

Memoirs 260: Politics

The party sprang into action. One of the [Lava Hydra]'s heads snapped down towards them, but Fynn leaped into the air, surrounded by a swirling green tempest. He met the fiery head directly, and their clash created a powerful shockwave.

Shin rushed forward on the ground, his sword glowing a powerful silver as he held it above his head. Meanwhile, Allyssa pulled out several vials from her bandolier.

The [Lava Hydra]'s remaining heads released several strange roars as it moved in its molten pool. Tiny orbs of fire began to form in front of them, growing larger and larger as it prepared its attacks. Rosa's music began to play just as six beams of fire shot towards the group.

Shin lowered his sword, releasing a blast of silver light that crashed into one of the beams. Allyssa threw her vials, which exploded in shimmering showers of ice, partially blocking two others. Scarlett then conjured three thick barriers of water, intercepting the remaining attacks and sparking massive clouds of steam that temporarily obscured the space in front of them.

"Rosa, I'm blaming you for this," Allyssa said as she retrieved more flasks, her crossbow holstered on her waist.

"When I asked for 'dramatic', I didn't mean this," Rosa replied, her kleret emitting a blend of harmonising notes. "I know the gods aren't my biggest fans, but surely they wouldn't go *this* far just to teach me a lesson."

"I don't know..." Allyssa hurled another vial out in front of them, just as the steam cloud was dispersed by a strong current to reveal Fynn clinging to the hydra's first head. Flames licked at his arms, but he somehow held on to its immaterial body with his claws. Allyssa's flask landed underneath it, shattering into an expanding block of ice that Scarlett converted into water.

Seemingly annoyed by the pest on it, the [Lava Hydra] flung its head upwards, attempting to shake off Fynn. The youth let the motion carry him, soaring dozens of meters above the boss. As he fell back towards it like a cannonball, three heads targeted him with their flaming maws open. Suddenly, though, he maneuvered in the air, dodging them and tearing into one of its necks with his claws as he continued down, leaving a trailing viridescent light.

The remaining four heads turned their attention to Scarlett and the others. As two began charging up fire attacks and the others lunged forward, Scarlett used her hydrokinesis to block the first attacks. Meanwhile, one of the heads lunging forward was aimed directly at her and Rosa, but the bard beside her used a charm that caused the air in front of them to shimmer as a minor illusion formed and hid their movements, allowing them to hurriedly dodge to the side.

A wave of heat burst past them as the hydra head slammed into the ground, and Scarlett shaped all the water she'd been gathering into one giant blade. She then brought it down on the hydra's neck like a scythe. Steam shot up as the liquid met flames, and she could feel how the fire that made up the hydra's body resisted. Pushing through all of that, however, she cleaved the head clean off.

The [Lava Hydra]'s wounded neck recoiled, thundering with a sound like burning brimstone. The fire that had been its head began to lose cohesion, but Scarlett quickly seized control, funneling it towards the chamber's entrance where the Emberling still stood, motionless. The fire was absorbed into its body, as with the elemental before.

It would be a waste to just let it disappear.

"Oh, you *can't* be serious," Allyssa's voice cut through as the flames of the injured hydra's neck reignited, regrowing and restoring its head to its previous form.

"As long as it remains in that fire lake, it will keep regenerating," Scarlett said, shaping the remaining water blade into a wide shield to block another blast of fire. She then used her [Garments of Form] to teleport away from an attack aimed directly at her, while keeping track of the others' positions in the chamber.

She wasn't worried about Fynn; dealing with enemies several times his size was practically his specialty. He was much hardier than the rest of them, and as long as he remained in the chamber, Rosa's charms could still reach and heal him. Shin wasn't quite as resilient or mobile as Fynn, but with his armor and Rosa's charms, the young Shielder should be able to manage while keeping one or two heads occupied.

That technically left her to handle the rest, relying on Allyssa's and Rosa's support. They needed to deal with the pool of fire before anything else. She'd already tried dispersing it with her pyrokinesis, but it hadn't worked, so they had to try something more aggressive.

"Rosa," she called out to the bard, who now stood a few meters away from her, furiously cranking away at her instrument to maintain all the charms while also not getting burnt to a crisp. "I will be requiring your assistance."

"Ehm, alright. Give me a moment." Rosa grimaced slightly, then paused her music.

Scarlett felt her buffs fade, but she knew it was difficult for the woman to maintain them at the same time as she did this.

"Alright, go ahead," Rosa said.

Scarlett nodded. After blocking another attack from the hydra, she raised her hand. A thin blanket of deep red flames materialised above a portion of the fire lake the [Lava Hydra] occupied. A fresh melody rang out from Rosa's klert, cutting through the chaotic noise of the battle.

As if in response to the music, the deep-red flames Scarlett had summoned began to shift. Tiny, translucent echoes flickered into existence among them, trailing delicate shades of blue that danced to the melody. These echoes exploded in small bursts of light, resonating through the chamber and spreading through the rest of Scarlett's fire, eventually reaching the lake beneath as well.

To her surprise, the lake's fire resisted as well, like it was part of the [Lava Hydra]'s body. Some of it was still overcome by the blue echoes, which spread in threads across the fiery

lake, but it was less than she had expected. When the echoes reached the hydra, they simply flickered away without causing any damage at all.

Soon, she heard a strained gasp from Rosa as all the blue flames suddenly died out, and the bard almost stumbled.

“I’m sorry, Red,” Rosa said, sending Scarlett a sorry expression. “That’s all I’ve got.”

Scarlett frowned, observing the lake of fire closely. Maybe half of it had been removed, but that had been far less effective than she’d hoped.

Once more, she activated her [Garments of Form], disappearing in a mist to dodge another of the hydra’s heads which thundered a torrent of fire where she’d stood. Reappearing close to Rosa and Allyssa, she summoned two more water barriers to block more of the boss’ attacks while glancing to the side.

[Mana: 5914/12302]

She could still stomach a couple more mana potions if necessary, so as long as she didn’t do anything crazy, mana shouldn’t be a problem. The issue was that no matter how much mana she had left, it would be difficult to summon enough water to completely eliminate the fire lake *and* deal with the boss. Maybe if she had Arlene’s [Eternal Flameweaver’s Athame], she could power through the boss’ defences and disperse all the fire here, but not by herself.

If it came to a battle of attrition, she could perhaps rely on the rest of the party to help whittle the boss down as she dealt with the lake, but she wasn’t too keen on that approach.

They needed something more.

“Rosa,” she said, stepping closer to steady the bard, who seemed unsteady from her exertion just now. “I believe you will have to put your heart into it.”

The woman blinked, looking at her for a moment. “You sure that’s okay here?”

“The fire goddess will hardly strike you down.”

“...Alright, if you insist.” Rosa’s expression hardened. Scarlett stayed by her side, ready to defend Rosa as the bard gripped her klerst tightly and took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing...”

The atmosphere around her shifted dramatically. The whites of her eyes turned pitch black, and a soft glow penetrated through her blouse near her chest as she seemed to be filled with renewed energy.

“Mind giving me a hand?” she asked, her voice now carrying an otherworldly character.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Don’t rightly know. Try something powerful. I’ll figure it out from there.”

Scarlett shook her head. One challenge with Rosa's Heartstone magic was that it wasn't quite as predictable as her other charms.

"Watch out!" Allyssa's cry pierced the air, and Scarlett pulled Rosa aside, summoning a sphere of water around them to shield them from another of the [Lava Hydra]'s attacks as steam enveloped their surroundings.

Rosa's concentration wavered, the darkness in her eyes receding slightly, but she quickly regained her focus. Looking around them, she seemed to consider what remained of Scarlett's defence barrier. "Actually, can you do that again? But this time, aim for one of its heads."

Scarlett watched her for a moment, then with a wave of her hand, she dispersed the steam around them before turning her focus to the hydra. Fynn and Shin had managed to pull most of the attention of six of the seven heads for now, but without Rosa's charms, they couldn't hold out by themselves for too long.

Especially not Fynn, who was darting between the heads' attacks, half his clothes seemingly on fire despite his high resistances.

Scarlett raised her hand, aiming at the hydra head that had attacked them just now. It was already preparing for another fire breath.

Gathering the remaining water in the chamber, and conjuring even more with her hydrokinesis, she steered it towards the hydra, where it coiled around its head like a great liquid clamp. A significant portion of it vaporised as the hydra unleashed its attack, but Scarlett simply replenished it.

Next to her, Rosa began playing a new, haunting melody that carried across the battle.

Scarlett felt a strange force intertwine with her magic, as if a hungry void wished to seep into her power. She watched as the water under her control grew murkier and thickened, becoming a storm of dark violet waves that engulfed the [Lava Hydra]'s head. Her mana also began draining more rapidly.

"Your turn, Red," Rosa said, voice slightly strained and brows knitted in concentration. Scarlett glanced at her before nodding and commanding her magic.

In an instant, the water contracted into a dense, violet-hued fluid, swallowing the hydra's head and part of its neck into nothingness. The hydra quailed in fury, its remaining heads turning towards Scarlett. What was perhaps most unexpected, however, was that the lost head didn't regenerate as before. Flames attempted to regrow the limb, but most of them lost cohesion immediately as they did, the process seeming to have been significantly slowed.

Scarlett looked at Rosa, who shot her a bright smile. "I was thinking about calling that the 'Call of the Abyss'. What do you think?"

"...Impressive," Scarlett replied. "But for now, you should focus on surviving the retaliation."

Three bursts of fire shot towards them simultaneously. Scarlett summoned more water shields to intercept them, quickly downing a mana potion at the same time.

“Are you capable of reproducing that feat for more than one head at once?” she asked.

“You might have to princess carry me out of here afterward, but I think the Heartstone’s up for the task.”

“I am sure Fynn will volunteer.”

“Grouch.”

Focusing intently, Scarlett formed spheres of water around three of the hydra’s heads, fighting for them not to vaporise while pulling on more water from the ice scattered around the chamber by Allyssa’s mixtures. Like before, Rosa’s charm soon began to influence the water, and the spheres transformed into swirling vortexes of darkness. Realising the threat, the hydra’s remaining heads extended towards Scarlett, but Shin and Fynn intervened, diverting their attacks.

The dark vortexes condensed down all at once, severing three more heads just like that.

Rosa stumbled, almost dropping her klert. Scarlett steadied the woman, eyes still fixed on the boss. Its surviving heads appeared weakened now, flickering with more unstable flames.

“Once more,” she said.

Rosa pulled a face but nodded, tightening the grip on her instrument and resuming her music. “Let’s go.”

Scarlett drained another mana potion, feeling the onset of what would likely be an annoying headache later. Ignoring the discomfort, she launched her final assault, enveloping the [Lava Hydra]’s last three heads with her hydrokinesis. The boss tried to resist, lunging its massive body from the fire lake, but it couldn’t disperse her attacks in time as long as she concentrated on maintaining them.

Then, with Rosa’s charm bolstering her magic, Scarlett let the remaining heads disappear into the abyss.

The hydra froze. Its first head had started to regenerate more by this point, perhaps having regained a quarter of its shape, but without the others, the hydra seemed to lose whatever held it together. Gradually, the flames that constituted its form began to die out, along with the lake of fire it had been in.

Scarlett wasn’t about to let all of it disappear, though. Without the [Lava Hydra] fighting back against her, she could now easily control all the fire in the chamber as she wanted, funneling it towards the Emberling. The tiny fire fox absorbed what had been at least half of the hydra’s body in a matter of seconds, still without any visible change.

As the last flames vanished, the cracks forming the fire lake sealed by themselves, restoring the chamber to its original state.

Scarlett nearly buckled as Rosa's full weight fell on her. The bard's normal appearance had returned, and she looked more than exhausted as she leaned face-down on Scarlett's shoulder. She assumed the bard was exaggerating, but despite considering pushing her off, she let her be. Rosa had contributed a lot in that fight, after all.

"That was incredible, Rosa!" Allyssa exclaimed, approaching them while wiping away a face full of sweat. Even with their fire resistance buffs, the heat had been intense.

Without lifting her head, Rosa gave a weak thumbs-up, her other hand loosely holding her kleret.

Scarlett checked her mana reserves one last time.

[Mana: 2136/12302]

That fight had actually been tougher than she expected. The [Lava Hydra] countered her pyrokinesis effectively, and despite hydrokinesis being a natural counter against it in some ways, it was also weak against it in others.

Escape had always been an option, but she was glad they hadn't needed it.

She summoned a small flame to beckon the Emberling over as the party regrouped around them. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, it appeared as if Rosa's exhaustion was entirely genuine as the woman sat on the floor, shakily bringing out a flask to drink from.

"But that sure was intense," Allyssa said, kneeling to inspect the Emberling. "By the way, how come this little guy isn't changing even after absorbing all those elementals?"

"Because it is not a true elemental," Scarlett replied absentmindedly, looking towards the end of the chamber. There, the altar with the colossal white flame still remained, as well as the massive rune-covered slab beyond it.

"That doesn't tell me much, but alright." Allyssa stood, patting dirt away from her knees and looking towards Shin and Fynn as the two neared, her expression growing slightly more concerned. "Are you two alright?"

Shin's armor was singed, his skin reddened in spots, but otherwise, he looked fine. Fynn, on the other hand, was badly burned along most of his left arm and shoulder, with large sections of his clothing scorched away. Despite that, he looked completely unaffected.

"I'll handle that in a minute," Rosa muttered from the ground, holding up a finger while drinking more water.

"Save your mana," Scarlett said, retrieving health potions from her [Pouch of Holding] and handing them to the two young men. Rosa shot her a grateful look before collapsing on the ground fully, utterly spent.

Leaving the bard to rest, Scarlett began making her way towards the altar. It was time to collect the loot and leave this place behind.