

Chapter 13 Preparing an Expedition

Adrian looked at the crude map he had sketched onto an empty piece of old paper. It depicted the small area of Faenhold castle he had managed to explore so far.

Two weeks ago he had seen the smoke for the first time. And this morning it had risen once more. Someone was here and they were burning something.

He tapped the map with his index finger. Adrian knew the next step and it scared him. The unfamiliar environment of Faenhold castle and its monstrous denizens had forced him into action. Action filled with misery, terror, and even death. But he had found himself adjusting, the crude medieval weapons wielded by the undead now tools he could use to make himself a space in this place. Tools for him to forge a way out of it.

His royal bedroom now housed several dressers filled with the best equipment he had managed to gather. Armor, weapons, backpacks, torches, food, and clothing. On a normal morning, he would do his workout at this time but he couldn't push it off any longer. He had to go out there, had to explore more than just a few blocks. And he wouldn't be able to get back at night. Not if he hoped to find whoever was inside this cursed ruin.

Even if it's a smoke dragon ready to eat me, he thought and stood up. Two oil lamps lent their light to the room, the early sunlight pressing through the cracks of the door. He had enough oil to set half the place on fire, not that he thought it a brilliant idea.

The soldier pants were comfortable, not quite as much when he wore two pairs on top of each other. He did so anyway, knowing the additional padding would help against both the dogs and servants. Just in case they got close enough.

He looked at the large mirror he had carried into the bedchamber, intricate silver decorations surrounded the oval center. What looked back at him wasn't exactly the Adrian he had gotten to know in the past decade. He looked thinner, for one. The belly was mostly gone and muscle again started to show on his chest, shoulders, and arms. His brown hair was still messy, but slightly shorter. He had to admit that the short beard didn't look bad on him.

All he had to trim either was the letter opener he had found on his first day in the castle. Nothing else had a blade as thin or sharp, even after he had tried to sharpen a few of his weapons.

He glanced at the three badly carved wooden figures standing next to the mirror on the chest of drawers. One for Steve, the dog he still wanted, even though his experiences here might drive him towards owning a cat instead. One for Baxter, the friend that had so adequately prepared him for this unwanted trip, the friend who had never let him give up, who had pushed him onward no matter what. And Marco, his boss that just refused to fire him, no matter what.

Nothing to show anybody, especially with his little skill in the craft, picked up ages ago and forgotten until he rediscovered it in this castle. Each represented someone he wanted to get back to.

They all believed in him, in their own way. And he wouldn't let them down. He refused.

First he put on another shirt, two of them just enough to provide some more padding without restricting his movements too much. He didn't consider himself a very nimble guy, nor did his month long training regime without an actual trainer or the needed calories or proteins change much of that. The weight loss certainly helped, as did the gruesome murdering he had to do every day.

The leather armor came next, each strap perfectly set for his body. He checked it for damage, ready to replace it in case of any weaknesses or magical effect loss. *Pristine*, he thought. *Except for the smell.*

He really did his best to clean off the dark blood but sometimes the fights just became a little messy. Especially when a servant managed to sneak up on him.

The belt looked sturdy still, various sheaths and pouches hanging from the thick leather. He had two daggers, actual daggers and not letter openers. If the monsters got close, he had to have an answer. The daggers were just that. Next came the small quiver, stuffed with as many bolts he could push in there. Twelve of them to be precise. A second one was usually not worth it, considering the loading time and his ability to mostly recover the bolts. Just one felt uncomfortable already.

The largest sheath held his shortsword, previously his most trusted weapon against the undead. Until he found a small armory that was, an armory that held plenty of things he would never touch without a master at arms to teach him. What he trusted himself with however, was a spear. And they had quite the selection.

The best ones he had carried up to his chamber, a small weapon's rack now holding about ten of them. He grabbed the weapon that nearly reached his height, the solid steel heavy in his hand but solid beyond anything he had found so far. The tip was shaped like a leaf, surely inspired by a certain tree he had woken up next to. Adrian doubted he could even remotely handle the weapon without several years of physical exercise and weight lifting. The good thing was that he had a way around that pesky issue.

1h Weapon – Faenhold Leaf Spear [High]

Strength +5

Magic Projectile Speed +3%

How a human being could wield such a heavy weapon in one hand was beyond him. If the magical bonuses applied to everyone, he could imagine they had some quite ridiculous weaponry to play with. Or they weren't human at all. The undead were quite similar however, both in weight and height.

He had three of the Leaf Spears, two being of Adequate quality, with only one bonus of a lower range. Adequate usually meant one bonus to a stat befitting the weapon in a range of one to two. Anything with a high rating had two bonuses and the stats could range up to five. The secondary bonuses were never additional stats, or at least not as far as he had found.

He twirled the weapon and put on his soldier helmet, this one a little wider than his previous finds. No more headaches caused by constricting head gear. At least not until he found something with stats he couldn't resist.

His pack was ready, as was his shield. The armory held better versions than the small wooden one he had found before.

Off hand – Knight Shield [Adequate]

Vitality +2

The Knight Shield was still made of wood but sturdier and quite a bit larger. Without the various Strength bonuses, he would tire out in mere minutes of fighting. He had taken a liking to using his spear with both hands anyway, his shield mostly shining in close quarters where his sword or daggers came into play.

Adrian checked his pack one more time, finding several bottles of cooked off water, oil for his lamp hanging from the pack's side, matches, a piece of soap, the rest of his health potion, and a large part of his remaining food consisting of dried fruit and nuts. One of the side pockets held few pieces of folded up paper, a quill and some ink in a bottle. One of the few that hadn't dried out.

Anything else he didn't deem worth the weight. Not inside the castle town. The buildings he had searched seemed largely untouched. Clothes, beds, furniture, and cabinets stacked and usable. By now he was sure this place hadn't been hit by a famine or a war. Nor did he believe the undead to be anything but the previous occupants of this place. Nothing else really made sense to him but with a world of magic, he could imagine some necromancer or cursed artifact turning the people into what they were now.

His main problem was food and water, the former mostly rotten or already eaten by rodents, insects, or other animals while the latter just suffered from a water system that hadn't seen maintenance in quite some time. So far he had just cooked off the water, hoping it would kill any sicknesses lurking within. However that took time and a working kitchen, or a fire. The magical stoves in the royal wing had turned out to be extraordinary and not something he could count on in his exploration.

He stuffed the backpack again and slung it over his shoulder, the lamp clinking as it swung around. Weapons at the ready, he grabbed his best crossbow and slung it over his shoulder too, the leather strap he had added neither pretty nor particularly sturdy, but it did its job. The weapon wasn't loaded but he had found the undead didn't have incredible eyesight. He usually had time to load.

With a clear goal of returning to his home, and the short term goal of finding whoever created the smoke, Adrian had found himself wasting little time. His days were stressful, filled with dangerous fights and exploration. More so the latter. The regular workouts coupled with the constant strain of fear and all his heavy equipment made any sleep issues he had thought incurable slowly fade away.

More often than not, he didn't even remember his dreams. Exhaustion turned out to be quite helpful.

He leaned his spear onto the wall and pulled on the chest of drawers he always used to block the door, just in case something came for him at night. A tap to the wood with the butt of his spear created some noise. Enough to attract any nearby undead, if there were any.

None had shown up near his chambers but he still checked. Always. A few seconds later, he stepped outside, glancing to the door on his right, at the end of the corridor. It remained closed and blocked off with a few pieces of furniture. He tried not to think of his rotting body lying on the other side and instead stepped out onto the terrace.

The smoke was still rising in the distance. Even without the knowledge that the castle was filled with undead monsters, he would assume it took several hours to reach that part of the town. And that was with a town map. Something he had surprisingly not found yet, even with many hours of searching in the various books and studies he had invaded. There had been a few maps but none of the castle itself.

He couldn't read the language, making it impossible to determine where on the various landscapes he currently was. No fancy 'You are here' mentions, arrows, or a small castle icon.

Adrian turned around and walked past the tree, brushing it with his left hand as he had come to do every time before he went out there. *Will I return here with new information, gear, and food? Or will another leaf fall, for me to wake up here, naked and scarred.*

He looked inward, feeling confidence swell up at the levels he had gained. Each new one increased the cost by one hundred Essence. With the constant exploration and regular battles, he had accumulated quite a bit of the resource. Enough to get to level five and a base Vitality of fifteen.

Soulbound:

Essence – 350

Level – 5

Vitality – 15 [26]

Endurance – 10

Strength – 9 [20]

Skill – 8 [12]

Intelligence – 12

Wisdom – 11

Soul skill – Slot 1

His gear was largely the same, save for his helmet upgrade and his weapons.

Equipment:

Helmet – Faenhold Soldier Helmet [High]

Vitality +3

Fire Resistance +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 Leaf Spear [High]

Strength +5

Magic Projectile Speed +3%

Off hand – Knight Shield [Adequate]

Vitality +2

2h Weapon – Faenhold Crossbow [Adequate]

Skill +2

Adrian stepped inside the hallway, checking if every door was closed. He continued through the stairwell where his kitchen was located, continuing on to the courtyard. Again he tapped the wooden door, listening for a while until he stepped out, closing the exit behind himself.

Few undead had wandered close in the past week, Adrian having slowly cleared out the buildings and alleys. Now however, his goal wasn't exploration. He glanced at the corpses left behind, soldiers, dogs, and servants littering the path, usually in front of the various buildings he had cleared out.

How long until I get lost? he thought to himself, spear in both hands as he crept through the castle town, down alleys and stairs he hadn't ventured past before.

A few minutes of uneventful walking later, Adrian spotted a familiar sight. A patrol of three soldiers with a dog. *Just one. No crossbow.*

He stopped walking, crouching down as he kept his eyes on the monsters about thirty meters away in the dark alley. There was just enough light reaching down into the gap between the high buildings on each side to let him see the undead. Adrian placed down his spear and took off both his crossbow and backpack, placing the latter to the side. The string was pulled back with ease, a bolt placed inside in a quick and quiet motion.

Adrian aimed and fired, his arms barely moving from the released forces. He placed the crossbow down to the ground and pulled the string back again, watching the dog stumble to the side. Not a perfect shot but it would do.

Another shot slammed a bolt into the closest soldier, the creature taking a step back before it fell. By now the other two had noticed him, running towards Adrian with their swords at the ready.

He placed the crossbow next to his pack and grabbed his spear, gripping the pole with all the strength he could muster. The alley was narrow but broad enough for about three undead to pass next to each other. The creatures of course weren't coordinated enough to use that advantage, one of them already a little ahead of the other.

Adrian stepped to the side, making sure they would get in each other's way as soon as they reached him. Spear at the ready, he waited for a few second until the soldier reached him. Ignoring the sword, he thrust his weapon forward with a quick and powerful motion. The leaf like blade pierced through the leather armor with a dull thud, digging deep into the monster's chest.

He ripped the weapon out before the undead fell, its sword clattering to the ground. Adrian stepped back, looking at the two remaining enemies. The dog had advanced a little but looked to be slowed and bleeding. More so than a 'healthy' one.

Adrian didn't mind, his spear lashing out into the second soldier's neck. He finished it with another thrust into its unprotected face. He stabbed both undead a second time before he waited for the dog, not about to move ahead too quickly. The undead always came for him. There was no reason not to take the advantage.

He shook his head lightly, remembering the times he had rushed his enemies without thought. Back in the kitchen when he was delirious from terror and hunger. And out in the courtyard, disregarding caution because of his recent death. Anger was useful, that much was true, but it wouldn't keep him alive for long.

And so he waited, watching the bloodied steel leaf turn slowly as he rotated the spear. It really was a wonderful weapon, most of the undead unable to even reach him. And those who did would fall

against his shield and sword. As long as he kept away from anything more dangerous that walked this castle.

The dog reached him and sped up a little, its head stabbed through one moment later by the steel spear.

Adrian quickly checked the two soldiers' gear but found nothing remotely as good as his current equipment. He wiped off the blood on their pants before he grabbed his pack and crossbow. One of the bolts had broken but he didn't mind much. Eleven was plenty.

Any buildings and entrances he avoided, his journey bringing him through the massive town. He occasionally sketched down a rough plan of what he saw and where he had walked through. More undead started to show up a while later, people dressed in tattered robes, work pants, and even dresses. They were just as dangerous as the servants he had fought before and rewarded the same amount of essence.

When he reached a square with several dozen of the creatures, Adrian took a detour through a few dark alleyways, avoiding the mass of people. A few servants were fine and he might even be able to survive more than five with his high Vitality but he wasn't about to put it to the test. Not if he wasn't forced to do so.

He found an undead woman in one of the alleys, her red dress ripped and clinging to her faded body. A thrust of his spear ended her cursed existence before he continued on his way. It became clear that his royal chambers were located high up in the town, his goal thus leading him down towards the distant walls.

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Soul skill – Slot 1

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