

ACT II - Anrosh

The frigid air was starting to make Anrosh's skin hurt. Still, she tried to maintain her focus as she focused on the awakened weapon on her knees and kept pulling in Qi through her.

Even now after several months of having Kagehime bonded to her, she was often surprised. Never in her life had she imagined having an awakened weapon bonded to her, and yet here she was. The way that her life had turned out was often surreal to her, but she had come to accept it over the last few months. It had been almost two years since her husband died, and since her life had been turned on its head. Looking back, she couldn't even recognize the person that she used to be.

She had been barely an average warrior of her sect, her prospects had been dim. Her advancement and status in the sect tied to the fortune of her husband. Now... now she was a Sect Leader, a powerful Cultivator in her own right, and possessed an awakened weapon. Her daughter had been put on a path that would have her reach great heights and everything seemed... good.

She had adjusted, settled into her new role. The Twilight Melody Sect had grown much in the last seven months since they had taken over the Last Ember territories and people. Some had left, hoping to find fortune in other sects. But many had stayed, giving their oaths to the new sect. It was the way of things, strength mattered in sects more than anything else.

Anrosh was at least glad that she didn't have to bother with paperwork anymore, since it was now Embesh's task. The former Territory Leader had done very well in his administrative duties, enough so that Anorsh was able to take even more time to train. She was a Sect Leader, but she had taken a different role. She was one of the strongest people in the sect now, and it was her job to keep working on that strength. To project it and make sure that everyone in the sect saw it, as well as their neighbors, whether they were friends or foes.

Well, her and Nayra's job. Anrosh wasn't quite as strong as the other woman, but she planned on catching up soon.

She felt the intensity of the cold slowly overcome her endurance, and she knew that she couldn't keep drawing in Essence for much longer.

Kagehime gave her an enormous boost to her drawing in speed, and she knew that she wouldn't have reached this point without her help.

Finally, she knew that she had reached her the end of her endurance, but she also realized that she was very close to filling her core. She endured for a few seconds more, her body barely holding. Then, finally, she felt her core fill to the brim. She stopped drawing in Essence and stood, quickly walking out of the shrine and onto the mountain plateau.

She shivered and then sighed in relief as her body recovered.

"I did it," she said to no one in particular.

"About time!" Kagehime chimed in.

"Yes," Anrosh said, her drawing in rate hadn't been anything special before she bonded with the sword. But now she felt like her cultivation had taken a leap forward. Not only did she cultivate properly now, she could also do it by herself.

"We should go fight the redhead again," Kagehime suggested. *"You owe her for that last bout."*

Anrosh couldn't help but grin. Kagehime was... she was a lot. But Anrosh liked the sword and her desire to fight strong or worthy opponents. Especially if it was done one on one. And Anrosh enjoyed that as well.

"I should probably advance before we challenge Nayra again," Anrosh said.

"Oh, right, right," Kagehime added.

Anrosh shook her head and then looked at her screens. The amount of Essence that she had was... truly an obscene amount, for someone like her at least. What she gained from the attack on the Last Ember Sect and in the time since from her monthly contributions had accumulated quite a sum. Enough to push her all the way to Peak Monarch perhaps. But she wasn't going to do that, she was advancing properly now. And it took time for her to cycle Absolute Cold Essence by herself.

But she did have another way of gaining power—her Class. She hadn't touched it in a long time, but it had become apparent to her that she would be hard pressed to advance her skills. She just wasn't all that talented with them. And anyway, her Class was the basis of her fighting style, and if what Tali had taught her was right, she could safely advance it to the next evolution.

She was about to put in her Essence and start leveling when she paused. Being in a sect had seen her grow up around people who all looked down on Classers, thinking it an easy and quick way to power. In some ways that was true, a Class had few requirements other than the Essence. Still, Nayra had told her some of how Classes evolved. The quality of a Class depended on everything one did, as did the direction of its evolution.

Remembering Nayra's words made her hesitate, and she turned away from her Class and focused on her Cultivation. She sat down on the cold stone, which was not nearly as cold as the shrine and started to cycle.

She drained her core of the Absolute Cold Qi slowly, focusing on improving the capability of her core over her conduits. She wasn't built for fast Technique activations, instead she was going for larger amounts of Qi and power. She had to specialize, she wasn't a monster like some other people she had met.

Once done, she put in enough Essence for advancement. She took a moment to look at it. It had been a long time since she last advanced. The months prior to the attack on the Last Ember Sect had been filled with advancements and improvements of all kinds. It had almost made her think that advancing so fast was normal. Now, it had been almost a year since she last advanced, which was still fast compared to how some people advanced, but nowhere near the speed she had been advancing at before. She chuckled and then shook her head. Finally she, triggered her advancement.

The warmth spread through her body and she felt herself grow stronger. As soon as she could, she brought up her new notifications.

Path Perk available: Physical Appearance	
Physical Appearance: Age	You have reverted your body's age to its prime. And have gained an increase of 50% to your life span. +10% to vitality, +10% to endurance, +10% to strength.
Physical Appearance: Maturity	Your body rapidly matures, you gain an appearance of an elder and experienced woman. You

	lose the skipped years from your lifespan. +10% wisdom, +10% to intelligence.
Physical Appearance: Beauty	Your body and features are altered. Enhances your physical appearance in order to make you more attractive. +10% to vitality, +10% to dexterity.

Anrosh nearly laughed at her last option. She wondered what she had done in her life to deserve such a choice, but in the end there was only one choice that she could make. She couldn't afford not to pick the first perk offered to her. She needed time if she was going to advance as far as she could.

She made her choice and then turned to her Class. Her Class was Duelist, and uncommon Class that focused on single combat. It wasn't as restrictive as some other classes, so she could use it with nearly any melee weapon. For most of her life she had been using a long sword, then after a larger two-handed one.

Now she had Kagehime, which was shorter than any weapon she had used before, but also infinitely more powerful. She had also taken up to using a shield and Nayra had been instructing her in its use. It was a different type of fighting, a different tempo. But all of her powers had changed. She could grow stronger, while losing much of her mobility.

Now she was slowly turning herself into a defensive fighter. Someone who could take on a lot of damage and throw out devastating strikes. Nayra had assured her that at least one of her offered evolutions would involve a shield, but that she also shouldn't disregard choices that seemed strange at first glance.

Anrosh wasn't sure what exactly Nayra meant, she didn't know much about Class evolutions. Her level 60 had been simple, almost an equivalent to a Cultivators Mortal Realm, in its basic nature if not in power.

She took a deep breath and started leveling. Quickly she reached her first perk at level 75, and pulled up her options.

Second Chance	Once taking damage that would kill you, heal it instead. Once per combat. Healing speed depends on vitality stat.
Healing Burst	Five times per combat, gain +100% vitality for ten seconds after you take damage.
Cold Regeneration	Your regeneration scales with the temperature around you, the lower the temperature the greater the increase to your vitality, scales up to 100% boost.

Anrosh's eyes widened at her choices. Each was incredible on its own. **Second Chance** was something that could save her life, especially in the kind of circles that she ran around in. **Healing Burst** was an amazing boost to her regeneration, but it was somewhat limited. It would help her heal any damage, which meant that even glancing blows that do little to her would trigger it.

The last one was the most conditional, but she had several techniques and her aura that would lower the temperature around her. It didn't have a limit, so the passive effect perk would nearly always trigger.

She didn't know what to choose, and for a moment she debated waiting until she next met Nayra to discuss things with her. But then she shook her head. The other woman had told her much, shared things she had known about Class and told Anrosh what to do. This was something that she needed to do by herself. To chart her own path independent of anyone else.

Nayra's advice had been to find a niche and lean into it. And while **Second Chance** would've been amazing, she knew that her future was in the path of cold. She needed to get her Class to evolve along the same path in order to increase her Class and Cultivation synergies.

She chose **Cold Regeneration**. Immediately she felt the effects of the perk activate. She was pretty high in the mountains where the cold air would make anyone shiver. Her **True Body** made her able to shrug off most of the

effects of this level of cold. But she checked her stats and saw that the boost was at almost 40%, which gave her some idea as to how much cold she would need to use in order to increase it further.

She turned back to the task at hand and continued leveling.

Deflecting Stance	You may trigger this perk and enter a deflecting stance, you gain +40% to strength and dexterity, you also gain increased awareness and reflexes, you will be able to anticipate your enemies movements 0.01 seconds in advance. Your body will move without conscious effort to intercept and deflect attacks. During this stance you are unable to attack. Perk ends when canceled. Can only use one stance at a time. Cooldown: 5 minutes.
Offensive Stance	You may trigger this perk and enter an offensive stance, you gain +40% to strength and dexterity, you also gain increased awareness and reflexes, you will be able to anticipate your enemies movements 0.01 seconds in advance. You will be able to sense weak spots in your opponent's stance and exploit them. During this stance you are unable to defend. Perk ends when canceled. Can only use one stance at a time. Cooldown: 5 minutes.
Defensive Stance	You may trigger this perk and enter a defensive stance, you gain +40% to endurance and vitality, you also gain increased balance and pain tolerance, you will be able to anticipate your enemies

	movements 0.01 seconds in advance. You will be able to sense the power of your opponent's strike. During this stance you are unable to attack first, only respond. Perk ends when canceled. Can only use one stance at a time. Cooldown: 5 minutes.
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Again, all three of her choices were amazing, and she was tempted to take the **Offensive Stance**, if only because it would offset her current weakness. A boost to her dexterity would make her lose speed at a slower pace when she used her strongest techniques.

But in the end, that was not the path that she had chosen to walk. She knew that she wouldn't be able to hold her own against powerful people, she wasn't talented enough to win in fights where she was against someone equal or stronger. But she could take the hits, and if she built herself so that one powerful strike was all that she needed... well then she didn't need to worry that much about being better.

She picked the **Defensive Stance**, and then continued, reaching the next perk.

Greater Shield Block	Once per combat you may increase your shield's durability by 100%, your strength by 35% and your endurance by 35% for a single block.
Force Shield	Three times per combat, create a concave shield directly in front of you. The shield's durability depends on your endurance stat.
Intercepting Block	Twice per combat you may charge across a field at 200% current speed in order to intercept an attack being made against another.

Again she had a tough time making a choice, but in the end she chose the last perk. **Intercepting Block** didn't increase her defense or stats, but it gave her mobility, which she lacked.

Finally, she leveled once more, and reached her class evolution.

Class Evolution Available		
CLASS	DESCRIPTION	ATTUNEMENT
Shieldmaiden	<i>You are a warrior, blazing a path through enemies and protecting allies.</i> Shieldmaiden's are great warriors focused on utilizing a shield and a sword to fight. Their greatest strengths were when fighting with allies and they have powers designed to help them and their allies survive in battle.	Shield: All shield based powers are 10% more effective. All shield based skills level at double the speed. Gain +10% to endurance and 10% to strength. !Gain one of the following: - Shield Bash offensive ability: Execute an attack with your shield that deals 25% increased damage and has a greater chance of stunning your opponent. - Great Shout support ability: Release a shout that increases your and any allies around you endurance by 10% for 3 minutes. - Fortitude and Might: Gain plus 10% to base endurance and 10% to base strength.
Frost Knight	<i>You are a warrior of frost. Excelling in the cold and utilizing it to defeat your foes.</i> A Frost Knight is a warrior is a master of frost and defense,	Frost: Gain +20% to stamina and +20% effectiveness to all cold-related powers when fighting in cold environments. Gain +10% to endurance and strength.

	<p>using their powers to hinder their enemies while increasing their own defenses. But make no mistake, while a Frost Knight's main focus was defense, they were fully capable of dealing great damage if allowed the time to set up their powers.</p>	<p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Frost Surge support ability: Summon a pocket of coldness around you, dropping the temperature in a twenty meter radius around you.</p> <p>-Cold Bite offensive ability: Send out a blast of extreme cold in front of you, dealing frost damage.</p> <p>-Fortitude and Might: Gain plus 10% to base endurance and 10% to base strength.</p>
<p>Enduring Duelist</p>	<p><i>You are a duelist focused on endurance and outlasting your foes.</i></p> <p>Enduring Duelist is a warrior focused on surviving long enough in a fight to take advantage of an opening. Their fighting style revolves around taking damage and tiring their opponent out, before dealing a single powerful and decisive blow.</p>	<p>Enduring: Gain +20% to endurance when in combat. Your pain tolerance is doubled. Gain +10% to endurance and strength.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Endure support ability: Activating this ability increases all your resistances and endurance by 25% for ten seconds.</p> <p>-Enduring Charge movement ability: Charge at a target within 20 meters of yourself, gaining 10% to all resistances and endurance during the charge.</p> <p>-Fortitude and Might: Gain plus 10% to base endurance and 10% to base strength.</p>

Anrosh looked at her choices and felt her hearts beat faster at what she read. She had expected a Class that would synergize well with her Path, Nayra had told her that it was possible. The other two choices were good as well, but they weren't quite what she wanted.

The **Frost Knight** on the other hand... that was perfect. She made her choice, and picked an increase to her endurance and strength over another ability as those didn't appeal to her. She already had several ways to lower the temperature around her, and she didn't need another cold attack.

As soon as she picked a Class she got to choose another perk.

Frost Resistance	You gain a +60 % resistance to all cold-related effects.
Frost Armor	Cover yourself with a layer of frost that protects you from damage. Protection depends on endurance stat.
Block of Ice	Summon a large and thick block of ice around you, protecting you from harm. Durability of the ice block depends on endurance stat.

All perks were defensive in nature, but she already had a few such powers from her path. The **Frost Resistance** on the other hand was much better suited to her. It would help her a lot, but also set her up for the future. It would also help her stay inside the shrine for longer, allowing her to cycle faster.

She made her choice and released a long breath. She was exhausted, both from cycling in the cold and making so many choices. She had spent most of the Essence that she had gathered in a year, from many fights and monthly contributions. But she didn't regret it. This was what she wanted to do, to grow stronger.

She stood up and headed down the mountain where her mount was waiting. It was time for her to check in with the sect and see how things had been going, and it would take her a few days to reach Emberhill which was

now the seat of the Twilight Melody Sect. But she trusted that Embesh and Nayra had things well in hand.

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Several days later, Anrosh sat in the meeting room of what used to be Emberhorn's palace, Nayra standing next to her.

"It is good that you have arrived now, I wasn't really sure what to do, and Embesh... well he is a good man, but he lives and breathes sect codes. He was going to fold," the redheaded woman said with a grimace on her face.

Anrosh couldn't help but mirror the expression. She had been away for less than two months.

"How long had they been raiding us?" Anrosh asked.

"Well, we don't have any real proof that it is them. But... a few weeks, I think, we don't really know exactly. We could've lost some people to monsters, the frontier isn't exactly tame," Nayra answered.

Anrosh closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A core sect, coming to expand into the frontier. A sect that had a lot more resources than the Twilight Melody Sect had, even now after they had taken a lot more territories under their wing. For all intents and purposes, the Twilight Melody Sect was now a mid-sized sect, if on the lower end. But they... they didn't have many strong people, not yet. Usually a sect of this size had at least a few heavenly cultivators. Twilight Melody had one, who was absent. It made them look weak.

Or at least, that was what any sect that didn't know them would think. Anrosh and Nayra were strong, and they had a few other powerful warriors that had been raised in the last year. The Twilight Melody Sect didn't operate the same way that most sects did, they shared their knowledge, and they trained people. Ryun had even given them all a lot of Essence as a reward for fighting the swarm, and since he left they had hunted down the remaining swarm monsters all around their territories. They had retaken Ven'oran, and started to rebuild.

The Twilight Melody Sect had less high tiered warriors, but Anrosh would put any one of hers against two of anybody else anytime.

The issue was that she didn't know much about this new sect. The only reason that Nayra knew was because the core sect had sent an emissary. It was then that the last few weeks became apparent to Embesh, it was a classic sect tactic.

When a stronger sect wanted to expand, they raided the weaker one, and then sent an emissary announcing their presence and planned expansion. It usually ended with offers of making the weaker sect a vassal, a subordinate sect to the main one. If the weaker sect hadn't been able to fight off the raids at least. In this case Anrosh knew that they had failed, and that honor would demand them to accept the offer once it was made. It was how sects grew.

But Anrosh had no intention of doing that. Twilight Melody Sect was not like others, and it was not going to bow down to another sect just because they came from the core.

"Alright," Anrosh said finally. "Let's go and meet with this emissary then."