

BOO! Fall Festival 2008 Short Stories

When the leaves are falling and the pumpkins are in the fields, it's time to celebrate the season of change. Join us for the 2008 Fall Festival, featuring a collection of short stories by talented authors. The stories are as diverse as the leaves themselves, and we hope you'll find something that resonates with you. Happy reading!



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Stuffy Man

(Contest Winner)

By Sefhiranoth

When the leaves are falling and the sharp point moon is high
Then Stuffy Man goes walking, for those tides be Harvest Time
And if ye hear him knocking while ye snuggle in thy bed
Then pull thy blanket closer, else ye'll wind up worse than dead

The Stuffy Man be stuffy with the farmer's dried up store
His head be old sack scruffy with a mouth and eyes of chalk
The rags he wears be ragged from a year spent on the land
But the moonlight dances new-bright on the sickle in his hand
The Stuffy Man hath stuffy hands that knock upon each door
But none will sleep the pounding from those hands made all of straw
And if a woken answer with a door cast open wide
Then sickle hand will fall and rend, for this is Harvest Tide

The Stuffy has no hunger, for it has no need to eat
But straw is dried and thirsty cries the one that seeks no meat
The liquor for the Stuffy runs hot red in ye that wake
And it will open any that it finds, its thirst to slake

So when the leaves are falling and the sharp point moon is high
And if ye hear a knocking when the stars are in the sky
Set head beneath thy pillow, do not answer to thy door
Else next year ye'll be knocking, with a sack head made of straw

Brolen's Smelter

(Contest Runner-Up)

By Awdz

There was a young dwarf by the name of Brolen. He was pleasant enough, but other dwarves thought him odd because he hated mining. Knowing he hated digging, his parents sent him to learn smelting techniques instead.

From the first time he saw the flames leaping about in the smelter, Brolen was fascinated by it. He liked the warmth and the cascade of sparks as he poured the liquid ore into molds for making bars. His parents were delighted, and encouraged him to develop his skill with metal. Little did they know the truth.

Brolen was fascinated with the smelter because he saw a figure dancing in the flames. He began talking to the figure as he worked. And after a little while, Brolen heard the figure speaking back to him.

The figure in smelter flame had processed ore for many years, and understood the technique better than any dwarf could. It taught Brolen how to discern high quality ore, and how best to work it. With this coaching, Brolen made some pieces so pure and shiny that standing in front of them, his reflection appeared clearer than he did! Due to the quality of his work, other dwarves grudgingly came to respect Brolen.

Brolen began to spend more time with his fellow dwarves, joining them for ale at the end of the day instead of spending the evenings in conversation with the figure in the smelter. This angered the figure, who wanted Brolen's company. It tried everything it could to keep Brolen's attention, coaxing him closer by dancing seductively in the flames when simple conversation failed. Its efforts worked.

Always fascinated with bright flames, Brolen was entranced by the dancing figure. It called out to him to join it in the dance. Brolen had worked ore long enough that his skin had toughened and was resistant to burns, so he drew nearer and nearer to the dancing figure, intense heat rolling over him in a constant wave.

Some dwarves, coming to invite Brolen to drink ale with them, were some distance away when he stepped up into the smelter. Crying out to him to stop, they were too far away to intervene - but heard all too clearly. To this day, they consider the smelter cursed and shun it.

Brolen discovered that even toughened dwarf's skin cannot withstand the extreme heat of the inside of a smelter. The figure dancing in the flame embraced him in excruciating pain, and he howled in agony. He tried to get out, but the figure forced him to stay until his flesh had burnt away and his bones fallen to ash. Brolen became a new figure of flame within the smelter.

Sometimes you can still hear his cries on the wind.

Of Thorn and Wood

(Contest Runner-Up)

By Sonea

'OUCH!' An over-sized bundle of sticks scattered to the ground. The youngling, who had been struggling to carry the burden up a steep hill, stood sucking a finger pricked by a thorn that gave the wood its name. He looked closely to make sure no sliver had lodged in his skin, for all knew that it was an ill thing to let a thornwood splinter fester.

Goods made from the gnarly wood had a rich, dark luster that brought good coin from two-legged Istarians as well as four, but few knew the secret of shaping it. Tansen began to suspect why after a long day running hither and yon, searching for trees that were scattered across the Autumn-hued grasslands north of Harro. Their ominous silence had made him jumpy. He could almost feel their presence before he spotted them. And each appeared to him like a grotesque caricature, frozen in a silent scream as it ran in fear from.. something.

Now he understood why Grandfer had warned him to take only deadwood on the ground. He couldn't bring himself to touch the trees, and shuddered at the thought of taking a limb from something that seemed almost alive. Even so, after a long day spent collecting, he was not about to lose any of the precious wood, so he carefully regathered it and was soon on his way, grinning in anticipation.

After much wheedling and cajoling, his grandfather had thrown up his hands and consented. On the morrow, Grandfer would teach him to carve thornwood. Perhaps Tansen would some day become the finest carver of thornwood in Harro, as his father had once been. The coin would surely be welcome. Mam worked hard to make ends meet, but life had been difficult since pappy disappeared with nary a word as to where or why he was going.

The pricked finger was long forgot by the time Tansen set the bundle at his grandfather's door. He hurried back downhill to the cold supper his mam had set out, and then crawled into bed to dream of fame and gold.

The moon rose full and cast its cold white light through a small window. When it touched a hand that had become twisted and swollen, Tansen started awake. In the half light, he watched in wide-eyed horror as dark streaks crept like worms from hand to elbow. In moments his skin had turned black and shriveled. Tansen knew not what magery had hold of him, but he must move quickly to stop its spread. The door banged as he ran screaming into the night... 'GRAAANFERRRR!!'

~

An old man watched the sun's first rays peek over the horizon. Bones creaked as he stretched muscles gone stiff from the cool Fall night. He spied the large bundle of thornwood sticks and chuckled. The boy must have spent a whole day gathering. He went inside to wrap the tools that had lain, rusting on a shelf, since the boy's father had gone missing. They were newly oiled and sharpened and ready for use once more.

When he ventured forth again, it was true day and sunlight left a shadow where none had been before. The old man gasped in surprise, for there on the hill was a thornwood tree. Frowning, he glanced at the bundle of sticks and then up at the tree again. With tools in hand, he hurried towards Harro. He paused for a moment to examine the tree more closely. His pace quickened until he was running as fast as aged legs would carry him. Throat so tight he could barely breath, he threw open a door and called his grandson's name.

Of course, there was no answer.

A Blighted Heart

By Seldum

Murder, envy, treachery, and a ring: these things led me to the blighted graveyard.

The place had not always been blighted. It was once a beautiful gravesite where friends and family could rest in eternal peace. It's where I buried my brother. He was not dead, however. How was I to know that the Withered Aegis would blight the land before nightfall?

I had to have the ring. Perhaps I didn't check his pockets well enough.

The Withered Aegis patrolled the area, but I was able to stealthily slip through to the graveyard.

I saw him at the foot of his grave: freed from his earthy encasement but bound by something far more evil. Even from where I hid, I could see it in his eyes. His body was whole, but his soul was wholly corrupt.

An abominable creature with four arms was dragging him away. His screams were both of fear, and of hatred for me.

I followed them. I had to get the ring. Perhaps it would fall from his clothing as he struggled.

A host of undead joined the abomination. Arched backward over a stone, they bound their struggling prisoner with chains.

"The blighted heart of one who yet lives," one of them called out. The creature used no tool or sharp implement, but with hands alone it broke open my brother's chest and tore out his heart.

A lifetime of nightmare screams pierced the night. He should have died right then. Yet as soon as the heart was out of his chest, a withered undead resembling an unwrapped human mummy immediately incanted a spell and my brother's chest began to heal and close.

With care, the beating heart was placed into a blood-red phylactery.

"The blighted heart of one who yet lives," another creature chanted. The newly healed chest was again breached and again my brother's heart was ripped from his chest.

His scream was that of a thousand agonizing deaths. His pain was not only from the physical rending, but of sudden realization that his body would be broken and his heart removed again and again.

I was angry with myself. I should have searched his pockets more thoroughly. If I was lucky, the ring would have fallen out in the grave.

As I moved away, I heard him cry out, "I forgive you, brother!"

I turned to look back. The healer had already cast his spell, but none of the creatures stepped forward to rend their captive's heart again.

One of them pointed toward me. "The veteran blighted heart of one who yet lives," was his hoarse cry. I then realized that each one of them held a blood-red phylactery.

I ran.

On the darkest nights, the undead still roam the land seeking those with hearts blighted by wickedness.

If, in the silence of the night, you hear the soft, grating rasp of a porcelain phylactery being opened, it's already too late. Scream. The nightmare has only begun.

A Chip Off The Old Block

By Sephiranoth

I'll tell ye how it was, and ye can believe or set it aside. But on the dark nights, when the branches creak.. well and all. This be how it was told to me.

"Look not back."

Imperial Researcher Eldira Flitwing hovered before the blood-written wall, wings. well and all, flitting. It was, she thought, most dramatic. Most mysterious. And, given the attentions of a fine young elf in Tazoon that she had had to leave behind. most irritating!

Empty research outposts with words in dripping blood upon the walls were best part of the market tale teller's art, and not, in her view, a proper part of her world. But the blood was indeed there, and the outpost. most empty. No signs of Aegis merriment. no signs indeed of any matter out of order. Tables set, and food half eaten. Or so it seemed. for food decayed and much had done so. Weapons racked, and people. gone.

Beyond the hill, the Blighted Forest loomed. And of course, if a Forest were involved, who else to send but an over-tasked and under-recognised Dryad?

Imperial Researcher Eldira Flitwing was NOT happy.

Wings beating, she made swift inspection of each house. In only one place were the words writ, and that place was else like all the rest. Which was. as any might think to find it, did it but have people.

Which left. the Forest. Eldira sighed. A Dryad she might be... but she hated Forests. Were it a forest. no matter. But Forest? Never good. no, never good. Wings beat.

Staff ready, Eldira danced on air between the trees. Thornwood. but Blighted. All Blighted. The Outpost had sought to try to cleanse it... for much wood would it have offered. As she looked. one tree caught her eye. Stark branches reached with broken ends. as though. surely not? She moved closer. like. like arms? Like. NO!

Eldira spun in the air, and beat wings like she never had. Not this... not her! Oh, how she had laughed at her mother's tales. and now she flew like the Lich Lord itself was behind her. And better, her terror thought, were it so.

Behind her, Thornwood lumbered to her chase. Swifter than any tree had right to be, and with branch and root that sought its prey. And as Eldira flew, it was yet faster.

Eldira heard the crunch of roots that tore from ground and held fast once more. Close. too close. For a moment. a moment only. she turned her head.

The bark of the Treant was torn and twisted. but no natural twist. And in that bark, the horror face of. of one that had given the Treant life, one that now silent screamed. screamedandscreamedandscreamedand.

The Treant branch whipped down. Down and down... and pierced her through. And then. it was gone. Gone, and the Treant gone. But Dryad she was.. and she knew what her mother had known. And Eldira Flitwing took wing for wing's last taking. And when she reached the outpost, she found a wall. And her staff's tip she dipped in her own-dripped blood. and words she wrote.

"Look not back".

Inside her, the twig the Treant had left set deep, set deeper. And as it began its task to suck her life and suck her spirit and suck what blood she had, that it might grow and root, and walk. in the dark night, the scream began again.

Druid's Bane - The Story of Cedaris DuQuis

By Q/Bob

Long ago when the Cedar Treants controlled the forests near Kion, I had a friend named Cedaris DuQuis. We spent much time in the forest and developed a fascination with the Treants and the trees they protected. Cedaris joined the Gatherer school to begin his life's work and as I was a Carpenter we worked well together. We both agreed that proper combat training would be valuable in our endeavors and decided to train as Druids.

Some seasons later Cedaris and I were logging cedar in the Kion forest when, to our great dismay, the named Treant Greenpiece ensnared Cedaris, causing him to bleed. A battle ensued and after a time, our Druid training began to give us favor. The Cloak of Thorns on Cedaris and our combined Lightning attack damage was causing Greenpiece more damage than could be healed. The Treant, realizing his death was near, made an unexpected offer, "If you spare my life I shall give you a magic mask which will hide you from your enemies!" Hearing this amazing offer, Cedaris held back what would have been the fatal bolt and accepted the offering in spite of my words of caution. Truly, it was a splendid mask and worked as Greenpiece had claimed. When wearing the magical Treant mask, all creatures perceived you as a Treant.

One moonlit night during the Fall Festival we were working late. As we took the last batch of cedar boards to Parsinia, Cedaris was wearing the mask and I was some distance away on a safer path. I saw a Treant overtake Cedaris. Startled, he quickly cast Cloak of Thorns on himself and prepared to attack, but the Treant walked away. "Cedaris don't forget you still have the mask on. " I shouted as a reminder. As we continued down separate paths and approached Parsinia I saw that Cedaris seemed to be pulling at his mask and that he still appeared as a Treant to me. We would always remove it when this close to the settlement; something was wrong. The next instant Cedaris was spotted by residents who attacked him fiercely. Slowed by my heavy load I ran to his aid shouting for them to stop, but the crowd was drunk with festival ale and paid no heed. Cedaris fled into the woods in fear of his life where he found refuge among the Treants I am sure.

The many extended trips I made into the forest looking for my friend ended in despair and after some discussion with various renowned Druids; I eventually came to realize that the Cloak of Thorns must have bonded the mask to Cedaris. The longer he wore the mask, the more like a Treant he became.. I've heard tales of a Treant wandering near Kion, even stopping to stare distantly at the city for some time. I do not doubt those tales, nor the ones which add the oddity of a Treant tugging at its own face as if trying to remove it.

The Last Word

By Sefhiranoth

It's an old tale. I don't know if ye heard it. I did from my momma, and she from hers. We don't tell the men folk. They wouldn't believe...

Now, it all be citified. But once, this was new land. And new ones came, and few alone. And one, she was Adris-gnome. And along of her came Kulak-dwarf, though no dwarf likes to say it. And some say they was married, and some say they weren't. But back then it was just them, and none cared.

They set down by the river, and built a place, and Kulak set to men stuff. Which was mostly lying around and drinking. And Adris set to women stuff. Which was mostly everything else.

And a woman knows much a girl don't, and one is that men-folk can be mean as Fyakki. And Kulak, he was mean.

And soon Adris knew Kulak's long arm, and how to stay from reach. But ale gives longer arms. Long nights she had with that Fyakki by, and more tears than rain fell near Kulak.

And a day came that was one too many. For it came she couldn't get childer, and that made Kulak worse, and he had beat her near dying. So die she decided to do. To the river she went, and not to come back.

As she walked, and her last walk it was to be, she saw a thing upon the ground. It sparkled in the sun, a bright blade knife. So sparkly it was, she bent and took it. And it had writing, all curled and clever, and the word was.... Kulak. And a fear came, and she threw it to the river.

But as she walked, she saw a thing upon the ground, all sparkled... and she was a good gnome, just one who had come to die, and she kept her walking. And she came to a place she knew and loved, and the place she chose. And rocks she gathered for her pockets. But as she put the first rock in her pocket... she found a thing. And all bright it sparkled in the sun. And the word. was Kulak.

And Adris walked home, a thing held tight. And that night, she put the thing to Kulak's sleeping throat. But will as she might, no move could she make. And her tears fell. and Kulak slept safe. And Adris took her to Kulak's bed, and she knew her lot to bear.

Next morning Kulak still slept. If sleep was gash where throat should be. If sleep was a pillow red and bloody. And if sleep was a thing with no waking. A knife was in his hand but no name it bore, and it was his own.

And she took him to the river, and she came back alone. Then away she went, and never she came back.

That Adris, she was the first. But not last. For men are men and ale is ale... and no few women have walked to the river.

So if ever thy man hath a long arm, and too much it comes, and ye walk to the river, and a thing you see, all gleaming in the sun... have care. For if ye read, then that word is the last word. And deed be done. But leave it, then ye have made thy choice and never will you see it again.

It's an old tale. I don't know if ye heard it. I did from my momma, and she from hers. We don't tell the men folk. They wouldn't believe...

Moonless Night

By Malaquion

It was a dark and clear but moonless night when I first heard the wail.

It floated to me over the oak trees – a cry that wasn't piercing, but it was hollow and it echoed in an eerie way. Though it wasn't very loud, it was the sort of noise that would carry for miles.

I had heard of wandering haunts, of course, but not of a screaming one. It seemed far away, despite how it carried, and so I returned to my hunting of oak treants. It was one of those eerie one-night occurrences, and I did not hear it again that night.

A month rolled by and one night, I was strolling through the Middling Lands, on my way to Aughundell. It was a peaceful, clear night. It was tranquil and moonless, with a few clouds here and there. I could hear the spiders scuttling and the crickets chirping. One of those nights that makes you feel alive.

Suddenly, the night changed from a peaceful silence to a **waiting** silence. At first I didn't know why there seemed to be a difference, and then I realized I could hear nothing. There were no crickets, no late-night birds. The wind had stopped blowing and the air was completely still.

That was when I heard the sound. Whump-Whump-Whump, like the beating of vast wings. I looked around, terrified, unable to tell where it was coming from. Then I looked up, above me, and saw a dragon taking a late-night flight. I relaxed, thinking I was getting jumpy over nothing. The dragon flew away, and I slowly began to walk forward.

The cry sounded again, closer than it had been last time. The scream echoed over the land like a rolling fog, hollow and wailing and echoing exactly three times. I stood there, frozen, as the wail slowly faded.

I heard wings again. I looked up, expecting to see another dragon, but there was nothing there. I couldn't tell which direction the wings were in, but they were definitely getting closer. Everything seemed very dark, though the light had not changed at all, and I could barely see my hand in front of my face.

I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and a hand simultaneously close about my mouth. I screamed, but it was muffled by the hand. Cold, scaly, and taloned, but definitely not dragon.

Whoever it was twisted me around. I saw, then, that it was not a *who* but a *what*. I found myself looking into glowing red eyes, with narrow white pupils like a cat's. A long-haired head like a human's, but with a small curve instead of a nose and a very, very long mouth that stretched all the way up its pallid and scaly cheeks. It grinned at me, and I saw thousands of fangs, long and very thin fangs like needles.

I screamed, grabbing at its face, jerking backwards and out of its grasp. It answered with that frightening wail of its own, looking terrified for some reason, and ran off. Its movements were jerky and hopping, like a crow's, but it moved incredibly fast.

Shaking, I looked around, saw that the night had become normal, and slowly made my way to Aughundell. When I got there, I discovered black blood on my fingers and an oozing wound at my throat. I have never heard or seen the creature again.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Wings

By Justa Mirage

A friend I knew, a dryad with golden wings that glistened in the moonlight as if touched by the evening dew, her green body and hair like the moss against the lee of a stone.

While shopping in Tazoon, her eyes shifted to a far corner. It was an art shop that caught her attention. Beautiful canvases depicting dryads were poised in the windows. Upon entering the establishment, more could be seen displayed on the walls.

She contacted the curator, not to buy any of the art, but to ask who the artist was. He wrote down a location where the artist could be found.

She glided a windy path to a house on a hill. It was of fiend design and appeared dark and foreboding. Slowly she fluttered to the door. It was open, and a voice came from inside.

“Come in.” a voice echoed out from the portcullis. As she cautiously entered the study, she saw a fiend sitting in front of a large easel. His head peered to the side and looked at her. “Did you not find what you were looking for at the shop?” he spoke softly. “I am interested if you would use me as a model, I would pay you more.” She said. “I would be glad to.” He smiled, his pointed tail flicking back and forth.

He had her stand in a pose and began his work. Time passed as she watched his head occasionally peer from the edge. He finished and motioned her to have a look. “The wings are missing from the picture!” she exclaimed, just as she saw the fiend slam the portcullis closed. “Silly dryad, YOUR wings will complete my masterpiece” he laughed in a way that sent cold chills through her.

She bolted from the room, taking the first exit she could find. Door after door she tried, but locked.

“There’s nowhere to go little one.” The fiend’s voice maniacally echoed behind her in the halls. She followed a passageway to a door at a dead end. Her heart beat faster and she swallowed hard. Twisting the handle, it was unlocked! The passageway lead down into a room and to the horror she found.

The room was filled with the corpses of dryads, all with their wings removed. Some of them she recognized from the artworks. But... some weren’t corpses, but undead zombies, withered aegis! They grabbed her arms before she could flee as the fiend entered the room. “Your picture will fetch a nice price.” He smiled fiendishly as a pain ruptured from her back as she fell unconscious.

Friends traced her route, and could not find her. They heard she had stopped in the art shop. The curator had seen her but she bought nothing from him. As they left, he pulled up from his counter, the newest art piece and priced it, a green dryad with flowing green hair and golden wings, which glistened in the moonlight as if touched by the evening dew.

The Shadow of the Ghost

By Takora

You want to hear a story that will put a chill down your spine? Very well, come along and have a seat.

You know of the Shadow Dragon and Seliena the Brilliant? The two horrible undead Dragons that roam the fallen dragon city of Draak and the Western Deadlands? They both lived once, a very long time ago.

While Seliena was a very mighty Lunus warrior, the dragon known as Shadow Dragon was a very powerful Helian spell caster. During the passing of time, his original name has been lost to history. But it is said that Seliena always lovingly called him “Shadow”. A long time ago, Shadow was a very respected Scholar at the Draak Academy. While visiting a cousin, Seliena met him during a ceremony. It was love on first sight. Everyone noticed how they complemented each other perfectly. While she was the hot tempered warrior, he was the calm and considerate primalist. Both spent as much time together as they could and as her duties would allow. It was not always easy, because Shadow had to teach the hatchlings and perform research while Seliena often had to battle the Withered Aegis that roamed the lands.. But they always enjoyed their spare time and often sat on the top of the Draak Mountain and watched the lands under them.

Then Seliena got an order to go to the frontline to battle the undeads there. The lovers were very troubled and sad, because the Withered Aegis had recently gained strength, and Shadow was worried that Seliena might get killed in battle. He even suggested fleeing, to run away from Draak and from the war, and hide somewhere – somewhere they could be in peace together forever. But both knew that this was not possible. Seliena was needed at the battlefield, while Shadow was needed in the Academy to teach and protect the hatchlings and adults there.

A day before Seliena had to leave for the frontline, the lovers sat again on the Draak Mountain and talked long into the night. The pair took the opportunity to say all the important things to each other, preparing for the possibility that neither one wanted to imagine. That Seliena would not return from the battlefield.

Screwing up his courage, Shadow made a proposal of bonding to Seliena. He offered her, as a betrothal gift, a head scale made out of adamantine and studded with the rarest and purest gems he could find in Istaria. She happily and enthusiastically accepted, proudly donning the exquisite scale.. The lovers whispered elaborate plans for the bonding ceremony they would have, when Seliena returned triumphantly from battle.

The next day, brave Seliena marched to the frontline, wearing the scale from Shadow. Weeks passed, and sadly, the undeads got stronger. The horrid enemy overran the Draak Academy and Shadow died in an epic battle while protecting the hatchlings there. Of course, Seliena had no clue what had happened to Draak while she was on the frontline.

When Seliena returned to Draak after weeks of fierce battle, she found her beloved city blighted, almost beyond recognition. Everything she knew was destroyed and everyone she saw was undead. She searched desperately for the familiar face, among the many corpse dragons roaming Draak, that she hoped she would never find – but of course, she did. The dragoness found her mate Shadow, undead among and like the others. He sat at the top of the portal, attacking anything that came near him. When he spotted his former love, his angry roars told her he had changed. Depressed and not wanting to combat the revenant of her mate, Seliena flew away, leaving behind her one and only love, who had become the very thing she had to destroy all the time.

Roaring with pain and rage, Seliena flew to the Western Deadlands, reportedly the stronghold of a commander of the Withered Aegis. Blind with despair, she razed through the undeads, killing everything in her sight. In her rage she killed thousands of them, revenging her dead mate.

The dragoness died with a broken heart at the battlefield, loosing all her will to live in one final wave of destruction. But the Withered Aegis could not claim her in death, so strong was her will. She returned as a ghost, haunting the battlefield and trying still to take her revenge on the hated enemy.

Both are now united in undeath, and still separated by it. Sometimes in the night you can hear both roar in love and pain for each other, their only touch until their souls can hopefully be reunited forever.

Did you hear that sound, was that a dragon's roar? Hey, what's up with you? You look so pale!