

Behind the Masque

A Megatokyo Endgames short story

by

Fred Gallagher & Thomas Knapp

Based on

Story and Characters

Created By Fred Gallagher

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by Fred Gallagher and Thomas Knapp,

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Introduction

have

The *Endgames* world is actually a story within a story, a game played by several of the main characters in my online webcomic *Megatokyo*. What happened in that game plays an important role in the *Megatokyo* story, but only parts of Pirogoeth and Largo's has been told. What follows is a sample; a small glimpse of that history, part of a larger story to come.

Pirogoeth and Largo's... stories? history? sentence seems incomplete

This short story does not require you to have read all the way through Chapter 10 of *Megatokyo* or be familiar with the *Endgames* story as it has been hinted at so far.

These *Endgame* stories should stand on their own and be understood without requiring knowledge of the *Megatokyo* world, much like the characters in the game itself.

Endgames (Plural form is the actual title of the MMO game, yes?)

extra space

This is a sample of a larger project, to tell the entire *Endgames* story via a series of light novels. Hopefully you will enjoy this short story and see it as an example of what the forthcoming light novel releases will be like.

Fred "Piro" Gallagher
May 2011

References I'm checking suggest that "legionnaire" shouldn't be capitalized, but "Domina" should.

than

The road to Alaghonon turned out to be a lot more difficult than Pirogoeth had hoped. Of course, she hadn't anticipated traveling with a man possessing intellect measured somewhere between that of a horse and a brick, further impaired by the attention span of a five-tailed ferret.

"I think we are lost," Pirogoeth said, holding up a tattered map. "If you look—"

It was no use. Her companion's attention was not something to be applied to mundane things like maps, or the avoidance of becoming lost forever in a forest where such disappearances were not uncommon.

"Hold! A woodland creature!" the former Legionnaire shouted, smashing his way into the underbrush after whatever play of the shadows he had seen.

Pirogoeth tried to ignore the near-insane shouts of her unlikely traveling companion. "There should be some sort of town here," she murmured, not even attempting to be heard over the sounds of animal squeals and the ring of steel followed by loud chopping and whacking sounds.

Triumph filled Largo's voice as he returned to the former Domina's side. "Behold! Look upon what I have killed!" he crowed, brandishing a mangled and sorry-looking rodent by its long ears. He thrust it into Pirogoeth's face. "A vicious sparkle bunny!"

"Pleasant," she said, regarding the kill with disdain as it dangled inches from her face, swaying and turning slightly beneath his clenched fist. The effect was almost hypnotic – a twinkling panorama of colors in the dappled sunlight that reached this small clearing, creating the effect that was the creature's namesake →

~~"Can you at least pretend to help me with this?"~~

"Help" did not seem to be a word in Largo's limited vocabulary. He had already launched himself off once more into the undergrowth, smashing through the bushes with a ferocity that she could have sworn made the bushes and shrubs cry out in agony.

With a sigh, Pirogoeth decided to continue with the vain hope that he might actually be listening. He had surprised her on a number of occasions by responding to something she said long after it seemed obvious he had ceased to pay attention to her. It would be nice, since he was the one supposedly familiar with this area →

~~"As I was saying, either this map is wrong, or we are really lost."~~

His reply was to shove yet another animal carcass in her face. A rainbow armadillo, if she remembered her taxonomy correctly. Quite young, its snout was still a bright yellow and not yet faded with maturity. "I know not what this is, but I killed it!" he whooped, clearly pleased with himself.

She looked at him with a gaze that would have sane men contemplating their fragile mortality. "Wave another dead thing in my face and I will hurt you."

She wasn't even sure if Largo heard her, for he was once again plunging headlong into the weeds and high grasses. She shook her head in disbelief. How did this man become a Legionnaire? He was of barely functional mind, and that was being generous. Had he suffered a massive head injury during the course of the battle that ended his siege of her former domain? Was it witnessing the haze of the Void consuming his legion and her lands that finally snapped the strings of his sanity? Was it joining forces with the only other survivor of the battle - the same woman he had vowed to destroy - that put him over the edge? Or perhaps was this entirely natural for him, and Reht sent him far afield to conquer and pillage in order to keep him at a safe distance from anything of importance within the homeland.

Since this might actually be as close as he ever got to listening, she continued, "Even if the town was abandoned, we should still see traces of it."

Another interruption, and another boisterous bellow from her partner. "Ah! And there! The dreaded evil eggplant! It put up a valiant struggle!"

Pirogoeth suppressed an urge to uproot a tree and smash him with it repeatedly. It wasn't even an eggplant, for Coder's sake, it was a *radish*. How did this man survive to adulthood?

~~She drew a long breath and spoke calmly.~~ "Largo, we are trying to get through this forest, not depopulate it."

He did not hear her. He was off again, this time seeming to attack the bushes and shrubs and undergrowth itself. Dry wood snapped and cracked, followed by the emergence of the warrior grasping a handful of twigs and kindling. "Behold! I have found some sticks! I have broken them in half! Now I shall sharpen them!"

"I really don't know why I don't just set you on fire."

"Fire!" he exclaimed, the first direct sign that he had heard *anything* she had been saying for the last three minutes. "Yes! I need fire! I shall return!"

She sighed, putting her map back into her satchel. Might as well set up camp, they weren't going anywhere for a while.

~~"Camp"~~ was a bit of a misnomer, as they really didn't have much outside of what they could carry: their only shelter was sleeping bags and a tarp that they would tie over whatever wood they could find to make a tent. It was a major reason why she wanted to find this town. Sleeping in the immediate vicinity of Largo was an insult to her senses.

The weather wasn't particularly cold or showing signs of impending rain, so she unclipped her cloak from her neck. She didn't want to risk any loose garments catching and tearing on brambles during her own foray into the rough underbrush to find wood suitable for a tent frame. Emerging a few minutes later with three stout

branches that could be trimmed down, she dipped back into the foliage to find three more to complete the other side of the tent.

After fighting her way back into the clearing with a second bundle, she found the first three branches gone. Her brief curiosity concerning their fate was answered by the sound of crackling flames and the smell of cooking meat.

Largo was on the other end of the clearing with a decent fire going. He was far too close to the brush to safely raise such a large flame, but Largo apparently figured the stones circling the fire would even things out.

"What are you doing?" Pirogoeth asked, almost casually.

"I have killed many things. We will now eat them," Largo answered, as if it were obvious. "One cannot eat raw sparkle bunny."

"One cannot eat *cooked* sparkle bunny either," she retorted.

Largo looked up at her under raised eyebrows, his expression silently scolding her as if she was the nuisance. "And what will you eat then? Will you conjure some more of your bread and tea?"

"When I am hungry? Yes," she grouched. "Now, thanks to you, I need to find more wood."

the fire. "You will

"That is why you remain so small and underdeveloped," he said, turning his attention to the fire, "you will never grow eating conjurer's fluff and dirty water. You need meat! Cooked with fire!"

Pirogoeth clenched her fists. She muttered the incantation of a most incendiary evocation. Feeling the energy flow from around her, through the focus of her book and into her hands, she grumbled, "Yes. Fire." Some urges could not be suppressed.

She raised her arm, right hand forward, not even looking up to verify her aim at the broad back of the Legionnaire and his cooking fire. A torrent of white-hot flame ignited the air and everything else with the misfortune of being in the general direction she pointed.

Largo, to his credit, had heard her use that tone of voice before, and had huddled up into a tight ball in self-preservation. He soon emerged from the inferno, rolling on the ground to put himself out.

By the time Pirogoeth lowered her arm, she had cut a thirty-foot charred swath into the forest. The sparkle bunny, rainbow armadillo, and radish were gone. She glared at him for a moment then stomped off, walking along the narrowing dirt road to let off the steam that had been building in her temper.

Largo brushed himself off, the soot flaking from his armor. He looked after her with a puzzled expression, then shook his head. "Women. They are all possessed," he grumbled, then examined his fire pit. The stones were still there, blackened from the mage's fire, but not much else remained. Even the rainbow armadillo, known for its

tough skin, had been reduced, bone and all, into inert ash.

Pirogoeth started kicking at loose rocks in the path, her anger and rage finally melting into something bordering on regret. She shouldn't have done that to him, he was just trying to eat. He was right about conjured crackers and the like. One cannot live on foodstuffs created by magic alone, not even a powerful mage's fare would be robust enough. It was not like he chose to eat sparkle bunny, no one would choose that. The sun was still high, there was time to hunt and forage. She could have simply gathered more wood. They were in a damned forest for Coder's sake. It's not like twigs and branches were in short supply.

It was

The bushes just to her left rustled, then seemed to explode as a body ejected itself from them with a blur of speed. It rolled to its feet and thrust an impressive long sword to within a whisker's length of Pirogoeth's throat. She had been so engrossed in her thoughts that she had been taken completely off guard. The heavy armor plating adorning her assailant's chest and legs did not lend itself to stealth, yet she hadn't heard him approach at all.

The

Now that he was stationary, Pirogoeth was able to appraise him. His long white hair was lightly touched with violet and surprisingly well maintained, completely unlike the untamed and unnaturally massive wild mane of her companion. Gray eyes, so faint in hue they were almost colorless, flashed with serious and lethal intent as they stared her down, along with a firm jaw clenched with controlled fury. When he spoke, his voice was rich, full, and dignified, with an inflection and accent that didn't belong to that region – a smooth, chilled honey to her ears after nearly a month of nothing but the brash speech of a hardened soldier and the common folk of these remote lands. Here was a refined warrior from a world Pirogoeth had almost forgotten existed. His presence was so exotic and out of place that the unwavering sword point just inches from her throat didn't concern her the way it probably should.

~~"You have one chance to leave this forsaken road of villainy alive, wench. Take me to your other brigands, and mayhap I will spare you."~~

should have.

"Brigands?" Pirogoeth replied, blinking at him, her bemusement changing to irritation at the absurdly out-of-place knight. "Do I look like a brigand?"

"Only a thief would have reason to take this path," the man responded, understandably suspicious. "Is your excuse going to be that you're *lost*?"

"I am a traveler seeking nothing more than a way out of this damned forest," she said, moving a hand to the satchel slung over her shoulder, but stopping when her assailant's blade danced slightly closer in warning. "It's a map. I doubt that I could hurt you with it."

Keeping his eyes and sword steadily fixed on her, the man's left hand reached into her satchel, pulling out the maps that Pirogoeth had been attempting to consult.

He examined them, furrowed his brow, then looked at Pirogoeth, appraising her

extra space

With all the paragraphs you've been combining, this one can be too.

for a long moment. He withdrew his sword and deftly returned it to its place in his scabbard. "I had the feeling you weren't a highwayman. The care and worries in your eyes are not those of a brigand." →

~~He~~ stepped back and bowed gracefully, yet without any pomp or flourish. "My apologies, lady, for my assault on your person. I've been hunting thieves for the past four nights in this forest. They've been making life difficult for merchants trying to get their wares further north."

Pirogoeth inclined her head. "My partner and I were simply trying to find a town we should have reached by now. We are simple travelers and desire nothing more right now than to reach this town and the comforts of its inn. I doubt you hail from this town, but maybe you can guide us to it? Your company would be welcome."

"Eh? A partner?" he replied, his eyes widening and his tone becoming apologetic. "Heavens no! I would not wish to impose on the private time of lovers."

→ She gave him a look of unspeakable horror and dread, and shuddered with revulsion and disgust at the very thought. The knight blinked at her, perhaps concerned that he had come across someone seized by a horrible plague or malady.

"No, no!" she said, shaking the thought from her mind, appalled. "He is merely a traveling companion. One of fortune, not of choice."

"Ah," the knight said, "I am sorry. In my experience, when a man and a woman... never mind, I did not mean to offend."

"He's more than capable of being offensive completely on his own merits."

The knight laughed. "Still, it is not polite to offend a lady, even one met as a stranger upon a strange road. I would gladly join you, but I must continue my quest to clear the villainy that mars this forest. What I *can* do is, I think, point you in the right direction so you can reach the goal of an inn in the nearest town."

He unrolled one of her maps, showing her the area in question. She raised her finger and traced the third fork in the forest road. "This junction here is supposed to bend to the south and reach the town of Alaghonon. But from what I can tell, it hasn't followed what the map lays out."

The man laughed again. "Therein lies your problem, lady." He tapped ~~X~~ to the section of the road just west of the junction Pirogoeth pointed out. "You actually took an unmarked bandit's trail that runs parallel to the main road. Normally, these trails are hidden from view, but it seems that the entrance to this one was exposed either by a careless bandit or the elements. At any rate, you will want to retrace your steps to the main road, then take the *next* junction. It *should* have a signpost that will help point you in the proper direction."

Pirogoeth frowned in annoyance. Of course the answer would be something stupidly simple. "Thank you, sir," she said, even if her voice didn't inflect gratitude. "The pleasure was mine," he answered with another gracious bow. Taking her palm in

↖ Put the indent back, this must still be a new paragraph.

his, he placed a chaste kiss on the back of her hand as Pirogoeth cocked an eyebrow and looked up at him. "I shall fare you well, milady. If our paths cross again, I hope it will be under more pleasant environs."

"I don't think I got your name, sir," Pirogoeth said, more in statement than in question.

"Nor did I provide it," he replied sheepishly. "Again, my apologies. I am Moh, Knight-Errant of Caravel. At the risk of sounding rude, I really must take my leave."

"No rudeness taken. I am Pirogoeth, simple traveler with business in the north." Her courtesy extended, Pirogoeth watched as the knight-errant turned and disappeared into the trees. With his unusual and exotic presence gone, the forest settled back into its former vegetative normalcy.

I don't think "knight errant" is capitalized.

Fougoureth



It took another three weeks until the towns of Alaghton and Fourgoeth – and the bad memories in between – were behind them. It would take a little bit longer to dispose of the “adventurer” that they had “acquired” along the trade line south of Land’s End, the last settlement in the Free Provinces before they gave way to the Daynelynds.

“So, why is this leech following us again?” Largo asked with surprising subtlety, leaning in his saddle towards Pirogoeth so he could speak with a hushed tone.

As it was, she could barely figure out what he was saying over the clomping of the horse underneath her. “Because he thinks hovering around us will keep him safe while he wanders about areas far too dangerous for his level of expertise.”

On cue, the leech interjected. “Hey! Whatcha guys talkin’ about?”

Both of them turned to address the temporary third member of their group. He couldn’t have been much into adulthood, and the manner in which he wielded the bow now slung across his back was reliable only for sending shafts in the general direction of his target. His gear was of very inexpensive make, featuring chain mail composed of *copper* of all things, and the most absurd green cloth hat, adorned with teddy bear ears. Clearly, neither form nor function mattered to this clown.

“We are planning our next adventure,” Largo said expansively. “Would you like to see?”

“Yeah! I bet it’ll be *intense!*”

Pirogoeth looked at Largo who was grinning deviously. She suspected she knew exactly where he was planning to take this annoyance for an “adventure,” and she was not going to stop him. Turning their horses south towards the bluffs, they picked up their pace, naturally intensifying the sense of thrill in their green companion.

The bluffs themselves were on the north face of a bay that cut nearly forty miles into the continent’s eastern coast. Fifty feet below them was a strip of sandy beach, home to a race of sentient crustaceans called the Krakkit, who frequently raided coastal towns in their intermittent war over fishing grounds and human infringement into their claimed territory. This particular bay was their last bastion on the surface, with only a narrow path winding down from the top of the bluffs to the beach, presenting the current stalemate. The path was too narrow for either the humans or Krakkit to attack in large enough numbers to shift the line.

Not that they didn’t try, and try often. In fact, as the trio reached the cliff’s edge, they could see a small group of adventurers getting ready to charge down the path, most certainly to their demise. Pirogoeth and Largo dismounted as their “companion” hopped down eagerly. Giddy with excitement, the foolish adventurer-to-be nearly raced to the edge to look down.

His cheer drew the attention of the crab-like monsters below. They lifted up heads filled with black, beady eyes, then raised vicious claws, marked with ivory, knife-like serrations, as if inviting any daring adventurers up at the top to come down and visit.

The young adventurer was suitably impressed. "Amazing!" he chirped with glee. "I bet you guys could battle those!"

While he prattled, Largo brandished a local coin between the index and middle finger of his right hand, and silently displayed it to Pirogoeth. "Heads?" he asked. She nodded slightly. He flipped the coin, caught it on its descent, and slapped it against the back of his left hand. Displaying the result to Pirogoeth, tails side up. "Looks like a head to me," he said.

The mage nodded her agreement.

Largo grinned maliciously and – in another uncharacteristic show of subtlety – stretched his right leg with complete nonchalance. Slowly and gradually, the former Legionnaire came up behind their new associate, properly sized up the distance, then swiftly kicked upward into his backside. The momentum carried the hapless copper-clad excuse of an adventurer over the edge, falling with a terrified and undignified shriek to the beach below.

The pair regarded Largo's handiwork with satisfaction.

"Nice punt," a voice said, obviously impressed.

Largo turned in alarm, glaring at the man that stood behind them, wearing pale violet hair and a grin of approval.

"Moh," she said, with a tone as close to surprise as she ever had. "Odd meeting you here." Pirogoeth

"Who is this person?" Largo asked, surprised by her familiarity with the new arrival.

Moh offered his hand in response. "I am called Moh. The lady and I are already acquainted. I am a knight-errant from the western lands. You must be her traveling companion."

Largo warily accepted the handshake as Pirogoeth elaborated further. "He was the one that helped me find Alaghtonon while you were trying to roast sparkle bunnies."

"I see," the Legionnaire nodded. "Well met, sir. Largo, once of Reaht."

"And well met in return," Moh answered warmly, releasing Largo's hand. "I heard what happened to that land. Tragic. You have my sympathies for its loss."

Pirogoeth then interjected into the conversation. It felt odd to be the one facilitating it. She was usually the grim, reticent one while Largo handled the dialogue, awkward as his methods tended to be. "What brings you to these parts? Finished purging the forest of bandits?"

"wearing hair"?
The previous version of this sentence is better.

Indent

The knight sighed. "What few there were. It seems the local towns somewhat overplayed the threat. It is of little matter, I suppose. I will continue to march on to where adventure calls, until I find a purpose and noble banner I can take upon with pride."

Largo glanced back towards the edge of the bluffs, where he thought he heard a call for a healer or help of any kind drifting up from the shore.

Moh seemed to have caught it himself, peering over the edge to note the carnage. "That fellow didn't last long, did he?"

"Such is often the fate of those who seek glory beyond their experience," Pirogoeth said, then wasted no further thought on those unworthy of it. "It seems we have an opening in our party, and would welcome someone capable for once. There is adventure in our task, though of a grim sort."

Moh looked at them seriously. "There are tales out of Fourgoeth of an unlikely pair, a large military man of Reaht and a slight woman of the northern coast rumored to be a mage of great skill..." He looked out over the bay, the horizon lost in a mist and haze. "If you feel I am capable, good sir and lady, I could not hope to find a more noble service than to join your party."

Largo wasn't one to trust easily, and this fellow in front of him was no exception, but he was willing to give anyone a chance as it was never a bad thing to appraise potential talent. Pirogoeth also seemed to have a decent opinion of the man, which was odd because Pirogoeth never had a decent opinion about *anybody*. "Good attitude, but attitude isn't going to be enough," the Legionnaire finally said. "I'm going to need to see what you're made of."

"Oh, I assure you; flesh, blood, and bone," Moh joked, holding up his hands comically.

Pirogoeth glared at Largo, but he ignored her as he grinned at the knight, who returned the gesture. She rolled her eyes skyward, bit back several vitriolic comments that rested on her tongue, and walked back towards where they had left their horses. "The two of you can do whatever manly duel and test of stupidity you like after we've settled in. If you don't have a horse already, Moh, I believe we just came across one that appears to be missing its rider. I doubt whoever left it will mind."

If you want to combine paragraphs here, join these with the one above

Indent

Fougoureth

per "Presence" Kuith was an EASTERN coastal realm

The road turned further north. Not even fifteen years ago, this would have been suicide. Fortunately, the peace since the Daynish Campaigns had been stable, if uneasy.

"I wonder if the inn will have some decent ale," Largo mused skeptically as they approached the trading outpost, likely to be the last one on this particular trade line. "I doubt it. None of these northlanders seem to know how to make a good brew to save their mothers' lives."

"I would recommend waiting to see if this trading post even *has* an inn before you start worrying about the quality of their alcohol," Pirogoeth corrected.

The world was connected through the Great Trade Lines; long, wide roads produced in a rare era of cooperation between the ancient empires. The project was so wildly successful that even modern kingdoms and imperial nations dared not break the Lines. Outposts were established at fifty-mile intervals along each of the lines, and even the most insidious tyrants were sure to properly maintain any that lay within their borders.

On the major West, Northeast, and East trade lines, the outposts might as well have been towns in their own right; large, sprawling centers of commerce that had nearly everything a person could want. On the smaller branch roads, however, the fare was a bit more sparse, to the extent that the farthest minor lines often had nothing more than a fire pit and a fence-encircled space for camping and bartering.

This particular outpost wasn't quite as bad as all that, but it was still fairly meager, with only a handful of pinewood and hide cabins, and a scattering of tents.

Then... came the sound.

Pirogoeth had almost forgotten the most teeth-grating and spine-chilling noise in the known world. The winged terrors often used the area around Kuith as a stop along their migratory pattern from the northernmost regions of the world to the south as the seasons shifted, the sound of their passing like a creature of the abyss rising on the horizon to drive mad all those in its path.

She hadn't given much thought to where they went on their migrations. Just the fact that they *left* was good enough for her. Now, she knew. Apparently, they came *here*.

She snarled in frustration, her head throbbing as she yelled, "For the love of the Coders, *will someone do something about those accursed beasts before I do?*"

Largo and Moh moved instantly to their weapons, prepared to draw as they scoured their surroundings looking for incoming threats. Their concern melted into confusion as they could not identify any actual threat.

"What... beasts?" Moh finally queried. There were no animals or monsters anywhere in sight of the outpost grounds. Could the mage finally be snapping under

:

Trade Lines

:

I would say combine this one too

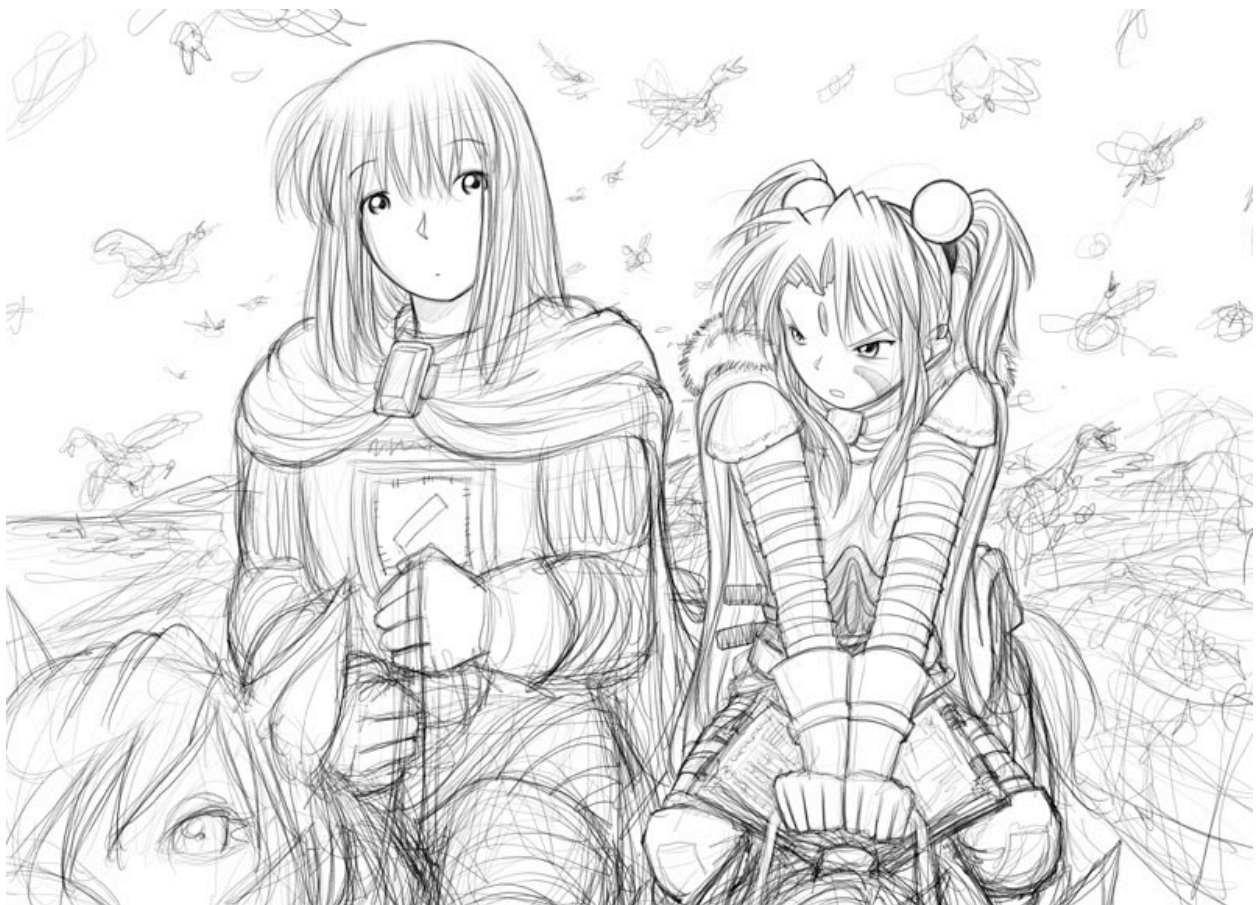
the strain of keeping Largo in check?

Her left arm jerked outward towards the west and the small marsh roughly a hundred yards off the road, the tension in her muscles causing her hand to tremble. "Those! Those... *monsters!* Can you not *hear* them?"

Moh followed the invisible line, and then replied with a hint of confusion, "You mean... the ducks?"

"Yes!" Pirogoeth shrieked. "How can you not be bothered by that horrendous racket?"

Moh shrugged indifferently. "Ducks are all over the western lands. ~~I~~ guess I've just gotten used to it."



The former ~~o~~ domina grit her teeth. "How one gets used to such an infernal squawking is not a procedure I wish to discover nor undergo."

Largo then shouted with glee, "An inn! I knew we could find liquor here!"

"I can't believe I'm glad Largo found somewhere to drown himself drinking," Pirogoeth grumbled. "At least these little beasts won't be so loud indoors."

The "door" to the inn was animal hide, bleached and stripped of fur. Largo stepped in first, and Moh held it aside to allow Pirogoeth entry, a "gentlemanly"

gesture that she didn't exactly take with a smile.

More accurately, she took it with an elbow jab to his side, right in the unprotected seam between the chest and back plates. She shot him a withering glare as he recoiled, but nonetheless entered through the opening provided.

The interior was decorated in much the way habitats in the northlands were decorated. Bare earth floor dotted with bearskin rugs, unstained pine logs serving as walls, strips of hide serving the purpose of curtains, and stuffed animal heads spaced along the perimeter. The occasional claymore or hafted axe was also mounted on the walls to give it a more "civilized" feel.

Largo led the way through the empty tables towards the bar, which seemed to be nothing more than the trunk of a gigantic pine tree laid on its side, sized to fit the cabin, and then sheared off at the top to form a flat surface. Behind the bar was a scraggly-haired man in a tanned hide hat, nearly seven feet in height and muscled in ways a human being should not rightfully be muscled. He wore a leather deerskin vest, neither buttoned nor tied, revealing a sculpted chest and abdomen covered in coarse black and gray hair that matched the robust beard on his face.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender asked with a deep, guttural growl, but for all Pirogoeth could tell, he was *trying* to be friendly. The folk of the far Daynelyns tended to be a bit more... grizzled... than the typical layman of the world.

"Your finest beer!" Largo called out eagerly, pounding his fist on the table to accentuate the point.

Unimpressed, the bartender turned to Moh, and said, "You?"

The knight-errant seemed a bit flustered, then nervously asked, "Do... you wouldn't happen to have any red wine, would you?"

The bartender stared at him, unblinking, as if Moh had just asked him to sing a Hermian opera. Slowly turning about, he stepped into the kitchen, and bellowed, "I have one man and two women!"

Pirogoeth's eyes flashed with insult, and her hand swiftly moved to the book tucked at her waist, but Largo was quicker, grabbing her by her biceps and effortlessly lifting her off the ground at arm's length while she kicked ineffectually at him.

"Release... me... this... instant!" she snarled angrily.

"This inn is exactly what I'm looking for," Largo said.

"This inn is *flammable*."

Largo tightened his grip on her arms, and said sternly, "You will *not* burn this place down until I've had my beer."

Pirogoeth stopped fighting, and huffed indignantly. "Fine."

Only then did Largo release the mage, just as the bartender returned. From his right hand, he dropped a heavy wooden mug filled with a light brown, extremely pungent liquid, and said, "House mead. Our specialty." From his left, he almost

"A bare earth floor" or "Bare earth floors"

carelessly tossed a dusty bottle onto the bar surface, and said, "I don't know what it is. Close enough, I guess." He followed it up by reaching under the bar on his side, and coming out with two small, clear drinking glasses.

Then, after a moments pause to take a breath, he grumbled, "Thirty pieces."

moment's Largo gleefully covered the charge, and had downed the entire content of the near quart-sized mug before Moh could take the wine bottle and move a step back. Dropping the mug down onto the bar with a resounding thwack, Largo grinned and taunted, "Is this the strongest you got?"

The bartender smiled broadly in return, obviously pleased to see a man who could hold his liquor. "Be right back," he said, and disappeared into the kitchen once more.

Moh's jaw dropped as if dislocated, only to regain his joints once Pirogoeth gave him a tug on the arm to lead him toward one of the tables, holding the glasses deftly in her left hand. "Come. This is going to take a while."

Moh's head continued to try and follow the former Legionnaire as Largo received another mug, and downed it with equal speed and vigor. "Is that natural?" the knight-errant muttered. and gestured

Pirogoeth had pulled out a crudely-fashioned chair from under a table covered in hide, gesturing for Moh to follow suit. "My theory is that Largo is a mutant, unaffected by the intoxicating effects of alcohol." She then gestured to the bottle Moh was holding, and said, "Give it here."

Moh did so as he took a seat, watching in rapt fascination as Pirogoeth deftly moved her fingers six inches from the top of the bottle and pulled the cork free as if with an invisible hand.

"I wish I had your delicate touch with magic," Moh said wistfully, then warded off the challenging glare from the mage. "Make no mistake, power has its place! But sometimes, the most effective application of power is in its precision and lack of overwhelming might."

"Nice recovery," Pirogoeth replied, her features softening into her normal impassive expression. She sniffed the bottle, and winced. "This has been on the shelf for a while. Oh well, it should at least be drinkable." She poured out the contents until the glasses were half full, then handed one to Moh while she regarded the other.

"Thank you, Pirogoeth," he said, taking a small sip of the liquid and cringing. "Yes... quite exposed to the elements. A bit sour rather than tart. But I agree, it is at least drinkable."

They were interrupted by Largo again being unimpressed by the inn's offerings. "Come on, I've tasted stronger *water*. You northlanders have to have something that could make a bear totter!"

This had apparently become the local's equivalent of a gentleman's challenge.

"I like you," the bartender said with a laugh. "All right, now we'll start with the grownup drinks!"

Pirogoeth

Pirogeht forced herself to not pay any more attention to Largo's antics. Unfortunately, that made her keenly aware of the muffled quacks of the ducks outside. "Gah! There's no escaping those terrors!" she snarled, her cheeks coloring in fury.

"I've never met a person who hates ducks," Moh said with a chuckle.

"They're an even greater irritant than Largo," she retorted. "Always honking and squawking at each other or anything that moves. Things like grass blowing in the wind. For one week every five or six months, they would stop around Kuith and bleat and make an unholy noise, non-stop. Got so bad that I would send out scouts to hunt the blasted winged demons."

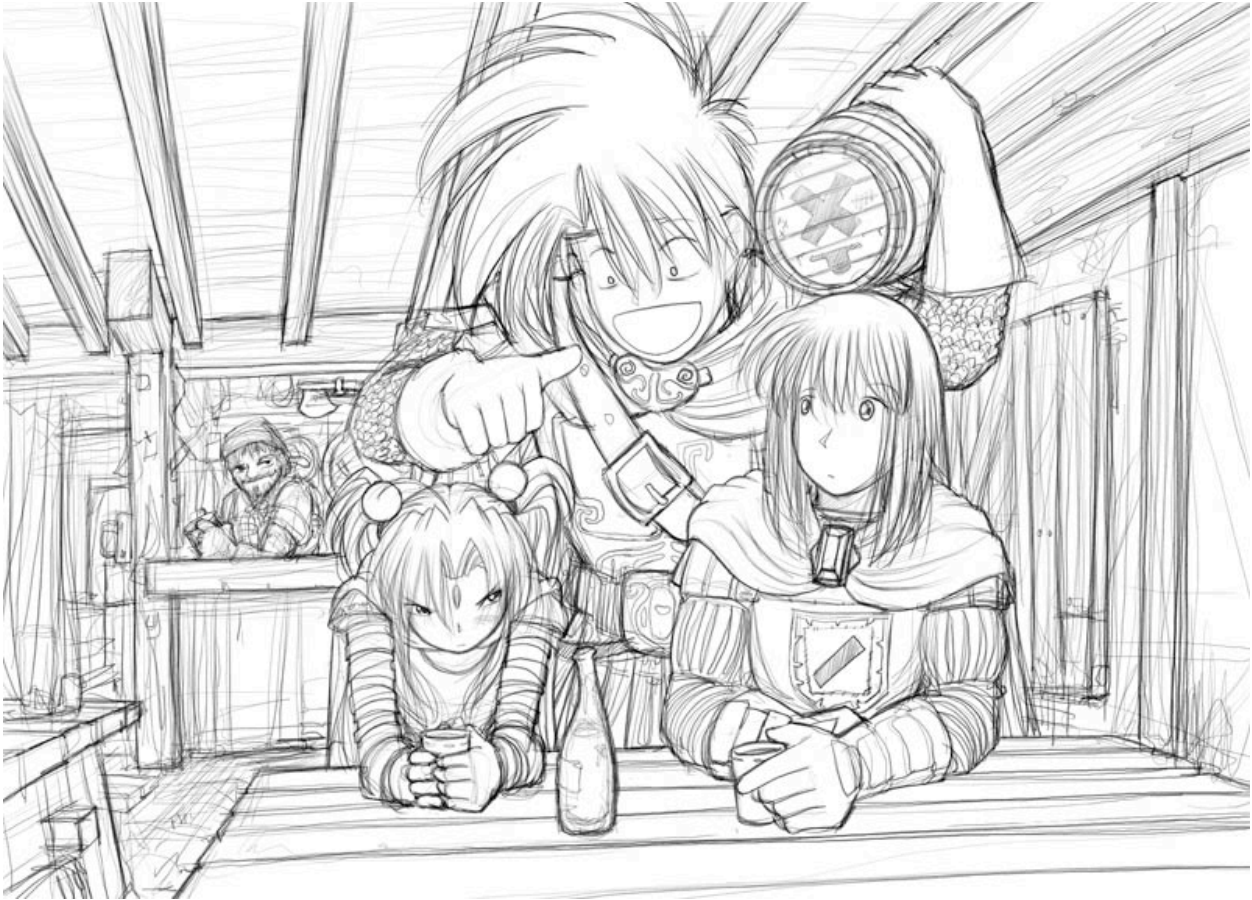
East

"The mighty Witch Queen of the North; not a dragon's fire, nor a golem's stone, nor a demon's dark magics can bring her to her knees. Nay, it is the hellish trumpet of a waterfowl that is nary her only weakness!"

"Do you want to continue your travels in five neatly trimmed pieces?" Pirogoeth warned.

"Oh, goodness no!" he answered, warding her off with a comical wave of his hands. "That would be a most difficult condition to fight in, I am certain."

"Pirogoeth!" Largo interrupted, startling both of the people at the table by how quietly he had seemed to move. "Look at what I have acquired for our further travels!"



She and Moh did indeed look. Resting on the former Legionnaire's shoulder was a wooden barrel keg, stained black and about two feet in diameter. Pirogoeth was honestly amazed that Largo could even *hold* the damned thing.

"They sell their black mead in kegs!" Largo exclaimed happily. "And for only five hundred pieces after a man's discount!"

Pirogoeth glared, and said, "No."

"But..."

"No."

Largo turned about despondently, returning the keg to its owner like a child told to put back a toy he had found.

Moh pointed at the retreating Rehtan, and asked, "Is... he normally like this?"

Pirogoeth shook her head. "No."

"That's a relief..."

"He's usually worse."

Awesome, but it's a lot smaller in the picture.

The trip to the far northeast had largely been a waste of time. They found no sign that the zombie horde had been there at all within the lands bordering the Icy Expanse at the top of the world. Much adventure and considerable peril, certainly... but no zombies.

That suited Pirogoeth fine. It meant they didn't have to stay in duck country. Obviously, the undead had more sense than the three adventurers did.

Moh had expressed a desire to examine the western provinces for signs that the undead armies were moving in that direction. With no other leads, Largo and Pirogoeth decided to humor him.

The party crossed along the wilderness rather than retrace their steps, cutting through the evergreen forests toward another branch in the Northeast Great Trade Line. They planned to follow that road back to the south and toward Grand Aramathea, the central hub of the trade lines, then move along the West Trade Line to the Republican Provinces of Avalon.

The nights this far north could get frighteningly cold due to the proximity of the Icy Expanse, and by the time Largo selected a camp amidst the dense wood, they didn't have much time to prepare. The setting sun promised the chill would soon fall upon them.

Moh gathered supplies for a fire while Largo went hunting and Pirogoeth readied the tents and settled the horses. They were understandably nervous, likely hearing the chittering of the bats in a cave not even two hundred yards away, but the mage was able to soothe them and get them settle nervously behind a natural barricade formed by an extinct river bed.

"settled" or "to settle"

Once her companions had returned, all that remained was to wait until night set and the cold struck them with its fury. Largo brandished some marshmallows – sure to be stale since he must have purchased them before entering the evergreens – Moh displayed several sticks that would serve for their roasting, and Pirogoeth quickly supplied the fire.

The scene was rather majestic, if Pirogoeth was being honest with herself. Through the fire, she could look up to see the grand pines around them extending into the darkness, awe-inspiring in their sheer stature. It was as if everything in the deep northlands, from the people to the plants, were three sizes larger. Contemplating it made her feel a combination of amazement and insignificance.

As Largo dual-wielded a pair of sticks in the fire, with two marshmallows on each, he began, "I've been thinking–"

"That would be a first," Pirogoeth snarked, earning a chuckle from Moh.

Largo gave her a glare out of the corner of his eye, and continued, "Perhaps the reason we can not find the zombie horde is because they are up there." The former

Legionnaire jerked a thumb north towards the Icy Expanse.

It was a region of perpetual frost, ice, and snow, beyond bitterly cold and considered entirely uninhabitable. The longest settlement to survive within that frigid hell was a little over three weeks, and even then, half of the settlers died from the elements while trying to return to thawed ground.

It was even debated whether there was ground underneath the Icy Expanse. Some scholars claimed that scrying had shown nothing but water underneath the ice, some argued it was the void. Some adventurers claimed an ancient civilization could be found beneath the ice shelf, perhaps the Origin City where the Coders fashioned the world, a quest from which no one had yet returned.

"Don't be absurd," Pirogoeth dismissed. "Nothing exists in the Icy Expanse."

"It is well known the undead do not feel the cold," Largo shot back.

Moh smirked, and added ruefully, "I suspect they would, living up there for any extended period of time."

That drew a hearty laugh from Largo, and even a snort from Pirogoeth, the closest to laughter she ever got in the presence of another person, if at all. Moh regarded the sound as Largo cheerfully devoured the first of the roasted marshmallows he had prepared. Pirogoeth had the slightest of smiles on her face, until she noticed Moh observing her, prompting her expression to vanish behind her icy exterior.

"The longest amount of time a settlement survived within that frigid hell was a little over three weeks" or "The longest settlement to survive within that frigid hell did so for a little over three weeks"



"I saw that," he whispered.

"No you didn't," she responded coldly.

He poked her gently on the arm, and teased, "Yes, I did. I saw you smiling."

"Keep it up, and the fire's going to be getting extra kindling."

By this point, Moh was unimpressed by her seemingly empty threats. "Come now, just because the Icy Expanse is nearby doesn't mean you have to try and top it."

Largo was happily chomping down on the second of his marshmallow sticks when a prompt gust of wind heralded a vaguely Moh-shaped blur, which flew just over the fire and into one of the massive, unyielding pines nearby, setting off a flying cloud of bark dust and a rain of pine needles.

The former Legionnaire shook his head, and offered some sage advice.

"Whatever you did, I'd suggest you don't do it again."

Moh slowly pulled himself off the ground, dusting the loose bark and needles from his armor. "Ah, but isn't pain part of the adventure?"

Largo cautiously appraised both his companions. Pirogoeth was still scowling frightfully, her eyes promising that she wasn't done dishing out punishment if necessary. "Some pain isn't worth it," he finally surmised.

The mighty pines of the deep evergreen forest shook from another close

meeting with another sample of humanity mere seconds later.

The wilderness of the Northlands was a memory a week past by the time the events thereof were brought up again. The trio had resupplied and were already two days on their way southwest to Grand Aramathea. The skies were clear, the sun providing welcome warmth to adventurers having spent the last handful of weeks in the bitter cold lands just south of the Icy Expanse, and the road of the Northeast Great Trade Line was smooth and comfortable under the hooves of their horses.

"I'm sorry."

Moh blinked in confusion as he regarded the mage that had spoken. "You're... sorry? For what?"

"For... throwing you into that tree in the forest a week ago," she elaborated.

Moh waved off the concern. "Long since forgotten, my friend. I know not why, but showing your heart is difficult for you. I should not have pried, and in that regard, the fault is mine."

Pirogoeth frowned, and then said, "I have a challenge for you."

Moh's eyebrows perked in curiosity. "What sort of challenge?"

"I'll... thaw myself out... on occasion... when the opportunity suits... and when I won't have to deal with Largo. You... will stop taking responsibility for everything and allow others to have wronged you. And start accepting apologies."

The smile that crept across Moh's face would have brightened the sun had he looked upon it at that moment. With a mirthful laugh, he said, "I accept your challenge, fair maiden." Then with a quieter, more conspiratorial tone, he added, "And I accept your apology."

Pirogoeth straightened in the saddle. "Largo!" she yelled to the lead of their procession. "Next outpost, I need to stretch my legs."

"I haven't had drink today myself," Largo agreed. "Come then, let us pick up the pace!"

The horses weren't excited with the prospect of moving any faster, but reluctantly increased their gait with due encouragement smacking against their flanks.

Grand Aramathea

Two hours later, they rode into the outpost town of Timin, a major supply point in the Free Provinces on the road to The Imperial Aramathea. It was a rather well-developed Trade Line outpost for that reason, a veritable city of its own measure, extending two miles along the road with multiple side roads and intersections to lead one wherever one wished to go.

Fortunately, the majority of merchant traffic was heading north rather than south at this time of year, so the stables on the north entrance to the city had several openings for their horses to take a break while they explored the town.

The stable master, a wrinkled, hunched man with wiry gray hair and a sour

disposition, charged a ridiculous price for the “privilege” of keeping their horses with him, but none of the three really wanted to spend more time wandering about looking for a better deal. With only some hesitation, they paid the man a half day’s fare and were given keys to their respective stalls.

“Let’s not get too comfortable. I would like to reach the capital within two weeks, so we will need to be on the road swiftly. We will meet back up after the noonday sun,” Largo said, after making sure the door to his horse’s stall was secure and giving a passing glance at his companions.

As Pirogoeth passed Moh to follow, she whispered to him, “Meet me back here in an hour.”

The knight-errant nodded, then took the rear as they left the stable and ^{went} into the city proper, parting ways on their respective errands.

At the appointed time, almost perfectly to the second, Moh turned the corner back into the relative seclusion of the stable. Granted, it wasn’t the most private place he had ever seen, with a completely open side facing the road, but the stalls were fairly well enclosed, and considering their party’s horses were the only ones currently stalled, it didn’t seem likely that there would be any unwelcome visitors in the near future.

Pirogoeth was already waiting, twirling a blade of pale yellow straw between her fingers, and leaning against an empty stall beside the one where her horse was happily eating its oats.

“Children can be terrible little beasts,” she began, not bothering with any greeting. “They’ll find any reason to gang up on one of their number and do nothing but make that poor child’s life a living hell. And contrary to popular belief, girls are worse than boys at this. They’re terrible, insipid, shallow, ignorant, vile and mean-spirited beasts.”

“Maybe the girl is flat-chested. Maybe she’s short. Maybe she has magical talent. Maybe she has all three. They’ll mercilessly ravage this little girl... calling her a boy dressing up like a girl. She’ll be a witch, a freak. They might openly wonder if she’s ever going to have her tenth birthday... or if she should be having her nap time rather than evening chores. They might stick gum in her hair or frogs in her shoes. And through it all, what is the best advice parents have for these little girls? If you ignore it, they’ll stop? If you pretend it’s not bothering you, they’ll give up?” A moment of absolute silence passed before she glumly answered the unspoken question. “It didn’t stop.”

Pirogoeth’s exterior finally began to crack, and a small handful of tears from a bullied young girl began falling down her cheeks. “It never stopped. Not even as an adult. I heard the whispers from those who claimed to be friends. I was the Ice Domina when they didn’t think I was listening; cold and heartless. Or Coders know the hundreds of

stories the Reahtans made up about me.”

Wary of approaching uninvited, Moh settled for a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I expect and grudgingly tolerate the vapid tongues of children. Adolescents act out from jealousy. But to know that you suffer the slings and arrows of fully mature men and women makes me lose faith in humanity. Not only are they churls, they are liars too.”

Feeling emboldened by her acceptance of his gesture, he placed his other hand on her free shoulder and turned her to face him. “You are certainly no witch, and you are certainly not made of ice. I dare say you in fact feel entirely more than any lout we’ve come across. You feel so much you can’t bear to let others know it.”

He smiled in an attempt to be disarming, “And for what it’s worth, you most certainly don’t look like a boy. You are, at the risk of being ignited where I stand, quite pretty.”

And back came the icy expression, betrayed only by a moist trail of spent tears. “Flattery isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“Since I am not trying to go anywhere, it is of little consequence,” he retorted candidly, then his face lit up with something he had almost forgotten. “Oh! I have something for you. A gift, if you will.”

“I swear, if you reach into your pants, you’re going to lose whatever comes out,” Pirogoeth warned.

He held up his left hand innocently, as his right hand slipped into one of his belt packs at his waist. “Wanna know what it is? I’ll give you hint. You can use it to face your most dreaded fear.”

“Crushed pepper powder to ward off knights from western lands trying to flirt with me?” Pirogoeth asked with a glower.

“No... and I’m a bit distressed to think that truly *is* your greatest fear,” Moh answered, finally removing a bright yellow object that he held right in front of her nose. Made of rubber with an orange bill, shaped rather crudely in the form of...

“A duck,” Pirogoeth stated flatly. “A rubber duck.”

“Indeed, milady. A mere handful of washings with this adorable bathtime toy will strip away all your loathing for the waterfowl that has menaced you for so long!”

“Is that right?”

“Of course I’m right! How could one hate a cute little thing such as this?”

Moh gave the toy a squeeze, prompting it to emit a short two-toned squeak, one note as he squeezed in, and the other as he released. It wasn’t nearly as annoying as the honks of its namesake, and in fact was rather amusing to see in relation to the broad-shouldered knight-errant’s enthusiasm.

“I’m sure I’ll manage,” Pirogoeth retorted darkly, but was unable to completely maintain the facade. “Thank you though. That was... sweet of you.”

She started to take the toy, when Moh then clasped his hands over hers around it. "I wasn't being totally honest."

Pirogoeth cocked her left eyebrow, and asked, "About?"

"About not wanting to go anywhere with you. I am honored you let me in through the surface you show to the world. I would like to prove I am worthy of that trust and more."

He leaned in slowly, his face dropping down to hers, pausing inches away to beg for clemency, "Please, dear Pirogoeth, don't send me careening halfway across town for what I'm about to do..."

It wasn't much, barely a brush of his lips against hers, before he pulled away, took three steps back, and winced in anticipation.



Again the picture
and the text
disagree

Pirogoeth hadn't moved, in fact, her hands were still clenched around the duck in front of her. After the longest thirty seconds of his life, she finally went into motion, putting the duck into her own belt pouch, and closing the distance with two deliberate strides, a very intimidating scowl crossing her lips, her brows furrowed downward with ire.

She then grabbed Moh by the sides of his head and pulled him down to her, pressing her lips insistently to his until they parted under her assertion. Once she finally pulled away, she said, "*That* is how you should kiss me. I trust you will remember that for next time."

The mage then left to find the nearest tavern or inn, where she would most likely find Largo, in order to drag him back to the stables and return to the road he had professed wanting to make quick time upon, leaving a nigh-catatonic knight-errant in her wake.

* * * * *

For further reading:

Megatokyo by Fred Gallagher

Volumes 1-3 available from Dark Horse Comics

Volumes 4-6 available from DC Comics

or read online at www.megatokyo.com

The Second Gate by Thomas Knapp

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