



*Istaria: Chronicles of the Gifted*  
ANNUAL  
**HOME AND HEARTH**  
*Songs and Stories 2007*

## Table of Contents

Icicle by Runos.....	1
Winter-Gift by Sephiranoth.....	4
Grains of Sand by Sam.....	5
Istara's Gift by Mary.....	7
The Little Treant by Mina.....	10
A Hatchling Winter Festival Song: Red Talon by Silithus.....	12
The Legend of the Bravest Wish by Krysteen.....	13
The Big Night by Cixi the Gnome.....	16
First Fist.. First Foot by Sonea Finder.....	20
Season's Greetings by George.....	24
Kaasha's Cleansing by Rashgalaveck .....	25
The Annual Tinkers' Convention History by Awdz.....	29
The First Snowfall by Emily.....	32
The Winter Solstice by Rebus.....	34
A Giant Migration by Awdz.....	35
A Dryad's Winter Tale by Gengel.....	38
The Festival of Ash by Maekrux.....	41
Bring Gnomekindle Back to Me! by Chely.....	45
Of Innocence and Winter Unblemished: The Tale of the Istarian Snow Globe by Robert.....	46
Banner Days by Awdz.....	50
Skirnir's Christmas Hunt by Lindlae.....	53
Song of the Winter Fang by Kris.....	57
Freedom Follies by Awdz.....	58
Dazzled by Dryads by Fid Git.....	62
The Winter Festival Spirit by Lisa.....	65
WinterFestive AppleJack by Sephiranoth.....	69
A Tale of Two Kitties by Charlie.....	70
Hermie and the Helian by Linda.....	71

## Icicle by Runos

To the naka-duskael, he is called 'Icicle'. To his kin, they refer to him as 'tondargaet isart', which translates to 'Ice Spear' from dragon. It would seem either way, both dragon and naka-duskael agreed that he was similar to his given title. His heart had frozen to the core long ago, leaving him bitter, cold, and ruthless. None knew exactly how he had become this way, and it was long enough that he had forgotten as well.

Winter had recently arrived, driving a howling storm through the night. The breath of this fierce storm left the landscape transformed from fall's vast paint palette into a thick white sheet. Icicle stood at the mouth of his lair, performing his usual morning ritual of watching the sun and the distant town rise. This ritual, to him, was to ensure none visited him unexpectedly, dragon and naka-duskael alike. His eyes surveyed the cold, dead landscape with a gaze that matched what they saw. The sun peeked over the horizon; perhaps double-checking that Icicle's sharp gaze would not stab it down again. The town awoke with the sun as well, and soon the shops opened, and the children were rolling and frolicking in the snow.

With a swat of his claw above him, the newly formed icicles of his lair's roof were shattered as he snarled. "Gaurerten..." he muttered while watching the town outside, especially the children in the snow. The more he observed the playing youngsters, the more he felt sickened by their happiness. "No. Not even as low as animals. Aun! Dirt! Filth!" Icicle hissed. He turned round as the sun cleared the horizon, heading into the depths of his massive and cavernous home.

Hours passed, Icicle spent it lazing, rolling over his hoard, thinking, trying to empty his head of the sickening children he could not stop thinking of, but did not know why. He got up with a growl, unhappy about the image stuck in his head. Figuring that a 'winter bath' may assist in clearing the image, he headed up again to prepare to go to the frozen river nearby. At the mouth of his lair, he was halted by something sitting in the way: a box. It was wrapped in red paper, with a silken ribbon further adorning it, and a tag that read: 'This is for you, Icicle'.

Now, it is well known not to visit Icicle by the townsfolk; they feared him religiously. The town's children play a game much like the dragon hatchlings silly "Burnbones" taunting game around Icicle's lair; pushing each other closer until they are convinced they've heard a roar or growl, then go running home screaming. The adults know better, and these children often are disciplined for 'almost not coming back again'. Travellers are warned many times to ensure they stay away.

Yet, someone had placed this here for him, stopping him in his tracks and leaving him surprised. It was short lived, as he shook off his shock and proceeded to screech. "Aun!! In my lair?! If I find you, you shall perish!" his voice echoed, shaking the halls behind him. There was no answer... for the one who had left the box was long gone. Still feeling bitter, he growled and shoved the box aside roughly. The lid popped off it readily, exposing its contents: A freshly and carefully roasted pheasant, garnished with pear slices and citrus fruit, still steaming hot. The sweet aroma hit Icicle like the chill of the wind outside, forcing him to wheel around quickly and re-inspect the mysterious box. Peering at the contents from inches away, his thoughts ran in circles with his mind at their mercy. Was it an offering of worship or some kind of brown-nosed apology? Perhaps this food is poisoned. Yes, that's it, he thought

to himself. It's poisoned, someone wishes to be rid of me, he thought out with a quiet nod of his head. This thought was interrupted suddenly, and he began to think aloud. "...But if this roasted... thing... is poisoned, I would have sensed and scented it by now..." he mumbled. No! That can't be true, his mind screeched to him. It's poisoned!

Several minutes passed with Icicle frozen in place, stuck arguing with himself. His mind wheeled round the thought of poison but the sweet scent of a slowly cooling meal that had been prepared with love and care urged him otherwise. Frustrated, he picked up the box, and hurled it outside with all his strength into the nearest snow bank.

The next day, as he went to do his morning ritual, he again was stopped unexpectedly. There now were two boxes there at his doorway. One smelled like the roasted pheasant of before, but the other felt different. "Aun Gaurert! Filthy animal! What is the meaning of this desecration of my domain?" he roared, peering at the carefully wrapped boxes. The food, it must be the one I threw away yesterday. How else could they mock me, Icicle thought. He focused outwards to that particular bank of snow, only to discover the box remained where it landed, and containing a frozen roasted pheasant. In dismay and confusion, he backed up with wide eyes and focused on the new boxes, both addressed to him.

The second, and significantly larger box was pushed aside from the familiar one. Icicle gave into his desire for the sweet-smelling pheasant, his mind butting in that he could purge poison with spells if need be. His hunger aided him also, as the escapades of the day before deterred him from hunting. Stuffing it into his maw, his heart leapt over the flavor of the bird. It was fantastic; the scent would not describe this, he thought, as he rushed to melt the frozen pheasant outside with his breath. The second one was not as good half burnt, but he ate it anyways. Icicle turned towards the second box curiously, but swiftly was interrupted. Do not fall for this mockery, his mind yelled. Giving in slightly, the box remained closed, but he picked it up and retreated to the depths of his lair.

The inner portions of his lair, although crafted well, had a flaw: Drafts. Insignificant at first, Icicle has impatiently tried to apply his lairshaping to correct it for months on end, the situation worsening with every attempt. He was reluctant to admit he was cold at night, often shivering and resorting to breathing flame upon himself to survive. Here he sat now, attempting to laze away with a roaring draft icing his body. The little box sat not more than a few feet away, and it was now that Icicle sensed something warm and comforting about it. The thought of warmth compelled him forward. Opening this large box revealed a colorful and carefully woven dragon-sized blanket. A note at the bottom of the box read: "I hope this helps with those cold corridors."

"What is this? Who is doing this?" he spoke aloud. "Aun! How did you know about my drafts? I will catch you within my walls someday!" his temper bellowed out. He put the blanket to use, and for the first time in months, he felt warm in his home as he went to sleep.

Every morning for the next long while, two boxes appeared every day as he went to greet the day. One was always a welcomed pheasant. The second was an item that Icicle could use in some way. Often he was given statues, carvings and trinkets of high value for his hoard. His favorite gift received of all the boxes was a large and enchanted drum. When struck, it sounded of thunder, and overtook his voice, a feat he thought deserved respect after days of competing with the instrument.

A month went by. Icicle had become enthusiastic about these boxes, and raced upwards to the door. It was earlier than he normally rose and upon arriving at the mouth of his lair, there were no boxes. Tilting his head curiously, he sat upon the ground. Perhaps now, I will see the gaurert who has been doing this, he thought. Focusing intently on the entryway, a voice suddenly entered his mind.

“Sorry, Icicle, you do not get to see me today until I know for sure. I hope you like what we brought today.” said the thought on his mind. The pheasant box appeared in a puff of smoke, followed by the other mystery box.

Today’s second box seemed to have a mind of its own, as it jostled and made strange noises. Icicle disregarded it until after the pheasant had been dealt with. Returning to the odd box, and opening the lid revealed a little puppy, who panted, wagged its tail in glee and bounded out of the box to run happy circles round Icicle’s legs. Icicle caught the little puppy, and sat staring at it, unsure, although it was not long before the tiny canine was licking Icicle’s face affectionately.

Icicle instinctively raised his talons to strike but was held back by an unknown force. The month of gifts had been someone’s way of melting his heart, to show him he was not alone and was cared for. This puppy unlocked all he had unknowingly learned over this time. Lowering his talons, he smiled, and for the first time in perhaps a thousand years, laughed. “Your name is now Ecolt, for you were a gift that gave back to me.” Icicle stated. “Come Ecolt.” He called, walking back into his home with a little puppy trailing behind.

With a deep breath that night, Icicle waited for the sun to set. He had decided that the town must be behind everything, that he must do something to match them. Leaving Ecolt behind in the warmth of his blanket, he emptied his silos of supplies he had stocked for his own use and piled them into his cargo disk. Outside, he spread his wings, and flew as fast and hard as he could go, arriving in town a while later. Hovering above, he scoured the town to ensure all were asleep, and set to work in the large and empty town square.

Hours of work passed by, patiently shaping components from the ground up into a structure. It was difficult to remain quiet, although it somehow was accomplished. The work finally was completed at dawn, Icicle’s hard work raising a beautiful crystal fountain of magic that glittered and shone in the morning light. He had not created a work so fine before, and felt proud of this accomplishment. I should not feel this way, this is for them, who saved me from myself, he thought. Tired, he reclined upon the ground next to his fountain.

The town slowly awakened, people filtering out of their homes. As word spread, they filtered towards the square. A group of people came forward to greet Icicle. One appeared to be a sorceress from her clothing.

“Thank you, Icicle... this is wonderful.” she spoke softly.

Icicle smiled toothily. “Out of curiosity, how did this begin?” he could not help but ask.

The sorceress smiled. “We are tired of living in fear, and believe that you too, were tired of it. We celebrate the winter as a time of giving, spirit, family, and feasts. Every year during this time, we would find someone who needed help and secretly present them gifts for a month. This year, the town decided on you for both our sakes. I want to live in peace, as friends.”

Icicle nodded. “Thank you, everyone.” He said, gently nuzzling all who came to embrace him lovingly.

## Winter-Gift by Sefhiranoth

I'm told they call me Gifted  
And many Foe I've slain  
And heard of glasses lifted  
To toast my foolish fame  
But I woke late last waking  
And saw ye wake as well  
To watch the new dawn breaking  
In Fest of Winter's spell  
And out I saw ye walking  
Fresh snow to mark thy path  
And in thine eye I saw them  
The seeds thy Spring would cast  
And in thy cot behind thee  
I heard another wake  
And merry was the gurgle  
That happy babe did make  
Then from thy path of walking  
A moment stepped aside  
And mistletoe ye bore ye  
To she that was inside  
And to me it was wonder  
That snow stayed by thy cot  
For from it sprang a fire  
My breath had never got  
And all that fire was heart-born  
And all that fire was joy  
And WinterFest  
Was all of best  
And thy cot best of all

I'm told they call me Gifted  
And many years my score  
And Foe I'll rend in Blighted land  
Mayhap a hundred more  
But let me wake Fest morning  
And see thee wake the same  
Then I will call me Gifted  
And worthy of the name.

## Grains of Sand by Sam

Though Lady Kendra was known to be militant and often cold when it came to the Withered Aegis, she was also known to be generous and caring when it came to her people and the sslik, who she still considered to be under her care and who also sought to be independent from the saris. It was about the latter of these facts that she and a small caravan of her constituents were on their way to Sslanis to meet with a number of its elders. The winter season was soon to come, and though the saris and sslik saw close to nothing of snow or harsh cold in their regions, the food supply would diminish and stocks would be slimmed since trade would lessen from the other races. She had to be sure that they would be alright throughout winter, she had to be sure they could survive if the coming rains were to wash out the roads and restrict travel between the settlements.

Word of their traverse had made its way down the western coast of Lesser Aradoth and the inhabitants of the villages along the shore had made a number of preparations to welcome the Lady and wish her well on her way. Welcome banners hung over archways and beautiful holiday decorations were hung from building and cliff side. Ceremonial fires were lit and banquets were already being laid out on gorgeous yew tables and steel silk tablecloths. Of course, not all of these decorations were put up in Kendra's name alone. The Winter Festival was just around the corner and no place of residence could go without a bit of seasonal spirit. Lady Kendra's coming was simply a reason to get a head start on such matters.

Lanky and grey-furred, a saris cackled with excitement as Parsinia's scout returned to town with news that Kendra was only minutes away from the border. He had always fancied that he might appeal to her generosity with praises and compel her to part with a number of her rare jewels and make him a wealthy man. It was a sure fact that he had always dwelled in poverty, but this day brought with it a chance to change his life around, and he would not let it pass him by. Earlier that morning, when the cool sea breeze blew softly from the south and brought with it the sweet smell of jungle flowers and exotic fruits from the Sslanis Jungle, he'd done his best to make himself look as miserable as possible. His fur was already smeared with dirt and ruffled in the wrong direction, but he added a few more finishing touches. After examining his reflection and making sure his appearance would properly reflect his later claims, he went about his business and waited patiently for his redemption's arrival.

Indeed, it was not long after the scout's announcement that the Lady and her followers and guardians entered town. In a rush, the beggar ran to the edge of the crowd around her and shouted praises and blessings of Kendra, all the while being sure that his words could be heard over the bustle of the gathering. Kendra, curious of this boisterous well-wisher, called out to him.

"Who are you?" she asked, standing tall so that she might catch a full glimpse of him before he made his way through the crowd.

"One of your most humble followers, Milady!" he moaned, pushing through the last layer of the others who surrounded her. "Poverty and misfortune follow me like a venomous stalker and prey on me like rabid wolves!"

Lady Kendra frowned and from behind her, one of her guardians flexed his claws in irritation and growled. "Have you no more for me than a story of your woe?" She extended a sandy colored and

white-tipped hand with her palm open and facing upwards, “Give me something.”

Irritated, though he did his best to hide it, the beggar looked over his ragged body and plucked three grains of sand from his fur. He dropped each one carefully into her palm then stared back at her, spiteful. Lady Kendra paid no heed to the disrespect his eyes told all of and simply pocketed the grains before commanding her party forward. The crowd followed her to the nearest tavern and left the beggar behind in his confusion and anger. Ranting and raving, he cursed the Lady and her parsimoniousness. When his anger was spent, he went on, disgruntled, with his daily tasks of begging and scavenging.

Throughout the rest of the day, Parsinia’s inhabitants talked cheerfully amongst themselves about Kendra’s visit as they too went about their chores and to-dos. Saris kittens helped their parents hang decorations about their homes and the aroma of holiday incense was strong as the thin lines of smoke rose and wafted through the open windows of homes. Since Lesser Aradoth seemed to never witness snow, the children made small ‘sandmen’ from wet mud and salt. On a number of them, candied minnows and chocolate mice were used to decorate the muddy figures and create the image of faces. Even with these funny sights, the beggar found no joy in the remaining hours of daylight. He only used the holiday spirits for his own gain and tugged at the heart strings of friendly passersby for a few spare coins or treasures. When he returned home though, he saw a small, silk pouch lying on his doorstep. Curious, as any saris is, he picked it up and opened it. At first, he saw nothing but sand and cursed the assumed jest before tossing the pouch onto the ground beside him. When it hit the cobble street, though, there was a delicate ‘clink’ before the ensuing silence. Looking back, he saw three of the most brilliantly polished, beautifully cut diamonds he had ever laid eyes on; one for each grain of sand he had given to Lady Kendra. “Had I been generous and given to her willingly,” he thought, bending over to pick up the gems, “I’d have been a rich tom today.”



## Istara's Gift by Mary

Winter Solstice in Istaria was an uplifting time of year, a time to rejoice over the many tasks accomplished, a time to celebrate recent battles fought and won, and a time to name the young ones that would step over the threshold of adulthood as each was presented with a special weapon and the shiny new tools of their chosen trade. This year it seemed the rejoicing would harbor many sad overtones. It had been a hard winter, snow and ice had ravaged the land making travel impossible, and hunting game came with the risk of losing loved ones to the terrible storms. Most settlements were down to the last of the stored foods they had harvested that fall, and everyone was tightening their belts as hunger became a way of life.

Nevertheless, it was Winter Solstice and Jessum, the leader of the settlement of Duskhold, had decreed that the celebration would take place as usual this year. Jessum had called a town meeting, and to cheers ringing off the meeting hall walls, had outlined his plans. "The Festival will go on! This year will be the best festival ever", he vowed. "We will keep the traditions we can, and come up with new ways to celebrate!" His booming voice left no doubt that he would work harder than anyone to make this a year to remember. Because trader caravans had not made it through that year, Instead of the usual trinket gifts normally given to family and friends, Jessum challenged everyone to come up with a gift that the whole town could share. "Make it something from your heart that everyone will benefit from."

As the meeting broke up, many voices could be heard discussing this new idea. The townsfolk had grasped the spirit of the celebration and their laughter and chattering sounded lighthearted and gay. Men folk braved the storm and cut the huge logs that were dragged back to the bonfire circle and carefully laid. Plans were made for the wonderful feast and instruments were brought out and carefully polished and tuned.

However, as the weeks went by and the winter storms raged even harder, it became more and more difficult to hold on to that festival spirit. The winds howled down from the mountains and blew snow into huge piles up against homes and barns. Ice covered the lakes and fishing became impossible. Windowpanes rattled and families huddled together as they struggled just to keep the hearth fires burning. Many of the townsfolk were forced to slaughter milk cows to feed their families. Hope dwindled. Winter Festival preparations were put aside as people struggled to live.

The day before winter solstice showed no respite from the harsh weather. Jessum took his place at the table for breakfast with his wife and three daughters. He sighed heavily as he voiced his regret that the festival would be canceled. "The snow is so thick it would be impossible to even light the bonfire and the cooks have informed me that the ground is too frozen to dig the pits to roast the haunches. And no one should be outdoors in this weather." He looked at his family sadly and spread his hands on the table. "I don't know what else to do". His eyes were bleak as he contemplated the year-end without a festival.

His heart sank as he remembered festivals from previous years. He could almost feel the heat from the enormous bonfire, smell the roasting meats and hear the laughter and music as he sat lost in thought. He could see the brightly colored ribbons decorating the tall fir trees that surrounded the festival circle, the tables laden with savory treats and kegs of the best wine and ale off to the side of the dancing

square. How could he ask his people to go into the New Year without having celebrated the festival? How could they not light the huge bonfire that was the traditional honor to the gods? His hands clenched tightly as he watched his wife carry the porridge kettle to the table. How could he fail them all?

"Maybe we could put it off until the weather breaks or, until spring?" his wife Challa asked tentatively, her voice trailing off as she saw the sadness in Jessum's eyes. She laid her hand gently on his shoulder. "You will think of something, my dear, you always do", she said briskly as she ladled porridge into bowls.

"My friend Triny says the gods and goddesses are angry and are punishing us," piped up Jessum's youngest daughter. "She says there will be no festival this year and the goddess Istara is taking away all our food so that we will all die." This pronouncement was met with shocked gasps.

Jessum stared hard at his youngest. He pointed to the steaming kettle in the middle of the table and then to each of their bowls of the thick rich porridge. "We are blessed with the food of this earth and the creatures living in it. We honor the gods with our festival bonfires and prayers. The gods keep the magic of this world alive. That has been the tradition since this world was born." He forced himself to smile. "We will have a festival," he declared loudly. "I just have to figure out how," he muttered to himself.

As Jessum sat at his worktable later that day, his brain churned with all of his enormous responsibilities. There had to be a way to hold the festival, there just had to be. But he could come up with no way to shelter the whole town outside around the enormous bonfire. The wind was too fierce and tents would just blow away. He was also beginning to realize he had an even bigger problem to solve that was more lasting than the festival. Food storage was becoming a grave problem. They only had so many farm animals they could slaughter before they ran out of fresh food. And while this was the worst storm in living memory, it certainly could happen again another year. They needed to come up with a way to store enough food so the town could live in comfort through another such winter.

As he polished the sapphire he had just finished cutting, his oldest daughter entered the workshop and stood respectfully beside the worktable. Sita knew better than to interrupt her father if he was cutting gems. When he set aside the sapphire and swung around to look at her, she took a deep breath and began to speak. "Father, I have an idea," she said softly. "It's for the festival." She held her breath as he scowled bleakly. Then he nodded at her and she continued.

"I know that tradition means everything to this town. But to not have a festival tomorrow would be breaking tradition." She paused to let this statement sink in. Sita took a deep breath and trembled a little at what she was going to suggest. "So if we are going to break tradition, let's really break it." She quailed at her father's look of alarm, but was determined to voice her thoughts. "Instead of having the festival outside in the festival circle, let's hold it in the meeting hall. We can move all the benches aside and set up the food tables along the wall. A tree can be cut and brought indoors and decorated. The stone fireplaces are large enough to hold some of the bonfire logs. We can have music and dancing, and the traditional adulthood honors as usual. And there can be Ahhhhhh..." she gasped in surprise as she was lifted off her feet and swung around the room.

Jessum set his daughter back on her feet and laughed until he cried. "Daughter of my heart, you are smarter than us all," he gasped as he rubbed the tears from his eyes. "Let's do it!" Still laughing, Jessum hurried from the house to rally the town.

Music and laughter shook the meeting hall the next day as the townsfolk gathered to celebrate Winter Solstice. They each brought their favorite foods and drink to share with all. Tables were laden with savories and sweets and the wonderful smells filled the air. The huge bonfire logs were cut to fit the great fireplaces and crackled merrily as they heated the large room. An enormous fir tree had been felled and dragged inside, and many of the townsfolk had brought a cherished treasure to hang on the branches. The storm raged around the building but the mood was so festive no one seemed to remember the cold and snow outside.

Seven young folk were honored with the traditional ceremony into adulthood. Each was given a finely tooled weapon of choice and tools for their professed trade. They were also presented with a deed to land and the promise of the town to help them build a house and craft shop. After the ceremony, Jessum asked everyone to share their gifts. Several folks had written poems to honor the accomplishments of the new adults. Another had constructed a ballad about the town's old warriors and their deeds of valor. One of the older cooks had written out many of the recipes favored by the townsfolk and bound them into books so everyone could learn new ways to cook. Rugs and wall hangings had been crafted for the meeting hall and a beautiful bronze bell was proudly presented to be fitted to a cupola on the roof. All the gifts showed the respect and love the townsfolk had for each other.

Suddenly, the fires roared and the meeting hall door was flung open. Snow swirled in and almost obscured a tall figure that strode in from the storm. Everyone paused and turned to the door. The man was a stranger to all. Silence hung over the hall as the stranger strode to the front of the room. He was dressed in long flowing red robes and had on a cloak that seemed to shimmer as he walked. He carried a large rolled-up parchment in one hand. He stopped and raised his hands.

"I am a messenger from the goddess Istara," his voice rang into the stunned silence. "She has sent me to thank you all for honoring her this day. She has given you a great trial to bear this last year and is very pleased with you all. Your persistence and innovation will stand you in good stead. Because you have honored her so well, Istara has asked me to present you with this gift." He raised the rolled parchment above his head. With a flourish, he opened it and held it for all to see. "These are the plans for a new building called a tavern. Once it is raised, Istara will grace it with her magic. Anyone putting food into this building will see it last for as long as it is needed." The stranger gazed out over the stunned crowd and smiled. He rolled the parchment back up and handed it to Jessum with a small bow. "May the blessings of Istara be upon you all." He swirled on the spot and his long cloak shimmered brightly. Then, he disappeared.

## The Little Treant by Mina

The little treant stood on top of the hill. It was bitterly cold, and snow had just started falling, which only added to his feeling of loneliness. His Clan were some distance away, most sleeping while the patrol trees moodily paced the perimeter of their camp, ever watchful for the pale two-legs who often strayed too close, looking for wood.

His Clan didn't like the little treant - they thought he was too small, and weak. He also had a strange fascination with the two-legs. He was often to be found up on the hill, staring down at the small village below, watching the two-legs as they scurried from place to place, and would refuse to harm any who came near to the camp. He had realized over time, that these two-legs were different from the others - bigger ones who came hunting with sharp weapons, taking delight in killing anything living they came across. "His" two-legs looked weak, only ever creeping near the forest to gather armfuls of fallen branches, or killing the occasional small animal, obviously for much-needed food.

He watched the village now, as nighttime approached. The snow was falling more heavily now, as he watched tiny figures darting from house to house, smoke starting to rise through holes in the roofs as fires were lit to try and ward off the chill air. The houses were really nothing more than huts with rough clay walls and dirty straw and rushes for roofs. The two-legs were dressed in tattered clothing and furs.....these must be poor two-legs indeed, he thought - nothing like the heavily armored, well dressed ones he saw so often, hunting or traveling round the countryside. He never saw those well dressed two-legs going anywhere near the small village - almost as though the poverty there was infectious, and something they didn't want to see. "His" two-legs seemed to barely scratch a living from the few small fields around their village. He sighed softly at the injustice of those who have so much, shunning those who have so little..

The little treant prepared to go back to his camp for the night. He suddenly realized his branches were heavy with snow, so shook himself briskly. There was a quiet "umppphh!" from beside him. Startled, he looked down and saw a tiny dryad child stood beside him, now covered in the snow he had shaken from his branches. Strangely, the child didn't seem scared of him at all, and even giggled as he attempted to brush the snow off her head with gentle sweeps of his arms, the needle-covered branches acting like small brushes.

"I am sorry!", he said, in a quiet voice, not wanting to scare the child away. "I didn't see you there!" "It's ok", the child said between giggles. "I often don't get noticed, I am way smaller than others my age". She grimaced slightly, as though remembering past teasings about her small size. He took a closer look at her, noticing her tiny frame, barely covered in ragged furs - she looked so thin, what should be bright body tattoos were dull and faded, covered with grime and dirt, her hair a tangle of knots, and he couldn't even tell its color it was so filthy. But her smile, as she turned to him, could of lit up any room she was in, it was so bright and totally charming. He looked back down at the village, the girl still standing quietly beside him.

Suddenly, in a quiet voice, she said "Do you know what day it is?" He looked down at her, and replied "No, is it something special?" She said "It's Christmas Eve". The treant didn't understand what this meant, so the dryad explained, telling him the old story, her face lighting up as she explained about

how the people of Istaria would celebrate, exchanging gifts and decorating their houses with streamers and ribbons made from brightly colored paper and cloth, and how colored lanterns would be hung around outside, making wintery streets look like a fairyland. "I saw it once, in the next town. I went with my father to take some wood carvings he had made, to see if we could sell them, so he could bring home some food for us to have on Christmas day". The dryad sighed softly, a smile on her face at the memory of what she had seen. She grinned up at the treant "They even decorate trees with lights, and ribbons, with a fairy on top!".

"Doesn't your village celebrate, then?" asked the little treant. "We do", she said. "But we've never been able to get the decorations, or have a tree, or anything like that. But we do all gather in the middle of the village, and sing the traditional songs. It's a time for families to be together. I still have my family, some of the boys and girls I know don't have theirs any more, thanks to the Withered Aegis. So I am happy - I don't get any presents, but at least I still have my mum, dad and brother....even though he annoys me sometimes!" She grimaced, and the little treant chuckled, making her giggle again.

"I must go!" the dryad said suddenly. "It's nearly dark and mum always worries if I am out after dark, plus we need this wood for the fire!". She picked up the bundle of small branches at her feet, then, looking back as she ran down the hill in the near darkness, she cried "Happy Christmas, little tree!"

As he watched her run off, an idea began to form in the little treant's mind - he felt a strange affinity with that tiny dryad girl, and what he wanted more than anything, was to see her face light up in that dazzling smile once more. He wandered back to his camp, deep in thought.

Early the next morning, before it had even started to get light, the little treant rose, and left his camp. As he walked, he picked various plants, and some fruit and berries that were growing nearby. The snow was still falling lightly as he crept down into the village. Positioning himself in what passed for the tiny village's town square, he draped ivy and trailing vines around himself, and stuck the fruits and berries on the end of his branches. The big star in the sky that he had noticed the night before, started to fade as dawn approached. Snow started to gather on him, glistening amongst his green needles like tiny lights.

Soon, the villagers began to stir, and a nearby door opened. The tiny dryad girl came running out, tumbling to a stop when she saw the little treant in the square. Her hands flew to her mouth and she gasped, before breaking into one of her dazzling smiles. She ran up to the little treant, and said "You are a Christmas tree!" She stood back a little, looking him over, smiling all the while. Then her smile faltered. "But, you have no fairy for the top!". He beckoned her to come closer, and whispered something to her. She ran back to her house quietly but quickly, only to emerge a short while later, for once looking clean, with her hair missing most of the tangles and showing it was in fact, a lovely bright red.

As other houses started to come to life, she carefully climbed to the top of the little treant. People opened their doors and stepped out into the bright morning, snow still lightly falling. Murmurs of surprise could be heard as they moved into the square to gather for the singing of the traditional Christmas songs. All gathered round the little treant, and as they started singing, they looked up to the top of the treant, who was standing tall and proud with his branches covered in plant streamers and brightly glittering snow, to see the tiny dryad perched at the top, grinning from ear to ear as she shouted "Happy Christmas everybody!"

## **A Hatchling Winter Festival Song: Red Talon** by Silithus

Wake little hatchlings, and come warm thy scale,  
Festivities are upon us, there is no time to fail,  
The snow falls feathery alight with winters fire,  
Decorations hung and presents made the time for you is dire!

The little ones look up to you, many a story have they heard,  
They say you come to bring them gifts, and naught but kindest word,  
The festive hatchling will come to see us, the one with talons red,  
We hope you appear again this year, before we go to bed!

The older dragons wink and chuckle, but we will prove them wrong,  
We know if we believe enough, and raise our voices in song,  
He will come and speak with us, and grant our hatchling wishes,  
Great Red Talon of winter fest will give us gifts delicious!

So hear our tiny plea's, answer our hearts desire,  
Bring us shiny gifts golden, and jewels of wondrous fire,  
We hope you hear us great Red of the north,  
You can hear the call of us the small, with gifts do you come forth!

## The Legend of the Bravest Wish by Krysteen

Many tales of strange events come from the darkness of the woods at night. But there are none so miraculous as this one. For long ago, the simple wish of a pure heart saved the lives of all that was held dear.

It was the winter day of feasting in Feladan, a time when the brightest star in heaven would align itself directly to the top of the city's pride and joy, The Shrine of New Hope. It was given that name after the many races of Istaria had banded together to rid Feladan of the evil that once plagued its land. It is a widely held belief amongst the elves that the star will grant one wish to the person who is in most need of it that night.

The sounds of celebration could be heard all over the city as the Festival of Hope carried on throughout the day. Joy was present in each heart. There was dancing. There was drinking. Games of chance were played around every corner. And delicious foods adorned each table.

As the day wore into night, the women in charge of keeping the tables stocked began to run low on food. A young maiden named Elestanya volunteered to go out into the woods and gather food so the others could stay behind and prepare more dishes for the hungry crowd.

Seeing that the lady was on her way out of the city, Grendor, one of the council elders, stopped Elestanya to ask her for a favor. The time of wishing would be there within the hour. It would be a pity for any elf to miss their chance at being picked by the star. So Elestanya was asked to give a message to the sentries that stood guard at the dormant portal that lead from the dreaded Realm of Blight. The portal had been dead for so long that the elders believed it would be safe to leave it unguarded for just a little while.

After delivering the message, Elestanya was about to take her leave from the guards when one of them stopped her. He smiled boldly and winked as he handed her his horn for just in case she needed some help. Then he asked her to stand with him at the shrine when the wishing star came. With her head lost in romantic thoughts, Elestanya placed the horn in a basket that she had with her, and happily made her way through the woods to where the wild grapevines grew.

\* \* \*

But evil does not lay still just because a season of joy overtakes the land. Rather, it sits and watches from a distance; waiting for any opportunity to strike terror into the heart of all those who oppose it. The soft hum of energy began to sputter its way into a rhythmic pattern as the portal once again came to life. An eerie green fog oozed up from the ground. A foul smell of death hung thick in the air. And very soon enough, the heavy thud of footsteps thumped against the ground. The Withered Aegis had returned to Feladan.

Off in the distance, Elestanya gathered up her bounty as quickly as she could. Her head was swimming with thoughts of the handsome young guard who took a fancy to her. Once her basket was full, she hurried her way back to the city in hopes of discovering a name to put with the guard's charming face. But she had been so preoccupied with her thoughts that she didn't notice the hordes of undead minions until it was too late. Her smile turned to fear as she gasped in disbelief.

Not wanting their surprise attack to be foiled, the black hearted soldiers targeted the young elf for destruction. Elestanya's heart pounded against her chest as her attackers drew near. She could already feel her soul being leached out of her body. A voice inside her head screamed at her to run.

Utterly terrified, Elestanya dropped the basket of grapes and ran for her life. She ran through the trees, hoping to cut across the woods and back to the road. But her legs could carry her only so far. Panting for air, Elestanya hid behind one of the trees. In the distance, she could hear the cheers of celebration as the festival carried on. Her thoughts turned to her people and how devastated they would be from such a sneak attack. She knew she had to warn the others somehow. She reached for the horn in hopes that her handsome young guard would come and rescue her. But it was not there. Only then did she realize that the horn was still in the basket that she dropped along the road.

Summoning up enough courage, Elestanya took a peak out from behind the tree. More and more of the dark forces were coming out of the portal. But worst of all, they were closing in on her. Her heart sank in despair as she looked back towards her village. She knew she would never make it back home. Nor would she ever see her young guard again. But just when Elestanya thought all was lost, a ray of hope filled her heart.

The night sky lit up with a brilliant white glow as the Star of Hope aligned itself with the city shrine. There was only one wish in Elestanya's heart. And even though she was in grave danger, she stepped out from behind the tree and into a clearing. She knelt down on both knees in the direction of the shrine. And with a bright smile on her lips, she clenched her hands together and held them up towards the star as she made her wish. "Oh, star of heaven. Oh, star of light. Grant me this wish that I wish this night. Please keep my people safe."

In the blink of an eye, the air around Feladan dropped to a bone chilling temperature. The night sky darkened as clouds moved in to conceal the moon and stars. Throughout the city, all eyes look up to the sky in bewilderment. Shivers ran rampant over every living body as the air they expelled became white puffs of mist. And then a torrent of rain came pouring down from the heavens. It had grown so cold that the rain began to freeze as soon as it landed.

The townspeople had seen this kind of weather before, but never here in Feladan. In all the history of the land, it had never once gotten cold enough to snow, let alone turn water into ice. A sheet of ice began to coat everything in sight. Everywhere, people started to grab whatever could be saved from the festivities as they hurried into their homes for safety. All through the night, howling winds roared with anger while the rains continued to freeze where they fell.

\* \* \*

By morning, the storm had finally quelled its fury. Mages could be seen hurrying about to each house, using their flame spells to melt the ice that had glued all the doors and windows shut. When the people came outside to look at what was left behind, they were in awe from the beauty of it all. The glassy coat of ice made the city look as though it were made of crystal.

But what had caused such a strange thing to happen in their own land? They all had to wonder. As the people began to walk around the village to marvel at the sights, they heard a call of alarm shouted out by one of the portal guards returning to his duty. They all rushed outside the city walls as quickly as they could to see what it was all about.

When they gazed down into the valley, every heart pounded with the fierce beat of brotherhood at what they saw. For they now understood why the ice storm had come. Just off to the side of the road, a



frozen statue of a young maiden kneeling with her hands raised towards the sky, glistened in the sunlight. And just behind her, an army of Withered Aegis minions stood frozen in their tracks.

From that winter season on, every elf adorned their homes with glass figurines of Elestanya to commemorate her selfless act. The village courtyard would fill up with ice carvings that depicted how one brave wish had saved the lives of so many. Just looking at the statues filled the villagers hearts with joy. For there was the proof that wishes really do come true.

## The Big Night by Cixi the Gnome

The crisp winter sky exploded with clouds of steamy, obsidian soot. Shouting gnomes poured from the workshop, leaving only a bearded master inventor and his diminutive apprentice.

“Now see what you’ve done, Cixi Tinsprocket! I regret the day I consented to take you as an apprentice.”

“But it’s just a small setback, Master Pulleyup,” said Cixi, plucking some fragments of wood from her pigtails. “I promise I will have it working in time for Winterfest! Just give me one more chance, please?”

“The Big Night performance is just too important to leave to chance. I’m sorry but I think you should go make yourself useful in the stables.”

“But we don’t have any stables, Master Pulleyup.”

“Just so, Tinsprocket, just so. Well, I expect you can find something less incendiary to occupy yourself with in the future. And make sure you don’t leave anything behind when you leave. My new apprentice will need the storage.”

And just like that, Cixi Tinsprocket found herself masterless and lessened again in the eyes of her own kind. This was just the latest of her failed apprenticeships, which had begun after her tenth summer and now stretched into her 15th winter. None of the trades had suited her temperament or her interest one iota. But in the way of gnomes, she was supposed to learn mechanics and the forming of all too clever things.

Gnome competition reached its highest frenzy around Winterfest, when new inventions were exhibited in the Gnome Tent leading up to Big Night, when the cleverest technologies were showcased in a stage show, an event which drew big crowds from all the races of Istaria.

Cixi had been helping Master Pulleyup with what he termed his most brilliant invention to date. At least that is what the Master said. Cixi had had her doubts.

Indeed, if she had her way, she would have been far away from the Rachival Workshop and attached to some big house on Copperton, with a fine kitchen to manage, and perhaps a weaving loom for recreation. But such was not to be, for her parents were set upon her following in their footsteps in tinker trades. And so, she lived with the fear of bringing shame upon the entire House of Tinsprocket by her failure to reach journeyman.

She could hear the other apprentices laughing at her as they made their way back inside the shop. Blinking back tears, she ran to the storeroom, shoved supplies into her cargo disk, and slipped out the back.

“Wait, at least clean the cinders from your face before you leave!” A quiet voice made her step around the portal to find her old friend Zygax Wingnut waiting there. He gave her a clean cloth dampened from the well.

“Cixi, you’ve made a muddle of things again... well, maybe it will turn out for the best this time, and

your family will finally see it your way. Where are you going? Not home, I assume.” Zygax looked at her with concern.

“No, I shall travel around a bit. I still have my last month’s wages.”

“You will be back for Winterfest, won’t you? You promised me the first dance, and the last one, too.” He smiled.

“Yes, of course, Zygax, if you still want to dance with me when I am so disgraced.”

“Widgets, don’t even think a thought like that. This will all blow over soon enough. Sorry, I didn’t mean to use such a poor choice of words!” Zygax rolled his eyes, poorly hiding a smile.

In spite of herself, Cixi had to laugh. “I shall be there, don’t worry. Now, I best be on my way before word reaches my father!”

Cixi entered the portal and vanished.

On the hills near Spire’s Shadow, the sun was approaching high noon. Not far away, the ground rises to the fearsome height of the Cleric’s tower. And it was beneath those towering heights that Cixi aimlessly strolled the craggy hillsides, one hand on her tool belt and one hand gesturing as if she was speaking to an invisible companion at her side.

“Dearest father, Why can’t you just let me be? I told you I wasn’t cut out for these infernal careers of Tinkering-Machine-Gadget-Tool-Forming-Pattern stuff. What is so wrong with Confectioner? Nothing, dear father, nothing! I’m sorry to shame our family, but if you would stop insisting that I study things I haven’t got a wit of talent for, no one would even pay heed! As it is, they focus only on my lack of achievement each Big Night.”

A loud scuffling interrupted her arguments. She ran for cover behind the nearest boulder. Just as she peeked out for another look, what appeared to be a small arbotus galloped forth from a crevice right where she had left her cargo disk. Its jaws were full of bounty.

Disaster! If she lost supplies, she would not be able to continue her much needed “vacation” and worse, she had a huge batch of jam tarts in there!

Reaching into her tool belt, she charged after the arbutus, but to her horror, as her fingers grasped her tinkering spanner, her belt buckle snapped open and tools flung out in all directions. Another step caught her foot on a hammer and down she flew.

Over the cliff she tumbled, sliding ever downward. And when she felt she couldn’t hold on to her senses for another second, the whirling, twirling and bouncing stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Amazingly unhurt, Cixi cranked open an eye, only to see her view blocked by what appeared to be a thin tree trunk.

“Are you going to lie there looking up my skilt or shall you introduce yourself?”

Cixi found that she was wrapped around a pair of green- stockinged legs. More amazing, not ten feet away, she could see the scraped side of her cargo disk.

She scrambled to her feet and stammered, “I am Cixi and I seem to have lost my balance.”

The elf tossed his long hair and bowed. “Apology accepted.” Then, without a a move into either pack or pocket, his hands suddenly held a loaf sized, gleaming stone.

He smiled and said, "Is this what you were chasing, then? Yes, I am sure this is exactly what you seek." And without another word, he set the object down and filled the air with spell casting. Before Cixi could reply, the elf disappeared in a veil of light, leaving only a faint perfume behind.

Still dizzy from her fall, she rubbed her eyes and questioned whether she had just imagined that scene. In any event, she was safe, somehow in one piece and most unbelievably, she had recovered her cargo disk. Unsteadily she walked to it and sifted through the jumbled contents. Nothing was missing. Surely, that couldn't be.

Feeling need of sustenance, she took out bread and cheese, and sat down to dine.

As she swallowed the last of her meal and wiped her knife clean, a gleam of light glanced off the blade, drawing her eyes to the stone which the elf had left behind. It glowed strangely.

Upon close examination, the egg shaped stone was smooth and glimmered as if lit from within. She picked it up and turned it in her hands. It was a pretty thing, mottled with veins of rainbow color. She held it up to the light.

"By the gods!" she cried in a shock of recognition.

This was an egg, and from its size, could only be a dragon egg! And worse, where there was an egg, there need be a mother dragon and that was never, ever good, especially if one was a gnome. She should leave the egg right where it was and flee the area. But what had the elf said? He'd told her that this was exactly what she was looking for. And he had perhaps saved her life. Was this her lucky charm? She let out a sigh of exasperation that would have made Master Pulleyup proud.

At that moment, the egg vibrated with a low buzz, rather like a Saris's purr. Shaken, she set it down and thought about her options. Best find a secure place to watch and see if the mother returned.

She fashioned a cloth to hold and warm the egg, set it on a flat rock and climbed to an overlook, where, exhausted from her ordeals, she fell into a deep sleep.

And so the night passed, and the next, and the next, until, convinced that the egg was abandoned, Cixi pulled up her makeshift camp and headed toward the Vandus March, where she planned to deposit the egg near a region of dragon lairs.

At times she fought wolves or treants, but kept safe the egg. Whenever she saw a winged creature overhead she trembled that she would be taken for a kidnapper. And as she walked alone, she sang and spoke to the egg, for it seemed willing to share her troubled heart.

Finally, she neared a distant cliff face with lair openings. Cixi crept forward cradling the wrapped bundle, but stopped short when, to her great horror, what appeared to be a small claw poked out from the cloth wrappings.

"Oh Rust," she cried, trying to stuff the hatchling back into its shell. But the hatchling's time had come.

"Mmmmp, errrreeeckk," came a tiny voice from within the cloth.

With deep misgivings she gazed upon a tiny, green/gold hatchling. Two ruby eyes were gazing up at her with unqualified love. It was more than she could bear. Without thinking, Cixi burst into tears.

And so she didn't see the shadows and failed to hear the flapping of wings around her. What she finally did notice was a hissing in her right ear.

“And what do we have here? A hot lunch?” Hot breath scorched her eyebrows.

“Mmmmmph, errrrreeckkkkkmmmmaaaaaaaa maaaaa,” came the tiny voice from Cixi’s arms.

“Well, I’ll be a Gruok Handbag, a Gnome has hatched an egg! I knew they were strange, but this is a first,” said a red drake, peering down over Cixi’s bent head.

“Kepesk Dawnfire, you idiot, that’s not a Gnome baby. Come away from there and let someone with a brain take a look,” said a testy blue Dragoness.

“Yes, dear,” said the red dragon, much chagrined.

“My goodness, get Goldenorb out here! Doesn’t this look like one of hers?”

And so, Goldenorb was duly sent for, and arrived in a flutter of matronly excitement to claim her lost daughter. And Cixi became the guest of honor at lunch instead of the main course.

Winterfest began with the first snows that year. Excited crowds surged around the outdoor stage for the Gnomish Big Night Technologies Show. One magnificent device after the next was demonstrated. But, as the last presentation was announced, the crowd was rent by an ungodly presence.

Kwellin and Blights erupted into the gathering, but before even one arrow was nocked, a score of immense drakes descended upon the WA and in moments, tore the WA all to bits.

Before the Gifted could catch their breath, a large green/gold Dragon marched to the stage and deposited a small rider upon it.

Every eye was on Cixi as she stepped to the podium with a tiny hatchling in tow.

“Dear audience,” she stammered, “I am pleased to produce my newest invention, the Dragon Egg Cozy.”

With that, she shook out a quilted cloth and held it up for the crowd to see. In the hush that followed a large green/gold Dragon announced that henceforth the Drakes of the Vandus would be available to escort all crafters.

Cixi was the Heroine of Winterfest and henceforth given the title “Tailor to the Drakes”. She set up her own shop on Copperton, where it can be secretly reported she did almost no tailoring and very much cooking, and lived happily ever after.

## First Fist.. First Foot by Sonea Finder

It was the night before... Well, thought the Ancient who sat atop the Hall of Mirrors, it was, as far as he could tell, the night before tomorrow's dawn. But below, the hustle and bustle, the to and fro of many seemed to speak that it was something more. And the Hall glowed.

Bright lanterns lit the tree-covered walk leading to its door, and swinging glass globes of red and green, aye and blue also had made the Hall a kaleidoscope of color. Twisted paper stretched across the main room, and tables groaned under the weight of ale and such foods as two legs loved.

Sonea had tried to explain WinterFest. How each made merry in their own manner... that winter was passing, and a new year waking. And of this gathering where all would come to hear the new year's First Tale.

Sephiranoth... was not good at merry.

Cold winds blew where the drake had perched.

ShadowGuard was... as ever. Though ShadowGate's spiral kept out the wind and snow, to the Ancient, the lair seemed ... cold.

He thought of the Hall... Red. Green. And Blue? Why... was Sephiranoth not himself blue? Wings beat, claws struck, and red lava rocks from Dralk stood here and there about ShadowGuard. Dragon fire could coax any rock to burn red and warm, and these were no different. Now green. Blight, of course... but that green seemed somehow... wrong... for this purpose. So great pines had lent their boughs, willing or no. The scent of resin dripping from torn wood and the bright green of their growth was set about the lair also.

The Ancient looked about. Red... Green... Blue..... and a cold chill, spirit-deep.

A noise came from outside. No such was let pass, so the drake took swift wing to ShadowGate. There, standing at the Gate, was a young elf. The boy was beating upon the Gate's rim with what appeared to be a large lump of coal. The battered edges showed that this was not the first beating it had given.

"First Fist, First Foot!" Clearly delighted at some jest, the elfling was hopping back and forth across the Gate, and in he was, then out... and he turned to Sephiranoth and smiled in glee.

"Hah! I was first! They beat me to Maiyr's place, but I was first to thine! Make sure ye tell them when ye get to the Hall, old one!"

The elfling took his lump of coal, and dragged it clear round the Gate's rim leaving a shiny ring of black. And in a flash of feet, the boy was gone.

Gazing at the black scarred gate, Sephiranoth pondered. First... Fist? That, clearly, was the coal. Foot? Aye, the boy had stepped across the gate's arch... but why? This was not the first time the Ancient had pondered this thing, yet it seemed important this time to learn why.

Wings beat. ShadowGuard stood empty. By ShadowGate, unnoticed by drake eyes set to the mystery of coal, a bright-wrapped package sat tucked in a corner.

\* \* \*

Sonea had searched the Hall's every room, and thrice over, but none held that which she sought. Tear-blurred eyes saw that it was time. The last guest was seated and all were come to hear the new year's First Tale. The rite began as it always did. Youngling voices chanted:

" A tale... a tale.... a tale...."

The Hall lights flickered and TaleSpinner appeared. As she settled onto the speaking place, a gust of cold air set the lights flickering again. Heads turned and TaleSpinner made to greet the late-comer. But none was there. Yet drake eyes be sharp. And TaleSpinner caught a glimpse of a pink trimmed black cloak just as the Hall's door slipped shut.

TaleSpinner had meant to speak the year's First Tale, but the Tale could of a time be tricky-sly. And on this night it seemed the Tale would tell itself. Spinner left the speaking place and walked among the listeners, quietly making requests of each. Smiles came, and hands busied, and TaleSpinner faded into the night.

When the Fair One reached ShadowGuard, eyes not yet dry, she saw the package and picked it up. She entered the Gate she knew so well, and walked the passages past scattered red rocks, cooling now. She saw torn pine boughs propped against the rocks. Her hand caressed the worn rock... though her eyes were distant, and it may be she touched some other thing in her spirit. For a moment her eyes filled once more. He was not here. She turned to leave...

And she saw that a crowd had gathered behind her... many and many there were of Mia's Edge. First Foot might have passed ShadowGate, but many more did too. And feet bore hands that were heavy laden. And though tears fell, Sonea-Fair smiled, for she was determined how this night would pass.

\* \* \*

There was a place Sephiranoth knew in the high places of Mia's Edge. Of a time he would go there to set thought. And this was no different. He took wing to that place, and he sat. And there are few things so still as a drake deep in thought. Driving snow drove, and blowing winds gathered the snow against anything in its path. And Sephiranoth was none of different.

After a time, did any pass that place, then a thing they would have seen. For childer did oft roll snow and set about crafting snow-people... but few it was if any that had ever crafted what the wind did.

And the snow-dragon sat silent in the night.

One there was who might have seen, but passed unknowing, with cloak wrapped tight against wind and snow. For she had matters of her own, and thought also. But even snow covered drake ears are keen. And once that one had passed, snow shook, and the Ancient stood forth. He took soft wing and followed.

When they reached a tree-ringed clearing, the cloaked one hurried inside. Worn knees creaked as she knelt by a slight shallow in the center. An aged hand reached forth and brushed the snow, laying bare a small space. From a sack, she drew forth a candle and wedged it in the earth. A single sprig of mistletoe was laid before the candle, followed by a set of logs. Fire sparked, and the logs were set to burning.

When the fire had taken hold, she drew forth a bottle. To a keen drake nose drifted the smell of a strong two-leg drink, of the kind called fuisce. Sonea knew of these things, and had shown different brews to Sephiranoth, once even to taste, and told of them. And this was clearly of the best. The one smashed the neck of the bottle against a rock and poured the liquid on the flame... and the flames leapt high!

The old woman, for clearly it was so, laid the broken empty bottle in the shallow. She stood awhile watching the flames. Then she turned and left the clearing.

Soft wings beat in the night behind her.

The woman came to a weathered cot. But where Sephiranoth expected her to enter, she did not.

“Ye have soft wings, dragon. Soft, aye, but old ears are not always deaf. Come out from your hiding. Heh... I’ll not bite, and it be clear ye have some trouble about ye. Else why waste thy time following one as old as I?”

Sephiranoth settled to the ground. After a short, uncomfortable silence, he spoke...as if to the night air itself... though only the woman was there.

“Soni tried. But Fool I am, and in this it seems fool also. Red? Green? They did no magery... First Foot? Many have passed ShadowGate, and yet one now First? At the Hall, they gathered, but this one stands alone... and they were merry, and this one seems calm. And her spirit, I see its warmth... and I am draku... fire is my being.... YET I AM COLD!”

The anguish in his voice surprised the old woman. Though other drakes she had seen, and though she knew dragons never did weep... there was melted snow that lurked in this one’s eye.

She pondered his words, and much came clear, for the mountains where she lived taught many things, and her life more. She spoke as though to a child.

“Hush now, chroi. Hush, heart. Ye see, I am not alone. Not any night, and aye, not this one most of all. For where ye saw me, there lies mo cariad, or ye might say, macushla, the love of my heart. He died... oh years gone. But he never left me...”

At the look that came to the dragon’s eyes, the old woman laughed.

“ Oh, no. No ghost walks here. But... he is with me. Always. And I with him. And this night... on this night, our spirits dance. And I bring him his WinterFest gift, for he loved the fuisce. And he brings me soft memories, and warm dreams. And I deck his sleeping place as we used to the house we shared. This house. For such is what we do, we two-legs, to make joy in the dark places, to share the warmth of our hearts.

We tell tales of things past and look forward to new things coming, the new year and the new... us. We give gifts, and we share love we do not always speak. This is WinterFest. And if any we know are not yet come to the celebration, why we go there, and we mark their place to show we have come. And we set foot to their door, and we call them to the joy. This is First Fist and First Foot.’

Sephiranoth looked long at the old woman. Then he turned to a tree. Drake fire came, and a branch burned. Breath came and the burning ceased. He took the branch, now charred, and he marked the woman’s door. Gently, his claw scraped the door open and his foot crossed the threshold. And a thing few see happened. The drake... smiled.

“ First Fist! First Foot! Now I know this thing, and I know a place, and it waits, old one.. oh it waits!”



The two walked long. And they reached the Hall. Sephiranoth had brought the old one who was true Ael-Theyr, for well she had taught him. But the Hall was dark. And empty.

Sephiranoth was lost once more. He thought this maze ‘ravelled, but found it twisted yet. The two turned, and they took them to ShadowGuard, for the wind blew cold and it was too late to return to the mountain.

But this was not the ShadowGuard he had left. For fires burned and much hubbub was within. When they entered, they found all Mia’s Edge a-waiting. The lanterns and streamers that had bedecked the Hall were draped over rock and branch. A board had been brought and piled high with food and drink. Childer laughed as they played chase among the warmed lava rocks.

Before them all was Sonea. She spied the blue one and, through tears of joy, she smiled. The old woman spotted TaleSpinner off to the side and stepped near. They shared a wink and a smile, for they both saw what the two did not yet see clear.

Sephiranoth saw the red, and the green, and above all the Fair One holding a bright-wrapped package. At last, he knew WinterFest. And he spoke.

“I have learned new words this night. And I will learn their use. A chroi, macushla... aye, and cariad also. Yet no gift have I brought... so this poor one I offer now.”

All rushed outside as the Ancient took wing. No wind or driving snow might stand before that one’s wings, and the snow cleared. In the light of the new year’s moon, Sephiranoth sky-danced WinterFest.

## Season's Greetings by George

Spent the season hunting and gathering to sit in my warm new home wondering what is a happening.

A strange little knock at my door comes a wrapping.

Wondering who is knocking at my door in weather such as this.

I answer it with my tiny wings a flapping

Why it is Jolly ole Ramos, the Christmas gnome from down the lane.

He brings with him, warm Grouk pies and season greetings.

## Kaasha's Cleansing by Rashgalaveck

Rashgalaveck was growing tired of the city. Around him the grand buildings of Tazoon towered and the dome of the central market sheltered him from the mid-day heat, but the noise was wearing him down. He thanked Baltima for the kabob as she handed it to him along with his change and he made his way out of the market. He remembered the first time he had visited Tazoon. He had been astounded at its size and at the variety of goods available there, but lately, he longed for home.

The sun was hot overhead and it reminded him of Kion, which of course reminded him of home – of Sslanis. There was not so much noise there, deep in the jungle, and the sun although present was rarely in full view amid the canopy. Rashgalaveck had not been home in some time and was looking forward to resting, to seeing his brood-kin and feeling the wonderful warm touch of the humid jungle air.

As he made his way down Tazoon's great streets towards the travel gate, he overheard many people chattering enthusiastically about the coming change of seasons. The Dwarves had celebrated Hammer's Rest for the first time in ages and now most races were looking forward to the Winter festivals. Rashgalaveck had no interest in Winter – there could be no jungle in the snow. He was however able to share his fellow citizens' anticipation as the Sslik had their own festival of sorts.

As he chewed on his kabob, he recalled the amazement of his fellow adventurers when he had explained that it never snowed in the jungle.

“But...what do you do in the winter!? How do your little ones make snow-golems? What kind of festival is it without snow!?”

Rashgalaveck had hissed a happily at their bewilderment and explained to them that in the jungle, the winter is the rainy season.

“Around the time that you all are freezing in the snow,” he had said, “My people are celebrating Kaasha's Cleansing. The rainy season is when we wash away the past year's miss-deeds and forgive miss-deeds against us. This way we start the year fresh, start clean.”

His companions had not understood, but Rashgalaveck did not blame them. They had never experienced the torrential downpours that Kaasha unleashed on the jungle once a year. They had never been cleansed of their worries, mistakes and fears by Kaasha's Blessed Rain.

Rashgalaveck arrived at the portal and finished his kabob as he waited his turn to step through. Soon he would be home and relieved of his weariness.

\* \* \*

Rashgalaveck stepped out of Tazoon and into Sslanis. The portals never ceased to amaze him. In an instant the hot sun and din of the city was gone – replaced by the humid jungle air and the distant calls of birds. Rashgalaveck breathed deeply was home.

He made his way down the hill from the portal pad and was pleased to see Shasses standing guard as usual.

“Don't you ever sleep?” Rashgalaveck shouted happily.

“Only when you're not looking, Rash! Glad to see you made it back, the Rains will be starting any day now!”

Rashgalaveck waved and continued on his way to the city gates. He was greeted by some amazing smells wafting from Fillet's shop and was about to investigate when someone called his name. He looked up and saw Ssthar the Elder striding towards him, as stately as ever. Rashgalaveck had always had a great deal of respect for Ssthar, as did every one in the jungle. Ssthar had seen more Cleansings than anyone and so was the purest and wisest of all the Sslik.

“Elder! I'm honored to see you again.”

“Welcome home, Storm Disciple. I trust your training is going well?”

“Yes, Elder. I have reached the highest ranks in my school and so have come home to rest and be with my kin.”

“The highest ranks?” Ssthar seemed genuinely pleased. “Well, then I know I have made the right decision. Rashgalaveck, the Rains are coming and soon we will go into the jungle to the clearings to be Cleansed. I have decided that you shall be Keeper this year, while the city takes part in the Cleansing.”

Rashgalaveck was overwhelmed. The honor of guarding the Eggs was not given lightly. Though it was a great tribute, it also caused mixed feelings, because it meant he would not take part in the Cleansing this season.

“I am honored, Elder. I will guard the brood with my life.”

“Of course you will! I have heard many great things about your training from Essiel. I only hope you can forgive me for causing you to miss out this year.” Ssthar knew that Rashgalaveck would certainly forgive him, if not now, then during the cleansing. “Wear this emblem Rashgalaveck, and let the city know you are the Keeper of Kaasha's Children this season”.

Rashgalaveck donned the emblem proudly and thanked Ssthar again. The two parted and Rashgalaveck, mind full and racing, tried his best to put from his mind the great responsibility that had been given him. He went back to rediscovering his home and catching up with many of his brood-kin.

\* \* \*

The next day, the Rains began.

Rashgalaveck and all the other Sslik donned their traditional Sslanis Jungle Wear and preparations began. The jungle wear was little more than some beads really, and many of the other races were uncomfortable wearing so little. Rashgalaveck thought this was silly and happily shed his heavy clothes to allow the Blessed Rains of Kaasha to more easily wet him.

The downpour was relentless. As it must be if Kaasha was to cleanse her children of their misdeeds. Rashgalaveck took up his post at the entrance to the brooding chamber and the city quickly slipped into the jungle. By mid-morning Rashgalaveck could hear the drums, even at this distance and even over the rain. As it must be.

As Rashgalaveck stood unprotected in Kaasha's rain his mind wandered and he pictured the ceremonies that were taking place deep in the jungle clearings. Dances and drums and the Blessed Rain filled his mind. He thought of his days as a brooding and the Cleansings he had been through. He had many fond memories of chasing after Jungle Crawler eggs as they floated on the streams formed in the jungle

after the Rains. The spiders themselves would cling to trees or roots, but the Sslik were strong swimmers and so enjoyed hunting wayward eggs.

Then the drums stopped.

Rashgalaveck felt the grip of terror in his stomach. The drums are not to stop! Not for days! They must continue with the rains! He could hardly contain his shock, but shook his mind clear and began to listen, began to think. What has happened!?

In the distance, then, he saw a great flash, the moments later heard a crack. Lighting. Rashgalaveck knew the forces of nature. No one but the druids were more in tune with the juggle, with nature. He recognized that lightning as the same spell he had brought down countless times on the backs of his enemies. More bolts, and flashes, storms of them – there was a battle being fought and Rashgalaveck could not leave to help! He could not leave the eggs!

The eggs! Rashgalaveck was inside the brooding chamber in an instant. The eggs were safe. Not a one was cracked. Not one disturbed. Only partially relieved, he made his way back outside and listened. More cracks and booms could be heard, and for what seemed like an age Rashgalaveck waited. He agonized over what to do, but then there was also another sound. This sound was closer - foot-falls.

Rashgalaveck listened and realized that there was a group running towards him and heavily armed it seemed! Rashgalaveck prepared a spell and was just about to unleash his own storm of lighting when several of his brood-kin burst out of the trees. Rashgalaveck recalled the energy of the spell and rushed to meet his kin.

“What is happening?! Why have the drums stopped?”

“The gathering was ambushed but the undead, Keeper!” Said a Sslik soldier. “Elder Ssthar ordered us to fetch you and to take over here. You must help them!”

Without another word Rashgalaveck sprinted into the jungle heading towards the basin where the ceremonies took place. Fury and anger drove him now. Those who would attack the Sslik during the Rains would pay!

Rashgalaveck took the road east up the mountain, planning to get a look at the battle from higher up. Soon he was able to get a clear view and he saw chaos. Hoards of undead had flooded the Sslanis basin and the spiders, normally hidden away in their burroughs during the rains had been stirred up as well. Rashgalaveck could see that his people were unable to form a solid line of defense, that they had been taken off-guard.

Immediately, Rashgalaveck began to focus. As he called his most powerful spell, he glowed with the green energy of nature and with the fury of Kaasha unleashed a cyclone in the midst of the undead hoard. They too were taken by surprise. Their line shattered and the Sslik below took advantage of the confusion. The warriors and heavy fighters of all kinds rushed to the front and the casters took up position behind. The line was solid.

Rashgalaveck could see from above that he had given his people the chance they needed to organize. He continued to rain down storms and bolts of lighting onto the undead and his fellow nature masters below were able to gain enough focus to unleash cyclones of their own. Like Kaasha herself the Sslik began to cleanse the Sslanis basin. Rashgalaveck descended from the cliff then to help his kin finish off the last of the invaders and soon only the Rains and Kaasha's Children remained in the basin.

Rashgalaveck caught sight of Ssthar and cried, “We've beaten them back, Elder!”

“Yes, Rashgalaveck, but at the cost of too many of our kin. This Cleansing saw the flow of our own blood as well as Kaasha's rain. But it has unfolded as Kaasha willed it. You helped turn the battle, Rashgalaveck! I am proud to call you kin. Stay with us, I will send a messenger to tell the others what has happened.”

Rashgalaveck and his kin healed those who had been injured and revived those gifted who had fallen. Those who could not be revived were set afloat on the swollen rivers of the jungle to be sent where Kaasha would have them. The rest of the Cleansing must continue and so the drums began again.

The rains eventually eased as they always do, when Kaasha is satisfied that her children are ready to begin a new year, and the Sslik returned to their lives in Sslanis full of hope and free of the past year's burdens. Despite the lost of some of their kin, they were Cleansed and ready to meet the new year.

As Rashgalaveck packed away his Jungle Wear in the vault, he thought of his friends elsewhere in Istaria as they celebrated the renewal in their own ways and knew that they were all rooted in the same ideas. He knew that they wanted a fresh start, a re-awakening and that's what he had gotten as well.

He said goodbye to his brood-kin and stepped through the travel gate once again – out of Sslanis and into another adventure in the world Istaria.

## The Annual Tinkers' Convention History by Awdz

Awdz sipped her klava at the Gnomekindle gathering, enjoying the shared tales, songs, poems and camaraderie. The conversation had turned to great events in history, so when her turn to speak came around, she shared the following account:

Perhaps the single most celebrated event in gnomish culture is the Annual Tinkers' Convention. It began with the creation of the School of Tinkering within the Rachival Research Institute. Initially, many gnomes scoffed at the idea that children could learn useful tinkering skills in a controlled environment, believing it would restrict their creativity. The Rachival School for Tinkering (RST) administrators, wanting to prove the scoffers wrong, planned a student projects demonstration day at the end of the first year. While most projects were poor copies of items already commonly available, two were considered both innovative and useful: the sunrod (precursor to today's sunscope) and the 3 m collapsible pole.

That the students created such items in their first year caused a great stir within the community. Enrollment more than doubled for the next year. The student projects demonstration day was anticipated with much excitement; discussions about what would make a worthwhile project filled the community. Over the next few years, many parents, wanting to be sure their child (and thus the parents) would not be embarrassed, took to "helping" their children with the projects. Some went so far as to construct a project at home for the child to present, without having the child lift a finger to create it.

The school administrators realized that something had to change, for some students were being alienated from tinkering by the project demonstrations process because of pushy parents who wanted to show off their own handiwork. They declared that the students would have to present projects created solely in school, with no home assistance; these were designated Official Projects Qualified by the Rachival School for Tinkering (OPQRST). An uproar of complaints from both parents and students ensued, that many projects done at home had equal or better value than what was done at the school.

A compromise was reached, in that the families of students were allowed to present projects in an area adjacent to the student project demonstrations. This allowed students to show off what they achieved at home, enabled parents to present their own inventions with proper credit given to those who created it, and still showcased what the students truly learned at the school. To keep the students' section interesting, some new projects were qualified; the list of New Official Projects Qualified by the Rachival School for Tinkering (NOPQRST) was posted at the entrance to the demonstrations area. This was modified the next year, and each year following, resulting in the traditional posting of the Latest Modified New Official Projects Qualified by the Rachival School for Tinkering (LMNOPQRST).

In time, the families project area expanded to the broader community; alumni still wanted to be involved, and community members without children wanted to exhibit their inventions as well. It became the showcase for all new tinkering advances. Gradually, it grew large enough for some subgroups to be designated each year, such as wearables and tools. Students who particularly excelled at their studies were given a subgroup of their own, Honors Inventive Juniors. The top student of the year was titled the Finest Gnome, and all who attended had to see the display by the Finest Gnome Honors Inventive Junior in Keeping with the Latest Modified New Official Projects Qualified by the

Rachival School for Tinkering (FGHIJKLMNOPQRST).

One RST administrator, Professor Zendilwigger, kept records each year of the most advanced and large inventions created by the top students, and made an effort to keep as many of the displays themselves as he could. He set them up in his workshop, and when that grew full, in his yard. A sign at the annual RST projects demonstrations encouraged attendees to also visit the Advanced Big Contraptions Designed Expressly by the Finest Gnome Honors Inventive Juniors in Keeping with the Latest Modified New Official Projects Qualified by the Rachival School for Tinkering, Under View at the Workshop and eXhibition Yard of Zendilwigger (ABCDEFGHIJKLMNQRSTUWXYZ). This was maintained by the professor and his descendants until the fall of Rachival.

Meanwhile, the greatest tinkering minds gathered at the demonstration days, and often wound up in lengthy conversations and debates about the various projects and how best to improve them. One year, after a heated argument, two of the leading tinkers made a bet that each could create a better solution for gathering eggs from chickens. They agreed to meet at the demonstration day the following year to compare inventions and settle the argument with proof to match their words. One onlooker asked if she could bring a creation to compare with theirs; with raised eyebrows and glances at one another, the tinkers each said, “Anyone is welcome to try comparing their invention against mine!”

Word got out that there was an egg-collecting challenge for the next year, and the themed convention was born. The Mayor of Rachival was solicited to judge the contest outcome; he announced that whoever’s device provided the most intact eggs to him would win. To make sure that everyone submitting a project for the egg-gathering challenge had time to view all of the other egg-gathering projects, the school administrators arranged for the contest displays to be presented in a series of demonstrations in the field just outside the hall. A hen coop with multiple nests was erected to complete the preparations.

On the day of the event, fifteen different egg-gathering devices were demonstrated with varying degrees of success. Of those that did not explode or break, there were reinforced gloves (for protection while pulling eggs out of the nest) with pockets for individual egg storage spots, long-handled lidded scoops, and nests with holes underneath connected to long tubes (for the eggs to roll down and crack at the bottom); there was even a whirling bag device that scooped up the chicken, next scooped up the eggs in another bag, then emptied the chicken into the empty nest, and stowed the eggs to the side. However, the winner of the day did not even go near the chicken coop.

Placing a chicken-shaped device in plain sight of everyone, the inventor pulled an egg from her pocket and put it in the device. Many of the onlookers booed and laughed, thinking that she’d only have the one egg she put into the device to show for her efforts. The tinker gently set the device in motion, and the crowd hushed as a stream of eggs rolled out of it. Taking one egg out of the pile produced, she said, “I’ll take this out of the count, it’s not fair to include what I added to the egg fabricator at the start into the count of what was collected.”

The onlooking tinkers roared, all insisting on an explanation of how the device worked and repeat performances. The inventor of the egg fabricator was made to disassemble her device, give a complete description of how it operated, reassemble it, and run another demonstration. Once reassembled, the egg fabricator again created a pile of eggs after the addition of a single egg to it. This process of demonstrating the device, showing its workings and construction, and re-demonstrating the device became the format for all future featured-theme presentations. Often device designs were modified during the presentations, especially if the initial demonstration did not proceed well.



The mayor, impressed by the day's events, declared that the student projects demonstration day would now be known as the Annual Tinkers' Convention. A committee comprised of leading tinkers and school administrators was formed to organize it, with the admonition to publicize the next year's theme as soon as the current convention was finished.

With this endorsement for full community participation, the Annual Tinkers' Convention grew into a multi-day event. Inventions were not only displayed, but advertised as for trade. This drew traders from other races, who were astonished by the chaos of exploding devices, the cheerful, matter-of-fact way the gnomes had of dealing with the minor disasters, and the alphabet signs. The traders' stories about it back home led to adventurous outsiders attending just for the novelty of the experience. "Steady as a gnome's invention" became a catchphrase for other races to describe unstable things.

The fall of Rachival caused a break in the Annual Tinkers' Conventions, even once the gnomish community settled into New Rachival. The invasion of the Withered Aegis caused all leading tinkers who survived to focus on inventions that would help in the fight to save the land. There were some plans to revive the school and the convention at the observatory on the peninsula, but those were dashed when the Withered Aegis overran the area. Some of the leaders of other races considered tinkered inventions more of a hazard than a help in the lost fight to retake the observatory, and publicly discouraged the gnomes from reinstating the annual convention. In recent years, there has been an undercurrent of gnomish activity, suggesting that the conventions have resumed. However, no other race has evidence of a tinkers' convention occurring other than anecdotal stories of days with a particularly high number of explosions in and around New Rachival.

## The First Snowfall by Emily

Istaria was a gorgeous place and it was home to many living creatures. In her mountains were carved, astounding caves. They were dim and very large, but the creatures that lived in them always required large spaces for them to move without restraint. Dragons carved these beautiful lairs, only adding more exquisiteness to Istaria.

There were numerous wildernesses in Istaria and so many magnificent towns. But there was one certain training island for anyone deficient to learn new ways in different schools. There were mage trainers, warrior trainers, scout trainers and several more.

The island had a small town, but most of it was an explored wilderness. It crawled with living animals and beasts and a number of horrific monsters. A mass of ghosts roamed a blighted area in the mountains near the maggots. They did not disturb one another, indeed; they seemed to enjoy each others sinister company.

Groups began to assemble and soon became guilds. There were so many different guilds with so many dissimilar names.

Trainers gave out quests. Some were very important to Istaria and some were as small as collecting wood.

A young elf was in need of assistance. She sent a scroll of parchment to the island of New Trismus, begging for help and hoped that it would reach someone who would be able to aid her. The consigner did obtain it and did expect her to arrive. The elves' long brunette hair flew with the wind as she raced from the portal to the consigner.

"My town! My town is being attacked! Please! You've got to help me!"

"Wait, Clynda slow down! What is it you want us to do?"

Clynda swept her long hair from in front of her face and the consigner could observe her blue, glowing eyes.

She seemed to gather her strength before speaking again.

"My town of Feladan- it is under attack! The starving wolves from Mahagra have ventured to our city looking for food! We do not have anywhere to go and the warriors are fighting them off as best they can! I'm afraid it is getting worse and worse!"

"Of course! We will send someone. I have sent word to many guilds and they have accepted.", and with that, the consigner strapped on her sword belt and dashed out of sight.

The young elf wearily walked back toward the portal and disappeared.

The winter wolves from Mahagra were gnawing their way through the Feladan army, toward the elevated towers. The elves all seemed to feel the same way. They were stunned with fright and the whole Elven army was entering defeat. The whole battle seemed to pause unexpectedly as a whole group of dragons joined in the battle against the wolves. Some flew in from the sky and the hatchlings all ran in with their cute little tails flailing. Then some others came, and a number of sslik showed up.

Then a massive group of fluttering dryads came geared up and they scattered amongst the battle to assist in the fight. Others came from all over Istaria to aid the elves in the crisis. Satyrs, gnomes (the dragons had a hard time trying not to step on them), dwarves and fiends. Some saris came to help too. The battle was loud and sword clanging was heard from over a great distance. Hatchlings were dying and young creatures were laying everywhere, but they stood minutes later and received back their life. Resurrection spells were being used tirelessly and some people had to wait until after the battle.

At last, the wolves retreated and the battle was over. Tiny snow flakes began to fall from the sky for the very first time in Feladan. It was snowing and all of the elves were astonished at this peculiar change in the weather. The others who had arrived from all over Istaria began to turn and depart. They had walked away feeling the elves gratitude in their attempt to lend a hand.

Everyone gathered the next day after recuperating and enjoyed their magnificent victory. They came together and there was music, dance and food. They sang and decorated the towers with wreathes and tinsel. A soft blanket of snow still covered the ground and the fervent hatchlings made little snow dragons in the soft, icy snow. The elves thanked everyone deeply for their assistance the day before. It was the Christmas season and everyone was merry- the elves especially.

Now the elves see no more snow, and suppose that it was because of the others helpfulness that it snowed just the once. The winter wolves have never dared to attack Feladan again.

## The Winter Solstice by Rebus

to the tune of Auld Lang Syne ( with my apology to Robert Burns)

Come races one,  
Come races all,  
Proclaim it loud and clear,  
And raise your foaming goblet high,  
To toast our world's New Year.  
From Desert Edge,  
To Frozen Waste,  
Let's join in song and rhymes,  
This Winter Solstice celebrate,  
And drink to better times.  
We'll mine the ore,  
And fell the trees,  
We'll gather gems and stones,  
We'll craft our tools, and make them sharp,  
To build our lairs and homes,  
Our legs are two,  
Our legs are four,  
Let spells and magic flow,  
We'll stand together, you and I,  
And help each other grow.  
So here's my hand,  
And here's my paw,  
And here's my tooth and claw,  
Together we will never yield,  
But win this blighted war.  
It's one of us,  
It's all of us,  
Tonight ignore the foe,  
Istaria grants another year,  
So let the spiced wine flow.

## A Giant Migration by Awdz

Flapping her wings in a vain attempt to move faster, Awdzy romped down the hill into Mahagra. She had heard word of the half-giants celebrating its founding, and did not want to miss out on any of the fun. She snorted bright puffs of flame as she ran in anticipation of yummy festival food and interesting stories.

As she slid the last few meters into town, fireworks blasted overhead. Awdzy paused to look up at the bright lights, then saw another blast go up. Trotting over to the half-giant who set them off, she sniffed at a box of the fireworks near his feet. An itchy feeling began in her nose, traveled up her snout and made her eyes water. All at once she let out a tremendous, “Aaaaachooooooooo!”

Unfortunately, a sneezing hatchling usually lets off a burst of flame, and this was no exception. The entire box of fireworks ignited, blasting into the air all at once in a huge display. The half-giant who had been setting them off one at a time was scorched by the sudden rush of flames and fireworks, and stood just blinking in amazement for a few moments.

“Ooh, I’m sorry!” cried Awdzy. Summoning all her magical ability, she cast a healing breeze spell on the poor fellow. The spell seemed to break his stun.

“Hey, be more careful!” the half-giant hollered at the little green hatchling. Seeing that she was distraught about what she had done, he sighed and took a gentler tone with her.

“These fireworks represent the eruption of the Katja Volcano. I need to keep them going all week as part of the celebration. I cannot spare so many going off at once like that...” The half-giant’s voice trailed off at hatchling’s miserable expression.

“Is there any way I can make it up to you?” Awdzy asked. The half-giant raised an eyebrow.

“Actually, if you could bring me some of the components used to make them, that would be a great help!” he replied. Awdzy nodded, listened carefully to what was needed and promised to bring back what she could.

Continuing further into the city, she stopped to listen to a half-giant historian describe the original harsh trip south from Trandalar. He finished his tale with a challenge.

“To commemorate how the original travelers had to pack what they could and scavenge the rest along the way, we’re having a scavenger hunt! I have lists here of what you need to bring back to me. When you return with all of it, you win a prize!” With that, he began handing out sheets of parchment to all who wanted to participate. Awdzy stepped forward, her tail swaying with curiosity. She sniffed at the parchment held out to her, got another itchy feeling in her nose, and sneezed profusely again. Fortunately she only hit the outstretched hand and single piece of parchment with her flames this time.

“Ooh, I’m sorry!” cried Awdzy. Summoning all her magical ability once again, she cast another healing breeze spell.

“Here now,” said the good-natured half-giant. “Maybe I’d better read off the list to you before I give you another parchment for reference! Let’s see...” He cleared his throat and began to recite.

“Five boards to represent the wood of the longships, four hides to represent warm clothing, three spellshards to represent the magic used to keep them safe during the crossing, two snowballs to represent the long winter, and one fish to represent the food that sustained them.” He handed the list to the little hatchling, making sure it was not flamed this time.

Stowing the list carefully, Awdzy began looking around the city for the items on her list. Deciding to check the consigner to see if she could buy what she could not make or gather, she bounded toward the vault building. Along the way, she was confronted by a noisy tirade at the town marshal.

“How on earth are we supposed to feed all these people when someone keeps snitching our fish?” a fuming half-giant was railing at him. Awdzy stopped short at the mention of fish, for it was on her list and she had never tried to catch one. Maybe this person could help her?

“Excuse me,” Awdzy said, blowing smoke out her snout. “I could not help overhearing you say something about fish, and I need to collect some for the scavenger hunt. Can you help me?”

The upset half-giant glared at her. “I need to make food for everyone attending the celebration, and cannot spare any fish unless you replace it with something else. Bring me back a gruok carcass and I’ll let you have the fish you need.” Harrumphing, the half-giant turned away, so Awdzy continued to the consigner. The shelves were already bare of the things she needed, so she stopped at her vault instead to check for spell shards. The vaultkeeper was busy gossiping about the townsfolk.

“Well, I heard that the blacksmith trainer was going sweet on one of the other trainers!” said the vaultkeeper. “But as trainers, they’re both stuck at their posts and cannot see each other like they want to. The last person in here told me that they’re even willing to do favors for anyone who delivers messages back and forth between them!”

Awdzy considered. Of course, there was nothing helpful in her vault. However, with a bit of hunting, she could get the hides and a gruok to exchange for the fish. She could make the spellshards, albeit not very efficiently, and could scoop a couple of snowballs out of the snow after she was done hunting. The only thing she really lacked was boards, and maybe this biped trainer could help her with that.

Heading outside, Awdzy asked around until she found the blacksmith trainer, who was more than willing to give her some boards if she would just deliver a message and a package. After running the errand, she returned to the blacksmith, who was delighted with the return message and happily handed over the boards she needed. Overhearing the exchange, the scholar trainer piped up.

“Hey little hatchling, Awdzy, is it?” the scholar trainer asked. “Would you be willing to run an errand for me too? I can make you the spellshards needed for the scavenger hunt, to make up for your lost time.” The little hatchling brightened; it was still hard for her to manage the stone needed for those shards.

“What do I need to do?” Awdzy inquired. “I need some of the most pure ice, unsoiled by creatures wandering the land,” replied the scholar. “But I am required here, so I need for someone else to fetch it for me. There’s a cave some distance to the east of here, wherein lies a frozen underground pool. Go there and bring me back a block of ice about so big.” The half-giant’s large hands shaped out the size. “Be careful along the way, because there have been reports of terrible ice beetles and wolves, ogres, and blizzards.”

Awdzy blinked as the half-giant shivered at the thought of those hazards. The little hatchling wondered if the big half-giant was required to stay simply because of fear. Shaking her head, she gave a mental

shrug. Bipedes were so hard to read.

Wandering outside, Awdzy asked the guard at the door for directions, hoping he would be able to tell her a safe route past all those nasty things about which the scholar had warned her.

“Well certainly I can give you suggestions,” the guard said, and elaborated on a coastal route. “But if you like dangerous wandering about and want to know what it was like for the migration, I suggest going across the ice floes north of the city, to the islands. If you can get past the blizzard on the islands – some say there are terrible creatures hidden in that swirling snow – and across the ice bridge to the tower, Archmage Fox can tell you a bit more about what the trek was like for our ancestors. They’ve even set up a portal to Trandalar at the top of it.

“Or, for an even longer challenge, you can go to the Island of Ice and travel the ice floes to the northwest – you can get all the way back to Trandalar from there! That was how people were first able to return to the continent without touching the water or sailing on it.” He went on to explain the wrath of Mountain god that drove the half-giants away from Trandalar, and the geis put on them about returning.

Thanking the guard for his help, Awdzy set off after the “most pure ice”. The journey was very difficult for the young hatchling, as even claws do not grip ice all that well. Scrabbling through the blizzard, she had to sprint away from beetles larger than she was, and dodge wolves further on. Eventually she returned successfully, and exchanged the ice for spellshards from a very happy scholar.

Hunting a gruok did not take Awdzy very long; she ported to Sslanis and brought back a gruok carcass and some hides from there. She was just arriving in Mahagra again when she was beaned with a snowball from Kalaoa, an adult dragon friend who refused to behave like one.

“Ooh! That was no fair, I have not even stepped off the port pad yet!” complained Awdzy. Kalaoa pretended innocence, laying her earfins back demurely, but Awdzy knew her far better than that.

“At the very least, you can share some of your snowballs stock with me, so we can have a proper game!” Awdzy exclaimed. Kalaoa happily passed over a couple dozen, and for the next few minutes the Mahagra town square was full of chaos as the dragons chased one another about, pelting each other (and sometimes a bystander) with snowballs. Suddenly, Awdzy stopped short.

“I need to finish the scavenger hunt!” Awdzy ran over to the half-giant cook and offered the gruok carcass in return for a fish. Kalaoa snickered at Awdzy’s trading skills when she saw the exchange. With that last item on the list collected at last, the hatchling bounded over to the historian who had started her on the scavenger hunt.

“Well done!” the historian told her. “Here’s your prize!” He handed over a badge that read, “Mahagra Migrator.”

“I went to all that trouble for a badge?” Awdzy looked at it with a raised eyeridge. Sighing out a puff of white smoke, she wondered if she could find someone to change the engraving to read, “The half-giants migrated to Mahagra and all I got was this silly badge!”

Chatting with Kalaoa about the day’s events, they curled up for the night near the Mahagra shrine. The next day, they planned, they would try that ice floes challenge and maybe replenish some of the fireworks supplies. This migration celebration was a big adventure, and Awdzy was determined not to miss out on any of the fun!

## A Dryad's Winter Tale by Gengel

### *Preface*

A story entertains, sometimes teaches. But more often, a story forever captures the memories of a precious time. "A Dryad Winter Tale" offers a legend that explains a daily occurrence that may have happened in history. The audience is never sure, but as all mythos, wishes to believe.

### *The Turning of the Seasons*

The Winter Festival evening is gently outlined by a haloed moon. Laughter and festive banter permeate the surrounding darkness like a lazy haze. Little Ones can be heard flitting around teasing each other. The whispering breeze slithers through their wings while caressing their spines with a tingling chill. A Little One shudders and pushes herself closer to the fire. The frigid breeze coaxes ashes into a spiraling dance of death with the oncoming snowflakes. Crackling wood shifts and falls outside of the protective slate bricks. A spider hatchling is startled and scurries away from the burning embers. In the darkness, a shadow against The Tree whispers a spell. A vivid purple flash entangles itself with the deadly Blood Bolt. The spider hatchling scurries no more.

### *The Elder*

The Little One's startled by the sudden spell begin to flee as if seeing a Marrow Guard. In their wake, a cacophony of dryad motes chaotically whorls into brightness then fade to the Void. Giggles infect the young dryads as they burst into laughter at their own silliness. A synchronous quick reversal of direction, as if each one has a wing held, quickly brings the children to the Spell Caster in the shadow.

A Little One brushes her head-flowers to one side. Her large brown eyes sparkle as she smiles at the Elder Spell Caster. "Elder, are ya gonna go hunting!?! Can we come!!" she hurriedly queries. Distantly, and oblivious that she cast the spell, the Elder smiles at the Little One, opens her arms and replies "Hmmm, let me think on that, but please come sit with me and share our warmth."

The Elder, is tall for her kind and is the color of the verdant flora. As it is often these days, she rests with her back to The Tree. The Elder, brushes her own head-flowers instinctively, and watches another ash mote flash its existence as it floats to a graying death. Smiling, The Elder reaches into her pouch. The Little Ones wince in excitement. With a rasping chuckle, The Elder waves a menacingly Mithril Awl. The children jump in excitement and ask at the same time, "You're gonna hunt with that?!" The Elder quips, "No Little Ones, sit down, as I 'weave' you a tale". They emit a laughing groan at being fooled once again by the Elder's pun. Quickly, Little Ones and not-so Little Ones hover near the Elder for a story telling.

"Tonight, I wish not to be your Trainer, but do you all remember your lessons of The Lament?" The Elder considers her listeners and chuckles at all the heads bobbing acknowledgment in unison. Pausing, as if pained, she suddenly smiles. "Hearken to the stories of our verdurous Palmyra! Such splendor, warmth and friends! The shimmering of life's essence enconced every aspect of our lives. Oh, and The Tree, was such a wondrous gift from our dear Alyssa." The Elder, pauses once again and mutters, "The horrors of the poor Satyrs." The Elder stills and the silence drips retrospection over the gathering. Suddenly, the Little One nuzzling at the Elder's lap looks up and shakes the Elder. "You still awake?" A smile warms the Elder as she once again speaks.



### *The Siege of Palmyra*

Addressing the child in her lap "Would you please fetch me something to quench my thirst?" the Elder softly instructs. Innocently and knowing the Elder's penchant to frequent the Dwarves, she asks, "You want the special Dwarven brew?" With a smirk, the Elder retorts, "Not tonight. I suspect the Trainers finished it after their last session with you. Some hot tea would be perfect". The Gathering murmurs a laugh as the Little One flies away.

Clearing her throat, and as if recalling a painful memory, the Elder continues her story. "The Age of Lamentation was a horrific time. Although we Dryads were hurt twice, our friends, the Elves and Satyrs, suffered even more so." As the gathering muttered in agreement, the Elder continued. "But, we did not need to suffer as such. One Dryad, that we should always remember, witnessed the advancements of the blightful Withered Aegis upon our home Palmyra. Sadly, we lived in naive bliss and laughed at such silliness. This Dryad was a persistent one that was not afraid to speak her mind. Hence, the townsfolk dismissed such a foreboding. But, she did persist, and thank Istara she did! Further did she explore and track the strengthening Withered Aegis. Yet again, we ignored her pleas for action." The Elder quietly drones to silence.

The Elder's eyes moisten in the shadows. The dutiful Little One returns with her hot tea and once again nuzzles into her lap. Smiling, as if being pulled from the dark past to the happy present, the Elder sips the tea and nods at the Little One. "You did well, thanks so much." as she begins her story once more.

"As the idyllic townsfolk went about their quests and crafts, the One went about her scouting activities." The Elder sips her tea once again and strokes the head-flowers of the Little One. Continuing, "As the One was leaving past the last Dryad tree; the Withered Aegis sizzling struck with Flame Bombs. Our homes began to burn." The Elder, staring into the fire, as if seeing the Dryad trees ablaze, speaks once again. "No one for sure knows how many waves of Nasties she held off or how. Her story is one of a child who stumbled into this epic battle. This child, as Little Ones do, wandered curiously to the distant din. The Withered Aegis seized the opportunity and struck without mercy. The One, blighted many times over, reached out to the Little One and cast a detoxifying instant transfer of health." The Elder, once again pauses. Glistening tears, gently caressing her cheeks, reflect the dancing flames of the campfire. As if all the air was consumed by the fire, the Gathering gasps as the selfless sacrificial act. The Little One wiggles on her lap, reaches up and wipes the tears. "We be doing fine Elder. Do not cry".

Sipping the tea, the Elder begins once again. "No one is sure what happened to the One, but the child, ragged and torn from the battle returned to the townsfolk. This Little One rallied her people with a prayer to the Mother. As the townsfolk approached the Nasties, snow began to fall and intertwine with the rising ash motes. Misted breaths warmed the freezing air as a frost settled over the Nasties as if a Binding Crystal encased the entire advancement. Creaking to a standstill, the Withered Aegis froze in their tracks."

### *Flakes and Fire*

The Elder, sips an empty tea cup with a guffaw. The Little One quickly reaches to refill the cup. The Elder politely declines. "What happened next was truly a miracle. From behind the Nasties, a large Radiant Dryad advanced with the brightest Mithril Lamp you have ever seen! Squinting at the Radiant Dryad, an ethereal 'Fear Not' echoed among the Townsfolk as she manifested an adamantium hammer that struck the land. Reverberations, as if the land was being awoken, shimmered throughout Palmyra. The Radiant Dryad approaches the ragged Little One and touches betwixt her wings. Softly she

whispers a spell or words of encouragement and backs away. 'Remember' fills the heads of the townsfolk followed by a terrific flash. The Radiant Dryad is gone. The Little One flies to her family, leaving the first trail of Dryad Dust that forever elicits memories of the ash and snow intermixing"

The fire crackles as the Dryads smile at the telling of Palmyra's passage from the Prime. Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The Little Ones echo a collective moan as they comprehend the "origin" of the Dryad's Dust. The Winter Festivities once again continue as they dryads merrily play.

The Elder, once the story ended, slinks into the darkness with her back against the tree. She squeezes her sleeping daughter as tears stream down her face. She will never forget the sacrifice her Mother made for her that day.

## The Festival of Ash by Maekrux

The winter chill was setting in over the town. The ancient blue dragon, Maekrux, sat before a congregation of hatchlings in the town of New Trismus. As Maekrux often did, he had come to tell stories of history and of myth; few things brought him as much joy as a hatchling inspired by one of his tales. For him, the hardest part of telling a story was deciding which story to tell. As a cold wind washed over the village, Maekrux smiled. "I know the story I wish to tell today. It's about that time of year now. Tell me, little ones, have you heard of the Festival of Ash?"

"No, what is it?" asked one of the hatchlings.

"When the cold air sets in during the winter, the ash that normally floats above Char begins to fall more heavily. Much is covered by ash in that time and so food becomes scarce. It is a lean time, but also a time of celebration, when dragons from all over the world in colder environments come to bask in the warmth of Dralk," Maekrux said.

"I've never heard of the Festival of Ash! All I get to do in winter is clean up the ash leading to our lair," a hatchling complained.

Maekrux laughed for a moment, but soon his smile faded and he nodded grimly. "It is a time of rebirth and renewal. It is a celebration held in Drulkar's name to assure ourselves that spring will come again. Alas, there has not been a Festival of Ash in many years; none have dared celebrate it since so many elders died at the Battle of Tazoon."

"What was it like?" asked another hatchling.

Maekrux's smile returned. "I shall tell you the story of my first Festival of Ash. When I was a hatchling, still fresh from the shell, my father took me down from our lair and into the city of Dralk. He gave to me an exquisite orb and told me that I would need it, though I did not know why. He had brought many treasures from his own hoard as well. When we arrived, he took me to the travel gate. Many dragons were already there, lined up along the road leading towards the bridge to the floating city. In their claws were pieces of hoard. I asked my father what was happening, but he told me to be quiet and observe.

The travel gate roared to life and from it stepped dragon after dragon. In their claws, too, were pieces of hoard and they greeted their brethren with warm smiles and the trading of hoard as gifts, symbols of friendship and kinship. A young hatchling was even directed by his mother to trade his exquisite orb with mine. Though I had never seen that hatchling before, I did feel a warm kinship with him.

After the travel gate, my father led me under the floating city, down by the lava pools. There was a great gathering of all the dragons present, with one of the elders lifting his wings proudly and looking out over the assembly. 'Praise be to Drulkar that this winter will pass! Praise be to Drulkar that we are amongst our kyn! Praise be to Drulkar that our flame will never be snuffed out!' The elder reared up and blew fire into the cauldron of lava and flames issued forth from the molten rock as if in reply. Several other dragons did the same, adding their flame to the cauldron, making it ever hotter. My father even directed me to breathe my own into the cauldron, an act which brought much admiration from the

crowd and no small amount of embarrassment on my part. The elder spoke again, 'Let the Festival of Ash begin!' The crowd roared in approval and began to converse readily amongst themselves and set up many delicacies from around Istaria on large slabs. With my father's approval, I took from the slabs freely and ate my fill.

'What does the flame in the lava mean?' I asked my sire.

'It symbolizes the concept of brothers of flame,' he said.

'Brothers of flame?' I asked.

'Yes, little one. Deep in our being is the very essence of flame, and like flame when we come together we become a great conflagration that could warm the whole world. Brothers of flame always burn brightest when they are together,' he explained.

'Wow, that's amazing!' I said, imagining in my mind's eye a flame that could warm the world. He laughed and said, 'It also keeps the air around Dralk warmer, so the ash tends to fall around the city rather than on it.'

'What about the hoard? Why did we have to trade? Nobody got any richer, did they?' I naively asked. 'Though some may come out ahead or behind, that is not the purpose of trading gifts. To trade gifts is a sign of equality with each other and that is why they are supposed to be as equal as possible. It serves to create a mood of hospitality and avow our kinship,' he said. My curiosity sated along with my pallet, I grew sleepy and my father took me home.

I awoke to find the hatchling I had traded orbs with in my lair. I immediately hissed at him, for a dragon's property is a sacred thing and no creature, not even dragons, should enter uninvited or unannounced. He scampered back, half asleep and all confused; the commotion woke my father who reprimanded me severely. By going to sleep early, I had missed the activity that ended the day: the Reunion. The Reunion finds dragons that live in Char to share their lairs for the five days of the festival with the dragons from far away. Most of the time, this is simply done by the two parties communicating, but the elders have been known to arrange accommodations as necessary. My father had tracked down this hatchling and his mother, who slept across the room, and offered his lair to them. I apologized to the hatchling and my father directed us to return to Dralk on our own and enjoy the festival.

The previous feeling of kinship I had with this hatchling had faded. I attribute this to having been brought up to be intensely distrustful of helians, though my father had never told me that helians existed. He seemed so smug at the time, stumbling around confused and grinning happily. He told me it was his first festival too, but I lied and told him I had seen two already. 'There is a rite of passage you have to go through for your first Festival!' I exclaimed with all the conviction I could.

'What's that?' the hatchling asked.

I struggled for a moment, trying to think what might be related to the festival. 'You have to go take the Idol of Flame from the pygmies! You bring it back to Dralk and throw it into the cauldron!' I said, pleased with my deception.

'That sounds dangerous. Are you sure?' he asked.

'It's tradition! You have to,' I said. He agreed and instead of taking the road into Dralk, he took the road out, alone.

I went into Dralk to enjoy the festival. The cauldron flame was kept stoked and the foods were prepared, but in addition there were many caves normally reserved for the vaults and commerce sectioned off; dragons of Dralk and dragons from elsewhere were storytelling, sharing their wisdom of primal magic or tooth and claw, speaking of the magnificence of Drukar, sharing most brilliant pieces from their hoards, and basking in the majesty of being dragon. I sat in a ring around an elder, much as you are doing right now, little ones, and listened to what he was saying.

‘Yes, the times were hard for us back then. But I shall speak on the first Reunion of the Festival of Ash. The year was 371, over two hundred years ago. Malganival Lunus sensed his time was coming, though he was bitter to it for he knew his greatest rival, Helian, was still in good health. Clawing his way from his lair, he looked over the whole of Dralk. The ash fell heavily; some say the great general thought back to a time that was simpler, another festival he must have seen. Go forth, he said to his attendant, fly as fast as the Primewind will carry you. Fly south to that city of scholars and bring them home. We shall hold a Festival of Ash.

The attendant was very surprised, but did as the general asked, flying as hard and as fast as he could through the ash-winds; it is in honor of this valiant flight that we hold a race between Dralk and Chiconis during the festival, but I digress. Within a day’s time, the sky was filled with the scholar-dragons, for there was no travel gate to Chiconis in those days. Helian herself landed before the dragon-general and bowed her head low to him. I thank you for your kind offer, Malganival, but where shall all these dragons rest their wings? she asked.

We shall exchange hoard and we lunus shall open our lairs to our kyn, one by one. The general gave from his hoard his most beautiful trinket and Helian traded it with hers. I shall personally open my lair to you. Let this be our Reunion, even if it is as fleeting as the season, and let this be a part of the Festival of Ash.

Malganival, Helian said with a coy smile, I have not seen this side of you since we were adults. I accept your hospitality and I urge my brethren to do the same. And so, even though Helian and Lunus found themselves at great odds, politically and philosophically, they were able to transcend even the Schism for a moment and be reunited as DRAGON. Though we are different and foreign, we are still kyn, still brothers. Open your heart and your homes in honor of that fact.’ The elder bowed his head, indicating he was finished. I thought a long time about this story as I wandered out from the cave. I had been wrong to turn away that hatchling and trick him. The Festival of Ash was not about surviving the winter season: it was about surviving together.

A terrible thought gripped me. What if he was not strong enough to face the Idol of Flame? I immediately rushed from Dralk as fast as my talons could carry me, up the path away from Dralk, down past the bronze golems that no longer reside there, and into the pygmies. There I found him resting, having slain many of the pygmies. ‘I’m so sorry!’ he exclaimed.

‘I - what?’ I was surprised he was apologizing to me.

‘I could not kill the Idol. I had to run away.’ His eyes were filled with tears and he looked heartbroken.

‘No, I am sorry. I should have gone with you. I should not have been mean to you or hiss at you this morning. You and I are going to slay that idol! Together, we are dragon and we are unstoppable!’ I exclaimed. He looked surprised at my change of heart, but he smiled. With his novice primal magic and my early skills at tooth and claw, we felled the fire golem the pygmies called the Idol of Flame, and we brought a shard back for the cauldron. It erupted brightly, the hatchling’s eyes ablaze with wonder at

the flame. I laughed at him and he laughed with me and we spent the Festival together as brothers. Though I never saw that hatchling again when the festival was ended, it was a most magnificent time in my life when I could set aside the hatred and distrust and be a dragon with dragons.” Maekrux bowed his head and the hatchlings scattered happily, speaking of the Festival of Ash.

## Bring Gnomekindle Back to Me! by Chely

I don't need lots of white snow  
To make to make Gnomekindle bright  
I just need my express checks  
in my hand holding tight  
Mayor Clause, hear my plea  
Bring Gnomekindle back to me.  
All my porting fees are ready  
The yule log all aglow  
Gnomekindle is far away  
A new door and mistletoe  
Mayor Clause, hear my plea  
Bring Gnomekindle back to me.

Please make these days hurry  
Well the time is drawing near  
It sure won't seem like Gnomekindle  
Until Mayor Clause is here  
Don't fill my vault with cogs  
Some weapon dye kits will do  
You wanna make me happy, some ambrosia too  
Mayor Clause, hear my plea  
Bring Gnomekindle back to me.

Please make these days hurry  
Well the time is drawing near  
It sure won't seem like Gnomekindle  
Until Mayor Clause is here  
Don't fill my vault with snowballs  
A new shoulder pet will do  
You wanna make me happy, lots of gold too.  
Mayor Clause, hear my plea  
Bring Gnomekindle back to me.

Mayor Clause, hear my plea  
Bring Gnomekindle back to me.

## Of Innocence and Winter Unblemished: The Tale of the Istarian Snow Globe

by Robert

Placing the five-pointed star atop the tree, Amethestra Stouthammer was lowered back down by her grandfather's arms. "Now, the finishing touch..." said he in deep, gravelly tones, and snapped the fingers of his right hand over his left. A small yellowish spark meandered from his left palm up to the star, where it slipped effortlessly inside. The tree, then the entire den, took on a warm, welcoming glow.

Settling on the bearskin rug, Amethestra's violet-eyed gaze moved in innocent wonder from the newly-decorated tree to the blazing hearth, upward toward an intricately-crafted mithril mace mounted on the wall beneath a large stone maul... finally coming to rest upon a clear, translucent crystal globe held by three dragon claws crafted of gold, and mounted on a polished mahogany stand. Snowflakes of varying shapes and sizes ceaselessly appeared within, drifted slowly to the bottom, and disappeared. Her mesmerization broken by a hot mug placed between her hands, Amethestra swirled her cocoa with the peppermint stick offered by her grandmother as she stiffly lowered herself down beside her.

Amethestra stared up into the loving, hazel eyes of her grandmother, an elderly Dwarf of four-hundred sixty years, and after receiving a hug as warm as her cocoa, looked inquisitively toward the orb again. "Gramma Djanee, where did snow globes come from?" Shaken by the unexpected question, yet comforted by her granddaughter's innocence, Djanee Stouthammer recovered quickly, smiled, and said "Why, the market of course, Dear. Every year after Fall Harvest, many of our best craftsmen spend two straight weeks making them."

"Oh Gramma, I know..." replied the young girl, looking away; Djanee stifled a sigh of relief. "But how come when you don't want me to know something for real, you call me 'Dear' instead of 'Thestra'?" From the kitchen came the sound of a mug crashing to the floor, accompanied by words Amethestra didn't yet know. "Like when I was forty seasons old, and you still told me Santa was a real..."

"Perhaps, Thestra," interrupted her grandfather, "it's time for Gramma and Grampa to tell you a story." Steele Stouthammer had reappeared in the doorway with two steaming mugs. "It's a long story, and some parts of it can be scary... and others sad, but..." He stared into the hearth for a moment, thinking, then met his wife's hazel eyes, and shifted once more to meet his granddaughter's expectant gaze. He sighed, handed Djanee a mug and eased his protesting joints into his well-worn armchair. "I always say: the best place to begin, is the beginning."

\* \* \*

The chill wind whistling past him, Grakkellurorum noted an unusual twinkling far below. Indulging his curiosity, the dragon cautiously began his long, silent, spiraling glide: the stealthy descent of a well-practiced hunter. His midnight-blue scales blending seamlessly with the cloudless night, he would easily remain undetected; his boldness grew more quickly than the shapes below.

The scene came into focus within moments: raging on this Winter Solstice Eve was yet another battle in the endless conflict against the Withered Aegis. Content to leave the naka duskal to whatever fate befell them however, he leveled his descent and gracefully swept his leathery wings forward to initiate



a great upward thrust. Then he saw it – off to the side, sprawled out on the rocky ground, was the still form of a dragon: a sleek young adult, horned, with an intricate pattern of deep burgundy and purple scales. Having driven a wedge between the disabled dragon and its defending naka, the enemy was now closing in on – “Kesstrysturrix!” a voice inside Grakk’s head exploded with sudden realization and rage. Without a thought he had already wheeled about and given one great beat, downward.

Neck and tail straightened, wings tucked securely against his sides, Grakkellurorum accelerated as a lance thrown from the heavens. Soon he would be upon them: a tall, hooded figure in long, tattered black robes ordered a group of skeletons to press what appeared to be a Human, two Dwarves, a Sslik and a Saris. The figure, whom Grakk now noticed bore an equally tall staff topped with an unusually large turquoise orb, then directed three mummified Dryads toward Kess. “I’ve been through this sort of exercise before,” he thought. His plan set, Grakkellurorum aimed for between the two undead groups.

Just forty feet from the ground, Grakk unfurled his great wings and swung his hips downward. Legs straightening, talons outstretched, he landed with such force that everyone standing staggered or fell; except for, Grakk observed, the hooded figure. The skeletons took advantage of Grakk’s momentary hesitation and began casting on the naka party; he recognized their spells at once. “Skeletal Satyr druids,” he scoffed, inhaling deeply. “Let the lightning course through me...”

Grakkellurorum felt the current flow upward and inward, from talons, wings and tail, tingling along his dorsal spikes, quickly gathering in the back of his throat. Savoring the feeling just a brief moment more, he opened his maw wide – and exhaled. Grakk unleashed a ferocious, primal roar and the skeletons before him were inundated by an unbridled torrent of blue-white arcs. As expected, these lesser undead were no match for the onslaught but his minor revelry had allowed them to complete their druidic incantation. Thornwood roots and brambles erupted from the ground, instantly encaging the naka.

“Hrmp! Naka... as useless as always,” Grakk growled, turning away from them to address the greater threat. The caster, his staff topped by the royal-blue crystal, now commanded the Dryads shrilly. “The ritual is already begun! The complex spell must NOT be wasted! Subdue him, or it will be YOUR souls taken instead!” This seemed curious to Grakk... subdue? Why would the Aegis want to subdue instead of destroy? Though unable to put this nagging thought out of his mind, Grakk stuck to his plan. Rearing up onto his hind legs once more, achieving his full height, he forcefully beat his wings. The Dryads were caught by the powerful gale, and tossed again in its wake. Their wrappings loosened somewhat from the turbulence, becoming entangled in their continually fluttering wings; they fell to the ground, vulnerable. Grakkellurorum was ready.

Taking another deep breath, he now summoned from within the flammable fumes all dragon-kind are born with, and loosed a second mighty roar. Upon clearing his maw, the fumes mixed with ripe-hot volcanic air and instantly ignited, becoming a jet of yellow-orange flames billowing forward toward the four cloth-draped undead. They didn’t flinch. To Grakk’s alarm the mummies continued chanting, uninhibited, through the flaming assault! Behind them the figure laughed, victoriously holding aloft his staff adorned with the indigo crystal; Grakk’s eyes widened with realization: the crystal! It was slowly changing color...

Caught within a web of overconfidence and surprise, Grakk neglected to reapply his own magical shields. The Dryads’ coordinated stunning spell completed. A streaking yellow braid impacted Grakk’s exposed chest; he fell with a muffled ‘whumpf!’ mere yards from the dragon he had sought to protect.

“The crystal’s almost ready! Prepare him - NOW!” shrieked the hooded figure. The three mummies

approached Grakkellurorum once more, hands raised, beginning another incantation. “Foolish lizard,” hissed the figure, “did you honestly believe that three mummies could simply be unaffected by the searing heat of this volcano?” He continued slowly, mockingly, “Your simple mind couldn’t fathom that, perhaps, I enchanted my minions with magical shields to ward against flame?” Grakk silently simmered with rage, unable to act. “Fortunately, we don’t desire your mind; else this would be a wasted effort. No, definitely not. This Winter’s Solstice, with so many magical forces brought into perfect balance, the Withered Aegis will employ a new plan: to collect souls!” Red eyes gleamed briefly from deep within the hood. “That worm,” he gave one sideways nod “was to be the first, but I think the honor should be yours.” Peering greedily into the focus atop his staff, which was now dark-purple and shimmering with an indigo aura, the figure continued “Your soul,” closing his eyes as the Dryad chanting faded, “will make a much more potent specimen.”

The figure began a nasally chant, the sky overhead darkened. A brisk wind picked up; it started to rain.

Lightning streaked down from the clouds. Swirling

winds howled faster. More flashes, though a softer white. A ball of yellow light exploded before Grakk. The lightning suddenly tripled in frequency; brilliant white flashes followed. When Grakkellurorum’s eyesight recovered from the dazzling display, the three Dryad mummies lay on the rocky ground, their wings stilled.

Screaming a fierce battle oath and brandishing a magnificent claymore, the Human charged past Grakk toward the figure. A Dwarf followed, his boots clomping deafeningly, twirling an oversized, glowing maul with such effortlessness that Grakk, though he would never consider admitting it, was mildly impressed. Grakk recognized rapid shamanic chanting; brown, olive and rust-colored mists seeped by, enveloping the robed figure. Despite the sudden commotion, the figure completed his spell.

A silent shockwave burst from the crystal, launching the Human and Dwarf airborne. Sailing backward, they tumbled to a halt before the Sslik shaman and Dwarven female, who each kept a supportive arm around the Saris’ waist; spent from triple-casting the Cyclone spell, he remained too drained to stand.

A sickly, translucent greenish-purple orb bobbed toward Grakkellurorum like an oversized, corrupted soap-bubble. He attempted to heave himself up, to work a spell, to do anything at all... and failed miserably, still under the stun’s effect. Spells wrought with the fury of nature, blight, energy, ice and flame – even bolts of pure spirit and holy essence – streaked past Grakk’s head with pinpoint accuracy, slamming into the orb with spectacular aesthetic display. None, however, had any effect on its slow, wobbling drift toward Grakk. The figure cackled triumphantly, “Success! The Withered Aegis will taste total victory over Istar at las-”

“NO!” came furiously roared from Grakk’s right. Standing tall, wings fully extended, and fueled by wrath unrivaled by any mortal or dragon in recent history, Kesstrysturrix seethed with dangerous iridescence. Grakkellurorum heard a deep intake of breath, the air temperature dropped precipitously; glowing red lava flowing along the walls grew suddenly dark, hardening to rock. A blast of merciless primal frost erupted from the Helian’s maw. As the figure and orb both became enveloped by her icy breath, Kesstrysturrix recoiled in pain; realization struck instantly: although Helian, she would never breathe frost again.

Kess’ bipedal companions charged anew as the hoarfrost abated. The hooded figure was apparently gone, though amongst the staff-shards littering the rocks, a translucent crystal orb remained.

Polymorphing into her Khutit form as the female Dwarf began invocations to liberate the blue dragon from its stun, Kess clutched the orb with her taloned hands, and gasped. Painfully cold to touch, she held it tightly to her chest. Head purposefully bowed, a single tear meandered slowly down the Khutit's cheek. Passing her chin, the drop desperately clung to Kess for a moment... then dripped upon the orb, which absorbed it instantly.

Finishing her ministrations over Grakk, the Dwarf turned her hazel eyes toward Kesstrysturrix. "Tell me how I may help, Lady Kess," then adding stubbornly "and don't tell me I can't, neither! I heard your gasp, and I've been around pain enough to know it when I hear it!" Kess studied her companion momentarily, and replied "The wound I have sustained is beyond the power of any to heal, save perhaps for Istaria herself." Kess held out the orb. "It grows cold to me, too painfully cold to touch; I cannot keep it." Hesitantly, her Dwarven companion accepted the globe, which to her fingers felt lukewarm. Inside, snowflakes had begun to appear, slowly and ceaselessly drifting to the bottom. "I should wish you to take it, Djanee, for your invaluable friendship to me and to dragon-kind. May it fill all naka duskak with hope when they look upon it: a permanent reminder that they, too, have the ability to help return peace to Istaria."

## Banner Days by Awdz

Kion was covered in cloth. Josuu strode off the port pad into a flagpole, one of many lining the length of the road.

"What the...?" He stopped in confusion. "What is going on?"

"Welcome to the Saris Banner Days!" A saris dressed flowing robes addressed him. "Do you know what this is all about?" Shaking his head no, Josuu listened to the explanation.

"We saris have long been admired for our sleek look and daring styles; with our high dexterity we produce the finest in textiles. Since the Lady Kendra's house was completed, we have had unrivaled cloth production. Our fashion business has flourished to unprecedented levels. Lady Kendra determined a celebration was in order. She ordered banners placed around the city and various festivities to honor the clothworkers. Be sure to pay your respects to Lady Kendra and join in the fun!"

Heading past the vault complex, Josuu passed a uniformed saris who looked a bit troubled.

"Is something wrong?" Josuu asked. The guard gave an appraising look at Josuu's armor, then answered.

"Well, you look like someone who might be able to help me out. Here it is, the big celebration, and we've got reports of gruok attacking gatherers in the flax field, spiders attacking racers on the road, and sand beetles overrunning the town. Would you be willing to clear away some of the pests for us?"

"OK," Josuu replied. "Does it matter which ones I clear first?"

"No, it's up to you, I'll just take whatever help I can get!" said the guard. Josuu chuckled, then headed up the hill to Lady Kendra's house, stomping a few beetles on his way. Once at the door, he heard a ruckus inside. Curious, he went in to see what was going on. The weaver trainer was throwing a tantrum.

"I do not have sufficient stockpiles for what that fashion playboy is demanding!" Bashale ranted at the tailor Kiva. "I already gave more supplies than I can spare toward this festival! I will not give Dimman the last of my spider silk!" Exasperated, he turned and saw Josuu. "You there, you look like a capable sort. Will you help me gather supplies for this festival? Apparently we've run out of spider silk for some of the banners we are making. Can you head into the forest, kill a few spiders and bring back the silk from them for me? If you bring me enough, I'll give you a token toward the purchase of a banner upstairs."

Josuu agreed, figuring he could easily manage the request. Kiva spoke up immediately.

"I need hides," she explained. "Would you be willing to kill a few gruok or wolves and bring back any hides you can strip off them?" Josuu hesitated, and Bolo chimed in.

"I'm running out of spools of thread," he said. "If you can harvest some unspun fibers for me, that would be really helpful." With a quick decline because he did know how to gather fibers from plants, Josuu excused himself from the room.

As he headed out the door, Janner caught his arm.

"If you're willing to help gather supplies, perhaps you could help me too?" she inquired of him. "My dyes require ground gems to make, and Dimman is certainly using a lot of them." Josuu shook his head.

"I'm a blacksmith, not a jeweler," he told her.

"But you can loot the gems off the golems you kill, you don't have to dig them up!" she pleaded. Josuu sighed.

"I'll see what I can do, but it probably won't be much," he answered. With that, he continued wandering about the house in search of Lady Kendra. Finally, he found her upstairs where she met him graciously.

"Welcome to the Kion Banner Days. I hope you are enjoying the bright colors and fine designs we have on display; our very own fashion designer, Dimman, created and arranged them. We have come a long way since the first stones were laid to build our fair city - Kion fabric and clothing production is famous across Istaria.

"To celebrate our progress, we are giving out tokens to those who help us with our industry. Please speak with the excellent crafters below to see how you might gain some. When you have enough, you can use them to buy some of the special banners that Dimman has prepared just for this festival." She leaned close to Josuu and whispered, "My favorite is the volcano banner, because of the mountain above us - but don't tell anyone that I have a favorite or I'll be inundated with them!"

Josuu chuckled. The Lady Kendra was very personable, and he found himself wanting to impress her. She continued describing the activities.

"To reflect the competition of the market, we are holding a race. Entrants start at the west gate of the city and run on the road around the volcano to the east gate. Sergeant Felessi will make note of your starting time, there are checkpoints along the way, and Private Berriens will record your finish time."

Perking up at the mention of a race, Josuu inquired, "What is the prize?"

"The winner will get a special medal to wear, 'Banner Racer'. If you choose to participate in the race, please be sure to stay on the road, and be careful, because there have been reports of a number of nasty creatures along the way." Lady Kendra sighed. "I'm sure the town marshal would not mind some help in clearing the area of pests, too."

After a few more minutes of chit chat, Josuu regretfully took his leave of the lovely lady. He stopped to browse Dimman's wares; the banner designs were impressive, and the fashions available were from all over Istaria. Dimman expounded on the high quality of his products.

"Note the fine, soft weave of this one... And here you can see the subtle interplay of the colors weaving through the length of this... Oh, that fringe was just an afterthought, you really should consider the design here..."

Josuu was amused at Dimman's passion for the clothes; he had never given much thought to fashion beyond trying to have all the pieces of his armor match in color. The banners were interesting, though. With special components, they could be activated to help the gifted in their fight against the Withered Aegis.

"We all do what we can to support our fighters in the war," Dimman explained. "I have no ability to battle; I'd be shredded faster than a jaunty cap in a stonecutter! But I do try to make it easier for our

side in battle, and more enjoyable at rest."

Thanking Dimman for the discussion, Josuu left the building. He decided to try the race first, and to collect items in support of the industry later. He set out on the road near the lighthouse, wending his way past the woodworking shelter and the ore smelter. He passed the first checkpoint, where the road turned left, and nearly ran into Lt. Tarn's sword. Evading the danger, he ran past innumerable spiders - including a viscious-looking spider huntress - and crossed the next checkpoint under a huge tree whose trunk spanned the road. He sprinted past the remaining spider nests, rounding the third checkpoint as he turned left onto the road leading back to Kion. Dodging the greymane wolves and undead skeletons along the road, he finally relaxed his guard a little when he reached the mushroom patches. With the gates in sight, he drew ragged breaths during the final stretch.

"Five minutes and fifty-two seconds!" called Private Berriens as Josuu passed through the east gate into the city. Gasping for air, he took a few moments to cool down by walking around the gate walls, and then approached the guards.

"How was my time?" Josuu inquired.

"Well, I've seen better, but I've seen worse too," replied Private Berriens. "You're welcome to try again, if you wish."

Josuu thought about it before declining. "I'd better get to gathering the silk off those spiders first," he said. "I think they slowed me down a little. Besides, there's a nice banner up there that I need to earn tokens to buy." With that, he brandished his sword and went back to the forest.

Later that day, Josuu returned, arms laden with the supplies requested by the trainers. He had kept at it until he earned all the tokens he needed. As Josuu proudly bought the banner he wanted, he groaned at Dimman's quip:

"There's nothing better for a flagging spirit than the Kion Banner Days!"

## Skirnir's Christmas Hunt by Lindlae

Wind Dancer hummed Christmas carols as she decorated her home, oblivious to the effect it was having on her husband. Skirnir muttered and fiddled about with various tasks she set him to, but failed to accomplish much. He was too worried about what to get her for a present.

"Oh, Sweetheart, I've already gotten all your gifts. No peeking now while I set them under the tree!"

"Has to rub it in every year," he mumbled angrily. "Every bloody year it's the same bloody thing. Always does her shopping early, never waits to the last bloody minute – like me. Bollocks!" Throwing things about, he managed to get himself sent away, which was exactly what he wanted.

Heading to Bristugo, he chanced to meet Zexoin. The adult dragon looked at the tiny dwarf and controlled himself so it wouldn't lick his chops. Zexoin was hungry, and it had been a long time since he had eaten dwarf. But Skirnir was a friend. One refrained from eating friends.

"Zex, my friend, I'm in a bit of a pickle."

"Emm, pickles," said Zex. "Sounds tasty. I like dill. Which do you prefer, Skirnir?" Meanwhile Zex was wondering how pickled dwarf would taste.

"No, no, you giant scythe toed lizard. I'm not a pickle, I am in a pickle. I've got to find Wind a present that's equally as amazing as what she's gotten me!"

"What has she gotten for you then?"

"I haven't the least idea," he grumbled, kicking a hole in the dirt outside the guild house owned by his niece. "She always manages to get me something far better than I get for her. It's getting embarrassing."

"What did she get you last year?"

"A full set of mithril armor. It's quite comfy, and a lovely shade of blue."

"And what did you get for her?" The dragon stared at the dwarf expectantly.

Skirnir kicked a bigger hole, knowing his niece would probably raise all kinds of cane with him for doing it. But he didn't care. He was mortified by his own inadequacy and hoped no one else was in hearing distance when he muttered to the dragon what he'd gotten Wind for Christmas the year before.

"A sewing needle," he muttered.

Zexoin blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"A needle. I got her a ruddy sewing needle. Lovely shade of blue...." he mumbled, kicking dirt back in the hole he'd made.

"I see." But Zexoin didn't see at all. Somehow it didn't seem quite the thing, but how did one say that to a friend. "I think that I'm not the best judge of such things. Perhaps you'd do better asking Karya's opinion. Being a female, I am sure she would know what Wind would like better than I." Whew, Zex

thought. Got out of that one! Before Skirnir could object, the dragon took flight and didn't look back.

"Bollocks and barnacles," Skirnir cursed loudly. "I'd best ask someone else. Bloody dragons, can't trust em."

He set off to visit Karya, thinking Zex had at least gotten that idea right. Karya would know what to do. She wouldn't laugh at him for his choices in the past, but would suggest the perfect gift.

"You got her what? A needle? What were you thinking?" She cuffed him sharply on the ear. "Leave it to a man to think a sewing needle was a good gift. Idiot dorf!"

"She needed the needle. It was nicely teched and had a gem or two set in it. Lovely shade of blue...."

"Skirnir, a sewing needle hardly compares to a suit of armor, does it? You must do something really special this year to make up for it." Putting a finger to her cheek, she thought long and hard. Eventually, a thought emerged. "You will do what you do best," she told him with a happy grin.

"What? I do so many things, and all of them well, I might add..." He looked dwarfishly proud of himself.

"Heal."

Skirnir jumped into position behind her.

"The kind that makes you feel better, you dolt. Not H-E-E-L, H-E-A-L!"

"Oh. Sorry." He looked chagrined. "I don't think I follow you."

"Hasn't she been working on Chaos Warrior all this time?"

"Yes, but I still don't...."

"And you, selfish man, have been crafting, leaving her to hunt alone. How can she hunt and heal? Use your head, you dolt! Take her hunting, help her get that rank in Chaos Warrior she's been wanting."

"I could do that...."

"Of course you could!"

"But how to I wrap that up? I can't put heals beneath the tree."

"I'll make a box of potions. You put those beneath the tree. With a card.... Yes, that's the perfect thing. I'll even write the card for you. Oh, this will be such fun! Better yet, a scavenger hunt! You wait, Skirnir, this will be the most perfect gift ever!"

Giggling happily, she started composing the clues for the scavenger hunt while Skirnir went out to gather the ingredients for the potions. It wasn't that he minded doing that, not exactly. But it did seem rather like he had suddenly become less important in this equation than Karya and that bothered him. Where did he fit in? Sighing heavily, he dragged his disk and started gathering wisp essence for the potions.

"Bollocks and barnacles," he mumbled. "I hate chasing wisps."

By Christmas Eve, everything was in position for the scavenger hunt. With the help of Karya, Zexoin and various family members, Skirnir had put together an entertaining romp.

Christmas morning dawned bright, clear and cold. Even the shores of Carmo, which were usually



warm, were rimed with frost. Skirnir could see his breath as he prodded the reluctant fire to life. They emptied their stockings, ate breakfast, and waited for the children to arrive before opening their special gifts to one another.

Wind had surprised him with a new shield and a cunningly crafted war hammer that was nearly as big as he was. They were both dyed to match his armor. Filled with anticipation, he handed her the first clue.

"Neath the giant tree wilt thou find me."

"What's this? Is this my gift? A poem?" Wind waved the card under his nose. "Last year it was a needle. This year it's a couplet?"

"No, no, my sweet. It's a clue!"

"To what, Pa, another needle?" Their son William scoffed at his father's efforts.

"Enough of you," Skirnir scolded. "Trust me, love," he told his wife. "I know I've disappointed you before. But not this time."

"Giant tree? What tree? There must be hundreds of giant trees."

"Biggest one I know is near my home in Bristugo," her niece, Reanne said softly.

"Could be, could be!" Skirnir blustered. "Why, it's worth a try!"

"All right. I'll go look!" Wind recalled to her bind spot in Bristugo and ran to the base of the tree. There was a small box beneath it. Inside, she found healing potions and another note.

"In the air find water fair."

Puzzling over it for only a moment, she thought of the one place she could find water in the air. "Floating Island," she decided. Gating over, she wondered what she would find there.

In one of the ponds was another box. This one held a new weapon for her Chaos Warrior school and another note.

"Midst snow and ice is something nice."

"Snow and ice? We're covered with it!" But there were places where there was snow and ice year round. Putting the two gifts with the location, she could think of only one spot - Island of Ice.

It took a few minutes and more than one gate, but eventually she arrived on the Island. The north wind scurried across the barren, icy land, whipping snow into her face. Squinting, she spotted another box by the gem cutter's shed. Unfortunately, a peridot and emerald golem were standing by, ready to fight. Taking a deep breath, she attacked the emerald golem. Of course, once the noise of her spells got its attention, the other joined it.

Caught off guard for a moment, she lost her footing and was forced back a few steps. The golems continued to pound at her relentlessly. Suddenly, she felt refreshed and noticed a healing aura round her. Skirnir stepped out from behind the gem cutter's shed, healing her and rooting the peridot golem, he waved his broad hand at her.

"Hello, love. I knew you'd find your way here. Hit him again, he's nearly done for."

Doing as he bid her, she killed both golems with ease. They hunted awhile longer, finally stopping

when they got too cold to continue. Laughing and joking, they went home to a hot fire. The girls had cooked a big dinner, the dragons had build up a bonfire, and Skirnir's cousin Reebdoog had tapped a keg of his famous ale. Many friends dropped by to wish them Merry Christmas. It was a delightful day.

As the sun set on yet another Christmas, Skirnir and Wind sat staring in the waning fire, arms entwined.

"That was a lovely present you gave me," Wind told him softly.

"Aye," her stubby husband answered with a yawn. "And I've another for you."

"Really? Where is it?" She asked him, looking around for a box.

"Upstairs," he chuckled. "Come to bed, my wife, and wish me Merry Christmas."

## Song of the Winter Fang by Kris

When mists of autumn silver the ground,  
And winds of north whisper of ice,  
We gather round warm pools in lairs,  
Listening to nature sigh in slumber.  
The sparks of life, hidden in ground  
Waken to life in tales we spin,  
Deep voices lifting them to sky.  
Sparkling in flame of our breath,  
They float, and carry our gaze  
Beyond the realms of snow and frost  
To gentle breezes of the spring,  
When myriad rainbows flow on wings,  
Stretched wide in flight of life and joy,  
In timeless dance  
Of new Beginning.

## Freedom Follies by Awdz

Fendidior decided to do some cooking, so she headed to the farm near Sslanis for ingredients, and then to the city in hopes that Fillet would let her use the mill and oven again. However, she was stopped by a red wall blocking her path, and turned to the guard Ssathe outside the Sslanis gate.

“Hold, citizen!” the guard commanded. “Today we are holding the Freedom Follies, to commemorate breaking free from our history of persecution. Any sslik may come and go freely, and is given twenty tokens to spend as it chooses. Because the saris have stood by our race and indeed often suffered with us, they may come and go freely as well, though to get tokens they must earn them. All other non-sslik must either stay out or enter as a slave whose freedom must be earned before they can leave the city.”

The petite dryad, overloaded with vegetables and meat, looked at the guard in shock.

“What do you mean, earn our freedom?” she asked.

“Your hand will be stamped ‘SLAVE’ on entering, and you will not be allowed to leave until you have shown your obeisance to the sslik,” Ssathe explained. “To show your obeisance, you must earn tokens by performing tasks in the city. You may choose which of the tasks you wish to perform – this is more choice than we often had. When you have enough of the tokens, you can bring them to me or to Shasses and have the ‘SLAVE’ stamp overwritten with ‘FREED’. The stamps are tied magically to the portal and to a force field around the town, erected just to enforce the rules for this celebration. If you wish, there are some special items in the city which you may purchase with any extra tokens you earn as well.”

“Oh my,” Fendidior looked distressed. “I have a very full load and cannot easily take it somewhere else, and I don’t want to lose my work. Will I still be able to use the city equipment and vault for my own needs? And just what kind of tasks am I supposed to perform?”

The sslik guard gazed at her with eyes she could not read, despite years of accompanying her sslik friend Digbe on hunt after hunt.

“The tasks will be nothing more than what we sslik were commonly expected to do as slaves, and indeed will be easier than many commands we were given. You should have no difficulty with them; they are simply designed as a reminder of what we went through before achieving our freedom and building this city. And yes, the city facilities are open to all, as always. You may take care of your needs but must attend to ours before you may leave.”

Fendidior swallowed, nervous about what she would be getting into. Then she looked at her full disk and pockets, and decided that if it were too bad, she could always contact Digbe to come help her out. She stretched out her arm to the guard.

“All right, I will try it,” Fendidior said, fluttering her wings rapidly. The guard nodded, and applied a bright stamp that covered the entire back of her hand. She looked at it a bit fearfully, hoping she had not just made a mistake. Ssathe suddenly seemed arrogant and demanding.

“Move it along, slave!” the sslik commanded. “Don’t block the gate for the free citizens!” Gasping,

Fendidior took a few steps backward, only to encounter a red force field that prevented her from getting further away from the city wall. Realizing that she was now committed to seeing the quest through, she quickly grabbed hold of her disk and dragged it into the city. She could not tell for sure, but thought the guard had a look of amusement at her discomfiture.

Dragging her disk down the city street, Fendidior was aghast at a sslik telling her to move aside as though she had no right to be there. She scuttled to the side as best she could, nearly bumping into Jurixx in the process.

“Oh, excuse me please!” Fendidior said nervously. Seeing her load, Jurixx told her to come see him when she got done with her task, because he had more work for her. Speechless, she stared at him until he told her, “Well, get on with it... and hurry back!” She grabbed her disk and continued on to Fillet's shop.

“Well, well, another slave come to help me with my cooking,” Fillet commented as she entered. “And you brought a full disk of supplies for me! I'll just take those and stow them over here!” Fendidior burst into tears.

“Please, Master Fillet, I need those!” cried Fendidior desperately. “I've worked with you before, you know me. I just wanted to make some soup. I collected all the ingredients and was hoping to use your machines, when I was told I could not come see you without becoming a slave! With my disk full, I had nowhere else I could readily take it, so I agreed. But some of the sslik are really nasty about it!” Fendidior wiped her nose with a small handkerchief so she could breathe better.

“My dear, calm down,” soothed Fillet, taking pity on her. “It's not so bad as it seems to you right now. I was just teasing you, seeing how much fun we could have pretending you were a slave. Of course you may work your ingredients here. But since you have to earn tokens today, perhaps you'd run some errands for me? If you get enough extras, I'll even give you instructions on how to make gruok wurst and spun sugar.”

“Oh thank you!” Fendidior dried her eyes and quickly set about making her soup. She paused before heading out the door with it.

“I'm going to put this in my vault for now. You said you had some errands I could run for you?”

“Yes, I have several,” Fillet answered. “Apparently being slave drivers makes ssliks hungry. Please deliver these fish kabobs to Kazrok and this peppered jerky to Lagontus. When you are done with that, I need you to pick up a few jars from Zhessix the Singed and some special sauce that I have stored in my vault from Nellisha. Once I have those items, then I can make the lunches that Ssthar and Essiel requested; you can deliver those for me as well.”

Fendidior blinked at the number of things Fillet had rattled off. Quickly, she jotted down notes about what she had to do and set off. Rather than drag her disk with her through the town, she decided to stop at the vault first, stopping to deliver Lagontus' lunch on the way. The trophy hunter saw her hand stamp and asked her to check with Ralsh the warrior trainer and with Kerrak the guard to see if they had trophies ready. Pleased to be able to earn more tokens so easily, she agreed.

Nellisha took one look at the dryad's stamped hand when told of Fillet's request, passed over the sauce, and made some more requests.

“I've been cleaning out old shelves and found some relics that no one claims. Take them to Vrex and you can earn another token toward your freedom.” Nellisha pushed a jumbled pile of junk at Fendidior,

then passed over stained, stinky, covered pot. “Also, Sshranu must not keep this smelly substance in here, it is eating away at the shelves and affecting other stored goods. Return it for me and I will give you another token. Do not let him send it back to me, I will not accept it again.”

Fendidior readily accepted the goods for Vrex, and somewhat more hesitantly agreed to take the pot to Sshranu. Nellisha nodded approval, then continued.

“I also need notes delivered to Melli, Reg and Ssardask; see to those as well and I will reward you for it again.”

Laden with almost more than she had entered with, Fendidior headed upstairs from the vault area to where Sshranu and Zhessix the Singed were debating the merits of various alchemical ingredients. Carefully she handed the smelly pot to Sshranu, who hissed angrily.

“I do not want such a thing near my other chemicals, that is why I put it in the vault in the first place! Take it back to Nellisha!”

Fendidior replied, “But Nellisha already said it would not be accepted back!”

“Well I don’t want it,” Sshranu snapped. “Take it down to Grash, it should be good for tanning those hides outfitter work with. Just do not leave it here!”

Worried about getting stuck with it, Fendidior kept the smelly pot. Turning to Zhessix the Singed with Fillet’s request, she was relieved when that task went much more smoothly. She then went downstairs to give Grash the “gift” from Sshranu.

“Oh, what is that terrible smell?” cried Grash upon opening the pot. “I cannot use this on any hides, even if it does not ruin them, the smell will render the hides unbearable! If Sshranu will not take it back, I suggest you take the matter up with Ssoren.”

Fendidior dragged her loads past the vault to where the town marshal stood, and explained the situation with the smelly pot. Ssoren looked at it and grimaced.

“I do not know where it would be safe to put that. Try asking Grosok; maybe there’s a safe place in the forest to dispose of it.”

Poor Fendidior climbed up the hill to the trainer’s buildings. Stopping to deliver Kazrok’s fish kabobs, she wound up apologizing for the smell from the pot, explaining that it really was not the fish lunch. She proceeded to Grosok and explained the situation with the smelly pot; she was rewarded with a tirade about those who do inappropriate things to nature. She was relieved when Grosok did take the stinky pot from her after all, and scurried back to Fillet as quickly as she could.

The confectioner was pleased with what she had done, gave her some tokens and admonished her to return in a little bit to deliver the remaining lunches. Fendidior tucked the tokens away safely and proceeded with the other errands she had received. It seemed like each time she completed an errand, she wound up with at least two more. She nearly fluttered her wings off going back and forth across Sslanis that day. Finally, she finished up all the tasks she had agreed to do and went to see Ssathé.

“Yes, slave?” inquired the haughty sslik. “Do you have a message or delivery for me?”

“Not exactly,” Fendidior replied. “I have tokens and wish to buy my freedom.” She held out the tokens she had earned that day.

“Well, well, well, you have been a good little dryad, haven’t you!” Ssathé exclaimed. “You’ve earned

more than double what was required. Let me relieve you of the necessary amount and stamp your hand. Well done, and thank you for participating in our Freedom Follies!”

Fendidior was delighted to see the “FREED” stamp overlay the “SLAVE” one. She fluttered happily back and forth across where the red wall used to block her way. Her tokens jingled, and she paused.

“What do I do with the rest of these tokens then?” Fendidior asked. “Buy the other slaves?”

Ssathel laughed. “No, we do not sell them. However, you can visit several of the trainers in town for special commemorative items.”

“Oh that’s right, Fillet said something about teaching me new recipes!” trilled the elated dryad.

Finally fluttering freely, Fendidior flew to Fillet for food formulas, a fine Freedom Follies finale.

## Dazzled by Dryads by Fid Git

*Please note that this story is told in character by Fid Git. His grammar is a bit different than is typical for most English speakers: Fid uses "an" instead of "and", and he uses "an" instead of "a". He uses "didst" to make verbs past tense. He seems to like for 1st and 2nd person present tense verbs to end in -st, and for 3rd person present tense verbs to end in -th. He uses "mine" instead of "my", "mineself" instead of "me", and he spells "not" naught.*

I dost be but an simple warrior an outfitter. Cert as such an one as mineself didst traverse the blighted portions of Istaria, I didst chance upon an wondrous anomaly. Nigh unto the great tower guarded by druids, an bridge composed of all the colors of light spanned the ocean unto an isle of fairest green. I wast enamored of the sight. Summoning mine courage, I didst place an foot upon the light, an behold! Mine weight wast supported by the streams of light leaping oft to the distance.

I didst wonder if I shouldst shed mine boots, for such beauty couldst only be the handiwork of an god or goddess. Yet naught of soil remained upon the light, so I didst cross without such removal. Upon stepping off the far end, I wast greeted by an most lovely winged little dryad.

"Welcome!" didst she cry. "You have arrived in time for the Song of Alyssa. We are so happy finally to be able once again to share the musical beauty the goddess herself first shared with us! I do hope you can join in the harmonies; we can always use another fine voice."

"An yet, I knowest naught of the Song of Alyssa," I didst rejoin. "Prithee indulge mine ear, an tell of what such doth entail."

The petite creature didst flutter her wings most becomingly ere she spoke next.

"Oh, this is one of our oldest traditions. We used to hold this celebration even back when the city of Palmyra was first built." She didst pause with an gentle giggle. "The elves were so astonished when they first heard it! That was when we first began to teach them of the beauty of Alyssa." Bowing her head reverently upon mentioning the goddess, the little dryad next didst look up quickly.

"The goddess created the great forests of Istaria, beginning with the first Taniqel Tree. Within these forests was a refuge for the peoples of the land. We who lived amid their branches were blessed by her breath blowing through the leaves, and occasionally she would speak with us. Awed and thankful, we asked how we could honor her.

"I would hear such music as reflects your happiness," She replied. "But how are we to make such music?" we begged to know. Gently She instructed us, "Gather such things as you can find in the forest, and I will show you how to create different sounds with them." We gathered all sorts of things and brought them to Her, and She had us make musical instruments with them. She then taught us a simple song, and how to harmonize with it.

"For this festival, we build instruments as the goddess first taught us. Then we gather in the trees and play them in concert, beginning with the first melody we learned. Slowly, each instrumental master breaks from the melody into a harmony, until the entire forest is vibrant with a resounding song of life - the Song of Alyssa!"

Cert, I didst wonder how wings fluttering in such rapid excitement didst naught break. Ere she didst



explode with excitement, I didst bow mine leave of her an proceed further upon the isle.

Upon an mushroom didst sit an dryad working an large fungus cap. He didst hail mineself as I neared.

"Welcome to the festival! Are you ready to help with the music?" His gaze didst rest upon mine armor an weapon, an his eye narrowed thoughtfully. "You don't look much like a musician, but maybe you can help me. You see this?" He didst brandish the worked fungus cap. "I need a large hollow log to put this on. I meant to bring one but left it near the tree I live in. I can't leave here now because once I start the fungal processing, I have to keep at it until I put it on the hollowed wood or else the fungus is ruined.

"If you run down the road south of Bristugo until you find a large hollow log, there should be a piece of it cut and conditioned lying nearby. If you could bring that back to me, I'd be much obliged!" With that, he didst bend his head unto his work once more.

Stepping an little further into the forest, I didst chance upon an dryad at the base of an tree. He didst hold an most intriguing contraption, an dried gourd at the base, an long wooden handle, an strings attached the length of it. An yet, as he didst turn unto mineself, he didst let go of the top, an I didst see the wooden handle wast cracked most severely.

"How dost thou fare?" I didst greet him.

"I've had better days," he didst reply. "The festival is here, all kinds of folks are coming to see it, and some of them wouldn't know music from a rucus' snort. A drunken dwarf just ran by without a thought, knocked into my instrument with his hard head, told ME to watch what I was doing, and ran off, leaving me with a broken sitar.

"I won't be able to properly honor the goddess with the shaft cracked, but I promised my wife I'd wait for her here, so I cannot go for a replacement part." He didst review mine appearance. "You look like a capable fellow. would you be willing to help me?"

As I didst nod, he didst continue. "Felion Mor stands in the woods near Parsinia, and he shapes fallen pieces of the wood into different things. He made the original neck of this for me, and can give you a replacement to bring me. He might need for you to. uh. 'calm' some nearby treants first, though.

"I can work the broken neck off the gourd, but I'll also need something to secure the new neck onto the gourd. The strongest adhesive that I know of is ogre snot; I sometimes wonder how they can open their big mouths with that stuff running out of their noses. Anyway, if you can fill this jar with some and bring it back to me, I'll be able to fix this sitar properly." He didst hand mineself an jar, then began to remove the strings from his instrument.

Nigh unto an waterfall wast another lovely dryad lass. This one didst flutter before an large harp, plucking an lovely tune. She didst startle upon mine greeting her.

"Oh! Hello! Welcome to the festival!" With an smile to cause mine heart to flutter, she didst continue. "I'm just practicing some before the festival begins. Would you like to try?" Speechless, I didst shake mine head.

"No? Ah well, I was just about to pack up my harp for a while anyway. I want to get some more strings ready in case one breaks before the Song. I would not want to have my instrument anything less than perfect for it! I just hate to have to leave even for a minute, though, I love this festival!" The dryad didst sigh most winsomely.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to fetch me some unspun material? I've gathered it from plants, but I know spiders in the area also carry some that can be collected from them if you're brave enough to kill them." I didst kneel ere the lovely maiden. "Mine pleasure doth be to serve thee." "Oh thank you!" didst she exclaim. "I'll wait here for you, getting more practice in!"

Following the river, I didst come to an ford. An gracious dryad didst flutter nigh unto the shore, as though searching. Spying mineself, she didst exclaim, "Good sir, we are glad to have you for the Song of Alyssa! Do you have an instrument with which to join in?"

I didst shake mine head. "Cert, mine talents doth lie elsewhere," didst I reply.

"Would you like for me to make you one? I can make you some reed pipes or some chimes." As she didst look upon mineself expectantly, I didst ask of pipes.

"All I lack for the pipes are some long water reeds. but I'm having a hard time finding them here. They really grow best by standing ponds. Perhaps you could find some elsewhere and bring them to me here?"

"I dost naught have an discerning eye for such suitable components," I didst demure. "Well then how about some nice chimes? I can imbue metal - the kind used for jewelry - with essence to give them a nice range of tones. When tapped with a hammer, they produce so lovely a sound!"

"Cert, I dost have an errand to run, else might I dally with thee," didst I reply. With an bow in farewell, I didst hie unto the errands already given mineself.

An while later I didst return with arms laden. Having happened past an pond, I didst deliver some reeds unto the gracious dryad nigh unto the river. She didst deftly create an fine set of reed pipes, an didst listen to mine attempt to play them. Wincing, the dryad didst offer an suggestion unto mineself.

"Here now, they say music soothes the savage beast, but I think maybe you'd better start with a less complex instrument! Why don't you take this whistle instead and see if it doesn't help you deal with wolves better? And since you brought me so many reeds, here are a few extras for you to use with the whistle when the first one wears out."

I didst deliver the hollowed log, with which the dryad produced an large, fine drum. With the shaped branch from an fallen treant an snot of a dead ogre, the sitar player wast once more able to perform. I didst dally an bit with the harpist upon delivering her material, mine meager skills as an outfitter of assistance in the spinning of thread.

Mine dalliance wast interrupted by strains of music beginning in the highest branches of the tallest tree upon the isle. As the lilting melody began, every dryad, satyr an elf present didst intake an breath, cease whate'er wast in progress, an begin to join in, in unison. Mine heart didst lift at the sound, an yet it didst soar all the higher when, one by one, each musician didst begin an harmony according to their skill.

Such beauty wast in the sound that I couldst not see for the tears filling mine eyes. Suddenly, when all didst play harmony, the melody wast taken up again - but by naught an instrumentalist there. It wast the voice of the wind and the trees, the goddess Alyssa gracing the music of life with Her presence.

Mine soul shall ne'er be the same for the experience. Eternally renewed doth be mine passion against the blight upon this land, that the beauty of life may be forever assured.

## The Winter Festival Spirit by Lisa

"You want to hear what?" The puzzled dryad questioned. "Heh, I am sure you are aware I don't generally tell those kinds of stories. However...since you asked so politely, I suppose I could make an exception this one time." Holm replied with a cheeky grin. "Yes! In the spirit of the Winter Festival I shall unfold to you a tale to celebrate this wonderful holiday. A story I overheard not too long ago, from a rather tipsy and well," Holm paused, "boisterous, old dwarf."

\* \* \*

"Pfft. What is the big deal about the Winter Festival?"

The female fiend just sat in her chair, as if expecting an answer that would never come before eventually letting out a feeble sigh. Her eyes roamed the walls of the tower as she recalled the memories when she first laid eyes on it. It was around this time of year that she first embarked on a journey to this dismal place. She came in hopes of finding a mentor to guide her path to becoming a truly powerful mage. What else would one expect to find from a place remarked as the "Tower of Magery"? However, this was not to be so. The once legendary gathering place had long been deserted by the time she had arrived. All she had hoped for and dreamed of were relentlessly dashed before her, in mere seconds. The Winter Festival had become just a painful reminder of years of loneliness she wasted waiting for its former residents to return.

"I mean really, it is just a conspiracy deployed by the vielo in attempt to steal someone's hard earned savings, right down to the last copper! Then they try to feed us lies about how people put aside their differences and come together in happiness for the sake of one holiday. Bah, as if the bloody past between the Living Races can be so easily forgotten!"

The fiend threw her hands up to the sky, as if gesturing her great disgust to such an idea. Seasons of near isolation had made her almost as cold and bitter as the frozen wastelands that surrounded her. Minus a few lost travelers, very few had ever ventured this far up the snowy peaks. The only company she ever had were the "ever watchful" Naithis, Watcher of the tower, the ravenous wolves, who called this unforgiving place their home, and a lone werewolf that was oddly colored, for a snowy type.

"My, my, someone is in a particular foul mood today eh, Eilen? None of that Winter Festival spirit in you?" Naithis mocked.

Eilen looked towards the dragon who had perched himself high up on the twisting staircase. "I am not in a 'foul mood' as you so plainly put it. I was just merely making a truthful statement." She snapped back at him. "So anyways, what brings you down here? Shouldn't you be at your post, watching the exciting events that happen here oh so often?" Eilen remarked without so much as an attempt to hide her sarcasm.

"That is just the thing, while I was patrolling the land, I thought I saw a person lying unconscious in the snow!"

"Impossible! Who would be crazy to be all the way out here, and just after a horrible snow storm too!"

Reluctant to leave the comfort and warmth of her shelter, Eilen grabbed her staff and scouted the area for this mysterious figure. It wasn't too long before she could see the still form of a wounded man. He laid face down, his body outstretched in the blood-soaked snow. The only movement she could see was that of his brown hair, blowing in the breeze.

"Great....just what I need, a corpse to bury. Why couldn't he chose someplace else to keel over!" Eilen said, not caring much for the poor man's life. As she reached over to lift the body up, she could hear a faint, almost inaudible groan.

"What? Are you still alive!" Eilen grabbed his arm and shook gently. "Hello? Can you speak? Answer me!"

"Aaaarh! Get away from meeeee! You think jussst because..... I'm wounded that gives you the rrrright to approach me! You ssshould fear something sssssuch.....as I, what..." The disgruntle man broke off, staring at his own hands almost as if he was in shock at what he saw. "What! How can it be! How did I come to be in thissss.....wretched form!"

"Listen to me! I have to take you back with me so I can help heal your wounds. I need for you to calm down, you are going to die if..."

"You will be doing no sssssuch thing!" The man shouted in agony as he tried to lift himself from the snow. Blood continuously trickled down from his fresh, open wounds. His breath grew heavy as he struggled to stand, despite the shooting pain. " I wissssh no help....none....from the likes of y-" Unable to gather the strength to even finish his sentence, he collapsed back in the snow, unconscious again.

"Well, it looks like I am going to have to drag his dead weight back."

Naithis occasionally made comments on how it was so unlike her to go out her way in helping this poor soul. He claimed it was the "spirit" of the Winter Festival that was responsible for the sudden change in her attitude. Eilen just shrugged off his remarks and focused her attention to bandaging the wounds before her guest had roused from his sleep. From the looks of the injuries something large had attacked him, perhaps a pack of wolves.

"I.... where....you! I told you befffore.....I require no help from the likesss of you!" He hissed having finally awoken. Momentarily forgetting his injuries, the man quickly jumped off from the bed he had been resting on and took a stance as if preparing for combat. Angered by the sheer lack of gratitude, Eilen rashly struck at him, causing him to let out a yelp of pain.

"Listen you! I didn't risk my neck to dragging you all this way to heal your injuries just so you could turn around and yell at me! I tried to show a little kindness and look what it gets me! How dare you treat me in such a manner! You ungrateful -" Eilen broke off and threw her hands out in frustration.

The young man, never expecting such an outburst, could do nothing but stare in shock. He took a moment to look at the bandages the fiend had placed around his waist and forearms before he finally spoke.

"Why? What do you wissssh....to obtain for thissss act? I've not given....you any reasons to believe I ssshall repay you for the deed....ssssso why?"

"Do I really need a reason for saving your life? I could say it was because 'it was the right thing to do', but honestly, I don't know why I did it myself."

As if giving in to defeat, the man plopped back down on the bed. Even though his body had already begun to heal, his strength had not fully return yet. In his current condition, to leave now would be a death sentence. He could only glare angrily at the fiend as she continued with his treatment.

Little more than a week had past since Eilen had been playing host to her guest. His wounds had healed up nicely and after some time, she came to know his name as "Talon". Unusual as it was, she thought nothing of it. That evening Eilen went looking for Talon, she had something urgent she wanted to show him. She manage to find him outside, sitting on the stairs leading to the tower, staring at the moon as though deep in thought.

"It's pretty isn't it? Must be a full moon."

"Not quiet, perhapsss a day more." Talon gave a long sigh before continuing. "I havvve been meaning to.....sssspeak with you."

"Ah, before you do, I have something I want to give to you." Eilen reached behind her backed and presented Talon with a small package. "It's my Winter Festival present from me to you. Consider it a gesture of my gratitude for finally giving me a reason to be jolly during this lovely holiday. Go on, open it! Don't just stare at it all day." Never before had Eilen had such a large grin on her face. She finally felt as if she met someone she could truly call a "friend" . Talon stood silent for a moment before he reached out and took the gift. He tore the wrapping off and pulled a simple silver necklace from the box. As he placed it around his neck, tears welled in his eyes.

"Thank you very much.....for all you havvve done."

"Now, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

"..... Nothing.... nnnnnothing important."

When she had awoken the next morning, Talon was still sleeping soundly. Not wanting to disturb him, she snuck outside to do a little shopping for supplies in Morning Light. By the time she had reached the tower, night had already set in and the weather took a turn for the worst.

"The weather sure does change fast out here, you would have to be a nut to get caught in a storm like this huh, Talon?" She waited for a response, but never received one. Surely he must have awoken from

his sleep by now. Eilen scanned the tower, top to bottom, but he was nowhere to be seen. "He couldn't be outside!" Fearing for the worst, she rushed out the doors, neglecting to bring her weapon.

It was only a few minutes before she found herself lost within the storm, frantically calling out Talon's name. While she was a fiend and naturally suited to the cold, she had no way of seeing which way she was going or to what she was walking towards. Then just in front of her, the outline of a figure revealed itself through the blanket of snow. Without hesitation she ran towards it, not noticing the ever so familiar howls in the blowing wind.

Wolves. A whole pack of them had heard her yells and honed in on her location. Completely surrounded and unable to defend herself without her staff, she could only stand her ground, and pray for a miracle. One wolf took a step forward, crouching in a pounce position and poised to attack. The beast snarled and hissed, its golden eyes filled with malice. Within seconds, the rabid animal leaped forwards, bearing its teeth. Eilen shut her eyes, preparing herself for the impact, but felt nothing. Bewildered, she cautiously reopened her eyes to see the wolf in front of her, knocked senseless in the snow.

Eilen could see nothing but heard the yelps and growls of the pack. As the storm subsided, she could make out a vague image of someone fighting off the wolves. Certain that the person who saved her was her beloved, she ran and embraced the figure.

"Talon it is you! I was so worried you-" Eilen broke off when she realized exactly what it was that had saved her. Hunched over, with brown fur and inch long fangs, was her "savior", a werewolf. In a state of shock she didn't so much let out a scream. Her eyes just stared, fixated at a familiar silver necklace worn around the creature's neck."

\* \* \*

"The Winter Festival is a remarkable time is it not? A time when even the most malevolent spirits are made placid under its influence. Heh, the old dwarf who had originally told the tale had proclaimed that every word he spoke was truth. Events that had actually taken place, if you could believe in such a thing." Holm looked out towards the crowd. "And for those of you who are still wondering, to this day, it is said that Talon still visits his beloved, Eilen. Their love unchanging, unending ..... and unknown."

## WinterFestive AppleJack by Sephiranoth

To the Tune of Good King Wenceslaus

Sonea-Fair took walk-a-bout  
WinterFest the eve'en  
Long stored cask to offer out  
Many friends to seek-en  
Bright her smile and merry sight  
Walking with the Foo-el  
When they came upon a Blight  
Aegis-Foe so cru-el  
Sonea's staff stood in the Hall  
Drake hoard slim past mention  
How to save their neighbours all  
From the the Blight's intention  
Sonea-Fair stepped to the Blight  
And she bade it greeting  
" It's WinterFest, mayhap we might  
Set aside thy beating.  
Surely even Blight's have thirst  
Let thy thirst be riven..."  
Sonea-Fair took up her cask  
Poured it Blight upon him  
Sephiranoth opened jaw  
Casting out a flaming  
Flame and Sonea's spirit bore  
Green Blight to an ending  
Fool and Fair saw Blight made burn  
And it made them ponder  
Made their path to Deadlands turn  
Aegis lands to wander  
There a WinterFest they brought  
Any chef might relish  
AppleJack and drake-fire taught  
Flambe-d Foe to perish  
So now all ye Gifted folk  
Or if ye be other  
WinterFest's cask cheer store up  
Ready glass to offer  
When the Foe are at thy back  
Keep the Festive spirit  
Off them some AppleJack  
And a light to see-ee it!

## A Tale of Two Kitties by Charlie

The Elven Goodiemaker family has followed a winter festival tradition of ending the year by freely giving gifts. Listen closely little Saris and I will tell you a tangled tale of two stingy Saris kittens, and a Dragon named Duck. He was named Duck because of his wide and flat snout and bright yellow coloring.

Long long ago before the Withered Aegis, my great great great grandmother Goodiemaker earned her name by baking delicious treats and dinners. She loved cooking and would give away scrumptious dishes to all the elves and travelers in Feladan, especially around the time of our Winter Festival. One day as she was out harvesting herbs, she found a book. It was a curious book with pages of bronze. It was a trade edition lost in the midst of thyme.

The book was written by the mighty Duck himself, scribed on bronze with a long flat steel stick with an odd curve on one end. The book was the business journal of the Dragon, who would trade metals and gems for jewelry to decorate his horde. The honest jeweler he dealt with was named Kytti. Her lazy, young assistants were nick-named Fatty and Skinny.

Fatty and Skinny both had bad reputations as cheaters who never gave Festival gifts unless their parents made them. They also didn't pay their debts. They wanted to be Phatt Kats. Kytti only hired them because she had so much work to do, and they were family. With their new wages from Kytti the two naughty Saris spent even more money and got deeper into debt. One day they decided to cheat their boss. They kept half of Duck's jewelry for themselves, and told Kytti they had delivered the whole order. Then they sold the stolen jewelry to their shady neighbor for money to buy the fanciest Festival clothes they could find. Good Fences do not always make good neighbors.

A Dragon knows each and every part of his Horde, and Duck was a Dragon who kept a book. He soon came to Kytti asking where the rest of the jewelry was. You can imagine it did not take long for Duck to find out who stole his Horde. As Duck searched through Kion looking for the two miscreants, he found others who had been cheated by them. Meanwhile Fat cat and Skinny cat had fled town, hoping to hide in the mountain above the gem mine. Unfortunately for them Kytti was also an accomplished Scout. Kytti and Duck soon found the naughty kittens hiding behind a field of gem golems.

Frightened out of their wits, Fatty and Skinny tried to run away. Skinny quickly left her friend behind; running up the mountain until she slipped and fell screaming into the arms of the golem who lives in the bottom of the volcano. Her tail came to a bad ending.

Kytti and Duck soon caught up to the panting Fatty cat. Since Skinny was gone and couldn't pay any bills there was only one thing Duck could do. Duck billed Fatty-puss.



## Hermie and the Helian by Linda

Standing amid the lights and false snow,  
Hermie looked about him in despair;  
This wasn't the Gnomekindle he did know,  
And yet his parents didn't seem to care.

He thought about what he should do,  
To right this holiday gone so wrong.  
After taking a risk on his part, away a dragon flew;  
Off to Feladan to learn of elven ceremony and song.

Anxiously he awaited the dragon's return,  
Half in excitement, half in fear in his heart-  
For he did not wish to feel a dragon's fire burn,  
Yet he hoped for the tales it may depart.

At long last wings stirred the sand,  
And the Helian descended once more.  
And there in that scorching land,  
It wove stories of elven song and lore.

Yet wisdom too it had to impart,  
From mouths both elven and draconic;  
"Celebrate your holiday from the heart,  
It matters not if gifts tock or tick.

"Give them with your own meaning,  
Keep the wishes pure and true;  
Gnomes will eventually find a more solemn seeming,  
Do not let one year's disappointment blind you."

Hermie pondered the lesson given,  
Then solemnly thanked it among false sand;  
And away then flew the crimson Helian,  
Leaving only one debate now in Hermie's hand:  
What gift, precisely, did one give to thank a dragon?