

## Chapter 12 Cleaning up

Adrian watched as the fires consumed his corpse. The rooms he had cleared out provided more than enough wood for a pyre or ten and he wasn't about to throw his own corpse over the railings.

It felt like the right thing to do.

The distant smoke was gone now. Adrian wondered if whoever had started the fire was still around. Were they watching? He would've burnt the body either way but now it had turned into something else. A call for help perhaps?

He gripped the sword in his hand, ready to fight in case something crawled up towards his terrace, summoned by the flames and smoke. The situation had changed somewhat. He had just fought two patrols, killing every single one of the undead creatures without any major injuries.

*Hardly matters. If I die, I come back*, he thought, glancing over to the white tree. He had made sure not to start the fire close to any of the dry trees. *Maybe I won't be able to return if I burn down the tree and its silver lined leaves.*

Looking inward, he found that he had 140 Essence but no way to increase his level. Which meant he needed more, or there was another thing necessary to level up that he didn't know about. Some kind of condition or a hidden resource. Maybe he simply wasn't judged ready to reach level two.

*The difference is barely noticeable with all my gear. Just one more point*, he thought. And yet it felt like the main way for him to increase his survivability in this horrifying place. Adrian reminded himself that he had quite a stockpile of gear by now and soon there would be more. All the rotting corpses he had left behind would have to be stripped, their gear inspected and brought up to his royal quarters.

And the courtyard was hardly the end of it all. He had bolts again for his crossbow, had a shield and sword, and armor to protect him somewhat.

*Am I getting used to this?* he asked himself, looking at the burning corpse. He himself was covered in sweat, dark blood sticking to his face and gear. The thought of going out into the left hall to recover his first rotting corpse crossed his mind. It needed to be burnt too, by now surely in a half decayed state.

*Or risen, to join the undead of this castle*, he thought. And still he didn't even consider the practical execution. For all he cared, he could let the door remain closed for however long it took him to get back home. And compared to his first few nights here, he actually started to think there was a chance.

*Two patrols. What else are they going to throw at me?*

As long as he avoided anything more powerful than the basic soldiers and servants, he could surely amass quite a bit of essence. Even if he made a fatal mistake or two, he would simply return. Adrian didn't want to die, he didn't want to get injured, or ever feel the pain again of a sword stabbing through his throat. But in a way it calmed him, to know that death wasn't the end. Just a set back perhaps.

He ate nuts and berries, trying to fill his rumbling stomach with the little nourishment he had found. There was more out there, he knew, ripe for the taking.

*And I will take it.*

Wherever he had come, whatever they threw at him, Adrian decided as he looked into the crackling flames, that he would push onward no matter what.

He waited for the fire to go out, only bones and ash remaining from his corpse. The rest of the day Adrian spent moving around corpses, taking their gear to add to his stockpile, and dropping them down from the terrace.

It felt good to clean up, a simple enough task that didn't demand his full mental capacity and wouldn't endanger his life. Or so he thought at least.

Some of his time he spent searching through the rooms again, looking for tools or weapons he had missed, hidden stocks of food or otherwise useful items. His previous searches had however been quite thorough, revealing nothing new.

The sun had already set when he threw the last undead out into the night, all the doors leading up to his royal chamber shut, the corridors and rooms left without bodies rotting within.

He sighed, brushing away the sweat on his brow. "Don't look at me like that, I'll bury you soon enough," he said, looking at the pile of bones sitting within the ash and blackened wood. *Wait a minute. What if some kind of curse makes my old body rise up?*

The thought didn't want to leave, making him collect everything in a blanket before depositing it in the guard room next to the first stairwell. The thing could rise in there, with the door closed and nothing to murder.

At last he fell into his bed, sleep gripping him a few mere moments later. The day had been eventful.

"Useless," Adrian muttered, going through the sixth set of soldier gloves. He had killed a lot of undead soldiers, and the gear he accumulated filled more than just the chest of drawers in his royal chamber.

It took him over an hour, categorizing everything and finding a spot to put them all. More than ten full sets of gear and most certainly enough for now. He didn't plan to die ever again but even with the small voice in his head letting him know that he would slip up at some point, he didn't need more than a few sets.

He had only gotten into the first courtyard in his part of the castle town but already he had to consider the quality of his equipment.

*How much money did it cost to manufacture all this? And now it's just worn by an army of zombies.*

Most of the gear was in a somewhat good state too. Adrian had found the best pieces of each type and sorted them all for easy access in the future. He may not have been the best fighter but if he could do something well, it was documentation and storage.

*What an exciting power, he thought, just waiting for his one Soul Skill slot to be filled by just that. It remained empty however.*

He sat on his bed and ate a few nuts and berries, looking at his supply with some apprehension. At least water wasn't an issue anymore but soon he would have to find more food.

He gulped, thinking about the events from the prior day. *I just slaughtered them.*

It felt weird, knowing what he had done. In a way like an out of body experience, or a memory from a game or movie. And yet he remembered the sunken in faces, the sound his blade had made when slashing into them, the smell of their rotting bodies. It was all real and he was still here.

*Still without anybody telling me what the fuck is going on.*

He sighed and checked his gear, the best pieces pulled together from all the soldiers he had taken down.

### **Equipment:**

**Helmet – Faenhold Soldier Helmet [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Chest – Faenhold Soldier Leather Armor [High]**

Vitality +4

Fire Damage +3%

**Arms – Faenhold Soldier Bracers [Adequate]**

Strength +2

**Hands – Royal Faenhold Silk Gloves [High]**

Skill +4

Rogue Soul Skill Damage +3

**Belt – Faenhold Soldier Belt [High]**

Strength +4

Warrior Soul Skill Cost -2%

**Legs – Faenhold Soldier Pants [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Boots – Faenhold Soldier Boots [Adequate]**

Strength +2

**1h Weapon – Faenhold Shortsword [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Off hand – Wooden Shield [Common]**

Adrian mostly focused on Vitality and Strength, the two stats he felt made the most difference in his fights. With his stabbing approach, little skill was necessary. And he hardly thought himself capable enough to not get injured at all. A heap of Vitality would help with that tremendously. In theory at least. He doubted a crossbow bolt to the face was something he could endure, not now, or ever.

*Well maybe with a knight helmet.*

He gulped, thinking of the creature that remained in its room just a few dozen meters behind him. Adrian looked inward, focusing on the numbers that gave him strength. Quantified hope to cling on to in this nightmare.

**Soulbound:**

**Essence – 140**

**Level – 1**

**Vitality – 11 [21]**

**Endurance – 10**

**Strength – 9 [17]**

**Skill – 8 [12]**

**Intelligence – 12**

**Wisdom – 11**

**Soul skill – Slot 1**

Over twenty Vitality, he thought, pressing a finger into his arm. He couldn't exactly feel a difference. But he knew it worked. He had tested it before after all. His enhanced strength was more obvious, the seventeen presenting a whopping increase in his power.

He stood up with a grumpy look on his face, taking a few practice swings with his sword. Then he did practice stabs, knowing he wouldn't exactly use the former.

*I have to explore more of the courtyard and the surrounding buildings. Find food and kill things, he thought. The idea sounded absurd. Not to the part of his mind that was used to videogames and action movies but his real self. He couldn't deny that it had gotten easier, that his fear had lessened a little, but it remained absurd.*

*Another level means more Vitality. And more vitality means I might be able to survive a little longer.*

Adrian realized a few minutes later that he was stalling. Again. "How will you find whoever made that fire?" he finally asked himself. "Maybe they know what the hell is going on here. Maybe they know where we are and how you can get away."

Perhaps it really just made sense to him to seek out this fire maker. Maybe a part of him was getting lonely too. The need to continue his exploration was obvious. He could rationally justify it but his fear made a strong counter argument.

It took him longer than he liked to admit to finally make his way downstairs, closing every door behind him to make sure nothing would creep up on him or find its way into his sanctuary while he was away.

He had four working bolts left and carried his loaded crossbow, the weight of it barely noticeable with his increased strength.

The morning sun hadn't quite reached the courtyard yet, looming buildings and towers all around preventing it from pushing through. A few of the windows on the highest towers did however bask in warm light.

*Good thing I came to on that terrace. Couldn't imagine being somewhere down in the sewers. Didn't a lot of games start in sewers? Or were those just the first quests.*

He didn't have a quest. Well maybe he did. If it were one, he'd likely call it 'Find the Smoke maker' and then with his luck so far, it's probably change to 'Kill the Smoke dragon'.

Contrary to his expectations and fears, the courtyard remained mostly empty. A few corpses remained which he had deemed to risky to retrieve. More gear to look through. He certainly didn't

plan to strip them all of everything again. He had his bedroom, a kitchen, and even a terrace with a nice view. There was little reason to add a cleaned out courtyard to the mix. His priorities didn't yet include burial rites, not as long as the dead remained so without.

There were plenty of buildings and doors to check but first he made a cautious round to check the bodies and their gear.

A few minutes later he left them behind, not having found anything that surpassed his current equipment. He did however spot a single adversary slowly strolling into one of the two adjacent alleys.

It was a dog. The creature looked much like the few he had fought before, its skin barely clinging to its meager and malnourished form. It was a dead thing.

Adrian checked his shield and aimed his crossbow, waiting as the dog slowly moved closer. It hadn't spotted him yet but he was in no rush. By now he knew at what distance he trusted himself to shoot and while the monster certainly looked dangerous, he had seen and killed a few of them already.

They were quick and nasty but also light and flimsy. He just had to keep his calm and not give in to panic. Certainly easier said or thought than done in practice. He focused on his breathing and watched the dog. He watched as it finally saw the figure standing in the courtyard, growling before it rushed at him with a wild stride.

Adrian felt his arms shake lightly but he kept his aim true. The dog's reaction wasn't unexpected but the wild barks and bared teeth still sent an instinctual fear into him that made little sense in theory.

He shot his bolt, the dog making no effort to dodge or react in any way, likely lacking the intelligence to understand the tool he held.

A small target perhaps but one still easily hit from a few meters away, running towards Adrian in a straight line.

The bolt dug deep, the dog likely dead upon entry, falling before it slid to a stop near Adrian's feet.

*What would Steve think if he saw me now?* he wondered. A smile crept to his lips, the thought of a support dog tackling undead from the side coming to his mind.

*Yeah but the dog might not come back to life. And what the fuck will you do then?*

With nothing else of interest in the courtyard itself, Adrian chose a random door and tried to open it.

*These people really didn't believe in locking their doors,* he thought, when the wooden entrance opened inwards. He simply pushed it open with his left hand, his right firmly grasping the loaded crossbow.

"Hey," he said into the dark hallway. "Anybody home?"

A moan came from a room to the left, Adrian stepping away from the door, grasping his weapon as he waited. "Come on now," he said, his voice wavering a little.

Another moan resounded, this time from the right.

*Shoot one and retreat if more show up,* he thought to himself, taking a deep breath when he saw a servant step into the dim light flooding into the hallway from the courtyard.

He took aim at the creature and fired, the bolt sinking deep into its chest. The force of the bolt sent the undead staggering back before it fell, not moving anymore.

Adrian placed the crossbow on the ground and drew his sword, waiting for the second creature to show up. That one too was a servant. "Now come to me," he said, confident that he could meet the challenge. He held his sword out towards the monster that was now charging in a manic sprint.

A moment later it impaled itself on his weapon, the tip of his sword digging into the undead woman's chest.

Adrian had barely felt the impact, his highly increased strength lending him more than a little stability. He pushed his weapon deeper, the sword punching through the chest with little issue, killing the creature instantly.

*The difference some magical ass equipment makes, coupled with horrifying exposure to danger and death.*

He stood in front of the open door still, waiting for more. When a few minutes had passed, Adrian stabbed the close undead another time and grabbed the oil lamp he had placed a few meters away. Its light was all he had to help him see indoors and the crossbow wasn't particularly practical in close quarters.

His shortsword and shield would have to do. *Just let there be no knights.*

The house turned out to be a rather normal home. Bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room with various furniture, and a cellar with some potentially edible supplies. The rats weren't exactly part of that but Adrian didn't have much trouble shooing them away with his lamp.

After all the undead, he was simply glad the things weren't half a meter tall and twice as long, with venomous teeth and aggressive behavior.

*But then again, it's just the first courtyard. Who knows what else is out there,* he thought, chuckling to himself as he waited for a knight to come out of the shadows to end him in a brutal slaughter. At least now he could potentially survive for a few more swings.

His death however did not come and the house turned out to be utterly boring besides the two undead he had already dealt with. He did turn at every creaking sound and moving shadow, all created by himself but he felt the sword and shield he held gave him some confidence. Tools made for war now helping him survive.

He left the home with a dusty leather pack that had two straps. There wasn't quite as much room inside as he had hoped for but it would serve its purpose for now. Within he stored the few immediately useful things. Dried fruit that may or may not be riddled with rot and sickness, matches, lamp oil, and his most precious find by far, a bar of soap. Soon enough, he wouldn't have to die to get rid of filth and sweat.

### ***Soulbound:***

***Essence – 170***

***Level – 1***

***Vitality – 11 [21]***

***Endurance – 10***

***Strength – 9 [17]***

***Skill – 8 [12]***

**Intelligence – 12**

**Wisdom – 11**

**Soul skill – Slot 1**

**Equipment:**

**Helmet – Faenhold Soldier Helmet [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Chest – Faenhold Soldier Leather Armor [High]**

Vitality +4

Fire Damage +3%

**Arms – Faenhold Soldier Bracers [Adequate]**

Strength +2

**Hands – Royal Faenhold Silk Gloves [High]**

Skill +4

Rogue Soul Skill Damage +3

**Belt – Faenhold Soldier Belt [High]**

Strength +4

Warrior Soul Skill Cost -2%

**Legs – Faenhold Soldier Pants [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Boots – Faenhold Soldier Boots [Adequate]**

Strength +2

**1h Weapon – Faenhold Shortsword [Adequate]**

Vitality +2

**Off hand – Wooden Shield [Common]**

**2h Weapon – Faenhold Crossbow [Adequate]**

Skill +2