. Sky and earth had become one.

The verses wrote:

"Like an undying echo, all things in the cosmos reflect their songs to themselves."

Everything? I don't fully understand.

But I shall think about it.

And neither of us shall forget it.

Thank you, mountain, for the lessons given to us.

Soon, we arrived at our destination.

*The ruins of Dama'su.*

Three circular prisms appeared over the ground. They revolved around an invisible barycenter. Frills of moss and vines tapered down, giving the impression of being afloat as they nestled over the breezing winds. Each prism was pink, signifying health and clarity in my culture. But it channeled a feeling of serenity within Shanyrria and I.

"There it is," said my mentor. "I know what this contraption is. Years of learning in the academy have come to application at last!"

Her fingers twirled and then fumbled with clumsy repose, almost like playing a kalimba. Then, slivers of white light dashed into the prisms. They now spun like an orrery, each prism resembling a planet's motion around an empty center. She then placed her hand atop them to read their living memories with her Ul'taran gifts.

"I see," she said. "Three riddles we must solve. Speak the word to each, and we shall be able to obtain its closely guarded secrets."

"What's the first?" I asked.

Rays of light shot from one and spun into helices curved on the air with radiant gold, much like sunshine and the diffuse gas of some ghost. It wrote the message:

I am a number of three digits.  
My ones place is three more than the tenth.  
My tenth place is two higher than the hundredth.  
We all add up to nineteen.  
What number am I?

"Well, care to answer this first?" Shanyrria asked. "I know what it is, but I shall not spoil the joy for you."

I closed my eyes in deep thought for many seconds until a glimmer of insight flashed in me.

"Ah," I said. "Then, let's assume the ones place to be three. The tenth would be zero. Then the hundredth would be minus 2. So -2, 0, 3. Let's do some trial and error by adding more digits to them ... plus five, hmmm, not the right answer. How about plus six, so it makes 4, 6, 9, which adds up to 19!"

The prism cracked and turned into shattered shards that unveiled a crate within. Shanyrria opened it with a spell.

"Ah, one of the components to forge your father's key. Now for the next riddle."

With her palms clapping together, a wind swirled around the next prism until it grew livid with scalding light. It then wrote the following luminous words before us:

Touch me not with hands and feet.  
I begin from the alpha to the omega.  
I drift past everything from mountains to gnats.  
Yet I am un-negotiable, ceaseless, and real.  
Historians pay homage to me.  
I exist only for the moment.  
Then forever drift away from history.  
What am I?

Shanyrria then smiled at me and said, "Time."

The prism rumbled with a crescendo and quickly melted into a cooling substance that embraced the ground. Another component – some widget of some unknown form with rusted skin – appeared before us.

"And now for the last," she said and invoked another spell. The last prism spun symbols until it formed the following riddle:

A gnat is flying between two carts.  
Both carts move at even speeds.  
They take a minute to bump each other.  
They travel at one meter per second.  
The gnat travels at two meters per second.  
The gnat bounces between the two,  
traveling at even speed throughout.  
How far does the gnat travel before being squashed?

"Now, that's a *really* tough one!" I said.

With the living element of Suu, I imbued light into the latter. I created a simulation of the math puzzle before me. I emulated the cart and gnat, which began prancing between the two.

"Damn!" I said. "I need the knowledge of how to sum geometric progressions to solve this!"

I gazed blindly at the living waters for many minutes, trying one permutation after another. Sweat glistened from my forehead, and I grew nauseous with fatigue.

"Give up?" asked Shanyrria.

"I give up. How do you solve this?"

"Well, Ni'vim. The answer was staring at you in the face. The third and fifth lines are all you need," she said before mumbling an answer into the prism. The prism shook and cackled, turning into a frill as it cascaded down like a river. "Here's the last component."

"How did you solve it?"

"I was astute. There was no need to sum up using a geometric series."

Very witty, but apparently, I am not born for math.

We then got home with the components. Fires brewed around us as we surrounded them with many Vi'latona. Surges of Za zapped between each apex to form a hexagon until flames pranced at its center. The components melted into a medley and then into a fuzz of green light that sent buzzes all around us.

A single rod-like tool appeared before us.

"The key's done," said Shanyrria. "Now, we just have to remember the location of the other coordinate from your father's map."

We never slept more soundly that day as our progression towards unraveling the eternal reflection grew one step further. Perhaps somewhere in these ancient structures may hold a secret we may unlock with this newfound key.