

Chapter -101

From the hallway revealed by the mask puzzle came a vast spiraling staircase with rock walls on either side. The stairs were about twenty yards wide with large flagstones lain in alternating order all the way down to form the steps. It curved slightly to the left and we both glided above it using our skills.

“It’s been a while since I’d seen *that*,” Panda commented, as the wings of my own skin were spread out from my back and the tail of my purple loincloth flopped around limply.

I was hoping to find a way to use I_CAN_FLY without needing to take my clothes off, but, so far, the skills I was offered weren’t really helping much.

‘Lustful Loincloth’ x
<p><i>Made from the hide of a Lustful Demon, who wronged Duchess Miranda, and imbued with her unique powers. She is known as a fearsome General that gains power from showering in the blood of her foes.</i></p> <p><i>This loincloth is imbued with the following effects:</i></p> <p><i>This item does not count as a piece of armor.</i></p> <p><i>When a kill results in a splatter of blood that hits your bare skin, you get a stack of ‘Battle Hardened’ for 30 seconds, increasing damage resistance by 5% and damage by 10%.</i></p> <p><i>This effect can stack up to 10 times.</i></p>
Weight: 0.45 Pandas

“Thanks to Miranda being outbid, the restrictions making me unable to take them off are gone.”

“Are you going back to the stained boxers?” Bee asked, sounding worried, while intentionally slowing her pace to float alongside me.

“Without Miranda’s restrictions, they aren’t that bad,” I replied.

“What about that collar she gave you? Are you going to sell it?” Panda wondered.

‘Fur Collar’ x
<p><i>Made from the pink fur of a man-eating bat that lives in the domain of Duchess Miranda of Throbbing Excitement. It has been infused with her powers.</i></p> <p><i>This collar is imbued with the following effects:</i></p> <p><i>This item does not count as a piece of armor.</i></p> <p><i>You transform into a Minor Lust Demon, increasing your Dexterity and Vitality by 25%, but take 100% extra damage from silver and gold weapons, as well as holy- and light-based attacks.</i></p>
Weight: 0.2 Pandas

“Without the restrictions and literal offering of yourself to Miranda, it actually seems a pretty useful item, so long as the transformation isn’t permanent.”

Panda nodded. “It could be worth a lot of Coins I think.”

We still hadn’t heard anything from the Players in pursuit of us, which made me wonder if they were unable to use our mask fragments that’d popped off the skeleton. If they had to find them again, we might be able to get to the boss before they were able to catch up.

While floating down along the gentle curve of the enormous staircase, I started to notice large puddles of blood on the wide steps. The moment we floated near one, a creature lifted itself up and out of the puddle.

It looked like the Cult Members we’d seen countless iterations of, except its arms and legs were like double the normal length and its fingers and toes were twisted into animalistic claws. The crimson robes still covered its torso and head, but the sleeves and long skirt were torn and frayed, exposing the pale limbs.

Our disguises also weren’t fooling it, as it looked up at us and opened its mouth to hiss loudly. Then it seemed to prepare for a leap up at us.

Bee shared it’s appraisal as I cut off my gliding ability.

Level II	'Cult Anointed'	Enemy ^x
<p data-bbox="687 533 906 566">“*Angry Hiss!*”</p> <p data-bbox="288 616 1305 734"><i>There are a lot of Cults in your world, perhaps thanks to the denizens of ‘Dirt’ being fundamentally gullible creatures in search of wish-fulfilment through serving some grandiose higher purpose.</i></p> <p data-bbox="280 786 1313 987"><i>Anyway, most of the Cults are nothing more than blind faith with no real power behind it. But there are a few that a genuine. Like this Cult, with its emphasis on Blood and Silver. They are not just play-pretend, at least not entirely, as they found true power in the worship the Flayed Queen. But she is a fickle mistress and her power always comes with a price.</i></p> <p data-bbox="419 1039 1174 1072">“What does this have to do with Anointed?” you’re asking.</p> <p data-bbox="604 1124 989 1158"><i>I’m getting to it, okay!? Jeez!</i></p> <p data-bbox="280 1209 1313 1328"><i>Anointed are a great example of power-at-a-cost, as they have been transformed and imbued with Blood Magic, but they now serve the whims of the Blood, with their own minds void of the personhood they once possessed.</i></p>		

I fell down onto the creature fist-first from about ten feet in the air, and the impact was so strong against its hooded featureless head that the whole body slammed down into the stone steps with a violent *crunch*. Thanks to the Pearnana effect, its robes and pale body began to turn a sickly yellow.

“Oof, it’s definitely dead,” Panda muttered.

I peeled my balloon gauntlet off the floor, where the squished now-yellow meat of the Anointed had gotten me stuck like a glue-trap. Then I quickly equipped my Cloak, Schmonic Boots, and Carapace Suit.

“Moth Missile!” Bee shouted, firing off her mothballs curled and weaved through the air to strike a different one that’d emerged from a puddle a few steps down.

With four successive smacks, the Anointed keeled over, just as three more began to emerge from other large blood spatters further down.

“Crap, these are creations of the Flayed Queen,” Panda said, worried, as I strode down the steps with my clenched right fist cocked back. The Sea Urchin Ring activated and covered my arm in a spiky shell.

I hopped back a step as the Anointed leapt forward with a slash of its long claws, which was further extended by blood flying out from the tips of its fingers and solidifying at the ends of its claws. The blood claws barely nicked the front of my Carapace Suit, but tore thin lines across them with ease, which was worrying.

“Don’t let them hit you with their blood!” Panda yelled from my shoulder and up to Bee, who was diving down towards another Anointed, ready to fire a blast up-close to take advantage of the 50% damage boost from her Beetle Battlemage.

I sidestepped to line myself up perfectly, then punched the air and launched the Sea Urchin spikes into the one in front of me, as well as the other that was directly behind it. The sound was like ten nail guns firing simultaneously, and the result was gloriously-gory. The spikes tore right through the front one, pulling large chunks of pale flesh with them as they exited out its back, only to embed themselves deeply in the other one.

“*Yippee!!*” Brock celebrated as they both collapsed dead to the ground.

A thud sounded as Bee fired her Beetle Blast into the back of her target, after maneuvering around its back. The top of its torso, along with its head, vanished into a puff of chunks and misted blood.

“‘*Yippee*’?” I commented, my disgust evident in my voice.

“*Issa genuine expression of mirth, Gamby.*”

“Just felt very out of character, is all.”

Brock cleared his throat, or his equivalent of it, as he geared up for a second go at a celebration, and squealed:

“*Ah fak yaah, cunt!! Queensland foreva!!*”

“That’s more like it,” I said with a nod.

“*...Is this what I have become? A 2-dimensional caricature of my proud nation?*”

“Stop! We don’t have time for you to get introspective!” Panda scolded him.

As if to punctuate his words, a laughing voice flowed down through the large stairwell, followed by a tremble as something above shifted and ground against the foundations of the cavern. It was clear that Twine and the other two had managed to do the mask puzzle.

Bee grabbed my wrist and pulled me down the steps.

Moments later, the echoing *clank* of the Knight’s metal boots could be heard coming our way.

Driven by Bee’s desire to avoid a confrontation with our pursuers and my own wish to find *literally anything* to point me in the direction of the Mayor, I ran as fast as I could, while Bee lifted back up into the air. She was constantly looking back the way we’d come, but we had a decent lead on them, plus Angel Boy’s wings didn’t look to be in very good shape when we’d seen him in the Mansion hallway.

We ignored the blood puddles around us as we moved down, passing by eight additional ones, each of which manifested their own Anointed. They were fortunately nowhere near fast enough to keep up with us and had nothing in the way of ranged attacks.

“Hopefully they’ll slow them down,” Panda said. “But it’s bad news if they kill any of the Players, since their blood will take them over and—”

“Turn them into Skinstealers!?”

“Something akin to it, yeah. The Flayed Queen loves to pit people against each other.”

“Is she another Absolute?”

“Oh yeah. And she’s a big fan of the Great Game, always sponsoring the Players best poised to screw up everyone else’s chance of survival.”

“Do we need to add her to the list of things to worry about?”

“Not yet, I don’t think.”

Bee came down closer to us and asked, “How do you know about past Games, Panda?”

The plushie froze, as though he’d been caught telling us things he shouldn’t have.

“Oh, look, it’s the boss entrance!” he said and pointed down at the bottom of the large stairwell.

The ground transitioned from the smooth flagstones to a rough and uneven cavern floor, which led to a naturally-formed arch that had a black veil obscuring the other side.

Behind us came the wet slapping footfalls of the many Anointed we’d aggroed, as well as the echoing *clang* of the pursuing Knight.

“You’d better explain yourself when we get out of here,” Bee told the plushie.

Then we ran through the dark veil.