

Thirstwisk

THE HOLIDAY SPECIAL



A WINTER IN Thestwick



ord Fandry and his Lowland Reclamation Corps were—of course!—woefully unprepared for winter in Thestwick-on-Alderham. Their shoddy spades can barely pierce the frozen mud and peat, so dike construction and repair ceased entirely. Their drab urban clothing, typical for winters in Lotthingham, doesn't jibe with the festival attire of the fenfolk. They also have no strategy for confronting the terrifying fenwurm that has come to Thestwick seeking sacrifices. What a faux pas!

2 Winter in Thestwick is a magical time. Though the reclamation has reshaped the ecosystem, women can still harvest the plentiful thurleigh berries, and men can go ice fishing along the frozen creek. Colorful lights signal the coming solstice festival. The omnipresent and unusual scent of burning peat might be a turnoff for outsiders, but most fenfolk savor the idiosyncratic aroma. The pace of living slows to a comfortable crawl as folks bundle up and enjoy the chilly outdoor activities before returning to their cozy thatched-roof homes for the evening.

This winter is, unfortunately, a bit different. The pre-solstice festivities are still in full swing, but Gênrhaw the fenwurm's menacing presence has certainly put a damper on the holiday merriment. The reclamation has completely undermined his typical winter feeding patterns, and he's wise enough to understand that Thestwick and its accursed windpump are to blame. He has made his demands: two dozen human sacrifices by the solstice. If the town accedes, Gênrhaw will return to his lair. If not, he'll destroy Thestwick and kill everyone.

Unsurprisingly, Lord Fandry decided now was a good time to reach out to some reliable adventurers for help.



RUNNING A WINTER ADVENTURE IN THESTWICK

The winter season brings a number of changes to life in Thestwick that will alter how you run your adventures. Eelers aren't out in their canoes each day, Black Alfie will have no problem crossing the river to harass the villagers, and the actual reclamation project will likely be on hold until the thaw. As such, you'll *probably* want to run the standard Thestwick questline—confronting the four monsters of the fen—during warmer weather.

The winter content in this guide is best reserved for a “return trip” to Thestwick once your party has already decided the fate of the duke and duchess, the LRC, and the supernatural quartet. Alternatively, you can skip that altogether and just run a little holiday one-shot in cozy snowy Thestwick. In either case: this document will feature references to Lord Fandry and other existing characters, but you can easily swap them out if your party killed, imprisoned, or exiled those NPCs in a previous adventure.

WINTER festivities

The Alderham Fen usually receives its first snow roughly a month before the solstice. The moment the first dusting of snow lands atop the thurleigh reeds, the fenfolk begin preparing for the solstice festival. Though the merriment culminates in a grand party on the year's longest night, the weeks leading up are just as festive.

SOLSTICE BULBS

Hattie and Catryn Howell—who are *totally not* amateur witches—prepare hundreds of tiny glowing bulbs to string up between the houses, providing a cozy glow to the village at night. They claim to use a traditional fenfolk recipe to craft these lights, but the truth is that they learned this simple magic from Anise Bloodbirch.

These “solstice bulbs” are, in fact, modified fenbulbs created when Gumperham, the colossal snail, eats thurleigh berries. It should come as no surprise that Hattie and Catryn don’t particularly want to reveal the nature of this lighting to all of their neighbors. The villagers are better off not knowing that their solstice bulbs are magical snail feces.

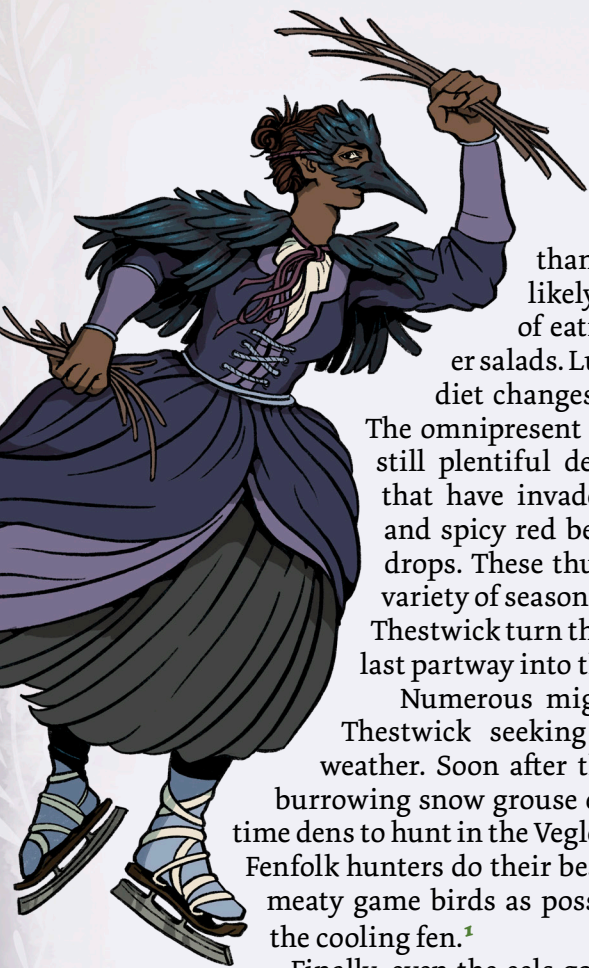
Adventurers can pocket a few of these solstice bulbs to use as portable lighting for adventures into the dark night. They cast a dim but colorful glow that gradually fades over a period of about two weeks.

SKATING

In normal years, residents skate from home to home and to distant parts of the fen throughout the winter. With current water levels so low, the villagers decided to allocate one small section of the basin beneath their homes for skating. It is still possible to skate the entirety of Alderham Creek all the way to Lotthingham, but the rest of the fen is too drained to traverse on skates reliably.

Assuming the adventurers have made friends with the villagers, they’ll be able to borrow skates as needed. If the adventurers have instead cozied up with the LRC, they’ll have to pay a pretty penny each time they hope to glide across the ice. There is no particular vendor for these skates, but most villagers have a pair or two lying around and will gladly accept payment from traitorous travelers.

Any sufficiently graceful adventurer should have no trouble skating on the smooth sections of the yet-undrained basin beneath the village’s homes, but skating elsewhere is a challenge. Errant sticks, reeds, and even frozen eels stick up from the surface of the fen’s waters. Skating at night is particularly challenging, as bumps in the ice are nearly invisible to any who lack the eyesight of nocturnal or subterranean species.



FESTIVAL CUISINE

Travelers who spend more than a few days in Thestwick are likely to grow exceedingly tired of eating jellied eel and wildflower salads. Luckily, the typical Thestwick diet changes dramatically come winter. The omnipresent thurleigh reeds—which are still plentiful despite the swarms of pests that have invaded the fen—produce sweet and spicy red berries once the temperature drops. These thurleigh berries are used in a variety of seasonal recipes, and the women of Thestwick turn the berries into preserves that last partway into the spring.

Numerous migratory birds pass through Thestwick seeking both warmer *and* colder weather. Soon after the season's first snows, the burrowing snow grouse emerge from their summer-time dens to hunt in the Veglenic Kingdom's frigid north. Fenfolk hunters do their best to down as many of these meaty game birds as possible as their flocks fly over the cooling fen.¹

Finally, even the eels go through seasonal changes. The men of Thestwick drill holes into the creek to fish for eels beneath the frozen waters. The extreme temperatures render the eels sluggish, and quick fenfolk can easily pierce one with a spear or allow their moorwings to go for a frigid dive. As the weather changes, so too does the flavor of most eels. Fenfolk prefer the mild flavors of these chilly eels served raw.

¹ Though the fenfolk work closely with moorwings, they have no particular misgivings about eating birds. If the fen supported larger year-round populations of game birds, Thestwick's villagers would undoubtedly eat more.

D6 SOLSTICE DELICACIES

DESCRIPTION

1 Thurleigh pie

Extremely flavorful berry filling inside a dough made from flour and duck fat.

2 Roasted snow grouse

Whole bird cooked over a spit. Idiosyncratic smoky flavor from the burning peat.

3 Fen snail crunch

Horribly overcooked snail meat with a satisfying crunch but minimal flavor.

4 Sugared berries

Theoretically reserved for the children, but adored by all fenfolk.

5 Stink bread

A thick dough “enhanced” with dried eel. Fried and served with mayonnaise.

6 Fortified berry wine

Fermented thurleigh berries combined with wildflower brandy. The cause of many mistakes on the night of the solstice.





THE SOLSTICE

The “solstice festival” encompasses the few weeks leading up to the longest night of the year, but the grandest festivities are saved for the final evening.

First, the “Moorwing Mother”—usually a fenfolk woman in her 20s covered in feathers—skates through the town and whips all of the adults with bundled reeds to cleanse them of their sins.² If the chosen actor is a sufficient skater, she’ll perform a few graceful tricks on the ice before taking a bow and slinking off into the night. Once out of view of the children, she’ll doff her goofy costume and return to the festivities.

Next, a feast is served outside of the thatching workshop. Despite the cold, everyone huddles around the long table and gobbles up the delicious communal meal.

Finally, any young men who have become eelers since the past solstice must swim in the frozen river. This tradition is *exceedingly* dangerous, and the older eelers are always present to make sure that nothing goes wrong. After the young men have dunked themselves completely in the water, a peat bonfire is lit, and all the fenfolk dance for hours while wrapped in their warmest clothes.

Gênrhaw

This year’s winter has been a season of firsts. It is the first year that the fenfolk have shared their village with the LRC, the first that the water level has been too low to skate across the fen, and the first that Gênrhaw (he/him) the fenwurm has come to the village.

In previous years, Gênrhaw has felt no need to veer anywhere near Thestwick. He is an intelligent beast, a creature smart enough to avoid humans altogether—they’re a dangerous lot, conniving and greedy. Instead, Gênrhaw typically keeps to himself or sojourns briefly with other dragons across the Veglenic Kingdom.

² Note that this is decidedly not a religious act. The fenfolk don’t actually believe in a moorwing deity or powerful spirit. They just think this is a funny tradition, and they love watching their children laugh as a bird lady bonks everyone with reeds.

Most years, Gênrhaw slumbers for the entirety of autumn. He feeds well in the summer and then rests in his lair until winter begins. Then, he prowls the fen, carving deep gashes in the frozen waterways with his shovel-like jaw. He wanders aimlessly, following his nose to the highest concentration of frozen creatures and other prey. Though he lacks the wings of the great Veglenic dragons, he can still cover incredible territory with his two powerful legs, all while plowing through the ice and snow to dig up all varieties of delicious food.

This year, however, his typical winter hunting strategy has been a complete failure. The only suitable hunting grounds this year are the few stretches of Alderham Creek that the eelers have yet to fish. With water levels so low, he can't sate his ravenous post-slumber hunger.

And so, Gênrhaw came to Thestwick. He *gets it*. The loathsome villagers are sick of the "old ways," and they just want to farm the fen like the fools in every other duchy. They're draining the fen and shaking things up for everyone. Well, if they can change the rules of the ecosystem, then so can he.

Gênrhaw came to Thestwick and did something he had never tried before: he threatened the fenfolk. He crawled up alongside the windpump and presented an ultimatum as eloquently as he could.

**You have stolen my hunting grounds,
but I still need to eat. You can either
give me flesh, or you can perish. I
need two dozen healthy bodies to tide
me over until the thaw. Should you
refuse, I will instead destroy this
town and eat all of you. I will have
your decision by the solstice.**

PLOT HOOK

Confront Gênrhaw

Everyone in Thestwick is panicking. They don't want to fight Gênrhaw, they don't want to die, and it's too late to do anything about the water levels until the ice thaws and the spring rains return. The fenfolk are trapped, and they know it. They're doing their best to enjoy the solstice festivities anyway, but the looming threat has had a notable impact on the mood of the revelers.

Lord Fandry swears he'll take care of the lumbering dragon. He says he has plans and that it is his responsibility as Duke of the Alderham Fen to protect his people. He is, of course, bluffing. The LRC is woefully unequipped to fight a *dragon*, and though Mabel brought a few Alderham knights to Thestwick, there is a 100% chance they'd rather flee to Lotthingham than risk their lives for this backwoods dump.

As such, it once again falls to the adventurers to find a solution. Lord Fandry has sworn to compensate the party should they succeed in slaying Gênrhaw or, at least, convincing him to leave. Again: Lord Fandry is likely bluffing.



GM NOTE: You have two options for how you present this quest to your party. You can either have Gênrhaw approach Thestwick while the party is in town, or you can have the party arrive after the dragon has already made his demands.

We recommend you opt for the latter option. If Gênrhaw approaches the town while the party is already there, there is a good chance they'll attempt to dispatch him immediately. That's fine, but it may rob the quest of some of its nuance. Ideally, your party will speak with Gênrhaw, consider his point of view, and then weigh the options before committing to a course of action. Presenting the dragon as a sudden and immediate threat may inadvertently tip the scales in favor of rash actions that will shorten and simplify this plot hook.

GÊNRHAW'S AIMS

Unlike every other creature harrying Thestwick, Gênrhaw is up-front with regard to his demands. He has made a credible threat, and his reasoning is sound. The dragon is hungry, and the reclamation has completely undermined his typical feeding strategy. He wants to minimize bloodshed, but he also needs *meat*.

He is also a very understanding fenwyr. He does not want to start a war with the people of this wretched duchy. Attacking outright will almost certainly result in scores of Alderham knights ambushing him in the coming weeks. He desperately wants to avoid this outcome but is also in a perilous position. He will starve if he stays in the fen and refuses to eat humans. Yes, he *could* leave, but dragons typically fare best in regions with the lowest population density. If he moves into neighboring duchies, he suspects he'll have to confront frequent mobs of angry villagers who don't want a dragon intruding on their lands.

This is a desperate gamble for Gênrhaw. He is well aware that asking a village to sacrifice so many of their own is a big ask, to put it lightly.



APPROACH GÊNRHAW

After a lengthy autumnal hibernation, fenwyrms don't need to sleep for months at a time. As such, Gênrhaw is awake at all times. He waits near the windpump. Should someone approach him aggressively, he'll breathe fire on the massive wood building, likely igniting a blaze that will destroy the town in the process.

The fenwurm suspects that no one will come dashing at him with a sword and shield ready to battle, though. Instead, he waits for the inevitable bargaining. Lord Fandry or some braver mouthpiece will approach and make offers: *How about one-dozen people? What if we catch you a bunch of eels? Maybe you want gold instead?*

Gênrhaw doesn't suspect anyone will present a convincing counteroffer, but he also has no intention of committing extreme violence just because someone wants to discuss alternatives. Again: he is a reasonable dragon.

The party may speak with Gênrhaw at any point, either on behalf of Lord Fandry or of their own accord. As they approach, Gênrhaw will demand that they drop their weapons. If they refuse to do so, he will ask more forcefully and spit a small puff of fire into the sky above—a gesture that tends to be adequately threatening. If the party acquiesces, they may approach and speak with the aged dragon for as long as they wish.

DEAL WITH GÊNRHAW

Lord Fandry has encouraged extreme violence as an appropriate means to deal with his other marks, but he is far more tentative regarding the fenwurm. For one thing, he's terrified that even a moderate level of intimidation from the party will cause the dragon to fly into a murderous rampage that will surely destroy his beloved windpump. Lord Fandry is also discouraged. His reclamation has been a *disaster* this winter, and his confidence is shaken. Even if the party claims to be expert dragon slayers—as all good adventurers should be—he will be skeptical.

Instead, Lord Fandry will encourage the adventurers to be as sneaky and devious as possible. He doesn't have any good ideas of what to do, as per usual, but he will encourage deceit and trickery before violence.



KILL GÊNRHAW

Regardless of what Lord Fandry believes, violence is always an option. After all, “slaying dragons” is one of the primary services offered by adventurers across most known realms.

Gênrhaw will be a dangerous adversary, especially in the winter. He is surprisingly nimble on the ice, his jaw is stronger than steel, and his fiery breath can both char opponents or rapidly thaw the ice beneath them. When in combat, he’ll whip adventurers with his long salamander-like tail, launching them across the frozen battlefield.

The greatest risk, however, is that Gênrhaw will damage the town. Setting fire to Thestwick is his trump card. Despite his threats, he will only ignite the windpump as an absolute last resort. Once he's done so, it is almost certain that he will be hunted by the Alderham knights, and he will have given up his sole bargaining chip. Nevertheless, he will destroy the town if he has to. Adventurers would be wise to lure him away from the windpump before attacking him if at all possible.

OFFER SACRIFICES

Gênrhaw wants sacrifices. If the town presents him with sacrifices, *he will leave*. It is as simple as that. The dragon doesn't want to enter into an endless conflict with Thestwick. He'll accept two dozen bodies, ration them for the winter, and return to his lair. Most adventurers will consider this option a total failure.

But what if it isn't?

What if there were roughly two dozen people in the town that had proven to be wildly destructive, who were leeches on Thestwick society, and who were—as far as the adventurers are concerned—disposable?

The Lowland Reclamation Corps might do the trick. Gênrhaw presents a potential strategic asset to the Thestwick Resistance, and most fenfolk would be quite fine with offering Lord and Lady Fandry and the LRC lackeys to the dragon. Unfortunately, there is no obvious method to *present* these viable sacrifices to the dragon. They certainly won't offer themselves up. The adventurers will have to think of some means to assemble the LRC and offer them up to Gênrhaw.

FIND OTHER FOOD

The dragon is hungry. He says he wants humans, but he'll take what he can get. If the party can find a huge source of other food for him, he'll be satisfied. The party may end up considering the following options:

D6	ALTERNATIVE FOOD	DESCRIPTION
1	Gumperham	Fenfolk know better than anyone that snails are filled with tasty meat, and there just so happens to be a 40-foot-tall snail just outside of town. Gênrhaw won't kill Gumperham himself, but he will eat the snail if the party provides his corpse.
2	Bog bodies	Dozens of preserved corpses still linger in the peat beneath Thestwick. It is unclear how much nutritional value these cadavers might provide, but they are bodies. Adventurers should be aware that there is always the risk that exhumed bodies will thrum with undeath.
3	Talmouth's villagers	The Talmouth border isn't far, and the party might be able to convince Gênrhaw that the villagers over there will be either more morally flexible or less intimidating than the fine folks in Thestwick.
4	Thestwick's winter harvests	Winter food yields in Thestwick are surprisingly bountiful. If the fenfolk work day and night fishing for eels, hunting grouse, and harvesting berries, they may scrounge together enough food to sate Gênrhaw. They might starve themselves in the process.
5	Shipments from Lotthingham	The duke and duchess live in Thestwick, and Lotthingham is not so far. If the adventurers skate for days on end, they may be able to secure a shipment of food for the starving dragon.
6	Another beast	There are strange creatures in Thestwick and beyond: bog trolls, giant frogs, mystical tree spirits, legendary eels, malevolent drakes, and countless other bizarre beasts. They're typically too dangerous to hunt, but perhaps the party could cull their numbers in an effort to feed the dragon.

