

# ***Phase I: The First Level of Hell***

Lava poured into the room that had been empty - except for Locke himself.

Time did not slow for him, but his thoughts processed quickly. He had not survived dozens of intense battles and encounters with powerful Elders of the Brotherhood to die to some lava. He scanned the room at a careful, but brisk pace, knowing he would only have the one opportunity before he met his fiery end.

There was nothing. It was empty, except for that pattern of black diamonds on the walls. *Surely they would not design this test to be impossible*, Locke's mind thought.

So he waited. Milliseconds went by. He would face death soon. Thoughts passed through his mind and one was vivid for a moment and then gone:

*It was the Temple of Sorrow, several years ago. He stood before the Consul's throne, watching as Macron Sadow charged toward him. Locke was merely a Krath Priest. He knew he would have little chance in a one on one duel with the mad Elder, but he had no choice. The title of Consul was his, and he was not going to show weakness by bowing before this man. When Locke thought death was sure, Macron stopped. It had been a test. Locke laughed, not thinking the madman had the sense to stop himself.*

His thoughts focused back on reality. The lava was almost to him. It was just like Macron's molten red lightsaber blade - but everywhere.

"Come on," he muttered. He summoned the Force, preparing both to leap into the air and to prepare a barrier to block the lava, if only for a moment. It seemed hopeless, but he would never give up. Not before the Elders of Sadow, and not before this ridiculous test. "I'll show you loyal."

He prepared to jump, and then just then heard a sound. The room filled with long bars, each a few meters long. The black diamonds had jutted out from the walls, forming a lattice of bars.

They were just big enough to stand on - but they were still several meters away.

Locke leaped forward, the Force assisting him as he propelled his body toward the nearest set of bars. He hit the wall and fell, his stomach hitting one of the lowest bars, his arms and head on one side and his legs hanging over the other.

The lava rushed closer. He knew he had little time. Locke swung himself up onto the bar, barely catching his balance atop it, arms steadying himself on one of the other ones. They were far

enough apart for his body to slip through, and they made several levels up toward the top of the room.

He leaped up two bars, careful to steady himself, watching as the bottom set of bars were vanquished by flooding lava that now covered the floor of the room. He had avoided incineration for a few moments, but was now faced with a new problem: the opening was in the middle of the room, and these bars were along the edges.

When he got out of here, he was going to kill whoever designed this test. "How's that for loyalty?" he said, to no one in particular. He wondered if they had an audio feed on this chamber.

In any case, he needed a solution - and quickly. The lava covered a second set of bars, and then a third. There had to be a way for him to get under that gap, but how?

He wondered. The bars had slid out of the walls, but maybe they would move further? Risking his focus for a moment, Locke centered his Force energy on a bar directly across from him. He telekinetically gripped it and *pulled*, watching it slide out toward the center of the room.

*Hah!*

Doing the same to two bars on his own side of the room, Locke pulled them out as well. This was almost easy compared to the early parts of the test. Now all he had to do was catwalk to the middle and jump up a few feet and he would be good.

Then the hole started to move. Locke watched with brief astonishment as it opened in a different panel several meters away, the first one closing. Then another opened, and that one closed. Every few seconds, one opened, and one closed. There was no time left for thinking, the lava was almost upon him.

Inhaling deeply, Locke summoned all of the Force reserves he could muster. He jumped to a another bar and pulled one close to the hole. Then it moved, so he leaped closer, and pulled another bar out. He continued this dance, trying to get to the hole. It moved. The lava grew higher. He pulled another bar out, then jumped, then it moved. It was all very frustrating.

Finally, there was only about three meters of vertical space left in the chamber. Locke was covered in his own sweat, both from exertion, and the room's heat. Finally, he noticed a pattern - the openings were spiraling back toward the center, in a way.

He intended to meet it there. Locke leaped toward the middle and balanced himself, for the first time having a moment to wait. He looked down, seeing lava everywhere.

Then the hole appeared directly above him.

Locke jumped up, clearing the gap, feet landing on solid ground as the hole moved.

Finally, everything was silent. He breathed deeply. The Arcanist slowly began recharging his Force reserves as he waited for the next test.