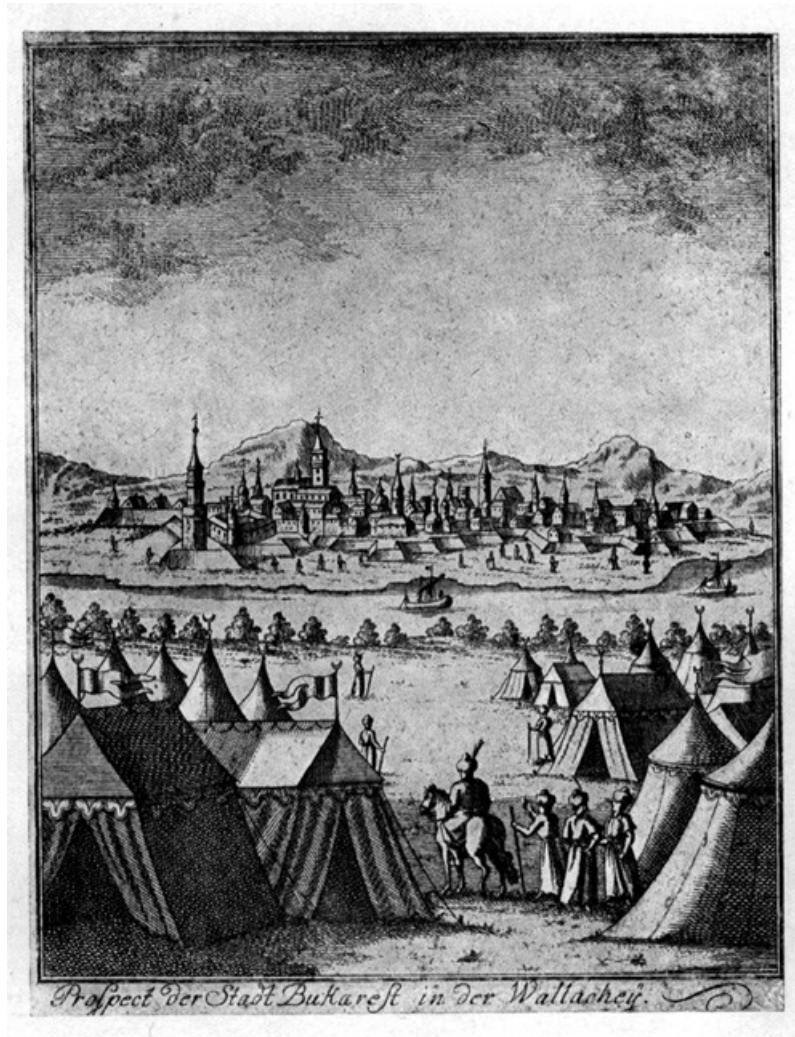


How to Survive and Thrive at the Gathering of Nations (and other such festivals)



Welcome to the field!

If you're anything like me when I started, you have no idea what you're doing and you only have the vaguest idea why you're here. You'll have plenty of questions. I can't answer all of them, but I'll try to answer some, and give you an idea how to find out more.

This book is organised with the most immediately relevant stuff at the front, and stuff you can save for later at the back. At the very end is rambling advice which may not actually teach you anything except that I'm getting old.

Good luck,

Ilsa

How to not get dead.

The basics: eating, drinking, sleeping, maintaining a sensible temperature

You should do those things.

Yes, yes, I hear you say, I know how to do these things. I've done them all my life, why do I need someone to tell me now?

Well, the field of an interfactional gathering is a funny place. There's always something going on, it's very often potentially lethal and almost always interesting. This means it's very easy to forget to do the basics. Many young keen warriors down the years have fainted dead away in the middle of a gathering battle or found themselves too ill to leave their tents by the final morning because they spent the weekend doing things that seemed more important than sleeping, eating or drinking at the time. Don't be one of them, if you survive it, you'll never live it down

- Carry water, more water than you think you need, and if you can, something to eat like jerky or nuts
- Remind other people in your guild or unit to eat. Get them to remind you. Group mealtimes are great if you can get them going.
- Remember, coffee and alcohol don't count as drinks when you're trying to avoid drying yourself out.

Speaking of alcohol

- If you're boozing, especially during the day, drink water too, or you'll feel like you've been run over by a shieldwall later.
- Speaking of which, if you haven't tried a drink before, don't drink it too quickly, or your legs may be drunk before your head's worked out what's going on. Mead is particularly notorious for doing this to the unwary.
- Start drinking seriously only when you are certain that you will not be fighting for the rest of the night. Drunk fighters are a liability, and once you're three sheets to the wind, you may no longer realise how drunk you are.

Staying warm

When factions gather, the weather tends to be unpredictable. I've heard a number of theories for this, some say it's the number of magic items, rituals and rites all in one place, some say that one or more of us have pissed off or otherwise attracted the attention of an ancestor who can control the weather at some point. Whatever the cause is, you need to be prepared for it.

- Bring many layers that you can strip off or put on as necessary.
- Bring more socks than you think you'll need
- Waterproof footwear. If you don't have some, get some. A pair of broken boots will cause you problems faster than a dull blade, so pass on the fancy sword if you have to, invest in the best pair of boots you can afford and maintain them well.
- Just because it's hot during the day doesn't mean it won't be freezing at night. Clear skies mean the temperature will drop more sharply when the sun goes down. If you're going to be far from your tent when night falls, bring a cloak. You won't want to bother going back for it.
- If the ground is cold, it'll leech the heat out of your bones while you sleep. Bring something to put under you, like a good thick blanket or some furs.
- For the love of all that's holy, no matter how drunk you are, take off your armour before you sleep, especially if you're in chain or plate. You will regret it if you don't.

Avoiding getting stabbed

Getting stabbed is something of a hazard, and not just on the battlefield. Not only do you have to contend with members of other factions that your faction is currently at war with, you must also deal with the best equipped muggers and bandits in the world. You'll also usually have to contend with threats from wherever you've come from, because you'll be sitting right next to a transport circle, and small-time aspiring coup leaders, demon lords, angry dryads etc. always seem to want to come and have a go, presumably thinking that they'll be able to take out the leaders of the faction more easily when they're not sitting at home in a fortress, forgetting that the presence of the heroes of a faction is better protection than stone walls. You'll also have to deal with other factions' enemies as many of them won't be able to tell you and their enemies apart, especially if they are mindless creatures.

So, how do you avoid your first trip abroad being your last? There's no guarantees, but these tips can help:

- Make some friends. No, seriously. The thing that's going to save you when you're bleeding in the dirt is someone recognising you and deciding that it's worth it to heal you. Don't like people? Think of yourself as a "lone wolf"? Remember that real lone wolves in the wild tend to die, and fast. Talk to people so they know your face and learn to hide your contempt, or at least be useful enough that people will keep you around anyway
- Wear something bright and distinctive if you're not scouting. If you fall in the dark, you may die right under your friends' noses if they can't see you, so try to have something on your person in a bright colour that won't be invisible against grass in the dark.
- If you are scouting, remember that black is actually easier to see than dark grey, green or

blue, and dress accordingly

- Know what's out there. Ask around your faction or guild what kind of threats they're expecting
- Go out in groups of at least 3, especially at night. Even if you're hard as nails, you can be taken down very easily if you're outnumbered, especially by magic users. Even if you're a caster yourself, you can only counter as fast as you can get the words out, so a pair casting simultaneously will take most people down.
- On that point, if you have no ability to counter, then beg or buy an iron will or three, they can be extremely useful.
- If you can't go out in a group, make sure someone knows where you're going and when you'll be back.
- Don't look like a target. Muggers are looking for the maximum return with minimum chance of death. If you must walk across the field alone, walk across that field like an angry high mage on important business. It doesn't always work, but enough muggers have died in a hail of magebolts for someone who looks like they're not worried to give some of them pause.
- If you can cast a transport rite, remember that there are usually three transport circles on site, one in the marketplace, and one in each field where the factions are camped. If you want to get from one of those areas to another and it might be dangerous to walk between them.

How to use the Ritual of Peace to your advantage (and not piss off the healers)

The ritual of peace affects the entire site for the duration of the festival. It protects any sentient living creature from bleeding to death, unless some curse or aberration of their pattern makes them immune to the effect. Some spells and effects will break the ritual of peace. Magebolts, the high dark incantation to cause great Harm and pattern rending Fatal wounds all break the ritual of peace. Some ancient legendary weapons or "Artifacts" will also cut through it, as will weapons that are specifically forged to affect or to be baneful to your race, pattern type or similar characteristic. Lethal poisons and attacks which cause your body to Decay or Petrify (turn to stone) will also still kill you. So don't get cocky, it's not *that* peaceful.

The ritual of peace will also cure any wounds you may have after you have been in what healers call a "debilitated" state (that is, the kind of groggy state you're in after you've come round from being knocked unconscious) for ten minutes. It won't cure any wounds unless you're debilitated, meaning that if someone has taken injuries to their limbs it's often easier to knock them out and wait for the ritual to take effect than to expend healing power on them. If you've got a physician to hand, it'll only take a minute for them to wake the person up, if not, it'll take about ten minutes as normal, meaning that it'll take twenty minutes for the whole procedure. There's a great demand

on healing at festivals because of their propensity to attract people and things which create complex and damaging magical effects, and sheer numbers taking part in battles, so don't be surprised if healers would rather lamp you over the head than use power, especially if it's a minor uncomplicated injury during a quiet period. Save yourself time and glares – find a safe place and someone trustworthy to make sure no one draws something rude on your face in woad and hit yourself over the head, or get them to do it for you.

The Gathering Charter

This is a treaty struck over twenty years ago to end a period of warfare between the heartland nations. The terms are periodically renegotiated, and if you want to know the details of the current charter the Militia Guild can help you out. It contains laws which govern members of signatory nations at festival and lay out rules of engagement for interfactional warfare.

If you live in one of the heartland or southland nations, you are covered by the gathering charter. masters of the guilds, the Watchers of Erdreja and librarians of the Great Library of Norhault, while faction neutral, are also covered by its terms.

Grievances between signatory nations can be settled by means of an honour battle under the ritual of peace, traditionally at the Gathering of Nations. The idea behind this is to stop these grievances from escalating to total war with massive civilian losses on all sides. Sometimes it is used to settle a question, for example in 1115, the factions fought over whether a ritual to summon the Archon of Spirit and ask it to destroy an ancestor should be allowed, and those who sought to ban it won. Once an issue is settled in this way the result is generally accepted, if grudgingly.

On a more individual level, it can be useful to know how and where the laws of the gathering treaty apply to you. If you're in a faction camp, the laws of that faction apply to you. If you are not in a faction camp, but are on one of the three fields being used for the festival (between faction camps or in the market place) you are on what is known as common ground, covered by the laws laid out in the Gathering Charter and under the jurisdiction of the Militia. Simply put, it is illegal to kill someone covered by the Charter, to assault them with violence or magic, to steal from them, or to remove them from neutral ground against their will. If you do any of these things, you may have the Militia on your case. If you are a victim of one of these crimes on common ground, you can report it to the Militia in the Martial guilds tent in the market place (unless they've killed you, then you probably won't be in any state to do so). Using reasonable force to defend yourself or someone else from attack is not considered a crime, nor are normally criminal acts taken during the course of interfactional war provided that your faction is willing to accept that your actions were taken on their behalf.

Making the most of the festival

So, got basic survival down? Now what?

Things to do around your faction.

You're spending a weekend with the political movers and shakers of your nation. Now's a great time to start a career, make friends and influence people or make some cash. This will not happen on its own. For that you've got to get your face known, and preferably trusted, at least by the people with whom you plan on doing business.

So how does a new person make their name? Here's a list of things that have worked for others.

Bodyguarding – If you're of a martial bent, close protection is an easy way to prove yourself, pass the time, and earn money or goodwill with your faction. While there can be times when little is happening, there are lots of opportunities out there to go to interesting places and sit in on meetings you'd otherwise not be invited to. Keep your eyes and ears open and you'll get to be frighteningly well informed very quickly.

Contribute to rituals – If ritual magic is more your thing, ritualists are always looking for contributors. Contributing is fun if you like to perform, and stressed ritualists will remember the contributor who is reliable, which can be useful if you need a favour later on. There are risks to going into a circle, but the ritualist assumes most of those risks themselves, so the chances are that you'll come out in one piece.

Talk to people who do what you want to do – Fancy being a diplomat? Talk to one. Ask them how they got into it, maybe ask if they need a scribe or bodyguard. Yes, it really is that simple sometimes. Often you'll be able to see your faction's high scout or lawkeeper or some such make announcements at your faction muster (a faction meeting of sorts – sometimes there'll be a board to tell you when it is, otherwise you'll know it's happening when a loud person starts shouting “muster”). Sometimes they'll even be making a recruiting pitch. Even if they don't, collar them (politely) afterwards and ask if they're looking for a keen underling. Most of them will say yes.

Ask your group or unit – chances are there are some busy people in your group who could do with some help with their various projects. If you don't know what to do, this can be a good way to try a few things out.

Guarding the gate – Not glamorous, but appreciated in many factions. You'll get to talk to all sorts. Bring beer or coffee, food and someone to chat to, and you'll hardly know you're working.

The Guilds

Your faction isn't the only place to find something to do. The guilds offer opportunities to learn skills, make money, and meet people from other factions on neutral ground. The guilds can usually be found in a large tent on the central field, close to the ritual circle.

What sort of guilds are there?

The guilds can be divided into three groups based on the kind of thing they do – the powers guilds, the martial guilds and the knowledge guilds. Until recently, guilds have tended to be quite disparate, but events of the last few years have meant that the guilds have become more closely allied particularly within the above-mentioned groups.

The powers guilds are interested in magic in it's broadest sense – the Mages' guild study spellcasting, the Incantors' guild are devoted to incantation and worship of the ancestors, the Healers' guild train both healers who channel from the plane of life and physicians, while the Corruptors guild explore the darker arts of corruption and necromancy.

The martial guilds are, as the name suggests, have an interest in the art of war, but all come at it from very different perspectives. The Archers' guild train archers, bowyers and rangers and are a good guild to go for if you want to work in the wilds. The Militia guild are responsible for upholding the gathering treaty, and so attract both fighters who patrol the field dispensing rough justice to muggers and those with a more deductive bent. The Armourers' guild forge fine weapons and armour, and the Scouts Guild attracts a more subtle warrior who favours working by stealth and cunning.

The knowledge guilds are possibly the group with the most varied interests. The Alchemists brew and sell potions and poisons, and often assist the Militia with their skills in forensic analysis despite their well known chaotic streak. The Bank trade, hold money and items for factions, units and individuals alike, and hold all kinds of secrets in their vaults. The Bards interest ourselves in history and lore of all sorts, particularly the art of communication, whether that be through the written word, song or story (or well crafted rumour).

While not guilds as such, you will usually find the knowledge guilds also share space with representatives of the Watchers of Erdreja and the Great Library of Norhault. The former tend the ritual circles of Erdreja protecting the circle network from damage and the Dragon from harm. They are very knowledgeable on the nature of magic and rituals, and if you are a ritualist you'd be very well advised to run your ideas past them, particularly if your new or your idea is unusual. Away from the ritual circle they are approachable and generally happy to talk through your ideas and point out if you're doing anything dangerous. However, once you step inside the circle you

are on your own. The Watchers unable to intervene unless you are going to harm the circle or the Dragon, even if it will harm the ritual team. The Great Library of Norhault is a vast, slightly sentient repository of information on almost every subject you can think of. For a fee you can gain access to the Great Library for research purposes or even the services of a member of staff to assist you (though this is more expensive). It's an incredibly popular service with limited opportunities each year, so speak to the Librarians for details as soon as you can when you arrive.

You can be a member of as many guilds as you have time for. You can only swear an oath to one, but you need not swear to any, it's perfectly possible to be a member in good standing without doing so.

Remember that guilds are looking for more than their stereotypical member. For example, people have often told me that they would be unsuitable for the bards guild because they don't sing, not realising that Vincenzo Sangrado, who was Grandmaster of the guild before me, can't carry a tune in a bucket – but he's brilliant at finding information, very persuasive when he needs to be, and has a talent for staving people's skulls in, all things that the guild has need for. Similarly, if you like the healer's guild but you aren't a healer or physician, they need defenders, runners, administrators – people who have skills that don't involve hands on fixing people.

Making Money

Have you seen the price of magic swords? Is that more money than you've ever had in your life? Fear not, because there's more opportunities to make money in this field than anywhere else on the egg.

Making weapons and armour – If you have a talent for smithing, why not get in on the magic sword game yourself. Your membership fees and guild service for the armourers' guild will be paid back many times over, and the more you learn of their specialist forging techniques, the more lucrative it gets.

Making potions or poisons – Similarly, if you've got a basic knowledge of potions or poisons, the alchemists' guild can train you to make preparations which you can sell for a profit.

Scribing scrolls – If you can cast, learning to scribe your spells onto a scroll and sell them on is a nice little money spinner. If you're any good with art or calligraphy, you can sometimes charge a little extra for a more beautiful or amusing scroll

Selling massively overpriced snacks/souvenirs/knick knacks – Not a blacksmith, a caster or an alchemist? Want to make money on a smaller scale, fast? There are a lot of people with more

money than sense in the field, who are too busy to get up and get snacks. You can get between a stell and a gold for sweets and biscuits, depending on size and quality. If you can make little trinkets, you can easily get a few gold for them. Even seemingly mundane items like pens and paper can go for shocking amounts of money if you're a long way from the official trading stands and it's dark.

Running messages – yep it's tiring, it can be dull, but it gets you out and about around the field, it gets your face known, and you'll pick up all sorts of interesting information

Information – A little trickier to make your beer money from, and can be a dangerous game, but can be very rewarding. The trick is to find the right buyer. Once someone trusts you as a source, and you trust them not to drop you in it, they'll come to you again and again. To get started, buy a notebook, open your ears, and shut your mouth.

The Entertainers Tour – The Bards guild run a tour of the faction camps every night except Friday at about ten o' clock, and profits are split evenly between everyone who goes whether they go to entertain, bodyguard, or help carry instruments.

The Brothels – Many camps have a brothel, and even if yours does not have one, they tend to be willing to hire outside their factions because of high demand. As well as employing ladies and gentlemen of the night, they often hire bouncers and bar staff, and occasionally musicians and other entertainers.

Other things to do.

Play in the casino – It is a truth universally accepted that a person in possession of a large pile of gold must be in want of a poker game to separate them from it. The casino will not disappoint you in this.

Check out the traders – Selling everything from dresses to daggers, even just bimbaling around can be entertaining. Das Shoppe in the Vipers is worth a visit if you have any clothes you want to trade in.

Visit a brothel – Apart from the obvious, they also do massages¹, which after a few days in full plate you'll want more than the more traditional services provided by the ladies and gentlemen of the night.

¹ OOC: This is all they do, just in case you were wondering.

Looking at the long term; Tips for survival and sanity

This is the part where I prove I'm getting old by spending a couple of pages giving you advice that you're just going to ignore anyway in all probability.

Lie if you have to, but never lie to yourself. Someone or something will come along and shatter the illusion at the worst possible time, and the results are never pretty.

Become immune to charms. There are other, more surely lethal things to be immune to, but charms have the most potential for dealing out fates worse than death.

If you've not been around for long, you might be confused as to why people don't react with horror to potentially world ending threats. The answer is, they've seen too many. Try not to get frustrated by it, and take comfort that the people of the Heartlands and Southlands, despite all the infighting and apathy you sometimes see, tend to pull through when the chips are down. If we couldn't, you wouldn't be here to ask.

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Don't wait for "important people" to solve a problem. They are far too busy.

"Important people" are just like you, plus a few years of experience. Most of them don't consider themselves important at all, and are very confused when you get intimidated by them. Try talking to them like a normal sentient being and you'll be fine.

Don't drink and rite. Even transport rites. If you slur at the wrong time who knows where you'll end up.

If you fall for someone, and there's a good reason why pursuing it would be a terrible idea (they're in a committed monogamous relationship, you're in a committed monogamous relationship, they have made it clear they're not interested etc etc), for your own sanity's sake walk away. Don't feed it by spending time around them, find yourself something that you can put all your energy and attention into, and avoid them for a few months if you can – and if you must knock boots with someone else to forget them, make sure the other person isn't looking for more than that. Also, take precautions.

If you fall for someone and there's no reason why pursuing it would be a terrible idea, ask them if they're up for it and see what happens. You never know how long you have left

If someone else falls for you, and you don't return their feelings, be honest, be clear, be kind, and don't leave room for hope.

Don't write down big secrets for people to read after you die. If you can't tell them to their face, it may be that it's a bad choice to tell them at all. There's always the chance that someone will find it while you're alive and you'll have to explain yourself, or that your circumstances will change and you'll die before you update the letter, causing needless pain. Even in the best of circumstances, your loved ones will probably be left with questions that you won't be there to answer. Leave practical instructions, beer money and encouragement, and then let them get on with it.

Never send anyone to kill someone you wouldn't be prepared to kill with your own hands.

Imprisoning any kind of magical threat only delays dealing with the problem. Eventually it will get out, no matter how strong your protections are, and your descendents will think you were an idiot. Only do it if there are no other acceptable options.

As the late High Sheriff of the Lions, Karnak Justice once told me; surprisingly often, the butler did it. Many people who keep servants look right through them, and that gives them both motive and opportunity. Also, surprisingly few people can resist the power of the clichéd narrative

When contacted by an ancestor or other powerful being, make sure you're talking to the right entity before you do what it asks. Loki and Satuun keep getting people that way.

Be very careful about what oaths you make. Those you swear to or by may take them more seriously and interpret them differently to you.

Demons are as capable of lying as anything else. Unless you're talking to a demon of law you can't hold it to its word without leverage, and even then, don't challenge a law demon to a game of semantics, it has had longer to practice.

You will lose people. If you survive more than four or five years, most of the people who were new when you started will be dead. When they die, it's totally normal to fall apart, to get pissed off with them for leaving you, to get pissed at yourself for letting it happen even if it wasn't your fault. If it's someone very close, you might even start feeling guilty when you start to laugh again. Grief is messy, try to let it happen as it will. Find a way to honour their memory, remember anything they taught you, and move on when you can. If you find you get stuck, talk to someone about it. Almost everyone around you knows what it's like.

Be careful what stories you tell about a person. Be especially careful what stories you tell them about themselves, and doubly so if they are young and impressionable. You'd be amazed how often people live up or down to your expectations.

Do not stop making new friends. It happens a lot to people who have been around for a while and lost one too many people. It occurs to them on some level that if they don't care about anyone, they can't be hurt when they're taken away. It rarely works; if it's in you to care, it's very hard to stop, and the loneliness tends to twist you, so you time alone only makes you more bitter and angry at the world, or just flat out starved of happiness. I know it's easier said than done, but if you don't want to go mad, you have to keep trying and hoping, loving and losing.

Know when to bow out, and know when to go home.

This may seem very far away from you now, but a time may come when you can't take what you're doing any more. Perhaps it's a thankless job. Maybe you're trying to do too many things at once. Perhaps you're needed elsewhere. You don't want to turn your back on something you've put so much into, but if you do it for another day, you're going to go spare. Please, if you ever get there, stop.

You don't have to stop forever. You don't have to stop everything. But do not continue if you no longer care, or it's destroying you. Stop before you hurt someone, probably yourself. There are situations where a lot of responsibility is resting on you, but remember that people with responsibility die all the time, and they are always replaced somehow. Find someone, train them and pass it on. Remember what you're like today, with all that possibility stretching out in front of you. There will be someone like that out there, just looking to get a start.

Sometimes just leaving one task or position isn't enough. Sometimes it's life on campaign that's getting to you. Sometimes you need to go home. Maybe for a season, maybe for a year. Maybe you'll never be ready to come back. That's okay. There's no shame in realising that this is not the life for you, there are many paths, and almost all of them have a longer life expectancy than life with the faction warband. Go home, sell your gear, buy a farm or open a shop, have some kids, try not to panic when one of them wants to go adventuring.