

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.

"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...

Part Two:
The Angel of Eden

The ripple formed the vague shape of ethereal wings. Green wings. In their hazy midst, The Artist could make out faint images and figures. He saw rolling gardens, coiling serpents, and trees burdened with bloated apples. He could see naked creatures clothing themselves, the temptations of mortals, and the loss of paradise. He could see beautiful days and blissful nights, suns and moons, and above all, the kiss of a traitor.

Then, the ethereal wings flapped and a woman melted into reality before them. She was naked. Her eyes flashed a vibrant green. Her form was fertile and healthy, coloured in the likes of a tribal goddess. Her lips were red, her hair green. However, on a second observation, it was not hair at all. Her head was framed by a coiling mass of serpents, which writhed about atop one another and whispered into her ears.

The Angel of Eden locked her icy green eyes with The Artist and smiled. Her smile was terrifying, like a serpent unhinging its jaws. "You summon me?" she asked, pulling her bedazzling wings closer to her alluring form.

The Angel slithered forwards, her hips swaying seductively, her every movement punctuated by a serpentine grace. "It has been a long time since your kind has called to us," she continued in her sickly sweet, but somehow icy, hiss of a voice.

The Artist stood there, transfixed by the emerald creature. His eyes twitched in pure shock, and a cry of fright was frozen upon quivering lips. The wings of the strange creature flashed and swirled like vortexes, showing him the vestiges of paradise and sin.

"Oh my..." The Artist mumbled. "You are real..."

The Angel of Eden laughed. It was a strange laugh. It coiled around her tongue like a snake. "Afraid so," she said.

"You're an angel," The Artist did not phrase it like a question. He knew, with a certainty that defied creation, that this creature was an angel.

"Well, to your eyes, yes," The Angel of Eden said. She

splayed her arms and wings, "I am The Angel of Eden, The Emerald Sister, The Seraph of Paradise." The snakes atop her head writhed and hissed.

The artist took in a shaky breath and took a small step towards the clandestine being.

One of the snakes whispered in Eden's ear.

"What be your name?" she asked. Before The Artist could reply, Eden cut him off. "No! Never mind... Your name is irrelevant. It's just a form, a shadow..." She took a sensual step towards him. Slowly, one of the snakes slithered towards The Artist and hissed into his ear.

The Artist clenched his eyes and cringed against the snake's advance.

"You're an artist," The Angel of Eden crooned. "Well, how I've missed your kind!"

"I am," The Artist said slowly.

"Why have you invoked our rite?" The Angel of Eden asked, beginning to slowly encircle her summoner.

"I have a problem, and I'm told you can fix it," The Artist said slowly.

"Really?" Eden hissed. "I don't know what mortal problem one could experience that would warrant summoning us." She made a full circle around the stunned man.

The Artist fought to keep himself from staring at the angels exposed breast, but found meeting her gaze an eerie prospect. "I, um, was told there'd be seven of you," he said.

Eden's snakes hissed amongst themselves. "My siblings will be coming, in time. Some of them, at least. But there is a protocol to this sort of thing. The rite calls us forth in age order."

"You're the eldest?" The Artist asked, cringing as he attempted small talk with the ethereal, eldritch, creature.

"No," The Angel of Eden said dismissively. "But Brother Asphodel never concerns himself with mortal affairs. He's far too busy, The Grey Brother... The Seraph of Death... He takes those tasks very seriously... But me, on the other hand, I find you organics and your flailing rather amusing."

Her wings blossomed behind her, and showed The Artist

a psychedelic haze of naked women, plump apples, and writhing, whispering snakes.

“Besides, what would I be without your kind? Without your lusting and your desires... Without your sins and your temptations?”

The Artist continued to gaze into the beguiling, misty wings. He could see rolling fields, a lone apple tree, and two apes holding each other in impassioned embrace as blood rained down around them.

“Focus mortal,” The Angel of Eden snapped, coaxing The Artist out of his stupor. “You summoned me for a reason, I trust.”

He nodded. “Y-yes,” he stammered.

Eden looked down at him and fluttered her eye-lashes. The snakes atop her head coiled around her, their dozen upon dozens of eyes boring into The Artist. “Go on,” she crooned.

“I,” The Artist said slowly. “I can’t paint,” he admitted finally.

The Angel of Eden let out a harsh cackle and her snakes recoiled in shock at the sound. “I’m sorry?” she asked.

The Artist averted his gaze and felt his face flush scarlet. “I need ideas, inspiration, something! I’m an artist who can’t paint! Everything is stale and wrong and-”

Eden’s snakes hissed in her ear and she walked past the artist and came to admire the painting set upon his easel. “You seem to be doing a remarkably good job of it for someone who can’t paint,” she cut in.

The Artist’s words caught in his throat and he turned his attention to the painting. To the beautiful maiden peeling away her face.

The Angel of Eden gazed down at the painting for a moment longer, then turned her head to gaze back at her summoner. She bit her tongue seductively. “She’s pretty,” The Angel crooned.

The Artist felt his face grow redder.

“She’s based on someone, isn’t she?” The Angel continued, barely containing a leud smirk. “They always are, there’s no shame in it. You artist types are all the same. Your heroes are always you, in some shape or form, and your villains are often the same...” She laughed. “But the romance, the pretty things, they’re nearly always

based on someone you fancied, at some point.”

The Artist sheepishly met the gaze of one of Eden’s snakes.

“It’s okay, darling,” The Angel continued, “you can tell me.”

“I’m not a writer,” he said finally. “I don’t have heroes or villains.”

“Nonsense,” The Angel of Eden said, waving a naked hand. “All art tells a story.” She caressed her chin and gazed back down at the painting. “What’s wrong with it?” she asked. “Most creatures could never hope to paint something as beguiling as this?”

“It’s all wrong!” The Artist exclaimed, coming to stand beside the angel, gingerly stepping around her ethereal wings. “There’s no passion. There’s no spark! There’s no vibrance to its sensuality, nor anything remotely controversial about the gore and-”

“Darling, it’s lost its charm because you are getting old.”

“I’m not old,” The Artist said indignantly.

Eden and all thirteen of her snakes flashed him a condescending look.

“I’m 26,” he added.

“You’re getting older,” The Angel of Eden compromised. “To a mayfly you are unfathomably old. To a child you are older than sin...” She trailed off. Her snakes writhed about and hissed into her ears. “However,” The Angel said slowly, “to me you are barely an insect. Well actually, I’d say you’re closer to a bacteria. Tiny, but not unimportant...”

“Can you help me?” The Artist snapped.

“What do we think, my pretties?” The Angel of Eden asked her horde of snakes.

A chorus of hissing ensued.

“I can show you,” The Angel of Eden said slowly. “I can show you what you are missing. I can show you the essence of life, and by extension art. I can show you all the things I have dominion over... That should be inspiring enough. It was for Eve, at any rate.”

The Angel of Eden turned around and strode into the centre of the room. She stood there, in all her sexual exhibition, and splayed both arms and wings wide. The ethereal canvas of her wings bloomed, and a slideshow of temptation met The Artist’s gaze in an instant. The snakes affixed to her head slithered and hissed,

and slowly, The Seraph of Paradise outstretched a hand.

“Take my hand, Artist,” she said, “and come with me.”

The Artist inched forward and gingerly took Eden’s icy hand in his.

Then, The Seraph flapped her wings, and reality fell away.

The Artist found himself tumbling through a frigid, inky darkness. All around him, the darkness swirled and ebbed. It lapped at his flesh and enveloped him like a lake of syrup. He tried to scream but found he could not. He could not move at all. He tumbled, through the nebulous void that rested between the worlds, an icy hand still clutching his. He caught sight of The Angel of Eden. However, now she appeared to be naught but a blazing comet of green energy burning in the dark.

Then, The Artist saw that there were other things in the darkness around him. Horrid things. All around him, fell monsters lurked and slithered, shying away from the blazing trail Eden left in their home. In addition, dotted about the void were blurs of colour. Some colours The Artist recognised, others he did not, and he quickly found his mind bending, fighting against the powers of impossibility to remain sane.

The Angel of Eden then began to steer them towards one such blur. The one she approached was a mix of rich greens and deep blues. In a matter of moments, they barreled into it, and they were enveloped by a nexus of warm light...

Two ethereal patches of wing-shaped energy appeared on the plains of Eden. At the apex of a lush hill, the wings winked into existence. In their midst, images began to swirl. Images of plump apples, coiling snakes, and naked lovers. Then, the wings flapped, and two figures melted into being. Attached to the wings was the naked monarch of Eden. Her head of snakes writhed and hissed as they took corporeal form once more, and her soft toes flared as they were embraced by the lush grass.

Holding the hand of The Angel of Eden was The Artist. He let out a cry of shock as reality rushed back to catch him, and he tumbled onto the grassy hill. Eden let his hand fall away from hers, and The Artist felt soft tussles of grass come to caress his cheek. He

just lay there, breathing deeply, relieved that the horrid, inky darkness had abated.

Slowly, he pressed himself back up onto his hands and knees. He looked around and saw that he was now kneeling upon a lush hill in a verdant, gorgeous garden of some kind. It stretched on far into the horizon. Fields of lush, sweet grass, orchards of trees ripe with plump apples, and the smell of nectar was carried upon a warm wind. He could hear birds singing above him, and snakes slithering in the long grass to his side.

Suddenly, he felt his stomach roll, and he bent over and began puking. Whiskey-scented vomit made mass exodus from his stomach, past his teeth, and onto the luscious grass. The Artist gagged and wretched, and finally sat back and wiped stray bile from his mouth.

He looked up at The Angel of Eden. She stood there, staring out at the clear blue sky and the rolling fields of green. Her emerald eyes crackled with power here, and slowly, her wings began to take a solid shape behind her. Slowly, scales pressed themselves into reality and covered the ethereal gateways. With a flap of the wings, they became fully realised and corporeal, adorned with scales the same green as her snakes.

The Angel of Eden looked down at her companion. "Welcome to Eden," she said, her voice carrying itself with an otherworldly grace in this realm.

The Artist slowly pushed himself to his feet, said feet coming to be enveloped by the devilishly soft grass.

"This is Eden?" he stammered, taking in the view. The sun was a perfect warmth, no clouds blotted the sky, but yet all the mass of vegetation was perfectly healthy and coloured in the most gorgeous of natural hues. "As in, the Eden?"

The Angel of Eden shrugged. "This is but a shadow of the true Eden," she said. "Much like me, but yes, this is The Garden." She gestured to the abject beauty that surrounded them.

"What happened?" The Artist continued, "how did we get here?"

"We flew."

"What was that place? The place before? The Darkness?"

"The Void," Eden answered. "The dead space between worlds. The proto-zone. The land of Urs and monsters."

The Artist let out a shaky breath. "Why are we here?"

"You seek inspiration," The Angel of Eden said coldly. "Are you yet inspired?"

The Artist let out a whistle and spun around. "It's pretty," he said slowly.

"Come," Eden said. "I shall guide you through this realm. You will see all that makes up Paradise. We will travel to the centre of my world, and there you can see. And you may find an answer to your question."

"The centre?" The Artist asked.

"Yes," The Angel of Eden said. "I will take you to The Tree of Knowledge." With that, she began to walk down the hill, her naked hips swinging alluringly.

The Artist fought to keep his gaze from them, then continued after his angelic guide. The sun of Eden beat down upon The Artist, but it was neither harsh, blinding, nor burning. It simply warmed his flesh. To compliment the glow of the sunshine, a faint breeze drifted past and brushed the thick tussles of The Artist's hair away from his eyes. He let out a laugh and looked around.

The Angel of Eden cast a glance back to him and smiled. "As I said, paradise."

The Artist nodded. "Yeah," was the only word his lips could conjure.

The Seraph of Paradise laughed. "Observe the garden, artist. Observe and be inspired."

The two of them fell back into silence. A silence punctuated only by the tweeting of pretty little birds and the slithering of concealed snakes. The meadow gave way to a small glade, and the two of them began to traverse a soft pathway, shielded by the gentle embrace of a canopy of leaves.

Flowers bloomed beside the trail. Bold, pretty things, with juicy petals and rich nectar. Eden's snakes licked their lips at the smell, and wriggled about on her head, trying to get closer to the scent. The Artist felt his eyes close and he took in all of it. The warm sun, the heavenly nectar, the grass gently tickling his bare feet.

Eden cast a glance back to her companion as they continued through the glade. "Be careful, mortal," she chided. "Stay on this path. This garden is not safe for one such as you... Not without me, that is."

The Artist's eyes snapped open and he felt the allure of the place loosen its grip on him. "Of course," he said.

Eden's eyes twinkled, and she fell back into silence.

As they moved through the trees, the sound of running water punctuated the idyllic haze. The Artist looked about and saw a pretty, sparkling stream drifting gayly beside them. Little minnows and other such fish swam about in the currents, and the water carried them on towards what was probably a quaint little pond. The water itself was a bedazzling blue, perfectly reflecting the sky's divine hue and painting a rippling water-colour of the surrounding trees in inverted beauty.

The two creatures continued onwards. As they did so, the glade fell away to be replaced by rolling hills. The path quickly found itself elevated above a steep, but small ravine. At the base, the river continued to run, heading off towards a neat little pond that glinted in the sunlight. Below the surface of the pond, The Artist was sure he could see a titanic snake curled up, basking in the cool embrace of the water. He hastily averted his gaze and continued on his way.

They walked past the river, past the pond, and continued, climbing steadily higher in altitude. The path became a little rocky, and the ravine continued to run alongside it. However, its bottom was now shrouded in tall, damp grass. The Angel of Eden continued onwards in front of The Artist. The snakes wriggled about and hissed into her ears. She would occasionally let out a laugh, or reach back to stroke one of their heads, and The Artist found the entire thing rather unsettling.

One of the larger of Eden's snakes hissed something to her and she stopped. She risked a glance over her shoulder, flashing The Artist her beguiling emerald eyes. In that moment, The Artist lost his footing on the rocky ground and tumbled sideways. He let out a cry of panic as he found himself tumbling down the ravine, several sharp rocks biting into his flesh and clothing. He pulled his arms in

close and gritted his teeth against the pain.

The Artist rolled and jolted toward the bottom of the hill. He broke through a small patch of plant life and tumbled into the basin at the bottom. The long grass embraced him with its damp tendrils, and then, he landed on something. Several hundred some-things.

A chorus of hissing erupted around The Artist's prone form and he felt his breath catch in his throat. The floor below his was wriggling and writhing. Shrill hissing slithered into his ears and he slowly looked around. When he caught sight of the canyon floor he let out a scream. All around him were snakes. One massive, shuddering orgy of snakes. The serpents swirled about with one another, but all seemed to take notice of the hapless human that had fallen into their midst.

He went to get up, but the snakes quickly began to envelope him. Serpents fornicated on his chest, coiled around his wrists and ankles, slithered into his clothes, and coiled around his head. He could feel their dry hides, and closed his eyes. Once again he screamed, but quickly snapped his mouth shut when he felt a snake slither towards the opening.

Then, the snakes began to talk. They spoke in a strange, serpentine language that The Artist could somehow understand. Gaggles of serpents slithered on over and gathered around The Artist's ears and began to speak.

"Ah, another of Eve's long-lost sons comes back to us!"

"Another son of Adam come to fornicate in our garden?"

"The clothes persisted, we see!"

"Why are you here, ape?"

"Did She bring you to us?"

"Is She here?"

"Has The Angel returned?"

"Is the second daughter here?"

"You wish to see the secrets of Eden?"

"You wish to eat of the fruit?"

"There is no need!"

"We know all!"

"We know all that Eden does!"

"You need not eat the forbidden seed!"

"She will show you nothing. Nothing you don't already know."

"You are an animal."

"All animals lust after the same."

"Food."

"Wealth."

"Sex."

"She will show you nothing, child!"

"The fruit is pointless!"

"The fruit is naught!"

"The fruit is just a form!"

"The fruit is but a shadow!"

"It is nothing but a shallow piece of paradise."

"A temptation."

"It is nothing more."

"And nothing less!"

"You seek the muse of paradise?"

"There is no muse in paradise!"

"What is there to strive for, child?"

"You are already here!"

"Perfection is elusive, but you strive for it nonetheless?"

"Feast your gaze upon perfection now!"

Then a shadow fell upon the mess of serpents. A shadow with two mighty wings splayed out behind it. The serpents looked up fearfully at their monarch, and scampered off back into the grass. The embraces of lust were broken apart, cozy serpents slithered out from The Artist's clothing, and the entire mass of slithering creatures made a hasty exodus.

The Artist gingerly opened his eyes. He was shaking, tense and traumatised. His eyes were met with the naked form of Eden, standing over him, a hand outstretched. Her scaly wings blocked out the perfect sun, and the snakes affixed to her head gazed at him icily.

"I did warn you," The Seraph of Paradise said.

The Artist did not reply. He slowly reached out and took her soft hand, and was wrenched back to his feet. He looked around the

ravine, and found no sign of the serpents anymore.

The Angel of Eden flapped her draconic wings, and suddenly, they were standing back upon the path.

The Artist shivered and looked around.

However, before he could speak, The Angel of Eden simply said, “come.”

The two creatures continued onwards. The rocky hill rose to its crescendo, and as they came over the apex of the hill, the great garden of Eden was spread out before them. Rolling, verdant hills coated the land, and all seemed to lead towards the basin below. Standing at the heart of the world was a mighty apple tree. It was the size of a small skyscraper, and millions of plump, perfectly ripe apples hung from its branches. All around the tree was a meadow of beautiful flowers. Their colours were as varied as their species, and The Artist let out a whistle of awe.

The Angel of Eden stopped on the cusp of the hill and turned to face him. “Bedazzling, is it not?” she crooned. Her snakes writhed about and gazed at The Artist with their hungry eyes.

“One way of putting it,” he murmured.

Eden smiled, then began her descent towards the meadow. The Artist fell into step behind her and gingerly made his way down the hill and into the thigh-high legion of flowers. He could hear snakes slithering about out of sight, and kept close to his Angelic guide.

The meadow gave way to the two creatures, and slowly but surely, they came to stand under the protective reach of the apple tree’s aloof branches. The perfect sun was blotted out by the mighty leaves of the all-encompassing tree.

They soon found themselves clambering over titanic roots that had broken free of the ground, and steadily came to the mighty trunk of the tree. Sounds from above drew The Artist’s attention, and he craned his neck and gazed up into the branches above. High above the ground, populating every branch of the mighty plant, were primates. They hooted and jumped from branch to branch, their genitals shrouded by loins made of leaves. They plucked apples from the tree and guzzled them.

However, upon closer inspection, The Artist realised that

the majority of the apes were fornicating with each other. The entire tree was a massive orgy of primates, scented by the juices of the apples they so carelessly glutted themselves on.

The Angel of Eden came to a stop.

The Artist stopped beside her. "So," he said.

"So," The Seraph of Paradise parroted. "Welcome. Here it is, the Rosetta Stone of sin."

The Artist cast his attention back into the branches above. "What now?" he asked.

"Now," The Angel of Eden muttered, walking towards a lower-hanging branch and prying a particularly large apple off of it. "Now you eat. Now you see. See all that paradise can offer your mind, and inspire your soul." She held out the succulent fruit.

Gingerly, The Artist took it. As he did so, the snakes affixed to the angel's head hissed and writhed, rooting their serpentine gazes upon him.

"Go on," The Angel of Eden implored. "Give into temptation."

The Artist gazed down at the apple of Eden he held in his hand. It was perfectly shaped and a heathy size. The red of its flesh was strong and rich, and it smelled faintly sweet. Slowly, he brought it up to his mouth and took a bite. The flesh of the apple gave way to his teeth effortlessly, but without forsaking the satisfying crunch. The apple then proceeded to melt in his mouth, and explode with sweet flavours. It was as if his every tastebud was sent into a state of ecstasy at once.

The Artist closed his eyes and took another bite, and as he did so, he felt his mind begin to cloud. The orgasmic ecstasy of the apple began to spread throughout his body, and he let out a contented sigh.

Then, the visions started, and he collapsed before the mighty tree. He collapsed before the angel. He collapsed before the snakes and the primates, and before he became lost in visions and wonder, he realised they were all the same thing. Every single one of them were but shadows cast by a nebulous Ur of cool blue and brilliant green.

The infinity of paradise was laid out before The Artist. All the varied forms that made up its entirety. A vortex of pleasures and tranquility hued in colours both real and impossible. Suns set over blooming meadows. Two young lovers kissed for the first time. A child beamed on their birthday morning. A virgin was lost to the march of time...

Water fell around tranquil pools. Naked apes frolicked in each other's embrace. Naked lovers cuddled under a veil of twinkling stars, and sweet fruits bloomed on healthy boughs.

The Artist could see beauty. He could see sin, and desire, and temptation. He could see the very Ur of beauty, the sordid strange thing that cast its shadow over so many places in the multitude of universes. However, he was tethered to Eden, and so he saw only the shadows of beauty cast upon its meadows and trees and coiling serpents. He saw sex and the shining of the sun, sweetness and mingled innuendos. Heard growls of ecstasy and screams of joy...

Then, the visions fell away. The Real rushed to catch The Artist, and he felt long grass embracing him. He could smell the aroma of Eden's nectar. He could feel the cool wind on his face, and then, his eyes fluttered back open.

He was lying on his back, staring up at the mighty tree. The apple was still clutched in his hands, a large bite missing from its flesh. The Angel of Eden still stood beside him, her head of snakes a hissing chorus. However, the plane of Eden had changed. No longer did the sun reign in the sky. Now, the cool canvas of night had fallen. Perfect stars twinkled down from the heavens, like tiny fires, and the cloudless night soothed the slumbering garden.

Steadily, The Artist sat up and clutched his temple.

The Angel of Eden looked down at him. "Well?" she asked.

The Artist pushed himself onto his feet and looked around. "How long was I out?" he asked.

The Angel of Eden shrugged. "Hard to say. Time flows strangely here when it is unobserved. To your mortal faculties I'd say it has been seven hours, but in truth, to the generations of Eden it could have been seven millennia."

The Artist let out a whistle of awe.

“So?” The Seraph of Paradise pressed. “What did you see? Was it useful to your plight? Are you inspired by my beauty?”

The artist looked into Eden’s emerald eyes and smiled. “Inspired?” he asked.

The Angel of Eden fluttered her non-existent eyelashes at him and arched what-should-have-been an eyebrow.

“I came here to see what I’m lacking... What I fail to reproduce in my art...” The Artist trailed off and contemplated The Garden of Eden. “No,” he said finally and flatly.

The Angel of Eden’s lips coiled into a snarl. “No?” she asked.

“No,” The Artist replied. “Not remotely. What I saw, here, and in the little Pomme-de-fever-dream, was nothing but shit. Basic shit.”

The snakes affixed to The Seraph of Paradise’s skull hissed angrily.

“I saw sex, a lot of sex... I saw basic lusts... Forbidden knowledge, nice summer days... but at the end of the day its just pretty pictures and pretty tits, isn’t it? Is that all the great Angel of Eden can offer me? I’d be better off watching a porno for inspiration than coming all the way out here-”

“Enough!” The Angel of Eden snapped. “Lower you tone, mortal! You insult my hospitality!”

“Oh, don’t get all ‘holier-than-thou’ on me now, angel,” The Artist retorted, much of his previous fear in the face of the divine burning away in the face of what it truly was. “You only brought me here because of that little voodoo ritual I pulled! There’s no hospitality involved, I invited myself!”

The Angel of Eden raised her chin indignantly and took in a deep breath. “Very well,” she said finally. “I am sorry that I was not of more help to you, artist...”

The Artist took in a deep breath also. “Sorry,” he said curtly.

“Your apology is not needed, child. As you said, you summoned me...”

The Artist awkwardly shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked around the slumbering garden. “So,” he said. “What now?”

“Now?” The Seraph of Paradise asked. Slowly, she held her

fair hand out to The Artist. “Now I take you back to your London... Now you await the coming of the next of my siblings. The Dark Brother.”

“Wait, D-dark Brother?” The Artist asked.

“Take my hand,” Eden pressed.

The Artist gingerly took the angel’s hand in his, and as he did so, the scales of her draconic wings fell away to reveal two pools of emerald energy. In their midst were coiling snakes, plump apples, and naked primates.

Then, the wings flapped, and The Garden of Eden fell away. The artist went to cry out, but once again found himself smothered by the inky darkness of The Irreal. The blurring pallets of a thousand clandestine worlds soared past him. And then, he was standing in his studio, completely alone...

Part Three:
The Angel of Babylon

The Artist stood inside his studio. The wind howled outside, and a chilly draught was creeping in through the miniscule gaps in the windows. His paintings sat discarded where they had been before, and there was no sign of The Angel of Eden. The Artist let out a laugh and patted down his body, coming to terms with the fact that he was once again standing in London, England, Earth.

He walked towards his desk, and with trembling hands, poured himself a glass of whiskey. He downed it in one gulp and waited. Waited for whatever other eldritch creature would crawl out of the primeval void and manifest itself before him.

He did not have to wait long.

Two patches of inky darkness swirled into reality. They coalesced into the vague shape of wings, and spread themselves wide. In their inky depths, The Artist could see black towers clawing for smog-coated skies, festering pollutants eroding waterways, and flocks of pigeons pecking at the carrion of long-dead cities. Black lightning danced in heavy clouds and rusting crowns crumbled atop shattered thrones....

Then the wings flapped.

A dark figure materialised before The Artist. It appeared to be a pale man with dark hair. He was tall, his features angular and regal. His eyes were a pitiless black, and his midnight hair was exquisitely styled and slicked away from his pallid face. He wore what The Artist perceived to be an abyssally dark pinstripe suit of the most delicate and extravagant tailoring, but in truth would have appeared as whatever he happened to associate with Authority. The final noteworthy feature of the Dark Angel was his right hand. It was concealed within a black gauntlet that, to The Artist, appeared to be a leather glove.

The Angel of Babylon gazed at The Artist with his frigid eyes, and in that moment, The Artist felt compelled to fall to his knees in submission.

He managed to refrain.

"You summon me, Mortal?" The Angel of Babylon boomed. His voice was deep and cold, like the depths of a subterranean spring.

His every syllable chilled The Artist to his bones, but somehow he met the angels' gaze and replied. "I did."

The Artist's voice did not waver, nor quake. It simply stood against the imposing creature.

"Why?" The Angel of Babylon asked.

"Now, now," The Artist retorted, somewhat playfully in the face of the dark angel. "Your sister had a nice list of titles. Let's not skip the formalities."

Babylon rolled his black eyes. "I am The Angel of Babylon," he proclaimed, "The Dark Brother, The Seraph of Dominion." He splayed his arms and wings mightily, consuming the entire room in his ebon shadow. "And who are you?"

The Artist wagged a finger at the angel, injecting his every move with a faux-confidence. "Now, now," he chided. "That's not important, is it? What I am is an Artist. That should be enough for you, no?"

Babylon's eyes narrowed at this. "I see you know how to play this game, Mortal," he said. "You obey the rules of this universe... Yes, your name is unimportant. You are an artist, one of many forms. One of many shadows... But I asked you a question. Why did you summon me?"

The Artist collected his thoughts and absent-mindedly put the cap back onto his whiskey. "I need help."

Babylon raised a dark eyebrow.

Slowly, The Artist walked towards the painting that sat upon his easel. To the beautiful maiden that was tearing away her own face. He looked at it longingly, and gestured for Babylon to do the same.

The Dark Angel followed The Artist's gesture and allowed his gaze to fall upon the painting.

"I need help with this," The Artist elaborated.

The Angel of Babylon's brow furrowed. "Its craftsmanship is exquisite," he said. "The colour is near perfect, and its contents hold a certain gothic beauty. What is the problem?"

"It's not right," The Artist said, his voice rising in pitch as his sheer exasperation built to a boiling point. "There's something wrong with it!" he continued to rave, "It's missing something, and I'm sure I used to have it! I've lost it!"

The Angel of Babylon cut into The Artist with his fathomlessly dark eyes. "I've seen your madness before," he said slowly. "I've seen it consume millions of your forms. You strive for perfection, but perfection, especially in art, is ever-elusive. Only The Great Cycle holds true perfection. You will go mad, in time, if you continue to agonise over such folly as art."

The Artist reeled on the angel. "That's a risk I'm willing to take!" he snapped.

"If you command me to," Babylon said slowly, "I could show you all that Babylon has to offer. All the inspiration its ebon beauty can bestow... I find it is oftentimes more realistic a rendition than my Emerald Sister's realm, especially to a creature like you... But I make no promises."

The Artist took a deep breath and steeled himself. "I command you," he said, "take me to Babylon."

The Seraph of Dominion's wings flashed a strange array of blacks, and he held out his gauntleted hand.

The Artist slowly reached out and took it, his fair fingers closing around the strangely cold object that he perceived to be naught but a leather valet's glove.

Then, The Angel of Babylon flapped his dark wings, and the world fell away. In their place, the faintest after-images of dark towers swirled. If one had been there to observe, for one frightful second, they would have been made witness to all the kingdoms and dominions of the multiverse. All that ever were, all that reigned now, and all that would ever come to pass...

The black realm of Babylon stagnated in near-silence. A veil of thick, sooty clouds enclosed it in gloom, and black lightning danced among them. The ebon streets, caked in soot and grime, stretched on in silence for miles in all directions, but they were empty and dead. Windows were cracked, sewage ran in the streets like rivers, and the black brickwork succumbed to the tireless march of time. In the distance, the titanic funnels of power plants

scraped at the clouds, still pumping out a slew of smog and sludge that corroded what remained.

However, the single largest structure in Babylon was at its heart. A large tower, of archaic brickwork, ascended towards the black sky. It was mostly-featureless, save for a collection of gardens that hung from its flared peak....

It was on one of the outlying streets that two pools of black energy swirled into being. In their midst dark towers and sooty skies flickered and ebbed, and then they flapped, and a dark creature materialised to claim them. Clutching its gloved hand was The Artist, his face aptly displaying just how queasy he was feeling.

The Artist fell to his knees beside The Angel of Babylon. He could feel the contents of his stomach churning, but managed to keep his whiskey down. Slowly, he looked up at the horrifying landscape, and wrinkled his nose at the putrid reek of stagnating sewage, and filthy pollutants.

Then, his eyes befell his angelic guide. No more did Babylon appear to be dressed in a suit. No, now the angel was concealed behind a set of sparkling, black, and baroque armour. Atop the armour was a regal and heavy cloak of midnight hue. His right hand was entombed within a black gauntlet, and he gazed down at The Artist, his eyes like black pits from within the confines of his open-faced helmet. A helmet, that was simultaneously, a black crown.

“Welcome to Babylon,” The Seraph of Dominion boomed, his clandestine baritone rumbling out into the putrid streets. As he talked, his wings seemed to shimmer, and one by one, oily black feathers sprouted forth from their nebulous depths. Inch-by-inch, The Dark Angel’s wings coalesced into completely corporeal wings, which reminded The Artist faintly of a pigeon, if it had been bathing in sewage for a week.

The Artist pushed himself to his feet and looked around. “Holy shit,” he murmured. “This place is rough.”

“Indeed,” The Angel of Babylon conceded. “Unfortunately, I cannot offer you the paradise that my sister reigns over.”

The Artist took in everything. The cracked streets, the crumbling buildings, the looming towers. Then he heard scuttling. Frantically, he swept his gaze over the horrid streets.

"They are merely rats," The Angel of Babylon said flatly. "The only denizens that still remain. Even the pigeons died out, much to my chagrin." The Dark Angel stroked his hairless chin with his gauntleted hand. "Now, come. My time is valuable, and we must traverse this realm promptly."

The Artist continued to look at Babylon. His eyes came to rest on the sooty tower in its centre. "We're heading there, aren't we?" he asked.

"Astute," The Angel of Babylon said. "Yes, The Tower of Babylon is our destination, or more specifically, the gardens."

"The hanging gardens of Babylon," The Artist mumbled. "Of course."

"Come," The Seraph of Dominion demanded.

With that, he strode off down the decrepit street and toward the looming tower. His greasy bird wings ruffled in the wind, and The Artist scampered to keep pace with Babylon's long strides. The air of Babylon was heavy and noxious. The Artist could feel pollution in the air, clinging to his skin and settling around his orifices.

The Angel of Babylon shared in none of the discomfort.

"So," The Artist began, "what happened to this place?"

"What happens to every civilisation," The Dark Angel answered, "it crumbled. Years upon years of decadence and corruption. My whispers hissed in the ears of the Kings and Queens of this realm. They built chimneys to heat their whole world. They built machines to cook and clean. They built vehicles to transport themselves around, and in the end, they put out the sun, and devolved into refuse as their civilisation crumbled around them. The machines broke, and the people died, leaving only the pigeons and the pests behind..."

The Artist looked around as they walked. He could see the skeletons of a dozen dead birds poking out from the rubble, and the tattered remains of a thousand posters clinging to the soot-coated exterior of the buildings. The posters, or those that remained, were bold. Bright reds jumped out from black backgrounds, and catchy slogans and mirages of power were etched over them.

"Beware the alien!"

"The Sun burns, embrace the dark!"

The other slogans and posters were illegible, or had succumbed to time in entirety. However, large banners of blazing red were still draped over many of the buildings, their hems frayed and their iconography tarnished... But they remained.

Then, there was a sound of scuttling in the rubble of the ruined city. The Artist jerked and reeled to face it. Scampering through the wreckage was a collection of mice. Big, white mice. Their fur was exquisitely maintained, and suffered none of the soot or grime of Babylon. Their claws and teeth were bloody, and many were missing chunks of their tails. Being carried by the half-dozen White Mice was a Black Rat. It was larger than they, but it didn't matter. The creature was overwhelmed. It thrashed about, snapping at its captors with large teeth and brazen claws, but it was beaten and bloody, and there were many-a-bite mark on its bloody patchwork of ebon fur.

The Black Rat screamed in a mixture of fear, hatred, and pain, and The White Mice carried it onwards, towards a shattered clearing in the jungle of broken buildings.

The Artist turned to his angelic guide and frowned.

"What?" Babylon barked.

"It's just, I saw-"

"The Mice and The Rats?" The angel boomed in his dark baritone.

"Yeah," The Artist mumbled.

The screaming rat was carried away by the mice, its squeaking agony echoing out into the smog-coated night.

"They are the truth of this realm," The Angel of Babylon continued, coming to a stop. His dark eyes ran over his shattered realm, resting on the tower, that was growing ever-closer.

The Artist came to a stop beside him and craned his neck to follow the small convoy of Mice.

"Do you wish to see?" The Angel of Babylon asked.

"See what?"

"The truth."

"How are some Mice and Rats going to give me the truth?" The Artist asked. "I thought we were heading towards that tower."

The Angel of Babylon rolled his dark eyes. "You are limited

in your thinking for one of your kind. The truth and beauty of Dominion does not come from towers or kings... No, it comes from the people. For without you, what am I to be? What is the point in the dominance and dominion of nothing?"

The Artist looked up into The Dark Angel's equally dark eyes and in that moment, was sure that the creature beside him was the very world that he now traversed. The Angel of Babylon was the White Mice and The Black Rats. He was every poster, every banner, every crumbling building. He was The Tower, and the Chimneys, and the smog-coated sky. The lightning that bounced about in the sooty air were naught but tendrils of his iron will, and the bones of long-dead pigeons were his memories and regrets...

As soon as the lucidity had come, it had gone, and The Dark Angel remained.

"Show me," The Artist murmured.

"As you wish," The Angel of Babylon rumbled, bowing his head. The Seraph of Dominion marched off of the crumbling road and The Artist followed.

They made their way over the remains of a dozen destroyed buildings, and towards the opening in the metropolitan graveyard that the Mice had fled to. As they walked bones of both rodent and bird were crunched beneath their footfalls. The sound of incessant squeaking became audible up ahead, and small effigies of skeletal rats popped up here and there.

The Artist and his angelic escort came to a stop on the threshold of the clearing, which The Artist recognised as a long-abandoned industrial lot. The entire lot was crawling with White Mice. Flaming torches were lit around the place, and in the centre of the clearing was a blazing bonfire. The half-dozen Mice that The Artist had followed dragged the thrashing rat towards the fire, and the assembled Mice began to cheer as they approached.

"What is going on?" The Artist asked.

The Angel of Babylon regarded the scene with indifference. "Observe," he said.

Standing before the fire was a trio of White Mice wearing ornate hats and robes. As the Black Rat was brought to the edge of the fire, the assembled Mice fell into silence. A silence punctuated

only by the hissing and roaring of the flames.

As The Artist looked on, he saw that in the depths of the bonfire were hundreds of charred Rat skeletons. Burning fat sat on the cusp of the fire, and a collection of mighty spits were being prepared by a collection of Mice.

Then, the leader of the Mouse Triumvirate began to speak. It stepped up and stood on its hind legs, using its snake-like tail as an anchor. The Mouse got up and began to squeak to its comrades, a squeaking that formed words in The Artist's brain.

"My Brethren!" The Mouse roared. "Gather around the purifying fire! Gather around the True Flame! Gather around that which unites us all in the ways of The White!"

There was a roaring of applause from the assembled White Mice, and The Black Rat shrieked in fear and tried to get free.

"We have brought another heathen to our blessed ritual tonight comrades!" it continued. "We have caught one of the filthy Black Rats! Those which poison the great city of Babylon and ruin all that is blessed and perfect with their sordid existence!"

Another chorus of squeaking praise erupted forth.

"We will burn away its imperfections in the fires of The White! We will char its horrid Black Fur and render its meat pure for consumption!"

The Artist turned to The Angel. "What the hell?" he stammered.

The Angel of Babylon crossed his arms. "Not hell, child," he said. "This is the truth of earth. Hatred. It unites them. Look around, look to their art."

The Artist saw that around the lot were dozens of posters. Posters depicting Black Rats as cartoonish, mutated villains.

"It unites them, no? Unites them in their hatred of The Other... Without it, they would eat each other."

"This is barbaric," The Artist whispered as the White Mouse's ravings began to build into a hateful crescendo of bile and eugenics.

"Perhaps," The Angel of Babylon replied. "But it is the truth, is it not?" his dark eyes glinted knowingly. "They say that love is more powerful than hate... They are wrong." The Artist didn't no

tice the fingers concealed behind his gauntlet flex at the mention of love. "Hatred is far more potent, and both are as easily manipulated. It is far easier to hate one you once loved than it is to love one you once hated, after all."

The Artist watched on in disgust as The White Mice ran a spit through the still-shrieking and writhing Black Rat, and then cast him over the flames.

"But it is not hate that really motivates them... It's fear," Babylon continued. "Fear is more powerful than love or hate. Look around you. This entire place is a testament to fear. Long ago, a King rose and told the people that if they built walls and cities that they would be protected from the monsters out in the darkness. That if they crowned him and served him, he would protect them from evil. It is the truth of art. Fear. The banners unite people under fear of The Other, or fear of Their King. It is the same with everything. What are fairy tales, but fear? Why do children love them so? Because they know that if they read the tales of brave knights and wise wizards that they will be protected from the dragons and the devils. Fear, Artist, is what motivates mortality... And Fear is how your art controls you."

The Black rat wailed in profound anguish as its fur was set ablaze. The stench of burning hair rose into the night, and it began to fall from its blistering flesh in clumps. Its eyes burned up in its sockets, and eventually, it fell still, much to the cheering of The White Mice.

The artist watched on as the creature's corpse blackened under the flames. How fat dribbled forth and spat out into the crowd. Finally, the Mice wrenched their victim from the flames and one of them produced a carving knife.

"Come," The Angel of Babylon said, snapping The Artist out of the revolting hypnosis. "We must reach The Tower. You've seen enough, for now."

The Artist nodded slowly, feeling his stomach rolling in his gut.

The Angel of Babylon began to march back towards the road, and back towards the path to The Tower. The Artist fell into step beside him, trying as he might to keep pace.

“Your world is horrid,” he said.

The Angel of Babylon raised an eyebrow. “And yours isn’t? How do you think you get your food? Probably looks something like that.”

The Artist nodded glumly, and the two of them fell back into silence, the sound of feasting rising from the crumbled alleys now behind them.

They walked onwards. The Tower grew ever closer, and as they neared it, the buildings grew taller and more ornate. They were in better condition than those previously witnessed, and many of their blazing iconography was still visible. The symbol of a mighty clenched fist dominated some of the buildings, and as they walked, strange little pieces of notably Rat-sized propaganda popped up.

One poster depicted a White Mouse with devil horns and a forked tongue.

Another read “The White Mice are Pests. Exterminate!”

Yet another showed a White Mouse being hung from a building. It read: ‘Destroy the White Menace!’

There were a multitude of other slogans as The Tower grew closer, each as vulgar as the last.

“You see the bigger picture now?” The Angel of Babylon asked.

“Yeah,” The Artist said after a brief deliberation of how to respond.

Babylon’s lips coiled into a smile. “It gets better.”

The Angel of Babylon led The Artist into a mighty plaza, or what would have once constituted a mighty plaza. The Sooty Tower of Babylon loomed over it, and in its centre was a rotting park. All around the park were mighty buildings with pillars and flags, but the flags had long since blown away and the pillars were crumbling. Mighty red banners depicting the clenched fist were draped over the roofs of the structures, and all around the park were thousands of posters. Most had long since succumbed to the ages, but a multitude of the Rat posters remained. However, it was the secondary items of adornment that caught The Artist’s attention. All over the park, hanging from lampposts, were the skeletons of a thousand white mice. Withered flesh kept the skeletons in their

misshapen shape, and at the edge of the park, a gaggle of Black Rats were standing. Looming over them was the largest rat The Artist had ever seen. It was a titan, with a protruding belly and mammoth teeth. It stood on its hind legs and addressed the crowd of Black Rats, and as Babylon led The Artist on by, he could hear the ravings of the fat rat.

“My brethren, The White Mice are a pestilence on this land!” The Black Rat shrieked, spittle flying forth from his jaws. “We will exterminate them all! As our fathers did, and their fathers before them! Their fire perverts what it means to be Rodent-kind! They are perverted, the seed of The White cannot be allowed to continue! Exterminate them all! Wrench their babes from their whore mother’s wombs and dash them against the cobbles! Purify them through blood! We are supreme! Exterminate The White Menace!”

Then the Rat fell out of The Artist’s ear shot, and his ravings returned to faint squeaks of malice.

“They’re so petty,” The Artist muttered.

“How do you think I see you?” Babylon asked as they entered the icy embrace of The Tower’s shadow. “The pigeons were far nicer, but unfortunately, back when The Black Rats and The White Mice were one people, they realised that the pigeons were not like them. They had wings, and so, the rodents became afraid... Or perhaps jealous... Regardless, the mantras back then were still ‘exterminate’ and ‘purify’...”

The Artist nodded numbly as they approached The Tower. It rose up into the smog-riddled sky, an inscrutable monarch to the twisted realm. The area around The Tower was barren. It stood alone in the crumbling city. Unlike the rest of Babylon’s realm, The Tower was undamaged. It stood there, in all its eldritch majesty. The bricks that made up its exterior were black, but they were not coated in soot. They had always been black, and would remain that way until Babylon ceased to be.

Steadily, The Angel of Babylon prowled around the tower. The Artist followed, his eyes flickering from The Tower to its sovereign, and back again. There was no door, nor any way to gain entry to the great tower. The brickwork spiraled upwards in totality, with

no crack or visible portal.

Babylon came to a stop and The Artist followed suit a moment later. Then, The Dark Angel clapped his hands together, and a doorway melted into being. An ornate, baroque archway opened on the skin of The Tower, revealing a stairway that spiralled up into the nebulous heights of The Tower of Babylon.

Without a word, The Angel of Babylon marched forwards and entered the tower, and The Artist quickly followed after him. As soon as the two of them had passed the threshold, reality rippled, and the archway disappeared. In its place, the walls of the tower resumed their endless vigil, and sealed them away from the bleak realm outside.

The Angel of Babylon began to walk up the staircase, and The Artist followed, trying as he might not to be struck by one of the Angel's oily wings. The interior of The Tower was cold and musky. The chill of abject authority wafted from the bricks, and the staircase seemed to ascend for infinity.

Upwards they walked, until they reached the peak of the tower. The staircase led out into a large room. There were four open archways that led to one of the four hanging gardens, and the staircase led upwards onto the roof of the structure. A vicious wind tore through the empty tower, and the smog clouds were palpable from the vantage, their musk hanging barely above the prongs of the Tower's unearthly grip.

Without turning to ensure that The Artist followed, The Angel of Babylon walked towards one of the hanging gardens. His booted feet carried him over the threshold of The Tower and onto the surprisingly solid ground of one of the quartet of hanging gardens. The chains that affixed it to the prongs of The Tower did not shake nor roil as he passed onto it, and The Artist gingerly walked to the edge.

The wind howled around him, carrying the noxious stench of the stagnating city into his senses. He looked down, his stomach threatening to evacuate itself at the sight of the ground so many metres far below. The garden hung from a heavy chain, suspended in space over the realm of the Dark Angel, and slowly, The Artist stepped onto it.

The Garden did not swing, nor buckle under his added weight, and The Artist raced forward to catch up with his angelic guide. He walked out in the bizarre garden. The only plants to remain were the wretched, leafless skeletons of a dozen small trees and bushes. Their branches were brittle and cracked, and as the wind howled around them, they let out mournful creaks.

The Artist finally came to stand beside The Angel of Babylon. Babylon was standing before a small pond that sat in the centre of the hanging garden. His oily wings billowed in the wind and he took in a deep breath, savouring the taste of his realm.

The Artist looked down at the pool. It was filled with stagnant sludge. Festering, noxious, hopelessly polluted mud. Black and silty, it bubbled and hissed like a black potion within a festering cauldron. It smelled of sickness and dirt, and The Artist felt his nose wrinkle.

“What now?” he asked finally. “Eden had me eat a fruit.”

“Bathe,” The Angel of Babylon commanded. “Bathe in the pool of Babylon.”

“In there?” The Artist asked incredulously.

The Dark Angel looked down at his mortal quarry and raised a dark eyebrow. “Did I stutter?”

The Artist peered into the sludge and shook his head. “No,” he said.

“You summoned me,” The Angel of Babylon said coldly. “You asked for my assistance. If you do not want it, I can take you back to your London.”

“Wait!” The Artist said. “Why, though?”

“Bathe in the waters of Babylon. You will see what comprises its beauty. I trust it will be inspiring.”

The wind howled around them.

The Artist peered into the murky sludge, then slowly removed his jacket and placed it on the ground beside The Dark Angel. Piece by piece, he removed each article of clothing, rendering himself naked before the smog of Babylon's crown. When The Artist stood shivering before the festering pool, naked and exposed, he felt the true power of the place he traversed. As his bared feet touched the cobbles of the hanging garden, he felt the raw power of

abject authority coursing through him, and before that high completely took him over, he leapt forward and disappeared into the muck.

The filth that festered in the pool of Babylon was warm. It was thick and silty, and held The Artist's body in its sludgy grasp. It reeked of rot, filth, and mud. It smelled like diesel, and oil, and grease. It filled The Artist's nose and ears, and he fought to keep his lips sealed. The horrid muck began to burn The Artist's skin, the dull prickles of warmth slowly blooming into an itch reminiscent of the most horrid rashes, and spreading everywhere.

The Artist went to scream, but managed to keep it sealed behind his lips.

Then, his mind's eye exploded with bleak colours.

A sun rose over a legion of dark towers. A whip bit into the twisted back of a broken slave. Policemen with batons bludgeoned young men, and the sound of claxons wailed in the night.

Crowns were placed atop greasy heads. Sceptres were hefted above the masses. A dictators' voice, rich with malice and pride, rang out over an assembly of soldiers.

Drapes of blazing red were draped over podiums and elegant uniforms marched side-by-side, with a marching band bleated a powerful anthem.

Portraits of power, in deep blacks and reds, were arrayed down high streets. Marches and demonstrations played on television. Children sat and watched cartoons, but these cartoons depicted The Other as horrid, silly, and strange.

A film crew shot a soulless piece. An actor stood before their green screen, spewing a litany of drivel The People had heard a million times before. A child sat in their bedroom on a rainy day reading from a book, but the words on its pages held no love or art. Instead they coiled like tendrils inside the child's head. A singer stood atop a stage, applauded by Party Members in exquisite dress. The same song blared in a grocery store. In a movie theatre. In a fast-food restaurant. It blared to young men stacking shelves, and young women waiting tables. It played through the radios, to the grizzled old truck drivers and the workers on commute.

And then, The Artist was forced to take a breath. The noxious filth of Babylon slithered into his mouth. It tasted vile. Like vomit and feces and rotting fruits. He wretched and gagged, and rushed to the surface. His naked body emerged from the muck slowly, the sludge trying to keep him in its embrace. He let out a garbled cry, goo drizzling from his mouth, nose, and ears. His skin felt as if it was on fire. As if millions of tiny fire ants were biting him at once.

He moaned and forced himself to the edge of the pool, and managed to free himself from its thick clutches. Muck threatened to drip into his eyes, and he tried his best to keep it at bay.

He fell onto the stonework at the foot of The Dark Angel. As he did so, his body convulsed and he vomited. He vomited up the muck and the filth, accompanied by what little bile remained in his system.

The Angel of Babylon looked down at The Artist. His form was coated in a second skin of silt, and the man just lay there, writhing in pain. Babylon looked up at the sky, and at his unspoken command, it began to rain.

A cold, heavy rain began to fall upon The City of Babylon, and The Angel held his wings over his head like a canopy. The icy rain began to fall, and as it did so, it pulled the muck off of The Artist's naked body, and rendered him clean before the smog-en-shrouded sky.

The Artist let out a weak cough, and slowly pulled himself to his feet. The cold rain ceased to fall as soon as he was clean, and he stood there, wet and shivering.

Babylon's pitiless, dark eyes regarded him.

The Artist ignored him, and slowly regarded himself, forcing his frozen body into heavy, wet clothes.

When The Dark Angel was satisfied that he was decent once again, he spoke.

"So?" he boomed. "Satisfied?"

The Artist stifled a laugh. "What?"

"Do you understand? Do you have what you sought?"

"Do I have what... no!" The Artist exclaimed.

Babylon raised a dark eyebrow.

"You showed me nothing! You showed me nothing but propaganda!"

The Angel of Babylon's lips coiled into a smirk. "That is what art is," he said coldly. "It is made, funded, bought, sold, promoted, to push a message. My Message, or another's like me. It is for The State. It is designed to cause fear, and conformity. The art permeates all, it entertains and it inspires. Inspires faith in The Towers and The Kings."

"No," The Artist snapped. "Not all."

"Not all?" The Angel asked.

"No," he said firmly. "Not all art is bought and sold."

The Angel of Babylon let out a baritone chuckle. "That art is unseen. It is sold for pocket change to a few dozen. It is meaningless. The only art that rises. The only art that survives, is mine! It forwards my message. The power of the political. The power of Dominion, over whatever its artist wants!"

"Your power does not exist under rail bridges and in alleyways," The Artist countered. "The graffiti, that escapes you. And all see it!"

"The graffiti is washed away!" Babylon boomed. "The Kingdom washes it out!"

"And then the children put it back," The Artist countered, taking a step towards the towering angel. "Your dominion has no power. Not really. And it certainly has no beauty!"

The wind howled around The Tower of Babylon.

The Angel of Babylon narrowed his dark eyes. "Very well," he growled. "I will return you home, ape. You will await The Seraph of Agony, and you will not see me again."

Without waiting for permission, the gauntleted hand of The Angel of Babylon clamped itself around The Artist's wrist, and The Angel flapped his dark wings, and they disappeared into The Irreal, leaving the crumbling city behind them...

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 eerie 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

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...

Part Five:
The Angel of Sodom

The Artist let out a gasp as he awoke in his studio. He was splayed out on his floor, the lights above him bathing him in synthetic glow. He abruptly sat up, the memories of his time in Tartarus flooding back. He clutched at his body, certain that his bones were snapped and twisted, and was relieved to find no injuries. He was no longer cold, no ice caked his hair. His clothes were not torn or shredded, and he lurched back to his feet.

He looked around for any sign of The Seraph of Agony, but The Blazing Sister was nowhere to be seen.

The Artist took in a shaky breath and walked towards his desk. He poured himself another glass of whiskey and began to sip at it. He leant back on his desk and stared into the tortured eyes of his painting. Into the bleeding visage of the faceless maiden he had conjured onto the canvas only days before.

Do you deserve it? He pondered. What did you do?

The more he stared at the painting, the more he came to dispute The Angel of Tartarus' claims. The painting was not beautiful because of some perverted sense of justice. No, he had intended for it to be tragic. For it to be profound. For it to be... Well, something that it wasn't. The girl he had drawn did not deserve her fate. She was just a projection. Just some grisly fetish devoted to the god that all over-emotional poets devoted themselves to. He had meant to inspire, to transgress, but all that stared back was gratuity. Gratuity and self-aggrandisement-

But then two oily patches of rust-coloured energy burst into being before him. Between he and his painting, the wings bloomed. In their incorporeal depths, The Artist could see brothels overflowing with lustful men. He could see young boys and girls being raped. He could see sinful overindulgence and a world sucked dry to fuel its patron's pleasures. Vampires wrapped themselves in fleshy masks, masquerades took place in the streets, and a thousand men drank themselves to death willingly. Doomed mortals partied against the darkness, drugs and elixirs were stuffed into veins, and

at the heart of it all was a city, a city being eternally razed by the heavens...

Then the wings flapped and a creature slithered into being. The Angel of Sodom was a slight figure. Its pale body was clothed in a baggy, rust-coloured gown. Beneath it they were completely naked. They possessed dark hair akin to the Angel of Babylon's and their eyes were a swirling mass of colours, varying from rust to clotting blood. The Angel neither presented itself as a man or a woman. Which mortal gender it subscribed to was completely unknown. To The Artist, The Angel of Sodom appeared a beguiling, slightly androgenous, woman, but to one whom did not find pleasure in such company, it would appear to be a gentle and loving man...

The Angel of Sodom smiled and took a slothful step forward. "Hello Artist," it hissed. "You are an artist, are you not?"

The Artist stared into the psychedelic gaze possessed by the angel. Then his eyes flickered to the oily patches of ethereal energy pluming behind it. His gaze soon became lost in an ocean of lust. Boats crewed by castrated rapists sailed down rivers of semen while bloated royals bed each other like dogs in the cabins. Fires rained from the heavens whilst angels hacked blind men to ribbons in the streets. Adulterers met in run-down hotels, and engaged in their clandestine revels.

Then, the oily wings of The Angel of Sodom moved, and snapped The Artist out of hypnosis.

"Yes," he answered finally.

The eyes of The Seraph of Kitsch twinkled. They flared, becoming the horrid colour of clotting blood, and then flickered over to the painting of the faceless maiden. Its lips coiled into a grin.

"Um," The Artist said slowly as his angelic companion gracefully lurched about before the painting and ran its oil-slick tongue over black lips. "Who exactly are you?"

"Who?" The Angel asked. "What would be more appropriate, but I'll indulge you." It glanced back over its shoulder and fluttered its eyelashes. "It's what I do." The Angel bit down on its oily lips and hummed with restrained ecstasy. "I am The Angel of Sodom, The Sister of Sin, The Brother of Blasphemy, The Seraph of Kitsch."

The Seraph of Kitsch splayed its arms and twirled, then came to gaze at The Artist.

“What do you want from me?” it asked. “Inspiration, is that it?”

The Artist nodded. “Yes,” he breathed, his heart fluttering in the presence of the simultaneously horrifying and beguiling creature. The entire entity was a juxtaposition. Holy and unholy. Male and female. Sinner and saint.

“Let me guess,” The Seraph of Kitsch said, sauntering towards its summoner and beginning to prowl around him. “Asphodel refused to show. Eden showed you a bunch of horny apes and writhing serpents. Babylon showed you some rotting towers covered in rodent shit and pigeon bones, and Tartarus showed you a bunch of masochists convinced that their ecstasy is in fact penance for some past sin?”

The Artist felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as The Angel walked around him. “Something like that,” he replied.

He heard The Angel of Sodom laugh. It was a sickly sound. It smelled vaguely of honey.

Then The Artist felt the creature brush up against him, and his shivered.

The Seraph of Kitsch rested its head on The Artist’s shoulder and gazed at the painting enthroned upon the easel. “She’s pretty,” it crooned.

The Artist flinched as the words of The Angel of Sodom slithered into his ears like oily tentacles.

“But she’s not a she, is she?” The Angel continued. “No... I think she’s a he. I think she’s you. Yourself, inserted upon the canvas, disguised as the fairer sex... But where I come from there is no such thing. There is only the individual, and I see her eyes in yours, darling.”

The Angel of Sodom let out its sickly, sweet laugh once more, and brushed past The Artist to stand before him. As it did so, The Artist saw the burning city once again flash across the canvas of its incorporeal wings.

“You have rendered yourself upon that canvas, baring yourself naked for all to see,” it cawed. “Am I wrong?”

“Well,” The Artist began. “No,” he conceded.

The Angel of Sodom grinned impishly and turned to face him. “There is nothing wrong with the picture, darling,” The Angel of Sodom brushed a tussle of The Artist’s hair and sent bolts of primal energy shooting through his system. “I can show you what you fail to see. I can show you everything. Everything my siblings don’t understand.”

The hand withdrew, and lingered before The Artist.

He gazed at it, his eyes constantly drawn to the rusty, oily wings of the accursed angel.

The Angel of Sodom cocked its head to one side and beckoned The Artist forward with its index finger.

“Come,” it demanded.

The Artist took a breath, then took The Angel of Sodom’s hand in his. It was warm, like a fever, and felt filthy and slick against his own.

Then, The Angel of Sodom’s wings flared, and the world around them began to blur. Unlike the previous angels, no nebulous void of inky darkness came to claim them. Instead, the features of the world blurred, and when The Angel’s wings flared again, they were standing in a grimy, dim room. It smelled of sweat and liquor. Strange, psychedelic lights buzzed about on the ceiling. The sound of drinks clinking, people shouting, and music thrumming tore through the air, and bit into the bones of all patrons.

The Artist looked around and saw that they had materialized inside a nightclub. Around them were tables and booths, most of them packed. There were two bars, all of them crowded, and beyond the bars was a large dance floor. It was full, and a legion of youths jumped and lurched about to music conjured forth by a DJ standing on a podium.

“I know this place!” The Artist shouted, barely audible over the din. “This is Empire’s End!”

“No need to shout, mortal,” The Angel of Sodom said as it took a look around the place. “I can hear you just fine.” It brought its oily wings in close to its body, and the horrid images they conjured were lost. Then, the angel laughed. “Lovely place!” it praised.

“What are we doing here?” The Artist asked.

"You wanted to see," The Seraph of Kitsch replied.

"I can see a nightclub anytime I want!" The Artist snapped back.

The Angel of Sodom cocked its head to one side. "We're not here to see a nightclub," it countered. "We're here to see Sodom."

"This isn't Sodom," The Artist retorted.

"It might as well be," The Angel said dreamily. "It's a lot of effort to drag you halfway across the multiverse to a burning city full of vampires, rapists, and pedophiles. Why go there when I can keep it local? Now, let's get us a booth."

"You're having a laugh," The Artist scoffed. "A booth at this time of-"

The Angel of Sodom walked into an empty booth that The Artist could neither confirm nor deny existing a moment prior.

"Sit," The Angel instructed.

The artist raised an eyebrow, then gingerly lowered himself into the seat beside his eldritch companion. From their booth they could see nearly the entirety of the club arrayed before them. They could see drunken girls dancing, bouncers eyeing up people suspiciously, men tipping pretty bartender's ludicrous amounts...

"So," The Artist began.

"So?" The Angel of Sodom mocked.

The Artist looked into its strange eyes. "Why have you brought me here? Why not take me to Sodom?"

"Because I can't be bothered," The Angel said, biting on its lips seductively.

The Artist smiled. "There shouldn't be any choice in it," he said. "I summoned you, remember?"

"Mortal," The Seraph of Kitsch began, "do you understand the rules and workings of The Codex Infernus and how they interact with a creature like me?"

"Well, no-"

The Angel of Sodom fluttered its eyelashes. "Then shut the fuck up about it."

The Artist let out a laugh. "You're not like the others," he said.

"Why? Because I don't hold myself with some kind of oldy-

worldly divine authority? Bah!" The Angel of Sodom cackled. It was a strange sound. It smelled of poison. "I can act how I like. The cycle turns, and my role in it is over, practically."

"What cycle? The others mentioned that."

"The cycle," The Angel of Sodom answered. "Life, the universe, and everything in it. It operates on all levels. In our case, we are dealing with your story. Your cycle, but the universe is as alive as you or I, and it too has a tale to tell."

The artist shook his head, and allowed for his senses to momentarily get lost in the overload of the club.

"What now?" he asked, shifting awkwardly.

"Do I unnerve you?" The Angel of Sodom asked.

"Of course you unnerve me. Until yesterday I didn't believe in angels. And even now, now that I have proof, sitting next to me, there's something wrong with you. It's like you're not an angel at all." "Because I am not," The Seraph of Kitsch said. "I am Sodom. I am a burning city, razed by the heavens. I am sin, and all that is taboo. I am more than this measly form, as you, Artist are more than yours."

"Why are we here?" The Artist asked again.

"To see," the angel replied.

"To see what?"

"Everything. All the sights and sounds this place has to offer."

"How will this help me with my painting?" The Artist said finally.

"Painting?" The Seraph of Kitsch scoffed. "My dear, there's nothing wrong with the painting. It's up here," it tapped The Artist's temple with a strangely slick finger, "that's the problem."

The Artist frowned and fought to form words.

"Ssh," The Angel hissed, placing a finger on The Artist's lips. "Just look. Look around. Tell me what you see?"

The artist leant away from his companion and once again cast his gaze around them room. "A bunch of twenty-something's trying to get in each other's pants," he said finally.

"Oh, my darling, please be more imaginative," The Angel crooned. "Look closer." The Angel then pointed across the room, to the second bar. The Artist followed her gesture with his gaze, and

was met with two very drunken guys. One was slightly older than the other. He had long hair and a lumberjack's beard. He wore an unbuttoned flannel shirt with a vest-top underneath. The second wore a simple jacket and was trying to get the attention of a waitress wearing too much eyeliner.

"Those two drunk guys?" The Artist asked. "What about them? Why are they so special?"

"They're not," The Seraph said, "but drunk is definitely one way to describe them. In fact, it would be an understatement! They're pissed! Blackout, I'd wager. And I'd say they were close to that when they got here a few hours ago," The Seraph of Kitsch giggled at this and clapped its hands together giddily. "Things have only got worse! Judging by the sweat caking them, the fact that this is the second time they've gone to that bar since we've been here, and the fact that Mrs. too-much-eyeliner has b-lined straight to them, indicating they are tipping ridiculously... They're having the best night of their life that they'll ever not remember." The Angel giggled. "Why?"

"What?" The Artist asked incredulously.

The Angel of Sodom turned back to him and smiled impishly. "Why?" it asked again.

"Because they're two dumb idiots who can't control themselves," he ventured.

"No," The Angel said. "Well, yes, but that's not the point I'm trying to make. It's all kitsch, that's my point."

"Kitsch?" The Artist asked.

"Yes, Kitsch," The Angel of Sodom said. "You know, ironic in a knowing way." It winked.

"Okay, it's ironic," The Artist said, "but what's the difference between them and millions of other students getting blackout at the club?"

"Nothing," The Angel of Sodom said. "They're forms, as are they all. But what is the point? What is the point in their night on the town? They won't remember a thing. They won't remember a single song that played. A single girl they danced with. A single taste that passed their lips, save maybe bile. They'll get thrown out of here soon, I'd wager, but look at them. Smiling. Dancing. Laugh

ing. Enjoying themselves. Why? What's the point in an ecstasy they won't remember? Kitsch. They know it's pointless. Deep down, they know. They know, and yet they party on, as do we all. That is the truth of it, artist. That's what you're missing. You're not in on the joke yet. You still think that galleries care about art."

Once again, the laughter accented with honey.

"They care about so little, in the end. The art they acquire is like those two lads. They'll never remember why."

The Artist crossed his arms and leant back. He gazed deeply at the angel, and as he did so, he became aware that this creature truly was no angel. It was sin. Pure sin and hedonism, given form and function. Its wings glistened like oil. In their depths he saw pedophiles and rapists. Young boys stashing porno mags underneath their beds. He saw vampires, partying in a city being perpetually razed by the heavens. He could see angels in the streets outside, hacking away at the vampires, but the vampires didn't care. Still they feasted. Still they fornicated, with smiles on their fanged faces.

Then he became aware that somehow the city of Sodom was the entire club.

He could see a creature on the dance floor. She was young, younger than he. She was dancing alone. She was dressed up in a revealing dress, with too much makeup on her face. She swayed sensually to the music, but every man that approached her was turned away. Every phone number or drink that was offered was turned away. And as The Artist stared at her, he could see that she was Sodom. The makeup on her vampiric face was that of a clown. She had applied it herself, to attract the other vampires, but she knew, deep down, it was kitsch. She could not bring herself to kiss another, or even, to dance.

Then the entire room became a rust-coloured, oily canvas of ghastly images.

The Artist could see the DJ. Looming above the crowd as their sovereign. He was wreathed in a crown of hubris and wild despair. The music his electronic instruments conjured coiled around the room like the tentacles of a noxious leviathan. He was Sodom, in all its perverted majesty. He was kitsch. He knew it. He knew that not one patron cared about him. They only cared about the music.

Cared that he continued to spin tracks, tracks they could dance to, or tracks they would recognize and sing along with. They didn't care for him. But still he acted as if they did, prattling about on his podium and trying his best to hype up the crowd.

The Artist slowly got to his feet and looked around.

Everyone. Every student or drunken youth. All were Sodom. The rusty, oily energy had come to envelope all, and it all led back to one source, the androgenous angel that still sat at the conspicuously available booth.

The Artist then looked down at himself. Where his dinner jacket and pale hands should have met his gaze, his form was now an oily canvas displaying the wonders of Sodom. He could see men covered in sores and boils bedding each other. He could see whores being beheaded by avenging angels, that upon closer inspection had a rabid glee in their hallowed gazes. He could see children burning as fire rained from the heavens, and above all he could see a pretty maiden slicing off her own face. A crowd of people stood and stared as she did it. She was crying. Screaming in pain, but the people could not notice. They simply stared, in awe. He could hear them discussing the beauty of the cuts, the cleanness of the flaying. And then, the girl started laughing. She started giggling madly. She started to sing a mournful song, and all the people clapped. They threw money at her, for her to keep singing in her hoarse, agonized voice. They gave her canvas' with which to spill her blood onto. They gave her pots of gold to take the canvases away, and the woman continued to laugh. As blood cascaded down her face, she wrapped it in bandages, to heal, and when the money ran low months later, she removed the bandages, and took the blade once again to her still-healing face-

The Artist's gaze snapped back to the angel.

The Angel of Sodom raised an eyebrow. "Welcome to Sodom," it purred.

Then, reality snapped back into focus and The Artist was shoved to the side as a gaggle of drunk girls pushed past him to get to the dance floor. He slowly walked back towards The Seraph of Kitsch.

"I get it," he said.

The Seraph of Kitsch

The Seraph of Kitsch smiled and slinked to its feet. "Well," it crooned. "Took you long enough." It reached forwards and gripped The Artist's hand in its. It leaned in close, brushing his ear with its oily lips. "You understand?"

The Artist stiffly nodded.

"Shall I take you back to your studio?"

"Yes," he breathed.

The Angel of Sodom laughed. Once again it smelled of honey.

"Then I shall inform the others that you do not need their services?"

The Artist considered this. "Yeah."

"You will see them, I fear, regardless. The Scarlet Sister and The White Brother. The Seraph of Sacrifice and The Seraph of Judgement. The Angel of Golgotha and The Angel of Armageddon. The Twins of Finality. But which one awaits you, Artist? I'm certainly not telling."

The Artist's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

The Seraph of Kitsch's wings flared, and when the rusty blaze of power had faded, he was once again standing in his studio, completely alone.

The Artist took a look at his painting. He looked into the maiden's agonized eyes. As he stood there, he poured himself another glass of whiskey, and remembered that he didn't believe in angels.

He finished his whiskey, then turned out the lights and descended back down to his flat.

No other angels visited him that night.

The two drunk men were bounced on their next trip to the bar.

The young woman never danced with anyone and went to bed alone.

The DJ pretended the crowd cheered for him.

It was all Kitsch

Part Six:
Epilogue

"It's really quite beautiful," the young woman said as she sipped at a glass of champagne. "In a kind of tragic, artsy way."

The Artist took a sip from his champagne and turned to her. He could see that her hair was clearly dyed blonde and that she had applied vastly too much makeup. Before them stood The Artist's latest piece, just purchased by the gallery. The faceless maiden was now affixed to the wall, and many of the London art scene's most influential people pratted around it, talking and sipping on champagne.

"You think so?" The Artist asked, looking into the woman's almond eyes.

"Yeah," she replied, her eyes flickering back to the painting for a moment before becoming lost in The Artist's once again. "it's so... Well... I don't know. It's just so grisly. I think it's a beautiful statement about modern beauty standards and how they affect young women."

"Really?" The Artist asked, feigning sincerity.

The Woman fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Yeah," she said. "The blood's ironic, right?"

The Artist smiled wryly, then shrugged. "Couldn't have put it better," he said, downing his champagne. "You doing anything tonight?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" The Woman asked.

"You want to see some more of my art? I could take you to my studio."

The woman slinked towards him. "That would be... educational," she said, running her tongue over too-red-lips.

"I'm sure," The Artist said. "It's above my flat, I'll get you an address."

"Get me a phone number first."

"All professional inquiries must go through my agent, I'm afraid," The Artist countered, pointing across the room to where his agent was currently talking with the head curator.

The woman giggled. "Alright," she said.

The Artist watched her go, and before he could disappear back into the party, an old man in a grey overcoat came to stand beside him.

"It's all rather gratuitous," Old One-Eye said, clasping its hands behind its back.

The Artist froze. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," Old One-Eye replied, turning its remaining eye to focus on The Artist. "I trust my friends were educational."

"So it was real," The Artist mumbled, coming to stand beside the strange creature and following its gaze back to his painting. "Indeed," he said.

Old One-Eye smiled. "I don't like it," he said, "but It'll end up as mine, I suppose."

The Artist raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Old One-Eye said. "You summoned The Seven, they can all visit you now. And every story comes to an end, some far sooner than others. The only question is, what will the headline be?"

The Artist shifted uncomfortably. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I came to see my painting, and I came for my pages. I trust you have them."

The Artist nodded and reached into his jacket pocket. He produced the trio of pages, wrapped up in twine. "They haven't left my side since," he said.

"Good," Old One-Eye praised, taking the them off of his hands with a gnarled and twisted limb of his own.

Old One-Eye looked at the maiden. "I see Tartarus' influence," he said before turning away and disappearing into the small crowd like he had never existed.

The Artist shook his head and let out a little laugh. "Kitsch," he muttered.

"Hey!" a voice cut through the din.

The Artist reeled on the sound and saw his agent barreling towards him, ruddy face beaming. "There's my golden goose!"

The Artist let out a sigh, then forced himself to put on a

smile.

His agent reached him and battered him on the back. "I told you!" he said, pushing his pudgy finger into The Artist's face. "I told you you could do it!"

The Artist flashed his best smile. "Get me another champagne before you run your mouth," he said jovially.

The Agent let out a booming laugh and flagged down a waiter.

As he did so, The Artist's phone buzzed in his pocket. He had a single text message from an unknown number.

Ten o'clock?

He looked across the room to where The Woman was looking at him, biting her bottom lip. He winked to her and nodded his head, and she smiled back. Then, The Agent thrust a glass of champagne into The Artist's hand and began to talk.

The artist opened the door to his flat and entered. He looked around the place, letting out a sigh of relief when he realized that it was in a relatively presentable state. His living room had a few empty bottles of whiskey sitting on the table, and his kitchen had the dregs of last night's dinner strewn about the counter.

The Artist walked through the apartment and poked his head into his bedroom. The bed was nearly unmade, and he muttered under his breath. He walked back into the living room, scooped up the empty whiskey bottles, and then opened the door to the staircase that led up to his studio. He walked up the stairs, and as he entered the dimly-lit studio, he became aware of a heaviness in the air.

Then he saw the angels. There were two of them.

The first appeared to be a teenage-girl. She wore a scarlet gown and had a head of blazing, crimson curls. Her skin was pale to the point of being stark white, and her talon-like fingernails were painting red. Her eyes too, were red, and the patches of energy pluming behind her like wings swirled like a bloody mist. In their depths The Artist could see bloody skulls, a thousand lambs being slaughtered, and above all, a lone hill with a cross upon it. Hammered to the cross was a man, crowned with thorns and adorned with blood, the skeletons of a million more like him hammered to

crosses stretching onto the infinity of the horizon...

The second angel appeared to be a man reaching the end of his adolescents. He was wearing a white robe and had the shorn head of a monk. His eyes were an eerie white, with no pupils or irises, and his skin too was nearly as pale as his sister's. In his calloused hands was a dull steel sword, and two wreaths of ethereal white energy were spread behind him in the shape of the mightiest wings The Artist had seen on any of the previous angels. In the midst of The White Angel's wings, he could see a plane drenched in the blood of sinners. He could see a mighty battle. Dragons wrestled with legions of angels, horsemen rode out across the world, a titanic lamb adorned with a dozen eyes peeled seals off of scrolls, and the very world itself was cracked apart and bathed in hallowed fire...

Both of them were bare-footed.

The Artist took a step away from the angels. "What the hell are you doing here?" he breathed.

"You called," The Red Angel said in a soft, manic voice.

"We answered," The White Angel added in a booming, authoritative tone.

"No, no, no," The Artist said, placing the collected bottles onto his desk to join the graveyard of their peers. "I don't need you anymore," he continued. "The painting's done. It was sold weeks ago-"

"It matters not," The White Angel boomed.

"What you desire," The Red Angel finished. "As we were summoned."

"So must we come, in time," The White Angel said.

"We care not about your painting," The Red Angel said.

"Only you," The White Angel boomed.

The Artist felt a lump form in his throat. "So," his eyes flickered to each of the angels in turn. "Who are you, then?"

The Red Angel stepped forward and curtsied politely. "I am The Angel of Golgotha, The Seraph of Sacrifice."

The White Angel took a step forward and bowed his shaven head. "I am The Angel of Armageddon," he boomed, "The Seraph of Judgement."

The Artist licked his lips nervously. "A pleasure, but, some-

one is coming over in a few-”

“We shall not keep you long,” The Angel of Armageddon cut in.

“We are here to show you,” The Angel of Golgotha said.

“Show me what?” The Artist asked. “I don’t need to see any-more. The painting’s finished, as I said-”

“This is not about paintings,” The Angel of Armageddon said.

“It’s about stories,” Golgotha finished.

“Your story,” The Angel of Armageddon continued.

“I don’t have a story,” The Artist said, crossing his arms.

The Angel of Golgotha giggled. “Everyone has a story,” she said. “And every story has a hero.”

“And a villain,” Armageddon said.

“And an ending,” Golgotha finished.

The Artist raised an eyebrow.

“The only question that remains for you, conjurer of arts,” The Seraph of Judgement boomed, “is which one you are in yours.”

“And which ending awaits you,” Golgotha continued.

“Ending?” The Artist murmured, feeling the faintest traces of fear in his veins.

The Angel of Golgotha giggled again. “Hero or villain?” she asked.

“Savior or slaver?” Armageddon questioned.

“Tragedy?” Golgotha said.

“Or comedy?” Armageddon finished.

“Sacrifice?”

“Or judgement?”

“Will they remember your virtues?”

“Or your vices?”

“I don’t understand,” The Artist said.

“Will your death be a tragedy? A hero’s demise?” The Seraph of Sacrifice asked.

“Or a comedy?” Armageddon boomed. “A villain’s just and poetic punishment?”

“I-” The Artist stammered.

“The choice is yours, Artist,” Golgotha said sweetly.

“But we will show you,” Armageddon said. “We will show you your finality.”

“We will show you what awaits if you choose the ending we offer,” Golgotha said.

Then, the wings of The Angel of Golgotha plumed. The Artist’s gaze was sucked into their crimson depths. He saw rivers of blood, mountains of skulls, and an altar with a heartless child splayed out upon it. Then he saw himself. He saw his fate-

Then Armageddon’s mighty wings exploded behind him, bathing the room in an icy-white illumination. The Artist’s gaze was immediately drawn into their depths. He saw lightning striking the unholy, an army being defeated upon the altar of the end of days, and a mighty dragon bound in heavy chains and cast forever into a fathomless pit... Then he saw himself once more. He saw another version of himself, and he saw his demise-

Then, The Twin Angels flapped their wings, and vanished.

In Golgotha’s place nothing remained but the faintest trace of a grinning skull, and where Armageddon had proudly stood there was nothing left but the image of a sword, wedged deep in a mighty rock...

Then those two images faded, and all was quiet.

The Artist felt his legs trembling, then quickly hurried back downstairs to make up his bed. As he pulled the sheets back over his mattress, he found a smile on his face. He had remembered something important:

He didn’t believe in angels.