

148: Panic at the disco

I presume you do not know what that was?" Iyana asked as the two of them looked at each other.

Scarlett shook her head. "You presume right."

As far as she was aware, there wasn't supposed to be anything special going inside right now.

Another muted scream rang out. This one sounded more panicked than the last.

One of Iyana's hands reached for the woman's waist but paused when there was nothing there. With what might count as an expression of slight frustration—it was hard to tell—the knight suddenly shot off.

Scarlett blinked. The woman had already reached the other end of the balcony and disappeared inside.

Looking around, she decided it was probably best for her to figure out what was going as well and started moving towards the entrance. There were sound-deafening enchantments on the archway leading to the balcony, so when she passed through it, the noises became slightly clearer. It was still muted, but it sounded like people were fighting.

She started hurrying down the corridor, turning around the corner the first corner into the nearest room. There, she froze. The peaceful, conversational atmosphere that had been present when she passed through earlier was gone, and most of the inhabitants seemed to have either run away or were hiding in the corners behind overturned tables and furniture. The center of the room was taken up by a group of black-clad individuals with painted faces that had teamed up around Iyana's.

Scarlett scowled.

The Tribe of Sin.

What the hell were they doing here? With a thought, her dress disappeared, replaced by most of her gear as she activated [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs].

More of the Tribe members were spread out around the room—perhaps a couple of dozen in total—locked in battles with other guests. The bulk of their numbers were focused on Iyana, though. They seemed to know who she was.

None of the defenders had any weapons, so Iyana and the others were left fighting with their bare hands, small knives, or even chair legs. For Iyana, however, that only stayed true for a moment longer as the woman slid behind one of her opponents like she was moving on ice, grabbing hold of their arm. The person went flying across the room and the knight seized an axe from them. Then she turned to the rest of her foes with an emotionless expression and went on the offensive.

Scarlett was no expert, but she could tell that the Tribe members were no slouches. Despite that, they didn't stand a chance as the woman wound between them effortlessly, slashing out with her stolen with calculated moves.

Soon, even more black-clad figures arrived from one of the room's entrances. They ignored the people hunkering down near the walls and immediately headed towards Iyana. Among them was a pair of mages who sent off two fireballs. A clear-blue light shone from the knight's weapon and two barriers of thin, glimmering ice formed to block both attacks. Shards of ice exploded out from the barriers and struck some of the nearby Tribe members, sticking to their bodies and beginning to spread over their limbs. Iyana sprang forward to meet as many of the newcomers as she could, deflecting their weapons as she aimed for the mages hiding behind their allies.

Scarlett watched the fight, trying to get a read on the situation. Why was the Tribe suddenly attacking like this, and how many of them were there? She didn't have any information about this event from the game, so she had no idea about their motivations here.

It couldn't be that they were here for her?

Just as she had that thought, a black hole tore the air open at the other end of the room, widening into an arch of living grey darkness. Even more figures with painted faces stepped out of the portal. Screams echoed out as some of the guests near them tried to move further away, and an elderly woman pressing against the wall fainted at the sight. A pair of men next to her tried carrying her towards one of the exits, but most were blocked at the moment.

At least none of the Tribe members seemed to care much about those guests who weren't part of the fight, focusing on keeping Iyana occupied as she tore through their numbers. Some of them communicated with each other through hand gestures before moving towards the knight, while a few others ran to their injured compatriots and started pulling them back towards the portal that was slowly closing.

Even with these numbers, Scarlett doubted the Tribe could do much against Iyana. Unless someone stronger arrived, it was only a matter of time before this room was cleared.

She shifted her eyes towards one of the exits that had become unguarded in their latest assault against the knight. Some of the other guests were already moving towards it, and she chose to follow. The Tribe of Sin wouldn't be attacking only this room. There had to be more of them. She needed to get a better grasp of the situation.

None of the Tribe members moved to stop her and the others. Soon, she and a group of about ten people were moving down a hallway away from the room, with her close to the front. Most of those around her looked inexperienced in combat and had worried expressions on their faces. Scarlett herself didn't know what to feel.

The Tribe *had* to be here for a reason. The question was if there was something here that they wanted, or if they were simply attacking a place they knew would host a lot of influential people.

She was just hoping they weren't here because they knew she had The Angler Man's heart.

She touched a finger to the spatial ring on her left hand. She had brought the heart with her just to be safe, but it wasn't something she wanted to bring out in an environment like this. If the wrong people saw it, that could raise far too many dangerous questions.

Soon they reached the next chamber, only to witness a similar scene there. Dozens of Tribe members were spread out around the room, doing battle with those guests that could fight back while the rest hid or took cover. The people behind Scarlett blanched at the sight, stepping back into the hallway they'd come from, as if reconsidering their choice of coming here. Some even turned around and started running back.

Perhaps that was the best choice. Back there, the empire's Second Sword was almost assured to get rid of the threats soon enough. Here, though, there didn't appear to be anyone even nearly as strong.

She tried looking across the room, where it connected to the ballroom through a narrow glass corridor, but she could barely see anything with all the people blocking the way.

All of this was just one huge mess. She really didn't want to get involved with this, but she also had no plans of going back yet. She at least wanted to find Evelyne and make sure the woman was okay. Running the barony without her in the future would be hard, and she had a responsibility as the current head of the house.

Ignoring the people clamoring behind her, Scarlett stepped inside the room and started moving along one of the walls towards the other end of the room. The Tribe members were too focused on their own opponents to do anything about the people that tried to escape here. Or maybe they simply didn't care. Whatever the reason, she hoped it would continue.

She had to step back when an elderly gentleman was pushed back and fell over a low table near her, letting out a grunt as blood ran down from a wound in his shoulder. He had been fighting one of the Tribe members—a broad-shouldered man with a bald head and three white lines drawn across his face—with nothing but a cane, which was admirable enough, but now he was at the mercy of his opponent.

The Tribe member stepped closer to finish the man off, but that was when his eyes passed over Scarlett. He stopped for a moment.

She stared at him. Worries about her being their objective after all rose to the forefront of her mind, and she got ready to defend herself. Just then, a yell sounded out as a young man with a chair in his hands came running. The youth slammed into the Tribe member while swinging the chair, and the broad-shouldered man shifted his attention away from Scarlett as he took one step back. Gripping hold of the chair's wooden leg, the man simply tore it and half of the furniture along with it.

To the youth's credit, he didn't let that affect him as he used what remained of the chair to try to force his foe away from the elderly gentleman on the floor. Unfortunately for him, the Tribe member easily countered his attacks, soon scoring a blow on the young man's side with a sword.

Scarlett observed the fight with hesitation in her heart. She glanced at the old man, whose sweat-covered face held a grimace as he tried using his cane to stand but was betrayed by his

own legs. For some reason, the image of an injured Garside with a destroyed shoulder came to mind.

She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. Then she raised a hand.

A mass of water formed around the Tribe member's sword just as he was about to strike again. The blade sliced through the liquid, but it was slowed down just enough for the youth to avoid it, holding a hand to his bloodied side. Then several spheres of fire appeared in front of the Tribe member, and the man's eyes widened as he leaped back to avoid them.

Conjuring even more flames to keep him in check, Scarlett walked over to the youth and the old man. All three of them stared at her now as the ring on her left finger lit up and a thin vial appeared in her hand. She studied the youth's wound for a moment—it looked to be mostly superficial—before kneeling down next to the older man and holding the vial out to him.

“Use this,” she ordered. “It will heal your injury.”

He looked between her and the vial for a second, then glanced at her clothes. They probably did not look like what one would usually wear for a ball. He coughed weakly, reaching to receive the potion.

“Thank you, my lady.” He gestured over at the Tribe member—who seemed unsure about what to do now—and the rest of the room. “I am not so foolish as to turn down help, but you shouldn't waste any more time on me. There are plenty who need more aid than I do.”

She swept her eyes across the space and the many similar battles that were taking place around them, including the dozens of people that were simply too afraid to move from where they were crouching down. She even counted a few children.

For some reason, all three of the men simply seemed to wait for whatever her response might be. After staying silent for a moment, she clicked her tongue.

She didn't *want* to mess with the Tribe of Sin. She didn't want to do anything that might risk breaking her deal with the Cabal. But there were clauses in their contract for situations like this. She would have been stupid not to include them. Assuming the Tribe's goal here wasn't her, there were things she could do and still remain within the bounds of the terms she had agreed to.

With a thought, the [Tiara of Lost Benediction] appeared on her forehead. Through its effect, the world around her became clearer. More focused.

She raised her hand again. Seeing that, the broad-shouldered man finally made a move against her. But it was too late. She had already sized up all the Tribe members in the room. None was at a level where her [Charms of Apperception] didn't show her their weak points.

Several dozens of Aqua Mines appeared all over the place, shining like bright little stars surrounded by water. There were at least two for every Tribe member, and the man moving towards Scarlett had over a handful appear right before him. A moment later, all of them exploded at once.

Bursts of steam and screams tore through the room as several Tribe members stumbled or fell with agonized and surprised screams. A couple had even been unlucky enough to get knocked out. Not every single Mine struck perfectly, but it was enough to give the defenders a momentary edge.

The man in front of Scarlett had his clothes torn apart by the barrage she'd aimed at him, and he had fallen to his knees on the ground with grit teeth.

Seemed like there was actually a pretty wide range of strength levels among the Tribe people present here.

Scarlett conjured another swarm of Aqua Mines around the room and detonated them once more. A handful more black-clad individuals fell to the ground, and many more received injuries when their opponents leaped at the opportunity. The man in front of her fell into a heap as well.

Sweeping her gaze across the room again, she felt that was almost enough. She didn't want to waste too much mana, so she only used a little bit more magic to help out a few more people that looked in need, but from there it didn't take long for most of what remained of the Tribe members to be dealt with. Anyone that tried to refocus their attention on her was swiftly dealt with.

Soon, the room fell silent. Only the muted sounds of fighting from the connecting rooms rang out, and the people here seemed to be trying to comprehend the situation. Everybody's attention turned to Scarlett. Several of those that had been fighting the Tribe of Sin sent her appreciative looks—many of those had injuries that would probably need checking on—while the rest simply seemed relieved that the danger seemed to be over for the time being. At least in here.

With a thought, Scarlett removed the legendary artifact from her forehead and looked at some of the bodies of the tribe members around her. She wasn't sure if they were dead or not, but that wasn't important right now.

What mattered was how the Cabal would react to this. It might be hard for them to verify it, but if they thought she had reneged on their deal, it would be problematic. She *was* allowed to defend herself and other people if she accidentally clashes with the Cabal's agents like this, though. As long as she didn't try to actively interfere with whatever their goal here might be. Their deal stipulated that whoever acted first held priority, after all.

Still, it might have been easiest to just ignore what happened here and let the Tribe do whatever they wanted. But she also had to take into consideration how others viewed her. It would look suspicious if she didn't help in staving off the attack at all.

“Ahem, my lady.”

She turned to look at the elderly gentleman again. He had finally managed to stand and moved up to her. His black jacket was dark from the blood on his shoulder, and his skin looked pale, but he appeared in slightly better condition now, at least. That healing potion should at least keep him going for a bit longer.

“May I inquire about your name?” he asked. “I want to know to whom I and my grandson owe our lives. I imagine many here share that sentiment.”

She looked at him. Behind him, the young man was staring at her with admiration in his gaze. Neither seemed to recognize her, but some of the others in the room probably did.

“I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford,” she said, sweeping her eyes across the other guests. “...And you owe me nothing.” She raised her voice. “I suggest that those of you who do not wish to remain here and risk your lives move on to the next chamber. A member of the Royal Guard is there, and she will be able to protect you better than anyone here can.”

Some of the people showed relieved expressions at hearing that.

“And what of you?” the gentleman asked.

Her eyes moved in the direction of the main ballroom. Now she could see parts of it through the hallway. There was definitely fighting going on there as well. “I still have other matters to attend to.”

“I see. If I were younger and in better condition I would have joined you, but I am afraid I would only be in the way as I am now.” The man leaned on his cane. It held several chip marks on it but remained in one piece. “I am Deverell Halewell. And while you say we owe you nothing, I am afraid that I disagree. Halewells do not forget easily, Baroness. The lives you saved tonight will be remembered.” He glanced at the Tribe members on the floor. “If we survive to see the end of it.”

She gave him a slightly surprised look, but then nodded shortly as a goodbye before she started moving again. Some of the other people in the room offered their thanks to her as she passed by as well, but she paid it little mind.

When she exited the room and entered the ballroom, she saw even more of the Tribe members than before. There were *so many* of them. Countless black-clad figures were spread out around the place, mixed in with those of the guests that were fighting them. It looked like one giant battlefield. Anywhere she turned her eyes, blows were traded as attacks of magic or aura flew through the air.

She spotted a few familiar faces among those doing battle. The most noticeable was Dean Godwin, floating in the air on the other end of the room as a wide array of runes surrounded him. His opponent was an old but powerfully built man who wore black rags and had a mane of unruly grey hair that reached down to his lower back. A rising mass of murky water rose behind the man as shots of lightning sprang forth from the runes around Godwin. Their magics clashed, forcing all those near them to flee the aftershocks.

Closer to Scarlett was Raimond, standing among a group of injured people. Barriers of golden light escaped from him in quick succession like small lights, blocking the attacks of a gathering of Tribe members who had him surrounded. At the same time, a glowing circle around the man seemed to heal the injuries of those around him. Even with all that going on, however, the man’s attention seemed aimed at stopping one particular Tribe member. A lithe woman with dark-blue hair and two short swords that moved like the wind, continuously being only a finger’s breadth away from getting past his barriers.

There were dozens of such battles taking place simultaneously, but Scarlett only briefly glanced at them as she searched around the room. More of those portals that the Tribe members appeared through were scattered around, something sending out more of them, but none seemed to focus on her in particular.

She started moving along the edge of the room, looking for Evelyne among all the chaos. Occasionally, she paused for only a moment to help someone out if they looked in dire need, but she preferred not drawing attention to herself. The whole room was in such disorder that she could move about surprisingly unhindered as long as she was careful.

After a while, when she started wondering if Evelyne was even here, she finally spotted the woman's auburn hair near one of the other walls. The Withersworths were with her, along with a large group of people that seemed to have just escaped from one of the side rooms. Evelyne and a few others were focusing on defending the group from the Tribe of Sin as they appeared to be making their way towards the ballroom's main entrance.

Scarlett paused when she suddenly saw Evelyne cast a spell that summoned several flaming disks in the air above her. They shot out and slammed into three Tribe members, with two others being protected by barriers of dirty water that seemed to originate from a mage that at the center of the group of attackers. One of Evelyne's fellow defenders ran forward with half a table in one hand and an axe in the other as they tried to protect her from more of the approaching enemies, and the young woman took that opportunity to cast another spell. A moment later, a storm of tiny burning rocks rained down over the Tribe. Half of it was blocked by a hastily erected sphere of water, but it still managed to deal decent damage.

Scarlett had never seen Evelyne actually fight, so it surprised her a little to see that she was this experienced. It was perhaps comparable to when Kat fought.

She shook her head. That wasn't what was important now.

Spotting a path that could take her closer to them without getting too close to any of the Tribe members, she started moving.

Evelyne seemed to notice her as she got closer.

"Scarlett?!" the woman cried out.

Some of the group behind her looked up as well, including Lady Withersworth and her husband. Both looked tired, but no worse for wear.

A new portal had formed a dozen or so meters away from Evelyne and her allies, spitting out more Tribe members that threatened to attack them. Scarlett raised her hand and the new arrivals were met by a swarm of Aqua Mines and fire.

Some immediately fell over from the unexpected attack, and she followed it up by once again donning the [Tiara of Lost Benediction] and creating a barrage of attacks against those that Evelyne had been fighting as well. She also managed to create an opening that allowed her to focus some of her attacks on the water mage that had been giving Evelyne trouble. The mage, in turn, was forced to place more attention on protecting themselves.

Evelyne and the others looked on with disbelief at first, but then they recognized the opportunity that had been given them.

Scarlett watched as they started beating back the Tribe members, and she continued to use her magic to support them where possible. It was at times like these when she was facing a large number of relatively weak opponents—excluding the mage, most were perhaps slightly under Shin and Allyssa’s levels if she were to guess—that her magic really had its time to shine. With the buff the tiara gave her, it was almost laughably easy to keep her opponents in check for her allies to deal with, even though it did wear on her mana stores.

Soon, most of the Tribe members closest to them had been dealt with, and Evelyne and her group continued moving as Scarlett reached them. Evelyne stared at her with wide eyes, an expression that was shared by many of the others around the woman as well.

“Scarlett. Was all of that really you?”

“It was, but that is not important now. I presume you are aiding in bringing these people to safety?” Scarlett glanced over the group, giving a brief nod to Lady Withersworth and her family.

“Yes, I was—”

“Then I will help you. Let us not waste any more time.”

Her eyes immediately went back to the rest of the room, keeping track of any enemies that might target their group again. She paused, however, when she realized that the enemy was suddenly retreating for some reason. A dozen more portals opened up to replace those that had almost closed, but instead of spewing out reinforcement, all the Tribe members around them had started disengaging from their fights and were picking up their fallen allies. She doubted she was the reason this happened, but all of them were escaping back through the portals now.

It was insane the efficiency with which they left, even when hounded by the attacks of those they had just been fighting. The old man that Dean Godwin had been fighting and some of the other strong individuals belonging to the Tribe had been covering the retreat, and all Scarlett could do was stare as barely a minute had passed and the majority were already gone.

Just as suddenly as the attack had started, it was suddenly over.

Scarlett felt even more confused now, as the same question that had popped up when she first saw them remained at the forefront of her mind.

What the hell *had* they been here for?