

# *The Seraph of Kitsch*



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*Part One:*

*The Codex Infernus*

The Artist sat inside his studio. His hair was dishevelled and unwashed. His eyes were bleary and his studio was a mess. He sat forlornly on the wooden floor and gazed at his easel. His sleeves were rolled up and his hands covered in paint, paint that was also slathered upon the canvas that his easel so cradled. The outside world was beginning to fall into the clutches of the night, and the lights that hung from the arched ceiling above him caused ghastly shadows to flicker across the collection of paintings that cluttered the room.

The Artist gazed into the eyes of the portrait he had so drawn. The painting depicted a maiden's visage in exquisite detail, but the young woman so-depicted was in the process of clawing away her face to reveal the skull beneath. The painting itself was a harrowing contradiction. It was both simultaneously beautiful and horrific. The supple beauty of the female's face brutally intersected with the gore and demonic flare of undeath. It was both a masterpiece few could ever hope to replicate, and yet it was soulless and uninspired.

The artist picked up the glass that sat upon the floor beside him and downed the last dregs of the whiskey contained within. With a growl of primal frustration, he smacked the painting free from its perch and crumpled back onto the floor as it clattered off into the studio to join the venerable legion of discarded projects. Tears formed in The Artist's eyes and he got back to his feet. He surveyed the wasteland of discarded canvas' around him, then lurched towards his desk. Sitting upon the old desk was clutter. An old laptop, an even older landline phone with a blinking answering machine, stacks upon stacks of indignant papers from his agent and the gallery, and bottles upon bottles of cheap whiskey. Many of which were empty.

The Artist seized a bottle in a shaky, pale hand and pried off the cap. He filled his glass back up with the noxious stuff and pulled a sweaty clump of hair out of his eyes. Then, he leaned back

upon his desk and surveyed the carnage around him, contemplating just how much he would really like to drink the whiskey he had just poured.

As he stood there in silent contemplation, he gazed at the newest of his discarded paintings. The half-faceless maiden stared up at him, one of her eyes brimming with childish innocence, and the other naught but an empty socket dribbling blood onto a hand that held the remains of the missing eye, and about half the flesh on her face.

The Artist felt a few stray tears fall and downed his cup of whiskey in one go. The more he stared at his painting, the more he came to loath it. It was hideous in a way it was not meant to be. Whereas his early work had been thought-provoking and beautiful in the most ghastly of gothic flair, this one was naught but gratuity, both in violence and in sexuality. As were the others that formed the graveyard of canvas around him.

The Artist's watery, grey eyes rested upon the bottles of whiskey once more, and he found his hand inching towards them.

Then, his pocket began to vibrate.

He cursed under his breath and wrenched his cell phone from its hiding place. The accursed device was buzzing against his grip, its screen flashing a number that was presently trying to call him. The number he recognised; it was his agent.

Slowly, The Artist placed the now-empty glass back onto the desk and answered the phone. "What?" he asked, fatigue palpable on his voice.

"Or hello, as they used to say," the warm and utterly synthetic voice of his agent answered.

The Artist rolled his eyes. "What do you want? I'm busy."

"Busy painting, I hope," The Agent said. "Although with that many slurred words in a single sentence I'm sure you're busy guzzling some of the most vile and cheap whiskey you could dredge up."

The Artist didn't reply. He simply let himself crumple to the floor before his desk.

"Anyhoo," The Agent continued, "I've been trying to reach you all weekend. I've been calling that stupid landline you still

use, but you don't seem to be answering that, so here we go, back at it again with your personal cell."

"Spit it out," The artist said groggily.

"We are in a mood tonight, aren't we?" The Agent crooned, "listen, the gallery has been calling me all weekend. They need a new piece! They loved the last one so much, and they are willing to shell out millions for another!"

The Artist gazed at the graveyard around him.

"Yeah," he murmured into the phone. "I keep getting their letters."

"And?" The Agent pressed. "You must have something, right? The last few in-progress pics you sent me looked amazing!"

The Artist stifled a sob.

"Are you crying?" The Agent asked.

The Artist took in a shaky breath and tried to calm himself. "There's nothing!" he croaked.

"What do you mean, nothing?" The Agent snapped.

"I mean, I can't paint!"

"Then, what have you been doing for the past six months? What were you sending me?"

"I haven't finished a painting in over six months!" The Artist wailed. "I can't! I just can't! It's all wrong! Every time I slather paint over a canvas it's horrid and meaningless! It's shit! I've produced nothing but shit!"

"Calm down," The Agent snapped. "Breath."

The Artist took in another shaky breath.

"I don't know," The Agent continued, "why can't you just, you know, finish one of the paintings you started? Just slap some gloss on it and send it over. I'm serious, these guys at the gallery are straight-up salivating at the thought of getting another of your pieces! I need the money, you need the money, they need the painting! Come on, it's a match made by angels!"

The Artist let out a groan. "You don't understand!" he protested. "It's not a matter of finishing something, or wanting to finish something! I can't! It's not possible. Every brushstroke, no matter how perfect, is horrible! It is not meant to be! It is an insult not only to my audience, but to myself! There's nothing left in

me... No passion... It's all gone. It left as the millions came..."

There was a moment of silence from the other end of the phone.

"I see," The Agent said coldly. "I remind you that you signed a contract with me. I would represent you for at least one more piece, and if you refuse, you'll be in breach..."

The Artist stifled a sob. "I want to paint!" he croaked. "But it can't be done!"

A moment passed.

"Well," The Agent said after a long moment of deliberation, "there is a guy who I can call."

The Artist's ears pricked at this. "A guy?" he stammered.

"Yeah," The Agent said. "Some batty old eccentric chap. He's like an art dealer or something, I met him about a decade ago at an art show. Weird guy, missing an eye, but anyway, I could call him for you. He's helped many-a-people with writer's block type ailments over the years. Got one of my previous clients out of a similar rut a few years back..."

The Artist gripped the phone tighter. "Okay?" he pressed. "But how does he help?"

"I don't really know," The Agent said. "It's some combination of weird old technique and kooky artifacts."

"Artifacts?" The Artist asked, his voice becoming far steadier.

"I don't know," The Agent muttered. "I don't pretend to know, but yeah, some artifact or something. Like the Rosetta Stone of creativity or some shit..."

The Artist thought about this. "What does this one-eyed man want in return?"

"He usually just wants a painting, or some other token of appreciation."

"That's it?"

"We'll see," The Agent said slowly. "I'll contact him, and we'll see what he says."

"Thank you!" The Artist exclaimed.

"Don't thank me yet," The Agent said. "I still expect a million-dollar piece."

The phone went dead.

The Artist let out a shaky breath and let the phone fall to his side. He gazed around the desolate landscape of his studio, and looked into the eyes of each of his discarded portraits. They gazed back, a small army of maidens, each one attempting to rip off the fleshy prison that so enshrouded her skull.

Then, the landline atop his desk bleated.

The Artist jolted and reeled on the obsolete device. With trembling hands, he reached out and pulled the phone off of its base and held it up to his ear.

“H-hello?” he stammered.

“You’re the artist?” an underwhelmingly normal voice asked.

“I am,” The Artist replied.

“You beseech me?”

“I-I do,” The Artist replied, almost questioningly. “But, um, who exactly are you?”

“Most call me Old One-Eye,” the man said. “You are welcome to do the same.”

“Old One-Eye?” he asked. “Isn’t that from Warhammer?”

“I’m old and I have One-Eye,” the voice snapped. “What else are they going to call me?”

“S-sorry, sir,” The Artist murmured.

“Your promoter informs me that you have run into a nasty creative block, yes?” Old One-Eye pressed.

“Indeed,” The Artist said solemnly.

“I can offer you inspiration, divine or mortal,” Old One-Eye continued. “If you wish to receive it.”

“I’d take anything at this point, sir,” The Artist said.

Old One-Eye laughed. It was a rumbling chuckle.

“Well then, if you seek my aid, come and visit me tomorrow morning. There is a tower in your city, human. In its basement is a food court. Meet me before a pizza place called ‘The Coliseum’ at eleven sharp and I shall grant you a chance at a masterpiece.”

“The Coliseum,” The Artist replied, turning to his desk and scribbling the name onto a scrap of paper.

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“I will warn you, child,” Old One-Eye said, “you must come with an open mind or you will never leave your doomed, creationless grave.”

“I like to think I’m open minded,” The Artist said.

“Really?” Old One-Eyed said with a sardonic twist to his words. “Do you believe in God? Any one will do.”

“No,” The Artist said slowly.

“Do you believe in angels?” Old One-Eye asked on the immediate heels of The Artist’s admission.

“N-no,” The Artist said.

“Interesting.”

The line went dead, leaving The Artist alone in his studio.

Slowly, he returned the phone to its base and poured himself another glass of whiskey. He downed it, then stumbled back across his cluttered studio and picked his most recently discarded work up from where he had knocked it. He held it out before him and gazed at it.

By any metric of artistic grading, it was truly perfect, or close to it. The colour, while not finished, was exquisite, and the form the paint had taken was both ghastly and harrowingly beautiful, much like his now-revered original piece. But still, the more he gazed at it, the more a warm and sickly feeling tugged at his gut. Tugged at it and told him that the painting was awful. The painting was soulless, and horrid, and unworthy-

Slowly and gently, The Artist put it back onto the easel. Then he walked towards the door of his attic studio, turned off the light, and descended into his apartment.

The Artist walked down the frigid street. The city was in the grip of autumn and a ghastly wind blasted past him. The artist wore a long coat, its collar pulled up against his face and a scarf wrapped around his neck like an overzealous python. His hair blew about wildly, and he soldiered through the gale, avoiding the eyes of the others who fought against the wind around him.

Glass towers rose above him and he finally reached the one he sought. He pushed through the revolving door and walked into the skyscraper’s ground level. His eyes scanned the area for any form of sign postings and saw one for the food court, an arrow ges-

turing to an escalator. He pulled down his coat's collar as he strode towards it, and began to unwind his scarf, the building's heating a pleasant change to the chilling outside.

He reached the escalator and walked down it, pushing his way past a collection of people simply standing upon it and allowing the motors to carry them away. With his coat billowing, he marched into the bustling food court and ran his eyes over it. There were dozens of eateries, and he frantically looked for one dubbed 'The Coliseum'.

He eventually saw it, heralded by a fat Italian mascot wearing gladiator armour. The Artist marched towards it and scoured the tables and benches in front of it, trying to find the enigmatic 'Old One-Eye'.

Finally, he caught sight of a strange fellow wearing a grey coat. Well, he thought it was a fellow. The creature was utterly androgenous and sexless. It had a head of grey hair and was missing an eye. It possessed no eyepatch or set of sunglasses. Instead, the empty socket was on full display, a few cauterised tendons still quivering in its pit.

Feeling a fluttering of mingled excitement and dread, The Artist walked towards the one-eyed man, and slowly inched himself into the chair opposite.

Old One-Eye did not react as The Artist slid into the seat before it and nervously folded his hands on his lap. The strange man's lips coiled into a smile after a few moments, and its singular eye blinked.

"I sorely hope you're the artist I was talking to last night," Old One-Eye said in a strangely ordinary voice.

"I-I am," The Artist stammered in reply, trying to keep himself from looking his companion in its singular eye.

"Interesting," Old One-Eye murmured, running its single eye over The Artist. "You're younger than I'd thought you'd be."

The Artist raised an eyebrow at this. "Well, you're..." he trailed off and gazed into Old One-Eye's face. It was neither old nor young, The Artist concluded. It just was. There were wrinkles of an aging widow, and there was smooth skin of bright-eyed youth. The entire creature was a patchwork of ages, and the more

he stared at it, the more he was sure that the ashen coat it wore was actually a set of grey wings curled around a gaunt and skeletal body.

But as soon as the notion had come, it was gone, and the strange, androgenous cyclops was still sitting there, a strange smirk on its pale face.

“You’re...” The Artist mused. “Stranger than I thought you’d be.”

Old One-Eye laughed at this. A weak, fickle gesture. “Stranger?” it asked.

The Artist shrugged, sure that the creature he was looking at was really some kind of conjured mirage over the top of something otherworldly, ethereal, or strange.

“Stranger,” he confirmed.

Old One-Eye’s smile broadened. “Interesting,” it said again.

There was a brief moment of silence.

“Well then,” Old One-Eye said, clasping two pallid, ashen hands on the table before it, “you have an ailment of inspiration?”

The Artist nodded slowly. “Yes, sir, or ma’am... I’m not really sure,” he trailed off.

“Either or will do,” Old One-Eye said. “But tell me, artist. Tell me of your ailment. Do you lack ideas? Do you lack the means to communicate them? Is there something else?”

The Artist licked his lips and leant forward hungrily. “I have ideas,” he began to rave. “I can see in my mind, so many ideas... But when I go to paint them, they are just so wretched! Even if every brush stroke is perfect, every colour in synchronous harmony... It’s all just shit!”

Old One-Eye stroked its hairless chin contemplatively. “Tell me more,” it said.

The Artist raised an eyebrow. “More?” he asked.

“More,” the one-eyed creature said.

The Artist let his head fall forwards and ran his fingers through his matted curls.

“I can’t,” he breathed. “I just can’t. Even if I get the most perfect of ideas, they just turn stale.” He looked up at One-Eye’s

singular eye, tears forming in his own. "It's like I know, deep down, that I cannot produce anything anymore. That the last great painting I made will be the last one. The last one to be as inspired and beautiful as those that came before. Every attempt has been nothing but a pale imitation of something I've already done, or even worse, just being a dreary copy with a changed pallet..." The artist leant back in his chair and let out a breath. "I have nothing left to give! It's all over! I cannot give anymore. The passion is gone! I drew all of my most proud works before I even became a real artist. Before I had an agent and galleries and collectors clamouring for my talents! I sold them all for pocket change, to tourists on the streets, or to patrons at conventions! I scrawled them under highway bridges, or in the backs of old school textbooks... I've lost it..."

He trailed off as a lone tear fell from his eyes and drizzled down his face.

"I see," the cold voice of Old One-Eye replied a moment later. "I see the problem. You have the ideas but no direction. You have the colours but no beauty..."

The Artist looked deep into the peculiar creature's single, bloodshot eye. "Can you help me?" he begged.

"Not directly," Old One-Eye answered.

The Artist felt a pit open in his stomach.

"But I can point you into the directions of some who can... Old... acquaintances of mine."

The Artist's eyes narrowed and his mind filed itself into a proverbial point of desire.

"Okay," he said breathlessly.

"I told you to open your mind," Old One-Eye said. "And I mean it."

"Anything, at this point," The Artist said.

"Very well," Old One-Eye replied. Slowly, it reached into its coat and produced a bundle of tattered parchment, bound in fraying string.

The Artist raised an eyebrow.

"Patience, my homo sapiens friend," Old One-Eye chided. Slowly, it undid the twine and allowed a collection of tattered pa-

pers to unravel. Etched upon them were strange runes and eldritch markings.

“W-what is that?” The Artist asked.

“Pages,” Old One-Eye replied, its voice sounding almost bored. “Pages ripped from the spine of The Codex Infernus.”

“The Codex Infernus?” The Artist asked. “What is that, like a religious book or something?”

Old One-Eye laughed. “No,” it said dismissively, stifling another chuckle. “Far beyond that. The Codex Infernus is The Book. My benefactor wrenched these pages from it millennia ago, and they ended up in my hands, as all forbidden things do.”

“But what is it?” The Artist asked. Feeling a near-indescribable mix of greed and fear at the sight of the pages. He knew he wanted to read them, but knew they were not meant for his eyes.

Old One-Eye tapped the table. “Think of it like this,” it began. “Imagine that we were in a book. Let’s see... Twenty-first century earth... Harry Potter!” it exclaimed. “Say, for example, that we were In Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone!”

“Okay?” The Artist mused.

“Now say that, in the book of Harry Potter, that Harry Potter finds a copy of Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone. That he can look ahead and see what happens, or whatever. Now imagine that Harry realises that if he changes the words in the book, it changes them in his life. No longer is he an orphan, and no longer is some bargain-bin dark lord after him, no longer are his friends poor and his enemies rich...” Old One-Eye’s singular orb rooted itself on The Artist’s eyes. “That’s what The Codex Infernus is to us. The Book of Books... the power to write your own reality... Anyway, we only have these three pages, but on them are some instructions. Instructions on how to summon the Urs. Agents of The Great Cycle.”

“The Great Cycle?” The Artist asked.

“Yes,” Old One-Eye said dismissively, “The Great Cycle. You know, the only one that matters. The beginning, the middle, and the end?”

The Artist frowned.

“Creation, Preservation, and Destruction?” Old One-Eye

raised an eyebrow. “Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva? Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos? Kutlakh, Sionysus, Druzhor? Birth, life, death? Not ringing any bells?”

“N-no, it is,” The Artist stammered. “Just, um, what does this cycle have to do with anything?”

“Everything,” Old One-Eye snapped. “But we won’t be beseeching the creator, preserver, or destroyer. They’re busy, as always. No, you will be beseeching other members of the cycle. Lesser members. Besides, the domain of The Three is purely narrative, you perform in a visual medium, no?”

The Artist nodded.

Old One-Eye unfurled the parchment further and slid them across the table towards The Artist. “I’ll be needing these back, obviously,” it said. “But give them a read.”

The Artist gingerly picked the ancient paper up and gazed down at the three sheets. They were coated in a litany of bizarre runes and runic markings. He stared down at them quizzically.

“I can’t read this,” he said.

“It’ll come to you,” Old One-Eye said. “But, allow me to explain. These pages will give you the ability to send out a summons to The Seven.”

“The Seven what?” The Artist asked.

“Well,” Old One-Eye said, lacing its fingers together and leaning back in its chair. “You’d probably think of them as angels. That’s how you’ll see them, at least.”

The Artist scoffed. “Angels?” he asked.

“Is there a problem?” Old One-Eye snapped.

“No,” The Artist hastily amended.

“Good,” Old One-Eye said coldly, rooting its eyes with those of The Artist. “You think you’ve gone mad?” it asked.

“Not yet,” he squeaked.

Old One-Eye smiled. A horrid and sickly smile. “Good,” it mused. “Now, the more powerful of these angels might be able to resist this summons, but it’s all I’ve got, and by extension, all you’ve got.”

It smiled.

The Artist massaged his temple. “I,” he stammered. “It’s all

a bit much, I'm afraid."

Old One-Eye shrugged. "It's your choice from hereon. I cannot make it for you. I cannot force you to summon The Seven. You could go back to your studio and toil over your canvases before reaching the final realisation that all artist's do... Or," it gestured to the trio of tattered pages in The Artist's hands.

The Artist nodded, then cleared his throat. "Um, so, do I owe you anything for all this?"

"In time," Old One-Eye said. "In time I will receive a painting from you. I always do. Peculiar art and forbidden pieces always end up in the halls of my palace... I hope yours is as beautiful as it is ghastly." With that, Old One-Eye rose to its feet and turned towards The Coliseum's counter. It walked towards it, then past it, and came to a stop before a featureless door that sat beside. It pulled it open and disappeared into the inky darkness beyond.

The Artist sat there for a moment, then risked a glance at the papers he held. Somehow, the runes had reformed themselves into English words, and spelled out a chant that would somehow summon forth The Seven Angels. He shook his head and tore his gaze from the tattered pages and buried his face in his hands. "What the hell?" he breathed.

Slowly, he got to his feet and pulled the collar of his coat back up. He tenderly wound the twine back around the parchment and stowed it in his pocket, then made his way back towards the frigid autumn wind.

As The Artist walked down the street, the wind howling around him, his phone began to vibrate. He bit his lip against the cold and pulled a hand from one of his pockets. He fumbled about in his coat and produced his cell phone, and saw that his agent was once again calling him.

He answered. "What?"

"Good day to you too," The Agent said.

There was a bout of silence punctuated only by the growl of the wind.

"How did it go?" The Agent asked, eventually.

The Artist let out a small laugh. "How did it go?" he mocked. "Who knows?" He let out a slightly-more-delirious laugh.

“It went!”

“Well, what did he say?”

“It,” The Artist corrected, “gave me three pages supposedly taken from The Universe Book or some nonsense and told me to use them to summon seven angels unto me and give me divine inspiration.”

He heard The Agent chuckle.

“Okay, but seriously, how did it go?”

The Artist frowned and let out a sigh. “Fine, I guess,” he mumbled, electing not to correct his agent on his belief in his prior joking. “I’m on my way back to the studio now, so we’ll see what happens.”

“Okay, good-o,” The Agent said. “Just wanted to check in on you. Hope you paint the most beautiful piece ever or whatever. Just get me more of what you did last time and people’ll eat it up! I have to be across town, I’ll call you tomorrow morning!”

With that, The Agent hung up the phone and The Artist slid his phone back into his pocket. He nestled his exposed hand back into the cozy embrace of his coat and picked up his pace. He dashed across the road, hair blowing wildly, and fought through the gale until he reached the house he was renting. It was a big Victorian thing, with arched ceilings and dozens of windows. It had been effectively split into three units by the landlord, and The Artist produced his key and slipped in through the back door.

He put his coat onto the coat rack, pulled the fragile pages from the pocket, and headed back up towards his studio. He ascended to the third-floor attic and shut the trap door behind him, sealing him inside his sacred space. He turned on the lights and illuminated the area.

It was as he had left it.

Dozens of discarded paintings littered the floor. Paint pots were stacked in the corner, his desk was still a mess, and the work depicting the unmasking maiden was still sitting on his easel, undisturbed. The artist walked towards his desk and collapsed into the chair.

As he sat there, pondering what strange new world he had unwittingly opened himself to, his eyes bore into his collection of

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whiskey and he found himself pouring out a glass. The foul liquid filled his goblet, and he took a long swig, savouring the burn as it slithered down his throat.

After a few more sips, the delightful fog of inebriation came to cloud his mind and he leant back in his chair and began to think.

He didn't believe in angels, did he? He didn't believe in magic and cycles and summons? He didn't believe... Did he?

But then he thought of Old One-Eye. There was something wrong with it. It was like it was a mirage, conjured over some feathered and horrific ashen creature. The darkness beyond the door it had opened was more than just gloom. It was inky and thrummed like the surface of a mirror when light bounced over it...

Slowly, The Artist downed his glass and poured out another. Only when he felt the happy sluggishness of a slight drunken haze, did he turn his attention to the three pages. He undid the twine with slightly-shaking hands and gazed down at each in turn.

They were written out like a recipe. A ritualistic recipe that would summon forth The Seven Seraphs. The Artist began to read the ritual aloud and clutched his temple.

*'Take an apple on the threshold of death... Anoint it in soot and the foul muck of The Kingdoms of Men... Christen it in semen and the liquids of sex... Shower it in blood ripped from thy own veins... Mark it with salt and sand and crumbled ruins of structure... Then set it ablaze. Let it burn and smolder and fester and die, and call through the aether to those it so heralds...'*

He let the pages fall to his desk and screwed his face up in perplexed contemplation. He let out a groan and got to his feet. "Where am I going to find all that?" he grumbled.

The Artist stood there and thought for a moment, then downed yet another glass of whiskey, and made his way towards the door of the studio. He pulled it open and descended onto the second-floor landing and shuffled his way off towards his kitchen. His kitchen was one of three in the mammoth old house, and was on the second floor. It was small, and had clearly once been used for the maids and servants to cook their meager meals in.

He walked in and looked around. The Artist had not been eating a lot of late, and the kitchen reflected that. The surfaces were filthy and the food stashed about were swiftly going bad. The Artist walked towards his fruit bowl, a bowl that was quickly on its way to becoming a compost heap. He smiled triumphantly as he fished through the refuse and pried forth a browning, shriveling apple. He deposited it onto the countertop, then walked towards a cupboard. He rifled through it and pulled out a bag of table salt, and set it down beside the apple.

Next, he opened a drawer and pulled out a steak knife, and he grabbed the lighter he used to light the ancient stovetops. With the four items in his hands, The Artist wracked his brain. Then, he remembered the old fireplace on the ground floor, and descended the stairs. He marched through the house until he entered his living room. It was small and possessed two chairs, and a small table with a tv perched atop it. Ignoring the amenities he owned, the Artist walked towards the old fireplace and pried it open. A cascade of soot and dust assailed his senses, and he grinned. With trembling hands, he put his apple onto the floor of the fireplace and began to roll it, end over end, until it was caked in soot and dirt.

Gingerly, he cradled it as he retreated back upstairs, cringing as he left a trail of soot through the house that would burn away his damage-deposit.

Pushing all monetary concerns from his mind, The Artist scampered back into his studio, and locked the door behind him. He quickly cleared off his desk and laid the items he had collected upon it. He gazed down at them. At the rotting apple, coated in soot, at the bag of table salt, to the old lighter, and the steak knife, glinting in the light.

His eyes gingerly met the knife and he took it in a trembling hand. Slowly, he held it up to eye-height and bit his lip. He rolled back his left sleeve and picked a bottle of whiskey off of the floor and placed it upon the table before him. He unfastened the top, allowing the sickly, fermented scent to tickle his nostrils. Before allowing the knife to bite his flesh, he realised he needed something to embalm the impending cut with, and so he reached down and produced a blank, discarded canvas. With the disdain

of haste, he used the knife to cut a long strip free and deposited it onto the desk alongside the other items.

Steadily, The Artist felt his muscles tense and he lowered the blade to the palm of his left hand. With a small yelp, he let the implement bite into his flesh and quickly drew it backwards. Deep crimson welled in the gash, and he quickly outstretched his hand to loom over the soot-coated apple.

He squeezed his fingers into his palm and thick globs of blood dripped forth. They drizzled out of his clenched palm and fell like pathetic rainfall upon the sooty apple. They left crimson trails in the grime, and The Artist quickly unclenched his fist, doused the wound in whiskey, and wrapped it tightly in canvas.

He gritted his teeth through the agony, and then returned his attention to the ritual. He pulled open the bag of salt, reached in with his unwounded hand, and produced a small handful. He tossed it over the apple, and saw it stick to the soot and blood in small clusters.

Satisfied, he closed the bag and turned his attention to the last substance needed. He looked from side-to-side sheepishly, then unbuttoned his trousers. He managed to coax his reproductive member into a state of artificial excitement and seized it in his good hand. With the other, he gingerly held the noxious apple, and he lovelessly and lustlessly managed to perform his reproductive tasks. A million potential offspring were sprayed onto the apple's surface, and The Artist quickly made an attempt to clean himself up.

With the preparations underway, he consulted the scraps of parchment a final time. Sure enough, they instructed him to set the apple ablaze, and there was a small chant written beneath. He memorised it, then returned his attention to the apple.

He gingerly picked it up and carried it to the centre of the room, where he cleared a small spot on the laminated flooring. He produced his lighter, and with a shaking, fearful breath, held it out to the apple and pulled its trigger.

A flame flickered to life at the end of the instrument and lapped at the hideous concoction. However, it did not set the thing ablaze. The Apple sat there, as semen and blood mingled upon its

sooty skin. With a frown, The Artist consulted the pages of The Codex a final time.

“Well, it doesn’t say I can’t use an accelerant,” he muttered. With that, he walked back over to his desk and hefted his still-open bottle of whiskey. He carried it over to the apple and let some of the alcohol drip onto its skin.

He returned the whiskey to the desk, then tried again. This time, fires sprang up upon the skin of the apple, then quickly bloomed into a small blaze. The Artist let out a shocked gasp and stumbled backwards. His eyes were transfixed on the fire, which was eating away at the fruit, and the soot, and the blood, and the salt, and the cum.

Then he remembered the chant.

“Oh, children of The Cycle, I call to thee!” he screamed, fear and excitement mixing together to amplify his voice. “Oh, Seven of The Cycle, heed my summons! Come and grace me with your presence and your power!”

As the last syllable rolled off of his lips, the fire erupted. No longer was it a fire. It was a blinding, white-hot ball of divine flame that ate the apple and its coating in an instant, then went out.

The Artist let out a shocked cry. Then, once his eyes were adjusted, inspected the area. There were no signs that the apple, or the fire, had ever existed.

The Artist let out a curse, and frantically looked around.

Then, reality rippled...