

The Glass Piglet
By Alcuin Fromm

So, let me get this straight: you want us to green-light a musical/variety television show featuring a romance between a pig and a frog. (Shouting into intercom) Security!

A man hurried past Gregoll, clumsily bumping the eleven-year-old and knocking a carefully wrapped bundle from the boy's hands. The precious parcel bounced once on the loose cobblestone road, then came to rest in the gap between two smoothed bricks. Gregoll gasped and his terrified eyes became as wide as the twin full moons of Creska and Beronai. The boy thought his heart had stopped beating, and in his stomach, a gigantic pit seemed to open that felt large enough to swallow up both him and his father standing nearby.

"Oh, I do apologize, my lad," said the stranger, stopping and turning back to face Gregoll. The man noticed the object on the ground. "Let me get that for you."

He took a step forward, but Gregoll reacted with the speed of a pouncing cat, placing himself between the man and the bundle.

"No, no, thank you, that's fine, no, please, I'll get it, thank you very much, yes, yes, thank you." The words flowed out in a panicky stream of politeness and fear as Gregoll snatched up the object before the man could reach it. The man straightened and gave Gregoll and his father a quick bow.

"Good day, then," he said and continued hurriedly on his way down the road.

Gregoll clutched the bundle to his chest like a mother with her baby, gently testing and examining it. His father, Wilsteck, after returning the departing man's bow, stepped over to his son and peered down at him with concern.

"Everything in one piece?" said Wilsteck.

"I think so," said Gregoll, relieved. "Good thing we wrapped it with that extra layer."

"Quite right," said Wilsteck with a reassuring smile. "You'll find the way of life in Hundafalva much more hectic than in our little village. You should always take extra precautions and be extra careful when you're in town."

Gregoll nodded and turned his eyes down the length of ancient, time-beaten road stretching out before them, seeing the countless towers of Hundafalva already rising above the horizon. He felt as excited as he did anxious at the renewed thought of their destination, the great Hundafalvan Art Festival. His excitement took the upper hand.

"Let's go, father, we're almost there. You can see the towers!"

They continued on their journey. Wilsteck walked at a calm, even pace with Gregoll ten steps ahead, bursting with energy and anticipation. The boy glanced back frequently to make sure he had not strayed too far away, but the town pulled him towards it and he could barely keep from running outright.

In his hands, Gregoll held the culmination of an entire winter's worth of toil and heartache, of failures and renewed attempts, of disappointments and hopes; to say nothing of the countless singes and burns to his hands, forearms, and even once to the back of his neck. In his hands, Gregoll held a glass piglet.

For three months, Gregoll's father had taught him the craft of glassblowing, practiced by their family in the same small village for seven generations. From the first moment he put his lips to the strange, clay pipe, Gregoll knew that he had found his calling. His initial tries had not been impressive, but far from discouraging him, those first pitiful blobs of glass only motivated and inspired him further. Apt and precocious, Gregoll advanced rapidly and progressed with avid determination. By the beginning of the late-winter thaw, Gregoll had already begun experimenting with less practical and more artistic pieces. His greatest success had been his glass piglet, which he carried, wrapped in three layers of burlap, plus one, down the road to the Hundafalvan Art Festival.

The towers grew taller, and the morning sun became the noon sun as it reached its zenith for the day. Gregoll and Wilsteck eventually came to the South Gate, a giant, arching maw with the fangs of a raised portcullis. Armored guards stood at either side, holding pikes. Gregoll had never seen such imposing weapons held by men so heavily clad. Their village contained no such warriors. Without realizing it, he no longer found himself out ahead of his father, but huddled close to his side.

"Halt," said the town guard brusquely. "State your business in Hundafalva."

Gregoll could hardly believe the question. What other business could they have but to go to the Art Festival? Held once a year, the Festival brought together the best and most talented artists and artisans from the entire region. All types of art, from painting to woodcarving to bookbinding, would be on display and in competition for the honor of being awarded by the Festival judges.

"We are here for the Festival, sir," said Wilsteck politely.

The guard squinted.

"Right," he said slowly. "Keep out of trouble and find lodging or leave by sunset. Gate closes at sunset. Understand?"

Wilsteck nodded his assent.

"All right," said the guard waving his hand. "In with you."

They walked through the wide gate onto an open square. Narrow alleys branched off in a half-dozen different directions. Above them rose the nearest of Hundafalva's many towers, crooked and leaning as if to stretch over the stone and wooden buildings in order to peer down and spy on the hapless people below. Gregoll had never seen such a conglomeration of men and women before, rushing around in all directions. He remained close to his father, holding his hand with a genuine fear of being swept away into the swirling throng.

Wilsteck stopped a richly dressed merchant and asked for directions to the Art Festival. The man turned and pointed to one of the streets on the far side of the square, explaining the route. Gregoll's father thanked the man and began to lead his son through the crowd. They bumped and jostled their way across the square, Gregoll taking extra care to protect his delicate bundle. The indicated street, full of shops and taverns, sloped upwards before cresting a hill. Reaching the top, Gregoll and Wilsteck looked down the opposite slope which descended to another, much larger square. From their elevated vantage point, the whole square spread out below them. Gregoll gawked in amazement at the sight as they emerged from the narrow passage. Dozens of broad, brightly colored pavilions squatted all over the open square like puddles after a heavy rain. Countless people strolled in, out, and between the tents and their conversations filled the air, punctuating it with a hearty laugh here or an angry word of disagreement there.

After investigating a few of the tents and asking again for directions, Wilsteck and his wide-eyed son eventually found the pavilion dedicated to glasswork. The harsh sunlight filtered through alternating orange and white strips of the thin, translucent fabric composing the tent's ceiling to fill the space with a copper-tinted light. A wooden dais backed by a heavy, dark green curtain had been built at the far end of the tent, where two men stood in heated discussion. The various pieces of glasswork submitted for the contest covered long tables all around the perimeter of the pavilion.

Finally finding himself in a less daunting space, Gregoll's sense of independence returned. He trotted from his father's side and went straight up to the nearest table to examine the other pieces, moving systematically from one to another. Though the pieces impressed him, and many demonstrated a technical ability superior to his own, they all seemed to be functional, household items. He saw vases, goblets, and bowls, but nothing purely ornamental. He thought his piglet would clearly stand out as a unique, artistic sculpture among the other utilitarian submissions.

"Hey there, Gregoll."

Gregoll whirled around at the sound of the nasal voice calling his name. An older youth of about sixteen years strode over to the boy. Gregoll's heart sank at the sight of Bresh, the son of their village's Chief Alderman. The newcomer stopped in front of Gregoll, towering over the boy.

"So, it's Gregoll the glassblower's son," he said, intentionally mispronouncing the boy's name. He crossed his arms and looked down at Gregoll.

"What're you doing here, Bresh?" said Gregoll.

"What do you think?" said Bresh. "I'm here for the Art Festival."

"Yes, but, why here? In the glassworks tent?"

"Because I have an idea, Gregoll. A new idea that no one's ever thought of before. It's not like all these silly, little peasant things. It's new, but it's glass, so I'm here. Make sense?"

"Not really," said Gregoll.

Bresh laughed sardonically and Gregoll looked to his father twenty paces away in conversation with an old man. The boy sighed.

"That's because you're like all these other peasants with their little things. I'm doing big things. Big ideas. Father says I have a future as an Alderman and then I'll come here to be on the Council and then I'll go to Vayria to advise the duke."

Gregoll frowned and wished to be free of his interlocutor.

"What's that?" said Bresh pointing to Gregoll's bundle.

Fear gripped Gregoll's heart.

"What?"

"That thing you're carrying. Lemme see."

"Well, I'd rather--"

With a quick movement, Bresh snatched the bundle from Gregoll's hands and spun around. Gregoll clutched for his possession, but the much taller Bresh kept turning away from him. He began unwrapping the object. After a few more vain attempts to retrieve the bundle, Gregoll looked helplessly to his still conversing father and considered calling out to him, but decided against it. Resigning himself, he waited for the inevitable mockery.

"Huh," said Bresh once he exposed the small, glass sculpture. "What's this supposed to be? A fish?"

Gregoll used Bresh's momentary distraction to rescue the stolen item and hastily cover it.

"It's a piglet," said Gregoll with an air of defense. "Can't you tell?"

"Nope. Looks like a big, fat fish. Anyway, it's peasant work. Not new like my idea."

"Good for you," said Gregoll with a scowl.

"Just wait. You'll see."

Without another word, Bresh turned, strolled away from Gregoll, and left the tent. The boy followed the departing youth with a wary stare until the Alderman's son was gone. Then he walked over to the judge's dais feeling decidedly less enthusiastic than before.

The two debating men had not slackened their argument as Gregoll approached timidly. One of them, a heavysset man, noticed the boy out of the corner of his eye and raised a silencing hand to the other, a tall gentleman with a thin goatee. The heavysset man turned to Gregoll and looked down at him with a kindly smile. Gregoll felt some of his confidence return under the man's encouraging gaze.

"So-so, my lad, do we have a young artisan here?" he said, nodding to the bundle.

"Yes, sir," said Gregoll before beginning his well-rehearsed introduction. "I am Gregoll, son of Wilsteck the glassblower from the village of Trebesleen. I have made a glass sculpture and I would like to submit it to the Hundafalvan Art Festival."

"Now, isn't that something?" said the heavysset man to his companion with a nudge of his elbow. "So-so, such a young man and already a fine glassworker. Let's see what you have there, my boy."

Gregoll held out his bundle almost reluctantly, feeling a strange sense of loss as the man gently took it from his hands. The man parted the flaps of overlapping burlap to reveal the sculpture. He lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

"So-so, that's quite a nice tea pot, isn't it there?" he said to the man with the goatee.

"Yes, yes," replied the bearded man, his eyes fixed on a lady entering the tent.

Gregoll cleared his throat.

"Actually, it's--"

"We'll put that right up with the other submissions. What was that name again, my boy?"

"Gregoll, sir."

"Gregoll. Wonderful. We'll put your name right next to your lovely tea pot. So-so, now, run along, my lad. The winner will be announced precisely at the ninth hour this afternoon. Right at the ninth hour. Run along, now."

Gregoll watched the man depart with his work and place it on one of the tables next to what seemed to be a lopsided fruit bowl before striking up a new conversation. A hand gripped Gregoll's shoulder. The boy twisted around in surprise, fearing that Bresh had returned to taunt him further, but relief washed over him at the sight of his father. Wilsteck looked at his son with a furrowed brow.

"Where's your sculpture?"

"I've already submitted it."

"All by yourself? Well, that's a good job, Greg."

Wilsteck smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. For a moment, Gregoll almost forgot about his less than reassuring encounters with Bresh and the heavysset man, but a pang of something unsettling still lodged itself in the pit of Gregoll's stomach. He took his father's hand and the man began leading him to the entrance.

"Now then," said Wilsteck. "How about some lunch?"

The wooden, hanging sign outside the Hungry Hog swung lazily in the spring breeze. It depicted a portly pig wearing an elegant hat and a tiny vest ready to burst. He held a tankard of foaming ale in one hoof and a chicken drumstick in the other. The brightly painted pig gave Gregoll and his father an eternally frozen wink as they looked up at him.

"This seems to be just the right place, don't you think?" asked Wilsteck.

"Yeah."

Gregoll's stomach made a gurgling growl as they entered the small tavern. The sweet smell of onions fried in butter wafted in the air above the raucous, overlapping conversations of more than thirty munching and gulping guests. Wilsteck spotted two seats at the end of a long table. He pointed over Gregoll's shoulder and nudged him in the direction of the empty spots. Another growl issued from Gregoll's belly as a serving girl passed by carrying a greasy wooden plank with a skillet of sizzling meat on it.

But no sooner had Gregoll's growl begun its famished plea than a new sensation took hold of his insides, all of a sudden rendering the thought of eating unimaginable. In the wake of the serving girl's long, billowing skirts walked a cluster of people. At the head strode a man, followed by a woman holding an infant, with two girls squeezed in between the adults, one around four years old and the other just about Gregoll's age, wearing a simple blue dress. Gregoll felt as if his heart had leapt out his mouth and right onto the burning skillet.

"Ah, what a nice surprise," said Wilsteck reaching out his hand to the man, who shook it warmly. "Varan, how are you? Visiting Hundafalva with the family?"

"Good, good, thank you," said the man. "Yes, well, we're not visiting so much as on a work trip. We're here to pick up a few bushels of extra seed for the spring. Been a terrible winter, eh? Terrible. But we'll see a few things. Visit a few of the Festival pavilions. Not here with the whole family today, though, oh no, not by a long shot. Just got the three youngest for the trip. Boys're back on the farm."

The older girl in the blue dress stepped out from between her parents.

"Hello, Gregoll," she said.

His head swam. His mouth went dry. He ceased to see clearly. Beads of sweat oozed from his forehead. He thought the pounding of his heart must be perfectly audible, and his head throbbed in time with his galloping heart. For a split-second he considered whether his head might not actually explode. Abject terror had seized Gregoll.

"Hello, Appia," he said finally. He coughed unnecessarily.

He almost collapsed from the effort, but confidence surged through him on the wave of relief that his words had not come out like the bleating of a goat.

"What are you doing in Hundafalva?" Appia asked with a smile.

The pounding of his heart seemed to increase fourfold. He unthinkingly wiped the sweat from his brow, then quickly folded his arms to hide his wet hand.

"We're here for the Art Festival."

"Really?" she said, her smile widening and her eyebrows arching. "Is your father submitting something to the contest?"

Gregoll could barely contain the tumultuous mixture of exhilaration and trepidation that raged in his young heart.

"Actually... I... submitted something... that I made... myself."

Appia clapped her hands together in delight.

"That's wonderful! Did you win?"

"It's being judged now. They'll announce the winners soon."

"Where?"

"In the glassworks tent."

Gregoll realized that he was staring at Appia with a stupid, bemused expression. He pursed his lips and nodded seriously.

"Yeah, so... yeah," he said without the least idea of how to continue the conversation.

"Uh-huh," she said.

"Come along, Appia, we need to be going now," said the young girl's father.

"Yes, father," she said, looking up at the man. Then she turned to Gregoll. "Goodbye."

He raised his hand lamely as his mind raced, struggling to find something to say. He felt as if some precious chance were slipping away, but there was no more time. He needed to respond. A choking gasp threatened to burst from his clenched throat. Then it did.

"Guuhhh..."

But Appia had already floated past him, departing with the rest of her family. She walked out the door, in Gregoll's estimation with all the stately poise of an empress, and out of his life. The door slammed shut and Gregoll stared at it in disbelief. The noise of the merry guests gradually returned to his ears as if there had been total silence mere moments before.

"Come on, son," said Wilsteck with a wry, knowing smile. "Out of the clouds and onto that chair over there."

Gregoll followed his father and sat down, but he did not leave the clouds for a long time.

Not hungry at first, Gregoll eventually found his appetite once the scalding skillet of pork loin with onions and a small mug of cider was set before him. The hearty food, and especially the cider, did much to distract him, and he succeeded in pushing the harrowing encounter with Appia into the back of his mind for future analysis and interpretation.

By the time they had finished their meal, the moment of the announcement had almost arrived. Gregoll practically dragged his father by the hand through the streets and back to the glassworks tent. They entered just as the distant Watchtower Bell rang the ninth hour.

"Gather round, everyone, gather round," said the heavysset man on the dais.

A sense of foreboding came over Gregoll as he realized something. If this man were the judge, he thought, he didn't stand a chance. He couldn't tell the difference between a piglet and a pork chop. Then another thought dawned on him. Gregoll scanned the faces, looking for Bresh, but did not see him. His tension eased a bit. Bresh must have been just joking around, Gregoll told himself.

"We have a winner, folks, and this is... uh... an interesting one. I'll let our judge, Master Salflet, explain."

A tepid round of applause rose from the nearly two dozen participants standing around the dais. The man with the goatee emerged from behind the curtain holding a wide, flat board covered with a white sheet. A surge of excitement and hope welled in Gregoll's chest. Some unseen item

lay under the sheet, wider than it was tall. It could very well be his sculpture, he thought. He could not take his eyes from the hidden object and dared not look back to the table where his sculpture had first been placed. The man set down the board on a table next to the dais and looked over the crowd with a stern, unsmiling face.

"I do not know what I expected to find when I agreed to come here. A small, rural arts fair is hardly my usual concern. Vases?" He frowned and shrugged. "Goblets? Bowls? Commonplace things. But I know what I did not expect to find. I did not expect to find a visually stunning, artistic masterpiece."

Gregoll could barely contain his anticipation.

"But more than that," continued the man, his voice rising and gaining strength as he caught himself up in his oration. "More than just a work of profound aesthetic value, I found a commentary. A powerful, bold commentary on the state of the Empire. I found a piece that had something to say. I present to you the winner of this year's First Prize in the Hundafalvan Art Festival for glassworks!"

He swept off the sheet with dramatic exaggeration. More than one gasp rose from the onlookers. Gregoll blinked rapidly to make sure his eyes were not deceiving him. Every man, woman, and eleven-year-old boy stared in horror at a pile of broken glass shards.

Gregoll's second reaction, after his initial shock, was a genuine, instinctive sympathy and condolence for the artist whose work had obviously been destroyed somehow. But with a slowly dawning awareness, Gregoll realized that he was looking at the actual piece.

"Divisions between the duchies and kingdoms, fracturing between the Guild and the Imperial authority, political and cultural disunity. All these are expressed in this challenging critique."

The man with the goatee clenched his fists and raised them to the height of his shoulders. "But much more!" he said, spitting as his voice grew to a howl. "Art itself and the nature of our perception of art are thrown back in our faces. What is it to be art? What is it to be glass? The piece makes us think."

The man's eyes stared wildly at an unknown, distant point on the horizon.

"I think it's garbage," muttered Gregoll under his breath.

Regaining his composure, the man lowered his arms and cleared his throat awkwardly. He then opened his coat and removed a small, circular medallion.

"Let us congratulate this year's winner, Bresh Pillsup."

Bresh, who had been standing unseen at the back of the dais behind the curtain, stepped forward with a broad, smirking grin. The judge clapped wildly, joined by three or four unenthusiastic

members of the audience. Gregoll stared dumbfounded. The judge handed Bresh his award medallion and clasped the youth heartily on the back.

"I had an idea," said Bresh. "An idea about things."

"You did indeed, young man," said the judge, nodding in approval.

The confused, mumbling crowd began to disperse and the two judges started a new, animated conversation. Bresh examined his medallion with greedy pleasure. Gregoll had been so surprised by the entire scene, that he had temporarily forgotten about his own submission. All at once, disappointment and failure reverberated through his whole being like the delayed rumble of thunder after a flash of lightening. He lowered his head and hunched his shoulders in discouragement, breathing out a heavy, sad sigh.

He trudged over to the table where his piglet was still on display next to the lopsided fruit bowl. A fresh sense of defeat struck him when he noticed the small, official piece of parchment with his name on it. He had been truly part of the competition, but he had just as truly lost. He picked up his sculpture and tucked it unceremoniously under his arm, no longer concerned about protecting it.

"Ah. Look, dear," said an elderly woman's voice, passing behind Gregoll. "It was a young boy that made that strange glass turnip."

Gregoll rolled his eyes as Wilsteck came up to him and placed his hand on his son's shoulder. "Well, Greg, I--"

"I don't wanna talk about it," he said sharply without thinking, then immediately regretted it. Wilsteck nodded and removed his hand.

"All right, that's fine. We should be heading out, though, in any case. Your mother's expecting us for dinner."

"Yes, father," said Gregoll quietly.

They walked to the entrance, Gregoll's head hanging in dejection.

The late-afternoon sun hovered low in the western sky, casting long shadows over the road as Gregoll and Wilsteck made their way out of Hundafalva. No word had passed between them since they had left the tent. Gregoll had kept his head down, staring at the small patch of space immediately in front of him. He dragged his feet as if weighed down by a prisoner's ball and chain. Finally, his pent up emotions exploded.

"It was just a pile of broken glass!" he shouted. "That's so stupid! Bresh doesn't know anything about glasswork. He's just a... just an idiot!"

"Now, Greg," said Wilsteck in a gently reproving tone. "Let's not respond to one evil with another. We shouldn't approve it when someone does something wrong, but we can't go insulting them."

"Yes," said Gregoll, his flash of anger subsiding. "Yes, I know. But it wasn't fair. He didn't make a real thing, he just... made fun of real things."

"I think everyone else knew that too."

"Not the judges."

Wilsteck smiled sadly.

"There are a lot of strange ideas floating around nowadays. But let me ask you this. Did you try your best to make your sculpture?"

"Yes, of course," said Gregoll, nearly insulted by the question.

"Did you do it just to win that contest?"

"No, I finished it before even thinking about the Art Festival."

"Then you did everything correctly, Greg. Nothing and no one can take that away. We don't work with glass only to be praised for it and we don't disrespect the craft with gimmicks and tricks. We help the Creator continue his Creation for his own honor and for the benefit of our fellow man. That's reward enough, isn't it?"

Gregoll nodded, realizing the truth of his father's words even though his frustration still stung.

"Yes, father," he said.

Behind them rose the increasingly louder sound of wagon wheels clunking against the uneven cobblestones of the road. Gregoll and his father moved aside and let the wagon bump and rattle past them.

"Good evening!" shouted the driver over his shoulder. It was Varan.

"Evening!" yelled back Wilsteck, smiling and waving.

Gregoll, still lost in thought, kept his eyes fixed on the ground and did not bother to glance up at the passersby.

"Gregoll?"

He recognized the voice of a young girl. Gregoll's head shot up and his eyes went wide. In the back of the wagon was Appia in her blue dress. She raised herself up onto her knees, leaned over the side of the wagonbed, and waved happily. The wagon continued its way, thumping and shaking down the road. Gregoll, as if in a dream, waved back slowly, his face locked in an expression of speechless surprise.

"I liked your piglet!" shouted the girl.

Then she spun around and plopped back down. Only her braided hair remained visible above the wall of the wagonbed. Gregoll followed the bouncing blonde locks in the lumbering wagon as the sight grew smaller and finally turned a corner of the road, vanishing behind a grove of peeling birch trees. The boy and his father walked a long time without saying anything before Gregoll abruptly ended their silence.

"Do we have any of that... that... oh, what's it called? The crustacean powder?"

Wilsteck burst out in a cheerful laugh.

"You mean the cerulean powder?"

"Yeah, that's it," said Gregoll. "Do we have any back in the shop?"

Wilsteck furrowed his brow, considering the question.

"Yes... yes, I believe so. Not much, but enough for something small."

Gregoll smiled for the first time all day.

"Good. I think my next project will be something tinted... blue."

He reached out to take his father's hand and they continued their way back home.

THE END

I'm often asked "How do you choose the stories for another realm?" Lots of answers for that one, but one definite criterion is: the author makes me care about the characters. That's what Alcuin Fromm did here. I care about what happens between Appia and Gregoll. I'd like to hear more about those two and their possible future relationship. And that's part of the magic of well-wrought fiction. Agree . . . or not on our BBS.