

Lilith awoke to smoke. Coughing, she looked about at her home. Her burning, very much on fire, home. Shaking her head, she got up and grabbed her kit. The roar of a mob outside confirmed her suspicions. Another village, another home up in flames. This one had lasted her several seasons though, which made her wonder what had caused the attack. Usually she messed up, and hurt someone somehow, but as far as she could tell she'd been careful enough, only going on excursions at night, and doing the boring part of her research in the daytime.

As she pulled the last of her escape kit together, she looked for her coat and hat. They hung on a pole in the centre of the room, safe from any fires. The thick leather of the coat did a lot to hide her and her various trinkets, artefacts, and excursion tools. She donned her wide brimmed hat - perfect for hiding her face - and pulled on her boots, covering up what little of her that the coat didn't already. Finally, she grabbed her crossbow, and moved towards the back door.

A scream interrupted her motion, as the mob's jeers turned more frantic, some apologising, others begging whatever gods they had faith in. Then came an unfamiliar noise, a low gurgling growl. Lilith made up her mind, and kicked the door open.

What greeted her behind it could only be described as grotesque. Red, bulging eyes atop a gorged frame, a mockery of a human figure - or corpse. It had only a moment to gurgle incoherently before a bolt struck it through what Lilith hoped was its vitals. It fell down, and started melting like acid into a fiery pool of goo.

Not for the first time, Lilith wished her father were with her. He'd know what this was, what was going on. In the past decade she'd learnt a lot, and he'd left behind enough notes to help her make a living as a scholar and medicinal expert. She fumbled with a vial as she mused, scooping a small sample up of the creature's remains. Something interesting to help her settle into the next village. The port town of Pindeng was nearby, maybe a good choice. She'd heard they'd had some sort of plague recently, probably needed help from someone with her skills.

She stood up again, and turned to look down at the village. There was fire everywhere. Perhaps she could still -

"There she is! Get her!"

Maybe not.

Lilith broke into a sprint as the farmhands gave chase. She was aiming for the southern path, from there she could make her way directly through Drakeston and on to Pindeng. A few days hike, but nothing she couldn't handle. She'd already spent a few nights down the trail inspecting the ruins along the coast. This would be just like that.

As she passed the village hall, she checked behind her. The farmhands were gone. In their place, more of the creatures. Pulling her collar up to stop the smoke, she turned again, and found herself surrounded. Lifting her crossbow once more, she muttered a few arcane words and the bolt glowed green. One of the few spells she

knew, it took more of a toll on her than it should; practise was dull, and not as fun as research.

The bolt flew into the front creature, and after a moment's pause, exploded. Blood flew from the monster as it started to melt, but those around it didn't react. They hadn't even flinched. Not the reaction Lilith was hoping for. She grimaced and prepared to load another bolt.

Heavy footsteps and the clang of metal made her look up just in time to see a large blade, bigger than her, swing through the creatures ahead of her. Its wielder stood, easily 7 feet tall, and looked her in the eyes. Dressed in full metal armour, only its face was visible. Bright blue eyes surrounded by silver-grey scales, a facial structure closer to a lizard than a human. It took Lilith a moment to realise this was a creature from legend - a dragon-man, or dragon-kin - and she resisted the urge to pull out some parchment and start writing.

Instead, she pulled her hat down over her eyes and called out. "To whom do I owe my thanks?" Her voice came out shakier than she would have liked.

The dragon-man stepped forward past her, and with another clean slice removed the creatures that remained. "My name is Drakkis of the Steelborne. I am looking for a girl by the name of Lilith Tanis."

Lilith took a moment to think. The mention of her name shook her, but she thought about the writhing pools of acid that were no longer attacking her, and replied. "Then you are in luck, for I am she. What is your message?"