

# *The Seraph of Kitsch*



*The Seraph of Kitsch*

# *The Seraph of Kitsch*

*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.

## *The Seraph of Kitsch*

“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



object 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.

## *The Seraph of Kitsch*

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...