



## HELL - BELIAL'S REALM: story 2 - Where the Fruit Comes From

Decisions, decisions. Belial huffed and puffed over a collection of robes that streamed through the throne room, carried across the arms of an army of exasperated tailors, robe makers, artists and artisans. None of the items satisfied his extraordinary demands and high quality threshold.

He tutted and looked for Sizma's sympathy. "Not a thing to wear, Chamberlain. Two hundred and forty-seven samples and not a thing to wear."

"Perhaps you could attend the banquet wearing nothing, Most Illustrious Majesty. Set a new trend."

He actually considered the idea. "No. I don't think so, Chamberlain." He floundered in front of his throne, tried to concentrate on the next robe brought before him by a bashful woman who avoided his gaze. "Not the William Morris print, doesn't anyone have any imagination? Chamberlain, the fruit."

"Fruit, Majesty?"

"Yes. Send for the Manager of the Royal Fruit Displays. At least he'll have some good ideas for me."

"As you wish, Majesty. Majesty, may I enquire. . . ."

He was distracted by a luminous green robe. "Yes."

"My horns. Are they a satisfactory length now, Majesty?"

"What?" He checked. "Yes, yes, fine. Very good. The fruit, Chamberlain."

"Majesty." She left him to his distress and opened a window at the far corner of the throne room. Down below, not quite obscured by the mist which became lighter by the day, she called to one of the kitchen servants scurrying towards the wine cellars. "Oi. Send for the Manager of the Royal Fruit Displays."

"The what?"

"Manager of the Royal Fruit Displays. Tell him to attend to His Majesty in the throne room. No, wait. . . ." Belial had cut short the robe presentations. "Send him to the library."

"Library. Royal fruit, got it." He shouted again after Sizma closed the window.

"What?"

"Does he want some fruit?"

"No, just send the manager."

"All right."

Several minutes later the panting Manager of the Royal Fruit Displays appeared in the library, his hands stained red by a liquid smelling of pomegranate. He took a deep breath. "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."

Sizma winced.

"Something wrong, Majesty?"

"Something wrong, Chamberlain. He asks if there is something wrong. Tell him."

"His Majesty is no longer the Fair and Equitable High Monarch and Defender of Valleys, Townships, Lowlands and Select Routes and Byways. He is the Fair and Equitable High Monarch and Defender of Valleys, Townships, Lowlands and *All* Routes and Byways."

"I'm sorry, Majesty, I haven't been told." He bowed until his chin almost touched his thigh.

"Hasn't been told, Chamberlain." At times like these Belial's guards had an unnerving habit of appearing from doorways. "That will be all."

"Majesty." The ex-Manager of the Royal Fruit Displays was escorted backwards from the library.

"Would you like me to send for the Manager of the Royal Meat Displays, Majesty?"

"No."

"I thought not."

"What will I do now?" He was surrounded by books but none of them concerning fruit displays. "Ah, I know. Several months ago I attended a feast at the castle of the Lord Demon Havielzek. Odious person, but he had a fruit display as grand as anything I've ever seen. Go there and find out who did it for him. Commission a display for the banquet. Have it delivered after everything else is set out. I want it to be a surprise."

"Yes, Majesty. Any particular fruit?"

"No bananas. They look like big fingers. They never sit well in a composition."

"No bananas." She was ready to go, but he waited for her to put a foot in the corridor before calling her back.

"Take my son Benendier. He needs to meet some of these Lord Demons. He thinks they're all great, but Havielzek will soon change his mind."

"Certainly, Majesty."

"And Chamberlain. Your horns. Good show."

In one sentence he pleased her, in another sentence he presented her with a challenge she could do without. At the main gates of the castle she waited for Benendier to join her. Belial's son insisted on riding a horse dressed for battle with flags and pennants, his own suit of armour clanking and tinkling. Sizma rolled her eyes and then smiled. "You look ridiculous, Majesty."

"My father says you have an ironic sense of humour."

"Your father is so right about so many things, Majesty." And under her breath, "But not this time."

As soon as Havielzek's castle came into sight Benendier became excitable, babbling and muttering, his grumpy horse snorting underneath the rider's shifting weight. They were greeted by a suspicious pair of sentinels at the gatehouse and it was obvious they were trying not to laugh.

Sizma introduced herself. "Chamberlain to Belial. I've been asked to meet Lord Havielzek about an urgent matter."

"Who's the clown in the metal coat?"

Struggling not to release an insistent grin Sizma said, "That is Belial's son, Benendier."

The sentinel stared at the horse's face. "Do you go to bed dressed like that?"

"Pardon."

"May we enter?" said Sizma. The tittering continued at the gatehouse as they walked and plodded into the courtyard. "They probably think you're here to seize the castle, Majesty."

"And they'd do well to acknowledge my authority, Chamberlain. People are forced to take me seriously when I am dressed for battle."

"Indeed they do, Majesty."

Except Havielzek. His status allowed him the licence to burst into peels of laughter when Sizma entered his study followed by an armoured youth who struggled to stop his sword clattering the back of his legs.

When he calmed down Havielzek said, "I already have a suit of armour. I don't need another one."

"It's not for sale, Lord Havielzek."

"And who are you?"

"I am Belial's Chamberlain, Sizma. This is Belial's son Benendier."

"Is it? Anyone could be hiding inside that suit. Show your face."

Benendier tugged his helmet and eventually revealed his head.

"What do you want?"

"Belial wants to know who created a large fruit display at a recent feast he attended here. Can you tell us?"

The answer was difficult. Havielzek paused, inflated, his large chest bulging at the robes Belial wouldn't be seen dead in. Then he exploded. "Fruit. I hate fruit. What fruit display? He knows I hate fruit. I would never have a fruit display at a feast. Is this some kind of joke? He sends his Chamberlain with a tin man to ask me about fruit. I have no fruit, I can't stand fruit. There was no fruit display. Go away."

After being ejected from the study Sizma was perplexed. Belial had many flaws but his memory was sound. Benendier, rattled by the outburst, struggled to put his helmet back on the right way round. Back in the courtyard Sizma approached the sentinels on her own.

"Lord Havielzek couldn't help us, but he told me to speak to his cook. Where will I find him?"

Where she'd find any cook. The sentinel marched her to the kitchens where a slender man sliced a side of pork with superb dexterity. He gave her the names of several guests at the feast and when asked denied any knowledge of a fruit display.

"Are you sure?" The cook was distracted by a figure at the kitchen window. It darted away when Sizma met his gaze.

"There's something wrong," she said to Benendier, back on his horse, helmet adjusted. The sound of cantering hooves retreated away from the gatehouse.

"How so?"

"People denying the existence of a fruit display, but your father hasn't made a mistake, I'm sure of it."

"My father has been known to be wrong, Chamberlain. Do you know he has thirty-four sons?"

"Yes, I did know."

"But he told me I was his only son."

"Perhaps you were at the time he told you."

"Last week?"

Sizma patted the horse's neck. "A lot can happen in a week, Majesty."

The first guest of the feast, Hodder, lived in a modest woodland house and smiled at Sizma when he answered the door. He invited them in and didn't react when Benendier accidentally swiped a water bowl off a table in the hallway.

"A feast?" said Hodder. "Havielzek? Haven't been to his castle for a long time. Do you know when he was a young recruit in the army he was a great dancer." Hodder dropped onto a pile of cushions in his lounge. "Yes, great dancer. Sorry, what was the question?"

"The last feast you attended, do you remember a large fruit display?" Sizma remained standing. Benendier was unable to sit down.

"Fruit, fruit. That reminds me, there's been an outbreak of aphids in the woodland and they seem to have an appetite for the apples. I've tried everything. No such luck. Only the bad weather seems to get rid of them."

Sizma waited.

"Sorry, what was the question again?"

"Havielzek held a feast at his castle. You were invited. There was a large display of fruit. Do you remember it?"

"A feast? I've been to lots of feasts. Which one again?"

"At Lord Havielzek's castle. It wasn't that long ago, several months apparently."

Hodder was distracted by the new suit of armour delivered to his lounge. It stood to attention next to a cabinet full of books and only occasionally moved to adjust its helmet.

"Yes, Lord Havielzek. He's never been here. If you ask me I think he has a touch of agoraphobia. He seldom leaves his castle these days. If we want anything we have to go up there."

"I see."

"Yes. Sorry, what was the question again?"

"A fruit display."

"Oh, yes. The fruit display. No. There was no fruit display. I remember the feast you speak of. His Majesty Belial attended, wearing a hat that resembled a bowl of fruit. Perhaps he was," Hodder laughed, "perhaps he saw the fruit display in the mirror."

"Yes. Perhaps that's where he saw it."

"I've never met anyone so vain--"

"Yes. Thank you for your time."

"I imagine him to be surrounded by servants holding up mirrors everywhere he goes--"

"We'll see ourselves out."

Back on the footpath to Hodder's front door Sizma was about to reassure Benendier that the old man didn't know what he was talking about when she was called by a woman waiting at the gate.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"Do you live here?" Sizma was becoming embarrassed by the ever present shadow looming over her.

"No. I saw you coming from the castle. Just curious, that's all. What's this?"

"This? What? Him? He's a, a VIP."

"Oh."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No. Is there anything I can do for you? Just ask."

Sizma said no, tried to continue, left Benendier to sort himself out and was half way to the house of the next guest before her metallic companion could climb into the saddle. All the way the nosey woman continued to pry, but Sizma was having none of it.

The second house was more grand than the first, and the sound of hooves and unstable metal alerted the owner who appeared at the gates of his garden before Sizma had a chance to ring the large bell next to the owner's name. Lucius.

"Well, what have we here?" He peered at Sizma's tail. She drew it away from his gaze.

"I'm Belial's chamberlain Sizma. May I ask you a question?"

"Ask me anything you want, dear. I like your tail."

"Thank you."

He could see the pointed tip. "I bet more than a few people have a had nasty prick from that."

"Yes, yes. May I ask about a feast you attended at Lord Havielzek's castle?"

"What? That old duffer? First and last feast I'll attend there." They strolled around the garden and left Benendier stuck on his horse. "Calls himself a lord demon, he's nothing more than a wine seller. Have you met him?"

"Yes, earlier today."

"Did you notice what colour he is? Bright red. Bright red, as if he's a frequent visitor to Baphomet's realm. He's fooling no one." Lucius leaned a little too heavily against Sizma's shoulder. "It's vegetable dye." His left hand slipped along the shaft of her tail. "Ooh, it's quite a thick one, isn't it?"

She pulled away. "Yes, it is. The feast, Lucius."

"Take some effort pulling that one off."

"Lucius, the feast. Do you remember a large fruit display?"

"Fruit display?" Lucius plucked a rose flower and offered it to Sizma. "Havielzek doesn't do displays, dear. He does piles, he does assortments, he does haphazard ruination. The day he does a display he'll be writhing on a spear. He doesn't know the meaning of the word."

"Belial attended the feast and insists he saw a large display of fruit."

"No, he's got it wrong, dear. Has he ever had his hands on this tail of yours? I bet he's never away from it."

"I don't think he's even noticed it," she lied.

"Hard to miss, dear. It's like an enormous--"

Benendier clattered down a short flight of steps. "Sorry, had to be helped off my horse." He nodded to Lucius. "It's enormous."

"Is it, dear? Well you don't need to boast about it. We're all friends here you know."

"So there was no large fruit display?" said Sizma.

Lucius tutted and ran his fingertip along the waving tail. "She's obsessed with fruit. May I ask who you are and why you're dressed like a water heater?"

"I'm Benendier, son of Belial. One of the sons of Belial."

"Are you? I believe the water sprinklers will be coming on in a moment or two. I wouldn't stand there in all that metal. You'll get stiff if it starts to rust."

On the safety of the lane outside Lucius's garden of innuendo Sizma gathered herself and tucked her tail into the back of her breeches. The nosey woman waited for them. "Well, what did he say?"

"What did he say? I'm sorry, this is a private matter. It is the business of Belial. I can't disclose it to you."

By now Benendier have given up mounting and dismounting his horse - and Sizma was glad Benendier had avoided the word mount in front of Lucius. "Where is the third guest, Chamberlain?"

"Not far from here. He's a luthier. I don't expect he'll know either. They all seem to be hiding something."

"Hiding something," said the woman. "Perhaps if you ask me I'll be able to help."

"What's a luthier?" said Benendier.

"A violin maker," said the woman. "Not very bright is it? Are you sure I can't help?"

Her insistence was suspicious. The woman had followed Sizma from the castle and kept up with her throughout the search. Benendier muttered his own thoughts in Sizma's ear. "Perhaps she's a spy."

"A what? A fly? What do you mean perhaps she's a fly?"

"Spy."

It was a possibility. She didn't look like a spy, which was normal. They headed away to the luthier's workshop.

"You-know-who has spies everywhere," said Benendier.

"You-know-who? Who are you talking about?"

"You know." His helmet twitched. "You know. I can't say his name."

"Oh him. Rubbish. He doesn't own the shirt on his back, how can he afford to pay an army of spies?"

"Money lenders."

"You have it all worked out, Majesty. One day you will make a fine leader."

"Thank you, Chamberlain."

"Assuming you can beat your brothers to the throne."

Benendier spent the rest of the journey working on his strategy of succession and didn't notice the luthier's workshop. Inside, Sizma waited for an argument to subside. The luthier insisted he had repaired a violin, but the owner was having none of it.

"Listen." He drew the bow across the strings and produced a noise that sounded more like a bassoon than a violin.

"Good bass resonance," said the luthier. "You don't get that on most violins unless you pay a lot of money."

"I have paid a lot of money. To fix the bridge. I don't expect it to sound like this. This belongs in the woodwind section."

"No, no, no. Look, the wood on the face needs time to season." He tapped the violin with his finger. "Do you hear that, a slight hesitancy in the reverb? The spruce hasn't had time to dry out."

"What are you talking about?"

"Excuse me one moment." The luthier acknowledged Sizma. "Some of my customers have expectations beyond the physically possible."

"I brought my violin here to get the bridge repaired, there's nothing physically impossible about that."

"I'm not a betting man, but I assume it will be physically impossible to extract some form of payment from you."

"Payment? You're lucky I don't ram my bow up your-"

"Excuse me, I'm in a hurry," said Sizma. "I am Belial's Chamberlain."

"So what?" said the customer.

"And this is his son, the Prince Benendier." She hoped the title would compensate for the absurdity of an armoured longshank ducking to avoid the low hanging violins.

When the customer was gone the luthier shook his head. "Do I look like a crook? Look around my workshop, my work speaks for itself." The gloomy room was littered with the corpses of dead violins, expired violas and a cello in bits, only fit for firewood. "My reputation is known across this realm. Look at this, look here."

He found a violin in a complete state, pulled a bow from under a pile of rusting tools and dragged it across the strings. The violin howled in anguish. "Sorry, haven't tuned it. You see the damp atmosphere causes the wood to stretch and contract. One has to control the environment very closely." He tried again and failed a second time to make his fiddle sound like a violin.

"Perhaps the pegs are loose. They come loose now and again."

"Do you provide violins to Lord Havielzek?" said Sizma.

"Gracious no."

"Have you been to a feast at his castle recently?"

"Yes, several weeks ago."

"Good food?"

"Not bad."

"Fruit?"

"Fruit?"

"Yes, fruit."

"Why do you ask?"

"Why won't you answer?"

He gathered up a set of small planes on his work table. "I've been looking for these."

"Why won't anyone speak about fruit round here?"

"I make and repair violins. Fruit is not my expertise."

"You don't have to be an expert on fruit to eat it." She followed him out of the workshop and continued to follow him when he doubled back.

"Sorry, I forgot my key."

"Well?"

"It's about five inches long."

"Was there a fruit display at this feast?"

"I can't remember. I have a shocking memory."

Any further interrogation would have killed him. The luthier sweated like a hog, trembled, sat down on his key and stood up again. "Well, there it is." He locked the door to his workshop, stumbled away and took his answer with him.

Neither Benendier nor the onlooking woman had an explanation. Sizma grabbed the tip of her tail and pointed it at the luthier disappearing down the lane. "What is going on? What is so peculiar about Havielzek's wretched fruit display?" Sizma dragged the woman towards the hedgerow, "Tell me what you know about fruit? In particular fruit displays?"

"Fruit displays. Well, would you believe me if I told you that my husband made the most amazing fruit displays in the realm?"

"What? No, I wouldn't believe you, but tell me more."

The woman opened up, all the way to her own house a short walk from the luthier's workshop. They talked of fruit, of gardening, of horticulture, of soil nourishment and the secrets of harvesting. The only detail the woman failed to reveal was her husband's full time occupation.

"He makes barrels?" The woman's husband was busy in his workshop. Around the outside walls barrels of all sizes stood to attention, the wood dark, the metal bands still shining. "He makes barrels? I thought you said he made fruit displays."

"He does. That's not his full time occupation, obviously. There's no money in fruit displays. But look at the size of his barrels. Can you imagine them full to the top with fruit, apples and grapes, tomatoes and bananas, oranges, and those little oranges that no one ever talks about."

Even Benendier looked disappointed and his face was hidden by the helmet which had slipped down again.

The barrel maker was a jolly man, a little too eager to describe the qualities needed to make a good barrel and when the subject of fruit was mentioned he was in his element. He explained the best barrel for fruit displays, "A fifty gallon Falubgazadar." And then guided everyone around the orchard full of trees full of rotten moth-eaten fruit riddled with grubs and wasps. His pride blinded him to reality and pulled Sizma's hopes down to her boots.

And to make matters worse, on the way here, she had overreached herself and briefed the woman on Belial's request. The barrel maker was happy to fulfil the order and provide Belial with a fruit display he would remember for as long as he had the faculties to remember anything.

"Of course," the barrel maker waited for his wife to go into the house for a quill pen and sheet of paper, "I'm not the best fruit display maker in the area."

"Aren't you?"

"No. Keep it to yourself, but Caziar, over in the water mill, he's the man you go to if you want a real fruit display. Makes them for all the high and mighties. Lord Havielzek, swears by him."

"Does he."

"Oh yes."

"Likes his fruit, does he?"

"Who?"

"Havielzek."

"Oh yes. Uses his fruit displays like a weapon. Look at me, I'm the only one who can afford anything like this. You see that's the difference between me and Caziar. You can afford my prices."

"I'm not paying."

"Right. Course not."

The quill pen was used to take Sizma's order, but she didn't care any more. She left them to it and guided Benendier back to his horse, even helped him up, pulled her tail from her breeches and headed off for Caziar's water mill and the conclusion to the quest.

"You sure he's the right one?" shouted Benendier who's flags and pennants seemed somehow appropriate now.

"Certain. Absolutely certain, Majesty."

Caziar was happy to take the order, provided sketches of some of his best displays, but Sizma asked for a unique example, one fit for a Prime Demon. No bananas, no barrels, and a specific date and time for delivery.

When the day of the banquet arrived the castle filled with the great and good, the horrible and diabolical, some dressed for a celebration, others dressed for a bet. Belial stood proud in the centre as usual; guests to the left of him, guests to the right of him, guests in the gardens and the patios, along the elevated pathways and surrounding the illuminated ponds. All agreed it was a fine banquet with good food, no excellent food, and even better drink. But it wasn't over yet, Belial, he announced had one final surprise.

The doors to the dining room were flung open when the fruit display arrived. From the end of the great dining table Belial watched four large demons struggle to carry the enormous payload and heave it onto a low table. The enormous barrel groaned from the weight of the fruit, much of it pockmarked and wrinkled, the skin in the early stages of being perished. Discoloured pears sat alongside lemons turning green and limes turning yellow. Goodness knows what state the melons were in when they were sliced open.

Perhaps there was a punchline, some trickery Belial was holding back. But he wasn't. He knew the truth, as did Sizma. His face turned a peculiar shade of purple and the sound of his knuckles cracking forced the nearest guests to step away from the table. He approached the barrel, stuck his knife into the soft flesh of a damson and held it up to the smoky light of the dining room.

"What is this, Chamberlain?"

"It is a damson, Majesty."

"I know it's a damson, Chamberlain. That is not what I meant."

She knew the order had gone through. The fruit display, the real fruit display should be on its way, but where was it? Belial swung his arm and the rancid damson flew through the air, dropping with a soft plop at the far end of the table.

Sizma swallowed, but then heard a noise, a commotion, a group of men struggling with a great weight. They leaned against the dining room doors and stopped when they saw the barrel occupying the space created for their fruit display. "Can we move this barrel out of the way," Sizma said.

Dragged to one side the barrel stood alongside its replacement, a huge brass bowl piled with a pyramid of glowing fruit. It shone like precious metal and the fragrance filled every flared nostril with the scents of spring. Puzzled by the arrival Belial waited for the right words, but he was tongue tied.

Sizma, with great hesitancy, whispered in his ear. Belial nodded. "Yes, good idea. Excellent idea. Guests," he announced. "Cast your gaze upon this barrel and consider the quality of the service you would receive from others living in this realm. And compare that substandard offering to my offering," the bowl, the pyramid. "See the difference, see the greatness of my generosity side to side with that of others. My modesty prevents me from saying any more."

At the top of the display sat an apple, rich ruby red in colour, its surface as polished as any surface in Belial's castle. He held it up, admired its perfection and then offered it to Sizma.

"To my most excellent Chamberlain."

"Thank you, Majesty."