



HELL - BELIAL'S REALM: story 4 - A Dangerous Gift

From the side room of the waiting room on the second floor of Belial's palace, lingering visitors could, on occasions, hear the floorboards creaking in the room above. But only when Belial was pacing and prowling, and he only did that when he was particularly animated. Invasion of his realm, another collapsed monument and so on.

Sizma peered through the gap in the door of Belial's room and saw him in a stage of agitation. "Majesty?"

He mumbled and looked down into the wide cuff of his sleeves.

"Has the magic trick not worked, Majesty?"

"Eh? What? Magic trick?"

"You're looking into your sleeves."

He flung his arms out. "What am I to do, Chamberlain? It's her birthday in two days time. What do I give her? What do you give the consort of a Prime Demon? She has everything."

"Can you not take something off her, Majesty? Set a new trend."

"You're not being very helpful, Chamberlain." He stuck a finger in his right ear and squinted as he rubbed hard. "And these noises are annoying me."

A calm entered the room when Sizma paused to hear the noises. There was nothing. "Why not build a monument to her, Majesty."

"She can't have a monument. Only I have monuments. It's a royal privilege, you should know that by now."

"Your horse had a monument-"

"Yes, yes. Concentrate, Chamberlain. It's no use. I don't want to ask her what she wants." He set off again, pacing up and down the room, mumbling gifts and trinkets, bric a brac and thingummybobs. And nothing came to mind. Sizma pinched the point of one of her horns. "You'll have to pay a visit. Find out what she wants. Be discreet."

"I can go in disguise, Majesty."

"There's no need to go in disguise, Chamberlain. You're not a spy. Just meet her, walk with her, show an interest and deduce from her demeanour what she might need."

"May I ask, Majesty, when you last spoke to her?"

"Stupid question, Chamberlain. Last year. On her birthday."

"Yes. It was a stupid question, Majesty. Leave it to me. What are these noises you say you can hear?"

He pointed at the window. "Like scratching glass, Chamberlain."

The window looked out across the courtyard, deep and hard, cobbled and contained by smooth stone walls, the window built into a cantilevered extension. Beyond the rooves and turrets, the gentle rolling hills stretched away to a hazy lake covered by a pale mist of steam created by the lingering heat of Baphomet's realm.

"The glass is untouched, no signs of anything trying to get in."

"It's not the window, Chamberlain. It's in here." He poked his finger in his ear again.

"Let me arrange for the Royal Physician to stick a probe into it, Majesty. Perhaps there's a small insect stuck there."

"I hope not." Belial shuddered.

"The Lord Demon Jidd had a fly stuck in his ear for four months, Majesty. They were going to chop it off to get it out-"

"Spare me the details. Go, go on. Find out what she wants. Go. Hurry."

"Majesty." She reversed out of the room and carefully closed the door. The corridor and stair well offered no sound, no scratching of anything and for a moment she thought about the possibility that Belial was going mad. He wasn't hearing voices, but it was just a matter of time before they replaced the sound of scratching glass. She was met on the stairs by Odrid, the fourth Royal Balloon Builder in as many months. Here was a man with a weight on his shoulders greater than any his balloon could carry.

"Is he in?" said Odrid.

"In where?"

"His room?"

"Yes. And he's in a terrible mood. Absolutely foul."

"Is he? Shit."

"But your good news will cheer him up no end. You do have good news, don't you?"

"Well," he stooped even lower, "we're closer than ever to lifting the effigy to the top of his tower, but we just need stronger material for the balloon."

Odrid followed Sizma down the steps, careful to stay just behind her. "He was expecting the effigy to be in place by this afternoon."

"It's a very tall tower, Chamberlain. I have no control over gravity."

"None of us do, Odrid." The steps opened into a large hall with several doors around the walls, one of which led to the marital records office.

"There's only so much one balloon can carry, Chamberlain."

"Then make a second balloon." Between footsteps, Sizma could hear Odrid's brain grinding, the suggestion new to him.

"I'll try that, Chamberlain. Thank you."

"This afternoon, Odrid," she called. "And it's mid-day in ten minutes time." Short, heavy footsteps scurried out of the palace.

In the marital records office there was one presence older than the books. The Marital Records Officer, an ancient demon who had been married thirty times and had a shelf of her own full of books detailing the grisly outcomes of her ex-husbands. Gracious Emmal didn't like people inside her marital records office.

Sizma sat at a high table, crossed her legs and rested the arrowhead of her tail on a shelf. "Do you know anything of his Majesty's wife, Gracious Emmal? Her fancies, likes, dislikes. Habits, hobbies. Favourite pastimes."

"Why do you ask?" Gracious Emmal remained still next to a writing desk as if the questions were a trick.

"It's her birthday. His Majesty wants to surprise her with a gift."

"Why doesn't he do what he always does when he wants to surprise someone?"

"He can't execute her."

Gracious Emmal returned to her book keeping. "That's not what I meant. His marital details are on the wall next to the goblets"

There were a lot of books, a lot of documents, scrolls, parchments, ancient writings, a marriage arrangement scribbled onto a handkerchief. The divorce papers pinned to the underside. "He was married to someone called Phidemin. . . Phidelemaean. . . ."

"He couldn't pronounce her name either. That's why he divorced her."

After searching through names and marriages going back nine hundred years, Sizma found the latest contract. Her name was Xandrian and she lived in a hunting lodge a long walk from the palace gates. The evening was drawing in, a deep blue sky to the east, a gentle transformation to the crimson clouds in the west. And in the middle of the canvas, a single intruder, a silhouette like a drifting pair of speech marks rose above the tree line. It carried the helpless stone effigy that should have been drifting in the opposite direction towards the topless tower of a new monument.

In a large field next to a dark forest a woman on horseback galloped towards a target and with no hands on the reins fired a crossbow. The bolt shaved the top of the target and landed in the

grass. Watching the practice, a second woman wearing the silver armour of Belial's infantry shook her head.

"Your centre of gravity shifts when you aim, you must allow for that when you sight the target. Compensate."

"Yes. I wasn't approaching on the right line, I had to make a correction." They stopped talking when Sizma picked up the bolt embedded in the soil.

"Hello. Which one of you is Xandrian?"

"I am," said the woman on horseback. "And you?"

"Sizma. Belial's Chamberlain."

For several seconds she became the focus of curiosity, perhaps suspicion. "And how is his majesty these days?" said Xandrian.

"He has a noise in his ears that sounds like scratching glass, but apart from that he's in good spirits."

The woman on the ground was distracted by the floating effigy that snagged against the distant treetops. A rope snapped and the whole heavy cargo disappeared.

"I think his majesty will be looking for a new balloon maker," said Sizma. "Have you ever taken a ride in a balloon, Xandrian?"

"No."

"Oh. Would you like a ride in a balloon?"

"Not really."

"No. Me neither. Your bolt." Sizma took her handkerchief, cleaned the soil off the tip of the bolt and handed it back. "I didn't know you were part of the infantry."

"I'm not. Rubezka is teaching me the art of horseback shooting. My archery skills are improving, but I prefer to use the crossbow." She studied the ancient weapon and passed it to Rubezka along with the bolt.

"Would you like a new crossbow?"

"No, this one's fine. The weight suits me."

Rubezka placed the crossbow into a frame and reloaded it.

"And your horse is okay, up to the task?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"It must be approaching your anniversary, Xandrian." Rubezka handed the loaded crossbow back. "Sounds to me like his guilt needs pacifying."

"It's not a good idea to speak of his majesty like that," said Sizma.

"No, mustn't speak of his majesty in such disrespectful tones, eh Chamberlain. Mustn't upset his delicate disposition." Xandrian turned her horse and spoke down to Sizma. "I don't need anything from him. No jewellery, no money, no land, no fantastic animals, floral displays, fireworks or balloon rides. Go back to his majesty and tell him to shove his gifts up his arsehole."

The second shot at the target, fired at speed, hit the centre. Xandrian thundered past Sizma, the draught shoving her tail to one side. The ground echoed with the horse's weight. "She's been liberated since she left the palace," said Rubezka. "She can joust, she's an excellent swordswoman, she can sprint like a cheetah, climbs rocks and swims the length of lakes. How can any gift be a match for freedom?"

"I have to agree with you, Rubezka. Perhaps his majesty should save his money and spend it on charity."

"Or another balloon."

"Another balloon. Yes." The balloon problem would be waiting for Sizma when she returned to the palace. Her expectations came true and just after dark she strolled into the gardens of the palace illuminated with blazing torches. She paused at the main gate to avoid the puddles of blood. Above her, the bodies of Odrid and his balloon making team dangled like mannequins, their innards hanging from open bellies.

Sizma met the Chief of Security on the palace steps. "I take it we need a new royal balloon maker?"

"If anyone wants the job. They'd have to be mad to accept it."

They both studied the grisly display. "Why don't they learn from the previous maker's mistakes?"

"They had four days to find a solution. It isn't long enough."

"What isn't long enough?" Belial burst out of the palace onto the steps and examined Sizma's tail. "Looks all right to me. Have you had it gilded, Chamberlain?"

"No. It must be the warm light from the fires, Majesty."

"Yes, well. Chamberlain, what are we to do now? This lot have dropped my effigy in to a forest. It's a terrible job trying to retrieve it. It might even need repairing. We need a new Royal Balloon Maker. Can I leave you to find one?"

"Of course, Majesty."

"And what about my wife? Any clues?"

"Yes. I think she'd like a surprise, and by that I mean a gift from a mysterious admirer rather than putting your name on it. Her interests at the moment include rock climbing, swimming, archery, jousting-

"Jousting?"

"Jousting, yes."

"She never liked jousting. She doesn't like horses. She's terrified of them."

"You should see her now, Majesty."

A servant appeared and spread straw along the ground where the blood was collecting. The last of Odrid's entrails became detached from his stomach cavity and fell on the servant's head.

"When did she start jousting?"

"You said yourself, Majesty, you haven't seen her for a year. You can learn a lot in a year. She has a female Lost Soul from your infantry teaching her."

Belial rolled his head back and closed his eyes. "Oh, Chamberlain." His groan forced the Chief of Security into the palace. "Was her name Rubezka or something?"

"Yes."

"She's not my wife."

"I didn't think she was."

"Not Rubezka. The woman she's teaching. Xandrian is my ex-wife. Mercy me, I don't believe this. Do you know what you've done?"

"No."

"No! You've no idea. Where's my Chief of Security gone?"

Events moved quickly. The Chief of Security was found peeling apples in a bathroom. He was ordered to summon Gracious Emmal who crept into Belial's throne room.

"Gracious Majesty, Overlord of All Glorious Territory, High Council of Culture and Creativity, Overseer and Overprotector of All Realms, Grand Justice and Supreme Magistrate, Fair and Equitable High Monarch and Defender of Valleys, Townships, Lowlands and All 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."

"Chamberlain."

"You left out his majesty's Settlements. Overprotector of all Realms and Settlements."

"My apologies, Majesty. It's an easy mistake to make."

"Take her away." She was dragged out of the room. "Bring her back." She was dragged back in. "Tell my hapless Chamberlain the name of my current wife."

"I believe her name is Consortia."

"Thank you, Gracious Emmal. Take her away again."

The Chief of Security went with them leaving Sizma to study Belial's renewed agitation. He sat down, stood up, tapped his chin with his index finger, stroked his beard, fidgeted around his waist. "I need a dagger."

"I'll find one for you, Majesty. You look disturbed."

"Of course I'm disturbed. You met her. You met them both. Did you notice anything about her?"

"She wasn't too keen to receive a gift from you, Majesty."

"No. I can only guess how that was phrased."

"She said tell him to shove his gifts up his arsehole. Majesty."

"Sounds like her. She's a wicked woman, Chamberlain."

"But you're the ruler of this realm. She can't speak of you like that, Majesty." The window framed a new body added to the display still hanging from the walls of the gate house.

"Do you know who she is? Xandrian? Do you know her full name?"

"No, Majesty."

"She is from the house of Astar."

"Ah, I see."

"I can't execute a relative of Astaroth, no matter how objectionable she might be. And now she's upset. You've upset her, Chamberlain."

"I'll put it right, Majesty. And I'll cure your hearing problem."

"Good. Good show, Chamberlain." He smiled. "Well, get on with it."

"Majesty."

Off the main entrance hall, the postal service was the usual bustle of activity. Delivery demons came and went with messages of desperation scribbled onto scraps of paper, pleading invoices (ignored), fan letters to Belial (placed in a separate pile), miscellaneous communications and the occasional lost postcard or envelope which had to be steamed open before being destroyed. Sizma intercepted everything posted to Belial including one small envelope with the palace address handwritten in a beautiful cursive script.

"Does anyone know where the Royal Physician is?" She steamed the envelope open over a boiling cauldron.

"He's seeing to the stable staff," said the Postal Secretary. "Smoke inhalation again. They won't stay away from the border when they exercise the horses."

"Get a telegram to him urgently, ask him to return to see to his majesty's ear."

"What's wrong with it?"

"He can hear scratching glass. It might be an infection or inflammation or something stuck in his head."

The Royal Physician was back within the hour, case opened, equipment spread out on the table next to Belial's throne and ready to peer into the Royal ear. "There's nothing in there, Majesty. One can see the brain-"

"The brain? My brain?"

"A joke, Majesty."

"I see. Well if there's nothing in there what might it be?"

"Do you ever suffer from dizziness, Majesty?"

"A little. When I stand up too quickly."

"Yes. Perhaps you have a mild form of tinnitus. Ringing in the ear, Majesty. A common ailment in the elderly."

"The what?"

"And the young. Of course, Gracious Majesty." He backed away from the ear and bowed. "A little bed rest for a few days. I can prepare a warm tincture to ease the sensitivity of the inner ear, reduce any noise that might be going on in there."

"I don't have time for bed rests, Royal Physician."

"Why not, Majesty?" said Sizma. "I can look after things while you rest. The Chief of Security is on top of everything, I believe." She examined the windows. "When was the last time you had a rest, Majesty?"

"Last night."

"I mean a proper rest. A break from all the responsibilities and duties and pressures that come with running a successful realm."

"Yes. Yes, I see what you mean."

He was easily persuaded, especially when it suited him. He took the physicians advice and Sizma's reassurances and sent for his courtiers to dress him for bed. When he was settled with his favourite biography of himself, Sizma left to find the wife she should have already met. On the way out of the palace she concealed herself behind a storage barn and read the letter she had intercepted.

His Gracious Majesty

Overlord of All Glorious Territory, High Council of Culture and Creativity, Overseer and Overprotector of All Realms, Grand Justice and Supreme Magistrate, Fair and Equitable High Monarch and Defender of Valleys, Townships, Lowlands and All Routes and Byways, Arbiter of Wit and Intellect (!) and Perennial Champion of Concerns Becoming and Suitable of All Monarchs and Prime Leaders et cetera et cetera.

I have been in the service of your former Queen for a number of years and have come to respect her above all others. It is impossible for me to hold my tongue and stand by as she is forced to suffer the humiliation of your actions. Queen Xandrian is worth two of you and your entire circle of cronies and if more were prepared to say such words to you this realm would be a far more just place to occupy.

Please inform your peculiar Chamberlain to stay away from the Queen's property, if only to force you to do your own bidding should such a need arise in the future. For now, I will endeavour to serve as her only protector and will do so to the death.

Rubezka V

Such handwriting. The beauty so at odds with the venom of the words. Great rolling loops swooped and rose above and below the letters and lines, and the signature written with so much elegant confidence that it could be bottled if a bottle with strong enough glass existed. Sizma wished she had a signature as gorgeous as Rubezka's. As for the actual message, she couldn't care less.

Consortia, Belial's current known wife, buzzed around a small garden filled with the lightest flowers and stepped across grass that sank beneath her insignificant weight. A billowing skirt chased her when she switched from one pom pom to another.

Sizma tried not to startle her. "Hello."

"Hello. Oh, what a beautiful day isn't it? Don't you just love being alive when the bees are out and the birds are singing and the rabbits scurry from their . . . holes and things."

"Delightful. What do you want for your birthday?"

"My birthday? My birthday?" She had to think about it. "I know. I want the stream to sing to me and the trees recite the finest poetry until the-

"Not even his Majesty can arrange that. Something tangible. Something for the garden perhaps. A spade?"

"A what?" She started asking the flowers what they thought, but they were as clueless as Consortia. "A tree house."

"Tree house?"

"Yes. A tree house made out of hornbeam, with garlands around the door, rose petals scattered across the path leading to a ladder woven from fresh willow."

Sizma found a small notebook in her wallet and made notes. "Anything else? What about a surprise?"

"A surprise? Yes, a surprise. I love surprises. How is his majesty?"

"When I last saw him he was asleep."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure he needs his rest. Can't be easy controlling so much land. I take it you work for him?"

"I'm Sizma. I'm his Chamberlain."

"May I ask you a question, Sizma? Will he ever come to visit me? There are times when it would be nice to have some company."

"You've got all these flowers to talk to."

They looked at her adoringly. "Yes, I suppose so."

She may have been talking to a lightweight flibberdygibbet, but Sizma recognised a broken heart when she saw one. She put her notebook away. "Leave it to me. I'll arrange a surprise and see if his majesty will deliver it in person. I can't promise anything though."

Consortia's face brightened.

"Leave it with me." Before she reached the small picket gate Sizma turned back. Consortia stared into empty space. "Do you like archery?"

"Archery? No."

"Try it. You might enjoy it."

On the way back to the palace Sizma ignored the accusing gaze of the wildflowers and welcomed the diminished evening light. Before the path turned towards the great gates Sizma noticed Belial's bedroom window and the weak warm glow behind it. His rule was tolerated, suffered, and it was only a matter of time before someone like Xandrian or even a crazed Consortia emboldened by the fumes from the garden blossom took a shot at him.

But an attack would have to come through the great gates having taken out the guard. Once through the gates an attacker would have to sprint across the cobbled courtyard, open and exposed, without being spotted by the lookout up on the walls. And then, even if the attacker was still able to move, there was the palace wall to scale; a vertical surface of smooth stone with the window's cantilevered bulge overhanging it. When the window was closed it presented the last barrier to a difficult entry.

In the gentle candlelight, Belial slept like a beached whale. Sizma settled at the table, took out her notebook and Rubezka's letter and copied the writing until her own signature took on the gracious beauty of the original. She practiced each letter, writing it over and over again until it was second nature and by the time she was proficient in the art of cursive script she took off down to the postal service room and left a letter for special delivery. Back in his room, Belial was awake.

"It's you. You're back. Was she in?"

"In a manner of speaking, Majesty. She has a casual approach to life, does she not?"

"Still talking to the flowers is she?"

"Yes." She approached the window and opened it. "Who else can she talk to, Majesty?"

"Well, perhaps."

"She'd like something for the garden, Majesty. A tree house was mentioned."

"She's already got a house."

"Not in a tree, Majesty. Made out of hornbeam."

"Well, see to it, Chamberlain. You're more than capable."

"And she'd like you to deliver a surprise gift, Majesty."

"Would she?"

"The route to the library being constructed in your honour passes by her house. It wouldn't be too much to just call in with a . . . a locket or a bracelet, some trinket to show your affection. Perhaps talk with her for a while. She might actually prefer that to a tree house."

"Wouldn't cost as much, I suppose. Look at my itinerary, see if I have time, Chamberlain."

"Certainly, Majesty."

"Before you go, Chamberlain, are you sure you haven't had your tail gilded? You know only I am allowed to gild things."

"It isn't gilded, majesty. How is the ear?"

"It's much better, thank you. That Royal Physician certainly knows his tinctures, and this bed rest is better than I thought it would be. Do you want something, Chamberlain?"

"No, Majesty."

"Well, hop to it. Consortia's tree house won't build itself."

At the door, Sizma said, "I think she's lonely, Majesty."

Belial sat on the edge of his enormous bed and smoothed the pattern in the fabric. "Check the itinerary. I'll, I'll pay her a visit. Take her some flowers or something."

"Yes, Majesty."

At daybreak Sizma visited the town's building contractors to order the wood and the nails and the slate and glass, garlands, rose petals and willow; everything needed for a lonely consort's tree house. She insisted on hornbeam. In the afternoon she paid a visit to the florists, where she discovered a shortage of lilies because of the increasing levels of warm air drying out the soils in the lily growing fields. Early evening, she moved on to several jewellery shops and depleted Belial's wealth with a grand selection of rings, necklaces, bracelets and brooches. And with the last rays of sun retreating into night and everything on her list ticked off, she slipped away to Xandrian's house.

The place was empty. The rooms lay settled as if abandoned: lounge pristine, dining room cleared away, beds made. In the kitchen she found a folded sheet of paper with an annotated plan of the castle and Rubezka's signature. She held the paper up against a space on the white wall and found the royal watermark, Belial's sigil hiding amongst the paper's fibres.

Outside the house, there was no noise from the stables. The stillness alarmed Sizma and she raced back to the palace. Before she arrived at the great gates she took cover behind the hedgerow and waited for the guard to appear. At the base of the walls a shadow lingered, the guard appeared and before the shadow was found the thud of a crossbow bolt dropped the guard to the ground. The figure moved and slipped through the smaller door in the guard house.

Sizma entered through the great gates and headed for the courtyard walls, hoping to get a better view of the figure's progress. Interrupted by the lookout's suspicion, the figure had frozen behind a cart loaded with barrels. Sizma could see it, the lookout could not and would never see it after a dagger swept across his throat. The clatter of falling weapons and armour alerted the figure that dashed towards the wall.

The verticality was no obstruction. The figure that hurled a rope up to the cantilevered overhang, its rough stone edge providing a catch for the rope's hook. Up it went, like a giant spider and when it arrived at the overhang Sizma noticed the open window to Belial's room.

Short of time, Sizma sprinted along the wall, through a heavy door, up the spiral steps of the tower and emerged into the corridor that passed Belial's room. She clattered through the door just as an arm groped for the window frame. Sizma's breathless arrival and the commotion at the window woke Belial who observed the unwelcome confrontation when Sizma lurched for the figure half in, half out of the window.

They grappled and twisted, the figure strong and female, her face covered by a scarf pulled up over her head, with a narrow gap revealing broad brown eyes. Sizma's dagger snagged the scarf; the figure sat in the window, her immense strength pulled Sizma towards the drop until she was almost horizontal. Her centre of gravity reached a pivotal point, but Sizma used the figure's energy to flick her tail around and gouge a deep scar in the figure's cheek. Surprised by the arrowhead, her grip on Sizma's wrists weakened and she lost her balance. The opportunity present, Sizma heaved the figure through the window. The scarf remained in the room, its owner slammed against the cobbled courtyard and remained still as the blood escaped towards the cart.

"Who is she, Chamberlain?" Belial pulled Sizma from the window.

"I'm not sure, Majesty. Possibly the Lost Soul that teaches Xandrian. Rubezka."

"Rubezka. Why would she want to kill me? You went there offering gifts, what did you say to them?"

"Nothing to cause this, Majesty. I visited Xandrian's house earlier and found this." She produced the letter with the plan of the castle. "There's her signature. Rubezka."

"Strange carry on, Chamberlain." Guards appeared in the courtyard, poured through the great gates and along the walls, but they were five minutes too late. "Where's my Chief of Security? Send for my Chief of Security, Chamberlain."

"Yes, Majesty." Sizma paused at the door, ready for the inevitable second instruction. She was right.

"While you're out there, Chamberlain, go down to the Royal Torturer and tell her to prepare something special for him. Something painful."

"Yes, Majesty."

He called after her again. "Very, very painful. Tell her to use her imagination."

"Yes, Majesty."

The Royal Torturer liked a challenge. "Use my imagination, is that what he said?"

"Yes. He allowed an assassin to reach the royal bedroom, so perhaps something based on the route from gate to window. I don't know. Use your imagination."

"Don't tell your sister how to do her job." Kezma twitched her wings and ran a black tongue along her lips. "What's the letter?"

"This? A plan of the castle. I found it in Xandrian's house."

Kezma took the folded paper and studied the plan. She nodded, grinned, tapped the folded paper on Sizma's forehead and slipped it beneath the belt around her hips. "You always spell turret with one R. You should be more careful, Sizma."

"Yes. I'll come back when you're done with him." Sizma pulled open the stiff gate to the cellar. "One down, two to go."