

77: Chill

It was hot and oppressive in the square outside the Guild, with not even a breeze to stir the stagnant, swampy air. The sky was dim, the mid-afternoon sun blocked out by the storm that was raging on the other side of the barrier. The entire world outside was lost in snow. Occasional flashes of lightning indicated that this was another bout of thundersnow; however, the sound of the thunder didn't make it through. Nothing did, except light. Not heat, not sound, not air, nothing. The people passing through the square looked bedraggled and miserable, stripped down to light clothing as if it was the middle of summer, not the onset of what looked to be a harsh winter.

Rain sighed. He was sitting on the steps to the Guild, having come here to catch up with Carten. The big man hadn't been anywhere to be seen; in a world without cell phones, finding people was difficult. Rain wasn't even sure what advice he could have given Carten had he found him. All he could do was hope that things between Carten and Velika didn't end with a shattered pelvis or a pissed-off Citizen. From Carten's earlier comments about 'his type', Rain suspected that he'd be more than willing, but that didn't mean it was a good idea.

He shook his head. Carten was the least of his problems. The guild was packed, the members having returned here en masse after the Watch had stepped in to break up the argument between them and the nobles. To say that things were tense in there was a gross understatement. He'd come out here to get a break from the noise and stress.

Rankin supported the Citizen and had a small group of followers. He was claiming that Velika had put him in charge of the Guild and he was trying to use that authority to badger the other members into completing Velika's requests. People were pretty pissed off by the lack of pay on top of the tax. As for the requests themselves, they had already been posted on the board

by the time Rain had arrived, but he hadn't had a chance to look them over yet himself. There were too many people in the way.

The argument inside was loud, circular, and had a significant risk of becoming violent in Rain's estimation. The Adventurer's Guild attracted a certain kind of personality, one that did not respond well to being trapped in a cage and forced to do chores. Rain had retreated out here to give his mind a break but seeing the sorry state of the city had only made his thoughts spiral lower. Things were holding together for now, but if something wasn't done, there could be trouble. The city was primed for a riot.

Damn it. If Velika doesn't get what she wants, she might go ballistic. If Rankin tries to make the Guild into her minions, then the Guild will go ballistic. The nobles...the Watch...the people cowering for their lives... He looked around the square and shook his head. Someone needs to do something. I need to do something. I have the power to help, so I'm going to use it. The city has to stay calm or we're all fucked. It's time to stop holding back.

He got to his feet and turned around, pushing the door to the Guild back open. A few people looked over at his entrance but quickly returned their attention to the main event. Rankin and his supporters were faced off against the opposition, led by Jaks of all people. He stood on his toes to see better over the heads of the crowd. The Vivificant had his pair of axes tied to his belt but was clearly itching to draw them. He was clenching and unclenching his hands as he stared at Rankin while the old man spoke.

Rain shook his head and dropped back on his heels. The majority of the guild was crowded around the two, leaving only a small open space around the board where the new 'civil service' quests had been posted. He started pressing his way through the mass of bodies, taking advantage of the fact that people didn't want to get in the way of a man wearing full

plate. Many of his fellow adventurers still thought he was some sort of warrior, just one with a magic spell or two.

He stopped for a moment when he judged that he was in the middle of the room. He opened his menus as he deactivated Winter and pulled up the IFF settings. It was currently on whitelist mode with only a few names listed. It was time to change that. He switched the mode to blacklist and removed everyone, leaving it wide open. He almost added Rankin's name to the list as an afterthought, but quickly discarded the idea. As much as he disliked the man, this was no time for petty grudges.

"Hey," a voice came from his left. "I saw you come in. Think there's going to be a fight?"

Rain turned his head, smiling beneath his helmet as he saw Val standing there. He was relieved. It would be good to have someone on his side, no matter how the Guild reacted to what he was about to do. He didn't think there'd be any problems, given that a good half of the people in the room were mages. He'd have plenty of supporters, once they realized what Winter meant for them. He was counting on that, in fact. *The Guild will protect me. The only question is if they can protect me from someone like Velika. She's not a mage, so I don't think she'll try to steal me for herself, but you never know. Damn it, is this really a—*

"Hey, Rain, you okay?" Val asked, interrupting his thoughts. "You heard me, right? Damn it's loud in here."

Rain chuckled, setting aside his doubt. *No more fear. I've decided, and that's that.* He leaned in close to Val to get as much privacy as he could. "Yeah, I heard you. There's not going to be a fight. People are going to have something else to talk about in a second. I'm going to use Winter."

Val tilted his head. "At full blast?"

Rain nodded. Val broke out into a grin and punched him in the shoulder. "Hells, about time. You doing it now?"

"Yeah, starting out gradually, though. I don't want anyone to think they are under attack. The cold isn't real, but it sure as hell feels like it is."

Val nodded. "I've got your back. This is going to be great."

Rain glanced at his health bar one last time and double-checked the charge on his armor. *As good as it is going to get. Let's do this.* He activated Winter, starting out at a 10% boost to mana regeneration and using Extend Aura to reach everyone that he could. He started pressing his way through the crowd again, slowly increasing the intensity of Winter as he neared the board where Rankin and Jaks were arguing.

"Hey, someone's using magic!" a man to his right said, looking around. "It feels cold, what—"

"It's that mana boost thing again! You know, the one from before," said another voice, this time from a woman on his left. "Who's doing that? I didn't know you were still here!"

Rain grinned bringing the boost up to 100%. *Looks like some people remember me using this in here before. I could probably just leave it at this level and call it good. They might not even be able to figure out it's me, but...no.*

A growing number of people were now looking around and playing with invisible interfaces that he couldn't see. Jaks was still screaming at Rankin, who likewise appeared to have yet to notice the buff. It was time to change that.

Rapidly, he let off on the brakes, allowing Winter to ramp up to its full, unmodified strength of 180%. Then, he pushed it beyond, using Channel Mastery to multiply it by two, then Amplify Aura to multiply it by two again. He reigned it in with Compression, cutting the range back to 11 meters. By his calculations, that would result in an effective multiplier of 10x, completely canceling out the effect of the mana siphon.

Cries of surprise erupted as Winter spread through the room. For all that it was invisible, he could track the progress of the boost as it spread. At this level, the cold was piercing. He'd long since gotten used to it, learning to ignore it even as he slept. For everyone else, though, it would feel as if they had been dunked into icy water.

"Fuckin' depths! Shit!" cursed Rankin, jumping back and colliding with the edge of the crowd.

"The siphon's gone!" someone cried as Val started laughing.

"No, it's still there, look at the message," came another voice.

"Shit, you're right. Fuck, it's freezing in here" said the woman who had recognized Winter.

"How the fuck is it so strong all of a sudden?"

"I don't—You," Jaks said, jerking his gaze to Rain as he broke through the edge of the crowd. His eyes narrowed. "You're doing this, aren't you? That mana skill? No, something else..."

Rain ignored him, silently heading to the board. He felt the eyes of the crowd on him as he looked over the postings bearing the hawk symbol, searching for ones he was suited for. There were multiple copies of each and Rankin had explained earlier that anyone working 'for the good of the city' was expected to take one with them in case they were challenged by a

member of the guard. That was good, it meant that Rain could act freely as long as his magic use could be considered in service of one of the goals.

"What the hells do you think you are doing?" Rankin yelled at his back. Rain ignored him, too. He was done with being meek.

Looking over the board, he saw three postings that he was interested in. One was for the purification of the river, it had his name on it, quite literally in fact. It appeared that word traveled fast. Another was for boosting the city's mana regeneration to fuel the barrier. The last was for cooling the air in the city. The stifling heat had only grown worse since the fight had ended, and people were starting to become concerned. *Good enough*, he thought, taking a copy of each and stepping back from the board. His heart was beating furiously, but he kept his motions smooth, relying on the armor to hide how nervous he felt.

He turned and walked over to Rankin, who stepped forward to confront him. "Hey, I asked you what you think you're—"

"I'm taking these," Rain interrupted him, holding up the three papers. He was still mad at Rankin before and was in no mood to deal with him. He looked around, spotting Gus standing nearby. "Can one of you please mark them down, if you're doing that for Veli—Citizen Sadanis's quests? If not, whatever. I've got the river one, obviously, plus the one about mana, and the one for cooling the city."

"You can't order me around," Rankin shouted in his face. "I'm in charge here. Me! I said I'd kick you out and I will, you—"

Rain laughed loudly, interrupting him. He had to shut him down before he got going. "You are telling me *not* to complete these quests?" He waved the papers as he looked around the

room. People had mostly fallen silent, watching him or staring at their interfaces in shock. He turned away from Rankin as the man spluttered, projecting as he addressed the crowd. Further antagonizing him wasn't necessarily smart, but he did have to admit that it felt good to let loose at last. "I'm not about to tell you what to do, but we're all in this together. Whether you like it or not, we need to help the Citizen with these requests. I don't know what she'll do if we don't, but I know I won't be able to stop her from doing it. I actually agree with Rankin here. We need to do our part, whether we're getting paid or not."

He started walking, stepping around Rankin and heading for the hallway that led toward the Guild tavern. The man looked less angry than before, but only slightly. People made way for him, some still in shock, others laughing or slapping him on the back as he pushed past. The response was generally positive, but there were also a few people looking at him with calculating eyes. He tried to ignore them, clearing his throat to speak again. "I can help, so I will. I'm going to the tavern. I'll be there for a few hours, and I'll be using this skill the whole time. Technically, anyone who sticks around is helping with the mana quest. The sooner this barrier gets charged, the sooner the siphon will get turned off and things will go back to a semblance of normality."

"What the fuck?" said Jaks, staring after him. "How the fuck did you make it so strong?"

Rain grinned. It felt good. "No comment. Just to warn you though, once I get there, I'm going to make it even stronger."

Ameliah skidded to a stop at the edge of the river, panting. Snow was falling heavily, melting immediately upon touching her steaming skin. She'd been running for three days straight, with only a few minutes here or there to rest. She hadn't slept either, other than the few hours she'd needed to recover after scaling the mountains that separated the DKE from the unclaimed lands to the south of the range. She hadn't been in any mood to pace herself and had paid for it.

She dropped to her knees in the snow, cupping her hands to drink from the freezing river. She had been denying her thirst for far too long. Just because she could ignore the needs of her body for longer than most, it didn't mean it was healthy. She got back to her feet after only a few seconds. She knew that she should rest properly before pressing on to the city, but couldn't bring herself to do so. Not when she was so close.

She started to walk, then picked up the pace as she returned to the road, heading south toward Fel Sadanis at a jog that quickly turned into a sprint. *Please still be there.*

After fifteen more minutes of silent running, a shape started to become visible in the distance. The snow was skating off the surface of an invisible dome of some kind. *What the hells?* As she drew closer, she sighed in relief as she saw the city within the dome, slightly damaged, but still there. There was also a large camp to the east of the city, visible through the storm by the numerous campfires that were burning.

Shit, the Empire? She slowed to a jog, then a stop, walking off the side of the road to take cover behind a large rock. Lightning flashed, followed by the sound of thunder a few seconds later. She peered at the camp, slowly relaxing as she took in the details. *No, not the Empire. There aren't any banners. No tents either. This looks like some people got caught unprepared in the storm. It must be the Watch. The dome—whatever it is—must be what's blocking off the teleportation platform. What the hells is going on?*

She hesitated, trying to decide what to do next. No one in had Jarro had known or been willing to tell her why the connection to Fel Sadanis had disappeared. Best case, the DKE had sealed it. Worst case, the Empire had. She hadn't wanted to wait around to find out, but now that she was here, she wasn't sure that it had been either of them. The dome was unlike any spell she had ever seen.

"Identify yourself," a voice spoke. Ameliah jumped and whirled, dropping into a defensive crouch. There was a slender man standing there, hand resting at the ready on the hilt of a thin sword belted at his waist. He relaxed his hand after a moment, releasing the sword and holding his palm out facing her. "Easy, don't attack. I'm not your enemy, Guilder."

Ameliah relaxed, mirroring the man. He had the silver plate of a Watch sentinel hanging from his neck, and he'd clearly seen her own plate as well. *He's good. I didn't even hear him.* "What's going on?" she asked, motioning toward the dome. "What happened to the city?"

The sentinel snorted. "We got fucked is what happened. The DKE sealed it off somehow. I've never seen anything like it. We can't break through."

Ameliah ran a hand through her ragged hair, still breathing heavily from her run. "Damn it, I hate being right. Which Citizen?"

"Westbridge. Now that was a fight to see, here, come to our camp and I'll tell you all about it. You look ragged as all hells, pardon my saying so. Where'd you come from, anyway? Vestvall?"

She shook her head. "Jarro."

"Long way by foot," he said, starting to walk down the road. "Come on, my patrol is just ahead. I had them hunker down when I spotted you. The bloody amateurs are louder than a herd of drunken goats."

Ameliah followed him, saying nothing as they joined up with a group of four Watch officers that came out at his call. True to his word, they were quite loud compared to the silent footsteps of the man. Idly, she noted that he was leaving no tracks in the snow.

"Calm down kids, just a Guilder," the sentinel said. "Hey, Cob, you got any trail bread? She looks half-starved."

"Yes sir," said one of the men, removing a paper-wrapped bundle from a pocket in his cloak. "Here you go, miss...?" he trailed off as he held the package out to her.

"Ameliah," she said, taking the package gratefully and unwrapping it. She tore into the hard Watch ration, devouring it in a few quick bites. She'd hardly had time to hunt during her run.

"Damn," another of the officers said, watching her. "Doesn't that hurt your teeth? Those things are like rocks."

Ameliah laughed. "You've never had a Guild ration bar, have you? Trust me, that was soft by comparison."

"Right, let's go. If she really did come in from Jarro, she'll have been on the road for at least a week. Those mountains aren't exactly an easy climb."

"Three days," Ameliah said.

"Pardon?" said the Watch sentinel.

"Three days from Jarro. They wouldn't let me through the platform."

The sentinel whistled. "Now that IS impressive. You see men, that's why you shouldn't look down on—Ah!" He jumped back as an arrow burrowed itself into the snow near his feet. "Hey, Skaper, what the hell?"

"Stop calling me a man, Tabot," the female Watch officer said, lowering her bow. "And give me my arrow back."

"It's just a saying," the sentinel said, pulling the arrow from the snow. "I know you're not a man, obviously. Phoss would've ordered you flogged for insubordination. You're lucky that I'm so friendly and that he's trapped inside. Damn it, this is why I hate leading patrols."

Ameliah smiled. *He seems okay, for a sentinel.* She shook her head. She had to stay on topic. "Your camp," she said, "is Halgrave there? Any other members of the Guild? A man in seamless plate armor and a black cape, or a mage in an orange robe? Maybe an Osaran with a ponytail, or a big bearded warrior with two shields? They're pretty distinctive."

The sentinel shook his head. "All adventurers are distinctive, but no. Halgrave left for Southguard once he realized he couldn't batter his way through the barrier. Said he needed to contact the Guild. As for the others, I haven't seen them. I know that shields guy, bit of a troublemaker. Haven't seen him since the barrier went up though." He looked at the officers trailing along behind them. "Any of you goats seen anyone by that description?"

"Goats?" one of the men said.

Tabot grinned. "Well, I can't call you 'men', now apparently. Now stop bleating and answer the nice lady's question."

Ameliah snorted. *Nice lady? Really? Never mind, I'm not sure I like this guy as much anymore.* The officers looked to each other, then shook their heads. Her face hardened as her thoughts returned to the fate of her friends. She couldn't afford to be distracted by the oddness of this particular Watch patrol. *Message Tallheart...Message Rain...Message Jamus...Message Val... Hells, Message Carten...Damn. All out of range or blocked. I hope they're with Tallheart, not trapped inside. I'll rest for a few hours, then go see if I can track them down in the forest. Tallheart wouldn't have stayed here, not with all these people so close by.*

She looked at the barrier. *Don't do anything stupid. Rain and Val, you two in particular.*

Sitting deep in the chill of Winter, Rain shivered. It had been over two hours since he'd started, and the chill was starting to get to him. He was using Aura Focus, meaning all of his physical senses were blocked; however, Winter's effect wasn't physical. At first, he'd stopped every so often to look around the room and make sure that nothing bad had happened, such as Velika showing up. People had figured out that he couldn't hear them while he was using Aura Focus and they pelted him with questions whenever they felt the skill lighten up. That annoyance, plus the knowledge that he couldn't do anything to stop her if she did show up, had eventually convinced him to stop checking. He was all in, come what may.

While he waited, he kept himself distracted by keeping an eye on his Adaptation panel while he trickle-charged his armor. His tolerance for Clarity and Focus buffs had both improved slightly, but not as much as he hoped given the ridiculous boost he was generating right now. Just two points for Focus and six for Clarity since he'd last looked at it back in Staavo's place. None of the other categories had changed, though his total tolerance had gone up by a point. He hadn't adjusted the ring, wanting to see if things went faster or slower depending on how far above his tolerance he was. Results so far were inconclusive.

Adaptation						
	Effective	Total	Base	Potential	Buff	Tolerance
Strength	5.29	41	10	23%	31	13
Recovery	5.33	31	10	41%	21	3
Endurance	3.6	30	10	30%	20	2
Vigor	6.46	35	10	38%	25	7
Focus	23	39	10	100%	29	13
Clarity	209	221	200	100%	21	9

	Current	Tolerance
Enchantment Stat Boosts	147	128
Enchantment Resistances	50	Unknown

It looked like boosting his tolerance wasn't going to be a fast process. It wouldn't be too bad for Focus and Clarity, but the others were going to take longer. He didn't have any physical skills, so training and time were the only tools available to him. He was planning to start working out more regularly to attack the problem.

While he'd been using Winter, he'd had the time to unlock some skill trees. He'd stopped at ten unlocks, not wanting to strain himself after working so hard on the Adaptation panel. They were different soulstrain categories, and he was pretty sure he would have been fine to keep going based on how he felt, but he didn't want to borrow trouble. He kept himself busy by playing around with potential builds in his mind.

One that had caught his fancy recently was something that he'd dubbed the 'passivist'. It was a shame that the pun really only worked in English. It was all about picking up as many passive skills as possible, with only a few actives for utility as well as some pre-combat self-buffs. He had no idea how viable it would be in practice, but on paper it was putting out some impressive numbers at level eighteen. It was a lot more rounded than his own build, with good offense and defense, just a bit lacking in utility.

Mana Striking was an odd passive that used mana to boost damage on any physical attack, armed or not. Combined with the multiplier from Strength of Arm and a few other things, basic attacks ended up doing a few thousand damage, which was insane. He wasn't that sure of the numbers, just going by the damage of punching practice with Carten as the punching bag.

Additionally, the build had great staying power. That was thanks to Mute, a skill which tripled all regeneration, health, stamina, and mana. It did this at the cost of temporarily sealing other active skills. He'd heard about Mute a while ago, but as nice as getting another regen multiplier would be, it wasn't compatible with auras. Winter was better after all the boosts he

had, but it wasn't surprising that most people went with Mute for recovery between fights. It was a great skill, assuming they were willing to spend the points to unlock the prerequisites. The so-called Passivist would be able to keep it going constantly as it didn't affect passive skills. They'd only need to lower it to recast buffs.

Rain shivered again as he looked at the build he'd outlined in his mind. *This would trash me in a one-on-one, even with my armor. I wouldn't have a chance, but...imagine if I had one on my team. Velocity alone would be massive, but if I also had Prismatic Intent with Precision, Acuity, and the Imperial Auras... Woof. Crazy.* He closed out the dozens of open windows with a frown. *I need to see if I can get tabbed browsing working. Things are getting a little cluttered.*

He took a moment to clear his mind. The gamble of revealing Winter appeared to have not backfired—no one had bothered him since he'd made it clear he wasn't going to respond to any more questions. Still, he wanted to be in good condition in case things got dramatic. To that end, it was time to drop the skill. He felt perfectly fine apart from the cold, but he was conscious that using Winter when he was past his Tolerance was what had made him go fruit loopy before. He hadn't boosted himself that high obviously, but he didn't want to push it much further.

As his senses faded back in, he gasped. The room was freezing, his shivers had been his body's way of telling him about the cold that he couldn't feel on his skin thanks to Aura Focus. That thought was pushed aside by his recognition of the woman seated across the table from him, her face even colder than the air.

"Well, what are we going to do with you?" asked Sentinel Lamida mildly, her voice fogging the frigid air. Rain's eyes darted around the room frantically, looking for support. There were plenty of metal plates to be seen—silver ones bearing the shield emblem of the Watch. *Craaaap.*