Hell Itself

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Hell Itself

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What We Do Here:

There's a bit of advice we give to writers: "Keep submitting your story until hell itself won't have it." The unfortunate truth is that there are more humans out there producing great short stories than there are venues to publish them.

And, thus, *Hell Itself* was born.

Most editors will tell you that they reject far more good material than they accept. A great story may simply not be a good fit for the current issue. Or it could be great but the wrong choice for the publication's tone and style. It might be about something that the venue's core readers wouldn't like to read about. Or there may just not be enough slots in the magazine to take everything the editor loved.

Well, sometimes those great stories can rack up a lot of rejections, leaving the author feeling like hell itself won't take it.

We wanted to let go of those reasons why great stories don't get published. We don't have a fixed number of stories we can take, a proscribed tone or style for the magazine, or a core readership we need to keep happy. If it's a great story that no one else would take, we want it.

Welcome to *Hell Itself*.

https://hellitself.com

Lightning Cellar Publications

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Rejected (Again)

by Galen T. Pickett

Dear Creator:

Please forgive this "form" rejection letter. I am sure you will agree that the more time we spend evaluating the different creations submitted, the more we can get produced and out there in the multiverse. While your work shows promise, our only editorial advice for you beyond the enclosed reviews is to keep working. We are *not requesting a rewrite at this time*. We urge you to read through the comments of our team of evaluators carefully. We hope to see your work in the future!

On behalf of us all,
The Editor in Chief

. . .

Report 1

The creator makes a valiant effort in world building here, and there is a lot to like! In the end, this design did not work for me. There are significant structural weaknesses that would need to be addressed on a resubmission.

First, I think the overall strategy of allowing this universe to chug along without intervention is remarkable. The reliance on quantum-scale fluctuations to set the broad initial conditions is interesting, as is the decision to let everything just "run" automatically from that point. Making random chance the driver of the story reminds me of using the *Yi Jing* to decide major plot developments in, for instance, "The Grasshopper Lies Heavy," which I am sure the author has read. The problem with this is the creator has made a standard "second law of thermodynamics" world in which the work will eventually wind down, destroying everything here a reader like me might like or begin to care about.

There winds up being a lot to care about! One of the many, many random combinations this work throws up for our consideration is a set of dominant organisms on a small planet. We do have to wait a long time for that subplot to get going — almost fourteen billion years! But when the author gets around to it, there is a wealth of pathos and irony here, more than enough to keep my attention! Getting

to that point in the work is a slog, so I would urge the author on a resubmission to cut a great deal of that, and maybe just "poof" the whole thing into existence. I know that means invoking a "*Fiat lux!*" -ism, but I think it would be justified in this case.

A society of social animated beings, "animals" in the text, are the dominant form in the critical set of passages in the middle of the work. These beings are so finely tuned for irony and gullibility that they actually begin to believe they have been "intelligently designed". Designed or not, intelligently or not, I am disappointed the author didn't spend more time telling us about them. Social, but not sociable, they seem to need to gather in groups for the purpose of taking advantage of each other. Maybe the author could describe them as "anti-social animals" which seems closer to the mark to me.

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Report 2

This is not a fit submission for publication in this venue. The author would be well-advised to stick to the broad-brush strokes of the story and not get bogged down in the details of the self-assembled "animals" scattered on self-gravitating masses strewn throughout the work. Using chance to design the world is a poor choice. I prefer the active involvement of the creator, driving the entire design to an established goal. The whole piece is just messy. This is clearly the work of an amateur, and I would appreciate the editorial staff not passing this sort of work up to this level of review in future.

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Report 3

The author of this work is fiendishly clever, and I congratulate them on this achievement. Nonetheless, this will not work *at all* for this venue. There are some entertaining elements, particularly in the portions that seem at first glance to be driven by random chance. There is a subtle guiding hand, a whisper in the night as it were, that a reader can hardly tell is there in all the noise the author kicks up. There is clearly a grand plan, and the antics of the various animated lumps of matter add to a tapestry that is occasionally hilarious, but generally tragic. The recipe of order and meaning emerging from the interaction of these complex objects marks nothing less than the inauguration of an entirely new genre of universe-building. This sort of wild creativity is better reserved for, frankly, a higher-brow publication than the one I am reading for right here and now.

I really hope that this work gets published — somewhere. There is hope and redemption in there for just about every reader, and I appreciate the care the author puts into intervening in the text here

and there. No one experiencing this over the billions of years of the expanse of the work will be unchanged. It takes my breath away to think what could be made with this sort of tool by an experienced creator. This is a remarkable piece for a first-time author, but I hope they learn the craft of world-building a bit more thoroughly before again embarking on something as ambitious as what I have before me here.

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Associate Editor's Report

I realize this is an unusual step, and that we normally do not provide direct feedback to our submitters from this level of review, particularly for works we are not publishing. But I think it appropriate (necessary?) to make a few comments. It is clear from the bulk of our editorial opinion that this is just not going to be published in our multiverse. I think that is a shame.

Our staff seems mesmerized by the role chance plays in your work. My guess is our screening readers (who are all authors and world-builders themselves) have had their own run-ins with random elements in their own works. The multiverse has many examples of exquisite, but unstable, constructions. Some of these worlds just stop after running out of energy. This is caused by an uncompensated entropic tendency dissipating the initial store of free energy into useless, disorganized thermal motion. The only narrative device we have for countering entropic rundown poses the danger of creating multiple positive feedback loops. The result is an unplanned concentration of the available energy until BOOM. The center does not hold — I am sure you know of many stories and worlds like that.

The traditional response to all this is to overcompensate, creating a lock-step order that leaves absolutely nothing to chance. Even so, such worlds are fragile. Their pristine, crystalline beauty shatters at the first unplanned change. In the interests of full disclosure, this is my own preferred method of construction, but as Report 3 mentions, you have invented a less heavy-handed way to approach this.

While it does take a long while for the work to get going, the layers of theme that you build from the first instants of the initial singularity reinforce and build upon other. Suffused through the work is an (at most times) unuttered but manifest ethical judgement you add here and there. I heard myself saying those words out loud along with the work: "And I saw that it was good." Time and again — and indeed, it was *good*.

The spirit of entropy and decay are here, to be sure, but the spirit of decay is countered *almost exactly* by the spirit of the "whisper" noted in Report 3. Two almost equally matched principles, one causing decay

and one continually rebuilding the world, vie throughout the work. The sweep and meaning of the entire effort (as well as your genuine affection for your animated beings) is right there — and you take an active part in the actual world at a critical point, experiencing the worst barbarities imaginable. Rarely does an author claim two roles in a work like this, but in addition to creator and guiding spirit, you actually become one of the characters as well. Three deep roles in the same work … I have never heard of anything so ambitious. The animals regard your eventual reappearance as miraculous, but to my mind the real miracle is that you would submit yourself to this on behalf of these creatures in the first place.

So, as I said, this will not get produced in our metaverse, and that is a real shame. But it is my conviction that the way you point out is a new way, a new truth, and a new life for the rest of us. This is important. There is an example here I am sure some of us would be glad to follow.

And I hope you do manage to self-publish this. Let me know if you do! I would be happy to assist as water-carrier or light-bringer, antagonist or protagonist … in whichever role seems best to you.

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure. He tells us that this piece was rejected more than 20 times, but he thought the theme was a great match for Hell Itself. *We agree.*

The Unbearable Sweetness

by Ted Morrissey

[Fragment 0935]

The oddity at first was to see a group of Wandas together. Synthetic girls were set to solo organic bonding. A Wanda was pricey. One didn't want her time and attention distracted for that kind of crypt. Sure, rumor wrote that some owners liked to get their Wandas together and have them to do each other — but the bi setting was extra so most Wandas weren't capable of both. Sure, putting a Mannie and a Wanda together was common enough, for entertainment, for inspiration. Rumor wrote that some sick fucks like to set the Mannie to rape, strictly a downside show (rumor added).

So it was odd to see four Wandas together on the street, walking abreast, crowding the midday pedz. Four sets of thighs between skirt and boot-top. Hem noticed the Wandas' legs because their walk wasn't quite right. Stiff-legged gaits, to be sure, but not stiff enough. There was a bit of an organic bounce, fibrous flex, subtle adjustment, that Wandas couldn't manage, not even the newest modz. After all, they weren't meant to be vertical most of the time.

The Wandas were across the street, walking toward him. With the tramz and pedz, Hem couldn't get an unobstructed view. He crossed at the first light. They were still a busy frizzy block away. Standard Wanda bobs, three blondes and a neon blue, iridescent fish-scale dresses, iridescing in the daylight, white boots (the deck called them go-go boots but the etymology had been eaten, the bytes bitten — not even Antie expected expectorate them). As the Wandas drew nearer he could see the uniform smoothness of their skin, the perfection of synthesis. Perfect to see but unreal to feel, even though the machine-made dermis was warm to the touch, due to the heating net just below the perfect surface. Makeup could vary of course, according to the owner's preference (and mood). These Wandas all had their faces set to medium-high cosmetics, with elevated rouge.

As they approached, he decided he couldn't tell Berto of the encounter, no matter how strange. His roommate liked to jibe he was in love with his Wanda, that he wished she was organic, so they could go out, in public, as organic couples sometimes did. His response was always essentially the same: Fuck you — take your hand out in public, take

your screen out for some dinner foreplay, two-d yourself to death. Something like that.

He stood at the edge of the walk, within inches of the tram traffic (the tramfic), so that he could have a close and clear view of the four Wandas. They were attracting attention, and pedz slowed to a staring pace, if only for a halting hesitating moment.

He watched. He saw:

They were not Wandas. They were a group of org girls who had made themselves up to look like Wandas. The clothes, the wigs — everything in the style of Wandas. But the most elaborate aspect of their impersonation (their im-non-personation) was the cosmetics to make their imperfect organic skin appear flawlessly synthetic. Their faces certainly (faces that were each attractive in their way, as attractive as biological girls' faces can be), but also their arms, hands (down to their idealized clawlike nails, iridescent to match their dresses), and their thighs, the cosmetics covering markings that syn girls don't bear: red remains of old scratches, moguls of moles, simple dimples of cellulite.

Hem admired the girls' work. They had achieved the Wandas' unnatural look, capturing above all their uncanniness — the final frontier for the synthetics' designers. Rumor wrote that the designers couldn't conquer syns' uncanniness because the designers themselves were synthetic. Antie wouldn't say…

[Fragment 0977]

Berto was expecting him to pick up an order (mostly dairy, some especially fibrous vegetables, fauxmeat, tea). Berto could've had the items delivered, except he liked to make Hem earn his keep, or at least justify it. Hem's extro fee was substantial.

Hem assumed the Wanda wannabes (Wandabes, his cognition coined) were going someplace together. However, at Belmont and Broadway they began splitting apart, and by Addison and Broadway he was following only a blond Wanda and the one with the neon-blue bob. Then the pair went their separate ways at Irving Park and Sheffield. Neon blue was heading directly north, that is, knee-deeper northside. He tried telling himself that was why he decided to stick to her. He knew, though, what Berto would say: this Wanda looked the most like his Wanda, with her pink hair and blue eyes (technically aquamarine 3) — which is why he wouldn't be whispering a word of this episode to Berto.

The number of pedz had dwindled to almost zero when neon-blue Wanda entered a skyrise building, one that required a handprint to access. Hem was surprised because most old-fashioned scanners no longer worked. He placed his hand on the glass pad next to the skyrise's

door, but of course it didn't know him. He decided that something genuinely synthetic about the Wandabe girl was her scent, which lingered near the door and was laced with artificial pheromones — the scent instantly quaked his chemistry, waking Rick, stiffening Rick's upperlip (something the deck said). It was a wonder he was the only male bloodhounding the imposter syns. Bloodhounding crotchpounding depthsounding fantasybounding.

There was a camera focused on the skyrise's entrance. Hem glanced up at Antie's amber eye — and he heard the lock release. Antie wanted him to enter the building, to keep pursuing the Wandabe. Why else would Antie open the door?

He didn't take the time to entertain alternate answers. Hem slipped inside.

The skyrise was nondescript — glass and metal and plastic — with no hint of its function, Before or now. The lobby was empty, even void of furniture (filched long ago), and Hem's steps echoed as if the space was much larger. Dust motes, thick in the stale air, mixed with the faux Wanda's pheromones, a scent Hem could almost follow like a dog. She must have used the stairs or the elevator, the latter always risky, due to the dearth of maintenance, ancient parts (ancient maintenance), and the inconsistency of electricity (electricity duplicity).

A ding and a green arrow caught Hem by surprise. A set of elevator doors opened. Antie must be watching still. He found her eye in a corner of the lobby, observing through the daze of dust.

Hem stepped into the elevator. The doors shut and it began to climb. According to the deck, some people used to call elevators lifts, and that word made more sense. He did not feel elevated; he did feel lifted.

He couldn't read the digital numbers indicating the floor he was passing. Something was burned out and the numbers didn't appear as numbers, just broken lines and squiggles of green.

The elevator stopped. In a moment its doors parted (Hem thought of the story of a red sea, which must have split apart because it was so contaminated, the parting not literal but figurative. Stories from Before were mercurial with metaphors, which made them harder to understand, then and now, Antie said.

He didn't know what floor he was on. He guessed in the twenties. Since the electricity was flowing, so too were a few ceiling lights, one or two erratically sputtering their blue-tinged light. Some of the building's rooftop panels must've been pivoting, dogging the opaquely white sun across the dingy sky. He noticed a placard next to a door: 2223.

He sensed the Wandabe's scent. Antie had brought him to the correct floor — of course Antie had, but why?

He could go left or right. Antie couldn't assist him now, so he trusted

his instincts (and his luck and his sense of smell) and turned left, going past the closed door of 2223.

Towards the end of the hall, a hall whose gray-blue carpeting was worn and torn and dark-stained here and there, there were open doors. Other, stronger scents overtook the Wandabe's: oily, chemical. Hem stepped through the first open door. Large windows offered an overlook of the city streets, toward the lake, out of view beyond other skyrises. Daylight filled the room, and it wasn't the windows' cityscape that attracted his attention. The walls of the empty room were covered in art. On one wall was a detailed rendering of the cityscape, accurate except in unnaturally vibrant colors: bright greens, orange-reds, violet-pinks — a stark contrast to the true mostly mottled gray.

On the opposing wall was another city scene but it would seem a city of the muralist's imagination, structures of spirals and bulbous shapes, acute slopes, with glittering and glowing exteriors.

Then Hem noticed that nearly all the drop-ceiling's panels had been removed, exposing conduit pipes and wiring. The room's two fluorescent fixtures were unlit.

With daylight filling the room — even though it was gray with the haze and smoke from distant fires, somewhere in or beyond Satellite Desert — it was warm, so Hem removed his coat and folded it over his arm.

He went to the hall and to another open door. The walls of this room, too, were festooned in art, but not cityscapes, real or imagined: murals of a different sort, crowds of people standing shoulder to shoulder, two or three people deep, all facing forward, all staring, all slightly smiling or slightly grimacing (Hem couldn't decide). Murals of monochromatic gray, mainly residents of the Venn. Depictions of the dispossessed. Renderings of the wretched.

Again the room's drop-ceiling panels were gone.

Again the hall and a third open door. This time, however, he could sense movement in the room. He peeked inside. Cautiously.

It was the girl, the Wandabe, her back to him and fully absorbed in her activity, which was painting. There were several makeshift easels in the room, fashioned from odds and ends, scraps of wood and metal, held together with heavy plumbing tape. On each crude easel was a drop-ceiling panel bearing a painted image, each detailed and elaborately colorful.

Hem recognized the artist as the Wandabe because of her dress and boots. The blue-neon wig lay on a chair in the corner, the only chair. The girl's real hair was dark and hung down her back, where, unpinned, it had fallen.

She must have turned her head enough to sense Hem behind her. Startled, she dropped the paintbrush and, with feline speed, removed

a switchblade from one of her knee-high boots. Its blade clicked into place like the cocking of a Beforetime pistol.

Easy, said Hem. I don't want to hurt you. And I definitely don't want you to hurt me.

The girl still wore her Wanda makeup, which looked especially artificial framed by her natural hair. What do you want? How'd you get in here? The girl held the knife before her. Her other hand ready for fight or flight too. She was slightly smaller than the standard Wanda (of course one could customize taller or shorter for extra crypt). Hem stood between her and the room's only exit.

The girl had been at work on a self-portrait — or the portrait of a Wanda, or of another Wandabe, recognizable even though it was as yet little more than an outline. The girl was gifted. He recognized the subject of another painting, this one seemingly finished.

He said, You know Townsend? The chessmaster? [See Fragment 1023b: Her chess is masterful, but it's her private site (private sight) that gives her such an edge. She's attractive, not stunning mind you. Very English, pale, lithe, engaging smile with that little gap between her front teeth that shouldn't be alluring but is.]

The girl glanced at the painting, perhaps lowering her guard incrementally, her wariness infinitesimally. One doesn't have to *know* one's subject to paint her, she said, especially someone like Townsend.

Hem considered that: of course not, just as a writer doesn't have to know one's subject to write about them. He said, You're good. Are all of these yours?

She continued to hold the switchblade but less threateningly. You didn't answer my question. How'd you get in the building?

The door was open.

Deck-shit. Were you following me? I thought someone was following me.

He thought a moment. You're a curiosity. You and your friends. Why pretend to be Wandas? For attention, right? It works.

Hem took a few steps, toward the room's chair, and placed his coat next to her blue-neon wig. He was no longer blocking the exit.

The girl said, Yes, all these paintings are mine — but I didn't come up here to talk to some sorry stalker, some drooling gawker. Not even about art.

Stalker? Drooling? Hem was taking a closer look at one of the Townsend portraits. The chessmaster was nude, as she was half the time on the deck. Hem recognized the chair she was seated in, its chrome frame, its rectangular back, the back's scuffed edge. Townsend was turned slightly away from the artist's perspective, so that her right breast was in profile. Did she sit for you? Do you *know her* know her?

You're invading my privacy, said the girl, interrupting my painting. If you care.

Well, said Hem, returning his attention to her, I'm sorry about that, a little, but you have to acknowledge that you wanted attention. Maybe I've just given you more than you had in mind.

She lowered the switchblade to her side, not, however, recessing the blade and returning it to her boot. She seemed to be considering something, weighing it. Are you familiar, she said, with performance art?

Hem was half perusing other paintings, half paying attention to her. The smell of acrylics and alcohol-based fluids in the room was heady. I suppose, he said. Sounds self-explanatory.

We are perhaps making a statement, maybe conducting an experiment.

Perhaps. Maybe. Don't you know what you're doing? Why you're doing it? Hem had decided the girl hadn't done all the art on the twenty-second floor. Her style was different from the murals in the other rooms, the cityscapes and the gathering of the dispossessed. So, he said, the other Wandas, they're artists too? Performance artists?

The girl thought again, pausing, perhaps considering how much to say, perhaps wondering if she'd said too much already. She continued, Artists have intentions. Art says something. But the intentions, the messages, the meanings aren't always crystal clear to the artist. Sometimes, oftentimes they are clearer to those viewing the art than they are to the artist.

You sound like the Librarian. He's always filling my head with abstractions. Abstractions to assess, abstractions to access, as he puts it. Homework, he calls it.

You know the Librarian? The girl absentmindedly closed the switchblade, slid it back into her boot. How?

How does anyone know the Librarian? he said. One visits his library. [See Fragment 0702: The figure stood quietly and surveyed the room of books, pausing when his gaze came to the stack from which In Our Time had been pilfered.]

The girl had perhaps studied Wandas too long or too closely, practiced mimicking them too diligently — for when she paused to ponder something, her face found the look of their slightly protracted processing: a faraway blankness while their programming analyzed and reacted, a quarter-beat slower than normal organic cognition. The girl's concentration and contemplation seemed almost artificial. Hem noted that the word artificial had art in it so they must be related. Art, artificial, artifice, artifact. (He would check the deck.) He glanced at the girl's painting, thought of all the room's paintings — thought of the girl, now, as the Artist.

We should go, she said. I've probably been here too long.

You just got here, just got started. Before I interrupted you.

What if you left the door ajar? What if others have entered the building? She was putting her brushes in cups of fluid, capping tubes of paint and placing them in a metal box.

I'm sure no one has. I'm sure we're alone.

You can't be sure. The idea — of their being alone with him — appeared to disquiet her (she'd forgotten that fact), and she tidied her things with greater urgency…

[Fragment 8047]

There had been a painting, a portrait, that captured his curiosity. Its image continuously asserted itself into his thoughts and visited his dreams. Yet its sharpness, its detail had begun to degrade and fade, as is memory's way. There were several portraits of the same subject — how many Hem couldn't say as he hadn't had time to fully observe and absorb them before the Artist rushed the two of them from the room and the building (after a silent, uncomfortable descent in the elevator).

He lost the Artist among the pedz, as she wanted to be lost (she had taken the wig of neon blue but did not wear it, so that she entered the foot traffic of the streets as herself, not as her artificial persona. Hem suspected she didn't resume her performance because it would have been more difficult to disappear, to lose him). Her normal gait was fast and fluid…

[Fragment 4613]

He didn't think of the Artist, with or without the blue hair, that is, as a Wanda or as her true self, nor of Townsend — but, rather, it was the subject of the portraits that had colonized his psyche. The subject was female, he believed, though the subject's gender was not obviously portrayed. In each painting she was rendered from the shoulders up, and she wore a simple article of clothing, plain, somewhat loose at the neck. Her hair was short, cut in a style that could be either masculine or feminine. It was the subject's eyes — eyes never quite focused on the viewer — that gave the impression of femininity, though just how Hem couldn't say. Once that impression was communicated it cast a sense of the feminine over the whole of the portrait. Every aspect then seemed feminine: the simple attire, the hairstyle, the thin neck, the subtle chin, the expressionless lips, the moderate cheekbones, the overall oval of the face.

But was Hem recalling these details, or was he inventing them, restoring the image as it faded from memory? It had only been a few days, a week, and the degradation was steady, or rather the degradation

of his confidence in recalling the image was persistent, day upon day, dream upon dream.

Hem looked at the walls of his bedroom. They could easily, effortlessly be blank, the few cheaply framed pictures taken down — pictures of geometric shapes and blocks of color. They no longer held meaning for him. If he had the Artist's skill, he would paint his bedroom with murals. He envisioned scenes featuring the girl, the woman, in the portraits he couldn't identify in spite of a sense of familiarity. But Hem didn't have the skill. Besides, he possessed no concept of the woman fully rendered — that is, more than what she was in the portraits, head and neck and shoulders. His imagination could supply the missing details: her body type, her height, the length of her arms, her legs, her posture, her bearing, how she held herself at rest, in motion. Except the details wouldn't be real, and reality is what Hem wanted, or at least the illusion of reality.

He looked at his Wanda. Sensing his gaze she returned it. He thought of switching her hair from pink to blue. They had not had sex since his encounter with the Artist, the Wandabe. Wanda couldn't feel neglected, taken for granted. Wanda couldn't feel anything. Hem's sense of her feelings was pure projection. He knew this, yet he projected…

[Fragment 3210b]

[The]A[rtist]: What does it matter? Once the subject is rendered into art, it is art. It is the painting, the mural, the sculpture, the poem.

H[em]: Even a portrait? Surely its purpose is to identify and memorialize the subject, immortalize it — the person whose likeness has been captured by the artist's hand and eye. If not immortalize, publicize — make more widely known, to extend that knowing, that identification across time and space.

A: Once the subject becomes art, the art's purpose is the same as all art: simply to be, to exist in the world. Any other use, any other *purpose* is the creation, the addition of the viewer. As if they themselves added some brushstrokes to the picture. Given the subject an extra nose, set them atop a cycle, made them wink. To try to make the art something other than art is always a form of insult to the artist. A violation every bit as much as adding that nose or cycle or eyelid.

H: What then of erotic art? It must have some purpose other than to simply be art. You must admit, surely, that much of your art is erotic?

A: You have added *that* adjective, just as if you've given Townsend a third breast, a second nose, horns. A whip.

H: So the portraits — of Townsend, since you have alluded to them, or the Wanda portraits — they're not intended to be erotic?

They're not intended to get viewers' chemistry cooking? Their biology boiling?

A: I have no control over what *gets viewers' chemistry cooking*, etc. Some viewers wouldn't respond to Townsend or a Wanda at all, but a still life with rusty bolts, a dead fish on a dock, a picture of one of the Librarian's Beforetime books — those images may send some into a bathroom stall for a few happy minutes. But, again, that isn't my doing, as the artist. That's yours … or theirs…

[Fragment 3210f]

H[em]: All right, then, why perform Wandas?

[The]A[rtist]: Hmmm … that's a good one. (Hey, hmmm sounds like Hem.) I don't know that we've completely sussed out the reason ourselves, the reasons, plural, no doubt. One, I suppose, is always part of the artist's purpose: to call attention. If one stops to think, to really think about it, the role of Wandas in our society is supremely unnatural, and disturbing, and sad. Yet it's become quite natural, quite beyond question that there are two types of females: synthetic and organic, and the former is the preferred female for many. I suspect it would be *most* if more men had the crypt.

H: There are Mannies, too, don't forget.

A: Yes, well, true, but far fewer — and there's a difference, isn't there? Mannies remain a machine, a device, like a can-opener or a lighter or a toilet-brush. Mannies are elaborate, expensive dildos. They're not companions, not mates. Look at you. I bet you love your Wanda. I bet you dream of her.

H: It sounds like another reason to perform Wandas — to become Wandas — is jealousy, admiration, envy. You — and the rest of the collective — want to experience the desire directed at Wandas. The attachment. You want to be loved.

A: That's crazy. You're crazy. You're insane. Did the ancient artists who painted scenes of torture, did they desire to be tortured themselves? Did they envy the christmen nailed to their crosses?

H: Maybe, maybe they did. Beforetime was obsessed with christmen on crosses, christmen in agony. They must've really loved the idea of that torture. They must've wanted to climb up on the cross and be a christman too.

A: Anyway, no, we don't envy syns. If anything, we feel sorry for them, except synthetics themselves can't feel. They can't feel their humiliation, their degradation, their enslavement. I suppose, really, we feel sorry for you — for everyone who has been taught to prefer the unreal over the real, to love what is synthetic because it is easier, because the only investment is in crypt…

[Fragment 7593]

The origin of the word art could be traced west, across and beyond the satellite desert, to the land of the Latinos: to prepare, to fit together, then came the sense of doing the preparing and the fitting together with skill, which made sense. The artists of the collective were preparing their materials, and they were fitting together the various elements: line, shape, light, angle. And when done skillfully, the art became someone or something recognizable. No, more than recognizable. The art became the one or the thing. The deck also said art meant to be, long ago, too, but by people other than the Latinos. Now no one thought of art when they thought of Latinos. They thought of the Second Mexican War and violence and death. They thought of the Battle of Los Angeles, and the Mexico City Massacre.

Although, he'd read of the art of the bullfight, he'd read that phrase, could one become so artful — could one prepare and fit together the instruments of violence so skillfully — that violence became a form of art? Could one find beauty in the brutality? Balance and symmetry in the spilling of blood? Is that why the deck had so many paintings of the christmen crucified? Christmen dying, christmen dead. Was there a kind of terrible beauty in the christmen's torture?

The deck said there had been a book called The Art of War, since lost, probably, ironically, during the satellite wars…

[Fragment 6767d]

The illumine curfew didn't shut down the city, but it separated the citizens into different classes, different types. It was said the illumine curfew had been a regular curfew in the Just After — that people were to stay off the streets when the city went dark. But it was impossible to enforce. So Antie was content to shut off the lights and conserve energy, and let people do what they would.

The citizens who preferred to come out after the curfew, who relished the dark: The Librarian called them denizens of the night (Hem remembered the word because it rhymed, nearly, with citizens). And they were not cur-few, the Librarian said, they were cur-many.

The Artist said she and the other Wandas (Wandabes, a term he hadn't shared) would be performing at the Din, a speakqueasy this-side Venn-side, which meant half the crowd (or more) would be from that-side Venn-side and farther Downside, probably even Badsiders.

He wanted to think he was going to the Din to protect the Artist and her friends (fellow artists, part of the collective), but, really, what could he do if there was trouble? He wasn't a nutcracker; anyone could

see that. [See Fragment 0266: A hundred and sixty pounds soaked in Ukrainian rain.]

He was curious, a little obsessed even. He wanted to see the Wandabes. He had thought of little else since encountering them, since talking to the Artist. He hadn't touched his Wanda in days.

Berto was curious where he was going after curfew. He likely wanted to tag long, remotely of course. Hem didn't invite him, however. Sometimes Berto's presence, peering from his shoulder, buzzing in his head, felt like the invasion of a parasite. To fully concentrate, to be present, Hem had to be free of Berto's piggy-backing persona — joking, observing, offering unwanted opinions, giving directions, making demands, in general being a nuisance from a distance.

At first, their arrangement was something he enjoyed. He often liked the company, and Berto could be funny. Lately Hem found him more annoying than amusing, more chaffing than soothing. He knew Berto hadn't changed, not really, not significantly. It was he who was different.

Did it start with the Wandabes? With the Artist? This change, this difference? Maybe it was the influence of the Librarian, or rather his collection of books, real, physical, Beforetime books. That's when Hem began being secretive, when he began preferring that his thoughts be private, that they were valuable, that some were even precious.

And it wasn't precisely that he wanted to keep them to himself, not all of them, not all the time. He wanted to share them, just not with Berto and especially not via mindplant, which Antie could eavesh-op (Eve's hop) anytime she liked. Sometimes he whispered things to Wanda, things she wasn't programmed to respond to. Behind her aquamarine-3 eyes, he could almost hear the bits and bytes of data bumping into each other trying to bring order to his confusing collection of words…

[Fragment 5712]

The Din was subterranean, two steep stairwells below street-level. Entering was all analog. Above and below pairs of muscleboys, stroidboyz even, let you in or tossed you out, which seemed to be their only purposes in this life. Projecting their cheery personalities certainly wasn't part of their job depictions. The stroidboyz streetside had it easy. They were none too discriminating regarding admittance. A pulse and the possibility of having some crypt to blip for drinks and such were the only criteria for getting in. The stroidboyz below had all the fun, like bouncing too-rowdy crowdies.

The Din was aptly named. The music the mumbles the fumbles of

the coursing crowd the locomoting mob was an assault on one's sanity. The music was live. A stage was against the far wall, and a band of punkboys was puking out licks and clicks with strings and sticks.

Their noise wasn't half bad, thought Hem, though the band wasn't his usual brand. He preferred leaner metal, meatier lyrics.

He'd brought a pocketful of crypt chips, aware that the Din was all analog. He bought a drink for three chips, something too fruity and half alcohol. He imagined the Artist could clean her brushes in it.

There was nothing in the Din to suggest he was even in the right place, on the right night, no advertz saying the artificial Wandas (haha, an ironic term that hadn't been turned until just then) would be appearing. Then he overheard two crowdies shouting about them. He couldn't catch most of their exchange, drowned out by the punkboys' puke, but it definitely had to do with the Wandabes. He thought of asking one of the crowdies — of shouting a query above the beery din — except suddenly the punk-puke stopped, and a host of some sort came onto the stage (meanwhile the punkboys packed their gear).

The crowd had grown mostly quiet, yet it was still hard for Hem to hear. He was a considerable distance from the stage. The host announced that the collective's artists would be out momentarily something something Wandas something amazing something blip another drink something something tip the something drinkmixer. The host exited the stage.

The whole time, the host had been holding a glass (filled presumably with the too-fruity alcohol), and spotlight light kept flashing off it with each casual movement of his hand. The deck said that Beforetime ships used flashing lights to communicate at sea, that the flashes were code — and Hem wondered for a moment (but not seriously) if the host was signaling something surreptitiously, maybe even unconsciously. Hem felt this way more and more — that there was some force in the world sending out messages, attempting to communicate directly to him at times, but he couldn't quite fathom the meaning; it remained frustratingly on the edge of comprehension. Maybe this sense of a steady and secret message began with his discovery of the library and the Librarian. Really, though, it began earlier, much earlier (maybe even in his childtime), and the books in the library and the words of the Librarian made him more aware of the world's secret and incessant messaging — made him feel he could almost grasp the messages' meanings.

Logically, it may well be Antie whispering wonderings into his mind, or the accidental chatter of someone linked to him — except neither possibility seemed to be the case. It was as if the outside world — the world outside his being — had been making impressions on his mind, and his mind, in turn, was constantly, slowly, uncertainly mak-

ing sense of them, connecting them, comparing them — converting the abstract impressions into language … articulating them — There was that word again: art…

[Fragment 8872]

L[ibrarian]: You are describing consciousness, intellect — aspects of the human mind that had been lost — well, greatly diminished — by the time of the satellite wars. Now, well—

H[em]: Lost, but not for good, for forever. Right? If diminished, they can be recuperated, rehabilitated. Right?

L: For whatsoever from one place does fall, is with the tide onto another brought. For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought. Something to that effect. Spenser.

H: Brought another place. Like New Beijing?

L: I suppose. If so, the tide would have traveled across the gulf of space. Why not somewhere closer too?

H: Here?

L: Never mind the where. Consider the how: To be found, the lost must be sought…

[Fragment 6721]

The crowdies grew quiet when the artists came from the dressing room and ascended to the small stage. Their Wanda-like movement was perfect, artificially wooden-legged, arm motion subdued, head and neck and trunk unnaturally still, as if fused. They'd been practicing since Hem had encountered them on the street; then, a subtle, almost invisible hint of humanity remained, a shading of organic life. In the meantime, the Wandabes had mastered the uncanniness of synthetics: the Wandabes had become Wandas; their art had become its subject.

The Wandas moved about the stage in a choreographed pattern. To begin, the crowdies were quiet, captivated by the illusion, almost in a kind of group hypnosis. The charm didn't persist long, however, and crowdies began shouting lewd comments and commands at the Wandas.

Lift your skirts bend over let's see them pole stars I prefer my syn titties topless nips on max how luby is your labia ladies

To their credit, the artists ignored the crowdies and persevered in their performance. Hem kept a close eye on the neon-blue Wanda. He thought he detected a slight flinch, a tightening around the eye as a reaction to one of the more graphic jeers. He may have been projecting the response, a sort of synthetic seeing of his own. Observing what he wanted to see rather than what he really saw.

Hem watched with increasing alarm as the crowdies grew cruder,

their jeers more beery, their animal energy more intense. The Wandas' obliviousness was obviously part of the performance: the disconnection from their environment.

Hem, helpless, was transfixed. He drained his too-sweet drink hoping the alcohol would afford him a level of obliviousness of his own, a comforting numbness, a callousing dumbness, a deafness to the warning the world was issuing to his being alone (it seemed).

Suddenly the host reentered the stage, and he raised his hands to calm and quiet the crowd. The Wandas, who had been moving in a calculated, choreographed pattern, reacted variously to the host's intrusion. All remained in character but their uniformity was broken.

As the crowdies quieted, the host shouted, Please, please, put it on pause people. Let's show the Wandas our appreciation — some warm applause if you would. And the host began clapping. The crowdies, unsure, joined him, some of them. The Artist and her friends stood stiffly, unresponsively.

Hem's heart rate slowed, his anxiety began to subside. All would be well.

— aren't they wonderful, the host was saying. We appreciate them so much here at the Din we have a special surprise, a sort of parting gift. He moved past the Wandas to the back of the stage. The spotlight followed him and illuminated something (a large something) draped in black. It had been invisible in the shadowy rear of the stage, against the black-curtain backdrop. The host, with dramatic flair, took the draping in hand and ripped it away in a single motion. Four nude men stood in the garish glare of the spotlight. No, not men (Hem and the crowdies realized): Mannies. Their dark hair, flawless features, triangular torsos — the overall perfection of their male form — marked them as synthetic immediately.

What could be a more fitting way to conclude the Wandas' performance? said the host. A perfect climax, if you will. Boys, if you would—

The Mannies' members raised in precise unison, their manliness monuments to synthetic tech.

It appeared that each Mannie had been paired to a specific Wanda — they started seeking them in their own stiff-legged way. There was something about their look — their facial expressions, the dark-cast of their eyes — that suggested they were set to aggressive domination, or even playtime violence. Hem feared that these syns' safety protocols were overridden so the violence could exceed the playful setting and escalate to full sadism.

The Wandas sensed it too, and one by one they dropped their performances and began looking for a way off the stage. But enthusiastic crowdies had come up the stairs, left and right, thus

blocking the artists' escape.

The strategy of the spot operators was to highlight the expressions of the artists' faces, now desperately organic. The Artist pulled off her neon-blue wig, maybe in an effort to confuse the Mannie who moved toward her. Mannies could raise tiny spikes on their members for maximum pain-pleasure. Even from a distance Hem could see the Artist's Mannie was fully in pain-pleasure mode.

Hem dropped his empty glass and tried to push through the crowd toward the stage — to what purpose he had no idea. He hadn't advanced very far when a couple of crowdies took exception to his rough behavior and responded with their own rough punches, knocking Hem to the sticky, gritty floor. Before he could get to his feet, a pair of hands grabbed him by the shoulders of his coat and began dragging him toward the exit. It was one of the stroidboyz.

Hem worked to stay upright as he was pulled backward. He watched as the Mannies closed in on their Wandas. The crowdies were wild with enthusiasm: this was their brand of entertainment.

The stroidboy dragged him up the two flights of stairs, effortlessly, and bounced him on the street. The stroidboyz at the door made it clear he wasn't getting back in without growling a syllable.

Hem stood and straightened his coat. His lip was bleeding. He tasted it and felt a trickle down his chin…

[Fragment 6724]

A warm rain had begun to fall. He was walking with no particular purpose, no sense of destination. Artificial light shone from a window now and then, but otherwise the dark buildings were black silhouettes against a nightsky that was only a degree or three less inky.

He used his handtorch from time to time to recover his bearings. He had to squeeze its handle several times to enliven its light. After a while (Twenty minutes? Thirty? More?) the torch-beam caught a street-marker that said Sheffield. He had been making his way, accidentally or unconsciously, to the skyrise where he first met the Artist. The realization was chained to another: his mental image of the subject — the woman — he couldn't identify in spite of her familiarity had almost totally faded. Only something of her eyes remained, and a trace of the angle of her jawline. Perhaps if he could see her again, the freshening of her image would jolt his memory, and he would know her.

He felt his lip. The bleeding had stopped, but it was puffy and sore to the touch. The heaviness he experienced upon being ejected from the Din — the frustration, the anger, the sadness, the impotence — weighed on him still. Recognizing the woman in the portrait may help somehow. She remained pure art, a two-dimensional picture; that is,

she remained unreal, and Hem needed for her to be real, to become real.

He was at the skyrise. It seemed that the electricity had been drained from the building. Even Antie's eye was dark. The door had been left ajar, however.

Hem maneuvered through the empty lobby by torchlight. The elevator was dead. He shined his light on the stairway door. Twenty-two flights, he thought.

The air in the stairwell was stale, as if no one had climbed the stairs in years, maybe decades. Occasionally he heard the clicking of something ahead or behind — rodents of some sort, he guessed, but his light didn't fall upon any, only some refuse sometimes on the landings between floors.

Finally: 22.

As he passed the rooms of murals he directed his torchlight inside and caught glimpses of the cityscape, then of the assembled dispossessed. The moment he stepped into the room where he met the Artist he knew something wasn't right. The handmade easels remained, and the one worn chair, but the paintings were gone. He moved his beam randomly but thoroughly. Every single portrait removed.

Hem fought a climbing tide of disappointment, of desperation — a rising spikey sickness.

He exited the art-stripped room and wandered down the dark hall, numb. He let the torch's light fade until the twenty-second floor became as black as a subterranean tunnel, a Beforetime shelter (the sort that people used to somehow fall out of).

Then Hem recalled the closed door of room 2223. He squeezed life back into his torch, and the placard was just to his left. The door was unlocked. He stepped inside hoping the portraits had been moved to this space, though there was no reason for hoping it. His roving light revealed a few pieces of furniture: a couple of chairs like the one in the other room, a metal desk on its side, a cabinet with drawers (for storing files when files were still made of paper). But no paintings.

He turned to leave when his light fell across a wall and caught his attention. He examined it carefully, a mural. Its composition took shape as his bead of light ran this way and that. It was unlike the other murals. It was a painting of males and females engaged in intercourse — the males hostile, the females distressed, some attempting to flee, males grasping after them. Hem discovered a word was painted in bold black letters at the top of the mural, a word that held no meaning for him: Sabine.

Hem continued to take in the scene, one circle of light at a time. The light at times appeared as nimbuses. The females, he realized, all looked alike, as if sisters. More than sisters, more than a resemblance.

All the women were *the* woman, the woman he couldn't identify. Her multiplicity didn't aid his memory, if, in fact, it was memory where her identity was kept.

He let the handtorch light fade away, intensifying the mystery, and his feeling of being ill. He sank to his knees and wretched uncontrollably in the utter dark, tasting again the unbearable sweetness…

Novel excerpts are particularly hard to sell to short story markets. Novels and short stories are fundamentally different, and few excerpts work as standalone pieces, so many editors won't consider them. Long short stories are also only read at a limited number of markets, making this piece a particularly hard sell anywhere else. Hell Itself *is happy to have it.*

Ted Morrissey's first poetry collection — Aspiring Child: A Biography of Mary W. Shelley — *will be released January 1, 2026. He co-hosts the monthly podcast* A Lesson before Writing *and teaches creative writing at both Lindenwood University and Southern New Hampshire University. Like the poet Carl Sandburg, he was born and raised in Galesburg, Illinois. Youtube: @tedmorrissey*

The Eleusinian What Now?

by Gerri Leen

Persephone was window-shopping at the mall, enjoying a rare afternoon away from her mom and her maidens and the endless gamboling around fields and flowers in pastel chiffon. She was eying a little black dress her mother would never let her wear when her phone pinged.

It was her creepy uncle Hades saying: *Hey*.

She ignored the text.

Her phone pinged again. *Heard you'd be out later picking flowers. Wondering where/when.*

She texted back: *Why?*

I <3 u.

She knew he didn't mean she was his fav niece. And his facility with text lingo somehow made the message even more disturbing. She tapped in: *Ewwwww.*

Her aunt Hera would tell her to show some respect. Aphrodite would just laugh. Her mother, though, would rip Hades' head off. To say she was overprotective was like saying Zeus was just a teensy bit unfaithful to Hera.

Perse, I really care 4 you. I think u should check my realm out. U might like it. Get some freedom from Demeter.

Right, 'cause the underworld was known as such a carefree place. *As if.*

Perse, we srsly need to discuss this. She's suffocating you.

He wasn't wrong. But why couldn't he just be her uncle about it? Someone to talk to instead of run from? What was wrong with her entire freakin' family?

She watched a group of girls go by, laughing as they looked at one girl's phone. Persephone wanted more than anything to be like them: normal and just having fun, not looking over her shoulder for overly protective — or worse — family members.

Perse?

I'm blocking your #. Leave me alone or you'll be sorry. She hit the block button then sent a note to Zeus, who always was quick to respond to her — was it true he was her father? Just more ickiness to contemplate so she focused on the task at hand. *Hey, like I know you're super busy, but could you tell Uncle Hades I'm totes off limits?*

Again? I'll talk to him.

UR the best! Before she could shove the phone back into her bag, her mother's ringtone sounded.

She answered on the second ring so her mother wouldn't commandeer one of the winds and fly over to see if she was safe. "Hey, Mom."

"What's up?"

"You tell me — you're the one who called." Before her mother could pretend not to be checking up on her, she said, "So, Hades was wicked pushy today. But don't worry. Zeus is handling it — gonna tell Uncle Squickman I'm off limits."

"Aargh. I'm going to have words with your stalker." The connection dropped, just as Persephone hoped it would. She eyed the dress again. She had the money — but did she have the gumption to bring it home and put it on and actually, like, wear it? In the face of utter Mom disapproval?

Before she could decide, she heard: "Persephone?"

She whirled.

Hades stood in front of her. "We can't fight destiny."

"Can't we, though?"

"It's written in the stars."

"It's daytime. And there's a roof."

"It's written in my heart, then."

"And once more I say, 'Ewwww.'" She pulled out the taser her mom had no idea she owned, flipped off the safety, and sent the darts into him, watching him convulse. "No means no. And I'm not some helpless maiden."

A mall cop rolled up on a Segway. "Problem here?"

"He wanted me to go away with him and…" She shuddered as if she just couldn't imagine what might have happened.

"Outrageous — to do that to a delicate flower like you."

"I tased him."

He grinned, as if she'd done the most amazing thing ever. "Delicate *and* resourceful. Well done, Miss…?"

"Just Persephone." She leaned in, pitching her voice low, giving the mall cop a little divine push. "I bet there's a lovely bench outside — you know, in full sun." After eons below, Hades had super sensitive skin. Let him read his stupid messages in the stupid stars with a nasty sunburn.

"Yes, Miss."

"But first—" She yanked out the darts.

Hades yelled, then surprised her by laughing. "We do belong together, Perse — you enjoy punishing me."

Fortunately the mall cop dragging him away behind the Segway shut him up.

She turned, eyed the black dress, and was about to go into the

store when her phone lit up with a text from her mom. *U ok?*

Mom, it's all good. Hades handled 4 now. Her mother didn't need to know she'd handled it herself, and she knew Hades would never let on.

Your maidens are lonely. Where are you? We'll join you.

Persephone turned away from the black dress in the cool shop and sighed. She bet she could wear all the black she wanted in Hades.

Shit. Had she really just thought that? Her life was so screwed up.

Her phone pinged again. *Honey?*

Be home soon. Luv u.

Luv u more.

Gerri Leen tells us this piece was rejected at least 22 times before making its way to Hades, er, Hell Itself. *She lives in Northern Virginia, originally hails from Seattle, and is passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She's recently published her first poetry collection* Unwilling: Poems of Horror and Darkness *and had her first novel* Bluegrass Dreams Aren't for Free *released by WolfSinger Publications. See more at gerrileen.com or Instagram @leengerri.*

Pala

by Reggie Kwok

On a snowy day, Wintbert and Finnian the white-feathered griffins carried snow with their webbed paws. With their one-story-home sized paws and work ethic, they cleared the pathways of three villages, Foremire, Coastmill, and Conepine.

Every time the griffins cleared the snow, they received one hundred gold pieces from each village. When snow didn't fall, the griffins offered rides for the low price of one gold per trip.

One day, Wintbert and Finnian prepared to work in Foremire when a wooden shovel with a rune on the hilt tossed away snow from a dirt path. A woman watched the shoveling happening by itself.

She said to the griffins, "Oh, we don't need you anymore. We have Pala, a rune powered shovel invented by a wizard named Goldhawk. It's faster than you two."

Finnian said, "We don't get paid enough unless it is winter. We need to be paid in gold for our survival."

"Why don't you invest in Pala yourself? You could make a fortune selling them to other villages," she said.

"But," Wintbert said, "we like our work and want to be paid for it."

She huffed. "We don't need griffins when Pala can do the work faster. Now go away."

Wintbert disliked the feeling of an object replacing his job. He loved shoveling snow. His webbed feet didn't freeze as he created large snowbanks for the children to slide. The adults did minimal shoveling and thanked the griffins for their work. With Pala, the humans wouldn't invest in the griffins.

The griffins departed Foremire for Coastmill and Conepine. The two villages needed the griffins' services, so the griffins cleared the snow within three hours. But when the next storm hit, all three villages had Pala up and running.

Wintbert was curious as to how Pala worked. If he could find the magic source, he could sell it to the humans. Maybe observing Pala in action would help.

Wintbert went to Foremire. Runes powered the shovels, and whenever a rune ran out of energy, a human would replace the discharged rune for one with magical energy, and Pala would continue shoveling.

Why would humans be interested in a device that cost more? A griffin ran on three meals a day and could shovel snow all day. If they needed more runes, how would the humans pay? The devices that the humans used were a downgrade, not an upgrade.

Back at the cave, Wintbert reported his findings to Finnian. "I saw

Pala in action today. They are a menace to deal with. Why should customers pay more when we griffins can do the same task?"

"I think we should give up. Clearing snow has a new magic now. We should focus on our ride business more."

"The humans should respect our services. It's our duty to shovel snow, not some wizard." Wintbert suggested, "We should wave a protest banner during the next snowstorm."

"I'm staying in the cave. Good luck with that."

"What?"

With those words, Finnian crushed all hopes of working together to find the demise of Pala. What could Wintbert say to convince his coworker to fight and to protest? No, he would protest alone.

Wintbert refused to submit to Pala. There had to be something wrong with the magic, and he was going to be there to witness the faults. If he had to, he would destroy Pala, but that was a little dramatic.

While Finnian flew about looking to promote the travel business, Wintbert bought some oil-based paints, cloth, and some wood. With the materials, he made a banner with the words, "Pala = Bad."

During the first snowstorm, Wintbert flew to the three villages, where Pala was working as intended. The humans stayed indoors, but Wintbert trusted that he flew low enough for them to see the banner.

During the second snowstorm, Pala had some problems, but the magic was still working. Some of the shovels would slow down and stop while others worked as intended.

During the third snowstorm, Pala stopped working all together. Some Pala dug down instead of across, which left massive dirt holes with snow in them. Other Pala flew into the sky, which didn't do the job at all.

This prompted Wintbert to visit the three villages and see if they needed his services again. First, he approached Foremire's leader at his castle.

Foremire's leader said, "We have complete and utter faith that Pala will clear the snow. We don't need your help."

As Wintbert left, Pala from all over the village flew with the wind. Snow blocked common pathways, and residents were stuck indoors without anyone to help.

Without pay, Wintbert couldn't help Foremire.

Next, he went to Coastmill's castle to speak with the village's leader.

Coastmill's leader said, "We have humans shoveling the snow as we speak. We have no need for your services."

As Wintbert flew in Coastmill, several humans shivered as they dug through the snow with their shovels.

Going backwards without griffins to help wasn't the solution either.

Finally, Wintbert visited Conepine's castle.

The leader hugged one of Wintbert's paws. "You're here! Pala stopped working, and we need your services again. Are you able to clear snow on short notice?"

"I'd be happy to do it," Wintbert replied, "but I need to get my coworker to clear snow with me. I don't clear snow without him."

"We are willing to pay a little extra."

Wintbert flew back to the cave, where Finnian slept by a fireplace. Wintbert shook Finnian.

Finnian said, "What? I'm trying to sleep."

"No," Wintbert said, "we're going out shoveling. Conepine has hired us again, and we need to get there now."

"What did you do now?"

"I didn't do anything but travel to three villages, and the third happened to need our help."

"I guess we're getting paid, huh. All right, let's go clear some snow."

Wintbert and Finnian spent the day in Conepine. They cleared the snow as usual, and villagers cheered as they saw a familiar sight. Conepine villagers spent several hours with Wintbert and Finnian, who built snow hills for the children and adults. In return, the villagers would pat the griffins' paws. Human hands felt cold to the touch, but perhaps the weather was the cause of that problem.

While Finnian tossed snowballs with the children, Wintbert approached a Conepine woman.

"Hm," Wintbert asked, "what are you going to do with Pala now that they aren't working?"

"We're getting a refund. Goldhawk who sold the shovels should have to pay us for the damage. I mean, look at the holes in the ground. Those aren't safe."

"You'd think the wizard would test his products before sending them out to the world."

"Would you help us with the refund? Your banner would assist in getting our gold back. We could ride you two to the wizard's tower."

Wintbert wanted to join these humans in getting the refund that these villagers deserved. If needed, he would destroy the wizard's tower. But what would Finnian say?

"Let me speak to my coworker," Winbert said. "Let's go together."

The kids tried to bury the macro-sized Finnian in snow, but they covered one paw. The woman ushered the children to the hill to slide down it. Finnian shook the snow off his paw.

"Oh, I was napping in the snow. It's hard to nap outside," Finnian said.

Wintbert said, "Conepine residents want a ride to the wizard's tower, so they can get a refund for the Pala."

"Are we getting paid to do that?"

Wintbert groaned. "Not everything we do has to come with gold. If we assemble the right humans, they can demand the refund from the wizard."

"Oh." Finnian shook the snow off his body. "I don't want you having all the fun. Let's go together."

The Conepine woman gathered fifty villagers whose Pala had malfunctioned. The griffins flew off to the wizard's tower, which took them until nighttime to find.

The wizard's tower was a cobblestone masterpiece, but why he didn't use other materials for the building was a mystery. From one of the holes in the building, a light shined.

The humans brought pans and sticks and made a ruckus outside the tower. They screamed, yelled, and chanted for the wizard to appear.

Wintbert might destroy the tower, but watching the protestors was much more fun.

As the moon reached its peak, a gong rang out from inside the tower. Goldhawk in black robes and pointy hat burst out the door.

"Why are you disturbing my sleep? I live far away from a village for a reason," Goldhawk said.

One of the male protesters said, "We want a refund for the broken Pala. They either fly into the sky or leave potholes in the ground."

Goldhawk stepped toward the crowd. "You all signed a contract when you bought Pala. I cannot give a refund."

A female protester said, "Show us the contract."

"No." Goldhawk turned to the door.

Finnian and Wintbert blocked the door.

Wintbert said, "You aren't going back inside until you give the gold back."

"I converted the gold into furniture, so I cannot give you the gold back. How will I ever live without golden furniture?"

Wintbert pinned Goldhawk to the ground with his paw. "You caused my coworker and me to lose our jobs. Several Pala have gone rogue. Villages are stuck shoveling snow or are doing nothing. And now you say you cannot give a refund for the accidents that you caused. You—"

He couldn't finish the sentence. He wasn't a violent griffin, but pouncing on the wizard was very forceful. At that moment, he could do anything to the wizard. Eating Goldhawk didn't sound like the best idea for his stomach. Humans weren't a part of his diet in the first place.

"You're coming with me." Wintbert picked up Goldhawk and flew.

Finnian cawed and followed.

They arrived at Conepine, where Wintbert found a deep pothole that Pala made. Wintbert tossed Goldhawk into the hole. Goldhawk struggled to climb back up and slid down the hole. Without any tools, the wizard was stuck in the hole.

Finnian asked, "Did you really have to do that to him?"

"It's for the best," Wintbert said. "Some jobs can't be automated."

The griffins returned to the wizard's tower. The Conepine protestors loaded the gold furniture on the backs of two griffins, and they returned home.

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After several complaints from Foremire and Coastmill citizens about the poor snow removal, the leaders rehired the griffins at the same rate as before. From what Wintbert heard from the Conepine leader, the Conepine blacksmiths melted down the gold furniture and paid the protestors gold for their time.

During the spring, the Conepine leader found Wintbert and Finnian looking for customers for their transportation services and stopped them to talk.

The Conepine leader said, "Wintbert, Finnian, the village bought a special surprise with the village's gold reserves. It's for your efforts during the winter."

The leader hopped on Wintbert's back and directed the two griffins during flight. Next to Conepine castle, two archways made of white stone and brick stood out.

Wintbert asked, "What's this?"

"It's your new resting place. Since your cave must be far away, we built you two a place to nap," the leader said.

Finnian said, "Woo! Nap time!" Trying out their new spot, the griffins rested, and they continued to prosper in their current lands.

We here at Hell Itself very much identify with Wintbert and Finnian. Reggie Kwok (he/him) holds a bachelor's in English and a master's in education. He currently lives in Massachusetts, USA. His Twitter is @KwokReggie. His Bluesky is @reggiekwok.bsky.social. He has published short stories at Samjoko Magazine, Underland Arcana, Scrawl Place, Androids and Dragons, Inner Worlds, Orion's Beau, Zooscape, Midnight Menagerie, Madam, Don't Forget Your Sword *and has two forthcoming at* Roses and Wildflowers *and* Androids and Dragons.