

## 268: Motioning

Scarlett returned to her seat in the galleries, where Lady Withersworth and Duchess Valentino awaited her. The former greeted her with a knowing smile as she settled down, adjusting the fabric of her dress.

“For a moment there, I half-expected Count Hayden to spontaneously combust before the entire conclave,” Lady Withersworth said, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “But it seems my concerns were unfounded. Though it seems you did not have to do much yourself, you handled the situation with admirable grace, considering things, dear.”

Scarlett cast a sidelong glance at the older woman, noting the widening of the duchess’ eyes at the first remark. She then turned her attention to the central table below. “You have been listening to too many of Miss Hale’s fanciful tales, Lady Withersworth,” she replied coolly. “I am not so hasty as to publicly disfigure a high-ranking noble of the empire, regardless of the provocation.”

She just entertained the idea of doing so.

Lady Withersworth let out a light chuckle. “No, of course not. Yet you managed to silence him quite effectively, despite your restraint. That was a rather curious remark you made earlier. I daresay the count will be occupied with some rather urgent housekeeping in the coming weeks.”

“He is welcome to try, if he so desires.” Scarlett’s sharp gaze fixed on the man where he sat at the table, a frown etched across his features.

Lady Withersworth wasn’t the only one who had picked up on Scarlett’s loaded comment and Count Hayden’s reaction to it. Whispers would undoubtedly spread, and quiet inquiries would probably be made, regardless of what happened next. The count probably hoped that Scarlett either lacked concrete evidence or chose not to disclose it, buying him time to cover his tracks where necessary. As for Scarlett, it would probably be enough to simply call in a favor from Beldon to set things in motion.

She doubted Count Hayden would lose his title or anything, but it would at least send a message. In that way, she was lucky. The count was pretty easy for her to target, compared to some others.

Her gaze drifted briefly to Duke Valentino, then to Lord Withersworth and his associates, who had remained uncharacteristically subdued throughout most of the proceedings. She supposed that she had inadvertently eliminated one of their political adversaries from the political game of chess currently unfolding. While she wasn’t necessarily allied with either the Duke or Lord Withersworth—she didn’t even know the latter’s agenda yet—but maybe it didn’t make much difference in the grand scheme of things. At the very least, they were unlikely to become her enemies in the immediate future.

Imperial Advisor Blackwood’s resonant voice soon cut through the murmur of conversation around the chamber, calling the assembly to attention. The emperor redirected the focus of the proceedings back to the matters at hand, encouraging open discussion on how best to

allocate and position the combined forces and resources of the gathered houses and factions to combat the escalating monster incursions.

Most of the logistical groundwork had already been laid, either by the imperial forces and other official bodies or by independent groups like the Followers and Shield Guilds. Now, though, the emperor sought to foster dialogue about how they could further collaborate and the like. Scarlett only half-listened to the ensuing discussions, to be honest, massaging the bridge of her nose occasionally to alleviate her dull headache.

Though these talks were technically relevant to her barony, given its ongoing relief initiatives, she wasn't familiar enough with the details to keep up with all that was being said. Despite her recent efforts to educate herself on the subject and keep on top of reports, she was still far from an expert in these kinds of operations. Fortunately, with Lady Withersworth overseeing matters while Evelyne was recuperating, the barony already had things covered.

That's why Scarlett allowed herself a moment of rest so that she could conserve her mental energy and focus on navigating the remainder of this evening.

As the discussions wore on, finally, Lord Withersworth rose from his seat. Immediately, Scarlett's attention returned to the present. A hush fell over the assembly as people's eyes shifted to the older gentleman, who had been silent throughout the evening.

"That dolt," Scarlett heard Lady Withersworth mutter beside her. "Look at him standing so proudly when it's clear as day he's been neglecting sleep and proper meals. If he's intent on leaving me a widow, he could at least have the decency to update his will first."

Oblivious to his wife's biting remarks, Lord Withersworth cleared his throat, the sound ringing through the now-silent chamber. "Esteemed peers, while many crucial matters have been addressed tonight already, I wish to bring forth a separate motion for consideration. One that might represent a matter of almost unprecedented significance. What I am about to present is, in the opinion of myself and my distinguished associates, the most comprehensive strategy for countering the threat posed by the Tribe of Sin and the ongoing monster attacks. Indeed, it may prove to be one of the most ambitious undertakings our great empire has seen in decades."

An air of anticipation fell over the Forum as those gathered waited for him to continue.

"We have been collaborating with select mages and wizards from the towers and the Ustrum Assembly to develop this motion," he said, his gaze sweeping across the chamber. "Once you hear the details, I'm certain you will all grasp its importance, if not its necessity. In essence, we have devised a method to inhibit the Tribe of Sin's teleportation capabilities within all imperial lands, effectively preventing them from launching any further attacks on our settlements at will."

A wave of astonished murmurs rippled through the galleries, and even Scarlett was taken aback slightly by the statement. That was a pretty bold claim.

"Are you in earnest, Lord Withersworth?" Duke Roscoe asked from his seat opposite at the central table, his voice carrying a healthy dose of skepticism.

“I am,” Lord Withersworth replied.

The duke’s brow furrowed. “...That is an extraordinary claim, if so. But there must be more to it, else you wouldn’t bring such a proposal before this conclave. I have never heard of magic capable of such a feat on such a vast scale.”

“I can assure you that it is most definitely possible.” Lord Withersworth straightened the sleeves on his clothes. “I have personally consulted with numerous reputable mages, including Elystead Tower’s Dean Godwin, the Ustrum Assembly’s Master Docent Ainsworth, and our own Imperial Advisor Blackwood. All have confirmed its viability.”

He paused, allowing his words to sink in. “However, this would be no simple task to execute. My colleagues and I, along with our dedicated subordinates, have spent countless sleepless nights over the past two weeks scrutinising every aspect of this motion. By all accounts, an endeavour of this magnitude would rival great historical projects like the construction of the Everdust Barrier or the Singing Sands Palace on the Luicean Isles. Given the urgency of our situation, we would also need to complete it within an extremely compressed timeframe.”

Scarlett heard hushed conversations breaking out around her. She glanced at Lady Withersworth, trying to gauge her reaction, but the woman looked as taken aback by what her husband was suggesting as everyone else.

It had been clear that Lord Withersworth and certain other influential figures tied to the crown had been planning *something* big lately, but even Beldon’s network had failed to uncover the details. The fact that they had managed to keep it hidden even from Mirage was, in its own way, impressive. All those involved must have been working under the strictest of confidentiality agreements, which meant they were serious about being able to present this motion tonight without giving the opposition time to prepare.

“What exactly is the scale we are discussing here?” the Imperial General asked, leaning forward with keen interest.

Lord Withersworth gestured towards Lord Fitzroy, the High Treasurer, seated to his right.

Lord Fitzroy’s expression was grave as he steepled his fingers on the table before him. “By our current measures, an endeavour of this magnitude would require funds with a value of at least four billion solars, to be amassed within a month.”

An uproar of gasps and exclamations erupted around the chamber as the assembled nobles and dignitaries heard the figure. Even Scarlett found herself staring at the man in disbelief.

*Four billion solars? In one month?* That was insane. She had thought she’d accumulated a pretty considerable wealth for a baroness over the past six months or so, but even her fortune—including what she’d already spent—only amounted to a few million solars. A duke might possess significantly more, but she doubted any would have more than a couple hundred million solars. And even then, much of that wealth would likely be tied up in lands, businesses, and other assets.

“This is preposterous!” someone shouted from the galleries, their voice quickly joined by a chorus of similar sentiments.

“Are you here simply to waste our time?” a noble at the central table demanded, glaring at Lord Withersworth and his associates.

“Quite the opposite,” Count Stansfold, one of the men seated to Lord Withersworth’s left, answered with unflappable calm. “This is the single most effective way of handling the Tribe of Sin, as we would be stripping them of their most potent weapon. Countless of our citizens currently live in fear of sudden attacks, and as many here tonight have been so eager to point out, our forces are strained to deal with the escalating incursions. This proposal is the best method for safeguarding both our people and the empire simultaneously.”

“If it weren’t impossibly expensive, perhaps,” one voice retorted.

“What would this mean for the Kilnstone network?” another asked.

“It would also be affected,” Lord Withersworth admitted.

This prompted another wave of outraged reactions.

Duke Roscoe shook his head. “So this motion of yours would not only cripple our empire’s finances, but our own trade and logistics as well?”

“The empire is more than capable of functioning without access to the Kilnstone network,” the Chancellor of Trade interjected. “And since the attack two weeks ago, we have implemented additional measures to reduce our reliance on it. The routes established to transport relief supplies will be more than sufficient to handle the additional strain that the absence of the Kilnstons would represent.”

“And how long would this last?” someone called out.

“Until the current threat has passed, or as long as necessary,” came the reply.

“There is no telling how long that could be!”

The debate intensified, with seemingly every person in the chamber eager to voice their opinion on the matter.

“What do you make of this, dear?” Lady Withersworth asked, turning to Scarlett.

Scarlett considered the woman for a moment before shifting her gaze back to the central table. “I am reserving judgement,” she replied. “For now.”

She had lots of thoughts on this, but much of it depended on the finer details.

“Tell us more about the specifics of this proposal,” Duke Valentino said as the chamber finally began to quiet. The portly nobleman fixed his gaze on Lord Withersworth and the rest. “Is this a one-time cost? Once this ‘barrier’ on the Tribe’s teleportation abilities is removed, can we reactivate it if necessary?”

“Not quite, and it depends,” Lord Withersworth replied. “The ‘barrier’, as you put it, consists of a single immense spell array spread over our lands, but casting and maintaining it would

require establishing vital infrastructure throughout the empire. The Kilnstone network would serve as its foundation, but we would also need to construct certain structures—'pylons', our mages call them—near each Kilnstone. These pylons require significant investment in rare and expensive materials as well as ingredients, not to mention skilled labor. Much of this would be provided by the mage towers and the Assembly, with several large merchant guilds aiding in sourcing the necessary materials not already available to us. This accounts for a large portion of the initial cost, but the majority relates to the upkeep of the array, which requires vast amounts of mana to function. As for what happens after we deactivate it, the pylons themselves will remain, so they can be used again at an added cost."

Duke Valentino seemed to consider the response thoughtfully, and many heads around the chamber nodded along as if that sounded reasonable. However, Scarlett noticed more who shook their heads in disagreement.

"I still fail to see how this can in any way be considered a reasonable measure," Duke Roscoe spoke up, his voice tinged with frustration. "In a crisis such as this, we shouldn't waste our time chasing grandiose dreams, but rather focus on practical solutions that actually address the problems before us."

"This *is* a solution that addresses those problems," Count Stanfold said. "And more effectively than anything else proposed thus far."

"And how would it be financed?" Duchess Swail questioned. "Four billion solars gathered in such a short period is not a burden the crown alone can bear. It would inevitably require significant contributions from us nobles, who are already stretched thin defending our own lands. How much are we expected to sacrifice for this project at the expense of our people?"

Lord Fitzroy answered her concern in a measured voice. "We acknowledge that it is a substantial cost, and to demonstrate its commitment, the crown would finance half of this venture, even if it means transferring ownership of a portion of the royal treasury's reserves, imperial land, and reduced budgets for other court expenses. However, the remaining half must indeed be covered by contributions from the noble houses and other institutions. This is a collective investment in the security and future of our empire, and everyone must do their part."

"And how would we decide how much each house must pay?" the duchess asked.

"That is still up for discussion," Lord Fitzroy replied. "But before we can come to an agreement on that, we must first decide whether to proceed with this motion at all."

Duke Roscoe scoffed. "This is truly absurd. We could never go through with this. It's more likely to spell the end of our empire than anything else. You claim that this 'barrier' would work, but how can we even be certain of that much?"

There were sounds of agreement from those gathered.

A soft, melodious chuckle echoed throughout the space, causing Duke Roscoe to frown as his gaze turned to the figure seated to the right of the emperor's throne. "...Did I say something amusing, Lady Blackwood?"

The raven-haired woman seated there shook her head gently. “Certainly not intentionally, Duke. I did, however, find it funny that you would so openly doubt Lord Withersworth and the others’ claims in my presence, after having heard my endorsement of them. Should I perhaps take offense?”

“That was not my intent.”

“Then there is nothing to question, is there? The array would work precisely as described.” Lady Blackwood’s lips curved into an enigmatic smile. “Whether it’s worth the price is another matter entirely.”

Duke Roscoe fell silent for several seconds before turning back to the others. “...Let us suppose that it will work as claimed. Nevertheless, this is not a decision that can be made here. These matters should be deliberated within the Imperial Diet, not in this forum.”

“That is where you are mistaken,” Lord Withersworth said. “While the Imperial Diet is indeed where these decisions would normally be made, according to the Edict of Sovereign Necessity enacted by Emperor Gautier the Second, during times of crisis, conclaves called to address them are empowered to make swift and decisive actions to safeguard the realm when necessary. In fact, is that not precisely why we are here today?”

His words were met with a fresh wave of whispers around the chamber, this time less flattering ones, and more than one noble shot glares in the direction of Lord Withersworth and his colleagues.

Scarlett couldn’t blame them, considering the audacity hidden in that statement.

Technically, he hadn’t said anything incorrect. This was indeed the supposed purpose of a conclave like this one. But there was a reason not all of the empire’s nobles had chosen to attend tonight, beyond simply being busy. While officially conclaves *could* be called and used to enact far-reaching, empire-wide decisions, traditionally, they just weren’t. And the reason for that was simple.

The nobles wouldn’t like it.

In the empire, the emperor wielded considerable power, but he did not hold absolute authority. As Duke Roscoe had pointed out, the Imperial Diet and other governmental bodies were often involved when it came to certain major decisions, and this wasn’t something the emperor could easily circumvent.

Meanwhile, while a conclave was ostensibly a gathering of influential individuals to deliberate on pressing issues, the institution itself was a relic of the empire’s early days. This was reflected in the fact that, regardless of what consensus those attending might collaboratively reach, the final decision was left up to one person and one person alone: the emperor.

In theory, this allowed the emperor to bypass traditional channels and push through decisions that might otherwise face opposition. However, even the most loyal nobles would view this power with suspicion if abused. Consequently, rarely any emperors had ever invoked this

privilege, and conclaves had largely become ceremonial affairs. But now, Lord Withersworth and his allies were brazenly defying this long-standing precedent.

Honestly, Scarlett would have been angry as well.

As heated debates erupted around her, Scarlett's gaze drifted to the emperor, who sat silently observing the proceedings without giving away anything in his demeanour.

Given that several of his officials were among those proposing this plan, there was no doubt he'd been aware of it beforehand. The question was whether he actively supported it or was merely allowing Lord Withersworth and the others to present it as a means of gauging the conclave's reaction.

As for Scarlett, one reason she had been caught off guard by this proposal was because it wasn't something she remembered from the game. There could be many explanations for this discrepancy, including the possibility that it didn't get through this conclave, or that the accelerated timeline of events had pushed the emperor and nobles to consider more drastic measures.

But even if the specifics were unfamiliar to her, certain aspects of this situation did ring true to her expectations.

Which led her to wonder who the original architect of this proposal had been.

Her gaze shifted to Evelia Blackwood, seated at the emperor's right. The woman didn't look at all bothered by the continued buzz of discussions in the chamber, even as impassioned advocates on both sides made their cases.

Eventually, the man everyone had been waiting to hear from spoke up.

"I understand that this is a divisive issue for those gathered here tonight," the emperor said, his voice cutting through the clamor. "Indeed, this motion is both drastic and far-reaching. Such momentous decisions cannot be taken lightly, even in circumstances as dire as ours. However..." He paused, allowing a tense silence to fall over the Forum as all waited for his next words. "For now, let us adjourn for a brief recess. This will allow everyone to consider the matter further and gather their thoughts. We will reconvene to resume these discussions shortly."

Scarlett frowned slightly as several disappointed murmurs swept through the assembled people.

While she had known a break was on the agenda, she didn't understand the point. It was already getting late, and she would much have preferred to wrap things up rather than linger for any longer than necessary.

She released a weary sigh. Still, she supposed this intermission could serve her plans for the night as well.

As people gradually rose from their seats amid animated conversations, Scarlett's eyes returned to the emperor momentarily before passing over Leon, who maintained his vigilant stance at the chamber's edge.

She probably wouldn't be able to talk with him quite yet, so that would have to wait. But there was someone else she wanted to speak with.

She stood and turned to Lady Withersworth and Duke Valentino's wife. "There is someone I must find during this recess. I will rejoin you when the session resumes."

"Oh? Very well, dear. Take care. If you need me before we reconvene, I'll be attempting to corner that oaf of a husband of mine for a much-needed conversation."

Scarlett nodded. She didn't envy Lord Withersworth right now. "I will keep that in mind."

With that, she made to leave the gallery.

It was time to have a private audience with a certain advisor.