



THE HORNED SERVANT

There once was a land far, far away, where tricksters as red as hot coal roamed the earth, and in that land there lived a poor woodcutter with his family. He worked hard, waking up at dawn and cutting down trees until dusk every day, and earned just enough money to take care of his family.

One day, the woodcutter was leaving for work and stopped in the pantry to pack some food for the day. When he looked in the pantry, however, he saw that there was almost no food left, so all he packed was a small slice of bread. With his meager lunch safely in his bag, he swung an axe over his shoulder and set off into the woods.

The woodcutter walked until he reached a familiar clearing. He hung his bag on a nearby branch and began to chop down a tree. The noise of his heavy axe hacking at the giant tree echoed through the whole forest. Birds quickly flew out of the nearby trees toward quiet and safety, and squirrels poked their heads out of the branches to see what was happening.

But the racket also attracted a curious little trickster.

“Ooh, who do we have here in the woods?” he asked, gleefully. “A woodcutter, you say? Well, I must admit that he chops swiftly. Lord knows I would never work that hard! Ooh-hoo! But what is that hanging over there? A bag! And full of tasty goodies, I’m sure!” The trickster excitedly hopped toward the bag, his tail

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swinging behind him and his horns twitching eagerly.

Sneakily he skittered over to the woodcutter's bag, snatched it up in a wink, and vanished as if he'd fallen straight through the ground to hell itself.

The woodcutter was so immersed in his work that he didn't notice until it was too late that the trickster had come and gone. Far off, in the depths of the devil's realm, the thief brandished the bag and boasted to his fellow tricksters about the devilry he had just accomplished.

"Look what I found today! I bumped into a woodchopper in the woods, chop chop chopping the trees, and he left me this bag just to take! Look at this little piece of bread! He was going to eat it, but now it's mine and he's got nothing at all!" The trickster was very proud of himself and did a little dance, waving the piece of bread in the air.

But the little trickster's bragging reached the ears of the king of hell himself, who didn't like what he was hearing in the slightest. Tricksters are known for their tricks, of course, and that usually involves some kind of stealing, but to steal from someone who didn't deserve it and had so very little to begin with was a type of cruelty unfitting for a proper trickster. With a voice so terrifying that the entire realm trembled and roared, he said, "To the IceFields with you until tomorrow! Then you will go to the earth before the sun rises, find the woodcutter, and serve him dutifully for a year."

The trickster knew better than to protest, though he still couldn't understand what he had done wrong. He spent the night in the barren ice fields, a place tricksters hate with all their might because it's very cold and there's absolutely nothing fun to do there, and the next morning, while his fellow demons still slept, he dutifully set off to find the woodcutter and enter his service.

The haggard woodcutter was about to leave for work when his door burst open and the trickster swaggered in, pretending to be a young fit lad.

"Good morning, mister," said the lad. "I'd like to start working for you!"

"Well, my boy, lord knows I could use some help, but I can't afford to pay you. Sometimes we barely have enough to eat ourselves. Just look at these poor hungry children of mine," the woodcutter said, apologetically.

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“Please take me in, sir. I’m not asking for pay, and I’ll serve you well. I won’t take no for an answer!” The trickster knew that the devil king would never let him come back if he didn’t do this.

“No pay? Well... alright, then. And since you’re so eager to start, why don’t you go with me to the woods this morning and help me fell some trees,” the woodcutter said, handing the trickster boy an axe.

So they set off for the woods and worked so quickly that in three days they had cut down enough trees to support the woodcutter and his family for three years. Everything changed for the family after the trickster arrived; suddenly they had food and they laughed more. And the trickster learned that he loved to see them happy, though he was beginning to miss his old tricks.

One day, after he had lived with the family for quite a while, the trickster went to the woodcutter and asked for a few days off.

“Hey mister,” he said. “Now that you have enough firewood for three years, you probably don’t need me as much to help with felling trees. I thought I would go look for some grains, so you’ll have flour for baking bread.”

The woodcutter marveled again at what a nice young man this was, gave him a day off, and the trickster set out to search the land far and wide for some grains. Soon enough he came across vast fields with heaps of crops just lying there. This was a very rich farmer! He had three hundred pigs oinking in his sties and three hundred oxen grazing in his fenced pastures.

The young trickster confidently walked right up to the farmhouse and knocked on the door. The farmer opened the door.

“What do you want, boy?” he asked gruffly.

“Good day, sir. I would like to start working for you. I noticed you need someone to flail your grains,” the trickster said in as polite a voice as he could muster.

“Well, yes, you’re right. I’ll gladly take you on,” the farmer said. “But you don’t can’t do it all just by yourself, can you? You’re well built and strong, too, I can see that, but there’s enough work for thirty hefty chaps.”

“Don’t worry, sir, I can handle it,” the trickster responded.

“And how do you want me to pay you?”

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“Oh, hm.” The trickster pretended to think. “I’ll just take as much as I can carry on my back.”

“Well, that’s a good offer!” the farmer said, and as the boy happily walked off to the field he wondered just how much this boy thought he could carry on his back. That night, as the farmer slept soundly in his bed the trickster summoned all his friends and set them to the task. Suddenly, hundreds of flails started beating the grains. Whack! Bam! Bang!

When the farmer awoke, the boy was already waiting for him, ready to show off his finished work. The farmer couldn’t believe his eyes. How could the lad have finished so fast? There was no explanation, but it was clearly done and he was happy with the work, so they returned to the house to pay the lad what he’d been promised.

Once there, the lad started piling up large sacks of wheat on his back. When he had taken almost ten, the man said: “Well, isn’t that enough?”

But the lad just laughed: “Enough? Oh, I can barely feel the weight. Keep piling up, mister, go on.”

He took almost all the wheat, and soon, a devilish grin on his face, he’d piled one hundred pigs on his back as well.

“How are you doing this? Haven’t you taken enough?” shouted the farmer, angrily. But again, the lad just laughed. The farmer was fuming with rage as the trickster piled one hundred oxen on his back as well, but there was nothing he could do.

Once the lad thought he had taken enough of everything, he gave the angered farmer a cheery goodbye and hurried back to the woodcutter’s house.

When he reached the yard, he dropped everything on the ground and brightly said,

“Well, mister, it’s been a year since I started working for you and my service is now coming to an end. But you don’t have to worry about being hungry anymore.”

The woodcutter stared at the young man and the piles and piles of wheat and animals.

“How did you do this?” he asked in wonder.

“Well...” the trickster began. “Do you remember that day when you were chopping

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wood and lost the bag with the last piece of bread you had?”

“I do... but how do you know about it?” asked the woodcutter.

“I’m a trickster, you see, and I have to confess that it was me who stole your bread. The devil king himself punished me for it. I was told to help you for a year to pay the debt. The year has just passed, so now I can return home. I hope that for the rest of your life, you are happy and fulfilled.” And then, right before the man’s eyes, he transformed back to his trickster form and disappeared.

Years later, when young tricksters were asked why they could only trick and steal from people who had too much, the elders would tell the story of the trickster who spent a year serving a mortal man, who had learned that those who are less fortunate need help, not harm.

And as for the woodcutter? He lived happily with his family to his last days, never forgetting the young trickster who had changed his life.