

## Interlude - Gift II

“Go slowly.”

Kri didn't think that was actually possible. Still, she tried to follow Ryun's advice. According to them, the bonding should be a quick and painless affair. But then again, they've also mentioned that it would bond with her flesh so who knew. She took the talisman in hand and started the bonding process.

It disappeared, and immediately she felt pressure in the center of her chest, slightly below her throat. She pulled her shirt down and watched as her flesh pulled apart and the talisman emerged from it. There was... pain, but it was faint, and far less than she had feared.

“Oh,” Kri said. “That wasn't so bad.”

She shouldn't have said anything. Then the pain really hit. It didn't come from her body, but someplace deep within, her soul if she had to guess. She bent over and fell to the ground, gritting her teeth as something ravaged all through her. She tried to marshal her willpower, to feed her **|Tough Body|** skill. Tali had said that it was weak, but that it would do for now. She was right, being tough didn't seem to help that much. The pain was twofold, both her body and something deeper, which made her terrified.

She heard Ryun and Selia talking above her, but she could barely understand them. And then, after what felt like hours, the pain slowly abated, and she felt the talisman settle inside of her. Finally, she gathered herself. It felt... as if she had been pulled tight. She raised her head and saw Ryun and Selia studying her.

“See, she didn't die,” Ryun said.

Selia frowned at him. “That is not how you treat children.”

“She is a grown woman,” Ryun added.

“She is twenty,” Selia said, in a tone that meant she considered her a toddler. Kri nearly told her that she was older than that, but she didn't think that a few more years would change anything in her mind.

“That is grown,” Ryun said.

Selia opened her mouth, glanced at Kri, then closed it. Again, it seemed like they were having a soundless conversation, which made Kri frown.

“Fine,” Ryun said after a few seconds. “How are you feeling, Kri?” He turned to look at her.

“Uh...” Kri took stock of herself, looked through her screens and made sure that she was alright before responding. “I am fine, just feel a bit... tired.”

“And the talisman? It works?” Ryun asked.

“I only got 100 stats from it, and 5 to base,” Kri said.

“That is more than we could’ve hoped for,” Selia added.

“Yeah, a hundred stats at your level matters,” Ryun said.

“What now?” Kri asked.

“First, you tell us that you understand the danger of that item and what will happen if you try to use it,” Selia met her eyes.

“I...” Kri paused, if she understood what they had explained previously, her soul would probably evaporate into nothingness if she tried it at Lord. “Yes, I understand.”

Ryun clapped his hands. “Good, now to the next part!”

“Next part?” She immediately perked up.

Ryun’s face turned into a smile. “I had your mother do this at a higher Realm, but... I think that what we have for you should be enough. If it doesn’t kill you.”

Her expression faltered. “Uh... what?”

The answer to that question came a few days later. They were in the mountains, in the center of the Absolute Cold Shrine. Once they arrived, Ryun pulled out a tub out of his storage, and immediately mist started spilling out of it. She could feel the cold from over here.

“Oh,” she just said.

\* \* \*

She was freezing herself in a tub filled with some kind of cold Essence. It was painful, but she was enduring.

“See,” Ryun said. “I told you that if she got the right body, she could endure it.”

“I never said that I disagreed with you Ryun. I said that it was too dangerous.”

Kri tried to focus on keeping the cold at bay as it was seeping inside of her. Her body made the cold impact her at a reduced rate, but it still penetrated. And she was feeling her body freezing, turning to ice.

“I said,” Selia continued. “That she has far too few stats, that if we let this go for too long, all it would take is an instant and she could die.”

Kri agreed with them completely. And it was obvious that they were worried about it, despite their conversations.

“Don’t worry, I’ve refined the process since I had her mother do it. That had been... rough, we forced it through. This... I’ve had an enchanter carve the formations on the tub to regulate the amount of Cold affecting her. There is also a soul protection field around it, and a few more things I thought up.”

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence,” Selia said. “You are tinkering with things that other sects refine over the centuries.”

“Bah,” Ryun waved his hand. “They are too timid, content to take safety in return for little gains. Kri isn’t afraid of a little pain, right?”

“I am a formation maker,” Selia told him. “You really think that I don’t recognize what that one there is?”

“Of course not,” Ryun answered. “She has a body skill, it should be useful.”

Kri couldn’t even glare at him, her eyelids had frozen shut. She tuned them out, focusing completely inward. She was cycling, pulling in the all the Cold-related Essences around into her core. She was certain that she was making it worse for herself, but Ryun had insisted, said that it Tali had said it would do more for her that way. If she could endure it. Kri could hear Tali’s tone inside of her head, she always spoke to her as if she couldn’t possibly live out to her expectations. Well, she would prove her wrong.

Her Absolute Cold Qi protected her somewhat, she had resistance to frost and she was resistant to cold. Still, by pulling the Essence in she was adding to the cold inside of her.

She focused only on the Essence, circling through her conduits before finally being pushed into her core where she swirled it around gently. She had to use everything that she learned in her lessons with Tali in order to do it. Moving Essence inside the core was impossible for many Cultivators of her tier, most could barely do it with Qi. Tali had forced her to learn, the lessons had often time been torture, but Kri had endured. Her will was focused on her body, on her **|Tough Body|**.

She would endure this too.

She had long since gotten numb to the pain, her skin had frozen, she moved and felt cracking. The outer layer of her skin burst like ice cracking, a wound opened up along her upper back. She stilled, tried not to move and injure herself more. The pain was excruciating, but as the cold seeped into the wound, that pain too grew faint. The numbness of Cold pierced deep into her, making everything... slow. There was only the cold.

A sharp pain assaulted her suddenly as something changed, and she twitched her hand. A wound opened up across her forearm, bringing back pain, nearly breaking her equilibrium. The cold intensified then, and she was sure that Ryun had increased it somehow. She kept her body still and relaxed, while focusing all of her attention on her core. The feel of her Qi and the Essence.

The Absolute Cold was... it was the ultimate Essence of Cold, in a way. It sought to bring everything into the realm of Cold, of Frost and Winter. It sapped heat from everything, but as there was never any Energy lost in the Infinite Realm, it just transformed. It was an Aspect of change. It changed Heat into Cold. And Cold had an energy of its own. It slowed down movement, it slowed down thought, turned other Essences to crystal states. A domain of cold, that was what the Absolute Cold sought to create. Somehow, she could see that clearly now.

She narrowed down her **|Resonance Sense|** trying to feel the Essence, the Cold, to understand it with greater depth. Through all the pain, and all the cold seeping into her. She was remembering something, a moment when she had glimpsed something great. The plane at the center of her core, beyond it. So vast, so great. She felt it deep inside, she tried to reach for it again, to experience what she had before. She was hurt, but she wasn't dying, not yet, she wondered if she should just use talisman, and bring herself close to death. She knew that that gate would open if she was close to death. She could feel the Absolute Cold seeping through, she was injured, but it was so little compared to what she had felt before.

She nearly did it, but something stopped her. She wasn't thinking clearly. She focused and tried to pull herself back. Still, she pushed at her core, trying to reach to that place beyond on her own. She had been trying it ever since the fight with the viper. Tali had made her document everything that happened to her, everything that she remembered. And then she had her go through a myriad of exercises trying to replicate it. She never succeeded.

But now, with so much Cold all around her, in her, she felt... in the right mindset. As if she was understanding more about it. She reached for the center of her core, Essence and Qi swirling around each other, and there she found it.

Absolute Cold seeped out into her core, it washed through it and into her conduits, overwhelming her, but it was not as before. The tier of Essence was the same as what was in her core, it didn't hurt her, it almost made her feel better. She started a technique, **{Cold Mantle}**, and enforced her entire body with it, she channeled it through the talisman. She couldn't get as much effectiveness from it as it was supposed to give, but she felt it grow Cold. She was filled with the Essence of Absolute Cold, with an understanding of it. Her mind and body sang of it. But nothing so great could be endured forever. She felt exhaustion catch up with her, and before she could even process anything she fell unconscious.

\* \* \*

She woke up slowly, to whispering voices.

“You taught her to control Essence, at Lord,” someone said.

“Tali did,” another voice answered. “Told you she had promise.”

“You do realize you are making her into a monster.”

“She’s awake.”

Kri groaned, a taste of a healing potion on her lips. “What happened?” She said as she slowly opened her eyes. They were in a small room somewhere that she didn’t recognize. With her sense she could tell that just outside the room was a... forge?

“You did great,” Ryun said with a smile. “Check your notifications.”

**Your skills have evolved.**

Tough Body >> Frost Touched Body  
Resonance Sense >> Enhanced  
Resonance Sense

**Congratulations! You have gone  
through a Crucible!**

**New title available—Crucible of the  
Body**

<b>Crucible of the Body</b>	Go through a harrowing experience to improve your body by forging it in the harshest conditions possible based on your body type.	+500 to endurance and vitality, +2% to all stats, Unyielding (Body Perk), 50 000 Greater Essence
-----------------------------	---	--

<b>Unyielding</b>	Your body is highly resistant to physical damage and can function at peak condition in all
-------------------	--

	states, even after it was damaged beyond the point where most would falter.
--	---

She showed it to them, too stunned to speak.

“Ha,” Ryun turned to look at Selia. “Told you.”

Selia didn’t respond. Then after a moment. “It’s unfair that it is so much easier when you are weaker.”

“It wasn’t easy for her,” Ryun said, then turned to look at Kri. “You did it.”

“I... did?” Kri asked slowly.

Ryun grinned. “Now take this.”

Kri frowned as she took the small vial from his fingers.

<b>Greater Drought of Path Perk Upgrade</b>	Drinking the drought will improve the perk of your choice by two tiers of your Cultivation Realm Evolution.
---	---

“Do the body,” Ryun said.

She looked back at the drought, and without hesitation drank it all up. The change came over her quickly, washing and evolving her body. She felt it settling deep within the core of who she was. Both Tali and Ryun had always told her how important a True Body was for one’s Path, it shaped everything to come.

Once it was done, she took a look at the new perk.

<b>True Body— Untethered Winter</b>	Your body has been reforged into your true self, adopting attributes to reflect your path. Your Path is that of transformation and advent of absolute cold, the authority of winter, as such nothing under Winter’s authority may exert unwanted influence over you. Any foreign influence attempting to
---	--

	change your state does so at a reduced rate, any cold-related power attempting to exert influence over you does so at a reduced effect. While in an area ruled predominantly by any Aspects of Winter, you may ignore any influences on your body that are outside the purview and authority of Winter. Physical changes. <b>You walk through the cold, through the authority of Winter. Immersed in its laws.</b>
--	--

“Good,” Ryun said. “Now, you have... a month, to change your techniques enough and get ready for Monarch.”

Kri opened her mouth, but then closed it. A month, that’s when they were heading to war. She was going to be ready.