

Chapter 60

Initiated

Two cloaked figures approached the lantern-lit doorway partially obscured in the backroom of the ruins. Amber light flickered across the grey stone, casting long shadows from the two advancing. A guard in similar orange robes regarded them warily, their pointed hood with white stripe falling back as they looked up.

“Password,” he grunted, hand idly at the hilt of a sword.

One of the hooded figures turned to the other as if to gesture to them to provide the information. A shrug was returned before they cleared their throat.

“Uh, praise the cone?” The female voice stated.

The Guard’s face screwed up, and the sword was drawn. “Just who are you-“

The female figure leapt towards him, her own sword flaring through the air as it came out from the robe and pierced into the chest of the man. Red soaked through the orange robes as he slunk to the floor.

“*Praise the cone?* Really?” Theo lowered his hood to raise his eyebrow.

Sally stowed her weapon and shrugged as she pulled her own hood down. “These are like traffic cone iconography, right? Orange triangles with white stripes?”

“I think it’s meant to be... teeth?” The vampire tilted his head to look at the carved shape on the door.

The zombie checked the Loot window of the Cultist Guard. A set of [Keys] and a [Half-Eaten Apple]. She took the keys. “This is fun, though.” She turned back to Theo with a smile.

“Yeah, I’ve always wanted to do something like this.”

“Well, just don’t get staked or whatever. I’m sure they won’t have holy water here since they are an evil cult.” She wiggled her eyebrows before raising her hood back over her face.

“Well, you just don’t get your brains blown out.”

The cloaked figure crossed her arms.

“Sorry,” Theo rubbed his neck before putting his own hood up, “that sounded better in my head.”

Sally unlocked the door, and they entered into a downward staircase. They descended for about a dozen feet before finding the torch-lit bottom - some manner of cellar had been converted into an underground cultist sanctuary.

In the cellar proper a small table with two chairs sat. Across from them, a further door led into whatever weird church had been constructed. Pinned to the frame of this door was a

piece of paper. Sally moved up closer to it and lifted the hood slightly to get a proper view. It was a map with brief instructions.

[Advocates of the Fang must report to the Shrine to be cleansed before heading to the main hall where the Ritual will be attempted TONIGHT]

Theo read it too and nodded back to her. She smiled beneath the shadow of the hood. Subtlety was not one of her strong suits, but the prospect of surprising all the Cultists made her giddy - even if they were just System-created.

She pushed through the door into a chamber beyond. A downward ramp continued for two dozen feet before opening up into a wide room. Rows of benches covered the floor of this room, populated by little cones of robed Cultists sitting and observing the front. At the front, a large statue painted orange with a white stripe across it up the majority of a raised stage. In front of it, a small lectern or altar sat unattended.

To their left, a doorway led to the noted Shrine - and with eyes on the main room, they entered here to play the part. Rows of candles ran along the walls of this small chamber, where a table sat at the far end. Around twenty cones of various sizes sat atop the table.

“Careful,” Sally whispered, “hazard.”

Theo nudged her with her elbow. Thankfully there were no other Cultists in here, so they didn’t have to pretend they knew what they were doing. After a brief minute of looking around the Shrine, they left to go and find seats in the Ritual chamber.

There were maybe three dozen other figures sitting either in silence or briefly murmuring to each other. Sally chose somewhere as far away from others as she could. She scrunched her nose up and stared at the large statue at the front - she wondered what kind of Ritual they were going to be doing.

“*You new here?*” A voice came from behind them.

They both slowly turned as a robed figure with a long grey beard extending from their shadowed hood sat beside them on the bench.

“Praise the Fang?” Theo responded.

“Yes, yes... Praise the Fang indeed.” The mysterious man turned to face the statue at the front. “You’re just not the sort who... worship here.”

The three sat in silence for a brief moment. Each not wanting to break the silence and possibly reveal more than they needed to. Eventually, this new man relented.

“Name’s Baldrick. They’ve attempted the Ritual at least a dozen times since I... can remember. They never seem to listen.”

Sally kicked Theo’s foot in a manner to communicate that this guy may be a Unique Monster.

“Uh,” the vampire shuffled awkwardly, “you’ve never thought of leaving?”

Baldrick kept on staring at the statue. "No. Well, yes. But I am an evil cultist - what options do I have? There was another here... who was... different."

"But?" Sally interjected, leaning over Theo to listen intently.

"Adventurers killed them. After that, I dug a pit in the Library, which I sleep in every night - hidden away. I don't usually come out for the Ritual anymore." His wrinkled hands clasped at the fabric of his robe.

"We are currently, uh, recruiting - if you are a learned man, we have a space for a Librarian in a proper town where you won't have to hide in a hole."

Sally nodded. "Unless you still wanted to, of course."

"Really?" The man seemed taken aback but quickly came to a conclusion. "Only on one condition."

"Sure!" Sally beamed.

"Prove your worth by surviving after I blow your cover."

Theo shuffled away, a task ineffective due to the zombie still leaning across his lap. "What?" he whispered.

"I did say I was an evil cultist," Baldrick cackled and grabbed at their hoods. "Initiates of the Fang, intruders!"

Sally and Theo leapt to their feet as their hoods fell back. All eyes in the chamber fell towards them. A mix of Level One and Twos, she grinned as she drew her sword.

"Ready to Level, vamps?" She chucked her robes and withdrew her dagger and sword.

"Always," he returned a wide grin, his fingertips illuminated in a pinkish-red glow.

As one, the Cultists withdrew all manner of simple melee weapons. Swords, maces, daggers, and even some improvised farming tools. With a roar of defiance, anger that these two were invading and besmirching the holy place of their foul god, they surged forth.

[Summon Zombies]

Four corpses broke through the stone floor - a welcome distraction and hindrance. Sally stepped forth and side-stepped an awkward swing of an axe, jamming her dagger into where the assailant's throat was. She ducked and spun around, sweeping the legs of her victim and allowing the recently emerged zombie to grab them.

There wasn't any real need to use [Hex: Slow]. As a Level Six, she could walk through half of the room even without Theo's help. She watched a figure run across the top of the stage. A spellcaster of Level Three - this must be the boss of the area! Just as the slightly more ornately robed figure arrived at the altar, she raised her sword and pointed to them.

[Necroblast]

A quick bolt of green energy zapped through the air and blasted a hole in the man's neck. She watched in morbid fascination as he spluttered and struggled to breathe as his blood sprayed out from the wound across the altar and floor beyond.

"Hey, Theo," she began, ducking a widely swung sword, "did you see that?" But Theo was otherwise distracted.

She watched the newly borne vampire slash through foes. Just using his fists and fingertips, his [Novice Strike] had turned into a barrage of martial ferocity that reminded her of the Monk. *Ah, her first brain.* Not only did a pinkish hue blaze in a trail behind his hands, but a glow in his eyes of dark crimson illuminated his face.

He dodged the stabbing action of a pitchfork and rolled along the length of it, a flurry of blows striking the torso twice, then the left arm, left shoulder, and finally, he twisted the bloodied Cultist around - pushing the head to the side to bite into the neck of his victim.

Sally shuddered as she dropped her knife to grab the wrist of her assailant, twisting it back until it snapped and forcing the Cultist to the floor. A quick stab of the sword and then [Eat Brains].

It did not taste great. She felt energised and fulfilled, but there wasn't the power behind it, the wild elation. Most importantly there were no stat bonuses. She looked up to see Theo drop the drained corpse, fresh blood covering his lower face and his chest.

"These guys don't taste great, but wow!" He beamed, eyes alight.

"We need to get you a Player to drain," she smirked back at him, her own face caked with Cultist gore. She blocked a wooden club with her bracers and headbutted the Cultist. "You Level up yet?"

"Yeah!" He shouted back, breaking ribs with a strong punch before grabbing the dazed Cultist and twisting their head around fatally. "I'll give it a prod once we are done."

Sally looked around. There were still plenty of panicked but aggressive Cultists for them to have some fun with. As she leaned down to pick up her knife a burst of heat rocked the chamber.

Wide-eyed, she looked over to the altar. It was now glowing with an amber light - and more importantly so too was the larger statue behind it. Even the Cultists paused their assault to observe the odd phenomenon as the Cultist Leader slowly slunk from the bowl now filled with his blood.

"You've only gone and summoned him!" The voice of Baldrick rang out from the back of the room, a mix of jubilation and mortal fear in his tone.

Sally readied [Hex: Slow] as the statue shimmered, a further wave of heated energy pulsing through the room.

From within the statue, a large paw of flame and darkened fur stepped through.