

Chapter 14 Nightfall

Adrian glanced at the road in front of him, dozens of undead moving around in their near shuffling steps. If he made a sound now, they would all converge on him like a group of rabid dogs. There were a few animals too, cats mostly. He didn't doubt for a moment that they were just as aggressive as everything else in this place and very much undead.

He gripped his spear and turned back, going down the stairs that led onto a broad plaza. More than ten undead were occupying the place but it turned out to be the safest area to go further down towards the distant walls.

Backpack and crossbow placed on the ground, Adrian gripped his spear and slowly crept downwards. The sun was getting low on the horizon, the shadows growing longer with each passing minute. He didn't have much time until nightfall.

The first undead turned when Adrian took a louder step, his spear killing the creature in a single thrust nonetheless, its ruined shirt now stained with blood as well.

He moved on to the next one, one powerful thrust for each of the undead. They fell one by one, only the last four seeing Adrian before he reached them. It hardly mattered. Their movements were uncoordinated, the range of their arms pitifully short. Adrian finished the second to last and took a few quick steps back, breathing in deeply as his eyes narrowed on the last.

The undead stumbled towards him and found itself impaled a moment later, falling to the ground with a deep cut in its old shirt and the torso below.

Adrian checked his surroundings and caught his breath, eleven corpses now lying where the undead had walked before. The plaza provided a good view of the distant Gothic buildings, spires and towers reaching up towards the skies. The forest beyond basked in the deep orange red horizon, dark clouds moving through in the distance.

I should find shelter, Adrian thought, his belly rumbling as he grabbed his pack and crossbow, choosing the smallest building he could find in the vicinity of the cleared out round plaza.

The small home turned out to be empty, Adrian taking his time to make sure that was actually the case. He found a small bedroom and closed all the doors, barricading the entrance with a large chest of drawers he pulled out from what seemed to be the living room and kitchen. A task much less daunting with all his Strength bonuses.

He sat down on the bed, seeing the last rays of sunlight breaching through the murky window. The flame in his oil lamp moved lazily, soon to be the only source of light in the small two story house.

Dried fruits and nuts quenched his hunger, washed down with cleansed water. He would run out the next day but a fire and a pot could be scrounged up with relative ease.

Adrian fell asleep on his small and uncomfortable bed, glad to finish another day without injury or death.

Shadows flickered in the room, his eyes opening slowly as he turned in his bed. He hadn't slept quite as long as he would've liked. His eyes opened wide when he saw the oil lamp next to his bed. It was dark still.

A dull knocking resounded from the window behind him, scratching coming from the door. The door handle creaked but his barricade held. A shiver went through him as he shifted in his bed, covered by the thin blanket and wearing all his gear.

Just go away, he thought, closing his eyes as he tried to ignore the monsters outside. He assumed they came because of the light, or maybe the smell. He wouldn't put out the flame, not if his life depended on it. *It might actually*, he thought and opened his eyes again. The thought had shaken him awake. He couldn't just ignore this problem. It wasn't in his mind, it was real, and it was right outside his house.

He grabbed the handle of his left dagger, slowly sliding it out of the sheath before he turned onto his back to look at the window.

It was dark, the murky window obscuring everything that could've been seen otherwise. Adrian carefully moved off the bed, keeping his eyes on the window. A cloud had obscured the moon, its light now shining into the plaza amidst the many buildings and towers.

He gulped, looking at the two pitch black eyes staring back at him. The creature looked like the shadow of a person, its thin hair floating next to the husk of a head, entirely see through in parts. It stretched out a ghostly black arm, its clawed fingers tapping against the window.

Adrian stumbled back, nearly tripping over his lamp. He grabbed at the spear, clutching it in both hands as he pressed against the wall. The clouds moved and revealed a dozen more of the creatures floating in the plaza, barely visible behind the window, each looking a little different.

He calmed his breathing, reminding himself that these weren't the first monsters he had seen. Slowly, he moved down and grabbed his oil lamp, stepping out of the room backwards with his gaze on the hollow eyes. When he reached the stairs, he bounded up the steps with terror on his heels, choosing the last room in the corridor and closing the door with as little noise as he managed.

His hands shook and his breath had quickened again, the man putting his lamp onto the small work desk, his spear in hand.

Ghosts, he thought. *There are ghosts here at night.*

It hadn't been useless to avoid the night after all. He looked at the desk and instead chose the dresser, pulling the thing with all the strength he could muster. The spear he held onto in an awkward manner to benefit from the additional bonuses.

When he had added the additional barricade, he leaned onto the opposite wall and looked at the single window in the room. The lamp lent some light to the room but the moon was bright, shining onto the town.

Adrian had finally managed to calm down when a new visitor landed on the window sill, outside the thin glass.

A raven, entirely black and quite large. It looked normal to him at first but when it flapped its wings, he could see the mist like darkness trailing behind. The wings had holes, a part of the raven's head bloodied and exposed, the left foot it stood on broken.

Adrian forced himself to look, not to take his eyes off the monster that had come to haunt him. *Just another dead thing.*

The raven tapped its beak against the window, its dark eyes focused on the lamp.

Adrian sighed, gripping his spear as he tried to convince himself. His life depended on it. He knew it, heard the impacts on the window. Slow tapping that would eventually allow the creature to break through.

The sun will rise again tomorrow, he thought and stepped over to the table, lifting up the glass cover as he looked at the flickering light. He hesitated, holding onto his spear as he glanced over to the crow. A moment later, he blew out the flame.

Darkness came to the room, only faint moonlight seeping in through the window. Adrian stared at the dark shape outside the thin glass, watching it for several minutes as his fear built. Finally, he saw it flutter away, sighing a breath of relief.

He wished the culture here had called for more curtains but his exploration suggested some aversion to the design. The study didn't have a bed either but if he survived the night, he would nail bed sheets over every window in his next borrowed room.

"At least I'm saving oil," he murmured in a quiet tone, sliding down the wall before he sat on the ground. Adrian was glad the specters didn't have a way to move through walls, otherwise he would have likely died in his sleep.

There weren't any near the royal chambers... I would've heard them at some point.

His theories would have to wait, there simply wasn't enough data. It was possible that the creatures showed up only in certain parts of the city, maybe only on certain nights. Or perhaps he was just unlucky and they were traveling spirits of some kind, remaining when the sun rose again in the morning.

The spear in his lap, he waited. Sleep wouldn't come now, he was sure of it. And he was wrong.

This time he woke up with sunlight streaming into his room, dream like shades in his mind leaving as he returned to the waking world. Had it all been a dream? He questioned it for a moment before he remembered. It couldn't have been. Everything about it had felt visceral, his beating heart, the dark shades. Perhaps he wouldn't have believed it but after living in this place for as long as he did, it was easy to accept another set of monsters.

He grabbed his pack and looked for his food, taking a few gulps of water as he winced. His back, legs, and butt were sore. One night and he already missed the royal chambers. At the same time, he felt committed. Adrian had gotten quite far in the single day, he had killed a bunch of undead, had seen a bunch of horrible ghost creatures, and most importantly, he was uninjured and still alive.

Or trapped in a horrible dream while they devour me, he thought but dismissed it with a smile, eating a few nuts and berries. He looked down and sighed. A more interesting diet would certainly make a difference.

He checked the door, hearing nothing behind. The window showed him the plaza beyond, undead corpses still littering the area. Nothing else had changed. The ghosts were gone.

"Which means they're either just here at night... or I'm very lucky," he murmured to himself, doing a few stretches and light exercises to get his body moving and ready for the day.

Fifteen minutes later, he left the home behind, rested and somewhat fed. He walked down the main stairs leading off the plaza, his spear at the ready and on the lookout for undead.

Adrian continued his journey through the often busy streets and alleys, working his way around the largest groups of monsters and taking out the occasional straggler. When he reached six hundred Essence, he added another point of Vitality to his stats, bringing the total including his gear bonuses to twenty seven.

In one of the alleys, he found a group of soldiers, two of them taken out before the rest even reacted. He saw one civilian among them but something seemed off about the man.

He saw the glittering of jewelry, focusing back on the soldiers when one of them took aim at him with a crossbow he had missed.

Adrian cursed under his breath and held up his shield, trying to angle it in a way that would stop the bolt. He heard the familiar twang and felt an impact on his side, pain following immediately after. His spear lashed out at the charging soldier, leaving only two.

One was reloading his crossbow while the other one waited with his sword drawn, standing right in front of what Adrian had assumed to be a servant or civilian.

The undead stared at him with glazed over eyes, his hands lifting before sparks of light burst into flames. The fire hovered above of the undead's palms in a mesmerizing calm, moving slightly in the wind that flowed through the alley.

Adrian felt the heat from where he stood, could see brightness that seemed too high for flames that size. It was magic. He had no other explanation. Real magic.

The sight made him hesitate for a split second, unsure how to proceed.

The undead made his choice simple, slightly raising his hands before the fire expanded in a flare. The ground, walls, and air itself were set alight as Adrian stumbled backwards, his shield raised high to protect his face and torso.

He grit his teeth, knowing immediately that he couldn't just dash through and kill that thing. The heat was unbearable, and the pain came quickly. Neither did the flames subside, forcing him to struggle backwards until he was out of the broad spray's range. He stumbled and ran, feeling a heavy thud against his shoulder blade that nearly made him fall.

Looking down, he saw the flames still clinging to his gear, panic taking over as he rushed out into the next alley, ripping out the bolts sticking in his side and back. He fell to the ground before he rolled, his gear clanking against the hard stone as his wounds and burns screamed in his mind.

The flames at least subsided, not behaving in a magical way. He panted hard, adrenaline and fear pushing him forward as he forced himself to stand up. He grabbed the spear and ran, hearing the undead come into his alley.

A dead end. He found a door but it was locked. Looking down the alley, he saw the undead aim his crossbow, the central one forming a single ball of fire between his hands.

His eyes opened wide as he looked around, running before he dived into a window. His weight and gear won out against the old frame of wood and glass. He felt the bite of new wounds, groaning as he slipped trying to stand up.

An explosion of heat and fire made the walls vibrate, utensils clattering to the ground next to him as he grabbed for his spear. This time he managed to stand up, looking left to see the locked door burst

inward, fire clinging to the wood as a waft of hot air flowed into the room. One of the undead stepped inside and aimed but Adrian had already run.

There was no other door but he found another window on the opposite side of the small home. Without thinking, he jumped through just like he had done with the first one. It broke just as easily but he felt something sharp dig into his stomach as he rolled through the small opening in the wall. He felt another impact, this time in his thigh as he pushed through and fell on the other side.

The ground was at least five meters down, Adrian flailing his arms as he fell, hitting the stone stairs below hard, all the air pushed out of his lungs as he spit out blood. He groaned, his sight blurring before he forced himself to stand up. Something was broken for sure.

He winced, stumbling down the stairs until he found another alley, his spear clattering to the ground as he grit his teeth and whined. Adrian looked down and saw the cracked bolt sticking out of his leg. He grabbed it and ripped it out. It hadn't penetrated deep but still managed to draw blood.

Get away, he formed the disconnected thought and nearly fell, trying to get his spear back. He still had his pack and crossbow, both strapped tightly to his back. Not enough to stop a bolt but perhaps the pack had slowed it down.

His breathing was ragged as he walked on, trying to make distance between the home he had left and the undead within. *Magic. Fire magic*, he thought, feeling the heat still, the sting, the terrible pain that nearly made him faint. But he pushed on, somehow able to keep it together.

He checked every door on the way, all of them locked. An undead civilian stepped out in front of him, Adrian thrusting his spear forward with all the strength he could muster. The creature fell, Adrian using the spear to keep himself upright. He moved on and chose a random window, using the butt of his steel weapon to destroy the glass and its frame.

Looking back, he found nobody following before he threw in both his pack and crossbow, gingerly climbing in himself as he felt the sharp glass cut into his fingers. A small addition that hardly mattered.

The inside of the home was dark and his lamp oil had spilled somewhere along the way. The noise would've already alerted any undead within. He felt his way through the home and found stairs leading up. Managing to reach the upper floor, he chose a room at random and closed the door behind himself.

A desk, shelf, and cupboard stood in the room, light flowing in from the window. Adrian quickly threw his gear to the ground and pulled everything in front of the door, barricading himself in the small study.

He found a mirror fixed to the wall opposite the door, wiping away the dust that clung to it before he nearly recoiled at the sight. The cuts were the least of his problems. His face had melted partially, half of his right cheek missing entirely. His hand shook as he reached up to touch the area, stumbling back as the pain returned with its full force, the adrenaline slowly subsiding.

Potion..., he thought, barely keeping himself together as he opened his pack and emptied it on the ground, food spilling out before the small glass container fell to the floor with a thud. He grabbed it and drank, emptying the liquid in a few deep gulps.

Warmth spread through him immediately, the pain subsiding as the magical liquid flowed through his innards. He sighed, moaning slightly as most of the pain vanished. When he looked back into the mirror, his cheek had reformed, just a slight scar and coloration visible where the fire had stripped away his flesh.

His hand shook when he touched his face, tears flowing as his lips quivered. *And I dared be excited for magic*, he thought, a pained laugh mixing in with the sobs as he sunk down on the wall. Many of his smaller injuries were still there, a general ache in his lungs as his breathing slowed. He had survived.

Soulbound:

Essence – 44

Level – 6

Vitality – 16 [27]

Endurance – 10

Strength – 9 [15]

Skill – 8 [12]

Intelligence – 12

Wisdom – 11

Soul skill – Slot 1

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