



ROAD WORK

A Never Realm Tale

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The southern jungle was vast, mysterious, and reputed to be filled with magic. Which is why most sane people stayed away. The southern jungle is extremely dense, and the porous lava absorbs sound, which although this provides travelers with a sense of solitude, the silence makes most people uneasy. The jungle also had a historical reputation as a home to the ghosts of the dead. In recent years, the southern jungle had also become known as "the Suicide Trees", as it was one of the most-used suicide sites outside the capital.



There were also several caves in the region which were the nominal homes of a clan of dragons. The local magistrates refer to the process as suicide by dragon. The royalty made no effort to take any action ... or even have the southern jungle patrolled in any way. After all, the dragons tended to keep the place clean of bodies without any outside assistance. And as long as they were fed ... they weren't interested in bothering anybody. Yet since dragons don't like to eat magic, the rumor was the jungle was full of a ton of magic objects just waiting around to be picked up. The place was silent. It was beginning to bother the small kobold picking his way among the leaves. After hours of searching, Morge hadn't found a thing and was beginning to have second thoughts as to why his business partners had sent him here in the first place.

Selling objects was the closest a kobold got to a religious experience. Morge had learned all about it at his mother's knee. Each item a kobold sold to another returned to him in the afterlife. It was the universe's two for one offer. You got the gold for selling an item in this world and it came back to you in the next. It was no mere myth the best deals could be gotten in any shop run by a kobold ... they were almost desperate to sell you something ... anything. No matter what the price.

The green of Morge's jacket blended in nicely with the jungle foliage. Morge himself was fond of the shoulder pads on the outfit. Non-functional, they were a total indulgence. It wasn't typical for his type of Kobold, but he liked it. His partners teased him about it, referring to him as a clothes horse. But he didn't mind. Only his brown shorts were standard attire for the clan, but he also held it up with a belt and not the usual suspenders. His partners claimed the look made him appear more human. It wasn't a compliment.

Morge first heard the strange noises after crossing a creek. It didn't sound like any ghost he could imagine. Ghosts usually had a thing about moaning. Although a couple of them were good with the blood-curdling screams. It didn't sound like a dragon either ... they were never this quiet. It sounded like a construction project. But why would anyone try to build anything in the southern jungle? It was like trying to build a boat in the middle of the hurricane.

At first, Morge sat frozen, hiding under a mulberry bush. After a time ... perhaps several hours ... he crawled out of his hiding place. It was not the fact he was any less afraid, but he was starting to get hungry. Morge crept closer to the sound, stealthfully moving on his elbows and knees. What he saw made him stop breathing. Someone was building a road in the middle of the jungle. Bricks, mortar ... it looked to be a serious project ... only it ran for only about 200 yards ... seemingly between two disparate trees. But the strangest aspect of the project was the construction crew. There was only one worker. He had wings, horns, claws and a tail. Even a simple kobold like Morge couldn't misidentify such a creature. He was a Horned Devil. Morge gasped.

“Well, hello there,” the horned devil greeted him in an upper-class accent. “My name is Larry.”

For some reason, this statement put Morge at ease. The whole concept was ridiculous. “You’re kidding,” Morge had to fight from laughing, “You’re a demon named Larry?”

“Well, yes. Odd isn’t it?”

“I’ll say ... but not as odd as building a road in the jungle.”

“It’s my penance,” Larry explained grimly.

“Penance for what?”

Larry’s shoulders dropped. “I don’t like to torture people.”

Morge rose to his full three-foot height. “Wait a minute. You’re a demon who is in trouble for not wanting to torture condemned souls?”

“That’s about right.”

Morge stepped out of the trees and walked over to the brick road surface. He glanced at the tight seams. “Nice work,” he commented.

“Thanks,” Larry seemed almost to blush ... but it was hard to tell. Horned Devils already have quite the red skin tone, to begin with.

“How long have you been working on it?”

“Oh, not long. Only about a thousand years.”

“A thousand years ... and you’ve only got 200 yards? How long will it take to get somewhere?” Morge walked along the road toward the far end.

“I would go any farther,” Larry warned. “The side you’re on leads to hell. Actually, both sides go there, so I wouldn’t recommend walking to either end.”

Morge looked confused. “What do you mean? The road leads to a tree. Are you saying trees are hell?”

“I would never say such a vile thing,” Larry protested. He seemed genuinely embarrassed. “Each end of the road is a portal to hell, only you can’t see it. They’re invisible portals.

“So, what’s it for?” Morge asked bemused. “A road in the middle of the jungle which doesn’t go anywhere anyone would want to go?”

“Didn’t I mention it was penance?”

“You did mention something along those lines.”

“So, now you know why I’m here,” Larry gave him a wry smile, “What brings you to the heart of the jungle?”

Morge beamed with pride. “Well, I’m part owner of a store.”

Larry applauded. "Quite the prestigious position for a Kobold. Your clan must be proud. But you still haven't told me what you're doing all the way out here?"

"Well ... looking for dragon droppings actually. You know the magic objects dragons they don't like to eat. Something we can put in the front window. "

"Because everything else is stolen loot ... and you don't put stolen loot in the front window for everyone to see."

Morge looked surprised. "How did you know?"

"I am a demon," Larry commented, "didn't my horns give me away? We tend to stay on top of these things. So, you must represent a member of the royal family. That's quite the feather in your cap."

Morge's smile went from happy beaming to glowing pride. "It does actually ... wait a moment, no, no, no, no," Morge repeated. "We don't have anything to do with the royal family. After all, we're just kobolds. Humans wouldn't have anything to do with us."

Larry patted Morge on the back. "No cause to be concerned. As a demon, we are not obligated to release any information about nefarious or immoral activities outside our circle. It's a matter of professional courtesy, you understand. We're not like the other side."

"Well ... I'm pleased to hear you say so, but I'd best be getting along now."

"Mind if I join you?" Larry asked.

"What about your road?"

"Oh, I can take care of it later."

Morge hemmed and hawed. "I don't know," he muttered.

"I think you'll find having a Horned devil around is good protection from your average dragon."

"What about the above-average dragon?"

"Oh, we're even better with them," Larry replied conceitedly.

"You wouldn't happen to know where any good magic loot is would you?" Morge enquired.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Larry grinned. "There this nice sword in a lake I can show you. The woman who lives there liked to give it away from time to time. But she doesn't do it much anymore. Seems she had less than positive results."

It didn't take long for Morge and Larry to get getting along like long lost brothers. The little Kobold now found himself able to walk with his head held high in the jungle, not ducking under every bush he came across. Not only did Larry know some exceptional spots for loot, but he was also great at carrying the stuff. Who knew wings had pockets?

Morge brought Larry back to the capital with him. As they approached people began to scream and run off to hide in their houses. Larry seemed disturbed. "I guess next time I should try a disguise?" he asked his reptilian companion.

“That might be for the best, especially inside the store.”

Larry grinned. “Wouldn’t do to scare the customers away, would it?”

“No,” Morge commented, “not good for business.”



The storefront was clean with a large set of glass windows sticking out into the street. Over these bay frames were written the words ‘Kobold Brothers Extraordinaire.’

“We’re not actually brothers,” Morge explains shyly, “but it sounds better than the kobold cousins and in-laws.”

Morge entered without so much as a knock on the door. Kleeg and Zipp turned to face the door at once. At first they were pleased it might be a customer, but their attitude was soon changed. “Morge,” Kleeg practically yelled in astonishment. “You’re still in one piec... I mean, your back early.” The two instantly took a step back when Larry entered the room. “What the ... great dragon droppings, what kind of trouble bag it this you’ve brought to our doorstep?”

“Collogues, I’d like you to meet Larry. Larry meet Kleeg and Zipp, my partners.”

The two other kobolds were still standing, stunned in silence as Morge explained how they met. If they hadn’t been, Morge probably wouldn’t have gotten a word in edgewise. As it was, Morge was able to relate the whole story ... in excruciating detail ... without having to be interrupted once. Normally this would have put everyone to sleep, but Kleeg and Zipp were too terrified to even blink their eyes, much less fall asleep.

Larry, however, took an immediate interest in the goods piled up inside the Kobold Brothers' emporium. He drifted over to a shelf and picked up a large dwarven Warhammer. “I’ve heard about this one.” The hammer glowed a light blue when he picked it up with his claws. Magic tends to do act like this. “Killed over 500 orcs at the battle of Golgatha Pass. This is quite the item.”

Kleeg was the first one to pop out of his state of abject terror. He was, after all, their self-appointed leader. The red-scaled kobold instant shifted into storekeeper mode. “It’s for sale if you're interested. I can give you an exceptional price on it.”

Before Kleeg could finish his pitch. Larry had already moved on. Flapping his wings, he headed over to a far corner of the shop. Straw still lettered the floor in this part of the store. Many of the items had only recently been unpacked from storage and no one had gotten around to cleaning up the packing bits and minutia. Larry grasped a silver goblet. “The Goblet of the Mists.” His tone was one of awe and reverence. It lasted about as long as his attention span. He was soon off to another part of the store. “Ah, a never-ending cask of ale. You can make a few dwarves drool over this. Ah, the Sacred Chalice of Midos. One drink from this and it will cure s all your ... what’s this? A night dagger? And what do we have here? An ogre and under cloak. The pride of every thief’s guild.”

Kleeg tried, pointlessly, to follow Larry around the room. But before he could start negating a price, Larry was off looking at something else. Zipp, however, was taking full advantage of Larry’s running commentary. The deep brown kobold had desperately been trying to identify the goods they were

unpacking. The trouble with loot is ... it usually doesn't come with a nice hand-written sign explaining what the object you just lifted is. Many an extraordinary bargain was had by a shop owner selling a priceless artifact that looked, at first glance, like a well-used plate. The only problem Zipp was having was being able to write things down fast enough. He'd have to invest in one of those magic pens. The once which simply recorded everything being said in a room. Members of the city watch loved those things ... not to mention lawyers. Although your average town councilman looked at them like they were accursed objects of the plague.

Kleeg finally gave up. "Seems like a handy fellow to have around."

Morge smiled. Usually Kleeg didn't care for Morge's friends. He never expected a demon to go over quite so well with his associates. "indubitably," Morge announced as if he was standing on a mountain of pride.

"Where did you say you found this one?"

"He was building a road to Hell ... out of bricks."

Zipp looked up from his mad scribbling only long enough to mutter, "I thought the road to Hell was paved with good intentions?"

Larry stopped his tour of the store and gazed over at Zipp. "Well," he remarked, "It's not actually paved *with* good intentions but paved *by* good intentions."

Kleeg practical choked. "What are you talking about?"

"It's me," Larry answered matter-of-factly. "It's my nickname. The boys in the front office call me 'Good Intentions.'"