

259: The House of Fire

The hidden passage inside the House of Fire brought Scarlett and the others deeper than she had expected, eventually leading them to the entrance of what looked like an underground temple carved out of smooth, darkened stone through some unknown method.

There, Scarlett and the others took a few minutes to retrieve their equipment from the [Bag of Juham] and get themselves ready. Then they started moving. A single long, dark corridor lay at the center of the structure, with a faint light visible at its end. Following it, guided by the flicker of Scarlett's flames, they walked for a few minutes before emerging in a vast, cavernous chamber.

Here, the ceiling stretched high above, almost lost in the darkness, while massive, crumbling pillars rose from the floor, some toppled and broken. The walls were adorned with ancient, faded murals depicting scenes of what was presumably the fire goddess and her followers in their prime, performing various rites. Scattered across the floor were remnants of the temple's former glory: forgotten altars, urns, and offerings long since turned to ash.

The chamber was dimly lit by frequent bursts of flame from sconces embedded in the walls and protruding from the floor, and the air was thick with heat while carrying a slight tang of sulfur. At its center stood a grand, partially collapsed statue of the fire goddess, its worn features fixed in a stern gaze that seemed almost locked on them.

"This... This is unbelievable," Allyssa said, awestruck. "It's *huge*."

"Indeed it is," Scarlett replied, surveying the chamber. "And I do believe this is only the first layer."

"There's *more*?!" the girl exclaimed in shock.

Even Shin seemed incredulous, his brow furrowed as he scanned the area. "...I'm having trouble understanding how this place has been under the capital all this time without anyone knowing."

"Right?" Allyssa nodded along with his statement.

"That is hardly uncommon for these types of sites," Scarlett said. Otherwise there wouldn't be any 'forgotten ruins' left to explore. "These locations often have enchantments that make them difficult to detect unless you know precisely what you are seeking. This is likely even more true for what was once the holy sites of gods and goddesses."

"How lucky we are that you just happened to know what to look for, then," Rosa remarked.

"Yes. Quite."

"I was being sarcastic."

"So was I."

“...This must be how a parent bird feels when they see their chick first fly out of the nest.” The bard wiped an imaginary tear from her cheek.

“...Let us not dally.” Scarlett started moving. “Do be careful not to touch the walls,” she added.

“Why not?” Allyssa asked, glancing back at the dark stone walls they’d passed.

With a flick of her hand, Scarlett conjured a ball of water that she sent towards the wall. It hissed and turned into steam upon contact.

“That is why.”

“Oh,” Allyssa replied.

“I’m glad you mentioned that before we stopped for a breather and I accidentally lit half my bottom on fire,” Rosa said with a chuckle. “Makes you wonder what the point of that is, though. I bet it’s already hot enough down here without the walls adding to the broil.”

“I believe the original purpose of this site was as a trial of sorts,” Scarlett explained. “From what I know, the fire goddess and her followers were not known for their restraint.”

To be safe, they had already imbibed fire resistance potions bought earlier when they visited the Coins district. Scarlett also had her [Chromacloth] which provided some extra resistance. On top of that, all of them had armor and gear crafted from the Ashenwraith dragon’s scales, which offered further protection.

As they crossed the chamber, passing the large statue at its center, Scarlett stopped briefly to study the statue before moving on. This place had been abandoned for centuries by now, likely even before the faith of Ittar rose to prominence and the Graenal Empire was founded. The number of people who had visited since then was probably minuscule, if anyone had at all.

She led them towards the far end of the chamber, where a wide opening leading downwards was. Above it, in the stone, were intricate carvings and unfamiliar symbols. While the first layer of this dungeon might have once served as a congregation area of sorts, the second layer was where the trial itself began.

“Walk the steps of...the furnace?” Shin suddenly read aloud.

“What?” Allyssa asked.

“I think that’s what it says. ‘Walk the steps of the furnace’. Or maybe ‘of the fire-keeper’.”

“What are you on about?”

Scarlett looked at Shin, who pointed at the symbols carved into the stone.

“That looks like Theraq script,” he said. “It used to be widespread around here long ago.”

Allyssa squinted at him. “Oookaay...but how do *you* know what it means?”

“Theraq and Old Kereq are related. Even if I don’t speak it much, I can still read Kereq without much issue, and I’ve studied texts in Old Kereq before. Some of these symbols are familiar.”

“Huh. I...didn’t know that.”

“You’ve never asked.”

“...You’re right.” A slightly downcast expression appeared on Allyssa’s face.

Rosa stepped up to pat her shoulder, then leaned over to whisper something in the girl’s ear that caused Allyssa’s eyes to widen and she quickly stepped away with a slight blush while the bard just chuckled.

“I did not expect you to be able to decipher the script used here, Thornton,” Scarlett said, mostly ignoring that other business. “Impressive.”

He simply shrugged. “Sometimes my interests are useful.”

Scarlett gestured for him and Fynn to take the lead, and the two started down the passage. Before following, she took out a fox-shaped amulet from her pouch. A fiery fox materialised in front of her, its head immediately turning upwards to stare at the small flame she conjured above her hand.

Rosa’s eyes turned in her direction upon seeing that, her lips curling into a bright smile. “Heh, look at the cute little fella. He’s practically ecstatic. Finally his time to shine, is it?”

“‘He’ is not sentient, Miss Hale,” Scarlett said, moving her flame so that the Emberling started moving down the stairs.

“Ehm, is it really a good idea to have him out here?” Allyssa asked uncertainly as the fox bounded past her.

“I do not know, to be frank,” Scarlett admitted. “But it will be interesting to see.”

Facing opponents who used fire attacks might not be the wisest when you had a pet running around that boosted any nearby flames. At least if it didn’t differentiate between friend and foe. Scarlett wasn’t entirely sure if it did, since she’d yet to use it against any other fire wielders.

Thanks to Thainnith’s legacy, though, she had some idea at least. Besides, dismissing it wasn’t difficult if necessary, so it was worth giving things a try.

As one, the party descended the passage. Soon, they reached a chamber that was starkly different from the open temple ruins above. It was a smaller, more confined space, with walls glistening with heat and marked by scorch marks that seemed to have burnt through parts of the rock itself. A dim, fiery light seeped through strange vents in the ceiling, casting ominous shadows across the space.

The floor was a complex grid of stone tiles, many cracked or singed. At the far end of the room loomed a large, ornate door, its surface engraved with the image of the fire goddess cradling a lone flame.

“You said that this used to be used for trials?” Shin asked, glancing at Scarlett.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“...Alright.” He stepped forward with his shield and sword at the ready, trailed by Fynn, who formed a pair of ethereal claws above his knuckles. Allyssa and Rosa also prepared themselves, the former pulling out a turquoise-coloured vial from her bandolier and the latter retrieving her klert from inside her enchanted cape.

As Fynn and Shin ventured deeper into the room, something shifted. Cryptic patterns appeared and glowed a fierce orange on the walls, pulsating with otherworldly energy. Suddenly, jets of flame erupted from some of the vents in the ceiling, blocking the path. From these jets, the fire seemed to coalesce and take form. Swirling, fiery vortices gathered in the chamber’s center, growing larger and brighter until they solidified into several vaguely humanoid shapes, radiating intense heat.

Fire elementals.

Rosa started playing her klert, and Scarlett felt her focus sharpen as the temperature around them seemed to grow more tolerable. Fynn roared, and the wind surged with him, sending both him and Shin forward to face their fiery opponents head-on.

Allyssa threw her vial into the air, which she then shattered with a precise crossbow shot, releasing a rain of ice crystals that crystallized in front of and atop three of the elementals to Shin’s left, creating a single large block of ice. Impressively enough, it didn’t immediately melt upon touching the fire elementals’ bodies.

Two of the elementals at the front raised their arms, and streams of fire shot towards Shin and Fynn. Shin hunkered down behind his shield to block the past, but Fynn simply charged through the flames, leaping and slashing at his enemy.

Scarlett had long since given up on instilling a sense of self-preservation in the young man.

“Oh, great, let’s *not* avoid the fiery inferno,” she heard Rosa mutter close to her. “Let’s just dive right in and let Rosa patch us up afterward. Pacing ourselves? What’s that? Can I eat it?”

Scarlett sent a short look Rosa’s way, noting that the bard was still intently focusing on her music despite her comments.

Turning her attention back to the fight, Scarlett looked down at the [Foxfire Charm’s] Emberling in front of her, where it stood still like a statue, nose pointed towards the fire elementals as if studying them. She had almost expected it to rush forward and had been ready to desummon it if necessary, but it didn’t look like it.

That was curious, but she should probably pay more attention to the actual fight for now. Narrowing her eyes, she focused on how to deal with the elementals.

In truth, she'd hoped that, with them being made of fire, she could control them with her pyrokinesis. Unfortunately, however, that didn't seem to be the case. Her attempts were being violently repelled. She might even have had an easier time trying to seize control of Arlene's spells than these beings. Something told her that simply attacking them with more fire wasn't going to be effective.

But, of course, she had plenty of other alternatives.

One of the elementals encased by Allyssa's ice struggled to break free but was unsuccessful. Seeming to realise this, it instead raised its free arm, aiming at Shin's flank. A swirling mass of fire began to form, but just as it was about to launch its attack, the elemental stilled, its entire upper body skewered by a thick lance of water. Moments later, two more watery spears pierced its frame, one even extending through it and into one of its companions.

These spears, extending from the block of ice, quickly grew as the ice melted, splitting into smaller shards that shot out, piercing more of the fire elementals in a hail of tiny liquid harpoons.

"Thank you for the assistance, Allyssa," Scarlett said as she carefully manipulated the water under her command.

"You're welcome," Allyssa replied with a smile.

Scarlett could only describe the concoction the girl had used as both literally and figuratively magical. Its recipe was among the materials Allyssa had found in the Veiled Library, and it created ice that allowed precise control over its melting point. Whether too hot or too cold, as long as you were within a certain range, it remained solid. It was perfect for someone like Scarlett, who could manipulate it with both her pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis, saving her mana and immobilising enemies at the same time.

It also looked pretty cool.

The first fire elemental she'd pierced soon lost cohesion, its form dissipating away, but the rest proved slightly harder. Unless Scarlett fully committed to maintaining the water's form, she found that it quickly boiled away upon touching their bodies, so her attacks just now had dealt less damage than expected.

Still, it didn't do nothing. While she was forced to spend more mana than she preferred, with Shin and Fynn keeping the elementals occupied and Rosa healing the group, she had plenty of time to pick their foes off with the more compact water spears, one by one.

Eventually, only one elemental remained. Scarlett expended a bit more of her mana to form a large water barrier, trapping the final elemental just as Fynn was about to tear into it. The white-haired youth stopped in his step, his almost feral behaviour from the fight immediately disappearing as he lowered his arms and looked towards Scarlett.

"Leave it be for just a moment," she instructed as she approached.

Inside the water cage, the fire elemental thrashed, repeatedly trying to break through the liquid barrier, only for parts of its body to disappear in bouts of steam.

Scarlett frowned. That was actually draining more mana than she had anticipated. She turned towards the entrance, where the Emberling still stood, intently watching the fire elemental like a curious pet.

“Come,” she commanded.

It didn't move.

She blinked, shaking her head with a sigh. She was letting Rosa's antics affect her. The Emberling couldn't even understand her.

Ignoring the tickled grin from a certain bard nearby, she summoned a small flame for the fox to follow. It immediately skipped over, stopping right in front of the fire elemental so that the water barrier was the only thing separating them.

“Now, let us see what happens,” she said.

As soon as she dismissed the water cage, the fire elemental lunged to attack, but Shin and Fynn intercepted it.

Scarlett observed it closely. The elemental's flames didn't seem stronger, even with the Emberling nearby. If anything, they seemed slightly weaker, though it was hard to tell.

“That is enough. Fynn, you can finish it off now.”

Following her command, Fynn tore through one of the elemental's arms, which flared as it tried to reattach to its body. Before it could, Shin's sword, which was coated in an alchemical solution made by Allyssa, cut through its side, and then Fynn unleashed his full fury on it. Within seconds, the elemental lost control of its form entirely, its flames starting to fade.

However, before dissipating completely, some of the flames drifted towards the Emberling, seemingly merging into its body.

Scarlett and the others watched curiously, while the fox-like creature remained motionless, now bereft of an object to fixate on.

“Did he just...eat part of that thing?” Allyssa asked.

Scarlett continued examining the Emberling closely. “It appears so.”

“Did you know that would happen?”

“Not exactly, no.”

There was no visible change in the Emberling's appearance. It seemed just as it had before.

Still, this was definitely interesting.

Scarlett turned her attention to the now-open door at the end of the room. “We can analyse this further later. For now, let us proceed.”

She conjured another small flame to guide the Emberling as they moved forward.

From there, the party encountered several similar rooms, each pitting them against one challenge or another. It felt a lot like a gauntlet, designed to test their skills and worthiness. In some rooms, they faced more fire elementals of various shapes—all having similar reactions from the Emberling—while other rooms contained puzzles and traps like those common in the game. Some were genuinely challenging, while others simply required time and patience to overcome.

Despite any difficulties, nothing could stop their progress completely. Eventually, they reached what seemed to be the final room, which held another wide passage leading down. Above it, murals depicting figures bowing before the fire goddess after surviving numerous trials were carved into the stone, along with large symbols.

“Welcome to the Sanctuary of Flames,” Shin read aloud. “At least, I think that’s what it says. It could also be ‘Embrace the Sanctuary of Flames’.”

“One of those sounds distinctly less inviting,” Rosa said.

Allyssa grimaced. “You don’t say.”

Scarlett studied the carvings for a moment before moving ahead. “Come. There is not much left, it would seem.”

They descended the passage and soon arrived at the bottom, where they were greeted by a great, circular chamber with a high domed ceiling gleaming afire in a blazing red. In the center stood a grand obsidian altar holding a colossal, white-hot flame, its intense heat radiating throughout the chamber. Surrounding the altar were towering statues of the fire goddess, each holding a brazier with undying blue flames, and the floor was a mosaic of molten lava and black stone.

Beyond the altar, at the far end of the chamber, stood a massive slab of dark stone, covered in complex etchings and countless runes.

“Oh? We’ve made it?” Rosa looked around as they stopped at the chamber’s entrance. “I was expecting something more...dramatic. Like a fire-breathing dragon atop a giant magma-eating tortoise, or at least a very stately cat. This feels a bit like a letdown.”

Everyone fell silent, and Scarlett turned to Rosa with a weary look.

Something in the chamber rumbled.

Rosa met Scarlett’s eyes, offering an awkward smile. “I spoke too soon, didn’t I.”

Scarlett sighed. The woman had to be doing that on purpose.

A deep, guttural roar reverberated throughout the area, and cracks formed on the floor, spewing forth molten rock as the chamber trembled. Between them and the altar, a single massive pool of liquid fire formed, and a colossal shape began to emerge from it.

First, one enormous head broke the surface, followed by another, and then another, until seven fierce heads rose from the molten depths.

The [Lavad Hydra], this dungeon's last boss, stood before them, each of its heads snarling and dripping with fiery saliva, and all fourteen of its eyes lowered to focus on the intruders in its domain.

“What the Blaze—”