

"Ashes x Ashes" Project Review/Commentary

It doesn't pay much to focus on the generally amateur nature of the artwork featured in this work, so I will simply say that this outing leaves much to be desired in terms of consistency, and anatomical, artistic quality. The only things that stay mostly the same are the clothing the characters wear and some of their facial designs, but most everything else is up in the air. There isn't a whole lot of background either, which doesn't serve excellently to place the reader, spacially. Though it can certainly be said it is not easy to mistake one character for another, their heights and shapes change erratically from page to page (in the case of the ill-fated Roland, this is sometimes used for comedic effect). The inconsistency in the art does, perhaps, lend itself to the inconsistency in the tone of the narrative.

The story essentially boils down to a conflict between two pirate crews: the Crescent Pirates, who are run-of-the-mill, throat cutters, and the crew of the Igneus, who are gifted with supernatural pyrokinetic abilities. The second character we are formally introduced to with a text bubble introduction is the captain of the Crescent Pirates, a rotund man named Alessandro, who boasts perhaps one of the most ridiculous character designs in the entire chapter. But if we were made to laugh at this character, the very next page suddenly snaps us out of it... we cut to a beaten young woman, in the bed of Roland, the second mate, a vicious young man with wild eyes and a sinister goatee. This entirely inhumorous change in tone is a bit

offputting, but is somewhat less awkward because of the lack of outright humor, and the fact that the two pages share the same leaf.

The most shocking example of a dramatic shift in tone comes at the climax of the story, where Roland is seduced by Captain Cara, the leader of the Igneus pirates, who after a brief moment of passion, incinerates him with her powers. The double-page spread, the only one in the volume is undoubtedly the most gruesome thing in it, with such details as bone matter, flesh and an eyeball drawn with too-close-for-comfort attention. The reason this scene is so shocking is because it follows a rather comical scene of Roland sneaking around the enemy ship, and is followed by several pages of Cara having a humorous discussion with her long-suffering first mate.

Roland, the character with the most screen time, dies graphically and in agony, and the story just forgets about him, as we readers are expected to. For its part though, the scene does come out of nowhere, and sticks to the original script for its portrayal of Roland dying suddenly, and painfully, as Cara looks on in enjoyment.

The art in this manga is certainly juvenile in its quality and technicality, which is to be expected of someone who has never spent much time drawing, but there is a certain impact to the heavy, threaded linework that Alvarez occasionally uses to show emotion, madness, or anger. The first page, which is a wide shot of the Igneus ship in the night sky, works as well as anything else, and the art improves slightly over the course of the chapter, particularly with character's expressions. As for what makes this chapter, manga: aside from right to left reading order, and a few of the face faults pulled by Roland, it's hard to say that this is *truly* manga, even though it does make a concerted effort to emulate manga style.

This piece definitely would benefit from more time being inked, and general clean-up work that comes with sketching a comic in graphite. A few of the pages get smudged, and a few shades happen here and there that don't belong, but for the most part, the dialogue is legible and the story is uncomplicated enough that one can follow it. The addition of text boxes to introduce characters of importance is a nice touch for following along. The title of "Ashes x Ashes" is clearly a little joke by the authors to make it seem like the story might appear in a seinen manga, using "x" unnecessarily like the popular "xxxHolic" (where the x's are silent) and Hunter x Hunter (where again, the x is paradoxically silent).

Without a full script, it's not easy to see where this story is going, but it's an easy read and the art isn't so hard on the eyes after the few three or so pages that it becomes completely un-enjoyable. Clearly there is effort here, and time spent, but the level of artwork is, frankly, fitting only for a school project or personal, free expression. The variety of faces used does keep things interesting, but this artist has a long way to create the lasting impact and breathtaking imagery that the manga form is known for. An assistant to help draw backgrounds and consistently ink pages would also improve the general quality dramatically. A solid, first outing for the author and artist combo of Kerford and Alvarez. "Ashes x Ashes" is no masterpiece, but at the very least, is certainly not boring either.