

FIRST TRIALS

Jacinth stood in tall grass. He could smell the sea overpowering every other smell. When was he?

Where he was he determined easily enough. He walked to the edge of the cliff, squinting against a bright sunrise. The vast city stretched out below him. It was not underwater, and it was not in ruins. The cliff he now stood on must have been above the cliff he would later or had previously stood on. Thick wet worms crested out of the ground and curved back in again like sea mammals rising for air.

It had to be Ayokouwi.

But his memory could still make no sense of it. Indeed, he couldn't even decide what he last remembered before appearing here.

He checked himself to see what he was carrying. A medpac, a ball of string, a comlink with several new buttons on it, a small insect in a tiny jar, a rock with tiny crystals wrapped in two pieces of purple felt, a piece of fruit, and his lightsaber.

He broke off a small piece of the fruit and fed it to the bug. The insect jumped on his fingers, causing a moment of alarm, but was easily brushed back into the jar with no harm done. It crawled around the chunk of fruit for several minutes, then it did begin to nibble at it. He'd never seen anything like it before. He looked for a face on the little creature, thinking of Garronin for some reason.

He examined the rock, pleased to have one. [8 on straight Knowledge roll] It looked neither common, nor particularly valuable. The rock itself was very dark gray. The crystals were reflective chips about ¼ the size of a fingernail.

Experimenting with the comlink, he found one of the buttons connected him to Captain Oujameq of the Scepter. "We read you Jacinth," said the alien Rebel officer. "Just give the word and we'll get you out of there." Jacinth began asking questions about where they were and what was going on, but Oujameq's response to everything seemed limited to: "We read you Jacinth. Just give the word and we'll get you out of there."

His lightsaber did not operate. Opening it up, he found that the main focusing crystal had been removed.

It looked like he could climb down the cliff in about 20 to 30 minutes, but at least one section of that climb would be dangerous. Another option was a long sloping path through the jungle which would probably take 6-8 hours depending on how well he was able to find trails.

A search of the immediate area (Search roll 24 - good one) discovered a faint trail of footprints in the grass; probably humanoid, lighter than human, with bare webbed feet. They led into the woods toward the base of another ledge above him.

He decided to investigate this trail. There was no reason to believe that time was of the essence here, and he decided that if he was meant to get to the city, then that would happen in due course. He trusted that the currents of the Force would carry him where he needed to go, and for the moment, this felt right.

He climbed up the rocks. At the top he could not find the trail, but a patient search pattern did pick it up deeper in the trees [Search: 30].

The tracks led to a small hut in a clearing. The small structure had an open doorway and windows without glass. Four parrot-sized birds with feathers of scarlet, canary, and gray, were feeding on some of the ground worms near the hut. They had to wrestle their meals out of the ground, some times hooking sharp claws into the trunk of a tree to give them a firm grip from which to pull. There were five torches spread equally around the clearing giving off sweet-smelling smoke. A 1.5 meter high heap of something like broken pieces of permacrete was piled along on one side of the house.

There was also a statue made of charcoal-colored stone which Jacinth recognized (Knowledge roll 21!) as a type of porous rock which, with treatment, could serve as a sturdy building material; and which almost certainly wouldn't normally be found on a planet like Ayokouwi. The statue was generally nondescript, but had a vaguely humanoid shape and was roughly carved to be holding a stick or sword or similar object. It stood about 7 or 8 meters from the hut door, facing out into the jungle to Jacinth's left. The statue appeared rather out of place.

Jacinth found himself opening up his lightsaber again to confirm the disappointment that the focusing crystal remained absent.

From cover, Jacinth coughed and called out politely, but the only change in the scene was that the startled birds flew away. He decided on a direct approach to the hut, but as soon as he entered the clearing, the statue transformed into a humanoid skeleton covered in the blackened, stringy remains of flesh.

This provided a much clearer look at it's sword.

The weapon was an energy blade of deepest, almost solid, orange. It reminded Jacinth of a lightsaber; less sophisticated with a thinner blade. However, it did look sophisticated and thick enough to be a very dangerous weapon, and that seems to be the use to which it's horrific wielder intended to employ it. The skeletal thing was five meters away and closing alarming speed.

Jacinth closed the distance ready to evade, but when the creature thrust it's blade at him with great speed. Jacinth leaped left, but the sword was there ahead of him and pierced his left side above the hip. The blade was very hot.

While there was pain, the damage wasn't too bad. It hurt enough to make a strong argument that this was not a dream, but the wound would not impair him. Unfortunately the creature was now squarely in-between Jacinth and the entrance to the hut.

[Bomb out complication (1 followed by a 1) on the initial defense roll resulted in the positioning problem.]

Jacinth backed away, half wondering if the real pain from the stab in his side just was yet to come. He retreated to the perimeter of the clearing and backed into the branches. When the creature pursued, Jacinth let one of the branches snap back towards it's face, then leaped into a rolling dive.

[Trick and Dodge, using the Breakthrough card on the Trick - creature is "set back"]

The creature over-reacted to the harmless branch attack, and even as it stumbled back, Jacinth was past it, on his feet, and running for the hut. This was an opportunity to turn and smash the creature with his rock, but he did not want to attack this thing if it could be helped. If it could not be helped, maybe there was a weapon inside the hut.

He continued running for the entrance.

There were, in fact, weapons inside, and more.

"Don't worry," said a big orange frogman with the large green eyes, "it won't follow you in here. And don't blame ME for it. I didn't put it out there, and I don't know who did. But it keeps away the customers and traders and that's annoying. You must be fast."

Jacinth looked behind him, but the creature was nowhere to be seen.

The frogman sat behind a desk on which were placed a variety of items. With weapons on his mind, Jacinth's eye first noticed a blaster carbine in a case. In a small glass box was a lightsaber focusing crystal - but not his! He recognized it as Hascil's. It would be extremely unlikely - and all too risky to the components - that he'd be able to get it to work in his own saber.

There were other items as well. A big glass bottle (like a huge pickle jar) filled with long, very thin, clear worms, unlike any seen outside. A dedicated datapad with a Huric label, which Jacinth believed read "Animals". A single low yield thermal detonator. A pink flowering shrubbery. A bottle of water.

A set of shelves on each wall held fifty or more geodes of every watery color of the spectrum. None looked to be of lightsaber focusing crystal quality - at least not for his rough skills to refine. For a moment he worried that he had somehow stumbled into a test intended for a Jedi with a lot more training.

"The water is free," said the frogman offering the bottle to Jacinth. "Otherwise, what will it be: are you buying or trading? Do you have anything good? What would you like?"

Jacinth introduced himself and politely accepted the water. The frogman said, “I’m Shappup. I’m the trader around here.” There was a bit of friendly small talk.

“I’m not suggesting that weapons be your first choice,” said Shappup, “but that thing might be waiting for you when you go back out.”

Jacinth asked what two items Shappup felt were the most valuable in his inventory, and which two he considered the least valuable.

“The two things I consider most valuable? Well, they’re all of equal value to me as far as trade goes, but since you asked so nicely....The worms are special, but they can’t help you for several weeks. I think you have a friend who could benefit from this pretty thing,” he says indicating the lightsaber crystal. “Otherwise, I think you’ll have to decide for yourself what makes something more or less valuable.” He smiled warmly, genuinely, and quite broadly, given his frog mouth.

“The two least valuable? I honestly can’t think of a thing you could do with this shrubbery. And the worms really don’t have a re-sale value, nor, as I mentioned, anything about them that can help you in the city.”

Jacinth began producing his belongings, watching Shappup carefully as he did so. [Bargaining roll 20]. Shappup made a subtle nod of appreciation when the rock was produced. He also might have shown a twinge of interest at the comlink. All of the other items brought what appeared to be equal and mild interest.

“Any of your items is worth any of my items. I notice you looking at my stones on the shelves, but I honestly don’t think you’d want any of them. They are just my collection. As for my interests, if there’s anything you can create, I enjoy trading for such things so long as whatever you offer is something you yourself take pride in.”

“I might be able to tell you a safe way out, but that would count as an item of trade.”

“That bug looks useful. I’ve seen images of one like that before somewhere, but I don’t know what they can do.” Jacinth noticed that his bug had grown 75% larger since he’d last looked at it.

When asked, Shappup said he hadn’t seen anyone else in the area in a long time. A significant minority of Kojan used to live in the city, serving the sacred buildings. As for the city itself, he hadn’t been down there for awhile, but explained that it was now abandoned.

“In general I prefer trading for items. When it comes to dealing in information, I’m afraid my stock is too low, and it doesn’t hold my interest.” He did not elaborate.

“But as I was saying. Offer me any deal, item for item, and I’ll probably take it.”

Jacinth said, “This rock I have has sentimental value to me. Would you be willing to offer me two items for it?” [Bargain 15]

“Yes, for that item only you may pick any two items.”

Jacinth traded the rock for the Hascil's lightsaber crystal and the jar of worms. He wrapped the crystal in his two pieces of purple felt.

He then took time to write some poetry.

Advice for the bartering man-
 He should get every bargain he can.
 In leui of a deal,
 You always could steal.
 But you could end up losing a hand.

There once was a Wookiee from Kashyyyk
 Who didn't know very much Basic
 While cutting a deal
 He let out a squeal
 And caused the whole market a panic

A Bothan was making a trade
 To maximize all that he made.
 He'd tell a small lie
 And hornswaggle the guy
 Then off, in the crowd he would fade.

Shappup was delighted to trade the datapad for the set of poems. [Poetry roll 18 + player written poems; excellent].

Jacinth also exchanged his helmet for the blaster carbine - which he found to be in working order with a fully charged pack.

"Ah," mused Shappup. "Decided to go for a weapon after all?"

As Jacinth was packing his belongings, old and new, he heard the sound of starship repulsors in the distance [Perception roll 19]. His best guess of direction was south or south east [for reference: the ocean is due west with the coast running roughly north-south]. A careful look out one of the windows revealed nothing, but there was something Imperial about the sound of those engines.

Shappup was still reading over the poems and chuckling.

The statue was nowhere to be seen, but Jacinth still did not like the idea of just strolling back out the front door. So, after gaining Shappup's permission to depart by an alternate exit, and after warning the frogman that there might soon be bad guys in the area, Jacinth dove out the window. He was immediately on his feet and running, blaster carbine in hand.

Sure enough, the statue creature had been waiting for him near the front door, and it was now a race.

There was a tendency to think that because this creature had been a statue, and that it was now not much more than blackened flesh on a skeleton, that it should be slow. That was definitely not the case.

Jacinth reached the jungle. The creature was gaining, but it slipped head over heels on a patch of leaves, buying the Rebel a dozen steps. A bit more running brought Jacinth to the edge of the upper ledge. He jumped off toward the top branches of a tree growing from the lower level. This didn't go as well as he planned – in large part because of the large glass jar of worms he had to cradle in one arm while trying to grab hold of the tree with the other. He fell down about 10 feet through the tree, breaking limbs as he went. Tree limbs, fortunately. He came to rest in time to turn and ready his blaster while watching to see what the creature would do.

His skeletal pursuer came to the edge of the upper ledge and saw him there in the tree. It looked about, and retreated a few steps when some scree broke loose under its feet. It appeared disinclined to either jump or climb. It stood, orange energy blade softly humming, and watched.

As Jacinth had been jumping to the tree, he thought he saw a space transport coming to a landing about 4 to 6 kilometers south. Without macrobinoculars, there would have been little hope of identifying it, even if he would have had time for a better look.

From the tree he could look down at the ruins - which were not ruins in this reality, but part of an intact city. The nearest wall looked to be 2 ½ kilometers west and a somewhat south.

He could have just blasted it from the tree, but Jacinth was disinclined to kill anything, even this THING that had been after him. He climbed down the tree, and took a little bit of time to remove leaves, branches, and a nasty splinter in his wrist. He also dressed the burn cut on his side. Man and clothing had taken a bit of a beating, but it was still nothing that would slow him down or require his Force power, Control Pain. He made sure that none of his equipment had been lost in the frantic chase.

He looked at the jar of worms again. It was going to be very cumbersome, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

Jacinth began the long walk down and around the cliff. At one point he carefully avoided a nesting area of the stinging insects which had caused him trouble upon his first (?) arrival on the planet. He did a good job of keeping his directions straight and avoiding any other local wilderness problems.

He'd been walking for two hours when his comlink beeped. He took it out, wondering if he should answer the call, and found another surprise. A light on the comlink showed that an earlier call - something other than his conversation with Captain Oujameq - had come in on a different frequency. He had not heard the signal. Perhaps it had come in during one of his encounters with the sword creature.

Jacynth found himself missing Garronin's communications expertise.

While he was thinking about this, his comlink picked up yet another signal, this one causing one of the strange out-of-place buttons on the comlink to glow.

Pressing the odd button first, Jacynth heard communications between Imperial scouts and at least one Imperial officer who seemed to be at some kind of base camp. It sounded like they were searching with speederbike teams for two groups. One was referred to only as "she". The other group was referred to only as "they". The Imperials thought "she" was heading for the city, and that "they" were already there.

"We'll alert Beta team."

"Yes," said Jacynth to his comlink in answer to the newest signal.

"Jacynth? Jacynth Kauphert? This is your father."

"F-father?"

"I want you to meet me in front of one of these temple buildings in the city. Just get here in the neighborhood and I'll find you."

"How...how did you get here?"

"How did I get here? What difference does that make? Your family needs you and it's time for you to face your responsibilities."

"I don't know how to....."

"You don't know how? Well find out how! And you better be quick about it. Now get off this freq before we're traced. Servess out."

Imperials and an angry voice claiming to be his father.....Jacynth wasn't so sure he wanted to check out the third signal. Nervously, he pressed the return call button. There was no answer. Jacynth couldn't keep the signal going for too long with searching Imperials in the area, but he remembered how he had missed the earlier signal himself and wanted to wait at least a little while.

Klik klik "Hello? Senior Lieutenant? Can you hear me?" Unlike his father, she knew well enough not to use any names, but Jacynth had no trouble recognizing Hascil's voice.

Conversation quickly established that she was to the southwest of Jacynth, hiding from Imperial scout patrols. "I recovered something important for your equipment that I think you'll be glad to see. I'm missing mine, if you happen to come across it."

“Yes, trooper,” Jacinth replied. “I’ve got your missing equipment. We both need to make it down to the city ASAP.”

In case anyone was listening in, they arranged a meeting place by using their original landing on Ayokouwi as a reference point. Jacinth was a little nervous about whether or not they had both figured coordinates correctly. He would have three or four hours of jungle travel to get there.

One of the good things was that the rendezvous would bring Hascil away from the area where she was expect her to go. Unfortunately it would leave the Imperials between them and the city by the time the two Rebels hooked up, but there was not a good way to avoid that.

The hours passed. Jacinth did a fine job of negotiating the jungle; although more than once he considered abandoning the jar of worms rather than continuing to carry it. He persevered, and eventually managed to dispel the sense of inconvenience entirely. [willpower 30].

The meeting place was within a 100 meters when up ahead two speeder bikes with stormtrooper scouts screamed into view and turned directly toward him, firing their main guns. He turned and ran looking for cover, but two more biker scouts pulled out a mere 20 meters behind him. One pulled a small blaster and fired twice. The second shot struck Jacinth squarely in the chest...

No, actually, none of that had happened...yet. Jacinth was standing about 60 meters short of the place he’d been in his vision. His pulse raced as he realized he’d just unconsciously triggered his Far Seeing power to look a few minutes into his future.

They were waiting for him.

Or for someone. Was it a trap for Hascil? Or was “Hascil” merely bait?

He reached out with the Force, trying to keep his probe limited in area to avoid unfriendly detection. He was pleased to catch a brief but definite sense of the real Hascil. She was mildly sick with fever, and probably within a few hundred meters.

“The future is fluid,” Casp Ergabib was fond of quoting from the Huric writings whenever topics of time came up in conversation. Hopefully Jacinth would be able to return with an excellent example of the truth of that statement.

Jacinth found a suitable group of animals near the river to the southeast. There were ten of them; all adults; herbivores; each about the size of a landspeeder. He approached the largest one and confirmed his hopes that he could both direct it’s course, and that the rest of the group was inclined to follow it.

The idea was that the bio-signature of big creatures would mask his own on the Imperial scanners. He directed the group west, following the river, and clung to the south

side of the lead creature – one arm still needed for the worm jar - to hide himself visually from the scout troopers in the jungle to the north.

It worked very nicely. Soon he was at the rise of rocks where he was supposed to meet Hascil.

There was a tense half hour of hiding and waiting for her to appear. Jacinth had felt her presence in the vicinity, but perhaps she too was hiding. None of his communication options would be safe with the Imperials nearby, so all he could do was remain patient.

It turned out that Hascil had been up in the trees over two of the scout troopers, waiting to help Jacinth through the ambush with some dubious plans involving a lasso. She had not noticed Jacinth sneaking by with the herd of creatures, but after some time the trick dawned upon her. She returned to the rendezvous and found him waiting.

“Very clever!” said the black-furred Selonian.

“Thanks.”

“Scout troopers in the jungle seemed cliché to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know: all those recruitment advertisements.”

“I think those are usually forests.”

“I guess you’re right,” Hascil nodded.

“You’ve been busy,” said Jacinth pointing to the laser sword in Hascil’s hand.... and the other THREE clipped to her belt. She’d lost her jacket, and her clothing and fur were burned in four or five different places; obviously from laser blades. He could also see the mild fever in her eyes and her slightly unsteady stance.

“Yeah,” she said simply.

Hascil’s efforts to recover Jacinth’s focusing crystal had put her up against a total of five blackened humanoids with laser swords. One blade had been lost in the water.

They exchanged crystals, then drained the power out of all four laser swords to charge up their lightsabers [Lightsaber Repair] until both Jedi blades were in decent working order.

They came to a large open field of chest-high grass.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Hascil.

“Those big creatures we fought with the team hunt here,” observed her human teammate.

“What makes you so sure?”

Jacinth pointed to the deep, massive prints in the soft ground.

“Oh.”

Hascil offered Jacinth a set of macrobinoculars, which he used to search the field.

“Big,” Jacinth observed. “It looks like we’d lose an hour or more if we try to go around, but that might be better than becoming food. There’s a river to the south which could make up the time if we navigate it, but that’s the direction the Imperials are coming from, and the current looked pretty strong from what I saw earlier.”

Hascil thought about it. "We could run really fast. Or go back to try to capture a speederbike or two. Or I could try to be a diversion to lead any predators away while you make a run for it. With my lightsaber working, I'd have a good chance."

Jacinth used Enhance Coordination, bringing up one Force skill element at a time. Successful, he increased their Lifting, Running, and Lightsaber skills. Hascil increased her Running and Lifting via Body Control. It seemed the hardest part would be for Jacinth to hold on to the darn glass jar of worms.

Hascil got down on all fours and Jacinth got on board. It was odd. This was his companion, and her body was small compared to most creatures one might use for transportation, but he could feel the strength of her and it made him surprisingly secure.

Assured that it did not hurt her, Jacinth took a good grip of fur at the back of her neck with one hand, and pulled in the worm jar to his body with the other. There were no hands left for macrobinoculars, nor blaster carbine. He clipped the former to his belt, and swung the latter on his back.

Hascil set off at a trot. Visibility at their current height in the grass was a problem. They had to avoid some areas, lest Jacinth lose all distance sight in the taller grass.

They were almost half way across when the pair of five-meter-tall, giant bipedal lizards rose up out of the grass fifty meters to the north. Obviously these things hunted in pairs. How they had been able to hide their massive frames was a matter of conjecture for which there was currently not time. Jacinth braced himself for shocking roars, but the monstrous equine heads did not make a sound. The silence was just as disturbing.

Jacinth coolly informed Hascil - who could not see the creatures from her position - that it was time to go faster. She obliged, and the race was on.

It was a short race.

The big creatures, observing Hascil and Jacinth's burst of speed, broke off the chase. Had they pursued, it would have been a very close call; but it seemed the hunger to laziness equation had worked out in favor of the scampering Jedi.

Some time later, the duo came to what they sensed would be the last obstacle between them and entering the city. Between the jungle and the city's coastal border, the nearby rivers formed a vast, soupy bog. Fog reduced visibility to scant meters. Testing with a branch, they found the water near the edge to be about a meter deep, but that was just at the edge. Gnat-like insects of several varieties moved not just in swarms, but in clouds. The "water" was thick and viscous - unpleasant to look at, and foul smelling, to put it mildly. There was likely to be many drop offs and other areas that could arrest their

movement or suck them down like quicksand. To season this unpleasantness further, the bog was bustling with gigantic worms; some more than a meter in diameter. The creatures arched slowly and powerfully in the mist above the brackish water.

There was no practical way around the bog. Somehow they would have to cross it.

Jacinth took a gulping breath as the great creature again submerged into the sludge. It occurred to him that about half of Rock Squad would not have the endurance to survive this ride.

Of course it had all been on the datapad. The hardest part had been sifting through hundreds of holopics to find the right worm. Along the way they'd passed an entry on the Sordas - the big predators - and enough insects to make him think to look for the one in his small jar. The insect was a "morritt". Morritts produced an extraordinary chemical able to make the big bog worms docile.

It also took awhile to rig up a suitable vine harness. Jacinth himself threw his first construction into the bog. But Hascil came up with a good design. The human did manage to fabricate a vine backpack to carry the ever-cumbersome worm jar.

Jacinth used a few drugs from his medpac to significantly reduce Hascil's fever.

When they were ready, Jacinth found a good candidate, and did a little bog worm bronco busting. He held on long enough through violent thrashing and splashing for his enthusiastic Morritt to burrow into the big creature and release its calming, and otherwise harmless, venom.

With the unusual steed under his tentative control, he turned it back to pick up Hascil, and they were soon on their way.

It was not going to be a pleasant ride. The bog worms could only move by a series of undulating dives through the sludge, with dangerously long periods of submersion. They did what they could to protect their equipment; wrapping much of it in strips of their own clothing. The blaster carbine was too big, so Jacinth could only hope it would function once they emerged on the other side.

At least they didn't have to worry about the clouds of gnats.

The ride had become so hard on Hascil that she put herself into a Hibernation Trance for the last third of the journey. Fortunately she was well secured to the creature. When she revived, she coughed up a nasty bit of sludge from her lungs. Jacinth found his body pushed to its limits, but proved himself once again the consummate rider of beasts.

They looked a mess: clothes were ruined, soaked in goo, Hascil shaken; but they had survived, little worse for the wear. They checked their weapons and equipment. The lightsabers were fine. Jacinth even managed to get his carbine working [unskilled Blaster Repair roll: 19].

The bog came within 10 meters of a portion of the city wall. Moving cautiously northeast along the bulwark, they found a city gate in short order; but there they also found more Imperials. There were two scout troopers with speederbikes, at least five regular stormtroopers, and parked in the gateway was a Chariot Command Speeder. Two of the stormtroopers were up on the wall with macrobinoculars - each assigned to watch the length of the wall for anyone trying to go over the top. A reconnaissance TIE fighter flew by above.

No one had spotted them yet, but it looked like it would be a bit of a trick to get into the city.

Checking his equipment, Jacinth noticed that his comlink was flashing again with an incoming signal. He had a good idea who it was.

Cutaway:

“They’ve reached the city walls,” said Tak Fol. “They are resourceful.”

“I want them stopped,” said Darth Tayshen.

“Perhaps we should send the other.”

“Maybe. But it is not a good time.”

“My influence has created various stormtrooper units to guard the gates and hunt for them, but I may have to go in myself.”

The Sith Lady considered this. “You are probably strong enough to stop both of them, but we must be certain. We will see if I myself can follow your link into the city.”

The Ithorian bowed in agreement.

Jacinth triggered the comlink to receive.

“Son, don’t respond. I’m too close to the boys in white. Look, I know this is some kind of dream, but I also know there are real dangers here. And that this is a chance for you to really come back to us. I have a ship ready for our escape. Meet me as soon as you can, and we’ll get out of this place. Out.”

“That was your father?” asked Hascil.

“I think so.”

Hearing his tone, and no stranger to clan conflict, the Selonian did not press the issue.

They thought about cutting a hole in the city wall with their lightsabers, but the wall was very thick and had a good chance of draining their blades before they made it through. Neither Jedi had the Control to keep the power output properly regulated, and Jacinth’s blade in particular still suffered from some energy inefficiency. And even if they could cut through, there was a good chance they would step right into the view of a stormtrooper with macrobinoculars.

The next idea was to follow a waterway into the city. Neither of them could remember their view from a distance well enough to recall if the river led into the city proper. They began a careful search.

When a pair of scout troopers on speederbikes cruised by at patrol speed, they hid in the bog until they were gone.

Jacynth came across something hopeful. There were signs of an underground waterway, and further evidence that there might be a passage down to it. At his direction, Hascil used her great strength to move a number of rocks and boulders until they uncovered a deep, narrow hole. They could hear flowing water with enough echo to indicate a large cavern. [Search roll of 25.]

They gathered up wood to use for torches, and, after a few careful lightsaber cuts to widen the gap, climbed down inside. Hascil led the way to help point out good hand holds, and both of them managed the 20 meter descent without much trouble.

They were on a wide rock shelf, about 12 meters across. The water below sounded much closer now, and the wall was covered in moisture. It was quite cool, and there was the strong smell of wet stone.

At the outer edges of their dim torchlight, three black humanoid figures simultaneously climbed up onto the shelf. Only their eyes reflected light from the darkness. Their forms became clearer when, their hands free from climbing, they activated their fire orange laser blades.

“On the bright side,” said Hascil igniting her lightsaber, “I think this means we’re going the right direction.”

With a gesture, Hascil telekinetically blasted one of the dark creatures off the ledge. It hit the wall and fell below into the darkness with a splash. The Selonian had sacrificed the time needed to bring Lightsaber Combat up to reduce the odds to two on two.

Feeling the strain of his exertions in the bog, but with Lightsaber Combat up and running, Jacynth tried to press an attack that would force the creature on his left back over the edge. A series of parries later, Jacynth instead found himself with his back to the ledge!

Hascil made a feint toward the creature on the right, then spun back upon the one menacing Jacynth. Jacynth stepped forward to intercept the stymied attack on Hascil’s back, and this put his footing in a much safer position.

Hascil chopped off an arm of her opponent and sent it over the ledge, but almost in the same moment, Jacynth was caught with his guard down as a singing orange blade slashing toward his exposed abdomen.

Jacynth shot forward into his enemy’s swing so that he merely took a blow from the hilt. Stunned, he turned all his energies toward defending himself. Hascil moved in and expertly forced the creature off the ledge on the dry side.

Jacinth retrieved his torch and brought it to the edge in time to see the wounded creature climbing back up. When it came in range, Jacinth destroyed it with a saber blow to the head.

They followed the river avoiding several underground dangers including some hungry plants, and a ceiling full of dangerous bat-like animals. Survival training and careful movement served them well. When they came to a spot where the river filled the tunnel, Hascil scouted ahead in the water and found the distance to the next open air cavern to be negotiable. They would be swimming with the current, and that would help. Hascil's body was well suited to the water, so Jacinth was able to hang on to her back while she swam them both through to the other side [Swimming even at minus 1D came to 40; easy Stamina for Jacinth, no problem].

By now they were surely within the city borders above.

They came to an area with three choices of how to proceed. 1) A rainwater pipe which was very likely to lead up to the city streets; 2) a lit corridor running as far as the eye could see, with eight statues standing in alcoves spaced 5 meters apart on either side of the corridor - looking much like the statue Jacinth had seen in front of Shappup's hut - and 3) the river continued into more caverns ahead.

Looking into Hascil's immediate future with the Force, Jacinth believed that heading down the worked corridor would simultaneously activate all of the statue guardians; so they decided to continue in the caverns as long as possible.

More swimming. More walking. Glowing plant life helped with the darkness, which was good because passing through the water had made their torches almost worthless. From time to time, Jacinth used the low light setting on Hascil's macrobinoculars. If unfamiliar with local plant and animal life, the underground in general was still a Selonian's native environment, and this also helped.

"So Hascil, any chance we'll see any of YOUR family members here?" Jacinth asked at a time when conversation seemed safe.

"I wouldn't think so."

"What do they think of your career choice? Do you all get along?"

"My clan set me apart to learn more about the Force. Casp persuaded them that it would be in their interest. There was a time in my adolescence when it was thought that I might be capable of bearing young, so my mother was very disappointed when that proved not to be the case. She has always been kind to me, but I know she carries that disappointment with her. I'm not particularly adept at reading minds, but with my own species and my own family it's much easier, and I often hear them without even trying. One of my sisters who is fertile is as envious of me and my sensitivity to the Force as I am sometimes of her.

"I studied with Casp for almost three years before Podojo Olo came and I met all of you. I don't think the clan was ever very impressed with the way I could make objects float with my mind, and there wasn't a single objection to my leaving the planet."

“Are you very close to Casp?” Jacinth asked regarding her Drall mentor.

“From what I’ve read,” she replied, “I believe I feel similar feelings toward him as humans feel about their fathers.”

Jacinth thought about asking what she thought humans felt about their fathers, but their conversation was interrupted by new circumstances.

The tunnel opened into a long cavern in which the river dropped below to a lower area. The giant, carnivorous plants they’d evaded earlier filled the lower area of this room, growing alongside the river with their red and white flower fronds. The floor of the upper area was broken shale resting on slender stalagmites, with large gaps throughout. Obviously the shale would collapse under their weight, sending them down into the waiting plants, or, if they were relatively lucky, the raging river.

A quick check of the datapad confirmed that it had all manner of animals, including insects and fish, but nothing on flora.

“You know how this works, don’t you?” asked Jacinth wryly, taking the macrobinoculars away from his face.

“I’m not sure.”

“We have to keep moving. Jump and run, jump and run. The flooring collapses behind us as we go, and we stay just ahead of it. No doubt the last jump will be a doozy.”

Hascil thought about it. “That means we would not be able to come back this way.”

“Ayup, not unless we figure out how to deal with the plants.”

“It looks fairly easy for me,” the Selonian evaluated. “I’m sure I could make all of the jumps while carrying you. To be extra safe, you could try to enhance my running and jumping.”

Jacinth shook his head. “I don’t think that’s going to work here. I’d say that floor will just about support our dispersed weight with a slow collapse. If I ride on your back our combined weight will crash right through. If we do this, I’ll have to make my own jumps.”

“Maybe we should go back?”

“One.....twoooo....THREE!”

They started running. The floor began collapsing behind them as predicted, but the first platform’s collapse also started an odd cascade of falling supports running along beside them to the right. They hit the first jump, and there was a moment of fear as they could only hope the floor on the far side would hold. It did, and they continued brisk apace.

The hardest part for Hascil was keeping her pace precisely even with Jacinth’s.

The domino collapsing effect on their right was out-racing them.

The Rebels cleared the second and third jumps running and jumping in perfect step with one another amid the noise of collapsing stone. They were two thirds of the way across when they saw why they were not going to make it.

The running catastrophe of collapsing supports on their right was going to curve left along the back wall and destroy the last platform before they would reach it. No human being, even calling on the Force, could make the final jump to the far ledge deprived of that platform.

Hascil shouted “Jump on my back!”

“No, save yourself!”

“Trust me!!”

They landed on the second to last platform and took three steps side by side; Jacinth hopped over onto her back with one step remaining to the edge. He could see no possible way she could clear this jump without growing wings or a jetpack.

His assessment was basically correct. But two steps before the final edge, Hascil had started reaching out with Telekinesis for one of the vines dangling from the ceiling.

She leaped [Force Point: 54 Jumping, 35 Telekinesis], sailed through the air.... began to drop.... then met and grabbed the vine angled up toward them. They swung down hard toward the far side as the final platform was annihilated right in front of them; then curved upward through a storm of stone to hit the far wall about three meters below the opening. Jacinth heard glass breaking on his back, then felt wetness on his back and legs. Red, white and green fronds began grabbing for them from below, but Hascil quickly climbed up the rope hand over hand, hooked her claws into the ledge above, and hauled them up to safety.

Two worms remained in the bottle, but with the fluid gone they were dying. Jacinth’s datapad did not give too much information beyond the fact that the worms were “mutually beneficial parasites” which could only survive inside a living host. Hosts were almost never harmed by this relationship. How “certain hosts” benefited was not explained. Jacinth and Hascil grimaced when he read how the worms could grow to 3 to 4 meters in length within the host’s heart, lungs, and other internal organs. The clear, jelly-like worms were currently about ½ a meter long, covered in hundreds of tiny hairs or legs. There was only one way to save these worms, and it wasn’t an appetizing concept.

In the end they did the right thing.

They had traveled enough distance to cross the entire city at least once, but the caverns circled and changed depth. Hascil assured Jacinth that they weren’t lost.

Hascil hit a trip wire about half an hour beyond the room with the collapsing floor. The result was not demolitions, but bright electric lights completely blinded the two young Rebels.

“Halt!” called a voice modulated by a helmet speaker. It sounded like a stormtrooper, but there was no way to confirm that assumption. “Stop where you are! We have you in

our sights!” Jacinth, still uncertain about sounds underground, estimated that the voice was coming from 10 to 20 meters ahead of him, but all he could see was white.

Jacinth reached out with the Force in hopes of identifying what he was up against. There were six beings in front of him, but he could not make out any details. His mind brushed what felt like a second group, and he tried to concentrate on them. Here he was able to feel more details. They were as far behind the first group as the first group was from him. There were two humans and the third member of their group he recognized: It was Bliss Blass; the odd, dumpy alien, whom he and the squad had encountered and rescued when they first came to Ayokouwi.

Jacinth next called upon the Force to increase the adjustment of his eyes to the blinding light. It was something he’d never done before, but he let himself be at peace and approached it much as he would his long held ability to minimize pain.

In moments, his vision resolved. Two white-armored troopers with unusual pistols were coming toward him. They resembled scout troopers with some color differences in the clothing exposed beneath their armor. There was a stripe on their pants, but he could not discern specific hues in the current lighting. Maybe they were some type of specialized, underground trooper. There were two more troopers about 10 meters behind the first two, covering them. The other two could not be seen.

Jacinth continued to feign blindness and disorientation. He thought he could bring the roof down, but not without a good chance of burying himself and Hascil.

“Can you see?” asked Jacinth in a whisper.

“Yes, but not well,” said Hascil.

“Be ready.”

The troopers were coming close now.

“Put your hands tight against your sides,” said the trooper.

One hand, held up against the “blinding” light, distracted for the other reaching for and igniting his lightsaber. “Now,” he said to Hascil.

There was a crucial distance of four steps to cover which gave the troopers time to fire. In those crucial seconds, stormtrooper fingers began to squeeze triggers, but Hascil was also at work. She Telekinetically tore one of the ceiling-mounted lights down and directed the sparking device at the Imperials. [Trick]

The troopers’ pistols were vertically double barreled. The lower barrel held a grapple and line, and this is what each of them fired. Jacinth was moving extremely fast, and by rushing close, he moved inside of the grappling weapon’s range setting. The missile missed him wide to the left.

Hascil was not as fortunate, and the grappling hook took orbit around her, wrapping her in high-strength cord.

Jacinth's silvery blue blade flashed and sang, sparks flew from penetrated armor, and the two troopers went down hard.

Blaster fire erupted farther back in the dark cavern. Jacinth winced until he realized that the red and green bolts were confined to the distance for the moment. Of the next two troopers with rifles, one had turned toward the fighting behind him, but the other one had Jacinth squarely in his sights.

Jacinth threw himself against the cavern wall to his right, safely away from the blast.

Hascil was using with her Telekinesis to unravel the cord around her as Jacinth charged. A blaster bolt caught him with a glancing blow, but it did not stop him from burying his saber through chest plate and deep into the man beneath. Unfortunately the blow went so deep, that it would require either an effort to pull the blade out, or time to turn it off and back on again. The other trooper was already training his rifle around on the Rebel.

"I'm free!" Hascil taunted as she advanced on the rifleman. When the trooper glanced in her direction, Jacinth kicked the dead trooper off his blade in such a way that the body flew into his partner, knocking him to the ground [Trick]. The trooper pushed off his comrade's body and aimed at Jacinth, but an emerald blaster bolt from deeper in the cavern struck the top of his head, and suddenly the battle was over.

"This is Jessa," said the newcomer, indicating a brown-haired young woman with a narrow face in sensible traveling clothes, "Bliss Blass, and my companion, Spanner." The last was a four-legged droid shaped like a pet hound. Jacinth was not surprised that he had not detected the droid earlier. "I'm Varlu." The speaker was dressed in a weathered uniform of the Old Republic Scout Service. One might have expected him to be ancient, but he looked to be in his late twenties to early thirties. Varlu seemed to be the only combatant of the group. "And you must be the ones all these white-armored gentleman are looking for."

"What are you all doing here?" asked Jacinth.

Varlu began searching the downed Imperials for usable equipment. "I came here to check out the city, but since all the guns showed up, I'd rather just get out. I ran into these two along the way, and we finally decided to lay low down here. Guess you managed to bring the show to us after all."

"Sorry about that," said Hascil.

Varlu smiled. "Don't be, it's probably not your fault."

Jacinth addressed the pear-shaped, blue alien. "Do you remember us, Bliss?"

"I don't think so," said Bliss apologetically. "I'm sorry if I've forgotten. I don't have a memory like you humans."

Varlu tossed Bliss a blaster rifle. The alien failed to catch it, but did then cautiously pick it up and look it over.

This was the inventory of new equipment available: 6 suits of armor in various states of repair, including helmets with infrared and macrobinocular visors. 3 Blaster Rifles; 1 Light Repeating Blaster; 4 Blaster Pistols; and 2 Blaster Pistol/Grapple guns. Rations, depth checkers (attached to left forearm plates), small grapnels attached to syntherope lines; comlinks; 4 extra grappling hooks for the guns; survival kits; 12 spare powerpacks; 6 concussion grenades, and 2 high-yield grenades.

Varlu asked for one of the grenades, warning the Rebels not to use any of them down here in these tunnels unless they are really desperate because the ceilings could easily come down.

The scout expressed interest in Jacinth's animal datapad, and was very happy to trade some maps of the city and the caverns for it.

"I have the information on holo, and on parchment in a waterproof tube in case I the holo recording is damaged. I'd prefer to keep my projector, but I'll give you whichever one you want."

Jacinth chose the parchment. Looking over the maps, and making some translations from the old Huric [Languages roll: 22], revealed four choices of how to proceed to the Huric Temple.

- 1) They were close to the sea. Varlu explained that there were 2-8 troopers at the cove which leads to the ocean. Very few troops were guarding the western part of town, so if getting by the group in the cove should make for an easier route through the city.
- 2) There was a waterway through the caverns that led right up into the temple. It was marked with many signs for danger and long stretches of water-filled tunnels. This would be perilous in any case, but those troopers at the sea cavern were sea troopers running searches of the water off the coast. They would have some excellent equipment to help with the water.
- 3) There was a building about a city block (100 meters+) northeast of the temple, in which there looked to be a secret tunnel leading into the Temple. There would be troopers patrolling this neighborhood, but not nearly as many as are at the temple's main street entrances. Hascil noticed on the map that another long tunnel connected to this building; probably the one they had avoided earlier because of the 10 statue guardians. There were passages to the surface from where they currently stood which would put them within a few blocks of this building.
- 4) There were concealed entrances all around the upper levels of the temple. Flying or climbing there could provide easy entrance, however, it would be very difficult to do that unobserved, even at night, because the bad guys were watching the building closely. The only good news was that the Temple appeared HUGE, and it would take a considerable army to watch the whole thing. Then again, Jacinth knew that a much smaller force could set up a sensor net around the base of the building.

Jacinth and Hascil found themselves FAMISHED. This was one of the expected side effects of their new friends living inside of them. Worried about poison in the stormtrooper rations, Jacinth attempted to look into the future, but the power proved unhelpful.

Varlu spoke to his droid hound, “Spanner, check the food for them. If that doesn’t work, there’s plenty to eat in these caverns.”

The machine sniffs at the rations, then said “Don’t expect anything too tasty, but it’s all good and nutritious.”

Droids talk all the time, of course, but it was odd coming from a mechanical hound.

Varlu admired Hascil and Jacinth’s lightsabers, and Jacinth’s proficiency with his in the battle. The scout claimed to own a pair of them himself - discovered in his travels - but had never been able to get the hang of using them. He asked if they were Jedi Knights. They explained ambiguously how they had come to be Jedi apprentices of a sort, and how they hoped that entering the temple building in the city would teach them more about the Force.

Jacinth was quite persuasive; so much so that Bliss Blass was ready to follow him to hell if he had asked; but the others politely declined his offer for the two groups to combine their efforts to reach the temple.

“But, I’ll tell you what,” says Varlu, “If you choose to go toward the ocean, we’ll help you with the goons there. You can take all the smaller stuff that will fit through the caverns, if you want it. We’ll take the bigger vehicles to help us escape down the coast.”

Varlu wasn’t too worried about the burned men. “They’re strange, but dumb. And blaster bolts put them down easy enough. Just stay out of sword reach - that’s worked for us. Also, I think they’re intended to stop people coming into the city; not those heading out. We’ve passed several that have left us alone. All the same, now that you mention them, do you mind if I take TWO grenades?”

When Jacinth asked him his “real age”, Varlu said he was 30.

“Wait a minute,” said the Rebel Senior Lieutenant. “What year is it?”

They found out that Varlu was over thirty years behind. Jessa was one year ahead. Bliss Blass had no idea what year it had ever been.

“We think this is all some kind of dream,” said Jacinth.

Jessa was particularly surprised. When invited to explain, she said, “I’ve been thinking this is just MY dream. I have dreams like this from time to time, but no one else in the dream has ever said it was one. This time Varlu and you have both said so. I think I’m still just the only one dreaming, but....well, it’s interesting.”

Hascil took Jacinth aside while they were considering options. “Sir, I think we should separate soon.”

“Don’t call me ‘sir’, Hascil.”

“Oh,” she said with some alarm, “I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.”

“It’s...just that Captain Nimeuta was very specific about my following military protocol. He was worried that Lieutenant Antilles might resign his commission and not re-enlist, but then try to...how did Rawlkom put it?.....’just hang out with the Squad’. He wasn’t going to allow that, and to be fair, he felt that I had to be held to the same expectations. I told him Garronin would never be so petty, but he was insistent that the precaution was necessary.”

“I think I understand the Garronin situation. But we’re not with the rest of the squad now, and I just prefer to be addressed casually by my friends. I consider you a great friend.”

She seemed quite surprised by this; perhaps even choked up. “I always thought it was difficult for humans to feel that way about aliens. I won’t let you down.”

“Don’t think about it like that,” said Jacinth. “You were about to tell me about an idea?”

She nodded. “I think we should split up. I’ve come this far to help get you into the city. One of us has to get into the temple, because I really think the Huric will talk to us there. But I’m afraid I’m the cause of all those Imperials out there. Tak Fol has some kind of link to me. He can’t find me when I’m near the Vault, but we don’t have the Vault here. I think all those Imperial troops work for him. If we stay together, there’s a good chance they’ll stop both of us. But if I lead them off like I did Fol on TuAnath, you’ll have a clear way into the temple. I’d rather not, of course. I really wish I could go inside with you. But I don’t think that can happen. I suggest that I help you get near the temple, then head off on my own.”

Varlu was disappointed to hear about Palpatine, the decimation of the Jedi, and the Empire.

Jacinth suggested that they meet together outside the dream. They could come together 3 months into Hascil and Jacinth’s future at the Dust Yard on Carest 1. Varlu was excited about the idea. As a scout, he planned to spend a lot of time exploring the unknown regions, and it would be difficult for him to promise if he could be there in 30 years and 3 months; but he would certainly try.

Jessa was still leaning toward her theory that this was all her dream, but she too accepted Jacinth’s proposal for a meeting. In her case, they agreed upon a date one year and two months from Jacinth and Hascil’s current date.

Hascil had the vague feeling that she might have met Jessa before, but she could not place the memory.

Following up on his hunch that some of the others may be Force Sensitive, Jacinth tried Life Detection on them at close range. This being his first meeting with Varlu and Jessa, he could not read them; but, as an acquaintance, he did pick up that Bliss was Force sensitive with Force skills. It was a pleasant, if peculiar, revelation.

Hascil explained that she had a plan for going her separate way, but, with Jacinth’s permission, she would not share it with him. Likewise, she suggested that he not tell her the details of how he intended to proceed (though she knew he was going to go up into

the city by the most direct route). This way, each would be less likely to endanger the other by revealing the information to an enemy.

Hascil asked for a grenade. Jacinth gave her two; one of them a high-yield device. This left him with three normals and one high-yield for himself.

He checked his comlink and the only active signal was from the button which seemed to monitor the Imperial channels. This might have been a good way to listen in on what the stormtroopers were up to in what areas, but, without knowing much about comm channels, he was not willing to risk giving himself away.

Eventually it came time for Jacinth to press on alone to the city above. "You're sure you'll recognize my father if you come across him?"

"Yes", she reassured him again. "Humans don't all look THAT much alike. Your description was detailed, and I won't forget."

On impulse, he gave the big Selonian a firm hug. "For luck," he said.

"Luck?" teased the big furry alien, accepting his embrace. "Don't make me quote Casp to you about 'luck'."

"May the Force be with you," he amended.

The climb was not terribly dangerous, but it was challenging enough to remind him of how much exertion his body had been going through for the past 8 hours or so.

The polarized lenses of his trooper helmet warded away any visual discomfort as he emerged into the late afternoon light of the city. The architecture was unfamiliar. Most buildings were one to three stories in height, with flat or domed roofs. Many doorways did not have doors, and the windows were all without glass or shutters. There was no apparent native space age technology. The structures were in good repair, but the city seemed abandoned.

In the daylight, Jacinth noticed more clearly that his stormtrooper black body glove had a blue right arm and left leg. He had no idea what that indicated.

Jacinth, understanding most of the Huric markings, was able to follow the map.

The building which he expected to contain the secret entrance was a block away when encountered some stormtroopers. Another Chariot landspeeder sat in an intersection to his right with three troopers around it. The intersection to his left had two stormtroopers on watch. One of these noticed Jacinth in his trooper armor, and alerted his partner. Neither stepped toward him, nor seemed to make helmet comlink communication. But they were definitely watching.

The disguised Rebel had no idea what behavior was expected of him.

Jacinth had an unusually powerful gift when it came to Far Seeing which would at times give him flash warnings of the immediate future, as it had with the speederbike

ambush back in the jungle. Unfortunately, his increased ability was not predictable, and invoking the power normally would require a minimum of a full minute; possibly 10 minutes or more. He would not be able to use it here to look ahead at various stormtrooper reactions to his various possible actions.

He decided to wave and continue walking like a trooper with a purpose. But one of the stormtroopers gave him a return hand signal to wait a moment, and started walking toward him. He came alone, and Jacinth took that for a good sign - even though the other Imperial was obviously watching; and he suspected that the two of them were having a private channel conversation about him.

“Are you alone?” asked the trooper.

“Yeah, we had some problems with our battery packs down there,” said Jacinth, hardly recognizing his own mechanical voice. He held out a battery pack which was in perfectly good order for a fast inspection.

“No aliens with you?”

“Nope. Just me.”

The trooper paused, perhaps in comm conversation again. Finally he said, “Okay, carry on,” and turned back toward his post.

Jacinth was glad that the Imperials were apparently passing him on, because his ability to sneak past them was in serious doubt. He tried to stay out of sight, but twice more, in the short distance to his destination, stormtroopers appeared - once from around a corner and once from a roof edge - to notice and then ignore him.

He arrived at the house corresponding to the one marked on the map. This one had a door, but it was opened easily by a touchpad. He was noting the interior walls covered in glyphs when a light shone in his eyes. Again his helmet lenses polarized immediately, and he was able to look straight into the glowrod beam and see his father. With a blaster.

He remembered what he was wearing. “Don’t shoot! It’s Jacinth!”

His father lowered his weapon. “It’s Jacinth” he muttered. “And it’s about time, isn’t it? C’mon now, we have to get out of here.”

“Slow down, Dad. I have business in the temple before I can leave.”

“Oh, you have BUSINESS in the temple. Suddenly you care about BUSINESS?? Well it’s far past time for some FAMILY business. You’ve had your time to gallivant around, and I’m ready to forgive you for that, son. Running away. Dropping out of law school. Joining the Rebellion. But now there is no more time to waste!”

“Dad, people are depending on....”

Servess started counting on his fingers. “Your mother, and brother, and sister, and I are depending on you! If you can’t see that....if that doesn’t come first to you, then you’re not a son I raised.”

“What is it? Imperials again?”

“Imperials. Now you care?” The older man stalked heavily across the room, looking off into the distance. “Imperials?” More pacing; then a decision. Servess looked his son in the eyes. “If you’re coming with me, I’ll tell you all about it. If you’re not, then it’s none of your business.”

“I’m just asking for a little time here to....”

“You’re asking for time? No. No no no. It’s right now or it’s never. Are you coming with me, or are you turning your back on us? Are you Jacinth Kauphert, or...”, his lip curled “...Jacinth ‘Troll’? Today you choose.”

Jacinth considered many things he could say to his father. He could tell him about higher ideals, fighting for the sake of the galaxy, the hundreds maybe thousands of lives saved, obliteration of the Empire, and fighting the good fight. He thought about explaining the Huric and the Jedi way; how going home at this point might merely bring evil and sadness upon his family as it pursued him. He might explain about his rank and responsibility in the Alliance military, and recount how he had earned the Star of Alderaan leading the team which destroyed the Holocaust and stopped the menace of the Deluge Project.

In the end he merely took off his gloves, dropped them to the ground and grabbed Servess in a firm hug. The older man was surprised, and allowed this for several long moments before slowly pulling away. Servess never looked up, so he did not see Jacinth’s tears. He just quietly moved to the door.

“I love you, Dad,” said Jacinth.

Servess paused, then departed.

When he felt ready, Jacinth turned to the glyphs on the walls. They were extremely difficult to decipher. They were certainly related to Huric, but were some kind of sub-dialect he’d never seen before. “Temple” was about the only word he could recognize.

By map and by logic, the secret tunnel would be in the basement, so he headed for a nearby staircase. The second through fourth steps looked suspicious, so he carefully stepped over them. The basement was empty and well lit, though he could not determine where the light was coming from. There was a long corridor connected to the room, and at first he thought this was the way toward the temple; but checking his directions, he realized it was the other end of the tunnel he and Hascil had avoided when they were in the caverns.

It took 20 minutes of tedious searching to find a hidden stone pull ring in part of the west wall toward the floor. When he extended it, two niches slid open on the north and south walls. He hoped this would be the passage, but instead the niches revealed two all-too-familiar looking statues which began to come to life.

A quick pull on the ring in the wall was enough to tell him that a quick pull would not be enough. The block was a meter square, and of indeterminate thickness. Jacinth would have to focus his efforts on pulling out the section of stone, or he had time to activate his lightsaber and bring up Light Saber Combat, or he could start shooting. The only other option seemed to be to run: into the long corridor, or back up the steps.

About that same time:

Hascil and Varlu observed the cavern open to the ocean. There were three seatroopers. One of them was repairing a personal water repulsorlift motor. Varlu and the others were hoping for a pair of the larger waveskimmers to make their way into the sea. For these they would have to wait for a returning patrol.

Varlu and Hascil began to sneak into positions; while Bliss, Jessa, and Spanner would be ready to fire cover support from the high back entrance. Hascil was hoping to slip into the water, but she slipped on her way down the rocks.

“Over there,” said one of the troopers, advancing and opening fire.

Hascil dove for what cover she could find among the rocks. She was tightly pinned down. Activating her lightsaber, she found herself unable to bring up the Force power she would need to deflect blaster attacks.

Not wanting to damage any equipment, she threw a grenade into the water near the troopers. The explosive splash distracted her attackers, and that’s when Varlu reached a good position to begin firing upon them. He knocked out two and injured the third. Hascil appealed to the remaining trooper to surrender, but instead he shot her in the chest.

Varlu finished the Imperial.

Hascil was not seriously hurt, other than her pride. Checking her comlink on the Imperial channel, she confirmed her fears. The seatroopers had sent off an alert, and more Imperials were now on the way. There would be no waveskimmer for Varlu and the others. They would have to go back into the caverns and look for another way out.

Hascil herself would need to hurry.

Jacinth blinked back fatigue, and brought his blaster rifle to bear on the creature to the north as it changed. It was more resilient when transforming, but not invulnerable. Two shots destroyed it.

The second creature hopped toward him raising it’s deep orange blade. Jacinth brought the rifle around and blew it to pieces with two more shots.

Well, that was easy, he thought. Brief as it was, it was also tiring. Jacinth sat down for a few minutes to eat, drink, and catch his breath.

When he felt a bit better, he returned to the block in the wall and planted his feet to pull on the ring. His first effort did not budge the stone. Time to get serious. His next attempt succeeded in pulling the block clear of the wall. A quick examination had him wondering if he had found the claustrophobia test. The tunnel was square, and less than a meter to a side.

He crawled through 50 meters without incident to another stone block.

At first he was worried because of leverage problems in the tight tunnel. He managed to turn himself about so that he could brace himself with his arms and push with his legs. He was relieved to find that his strength was up to the task. He pushed out the block and emerged into a room leading to a large, upward sloping corridor.

There was Huric writing on the wall around the opening. On the left was the question “What have you mastered?”, to the right was the Jedi code, and above the opening it read “Enter the trials of the flame.”

He looked up the ramp, cautious of traps. A level ledge followed the corridor, and on this ledge, about 20 meters ahead, two statues had completed their transformation and were activating laser swords. They looked a little bigger, each with a headband, including a central band over the top of their skulls, all of it lined with spikes.

They were already closing the distance.

In the coastal cavern, Hascil and Varlu together managed to repair the personal underwater propulsion unit (UPI) the seatroopers had been working on. Varlu explained to Hascil how to use the auto-speargun built into it. After a farewell of wishing the Force to be with each other, Varlu, Jessa, Spanner, and Bliss headed back into the caverns. Hascil took an air mask from one of the seatroopers, started up the machine, and let it pull her under the water.

Concerned, Jacinth fired a single shot at the creature on his right. It was faster - he could see that - but his shot was on the mark, and he was relieved to see the creature fall.

The other one was coming VERY quickly now, and there would only be time for one fast shot. He wounded it, stopping its charge, then he advanced on it, rifle raised, and was surprised to see it shrink away for a moment. But then it came at him again with frightful speed, and this time Jacinth's shot went wide. He dodged the energy blade that began to hack at him.

At such close quarters, Jacinth switched to pistol; but his shot was a poor one. The laser sword smacked into the left side of his helmet, stunning him.

The young Jedi tried to put some distance between himself and his opponent. He unclipped and ignited his lightsaber, knowing it would offer his best defense against a sword at this range.

There followed a series of electric parries. Then his enemy lunged at him off balance. Jacinth stepped out of the way, thrusting his blade up and through the thing's chest, just above the breast bone. Somewhere along the way, since the time he used to fear maiming himself every time he activated the Jedi weapon, and his sloppy hacking at slavers on Trajan; Jacinth realized he had become a respectable duelist. Even without Lightsaber Combat operating, he had done well.

His vision blanked out, and for just a moment he thought he was being struck down by the Force for his conceit, but then he remembered the damage to his helmet. He removed it, assessed the rent and melted circuitry. It was beyond his ability to repair, so he discarded it. Searching through the trooper utility belt, he was glad to find some flares in case of darkness.

Jacinth took a few minutes to rest.

He came to a room with a large metal door. There was a two-dimensional puzzle carved into the wall next to the doorway, 3 meters high and 3 meters wide. It was a strategy game of some kind. Stone markers could be moved to different octagonal spaces on the board. The caption said in Basic “Win in four”. Fortunately the rules of the game were provided; carved into all the other walls of the room from floor to ceiling. At a guess, there were more than 20,000 words. Half of them were in various different languages - fortunately they were – incongruously - languages from Imperial/Republic space, meaning Jacinth could work with them.

It occurred to him that someone with great strength might be able to pull the door open with brute force, but he guessed that that method would not be successful for him.

In other circumstances, Jacinth thought he might enjoy this game. He might have enjoyed it even now if he had had something other than the floor to sit on. Most of the time he needed to stand to read the walls. It took him forty minutes to translate the languages; another hour to gain a working knowledge of the game; and two more full hours to finally solve the puzzle. But in the end, this test of languages and strategy played to his strengths.

On the down side, while it had been a physical break from climbing and walking and fighting; standing and hours of concentrating still had taken a toll of fatigue. His body and now his eyes were reporting more and more aches. He was consuming his rations at an startling rate. On the bright side, his armor and body glove maintained their temperature control.

The big door opened to a stairway going down. A flash premonition from the Force warned him about a pair of poisoned arrows set to fly out of the wall to his left. Jacinth lit a flare and tossed it near the shadowy wall so that he could see the arrow holes better. He was able to determine how to make a safe jump outside their line of fire.

A corridor connected to a short, broad set of steps going up. At the top was an obvious deadfall trap. There was little choice but to attempt to run through the trigger area before the weight from the ceiling could squash him. He rolled through to the other side, a massive block of stone missing him by bare centimeters and impacting the ground so hard that the shock bounced him off his feet.

The next room he came to had a large, circular hole in the floor. Centered several meters from the edge of the floor was a 4 meter thick column of irregular stone. After searching for hidden options, Jacinth resigned himself to the leap and climb down this great trunk of rock.

The jump was easy despite the extra weight of armor and equipment. It would be a long way down. Jacinth shook his head. He’d been moving along since the puzzle door almost on auto-pilot. Proceeding carefully, and yet in a daze. Now as he hugged the stone, his mind cleared for the moment.

Meanwhile:

Hascil drove the UPU to a dry cavern accessible only by water-filled tunnels.

There she would wait. She would enter into Force Emptiness for several hours, attuning herself to the Force, set to revive if anyone entered the cavern or after the desired time expired. If Tak Fol or any of his Imperial troops found her here, then so be it. She would be ready. If not, she would awaken, Life Sense for Jacinth, and then make her own way through the waterway into the temple.

Most of all, she hoped her precautions had made the path safe for Jacinth to complete their quest.

Cutaway:

The Imperial captain approached the beautiful woman standing by the bridge viewports of the double-hulled stardestroyer. “My lady, we will reach the system in four hours, fifty-seven minutes.”

The woman nodded without looking away from the swirls of hyperspace. “Dream on,” she said, though not to the captain. Darth Tayshen smiled and every Imperial heart on the bridge leaped for the joy of it.

Jacinth considered using his rope and grapnel lines, but as long as the hand holds remained plentiful, it would take less time and energy to go without them. He decided to use his Force Power, Concentration. Centering himself on the task this way would reduce his alertness to other things around him, but it would significantly increase his climbing efficiency.

[Disaster Card comes up after steps A+B]

The climb was going well. Jacinth guessed he had climbed down more than 70 meters. The bottom was still not in sight when the column began to rumble and collapse. Stone began to rain down from above, and he had to come out of his Force Concentration to avoid being hit by some of the larger chunks. At least the column was falling apart from the top down and not the other way around.

He pulled out his pistol and fired a hook into the stone. He had to take his best guess in setting the winch on the gun for a fast, yet controlled, release. Rappelling down the column became running backwards into gravity. He descended another forty meters before the section of stone in which he'd anchored his line broke off of the column. He quickly grabbed onto the pillar when his line went loose. He hit the cable release button before the falling stone with the grapple embedded in it would have yanked the pistol away. There was no time at the moment to load another grapple line.

The next tactic was to make short, rough jumps down to tiny ledges which he could only hope would hold his weight. He had to dodge around to the other side of the column to avoid another huge chunk from above. Four jumps after that he was on the ground.

That's when the entire column began to topple...in a straight line toward the only exit. Stone was about to fill the bottom of this shaft to a depth of a dozen meters or more. Even

if he wasn't crushed, he'd never be able to dig through all the debris before starving to death.

He ran with a very large shadow deepening over him.

The entire column was coming apart, and most of it seemed to be falling toward Jacinth. He reached the arch in a dive, seconds ahead of the cataclysmic and deafening crash behind him.

Coming to his hands and knees - thankfully armored and padded as they were - he spit out rock dust, then started work brushing it off his body and out of his hair. Remarkably, he still had all of his equipment, and all of it remained in working repair.

At some point he became aware of what much of the dust was falling onto: the feet of a statue. He jumped up, fumbling for his lightsaber. But the statue did not animate.

The room he was in was 16 meters wide, about 20 across, and perhaps 25 high. There was no floor past the 2 meter ledge he was now standing on. The hole appeared bottomless. Silver bars - perhaps a dozen - anchored in different walls, criss crossed the gap at random at all manner of angles. There was a door - the exit apparently - on the far side of the room, on a ledge about 15 meters up. It looked like one could climb there by tightrope-walking the silver bars. In places bars would come close enough together to provide hand holds, but most of the time the bars were far apart.

The final complication was that there were at least three niches in the walls near various bars which contained the dreaded statues. Another statue was on the ledge with the door above, and the one on the ledge with him now made five that he could see.

The good news was that there was a crude map on the wall which showed that Jacinth was perhaps three or four chambers and halls from the "Sanctum of the Flame". He firmly believed that there he would reach his goal.

But first he would have to deal with this unpleasant room. And before he did that, he thought it would be a good time to eat and rest his protesting muscles. At least for a few minutes.

There was no way to tell how long he had slept; if it had been sleep. He dreamt of being instructed how to use the Force to prevent and neutralize the build up of fatigue poisons in his body. Dream or no dream, he felt wonderfully refreshed, if hungry again.

"Okay, let's find out why I can't just shoot a grappling line up there near the door and climb on over." He closed his eyes and looked into the future. After a few minutes he had a vision in which he was falling and screaming.

He nodded, not really surprised. "New plan then."

Jacinth put 10 blaster rifle bolts into one of the statues on a ledge. "I would have felt silly if I hadn't tried," he said, seeing that there had been no effect.

"Let's try this." He reloaded the grapple gun with one of his four reloads. He took aim and fired into one of the statues, then released the line and started pulling. It took a little

work, but he did manage to drag the thing off the ledge. It fell into oblivion, the grapple line following like the tail of a kite.

“Ha!” Jacinth taunted, once he was confident that the statue wasn’t going to magically reappear in the niche. That was one victory!

He had 3 more grapple lines and 3 more statues at a distance, plus the one on the ledge where he stood. He could get two more of the statues in this manner without too much difficulty, but the third was on a ledge directly above him. He would have to move out onto the bars to have a shot at it, and then he would be in a poor to pull. But it would be possible.

Elsewhere:

Hascil awakened from Emptiness. The Force was strong in her, and would be for the next three hours or so. She reached out for Jacinth, but could not sense him. She waited an hour and checked again, but there was no trace of his presence.

It had been almost six hours since they separated. It seemed more than enough time.... Something must have happened to him.

It looked like it was up to her. Suppressing worry for her friend, Hascil slipped into the water and started up the UPU repulsor engine.

Jacinth used grapple lines to topple two more statues. This left him with one more line for future use, and two statues.

He tried to Farsee what pushing over the one nearest him would do, but the future was a blur, and the effort made him mildly dizzy. He decided to try to push it off the edge. He’d keep his blaster in hand and his lightsaber within easy reach. If it animated, he’d rather fight it here on the ledge anyway.

Which is indeed what happened.

He fired his blaster pistol over and over again as the statue went through the transformation to animation.

And then there was one statue.

Jacinth secured a line to the nearest bar and began his climb. It was difficult maneuvering on the bars, but he took to it well, and it was less problematic only needing to watch a single statue. When the creature began to come to life, Jacinth hung upside down by his legs and one arm to draw his pistol.

The charred humanoid dropped off it’s ledge, landing easily on a bar on which it could soon reach Jacinth. A single blaster bolt wounded it, and delayed it’s advance.

He realized the real danger too late. Recovering quickly, the creature did not need to come any closer. Jacinth’s safety line was within it’s easy reach! The creature grabbed hold of it, cut it loose, and jumped while holding the line still connected to it’s prey. Jacinth held on with all four limbs against the resulting violent pull, losing his blaster

pistol/grapple gun in the process. He saw the pistol fall, but it was not a very good time to practice his Telekinesis.

This was serious trouble. The creature hung suspended from him on the rope, then changed its grip and began climbing up. The weight was unbelievable; it might still have been made of stone. Freeing a hand seemed like a bad idea. He thought Telekinesis might unbuckle his utility belt (to which the safety line, turned danger line, was connected), but he was loathe to give up all the tools connected to it, and sacrificing his lightsaber this way was not much of a choice at all. The thing was too close for a grenade, he could not get his rifle off his back, and wielding his lightsaber with one hand would have been extraordinarily risky.

Jacinth reached into a side pouch with his left hand, produced a flare, lit it with his thumb, and dropped it onto the creature [Trick]. Startled, his skeletal enemy batted at the flare as it landed on him, thus losing its grip on the line so that it dropped into the void. The flare fell a long long way before fading from sight.

In the aftermath, the Jedi adept learned that he had to climb to a switch which opened the door above. But only for a short duration. He had to quickly make the remaining climb across the maze of bars to the ledge before the door closed again, or be forced to return to the switch to do it all again. He succeeded on his second attempt; which was rather impressive.

The next room, 9 meters wide and 18 across, had a floor that was mostly made up of a 4 meter deep pool of very clear water. There was a door on the far side, and a ledge ran around the perimeter of the room. Four alcoves, two on the right and two on the left, held the tiresome statues. There were four switches at different locations underwater along the walls of the pool; each was recessed into the stone with a track that allowed a lever to move from a 3 o'clock position down to a 6 o'clock setting.

It looked like he was going to have to get wet.

Meanwhile:

After some extraordinary repulsor piloting through narrow caverns with sharp rock walls and treacherous water currents, Hascil met up with a very big fish. Her attempts to shoot it with spears were sadly executed, and she was lucky not to be swallowed along with the UPU on the fish's first pass. The sea creature chased her through the cavern, as the Selonian trooper searched for a narrow place where it could not pursue her. Only her natural nimbleness in the water kept her alive through the long chase which followed.

Finally she dodged away from the creature's charge so that it hit a cavern wall near a humongous boulder. The Selonian wheeled, Telekinetically directing the great stone to pin the giant fish against the wall.

Checking her oxygen supply, she continued on under her own power.

Jacinth tried to Farsee the future of pulling different levers, but the future was very muddy; probably because the combinations he was about to try were too numerous; possibly because he had made so many recent attempts to look forward in time.

He swam down to the levers, ready to race back to the surface, blaster ready, in case any of the statues animated. His body armor was not as heavy as he had feared. He pulled the switch under the ledge where he came in, and nothing happened. He set it back in the 3 o'clock position and proceeded to test each individual lever, all without any result, good or ill.

Next he tried combinations of two. He pulled the lever under the ledge, and the one on the right wall. That animated a statue.

One of the larger ones with spikes on it's skull began to take shape. It was not armed with the usual energy sword, but instead carried a long pole tipped on one end with dancing electricity. Jacinth opened fire with his rifle. One shot hit without effect, and his second shot was off the mark because of the difficulty shooting while treading water.

The creature thrust it's pole into the water, sending Jacinth a nasty and very painful shock. The young Jedi was able to retaliate with a shot which blasted his attacker to pieces.

The next combination of two levers - under the entrance ledge and the one to the far left - was the exciting one. Jacinth swam back to the surface, blaster ready for the next statue....but less ready to find all THREE remaining statues animating. And the exit door open.

There were some quick choices to be made. He could shoot as many times as he dared while the statues were animating (remaining in danger of being shocked in the water), or he could swim for the far ledge as fast as possible and run out the door (quite possibly with three creatures in pursuit and not knowing what was on the other side of the door). If he tried the quick swim, he could try to do it while keeping his blaster rifle in hand (challenging in the time available), attempt to sling it (challenging in the time available) or abandon it and swim all out.

Holding his rifle, Jacinth made clumsy splashings toward the newly opened door while the statues came to life. Then he was in pain again from current in the water. This time the electricity came from three poles, and he could certainly feel the difference.

He seemed to be in the water for a terribly long time [a second atrocious swimming roll]. The electricity was killing him [wound and 3 shock].

Finally he was out of the water. He ran for the open door and on into a broad upward sloping corridor. He failed to notice a trap door which fell out from under him, but

managed to jump clear to the far side before falling down into the water trap below. The open trap door created a 2 meter wide moat which held back the three skeletal creatures from pursuing.

Jacinth moved away up the hallway, in case the trap door were to close, then set about treating his burns.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged into a massive vault. For the first time, the stone of the walls looked like the sandstone of the Temple exterior. Most of the floor ahead of him looked like darkened transparisteel. He could just make out what looked like plant life beneath it - possibly the tops of trees. To his right a waterfall fell from an opening in the wall high above, through a hole in the floor, presumably down to the level of the plant life below. Perhaps 200 meters across the dark glass, the floor became sandstone at the base of a 6 or 7 meter tall set of silver double doors, embossed with flames. The temperature was comfortable, but the room was extremely humid. Everything smelled of jungle flowers. There were four sandstone, 4 meter tall, statues of Kojans; two here on the near side flanking the waterfall, and two across the field of dark glass on either side of the big doors.

Blaster fire attracted Jacinth's attention to the hole in the wall above through which the waterfall entered the room. Hascil appeared there with angry red bolts flying past her out into the big room. She closed down her lightsaber and was about to dive down the waterfall when, much to her surprise, she spotted Jacinth. Still in the line of fire, she stopped in alarm and uncertainty.

"Hascil!" Jacinth called. "Try to get down here!"

It was a long way down from the waterfall passage above. Hascil had intended to dive all the way down, past the level where Jacinth stood, into a deep pool beneath the dark glass. To join with Jacinth she would have to take a different route. Under fire, of course.

Hascil made a broad leap from of the opening toward an outcropping out and below to her right. Arcing through the space she had vacated came two grenades. One went all the way down with the waterfall, while the other landed on Jacinth's level, exploding on impact. The burst of heat and sound cost Jacinth his aim as reflexively shielded his face with his arm.

Hascil hung and dropped to another small ledge directly beneath her. She was now about half way down. Jacinth resumed covering the opening above.

Two Imperial troopers in armor like his splashed carefully to the mouth of the waterfall, blaster rifles searching for Hascil. Jacinth fired, and could see immediately that his blaster bolt was faded in color, meaning the weapon was probably low on gas. His bolt went high right, but it was enough to earn him unfriendly attention. They returned fire.

Jacinth clipped one of the troopers, stunning him. A third Imperial reached the opening, and there seemed to be more close behind. One of them reached for a grenade. Hascil lobbed up a grenade of her own, guiding it in with Telekinesis. The Imperials disappeared in roaring flame. Two white-armored bodies reappeared as they were launched out into the air over the waterfall. Much like their grenades before them, one fell through the hole in the floor along with the cascading water, while one landed with a crunch not far from where Jacinth stood with his ears ringing.

The helmet was too damaged to serve as a replacement, but Jacinth was able to collect a working blaster rifle, a grenade, and a few utility belt items from the dead trooper (grapple lines, medpac, rations, flares, utility tape).

Completing her climb, Hascil said, "I'm sorry. I couldn't detect you at all. I shouldn't have come."

"Maybe the Temple makes masks our presence like the Aefermon Vault," Jacinth speculated. Knowing she was probably as hungry as he was, he handed her some rations and they both began to eat while they talked. "Don't worry. We'll just have to make the best of things. Besides, I'm glad you're here to take care of all the swimming and heavy lifting I've been struggling with. Speaking of struggling, you look a mess."

Both of them were soaking wet, with singe marks, dents, bruises, bandaged wounds, and, in Hascil's case, only the tattered remnants of clothing.

Hascil smiled. "You too. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I was just almost electrocuted, but no, nothing serious. Fatigue was getting to be a problem, but the Temple taught me how to use the Force to hold it back. How tired are you?"

"Not very. I spent a few hours in Emptiness before heading back this way. I had to fight more statues and get past several traps. I was poisoned at one point, but I learned how to neutralize the toxin. All things considered, I still feel in top condition."

The moment they stepped onto the black glass floor they felt tremendous heat. Even through his body glove, and struggling temperature control systems, Jacinth was immediately uncomfortable. After two meters, Hascil's feet began to smolder and the air began to burn in their lungs. They returned to the sandstone entrance area.

Hascil experimented with climbing - staying on the walls above the glass - but the inexplicable heat affected her there as well.

They found a narrow passage in the floor which opened to a relatively easy climb down to the jungle floor below.

"I guess we are expected to go that way," said Hascil. "What do you think?"

Jacinth pointed up to the waterfall opening above. Glowrod beams could be seen hitting the blackened walls of the shaft. "Time to hurry."

"Maybe I should stay behind and keep them off your back."

“No,” said Jacinth. “Come on. We’re both taking the quick way down.”

It was a full fifteen meter dive to the pool at the bottom of the waterfall. The lighting was good enough, and the water clear enough, that there was no doubt that the pool would be deep enough for a safe landing.

Hascil went first. Jacinth could see shadows nearing the scored exit above, so as soon as she was clear, he made his jump. It seemed like a long way down, but Jacinth had always been remarkably comfortable with heights, and the technique on his dive was not unimpressive. Hitting the water hurt, but he controlled the sting with the Force and received no lasting damage.

Hascil swam down and recovered the other Imperial Trooper body that had been sent into the pool from the grenade blast. This was very much worth the effort. They took the usual supplies from the utility belt. The helmet was damaged, but this one Jacinth was able to repair, so he once again had a functional helmet compatible with his armor. The pistol part of trooper’s sidearm was badly bent, but the grappleline projector was still in good shape, and had two reloads. The body also had one high yield grenade.

The trees and ferns grew along massive, fifteen meter tall walls forming a massive maze. They began to follow the right hand wall, and Hascil even used her stylus and pad to map, but the first time they were reversed back to an intersection, they realized that the wall configuration had changed.

“I was stuck in another maze,” said Hascil, “fighting those blackened creatures, but it wasn’t like this.”

They marked one wall with a lightsaber, went around two corners, then returned to find the jungle corridors different and no lightsaber mark in sight.

“We could cut through a wall,” suggested Hascil.

“These walls are thick stone,” said Jacinth. “One or two walls per lightsaber, I would guess. If – and it’s a big IF - If we can rig an adapter for some of these stormtrooper power cells without frying our swords’ circuitry, that might give us ten or twelve more walls. A few more if I drain my armor. But which direction do we choose? And would twelve walls be enough?”

Hascil made some calculations. “Given the width of the passages - which seems a standard 13 ½ meters – and assuming wall thickness does not vary from what we can see, it would be very close. That’s trusting that no variables change. And we would have to be heading the right direction.”

“Could we climb the walls and run the maze on top of the walls?”

“No,” said Hascil. “See how the walls go up flush against the dark transparisteel ceiling?”

Hascil suggested they see if they could dig underneath the walls, but a little experimenting found that the walls went down deep into the ground.

“Maybe we can just FEEL the right way to go,” suggested Jacinth. “Doesn’t Casp quote something about not always trusting your eyes?”

They both attempted this for several minutes. “This way,” said Jacinth at length.

Hascil followed without question.

The feeling Jacinth was receiving almost slipped away after a few turns through the maze, but he regained it, more clear than ever. They traveled on until the maze opened up into a large, square area with an exit in each wall. In the center was a platform of six steps about 4 meters tall. Eleven statues stood on the steps; five of them the larger, spiked versions. Jacinth and Hascil both sensed that their path continued out the exit on the far side of the square.

“Eleven of them,” said Hascil, sounding weary, and, uncharacteristically, worried. “Do we have a choice?”

The hope was that the statues animated based on proximity. With the ceiling 15 meters above them, they had a lot of room in that dimension.

Hascil went first while Jacinth remained ready with Lightsaber Combat up, and a grenade in hand. She climbed along the right side wall of the corridor just outside the square. On her way she accidentally cut her hand on a jagged rock, and had to use her newest Force power to neutralize a mild poison. At about 13 meters, she imbedded the hook of a stormtrooper throw line, then tied a loop in which she could put one foot to help her stand (one foot against the wall, one foot in the loop) to fire the grapple gun. She hit the far wall, near the corner of the exit.

After untying the loop and letting the rope drop down for Jacinth, Hascil began a hand over hand crossing of the square. She reached the far wall, tired, but without incident. She climbed around the corner, inserted another stormtrooper hook and line, then descended.

The statues remained motionless.

Once Hascil had her lightsaber and a grenade ready, Jacinth put his weapons away, and began his climb up the rope; wary of jagged stones. At the top he dislodged the hook, reeled in the line, and put them away in a belt container. His regular routine of exercise paid off during the hand over hand crossing, and soon enough he was standing at Hascil’s side. She then climbed back up to unhook and recover the second line.

Total resources expended: one grapple gun hook and line (2 remain).

They continued through the maze; losing track of time as they concentrated on perceiving the path. At one point it looked like they were going to have to cross another square very much like the previous one, complete with THIRTEEN statues; but fortunately, Jacinth sensed an alternate route.

Finally they came to an extremely large open square - many times the sizes of the previous intersections. Here they found a new level of challenge and danger. There were only two exits, but this time there were FIVE flat ziggurat step platforms. At a quick count, there were between seventy to eighty statues! There was a lower ceiling here, barely five meters from the floor. And it was carpeted with the dangerous plants they had encountered in the caverns beneath the city.

Obviously the grapple gun and climbing tactic would not serve them here.

They talked of digging, using grenades, or just running across as fast as Selonianly possible, but none of these ideas seemed to hold much promise of success.

“May the Force be with you,” said Hascil with a trusting smile before slipping into her Hibernation Trance.

“We’re certainly counting on that,” Jacinth replied. He felt a surprising...tenderness, watching his friends eyes close and her body relax. In the year he had know her, she had become the person on whom he could most depend. Here she was again placing herself utterly in his care. The stark contrast between Hascil’s trust and the look on his father’s face a few hours ago – the contrast against so many other relationships in his life - stirred feelings he did not know how to interpret.

Relaxing, Jacinth reached out to the Force. His existence for the next few minutes would focus on walking across the crowded square while hiding himself from detection. He was convinced that the Dark Side of the Force animated the dread statues whenever it detected a living being. He would will himself invisible to such detection.

There was no room to consider failure.

Lifting Hascil in his arms and closing his eyes, he stepped into the square.

[Game terms: 3 actions involved: Carrying Hascil, Force of Will, and Concentration Force Point spent. 6D STR carries Hascil no problem.

Jacinth will need a Control DIFFICULTY NUMBER of 44 to remain undetected.

Control rolls for Force of Will and Concentration succeed.

Willpower w/ Force Point and Concentration = 16D -2D for 3 actions = 14D
Available dice will be Control 6D + Force of Will 14D

He rolls: 14 CONTROL + 53 FORCE OF WILL = 67

Jacinth’s willpower is battered, but he succeeds. Glory card is played.]

“Rock Squad,” said Jacinth, using the words they had agreed upon to wake Hascil.

She smiled just as she had before entering her trance. "I knew you would do it."

"Yeah," Jacinth nodded, "me too."

The Jedi made their way down a corridor and past a few minor obstacles until they reached a metal grating floor, which looked to be an open lift. They stepped on it and it began to rise; coming to a stop in front of the great, silver, flame-embossed doors. They were now on the far side of the dark transparisteel floor; across from the waterfall and the entrance Jacinth had used from the pool room.

"You have done well," someone said. Her voice was astonishingly beautiful. It resonated exactly in the range Jacinth had always found most admirable and enticing in a woman. The mere sight of her face brought a pleasing pressure to his chest and increased his pulse. She was wrapped in a voluminous cloak of kelly green, lemon, and black; mixed in a chaotic pattern like giant overlapping letters from unknown alphabets.

"The Force is incredibly strong in her," said Hascil keeping her voice low.

"I feel it too," Jacinth replied.

The Selonian winced. "It's my fault she's here."

"I am Tayshen," said the woman. "I saved your life in the Jundland Wastes. We share common goals."

"The Dark Side is strong about you," said Jacinth, hoping it was a mistake, and strangely reluctant to insult her. "Means can be more important than goals."

His words seemed to hurt her, and he regretted them in spite of himself. "You have much to learn about the costs of bringing balance." She changed the subject. "You have done exceptionally well here in defeating the Huric trials. The lessons you've learned will make you stronger in the Force. The time is coming closer when you will become strong enough to help us overthrow the Emperor. But for now you must leave." She pointed to a side door. "That exit will take you back to yourselves."

"We've come a long way to see the inner sanctum of the flame," said Jacinth.

"No," she said in that voice that made the Jedi long for things unspoken. "The journey itself was your test and your training." She walked toward the portals, looking up at them. "You are not ready to go farther. That will come."

"We ARE ready," Hascil countered.

"Garronin thought he was ready at Muujan, in the temple of the vault. Are you as anxious as he was to suffer his fate?"

"You speak to Garronin, don't you?" said Jacinth. "The two of you are connected somehow."

"I have tried to teach him to use the power of his emotions for good instead of destruction. He ignores me now and insists on his own way. It would almost be better for him to listen to the Jedi ways, but he refuses even to do that."

"I watched you kill a Jedi," Jacinth accused.

"With good reason."

“‘There is no emotion; there is peace’” quoted Hascil. “Emotions should be controlled, not ‘used for good’.”

This seemed to hit a nerve with the human woman. “That is the code of an extinct order, destroyed by it’s own misunderstanding and corruption. That is the code of those who failed to resist the evil of Palpatine. You quote a teaching designed by so-called ‘masters’ in a vile effort to maintain their own positions of privilege.”

“With respect,” said Jacinth, reluctantly meaning it, “we will consider your words, but we are going through those doors.”

“I will not allow it,” said Tayshen, a slight shift in her body beneath the cloak. “I am under orders from the Emperor to destroy this place. I can not openly defy him in this matter or we will all be destroyed. Soon this place will be gone. If your physical bodies are still in the temple ruins, you’ll be truly killed.” Her hand was moving beneath the folds. “I do not want you to die. And I will not allow you to pass.”

“Fighting would be unfortunate,” said Hascil. “But are you so certain you can stop the two of us?” Jacinth half agreed with the sentiment, and half wanted to apologize for it.

Tayshen looked into the Selonian. “I respect both of you. But the reality is that I am more than a match for ten of you.”

Jacinth had a strong suspicion that this was not an exaggeration.

“You can escape now with your lives, and the lives of your friends waiting for you outside.” “Or,” she activated her crimson lightsaber, “if you must risk so much, you can try to get past me.”

If it had to be a fight, there were still a few things Jacinth wanted to say. He took his helmet off and set it aside. “Stop ‘helping’ Garronin. Your influence has brought nothing but pain, suffering, and death for him and those around him.”

Darth Tayshen removed her cloak. She wore a short-sleeved top the same yellow, green, and black pattern of the cloak. Her loose-fitting pants and footwear were black. “One of your Jedi tenets is ‘there is no ignorance’. Yet you have no idea what my influence on Garronin has or has not caused.”

“The Jedi also teach us to trust our feelings,” Jacinth countered. “And that we will know the Dark Side.”

“Or is it just easier to blame someone else?” Tayshen accused.

“I sense that your words are intended....”

“...to deceive??” she finished for him. “I know exactly what you sense, and you don’t sense ANYTHING false about my words. You deceive yourself.”

There was enough truth in this to sting Jacinth, but his worst moment came when he noticed Hascil’s expression. She said nothing, but her eyes spoke her uncertainty in him; something he’d never seen before.

“Never-the-less,” he said, “I do sense the Dark Side about you, and you have not even tried to deny that. Whatever your intentions, your nature makes you the enemy of a cause to which I have committed myself.” He was alienating her, and part of him continued to

hate that. She was the most powerful Force-user he'd ever encountered by far, and she was astonishingly alluring. He coveted her approval.

At war with himself, he spoke on. "Hascil and I are taking guidance from one more powerful than ourselves. Indeed, it is the very Piscine whom your followers killed. Or thought they killed."

Darth Tayshen looked uncomfortable for the first time. He had surprised her. "Schjo Tyall [sounds like SHO TEE-all] is dead. That he misguides you from beyond death is unfortunate."

Jacinth had intended to say more, but his resolve had peaked. After rattling her with his last statement, he was reluctant to provide any more free intelligence. He had said what he'd said in large part to steel his own resolve, and to encourage Hascil. More, at this point, would be counterproductive.

The young man activated his lightsaber. Hascil mirrored this action in yellow, but Jacinth did have one more thing he wanted to try. "Garronin's resistance of you is tenuous, in flux all the time, and strained between what he wants and what he has. What he wants is respect. What he has is friendship and it is the best thing he can achieve at the moment. If you kill us, his closest friends, you'll lose Garronin forever. He'll see your true nature."

"You haven't been listening," she said, filled with regret. "I want nothing more than for him - and for you - to see my 'true nature'. You're wrong about me." She raised her blade. "Now let this be another sign of my good faith."

With that she attacked.

With exaggerated body movements, she had done everything short of verbally explaining exactly how her lightsaber would come at him, and yet Jacinth was taken almost completely off guard. He was stunned that she would strike first. She had them at a moral disadvantage. With time on her side, they would have been forced to make the first attack; something the Jedi code explicitly warned against.

Jacinth deflected her thrust, fighting down rising panic that neither he nor Hascil had any idea what they were doing. He wondered if Tayshen was somehow causing such doubts through the Force, but, unfortunately, he doubted it.

Jacinth began to press the attack against Tayshen. He forced her back so quickly that Hascil had to hasten to keep up. He made a feint to open his opponent to Hascil, but the Sith completely ignored him.

Blades deflected one another from all angles. When they locked up for a moment, Hascil whirled around with open claws. Tayshen grabbed Hascil's wrist, twisted it behind the Selonian's back and pushed her into Jacinth, ending their advance.

The combatants studied one another and prepared to go at it again.

There followed a few tentative exchanges, then Darth Tayshen launched at them with a speed they had never before even imagined. She drove them both across the full length of

the landing, hit their blades aside, and struck them with saber blows which knocked them over the edge to the floor two meters below.

Tayshen closed down her weapon, turned her back, and walked away.

Lying on the ground, shaking off the effects of Tayshen's onslaught, Jacinth looked at Hascil. "Uh oh."

"Yes, uh oh." She said getting back to her feet.

They regained the upper landing and walked cautiously toward their opponent. Lightsabers lit anew. When Hascil and Jacinth started to close, Tayshen lit the other end of her double saber.

The color drained out of Jacinth's face, and Hascil did a comical double take. Certainly they had noticed that her saber had two potential blades, and had heard several accounts of such a weapon; but after what she'd just done to them with one blade, it was frightening to think what she could do with two.

Tayshen leaped between them, parried their sabers, then smacked Hascil on the forehead with the hilts of her weapon, and kicked Jacinth in the stomach with such power that he flew several meters through the air to land on the dark transparisteel. He was immediately hot, and had to hasten back to sandstone before worse harm came to him.

"New approach, Hascil," said Jacinth. "I'm going to Enhance you. I'll stick close to give her something else to worry about, but you're the lead."

The Selonian nodded her understanding.

Tayshen waited patiently for Jacinth to bring up the power.

The Force immediately flooded him, and the power came up quickly and easily. [Enhance Coordination: Lightsaber, Jump/Climb, and Dodge] Blades clashed repeatedly, then locked again and Hascil GROWLED across them at the blond woman. Tayshen fell away, hard pressed by the Jedi attack.

Tayshen ducked and Hascil's blade blasted out part of the calf of a Kojan statue. The Rebels continued to hold an advantage.

Abruptly Tayshen turned the tide again. She blocked both Jedi blades in succession, then leaped up and away from them with such force that, for a moment, Jacinth was certain she must have been wearing a jetpack. She landed, sans any mechanical assistance, and dropped into a ready battle stance.

With a look, Hascil and Jacinth shared the frustration of coming so close to, and yet so far from, victory. It was unclear how long they would have the endurance to mount such attacks. Darth Tayshen appeared completely without fatigue.

"If I run for the doors, can you hold her?" Jacinth asked his partner.

"Yes."

"If I get inside...."

"I understand."

Tayshen spun around and released some type of throwing blades; one at each Jedi. Hascil and Jacinth deflected the attacks with their lightsabers, but by the time they looked, the woman had disappeared.

She was behind them, and Jacinth barely managed to parry an attack that would have split him down the middle. Hascil was quickly at his side, and Jacinth could now pull back and make his move for the doors. Tayshen closed down one of her blades. She and Hascil clashed furiously.

Jacinth reached the doors. How to open them? He pushed without result, and there was no grip for pulling. Tayshen gained the advantage over Hascil. Jacinth sensed carefully with the Force and found the solution, but it was bad news. He could open the doors with the Force, but the use of Alter was so new to him that it would be effectively impossible for him to use it while maintaining the Enhance Coordination power that was giving Hascil a fighting chance.

“Do it!” called Hascil, knowing full well what it would probably require, and what that would mean for her.

Jacinth allowed his coordination enhancement to drop. As fast as he could, he turned his efforts to reaching out with the Force to open the doors.

The doors opened. Without his helmet, he had to shield himself against the brilliance emanating from within.

Hascil was now hard pressed. Jacinth desperately wanted to enter the open doors, but first he had to renew his Enhance Coordination or Hascil would be finished. It took dreadfully long, but he restored the enhancement just in time for his friend to partially deflect a low attack which singed through fur on her arm. Blades crossed and held until Tayshen broke the stalemate with a backhand punch. The Selonian stumbled away, her vision blurring.

Jacinth’s vision was also blurred as his eyes adjusted to the extraordinary light of the chamber beyond the silver doors. On a dais, a huge diamond hovered in the air, glowing with power in the midst of silent white flames. Hascil shouted encouragement, or perhaps a battle cry, as he ran up to the dais. There was great heat upon him, but it seemed he could reach for the great gemstone without suffering from the veil of fire. Hascil continued to yell to him as he picked up the diamond with both hands.

To his joy, Jacinth sensed that, with proper concentration, he would be able to send a veritable flood of the Force through his Enhance Coordination link into Hascil.

Time slowed. Mentally exploring the gem while maintaining his enhancement of Hascil made him light-headed and detached. There were white tongues of flame all around his body now, and still Hascil shouted to him.

Why was she shouting?

And suddenly there was astounding pain.

And there was no diamond.

And he was not through the silver doors at all. He was standing far out on the dark transparisteel; his body enveloped in destructive flames! Garronin flashed through his thoughts as he watched his flesh combust. Control Pain was instantly the most important thing in the universe, and it was not enough.

Darth Tayshen was powerful beyond their reckoning. In the midst of her duel against Hascil, she had still been able to reach out and completely reconstruct Jacinth's perceptions to make him think he was going through the silver doors, when in fact he was walking the other direction to his destruction.

The flames were instantly extinguished when Hascil Telekinetically lifted him off the ground. She stood with her hand extended toward him, straining to float him to safety. She had dropped Lightsaber Combat. Jacinth had certainly relinquished Enhance Coordination.

Tayshen walked behind the Selonian in long, luxurious, taunting strides. There was no need to hurry. Hascil - and Jacinth along with her so long as he was over the glass field - was entirely at the Sith's mercy.

Tayshen wanted them to think about that for the eternity of moments remaining to them.

"Don't," Jacinth appealed. "We'll go."

The Dark Lady thrust her lightsaber into the back of Hascil's knee and tore it out through the side. The Selonian collapsed to her good knee, maintaining her hold on Jacinth in spite of the pain. Jacinth was still several meters from safety as Tayshen walked around in front of Hascil. The Sith stepped to the side so that Jacinth had a clear view as she sliced off Hascil's snout, leaving the ruins of burned gums, tongue, and exposed back teeth.

Hascil stubbornly refused to drop him. He had called her his friend. Tears flowed freely above the destruction of her lower face.

"It isn't necessary!" Jacinth shouted, his own agony forgotten, though he could smell the melted body glove beneath his steaming armor.

When he was almost clear, Tayshen stabbed into Hascil's lower back and at last it was more than the Jedi could bear. Jacinth fell to the glass, but was near enough to the end of the transparisteel to roll to safety with a minimum of further discomfort.

When he looked over, Hascil was face down on the sandstone.

"Now you can go," said Tayshen.

[At this point GM said to player: Obligatory GM moment: May I interest Jacinth in a Dark Side point at this time to make Darth Tayshen regret her superfluous evil?]

Jacinth felt fury, and great power in that fury, but he did not let it rule him. His physical condition so resembled that of a certain burn victim friend of his that it served as a clear warning. "Kill her if you must," he said. "Kill both of us. But you won't make me like you, you won't set me on the same path as Garronin."

"I don't want to kill either of you," said Tayshen, reasonably. "If that were to happen here, your Force abilities could be crippled for months, if not years, or even permanently - the same consequences you would have experienced if you had passed through those doors before being ready. My goal has been to keep you AWAY from such harm. All I ask is that you leave."

Jacinth ignited his lightsaber, and moved toward Hascil. Tayshen allowed it. The Selonian had rolled onto her back, blood bubbling in her mouth.

He did not want her suffering to continue. He said softly, "I don't know how much of what she says is true. I don't want to damage your Force abilities, but if the pain is too much..." He completed the thought with a meaningful look at his saber blade.

Hascil nodded emphatically. It was not the reaction Jacinth expected. He could only imagine the pain that would make her so ready for death - even temporary death.

"Don't!" Tayshen shouted with alarm. She pointed and Jacinth's lightsaber flew out onto the transparisteel, landing in a clatter, and sliding to the middle of the floor. "No!"

Jacinth did not see what remained that could possibly cause the Dark Side warrior distress until he looked back at Hascil. Almost completely paralyzed, she had relied on Telekinesis to guide her arms and hands to activate her lightsaber and thrust it into her own abdomen. She pulled it up into her heart, spasmed, and fell still.

Tayshen flung two deadly missiles at Jacinth. He had neither the means nor the will to defend himself, and prepared to join Hascil in death - whatever that meant here - when the blades vanished just over a meter from his face. Strangely, his armor and most of his equipment disappeared.

Darth Tayshen was also gone.

Hascil had figured it out. She had said she felt responsible for Tayshen's presence, and this was exactly true. The Sith, not truly present in the city, was able to manifest herself here through the psychic connection which her apprentice, Tak Fol, established with Hascil on the gas world of Oqe. With Hascil gone, Tayshen could not remain.

It took Jacinth a minute to realize that he was alive, if not well, with nothing else standing between him and the Sanctum of the Flame!

He looked over at the silver doors. They resisted his first attempt to open them, but once he calmed himself, the task was easy. The portals opened without a sound. There was fire and a presence.

He felt hands upon his shoulders, holding him back from moving through the doorway....

....hands upon his shoulders, shaking him.

“C’mon, c’mon,” said Garronin. “Wake up! We have to get out of here!”

“Garronin? What?”

Hascil lay nearby, apparently conscious, but unable to raise her head, let alone stand. Yasmine was tending to her. He recognized his surroundings. It was the temple; the real temple of the present. They were under the sea. Rock squad had returned to Ayokouwi after that business on Squali and with the Tepp slavers. They had come down here with equipment and diving suits; found a pocket of air inside the temple ruins.

Garronin, relieved at Jacinth’s open eyes, said, “We have to go. An Imperial stardestroyer just entered the system. Ffurgill says it’s a BIG one. And they seem to know we’re here.”

It was time to go.