

Chapter 171: Irreconcilable Ideals

Shade led Jason upstairs into a square room. The stairs emerged from an alcove in the middle of one wall, with a sealed door on the opposite wall. The walls to either side were covered in square panels marked with what looked like scrambled segments of constellations. On the walls and floor were images of constellations that were whole and in order. Jason was about to enter the room when Shade stopped him.

“Once you enter this room,” Shade warned, “the next trial shall begin.”

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

The trial of intellect will test whether your mind is not just sharp enough, but calm enough to save you from a grisly fate.

- Objective: Successfully solve the puzzle room.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“The virtue this trial will test is intelligence,” Shade continued. “If you fail to pass this test within the time limit, you will die.”

“Again with the succeed or die?”

“The Order of the Reaper needs those who are not just intelligent, but who can use their intelligence under pressure. An intellect that fails when it matters the most is worthless. Though the Order may be gone, it is their trials that remain and their standards you must reach.”

“So, what’s the time limit?”

“That will become clear once the trial begins. If you wish to withdraw at this point, you may. I will call a gate and allow you to leave. Once you have accepted the trial, however, I will not do so again. The remaining questions, then, become how smart do you think you are, and are you right?”

Jason took a long, calming breath as he looked into the room.

“That’s a tricky question, isn’t it?” Jason said. “People have a tendency to overestimate their own intelligence and I’m sure I’m no different. I mean, I think I’m pretty cluey but do I really believe that deep down?”

“You have the day to complete the final trials,” Shade said as Jason pondered over how much of his self-confidence was warranted. “You have time to consider.”

“No, I’m good,” Jason said, rolling his shoulders as he steeled his resolve. “If I’m going to be the kind of adventurer, the kind of person I want to be, I’m going to face tougher challenges than this.”

Shade stepped aside and Jason went to move forward, then stopped.

“Actually,” he said, “I think I will take the time to stop and consider.”

Shade was an indistinct silhouette, yet Jason somehow got the sense of a wry smile coming from the shadowy invigilator.

“Very well, Jason Asano. When you are ready to begin, step into the room.”

Shade vanished and Jason turned to the room. He started looking over the patterns of constellations on the ceiling and the floor, then comparing it to the walls. From the looks of it, he had to slide the square wall panels to make the correct patterns, based on the complete patterns on the ceiling and floor. He looked over it all, looking for matches and differences, seeing how the patterns matched up.

The pattern on the floor was different to the pattern on the ceiling. His first thought was that the trick was figuring out which wall would match which pattern and then matching them, but as he kept looking, he realised that neither wall had the correct pieces to match the patterns. Having realised it wasn’t about matching the images, Jason looked at the constellations for other kinds of patterns.

Finally, his face cracked a huge grin. The constellations, he realised, were just a disguise. The stars themselves made up a numerical pattern. Looking over the walls to make sure, he spent a goodly amount of time making sure he could make the whole room fit the pattern, then stepped inside.

The moment his foot touched the floor, a stone slab started descending to seal the alcove, locking him in the room. The patterned wall then started rumbling, slowly moving towards one another with a rumbling of stone.

“Wall crush puzzle room! Wait, focus, Jason!”

He rushed to one of the walls and started sliding the panels. They were heavy but slid well, apparently well-lubricated in spite of their centuries of disuse. Having already mapped out the patterns he needed, he worked quickly as the wall pushed slowly towards him. He finished the first wall and after quickly checking over his work, moved to the other.

The walls were closing in slowly but the room was already a third smaller than when he began. Seeing that, he realised that stopping outside the room was a required part of the test. Not only would he be pushed for time if he came in not already knowing what to do, but the enclosing walls were already hiding portions of the ceiling and floor patterns.

He went to work on the second wall, practice allowing him to move faster. He slid the final panel into place with relief but the walls didn't stop moving.

"What?" he asked, looking over the walls in a panic.

"This is right, this is right!" he told the empty room as his eyes skittered across the patterns. "This is wrong!"

He madly started sliding panels while admonishing himself.

"Four comes before five, idiot! You are not getting crushed to death because you don't know how counting works!"

Having corrected the pattern, the walls stopped, the room half its original width. Jason let out a shuddering breath as the walls started retracting.

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully complete the puzzle room 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Summoner's Die: Form] has been added to your inventory.

Shade appeared next to him.

"Congratulations."

"No worries," Jason said. "The whole wall-squeezing thing was a bit panic-inducing but the puzzle wasn't that hard. More of a third-person, narrative-driven-shooter puzzle than a puzzle-game puzzle. The kind where as soon as you solve it, it turns out the bad guys were following you all along and the room fills with faceless mooks to kill."

Jason looked around, hopefully.

"The last test isn't a bunch of faceless mooks pouring in here, is it?"

"No," Shade said. "Anyone can learn to fight, which is but a facet of what the Order required from its members. You have demonstrated wisdom in accepting the tools to survive, capability in crossing the city, courage in confronting your fear and intellect in solving the puzzle room."

The door at the end of the room slid upwards, revealing another stairwell.

"The final virtue to be tested is resolve," Shade explained. "Members of the Order of the Reaper would be required to operate alone for extended periods. Far from home, often living false lives, it is easy to lose focus on the mission. Only the most resolute were allowed into the Order. Proving their resolve was always the final test of the Order."

"That doesn't sound at all ominous," Jason. "Up the stairs, then?"

“Yes.”

Before moving on, Jason pulled out his new item for a look. It was a clear gemstone cut with twelve facets, with each facet having a different symbol engraved on it. His translation ability told him what the symbols meant, each one the name of a different animal.

Item: [Summoner's Die: Form] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

An eldritch tool for altering the nature of summoned creatures (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting an iron-rank summoning power will randomly alter the form the summon takes.
- Can be used in conjunction with [Summoner's Die: Element] and [Summoner's Die: power]. Using more than one die of the same kind will negate the effects of all dice.

“Damn,” Jason said, looking over the description. “Growth item, plus it’s a D12. Shame I don’t have a summoning power.”

He put it away and followed Shade through the room and up the stairs into a huge, circular chamber with a high ceiling. It was blank brick, except for the ceiling, where numerous holes, wide enough for a person to fall through, led up and into darkness.

“That’s an impressive ceiling,” Jason said. “I mean, all those holes can’t be great for structural integrity but there aren’t any supporting pillars in a room this big. Architects must have it easy with magic to fall back on.”

“The final test,” Shade said. “As with the first, there is no danger, only a choice. There is no puzzle, only the will to move forward. There is no obstacle; you need only the resolve to do what you must in order to go forward.”

A metal clanking echoed down through the holes in the ceiling, followed by the descent of frosted glass cylinders, suspended from chains that lowered them to the floor. One cylinder came down from each of the dozens of holes, coming to a rest on the floor. There was no light but Jason’s ability to see through darkness allowed him to see clearly. Inside each cylinder was a human-shaped silhouette.

All at once, the cylinders cracked open, a person dropping out of each, deposited alongside a cloud of frosty air. The people were unconscious, bound hand and foot with a power suppression collar around each of their necks. Most were humans, elves or celestines, but there were others scattered through as well; smoulders, runics, leonids and draconians. They were all dressed for combat, although none had weapons.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“When the Order was testing their initiates, the initiates were forced to fight their own friends and companions to prove they were willing to do whatever the order asked of them. To represent the Order is to subordinate your own principles to what the Order requires of you.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “They were actually fighting a projection or some kind of facsimile. Just enough to prove they were willing, without throwing away good initiates.”

“It was as you say,” Shade told him. “When the churches attacked the Order’s final hiding place, they did not take it easily or without cost. These people are some of the prisoners that were taken from the attacking forces and imprisoned in this place. They were placed here as a new test of resolve.”

“You want me to execute these people?”

“Yes. They have been held here for centuries, trapped in a magical state where they do not age, do not think, do not feel and do not die. The companions who left them behind are no doubt mostly dead and gone. Now it is their turn. Show that you have the strength of will to put down the order’s enemies.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

The invigilator of the trials has asked you to execute the Order of the Reaper’s enemies.

- Objective: Show your resolve.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“You would show them mercy,” Shade said, “but they had no mercy to show. They did not restrict themselves to slaughtering the Order’s membership. Most of the people living in the final fortress were servants whose only crime was a lifetime of diligence. Their families, their children. These people spared none of them.”

“Which makes them terrible people, assuming you aren’t straight-up lying to me,” Jason said. “I’m not going to execute a bunch of people on your say so.”

Jason moved to the closest person, kneeling down to examine her. She was wearing robes styled for combat like his own, but white with brown flourishes. They were dirty and stained but he could still make out the symbol of the Healer embroidered into them.

“The Healer,” he murmured to himself. That didn’t match the picture that had been painted of intolerant churches striking out in ignorance. “Revisionist history. How shocking.”

She was unconscious, her skin pale, clammy and shivering. Jason put a hand to her face and felt her cheek.

“If this is some kind of projection or double, it’s a pretty damn good one,” he said. “I’m not going to kill these people.”

“They are deserving of death.”

“Says you, who I don’t know that well.”

“It is this, or leave.”

Jason stood up, turning to face Shade.

“Then I choose leave. I’m not killing them, so open up your magic gate because I’m done. Also, I’m taking this lot with me.”

“They are not yours to take.”

“Tough.”

“You think it is your place to decide their fate?”

Jason stepped right up to Shade, face to the spot Shade’s face would have been.

“Mate, you want resolve, then here it is: get to helping, get to stopping me or get out of my bloody way. That’s your choice to make.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “You may take them.”

“Really?” Jason asked. “I was kind of expecting you to kick my arse.”

“The Order never wanted those who would follow directions blindly. The ability to make judgements in the face of inevitably shifting circumstances is one the most important traits of the Order’s membership. The resolve to decide the best course of action and follow it through, even against the Order’s own directions, was always a crucial virtue. The Order wanted thinking, intelligent agents, not blindly obedient soldiers.”

“Wait, you’re saying I passed?”

“Yes.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

- Objective complete: Show your resolve 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Immortal Crest] has been added to your inventory.

Jason minimised the window, ignoring it for the moment.

“I can take all of these people with me?” he asked Shade.

“All those who survive. You are not the only one to reach the final trial and there are other rooms like this.”

“If refusing to kill them is a pass, you’re going to let people kill them just to fail?”

“Killing them does not mean failure,” Shade said. “This is not a test of the willingness or unwillingness to kill. It is a test of resolve, which can be shown in many ways. The refusal to bend, even if it means giving up what you came for. A determination to perform any act in pursuit of a goal.”

“It is even possible to fail this test?” Jason asked. “I know people tend to only go halfway with things, but I have to imagine anyone who gets this far isn’t what you’d call irresolute.”

“When truly challenged, many falter when they should follow through or compromise themselves when they should hold to their principles.”

“What’s your sample size on that, mate? Didn’t you say this was a new test?”

“Would you like give up the success you have achieved and face a new trial?”

“No thanks, mate; your trials are flawed. Your order and I have irreconcilable ideals and yet here I am. It’s like this whole thing is...”

“What?” Shade asked as Jason trailed off.

“Nothing,” Jason said. “What comes next?”

Shade was silent for a long moment, Jason getting the sense of an assessing gaze from the featureless shadow.

“Next,” Shade said, “is the prize. The legacy of the Order of the Reaper.”