

Fest

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Trouble is that in character Gwenn and Drew are still lovers, but out of character they hate each other, moved into separate apartments, treat each other like NPCs. Trouble for all of us, as pre-breakup it had been Gwenn's mom who oft sat Drew's tot during fests, but post-breakup Gwenn's mom says she isn't about to sit the bantling of any daughter's ex-boyfriend. This meaning that when Gwenn and Drew do show at the fest (already hand-holding as Vivi and Drachma), they've got Drew's tot in tow, tucked into a carrycot, blubbering snot like a newb. Worse yet, Drew's father-type feelings are such that he says that even if we were to find someone in Tent Town willing to sit in accordance with Drew's funds—meaning someone willing to sit the tot for gratis—Drew isn't going to leave the tot with anyone he doesn't trust 110%. When asked who, pray tell, he does trust 110%? Only himself, this Drew says. Thus either the tot comes with Drew into LARP events, or with the tot Drew sits them out. As if any of us other than Drew had an HP greater than 320, an MP greater than 270. As if our outlook for this fest had been anything other than grim to bleak, that back when we thought we'd be totless.

Harv's feelings on this, the expected: Curses on this mother of Gwenn! Gwenn's feelings: Curses on this child, unproven in combat, still with its milkteeth! (Both of them crouched in the dune grass as Howl and Vivi, while Drachma paces the white-sand shore along the lake below, muttering a song to his tot in his arms, this tot he has yet to dub with

a name for tonight's event.) Gwenn feeling this despite that we'd still be totless if she hadn't told Drew she didn't love him, if she hadn't left Drew for a pusselgutt schoolteacher who apparently she does. Gwenn's feelings having always been anti-tot, even back when she and Drew were lovers, when she'd been tending to the tot as oft as him. My own feelings: Curses not on the mother of Gwenn, and not on this tot—curses on Gwenn, and Gwenn alone! Curses on her for not loving Drew as much as Drew loves her, for not loving Drew as much as Vivi loves Drachma!

Trouble for all of us, but also trouble for me. My own lover belongs to the Guild, in character is not my lover but the lover of another—oft at fests I see them (as not Spencer and Lars, but Valentine and Kuja) napping together in the meadow, or slurping together from a bowl of stew in Tent Town, or kissing into their palms pre-event and pressing these kisses onto each other's cheeks, in character as they should be. Spencer says it is impossible for Spencer and I to be lovers in character—Spencer is Guild, whereas I'm merely one of Harv's four-person Ragtag party. Spencer's attributes during events? Valentine, 410 HP, 390 MP, Level 21 Mesmerist. Me, Taylor, my own? Twinsen, 110 HP, 80 MP, Level 6 Engineer. Spencer's logic is sound: Valentine could never love Twinsen, not only because they're enemies, but because Twinsen is weaker, inexperienced, belongs to an irrelevant party. Besides, Spencer says (as Spencer, oft licking my neck as he does), what matters is who we love out of character, not in.

And maybe, but maybe I want something more. Maybe for once I want our lives outside of LARP to be the same as the game. That's what Gwenn and Drew had been for me—a sign that we could become out of character who we were when we were in. But now Drew hikes back up the dune, and when Gwenn squeezes the seat of his breeches and nips at his earlobe, it's only Vivi squeezing and nipping at him, and Drew looks sick with all of the love and the hate he's feeling for her at once. But still he kisses her, because when he

tongues her tongue he can pretend it's Gwenn, and that Gwenn is kissing him back, not just kissing his character.

Harv stands, the boss and founder of our Ragtag party, his jaw stubbled with black and silver, his neck tattooed with the name of the metal band he'd guitaried for before they'd broken up. His velvet doublet uncrumpling, Harv knocks sand from the pluderhose knotted at his knees and tells Drew that he'd rather fight plus a tot than minus a Drachma. Harv says he'll talk to the gamemaster, see if the GM will tolerate the tot at tonight's event. Drew says if his tot plays, it plays as Baby Dodongo. Then we hike back into the forest, frogs hooting at the coming dusk, fireflies drifting through the pines, glowing green then dark again. And curses on Gwenn! For making us weaker when we were already so weak, and for yoking us to a tot when we finally had a stake in the Realm, and for making me doubt that Spencer will ever be able to love me in character, making me believe that Spencer as Valentine must always love Lars.

A parley of sorts: we hole up in the ditch along the abandoned railway, Guild mages crouched in the pines beyond. Drachma keeps a gloved hand clasped over the mouth of his tot, trying to smother its yowling. Vivi mutters a healing spell over Howl, whose HP is at 20 after being battered by the mages' red magic.

"If you're going to come for us, come on already!" Howl shouts, his HP up to 50, then 80, then 110, Vivi's MP going down as she mutters the healing spell again and again. "Nine of us here in the ditch though, so you better be ready to lose some of your own. And as it is right now, I'd say we've got bigger problems than each other."

A few of the GM's underlings are perched along the railway tracks, refs all, here to tally Heart Points and Magic Points, to keep us true to our count, these underling refs known by their striped pantaloons. As the GM revealed pre-event, the plot of tonight's event bodes poorly for us Player Characters—waste from the Guild's spell factories has polluted the

millpond along the Realm's graveyard, animating the spirits of the evil buried there. Non-Player Characters play these ghostlings for the GM—these NPCs will stalk the forest, attacking Guild and non-Guild alike, till one of us PCs manages either to fight or stealth our way into the graveyard and cast a spell of hallowing. As always, the NPCs follow the GM's script, playing the monsters or the innocents his plot requires, leaving us PCs to play the event however we see fit, the autonomy to shape our own stories.

"Five of you in that ditch, not nine," one of the mages shouts, "and one of those five looks like he's about zero years old. Toss out your weapons and tender—you do that, and we'll take it and walk, leave you be."

I ease my railgun from its strap across my back, train it on the hooded mug of the mage shouting. The voice sounds like Kuja's, and if Kuja's in those trees, Valentine's probably in there with him. Nothing I'd love more than to drop Kuja with Valentine watching, to take Kuja's HP to 0 and Kuja himself out of the event—with any luck, out of the game forever.

"I say we do it," Vivi whispers. "I don't want to have to roll the dice on my PC the first event of the fest."

"How does that sound to you like anything other than a trap?" Drachma whispers, hunching all of his six-footedness against the ditch's dirt wall, the gray of his eyes black here in the shadows. "We toss out our weapons, they'll charge right in and kill us all."

"Besides, I'm carrying almost six hundred tender," Howl whispers. "I give that up, how're we going to buy the gear we need to get us through the rest of the fest?"

"Toss your effects, or we're coming in casting!" Kuja shouts from the trees. "We won't spare any one of you, not even the child!"

Drachma shouts, "Come on, even Baby Dodongo? With his HP of 5? That's heartless as fuck." Drachma unclasps his tot's mouth, letting it yowl now as much as it wants—which is a lot and then some—as Drachma straps it onto his chest.

“Don’t worry, love,” Vivi whispers, running her fingertips over Drachma’s buzzed scalp, then squeezing Drachma’s hand. “We’ll make it through this. All of us.”

Kuja steps out of the trees into the moonlight, his hair tucked into a crocheted slouch hat, a leather gorget at his throat, his cheeks flecked with red stubble and pocks of acne. Valentine steps out next to him, slipping his hands under the white fur coat he wears to unbutton the pistols he keeps holstered there, his dark dreads swaying.

“Twinsen, Twinsen, here we come!” Kuja shouts at me, but then Kuja and Valentine whirl as NPCs come swarming down the railway, their skin slathered with glow-in-the-dark paint, each of them shrieking whatever the GM wrote for them to shriek.

“Ghostlings!” Valentine shouts at his mages in the trees. “Fall back, fall back!”

I fire my railgun, popping off a shot at Kuja’s back, which instead bullseyes Valentine’s leg through and through. Valentine tumbles, his dreads flopping. He curses, tucking his leg up into a makeshift amputation, his leg dead for the rest of the event. Kuja stoops to help him, hauls Valentine up onto the one leg he’s got left. Kuja and another mage act as Valentine’s crutches as Valentine hops off into the trees, the rest of the mages shouting spells at the ghostlings. A few of the ghostlings spot us peeking up out of the ditch, come scrambling in after us. I reload, take a shot at one of them, Howl firing alongside me as Vivi and Drachma take off down the ditch. Our guns are useless against the ghostlings, they come at us biting—Howl butts one of them with his matchlock and then we’re pounding down the ditch after Vivi and Drachma, following the yowling of Baby Dodongo, trying to outrun the NPCs.

I try not to be needy but oft I can’t help it. I’m supposed to give Spencer a breather from boyfriend-type clinging while we’re at these fests, let him unwind with his Guild friends, partake in the Guild’s pre-event and post-event jamborees. But whether we’re LARPing weekends out at the lake or lifeing weekdays back in Interlochen, if I’m away from Spencer all day I miss him too much and worry about how he’s feeling and have to see him. We

don't even share an apartment, as although I've told my grandparents about Spencer, they've made it clear that, least till they're dead, they'd prefer I pretend to be the hetero character they wish I was; oftentimes I have to go no fewer than three or four days without seeing Spencer, which makes me all squirmy and unstill, all the more clingy the next I do actually see him. Clingier I get, more far far away Spencer gets with his feelings, but I get clingy anyway, tell myself the temporary wellbeing that comes with Spencer holding me will be worth whatever eventual meanness he'll make me suffer.

So post-event I go looking for Spencer among the sprawling tents of the Guild, my trilby in hand instead of on head, my purplish suspenders unshouldered and hanging from my hips. Lars is crouchwalking out the flaps of his tent, sees me coming and ducks back into it like the caitiff he is. His attributes during events? Kuja, 390 HP, 340 MP, Level 23 Thief. His attributes in Tent Town? Lars, 26 Years, 1 Addiction to Nicotine, 2 Eating Disorders, Lower-Class Pet Sitter. During events he flouts my Boyfriend attribute, comes after me with nothing but nastiness and spite, but downtime between events he's a bit more wary.

I peek into Spencer's tent—snuffbox, spyglass, brass goggles, no Spencer. My need for him is worse than usual because of what I've done: we made a lover's pact never to damage each other during events, and I feel sick about having shot Spencer's leg, worried he might think that I meant to, that I betrayed him. Worried that when Lars ducked back into his tent, he was ducking back into a shirtless or less Spencer.

I make inquiries at the Guild's bonfire pit, a carriage-sized pile of driftwood feeding a cottage-sized fire, which spits embers up into the pines. The mages sing Realm songs, plucking at dulcimers, plucking at harps, cranking at kit violins, hooting into bansuris, celebrating their customary win, the Guild Boss having butchered her way into the graveyard and cast the spell of hallowing. The Guild Boss wears the bone charm she was given

by the GM (the GM dressed as a gravedigger) for ridding the Realm and his graveyard of the ghostlings. None of us knows yet what the bone charm does, but it's not as if the Guild needs it. All the events they've won, they've acquired a tentful of charms and enchanted halberds and enchanted gauntlets and rusted keys to underwater grottos, a tent they keep guarded sunshine and moonshine by a platoon of mages twice the size of our Ragtag party. The Guild Boss' attributes during events? Nausicaa, 720 HP, 640 MP, Level 34 Seer. Her attributes in Tent Town? Susan, 41 Years, 3 Children, 1 Divorce, Middle-Class Crossing Guard. Impossible to play the game without both respecting everything she's ever done and wanting to destroy everything she's ever built.

I don't dare approach Susan for my lover's whereabouts, approach instead Bob and Corey, groundlings to be sure. They're glugging Market-bought cannikins of lager, chewing honey in the comb, brass goggles hanging from their necks.

"Pazu," I say, nodding with the deference due to mages of the Guild. "Setsuko."

"Twinsen," Bob says, slurping spume with the indifference due to a Ragtag mage.

"Spence about?" I say.

"Ghostlings got him," Corey says, smacking at a mouthful of honey. "He's at the GM's rolling the dice on Valentine."

Curses on me and my ill-aiming railgun! My shot to Spencer's leg cost him his life that event, may have cost him even the character he's spent a decade leveling up and living as. I'd like to all Lars-like go hole up in my tent, but I know slumber's not likely to come with Spencer's feelings yet unknown, so instead I hike through the Guild's tents back toward the clusters of tents belonging to lesser parties such as my own, and beyond them the tents of the partyless NPCs. Harv's cranking at a cider press with a couple of these NPCs, Gwenn and Drew leaning on panking poles nearby, sipping from Market-bought calabashes of poe-poe and smacking kisses into each other's cheeks, Drew's tot dozing in its

carrycot. Harv calls to me, wanting me to come celebrate that we survived tonight's event, but I ignore him. Trilby on head now instead of in hand, suspenders reshouldered, I hike through the Market toward the GM's marquee, where the GM himself dines and slumbers and plots all of our fates, and where when we die each of us must roll to revive our characters or bury them forever.

The marquee's entryway is crawling with the bosses of lesser parties, the lickspittles and gobsdaws who oft lurk at the marquee, each of them hoping to schmooze with the GM. In lieu of that, as the GM rarely emerges from his rear chambers, these spongers usually settle for bribing a few of the GM's underlings, hoping to bias the next event's reffing. Those bribes being the motive for working as an underling instead of playing as a PC: the GM's underlings are always flush with pelf, with ample tender for Market lager. Harv's one of the few bosses who doesn't haunt the marquee, saying he'd rather suffer defeat than cheat out a win. Other than that, he'd rather suffer nigh anything than defeat.

I sit on a wooden folding chair and wait among the wildings—Yuffie the wolf in her pinafore dress; Vyse the pig in his wool shawl and flop hat; Aika the cat with a matchlock pistol tucked into the obi of her kimono; Epona the duck in his straw rain cape, leather spatterdashes over his shoes—PCs all, but notorious for squandering away fests painting and repainting their makeup, gluing and regluing their whiskers, nary an event fought between them. Rare these wildings are seen here at the GM's; most oft they're among the Guild tents, where they juggle and dance for tender. I nod at Yuffie the wolf, who just snorts and goes back to muttering to her party.

Spencer comes hulking out the rear chambers, escorted by a few of the GM's underlings in their striped pantaloons. GM doesn't bother to witness the rolls for the countless deaths after events like these, leaves that to his underlings, in that respect being similar to my grandparents' GM, the GM they schmooze with via votives and hymnbooks at Inter-

lochen's St. Michael's. I follow Spencer out into the pines.

"How'd you roll?" I say.

Spencer takes his lantern down from a branch, shoves his dreads out of his eyes. "Two over a burial," he says. "Valentine's back, but not by much."

We walk through the Market toward Tent Town, neither of us touching the other, me feeling more like a gowk than a boyfriend.

"At least you won the event," I say.

"The Guild won," Spencer says. "You're not Guild when you're dead. When you're dead you're just dead."

Bob and Corey go staggering past with fishing net and a chamberpot.

"You found him!" Bob says. "How's Val doing, my man?"

Spencer smiles his don't-talk-to-me smile. We keep walking, past Ragtag's tents, Harv's lit with flashlight, Gwenn and Drew's too. The light smears their tents with the shapes of them: Harv's blob hunched over the blob of his epauliere, buffing the metal, Gwenn and Drew's blobs facing each other, fighting about whether Drew drove Gwenn away by paying more mind to his tot than to her, or whether Drew only avoided their lovelife and immersed himself into that tolife because Gwenn has talking skills only, no listening, and made Drew feel a lot of things she shouldn't've. Spencer has said he has zero respect for PCs who bring flashlights, that flashlights don't exist in the Realm, so they shouldn't exist at fests. Use a lantern, he's said, or learn to see in the dark.

"I thought we don't damage each other?" Spencer says.

I want to say I didn't mean to, but when I feel guilty I get defensive, so instead I say what I don't mean to, which is "You think it's that simple?"

"I think it's really simple."

"If it's that simple, why don't we make a pact not to damage each other outside of events

either? Why not make a pact not to damage each other in LARP or in life?" I say. "Sound fair?"

"Sounds idiotic."

"Only because you like damaging me."

"You're an idiot."

"Don't you?" I say. "Am I wrong that you do?"

"I would have never forgiven you if I'd have lost Valentine," Spencer says. He turns onto the footpath toward the Guild's tents, toward their bonfire and the sound of their singing and the tent we can't share, as I'm not allowed to sleep among the Guild, and Spencer's not willing to sleep anywhere else, meaning among us lesser parties.

I clutch at the arm of his coat, say, "Let's go for a walk."

Spencer shakes me off. "We just did," he says.

Howl stoops in the dune grass, looking for the stomped cigarettes that are the spoor of Kuja, trying to pick up the trail of the Guild. Baby Dodongo claws at the straps keeping him bound to Drachma's chest, blubbering drool. Dawn thaws the rime from the grass. Out on the lake a tanker hauls cargo from one port to another, a tanker that could not possibly exist in the Realm but nevertheless is here, on the horizon, as supernatural an appearance in the Realm as a ghostling in Interlochen. Vivi and I ignore it, keep our railguns trained on the tree line, her railgun's sight propped against her cheek under a triangle of dark freckles.

"The hell is everyone?" Howl says, squinting up at us.

Drachma feeds Baby Dodongo a chocolate, says, "You think it's over?"

As the GM revealed pre-event, the plot of this morning's event was prompted by a visit to his marquee: the wildings have tired of serving as the Guild's menagerie, have chosen to fight for their tender hereafter instead of juggle or dance. Before abandoning the Guild, however, the wildings have uncaged the other nonhumans kept by the Guild—the pixies and nixies

netted during past events that the Guild Boss still hasn't bothered to use, same as the bone charm that now she wears on her neck. The NPCs will play the uncaged nonhumans, will hole up wherever they can in the dunes and the forest and the meadow. Those netted during the event will belong to whichever party nets them, and those who go uncaptured will be forever uncaged. While we hunt the pixies and the nixies, the wildings, out of allegiance to these nonhumans, will hunt us.

"Twinsen, you see that?" Vivi says.

"I saw it," I say. "In the trees?"

"That look like wildings?" Vivi says.

"No," I say. "Nixies I think."

"You think, Twin, or you know?" Howl says. "I don't want to go running straight into a pack of wildings."

"I think," I say, but then I spot them again, NPCs in scaly nixie suits, flitting along the tree line. "No, that's them."

"Then let's take them," Howl says, and we follow him as he goes crouching across the sand. We pile against a dune, Vivi wriggling up it to scout, yanking her hooded cowl over her head as she does, the rest of us wriggling up after her. As always Vivi wears a striped dress and pelerine with tatty stockings, her stockings split at the knees and along one thigh from the fest when Nausicaa tossed her into the railway ditch headfirst. We peek over the dune into the dirigible-sized bowl ringed with dunes like ours. The wooden skeleton of the GM's dogsled lies overturned at the bowl's bottom, left to mark the hallowed spot of our GM's final stand as a PC. Instead of simply retiring his character when the retiring GM chose him as his successor, our GM wrote himself out of the story of the Realm—through a series of events transformed his character from untouchable to vulnerable, from the boss of a thirty-person party to a friendless outcast on the lam from a nigh unimaginable bounty. At the winter fest of his

final event he rode a dogsled through the dunes, hunted by PCs on toboggans and on foot, till he was toppled from his dogsled by Valentine's halberd—even after he was toppled, even after the PCs came pouring down the dunes shouting spells at him and firing their matchlocks and going blade-to-blade against his katana, our GM killed over a hundred PCs before his own HP hit 0. Post-event when he rolled the dice on his character—Barret—he rolled with everyone as his witness, shaking the dice in his fist and then slapping them onto the ground, all ones, nobody sure whether he was just that lucky or whether he'd been able to fix his rolls all along. Valentine tells that story more oft than any other—but so does everyone, as the PC who made the deathblow that event was Nausicaa, and as it was that nigh unimaginable bounty that funded her founding the Guild.

The nixies come spilling out of the pines, flopping along in their webbed footies, heading into the bowl toward the lake.

“They’ve got an escort,” Drachma says. “Wolf in the trees.”

Yuffie the wolf is hunkered at the tree line, scanning the dunes for PCs.

“The wolf’s a Level 2,” Howl says, “like the rest of those jugglers. I’ll take care of her, the rest of you take down those nixies.”

“Level 2 wilding’s like a Level 20 human,” Drachma says. “I’m coming, just in case.”

Howl and Drachma and Baby Dodongo creep off around the backside of the dune, wolf hunting. Vivi elbows me and smiles, having fun and happy. Then Vivi and I wait, Vivi chewing a stalk of beach grass, me fanning myself with my trilby. The nixies pass the dogsled, some of them pointing their webbed gloves at it, telling the story.

“Here we go,” Vivi says, nodding toward the tree line where Howl and Drachma are crouching at Yuffie, Howl’s matchlock already pulled and Drachma his knives. Railguns in hand, we hurdle the rim and hurtle into the bowl, Vivi and I more upright-plummeting at these nixies than running, pounding footprints into the dune a leap apart, the wind battering

our cheeks and snapping at Vivi's dress and flinging my trilby off somewhere behind us, and the tanker on the lake sounding a horn that cannot possibly exist, and the nixies still flopping around the dogsled in their webbed footies, still not seeing us coming.

Shouldn't've even thought about spending tender on Spencer, with him apt to snub me regardless if I come with gift or giftless, but when Spencer's angry I get antsy with the need to pacify him, and whether or not I think he's right that I've wronged him, saying sorry is a spell I don't know how to cast, so shopping for a please-love-me-again gift is about my only move. Harv offers to come with, needs to stock us up for the fest's final event. Gwenn and Drew make us take the tot, unzip their tent and rezip it and get at unbuttoning each other inside, Gwenn's schoolteacher back in Honor having become apparently moot. We take the tot to the Market.

"Are those two back together?" I say.

"Far as I know, only as Vivi and Drachma," Harv says. "I think they're just getting their fucks in while they can."

The tatterdemalions of lesser parties are mobbed around the outfitter's booth, ogling the leather armor, the lock-lace bodices hanging from dressmaker's dummies. Harv unloads the tot into my arms to look at a pair of metal sollerets, his own hobnailed boots older than Howl himself. Harv's attributes during events? Howl, 290 HP, 210 MP, Level 19 Thief. His attributes in Tent Town? Harv, 38 Years, 1 Motorboat, 1 Cabin, 0 Living Dogs, Lower-Class Bartender.

"It's like being a kid again, like living with your parents," Harv says. "You never even know anything's wrong between them—they're still kissing in the kitchen, saying their I-love-you's into the telephone, laughing at each other's jokes. Then your dad leaves, and when he does your mom tells you he's been planning on leaving for over a year. They've just been pretending to love each other until they thought you were old enough to take it,

until you hit seventh grade.” Harv shakes his tender out of his pouch, fingers through it counting. He puts the sollarrets back. “This is where we’re supposed to be able to get away from that bullshit.”

“Can’t go far enough away to get away from that,” I say.

“What’s Spencer mad at you for this time?”

“Nothing,” I say. Harv doesn’t know about my pact with Spencer not to damage each other during events, and I’d rather he didn’t. Harv’s feelings having always been anti-Spencer, Harv being of the belief that I could do better. Spencer’s attributes in Tent Town? Spencer, 29 Years, 1 Tendency Toward Child-Like Tantrums, 1 Tattoo of Someone Else’s Name On His Shoulder, Lower-Class Apple Picker. My attributes? Taylor, 24 Years, 1 IRA, 9 FoFs, 17 CDs, Upper-Class Director of Interlochen Public Library. Our life attributes are as unbalanced as our LARP, but in life it’s Spencer who’s weaker, inexperienced, belongs to the irrelevant party. But in Michigan it is nigh impossible to meet a man who is not only cute beyond all reckoning but alsoLARPs. I’ve tried dating kayakers, moviegoers, barbecuers, birdwatchers, LP enthusiasts, tea fanciers, cribbage players, been bored by them all. Sometimes I hate Spencer for his obsession with the Realm, but I love him for it always.

And as someone whose grandparents are infamous among Interlochen’s Civil War reenactors for being through-and-through farbs—for showing to their events in sneakers, clip-on suspenders, WWII-era caps—I can respect obsession more than I can neglect. Overheard enough historically clad reenactors belittling my grandparents’ thrift-store garb to understand Spencer’s feelings, understand why he carries a lantern instead of a flashlight. That’s why we drive to Empire instead of LARPing in Interlochen, why Gwenn and Drew drive from Honor, Harv from Northport. These aren’t any city-park fests, with foam swords and toy-store rifles, played out across playgrounds and picnic tables. Out at Empire we have national park lakeshore: forest instead of parking lot, meadow instead of

ball field, dune instead of manmade coin pond. Our Market's merchants selling bear muzzles, ice crampons, bird nets, brass monocles, cobbler's tools—nothing foam, nothing plastic, our poe-poe and lager homebrewed. Swords blunted and harmless, but nonetheless metal. Bullets rubber and harmless, but nonetheless painted silver. Events never snobbish, like those Nordic LARPer's trying to turn LARP into an art instead of a game, hosting character-driven events that are more nothings than actual events. Our GM doesn't want art, he wants story, line-course linear, ongoing and unpredictable, like his GM before him. Which is what we want, Spencer and I—that always, and hopefully also each other.

Instead of spending my tender on the bullets I need, I spend it on a jar of honey in the comb, leave the tot with Harv and hike out to the Guild's tents. Scour the Guild coxcombs and popinjays preening for the final event, and find no Spencer, only Bob and Corey scrubbing the woven leather of their cuirasses with soapy sponges.

“Spence about?” I say.

“Lars' tent,” Bob says, not looking at me.

Curses on this Lars! I torture myself imagining the pre-event lovemaking moans I might be about to find coming from Lars' tent, the moans that'll mean Spencer and I are through, that I'll have to eat his honey myself. And when I get to Lars' tent I do hear something like it, but instead of lovemaking find the tent unzipped, both Spencer and the Guild Boss hunched inside with a sniveling Lars. They look at me, Susan fingering the bone charm at her neck, Lars sleeving some snot from his nose, some tears from his cheeks.

Spencer crawls out, his dreads swaying as he stands.

“What?” he says.

“I bought you some honey,” I say, feeling like a cad. “Also I wanted to give you this leaf I

found this morning, because I thought you might like its colors.” I offer him the jar and the yellowish leaf.

Spencer stares at me. “Why would Twinsen buy Valentine some honey?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe he’s an admirer.”

“Twinsen doesn’t have any tender to waste,” Spencer says. “He should spend it on what he needs.” He takes the jar anyway, takes the leaf, tucks them into his coat. “Lars’ brother died. Suicide bomber wiped out half his convoy. His aunt just called.”

I don’t say anything, because I don’t know what to say.

“I guess his aunt didn’t *just* call,” Spencer says. “She called after this morning’s event. We’ve been in there awhile.”

Inside the tent Susan’s muttering to Lars.

“Is he going home?” I say.

“No,” Spencer says. “Says he still wants to play.”

I can think of only the most blackguard of blackguard things to say: that phones don’t exist in the Realm, that Lars should have brought a carrier pigeon instead; that it’s a pity Lars doesn’t have an actual lover to hold him when he’s sad, only a LARP lover who loves me not him; that his brother should have rolled better. I hate myself for everything I think.

“Did you really think of me when you found that leaf?” Spencer says.

“Yes,” I say.

“That was a nice thing to do,” Spencer says, and he kisses me, twanging at my suspenders. He smiles his I’m-glad-you-exist smile, then slaps the seat of my breeches. “Now go get in character, Ragtag.”

We leave a trail of lifeless mages, all from lesser parties: Impa shot in the forehead in the ditch along the abandoned railway; Chihiro gutted by Drachma’s knives in a thicket of maples; Seita shot in the hip and the neck; Freya battered HPless by Vivi’s death spells. We

hole up at meadow's edge, wildflowers rustling beyond the pines—orangish snapdragon, blue skullcap, wind floating the white fluff of milkweed. Baby Dodongo pukes all over the back of Vivi's dress.

"Dodongo does his first damage of the fest," Drachma says, trying to make Vivi laugh, but Vivi just says, "That goddamn fucking kid." Drachma crouches behind her, his socks poking out of his brogues where they're splitting at the toes, and wipes at the puke with his elbow.

"You nixies keep close," Howl says, scowling at the trio of NPCs we've brought along, nixies who so far have had a tendency to lag, to get sidetracked looking at toadstools and pinecones, to get winded and refuse to walk another step till we've fed them some of Baby Dodongo's chocolate. The nixies flash their pink tongues at Howl, then go back to ignoring him.

We chose to bring the nixies along only after the GM revealed the plot of this evening's event: the bone charm given to the Guild Boss by the GM after the first event of this weekend was not a charm but a curse, has weakened her attributes, taken her from a 720 HP and 640 MP to a 40 HP and 10 MP, left her temporarily weaker than a Level 0 newb. The GM will wait for the Guild Boss in the meadow in a moored balloon—if Nausicaa can make it from the lakeshore, through the forest, to the meadow, into the basket of the GM's balloon, the GM will cast a spell to nullify the curse. Till then, it'll be possible for any of us lesser parties to kill the Guild Boss—a Guild Boss who till now had been nigh invincible—with a handful of Market-bought bullets.

The Guild began the event at the lakeshore, but the rest of us began at the abandoned railway just beyond Tent Town, meaning had to choose whether to make for the dunes to intercept the Guild Boss early, or to make for the meadow and ambush her there. Most parties made for the dunes, greedy to take the deathblow themselves, but even with a nigh toothless boss, Guild's still the Guild, so we made for the meadow, assuming the Guild'll kill those other parties or send them scattering easy. We'll wait for them at the balloon, take them at their

weakest.

Trouble is, Guild mages cast a spell pre-event, this spell costing them most of the charms they'd been hoarding but nonetheless enchanting the Realm's citizens, animating their shadows and yoking these shadows to the will of the Guild. Any NPCs not playing nixies or pixies now play these darklings, their skin slathered with dark paint. These shadows—the shadow of a train conductor in a railway uniform; the shadow of a fieldworker, her yoke hung with wooden pails; the shadow of a bonesetter, his pockets stuffed with wads of musty cloth; a gatekeeper's shadow, a bootblack's shadow, a swineherd's, an astronomer's, a fowler's, a totter's—prowling the forest, the meadow, these shadows will fight alongside the Guild mages, as if they needed the help.

Stakes this event being what they are, we're ready to spend all three of our captured nixies, these nixies having the power to revive a dead mage to max HP—during an event, not post-event like the dice. Between us we've now got seven lives instead of four—eight lives, if you count Baby Dodongo's HP of 5.

"Looks like a party's already set up in the cottage," I say.

"Then they'll have to be displaced," Howl says.

We creep from the pines into the wildflowers, making for the abandoned cottage at meadow's middle. The grim mugs of wildings peer out from the roofless ruins, ignoring the trees that just spit us out, watching instead the meadow's edge nearest the lakeshore, waiting for the Guild Boss to show. A wine-colored balloon is tethered to the lone maple beyond the cottage, hovering above the grass, the GM inside the balloon's basket (dressed as a balloonist), a couple of the GM's underlings perched nearby for reffing.

We're huddled against the cottage's crumbling wall, Howl counting us down with his fingers to our assault on the cottage, when Baby Dodongo gets to yowling.

"The fuck—?" someone inside the cottage says.

Yuffie the wolf and Vyse the pig peek over the wall. Howl and I fire but they duck back down and now we've got wildings poking out windows casting spells and pouring around the cottage with halberds swinging. Except for Epona the duck, who goes fleeing across the meadow toward the pines, we kill them all—mostly Level 1's and 2's—but it costs us Vivi.

"She's down," one of the underlings confirms, as if we might cheat the count.

Howl waves a nixie over, the nixies just now catching up.

"Bring her back," Howl says.

The nixie flashes her tongue at Howl but does what he says: bends over Vivi and mutters a spell, the fingers of the nixie's webbed gloves fluttering over Vivi's lips.

"She's back," the underling confirms, and the nixie goes prancing off into the meadow, her duty done. The other two nixies sulk against the wall of the cottage.

Vivi's first act of appreciation after being revived from the grave? She hits Baby Dodongo with a death spell.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Drachma says.

"Kid got me killed. Now that he's dead, won't happen again. Pass him off to the ref."

"That doesn't even count," Drachma says. He asks the underling, "Does that even count? They're in the same party!"

"The kid's down," the underling confirms. "You want me to take him?"

Drachma waves another of the nixies over.

"Bring him back," Drachma says.

"Hold on," Howl says, "we are not wasting a nixie on an unarmed PC with an HP of 5," but the nixie mutters over Baby Dodongo anyway, his webbed gloves fluttering over the tot's drool-crusted tunic, the nixie just wanting to be uncaged.

"Kid's back," the underling confirms, and the nixie goes prancing off after his friend.

Baby Dodongo gurgles. Vivi hits him with another death spell.

"Kid's down," the underling confirms.

"Would you stop—" Howl says, but Drachma knifes Vivi in the leg.

"You are fucking petty," Vivi says, tucking her leg up into a makeshift amputation.

"Whatever he says," Howl tells the sole nixie we have left, "do not revive that baby."

"I don't care if Baby Dodongo's dead," Drachma says, "I'm carrying him anyway, I'll carry him the rest of the event and I hope he screams and cries and gives all of us away."

"Be as stubborn as you want," Vivi says. "Look how many hearts it's won you."

"Don't talk to Drew when I'm Drachma," Drachma says.

"I wish you could be Drachma," Vivi says, "instead of a bitch of a man whose only real ability is running off everyone who was ever stupid enough to try to tolerate his empty life."

"You two are taking this way too—" Howl says, but then Epona the duck comes tearing out of the pines back into the meadow, his coattail flopping behind him, pounding toward us as if he'd left something very dear to him behind in the cottage.

"Why's he coming back?" I say, tugging my railgun out of its strap.

The why follows him out of the trees: PCs and NPCs alike come spilling into the meadow, Guild mages spell-sparring with lesser mages, lesser mages siccing their pixies on Guild mages, darklings tackling lesser mages into the grass. We hole up in the cottage, Vivi hobbling along the wall with her one leg, Howl dragging our nixie in after us to make sure that she comes. Vivi mutters healing spells over me and then Howl, spending the last of her MP to bring our HPs to full, ignoring Drachma and the mere 60 HP he's left. Howl and I scramble onto the inglenook in the chimney's ruins, peek over the wall.

"There's the boss," Howl whispers. "Still standing."

Nausicaa staggers from the trees, her gold kaftan dark with sweat, her leather poulaines muddy, the gravedigger's curse at her neck, Valentine and Kuja with her, panting all. Kuja waves them on toward the cottage and the balloon beyond, throws himself into a mob of less-

er mages, knocking PCs into the grass with only his buckler, wild with something I've never seen. Any PCs who make for Nausicaa, Kuja's on them, and when he's not shouting spells he's shouting the name of someone who cannot exist in the Realm and who does not exist even outside of it, not anymore. One of the GM's underlings runs alongside Nausicaa and Valentine, shouting their counts. "Nausicaa, 20 HP!" the underling shouts. "Valentine, 90!"

"Valentine down to 90!" Drachma whispers from the window where he's watching. "They must have taken a lot of hits in the trees."

The darklings abandon their fight with lesser mages, leaving them to Kuja, run after Nausicaa to escort her to the balloon. "I'll sidetrack the darklings," Vivi says. "You three do the boss." Vivi hobbles out the cottage, railgun drawn. Howl and I pop over the wall as Nausicaa and Valentine go huffing past the cottage, Howl firing at Valentine, me Nausicaa.

"Nausicaa, 10 HP!" the underling shouts. "Valentine, 80!"

But Valentine's on us now, unloading his pistols, not just at Howl but me too, and when Drachma and Baby Dodongo hop out the gap in the wall and go running at him knives drawn, the both of them yowling, Valentine hits them with a spell that drops them then and there. Howl and I stumble off the inglenook, duck into the hearth for cover.

"Drachma, 0 HP! Howl 270, Twinsen 90!"

We reload, then Howl whispers, "Now," and we're out the gap in the wall and pounding after Nausicaa and Valentine. Behind us Vivi drops in the grass, overtaken by the shadows of steeplejacks, printmakers, knife grinders, fishmongers, balletomanes, playgoers, Vivi crying out to us as she does, something we can't understand.

"Bring back Drachma!" I shout, and Howl shouts for the nixie, but the nixie's fallen behind. I take a shot at Nausicaa but miss, reload, still running. Valentine hurdles a tree, shouting a spell back at us over his shoulder as he does, a spell that drops his MP to 0, but a spell that, when I hear the underling shout what it's done to us, it's nigh unbelievable.

“Howl, 70 HP! Twinsen, 0!”

And then I’m dead in the wildflowers where I should be, face-to-face with the snapdragons, my breeches stuck with clover burrs. And Howl says what he should—“Nixie, bring him back!”—but then the nixie’s standing over me, not Drachma, blotting out the red of the sun, and I realize Howl said not what he should’ve but what he shouldn’t’ve, that he doesn’t trust Drachma enough to bring him back, least not when Drachma’s strapped to Baby Dodongo, and even though Drachma’s the best out of any of us Ragtags, Howl’s bringing back me.

“Twinsen, 110 HP!”

Then I’m up and we’re moving, the darklings running after us and us running after a Guild Boss who’s a shot away from having to roll the dice on her character forever. Nausicaa’s at the balloon, the GM above her in a wool cloak and brass spectacles, his beard knotted with snarls, unrolling a rope ladder for Nausicaa to climb, watching us as he does. Valentine stands between us and Nausicaa, arms spread, his coat blocking her from any of our bullets. Howl shoots him, shoulder shot, shoots again, takes out the arm. Valentine fires back with the arm he’s left, a deathblow to Howl’s throat.

“Howl, 0 HP! Valentine 40, Nausicaa still 10!”

Valentine tosses his pistol, out of bullets. Behind him I see Nausicaa reaching for a rung of the ladder. My railgun’s trained on Valentine.

“Shoot him!” Howl shouts from the grass where he’s supposed to be dead. “Shoot them, Twin!”

“You swore,” Valentine says, “no damage between lovers,” and Howl looks at me like he doesn’t understand why we’re having a parley when I’ve enough bullets to bury the Guild here and now.

“You hit me,” I say. “Just now you killed me.”

“For my leg,” Valentine says. “A life for a life. Now we’re even, and you’re forgiven.”

I don't say anything.

"We made a pact," Valentine says.

"Then move," I say, "so I can keep it."

Valentine says, "This is where I have to stand."

I stare at him, and then shove my railgun back into its strap. Howl says, "Twin, if you don't—" but Valentine drops the arm he's left and behind him Nausicaa drops into the balloon's basket headfirst. The GM laughs—at which of us I'm not sure—then katanas the basket's tether. Flames spurting into its skirt, the balloon drifts up, leaving us in the meadow with all of our dead and our nigh, the Guild Boss not peeking out from the basket till it's high enough away that she knows I couldn't possibly do a thing to take away that last 10 of her HP.

From Harv, the expected: Curses on this Taylor! The muckrakers and makebates in Tent Town relishing each retelling of what they alternatively refer to as my cowardice, idiocy, or treachery at the face-off of the balloon. Gwenn and Drew less hating me than treating me like the Guild's catspaw, too taken with hating each other. Drew sleeps in my tent instead of the one he'd been sharing with Gwenn, tells me before slumber comes that he'd thought they were going to get back together, that things at this fest had been going so good, that he'd thought Gwenn would leave the schoolteacher, come back to Drew and his tot. I tell Drew that, come on, he had to know that she wouldn't, that outside of the Realm this Gwenn was through.

Packing our tents the next morning, Harv tells me that next fest I fight as just myself, no Ragtag to me. Gwenn then telling Harv that next fest she fights as *herself*, no Ragtag to *her*, that she'd rather fight lonesome than alongside Baby Dodongo. Drew post-event having rolled two shy of reviving Drachma—meaning next fest he's a Level 0, just like his tot, and wearing a new name—Harv says so then fuck Ragtag, next fest we're all just ourselves,

and if he sees any of us during events he's coming for us gunning. After Harv hikes off with his gear, Drew with his gear and his tot, Gwenn kisses me once on the cheek, tells me not to be sad, then hauls her own gear off through the trees toward the lot, toward her truck she shared with Drew the way here, the truck she'll have to share with him their way back.

Then I hike through the trees alone, my suspenders unshouldered, carrying my tent like a yoke through the torn-down Market and past where the GM's underlings are stacking the poles of the GM's marquee, and then on down the footpath that we've worn into this forest fest after fest, me padding across the white sand and the patches of brown needles shaken from the pines by the wind. And Spencer is waiting for me in the lot—him and Lars. They grunt their goodbyes, and then Spencer and I walk to my car, him in Valentine's coat, me in Twinsen's breeches, but us already handholding as Spencer and Taylor. Spencer takes a wind-up bird from his pocket, Market-bought, and offers it to me, and I take it, and say nothing, and try not to smile, but some of it gets out. I tuck our tents into the trunk, then press it shut, and settle into my seat and start the car, and Spencer cranks his window open and then leans over my lap to crank mine open too, and then he stays there, his dreads flopped all over my breeches, his boots out his window, him blinking asleep before we're even on the highway, his eyelashes shuddering in the wind whenever I look down, and I keep one hand on his chest and one hand on the wheel and in that fashion I drive us to a world where we can be together, a world where I will defend him from whatever damage comes for him, long as I stand.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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