The screaming was growing tiresome.

Blistering Judean sun glinted off the speartips of the Roman centurions. Three wooden crosses atop the highest hill cast long shadows across the eastern valley. Soldiers picked at scabs and fidgeted in their armor. Women's wails filled the air. The center crucifix’s silhouette reached toward the mouth of the cave like an outstretched finger.

Inside the cave, a creature, in appearance like a man, yet not a man, extended his hand forward to touch the shadow. He was too beautiful to be human; it was as if starlight had been braided into the very core of his being. He looked ancient yet still young, frozen for eons in the perfect blush of youth. His hair fell long and white to his waist and shimmered even in the dark, as did the rest of his perfect form. His ice-blue eyes gazed at the cross’ shadow with a kind of hunger. He stretched his fingers toward it, to the line of daylight dividing shadow from the sun.

Another piercing cry tore through the air. Behind him, a woman with black-tipped silver horns and a mutilated face broke into a series of pathetic sobs and whimpers. Three gorgeous, waif-like creatures attended her. Two of them held her down while the third dabbed a foul-smelling potion on her wounds. Her face sizzled with each touch.

The man sighed in irritation, retracting his hand.

“Asmodeus, can’t you do something about that?”

The three lovely creatures nodded in eerie unison. One passed its hand over the woman’s mouth, sealed shut with skin. Her eyes still screamed and streamed with tears, but the cave was blissfully silent.

Another man stormed up to the cave’s entrance, this one black-haired wearing full armor and a scowl that seemed permanently etched into his imperious features. “Why must we always meet here?” he growled, glowering at the white-haired man. “Every angel in the host must be crawling all over this moment.”

“That’s why this is the very last place they’d ever think to look,” he replied.

The black-haired man pulled a gruesome-looking knife from his belt and twirled it at dizzying speed. A vein stood out in his forehead, and he clenched his jaw. “I still don’t like it. What if Michael—?”

“Shh, listen.” The white-haired being held up his hand. The two turned their faces across the ravine to the crosses on Golgotha, listening to the distant conversation with perfect clarity, hanging onto every agonized word.

The man mounted to the crucifix on the right gasped through blood-filled lungs, “Yeshua, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

There was silence for a moment. The white-haired man’s eyes shone, and he mouthed in perfect sync with the Son of God when He replied,

*“Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

He leaned back, shaking his head. “Today. He’ll let him in today.”

The black-haired man scowled. “Why do you do this to yourself? You must’ve watched it ten thousand times.”

The white-haired man turned and walked deeper into the cave. “You know why, Azazel,” he answered mildly. “To remind myself of the injustice we fight to rectify. To remind myself, there is no other way to reclaim that which is rightfully ours.”

He walked over to the horned woman, still silently screaming in pain, and cupped her remaining cheek with his hand. “He forgives a condemned thief without a thought. Meanwhile, see what becomes of us. His first children. Those with whom He shared all things.”

He softly caressed the woman’s disfigured face before turning to the rest of the cavern. “Mammon’s failure is merely a setback. We have contingencies in place for such events. Belphegor’s device will succeed. It is only a matter of time.”

A figure in dark jeans, sunglasses, and a hoodie pulled down over his face flashed a thumbs-up and continued napping. He was leaning against an enormous, scale-covered wall that shifted ominously as though it were breathing.

“What about the girl?” Azazel glared accusingly. “She burned our sister to a cinder. Surely, you don’t consider her to be merely a setback.”

“The girl was unforeseen, to be sure. But she’s nothing but a mortal, subject to the same weaknesses and failings as all the rest.”

“If she has the Tears—”

“If what she has is indeed the Tears, so much the better. We will add their power to our cause. Our asset will be with her soon, watching her closely. When the moment presents itself, she will offer them to us freely. She will beg us to take them.”

Outside, the sun went black, and a tremor shook the earth. Frightened mortals cried out as they ran scuttling around the hillside like ants.

The beautiful white-haired man paused thoughtfully.

“Of course, there’s never any harm in hurrying things along. That which we cannot acquire, we could always… consume.” He looked toward a dark corner of the cave. “Baal?”

The air filled with a terrifying noise. It started softly and quickly heightened into a cacophonous buzz as a swarm of hellish metallic insects rose like a dark cloud and formed a face. It hovered a moment, then twisted itself into a monstrous smile.

The white-haired man smiled in return.

“Are you hungry?”