

## 274: Conclusions

Using the armillary sphere in Mistress' office, Scarlett teleported back to the restroom where she had originally started her disappearing act. From there, the Emperor's Forum was only a short walk away. As she entered the vast chamber, she noticed that most of the guests had already returned, though she was relieved to see she wasn't the last to arrive, with both the emperor and some of the people at the central table still missing.

Lady Withersworth and Duke Valentino's wife both greeted her as she approached their seats in the galleries. The former fixed Scarlett with a penetrating gaze, not hiding the slight curiosity in her eyes. "I trust your meeting with your acquaintance went well?"

Scarlett settled into her seat, smoothing her dress. "It went as well as could be expected," she replied evenly. "There were a few unexpected developments, but nothing of great consequence."

"Hmm." Lady Withersworth's lips curved into an amused smile. "If you say so, my dear."

Their attention was soon drawn to the front of the chamber as the royal herald's voice rang out. The massive doors atop the grand staircase swung open, revealing the emperor and his entourage returning. Scarlett's gaze moved to the raven-haired woman walking just behind and to the side of the emperor with a commanding presence.

Mistress had presumably finished up whatever talks she'd had with Malachi. Scarlett couldn't help but wonder what those discussions had been about.

The emperor took his seat on the throne at the head of the circular table at the chamber's center, and the forum fell into a respectful hush as he surveyed the gathered nobles.

"I trust everyone has had the opportunity to reflect further on the matter at hand," his voice carried easily through the room. "Let us resume our discussion regarding the establishment of a barrier across imperial lands to prevent the Tribe of Sin from utilising their teleportation capabilities. Those who wish to speak, make your voices heard."

There was a pregnant silence, then the chamber erupted into passionate discourse once more. Voices from both Lord Withersworth and his allies' faction and their opponents rose in a cacophony of arguments and counterarguments, and Scarlett almost found herself marveling at how little the recess seemed to have tempered the intensity of the debate.

Accusations and rebuttals flew across the chamber almost like on a battlefield. Concerns about the astronomical costs, the crippling of trade routes, and the weakening of defensive strategies reliant on the Kilnstone network continued to be brought up, met by equally fervent arguments about the necessity of combating the Tribe of Sin's attacks before anything else.

One noble asked what would happen if the empire's eastern front faced a sudden attack from the Undead Council or monsters from the Unresting Steppes, or if the unlikely but not impossible threat from Voneia Kingdom to the west forced them to rapidly deploy troops that they simply couldn't without the Kilnstones. To that, both the Imperial General and several associates of different knight orders suggested that stationing more permanent units in those locations would not be an impossibility, though some seemed to balk at the mere notion.

As the discussions raged on, Scarlett found it increasingly challenging to gauge which side held the advantage. Both factions boasted influential figures as their speakers, but simply judging by the number of voices, those who opposed erecting the barrier appeared to hold a slight numerical edge. It did not go past her notice, however, that some groups, like the Followers of Ittar, remained conspicuously silent throughout the proceedings.

Scarlett herself was a bit conflicted on the matter. While she recognised the benefits of stabilising the empire and had resolved not to work against the barrier if driven through, that didn't mean she had no reservations. Beyond her suspicions about how someone like Mistress would leverage this in her favor, the inconvenience of losing access to the Kilnstone network would be noticeable. There were also questions of the costs that might be levied on nobles like herself, counterbalanced by the possibility of her estate being used as a pylon like Mistress had suggested.

Not to mention how this dramatic shift would further diverge things from the familiar game narrative she remembered, potentially diminishing the usefulness of her foreknowledge. The implications and possible consequences of this weren't something she'd had the time to consider yet.

Still, it wasn't as if her opinion held any sway in the context of this conclave anyhow. Nothing she said would likely change whatever outcome was decided upon.

Eventually, after what felt like ages of heated debate, the emperor raised a hand for silence. The chamber fell quiet as all eyes turned to the man seated on his throne.

"I can see that this remains a contentious issue, even after our extended discussions," he began, folding his hands before him. "This does place me in a challenging position regarding the final decision." He paused, his gaze sweeping across the assembled

nobles and dignitaries. A palpable tension seemed to descend over the Forum as they awaited his verdict.

“...After careful consideration, we will proceed with this proposal,” the emperor declared. “Henceforth, the project shall be known as the Emyreal Barrier. Though it may not align with your wishes, I trust that everyone here will lend their full support to ensure its success for the sake of our empire.”

The reaction was delayed, but it was almost as if a collective gasp rippled through the chamber, followed by a din of whispers and exclamations. Scarlett glanced to her side, noting the serious expressions on Lady Withersworth’s face and those of many others nearby.

She wondered how this decision would shape things from here. It seemed to have left many of those present both surprised and concerned, even among those who hadn’t been entirely opposed to the proposal itself. Presumably, part of that concern came from the precedent set by the emperor using a conclave to push through such a major policy decision.

How would the rest of the empire’s nobility react? Those who weren’t present for tonight’s conclave. This included influential individuals like Duke Tyndall and Marchioness Thackeray of Wildscar.

No doubt many would question whether the emperor had already decided on this course of action from the start, or if the opinions brought forth during the conclave had truly influenced his choice.

The growing murmur of voices was abruptly silenced as Mistress struck her staff against the floor, sending a shockwave of sound through the chamber.

“With that decided,” the emperor continued, his tone measured as if to soothe those unsettled by his earlier proclamation, “the specifics will still need to be further explored by the Imperial Treasury and Ustrum Assembly, as well as deliberated by the Imperial Diet for the allocation of funds.”

While his words didn’t entirely dispel the tense atmosphere, none of the powerful nobles who had previously spoken out against the barrier seemed willing to openly challenge his decision.

Following this, the emperor announced this matter closed and called for the assembly to discuss other matters. The topics shifted to smaller concerns, mostly related to cooperative efforts and initiatives that the gathered nobles and dignitaries could undertake or expand upon. Though these discussions remained outwardly cordial in

comparison to earlier, an undercurrent of unease persisted throughout the remainder of the night.

As midnight came and went, the conclave began to wind down. No other notable subjects were brought up after the 'Empyrean Barrier' discussion, and finally, the royal herald officially announced the conclave's conclusion. The emperor and his direct entourage rose, preparing to take their leave. Scarlett's gaze followed them as they ascended the stairs towards the exit, lingering on both the emperor himself and Mistress' alter ego until they disappeared from view.

And with that, it was over.



"Scarlett," an even voice called out behind her as she walked down one of Dawnlight Palace's corridors outside the Emperor's Forum, Lady Withersworth at her side.

Scarlett turned to see Leon approaching, his polished black-and-gold armor gleaming in the soft light of the hallway. His hand rested casually on the hilt of his sword, and his dark black hair swayed slightly with each purposeful stride.

"Sir Leon," she greeted him, her tone cool and measured as she ignored some of the curious gazes around them. "It has been some time."

Throughout the conclave, even during her 'interrogation', the man had barely spared her a glance. Yet now, with the proceedings concluded, he spared no time in seeking her out. She supposed she had to respect how dutiful he was, even if it felt somewhat rude considering their official relationship.

Not that she was judging.

"Lady Withersworth," Leon said as he came to a stop before them, offering the older woman a respectful nod. "A pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise, Sir Leon," Lady Withersworth replied, an entertained smile playing at the corners of her mouth as her eyes flitted between him and Scarlett. "Perhaps I should give you young ones some privacy?"

Leon shook his head. "That won't be necessary. This won't take long." He turned back to Scarlett, his expression unreadable as he studied her for a moment, as if weighing his words. "You've been...busy lately," he finally said.

Scarlett met his gaze evenly. "I have, yes. Though I imagine the same could be said for you."

"Indeed." Leon's fingers drummed lightly on his sword hilt as the tall man looked down at her. "...Scarlett, I'm not sure if you're aware, but it's possible that my family is...taking action against you."

She arched an eyebrow at him. That's what this was about?

"I had noticed," she stated dryly.

"There's likely more at play than just what transpired during the conclave," he said.

"If there is, then Marquis Delmon and his wife will have no one to blame but themselves for the consequences," Scarlett replied coolly. "That said, I personally doubt there will be much more than this."

Leon's brow furrowed. "You don't know my family like I do, Scarlett. Especially not my mother."

"True, I do not. However, I know certain facts related to them that you do not." Her eyes locked with his.

It was clear from his expression that Leon didn't fully grasp her meaning, but Scarlett was content to leave it at that. She had plans to ensure that those who had tried to interfere with her tonight would learn that she wasn't worth the trouble, and the Delmons were at the top of that list. If possible, though, she would prefer an approach that was a bit more subtle than an outright confrontation.

"Was that all you wished to say?" she asked, steering the conversation in a new direction. "If there is something more substantial you would like to discuss, you are welcome to visit my mansion tomorrow. This is not exactly the ideal setting for an extended conversation."

Leon's frown eased slightly. "I'm afraid I won't have that luxury. The order is moving out again in the morning. But there are things I'd like to discuss with you when the opportunity arises." He glanced briefly at Lady Withersworth before returning his attention to Scarlett. "Also, I heard what happened to your sister. You have my condolences, and I hope she recovers swiftly."

Scarlett's lips tightened for a moment before she quickly composed herself. "I am certain that she will," she replied in a measured voice.

"That's all for now." Leon's gaze swept the corridor around them, seeming to take note of the few remaining guests who were casting curious glances in their direction. "I'll contact you the next time I'm near Freybrook," he added.

"Very well," Scarlett replied.

With that, Leon turned and strode away. Scarlett's eyes followed his armored form for a few seconds.

"Ah, the complexities of youthful relationships," Lady Withersworth remarked casually beside her.

Scarlett spared the elderly woman a sidelong glance. "By now, I am sure you have noticed that Sir Leon's and my relationship is not of that nature."

"True enough, but it's surprisingly more cordial than rumors would have an old lady believe," Lady Withersworth said. "That's more than can be said for many young nobles."

"Perhaps," Scarlett replied noncommittally. It didn't matter too much, as their engagement would end when convenient anyway.

Ignoring the remaining looks from those around them, Scarlett turned around and continued down Dawnlight Palace's corridors. Guided by an attendant, they soon reached its grand entrance hall, where they stepped out into the extensive square courtyard outside, now bathed in the cool light of a starry night sky. A procession of carriages glided up as other guests took their leave, the vehicles departing in a trail of lantern light and clacking hooves.

Scarlett and Lady Withersworth waited only a few minutes under the warmth of Scarlett's pyrokinesis—using what remained of her mana and had recovered during the conclave—before their own carriage arrived. The older woman would be returning with Scarlett to her estate, continuing her stay for the foreseeable future while her husband attended to matters in the capital.

As their carriage rolled away from the palace, crossing the long bridge that connected it to the rest of the city, a comfortable silence settled over the cabin. Scarlett gazed out at the frozen expanse of Rellaria Lake stretching out before Elystead, her mind racing with thoughts and reflections on the night's events, even as fatigue tugged at her consciousness.

The evening had unfolded in ways she hadn't anticipated. While she wouldn't go as far as to call it entertaining, it had certainly left her with much to think about. Perhaps that mental stimulation was the only reason she'd managed to stay alert throughout the lengthy proceedings.

The conclave itself had been more of a surprise than she'd supposed. Even going into it, Scarlett hadn't known quite what to expect, having been led to believe it was mostly just for the airs. The flimsy—albeit somewhat accurate—accusations leveled at her and Duke Valentino during the proceedings had been one thing, but this 'Empyrean Barrier' business was entirely outside the realm of her predictions.

She wouldn't be surprised if this decision triggered another wave of violent attacks from the Tribe once they learned of it and attempted to prevent its implementation. When that time came, the empire would need to be fully prepared to deal with the consequences.

As for Scarlett's own interactions throughout the night, there had been lots of unexpected developments from those as well. Not only had Deacon Solnate's approach and 'request' to meet with Raimond caught her off guard, but her meeting with Mistress had also yielded some new revelations.

Absently, Scarlett touched a finger to her temple, where her headache had persisted through most of the day. Mistress' words about the legacy were concerning. While Scarlett wasn't sure how much credence to give the woman's warnings about its dangers, she couldn't deny the clear side effects experienced when overusing it. The question that nagged at her was just how far those effects might go.

So far, she'd yet to experience anything worse than headaches, which often subsided quickly as long as she stopped using the legacy. Did that mean it was safe to continue using it? Considering it allowed her to freely read Zuverian, interact with Zuverian artifacts, understand runes and spell arrays to a certain degree, and even know about arcane practices such as the Rite of Primal Harmonisation, she was hesitant to simply abandon it. But if it genuinely posed a danger to her life, was it worth the risk?

The uncertainty was the problem. She found it hard to believe that Thainnith, even if it had just been a remnant of the legendary archmage, would knowingly endanger her life. But other than him, Mistress and The Angler Man were the only individuals Scarlett knew that might have reliable knowledge on these matters.

One thing she could be sure of, though, was that there was *something* special about her, something that offered her a measure of protection, if Mistress' words were to be believed. The most likely candidate was the system, or some mechanism related to it, but its inner workings still weren't something Scarlett could even perceive.

For now, she would probably continue using the legacy when necessary, but perhaps be more careful in other scenarios until she learned more.

At least she'd already reaped some significant benefits from it. The creation of the [Crown of Flame's Benediction (Unique)], for one, genuinely excited Scarlett. While she wasn't yet certain of its full capabilities, she was eager to explore its potential and the abilities it possessed. This night had been worthwhile for that artifact alone.

Moreover, it had been unexpectedly fortuitous that she had also been given the opportunity to glean more about the first princess' disappearance after her meeting with Mistress. *What* she'd learned wasn't necessarily as fortuitous—or conclusive, for that matter—and she still didn't know what implications the existence of the book she'd found in the princess' quarters had, but it was a lead to pursue.

The subsequent encounter with the second princess was a bit of a shock, but despite her initial concerns, she didn't believe it would pose a real problem. Nevertheless, it might be best if she was careful in any future interactions with the girl. And with the entire imperial family in general, if possible. She suspected she wouldn't have been nearly as lenient or accommodating to the princess if it hadn't been for the original Scarlett's lingering reverence for the imperial family.

Though she had to admit, the fact that the girl reminded her of things from her own past likely played a small part as well.

Still, even if she planned to be careful in the future, she would need to figure out a way to contact the second princess if she uncovered more information about the first princess. She had, after all, given her word.

Beldon was likely her best option for this, but for some reason, she felt uncomfortable with entrusting something like that to the man. Finding an alternative method would be preferable.

Scarlett heaved a light sigh as she sank deeper into her seat, feeling her eyelids grow heavier.

Whatever. Determining the exact course of action for that could wait for another day. Right now, she was looking forward to a night of well-earned rest. Tomorrow, she would need to wrap up a few more matters in the capital before she could return to Freybrook.

As the carriage rolled on through the night, Scarlett allowed her thoughts to drift, the events of the evening slowly fading into the background and more of the exhaustion began to claim her.