



HELL - BELIAL'S REALM: story 1 - When the Wind Blows

When the time came Belial's new Chief Communications Spokesperson thought he was ready. But he wasn't. They never were. Belial went through personnel like courses of a banquet when he was hungry and here was another one. Another overconfident minion, first day on the job.

Belial's Chamberlain, Sizma, sympathised with her elderly colleague, but she knew, from the moment she woke up that morning, she knew the CCS wouldn't be able to complete his opening sentence. She stood erect next to Belial's gilded throne, the Prime Demon courteous and expectant, and wondered how far he'd get before his memory gave up on him.

"Majesty," the CCS rushed forward, pulled up, knelt down and began, "Gracious Majesty, Overlord of All Glorious Territory, High Council of Culture and Creativity, Overseer and Overprotector of All Realms and, and Settlements, Grand Justice and, and Supreme Magistrate, Fair and Equitable and . . . and, er . . ." He glanced to Sizma for a prompt, but prompts were not allowed. You either knew it or you didn't. And he clearly didn't. He stumbled again. "Magistrate fairandequitableand."

He was stopped by Belial's raised right hand. "That will be all, thank you."

"Majesty." The CCS bowed again and reversed out of the throne room to his inevitable execution.

"Another one, Chamberlain. Do you think it's the diet?"

"Diet, Most Illustrious Majesty?"

"Yes, diet. Something afflicting the memory perhaps. He's the third this week who can't remember my name. It's not that hard to remember is it?"

"I don't think so Gracious Majesty, Overlord of All Glorious Territory, High Council of Culture and Creativity, Overseer and Overprotector of All Realms and Settlements, Grand Justice and Supreme Magistrate, Fair and Equitable High Monarch and Defender of Valleys, Townships, Lowlands and Select Routes and Byways, Arbiter of Wit and Intellect, and Perennial Champion of Concerns Becoming and Suitable of All Monarchs and Prime Leaders. Praise in Eternity Be To You."

"Yes. Exactly. It's not that hard at all."

"Perhaps if you limited the number of times your title varies. And I say that in the most humble terms possible, Majesty."

"Oh, I don't know about that. My role must remain flexible." He coughed. Belial coughed and usually there was a medical officer present to check he wasn't suffering from an emerging infection, but the most recent medical officer omitted an important Arbiter reference and lost his head for it.

Sizma closed the window. "The smoke is thickening again, Majesty."

"This cursed smoke. I can't see anything again." Belial stood against an adjacent window and gazed at the view, what was once his favourite view, the one in which eight towers and three monuments in his honour were visible in the one composition.

"There must be a new influx of sinners, Majesty. If Baphomet had a gold coin for every sinner he burned he'd have a lot of gold coins."

"He'd have enough gold coins to pay his sinners to stand at the border and blow the smoke back to him. Can't we do something about this, Chamberlain?"

"He does try to co-operate, Majesty. He is aware of the problem."

"Not aware of it enough. He should come over here and see it for himself." Belial clicked his fingers. "Commission an artist, Chamberlain. Paint that scene out there and take it to him. Let him

see the frightful chaos his infernos cause over here. Perhaps if he saw it he might be urgent in doing something about it."

Belial hurtled towards the door and off into the rest of his day, but Sizma called him back.

"Majesty, a moment."

"Yes, well, yes?"

"You said take it to him?"

"Take what to him?"

"A painting of the scene with all the smoke."

"Yes. He has to see it for himself. He obviously underestimates the scale of the problem. We'll all choke to death if this continues. Yes, take it to him. Make him aware, Chamberlain." And off he went, paused and came back. "And Chamberlain, your horns."

"My horns, Majesty?"

"A little short for a Chamberlain, don't you think? Perhaps a little longer, something befitting your high status as a servant in my court." He strode away. "A little longer, Chamberlain."

"A little longer," she muttered when he was finally gone. No mention of her tail. He was worried he'd trip over it so asked her to have it shortened, which she did and he hadn't noticed. Never mentioned it. Now it was just long enough to take the serrated tip in her hand and run her gloved finger along the branded name: Sizma. Her parents paid for it, a gift when she was appointed Belial's Chamberlain. And then he asked her to shorten it!

Sizma tugged the hem of her jacket and tightened the belt of her breeches. Her boots needed a polish; well, no they didn't, she could see her face reflected in the glossy black surface, but any distraction was worth exploring now that she had her latest instructions.

She found the Magisterial Portrait Painter in his studio. His belongings still unpacked and resting in several trunks around the edge of the room. He sat on one of them and sympathised. "He wants you to deliver the painting in person?"

"Yes." She studied the soft bristles of one of the bigger brushes.

"But you won't be able to come back."

"I know."

"What will you do? If you try to abscond he'll hunt you down. That's what he did to the Catering Manager."

"I heard."

"When they caught him they chopped him up and used his organs in-"

"Yes, I know what they did to his organs. Some of us were asked for our opinions on the taste. How quickly can you do the painting?"

"Couple of hours. I can have it ready by this evening."

"Make it a couple of days. Give me time to think of something. There must be exemptions to the rule. Not everyone who enters Baphomet's realm is trapped there."

"If you find out let me know." The painter began selecting his paints for the painting, but he only needed two colours: white and dark white!

When Belial went hunting for trout he had no need of his Chamberlain so Sizma used the time to meet up with the Court Archivist. Gracious Malegorn took the job when Belial's title was a dozen words shorter than it was now and he would be the first to admit he wouldn't last five minutes if he had to memorise the ludicrous self-aggrandising name.

"You can't say that," whispered Sizma.

In an out of his bookshelves Malegorn appeared and disappeared like a mouse. "I can say what I want if he isn't hear." A stray wing tip pushed over a pile of legal statutes. "You young ones are too subservient."

"We don't want to be executed, Gracious Malegorn."

"Executed. It's not the end of the world, Chamberlain Sizma. Show a bit of backbone. Are you here for anything in particular or have you just come for a moan?"

"No, I wanted your advice. Some legal advice."

"Oh, advice. Go on." He had a bowl of soup and slurped the steaming concoction as he carried on rearranging piles of rubbish.

"Is there a legal way of getting out of Baphomet's realm?"

"No."

"What, nothing?"

"No."

"Well, what happens to people who go there, but aren't sinners?"

"I don't know, I've never been."

There were enough ancient texts, manuscripts and legal volumes to contain the answer, but where would she start. Malegorn should have known the contents of everything in sight, but he'd found a lump in his soup and didn't like it. "Is that an acorn?"

"Would any of these books have anything? An ancient ruling, a contingency, a loophole perhaps?"

"Loophole?" He finally dropped onto a hard wooden stool. "Who have you ever seen from Baphomet's realm?"

"Baphomet?"

"Yes."

"His guards."

"Yes. Anyone else?"

"Not really."

"Well, there's your answer. You either join his entourage, his court, or you join his army."

"I already have a job, Gracious Malegorn. I can't join his army."

"No, and they wouldn't let you. Your family come from the wrong epoch. Wait a moment. I'm trying to have my dinner."

"Sorry."

Up on a high shelf at the far end of the room where a solitary open window allowed a slice of dusty light to brush the ancient spines and rotting shelves, a shy book, slim and darkened with age, resisted Malegorn's attempt to slip it from between the tightly packed manuscripts. He trudged back to his table, found his bone-rimmed spectacles and studied the title.

"This was a statutory agreement from eleven hundred years ago. A lot of the rules are still in place, but I don't know if they're honoured or enforced." His fingernail scanned the contents page and turned to the relevant section.

"The reason why Baphomet's borders are secured is to stop the sinners from escaping, that's obvious, but at the time this agreement was created they were becoming very devious and it isn't known how many tricked their way back across the border and then on to Leviathan's wastelands where they simply disappeared." Malegorn glanced over the top of the book. "He isn't very fastidious when it comes to security. A bit lazy. Well, the other Prime Demons became fed up with all these wrong 'uns running around and they wanted Baphomet to do something about it." He closed the book and pulled his spectacles off. "He's obsessed with setting fire to people. It's all he ever thinks about. Do you know he even has his breakfast cereals flame grilled. He's deranged. But here," he tapped the page, "the Border Concord Resolution. No persons who enter the realm from north to south will be allowed to travel south to north. Likewise the same reversed travel arrangements are prohibited. North south, east, west. You go in, you can't come out."

"What if you go in east to west, but come out south to north?"

"Article 15, clause 3, paragraph 2. Variations on the direction of travel to avoid this regulation will be a capitol offence. But," he raised his index finger again, "there are exclusions. I was right. Approved members of Baphomet's council, inner court or temporary guests may join his entourage for the purposes of cross-border travel. And an exemption exists for all army movements peaceful or aggressive." He closed the book. "You get back by joining his entourage or his army."

His soup was cold. As cold as Sizma's heart when she returned to the brisk swirling smoke and cloud and fog and mist and every form of opacity hiding Belial's realm, his testament to himself. She wandered the hidden lanes, past the ghosts of picket fences and lost chickens, serenaded by the

clackety clack of farm machinery and the chipping chisels of stonemasons. Somewhere behind the veil another monument was erected, another tower constructed, another chapel built. She couldn't see any of it now and in a few days time would never see any of it ever again.

Finally, the painting was ready. "A masterpiece," Sizma said when she saw the white canvas on the painter's easel. Located on a high terrace of Belial's gardens the painting hinted at what might be; a tentative brushstroke marked a distant steeple, a slip of paint where a weather vein hovered in the middle of nothing. She wrapped the painting in a muslin cloth, shoved it into a leather case and began the long walk to the border.

She was met by Baphomet's security at a checkpoint crossing that appeared like a dreamlike vision. A rectangle of grey, two shimmering shadows and then the details and features clarified. The armoured joints, the fluted horns, the dull steel swords held like enormous knives and forks. They cocked their heads and grinned when Sizma strolled out of the murk.

"No peddlers, tinkers, barrel makers or candle wick salesmen. Are you carrying anything flammable?"

"I think so," said Sizma.

"Good. We like a good fire over here. What have you done?"

"Done?"

"Sins. You look like a pickpocket to me."

"Dressed a bit fancy for the fires," said the other guard. "Must be a wealthy one if you can afford to send all this up in smoke. Nice tail."

"I'm Belial's Chamberlain. He's sent me to speak to Baphomet about the smoke."

They knew all about the smoke. One of them wandered too far from the checkpoint and was lost for several days. "Anything to get rid of this fog. It's terrible. It leaves a film of dust over everything." He stroked his heavy gauntlet across the windowsill of the checkpoint booth. "Look at that. Do you know what that is? It's the powdery ash of human flesh, that is."

"Can't be healthy, breathing all that in," said the other guard.

"I suppose you'll be wanting an escort to his palace."

"Yes."

"Tough," the guard barked and walked back into the booth.

"See that dark shadowy ribbon on the ground," said the other guard. "That's the path. Follow that, you can't go wrong."

Sizma knew when she was getting close to the centre of Baphomet's operations. The heat intensified and burned off the dampness and the fine rain and the airborne moisture until the infernal realm announced itself with more confidence. Blackened hills and slopes overlapped each other, gouged out with fissures and cracks, vents pumping blackened smog into an iron grey sky. Distant hidden machinery belched and clattered and cranked and when the light played across the forbidding folds in the landscape columns of the damned stumbled across the ridges to the cavern entrances where they would be devoured by the ever burning fires. Where Sizma had come from, people were breathing in the atomised remains of those unfortunates.

The palace Baphomet called home writhed and stretched out of a rocky outcrop, throwing pointed turrets and warped walls in all directions. She was met at the entrance to the grounds by an estate manager who explained the reason for the palace's disturbed shape.

"It's the heat," he shouted against the racket of a windmill. "Softens the rock, melts the mortar, turns the glass into toffee. These windmills are an attempt to provide some cooling, but the air is so hot it makes little difference. All it does is blow the smoke your way, which is fine for us, but obviously not so good for you. I suppose Belial is in agony not being able to see all his monuments."

"He can't see anything at the moment."

"Really." The manager walked on. "My heart bleeds." He flapped his wings and another plume of unavoidable sooty filth wafted into Sizma's face. Inside the palace there was relief from the smokey atmosphere, but the smell of burnt food and burnt flesh was never truly absent. Baphomet's

Chamberlain, his daughter Hrogomet took over from the manager and escorted Sizma to her father's office.

Hrogomet spoke with the bronchial affliction of a heavy pipe smoker and wore a heavy burgundy leather outfit that sealed her from the scalding heat outside. "He's concerned the fires are intensifying, but who else will get rid of all these sinners."

"I know," said Sizma. "Others should take their share."

"They do take their share, but then let them run free."

"You can't run free in our realm. Not unless you want to run into something hard and immovable."

The thought made Hrogomet laugh out loud. "Have you seen that happen? It must be hilarious."

"I saw someone step off a roof ledge thinking the ladder was underneath his feet."

"And it wasn't?"

"No."

Hrogomet roared with laughter alerting her father who was stood at a huge slab of a table covered with drawings and plans. "Father," Hrogomet gathered herself but spoke through a wide disobedient grin, "Chamberlain Sizma is here. It sounds like fun and games in their realm at the moment." She left the room and took her cackling hysterics with her.

"Excuse me a moment, Chief Engineer. Chamberlain Sizma, a pleasure to meet you. I can only apologise for all this." He came around the table and embraced Sizma, wrapping her in a creaking embrace of heat. "It's not very pleasant for us either at the moment, but there is a plan in place. Come look at these these." He waved his hand across the drawings. "I'd offer you a drink, but we're having trouble stopping the wines from evaporating at the moment."

"Can't you suspend the fires for a week, let things settle down?"

"No," Baphomet's mouth funnelled the word with great energy. "No, can't do that. If these fires go out it's a beggar getting them started again, is it not Chief Engineer."

"Quite so, my Lord. Quite a beggar indeed."

"No, no, never let the fires go out, young Chamberlain Sizma. No, look here. Our new windmills."

Windmills? Drawings, sketches, blueprints, plans, dimensions, specifications, they were all there, spread and scattered across the table. The towers, the sails, the winding mechanisms, the gears and crankshafts, all meticulously drawn on crisp new textured paper already singed around the edges.

"Do explain, Chief Engineer. Ah, some food, Chamberlain Sizma. You must be hungry." A sweating servant approached with a tray of chargrilled snacks. He went to place them on the table of drawings. Baphomet exploded. "Not there. The side table, the side table." He chased him out aiming a flying kick as the terrified servant escaped. "My apologies, do continue, Chief Engineer."

"As you wish, my Lord. Well, it's really rather simple, Chamberlain Sizma. Our windmills as of late have been somewhat underpowered when dealing with fine particulates. They drift and swirl and really have a mind of their own, bless them. They attach to airborne water droplets and become part of the prevailing winds, well of course that's when you can catch them. So here we have a new design of windmill powered by an innovation of which I have to say I am rather proud."

"Which is what, Chief Engineer?" said Sizma.

"Go on," said Baphomet smiling, "indulge her."

The Chief Engineer pulled forward a large drawing of a large windmill. He took particular interest in a cross section. "Here we have the sails, do you see? But they are not the source of energy, they are not driving the mechanisms. No, down here, you see this pit, that is the engine house."

"The engine house?"

"Yes. In there is a steam turbine, and it's the turbine that drives the sails and the sails blow the wind and clear the air." He stepped back with regal grace. "And thus we have our solution, I beg your indulgence, my Lord."

"Granted, Chief Engineer. It is indeed a revolution. And is that it?"

The Chief Engineer blushed. "It is not, my Lord."

"No, it is not, Chief Engineer. You are too modest."

"The turbines have an insatiable appetite for fuel and that fuel is not only turned into enormous amounts of kinetic energy, but the exhaust fumes, rather than entering the atmosphere and our lungs, are themselves burned off and expelled at such velocity they have neither the time nor the inclination to drift at eye level but instead fall back down to earth where they join the organic particles in the soil and enrich our crops and woodlands and so on and so forth. Your indulgence, my Lord."

Obviously pleased with himself the Chief Engineer gave the floor to Baphomet who smirked with all the sneakiness of a schoolboy about to reveal how he played the trick on the schoolteacher. "Would you like to see these windmills, Chamberlain Sizma?"

"Yes. You've built them already?"

"Oh yes, several, along the border with your realm, ready to huff and puff and blow the wind away." He whispered in her ear, "And that vain narcissist of a boss will be forever in your debt. Do help yourself to a snack Chamberlain, and may I say how much I like your tail."

They were left alone when the Chief Engineer went away to arrange some transport to take Sizma back to the border and the new fleet of steam powered turbines. Her opportunities were multiplying and over several oak smoked parcels of something that may have been meat, she asked Baphomet about the border.

"I can't go back," she said.

"Yes. Sorry about that."

"Can't I just walk away? You know who I am. I'm not a sinner or anything."

"Yes, I know. Tragic, but rules are rules, they apply to us all, I'm afraid."

"Would it be possible to join your entourage when you next cross the border?"

"No, you see, my next visit will be to Astaroth's anniversary celebrations which are only next year. Not planning to visit Belial for another, I don't know, forty years or so."

"I see. And your army."

"Yes."

"Do you take conscripts?"

"Not from other realms, no. I can understand you're in a bit of a pickle, but it's not so bad over here. Summers can be a bit exhausting, but there's lots for a young Chamberlain like you to occupy yourself with. Do you like hunting ditherers?"

"I've never hunted ditherers?"

"It's hilarious. It's Hrogomet's favourite pastime. She could teach you. They can never decide which way to run. Get themselves into all sorts of predicaments. No, Hrogomet will show you around, help you settle. Make a new life here." He ate the last snack and dabbed his lips with a stiff napkin. The Chief Engineer was ready, a couple of armed soldiers would transport them to the border and the windmills, but not before making a short detour into a busy, noisy workshop.

"Stay there," said a tall female soldier. She tugged her ponytail and secured it around the looping curl of her horns. She and her male colleague beckoned one of the exhausted workers to come over to a formidable looking chunk of metal and brick.

"There's something wrong with the flu," said the male soldier.

The worker glanced up at the brick chimney.

"We think something's stuck up there, a small child or an animal," said the female soldier.

The worker leaned into the cavity at the base of the flu and before he could report what he saw the clonking arm of a rotating steam hammer came down on his head. The soldiers fell about laughing. When the hammer lifted away from the base the worker stood up, his head flattened into a pancake of features and hair. He pointed at his scalp, but the soldiers were helpless. Eventually the female unrolled her ponytail and said to the worker, "You can go back to your station. There's obviously nothing wrong with the flu. Our mistake." And then crippled with laughter she tried to escort Sizma back to the cart and horses waiting to take them all to the windmills.

Five minutes later the male soldier wiped his eyes and said, "They fall for it every time."

There was no explanation for the accuracy of the soldier guiding the cart through the mist and fog, through a featureless landscape in which trees came and went, the splash of a stream followed them for several minutes without revealing itself, and the rutted rocky stretch of the path was avoided with supernatural dexterity. Ahead of them a drone-like sound approached and like a magic trick the outlines of a row of enormous windmills loomed out of the ground, their vast sails spinning like huge propellers.

"Behold," said the Chief Engineer, "look at these."

"Impressive," said Sizma, but she had a question. "Why is the mist still lingering here?"

The Chief Engineer laughed at her ignorance. "Come this way." At the front of the windmill the views extended as far as the rolling horizon and its distant crimson sky. Behind them, nothing beyond the rear walls of the windmill's engine house.

"It's the aerodynamics," he said. The two soldiers rolled their eyes and sat back on the bench of the cart. Even the horses had heard it all before. "The sails are shaped in such a way they don't drag the air from behind them. So we can accurately point them to or from the direction we wish to clear. See, if the sails pulled the air from behind, that air would replace the air being blown away from the front, do you see?"

"Yes, I see. That's very clever."

"Thank you, Chamberlain Sizma. It took us a long time to develop that, but it was most important. What it means is that when we blow the smoke away from the border, the sails won't extract the air from your realm."

And what a velocity. The rotation of the sails created a blurred circle, a vast single sail like a pale mouth and at their current rotation stood at a right angle to the border. If she could somehow grab a sail as it hurtled past it might . . . Tear off her arm. But what were the alternatives? Eating burnt food, hunting ditherers and squashing people's heads under industrial hammers. It would have to wait, the Chief Engineer wanted to show her the turbine.

"Won't be a moment," he called to the soldiers who weren't interested. "Now in here," he pulled open a heavy iron door, "in here is the power of the windmill. This innovation is where it all happens." In front of them, like a sleeping whale, a rusting cylinder fed by tubes and pipes murmured and shook, twitching from its own internal force. An array of pressure gauges reassured the Chief Engineer who watched over his creation like a father watching his sleeping child. (His gigantic sleeping child.) "Ah, it is about to stir. Brace yourself Chamberlain Sizma-"

His warning was interrupted by the turbine's shocking release of power, the exhaust fumes, building up in the churning belly, blasted down a wide pipe and out into the unexpecting landscape. The roar filled the engine house, shook the pipes, rattled the frame securing it to the walls. The pressure gauges shuddered and then relaxed, their fingers dropping back to a safe operating measurement.

"Valves," said the Chief Engineer. "Without the exhaust port the turbine would simply blow up after fifteen minutes of operation. Of course there is a trade off," he said returning outside. "A slight dip in the velocity of the sails. . . ."

Sizma didn't hear anything else. The exhaust release was the moment she could grab the sail, and by the time she was up at the top of its movement it would have gathered its energy again. She had the option of travelling around once or twice to make sure and then let go, let the momentum fling her back over the border. The rules said east to west, north to south. They said nothing about up and down.

"I hope you found that interesting, Chamberlain, Chamberlain."

She ignored him, watched for the sail's clockwise rotation, focussed on an outstretched vein that protruded just far enough to get her arms around it. When it whizzed past she jumped, collided with the wood with a thud and she was off, legs thrown up ahead of her, the wood freshly painted and slippery, but her leather gloves gripped the surface just long enough to help her to secure a leg around the inside of the vein. The world turned upside down, the ground spinning, the Chief Engineer stood on his head watched her shoot past, the soldiers stood on the cart, open mouthed,

hands on sword hilts as if that would make a difference. Twice she rotated, waiting for the velocity to return, the energy to build and when the ground began to tilt in the wrong direction she knew she had one chance, one trial run.

At the top of the arc she let go. The violent rattle of the windmill gave way to the gentle whistle of the air. She flailed like a rag doll, rolled in mid-flight, held her breath and braced herself for the inevitable return to earth, to solid ground, but importantly, the solid ground of home. Her welcome was anything but affectionate. The hard ground battered and punched, kicked her on and tumbled around until she stopped, breathless and bruised. Her tail was trapped beneath her thighs. Her horns speared with mud. She sat up, examined her tail, smoothed the mud off her horns and watched the chortling soldiers walk towards her.

They stopped and laughed harder. "Bad luck," said the female. "Another rotation of the sails and you might have made it." They lifted her off the ground and heaved her disappointed body back towards the cart.

"Chamberlain Sizma," called the Chief Engineer, "are you all right? That was an awful accident. Perhaps there is a need for some kind of protective rail around the base of the windmill."

"Stop a minute," said the male soldier. "Let her get her breath back." They sat her down on a mat of brushwood and bracken scattered across a high mound of soft turf. "Wait here," said the soldier. "We're just over there when you're ready to go."

They gave a good impression of being sympathetic, but their barely suppressed laughter hinted otherwise. At the cart they sat on the bench and continued to giggle and when the Chief Engineer tried to approach the female soldier held him back. "Give her a moment, Chief Engineer. She's had a bit of shock." When he insisted and they drew their swords to stop him Sizma suspected something was wrong.

And when the turf began to shimmer she knew there was something very wrong. The twigs and branches danced across the grass, the ground mumbled and then groaned and the vibration turned to a shaking that forced Sizma to stand up. She stepped away from the mound when it moved and the shaking grew to a trembling howl of oncoming violence.

The turbine exhaust portal opened.

A shock wave blew her off her feet, propelled her up and up and up like a firework ready to release its payload, and down below the shocked Chief Engineer stood alongside two soldiers hanging off the cart in hysterics. She saw it all, the top of the windmill, the landscape beyond the horizon, the ghylls and fissures, cracks and crevices, the machines and workshops, sheds and warehouses and there, on its rocky outcrop, Baphomet's peculiar palace retreating farther into the heat haze until it was gone, the windmill gone, the laughing soldiers out of view and Baphomet's realm a memory. One final mid-air roll and Sizma came down, bounced heavily, the impact no less severe, but this time, this time, she could smell the cool fragrance of heather, the damp musky aroma of peat and the rich soils of Belial's realm. She was home, she had returned. She was safe.

Still covered in mud she entered Belial's castle and negotiated the corridors hung with his portraits. He was back from hunting trout, lounging on his throne and reading a list of applicants for the role of replacement Chamberlain. Sizma cleared her throat.

"A moment. Concentrating." When he looked up he was astonished. "Oh, it's you."

"Most Illustrious Majesty."

"Ah, good." He rolled up the list of names. "No need for that then. Well, now, any news?"

"Yes, Majesty. Good news, lots of new initiatives to clear the smoke. All very effective. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"Good. Well, that's it then." He left his throne and headed towards whatever his itinerary was for the rest of the day. As he passed Sizma's mud-smeared figure he stared at her. "A bit dirty aren't you? And horns, Chamberlain? You will see to them, won't you?"

"Yes, Majesty. Longer horns."

"Longer horns, Chamberlain. Yes. Befitting the qualities of one so talented." His smile was brief, but sincere, and when he was gone Sizma allowed herself the briefest of smiles too.