

Tali

Anatalien landed on the ground next to Ryun and the crevice leading down into the cave. She could hear Kri scrambling around, trying to put distance between herself and the viper, trying to get an idea of her surroundings. She stumbled over a rock, and the viper's leap missed her as it flew over her head. Luck, that could've been the moment when she died. This was... far crueler than anything she would've done even in her worst moments. She had pushed her students before, thrown them into battle, sent them against tough odds, but Ryun was...

He had even refused to give her legendary armor and weapon, the most he agreed at was an epic spear. Having gear of the same rarity as the monster wouldn't have made things that easier. And what he had done with her eyes... It was insane.

She could tell that Kri was barely able to evade, that she had no idea about her surroundings and was struggling to keep track of the monster and her own body. Just taking someone's eyes out and expecting them to adapt so fast was, with no prior preparation? Without at least knowing that you would have to... no one did that.

Tali had been against this from the moment Ryun told them. Anrosh had nearly lost her mind, and if she was being honest, Tali had no idea how Ryun managed to convince her. But in the end she had agreed too. There was something about him that changed since they last spoke, and she couldn't quite put her finger on what exactly that something was.

She glanced at him standing there next to her, his eyes were closed and his body relaxed. If one didn't know anything about him, they would think that he wasn't even paying attention at what was happening below. He might not look it, but he was following everything. And she was too. The shifting of air painting a picture in her head.

"You do realize that she can really die," Tali whispered. "Even if we keep watch, that monster can kill her before we can get to her."

"Of course," Ryun whispered back. "Real danger is the only way for the Framework to recognize and reward."

Tali grimaced, but it was true. She almost regretted telling him all that could happen if they did this right. She didn't know if Kri could even get close to that kind of state but... The viper caught her off guard, its tail swung around and hit her in the back. Tali winced as Kri was thrown across the cave. The viper was massive, at least ten meters long, and it was smart. It attacked from the distance, from outside the range of Kri's sense.

She was lucky that the viper's main power was neutralized by her not having eyes. It had the ability to exert venomous pressure that would make anyone sick through eye contact. Without her eyes, she would still feel the pressure, get weaker, but at a far reduced rate.

"Hm..." Ryun hummed. "She won't be able to do it like this."

Tali had to agree. She hadn't even retrieved her weapon, and she was struggling to make sense of her surroundings. She saw her use a technique and force the monster back, but it wasn't nearly enough.

Ryun tsked to himself, and then spoke loudly.

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Kri

She hit the wall hard, but managed to scramble to her feet quickly. She put the wall at her back and listened. She heard a hiss in the distance, a grinding sound of a large body moving across the stone, but she didn't sense the monster. It was outside of her range. She froze, not moving, not knowing where it was safe to move. She couldn't tell where the monster was just by her hearing, the sound was echoing through the cave so even when it reached her sense she couldn't discern which direction was the real one.

For a moment, she felt like this wasn't worth it. That she shouldn't have ever asked for this—though in her defense, she hadn't asked for this, she hadn't known what she was even asking for in the first place. She was scared, and her heart was beating so hard that she feared it would break out of her chest. Her **{Cold Mantle}** was moving through her body, increasing her stats, but the cave was warm, so she didn't get the full bonus. She formed another technique, her **Lesser Qi Controller** letting her use two

techniques at once. She shaped her **{Cold Breath}** and when she heard movement, she let it out.

Her mouth opened and a plume of **Absolute Cold** filled the air, she moved her head, spraying everything in front of her. She heard a hiss and then more movement, and she hoped that she had managed to hit the monster, even if she doubted that she had hurt it much. She felt her stats increase as the temperature dropped, which was her plan in the first place.

“You are going to die if you continue like that,” Kri startled at the sound of a voice. It took her a moment to realize that it was Ryun, talking from above. She heard the monster hiss and knelt, got closer to the ground. She couldn’t afford to respond, and she didn’t even understand what he meant.

“Your skill’s range is too short,” Ryun continued. “Either you get close enough to the monster that it always remains in your range, or you figure out a way to sense more.”

Kri frowned, sense more? What was he... She got it, he meant for her to increase her range by evolving the skill. She still hadn’t finished her quest, but... She knew that some people could guide the skill evolution, that they could evolve it through willpower alone, force it into what they wanted it to be.

She heard a snap in the air, and then—something entered her range, small and heading straight for her. She moved, **|Enhanced Dodge|** threw her to the side, but it still clipped her shoulder. She winced as she felt it scratch her and then impale itself in the wall. It was a... spike? It vibrated as it impacted, it felt like... bone? No, less dense, cartilage—or something in between the two. It threw it at her. Then another entered her range, and she threw herself to the ground in a roll. Her left hand slipped, and her roll turned into a fall with her head hitting the stone, disorienting her for a second. She shook off the pain and rolled to hide behind a stone nearby. She felt another spike impact the ground near her.

She frowned, that roll... She looked—then realized that she had no eyes, the pain was there, always present, but she couldn’t even get a moment to focus on it. She touched her left arm and realized that it was numb. She felt up to her shoulder and found a small scratch, the spike had injected her with something, a paralytic.

“No time,” Ryun’s voice called from above.

She focused her mind, all of her will power, everything that she had, all on her skill.

More range, more precision, she needed to feel just... more everything. She remembered when she was a child, up in the mountains where she first met Ryun. She remembered their chess games, remembered pestering him with questions about his skills. How easy he had answered them. Now she knew what treasure he had given her. Her skill never had nearly the same range as his had, nor the same power. She wasn’t him. But she wanted to be.

She felt her range crawling, expanding slowly, and she pushed more. She felt the air around her move, the slight tremors in the ground, everything that was vibrating. But she needed more than that, she needed to feel the innate... resonance of everything, like he did. Her head was pounding, from the effort, from the pain, and then as she pushed it all went blank for a moment.

~~|Enhanced Vibration Sense| (10/10) — sense 1000 different sources of vibrations. 478/1000 — (Reward skill evolution, 3,000 Greater Essence)~~
|Enhanced Vibration Sense|
>> Tier evolution >> **|Resonance Sense|**

Her world expanded in an instant, she felt the cave the stone around her the two people far above her and—She threw herself to the side as the monster snapped with its two pronged tail sending two spikes at her. She managed to get out of the way just in time. The monster hissed from above. It had climbed on another section of the cave that had been above her hiding spot. She kept her sense on it, focused, tuned everything else out. She could track it from the distance now. She could feel how its body coiled, the muscles in its body getting ready to move.

It tensed, and she jumped back, rolling over the ground and grabbed her spear. Her left hand's grip slipped and she cursed, she could barely move her fingers. She couldn't fight with her spear while she could only use one arm so she pulled back.

The viper leapt, uncoiling with its maw open wide. It flew toward her and she threw her spear with all of her strength. She missed her target, the gaping maw, but her spear clipped the monster's side, opening a gash along its side. It hissed, got distracted enough she managed to drop low and roll beneath it. Her sense followed it as it passed above, she felt its body move—she knew that it was coming, but she wasn't fast enough, the poison had spread through her body, making her slower. The viper's tail lashed out and smacked her in the side. She flew across the cave, scraping her cheek on the stone floor.

The monster coiled and turned, then slithered at her quickly. Too fast for her to get away. She moved her Qi, quickly, as quickly as she could, and then just as it came at her, she opened her mouth and breathed out a **{Cold Breath}**. She hit it directly, through her skill she sensed its hide crackling, freezing. It turned away, its head smashed into the wall of the cave making it shake.

She was forced to stop her technique as a piece of the cave roof shook off and dropped down, nearly hitting her head. The viper slithered away, putting distance between them. She channeled her Qi, filling her conduits and preparing her fruit technique as she kept her attention on the viper. Its tail rattled and she could feel something forming inside of it, another spike. She couldn't let it stay far away and take shots at her from range, she was already feeling wobbly on her feet.

So she ran forward, getting closer to try and end it quickly.

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Tali

It wasn't going to work. She could see it. Kri had seemingly managed to improve her skill, to get the same evolution as Ryun had, but that wasn't

enough. She could track the monster, she could sense what was happening, but she still couldn't see. Her technique hadn't done nearly enough damage to the viper's tough skin. Oh, it had frozen a part of it, but the only place where the breath had done any damage was on the wound made by her spear. There her technique had managed to penetrate deeper. The rest... it was annoying the viper, but it wasn't going to kill it. She shouldn't have thrown her spear, and she shouldn't be doing what she was planning to do now.

"Inexperience," Ryun whispered and she grimaced.

That might as well have been a slap. It was her and Anrosh's fault that Kri didn't have as much experience as she should. Not in combat perhaps, they had allowed her to fight, against other sect members, against monsters. But... they hadn't given her all the tools that she needed, that innate understanding of the flow and the tiny little clues that she needed to be able to recognize when fighting an unknown foe. Every foe that she ever fought, she knew and understood, until now.

Now she was without her eyes, she couldn't see that her attacks weren't doing damage. She was rushing forward, to end the battle that she had no tools to end.

Tali felt the changes in the air, and watched the image inside her head as Tali jumped forward. The viper reared back, and she unleashed her **{Cold End}**. A blast of Qi exploded out of her, hit the viper and made it whine as it turned away. Its skin was covered in frost, biting, hurting, but it didn't kill it. Kri was breathing heavily, her entire left side dropping from the effects of the poison. She had to have expended almost all of her Qi supplies by now. She didn't have much.

The viper turned back and moved, surprising Kri. She yelped as it surged next to her and wrapped itself around her. She tried to get away, but she wasn't fast enough. It squeezed as it trapped one of her hands. She was punching down with her right hand, and Tali felt her move her Qi. Then she opened her mouth and blasted the viper in the face with breath attack. It turned away, and squeezed more. All the way up, out of the cave, Tali heard the snap of bones, then the scream. She recognized it, the scream of pure terror, when you realized that you were done for. That nothing that you could do would change the outcome.

She pointed her hand at the viper, and Tali saw her cycle her technique in a slightly different manner. She had been working on changing her techniques for a while now, and now in this moment of struggle she executed it perfectly. Instead of a breath of Qi, she released a beam of pure **Absolute Cold Qi**. It hit the viper in the side of the head, and the cold burned through the skin, carving a piece of it off and spreading frost and ice around the wound.

The Viper roared, then its head moved in a blur. The snapped to the side out of Kri's attack and then its head coiled down. Its maw snapped on Kri's arm, just below her shoulder, it squeezed and Kri screamed as it pulled. The ripping sound of tearing flesh echoed as it ripped Kri's hand off.

Kri didn't even scream, her bones popped again as the viper squeezed more, her head lolled about without any strength.

Tali took a step toward the crevice, her wings spreading, and then Ryun caught her arm.

"She is going to die," Tali yelled, trying to get out of his iron grip.

"Do you feel that?" Ryun whispered, his eyes now open and looking down.

Tali followed his eyes into the cave, saw the viper's head raised and ready to bite Kri's head off. And yes, she felt it too.

Tali almost couldn't believe it, "damn."

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She was going to die. The viper had ripped her hand off, she was bleeding, too much blood had seeped from her body. The pain was... manageable, somehow. The paralytic was helping probably, but half of her bones were mush.

She was cold, so cold. Her core was empty, but she could feel the Aspect of the Absolute Cold, even though she had no Qi. She never really understood it. Her core... it created the Aspect on its own, how? How could it just adopt the Essence type and then know how to create it. It made no sense, or it did. The fuck the she know, she had made a decision that killed her. Everything was so slow, the viper raising its head, preparing to kill her, it moved so

slowly. Her sense told her that half her bones had cracked, her ribs were puncturing her lungs, she couldn't even breathe. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't.

She felt tears bubble in her eyes, drop down so slowly. She was scared, she wanted to cry. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. She wanted to ask for help, to say that she was wrong, that she should've never been so arrogant to think that she could do this. She wasn't Ryun, she was just... Kri.

Everything hurt, her world was black, no sight, the sound was the grinding of her bones, the grinding of stone beneath the viper. Her nose was filled with the scent of blood, her skin hurt from the cold. Everything was so cold. Was this how death felt like? Like a cold that seeped into the bones.

It almost seemed to be coming from her core, the few drops of **Absolute Cold Qi** trickled in, created as her Qi regenerated. Created from... where? From nothing? From her body? From somewhere else? The Framework?

She couldn't think, even her mind was slowing down, though this moment seemed like it was stretching for an eternity. She just wanted it to end, for the death to come. She failed.

But the cold, it wasn't as welcoming as she imagined it would be. It was... harsh, it bit her skin, and it made her hurt. It was cruel, and that... it made her angry. She remembered Ryun on the ground, after Fier had captured him. Bloody and chained, she remembered his eyes, defiant. She had wanted to be like him so much. And now... death and cold were coming for her. She knew that he was up above her, but... he told her that she could die. Perhaps he never intended to help her, perhaps she had always been on her own. Her mom... she remembered her look when they said goodbye. Was that a final goodbye?

No, Kri wasn't going to go. She didn't want to. She needed... she needed something. She raged against the cold, against everything. The viper's maw was open, snapping forward. Why was everything so slow?

Why was it so cold?

Her core pulsed with the cold, and she tried to grab at it. She forced all of her willpower, willing for her core to pull more of that cold in, if she was

going to die, let the viper feel this cold too. Then she felt something, there at the edge of her comprehension, inside her core—or beyond it?

It didn't want to let her in, it refused, she was as alien to it as it was to her. Her mind froze. Everything froze. And she glimpsed something that was beyond her, so unlike everything else that she had encountered before. It was so incomprehensibly vast that she couldn't hope to understand it, but she knew it. It was... cold, the **Absolute Cold**. It had secrets, she knew. It sought to achieve something, as all Essence did, but it was... guide less. For a moment she felt like it was waiting, like she could reach out and... it hurt her, just by her noticing it. It was the plane of the **Absolute Cold**, touching her core? Helping her create Qi. She didn't understand how it worked. But she opened herself to it. She let the deepest parts of the **Absolute Cold** in as death approached.

Insightful knowledge acquired

You peered into the deeper law and the concept of an Essence. You glimpsed the truth behind it.

Personal Feat accomplished

Rewards:

—**She Knew The Absolute Cold**

Title and Grand Perk

—**Personal Feat: Glimpse of**

Aspect Title

It flashed across her mind, she couldn't even read it. Then everything... stopped.

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Ryun

Ryun landed near the viper and Kri, stepping close quickly. His sense told him that she was still alive, barely. The viper had frozen, the air had frozen, the ground, everything. The Essence around her had stopped, all of it had its heat robbed from it, the movement was nowhere to be seen. It reminded him of his stillness. He reached with his hand and his skin froze. The deepest cold tried to seep into his body, it was biting him, fighting with his Void. It was as if even moving through that area was... somehow abhorrent. But the area affected wasn't large, just Kri and the viper. He flashed a blast of Void around her, destroying the frozen body of the viper that was holding her and the Absolute Cold Qi, with such precision that only Kri remained. He was surprised that he had to use so much of it though. He caught her as she fell, her body as stiff as if it had been frozen completely. He couldn't pry her mouth open, so he grimaced and snapped her jaw off. Then, he poured the highest grade healing potion down her throat. Nothing happened. Her heart had long since stopped beating, but he could see the Soul Essence still present, but... it felt like it was slipping.

He pulled out another vial, a **Vial of Distilled Greater Fire Elemental Essence**, and poured it down. It ignited on the way down, the heat of it blasting out. He burned her, but he poured another healing potion down immediately after, then another, and one more. After the third one he sensed her heartbeat again, the burns inside her healing.

"That was too close," Tali said from behind him.

"It was worth it."

"Should wait to see what she thinks before we say that," Tali told him.

Ryun nodded, agreeing.