

250: Draconian encounters

Evelyne woke up to strange noises in the distance, accompanied by what sounded like faint cries. Groggily blinking her eyes open, she looked around the dark bedroom, her mind gradually awakening.

What was that?

She slid her bedsheet aside and slowly rose from the bed, her bare feet touching down on the cold floorboards. Walking over to the window, she drew back the curtains to peer out at the snow-blanketed inner courtyard situated at the heart of the estate.

Could it have been part of her dream?

She paused as she noticed a large shadow sweep across the gloomy morning sky. Squinting, she continued looking, questioning if her mind was playing tricks on her.

Then there was an explosion. Plumes of smoke began to rise from the city's edge, and her eyes widened as the scene quickly worsened. More and more smoke spread, each across different points in the city. Suddenly, the entire skyline above Autumnwell was illuminated by a massive red light from some unknown source.

Evelyne immediately recognized it. That was a flare spell. A warning.

The city was being attacked.

She spun around and rushed to the closet, quickly dressing before darting out of the room. In the mansion's hallways, she encountered several confused servants in their nightwear, whispering among themselves, trying to understand what was happening.

Now fully alert, Evelyne made it to the foyer, where a man in a brown uniform with wavy, flaxen-blond hair and a neatly trimmed mustache was already organizing some of the roused servants, issuing instructions to gather even more of them.

The head butler of the estate.

As the man noticed Evelyne, he turned to face her. "Ah, Lady Hartford, my apologies for the commotion. It seems the city is under attack, you see. But, rest assured, the disturbance caused by whoever these miscreants may be will be promptly addressed by the city's stalwart defenders, I'm sure."

"Do we know what's happening?" Evelyne asked, scanning the anxious faces in the hall.

"Regrettably, we do not, but Milord has ordered me to assemble everyone for their safety. Naturally, this includes esteemed guests such as yourself, hence why someone was dispatched to your room — though that now seems redundant." He added the last part with a rueful shake of his head.

Scarlett had warned Evelyne about this man's 'personality', but she'd personally found him far less bothersome than her sister had implied.

Her eyes drifted away from the butler to the dark courtyard visible through one of the nearby windows. "Where are Lord and Lady Withersworth?" she asked, gaze sharpening slightly as flickers of red reflected in the sky. So there were fires?

"When I spoke to His Lordship, he was in his quarters along with Her Ladyship," the butler responded, before clearing his throat and addressing the murmuring staff. "Please, let us ensure decorum and focus on attending to the matters at hand. Any loquaciousness can be left for when you are *not* on the clock."

Evelyne moved to the corner of the room, her thoughts racing as she watched him continue directing the estate's staff, with more joining them intermittently.

Scarlett had warned her of an impending crisis that would befall the empire. Her sister had known that *something* big would happen. Was this attack part of that? Who was orchestrating it? The Tribe of Sin? If so, it seemed likely that the chaos wasn't confined to Autumnwell alone. Scarlett had told her to prepare for a threat of empire-wide proportions, not merely a localised disturbance.

Yet, how could the Tribe possibly mobilise the forces for such a large assault? Evelyne had no clear sense of their full strength, but all indications were that they lacked the capability for such widespread and *significant* aggression. It had always been limited in the past.

Her forehead knitted together deeply as she continued considering the possibilities.

As the minutes ticked by, the distant rumbles of explosions and clatter of combat inched closer to the Withersworth estate, even though it was situated a fair distance from the city's edge. The anxiety was almost palpable among the gathered servants, their faces etched with worry. Evelyne was concerned, but she tried to maintain a composed exterior as she monitored the scene outside.

Some of her thoughts unconsciously drifted to Freybrook. What if it was under attack as well? And what about Stagmond and the rest of their barony? With neither she nor Scarlett present to lead, the responsibility would fall on Garside and Kinsley to take charge, but they were limited in what they could do.

Scarlett had mentioned that Freybrook was less likely to be directly impacted by the upcoming crisis, which offered Evelyne a glimmer of hope, but she didn't dare to place too much of her trust in that.

A sudden, chilling scream sliced through the tense air, momentarily paralyzing nearly everyone in the foyer. The scream seemed human at first, but Evelyne felt there had been something off about it.

Her gaze swept over the assembled group. Several of the estate's footmen stood ready, some clad in thick gambesons with arms strapped to their waists, but they hardly cut the figure of seasoned warriors. The Withersworths weren't known for their martial prowess and had few people on hand capable of handling these dire emergencies.

The scream erupted again, this time closer. A frown creased the head butler's forehead, and Evelyne approached him. "Do you have a plan for everyone's safety?" she asked.

He looked to hesitate briefly. "Milord directed us to gather here first, whereupon I presumed he had further directions for us to follow. However, his continued absence is concerning. It should not have taken him this long to finalise his preparations and join us with Milady." After a moment of contemplation, a resolute look settled over his features. "No, no, this simply will not do. I must seek the Lord myself. You, guard, accompany me—"

As he spoke, a cacophony of those strange screams erupted and several windows around the foyer shattered, allowing a pack of wolf-like creatures to burst into the room. Their jaws were filled with rows of sharp, saliva-dripping teeth that ground against each other, seeming to produce those eerie cries, while their intense gazes fixed on the terrified onlookers.

Evelyne's eyes locked onto the intruders. Those were shriekstalkers.

How had *monsters* penetrated this deep into the city?

A few courageous footmen stepped forward to shield the group, while Evelyne pushed the butler back to face an attacking shriekstalker. She had activated *Mana Barrier* at the first sign of the city's assault, and the spell was enough to protect her as the creature bit into her arm, trying to pull her down to the ground. Without hesitation, she cast *Blazeblade*, summoning a slender blade of fire in front of her free hand that thrust into the monster's skull, causing it to collapse limply.

Kicking its corpse away from her and shaking off the numbness in her arm, she then turned her attention to the remainder of the shriekstalkers in the room. She then began to cast another spell, *Emberflurry Salvo*, conjuring a volley of fiery bolts that darted into the monsters' heads. Most fell instantly, with the footmen being enough to dispatch the rest.

With the sudden ambush handled, Evelyne took a moment to assess the room. The people had huddled away from the windows, visibly shaken but unharmed. A couple of the footmen were bleeding, but it didn't look too serious, thankfully.

She had faced shriekstalkers once before during a childhood training session with her father. That was back when she was enamored with the idea of becoming a knight and was trying to pull him along on all kinds of ridiculous outings. They weren't as dangerous as they looked, even in packs, nor did they ever venture near major settlements, to her knowledge. That made their presence here even stranger, attacking a noble's mansion at the heart of a city.

"Y-You have my gratitude, Lady Hartford," the butler said, adjusting his uniform. He looked down at the charred carcass of the first monster she'd killed, scrunching his nose lightly. "Given the circumstances, it might be prudent to reposition ourselves to a more secure location even if His Lordship has yet to join us."

"Is there a safer place we can retreat to?" Evelyne asked.

"The cellar would be suitable under the current conditions," he replied. "However, as uncouth as it may be of me to impose, but I must insist that you lead them there yourself. In light of

what just occurred, the delayed arrival of Milord and Milady is worrying, and I feel compelled to verify their well-being.”

Evelyne watched him for a moment. “...I’ll go find them. You can proceed with the others to safety.”

The Withersworths—Lady Withersworth, especially—had been incredibly hospitable to her during her stay here in Autumnwell. She didn’t feel comfortable just leaving them while this was going on.

The butler gave her a long, somewhat uncertain look, but soon, he nodded his head. “Then so be it. Your commitment to the Lordship and Ladyship’s safety is truly commendable, Lady Hartford, if I do say so myself. You embody the virtues of nobility far beyond what is exhibited by certain others of a similar rank.”

With that, he led the group of people out of the foyer and towards a connecting hallway, while Evelyne lingered just to ensure no more monsters were lurking nearby. Glancing out one of the broken windows, her eyes caught on the silhouette of a tall structure in the distance, its outline just becoming discernible in the early morning light.

It was the Wells Tower, Autumnwell’s mage tower. More alarming than the tower itself was the large figure clinging to its side. Even from here, she could hear its roar as the creature clawed at the tower’s stone facade, spewing jets of flame from its maw.

A dragon. Was the city now under attack by a dragon as well? She couldn’t tell for sure, but it looked to be at least an adolescent dragon, if not an adult.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the beast, sending it spiraling into the air to circle the tower, searching for its assailant like a bird of prey.

Evelyne’s attention snapped back as a loud crash resonated from within the estate itself, accompanied by muted shouts. It originated from the opposite direction to which the others had fled — towards the southern wing, where Lord and Lady Withersworth’s chambers lay.

Seeing a dragon attacking the mage tower had shaken Evelyne, but she couldn’t let that get to her. She had already gone through a similar ordeal during the Tyndall Ball, and at that time, her sister had been completely calm and unaffected. She could do the same.

As for what the broader implications of these attacks were, they could wait. Her immediate priority was to make it through the current situation.

Evelyne started moving, hastening through the foyer and along the corridors towards the source of the disturbance. She arrived at a section of the mansion where the ceiling had collapsed and a large hole had been ripped open in the wall, revealing the broad patio outside. There, a massive creature, several times her size and bear-like in stature with dense white fur, loomed ominously.

She stared at it momentarily. Where had something that big even *come* from?

The creature didn't roar, but emitted a constant, low growl that vibrated through the air, shaking Evelyne's bones. On the opposite end of the patio, a small group of people was cornered by the beast. In their midst was Lord Withersworth, supporting his fallen wife, shielded by a wide translucent barrier.

"Dagnabbit and confound it all, have at me, you cursed brute!" the old gentleman shouted, brandishing what appeared to be a wand of some kind. He unleashed a series of lightning bolts that singed the creature's fur, causing it to step back slightly but not retreat.

Upon seeing this, Evelyne chose to spring into action. After quickly assessing the threat, she began to cast one of her most potent spells, seizing the moment while the creature's focus wasn't on her.

As Lord Withersworth fired another volley of lightning bolts from his wand, the monster seemed to grow increasingly enraged, pushing forward and pressing relentlessly against the barrier that separated it from its intended prey.

Evelyne had no idea who had created the item that conjured that barrier—she knew that Lord Withersworth wasn't a mage himself—but they were no doubt a skilled artificer. Still, it was beginning to show signs of strain. Any enchanted item that was dependent on its own finite mana reservoir had its limits.

The spell Evelyne was casting was both complex and demanding, but she still hastened her work, drawing upon a considerable amount of her mana. She had never used this spell in actual combat and still struggled slightly with its execution, but the stakes were too high to hesitate and use anything less.

Behind the creature, a lone red rune ignited in the air, hovering menacingly. Moments later, it duplicated itself, spawning identical runes to either side. These runes multiplied rapidly, weaving a growing network that soon enveloped the monster in a sphere of glowing symbols. So fixated was the monster on breaking through the barrier that it failed to notice the magic encircling it until it was completely surrounded.

Evelyne's focus intensified as she triggered the next step of the spell, weaving the runes into a grid of flames, the lines connecting to form a fiery cage. The monster, now realizing its situation, spun to face her, revealing a beaked face and round black eyes that glared at her as the tips of its white fur brushed against the confines of the sphere.

With a final surge of concentration, Evelyne completed the spell.

Emberheart Convergence.

For a fleeting second, the cage of runes and fire pulsated with increased intensity, as if snapping deeper into existence, and then, it contracted. The beast had no escape as the flames engulfed it, its movements constricted and its body both igniting and compressing under the magical force. It howled in agony, its fur catching fire and its limbs emitting a cacophony of disturbing sounds as it burned and squeezed.

The spell lasted until the monster was reduced to nothing but a charred heap, now a mere fraction of its original size, leaving a foul stench of scorched flesh in the air.

Exhausted, Evelyne collapsed to one knee, taking deep breaths.

This spell had been one of her father's creations, and she was glad that it worked. She shuddered to think what might have happened if it had failed.

At the patio's edge, a few servants watched in a mixture of awe and horror. Lord Withersworth, helping his wife to her feet, began leading the group towards Evelyne.

It was only then that Evelyne noticed that the white-furred creature wasn't the only dead monster here. There was also a scattering of smaller, rat-like creatures spread out around the area. She recognized them as skittercloaks, a type of monster known for their stealth and sometimes found in the sewers of bigger cities like this one.

As the others neared, it became clear that Lady Withersworth was injured; her left leg was bleeding, and she looked far more gaunt than Evelyne had ever seen her before.

"Thank you, dear," the woman said wearily, supported by her husband and a servant. "If you hadn't arrived when you did, who knows what reckless heroics my husband might have attempted."

Lord Withersworth grumbled next to her, but offered a gruff nod in agreement anyway. "Yes, thank you. It's clear that the Hartford lineage excels at producing exceptional mages to this day. Your father before you, and now you and your sister both demonstrate formidable abilities. Most impressive. Certainly more effective than these sorry trinkets that Warley gifted me." He waved the polished wooden wand in his hand along with a silver talisman in slight disdain.

His wife touched his arm. "While I am not one to excuse that old fox's behaviour, his 'trinkets' did save our lives, dear."

"Hmph. Yes, well, I'll make sure to give him our thanks next time I meet him."

Evelyne managed a weary, slightly awkward smile at the praise as she tried getting back on her feet. A few months back, she would have found the notion of her sister showing promise as a mage laughable. Scarlett had neither displayed interest nor talent for magic even since they were young. Evelyne had always taken a strange kind of pride in that, as well. It was one of the few areas where it was clear she was better at something, regardless of Scarlett's attempts to downplay that fact.

Now, however, she had no idea how much that was actually true. After witnessing Scarlett's prowess at the Tyndall Ball, it seemed possible—even likely—that Scarlett *had* surpassed her in magical skill, despite her unconventional methods.

Evelyne wasn't sure if she was envious of that or not, honestly. There were a lot of things she wasn't sure about regarding her sister.

"We should hurry and make our way to the basement," she suggested, finally managing to regain her footing. "I don't know where all these monsters are coming from, but it's clearly not safe here."

“That it is not,” Lord Withersworth agreed. He tucked his wand into his breast pocket and produced a pair of unusually shaped keys instead. “I suppose I do owe a debt to old Warley for managing to persuade your sister to part with these.”

Evelyne eyed the keys curiously. What were they for? And how did they connect to Scarlett?

“Let’s go,” she urged, pushing those questions aside for the time being.

She took the lead, about to guide the group back the way she came, when an unsettling noise made her stop and turn. At the center of the open patio, a black hole had suddenly materialized out of thin air. From it, a pack of shriekstalkers and other small monsters tumbled to the ground, their eyes immediately landing on her and the group with an almost supernatural fixation.

Reacting quickly, Evelyne prepared to cast another *Emberflurry Salvo* to deal with this new threat. Then a second, much larger portal ripped open. Another of those white-furred creatures emerged, its eyes briefly landing on the twisted body of its fallen comrade before fixing a menacing stare on Evelyne.

“Run,” she said.