

“Sole Reaper”

Raymond hummed a tune as he rode his cart down the forest path back to his farm. The harvest had been particularly good that year, and he had made a mint at the market in town. His thoughts turned to his sweetheart back in town. He could afford a nice wedding band with this kind of profit. His thoughts went from his sweetheart to wedding plans, and even raising a family. He didn't even notice the fog rolling in until he couldn't see ten yards in front of him.

This fog made him uneasy. Since when was there ever been fog this thick in the middle of the day? Within seconds, his field of vision went from ten yards in front to not being able to see the mule pulling his cart. By the time he saw the low branch hanging in front of him, it had already hit him in the chest. Unable to fall and slip under the branch, he clung to it as his cart passed underneath him and into the fog. By the time he dropped from the branch, he couldn't see his mule or his cart anymore. And even when he ran forward, he couldn't seem to catch up to them.

The bull froze in his tracks as he heard rustling in the forest nearby. He was a big Being, and plenty tough, but in this fog he'd never see a predator until it was already on top of him. And this forest was known for its wolves. He noticed a large branch at his feet. Before he could stoop all the way down to pick it up, he suddenly found himself jerked up and hanging in the air. Something was wrapped around his wrists and ankles. His blood ran cold when he looked to see what was holding him.

Tentacles.

He nearly wet himself when harsh cackling broke out in the fog in front of him. The fog cleared slightly and an incubus slowly appeared. He looked to be a black-backed jackal, with plenty of yellow fur and leathery, demonic wings. The yellow and black patterns on his fur almost looked like flames where they overlapped. His irises were blood-red. He was wearing a blue tunic and a beige undershirt, with ring-mail between them. His leggings matched his shirt, and his hands and feet were clad in tough leather. A rapier was sheathed at his side.

What really frightened him was the incubus's fur pattern. He had heard of 'Cubi like this. In the days of his ancestors, they would wipe out entire settlements of Beings and steal their souls. "*Jyraneth...*" he thought.

“That’s absolutely correct!” the incubus said at last. “I’m glad you maggots still remember us.” He paused for a moment and licked his chops, as if savoring the taste of something. “Yes... Such delicious fear... It has been too long. But still, it is not enough.” Another tentacle extended from his wings. “And so, your soul is mine!!”

Raymond really did wet himself as the tentacle shot toward him. He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth. He felt something rub his foot, but nothing else. After a few moments, still nothing seemed to have happened. He slowly opened one eye, then the other. The incubus had stolen his boot and was looking it over.

“Ye-eew,” the incubus said, his face twisting in disgust. “You know what? Never mind, this sole is pretty filthy.” He stared blankly at the dumbstruck bull for a split second before breaking down into a fit of hysterical laughter, snorting and slapping his knee. The incubus finally set Raymond down, his form shifting as he did so. No longer was his fur yellow, or was he even a jackal; his features melted from jackal to fox, his fur patterns changing to match his species, although his fur was still an unnatural blue color. His hair turned a more golden shade of blonde. His wings changed completely, from leathery and demonic to feathery and angelic, with light gray primary and secondary feathers and darker cover feathers.

The fog vanished, and Raymond found himself back in his own home on his farm. He fell on his rear as the fox continued to crack up. As his senses finally returned, he stood up and grabbed a nearby chair. He hurled the chair at the incubus, nailing him straight in the head. An aura of light briefly flickered around the staggering incubus.

“Ow!!” the incubus exclaimed, rubbing his head. “That might’ve killed me if I didn’t have a Protect spell up, you know! Whoa, hey, none of that!” He shot out a wing-tentacle and snatched a fireplace poker away from the bull. “Chill dude, I was just messing with you, I swear!”

Raymond felt like his blood was boiling. “What the hell do you want!?”

The fox perked up. “Oh right, I never mentioned my name!” He extended a hand toward the bull. “Adventurer Benjamin Buran, at your service!”

Raymond ignored the hand. "What... do... you... want?" he seethed through clenched teeth.

"Oh, you know, typical adventurer stuff. Just saving an innocent farmer from a bunch of bandits."

Raymond just cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah dude, they were following you ever since you left the market! Lucky for you I was there. Y'know, you really should consider investing in a farmhand or something. Preferably a Demon. They make good bodyguards."

"If there were bandits following me, why didn't you just take them out?"

"Oh, my partner's handling that even as we speak," Ben said, holding up a hand dismissively. "My job was to get you to safety and provide a diversion. Hence the fog." He began to twiddle his fingers and a guilty look played across his face. "Of course, then I decided to have a little fun while I was at it..."

"So let me get this straight: you jump me in the forest and scare the bahjeebits out of me, in order to save me from a bunch of bandits?"

Ben could feel the bull's doubt. He held up his hands defensively. "Hey, I'm an incubus, remember? I *literally* eat fear. And your fear was very tasty, if it's any consolation."

Ben withered a bit as the bull continued to glare at him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard a familiar "rap-rap-rap-rap-rap" at the door. "And that would be my partner!" he said as he extended a wing-tentacle to the door and gave it two quick taps. He opened the door to reveal some sort of wolf-giraffe hybrid incubus with a pink marking on his cheek. "Olaf, my man! How did it... uh..." Ben stopped short and winced at the bloodstains on the tips of his friend's leathery wings.

Olaf just rolled his eyes. "Relax, Ben, I just cut some fingers off. They won't be wielding weapons again anytime soon." He walked in and extended a gauntleted hand toward Raymond. "Olaf Jakobsohn, adventurer under Raines, at your service sir. I trust my partner already explained the situation?"

Raymond finally relaxed a bit and shook Olaf's hand. "Yes," he sighed, "we were just discussing it."

Olaf turned back to Ben and fixed him with a glare. "Ben... You weren't pretending to be a Jyraneeth again, were you?"

Ben assumed an expression of innocence. "Who, me? Naw, I wouldn't do *that*."

"Oh really?" Olaf said, crossing his arms, "Then would you mind explaining why I found Mr. Raymond's cart and mule wandering down the path alone?"

Ben's wings fluffed up a bit and the blue fur on his face turned a shade lighter. "Ah-heh-heh," he chuckled sheepishly, "Oops?"

END