

# *The Seraph of Kitsch*



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*Part Four:*

*The Angel of Tartarus*

The Artist let out a cry as The Real rushed back to claim him. The icy hold of the void between worlds was gone, and as he stumbled about his cluttered studio, he was sure he could still smell the faintest traces of the muck of Babylon. The icy grip of Babylon was gone, and there was no sign of The Dark Angel. The air was eerily still and silent.

The Artist let out a breath he wasn't fully aware he was holding and walked towards his desk. Out of habit more than any real desire, he clasped a nearly empty bottle of whiskey and poured himself a glass. He took a swig, and as the liquid burned his throat, two vaguely wing-shaped wreaths of blazing orange light appeared in the centre of the room. They hovered over the wood, about six feet off of the ground. Orange lightning bounced about in their midst, and with the roaring of a blazing inferno, they bloomed and cast plasma and boiling magma out into the room.

The Artist shielded his eyes, but did not flee. He stood, transfixed as the third extra-planar visitor forced its way into being before him. As before, images swirled in their depths. Fire lapped at the trappings of civilization, demons lashed the flesh from the bones of chained men, and the guilty wailed hoarsely. Hellfires burned, tribunals sentenced torment, and wicked men were plucked apart by crows. Trios of vengeful demon-spirits assailed the killers of their own kin, damned souls howled in anguish, and packs of horrid monsters prowled about, stinging the wicked with barbed tails.

Then the terrible owner of the wings appeared before them.

The Angel of Tartarus was a colossus that was housed within a shell of spiked, baroque armour. It was made of brimstone and granite, a titanic effigy to demonic imagery. Little of the entombed angel was visible, but fires seemed to lick at the insides of its helmet, two blazing pinpoints of light faintly visible within its eye-slits.

The Artist scampered behind his desk as the seven-foot titan took a thundering step forward. The lights in the apartment flickered and died, and a guttural, crackling, breathing emanated

from the angel. It sounded faintly of crackling fats and slithering oil. The entire studio became illuminated in orange, flickering radiance, and the fiery eyes of the entombed angel bore into The Artist.

“As I have been summoned, I have appeared,” The Angel rumbled.

The Artist stood there, frozen in place. The dregs of his whiskey was clasped in a shaky hand, and the shadows danced long and lithe upon the walls as The Angel’s wings flickered and ebbed. The voice of The Angel of Tartarus was terrible. It sounded as if pits of gravel were being ground into one another, and grated against the very fabric of The World.

“You are the one who summoned me so?” The Angel rumbled after a few moments of relative silence.

“Y-yes,” The Artist said, attempting to regain his composure and downing the last of his drink.

“Do not be afraid, child,” The Angel said. “I mean you no ill will. Only those with malice in their hearts need fear me.” It paused. “No,” it amended a moment later. “Only those with malice in their past, and a desire to atone for it, need fear me.”

“R-right,” he stammered, slowly moving around his desk to stand before the titanic creature.

“Do you fear me, child?” it boomed.

“No,” The Artist said hastily, running his fingers through his sweaty hair. “It’s just that, well, your siblings were a little different.”

The Angel let out a rumble. A strange, sizzling, guttural rumble.

The Artist realised a moment later that it was laughing.

“And you think that Babylon and Eden weren’t?” it mocked.

“Well, no,” The Artist mumbled. “Anyway! Who are you? Babylon said you were ‘The Seraph of Agony.’”

“And he was correct,” The Seraph of Agony affirmed. “I am The Angel of Tartarus. The Blazing Sister. The Seraph of Agony.” The wings bloomed. “And you are an artist,” it said. “So, tell me artist, why beseech us? Your kind rarely do, especially in these recent years.”

The Artist licked his lips. “I need to see.”

“And you have two eyes,” The Angel of Tartarus cut in.

The Artist chuckled at this. "I need to see beauty. Art. I need to understand it. I cannot paint, and I need to see what I'm missing. What I need to see to create. To conjure beauty. To inspire. To make... well... art."

The Angel of Tartarus gazed at him with her set of blazing eyes. "You wish to see my realm?" she asked. "I assume that is what the others showed you. Their domains. The Domain of Paradise, and The Domain of Dominion. You seek to experience the Domain of Agony?"

The Artist squared his shoulders and locked gazes with the angel, averting them a moment later to avoid their vibrance blinding him. "If that's what it takes."

The Angel of Tartarus nodded, and then turned on the painting which sat proudly on the easel. To the gothic countenance of a girl wrenching her own face away.

The Artist watched on in awkward silence as The Seraph of Agony observed the painting.

A moment later, she turned back to him. "I know what is wrong with it."

The Artist raised an eyebrow.

"You don't think she deserves it."

"What?" he mumbled.

"You think of her as innocent," The Angel said. "There is no beauty in her anguish. You think her undeserving."

The Artist went to respond, but The Angel of Tartarus held up a hand, encased in a granite gauntlet.

"It is easier to show you," she said. "Come."

The Angel of Tartarus outstretched her hand, and slowly, The Artist walked towards her, placed his empty glass onto the desk, and took it. Her hand was warm, like a clay pot boiling on a stove.

Then, The Angel of Tartarus flapped her wings, and The Artist was once again sucked into the inky, crushing darkness that lurked beyond The Veil.

The blazing, titanic angel barreled through the inky Irreal, pulling him through the thick void. The Angel of Tartarus aimed herself at a fiery, black and orange world wreathed in scarlet light-

ning, and The Artist cringed against the impending re-entry to a reality...

Tartarus was cold. It was dark. It was gloomy. It stretched on for infinity, an endless maze of frigid stone tunnels far underground. They were grey and lifeless, and the only sounds to punctuate the eeriness were the sounds of ghastly gales, flapping wings, and howls of agony. In one of the tunnels, two orange wreaths of energy burst into existence, and formed the vague shape of twin wings. Then, the wings flapped, and two creatures melted into reality. One, a titan clad in stone-like armour, the other, an artist wearing a jacket and trousers.

The Artist fell to the cold floor and felt his stomach churn. However, he managed to keep the minimal content of his stomach contained, and shakily got back to his feet. He looked up at The Angel of Tartarus. He could see wicked men being lashed, bodies snapped on the rack, and horrid demonic creatures with leathery wings plucking apart a young woman in the midst of the blazing wings. Then, the energy that comprised them began to congeal into a leathery flesh of brownish colour. Claws appeared on the wing's tips, then they flapped. When they did so, they snapped into sharp focus, taking the form of a bat's wings, or those of the most cartoonish of demons.

A frigid wind howled through the tunnel, and The Artist pulled his jacket closer around his body.

The Angel of Tartarus proudly lifted her helmeted head to it and allowed it to ruffle her leathery wings. The gale carried with it shrieks of agony, demonic cackling, and a haunting emptiness. The Artist turned to the angel.

"What?" Tartarus rumbled.

"It's cold," The Artist said, his teeth beginning to chatter.

"Yes," The Angel answered, beginning to walk. The Artist fell into step beside her as her thunderous footfalls bounced around the tunnel.

"I always thought hell would be hot."

"This is not hell, child. This is Tartarus. This is my realm. The realm of agony, not judgement."

The Artist looked around. The walls let off an unearthly chill. Their brickwork was ancient and absolute, and before he could reach out to touch one, another burst of frigid air blasted down the tunnel and he stuffed his hands back into his pockets.

“S-so,” The Artist said. “Where are we going? Eden took me to a tree, and Babylon took me to a tower.”

The Angel of Tartarus looked down at him. “We travel to The Pit,” Tartarus replied in her baritone rumble. “The Pit of Tartarus.”

“Right,” The Artist mumbled, shivering as the dregs of the latest gale slithered past him and ruffled his clothing.

“All these tunnels lead to it,” The Angel of Tartarus said. “Now, let us walk, and let you observe.”

The thundering footfalls of The Angel of Tartarus echoed out into the tunnel, and The Artist fought to keep pace with her long strides. Occasionally, The Angel’s wing would brush against his hair, and he would instinctively recoil.

As they walked, the air began to get colder. Occasionally, they would walk past a piece of the wall that was cracked, and from that crack would stem an unfathomable heat, but the cracks in the ancient brickwork were scarce. As they continued towards the tunnel’s end, the brickwork subtly began to change.

As time marched onwards, sounds of moaning, crying, screaming, and shrieking became audible. As they reached a twist in the tunnel, and rounded it, The Artist was presented with a near-endless corridor, leading towards a pale light at its end. Lining the corridor were hundreds of cells. Small cells. No larger than the dorm room The Artist had rented during art school.

As The Angel of Tartarus began to lead him towards the end of the corridor, a mighty gale blasted towards them from the tunnel’s end, carrying with it the moaning and shrieking and begging that The Artist was sure now came from the cells. He felt his stomach churn a little, and shivered as the winds passed him. Then, he continued onwards after his angelic guide.

As they reached the first of the cells, to which The Artist realised had no door, the sound of whirring machinery and soft cries of anguish were audible. The Artist poked his head inside the



cell and immediately averted his eyes. He felt his stomach roil once again, and scampered off after The Angel of Tartarus.

What lay inside the cell was some kind of mechanical contraption. It had a seat, and arrayed before that seat was a frame. A frame that housed drills and saws and blades held in mechanical arms. Sitting on the seat was a naked man, bald and shivering against the howling winds. He was moaning in clear agony as the device pushed spinning drills into his eyes. The man just sat there, crying in anguish as his eyes were reduced to globs of gore, and the drills slowly removed themselves from his face.

As The Artist turned away, he could swear that he saw the man's eyes heal, before once again, the drill bore them away.

As he scurried after Tartarus, he saw that none of the cells had doors. All of them were open. All of them contained a naked, bald human, and some means of torture. Across the hall from the eye-bore room, there was a room with a reclining chair in it. Sitting on the chair was a woman. Looming above her was a collection of clockwork arms. She just sat there as they lowered themselves towards her mouth, hands, and feet. She then let out a shriek of agony as the hands began to rip off each of her finger and toe nails, and pluck each of the teeth from her mouth one-by-one. She wailed and thrashed on the chair as blood poured from her mouth and her limbs, but as soon as the clockwork limbs receded, new teeth sprouted in her mouth and new nails grew over her digits.

The Artist shuddered and wrenched his eyes away from the woman. No matter where he looked, he could see into one of the cells. No matter how he attempted to occupy his brain, he could hear moaning, or screaming.

He saw a room with a man inside it. He was sitting under a shower of water so hot it was melting his flesh away. He yelled in anguish, and the minute the water shut off, his skin re-grew, and he just sat there, waiting for the water to turn on once more.

A woman lay over a block while an awful leathery demon with bat-wings and a mandible of jagged teeth lashed at her back with a spiked whip. It tore chunks of flesh off of her, until her back was naught but a patchwork of blood. Then, the demon recoiled its whip and looked down expectantly with a set of sparkling, fiendish



eyes. The skin slithered back into place, and the woman's back was once again unblemished and pure.

The Artist was sure he heard the tortured woman whisper "please, again." And as she did so, the demon unfurled its whip and began to lash at her once more.

He turned away and saw a cell with nothing in it save for a man. He was convulsing on the floor, his body snapping as it spasmed uncontrollably. He had wrapped his entire head in plastic, and was suffocating to death. He twisted and groaned, and then fell still. A moment later, his body twisted and popped. It slowly undid every break and twist that had killed it, and then the man began to struggle for breath once again.

The Artist reeled on The Angel of Tartarus. "What the fuck is this place?" he cried.

Before The Angel could answer, a mighty bellow of frigid air swept through the tunnel.

"This is Tartarus," she said a moment later. "This is agony. The truth of it."

"Why are you doing this to these people?" The Artist cried. "Is this where we go to suffer when we die?"

"No," Tartarus said, "not all. Do you see any doors? Do you see any chains, or locks?"

The Artist pondered this.

"They are here because they want to be here. They could leave at any time. They could rush from their cells and cast themselves into the abyss. Into oblivion. Into Asphodel's desert and final darkness. But they don't. Some souls come to me. Come to my realm. Those that crave punishment for their deeds. They stay here. They let my furies torment them for as long as they wish. For that is the prerogative of wicked creatures, especially of your kind, especially those that went unpunished in life. It is a rare creature that does not, on some level, wish to be caught. Wish to be punished. Wish to atone for their crimes. They want to be tortured, and so I indulge them."

"What the hell..." The Artist murmured, trying as he might to tune out the hundreds of cells they walked past.

"As I said," The Angel continued. "Torture and misery with-

out cause is not beautiful. But there is a beauty in the wicked being punished. There is an art in damnation. There is a sick satisfaction at those who were wicked being sentenced to wickedness. That is the truth. That is the truth you lack. Those who are innocent offer no satisfaction when agonised. But the wicked, deep down, crave it.”

“So, you’re telling me to make a morality play?” The Artist asked as the tunnel began a slight incline, and the washed-out light at its end came to dominate it. “You want me to show the wicked being punished? You want me to force values onto others? To show them the err of their ways?”

“Nothing so trivial, child,” The Angel of Tartarus retorted, “but if that is how you wish to learn my lesson, so be it.”

“Hang on,” The Artist snapped, reeling on The Angel. “Don’t make this about me!”

“But this is about you,” Tartarus replied coldly. “You summoned us. You read from The Codex. You called out to us from across the voids of creation. Don’t try to deflect.”

The Artist fell into silence as they approached the end of the hallway. The chill of Tartarus was growing as they neared it, and all that punctuated their awkward silence was the thunder of Tartarus’ boots and the cries of satisfied agony stemming from the open prison around them. The Artist’s teeth began to chatter and he bundled himself up in his jacket. The maw of the tunnel grew closer, and soon, they were standing on its threshold.

The Artist let out a whistle of awe. Spread out before him was a mammoth glacial cavern. All around its walls were the mouths of other tunnels, the same as the one they were standing in, and from all of them, the cries of agony called. Stone steps lead down from each tunnel, towards the floor. The floor was a massive frozen lake, and in its centre, was a pitiless black abyss. High above them, among the icy stalactites were dozens of horrid creatures. The Artist looked up and was presented with many of the hideous, lanky, bat-winged fiends that he had seen whipping the woman in the cell.

Then, a mighty bellow of wind rose from the abyss, and rose up into the ceiling. Jets of frigid air rushed into each of the tunnels,

and violently wrenched The Artist's hair and Tartarus's wings about. The Artist felt his gaze drawn to The Pit. It sat in the centre of the lake of ice, absolute in the totality of its darkness.

"Beautiful isn't it?" Tartarus asked.

"Yeah," The Artist mumbled. "What's down there?"

"I am," The Angel of Tartarus replied. "The truth of this realm. The truth of this form. The truth that you think you desire." She swiveled her helmet to regard him. "Come," she demanded.

The Angel of Tartarus beckoned for The Artist to follow her onto the precarious set of stone steps that led down toward the frozen floor of Tartarus. The Artist gingerly followed, his hand resting on the wall of ice. Tartarus thundered down the stairway deliberately and slowly, and The Artist took the time to take in the eery expanse.

High above him, the horrid demons cawed and flew, far below him the ice sat. As he gazed down at it, he frowned, and became aware that there were things in the ice. Stuck beneath its surface, twisted and trapped in their icy tomb.

"What's under the ice?" The Artist asked.

"Patience," The Angel replied.

The Artist fell back into silence and they continued their journey towards the floor. Finally, The Angel of Tartarus planted a boot onto the impossibly thick ice, and began to walk towards The Abyss. The Artist followed after her, nearly slipped on the ice, and slowly continued after The Angel's long strides. The Angel of Tartarus became aware that her mortal visitor was falling behind, and slowed her pace.

The Artist scampered to catch up with The Seraph of Agony, and that was when he caught sight of one of the objects sealed below the ice. He let out a gasp when he recognised it. A bald, naked, strangely androgenous person was trapped below the ice. Their body was twisted into an awkward pose, and its eyes were glued open, staring up at the surface. The Artist could see that all around him were others, just like it, naked, bald, and staring up at the surface frozen in place for eternity. All across the lake, and deep into its depths, the same was visible.

He looked up when he became aware that The Angel of

Tartarus looming above him. He looked up into her flaming eyes.

“What are they?” he asked.

“They are the, how would you phrase it? Permanent residents?” The Angel mused.

The Artist raised an eyebrow.

“They are the ones that choose to stay,” The Angel of Tartarus elaborated. “The ones who cannot give up on their torment. The ones who cannot forgive themselves for their crimes. The ones who wish to suffer below this ice, twisted and unmoving until all of creation falls into Asphodel’s clutches, and ceases to be.”

“They choose to stay?” the Artist asked.

“Yes,” The Angel of Tartarus said. “You saw the cells. They are open. They can leave at any time. They can walk down the steps, as we did, and cast themselves into The Abyss. Into The Pit. Into oblivion, where they are free of my realm and can enter the grey desert that Brother Asphodel governs.”

The Artist felt a fluttering of fear at the mention of The Pit. He felt his eyes dragged towards it. Towards its dark depths. Towards the totality of its darkness.

“But,” The Seraph of Agony said, “some choose to stay. They beg me to entomb them below the ice. And they remain there, accepting their agony forever.”

The Artist looked down at the entombed creature once again, then rose back to full height.

“Come, artist,” The Angel beckoned. “The Pit awaits.”

The Artist tore his gaze from the entombed creatures, and fell back into step beside the titanic angel. He felt a fluttering of dread in his stomach as they neared The Pit. The air grew colder, The Artist’s breath coalesced in the air before him. He found himself huddling closer to The Angel, sapping the warmth that was wafting from its burning body.

As they neared the edges of The Pit, no gale of frigid winds rose forth. The Pit sat there, a gaping maw, an eery and hum thrumming in its depths.

The tips of The Angel of Tartarus’ booted feet hung over the edge of The Abyss, and The Angel leant forward to peer into its depths. The Artist gingerly came to a stop beside his angelic es-

cort and looked over the edge. The Pit was impossibly dark. It was deathly cold and he knew with a certainty that defied creation that it led to the very heart of Tartarus.

Above them, the murder of demonic furies fell silent, and cast their infernal attentions down to their liege-lady and her guest.

The Artist looked up at The Seraph of Agony, and realised that his knees were trembling. “You want me to jump?” he asked, his voice quaking with an elixir of fear and cold.

The Angel of Tartarus turned to regard him. “You seek the answers. You seek the enlightenment of our kind. You summoned us. If you do not desire to claim that enlightenment, that is your prerogative.”

The Artist peered into The Abyss and gulped.

The Pit gazed back at him, like a pitiless, unblinking pupil.

Then, The Angel of Tartarus began to laugh.

The Artist froze, then reeled on The Seraph.

The Seraph of Agony’s laughter was grating and guttural. Then, as abruptly as it had come, it had gone. The eye-slits in The Angel’s helm locked with the Artist’s watery eyes. “You wish to jump, but fear it,” she said. “But it is not a fear to jump, with your kind, it is a fear to fall!”

The Artist slowly did up the buttons on his jacket and regained his composure. “It’s not a fear to fall,” he retorted. “We always fall, it’s the jump that frightens us.”

The Angel of Tartarus cocked her head to one side. “Oh?” she rumbled.

“Jumping makes us responsible. Falling absolves us of blame. I summoned you, as you said. I jumped.” He turned his back to the pit, feeling an unearthly chill slithering up his back. Then, he stepped backwards, and fell into the pit. He let out a cry as the world fell away from him, and he tumbled head-over-heels into the darkness. As he fell, he looked up at The Angel, and as the frigid grip of The Pit encased him, he could see that The Angel was The Pit. It was The Frozen Lake. It was every tunnel and every step. Every cell and every horrid, torturous implement. It was the murder of demons squawking in the stalactites above. And finally, it was every tortured soul that called Tartarus home. They had become The

Angel, and he knew that if he stayed in this realm, he would too.

And then the darkness enveloped him. The hum of the abyss thrummed in his ears, at a near-deafening volume. The air grew deathly cold, his hair began to freeze, and then, the visions came. The darkness around him burst into colour. Strange colours. Some he recognised, many he didn't. It arrayed before him all the kingdoms of Tartarus.

A wicked man was sentenced to damnation. He was cast into a fiery pit, where he began to blacken and burn. A wicked woman was locked in a cage, and a murder of crows began to pluck her apart. A thieving child was locked in a stockade, and a fierce whip bit into his back.

A shrieking trio of demons hounded the killer of her own kin into a brutal suicide.

A circuit tripped and lightning struck the brain of a convicted man.

Hellfires burned. Tribunals of demons sentenced eternal torment. Souls, wracked with anguish, shrieked in never-ending pain. And above all, held above the tortured masses were the culminations of their sins. The Artist could see every thief, every murderer, every adulterer. He could see every fraud, every assault, every collusion. And he saw their punishments. Souls, screaming in agony in a lake of tar and fire, but he knew with a surety that they accepted their punishments as just, for the blazing angel that presided over their horrid domain willed it. Willed them to be punished, and willed them to repent even as they cried out for more...

Then a mighty gale of frigid wind rose from the bottom of the pit and cast his tumbling body into its glacial edge. The Artist felt his body snap against the walls of The Pit, but he did not cry out. The Cold numbed his agony, and he fell into the darkness, his twisted form silent...