

I Got Caught Doing Resurrection Magic And Now I'm Being Hunted By The Undead Black Market

I panned my eyes over the brick walls and wood-panelled floor. They were cold and emotionless; the wood held no prosperous gleam; the brick held no saturated. The entire room was sterile – John had said it needed to be to perform his ritual.

I stepped past the room's threshold, holding out a bottle of some mysterious reagent to John, who was working at the rune carvings on the ground. He didn't look up, entranced by his work.

"Yo!" I called to him. "John, I got your magic juice."

He turned around, and accepted the bottle wordlessly, popping it open and pouring it into divots in the floor. He was quiet and focused, performing the task with stormy efficiency.

"So... what exactly is that supposed to do?"

"The arcane reagent helps maintain the structure of the ritual in the metaphysical plane," John uttered mechanically, as if quoting a textbook. He was an eccentric guy – had been since his sister had died. Always diving into these weird arcane books, coming out with a bunch of nonsense that he would then conscript me into helping him with. I didn't mind. It meant I got to chat with him and watch the outcome (usually nothing) of his messing around.

"The structure, aye?" I asked. "What exactly is that for?"

He looked at me blankly, as if this was information anyone should know.

"You want the structural integrity of a circle to persist throughout the process to avoid mishap. Especially in a ritual reversing death energy. This will take up so much metaphysical power that it's likely to rip a hole between the planes if not protected."

"Uh huh, pretending I understood that."

He ignored my sarcastic comment and stood up, admiring the circle carved in the floor. It was almost unnoticeable, a circular shape surrounded by symbols, carved less than a centimetre deep into the wood. The only point of contrast were the small divots filled with 'arcane reagent'.

"Alright," he declared with a resounding finality. "It's complete. You ready to start?"

I grinned, expecting another resultless spectacle. Usually when he did this, John would just wave his arms around, chant some weird phrases, and then wait for a moment while nothing happened.

"Yeah, sounds good. Go on."

He nodded softly, stepping back from the circle.

He raised his arms and chanted in a deep voice of authority:

“I call to the realm where eyes do not see, where ears do not hear and where life has no place. I call to the end of all things, the embodiment of destruction where lost souls are kept. I call to the void, where the physical ceases and the metaphysical begins. I call to Ponder, in hope that he may spare a soul in return for my sacrifice.”

I snickered as he waved his arms about over the circle. The sheer ridiculousness of the situation never changed, no matter how many times he tried this. It would always produce nothing at all, it was all just melodrama. I didn't know what John hoped to accomplish, but as usual, it wasn't going to-

Cackling filled the room, resounding from all the corners and nooks where shadows shifted and stretched. The room was shrouded in swirling mist, twisting and turning into nightmarish shapes. A voice spoke coherent words, each one perfectly within my vocabulary yet radiating no meaning.

The sun picked this moment to cross the horizon, beaming rays of gold and red shining into the room through the dust caked windows. But the light behaved strangely, focusing on the centre point of the ritual circle, shining brighter and brighter. It wasn't the sun. It wasn't any source of light seen before on Earth.

With a great screeching, the light was gone. John had disappeared, and in place of the circle was a gaping hole deep into the ground.

I was in shock, having slammed myself against the wall to get away from the light. Despite the lack of a physical mark, my body ached like hell. My vision was still tinted red from the light, and the acrid smell of overcooked food filled my nostrils.

However, I had no time to assess the situation. Tendrils of darkness, solid like physical objects, curled their way out from any shadow left in the room. They coiled and solidified into a great big cloak. No body was inside it, just a floating 'x' radiating golden light. Extending from the inside of the cloak (despite there being nothing inside the cloak) were two arms constructed entirely out of bone, ending in hands with metre-long sickle claws.

Incongruous with the rest of its appearance, it also wore a tie. Pinned to it haphazardly was a name tag, though I couldn't see what was written on it.

It turned towards me. The 'x' acted like an eye, the centre of it squinting at me in anger.

“You, mortal. Come with me.”

Casually, the figure slashed its hand downward. With a ripple of motion, the line its hand carved opened into a hole, through which I could see a quite regular looking office cubicle. The figure glided through the portal without another word.

I hesitated, standing stock still before the hole.

“Come!” The figure called from the hall.

Ethan jerked forward, stepping through the portal. Instantly, he was hit with a wave of vertigo, nearly vomiting as he transcended the space between physical reality and whatever interdimensional void this hallway sat in.

Gasping, he looked up at the figure.

“Who the heck are you?”

The figure twisted, the cloak whipping about in a nonexistent wind. The ‘x’ eye twisted its left side upwards, mimicking a raised eyebrow.

“Take a cue,” it said. Its cloak lifted upwards to display the name tag. It read: ‘Death Itself, CEO of Death Delivery Co.’

“So you’re... Death.”

“Death Itself,” it scoffed coldly. “The ‘itself’ is a mandatory part of the name. You should have studied up on me before you attempted a resurrection ritual. If you are facing up against an inevitable force on track to devour all of reality, I would suggest you do your research first.”

“Uh – right,” I said, eyes darting around us. The portal had closed, the space it had occupied now just a door in the wall.

“You will be assigned to room 7271987,” Death Itself declared. Death Itself dragged its arms around inside its cloak and came out with several items: a massive black scythe with a wicked serrated edge, an electronic tablet, a great black cloak, and a thick black metal bangle.

“Wait – wait, what is this?”

“You have a debt to pay off,” Death Itself rendered, bored. “You will serve as one of my reapers until I see fit.”

“Sorry- what exactly did I do?”

Death Itself stops, then reaches into its cloak and brings out a clipboard, which almost comically pops into its hand. Its pupil squished downwards to mimic a squint.

“Attempted thievery of property of Ponder Afterlife Disservices, use of arcane materials without registered license, invoking Ponder Afterlife Disservices without majority approval from the Interworld Council, attempted destruction of fabric of reality... there is a lot of legal jumble that comes with trying to resurrect a soul.”

It sighed, then dropped the scythe, tablet, and bangle at my feet.

“Scythe can be called at will, just think hard. Use the bangle for Immortal-derived telekinesis and opening portals. Tablet is company property. Record soul collections on it and me if you need. Cloak is mandatory uniform for anywhere outside of headquarters – we can’t have the living seeing reapers floating around.”

It squinted at its clipboard again.

“Well, looks like I’ve got to go. The poltergeists want to talk about more server storage or whatever it is they want this time. Find the jobs hall and get a contract there.”

Without another word, he sliced open a portal and led me through, before blinking out of existence.

I looked around. I was now in a generic office corridor, a long hallway lined with number-labelled doors stretching into the distance.

“Well now what?” I muttered to myself.

The door labelled 7271987 opened and closed next to me. Shrugging, I gathered up all the company issued crap on the floor and brought it into the room. Inside was a simple dormitory. A bunk stood next to the beige walls, a desk next to it. A closet was embedded into one wall.

A sheaf of papers was stacked on the desk. I searched through them, finding nothing useful except for a map. The title read ‘Death Delivery Co. Headquarters’. I stuffed it in my pocket and donned the bangle and cloak. The cloak conveniently had some massive pockets, which I put the tablet in. Then I picked up the scythe.

Damn, this thing is heavy. Having never held a glorified farming tool before, I shifted it about a bit before just holding it like a walking stick. With a thought, I was able to dismiss and summon it.

I didn’t have a mirror in the room, but I supposed I either looked like a wicked soul collecting minion of the big Death Itself – or the greatest nerd of all time. Well, I’m going to go find this jobs hall. It’s got to be on this map somewhere.

I did not find the jobs hall. I don’t know where the heck I am. The map was... let’s say, less than legible. That’s an understatement.

I walked around the dark corridors of wherever I ended up. There’s no features on the walls, and the fluorescent light strips have been replaced with gothic-looking lanterns and crystalline braziers. I continued down the hallway. This place was the most confusing building I’d ever been in. Some doorways are too tall, or too short. Some hallways physically become smaller as you walk forward. Some rooms open into straight up into beautiful cliffsides and forests.

I wonder how long this hallway goes on. Is it just an infinite loop? Hopefully not. Maybe it leads to Death Itself's secret study, or maybe it ends in a big ol' flesh pit like they have in the eighth book of – wait! I see people!

Up ahead was a figure in a cloak like mine, sitting in a small booth, reading a book. He seemed to be the room's gatekeeper, with a large metalwork gate attached to the building. Behind the booth, I could see a massive room filled with market stalls underneath a cavernous ceiling covered in hanging lanterns. I walked up to the person.

"Uh, hello there," I said hesitantly. The person looked up and I saw his face underneath the hood. It was a middle aged man, about thirty if I had to guess. His slick mop of hair curled upwards in a comically supervillain-esque shape, and his jawline was smothered in a cloud of beard. A scythe leaned against the wall next to him. Evidently, he was another reaper.

"Welcome to the Market, bud," he said nonchalantly. He lazily reached his arm over to a button in front of him. The gate swung open, and I stepped through.

An aurora of coloured light shimmering across the walls and floor. Market stalls littered the open floor, vendors in silent black cloaks showcasing goods – most of which being glowing orbs of various colours. I marvelled at the scene, catching snippets of dialogue as I passed customers and shopkeepers, all reapers scrambling about.

"Can't you give me a discount? I helped you smuggle in that last batch a week ago..."

Smuggling? I stuck around and lingered around the speaker. It was a man in a cloak like everyone else. He was speaking to an animate moose skeleton behind a stall.

"No can do, fellow," the skeleton said in a hollow voice. "These trusty souls I stole myself from Hades' old dump. These 'uns are old, they're worth what yer paying."

Wait, wait, wait just a second. Hold up. Stop. Souls?! They're selling souls here?

It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. If they were selling souls, who knows? Maybe that's just a thing here in the Death Delivery Co. Headquarters. But with that little snippet about smuggling... that can't be right.

I needed to leave and tell somebody.

I hurried back to the gate, ignoring the lights that had once entranced my eyes and pummeling my way past the marketgoers to the exit. I gave a quick nod to the gatekeeper, who was about to open the door until –

"What's up, newbie?" A voice called. A silhouette emerged from the darkness of the hallway outside the market. "Leaving so soon?"

"Oh, uh, hello!" I said, more from instinct than thought. "Who, uh, who are you?"

The figure stepped into the light and extended a hand. A middle aged woman wearing a long lab coat.

“Doctor Cleo Dahmer, former lab director at Refinoc Biowaste and current Market Administrator. You?”

“Uh, I’m Ethan. Is there any particular reason you’re speaking to me or... ?”

“Oh, nothing... I just want to make sure all our customers are satisfied with our services! Now, what has you leaving in such a hurry?”

“Oh, well, I was just – eheh – on my way to the... Jobs hall!”

“Well, that sounds mildly reasonable,” She paused. “Hmmm... you wouldn’t be thinking to report any activities happening here right?”

I didn’t say a word, considering my options. I could keep lying, and that probably wouldn’t convince anyone. Or I could run.

I ran.

Or tried, at least. I was fast, but the gatekeeper was faster. He dashed out of his booth and blocked the narrow hallway in under a second. He extended his arm, and a cloud of darkness swirled into a reaper’s scythe. He brandished the heavy weapon with ridiculous ease.

“Y’know...” Doctor Dahmer drawled. “Most people prefer when you actually answer their questions.”

“Perhaps we could...” I started. “uh...”

“Can’t be letting untrusted people spilling my secrets, can I? And the best way to keep a secret... is to eliminate the sources.”

She stepped aside.

“Limril, do the honours.”

Limril advanced forward. I tried to back away but was quickly met by a wall of marketgoers that had silently blocked my back. They stood still, happy to spectate. I had no choice but to summon my own scythe.

“Woo!” Dahmer cheered in a motherly voice. “Get beat up! Idiot! Haha!”

Limril lunged forward, his blade clawing through that air with a great woosh. I was barely able to dodge, his speed and experience with his weapon evident. I clumsily swung my own blade to meet his next strike, deflecting it off to the side. I knew I couldn’t win this fight, so I had to stall until I could get help. As I continued to defend, a plan formulated.

I raised the hand with my bangle on it, stretching my fingers towards Limril.

“Yo! There’s a – uh – uh – an army of rats behind you!”

The idiot actually turned around, just in time for me to test out that bangle's telekinesis. Red light extended from my fingertips.

Limril was in the process of turning back around when –

“Wha- “

The light wrapped around several boxes in the gatekeeper's booth and lifted them upwards to slam into the side of Limril's head. He temporarily lost his balance, which gave me just enough time to test out the bangle's other ability.

I collected my energy into the bangle and focused on an image of Death Itself's office. The portal opened successfully, and I dove through. Doctor Dahmer's voice screamed outrage before it closed and I crashed headfirst into the floor of the office, scythe clattering to the ground.

Death Itself was seated at its desk. It looked up.

“Hey man,” I groaned, crawling up from the ground. “I found an illegal market in your house.”

Death Itself and I emerged in the same empty corridor the Market's gate was located in. For a brief few seconds, the vendors and customers continued with their business. They were packing up, evidently in the wake of my escape. Then it happened.

The tinkling lights across the ceiling sputtered to a stop, the Market now lit by little more than dim lanternlight. Shadows crawled their way across the ground, growing extra-articulated limbs that grasped towards the caught Reapers. Walls and floors shifted and rippled like ocean waves.

A grand Presence settled over the room, radiating authority and power on a scale I'd never comprehended before. Death's aura told the people the truth: there was no escape from unexistence. No matter what measures you took, no matter what advancements humanity made, even if you were already dead, there was still absolution to look forward to; a sheer and inevitable destruction yet to come.

Death Itself cast its withering gaze around the cavern. The reapers shuddered and froze in place, fear permeating the air.

And then Death Itself spoke, his tone cold and unyielding.

“I am disappointed.”

A wave of fearful shaking passed through the crowd.

“I hire you all, spare you from the other side of the veil to do a job, and this is how you pay me back? Stealing souls from the shipments? *Selling* them behind my back? You do realize that these souls were once living beings like you had been?”

It sighed.

“I do not care what becomes of you all, except that I can no longer employ such scum.”

It spread its bone arms, limbs extending from the void inside its cloak. The bone claws attached to its wrists distended and stretched as orbs of black mist manifested within them.

“Run, reapers. Run, and pray.”

Howling and crackling noises filled the cavern as the shadows grew into full entities, amalgamations of darkness advancing on the marketgoers. Death Itself’s aura blasted out once again at full power as screams reverberated across the walls. Marketgoers rushed the one exist where Death Itself and I stood. Death Itself did nothing to stop them, allowing them to crush themselves through the small opening of the gate.

The shadow amalgams reigned for another five minutes before the marketgoers were all gone, either crushed into paste or escaped into the corridors of Death Delivery Co.’s headquarters. The monsters settled back into their usual position as regular shadows.

Death Itself turned to me.

“Thank you,” it said. “For helping me root out the unloyal.”

“No- uh, no problem,” I replied. “Sir.”

It swept towards the exit. I followed.

“As a token of my gratitude, I shall grant you this.”

It drew a gemstone from its cloak and handed it to me. It was intricately carved into the shape of a skull and shimmered with a jade sheen.

“So, what’s this?”

“An invocation stone. It grant you a few seconds of divine power. However, it will leave you weakened after use, so you must make sure you use it at the correct time...”

But suddenly, I wasn't listening, for something else had caught my attention. In the Market, a figure slinked through the ruined stalls and into a side exit. It wore a white lab coat.

Doctor Dahmer had escaped.