BIOLOGICAL CHRONICLE

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Book 8: Rising
One week ago...

Tanma idly dragged his swords along the hard ground, humming part of a tune he had composed himself. Every now and then, he would fire a little burst of light from the end of one of his weapons, chipping off a piece of rock and sending it flying over the edge of the land. Then he would peer over and watch it as it went down and down, finally vanishing into the mist far below.

Despite being a bit bored, Tanma had decided that life was generally good right now. It had taken a thousand years, but all of the villages had recovered from the Fall and the Matoran had adjusted to their new environment. Now it was just the routine work of maintaining things – gathering food, keeping the vine bridges in good repair, and making sure the scareRahi were in place. That last task was the job Tanma and Gavla had been given today, and more mind-numbingly dull work Tanma could not imagine.

Of course, it didn’t help that he was partnered with Gavla. Although they were both Matoran of Light, Gavla acted more like one of those ice-cold Ko-Matoran types. She always had her mask in the air, like she was better than everyone else. As a result, no one really wanted to be around her.

“Are you going to work, or are you going to stand around?” Gavla snapped. Her voice always reminded Tanma of the high-pitched shriek of the wind just before a storm.

“Keep your mask on,” Tanma grumbled. “It’s not like we really need these things anymore.”

That was true. Although flying Rahi had been a problem in Karda Nui for centuries, lately they had almost completely disappeared. No one knew why, but they weren’t going to question their good fortune.

Three Matoran shot past, heading down toward the swamp. Their improvised booster packs let them fly for short distances, so as long as they used them wisely, they could make the trip down and back. Tanma guessed they were going down to harvest vines, as one of the bridges between the villages was looking a little worse for wear.

Something flashed past the corner of his eye. He whipped his head around, but saw nothing. For a moment, though, it looked like a huge, black-winged shape had shot past. Some new kind of Rahi, maybe? Tanma hoped not. The village would need much larger scareRahi if the creatures were going to be that big.

There it was again! This time, Tanma got a better look at it before it vanished over a rise. It was jet-black, with small, scalloped wings on its shoulders and long, sharp claws. As it flew, it dropped something, but Tanma couldn’t tell what it was. He broke into a run. Gavla was over that way and she might have gotten a better look.

“Gavla, did you see –?” he shouted as he ran down the slope. But Gavla was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the shadowy winged visitor.

Okay, so I’m imagining things, Tanma said to himself. Only I didn’t imagine it – I saw something, and Gavla must have, too. But where is she? Hiding, maybe? She doesn’t seem like the ‘run and hide’ type, but maybe…

“Come on out!” he yelled. “It’s safe! Gavla? It was just some kind of a flier.”
Something slithered out from behind a rock, but it wasn’t the missing Matoran. What slipped past Tanma was a slime-covered leech about two feet long, faintly glowing with a pale, sickly light. Tanma had turned to follow it when he heard a faint noise behind him.

He looked back to see a sight that would haunt him all the rest of his days. It was Gavla… and yet at the same time, it wasn’t. She had changed in horrible ways. Her feet had sprouted claws, and wings had emerged from her shoulders. Her blades had transformed into talons that were fused to her hands.

At first, Tanma thought it was all some kind of joke. Matoran of Light had the ability to alter how others perceived the color of their armor, an effective means of camouflage. But the wings, the claws… no Av-Matoran could change their shape like that.

Gavla was walking toward Tanma now, slashing the air with her talons, undisguised hatred in her eyes. Tanma was torn between trying to figure out what had just happened and simply getting as far away as possible. His legs voted for running, and since there were two of them, majority ruled.

He raced back toward the village. Gavla followed, never altering her pace or saying a word. It’s almost as if she isn’t trying to catch me, thought Tanma, just keep me moving in that direction.

Two bolts of shadow energy flew past his shoulder. Tanma turned to see they had come from Gavla. He hurled a burst of light back, striking the Matoran. The noise she made in response was horrible, something between a scream and an angry hiss. She fired another beam of shadow from her blade. This one hit Tanma, knocking him off his feet. It wasn’t so much the impact that had downed him as the shock of the ice-cold darkness.

“Why did you make me do that?” asked Gavla, her voice soft and almost gentle. “I don’t want to hurt you. I want to help you.”

“What… what happened to you?” Tanma replied. “Your mask… your armor…”

“Oh, that,” Gavla said, chuckling. “You might say I saw the light… by peering into the darkness. And now you’re going to see it, too.”

Tanma scrambled to his feet and started to run. As he drew closer to the village, he stopped dead. There was not one, but three of the winged beings circling his home. Darkness spread from their wings as they flew, until it seemed as if the shadow was a physical thing trying to crush the town beneath its weight. And everywhere he looked, there were Matoran – his friends, his neighbors – wandering the streets, transformed into creatures of shadow.

“It doesn’t hurt, you know.”

Tanma turned to see Gavla approaching. “It’s quick,” the shadow Matoran continued. “The light is drained from you, and what’s left is… sharper, clearer. You know what you have to do… and you know you won’t let anyone stop you.”

“I hope you won’t mind if I try,” said Tanma, already running right toward the other Matoran. When Gavla tried to grab him, he dodged, then used a sweeping kick to knock the shadow Matoran off her feet. There was no question of staying to continue the fight, though.

I have to get to the other villages, Tanma thought, his eyes on the nearest bridge. I have to warn them, before shadow is all that’s left of this land.
From the notes of Makuta Mutran…

Entry 1:

As I, Makuta Mutran, recline in my hive in Karda Nui, carving this record, I am gratified by the sight of shadow leeches taking form in their bubbling vats. The invasion of the universe core is proceeding well, my newest creations are spreading darkness and corruption, and in general, it is good to be alive.

My assistant, Vican, is busily stuffing a failed experiment back into its crate. Normally, I dispose of any “accidents” as soon as possible… but in this case, this hissing, biting, and incredibly toxic creation would make a fine gift for Chirox.

Ah, Chirox… it was only 100 millennia or so ago that we were the best of friends, working together to create new and better Rahi to aid the Matoran.

It was during the reign of Makuta Miserix, first leader of the Brotherhood. The fortress of Destral had only recently been constructed and all Makuta were based there. Our sole job at the time was Rahi creation. I recall one particular day when Chirox and I were bent over our slab, trying to make something useful out of one of Spiriah’s experiments.

“Too many legs,” muttered Chirox. “And those teeth…”

“Do we break it down and start over?” I asked. “Or simply lock it in a room with Spiriah?”

Miserix chose this moment to enter. He took one look at the squirming thing on the table and snorted in disgust. Then he glanced up at us. “We have a… situation,” he said. “The inhabitants of Xia are demanding higher payments for their goods than most Matoran cities can afford. I want one of you to go with Makuta Icarax and his aide, Pridak, to explain the necessity of cooperation to them.”

After he left, we flipped the Rahi to see who would have to go. Unfortunately, it had two heads and no tail, so it took quite some time to arrive at a decision.

The mission was successful, of course. After days of negotiations, Icarax lost his temper. Later, after the rubble had been cleared away, the Xians were more than willing to be reasonable. We practically had to drag Pridak off the island, so taken was he with the place’s potential.

It was only when we were close to Destral that I realized I had forgotten my pet project, my favorite sentient rock. “I must have left it in the center of the island when we were inspecting the factories,” I said. “Most disturbing… I never travel without it, but it can be… difficult.”

“What’s the problem?” growled Icarax. “It’s a rock.”

“Well, true,” I answered. “That is, unless it starts eating Xians and grows into a mountain. Still, what are the odds of that ever happening?”

We sailed on then, leaving behind an island full of factories, a hard-working population of Xians… and a very, very hungry rock.
Entry 2: 

Ah, Pridak... it was not so very long after our excursion to Xia that he left the service of the Brotherhood of Makuta for "greater things." I gather that Makuta Miserix kept an eye on him, through an easily corruptible character named Takadox. And so the formation of the League of Six Kingdoms came as little surprise to us.

That's not to say we were happy about it. Oh, my, no. It was one thing to know you were always below the Great Spirit on the ladder of power – quite another to be receiving strongly worded "requests" from six jumped-up warlords who didn't know their proper place in things.

Well do I remember sitting in a cold, damp chamber in some Barraki tower, listening to Pridak and Kalmah discuss how they intended to carve up the known universe into territories. We Makuta would continue to provide Rahi beasts and anything else they might need that was within our power to give them. Miserix listened to all this with growing impatience until he could take no more.

"Insolent gnats," he spat. "The Makuta serve only Mata Nui. We do not put our secret knowledge to work for every being with a strong arm and legions of rabble behind him."

Pridak leaned forward, smiling. "That 'rabble' is prepared to march on Destral on my orders. Before your Toa and Rahkshi can even marshal their forces, we will have taken your fortress... and claimed your precious secrets. You would do well to remember that, while you serve Mata Nui, we are his chosen rulers in this universe."

"Then perhaps the Great Spirit is not as smart as we have been led to believe," said Icarax.

I glanced at Takadox then. A member of the League and a seller of information to the Brotherhood, he truly belonged with neither side. Perhaps that is why he looked like he wished he could sink into the floor.

Pridak rose, followed by Kalmah and the others. "You have a choice, Makuta – cooperation, or conquest. I trust you will choose wisely."

"What about the places not on your map?" asked Makuta Chirox. "Artakha... Metru Nui... the unknown lands to the south."

"We are in... discussions with Metru Nui," said Kalmah. "As for Artakha, let the old fool putter among his creations. And the southern lands are fit only for stone rats and lohrak."

"Then this lot should fit right in," I muttered, earning a glare from Kalmah.

"This meeting is over," said Pridak coldly. "We will expect fresh war beasts as requested. If you choose to obstruct the designs of the Great Spirit, then your fate will be on your own heads."

One by one, the League members filed out, Takadox shooting a worried glance at Miserix as he departed. After they were gone, Miserix turned to his most trusted lieutenant and spoke the words that (though we did not know it then) sealed the Barraki's fate:

"Swords so easily drawn beg to be used... and are rarely so easy to put away again. These Barraki may prove troublesome. Watch them."
Entry 3:

The war was over.

Not that I got to witness the final, grand battle between the forces of the Brotherhood of Makuta and the upstart League of Six Kingdoms. Oh, no – Miserix’s lieutenant claimed the honor of leading the attack and getting all the glory. I and another Makuta, Gorast, were sent on what amounted to clean-up duty in the fortress of Kalmah.

Needless to say, I was not excited about this task. If you have ever been to the northwestern regions of the League’s territory, you know that it stinks like the breath of a Kanohi Dragon and is littered with the carcasses of dead Rahi. Of course, that last is my fault – Kalmah never showed the proper respect due a Makuta, so I never sent him Rahi with a lifespan of more than three days.

Add to that the company of Gorast, as warm and friendly as cuddling up with a spiked lava eel. She said nothing on the trip north, other than to urge me to move faster, which was fine with me. Gorast is a fierce warrior, but once you have finished discussing dismemberment, slaughter, carnage, and decapitation, she has nothing much left to say.

Kalmah’s “fortress” was hardly that. Word of the League’s surrender had spread and that remnant of his army that had been left behind had sacked the place. They had fled before we arrived, so that all we found was a pile of rock and debris. A brief search revealed no signs of any weapons, charts, equipment, or anything else that would be of use.

After a while, Gorast spotted a few stragglers and hunted them down. I tried to clear some of the rubble to make a space to sit down. That was when I spotted the carving. Looking it over, I realized that some of my creations – the Rahi beasts I named “blade burrowers” – had defied the odds and survived. What’s more, Kalmah had discovered something most interesting about them. When enough blade burrowers are present, they start to tunnel every which way. At first glance, the tunnels look random – two long, curved ones running north and south, with smaller ones in between them – with the same pattern of construction, repeated over and over again. But Kalmah had realized they were not random at all, as any fool could see. No – the blade burrowers were constructing a map.

But… a map of what?

That question plagues me to this day. The shape of the tunnels looks like no land mass I know of. I even once tried having an imprisoned Toa wearing a Mask of Translation communicate with the burrowers, but to no avail. It seems the burrowers don’t know why they are building the tunnels in this pattern either, only that they must.

I felt certain then, and still do now, that this means something… perhaps something devastating. But it is a mystery beyond even the Brotherhood’s capacity to solve… and although a Makuta should never admit to feeling fear, I confess the memory of that carving haunts my dreams.
Entry 4:

There is nothing quite so… amusing… as Matoran at war with each other. There they are, with their powerless masks and their little weapons, trying to look formidable as they march into battle. One has to laugh.

Of course, Makuta Miserix did not find the situation at all amusing. A mere 500 years after the defeat of the League of Six Kingdoms, the Matoran of Metru Nui had gone to war with each other. It had begun as a simple dispute over boundaries and trade between Ta-Metru and Po-Metru. It escalated when Po-Matoran sank some of the transport barges and Ta-Matoran destroyed a Po-Matoran warehouse with molten protodermis. Onu-Metru sided with the fire Matoran, Le-Metru with the stone. The Ko-Matoran attempted to intervene and were rebuffed, which pushed them into the Po-Matoran camp. Ga-Matoran efforts to remain neutral failed miserably and they eventually sided with fire and earth as well.

Work ground to a halt as arguments evolved into pitched battles. Entire blocks of streets were badly damaged or destroyed. With no Toa stationed there, and the Turaga ineffective, it seemed as if nothing could halt the destruction. This suited me just fine, since I was using the chaos as an opening to slip new Rahi into the city to test their destructive potential.

Miserix ordered his lieutenant to step in and stop the fighting. By this time, that particular Makuta was already contemplating the overthrow of the Great Spirit Mata Nui, so no doubt he saw this as an opportunity to show how well the Makuta could impose order. Unfortunately, his solution was to seal large numbers of the opposing armies in the Archives and unleash the exhibits on them. It was, needless to say, quite a mess to clean up later. And it did nothing to inspire great love for the Brotherhood in the hearts of the Matoran, though they certainly behaved themselves afterwards.

What happened to the war leaders, we do not know. Possibly they were spirited off as the Barraki had been, to parts unknown. But from that time on, Miserix decided that each of us would be assigned a particular region to watch over. His lieutenant was assigned the prize of Metru Nui, while I was given the center section of the Matoran mainland. (Not that I ever paid much attention to what was going on there, being too busy with my experiments. Really, who cared what happened to a few Matoran here or there? There were always more where they came from.)

Of course, much of what I have related here, I did not witness personally. No, after the war was well underway, I was given another job by Miserix. By the time the Archives Massacre took place, I was well to the south, heading for a meeting with a legend… a legend named Tren Krom.
Entry 5:

Wherever you may travel in this vast universe of ours, it is likely you will run across someone who will tell you that Tren Krom is no more than a myth—just a legend of antiquity, no more real than Irnakk or any other figment of the imagination. Setting foot upon his island will not bring terrible consequences, they insist, just a pleasant walk on a rocky beach. To those beings, of course, I say, “What would you like for your memorial upon your death? So I can start planning it now.”

For it is a well-known fact to those who know it well that Tren Krom is no myth. He is older than the stars themselves, born in a time when there was no Mata Nui, no Makuta, only never-ending darkness that encompassed all. He walked through a universe in the throes of its birth, and even the shadows feared him. To meet Tren Krom was to court madness, or worse… so naturally, the Brotherhood chose me to seek him out.

The reason for the meeting was obvious: the Brotherhood could not allow a being of such power to dwell unchecked in our universe. We had to know his intent and whether he posed a threat to the lands we watched over. Thus I followed a trail of half-remembered stories told by the mad until I reached the shore of an island whose shores had not welcomed a visitor in millennia.

In the interests of writing a complete record, I should include every detail of my time there. In the interests of the sanity of anyone reading this, I will not. Even when I look back now, I remember only a scarlet mass, a face that was not a face, tentacles lined with tiny, sharpened hooks, eyes that were little more than holes in a gelatinous skull, and that voice… oh, that voice made Makuta Teridax sound lilting and sweet.

I expected to die. When Tren Krom’s mind touched mine, and I saw the reality of what he was, I almost wanted to perish in that moment… better than to live with the memory. But he saw something in my thoughts that must have intrigued him… hard to imagine what it might have been, given how alien he was to any form of life. Rather than crush me in his grasp, Tren Krom explored my consciousness, like an Archives mole rooting about for a meal. It was amazing… it was horrifying… it was a view into a mind as far beyond mine as mine is beyond a fireflyer’s… and it was feeling my mind turn into a nest of serpents, hissing and slithering and trailing slime.

Then everything went black.

When I awoke again, I lay on the deserted beach. There was no sign of Tren Krom, or even the cavern in which I had encountered him. I thought perhaps the whole thing had been a nightmare, some trick of my fellow Makuta… and then I knew it could not be. For I understood now… I knew how the universe worked, and as much as my mind could stand, why the universe worked.

And I knew one thing more – that Makuta Teridax’s mad dreams of overthrowing the Great Spirit Mata Nui were not just fantasies. It was possible. It could work. The knowledge I held was the ammunition for the weapon Teridax would one day wield, a weapon that would win us a universe.
Entry 6:

Well do I remember the day Makuta Teridax first revealed his Plan. I had only recently returned with the information I learned on the island of Tren Krom, knowledge he listened to without comment. Then he did something no Makuta other than Miserix had ever done – he demanded a Convocation.

Technically, any Makuta could demand that all members assemble on Destral. But normally, only the leader of the Brotherhood would ever do it. Worse, Teridax had not bothered to get Miserix’s permission to do this. The two were on a collision course from the start.

Teridax stated his idea briefly and clearly: we were to strike at the Great Spirit Mata Nui and seize power in the universe. Some of our number, like Gorast and Bitil, were immediately on board. Vamprah and Krika kept silent, for reasons of their own. A handful of others raised objections. Teridax seemed to listen carefully to them, but I could tell he was really memorizing a list of who they were for later.

Miserix, of course, saw this for what it was – a naked bid to take over leadership of the Brotherhood. His response was to rise from the head of the table, hurl a bolt of shadow energy from his gauntlet and blast Teridax halfway through the wall. I started to rise, intending to help him back to his feet. But a look from Miserix froze me where I stood.

“Treason,” said Miserix. “Worse than treason – stupidity. Succeed in your grand design and you risk the death of the universe itself.”

“A risk,” said Teridax, brushing rock dust off his armor, “I am willing to take.”

“And what will you use to attack the Great Spirit?” sneered Miserix. “Your shadow hand? A troop of Rahkshi? You are an insect in the eyes of Mata Nui… and in mine.”

If I could have ducked under the table and maintained my dignity as a Makuta, I would have. Teridax vaulted the length of the room and caught Miserix by the throat. He slammed the leader of the Brotherhood against one wall, then another, before flinging him down to the ground. Before Miserix could react, Teridax had his staff at our leader’s throat.

“You are a relic,” Teridax snarled. “This universe belongs to the strong, and your position of power has made you weak.”

Miserix grabbed the staff, sending a surge of lightning up it that sent Teridax hurtling backwards. “Insolent worm,” Miserix shouted, rising. “You would lead the Brotherhood to destruction and disgrace!”

“I would lead it… to supremacy,” Teridax said. “Supremacy that is ours by right.” He turned to the rest of the assembled Makuta. “I leave it to you… to choose who you will follow.”

Gorast and Bitil moved immediately to his side. Vamprah, Antroz, Chirox and Spiriah followed. I hesitated for a moment, but could not escape the fact that of all present, I knew his Plan could work. So I too joined Teridax. Others did as well, with Krika and Icarax being the last to come stand beside us. Only a small number of Makuta sided with Miserix. Seeing that they were outnumbered, they moved – somewhat reluctantly – to our side. Miserix was left alone.
“I claim leadership of the Brotherhood, through the will of the Convocation,” Teridax said. “The Plan will go forward. As my first act… I sentence you, Miserix, to death. Krika, Spiriah, you will carry out my will.”

Miserix, stunned and enraged, looked at the assembled Makuta with contempt. “You are suicidal fools, tampering with the very order of the universe. And this… this maniac will lead you nowhere but to your deaths!”

The former leader of the Brotherhood stared hard into the crimson eyes of the new one. “This is not over, Teridax. Kill me, scatter my remains from here to Metru Nui, but someday… I will be avenged.”

Teridax had already lost interest. He was huddled with Chirox and myself, discussing how best to strike at the Great Spirit. Krika and Spiriah moved in quickly, knowing Miserix’s penchant for shapeshifting into exceedingly nasty reptilian creatures. They hauled him out of the chamber. I would never see him again.

This is not the end of the tale, of course. Over the next year, Gorast and Icarax tracked down and killed all the Makuta who had stood by Miserix’s side. Teridax would order their masks nailed to the wall in the Convocation Chamber as a warning to others who might consider rebellion.

The only thing that puzzled me was that one mask was missing from that group… the one worn by Miserix. What, I wondered, had Krika done with it?
Entry 7:

Bitil was the first one to notice. We were both visiting Destral at the time, laying plans to support Teridax’s planned coup against Mata Nui. As I recall we were discussing how unfortunate it was so much of the plan might hinge on the actions of Makuta Kojol, who oversaw the region of Artakha. Kojol was a secretive sort, never sharing what he knew with anyone, not even the location of Artakha itself. His specialties were flying Rahi and sea Rahi, both of whom protected his region from any intrusion, even by us.

But I must stay on the subject. Bitil was making a point in his usual way, by throwing a weapon at the wall. He went to pick up an axe and found he couldn’t make his armor move. It was like all his muscles had turned to water. My amusement at his panic faded when I realized the same thing was happening to me.

Chirox pulled away some of Kojol’s armor, only to see a greenish-black mist rising from inside the shell. Worried, Chirox caught a sample, then did a crude patch of the armor. After extensive tests, he returned to inform us of his results.

“This,” he began, holding up a tube with the mist inside, “is what is left of our bodies. We have evolved from muscle and tissue to pure energy. No longer do we need to eat, or breathe, nor do we need fear the pains that come with advanced age.

“But there is more,” he continued. “If a Makuta’s energy disperses, his consciousness will disappear and he will die. So it is critical to guard against damage to our armor that might allow our essence to escape.”

How did I feel about this, you might wonder. Intrigued… resentful that Chirox figured out what was happening before I did… and unsure what this meant for the future of we Makuta. Would we be more powerful now that we did not have to worry about organs and muscles being harmed? Would the fear of our armor being pierced and our energy dispersed make us too cautious?

Teridax wasted no time worrying. He ordered the “Nynrah ghosts” brought to Destral so that they could modify our armor to take advantage of our new “bodies.” They added additional layers of protosteel, possible now that we had no physical forms that required space.

An unexpected benefit of our new existence was discovered in quite a painful way (for me, at least). Wandering through the fortress, I encountered a lone Exo-Toa. When I tried to pass it, the robot picked me up and threw me the length of the hallway, all the while laughing a most familiar laugh.

“Chirox?” I asked, getting back to my feet – for that was whose laugh I heard.

“Our new forms,” came the reply. “With them, we can take over robot bodies – perhaps living ones, too, I do not know. Think of it – the ultimate disguise!”

“Ah, yes,” I answered. “Once again, you find a better way to hide.”

He fired a missile from the armor in response, but not fast enough. I stalked over and tore an arm off the robot, then smiled as I saw his energies begin to drift out of the gap. My smile grew broader as I
heard him cursing in my mind, while he directed his energies back toward his empty Makuta armor in another chamber.

The idea of destroying the armor before he could reach it did, I admit, cross my mind. Did I refrain out of mercy, or kindness, or some sense of fellowship with my brother Makuta?

No, no, quite the opposite. I simply knew how long Chirox had been struggling to develop a flying serpent with just the right amount of exterior slime to allow it to slither through small crevices, while not so much that it left a trail wherever it went. And as soon as he was back in his body, I was going to take a great deal of joy in introducing him to my Lohrak, wings, slime, and all…
Entry 8:

Well do I remember the first time I saw the Kanohi Avohkii, or Mask of Light. Truly no more vile or disgusting thing has ever been created in this universe. There it was in the hands of Teridax, not even having the courtesy to be the color of a lump of clay when not being worn – oh, no, the Avohkii gleamed golden. Locked within it was the one power we Makuta dreaded, and the unspoken promise of something far worse – the existence, someday, of an actual Toa of Light.

Whispered rumors had reached Destral that such a mask had come into existence on Artakha. Naturally, Makuta Kojol, being the idiot he was, had not learned this directly. But he was more than ready to lead an armada against the island and seize the thing.

Teridax wanted a subtle operation, a few Rahkshi, that’s all. Kojol, at his peril, chose to ignore this. He assembled a strike force of Visorak, Rahkshi, and even a few Exo-Toa, intending to overwhelm any defenses on the island with one crushing blow.

It didn’t quite work out that way. The first things the Visorak ran into when they hit the beach were two massive serpents that seemed to be made of crystal. The Visorak, supremely confident as always, thought they would make short work of such large Rahi. Instead, the rays of the sun focused through the bodies of the snakes promptly incinerated Kojol’s entire first wave.

Kojol pulled his ships back and tried another approach. Fortunately, Rahkshi are good climbers and were able to get a clawhold on more treacherous terrain. While the Matoran on the island posed little threat, the devices of the island’s ruler – also named Artakha – took a heavy toll on the Rahkshi. They bought enough time for the Exo-Toa to deploy, however, and with their power added to the battle, the island fell.

Kojol could have – should have – taken everything in sight from the fortress. But it took him so long to come ashore, and so long to find the Avohkii (since the interior of the fortress was booby-trapped), and then he claims there was this intense blizzard as he tried to depart. Worse, he was never supposed to have set foot on the island at all – the point was for this to be a secret raid, not one that could be tied to the Brotherhood. (True, Visorak and Rahkshi are associated with us, but without the actual presence of a Makuta there, we could still deny knowledge of what happened.)

Kojol returned to Destral in “triumph,” and despite disobeying orders, Teridax praised him for claiming the mask. The Toa Hagah who served us showed no indication they knew anything about the raid, meaning somehow our plans were still safe from view. The story, it seemed, was over.

Then something strange began to happen. Two squads of Rahkshi dispatched to a remote part of the southern continent were never seen alive again. When I found them, their armor was reduced to scraps and their kraata to dark smears on the ground. It seemed an interesting coincidence that they were the same Rahkshi who were on the Artakha raid.

The Exo-Toa were next. In the middle of the night, they vanished from their guard posts. To this day, we have no idea what became of them. By then, I was beginning to suspect that Artakha, or someone
close to him, was taking revenge for our raid. That would mean Kojol would be next. Teridax needed to be informed immediately…

So, naturally, I did nothing.

Why? Because Kojol was a posturing, arrogant, obnoxious buffoon. If someone else wanted to spare me the trouble of killing him one day, so be it.

Oh, it looked like an accident, of course. He was visiting Xia, presenting them with a new armor-eating virus he wanted them to incorporate into a weapon. Either he made the virus better than he knew or else someone substituted a different one – for when it escaped, it turned out to have a taste for protosteel. His armor was devoured in seconds. Well, accidents happen. Of course, that didn’t explain how his energy form wound up in a high-temperature Vortixx furnace where it was completely destroyed.

The virus had died almost immediately upon finishing its work, and we have never seen its like again. The Vortixx claimed innocence, but Teridax ordered part of the island razed anyway, as a reminder to them to be more careful in the future.

It was only later that I realized what a fool I had been. Kojol was the only one who knew where the island of Artakha was, and I should have forced the knowledge from him before he died. When the Brotherhood tried to seek out others likely to know where the island might be located, we found that all had mysteriously died. Artakha – if it was him – was being very thorough.

In the end, we did not keep the Mask of Light for long. Teridax’s squad of Toa Hagah actually dared invade the Destral fortress and steal the mask! They paid for it in the end – remind me to write sometime of Roodaka’s nasty sense of humor – but they did escape with the mask.

Once that happened – once we knew there were Toa who had divined our new purpose in life – the Plan had to go forward swiftly. The time had come to bring down the Great Spirit and begin our march to power.
Entry 9:

Perhaps readers of this chronicle will have heard the old saying, “When Teridax is away, the Rahi will play.” Our leader spent most of his time off of Destral, particularly after the Toa Hagah’s rebellion. This left the rest of us to our own devices, particularly when we were visiting that island.

For example, shortly after Teridax left for Metru Nui to initiate the next stage of the Plan, I had a visit from Chirox. He was holding a dead specimen of my new Rahi, the Lohrak. He did not look at all happy, which was nothing new.

“Lohrak! Lohrak???” Chirox raged. “I created the Lohrak, millennia ago, and it wasn’t this… this… winged waste of protodermis! How dare you use the same name and try to replace my creation!”

“Your creation is best forgotten,” I replied. “As usual, you design Rahi that are a bludgeon rather than a dagger. I, on the other hand, put some subtlety into my work. It’s as if I signed my name to them.”

“Signed your name?” spat Chirox. “You can’t even spell your name!”

I was about to crush him with the perfect insult in response when the world shook. We were both thrown off our feet as a violent earthquake struck Destral. Masonry cracked, ceilings collapsed, and it was all I could do to shapeshift a pair of claws to dig into the stone floor and hold on. The shaking lasted perhaps a few seconds, or perhaps forever, depending on your viewpoint.

When it was over, I struggled to my feet. The fortress of Destral was in ruins. Some of our prisoners were dead, some wounded. At least one of my fellow Makuta had seen his armor damaged to the point where his energy was floating freely in the air (fortunately, we were able to get him into an Exo-Toa body until his armor could be repaired). Most beings would have reacted to this event with despair, even panic, and I have no doubt many of those mewling Matoran out in the larger universe were doing just that.

But not Chirox and I, for we knew what the tremors meant. They were a sign that the Plan had worked – Mata Nui had fallen before the Brotherhood’s attack! Now, if all went right, Teridax would seize complete control of the city of Metru Nui and we would be close to the power we all longed for.

Alas, the best laid plans of Makuta and Matoran… the days following the fall of the Great Spirit proved to be a complete fiasco. Consider:

- Our glorious leader was defeated in battle by six novice Toa and a Turaga.
- The Metru Nui Matoran we so prized were spirited out of the universe by those same Toa, leaving the city of legends abandoned.
- Sidorak was killed and our Visorak legions scattered to the winds.
- Teridax’s rash actions led to the deaths of two Dark Hunters and ended up sparking a war with that organization that rages to this day.
- The Mask of Time – a treasure beyond price – wound up in the hands of a Toa, along with a pledge by Teridax not to menace the Matoran for a full year!
It was around this time that Icarax began to grumble in earnest about Teridax's leadership. He proposed his own plan: seize Metru Nui, Matoran or no Matoran, and from there launch a wave of conquest that would make the Barraki look like a bunch of irritable sand frogs. Crush entire continents beneath our heels, loot the halls of the Nynrah and Artakha (if we could ever find that island again), and dare Toa to try to dislodge us from power.

Icarax actually had the insane courage to try to implement his ideas without approval from the rest of the Brotherhood. He left his assigned realm of Karzahni and journeyed south with a small army of Manas crabs. A number of small settlements on the northern continent had fallen to him before Teridax confronted him.

The battle that followed was epic. Icarax was the better fighter, but Teridax was more cunning. He allowed Icarax to pound him for hours on end, until the rebel's energies were almost exhausted. Then Teridax exerted the smallest amount of his will and turned the Manas against Icarax. Once he was surrounded, Teridax used every power at his command to defeat… no, demolish… no, perhaps humiliate would be a better word… Icarax.

Surprisingly, after all that, Teridax let him live. “Your talents are still of some use to me, and so I will not kill you… today,” the leader of the Brotherhood said. “But one day – perhaps in a year, or 1000 years, or 100,000 years – I may grow tired of you, Icarax. You may cease to be amusing, with your posturing and your boasting and your lust for battle. And on that day, your armor will be a meal for metal-eating scavengers, and your essence a wisp on the wind.”

Although Icarax made light of it later – claiming Teridax had been “too afraid” to try to kill him – I know he never forgot that battle. He remains to this day a danger to the Plan and a threat to Teridax – expecting him to be anything else would be like expecting a Zivon to place its head in your lap and purr.

Teridax did not linger on Destral to oversee repairs to the fortress. He returned to his lair at Mangaia, readying himself for the prophesied arrival of the Toa Mata, the keys to all our planning, all our hopes, and all our dreams of conquest.
Entry 10:

How quickly 1000 years can go by when you are busy outdoing Chirox in Rahi creation. While Teridax busied himself tormenting the Matoran of Mata Nui like a Muaka with a stone rat, I was bringing fabulous creatures into being. True, some of them did not live very long… and yes, one died quite an explosive death… but I had my successes as well. The shadow leech, for example – a mutated kraata that could drain the light out of any living being. Who couldn’t love that?

Naturally, I needed a test subject for it. I traveled to a village in my area of control in search of a Matoran brave/desperate/stupid enough to volunteer (I could have taken one by force, but after 100,000 years, all that screaming and begging grows tiresome to listen to). I was fortunate enough to run across a villager named Vican, eager to find a more adventurous life for himself. What he got for the loss of his light instead was a life of shadow and the honor of being my assistant… a more than fair trade, in my estimation.

It was shortly after I introduced him to the wonder that is Destral that a most fascinating incident took place: a Matoran went flying through my laboratory, to be dashed against the far wall. His armor was crimson, but it was obvious he was one of mine – meaning another beneficiary of the gift of a shadow leech. He was followed by Gorast, in her usual state of rage/psychosis.

The crumpled heap on the floor turned out to be Vultraz, a Matoran who had been in the service of Gorast for some time before becoming one with the shadows. On a far-flung scouting mission, he had discovered a way into the legendary Karda Nui, the core of the universe. That was the good news. The bad news was that he had decided to keep this knowledge to himself, apparently thinking he could benefit from it somehow. That he did, if you consider being beaten by Gorast to be a “benefit.”

Once she had the information in hand, Gorast informed Teridax (who was busy taking a long overdue bath beneath Voya Nui at the time). His reaction was predictable: we were to go to Karda Nui immediately, seize it, and see to it that any Av-Matoran there would pose no threat. Eventually, he had no doubt the Toa Nuva would make an appearance there… if they did, his wishes were clear. Icarax, of course, thought his demands bordered on insanity if not treason to the Brotherhood, and he refused to go. Eventually, Antroz gave up trying to persuade him.

“We’ll call him when there is someone for him to break,” our team leader said. “Otherwise, I can do without his company.”

Karda Nui – how to describe its glory, its wonder, its sheer beauty? How to capture the feeling one gets at the first sight of it? It isn’t easy, but let me try.

It’s a big cave. With a swamp in it.

At least, there has been the sport of hunting Matoran, which has kept Vamprah happy. Gorast, Bitil and Krika went down below to ready themselves in case the Toa appear in the swamp first, and I have not seen them since. I am sure they are fine – certainly, they would not be foolish enough to go into water so obviously foul.
As for me, I am back to creating shadow leeches in my new hive. I have my doubts the Toa Nuva will ever arrive – what sane being would challenge seven Makuta? If they do, things will be most… interesting. Teridax tells us we must show restraint – asking Makuta to show restraint around Toa is like asking a Rahkshi to show table manners.

Hmmm... what’s that? I could have sworn there was a flash of light outside. It must have been pretty powerful for me to see it all the way in here. Well, I suppose if it was anything important, I will find out about it in time...
Shortly before Mata Nui’s revival...

Antroz perched on a high ledge and looked down over Karda Nui. His searching gaze took in the Matoran villages, built atop fallen stalactites, and the great swamp far below. Cutting through the center of it all was a massive waterfall which flowed from the sky and fed the marsh.

Not so very long ago, this place would have been thought beautiful by Matoran standards of beauty. But today it was a place of chaos and fear, betrayal and grief – and Antroz looked upon this, and saw that it was good.

He spotted his ally, Chirox, in the distance, circling above the Matoran settlements. After a few moments, the bat-winged being came to a gentle landing beside Antroz.

“These Matoran are stubborn,” Chirox grumbled. “All but one of their villages captured… their friends turned to our side… their position hopeless… and yet still, they resist!”

Antroz smiled and shook his head. “Of course they do. The Great Beings made the Matoran to be more than just laborers – they gave their creations spirit and passion, even if misguided. That is something you would not know about.”

Chirox tensed at the jibe. In his time, he had created Rahi beasts of all types. The doom viper and the lohrak, among others, had resulted from his efforts. But his Rahi always seemed to come out twisted in mind and spirit. Unlike the creations of others, like the Muaka cat or the Kane-Ra bull, Chirox’s contributed nothing to the ecosystem but death and destruction. It was a touchy subject with him, and Antroz knew it.

“I was working on something new before the call came to travel here,” Chirox said, very softly. “You might want to see it sometime. I’m sure it would like to see you.”

Antroz laughed. “You take everything too seriously, my friend. Take this village – you can be annoyed at its resistance, or you can take pleasure in the fact that its Matoran are still free and available for torment.”

Chirox snorted. “This is a first – someone expecting a being born of the shadows to look on the bright side.”

Antroz spotted Vamprah diving toward the intact village. “What is our silent ally up to?”

“Hunting,” replied Chirox, “as only he can.”

Radiak darted from building to building, hoping to stay under cover. The skies were clear of enemies, but that meant nothing. He knew from past experience how quickly the foe could strike.

Venturing out alone was beyond dangerous, but it had to be done. The lightvine that surrounded the village was torn and broken in one spot. It had to be restored before the shadow Matoran took advantage of the gap. This light-producing plant was toxic to those who had only shadow inside them, so it made an effective defense against those Matoran who had been lost to the enemy.
He was perhaps forty feet away from the damaged spot now, but it was over open ground. Radiak scanned the sky again, saw nothing, and also saw no shadow Matoran anywhere near. If he was going to move, it would have to be now. The Matoran of Light took off running. Now he was thirty feet away… twenty feet… fifteen feet… ten… almost there…

Radiak never heard Vamprah’s approach. The dark flier hurled a bolt of energy from his claw, striking the Matoran in the back. Radiak lurched to a stop, held transfixed as the light was drained out of him from a distance.

At first, the Matoran tried to fight the change he felt coming over him. After all, he was a hero, respected and admired by his friends for his courage. He had always tried to live by the three virtues of unity, duty, and destiny. He had devoted his life to working and fighting for the will of the Great Spirit Mata Nui. Even though he and the other Matoran knew with an awful certainty that Mata Nui had just died, there had never been any thought of surrender.

But the new voices he heard in his head were so insistent, so persuasive. Why spend the rest of your lifetime in the service of a Great Spirit who is no more? And the virtues, the voices whispered – what had they ever done for him? He was brave, strong… he needed no help from other Matoran; they were just burdens to him. Duty? Destiny? A duty to what – endless, back-breaking labor? To achieve a destiny of exhaustion and more mind-numbing toil?

No, he realized, that wasn’t for such as him. Lost in the seductive call of the darkness, Radiak knew that the forces of shadow held the true power in the universe, and he belonged on their side. It was time to start looking out for his own interests, after all.

High above, Vamprah finished his feeding. The foolish Matoran who had dared to emerge from hiding belonged to the Brotherhood now. His armor remained crimson but his spirit was now black. Vamprah flew off, his hunger sated for now in a most pleasant way. After all, what could be more satisfying than dining on another being’s hopes and dreams?

Vamprah saw his two comrades flying to meet him. He took the most direct route toward them, passing directly through the central waterfall that bisected the realm. So intent was he on his journey that he never noticed a white-armored Toa plunging down through the water just above him. Had he chanced to glance up, he would have noticed that the Toa – Matoro, by name – was holding the powerful Mask of Life as he fell.

One shift in Vamprah’s gaze and all of history might have been changed. But everything – Toa, Makuta, and even Masks of Power – has a destiny to fulfill, and its course is not so easily altered.

Antroz flew close, his mouth curved in a vicious smile. “Chirox is upset with you,” he said to Vamprah.

“What am I going to have left for my work if you keep consuming all their light?” Chirox snapped. “I was promised material for my studies.”

Vamprah said nothing. He never spoke, of course, but no one was certain if he couldn’t or simply wouldn’t. Wordlessly, he turned back toward the village, the other two flanking him. The hunt had begun again.

The Matoran named Photok paced the stone floor of the shelter, now and then pausing to shoot a hard look at Tanma. What is he waiting for? Radiak should be back by now. We need go find him!

If Tanma noticed his friend’s expression, he gave no sign of it. He already knew the situation, but he couldn’t afford to worry about the fate of any one Matoran. The entire population of the last free village left was crammed into this underground chamber. Even through the thick walls, it was possible to hear the frustrated hissing of the shadow leeches as they looked for ways in. He knew that meant the enemy was in the air overhead. If Radiak was out in the midst of that, he was already lost.

After a week of fighting, Tanma knew better than to try and stage a rescue. Rushing out while the leeches were still outside was an invitation for more Matoran to be turned to the side of shadow.
Fortunately, the creatures did not live long. Once they expired, it was usually safe to go up above and try to harry the retreating foes.

Tanma hated hiding as much as Photok, Solek, or any of the others did. But the alternative was a quick defeat and all of Karda Nui in the hands of the enemy. This way, perhaps they could hold out long enough for help to arrive.

He caught himself, struck by the absurdity of his last thought. Help? Help from who? Who even knows we’re here?

Not for the first time, Tanma missed Kirop. In the absence of a Turaga, he had been the leader of the Karda Nui Matoran. Both wise and a warrior, he had kept everyone’s morale up in the first years after the Fall. If not for him, civilization might have ceased to exist here in this massive cavern.

Tanma could have used Kirop’s counsel now. But that was impossible. The Karda Nui leader had led an attack on the foe six days before and fallen prey to a shadow leech. Now all his knowledge of the Matoran defenses belonged to the enemy.

Still, he had given one “gift” to his people before that last battle. He had told them who they were facing.

“Ancient legends say we must always keep our true nature hidden,” Kirop had said. “This is the reason why. This is the enemy it was foretold we might one day face – the warriors of shadow, the dwellers in darkness – the Brotherhood of Makuta!”

Solek interrupted Tanma’s memories, muttering something too low to be heard. “What was that?” asked Tanma.

“I said Toa wouldn’t act this way,” Solek replied. “Tahu, Kopaka, they would be out there fighting. Not sitting here, hiding and waiting.”

Tanma shook his head. Kirop had filled Solek’s head with a lot of legends about Toa who had supposedly once dwelled in Karda Nui. The six figures had become Solek’s heroes, and they were all he ever talked about. Ordinarily, this preoccupation was no big deal, but right now, it was enough to push Tanma over the edge.

“Tahu! Kopaka! Right, if they’re so great, why aren’t they here?” he raged. “Where were they when all my friends got turned into those… things? Why aren’t they protecting us?”

Solek didn’t answer. Instead, he was looking up at the ceiling, as if straining to hear something.

“Hey,” he said. “I think it stopped outside.”

Tanma had to agree. The hissing sounds were gone, as were the noises of the Tridax pods that carried the shadow leeches striking the roof of the shelter. Tanma gestured for the others to sit tight while he went to peer out of the hatch. Cautiously, he undid the seals and pushed the hatch up a quarter of an inch.

The first thing he saw was shadow leeches disintegrating, a revolting sight he had never grown used to. Glancing up, he saw the three winged Makuta soaring away. Then his attention was drawn to the massive waterfall that fell from the sky through the heart of the land. Was that someone plunging down through the falls?

Yes, it was. He couldn’t make out who it was from this distance, but it was definitely a figure. The newcomer was wearing a mask that glowed more brightly every second. Suddenly, for reasons he couldn’t name, Tanma knew something either very good – or very bad – was about to happen. He slammed the hatch shut.

“Get down!” he shouted. “All of you, now!”

The Matoran looked at him, confused. But after all they had been through the last week, they weren’t about to argue. They hit the hard floor and waited. The only sound was their harsh breathing.

Then came the light, brilliant, blinding – it seeped through solid stone, through walls and roof and hatch, illuminating the entire chamber. It was as if a trillion lightstones had been turned on all at once… on second thought, that would have seemed like a dim glow compared to the radiance that filled the chamber and all of Karda Nui.
It lasted an instant, and it lasted forever. Each and every Matoran felt a surge of hope as bright as the light had been, as if some measure of balance had suddenly been restored to the universe.

Tanma suddenly realized he had closed his eyes. The light had been so bright that it had made no difference. Opening them, he checked to make sure everyone was all right. Satisfied that they were, he went to the hatch, opened it, and peeked out.

The three Makuta were still in the air, but something had changed. They no longer flew straight and true, but wheeled crazily through the sky. There was a faint glow attached to everything, as if an inferno had raged a moment before and then been extinguished, leaving burning embers behind.

“What is it? What do you see out there?” asked Photok.
Tanma took a long time to answer. When he did, it was to say, “I really don’t know. Maybe it’s the start of something… or maybe the end of everything.

* * *

Makuta Teridax, leader of the Brotherhood, originator of the Plan, was at the moment far from Karda Nui. He was in a part of the universe even he had never visited before, though it lived in more than a few legends. Vast and complex, even he had never seen anything quite like it.

Getting here had not been easy. He existed only as a free-floating cloud of energy, having abandoned his last body in the depths of the Pit. As it turned out, that was the only thing that had saved him. The defenses of this place – and there were many – were intended to deal with intruders with a physical form. The weaponry, while formidable, could not destroy a being that was pure power unleashed.

He knew that soon the rest of the Brotherhood would be in combat with the Toa Nuva in Karda Nui. The odds favored the Makuta in that fight, but odds were meaningless when it came to Toa. Despite the raw power, ruthlessness, and brutality of their enemies – perhaps even because of it – he had no doubt the Toa would find some way to achieve their destiny.

In fact, thought Makuta Teridax with a smile, you could even say I’m counting on it.

He had never been a believer in unity or duty, those virtues the Matoran clung to like drowning stone rats cling to driftwood. But the third one they cherished, destiny? Ah, yes, he believed in destiny.

And it is time for mine to be achieved, he thought, hovering before the carving of a Kanohi Hau, symbol of the Great Spirit Mata Nui. Isn’t that right, dear brother? Yes, there are schemes within schemes, falsehoods layered upon deceptions, and imaginings so dark only I can see into their shadows… and it is time at last to share them with the universe.

Without wasting another moment, the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta set about his final task.
Vezon opened his eyes, astonished to still be alive. The last thing he remembered, he was surrounded by Zyglak, who seemed immune to his wit and charm. Then there was a flash, the sensation of being grabbed by someone far stronger than he, a weird sensation of travel, and darkness.

He looked around. The room he occupied was a large cell and he wasn’t in it alone. Vezon didn’t recognize any of the other four occupants, all of whom stood well away from the others. By reflex, he started calculating how long it would take to disable them and how quickly he could pick the lock of the cell door.

Vezon’s musings were interrupted by the appearance of a sixth figure outside the cell. He was tall, lean and strong, wore a domed helmet, and carried a wicked double-bladed sword. The newcomer looked over the five prisoners as if they were cargo-hauling Ussal crabs up for auction.

“My name is Brutaka,” the visitor said. “I know you have questions – I’m not here to answer them. Where you are, who I work for, what this place is – you don’t need to know. What you do need to know is that there are two, and only two, ways you can get out of here.”

A Xian female stepped up to the bars and said in a dangerously soft voice, “And they are?”

“You can walk out, Roodaka, under your own power, and carry out a mission for some friends of mine,” Brutaka replied. “Or I can carry you out, plant you in a hole outside, and we’ll see if anything grows.”

Brutaka turned his attention to the others. “All of you have something in common – you have all had dealings with the Brotherhood of Makuta. Roodaka, here, betrayed them to the Dark Hunters, then betrayed the Dark Hunters as well – now both sides want her dead. Takadox and Carapar over there are Barraki, whose armies were crushed 80,000 years ago by the Brotherhood. The Makuta in the corner is Spiriah, who fouled up an experiment on the island of Zakaz so badly that his own people marked him for death.”

Vezon timidly raised a hand. “Excuse me, oh brutal, blade-wielding, lover of gardening. I have never met any Makuta face to mask and wouldn’t know one if he stepped on me and ground me into the dirt. I think maybe you wanted someone else… I’m Vezon with an ‘n,’ you see, not Vezok with a ‘k,’ and –”

The crab-like Carapar loped over, picked up Vezon by the neck, and bounced him off the back wall. “You talk too much,” the Barraki growled.

“Oh, yes,” Brutaka muttered, shaking his head. “This is going to work out just fine.”
Roodaka was furious. As she walked along the waterfront, clad in a cloak made of plant fibre, she imagined over and over again all the disgusting things she would someday turn Brutaka into with her Rhotuka spinner. One way or the other, he was going to pay for this.

Brutaka and his team – Roodaka, Vezon, Carapar, Takadox, and Makuta Spiriah – had arrived on the shores of the island of Stelt in a small boat. As soon as Roodaka recognized the skyline, she began to protest. Stelt was the home of the late Sidorak, her former comrade, and his people. Worse, Roodaka had set Sidorak up to be killed, and it was likely everyone on Stelt knew that. She would be about as welcome there as a Kikanalo stampede.

But Brutaka had insisted they would need a bigger boat to get where they were going, and this was the easiest place to get one. The only other team member to voice an objection was Spiriah, who believed Brotherhood of Makuta agents were waiting in every village to grab him.

“And just how are we going to purchase this boat?” Roodaka hissed. “We have no equipment, no arms other than yours, not even those ridiculous Matoran widgets. We have nothing of value to offer in exchange.”

“Of course we do,” Brutaka answered, as he pushed open the doors of a trading house. “We have you.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Carapar had seized her from behind. The team, along with the struggling Roodaka, stepped inside the dimly lit and foul-smelling shack. The proprietor was one of Sidorak’s species.

“We’re here to make a purchase,” said Brutaka. “Your fastest ship, outfitted with supplies for a long voyage to the south.”

“To the south?” snorted the trader. “Meaning I will never see my ship, or you, again? Unless you can make me rich –”

Brutaka took the hood off Roodaka, who glared at him with murder in her eyes. “Would the reward you’ll get for capturing the killer of Sidorak be payment enough?”

The trader smiled and invited the party out to view his prize craft. So excited was he by visions of the wealth that would soon be his that he never noticed Takadox had slipped away. The boat turned out to be good-sized, well armed with disk launchers, and large enough to accommodate at least a dozen beings. A crew of large, blue and gray armored bruisers were at work on it now.

“We’ll take it,” said Brutaka. There was a loud splash from the ocean side of the ship, but no one paid much mind to it.

“And I’ll take the murderer,” the trader said. “Sidorak was no prize, but we can’t let Vortixx and Rahi kill our kind and get away with it, now can we?”

There was another splash, then another, and another. Brutaka ignored them. “Of course not. But if you want people to believe you caught this dangerous criminal, you will need to look like you’ve been
in a fight. A light tap to your head would do the trick, perhaps. My colleague, Vezon, can handle it – you won’t feel a thing.’

“Ever again,” Vezon chimed in, smiling.
The trader looked over Vezon, who was nowhere near as physically imposing as the rest of the team. How much damage could he do? “All right,” said the trader. “One blow – a light one! – just to look convincing.”
Vezon’s grin grew wider. Roodaka struggled against Carapar’s grip. Brutaka walked casually away from the scene, surveying the boat. Vezon drew his fist back. Then, in one smooth motion, Brutaka whirled and whacked the trader in the back of the head. The trader crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

“Hey!” said Vezon. “He was mine! I wouldn’t have hurt him… much… and I only would have needed three or four hours and the right tools, just to make sure he would be no trouble.”

“That’s the point,” Brutaka replied. “You enjoy your work a little too much. Now everyone on board – that includes you, Roodaka.”

They climbed on the ship to find Takadox standing alone. The Barraki took a little bow, pointed to his hypnotic eyes, and said, “The crew decided to go for a swim, all at once. Imagine that.”

“Why all the trouble?” muttered Carapar. “We could have just stormed in and stolen the ship.”

“And had all of Stelt after us?” asked Brutaka. “Not to mention every Dark Hunter and Brotherhood member around, as soon as they heard Roodaka was here?”

“But what about the trader, you fool?” said Roodaka. “He saw me!”

Brutaka laughed as the ship moved slowly away from shore. “Who’s going to believe anyone stupid enough to stand still and get hit?”
Brutaka and his bizarre crew had been at sea for three days when he called them all together. “It’s time to let you know our mission. And before you ask, you were all chosen for this trip for one very good reason: You’re expendable. No one is going to care if any of you live or die, which makes you ideal for this job.”

Carapar grumbled something unspeakably foul. Brutaka chose to ignore it.

“We are going to an island far south of anything on any chart,” Brutaka continued. “But it’s not uninhabited. In fact, it has one very special resident: a Makuta named Miserix.”

Now it was Spiriah’s turn to mutter something, though his words were more in shock than in anger.

“Miserix, for those of you who don’t know, was the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta before the current holder of that title,” said Brutaka. “He was overthrown and wound up imprisoned on a volcanic island. He’s guarded by Rahi and the Great Beings know what else – things someone figured would be able to kill an escaping Makuta. And it’s our job to break him out.”

At first, none of the team members said anything. Then Takadox spoke up. “And what do we get out of this? Money? Power? Our freedom?”

Brutaka smiled. “You get to live another day.”

“And what do we do with him after we have him?” asked Roodaka. “Hold him for ransom?”

“That’s not your concern,” Brutaka replied. “All of you have a role to play in this mission. When we get close to the island, you will be given weapons and equipment. Try to run, at any time, and friends of mine will hunt you down – friends who make me look like a big, cuddly Ussel crab.”

It was Vezon who spotted them first. A small fleet of ragtag vessels was approaching from the west. They were about the ugliest boats one could imagine, slapped together from remnants and wreckage and barely sea-worthy. But he wasn’t focused on the look of the ships, but rather the identity of their crews.

“Zyglak!” he shouted.

The others rushed to the rail to look. Sure enough, the reptilian beings known as “the Great Beings’ mistakes” were manning the ships. Notoriously violent and destructive, Zyglak hated the Great Spirit Mata Nui and anything associated with him. It was doubtful they were paying a social call.

Brutaka tried to steer the ship away from them, but the wind and waves were not cooperating. After a few minutes, he realized why: Makuta Spiriah was using his power over weather to keep the ship in place.

“Did you really think it would be this easy?” said Spiriah. “I deduced our goal days ago and passed a message to my Zyglak friends through channels on Stelt.”

Vezon looked horrified. He had spent many days a captive of the Zyglak not so long ago. It wasn’t an experience he was anxious to repeat. “Friends? Zyglak don’t have friends… just meals they haven’t eaten yet.”
“They are outcasts,” said Spiriah. “And so am I. Now, Brutaka, I am taking command of this ship. We will be setting a new course, for the island of Zakaz. It was there that I met defeat and disgrace – there that my grand experiment failed, because the inhabitants were too savage to know what to do with my gifts. It is their fault I was cast out of the Brotherhood – and now they are going to pay!”
It had been three days since Spiriah’s takeover of the team’s vessel. Since then, they had steered a course for the island of Zakaz, surrounded on every side by boats filled with murderous Zyglak. Spiriah had been acting every inch the captain of the ship, ordering the others about and being particularly hard on Brutaka. Through it all, Brutaka said nothing and made no attempt to strike at Spiriah.

“To think, we were beginning to feel a little afraid of him,” Takadox said, gesturing toward Brutaka. “Speak for yourself,” Carapar replied.

“Home,” beamed Vezon. “True, I’ve never been to Zakaz… I’m not even really one of the native species… in fact, they’ll probably kill me on sight… or worse, tie me upside down over a spiked dagger plant… but at least I’ll die at home.”

Roodaka had abandoned any hope that Brutaka was going to act and concentrated instead on Spiriah. “The Brotherhood has overextended itself in recent years,” she assured him. “Warring with Dark Hunters and Toa… they are weak. If you struck at them now with your army, you could take over Destral and rule the universe. Of course, you would need someone by your side who knows all the factions and how best to use them…”

Spiriah looked at her as if she were something stuck to his boot. “I would sooner offer my neck to a dull axe blade than trust you, female. Your name has become another word for ‘treachery.’”

“Better that than being another word for ‘failure,’” Roodaka muttered.

The conversation was ended by the appearance of land off the port bow. It was the island of Zakaz, in all its ruined “glory.” A handful of Dark Hunter vessels could be seen in the waters nearby, on patrol. At a word from Spiriah, the Zyglak vessels attacked. Taken by surprise, three of the Dark Hunter ships were sunk immediately. The others beached on the shores of the island, only for the crews to be slain by a mob of Skakdi natives.

Spiriah laughed at the sight. “The Skakdi believe they know what savagery is,” he said. “But they have never met the Zyglak. And the Makuta believe they know all the colors and shapes of revenge… but I will introduce them to a shade darker than even they could imagine.”

The mini-armada surged forward. Zyglak already preparing to storm the beaches. They were still 500 yards from shore when the first Zyglak ship suddenly lurched and began to sink. This was followed by another and still another. Soon, Zyglak vessels on every side were taking on water, gaping holes torn in their hulls below the water line.

Takadox rushed to the rail. He caught a glimpse of beings just under the water, attacking the Zyglak craft. From a distance, they almost looked like his old ally, Ehlek. Whatever they were, they moved like fish underwater and the ships were no match for their claws.

Shocked by the abrupt annihilation of his force, Spiriah was unprepared for Brutaka’s attack. An energy blast knocked him off his feet, a well-placed kick kept him on the ground, and then Brutaka’s blade was pressed against his chest armor.
“Go ahead,” Brutaka said, coldly. “Use one of your powers. Think you can do it before I rip open your armor? And how long do you think your energy will last out here, with no body to occupy? Or maybe I should just throw you overboard right now.”

“How…?” Spiriah began.

“How did I deal with the Zyglak?” said Brutaka. “Simple. You have friends; so do I. Mine are a species of water dwellers who were specially modified by my employers to kill Makuta. They live off the coast of Zakaz, and right now they are practicing their skills on your Zyglak. You don’t want to look… it’s messy.”

“Wait a minute,” said Takadox. “Not that I am complaining, but how did you manage to get in touch with these ‘friends’ of yours? You never left the ship.”

Brutaka hauled Spiriah to his feet. All around, the ocean was littered with wrecked ships and dead Zyglak. “Spiriah had his friends following us. And I had someone following us since we left Stelt, just in case of emergency… and here she comes now.”

The others turned to see a small skiff approaching from the east. Its lone pilot was a female, lithe and well-armed. As she came alongside and clambered above the ship, Roodaka noticed that her left arm was completely mechanical. For a moment, she almost felt sorry for Spiriah.

“This is the last member of our team,” said Brutaka. “Treat her as you would me… and be sure she will treat you even worse than I do. Her name’s Lariska.”
Lariska stood at the bow with Brutaka, watching the ship cleave through the water. Behind them, the other members of the team were keeping a careful eye on Makuta Spiriah—not that they could have done much to stop him if he tried to make a break. But Brutaka had done a little math and explained to Spiriah how many hours he was likely to survive once the Brotherhood of Makuta knew where he was. Then he assured Spiriah that if the ship and its occupants were all destroyed, the Brotherhood would be notified immediately where to start looking.

That was a bluff, of course. But Spiriah had spent a lot of his life fleeing from his former comrades, and running and hiding got to be habits after a while. As Brutaka expected, Spiriah bought it and backed off.

The ship had veered away from Zakaz and was on its way south. There was one more stop to make before they headed for their ultimate target. This was the one Brutaka dreaded—it was time to arm the team.

The island that came into view was little more than a piece of barren rock. It was not the original site for this meeting, but plans had changed. Two Order of Mata Nui members, Botar and the nine-foot tall warrior named Trinuma, had been dispatched with a cache of weapons for a rendezvous on a small, wooded island just off the mainland. But a Makuta named Icarax had spotted their appearance and attacked. The fight was furious, but brief. Botar was slain, crushed by the Makuta’s magnetic power, and Trinuma barely escaped to tell the tale. In desperation, he stored the weapons at the first place he came to before returning to Daxia with the tragic news.

The ship dropped anchor just off the coast. Brutaka warned Takadox and Carapar he would be keeping a careful eye on them on the swim over, just in case they got any funny ideas about diving deep and escaping. Vezon was the first to react when they set foot on the rocky shore.

“There is something… wrong here,” he said, his tone unusually serious. “Something beyond even my powers to cope with.”

“You don’t have any powers, freak,” Carapar roughly reminded him.

“I don’t?” Vezon said, seemingly confused. “Where was I when they were being handed out? Let me see… Makuta’s lair… Voya Nui… tunnels… prison… how could I have missed the meeting, I was always where the action was.”

“Quiet,” said Lariska, dagger drawn. “There is one true statement in your babble. There is something not right in this place.”

Brutaka approached, carrying the weapons. Takadox took a long, thin blade, while Carapar grabbed a broadsword. Roodaka pounced on a Rhotuka launcher. Brutaka handed Spiriah a projectile weapon and warned him with a cold smile not to point it at himself… or anyone else. Vezon got a spear, which he turned over in his hands with no real enthusiasm.

“What’s it do?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Brutaka answered. “But with your powers, you don’t need it, right?”
Vezon brightened. “Right,” he agreed, having forgotten once again that he had no powers. Carapar growled in frustration and stalked away.

“We have what we came for;” Takadox said nervously. “Let’s go.”

“There’s something in that cave up ahead,” said Lariska. “I can hear what sounds like breathing, but it’s a… wet sound, as if the being were inhaling through mud. And there’s something else… it almost sounds like… something slithering.”

Spiriah took a step back. “I know where we are,” he said, his eyes darting from side to side as if expecting an attack. “Mutran told me of this place, though it didn’t look like this ages ago. We have to go. We have to go now!”

But it was already too late. Vast walls of rock suddenly sprang up from the shoreline, forming a 200-foot high wall around the island and cutting the team off from their boat. “Blast it down,” Brutaka ordered. But even the power of his blade was not enough to penetrate the stone.

Spiriah had shapeshifted himself some wings and was trying to fly over the top. A sharp spear of stone erupted out of the top of the wall and impaled one of his wings, sending him spiraling toward the ground. Lariska ran, leapt, hit the wall feet first, and propelled herself into midair to catch the falling Makuta.

There was no time to marvel at her athletic feat or make other attempts to escape. For now a voice was coming from the cave, but not a voice like anyone present had ever heard before. It sounded like the slimy, repulsive sound that comes when a nest of feeder worms is disturbed. Even Brutaka had to suppress a shudder.

“Visitors,” said the voice. “At last.”

“Who are you?” said Brutaka. “Did you imprison us here? I warn you, you don’t know the power you face.”

A massive tentacle shot out of the cave, wrapping itself around Brutaka and pulling him inside. The next moment, he was in the presence of something so horrible, so alien, that it took all his willpower just to hold on to his sanity.

“Now,” said the entity that held him in its grip. “Now tell Tren Krom of your power.”
Brutaka tried to close his eyes. It didn’t help. He couldn’t get the image of Tren Krom out of his mind – a writhing, crimson mass of tentacles emerging from a gelatinous central core, with two dead yellow eyes that somehow followed every movement without ever moving themselves. At least, that was what he had seen at a glance – somehow, Brutaka knew to gaze for long at Tren Krom would be to invite madness.

The entity seemed over time to have merged with the stone floor and walls of its cave, so that lurker and place of concealment were one. The acrid stench of decay hung over everything. In vain, Brutaka tried to break free of the grip of Tren Krom’s tentacle. He could feel the strange being trying to probe his mind, but so far, Brutaka’s mental training had allowed him to resist. If that should fail, he knew, the secrets of the Order of Mata Nui would be exposed to this monster.

“What wonders have come into my universe in the millennia since my exile?” Tren Krom said softly, his voice as revolting as his form. “I must know!”

Hesitantly, the other members of Brutaka’s team had entered the cave, only to wish they hadn’t. It was only Lariska, protosteel dagger in hand, who kept them from fleeing.

“You think me an alien… an ‘other’…” Tren Krom continued. “But I am of the substance of this universe, and I walked here long before you or even Mata Nui himself. Have you not heard the tales?”

“There is a Tren Krom in legend,” said Brutaka. “But… the tales obviously left some parts out.”

Tren Krom laughed. The sound made the team wish death would come for them right now. “Before the Great Spirit Mata Nui was born, the Great Beings created one being who was purely organic. They taught me the ways of the universe they were creating and they placed me in its core. There I was to remain, maintaining the heat, the light, all the forces that made their creation whole…”

Brutaka had managed to work an arm partway loose. With a little luck, he would be able to get his hand on a dagger and cut himself free… all he needed was time. “So what happened? How did you end up here?”

“My time was always to be short,” Tren Krom replied. “I was to shepherd this universe until Mata Nui was prepared to take power. A Matoran of Light came to me and said the hour had come for me to move on… a crafter of canisters he was, whose sanity did not survive our encounter. I surrendered myself to my fate, only to be exiled here by the Great Beings and bound to this rock.” His voice turned heavy with bitterness. “The universe, it seems, did not need two entities supreme.”

“What… what do you want with us?” whispered Vezon. “And please don’t say someone to hold your mirror for you.”

“I would know what has gone on in the universe in the last 100 millennia,” Tren Krom answered. “My visitors have been few in number. You seven will remain here and I will gain the knowledge I need from your minds… of course, sadly, you may have no minds left when I am done.”

“Why ask us?” said Lariska. “You obviously don’t really care.”
“Would you shut up?” hissed Carapar. “Rule number one: don’t annoy the giant, tentacled monster, or don’t they teach that one in The Shadowed One’s school?”

“Be quiet,” snapped Lariska. “Tren Krom… your universe is in danger. It’s our job to help save it. If you keep us here, you’ll be hurting the one thing you helped bring into being.”

Carapar edged slowly to the side, sword in hand. No one paid any attention – all eyes were on Lariska, who had been grabbed by one of Tren Krom’s many arms. Without the discipline Brutaka possessed, her mind was an open book to the entity. She screamed as a lifetime of memories were sifted through in an instant, screamed as she saw glimpses of the ancient mind of Tren Krom. When he finally released her, she collapsed on the stone floor.

“Mutran,” Tren Krom muttered to himself. “So long ago now, I entered his mind… and he mine… and so he learned how best to strike at Mata Nui. He and his kind have dared reach for power that fate chose to deny them. How… intriguing.”

“It’s more than that,” Brutaka said. “Tell him, Spiriah – tell him what will happen to him if the Makuta succeed in their plans.”

“If the Plan succeeds…” Spiriah began. He glanced around as if one of his former comrades might be somewhere nearby, listening. “A shadow will fall… Makuta will rule the universe, their will enforced by Rahkshi. Anyone with the power to threaten that rule will die… and that means anyone.”

“Impossible,” said Tren Krom. Suddenly, the minds of every team member were filled with nightmarish images projected by the tentacled entity, visions that would sicken even the mad. “No one can approach without my assent. No one can fight me. No one can kill me. I am eternal!”

Brutaka had his dagger in hand now. “Maybe not,” he said. “But I’m betting there was a time you said no one could bind you… and look what happened.”

Tren Krom paused in thought. Brutaka started to make his move, then caught Carapar out of the corner of his eye. The Barraki was raising his sword to strike the entity. It was too late to shout, too late to stop him.

Carapar brought his blade down, confident he had taken his enemy by surprise. Then a third eye suddenly appeared on Tren Krom, one gazing right at Carapar. The Barraki froze in mid-blow. A shaft of energy shot out from the eye, bathing him in its glow. The next instant, Carapar shattered into fragments as if he had been made of crystal. Then there was nothing left of him but a pile of glittering dust on the stone floor.

“I helped to birth a world of order,” Tren Krom whispered. “But from what I have seen in the female’s mind… you have turned it into a universe of madness and fear. It is not worth saving. But it is the universe you and your kind deserve.”

Tren Krom hurled Brutaka at his team. Spiriah used his magnetic powers to catch him before he could slam into the wall. The tentacles withdrew then, wrapping themselves around the core of Tren Krom’s being.

“Go,” the entity said. “Take yourselves from my prison… take your memories and plans with you… for the horrors already in your minds are worse than any I could visit upon you. I condemn you to your fate – life in the universe you and your kind have made.”

No one was going to take the time to argue. Gathering up Brutaka and Lariska, they fled the cave even as the stone walls that surrounded the island receded into the sand. Only Takadox paused to look back at the cavern where Carapar had died, wondering for a moment just what it would take to end the life of a being older than the stars.
Brutaka and Lariska stood together, watching Takadox standing silently by the rail of the ship. “I worry about that one,” said Lariska. “He has not spoken a word since we left Tren Krom’s island, after the death of his friend Carapar.”

“Friend?” snorted Brutaka. “Barraki don’t have friends, just people they use – and Carapar was Takadox’s favorite puppet. Besides, don’t waste your worry on him – save it for us.” He pointed off the bow. “We’ve arrived.”

Looming out of the mist was an island of black sand and jagged rock, volcanic peaks and strange Rahi arcing and wheeling through the sky. Despite the bright light that played off the waters around it, the island seemed to be in perpetual shadow.

“Welcome to Artidax,” said Brutaka.

Vezon approached, chuckling. “Hope we survive our stay.”

Brutaka looked around at his team – a Barraki, half a Skakdi, a Makuta, a former queen of the Visorak, a Dark Hunter, and himself. “Well, if we don’t, who knows? The world might be better off without us.”

Brutaka and Spiriah, being the two most powerful team members, led the way to shore. As they trod on the ebon sands, all seemed quiet.

“So you know nothing about the defenses here?” asked Brutaka.

“Only what Krika sometimes talked about. Ideas he had,” said Spiriah. “You realize this whole thing is a terrible idea.”

“What?”

“Freeing Miserix,” said Spiriah. “He can’t stop the Plan. All we will find here is an early death. Listen, we –”

What happened next was startlingly fast. The black sands began to swirl around Spiriah, forming a hand which grabbed the Makuta and started dragging him down. Brutaka grabbed Spiriah’s hand, calling to the others, “Help me!”

Lariska, Vezon and Roodaka rushed to his aid. Takadox hung back, occasionally glancing toward the ship as if contemplating escape. The pull of the sand was too strong and Spiriah’s mask had almost disappeared beneath it. Then Roodaka fired her Rhotuka launcher, the spinner striking the living sand and mutating the grains into a swarm of fireflyers. Unable to maintain its grip in this new form, it freed Spiriah.

The Makuta crawled back onto the beach, cursing.

“I’m an idiot,” Brutaka said. “I should have realized – Krika rigged this place to sense the presence of a Makuta and react. He didn’t want Miserix escaping, or any other Brotherhood member finding him and finishing him off.”

“Then I would be insane to go any further,” said Spiriah. “I brought you here – you don’t need me anymore.”

“On the contrary,” said Lariska. “I think you would be very useful. Anyone ever hear of a stalking kinloka?”
Surprisingly, Vezon was the only one who nodded. When everyone turned to look at him, he shrugged. “Vezok. He saw lots of things, and since I came from him, I saw them too. Say, when we are done here, who’s up for killing him? I’ll even clean up after.”

Lariska turned back to Brutaka, ignoring their lunatic companion. “Kinloka are rodents, found in many places, among them Zakaz. When the Skakdi need to cross land that might be booby-trapped, they send the kinloka through first. The creatures set off the traps and the Skakdi can cross safely.”

“And the traps here are sensitive to Makuta,” said Roodaka, smiling. “I see, I see. And come to think of it, Spiriah is somewhat rodent-like.”

Spiriah, back on his feet, looked right at Brutaka. “No. Not even if you threw in the chance to eviscerate that Vortixx –”

“Watch your mouth,” Roodaka spat, aiming her launcher at him, “while you still have only one.”

Brutaka put his arm around Spiriah and led him away. “You’re not looking at the big picture here. When all this is over, the Brotherhood could still be a powerful creature, only without a head. It’s going to need a new leader… and the beings I work for will remember who helped them… and who didn’t. Trust me, they have long memories.”

It only took a few more minutes of whispered conversation before Spiriah turned back to the group and announced that he would be their guide to Artidax. He immediately set off inland, with the rest following. Lariska fell in beside Brutaka, saying, “You know full well he could never be leader of the Brotherhood.”

“Let him think he might get to be the head,” Brutaka replied. “It will distract him from the fact that he might well lose his own here.”

Their path took them right up to the slope of a volcano. A tunnel had been bored through the mountain at some point, the only way to directly traverse the island. Spiriah was striding on ahead when Vezon leapt in front of him, holding up his hands. Then he pointed downward, at a razor-thin vine stretched across the path. It led up to a pile of boulders poised precariously on the slope.

Spiriah stepped carefully over the vine, followed by the others, and went into the tunnel. It was only when they were already inside that Brutaka noticed someone was missing. “Where’s Takadox?”

Lariska turned. “There! Look out!”

Brutaka turned to see Takadox bringing his blade down on the vine. In the moment before an avalanche of rocks cut them off from the Barraki and trapped them in the tunnel, they all could see his evil smile.
Brutaka pushed aside a pile of rubble and struggled to his feet. Around him, Spiriah and Roodaka were using shadow energy to blast themselves free. Vezon and Lariska were nowhere to be seen.

He glanced back toward the now blocked tunnel entrance. A few blasts of power would no doubt clear away the pile of rocks and stones, but Takadox would be long gone by now. There would be time to settle with him later.

“I’ve got him!”

Brutaka turned to see Lariska holding a squirming Vezon by the throat. “I caught him sneaking down a side tunnel,” the Dark Hunter said.

“Let us track down that traitor,” snarled Roodaka. “I want his shattered body beneath my heel.”

“We’re here to do a job,” Brutaka replied. “We keep moving. All of us,” he added, looking hard at Vezon.

The tunnel proved to be far more than a mere pathway. It opened upon a vast underground cavern spanned by a narrow bridge made of fibrous protodermis. Down below, the floor was littered with a massive tangle of what looked like dead branches intertwined with each other. Deep channels had been carved into the walls by lava flows over the centuries. Strange flying Rahi hung from the ceiling, their six eyes blinking slowly at the sight of intruders into their realm.

“Remind me not to let Makuta Krika arrange for my next pleasure trip,” muttered Spiriah.

“This whole island is volcanic,” said Brutaka. “Minor eruptions over the years, but nothing major. Tahu and Kopaka are supposed to have taken care of the problem. Otherwise, we would probably be flash fried by now.”


The Dark Hunter whipped out a dagger and flung it into the stone right at Vezon’s feet. The mad half-Skakdi turned to her, smiling, and said, “Or Lariska, the wise, wonderful, and gloriously homicidal.”

Brutaka led the way across the bridge. At the far side, light spilled through a narrow opening. The symbol of the Brotherhood of Makuta was seared into the stone beside that portal. Someone — maybe Krika, maybe Miserix — had marked their path, so long ago.

“What are we going to do with this legendary Makuta when we find him?” asked Roodaka. “What makes you think he will help the likes of you?”

“Miserix hates the Brotherhood for turning on him,” Brutaka replied. “He would ally with three Matoran and an Ussal crab if it would get him revenge on his fellow Makuta.”

“And so what will he be for you?” Roodaka pressed. “A general? A hero? A symbol around which to rally resistance to the Brotherhood?”

Brutaka shook his head. “Nothing quite so grand. He’ll be a weapon, like a Rhotuka launcher or a ghost blaster. And we’re going to aim him right at the Makuta fortress on Destral.”

Roodaka smiled. “And who, might I ask… are ‘we’?”

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Brutaka smiled back, the grin of a Kavinika about to feast. “Now, now… what you don’t know won’t cut you in two and dump you off this bridge.”
“'I hear something,” said Lariska. “Up ahead… it might be a voice… or the rumble of the volcano.”
“I hear something too,” said Vezon.
“Shut up,” replied Roodaka.
“And I see something as well,” Vezon continued. “But since you aren’t interested…”
“We’re not,” Roodaka snapped.
“Personally, I always find my comments and observations most interesting,” Vezon rambled on. “You haven’t truly lived until you have seen the world through the eyes of madness. Why, half the time I don’t know if what I see is what’s really there, or what I wish was there… or what I pray, I beg, I plead is not.”
“Why did we bring him again?” said Spiriah.
“He breaks up the monotony,” said Lariska.
“I’d like to break something much more satisfying,” hissed Roodaka. “I hear Skakdi make a most appealing sound when you snap them into pieces.”
“But, since you seem to have no interest,” Vezon continued, utterly disregarding his teammates’ comments. “Well, then, I won’t tell you that the floor is moving. You can find out on your own.”
“The floor is…” Brutaka repeated. He looked down. Far below, the tangled growth of dead branches had indeed begun to shift. The reason why rapidly became clear: they weren’t branches at all, but the twisted limbs of thousands of crimson insects, now disentangling themselves from each other. Apparently, it was time to wake up and they were ready for their morning meal.
Swifter than anyone could have predicted, they began to swarm up the walls of the canyon on every side. In an instant, they had blocked the openings on both ends of the bridge. The surrounding rock was now gone, buried beneath a skittering sea of red and thousands of unblinking, predatory eyes.
“No, no, no,” said Vezon, shaking his head. “Too late to apologize. Much, much too late.”
Brutaka scanned the cavern with narrowed eyes. The glowing eyes of the insects all around made it feel as if he were trapped in some lunatic starfield. Behind him, he could hear Vezon humming softly to himself, as if out for an afternoon stroll.

“Do we fight our way out of here?” asked Lariska, hand on the hilt of her dagger.

Brutaka’s answer was to turn to Spiriah. “Okay. You control Rahi. Make them clear a path.”

“On one condition,” said Spiriah. “Once I do, I go free. I turn right around and march out, take the boat – if Takadox hasn’t already – and leave. And I never see or hear from any of you, or anyone associated with you, again.”

“I wasn’t asking you,” replied Brutaka. “I was telling you.”

“I am a Makuta,” said Spiriah. “Disgraced, perhaps; a victim of jealousy and prejudice, most definitely. But I will not be dictated to by some obnoxious, insane –”

Brutaka hit Spiriah a solid blow in the mask, knocking the Makuta over the side of the narrow bridge. Spiriah caught on to the span, just barely, and hung in space.

“I think this is what they call ‘in no position to deal,’” said Brutaka. He triggered his mask power, opening a dimensional portal in space just below Spiriah’s feet. “If I move that opening just a little bit further toward you, you’ll find yourself in a dimension full of beings made of solid light. Know what they eat there? Shadow. You’ll be a food bank for them, Spiriah, but I have to warn you – they’re always hungry. And they don’t close their mouths when they chew.”

Spiriah said nothing. Instead, he reduced his density and floated up and away from Brutaka’s portal. Then he drifted back down to the bridge and turned solid once more. “I’ll do it,” he said. “Then I leave. I advise you not to try and stop me.”

The Makuta concentrated, triggering his power to control Rahi beasts. Nothing happened, other than restless stirring among the insects. After a few moments, Spiriah gave up in frustration. “They’re already under the control of a more powerful will. It must be Miserix.”

Brutaka gestured toward the wall of insect life that blocked the way they had come. “Then I guess you’re not leaving.” He turned to Lariska. “And we’re fighting. You stay back with Vezon. Roodaka, Spiriah and I will lead the way.”

On Brutaka’s signal, he and his two powerful allies unleashed their powers at the insects who blocked the passage way up ahead. As quickly as the crimson creatures fell, more came to replace them. Worse, the ones behind were now skittering across the bridge, closing in on Vezon and Lariska.

“I have an idea,” said Roodaka, summoning a Rhotuka disk into her launcher. She fired at the insects up ahead, the power of her disk mutating them into unrecognizable creatures. An instant later, the other insects fell upon the unfortunate victims of her attack. The mutated insects were dead in seconds, killed for being different than the rest of the species.

Seeing that her ploy had worked, Roodaka repeated the process, this time focusing on the insects blocking the end of the bridge. As the mutations took hold and their former allies turned on them, an
opening appeared in the wall of living creatures. With a roar of triumph, she led a charge across the bridge and into the tunnel beyond. The team didn’t stop running until they were well away from the cavern.

“Are they following?” asked Brutaka.

“They don’t seem to be,” Lariska answered. “Maybe they don’t like to leave their nest.”

“Or maybe they just know we have to go back out that way, so they can eat us then,” Vezon offered, cheerfully.

“Maybe there’s another way out up ahead,” said Brutaka.

“Or maybe we’ll get to like it here,” said Vezon. “A few grass mats, some cave drawings, the heads of my enemies mounted on the wall… it could be quite pleasant.”

“Brutaka!” Roodaka called from up ahead. “I think you had best see this.”

The team rushed through the tunnel to join Roodaka. She was standing at the tunnel’s end, looking out at another vast chamber. More specifically, she was looking at the largest occupant of the chamber, a massive dragon-like beast chained to the stone floor. All around it flew much smaller Rahi, darting and dodging the shadow hand that occasionally shot out from the creature’s chest.

“What… is that?” asked Lariska.

Brutaka shook his head in amazement. “Well, it’s about 40 feet tall, red and silver, with four legs, a tail, and a nasty disposition – and it’s who we’re here to rescue.”

“Miserix,” whispered Spiriah.

“All right, we can take him home,” said Vezon, “but don’t expect me to clean up after him.”
Vezon looked from the massive, chained form of the dragon-like beast to his partners, then back at the dragon, then over to Brutaka. He opened his mouth to speak, but Brutaka cut him off.

“Don’t say it,” said Brutaka.

“We’re going to need —” Vezon began.

“A bigger boat. I know,” Brutaka said. “Anybody know what those… things… are flying all around?”

Small, winged creatures were indeed flitting all around the dragon. Now and then, one would let out a scream that shattered rock. “They’re called klakk,” said Makuta Spiriah. “Something Mutran created a long time back – their sonic scream is formidable. They must be meant as guardians.”

Brutaka frowned. Guardians, all right, but against whom? He knew the dragon was in fact Makuta Miserix, ex-leader of the Brotherhood. He had been ordered executed, but Makuta Krika had instead chained him up here on the island of Artidax. It was Brutaka’s job to rescue him so the Order of Mata Nui could use him against his former organization.

At that moment, Miserix suddenly took notice of them. His great eyes narrowed as he spoke and his voice rumbled like a distant avalanche.

“Who… are… you?”

Brutaka started to say, “Friends,” then decided he didn’t really want to be considered a friend of that thing. “We’re here to free you,” he said instead. “Can you shapeshift to a smaller form?”

“Why would I wish to do that?” asked Miserix. “Do you know how many of these creatures I had to absorb to reach a size where their screams no longer pain me?”

“See, the size is a problem, your immenseness,” Vezon cut in. “We only have a small boat, hardly more than a raft, really, and if it sinks we have to swim. Personally, I am not big on swimming – some friends of mine went for a swim, I heard, and now they look like sea snakes, just a head and a spine. And I have no spine, so I would be just a head, and —”

Miserix’s eyes glowed red. A burst of laser vision struck Vezon, sending him tumbling backwards.

“Gnat,” muttered the Makuta.

Turning to check on Vezon, Brutaka saw that Spiriah had backed way up into the shadows. Miserix noticed too and bellowed, “Tell that one to come forth.”

Spiriah took a reluctant step forward. At the sight of another Makuta, the dragon smiled. “Spiriah. I do remember you. When Teridax rose against me, you were one of the first to be by his side. I have so looked forward to meeting you again.” Brutaka tightened his grip on his weapon. He did not like Miserix’s tone at all.

“Do you know I have not seen one of my species since Krika left me here?” Miserix continued.

“We all meant to come,” Spiriah said hurriedly. “Teridax wouldn’t let us. We all knew we would benefit by your experience, your power, your very presence.”

“But you did not come,” rumbled Miserix. “So now I shall benefit from yours.”
A hand made of living shadow erupted from the dragon’s chest, grabbed Spiriah, and pulled him into Miserix’s body. There wasn’t even time for a scream.

Vezon, back on his feet, stopped dead when he saw the Makuta consumed. “I thought we were here to rescue him from captivity,” he whispered. “Not from that mid-day empty feeling.”

“You know, we could just let you here to rot,” Brutaka said to Miserix. “Or wait for the next volcanic eruption to rain lava down on your oversized head. Or… you could have your chance to take revenge on your brothers. What’s it going to be?”

Miserix considered. Then he leaned forward as far as his chains would allow him and said, “Make your attempt, for what good it will do.”

“I have seen those kind of chains before,” said Lariska. “They grow and shrink with him. They feed on his own power and use it to hold him.”

Brutaka hefted his weapon. “Can they be broken?”

“Not without causing him great pain.”

Brutaka gave a grim smile. “I’ll cry tomorrow. Find me a weak link. Roodaka, we are going to need your help.”

The Vortixx had been silent since they had entered Miserix’s presence. Brutaka had no doubt she was planning something. But she dutifully stepped forward and stood beside him, her eyes never leaving the chained Makuta.

“There,” said Lariska, pointing to a segment of the chain that held Miserix’s right arm. “We concentrate our fire there.”

Brutaka and Roodaka took aim, he with his blade, she with her outstretched hand. Energy and shadow bolts struck the weak segment of chain, bathing it in a continuous stream of power. After several minutes, the substance of the chain began to flake off. After a few more, it began to crack. Then the link shattered to pieces. Miserix screamed, loud enough to crack the mountain itself.

The klakk reacted instantly, flying toward the rescue team and unleashing their sonic screams. Vezon and Lariska fought them off, while Brutaka used his blade to parry the streams of sound. Meanwhile, Miserix raised his arm tentatively. Seeing that it was indeed free of its bonds, he reached over with it and tore the other chain from the ground. This time, he did not scream, but only smiled.

The klakk were gaining ground now, driving the team back toward where the insects were still lurking. Miserix watched the battle for a moment in silence. Then he opened his mouth and unleashed a power scream that felled the klakk, along with Vezon and Lariska. Brutaka and Roodaka barely remained conscious. Crawling over, Brutaka checked on his two team members – both were still living.

“Now, then,” said Miserix. “Where is Teridax?”

Brutaka laughed. “And if I tell you, you have no reason to keep us alive. Gratitude is not high on the list of Makuta emotions. I’ll show you. But you are going to need to shrink down to make it out the way we came.”

“Your lack of imagination is disappointing,” said Miserix, in as close to good spirits as a Makuta ever got. He reared back and struck the side of the mountain with all his might, once, twice, again. The rock cracked and began to crumble. Miserix followed up with his fragmentation power, reducing the entire side of the volcano to shards of stone. Beyond it, Brutaka could see the sky and the sea.

“At last!” said Miserix. “After so many millennia – I am free!”

Before Brutaka’s startled eyes, the dragon grew wings. Then Miserix turned his crimson-scaled head to Brutaka and said, “Come. Show me where my enemy hides, so I may grind his armor to dust and feed on his energies.”

“No!” shouted Roodaka. “They want to lead you into a trap! Listen to me, I too am an enemy of the Brotherhood. Brutaka wants to use you, to sacrifice you as a pawn in a war against the Makuta. I want you for an ally!”

Miserix lowered his lead and leaned in so that his massive face was up against Roodaka’s. When he spoke, it was in a whisper. “Little one, I am Makuta Miserix. I am no one’s pawn. I am no one’s ally.” His next words came in a roar that drove Roodaka back into the rock wall. “And I am no one’s fool!!”
Brutaka watched, looking unimpressed. “Are you done?”
Miserix nodded slowly. “Let us go. I have a universe to rediscover.”
Brutaka loaded the stunned Roodaka and the now semi-conscious Lariska and Vezon onto the dragon’s back. Then he climbed on himself. Miserix unfurled his wings and stepped out into the open air. They soared high above the island, pausing only long enough for Miserix to make a muttered vow to come back and destroy the place one day. Brutaka noted that the team’s boat was gone – Takadox had gotten away after all, then.

_Let him run. It doesn’t matter, thought Brutaka. A storm is coming to this universe, and when it hits, there will be nowhere for anyone to hide._

Miserix spread his wings and turned toward the north, carrying his passengers into the unknown.
Takanuva, Toa of Light, walked along the shoreline of the city of Metru Nui, his keen eyes scanning the waters. He did this every day, waiting for some sign of the Toa Nuva’s return.

His time as sole guardian of the city was over. The Toa Mahri had returned, minus one of their number, to help secure Metru Nui. But the Toa Nuva were still missing, and no one knew where they were. He had petitioned Turaga Dume for permission to go searching for them. The Turaga had promised to consider it, but Takanuva was tired of waiting.

*I sat here and did nothing while the Toa Nuva almost died on the island of Voya Nui, he thought. I wasn’t there when Jaller and his team risked their lives to save the Great Spirit Mata Nui. Maybe Toa Matoro wouldn’t have died if I had been there. Not again – never again!*

For just a moment, he felt something dark and foul skitter through the back of his mind. It was not the first time he had experienced this, and at first, the experience had unnerved him. It was Turaga Onewa who told him that what he was feeling was some other mind trying to intrude on his. Instead of pulling away, Takanuva was supposed to push back to try and find the source.

The Toa of Light steeled himself and thrust with all his mental energy. Suddenly, he saw a picture in his mind. It was only there for an instant, but long enough for him to see that his attacker was in the Metru Nui Archives. Along with the picture came two words, heard as clearly as if someone had spoken them out loud.

*Dark Hunter.*

Takanuva broke into a run, heading for the Onu-Metru district and the entrance to the Archives. It all made sense now. The band of thieves and killers called Dark Hunters had coveted Metru Nui for thousands of years. They had slipped one of their number into the city, no doubt to stage a sneak attack in preparation for a full-scale invasion.

*Good plan, thought Takanuva. Too bad it’s about to turn into such a disaster for them.*

He ran, dashing past Matoran hard at work rebuilding the city, leaping over obstacles, totally focused on his goal. Later, he would realize that if he had been paying more attention to his surroundings, he might have noticed the slime-covered creature that was slithering toward him. He might have saved himself.

Takanuva had almost reached his destination when it struck. The shadow leech leapt at him, attaching itself to his armor with an unbreakable hold. It was hungry, and light was its preferred meal. In the Toa of Light, it had a feast waiting to be eaten.

He screamed as the creature began to drain the light that was his essence. For a normal being, it would have been painful, but for someone who was as bonded to light as Takanuva, it was sheer agony. As the light left him, it was replaced by darkness. Instinctively, he knew that if this creature wasn’t stopped, he would be a Toa of Shadow when it was done – if he was still alive at all.

Takanuva stumbled and fell. The pain was getting worse. If he blacked out, it would be all over. He had to do something now.
The leech was clinging to his chest armor, gorging itself on light. The armor had already turned from gold to gray, signaling how close Takanuva was to being lost to darkness. With great effort, he raised his arm and pointed his hand directly at the leech. Then a thin, intense beam of light shot from Takanuva’s palm, striking the creature.

At first, it seemed like a terrible mistake. Hitting a creature who fed on light with more light looked to only make it stronger. But with the light came heat – blistering heat. Smoke rose from the shadow leech as it began to burn. When the heat became unbearable, the creature tore itself loose and tried to squirm away. The Toa increased the power of the beam until the shadow leech was nothing but smoke and ashes.

Then Takanuva collapsed, unconscious. His last thought was whether he would still be a Toa of Light when he awakened, or if it was already too late.

When he could see again, Takanuva looked around in surprise. He would have expected to be in Turaga Dume’s chambers in the Coliseum or even in some Matoran shelter in Onu-Metru. Instead, he was in a darkened room that stank of rot. Am I dead then? he wondered. Just waiting for some Po-Matoran to carve my memorial stone?

“No, you are very much alive.”

A figure moved toward Takanuva in the dim light. For reasons he couldn’t name, the Toa’s first thought was that it was Makuta, come for revenge. But a minor use of his power illuminated the room and revealed the being drawing closer. She was not Makuta, but she was indescribably ancient and disturbingly frail in appearance. Her mask and armor were pitted and scarred from a thousand battles. She looked like a Toa, but her armor and mask design didn’t resemble anything Takanuva had ever seen before.

The light revealed another figure as well. This one was also a Toa, though not someone Takanuva recognized. His Mask of Power matched the description of a Suletu, or Mask of Telepathy.

“It is good to see you are still alive,” the female said, her voice so soft it could barely be heard. “When Toa Krakua here found you, we thought… well, we did not bring you to a place of the dead on a whim.”

Takanuva sat up painfully and looked around. He knew what this place was now. He had heard Turaga Whenua describe it. If a Rahi beast in the Archives died, either by accident or in an escape attempt, its body would be brought to this chamber for study. Fortunately, there were no carcasses in the room right now, but it was still a very unpleasant spot to visit.

“Who are you? What’s going on?” demanded the Toa of Light.
“I am Helryx, leader of the Order of Mata Nui,” came the reply.
“I never heard of it… or you.”

“If you had, we would have another worry,” said Helryx. “As for what is going on, the answer is… hopefully not more than your mind is able to comprehend.”

“And that Toa?” asked Takanuva. “Is he a member of your little group?”
Helryx shook her head. “Not a member, no. But we needed a courier to bring messages between ourselves and the likes of you, one who could do so without revealing the existence of our Order. So we arranged for a Matoran of Sonics named Krakua to achieve his destiny and become a Toa.”

“I must have hit my head when I fell,” muttered Takanuva. “Hit it really hard.”
Helryx’s expression darkened. She held out her hand toward the Toa of Light. Instantly, he found himself pinned to the wall by spikes made of water.

“Fool!” she snapped. “Even now, the Toa Nuva fight for their lives, and only you can help them. But to do so, you must be armed with knowledge… the kind only we can provide. So you will listen, and you will hear!”

It was all a little too much for Takanuva. “Why me? After that attack, I don’t even know how much power I have left.”
“More than you know,” Helryx answered. “In over 100,000 years, the Order has revealed its existence to very few, and then only in a time of great need. This is such a time – and we have need of a unique Toa, one who walks the world of both light and shadow.”

“But I’m not –”

“Silence! The time has come to begin.”

Helryx gestured to Toa Krakua, who stepped forward. In his hand, he held a small creature. It looked like a cross between the krana who lived inside the Bohrok swarms and the worm-like kraata who dwelled inside Rahkshi armor. The combination was far from pretty.

“Do not fear,” said Helryx. “There is much you need to learn and much you need to see. Our little pet is here to provide… visual aid.”

With that, Krakua placed the creature on Takanuva’s mask. A moment later, the world around the Toa of Light fell away. Suddenly, he was seeing events from a time long past, when the universe was new. He heard the voice of Helryx, as if from far away.

“Watch and listen, Toa of Light,” she said. “You have much to learn – and time is not your friend.”
Photok avoided, just barely, a bolt of shadow energy aimed at him. He maneuvered higher and peppered his two attackers with a barrage of light bursts. It didn’t stop them – barely even slowed them down – but it still felt good.

Even a few hours ago, it would have been impossible for the Matoran to meet the Makuta head-on in the sky and try to drive them off. But Tanma had been right – that soundless explosion of light had changed things. Caught out in the open, the powerful trio of Makuta had been blinded by the energy surge. Whether it was permanent or temporary, no one knew, but it gave the Av-Matoran an edge, and they were going to take advantage.

The Makuta had wasted no time in improvising. They had begun using the shadow Matoran of their creation as “eyes.” Each Makuta would carry a Matoran rider into battle. Of course, not every shadow Matoran was quick-wined enough for the job. Those who weren’t were returned to the captured villages, although not always gently.

Photok glanced to his right. Tanma, Solek, and their squad were barraging the Makuta with light, trying to drive them toward Photok’s force. As he watched, the attack turned into a disaster. The Makuta used their gravity powers to send half a dozen Matoran plunging toward the swamp, and it took the combined efforts of the rest of the squad to halt their descent. Bolts of chain lightning then hit the entire group, shocking some unconscious and driving most back to the village. Tanma and Solek darted toward Photok.

“We have to pull back,” said Tanma, “before they cut us off from home.”
“I think they have other plans!” yelled Solek. “Look out!”

The three Makuta had gained altitude, flying up near the ceiling of the chamber. Once they were over the Matoran, they unleashed the Tridax pods they carried. The pods split open on release, raining shadow leeches down. Before the Matoran force could react, two of their number had been hit. The leeches rapidly drained the light out of the unfortunate villagers, turning them into shadow Matoran. Photok hurled light blasts at both, stunning them.

“Let’s go!” he shouted. The remaining Matoran rocketed back toward the village, dodging leeches and blasts of shadow energy as they went. Amazingly, the way home was clear. It looked as if they were going to make it.

That is, until six powerful figures suddenly appeared right in their path.

Pohatu Nuva had been a Toa of Stone his entire life. In that time, he had seen a lot of strange things. There was the voice of the Makuta of Metru Nui coming out of a Matoran body; hordes of mechanical Bohrok attacking his village; hissing Rahkshi on the rampage; monstrous Bahrag and robotic Exo-Toa; and, of course, a Matoran suddenly becoming a Toa of Light. And that had all been in one year!

But a squad of flying – flying? – Matoran headed right for him, pursued by shadowy, bat-winged figures? That was a new one.
A less experienced Toa would have been too shocked to react. One moment, he and the rest of the Toa Nuva were knee-deep in snowdrifts on Artakha. The next, they were here – wherever here was, though it did look vaguely familiar. Yes, a novice Toa would have been wondering how he was managing to hover in midair, how come he wasn’t crashing to the ground, and how he got here in the first place.

But not Pohatu Nuva. He had a clear, simple view of life that served him well. It was a pretty good guess the big nasties with darkness trailing behind them were the bad guys, and the Matoran darting all over the sky were the good guys. He was a Toa, always had been, probably always would be. That meant it was time to kick some bat-winged tail.

I love this job, he said to himself as he soared into battle.

Kopaka Nuva, Toa of Ice, watched Pohatu go charging right into the thick of things. His other partners had shown the good sense to scatter and try and figure out the situation before acting. But not Pohatu, no, he was swooping and diving like a crazed Gukko bird.

Logically, Kopaka should have hung back until he had a better idea of the enemy’s abilities. Plunging into battle with no plan was a sure way to get defeated. Cold, clear analysis dictated that Pohatu had made his choice; it was the wrong one, and no one else should be put at risk because of it.

There was only one problem. Kopaka liked Pohatu. The Toa of Stone was everything Kopaka wasn’t – open, warm, friendly – so the two of them being friends was hard for most to picture. Kopaka, after all, was guarded, icy, far from trusting, and sometimes downright rude. But Pohatu had never asked or expected him to be anything else, which set the Toa of Stone apart from most.

Maybe that was why, grumbling all the way, Kopaka shot through the air toward the scene of battle.

Lewa Nuva was happier than he had ever been. The Toa of Air was in his element, soaring through the skies, and he was doing it without just a Mask of Levitation and wind currents to glide on. His new armor let him rocket through the sky, and that was fine by him.

He had narrowly avoided a collision with the oncoming Matoran. Looking behind, he saw some of them were turning around. Probably want to quick-find out who we are, he thought. Like to ask them the same question, after we clean up the mess here.

Up ahead, Pohatu, Onua, Kopaka, and Tahu were all having problems mastering combat in the air. Only Gali, used to fighting underwater, was easily holding her own in the new environment.

One of the monstrous fliers was closing in on Onua Nuva. Some kind of pod was dropping from the creature. Lewa doubted it was a Naming Day present. He hit it with a blast of air and it shattered, sending dark leeches flying through the sky. Lewa was about to create a mini-cyclone to trap one, knowing Kopaka would want to study it, when something slammed into his back.

"No! Leave it alone!"

Lewa twisted his neck to see who was now sitting on top of him. It was one of the Matoran – a green-armored Le-Matoran from the look of him – now riding Lewa like the Toa was a flying Rahi beast.

"Are you crazy?" said Lewa Nuva. "Get off me! I don’t carry-fly passengers!"

"Stay away from that shadow leech," Tanma insisted. "And – watch out! The Makuta’s coming back this way!"

"Makuta? Where?" asked Lewa, looking around. All he saw was the bat creature heading toward him, with a black-armored Matoran riding it. "You mean that Matoran?"

Tanma yanked hard on Lewa’s neck, forcing him to veer to the left. Irritated, Lewa reached back and hit his rider with a cyclone wind, blowing the Matoran off his back. "I hate backseat drivers," the Toa muttered.

Lewa glanced down to make sure the Matoran was safe, only to see that his flight pack was starting to sputter. As he began to fall, Lewa swooped down underneath so that the Matoran landed on the Toa’s back.
Images suddenly flashed through Lewa’s mind of events he had never witnessed. He saw Matoran going down to the swamp below and never returning; panic as the three bat creatures attacked, again and again, turning entire villages into places of shadow; and the soundless explosion of light and power that changed everything in Karda Nui.

The experience shook Lewa so much that he almost crashed into one of the captured villages, veering up only at the last moment. It took him a second to realize someone else was inside his head, and he was viewing their memories. Fortunately, Turaga Onewa back on the island of Mata Nui had taught all the Toa Nuva something about shielding their minds from intrusion.

“Hey!” he snapped. “Get out of my head-thoughts!”

“Why would I want to be in your head?” Tanma shot back. “Who are you anyway? You look like something Solek would dream up.”

“I’m a Toa-hero, here to save you from… whatever you need saving from,” said Lewa. “And what’s a Solek?”

Tahu Nuva, Toa of Fire and leader of the Toa Nuva, wished it was the old days again. As he answered shadow energy bursts with jets of flame, he was remembering a time when he would have plowed right into the middle of a battle without thinking twice. Experience had taught him it was better to have a plan. Make one, be sure your partners know it, and stick to it – that was the best approach.

Life, unfortunately, wasn’t going to stop while you did that. And sometimes it dropped you right into the midst of an all-out war without so much as a “Guess where you’re going?”

Even with that, some things hadn’t changed. His Kanohi Nuva Mask of Shielding still worked, although it did look different. He was able to throw a force field around himself, Gali, and Onua in time to protect them from a bolt of shadow. And Onua Nuva was still one of the best strategists he had ever met. It was the Toa of Earth who had spotted the enemy’s weakness.

“They can’t see well, or maybe at all,” Onua had said. “I should know, with all the light in here. I can hardly see myself. That’s why they need the Matoran.”

“Then we aim for the Matoran,” said Tahu. “See if we can knock them off their backs.”

“Tahu! We’re supposed to protect Matoran,” Gali said. “What if those riders are being forced to help?”

“Simple rule,” the Toa of Fire replied. “First priority goes to protecting Matoran who aren’t shooting shadow at me.”

Tahu’s strategy seemed to work – at least, the bat-winged beings broke off their attack. If it was more a matter of the enemy wanting to take stock of a new factor in the battle before continuing to fight than concern for their Matoran riders, it still meant a chance for the Toa Nuva to regroup.

“Um, so, nasty Rahi they’ve got around here,” said Lewa.

“You know that isn’t what they are,” answered Kopaka.

“I know,” Lewa said, shrugging. “Just didn’t want to be the first one to speak-say it.”

“Too many questions,” said Kopaka. “Let’s hope the Matoran have some answers.”

“Right. Way too many,” agreed Lewa. He began to count them off on his fingers. “What happened to our armor and masks and weapons? What does the Brotherhood of Makuta want with this place? Who are all these Matoran and why are they here? And where is here?”

Pohatu looked around. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, clawing to be free like a stone rat trapped in its hole. And then suddenly he remembered.

“Wait, wait,” he said. “It’s different now, very different, but… don’t you recognize it? Guys… we’ve come home.”

* * *
Takanuva’s vision of the past...

The crimson-armored being opened his eyes and looked around. He did not recognize where he was, nor did he have any idea who the five figures nearby might be. Each of them was lying on a slab, just like him, and each wore colored armor and a mask. But where he was red, they were other hues: white, blue, green, black, and brown.

Of course, it came as no great surprise that he didn’t know who these others were. After all, he wasn’t sure who he was, either.

He started to rise, then found he could not. Thick metal straps encircled him, keeping him pinned to the slab. Unsure of his identity as he was, he still knew that he didn’t like being bound. He tried to exert his strength against the bonds, but without success. His frustration and anger grew. And then suddenly the metal of the straps was growing soft, turning to molten liquid, running off him and onto the floor.

Did I do that? he wondered, as he sat up.

On the next slab, the white armored figure had frozen his straps and then shattered them with the merest gesture. The others had all found unique ways to escape their bonds as well.

“Well, we’re all free,” said the red armored being. “Now what? Anyone know where we are... or who we are?”

The answer came then, but not from any of them. Rather, it was a voice that seemed to come from every part of the room that spoke in reply. “You are Toa.”

The figure in the brown armor jumped down from his slab and onto his feet. “Toa! Hey, that’s great. I always wanted to be a Toa.” He looked up and addressed his next words to the ceiling. “Just one question: what’s a Toa?”

“A Toa is a hero,” the voice answered. “Every Toa commands an elemental power, which can be focused through your weapons. Each of you also wears a Great Mask, with a power all its own. You will learn about these powers in time, as well as how to control them.”

The white armored figure frowned. “To whom are we meant to be heroes, and why? You say we have great abilities, but what are we meant to do with them? Too many questions, for my taste...”

The unseen speaker laughed softly. “You underestimate yourself, Kopaka – yes, that is your name. Questions will always whet your appetite for answers. But now it is time for you to meet.”

A lightstone illuminated on the ceiling above Kopaka, as the voice said, “Kopaka, Toa of Ice.”

One by one, the lightstones lit above the others as the speaker recited their names.

“Gali, Toa of Water.”

“Pohatu, Toa of Stone.”

“Onua, Toa of Earth.”

“Lewa, Toa of Air.”

The last to be named was the crimson armored figure. “And Tahu, Toa of Fire. He will be your leader.”

That seemed to startle Kopaka, who said sharply, “It seems to me we should be allowed to choose our own leader.”

“I have to agree,” said Gali quietly. “I mean, none of us know anything about this Tahu. What if he’s too impulsive to be a good leader? What if he lacks the ability to work with his team members, or can’t motivate, or...”

Lewa chuckled. “Or what if he’s just a jerk?”

A bolt of flame shot from an irritated Tahu past the Toa of Air, close enough to heat his mask to an uncomfortable temperature. Lewa reached up and yanked the mask off. Immediately, he felt so weak he almost fell over. Pohatu and Onua rushed to support him.

“You must not remove your masks, unless you are replacing one with another,” the voice said. “Without them, your strength is halved.”
Lewa gingerly returned the hot mask to his face. “Thanks – ow! – for telling us.” He turned to glare at Tahu. “And as for you, fireflyer, better be careful a big wind doesn’t blow you out one of these days.”

“Big wind,” Tahu said, nodding. “Yes, that’s you, all right.”

Kopaka decided to ignore the argument. “So we are a team,” he said to their unseen host. “Again, I ask – for what purpose? What are we meant to do?”

A panel slid open in the far wall. Beyond, there was only darkness.

“The gateway to another mystery, perhaps,” said Onua. “I wonder if a Toa’s life is filled with them?”

“Then this will be just the first of many we walk through,” Tahu replied. “Let’s go.”

Beyond the door, there was a long, narrow platform that jutted out into the empty space of a massive, spherical chamber. The cavernous room was totally dark. Only Onua was able to see at all, thanks to excellent night vision the others lacked.

This was not altogether a blessing, because it allowed him to see just how high off the ground they were standing. He peered nervously over the edge of the platform. Being a creature of the earth, heights were not his favorite thing.

There was a sudden burst of light. A symbol illuminated in midair and hung silently before the eyes of the Toa. In the center was an oval shape, flanked to the northeast and southwest by two much smaller ones. On either side of the three ovals were larger curved shapes which ended in two sharp points.

The voice spoke again. “Your universe is guided and protected by the Great Spirit Mata Nui. You, in turn, shall be Mata Nui’s protectors. What you see before you is the symbol of his might and purpose.”

Pohatu was the first to put what all the Toa were thinking into words. “If he’s a ‘Great Spirit,’ why does he need protection?”

“The universe is vast and holds many dangers,” the voice replied. “If Mata Nui should ever be struck down, it will be your role – your destiny – to restore him to power. If that time comes, you will know what to do.”

“And in the meantime?” asked Tahu. “Do we just sit around and wait?”

“You will train. You will learn,” the voice said. “And, in time, you will go to the aid of the Matoran, who labor to carry out the will of Mata Nui.”

“Sure,” said Pohatu. “Hey, the Matoran could probably use our help. You know, what with laboring all day to carry out somebody’s will and everything.”

All five other Toa turned to look at Pohatu. Finally, Gali smiled and said, “All right, Pohatu. Go ahead. Say it.”

Pohatu shrugged, looked up, and asked, “Okay, I give up: what’s a Matoran?”
Back in the lair, Antroz sat in his now perpetual darkness and listened. Someone – probably Chirox, from the weight of his footsteps – was storming around the cave, smashing Tridax pods on the ground and then grinding the pieces to dust under his clawed foot. For a being who was more scientist than warrior, Chirox took any setback in battle extremely hard. Antroz, on the other hand, knew that any encounter where you learn something about your foe is a partial victory.

“Calm yourself,” he said sharply. “We were told this day would come.”

“We were told,” Chirox repeated, hurling another pod against the wall. “Like we were told what would happen if we were too close to the Mask of Life when it went off? How come Makuta Teridax left that little bit of information out?”

Antroz had to admit he had wondered the same thing. Teridax was the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta, assigned long ago to the region including Metru Nui. It was he who had conceived the plan to strike down the Great Spirit Mata Nui and seize control of the universe. On the face of it, it seemed a simple scheme: send Mata Nui into an unending sleep and then take over the city of Metru Nui and its Matoran. With that crucial site in Brotherhood hands, the Great Spirit would never awaken.

But nothing was ever simple with Teridax. The running joke was he had a backup plan in place even for his breakfast. His ultimate plot spanned thousands of years and relied on precise timing – and even the unwitting help of Toa! Antroz hadn’t seen the point – why not just kill the Toa and enslave the Matoran and be done with it? But after seeing what happened to the other Brotherhood members who spoke out against “the Plan,” he wisely decided to go along.

Unfortunately, Makuta Teridax only had one virtue – persistence – and apparently hadn’t even told his allies the whole truth. When Karda Nui was discovered by Vultraz a week ago, the Brotherhood followed standing orders to invade. They knew the Mask of Life would have to be brought there, but not that its use would blind them. They also knew six Toa Nuva would eventually show up, but not when. The hope had been that all of Karda Nui would be conquered before the heroes arrived.

And it would have been, thought Antroz, with more than a trace of bitterness. Conquest is easy. A little destruction… a little chaos…. some Matoran ending their lives in memorably gruesome ways… and the rest of the population falls right in line. It’s always worked before.

But not here. Makuta Teridax didn’t want the Av-Matoran killed. “They will be of far more use to us alive,” he had predicted.

“And far more trouble to us, as well,” muttered Antroz.

He heard the distinctive scraping of Vamprah’s claws on the stone floor. The fact that his partners could no longer see had not inspired Vamprah to start speaking again. In fact, of all of them, Vamprah was the only one who did not seem fazed by the accident. It just made his hunts a bit more of a challenge.

Antroz reached out and found Vamprah’s arm. “I need you to find our twisted genius and his mad little assistant,” said Antroz. “I want to make a welcome gift for our Toa visitors… one they will never forget.”
The Toa Nuva followed Tanma down into the shelter. It had been hewn out of a fallen stalactite long ago, intended for use as storage. Now it was a sanctuary for those Matoran who had not yet been corrupted.

But the Toa were paying no attention to their surroundings. Pohatu’s words had awakened memories in all of them. The realization that they had been in Karda Nui before, and hadn’t remembered, had shaken them.

“I know our minds were shatter-scattered when we got to the island of Mata Nui,” said Lewa Nuva. “But this is ridiculous.”

“My earliest memory is training on Daxia,” said Kopaka. “Then… then we were sent here. There were Matoran working, and we were needed to protect them from… something.”

“Energy,” said Tahu. “Energy spikes were affecting the Rahi here… We had to contain them…”

Pohatu nodded. “Right. Then the Matoran left, and we… we… What did we do?”

The Toa of Stone looked at each of his partners in turn, but all he saw were blank expressions and shrugs. Whatever had damaged their memories had done an effective job.

Suddenly, Lewa brightened. “Kirop… there was a Matoran named Kirop, I think!” He turned to Tanma. “Is he here?”

“Yes,” Tanma replied, his voice tired and harsh. “You fought him out there five minutes ago. Could we maybe stop with the happy memories and concentrate on now?”

“One more question, if you please,” said Onua. “What happened to this place? It’s not how I remember it.”


“Well, we should be able to help with these,” Pohatu said, looking at the large, shoulder-mounted weapon he carried. It had appeared when his armor transformed upon arrival in Karda Nui. He wasn’t sure what it did, but it certainly looked formidable. While examining it, his finger accidentally brushed against some kind of control. A sphere of light flew out of the end of the weapon, hit a nearby wall, and punched a neat and smoking hole in it.

“Oh,” said the Toa Nuva of Stone. “That’s what it does.”

“Good,” said Tanma. “We’ll need weapons like that. We have to be ready when they come back again.”

“Who?” asked Tahu, fearing he already knew the answer.

“I’d think you would know,” said Photok, “if you are the Toa that Solek says you are. Those are Makuta out there trying to kill us all, with a little help from our friends.”

Makuta Mutran was annoyed. As a Rahi creator and virus master, it was important that he have a clean and orderly place to work. He had so far not achieved that ideal situation, and someone was going to pay for it.

“Vican!” he growled. “I told you to kick that last experiment over the ledge and into the swamp. I can’t have it screaming and melting all over the cave. I keep slipping in it.”

The Makuta’s bizarre Matoran assistant scurried into view and began kicking the subject of Mutran’s complaint across the floor of the hive. Due to its habit of dissolving into liquid when upset, this was a long and tedious process. But Vican kept at it, knowing from experience what it meant to disappoint his master. Finally, he succeeded in shoving the unfortunate creature over the ledge. He decided not to tell the Makuta that, as it turned out, this particular creation didn’t fall, but flew.

Fortunately, despite still having his sight, Mutran had not noticed. He was busy monitoring the condition of a new batch of shadow leeches. They were the third group to be specially bred in tanks with an eye toward giving them a longer lifespan. So far, the experiment had not been a success. The first batch had died instantly; the second had wound up carnivorous and almost made a meal of Vican.

“Look at them,” Mutran said softly, tapping on the crystal wall of the tank. “They begin their lives as kraata, nothing but the essence of a Makuta given solid form. But a bit of this… a bit of that… and they
become ever-hungry stealers of light. Have you ever truly watched one feed? It is so repulsive as to be almost beautiful.”

Vican shuddered. When Mutran got like this, it reminded him of the days when he was just another Le-Matoran, seeking adventure. Being changed into something more powerful seemed like an exciting prospect – so when Makuta Mutran came to his village seeking subjects, he had volunteered. His memories after that were hazy, which was probably for the best. He had not come out on the other side as a Toa or a Makuta or even as a better Matoran. In fact, he really wasn’t sure what he was anymore, and soon decided it was better not to think about it.

A barely audible flutter of wings drew Vican’s attention to the hive entrance. Vamprah had opened it and now stood in the gateway. He glared in the direction of the Matoran, causing Vican to duck farther back into the shadows. Everyone knew that, to Vamprah, “Matoran” was just another word for “victim.”

Mutran spotted his visitor. He reached into the tank and gingerly lifted one of the shadow leeches. “See? Alive and thriving, even after three hours. Plus I expanded their capacity to consume – this little one could drain the light out of Mata Nui and still have room for a Toa or two.”

Vican tensed. Asking a blinded Makuta to “see” was like poking a Manas crab with a sharp stick.

Vamprah walked in the direction of Mutran’s voice. His senses told him where the leech was, and he bent as if to examine the squirming creature. Then he raised his claw and gently rapped the leech on the head. The creature shattered, little crystalline pieces of its form raining down on the floor.

Mutran watched the last of the fragments draining through his hand. Then, calmly and casually, he smashed the tank with his fist. The leeches disintegrated on impact. Mutran turned his back on the mess and pointed a clawed finger at Vican.

“Clean this up,” he said. “Now.”

Vamprah grabbed Mutran by the arm and started to drag him toward the hive entrance. Mutran shook himself loose, saying, “You know, I’ve discovered a way to force a being to shapeshift, and then lock him into just one form. Grab me again and you will spend eternity as a very angry frost beetle… with a broken arm.”

Vamprah turned, his cold, unseeing eyes fixed on Mutran’s for a very long time. To his credit, Mutran met his stare and held it, at least for a few moments. Then Mutran abruptly broke away and leaped out of the hive, his gray wings carrying him toward the main lair of the Makuta. Vamprah silently followed, a grim smile on his face.

The Toa Nuva had barely had time to digest the news that the Brotherhood of Makuta was making an all-out attack on Karda Nui when they got a second shock. This one came from Tanma, who told them of seeing a falling figure in white armor carrying a glowing Kanohi mask. “This was right before the explosion of light,” the Matoran said. “And then we all just… knew, somehow… that the Great Spirit Mata Nui had returned to life.”

The Nuva looked at each other. They knew, of course, that Mata Nui lived again, but they didn’t know how it had been achieved. From Tanma’s description, one of their fellow Toa – Matoro, from the sound of it – had sacrificed himself to save the universe. There was a leaden silence that lasted a long time. Then Kopaka suddenly seemed to remember something.

“The mask this Toa was carrying,” he asked Tanma. “Where is it? What happened to it?”

The Av-Matoran shrugged. “I don’t know. If it was caught in that explosion, it was probably destroyed.”

“Say it wasn’t,” said Pohatu. “Where would it be?”

“In the swamp,” said Photok. “That’s all that’s down below.”

“It’s the Mask of Life. It has to be,” said Tahu Nuva. “And we need to find that mask before the Makuta do… if they haven’t already.”

“Agreed,” said Kopaka. “But we also need to defend these Matoran and stop whatever the Makuta have planned.”
“Then we split up,” said Lewa. “I’ll stay here, since I am the only Toa-hero good at flying. Kopaka, you should jump-dive into the swamp, I think.”

“Why?” asked the Toa Nuva of Ice.

Lewa smiled. “Cause I ever-always end up on your team, and you’re not exactly a Matoran sack of laughs.”

The sides were quickly chosen. Lewa, Kopaka, and Pohatu would remain with the Av-Matoran and fight the Makuta in the sky. Gali, Tahu, and Onua would travel down to the swamp and search for the missing Mask of Life.

Prior to the departure of Tahu’s team, Tanma and Photok sat with all six Toa Nuva to share information. “We don’t know much about what’s below,” said Photok. “We only went down there long enough to grab vines and head back up. So you’re pretty much on your own.”

“There may be shadow leeches down there, too, we don’t know,” Tanma continued. “The Makuta make them somehow, but we don’t know how or where. The walls of Karda Nui are honeycombed with caverns, many shrouded in mist, so it’s impossible to tell just where they come from. But we know what they can do all too well. Even a Toa would not be immune to the leech’s power, so beware – otherwise, you may wind up the first known Toa of Shadow.”

Good-byes were short and subdued. These six Toa had been through the worst this universe had to offer and come out the other side. All of them realized that this fight in Karda Nui might be their last, so there was no need to put that into words. They knocked fists together in the traditional salute, then the Toa Nuva of Fire, Water, and Earth dove from the edge of the fallen stalactite toward the swamp far below.

“What do you think they’ll find down there?” asked Pohatu.

“Their destiny,” Kopaka replied. “And quite possibly ours.”

* * *

**Takanuva’s vision of the past continues…**

Gali hit the ground hard, and not for the first time. By now, her muscles ached, her armor was cracked in a few places, and her Mask of Power had already been knocked off half a dozen times. She was tired, she was irritated, and she still couldn’t see the point of any of this.

“I’m a Toa of Water,” she grumbled as she got to her feet. “So what am I doing here?”

Her trainer, Hydraxon, shook his head. “You’re a Toa of Water. That’s true. So naturally your foes will be sure to attack you only when there’s plenty of water around… that’s false.”

Faster than her eye could follow, he whipped a boomerang at her. It swooped low and struck her in the legs, knocking her off her feet again.

Hydraxon gestured at the landscape around them. It was barren desert for as far as the eye could see. The humidity in the air was close to zero. “If you want water, you’re going to have to make it yourself,” he said. “Provided I don’t carve you up before you get the chance.”

Gali sprang up this time and charged Hydraxon, swinging the hooked tools she carried. He caught one on his armored wrist, grabbed her arm with his free hand, and tossed her over his hip. She landed flat on her back.

“I could do this all day,” Hydraxon said, smiling. “And if you keep thinking with your heart, not your head, I’ll probably have to.”

Gali scrambled to her feet, but this time she didn’t attack. Instead, she took a few steps backward, keeping her eyes trained on Hydraxon’s hands. If he was going to toss another blade or boomerang, this time she would be ready.

As it turned out, his hands never moved. Instead, he lashed out with a kick at a nearby dune, spraying a load of sand into her face. While she was blinded, he threw two knives, knocking both hooks from her hands.
“Now you’re disarmed, and you can’t see,” he said. “That means you have about half a second to live, and that’s if your enemy’s slow.”

*Just keep talking,* Gali thought. *We’ll see who has how much time left.*

Concentrating hard, she fired a jet of water from the palm of her hand. It hit Hydraxon with the force of a small explosion, knocking him to the ground. When her vision cleared, she saw him reaching for one of his weapons. She fired again, pinning him to the ground with her water blast.

“Give up?” she asked.

“Not even a little,” Hydraxon replied.

Gali heard movement behind her too late. A silver energy hound slammed into her from behind, putting her face-first in the sand. With her concentration shattered, her water blast was cut off. Hydraxon got up, grabbed her by the back of the neck, and hauled her to her feet.

“Meet Spinax,” he said, gesturing to the four-legged beast who still eyed her warily.

“After I’m done training you would-be heroes, I have a new assignment, and he’s coming along. For now, though, he helps me prove a point—the danger isn’t always what you see. Often, it’s what you don’t see until it’s too late.”

Gali spat out sand. Somehow, she managed a smile. “I don’t envy the group working with you in your next job.”

To her surprise, Hydraxon’s face darkened. “You shouldn’t. Trust me, you shouldn’t envy them at all.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Gali tried to change the subject. “So, lesson learned. Are we done for today?”

Hydraxon, who had been lost in thought, suddenly seemed to remember she was there. “Hmmmm? No, no. You have a 15-minute head start. Then I send Spinax after you. They say he can track a wisp of energy across a planet and back… so I suggest you start running.”

“And what am I supposed to learn from that?” demanded Gali.

“It’s not training for you,” replied Hydraxon, smiling. “It’s training for him.”

By the time Gali made it back to the Toa’s shelter, she was exhausted and sore. “Mask of Water Breathing,” she sighed. “Big help when there’s no water anywhere around.”

Pohatu laughed. “I thought I’d be able to outrun the little beast with my mask, but darn thing never gives up. Ran so fast I fused some of the sand to glass, and Spinax still caught me the second I slowed down. Kopaka’s the only one who passed that test.”

Gali turned to the Toa of Ice. “What did you do?”

Kopaka shrugged. “I froze him.”

“You didn’t!”

“He did,” said Lewa. The Toa of Air was floating halfway off the floor. Determined to master his Mask of Levitation, his feet were almost never on the ground anymore.

“So what happened?” asked Gali.

“Nothing,” muttered Kopaka.

“Nothing?” Onua chuckled. “Hydraxon commended him on his original thinking.”

“And then knocked him flat,” Tahu added. “Was it six times or eight times in a row, brother?”

“I didn’t see you do any better, Toa of Ashes,” bristled Kopaka.

“I guess a Mask of Shielding doesn’t help much when the boomerangs keep hitting you from behind, huh, Tahu?” said Lewa.

Onua glanced at Tahu and Kopaka and saw neither one was laughing. “Well, we all need to do better,” said the Toa of Earth. “Someday, it won’t be a trainer we’ll be up against, but the real thing.

“That cannot be soon enough for me,” said Kopaka. “Perhaps then there will be less talking.”

Lewa drifted back down to the ground, landing beside Gali. “Friendly sort, isn’t he?” he whispered.

“He’s a loner, but one who’s smart enough to know he can’t succeed alone,” Gali replied. “It makes him angry, but he tries to keep it all frozen inside.”
“While Tahu keeps fanning the flames between them, like he’s trying to prove something,” said Lewa. “Maybe we better stick together, sister. Those two could get us killed.”
Solek approached the Toa Nuva of Ice nervously. All his life, he had collected legends about Kopaka and his team, now Toa Nuva. He probably knew more about their early adventures than even they did. But to meet one in person, well, that was pretty overwhelming.

“Um, Kopaka? Do you have a moment? I have something for you,” he said.

Kopaka turned. Keeping in mind what these Matoran had been through, he forced himself to look less intimidating. “Yes, we can talk.”

The words burst forth from Solek despite his efforts to rein them in. “I’ve studied all the legends about you. I even know about the time you fought three dozen Zyglak all on your own and defeated every one! You have always been the Toa I most admire… that’s why I altered my color to white. But I’m afraid I’ll never be as skilled as you, or even become a Toa.”

“Slow down,” Kopaka said, smiling. “I don’t remember the battle you spoke of, but then, there is much about the past I don’t remember. You remind me of another Matoran I knew, Takua — he dreamed of being a Toa, too, and his dream came true.”

“Takua?” said Solek, eyes wide. “You know Takua? Where is he? What happened to him? We were best friends, then one morning, he was just gone, along with some of the others. We searched, but couldn’t find any of them. I can’t believe Takua’s alive!”

“Oh, he’s alive, though no longer the Takua you knew,” replied Kopaka, thinking about Takanuva, the former Takua, now the Toa of Light. “I will tell you tales of him later. But for now, you said you had something for me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Solek, fishing in his bag. He emerged with a fragment of a stone tablet. “This is part of a keystone. The legends say you would need this if you ever had to awaken Mata Nui. Unfortunately, it got broken and scattered over the ages. Kirop has one piece, and our attackers seized another from one of the villages. I don’t know where the other three might be.”

Kopaka took the stone. The inscription on it was written in a very old Matoran dialect, but one he found himself surprisingly familiar with. There wasn’t much there, but what there was told a clear story — this keystone detailed how the Great Spirit Mata Nui could be awakened.

“Thank you, Solek,” said Kopaka quietly. “You may not be a Toa, but you may have done just as much to save the universe as any of us.”

Lewa Nuva stood at the edge of the lightvine barrier, gazing up at the sky. It had been a day and a half since he and the others had joined the defense of the Av-Matoran village. In that time, they had fought off a score of attacks by dark Matoran, shadow leeches, and some particularly nasty Makuta. Half a dozen Matoran of Light had been lost in the battles, and Pohatu Nuva’s shoulder had required emergency repair. But the village still stood.

The Toa of Air had volunteered to keep watch. Now and then, a shadow Matoran could be seen flitting across the ceiling of the cavernous chamber, but no Makuta were visible this hour.
“They’re just keeping an eye on us,” said Tanma, joining Lewa. “They stay well out of range. Just like to remind us they’re there.”

Lewa’s eyes narrowed as he tracked a dark Matoran’s flight. Then he raised his air saber and hurled a blast of hurricane-force wind at his target. It struck the flying villager and sent him spiraling out of control. Toa and Tanma watched as the corrupted Matoran struggled in vain to regain altitude before finally landing hard in a distant village.

“Out of range for you,” Lewa said. “Not for me.”

“Great,” said Tanma, sounding unimpressed. “There are only a hundred or so more where he came from. I don’t think this is a problem that can be solved with a little target practice.”

Watching through the open hatch, Kopaka had to agree with Tanma. Hiding behind lightvines and walls, trying to hang on for one more battle, was a quick route to disaster. At best, the presence of the Toa Nuva would buy the village and its people another few days or so. Maybe he and Lewa and Pohatu could even down a careless Makuta and a few dozen of their shadow Matoran. But in the end, the odds were too great.

I can’t even spot where the shadow leeches are coming from, he thought. Something in the substance of the mists blocks my mask’s X-ray vision. There’s no getting around it – darkness is going to win here.

It was a sobering realization and one that Kopaka hated admitting to himself. His dislike of it was even more intense because he knew it was something Tahu would never even consider. The Toa of Fire simply didn’t believe in the possibility of defeat. In Kopaka’s eyes, that made him a fool – but it also, he had to admit, somehow made Tahu a great leader of Toa.

Maybe, just this once, I need to be more like him, thought Kopaka. Facts – cold and hard as ice – say one thing. But maybe they don’t say everything.

His decision made, he climbed out of the hatch and used his power to form an ice bridge. He slid rapidly toward one of the captured villages, the site of the shadow Matoran’s abrupt landing a few moments before. Kopaka Nuva knew he had to work fast, before the other corrupted villagers were drawn to the spot.

“You don’t know it yet,” the Toa of Ice said, gathering the fallen villager into his arms. “But you’re about to help your old friends.”

Chirox stood in Mutran’s cavern, his unseeing eyes fixed on that hard-at-work member of the Brotherhood of Makuta. Antroz had ordered the creation of a new flying Rahi capable of traveling a great distance at high speed and dealing with any obstacles that might get in its way. Specifically, he had asked Mutran to do the job, but Chirox had no intention of letting that lunatic create such a thing on his own. Thus far, there had been precious little creation anyway, mainly Mutran muttering about the primitive equipment he had to work with in this hidden site.


Mutran turned from the vat where organic tissue was fusing to mechanical parts. He glared at Chirox. “Bigger means slower,” he said, his voice growing louder as he spoke. “Adding another virus to give it sharper teeth risks the integrity of the mix. And you can’t even see it, so how do you know what it needs?”

“I know you,” Chirox replied, in an acidic tone. “Your first tries are always too small and get stuck gumming their prey.”

“Stop breathing…” Mutran snapped. A long beat passed before he added, “On my creation.”

Chirox grunted. “What about intelligence? Will this thing be smart enough to evade the Toa Nuva and make it out of Karda Nui?”

Mutran didn’t answer. His smarter creations had a habit of rebelling, so he had tended to keep his Rahi beasts short on brains.
The silence answered Chirox’s questions. Irritated, he called for a shadow Matoran to attend him. When the villager approached, Chirox seized him and hurled him into the vat. Fluid churned and frothed as Matoran mingled and fused with still-developing Rahi.

Mutran watched with growing rage as the new creature took shape. When the process was done, he reached in and removed the beast, now a revolting amalgamation of Rahi and Matoran.

“Worthless. Disgusting,” grumbled Mutran, eyeing the struggling thing in his claw. “If it doesn’t die of shock, it will wind up mixing the worst elements of both species. Antroz will say –”

“He will say it’s perfect,” said Antroz. He approached the two Makuta and their creation. “I need something that can make it out of Karda Nui and through Toa-held territory to reach our base at Destral. If it’s as bad as you say, the sheer horror of its appearance will delay the Toa from striking for the crucial moments it needs to escape.”

The Brotherhood of Makuta field leader turned to Mutran. “Tell Vican he leaves on this new mount immediately. He is to take the western passage out of the swamp and fly to Destral as quickly as possible. When he gets there, he is to deliver my summons to Icarax.”

At the sound of the name, Chirox did his best to hide his shock. Mutran didn’t even bother trying. “Icarax?” said Mutran. “For a handful of Toa and half a village of Matoran? Isn’t that like calling in a Tahtorak to squash an acidfly?”

“A handful of Toa?” Antroz repeated, chuckling softly. “A handful of Toa stole the Mask of Light from Destral itself once. Another prevented the conquest of Metru Nui, kept the Mask of Time from us, and even dared to imprison a Makuta! Still another – this very group – defeated Rahi, Rahkshi, and Bohrok swarms, and invaded Makuta Teridax’s very lair. One thing I have learned is that you underestimate Toa – any Toa – at your peril.”

Antroz reached out and stroked the “new-born” Rahi. It cooed in a most repulsive way. “No, we must crush them completely. And since I prefer not to make that my life’s work, I turn to Icarax. Let him dirty his claws on the Toa Nuva – after all, who are we to deny a fellow Makuta his heart’s desire?”

In the depths of the swamp, something stirred. It was barely a flicker of energy, flaring for a moment and then subsiding. So minute was the disturbance that even the strange creatures who resided in the murky waters took no notice. But if any of them had possessed senses acute enough, they might have detected the merest trace of – what? Consciousness? Confusion? Fear?

No, not fear. More like curiosity.

Reaching out with a tendril of power, it examined its surroundings. Water. Mud. Plant life. Sea creatures much like the ones it had encountered in its last environment… and one thing more, something quite disturbing. It sensed the presence of intelligent life in the swamp – three powerful and evil beings not very far away.

The object known as the Kanohi Ignika, or Mask of Life, sensed danger. The mask had no doubt those three would attempt to obtain it. Should it create guardians from the sea life around it, to serve as protection?

Memories were sifted. The last few guardians created – an evolved venom eel and the warrior known as Hydraxon – had been, in the end, unsatisfactory. Another course of action would be necessary.

Another recollection intruded on its analysis. It was the memory of being held by a Toa named Matoro, a noble being who sacrificed himself to save the universe. This Matoro had shown no fear in the face of certain doom. In fact, he had gone to his death bravely, with his last wish being the salvation of his friends. He had been a true hero.

Friends… hero… they were alien concepts to the mask. It was, after all, an object – coveted by many, feared by almost all. Even its creators had been afraid to touch it, and with good reason. Matoro had been the first one to hold the Ignika with no trace of fear or regret… and the first to care so strongly about others that his feelings even touched the up-to-then emotionless mask.
What would it have been like to be Matoro, or any other of his kind? the mask wondered. To have lived – to face death – to fight for others, as opposed to just being fought over, as this one has been for so long? What would it feel like to be trusted, honored, respected, rather than simply needed and feared? For that matter, what would it feel like just to feel? 

Particles of protodermis began to swirl on the swamp floor. The Mask of Life drew the bits of organic and inorganic matter to itself, binding and shaping them. Its will gave them form and function, crafting torso and limbs, hands and feet. The body that grew, the one that now wore the mask on its “face,” sat up unsteadily – and immediately knew something was very wrong. The mouth was full of something – water of the swamp, the mask supposed – and the body could not breathe this substance. This was an error in creation, for, after all, Matoro could breathe water. The body, the mask decided, should have been modeled more closely on his and not on those of other Toa it had met in its existence. Still, since it did not intend to remain underwater, it was best not to modify. Rather, a way was needed to escape the swamp.

Calling upon its power once more, it forced matter into the shape of a vehicle, something like those the Matoran of Mahri Nui had possessed. This one, of course, would be better than theirs, for the Ignika had brought it into being. (Modesty was not a quality the mask had discovered quite yet.) Hesitantly, still getting used to the sensation of independent movement, this new being – “Toa Ignika,” it decided it would call itself – climbed on board its vehicle. Craft and passenger rocketed from the waters of the swamp into the open air, senses alive to everything around. It could sense the evil beings down below, feel their frustration – and sense still more up above, these filled with rage and hatred. But it also felt the presence of others – a familiar presence, though it had never been in contact with these six before. Still, it knew what they must be.

Toa...
Aiming its craft toward the sky, Toa Ignika rushed up to greet its new... friends? Perhaps, it hoped... perhaps indeed.

Takanuva’s vision of the past continues...

Toa Lewa, master of air, rider on the wind, emerald-armored hero in the making, had just discovered something very important. He really, truly, deeply hated the water.

Hydraxon’s exercise for the day had to do with searching for masks. Someday, he explained, the Toa might find themselves in a situation where Kanohi masks were not easy to come by, and they might have to seek them out. To prove his point, he took all of the Toa’s masks and hid them in various places. Each Toa was given a map carved into a stone tablet that detailed where his or her mask could be found. As the mysterious voice had warned them, without a mask their powers were halved. Lewa found himself wishing it had also warned them about insane trainers, unfriendly teammates, and how water was so very... wet.

He took a deep breath and plunged into the ocean again. His Mask of Levitation was supposed to be down here somewhere, but it was so dark he couldn’t see. What I could really use is a Mask of Light right about now, he said to himself. Right, like that’s ever going to happen.

Lewa swam further down, disturbing a school of rainbow-colored fish. They looked to him like most fish – placid, slow-moving, with dumb expressions on their faces. At least, that was how they looked until they closed in around him, darting and diving, and biting him with needle-like teeth.

At first, Lewa just found this annoying. Then, the fish started finding chinks in his armor, and their attacks began to hurt. Angry, Lewa tried to summon an underwater cyclone to blow them away. But without his mask, he couldn’t generate a force of sufficient power to scatter them.

His lungs were starting to ache for fresh air, and the school of fish wasn’t letting up. Lewa kicked his legs and shot to the surface. He climbed back onto the beach and sat down in the sand, staring at the water as if it was his worst enemy.
“Giving up?” asked Hydraxon. Lewa turned to see the trainer sitting on a rock, twirling a dagger. “No,” answered the Toa of Air. “Just… frustrated.”

“Then you and Gali should get along just fine,” Hydraxon said, gesturing over his shoulder.

Lewa rose and looked past the trainer into the woods. There was Gali, standing at the bottom of the tallest tree he had ever seen. Her Mask of Water Breathing was wedged among some branches way at the top. Scars in the tree showed where she had tried to use her hooks to climb it, but the trunk was covered in an oily substance that made it almost impossible to scale.

“Looks like she has a problem,” said Lewa. “Bet I’ll get to my mask before she does.”

Hydraxon sprang from his perch and executed a perfect, sweeping kick, knocking Lewa to the ground. “It’s not a race!” he said sharply. “You ‘heroes’ are incredible. Kopaka has spent all day staring into an active volcano, trying to figure out how he can freeze his way to his mask. Tahu has been melting and re-melting the same iceberg all day, trying to free his. And the other two are no better.”

Lewa got back to his feet and glared at Hydraxon. “You gave us these stupid tasks. Each of us is just trying to get ours done. It’s not so easy to do when you’re on your…”

The Toa of Air abruptly stopped, as he realized what he was saying. Hydraxon smiled and began a slow, sarcastic round of applause. “A light dawns,” said the trainer. “I didn’t realize it would take light years. Think about the missions I gave the six of you — and tell me when I said you couldn’t work together?”

Lewa looked down at the sand, feeling a mixture of anger (mostly at himself) and a little embarrassment. It was true. Hydraxon had never insisted they pursue their masks alone. They had just split up as soon as he handed out the maps. Lewa had never even considered working with anyone else, and he doubted any of the others had either.

Hydraxon tossed his dagger from hand to hand. “It’s a great weapon – sharp, perfectly balanced, accurate. But it takes more than talent and practice to use it correctly… it takes the brains to throw it at the right target. You Toa have plenty of power, but I’m not seeing much in the way of common sense. Without it, all that power isn’t worth a pile of protodites.”

Lewa looked again at Gali, who had summoned a small rainstorm to try to wash the mask out of the high branches. “Looks like I am going to get wet again,” he muttered, already moving to help her.

Gali was surprised when she saw the Toa of Air approaching. She was surprised even more so when he used his weakened elemental powers to add some wind to her rain. The tree began to sway back and forth, until finally the Mask of Water Breathing came loose and fell right into her hands.

“Um… thanks,” she said. “But wasn’t that against the rules of the game?”

“No,” said Lewa. “Turns out trying to go it alone is playing the wrong game completely.” He looked away, still feeling a little uncomfortable about what he was going to ask. “Well, uh, so… can you give me a hand now?”

Even with all their differences, Tahu and Kopaka had discovered one thing they agreed upon: They couldn’t stand each other. Despite that, the night after the mask-searching exercise found them hiking through the mountains together.

“There’s an easier way to go about this,” Tahu said. “Find Hydraxon and make him take us where we need to go. If the door is barred against us, I bet he would make a great key.”

“Are all fire types like you? Or are you just uniquely an idiot?” growled Kopaka. “We don’t know the extent of Hydraxon’s powers. We don’t know he wouldn’t be able to warn our ‘hosts’ somehow. We don’t even know that we could defeat him.”

Tahu’s sword went from red-hot to white-hot in an instant, then cooled down again. “Speak for yourself, frosty.”

“Excellent. Fine,” Kopaka snapped. “What was I thinking? Of course the answer to every problem is violence and destruction. Who needs conversation when you can have carnage?”

Their argument was cut off by the sight of an imposing fortress in the distance. The place bristled with weaponry and was ringed by armed guards. An army of Toa might have been able to conquer it, but two would just be a moment’s distraction for its defenders.
“Think they'll let us in if we ask nicely?” asked Tahu.
“I don't know. Think you can fight your way through all of them?”
Tahu shook his head, laughing. “You're not the only one who can come up with a strategy, Toa of Snow. Now get your hands up.”

Kopaka looked at his companion, puzzled. Tahu had already raised his hands, his sword giving off just enough of a glow that both Toa would be visible to the guards. Suddenly, it made sense. As he lifted his hands in the air and resumed marching toward the fortress, even Kopaka had a hard time suppressing a smile.

The fortress guards did exactly what Tahu had hoped they would do. They brought the Toa they had “captured” inside and right to their leader. If Tahu expected the ruler of this land to be some massive, heavily-armored warrior who could snap a Toa in two with no effort, he was to be disappointed. The figure that awaited them was a Toa, although one whose armor looked quite different from theirs. Even more surprising, that armor was blue – like Gali, she was a Toa of Water. She looked up from what she was tinkering with, a small vehicle with multiple legs.

“Like it?” she asked. “I am thinking of calling it a 'swamp strider.' Who knows, there might be some use for it someday.”
Tahu’s surprise was doubled now that it was clear the mysterious voice that had awakened them belonged to her. Kopaka seemed to take the revelation in stride, though, saying, “Who are you?”
““My name is Helryx,” the female Toa replied. “I was the first of our kind. It might interest you to know that I saw you created, Kopaka, all of you.”

“We want some answers,” Tahu interrupted. “We feel we're entitled to them.”
Helryx smiled. “Then answers you shall have, Toa of Fire. All that you want… and perhaps more than you can stand.”

The Toa of Water put down her tools and approached Tahu and Kopaka. She looked from one to the other and then nodded, as if giving her approval. “Brave. Daring. Strong. You and your team are ready to become true heroes. But… this universe, like all others, demands a price from its heroes. Sometimes, they have to suffer; sometimes, they have to die. That is the price for living a life that matters… for having the power to change, to protect, to act.”

Helryx gestured for the Toa to follow her. “Come, my brothers. It's time for you to learn what price will be asked of you.”
Tahu Nuva rocketed down toward the Karda Nui swamp. Usually, he would have been planning strategy during the journey, trying to guess what threats might be waiting and how to deal with them. Today, though, just one thought dominated his mind:

*It's really a long way down.*

He flashed back to just how he and his teammates had gotten here. Over 1,000 years ago, the evil Brotherhood of Makuta had attacked the Great Spirit Mata Nui, plunging that powerful entity into an unending sleep. His absence gave the Makuta the opportunity to seize power in various lands and spread their darkness throughout the universe.

The mission of the Toa Nuva was to rescue Mata Nui from his coma and restore order to the universe. So far, it hadn’t been an easy one. The Brotherhood had thrown monsters and menaces against them, battling every step of the way. Now the quest had led to Karda Nui, the very core of the universe, the site of what would be the final battle.

The team had arrived only to discover the Brotherhood was already here. The Makuta had been mounting attacks on the Matoran of Light who lived in this place and were close to succeeding at conquering the region. After a few hard-fought battles, the Toa Nuva realized they had to split up. Half the team stayed above to fight the Makuta, while Tahu, Gali Nuva, and Onua Nuva headed for the swamp.

Now that he thought about it, it wasn’t a plan that Tahu was too thrilled about. It went against his nature to run from a fight. But there was good reason to believe that the powerful Mask of Life was at the bottom of the swamp. If the Makuta found it first, they could wipe out every living thing in the blink of an eye.

*So here we are, flying through mist so thick even I couldn’t burn it away, heading for a mud pool, he said to himself. Even that wouldn’t be so bad, if this place didn’t feel so… wrong.*

Some time ago, on another island far away, Tahu had visited a site the Matoran called the “place of shadow.” It had felt corrupt and unnatural, as if the fabric of the universe was just slightly off. Although he never admitted it at the time, he had found the spot highly disturbing. He had hoped never to experience such a place again, but as he approached the swamp, he knew he had not gotten his wish.

It was hard to see much of anything about the marsh at first, so shrouded was it in mist and fog. As the three Toa Nuva flew closer, they could see clumps of land of varying sizes dotting the murky water, most of them consisting of mud and moss. Thick foliage grew from the bottom of the swamp, but most of the plant life seemed strangely twisted and warped.

The most prominent features were the stalactites which had impaled themselves in the floor of the swamp during what the Matoran called “the Fall.” Normally, these sorts of formations would grow from the top of a cavern down, narrowing to sharp points. But having broken off the cave ceiling long before, it was their fragile tips that now served as foundations and their wider ends that were home to Matoran villages far above. Onua Nuva frowned at the sight. He knew enough about stalactites to realize how easily these could collapse under their own weight, sending the villages plummeting into the swamp.
Gali Nuva was paying no attention to that. As Toa of Water, her concern was the mix of liquid protodermis and seawater that made up the swamp. The first thing she noticed was that it was hot, even boiling in some places. Even more surprising was that, despite the heat, it supported life. More than once, she spotted fins or tentacles breaking the slimy surface. She had seen many a creature of the sea in her time, and fought her share, but she was not at all sure she wanted to run into anything that thrived in such a place.

“This place has all the charm of a Makuta lair,” she said. Onua hovered in the air, eyeing the swamp with distaste. “So,” he said finally. “Who’s up for a swim?”

Gali landed on a patch of mud. Her armored feet immediately sank partway into the mire. “I can’t say I look forward to it, but…”

“If the Mask of Life is below the surface, what choice do we have?” asked Tahu. “The Makuta would go down there to search for it.”

“But would they ever come back up?” asked Onua.

“It may not even be down there,” said Gali. “All we know is that it fell here. It could have landed among the vegetation, or sunk in the mud on one of these little islets.” She looked around the vast swamp, which stretched for miles in every direction. “It could be… anywhere.”

“We’ll split up and search from the air,” Tahu decided. “Pick a direction. If you spot anything, use your elemental power to alert the rest of us. If anything spots you… be careful. It’s too much to hope the Makuta aren’t already here.”

Onua Nuva flew slowly, every sense alert. He had a reputation for being among the wisest of Toa, and his brains told him Tahu was right. The Makuta were somewhere in the swamp, they had to be. They were out to conquer Karda Nui, and the Brotherhood never did things by half-measures. Before they attacked the villages high above, they would want to make sure that the Matoran had no avenue of escape.

Sometimes, having so much knowledge was a curse. Onua knew all too well the history of the Brotherhood and Toa battles with them, thanks to studies he had made on Metru Nui. There had been a few legitimate victories by Toa over individual Makuta, but nothing truly final – the Makuta always managed to vanish into the shadows they loved. Other battles were less clear-cut. He had long suspected that his team’s wins over Makuta had somehow been fixed, with the intent of throwing the heroes off the trail of something much bigger.

Perhaps that is what bothers me most, he thought, the sense that something is not right in all this. The Brotherhood came close to killing the Great Spirit Mata Nui – but why? His death would have meant theirs, too, along with everything else in this universe. Now they concentrate their forces in Karda Nui, yet seem more interested in attacking Matoran villages than anything else.

On the face of it, it made no sense. If Karda Nui truly was the most important site to someday awakening Mata Nui – and if the Brotherhood wanted to stop that from happening – why not just destroy the place? They had the power. Why leave it intact for the Toa Nuva to find?

Unless… they wanted us to find it. Unless they want Mata Nui awakened, even though they know his punishment for what they did would be terrible indeed. Or do they have reason to believe they will escape having to pay for their crimes?

That thought, more than any other, disturbed Onua. As a being tied to the element of earth, he knew how the slightest shift of the soil in one place could lead to a landslide somewhere else. He had learned early on how to manipulate the earth to suit his own purposes. The Makuta had no interest in doing such a thing with earth or water, fire or ice, but they were masters at manipulating others. And if they were somehow pulling the strings now… if the Toa Nuva were doing exactly what the Brotherhood wanted done, without realizing it…

Then we may not be saving this universe, he realized. We may be doomng it forever.

He stopped to rest for a moment on a spit of mud in the center of the swamp. He had seen no trace of the Mask of Life or any Makuta. He had spotted a number of Rahi that would have sent even a
Metru Nui archivist running to hide under the bed. The bizarre appearance of the wildlife was puzzling. Why would so many odd specimens be found in the same place?

A loud buzzing made him turn. A Nui-Kopen was darting toward him, on the attack. Onua had seen the large Rahi hornets before on the island of Mata Nui, but never one quite this size. He triggered the power of his Mask of Strength and swatted at the insect with an armored hand. The blow sent the Nui-Kopen spiraling through the air and into the swamp waters.

Expecting the creature to emerge again right away, Onua braced for another onslaught. Instead, he saw the insect flailing away in the muddy water, wings beating furiously. Then, to the Toa Nuva’s shock, the Nui-Kopen started to transform. Tentacles sprouted from its sides, its wingspan expanded, and its tail transformed into a wickedly sharp, barbed stinger. When it flew again, it was as a vastly different creature than it had been just moments before.

It’s something in the water, Onua realized, even as he uprooted a tree to use as a weapon. Some kind of a mutagen that affected the Nui-Kopen – which means the others have to be warned! If any of us end up in the swamp, anything might happen.

The new Nui-Kopen hovered in the air, waiting for the right moment to attack. Onua Nuva drew back the tree, ready to swing it when the enemy got close enough. Then something struck the Toa Nuva’s back – just a glancing, painless blow. The next moment, he had dropped the tree and was standing, arms at his sides, rigid.

Onua frantically tried to move. He could feel his organic muscles flexing, but his mechanical parts refused to budge. He was paralyzed.

Someone or something landed in the mud behind him, but Onua couldn’t make his head turn to look. A seemingly endless minute went by before the visitor moved into the Toa’s line of sight. It was a yellow-armored being with a hideous face and spikes running the length of his legs. He carried a longsword and a launcher of a kind Onua was not familiar with. He looked Onua up and down with narrow, evil eyes and laughed softly.

“I always wanted my own Toa,” said the newcomer. “Makuta Bitil’s personal ‘hero.’ Kneel, Toa.”

Against his will, Onua Nuva dropped to his knees. He wanted to ask how this Makuta was controlling his body, but couldn’t get his mouth to move.

“It’s this,” Bitil answered, as if sensing Onua’s question. He gestured to the launcher he carried. “A little invention of the Nynrah crafters of Xia. One shot and I control every mechanical part of your body. I could leave you here, on your knees, until you starve… or make you wade into the swamp water and drown… or even have you kill your friends.”

Bitil smiled. “But first I want the others to see what I have done. We will go see Krika. All of us.”

As he said that, the mask the Makuta wore briefly flared to life. In the next instant, half a dozen more Bitils appeared, each as undeniably real as the first. Onua found himself forced to rise and jet into the air, surrounded by the duplicate Bitils.

“That’s it,” said the Makuta. “You know, I always wanted a pet…”

Gali Nuva skimmed low over the water, scanning for any sign of the Mask of Life. It had already been three hours with no trace, and she was beginning to despair of ever finding it. She also found it hard to concentrate on the search when she knew what might be happening to her friends who had remained behind with the Matoran.

It amazed her how a place could look so familiar and so strange at the same time. When they had first arrived in Karda Nui, all the Toa Nuva had suddenly realized they had been here before. It had been ages and ages ago, when they were still so inexperienced. But it hadn’t looked like this, far from it. Then again, that had been so long ago.

Not for the first time, she wondered just how many millennia she and her teammates had spent locked in canisters, waiting for the day they might be needed. They had been clear from the start about the importance of their mission. It was their job to someday awaken Mata Nui should the Great Spirit
ever succumb to injury or attack. What none of them had realized at the start was that, because their role was so vital, it would be decided they had to be shut away until it came time to play their part.

Would we have agreed, had we known? Maybe. We were still so innocent then, she thought. But I wonder how much good we might have done in all those years if we had been free to act?

Gali flew on, wrapped up in her still-fragmented memories. Perhaps if she had been more alert, she might have heard something rising out of the swamp as she passed overhead. Then again, in close to 100,000 years, no one had ever spotted Makuta Gorast until it was much too late.

Tahu Nuva was the first of the team to spot something unusual, although it wasn’t the Mask of Life. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, though something in the back of his mind told him he should recognize it.

It was a solid sphere with no visible opening, embedded into the stone of one of the fallen stalactites. The structure stood out because it was obviously artificial – made of metal, not rock – and designed by intelligent beings. Tahu doubted it was a Matoran construction, since they spent as little time as possible in the swamp.

If it belongs to the Makuta, it’s a threat, he thought. And if it was created by someone else, it may hold answers. Either way, it’s worth checking out.

Tahu flew toward the sphere, wary of a possible ambush, but still eager to investigate. This was the sort of thing he had hoped for in his first moments as a Toa: exploring the unknown, solving mysteries, and doing it all in the service of justice. His methods might not always have sat well with his teammates, but no one could question his dedication.

He circled the structure, giving it a wide berth. There were no signs of any hostile beings near it, not even any Rahi beasts. There was no visible weaponry either. But Tahu hadn’t survived this long by being stupid. He activated his Mask of Shielding, throwing an energy field around himself, then moved in to investigate.

An instant later – impact! Tahu collided with a barrier he could not see. There was a flash of pure power, and the next thing he knew, he was being flung back across the swamp. Stunned, he just barely managed to keep his shield up. It was all that saved him as he crashed into a grove of trees with what would otherwise have been armor-shattering impact.

Tahu tumbled down into the mud and lay there, unconscious. All was still and silent. Swamp birds glanced down from the branches at this strange sight, while insects buzzed around his prone body. Suddenly, the Rahi scattered as the temperature abruptly dropped. A moment later, a pale, white form drifted up through the mud like a ghost. The being hovered for a moment, then turned solid, coming to rest on four long legs lined with jagged claws. Bending low over Tahu, the newcomer prepared to feed.

*      *      *

Takanuva’s vision of the past continues…

Pohatu could honestly say he had never seen anything like this “Karda Nui” place before. Of course, he hadn’t seen much of anything in his short existence, but that didn’t alter the fact that this place was incredible.

Karda Nui was vast, almost a world within the world. Vast stalactites hung from a ceiling that was so high, it was almost impossible to even see them without the aid of the telescopic eyepiece on Kopaka’s mask. A huge, sandy plain stretched out seemingly forever – even with his Mask of Speed to help, it would have taken Pohatu a while to explore the whole place.

Pohatu turned to Lewa and pointed toward the sky. “Did you try making it all the way up yet?”

Lewa shook his head. “I need a little more practice with this Mask of Levitation first. I wouldn’t want to get distracted halfway up, and then get dead, you know? Besides, our fearless leader says there’s work to be done down here first.”

The plain was dotted with settlements inhabited by Matoran of Light. The villagers were toiling in various places in Karda Nui, often vanishing for days only to reappear, worn out from their labors.
A flash of light in the distance drew the Toa’s attention. “Uh oh,” said Pohatu. “Here we go again. Grab hold!”

Lewa took hold of Pohatu’s arm and let the Toa of Stone pull him along at super-speed toward the site of the sudden illumination. Onua and Tahu were already there and not faring very well. The Toa of Earth was on the ground, his chest plate scorched and still smoking, while Tahu’s walls of flame were proving to be no obstacle at all.

These were what the Matoran called “avohkah,” and the reason the Toa were there. At first, the villagers who labored in Karda Nui thought the place was just prone to violent lightning storms. But after more than a dozen Matoran were killed by lightning strikes, the rumor started that the bolts of energy were actually hostile and intelligent beings. The Toa’s first few encounters with the avohkah seemed to verify this. The lightning bolts avoided obvious traps and seemed to go out of their way to do harm.

“Where’s Gali?” asked Pohatu. “She’s the only one who has been able to slow these things down.”

“Off fighting another outbreak west of here with Kopaka,” said Tahu, hurling fireballs to try to divert the lightning strikes. “They’ll get here when they can. Meanwhile, it’s up to us.”

“Ah, this is the life,” said Lewa, nimbly dodging a bolt. “Wake up in the morning, have a little breakfast, and then spend all day trying to avoid being fried.”

“Look at it this way,” said Pohatu, as a lightning bolt shattered his hastily created rock wall. “If you don’t avoid it, you won’t have to worry about what to have for breakfast tomorrow. And – look out!”

A massive avohkah was headed right for where Tahu and Lewa were standing. Both Toa reacted at the same time. Lewa used his wind power to hurl a blanket of sand into the air to try to “blind” the creature, while Tahu launched a wave of super-hot fire. Neither really expected their hasty defense to work. Both braced for the painful outcome.

It turned out to be quite different from what they expected. The combination of sand and flame had resulted in a third substance, a hard, translucent, and extremely thick material that formed a wall between the two Toa and their foe. The bolt struck the wall of glass, but did not pierce it.

Lewa didn’t waste time being stunned. “What are we waiting for, flame-face?”

“We work together,” agreed Tahu, already adding his fire to the sand Lewa was stirring up. “And don’t call me that.”

“Oh, don’t be such an… ash,” Lewa replied, laughing.

When they were done, the lightning bolt was completely enclosed in a thick glass dome. It couldn’t get out, and its fellow avohkah weren’t having any luck freeing it. Puzzled by this, they withdrew, though no one doubted they would be attacking again soon, somewhere else.

Gali and Kopaka appeared soon after, both looking exhausted. “We drove them off,” reported the Toa of Water. “But I have to remember to use water bursts, not a stream. Otherwise, um… ouch.”

Lewa wasn’t paying attention. He had spotted a spherical structure on the horizon, this one not made by the Toa. “Hey, what’s that?”

Kopaka glanced at Tahu so swiftly that none of the others noticed it. Tahu shrugged in response. “It’s called the Codrex. It’s… not important right now.”

“Maybe not to you,” answered the Toa of Air. “Me, I’m kind of bored with busy Matoran, angry sparklers, and sand, sand, sand. I’m going to check it out.”

“No!” said Tahu, more harshly than he had intended. “You’re needed here. We can explore later.”

“If you don’t want to come, don’t come,” Lewa answered, already walking away. “Don’t pull all that ‘big leader’ stuff with me – I never voted for you.”

Kopaka fired a blast of ice from his sword, completely encasing Lewa from shoulders to knees. “Tahu’s team leader, and he said no. So it’s no.”

Later, Tahu approached Kopaka when they were out of earshot of the others. “Thanks,” said the Toa of Fire. “I could have handled it, but I appreciate your support.”

“Don’t thank me,” answered the Toa of Ice. “We should just tell them the truth about the Codrex, about all of it.”
“We need to keep them focused on the avohkah, not on what comes after,” Tahu argued. “There will be time enough for them to worry about that… all too much time, probably.”

Kopaka turned away, obviously unconvinced. “It’s your decision. But think about this – how would you feel if someone you trusted kept secrets from you?”
Kirop woke up in a cell. It took him a moment to remember what had happened to him. Then he recalled spying on the Toa Nuva of Air and Tanma from above, a blast of wind, and a sudden slam into the ground.

Looking around, he recognized the chamber he was in as one of the smaller ones in the Av-Matoran shelter. The shadow Matoran chuckled. It was funny: Here he was, the former leader of Karda Nui, now captured by his own people.

_ignorant fools_, he thought. _They can’t keep me locked up. Already, I see a way out. And they will pay dearly for their lack of respect!_

He sat up. It was then he realized his bag was gone and, with it, the fragment of keystone he carried. He knew he should have told the Makuta about possessing it, but he had figured he might be able to use its existence someday to win influence with them. Now it was in the hands of the Toa Nuva.

_Yet another reason to escape_, he thought. _The Makuta have to be told the Toa possess at least two of the pieces now._

It would take only a few moments to blast open a weak spot in the ceiling with his shadow energy. He raised his arm – then hesitated. He could hear voices coming from a nearby room. What were they saying? He put his audio receptor to the wall to listen.

_It was two of the Toa Nuva, that was obvious, though he did not know which ones. They were talking about the Brotherhood of Makuta and the shadow leeches._

_“Are you certain-sure this is going to work?” asked one. “Very sure,” replied the other. “With what we know now, we can destroy all the shadow leeches and the ability of the Brotherhood to make more. They will have corrupted their last Matoran of Light!”_

_“Then what are we long-waiting for? Let’s do it!”_

_“Give me a few hours. I need to make sure the Matoran know what they have to do. Then we strike.”_

Kirop got to his feet, startled and worried. Had the Toa discovered the location of Mutran’s hive? And what was this about a means to destroy shadow leeches? Mutran had to be warned!

He unleashed a blast of dark energy at the ceiling, blowing a hole large enough for him to pass through. An instant later, he was free and headed for Mutran’s hidden hive.


Kopaka Nuva checked his Midak Skyblaster and then mounted it back on his shoulder. The weapon’s name had come from Pohatu and Lewa. “Midak” was an Onu-Matoran on the island of Mata Nui, a very strange one, who much preferred being out in the light to being in the dark tunnels of his village. Despite having weak eyesight in bright sunshine, he still spent most of his time outside and told anyone who would listen about the thrill of pure light. Most Matoran thought he was nice, if a little off,
and most Onu-Matoran had slightly harsher descriptions of him. But Pohatu considered him a friend and thought this would be just the sort of weapon he would have enjoyed using.

As for “Skyblaster,” Lewa had always wanted a weapon called that. So, since none of the other Toa Nuva cared enough to debate, the new weapons became “Midak Skyblasters.”

“Now we give him a minute’s head start, then go after him,” said Kopaka Nuva. “With luck, he will lead us right to the home of the shadow leeches.”

“That was sharp-smart to fool him into thinking we already knew where it was,” said Lewa. “Of course, it would never have worked without my acting talent.”

Pohatu laughed. “That’s true, brother – after all, you’ve been acting like you were a Toa for years.” Lewa Nuva smiled at the joke. “And a most ever-convincing performance it has been.”

“Five other Toa to choose from, and I am stuck with two that are just this side of being Rahi,” muttered Kopaka. “Let’s go.”

“Not without us.” Tانما was standing in the doorway, flanked by Photok and Solek. “This is our home. It’s our people who have been corrupted. No one else is going to fight for them.”

Kopaka Nuva wanted to argue, but he knew there was no time. “All right, then the six of us will go. You ride with us. The fewer potential targets we give the Makuta, the better. Stay low, keep your mouths shut, and try not to get killed.”

“Listen to him,” added Lewa Nuva. “Trust me, I’ve never done any of those three things… and look where I wound up.”

Kirop flew as fast as he could toward the eastern side of the vast cavern that was Karda Nui. He shot through layers of mist that obscured the cavern entrances, focused on reaching his destination. Occasionally, he would allow himself to think about the vast reward Antroz would surely give him for his information. Perhaps his actions might even lead to the deaths of three Toa Nuva – wouldn’t that be wonderful?

So intent was he on his mission that he never noticed the Toa Nuva pursuing him, with three Av-Matoran riding along with them. They were staying some distance behind, so as not to alert Kirop to their presence. If he so much as looked behind and realized he had been duped. He would have been even more surprised if he had turned in time to see three Toa suddenly become four.

“We’re being followed,” said Lewa Nuva.

“I know,” Kopaka Nuva replied.

“You know?”

“Mask of Vision, remember?” said Kopaka. “It’s not just a cute name… unlike, say, ‘skyblaster.’”

“So who is he? Another of the Makuta?” asked Pohatu, looking back at their pursuer. The figure didn’t look like a Makuta – it looked like a Toa. Then again, being shape-shifters, the Makuta could look like whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

“I’ve never seen him before,” said Solek.

“So far, he’s just following,” said Kopaka. “If he makes a hostile move, then we’ll deal with him. Right now, we need to worry about Kirop.”

“He’s pulling away,” said Pohatu. “If we don’t speed up, we’re going to lose him!”

The words were barely out of Pohatu’s mouth when he and Photok suddenly shot forward so fast they were a blur. They were almost on top of Kirop before the Toa Nuva of Stone recovered from his surprise and veered them away. When he and Photok had rejoined the others, Pohatu finally allowed himself to exclaim, “What the rampaging Rahi was that?!”

Photok shook his head, smiling. “No idea. But it was sure fun! I just thought about us going faster, and zing!”

“Nothing like that ever happened to you before?”

“No,” said the Av-Matoran.
“And I didn’t trigger the Mask of Speed,” said Pohatu, puzzled. “Well, whatever it was, next time, warn me.”

But Photok wasn’t paying attention. He was looking up to where a huge, winged, multi-headed Rahi was heading right for them. “Warn you – got it – is now a good time?”

Kopaka and Lewa saw the menace at the same time. But before they could form a battle plan and attack, their mysterious pursuer had shot up into the sky to confront the beast. The Rahi eyed him with barely disguised glee, no doubt seeing a sure meal in its future.

The strange figure raised a hand, as if bidding the creature to halt. That was weird enough, but then the Rahi actually did stop in midair. A slight quiver ran down the length of its body. Its eyes grew wide and its breathing incredibly rapid. An instant later, it dropped like a rock and plummeted toward the swamp.

The Nuva’s mysterious pursuer – the self-styled Toa Ignika – watched the Rahi fall with a mixture of regret and satisfaction. The Mask of Life did not like killing any living thing – it felt wrong. But it – no, now I have a body, now I am “he,” not it, the new being thought – did not have enough experience in this new body to know how to stop the Rahi without ending its existence. So he chose the most merciful option, simply speeding up the creature’s life processes until they reached their natural point of exhaustion.

Of course, the three Toa Nuva did not know that. All they knew was that a being who looked like a Toa stopped a multi-ton Rahi by holding up his hand. And now that same being was hovering in the sky, watching the Toa in silence, as if waiting for an invitation to join them.

Kopaka looked at Pohatu and Lewa. Then, with a grim smile, he gestured for the new Toa to come along.

“And now,” said the Toa Nuva of Ice, “we are seven.”

Unaware of what was going on in the skies behind him, Kirop approached the fog-shrouded leech hive which hung suspended from the roof of the vast cavern. He was perhaps two hundred yards from it when its entrance suddenly opened. Vican flew out, riding on top of what Kirop first thought was another Matoran. Then he got a look at what the creature really was as it flew by, and even the shadow Matoran felt sickened by the sight.

Still, this wasn’t the time to be sentimental. He had a message to deliver. He flew straight toward the once-again-concealed opening. A mild bolt of shadow energy triggered it to slide aside once more.

“Mutran!” Kirop shouted as he landed on the hive floor. “The Toa Nuva are planning an attack on the shadow leeches! You have to prepare!”

Mutran took two steps forward and savagely backhanded the Matoran, sending him sprawling on the stone. “The Toa Nuva? You mean those Toa Nuva? The ones you led here?” he snarled, pointing through the rapidly closing entrance. Kirop turned and could just see four Toa and three Matoran bearing down on the hive.

Kopaka Nuva saw the entrance slam shut. It was a puzzle why he had been unable to spot this hive before using his Kanohi mask – perhaps something in the mist blocked his power. That would be a mystery for later. He looked over at Pohatu. “You want to do the honors?”

“Sure,” said Pohatu. “I’ll knock.”

The Toa of Stone summoned his willpower and materialized a half dozen good-sized boulders, hurling them toward the hatch. They struck hard, battering the gateway. “They aren’t answering,” said Lewa. “Let me ring the greet-bell.”

The Toa of Air sent a burst of air at the entrance so powerful that it seeped through the cracks and formed a cyclone on the other side. The winds caught Kirop, slamming him into the walls, but Mutran stood rooted to the ground.

Kopaka Nuva gave Lewa a few moments and said, “Perhaps no one is home. Let’s see if they left the door open.” He readied an ice blast, but Solek reached out a hand to stop him.

“Let us. Please,” said the Av-Matoran.
After a moment’s consideration, Kopaka nodded. The three Matoran raised their weapons and sent light energy at the weakened hatch. Their bursts hit on target, blowing the gateway in. It flew into the hive, only to be caught by Mutran.

"Toa are always so noisy," hissed the Makuta. "No wonder I could never get any work done around your kind in the old days."

The Toa and Matoran charged ahead. They saw no sign of the shadow leech tanks, but they did discover something else quite strange. The hive was far bigger on the inside than it seemed from the outside, with slime-covered tunnels that wound deep into its interior.

"Use the skyblasters," Kopaka said. "Find the shadow leeches and target them. Solek and I will handle this Makuta."

Pohatu, Lewa, Tanma, Photok, and the Toa Ignika charged ahead. Surprisingly, Mutran made no effort to stop them. He just watched them fly past on their way deeper into the hive. Then he turned back to the hovering Kopaka Nuva, arms outstretched, and said, "All right, Toa, handle me… if you can."

Vican did his best to steer the flying Rahi beneath him where it was supposed to go. It wasn’t easy. Having Matoran-level intelligence, the beast was willful, not to mention extremely unhappy with its current appearance.

He had been lucky so far. The Toa Nuva had been so intent on following Kirop they hadn’t noticed his exit. He dove as soon as possible so as to be lost in the mists of the swamp before they changed their minds. Now he was skimming over the waters, headed for the portal out of Karda Nui.

Vican would have much preferred being back in the cave helping Mutran with one of his experiments – or even being one of his experiments – to this task. He had heard enough about Icarax to know this was a suicide mission. When other Makuta consider one of their number to be too violent and destructive… there’s a problem.

The sealed portal was just ahead. He steered the Rahi right for it, despite its protests. At the last possible moment, it opened just wide enough to admit the two of them. Then it slammed shut again.

He was out of Karda Nui and on his way to deliver Antroz’s message. He wasn’t sure who he pitied more: himself, or the Toa Nuva. Neither was likely to survive a meeting with Icarax.

* * *

Takanuva’s vision of the past continues…

Gali hurled a water burst at an oncoming avohkah. The creature struck the water dead-on and exploded with a bright flash of energy. Exhausted, the Toa of Water looked around, but there were no more of the sapient lightning bolts to be seen. The battle was finally over.

It had taken months, but the last of the avohkah had been defeated. Whether they might return one day was unknown, but for now, the Toa’s work in Karda Nui was done. And so, apparently, was that of the Matoran of Light, who were now occupied with packing up their possessions and preparing to leave this realm.

All, that is, except one Matoran, who stood gazing up at Gali with wide and wondering eyes. "Can I help you?" asked Gali, smiling gently.

"What you did… all of you… that was amazing!" said the Matoran. "How can I learn to do that? How can I become a Toa?"

Gali shook her head. "I wish I could tell you… but I don’t know myself. I’d like to think that the universe knows when it needs a hero and finds a way to bring one into being."

The Matoran pondered her words for a while. Then he brightened, "Then I will just have to make sure I am around the next time a hero is needed! That shouldn’t be too hard."

The Matoran walked away, a new energy in his step. "Remember me, Toa Gali," he said over his shoulder. "You’ll be hearing my name someday, whenever people talk about heroes – Takua!"
Gali laughed. She turned at the sound of others approaching and saw Tahu and the rest of the team. The Toa of Fire looked grim, even for him. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Tahu, unconvincingly. “But we need to talk… and I need to show you all something.”

The Toa of Fire led them across the plain to the structure he had called the Codrex. A circular stone floated in empty air about five feet from the entrance. Lewa looked at it, curious, then reached up and plucked it from its invisible perch.

“Put that back!” snapped Kopaka.

“What?” asked Lewa. “I just want to get a look at it.”

The Toa of Ice started to respond, then visibly relaxed. “You know, you’re right. But you’ll have an easier time examining it inside the Codrex. Why don’t you head on in?”

Lewa gave a nod and started forward. He had only gone about two paces when he collided with an energy field and was sent flying. When he finally crashed to earth, Kopaka was standing there. The Toa of Ice snatched the stone from him and said, “That’s why.” Then he marched back to the Codrex and put the stone back into the field.

The six Toa, including a chastened Lewa, approached the sphere. Tahu raised a hand and the entrance slid aside. Even Tahu and Kopaka, who knew what to expect, were surprised by what they found.

The interior was huge, dominated by machinery that none of the Toa could even begin to understand. One whole section was sealed off, and even then, the place was bigger than any the heroes had ever seen. Onua and Gali looked at complex devices with wonder, while Pohatu ran a hand along the stone wall that blocked access to the other section of the sphere.

“I could probably bring this down,” he said.

“It’s not our concern,” Tahu replied. “This is.”

The Toa of Fire tossed a fireburst toward the back wall. When it flared, the light given off illuminated six canisters standing side by side, each about nine feet high. “What are those?” asked Onua.

“They’re called Toa canisters, for want of a better name,” said Kopaka. “They are a means of transport. Quite remarkable, from what I have been told.

“Well… great,” said Lewa. “It’s got to be better than that dimension-hop we took to get here. So where are we going?”

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence, with Tahu and Kopaka both waiting for the other to speak. Then the Toa of Fire said, “Nowhere.”

The hatch of the Codrex slammed shut. Onua rushed to it and battered it with his enhanced strength, but it wouldn’t budge. “Tahu, use your fire power – melt this thing!”

The Toa of Fire put his hand on Onua’s shoulder and gently pulled him away from the hatch.

“We’re not leaving, brother… at least, not for a long time to come.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Gali. “We’re prisoners here?”

“Not prisoners,” said Kopaka, “more like… emergency reserves. Remember what we were told? If Mata Nui should ever be struck down, it would be up to us to restore him to power. That is our goal and our destiny.”

“Terrific,” said Pohatu. “Can’t we keep busy until that happens, preferably someplace other than here?”

“Try to understand,” said Tahu. “Someday, the fate of the entire universe may depend on what we do. And until that day comes, it’s vital that we stay together and stay whole. If we were to be killed, there would be no one to do what had to be done.”

“These canisters – they will keep us safely in slumber until we are needed,” said Kopaka. “When the time is right, they will be launched and will take us where we need to go. We will emerge, armed with tools and masks to carry out our mission.”

Pohatu touched one of the canisters. Its top began to rotate, finally opening with a hiss. The Toa of Stone grabbed the lip of the canister, hauled himself up, and peered inside. “Right. Not so much as a carving to read in there. I don’t think so.”
A tremor suddenly shook the Codrex. Kopaka looked at Tahu, alarmed. “So soon? Do you think the Matoran made it out?”

“I hope so,” Tahu replied. “If not…”

Onua read the expression in the two Toa’s eyes. “Wait a moment,” he said. “There’s more to this than what you’ve told us. The avohkah were just the start, weren’t they? There’s worse coming.”

Tahu turned away and walked to the hatch. He passed his hand over a portion of the wall and a small segment of the hatch opened. The other Toa crowded around to see what looked like a massive storm of raw energy descending on Karda Nui. Already, the Matoran structures on the plain had been incinerated. The glare was so blinding Onua had to look away, but the others could not tear their eyes away from the sight. It was overwhelming in both its majesty and sheer horror.

A vast, swirling cloud of power hovered just above the ground, extending upward for as far as the eye could see. Spears of lightning flew from it in all directions. The heat emanating from the heart of the storm fused the sand of the plain to glass in all directions.

“It’s… incredible,” breathed Gali.

“It’s devastating,” corrected Lewa. “And we’re right in its path!”

“When it reaches full power, no living thing will be able to survive out there,” said Kopaka.

Tahu shut the gap in the hatch. “The Codrex can protect the equipment inside… but only the canisters will protect us. So it’s your choice: get into them and wait for the day we are called, or take your chances with the storm.”

The Toa of Fire looked around the room. He was far from happy about the decision he was asking them to make. But he believed what Helryx had told him and Kopaka that day on Daxia. Without Mata Nui, there would be no universe, and millions, maybe billions of lives would be lost. Against that, he had to balance the freedom of six Toa. There really was no choice.

Pohatu was the first to make a move toward the canisters. “Well, I could use a nap,” he grumbled as he climbed in. The lid sealed itself once he was safely inside.

One by one, Onua, Kopaka, and Gali followed suit. None looked happy, but at least they seemed to have resigned themselves to their fate. Onua paused before Tahu and said, “I can’t say I agree with everything that has been done… but I can guess the burden you and Kopaka have been carrying. Were I in your armor, perhaps I would have done the same.”

Lewa, on the other hand, was in no mood to be forgiving. “You knew this storm was coming all along,” he said angrily. “And you knew we wouldn’t have time to follow the Matoran out of Karda Nui. You and I are going to have a long talk, when we wake up again, Tahu – count on it.”

But there would never be any long argument between Lewa and Tahu. The special mechanism that put the six Toa to sleep in their canisters would damage their memories as well. When, 100,000 years later, they found themselves on the shore of Mata Nui, they would remember only a long and fitful sleep disturbed by dreams and nightmares. Gone would be all recollection of training on Daxia, meeting Helryx or Hydraxon, their adventures in Karda Nui, or the fate that forced them to give up millennia of their lives.

Most importantly, it had eliminated one important fact from their minds: the knowledge that, when Mata Nui awoke once more, the storm would return. And when it did, every living thing in Karda Nui would be turned to ash.
Takanuva shook his head, trying to make sense of all the images that had flashed so rapidly through his mind. One image in particular had seared itself into his consciousness – the energy storm that had torn through Karda Nui when Mata Nui awoke for the very first time.

He opened his eyes to see Helryx and Krakua standing nearby. “Now you know,” said Helryx. “We were aware the Toa Nuva would lose part of their memory in the time they spent in the Toa canisters, the better to keep our existence a secret. But we could not foresee how complete the loss would be. They are in Karda Nui now, with no idea that if they succeed in their mission, they and the Av-Matoran there will all die.”

“So there’s no hope? I can’t believe that!” said Takanuva.

“Of course there’s hope,” snapped Helryx. “Why do you think we brought you here? You are a Toa of Light, try not to be quite so dim. The key to the Toa Nuva’s survival can be found inside the Codrex, but they must have the knowledge you hold to be able to use it wisely. You must get to Karda Nui and warn them.”

“If your organization is so powerful, why can’t one of your members carry this message?”

Helryx nodded. “We have members of great power, true. But none with your ability, the mastery of light itself. Only you can battle the Makuta on even terms… while we launch an attack of our own on the Makuta base at Destral.”

Takanuva could guess what that meant. If the Order of Mata Nui attacked the Brotherhood, the resulting war might do what Mata Nui’s death had not: wreck the universe. But he sensed there was something more to the situation and his silence showed it.

Helryx looked away and spoke again. “Recent events have led the Makuta to suspect our existence. Already one of our members, Botar, has been killed. If his mental shield was somehow breached, the enemy may be tracking our other agents even now. But one Toa, alone, might be able to make it to Karda Nui.”

There was no choice, of course. If this was all some kind of trick, Takanuva had no doubt he had the power to make this Helryx pay. And if it wasn’t… the lives of the six beings he admired most were in grave danger.

“I’ll go,” said the Toa of Light. “But what about the Toa Mahri? Will someone be here to help them defend the city in my absence?”

“Oh,” said Helryx, smiling, “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Takanuva turned to see an armored titan enter the room, dragging another along behind him. He was tall and strong, but looked as if he had been through a war. Both his armor and mask were damaged. But that wasn’t what struck Takanuva as most strange. Rather, it was the complex breathing apparatus he wore – could this being not breathe air?
“Meet Brutaka,” Helryx continued, “an Order of Mata Nui member with a somewhat less than sterling record… still, desperate times. The Mahri may need a little convincing to work with him… but I can be very persuasive.”

“And this is Dwell,” Brutaka said, kicking his white-armored captive across the floor. “A Dark Hunter planted here long ago to keep an eye on the city – and to kill you, Toa. He has a way of getting into your head… but I decided to be nice and let him keep his own.”

“Wait a minute, I’ve heard of you from the Mahri,” said Takanuva. “You betrayed your oath and almost killed two teams of Toa. It took your own partner to put you down.” He turned to Helryx. “This is your idea of help for Metru Nui?”

Helryx’s expression turned dark. “Understand something, Takanuva. We are in a war. Maybe we have been since the day the Brotherhood struck down Mata Nui. And in a war, you don’t always get to choose your allies or test them first to make sure they are good and pure enough. I would recruit Dark Hunters and Pit prisoners if I thought it would bring the Makuta down.”

“And what kind of universe would that leave you with?” asked Takanuva.

“One full of beings still free to make their own mistakes,” answered Brutaka.

Takanuva said nothing, simply looked from Brutaka to Helryx, unsure of which one he disliked more in that moment.

Krakua finally spoke up, trying to break the tension. “Brutaka will be your means of transport to Karda Nui, using the dimensional travel power of his mask. It’s faster than going by Toa canister, if a little more dangerous.”

Takanuva looked again at Brutaka’s mask. There were hairline cracks in a number of places. It was amazing it was still functioning at all. But there was no turning back now.

“I’d have to be insane to trust him,” said the Toa of Light.

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” said Helryx, offering her hand. “You have to be insane to be a Toa at all. It’s the first requirement for the job.”

After a long moment, Takanuva reached out and shook her hand. Maybe she was right, he conceded. Maybe in a time of crisis, the old rules don’t apply – and maybe being a hero was a lot more complicated than he thought.

“Take this,” said Krakua. The object he offered Takanuva was, of all things, a sundial. “You may need it.”

Takanuva took it even as Brutaka triggered the power of his mask. A hole opened in space, its edges ragged and distorted, and its size fluctuating wildly. Taking a deep breath, Takanuva plunged into it, to begin the strangest journey of his life.

“Do you think he’ll make it?” asked Krakua as the hole disappeared with an audible pop.

“He has to,” answered Helryx. “If I am right, the Makuta have much bigger plans than just controlling Karda Nui – and we may need the Toa Nuva, if we hope to stop them. He has to get them out of the core before the energy storm consumes them all.”

“Should we have told him the rest?” Krakua said, obviously a little uncomfortable with what had and had not been shared.

“About what is going to happen to him? And what his true destiny may be?” Helryx gave a bitter laugh. “No, Krakua. If we are wrong, then it would all be for nothing. And if we are right… the truth might well drive him mad.”

Helryx, Brutaka and Krakua left the chamber then, to begin the long walk from the Archives to the surface of Metru Nui. Each knew what was about to happen: an all-out conflict between the forces of the Order of Mata Nui and the Brotherhood of Makuta.

They walked slowly towards the light high above, sure in the knowledge that what they were about to do would change the universe forever… or destroy it.

* * *
It had been much too easy.

Lewa Nuva, Pohatu Nuva, their Matoran companions, and their mysterious new ally had made it through at least a mile of tunnels with no opposition. That was the good news. The bad news was they had seen no sign of shadow leeches or anything that could be used to make shadow leeches.

“Maybe we missed something,” suggested Pohatu.

“I know they’re here,” said Tanja. “They have to be. Where else would Kirop have fled to?”

“I don’t understand,” said Photok. “How can this place be bigger on the inside than on the outside?”

Pohatu shrugged. “Saw a legend once in a Ko-Metru Knowledge Tower. It said the Brotherhood uses some kind of dimensional gate power to move their home island around. Maybe they’re using something like that here – maybe we aren’t even still in the hive, but in some kind of pocket dimension.”

“Well, wherever we are, we’re running out of tunnel-path,” said Lewa. “Dead end ahead.”

“Let’s ask our silent friend,” Pohatu said. “Maybe he knows something.”

Lewa looked back to where the strange Toa had been following, and gasped. He was gone – and in his place was something out of a nightmare. It was long and serpent-like, with a toothed, funnel-like mouth easily twenty feet in diameter. Its pale white flesh glistened from a thin sheen of slime, and it wriggled and squirmed toward the flying Toa. Its bulk took up the entire tunnel, making it impossible to fly over or around.

“Small Rahi beasts,” muttered Lewa. “Whatever happened to the small Rahi beasts?”

“Maybe it doesn’t mean any harm,” said Pohatu. “I know, what are the odds, but let’s just take it…”

Tanja fired a light burst from his blades, striking the creature dead-on. It hissed in pain and rage.

“– easy,” Pohatu finished. “Kopaka always told me don’t work with Rahi or Matoran, but did I listen? No.”

“Oh, come on,” said Lewa, firing his Midak Skyblaster at the oncoming creature. “When’s the last time we met a giant, slimy, jaw-mouth full of teeth, peaceful Rahi?”

Pohatu shrugged, already creating and hurling boulders that did little but bounce off the creature’s thick hide. “Well, there was… and then there was that time… hmmm…”

“It’s coming closer!” yelled Photok, furiously blasting light at the beast. “Isn’t there some special Toa technique you have for dealing with these kinds of things?”

Lewa shook his head as he summoned a cyclone. “Being a Toa-hero doesn’t come with a handbook. Besides,” he added with a grin, “Pohatu can’t read.”

“You just saw our technique,” said Pohatu. “We laugh in the face of danger.”

The creature lashed out, beams of pure force emanating from its eyes. They struck Pohatu, sending him and Photok crashing into the back wall.

“But sometimes,” grumbled the Toa of Stone, “danger doesn’t get the joke.”

Toa Ignika started out surprised… then he became puzzled… and now? Now he was enraged. He had been following along behind the two Toa Nuva and their Matoran companions. Not yet comfortable with spoken language, he had not joined in any of their conversations. But he still felt as if he were welcome at their side in the coming battle.

Then they suddenly turned around and reacted as if they had never seen him before. One of the Matoran fired a light blast, and then the Toa followed up with stone and cyclone. It was all very confusing. What had he done? Why were they attacking him?

Finally, it got to be too much and he had struck back. That only seemed to make things worse. The Toa Nuva and Matoran were all attacking now, although many of their blasts sailed over his head or to the sides. Either they were very poor shots, he decided, or else they thought he was much bigger than he truly was. Regardless, they had shown themselves to be enemies, not allies. He had joined them out of a desire for friendship and been repaid with violence.
Toa Ignika thought back to the flying Rahi outside of the cave. He hadn’t wanted to kill it, nor had he felt at all good when it was done. But he hadn’t seen any other choice… just like now.

If the Toa Nuva were going to continue to assault him without cause, then they were not worthy of the gift of life. He would simply have to take that gift back. It would sadden him to end their existences, of course. But periods of sadness were a part of being a living thing, or so he believed. Best to get used to the feeling now.

The Toa Ignika said a silent good-bye to the Toa and Matoran. It was, it seemed, more than time for them to die.

Kopaka Nuva knew exactly what he had to do. First, a blast of ice to distract his foe, followed by an all-out attack with the skyblaster. Done right, he would be able to keep the Makuta off balance long enough for Lewa and Pohatu to do their job.

He glanced at Solek, unconscious on the hive floor, thanks to a blow from Mutran. The Toa Nuva knew he would have to strike hard and fast if he was going to save himself and the Matoran.

But now something made him hesitate. The thought of creating ice sent an actual chill through him. Ice was so cold… hard… if he lost control of his power, he might fill the chamber with it. He would be buried in ice, unable to move or breathe, dying slowly in a frigid tomb.

No, that’s insane, he told himself. I’m a Toa! I have used my power hundreds of times and never lost control. I am one with the ice. I control it… don’t I?

Certainty turned to doubt, and doubt began to turn to fear. What if this was the fight where Kopaka’s precarious hold over the power of ice slipped, even a little? What if, once he started, he couldn’t turn his power off? He might doom all of Karda Nui to a frozen eternity.

None of this was logical. None of it made sense. But Kopaka Nuva found his mind filled with such thoughts, and so he hesitated, just an instant too long. Mutran was on him in two quick strides, armored hand around Kopaka’s throat, lifting the Toa into the air.

“I don’t just experiment with the physical form, you see,” Mutran whispered. “I like to play with the mind as well. You Toa always have such interesting minds – filled with grief over all the horrors you have seen, fear of disappointing others, anger at your enemies. You are all flood tides of emotion, Toa Nuva, and I am about to break the dam.”

With his free hand, Mutran tore the Midak Skyblaster from Kopaka’s grasp and hurled it away. Then the Makuta increased the power of his mental assault. To Kopaka’s credit, though his eyes widened and his breath came in ragged gasps, the Toa never screamed.

“A little rip here, a little tear there,” Mutran said, in an almost sing-song voice. “Before you know it, your mind will be torn to pieces. Of course, Antroz would probably want you intact for questioning. So we had better be finished before he finds out you’re here, hmmm? Yes, we had better get right to work.”

Photok was the first to sense something was terribly wrong. A feeling of weakness washed over him unlike anything he had ever felt. Instinctively, he knew what it was – the life was being drained from him.

He saw Tanma slip from Lewa’s back and fall to the floor. A few moments later, the two Toa were noticeably weakening. No, not weakening, he realized. Dying.

He looked up at the creature the four of them had been fighting. It was just standing there, unmoving, making no attempt to take advantage of its enemies’ distress. That made no sense. If it was out to destroy them, why not do it? And how could it have the power to steal their lives without even touching them?

Suddenly, for an instant, the creature was gone, replaced by the mysterious third Toa. Pohatu saw that, too, and knew instantly what was going on.

“An illusion,” he cried out. “The monster’s an illusion! We’ve been attacking our fellow Toa!”
Lewa, too weak to stand now, reached out toward his attacker. “Stop! We didn’t mean to hurt you! You’re killing us!”

Pohatu wasn’t about to wait for this strange new Toa to see reason. He took his best guess at where his foe was standing, then used his power over stone to make the ground erupt at Toa Ignika’s feet. The distraction proved to be just enough to disrupt the new Toa’s attack.

The image of the creature abruptly vanished. In its place was a slightly stunned Toa Ignika. Pohatu summoned all of his strength and charged, slamming into his attacker and pinning him to the wall.

“Who are you?” shouted the Toa Nuva of Stone. “Why are you here? And don’t try that little life-draining trick of yours again, or you’re going to live between a rock and a hard place, get me?”

Toa Ignika’s eyes blazed. So this, the new being decided, is what rage feels like. What was the proper response to this emotion? Past experience told him living things commit acts of violence when angry. Then, since he was now living, that was what he would do.

Before any blow could be struck, Pohatu released him and stepped back, looking confused.

“Wait a second,” muttered the Toa of Stone. “Your mask… I didn’t get a good look at it before. I know that mask— I’ve seen carvings of it on Voya Nui. You’re… you’re wearing the Mask of Life! Who in Mata Nui’s name are you?”

Solek struggled painfully back to consciousness, and immediately wished he hadn’t bothered. The sight that greeted him was horrible. Kopaka Nuva was huddled on the ground, unmoving, eyes open but just staring into space. Makuta Mutran stood over him, smiling wickedly.

“I didn’t think it would be so easy,” Mutran was saying. “I have always known Toa to proclaim their strength and resolve. But you melted like an icicle in a pool of lava, Kopaka. It will be a mercy to finish you off.”

Mutran raised his hand, preparing to fire a bolt of shadow energy. Seeing this, Solek raced across the room and dived toward Kopaka. But his dive fell short—he wouldn’t be able to block the bolt with his body. All he was able to do was to grab Kopaka’s arm and cry out, “Stop!”

The shadow energy flew from Mutran’s claw, but it never reached Kopaka Nuva. A shield made of light erupted from Solek’s hand, intercepting and reflecting the shadow bolt. Both the Av-Matoran and the Makuta were taken by surprise, so much so that neither noticed the gleam of intelligence return to Kopaka’s eyes.

The Toa Nuva sprang up, firing ice from both hands at the startled Mutran. Rock-hard hailstones the size of boulders pummeled the Makuta, while razor-sharp icicles pinned his armor to the wall.

“You’re all right?” Solek asked, in disbelief.

“A little trick Lewa, of all beings, taught me,” said Kopaka, never taking his eyes from Mutran or letting up on his devastating attack. “When attacked by an ash bear, it pays to play dead.”

Mutran grimaced, trying to summon a chain lightning attack against both Toa and Matoran. Kopaka, noticing the expression, intensified his assault until the sight of Mutran was lost amidst the ice and snow.

“I knew, given time, Mutran would win,” Kopaka continued. “So I let him think he already had, to buy time. But how did you create that shield?”

“I don’t know. It never happened before,” answered Solek. “Is he beaten?”

Kopaka shook his head. “Not even close. Delayed, at best. Where are the others? We need to finish what we came to do and get out of here!”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that.” The words came from the hive mouth, where Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah stood with two of their shadow Matoran. “Judging from the temperature, I am guessing Toa Nuva of Ice,” Antroz continued. “That would make you Kopaka, would it not?”

“Yes,” the Toa answered. “A few degrees colder, and your fellow Makuta will be permanently frozen… so I suggest you not make a move.”

Chirox smiled. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you, Toa, how it was that Makuta evolved into pure energy encased in armor? We found we didn’t need our bodies. We can strike down our enemies without flexing a finger or taking a step.”
Vamprah suddenly plunged the entire cavern into darkness with just a push from his mind. Chirox’s shattering power opened a crevasse in the cave floor, knocking Kopaka and Solek off their feet. Antroz finished the attack, using his power of magnetism to slam metal-armored Toa and Matoran against the hive walls until both were unconscious.

Radiak scampered over the bodies to the block of ice that imprisoned Mutran. “The Makuta is trapped. Shall I try to free him?”

“Oh, leave him that way,” said Chirox. “If he can’t free himself, he is worthless to our cause.”

“More importantly, Toa are like spiked fire worms,” said Antroz. “Where you find one, you find more. And like the worms, it is best to grind them beneath your heel. Call it a lesson to any other foolish creatures who might try to get in your way.”
Takanuva was a special kind of hero. He was a Toa. He controlled the power of light and wore a mask called the Avohkii, or Mask of Light. He had not been a Toa for long, but he had already had many adventures. He thought he knew everything there was to know about being a hero.

Today, he was on a new mission. He had to find six other Toa who were in a faraway place called Karda Nui. Takanuva had important news to tell them and had to reach them as fast as he could. To do this, he had to travel between dimensions.

But things did not go as planned. Takanuva fell through a hole in space and landed hard on the ground of a strange world. He got up and looked around. He was in the center of a forest. But it was a very strange forest. All the trees were black and twisted, and the grass was dying. A cold wind blew and made him shiver.

A voice spoke behind him. “A visitor!”

Takanuva turned to see a mask floating in midair. The voice was coming from the mask, but that made no sense. Masks couldn’t talk, they were just… masks.

“Who are you?” asked the mask.

“I’m a Toa,” said Takanuva. “That’s a hero. Can you show me the way out? I have a mission I must carry out.”

The mask smiled, which was a very strange sight. “Oh, if you are a hero, you are just what we need. Help us, and perhaps we can help you. There is a village on the other side of that hill that is in terrible trouble. You see, there is a –“

“All right,” Takanuva interrupted. “I’ll go and take care of the problem. Then you can help me get on my way.”

The mask looked like it was going to say something, but then just smiled instead. “All right. Good luck to you, Toa hero!”

Takanuva ran to the top of the hill. He stopped and stared. The “village” was more like a gigantic city, bigger than anything he had ever seen. Towers of silver reached up to the sky, surrounded by buildings made of gleaming crystal. It was beautiful.

It was easy to see what trouble the mask had been talking about. The city was full of small beings wearing black and purple armor. They were fighting a monster that was attacking their city. The monster was at least twenty feet high, with pointed ears, huge claws, and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The villagers were fighting hard, but Takanuva was sure they would lose.

He fired a burst of light from his staff, temporarily blinding the monster. “Get back!” Takanuva yelled to the small beings. “I’ll handle this!” The monster growled. For a moment, Takanuva thought he heard the beast speak, but decided he must be mistaken.

The monster tried to hit Takanuva, but the Toa of Light was too fast for him. A few more bolts of light from the Toa’s staff, and the beast began to stagger. It growled again, more loudly. This time, Takanuva was sure he heard the monster saying, “Wait! Stop! You’re wrong!”
It must be trying to trick me, Takanuva said to himself. I know an evil monster when I see one.

Takanuva hurled one more light blast from his staff and this one hit the monster. It roared in pain and ran off into the woods. Takanuva expected to hear cheering from the villagers. Instead, all he heard was laughter. Then they slammed and barred the gates so he could not get into the city.

The Toa of Light was puzzled, confused, and a little hurt. He had risked his life to save them and they hadn’t even said thank you! He knocked on the gates, but no one answered.

He found the floating mask again. “I did it,” said Takanuva. “I defeated the big monster and saved the city.”

“You defeated the big monster? Oh, no,” said the mask. “What have you done?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Takanuva.

“That ‘monster’ was the last of the beings that lived in that city,” the mask explained. “The little armored ones were invaders who took it away from him. They were trouble. I started to tell you, but you were in too much of a hurry to listen.”

“But he had sharp teeth and claws,” protested Takanuva. “And he was so big, and they were so little, so I thought…”

“Good does not always come in little packages, or evil in big ones,” said the mask. “My giant friend is gentle and kind, and used his teeth and claws only to defend himself. I’m sure he would have told you that if he’d had the chance.”

“He tried,” said Takanuva, turning away. “I didn’t listen.” The next moment, the Toa of Light was running away.

“Where are you going?” asked the mask.

“To correct a mistake,” answered Takanuva.

It took a while to find the wounded beast, and longer still to convince him that Takanuva meant no harm. The mask had been right. The beast didn’t want to harm the invaders, just get them out of his city. Takanuva thought he had an idea that would do just that.

An hour later, the Toa stood on the top of a big hill about half a mile from the city gates. He lifted his staff and hurled light into the sky. His powers created the most amazing fireworks show anyone had ever seen!

One by one, the small invaders came out of the city to watch the burst of light in the sky. Soon the was a whole crowd of them, all looking up in wonder.

They were so caught up in the light show that none of them noticed the beast emerging from a tunnel into the center of the city. It had taken him a long time to dig his way home, but now he was back. Striding to the huge gates, the beast slammed them shut, trapping the invaders outside the walls of the city.

Takanuva smiled. Since he had arrived here, he had been making mistakes because he judged others by how they looked. Now the invaders had done the same thing, by thinking the fireworks were just fireworks. As a result, they had lost the city they had stolen and would never get it back.

When he returned to the floating mask, it seemed pleased with him. “All beings make mistakes, at some time,” said the mask. “But part of being a hero is admitting you were wrong and fixing them. You have done that well.”

A hole appeared in space next to the mask. “Is this my way out of here?” asked Takanuva. “I need to get to my friends before it’s too late!”

“It is the way you must travel,” said the mask. “But beware – you may find that not everything is what it seems on your way. Remember, good and evil can be found in the deeds of others, not in their appearance.”

“I’ll remember,” said Takanuva. “And… thank you.”

With that, the Toa of Light dove through the hole and into the space between dimensions. Where his journey would take him, he didn’t know – but he did know that he was much wiser now than when it began.
Axonn charged across the landscape of Voya Nui, weapon at the ready. He had just spied two figures materializing in the Green Belt. One looked something like Botar, but obviously wasn’t. The other resembled a Toa, but wasn’t one Axonn knew. The first thing he had learned after being assigned to this place was subdue first, ask questions later.

The Botar look-alike spotted Axonn first, and tried to block him. A sweep of an armored fist sent him sprawling. Axonn was on top of the Toa in the flash of a heartlight, axe blade at the intruder’s throat.

“Who are you?” growled Axonn. “What do you want here? Talk!”

“My name is Krakua,” the Toa answered, trying in vain to push the axe away from his neck. “I was sent to find you. You’re needed.”

“Who sent you?” asked Axonn.

“Toa Helryx. Use your mask, you’ll see I’m speaking the truth.”

Axonn did just that, calling on the powers of his Kanohi Rode, the Mask of Truth. To his surprise, it told him that his captive was indeed being honest. He got up and let Krakua get to his feet. “You’re Order of Mata Nui, then,” Axonn said. “I see recruiting standards have slipped a little.”

Krakua paid no attention to the remark. Instead, he said, “Come with us. Your presence is required on Daxia.”

Before Axonn could object, the Botar-type had come close and activated his teleportation power. The three of them vanished from Voya Nui, only to reappear in the Order of Mata Nui fortress on Daxia. Axonn had been there before, so its appearance was no surprise to him. The sight of his former partner Brutaka was, though – not to mention the huge dragon next to him whose bulk almost filled up the great hall.

“Things must be desperate if they’re calling on an old war Rahi like you,” Brutaka said with a smile. “Oh, by the way, have you met tall, green, and gruesome here? Don’t mind the scales and teeth, but you might want to stay downwind of him.”

“Brutaka!” said Axonn. “What are you – how did you get out of The Pit?”

“They let me out early for good behavior,” Brutaka smiled. “But I’m the least of the shocking faces around here. This is it, my friend. The Order is about to come out of hiding after all these years. Helryx told me so herself.”

“What did she say?”

“Two words,” said Brutaka, his smile disappearing. “Destiny war.”

The Dark Hunter known as Ancient stood on the beach of the island of Odina. Behind him, rebuilding of the fortress destroyed by Pohatu Nuva went on rapidly. His eyes scanned the waters, watching for the return of Lariska from her mission. He was anxious to hear just what she had seen and heard.
A cry made him look up. It came from a bat-winged Rahi wheeling through the sky – one not native to Odina. He recognized the creature as one bred for long distance flying: more than once, the Dark Hunters had used them to send messages back and forth to agents on other islands. But the flying creature up above did not come from another Dark Hunter. As a half dozen more joined it, they began flying in a pattern recognizable to no one on the island but Ancient. It was a message intended for him, and one that was urgent. The time had come. He had to seek out the Shadowed One and try to make him see the only possible future for the Dark Hunters. And if the Shadowed One, his old friend, failed to see reason… Ancient would have to kill him.

Vezon paced in his cell on Daxia. Across the corridor were two great water tanks. In one swam the six Piraka, now mutated into water snakes. In the other was a bizarre-looking being others referred to as Karzahni, who seemed to Vezon to be quite insane. And Vezon knew insane.

When Brutaka’s team had first escaped the island of Artidax with Makuta Miserix, they had flown to a barren island in the middle of nowhere. After a short time, Brutaka had them on the move again, this time to a place called Daxia. Brutaka explained that the location of the island had always been a secret before, but that secrecy didn’t matter anymore.

Neither, apparently, did gratitude, as Vezon and Roodaka were both thrown into cells immediately upon arrival. Vezon, frankly, was disappointed. Sure, he had tried to steal the Mask of Life… and, yes, he had tried to kill the Toa Inika once – well, twice… and okay, he had made an effort to trade their lives to the Zyglak in exchange for his, but it’s not like that had worked. And he had volunteered – well, been forced – well, actually been threatened with bodily harm if he didn’t help, but he did aid in the rescue of Makuta Miserix. And what was his reward? A cold cell, an uncaring guard, and nothing nearby he could use to kill the Piraka. Was that justice?

His musings were interrupted by the crimson-armored Trinuma. The Order member took a long look at Vezon, shrugged and shook his head. Then he unlocked the cell door and threw it open. “It’s your lucky day, misfit,” said Trinuma. “You’re getting out.”

“I am?” said Vezon. “I mean, of course I am. Keeping a being of my brilliance locked away is a terrible waste of resources. No doubt your masters want to consult me on matters of strategy and tactics.”

“No,” said Trinuma. “I think they said something about needing someone who could die horribly without being missed. So naturally, they thought of you.”

Vezon’s addled brain processed what Trinuma said, and somehow decided it was a compliment. “Well, naturally,” he replied. “Lead on, and let me show you all how dying’s done.”

* * *

It took only minutes for Bitil, his doubles, and Onua Nuva to reach Krika’s lair deep in the swamp. There was no sign of any living being, only dead Rahi scattered about in the mud. That didn’t seem to deter Bitil, who landed on the small islet and stood, waiting.

“Krika? Show yourself.”

Onua Nuva wanted to look around to see if anyone was coming… and suddenly realized that he could. Whatever Bitil had hit him with had worn off. But he stayed perfectly still, not wanting to let the Makuta know his body was his own again.

“You never see him until the last moment,” Bitil muttered. “I hate that.”

The other Bitils nodded in agreement, all but one, who looked very confused. Now that Onua took a second look, he realized that particular version of Bitil was not an exact duplicate of the others. In fact, he was quite different in appearance, lacking the leg blades and the hideous face of his companions.

The Toa of Earth had no idea what was going on here. But whatever it was, it had started with the Makuta that had captured him. He waited until that one’s back was turned, then charged forward and caught him in a headlock. He swung Bitil around as the others surged forward.
“I wouldn’t,” said Onua. “Not if you like his head attached to his body.”

Six pairs of arms were outstretched toward Onua. Shadow energy began to gather in the palms of twelve hands as Bitil’s duplicates prepared to attack.

“What happens to you doubles if the original dies?” Onua continued. “Do you really want to find out?”

The Bitil Onua held prisoner began to laugh. Then, with a mere shrug, he broke the Toa’s grip and sent Onua sprawling on the ground in front of the duplicates. “You fool,” said Makuta Bitil. “These aren’t just doubles – they are me. They are all me. Each one plucked from my past to aid me in the present. Instant army, ever loyal, and I can call on as many as I need. See?”

As Onua rose, he saw that six Bitils had become a dozen, then two dozen, then close to 50. Some were standing, some flying, some resembled Bitil exactly and some hardly at all. But they all hated the sight of a Toa.

“Unfortunately, they – we – never seem to remember what we see in our own future,” Bitil continued. “Shame they won’t recall the moment of your death.”

Onua had made it to his knees. “Then I guess we better make it… memorable,” said the Toa of Earth.

Closing his eyes, he called upon his elemental power. Ruled by his will, the substance of the islet exploded, sending tons of mud into the air. Along with it flew Onua, rocketing up and away from Makuta Bitil and his legion.

When he felt he was high enough, he turned to see one mud-spattered enemy flying up after him. Shattered concentration had shut off Bitil’s mask power, sending his duplicates back to the past. Onua readied his Midak Skyblaster – and then discovered to his surprise that his weapon was no longer a skyblaster. Here goes nothing, then, thought Onua as he fired.

The rocket hit his foe head on, but the effect was completely unexpected. A sphere of pure energy formed around the Makuta, cutting him off from Onua. The next instant, the sphere dropped like a stone, carrying Bitil all the way back down into the swamp.

Onua banked to the right and flew off. He had to warn the others that the Makuta were here in force… if it wasn’t already too late. But how to find Gali and Tahu?

Half that problem was suddenly solved. A huge fireball rocketed into the air far to the east. That was a call for help if ever Onua saw one. Angling his wings and triggering the rockets on his armor, he headed for battle.

Gali Nuva couldn’t believe her luck. No, she hadn’t spotted the Mask of Life, but she had seen what appeared to be a keystone. The Toa Nuva had discovered some fragments of an ancient tablet in the Matoran villages up above. Inscribed on them were directions for how to awaken the Great Spirit Mata Nui. But the fragments were of no use unless all six of them could be collected and read together.

This particular stone fragment was wrapped up in the vines of a huge swamp plant. She was tempted to jet in and grab it quickly, but memory intruded. She recalled tales the Turaga told of an evil, intelligent plant called Morbuzakh that once tried to crush the city of Metru Nui. There was no telling what the plant life was like down in this strange place. Better to approach with caution.

Makuta Gorast could not believe her luck. Stuck in this miserable swamp, mutated by the waters, and no longer able to shapeshift, she had begun to question her role in the Brotherhood’s plan. Surely she was meant for something better than wading through mud, feeding off the small reserves of light in Rahi? Perhaps Makuta Icarax had been right all along… this grand Plan involved too much waiting and not enough killing.

She swiftly rejected that notion. The Plan was what mattered, nothing else, and certainly not the needs of any individual Makuta.
But now, Fate had sent her a Toa, no doubt brimming with light. She was tempted to glide silently on her wing blades and attack, leaving this Toa of Water a corrupted husk in the end. But she had heard tales from other Makuta about how Toa were sometimes the most dangerous when they seemed most vulnerable. Better, she decided, to approach with caution.

A mini-tidal wave of swamp water smashed into the plant, shaking its thick trunk. When the wave subsided, the keystone was still firmly lodged in its tendrils. Gali summoned another fist of water, targeting it right at the spot where the stone was trapped. This time, the fragment actually moved slightly, starting to work its way loose of the plant’s grip. Another three attempts, and the stone fell to the soft earth.

Gali went to retrieve it. It wouldn’t be long now.

Gorast watched as the Toa of Water harnessed her elemental power to dislodge a piece of rock from a plant. She vaguely recalled Antroz telling her that if she saw such a stone, she should gather it up and deliver it to him. But her hunger for light had driven that order from her mind until now.

Better and better, she thought. I will drain a Toa and carry out my orders at the same time.

The keystone was finally loose, and the Toa was headed for it. Gorast dove to attack. It wouldn’t be long now.

Gali’s fist closed on the stone even as she remembered something else. It was a hazy recollection of something said to her long, long ago. She had been in a barren, unbearably hot place, she recalled. There had been a battle, and she had lost, though not to an enemy. Someone was standing over her.

“The danger isn’t always what you see,” he was saying. “Often, it’s what you don’t see until it’s too late.”

The thought made her turn. Gorast was bearing down on her. Gali didn’t bother to think, just reacted, sending a pile driver fist of water slamming into the Makuta.

Gorast spun crazily through the air, finally latching onto a tree with her four clawed hands. Hissing angrily, she rocketed toward Gali. The Toa hurled another water blast. Gorast dodged and plowed headfirst into Gali’s midsection. Gali smashed into a tree, tearing it out of the ground and sending it toppling into the swamp.

Gorast landed in the mud and raced toward the fallen Toa. Dazed, Gali still managed to throw a water sphere around Gorast’s head, cutting off the Makuta’s air. Gorast tried to shake it off, but the sphere held fast. Gali glanced at her weapon, finding it had morphed into a virtual duplicate of what Gorast carried. She banished the water sphere even as she fired, sending chains of energy coiling around Gorast like snakes.

“Surrender. Or would you rather go for another swim on dry land, Makuta?” Gali said. “That is what you are, isn’t it? Another Makuta?”

“Gorast,” said her captive. “Makuta of the Tren Krom peninsula, mistress of the acid falls, conqueror of the Visorak horde – and you are Gali Nuva, Toa of Raindrops.”

With a seemingly effortless shrug, Gorast snapped the chains that bound her. “And Makuta do not surrender... for the same reasons Toa do not kill.”

Gorast fired her Nynrah blaster. Gali dove, narrowly avoiding the shot, and fired quick bursts of water even as she slid through the mud. Gorast batted away the projectiles with her four arms and advanced. Thinking quickly, Gali increased the moisture in the mud beneath Gorast’s feet. The Makuta began to sink into the ground, weighed down by her armor. She tried to fly out, but the mud clung to her as if it were alive and hungry.

“You Makuta think we’re weak because we don’t kill our enemies,” Gali said, rising and walking to where Gorast struggled to be free. “But sometimes, killing can be a mercy. Sometimes the worst thing you can do to an enemy is let her live.”

Gorast nodded. “And sometimes the worst is to deprive your enemy of that satisfaction.” With that said, Gorast shut her eyes and plunged beneath the mud pool. Gali started forward, stunned that the
Makuta was committing suicide rather than surrendering. There was no sign of Gorast, not even an air bubble breaching the surface.

"Stupid," muttered Gali. "Didn’t life mean anything to her, even her own?"

There was an explosion of mud behind her. Gorast tore out of the ground like an avenging spirit and drove her stinger into Gali’s back. “My life doesn’t matter,” said the Makuta. “Your life doesn’t matter. Only the Plan matters.”

A huge fireball flew into the sky then, illuminating the horrible sight of a Toa’s light being drained away… if there was anyone around to see.

Tahu Nuva hated the cold. Perhaps that was why there was always bad blood between him and Kopaka, Toa of Ice. Fire brought warmth and light; it was used to forge masks and tools; it was essential to life itself. Ice brought nothing but death.

Now, as he lay in the mud, he felt a cold that reached into his very muscles and threatened to freeze them solid. He had never felt anything quite like it, not even in mock battle with Kopaka. It didn’t feel like physical cold – it was more a chill of the spirit.

Tahu opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a long, white, vaguely insectoid leg lined with sharp, curved spikes. It shifted slightly in the mud, revealing three more just like it. Whoever they belonged to was bending over Tahu, but the Toa of Fire doubted it would wake him up gently.

Despite the cold, Tahu forced himself to roll away. Once he had put a little distance between him and his visitor, he got the chance to get a good look – and promptly wished he had not. The creature facing him had a long, narrow, white head with bony ridges extending from its brow partway down its spine. Its forelegs were very long, its hind legs shorter, and one arm held a weapon. It looked like some kind of monstrous Rahi and gazed at Tahu with crimson, hate-filled eyes.

"Once, I was like you," the bizarre being said.

"Like me? You mean you were a Toa?" asked Tahu. He was on his feet now, weapon at the ready.

The creature laughed. It sounded like a skeleton being crushed underfoot. "No. Once I was alive like you: solid and whole, needing no one and nothing. I was Makuta Krika, my name whispered in legends throughout half the known universe. And now...”

"What changed?" asked Tahu. He had noted how softly this being was speaking, an old trick to draw a potential victim in closer. The Toa had no intention of falling for it.

"Everything changed, Tahu... oh, yes, I know who you are," said Krika. "It changed the day Makuta Teridax unveiled his plan to conquer the Great Spirit and we fell into step behind him – some out of fear, some out of greed, some for... other reasons."

Krika shrugged, the wickedly sharp ends of his forelegs rising out of the mud for just a moment before sinking back in. "Our great Plan. It has cost the Brotherhood of Makuta much time and treasure. It has cost me far more.”

"Why are you telling me all this?" Tahu asked.

"Do you know why the Brotherhood of Makuta hates Toa so much?"

"I could think of lots of reasons," Tahu replied.

"It’s because you are what we could only pretend to be, once upon a time: heroes who do good for no reward. You are given freely the honor and acclaim that could never come fast enough for us. And so we call you fools, and worse, and slay you... because we cannot be you."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?" snapped Tahu. "After all the evil you and your kind have done? I don’t think so. Share your burdens with someone who cares."

Krika shrugged again. "I simply thought that you would want to know...”

The temperature suddenly dropped sharply. This time, Tahu felt as if the energy was being drained from his body. Too weak to stand, he fell into the mud.

"...Why it is you have to die," finished the Makuta.
The world was starting to spin around Tahu. He was going to have time for one action, and if it didn't work, he would be a dead Toa. With enormous effort, he raised one arm and hurled a huge fireball straight and high into the air. He could only hope Gali or Onua would see it in time.

Krika glanced up, his eyes following the flight of the fiery object. He smiled, but it was a sad smile, for he knew Toa all too well. Tahu's flare would bring more running to their deaths. They were doomed.

And perhaps, thought Krika, *that is the one thing I have in common with my foes.*
Toa Bomonga tightened his headlock on the Tahtorak and tried to wrestle the beast to the ground. Bomonga’s Mask of Growth allowed him to reach almost the size of the creature, but he could not match the Tahtorak in sheer strength. Still, he knew a few things about leverage and pressure points that the Rahi did not.

With a roar, the Tahtorak lost its footing and slammed hard into the ground of Xia. What was left of the island city trembled from the impact. “Now stay down,” Bomonga growled, even as Toa Pouks used his power to create bonds of solid stone for the monster.

After a long battle, the Tahtorak had battered the Kanohi Dragon enough that Toa Norik’s spinners had been able to slow it down, while Toa Kualus’ ice attack finished it off. It now lay unconscious, sprawled across much of the southern district of the city. Toa Iruini had taken the advice of a Vortixx and made sure to move the creature’s leg away from the Mountain, so it wouldn’t end up a big snack for that hungry landmark.

Only Toa Gaaki stood off to the side, her eyes fixed on the ocean but unseeing. The Toa Hagah had seen her like this before. She was focused inward, using the power of her Mask of Clairvoyance to see things they could not. Now she stiffened, cried out, and turned toward the others.

“They’re coming,” she said. “Hundreds of them.”

“Hundreds of who?” asked Iruini. He considered Gaaki a good friend, but her vague predictions did have a way of getting on his nerves at times.

“Seekers of shadows,” Gaaki muttered. “Slayers of the dark… ready for war… Xia cannot stand…”

Norik walked up beside her and gently eased Gaaki to a seat on a rock. He knelt in front of her and talked to her in a whisper. Now and then she would nod her head. After a few minutes, he gestured to Kualus.

Although the Toa of Ice was no longer a Rahaga, he had not lost his bond with flying Rahi or his ability to communicate with them. Now he signaled to a smoke hawk up above and spoke rapidly in a language none of the others understood. A moment later, the hawk flew off to the west.

“How is she?” Pouks asked Norik.

“It’s been a long time since she used her power,” answered the Toa Hagah of Fire. “Or, rather, since it used her. It’s never easy.”

“What she said – seekers of shadows – what do you think it means?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Bomonga, shrinking down to his normal height. “Seekers of shadows – Dark Hunters.”

The smoke hawk picked that moment to return, flying in tight circles above the island and cawing loudly. Kualus nodded twice and rushed over to his fellow Toa.

“Bomonga is right, from the sound of it,” he said. “My winged ally sees ships coming, so many they blot out the waves. And the crews are armed, my friends… it’s a battle fleet.”
Iruini had climbed up the top of one of the few spires still standing in the city. “Score one for the birdie,” he yelled down. “We have company. I'm going to check them out!”

“Iruini, wait—” began Norik.

“Wait for what?” the Toa of Air said, smiling. “I spent thousands of years as a Rahaga — now I'm back in action, and I love it!”

An instant later, the Toa of Air used his Mask of Quick Travel to teleport from the spire to the flagship of the oncoming fleet. He found himself standing on the deck, facing two powerful looking figures. A handful of armed warriors immediately moved to surround him.

“Who are you?” asked Iruini. “What's your business in these waters?”

“My business?” asked one of the figures. “My business is profit, and that profit has been strangled for too long. And who are you?”

“I am Toa Iruini. My friends and I have just completed a mission on Xia. That island was half-levelled in the process, and let me guess — you're here to level the other half.”

“My name is The Shadowed One,” came the reply, “leader of the Dark Hunters. Standing beside me is my loyal lieutenant, Ancient. Standing in front of me is a very foolish Toa if he thinks he can get between me and my goal.”

Iruini ignored the jab. “If you're looking to loot Xia, there's precious little left to steal.”

“Loot?” repeated The Shadowed One, in mock surprise. “Steal? How little you think of me. Would I muster a fleet for petty thievery? No, Toa, I have made a bargain this day with a power I never knew existed — and my new allies have asked me to ensure that Xia provides no more weapons to the enemy. They wish me to blockade or occupy the island, but I do not believe in half-measures.”

The Shadowed One smiled, an expression as cold as one of Kualus’ ice blasts. “So I am going to destroy Xia, and every last living thing on it. And if your friends are unfortunate enough to be there when I arrive... well, perhaps I will be merciful, and leave enough of them to bury.”

Iruini raised his cyclone spear. Weapons were suddenly aimed at him from a dozen different directions.

“This is my war,” The Shadowed One said softly, “and welcome to it.”

* * *

Five years ago...

Mazeka dove aside even as the acid blade slashed through the air where he had been standing. He could hear the angry hiss of centuries-old rock dissolving where the sword had brushed against it. A step slower and that would have been his armor.

He hit the ground and rolled, ending up back on his feet with dagger at the ready. Vultraz twirled the blade over his head, smiling. “You knew it had to come down to this, didn't you?” said the crimson-armored Matoran. “Just the two of us, mask to mask.”

“This isn't one of your epic fables,” Mazeka replied. “You're a thief and a murderer, Vultraz. You killed an entire village of Matoran who never did a thing to you.”

“Except have something I wanted — an intact lava-gem, a rare find on the Tren Krom peninsula,” Vultraz replied. “They didn't want to give it up... thought it appeased the volcano or some such thing, kept it from erupting... a few well-timed explosions and one sea of lava later, and they found out how wrong they were.”

Mazeka lunged. Vultraz sidestepped and hit his foe with the flat of his blade, burning an impression of the weapon into his armor. Mazeka stumbled toward the edge of the cliff and caught himself just in time. The entire mountain slope was lined with razor crystals, sharp enough to shred armor and tissue into ribbons.

“How many times do we have to do this?” said Vultraz. “When are you going to realize that you're not a Toa... just some crazy villager who thinks he has to risk his neck fighting the bad guys? Go home, Mazeka. Go back to your little life, before you force me to end it.”
Mazeka scrambled to his feet, his back to the cliff. Vultraz was right – he was just a Matoran, with no elemental or mask power. Of course, Vultraz was too, but his old enemy had years of experience at lying, cheating and killing. Up until a few years past, Mazeka had just been a scholar trying to solve the mysteries of the universe. That was before Vultraz killed his mentor and stole valuable tablets containing the results of years of research. The two had clashed many times since then, but the tablets had never been found.

“Put down your weapon, old friend, and walk away,” said Vultraz.

“We were never friends!” spat Mazeka.

“Sure, we were,” Vultraz grinned. “All those happy years toiling away in our backward little village, trying not to attract Makuta Gorast’s attention. I was just the more ambitious of the two of us. I got out.”

“And you’ve been running ever since,” said Mazeka. “Time for it to stop, before you run into something even you can’t handle.”

Vultraz charged, swinging his blade… but not at Mazeka. Instead, he sliced away at the piece of rock upon which his enemy stood. It disintegrated before the acid and fell away. Mazeka fell, too, grabbing onto the ledge and hanging suspended over the razor crystals.

“I really don’t want to kill you,” Vultraz said quietly. “You’re a link to my past… a reminder of all the things I avoided becoming. But you keep getting in my way, and I can’t have that.”

Vultraz lifted the blade over his head and brought it down. Mazeka swung to the side, letting go of the ledge with one hand, and used his momentum to carry his legs up. He kicked Vultraz in the side even as that Matoran’s attack was carrying him forward. The combination sent Vultraz over the edge of the cliff. He never screamed all the long way down.

Mazeka looked down and cursed. It was impossible to spot Vultraz’s body so far below, but that was a mercy, in a way. Sliding hundreds of feet down razor crystals would leave precious little to see. He concentrated on trying to climb back up to safety before he joined his enemy in death.

A hand shod in ocean blue armor grabbed his wrist and pulled him up. It belonged to a warrior Mazeka had never seen before. She carried a chain mace and a shield and looked powerful enough to down a Takea shark with one blow. She wasn’t a Toa, he was almost certain, but he had no idea who she might be.

“I’m a… friend,” the newcomer said. “Never mind my name. I saw what happened here. You are very brave, Matoran.”

Mazeka shook his head. “Not brave. Lucky. And not even that… he died before telling me what I needed to know. Now I have to return to my village and submit myself to the justice of my people.”

The warrior shook her head. “Don’t fear. You did them a service and will be rewarded… and who knows who else you may have helped today?”

Mazeka didn’t answer, just walked away with his head down. The warrior watched him go. When he was almost out of sight, the face and form of his rescuer began to shimmer and change. In a moment, the mighty warrior had been replaced by Makuta Gorast. She looked at Mazeka, then glanced over the cliff.

“Yes, little hero,” she said, smiling wickedly. “Who knows, indeed?”

*   *   *

Now...

Takanuva, Toa of Light, fell through inter-dimensional space, trying hard not to scream. A moment before, he had stepped through a dimensional portal created by Brutaka. His mission: travel to Karda Nui and warn the six Toa Nuva there of a disaster about to occur.

Somehow, though, this trip was not going as planned. Takanuva was being buffeted about, catching glimpses now and then of weird other worlds filled with beings both familiar and unfamiliar. He could guess that if he somehow wound up in one of those places, he might never find his way back to his own universe.
Suddenly, there was a jolt worse than any before. He was spinning wildly, out of control. There was an instant of complete darkness, followed by a very bright light, and then Takanuva slammed onto a rocky shore. He lay there, stunned, for a long time. When he finally lifted his head, it was to view a sight he could never have imagined.

The city before him was vast. It made Metru Nui look like a collection of stone-cutter shacks. Multiple design styles had combined to create a megalopolis that stretched for as far as the eye could see. Some of the buildings looked like ones in Metru Nui—he recognized the Coliseum, for example—others were totally strange and some almost primitive.

Takanuva glanced up at the sky. No, it didn’t look like the one over Metru Nui. It looked—oh, no, that couldn’t be, he thought. It was the same shade of blue as the one over the island of Mata Nui.

That’s impossible, he said to himself. Everyone left Mata Nui to move back to Metru Nui months ago. And Mata Nui was never this size, or filled with so many beings and buildings!

He stood up and looked around. Everywhere, he could see Matoran of all kinds hard at work. That certainly wasn’t unusual. Of course, the fact that they were working side by side with Bohrok, Skakdi, and Visorak was downright shocking.

“Hey,” said a voice from behind him. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

Takanuva turned. A Ga-Matoran, Macku, was there. She gave no sign of recognizing him.

“I’m Toa Takanuva,” he answered. “Can you tell me where I am?”

“You’re not Takanuva,” said Macku, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Try again—or would you rather we call the Hunters?”

“But I am Takanuva. I know I look different, but—”

“That’s for sure,” laughed Macku. “You’re a lot taller. Or have you never seen Turaga Takanuva, stranger?”

“Turaga—?” sputtered Takanuva. He recovered quickly. “Um, maybe I was a little confused. Tell me, do you know where I could find Jaller?”

“At the Great Furnace, naturally,” said Macku, suspicion in her voice. “What do you want him for?”

“I have, um, a message for him from an old friend,” Takanuva replied.

It took some doing, but he finally convinced Macku to escort him into the city, which she called “the kingdom of the Great Spirit.” The first person she brought him to was a tall, strong warrior carrying a massive axe. He looked Takanuva over for a minute, then nodded. “He’s not a shapeshifter. And he really does think he’s Takanuva.”

“Thanks, Axonn,” said Macku. “So he’s crazy then?”

“Not sure,” said Axonn. He reached out and snatched away Takanuva’s Staff of Light. “Might be better not to let him walk around the city with this. You know how the Turaga feels about citizens carrying weapons.”

They walked through the streets of the city, as shock followed shock for Takanuva. Over there were Matoran buying wares from street stands run by Vortixx; further on, a Skakdi was hawking a show, boasting of the amazing Visorak pyramid that could be seen inside for just five widgets. And on every street corner, there was the presence of law enforcers—not Toa, not even Vahki, but Dark Hunters!

Macku left Takanuva with Toa Jaller. The Toa of Fire looked the same as he always had, but he viewed Takanuva without the wariness the Ga-Matoran had. “Well, you’re obviously not Takanuva,” he said. “But as long as you’re not a Makuta in disguise, you’re welcome in the kingdom. What can I do for you?”

“Just talk to me,” Takanuva said. “Tell me about this place. Are we… is this really the island of Mata Nui?”

Jaller laughed. “Wow. I haven’t heard it called that in close to 10,000 years. Anyway, yes, this was the island of Mata Nui, but it’s a lot more than that now.”

“I see that. What… I mean, how…”
Jaller pointed to a massive stone wall. "That's what you want. There's a Wall of History in every district – Kopeke made sure of that. You'll find answers there." Jaller paused, and then added, "You know, it's funny. I know I never met you, but somehow you seem familiar. Why did you ask to see me, anyway?"

Takanuva thought about telling Jaller the truth. He could share all sorts of things only the real Takanuva would know. But then he decided that, at best, he would scare his old friend… and at worst, he would wind up arrested by the Hunters.

"Right. Well, I met Turaga Takanuva once, and he… um… told me what a great friend you were. He said if I was ever in trouble, to come see you."

"Well, that's a pleasant surprise," said Jaller. "None of the Toa Mahri are very popular around here, even after all this time… even after how things turned out. I don't think anyone's even seen Matoro in five or six thousand years."

The name startled Takanuva. Matoro was dead, killed when he sacrificed his life to save the Great Spirit Mata Nui and the universe. A theory was starting to form in the mind of the Toa of Light, and the Wall of History was where it could be proven or disproven. He thanked Jaller and hurried on.

Yes, it was all there all right. The first thing he noticed was the date – it was 10,000 years after he had left Metru Nui! But that wasn't half as surprising as the story the carvings told.

The Toa Mahri had journeyed to the underwater city of Mahri Nui in search of the Mask of Life, just as he recalled. But after that, the story had changed. Toa Matoro – referred to in the carvings as the "Disgraced One" – had hesitated a few moments too long in his pursuit of the mask. The core of the universe had been sealed off, making it impossible for him to revive the Great Spirit Mata Nui with the mask. And Mata Nui, ruler and protector of the entire Matoran Universe, had died.

But the tale didn't end there. The Turaga of Metru Nui had been planning for just such an eventuality. Mobilizing the Toa, the Vortixx, the Skakdi, and many of the universe's other species, they led a mass migration to the surface over the course of a few days. The Order of Mata Nui revealed its existence and helped as well. Even as more and more beings poured from Metru Nui up to the Mata Nui, those who were already there worked to construct floating platforms to hold them all. Naturally, not everyone made it – it just wasn’t physically possible to evacuate a universe in that short an amount of time – but many did. It was obvious that only by working together could they survive on the surface, and so the concept of the Kingdom was born.

Only two species from the original universe were not represented here. The Zyzglak had refused to evacuate, choosing death over accepting assistance from Matoran. The Makuta attempted to migrate, only to find their way barred by Toa Takanuva and the Order. Together, they drove the Makuta back underground, and no sign had been seen of them since. His destiny achieved, Takanuva had sacrificed his power to bring a new generation of Toa into being. These included Toa Kapura, Toa Balta, Toa Dalu, Toa Velika, Toa Defilak, and a new Toa of Light, Tanma. Takanuva had then become a Turaga and was named leader of the Kingdom in recognition of his heroism.

Things got stranger from there. Turaga Takanuva had formed a new ruling council, consisting of Turaga Dume, a prime Skakdi warlord, the Bahrag, Roodaka, the Shadowed One, Helryx, and a Nynrah Matoran. Dark Hunters had become the primary law enforcers, while Toa were put to work using their powers to help the city in other ways. First, they prevented the collapse of the original island in the wake of Mata Nui's death. Then they created new and more stable land masses to support the city's expansion. After 10 millennia, the Kingdom was now a mega-city and home to all the survivors of the original universe.

Turaga Takanuva and his Council ruled from the Coliseum. Toa Takanuva not only couldn’t resist paying a visit to his other self, but he needed to find some way out of here. The Wall had shown him he had not simply traveled into his future somehow. This was not his universe at all.

As he walked, he had to admit that part of him wished he didn’t have to leave. Who would have imagined that Matoro’s failure would have resulted in a paradise like this? Everywhere he looked, he saw beings of different species working side by side. Only Toa and Hunters carried weapons, but they looked like they hadn’t been used in ages.
He expected to find the Coliseum heavily guarded, but the opposite was the case. The seat of government was open to all in the Kingdom. Instead of asking to see Turaga Takanuva, though, he sent a message to Helryx. It was short, reminding her of what her original plan had been to warn the Toa Nuva about conditions in Karda Nui and asking if she could get him in to see the Turaga.

That produced results. Takanuva was escorted by Trinuma into the Turaga’s chamber at the top of the Coliseum. Turaga Takanuva was in conference with Toa Tanma and Roodaka. Resting in the center of a large table was a Rahkshi head.

“You say this Rahkshi appeared in the center of the city, near the Piraka fountain?” the Turaga said.

Roodaka nodded. “A bunch of Fe-Matoran were there feeding Avak and Thok, making plans to add iron supports to the western land mass. They spotted a Panrahk and called the Hunters, who took care of it. This is all that was left.”

“It shouldn’t have been able to get through,” said Tanma, grimly.

“Maybe it was an accident,” Turaga Takanuva offered, sounding as if he didn’t believe it himself. “Maybe one slipped through before the light barriers went up and has been hiding here all this time.”

“I wish,” said Toa Tanma.

“The light barriers are going down,” said Toa Takanuva. All three turned to look at him, startled.

“I… know a little about light.”

Turaga Takanuva started to say something, then stopped. He turned to Roodaka and Tanma and asked them to leave the chamber. Once they were gone, he said, “How is this possible?”

“You know, then?” said the Toa.

“How could I not?” said the Turaga. “And Helryx has told me what she planned to do, if things had gone differently. You’re from… someplace else, I take it?”

The Toa nodded. “Someplace else, it’s true, but not someplace as peaceful. You have done an amazing job.” He smiled. “I’m proud of me.”

The Turaga shook his head. “It can’t last. Onua and the others have done all they can, but the original island cannot survive much longer. We will have to move on again, perhaps to the stars if Nuju and Nuparu’s project works. But until then, the Makuta – if they still live – must not be allowed into the Kingdom!”

Turaga Takanuva looked at his Toa counterpart from another universe, not his own. “I know this isn’t your world, and I know the message you carry is vital. But Tanma… and the entire Kingdom… could use your aid. When you’re done, we can find a way to send you back. Will you help?”

Toa Takanuva nodded. “Of course. But… I could use my Staff of Light back.”

Turaga Takanuva smiled. “Oh, that weapon went out of style 10,000 years ago. I think we can find you something better than that, old friend.”
Later, Lewa Nuva would remember that sound.
It was a high-pitched, keening wail that threatened to split his head open. Pohatu, their strange new ally, and the Matoran heard it, too. The two Av-Matoran dropped like stones. The Toa remained standing long enough to see their attackers, three Makuta. Then they, too, succumbed to the pain and passed out.

When they awoke, it was to find themselves chained to a wall in the hive. Chirox and Vamprah were gone, leaving Mutran and Antroz to greet them.

“The challenge of being a Makuta is choosing which power to use to eliminate your enemies,” said Antroz. “It gets so boring using the same ones all the time. Variety is the spice of destruction, after all.”

Lewa yanked on the chains. They were made of protosteel, one of the hardest substances in the universe, and so thick even Pohatu would have a hard time breaking free by sheer strength alone. Of course, a quick use of their elemental powers could get them loose, and the Makuta had to know that.

“If you are thinking of escape, don’t,” said Antroz, as if he were reading Lewa’s mind—which he might well be, thought the Toa of Air. “You will notice your Matoran friends are conspicuous by their absence. They are with Vamprah and Chirox, having a... discussion. Attempt to break free or attack us and a telepathic flash will alert my two allies, who will immediately kill Photok, Solek, and Tanma. Is that understood?”

Lewa glanced at Pohatu and Kopaka to his right, and their new companion, still unconscious, to his left. No one answered. Antroz nodded at Mutran, who walked toward the opposite wall. For the first time, Lewa noticed that it was lined with bubbling vats.

“Little tricks of the mind,” Mutran chuckled. “You saw my precious toys as a blank wall as you flew by... and then your ally as a monster to be destroyed.”

“You are expecting to die, of course,” Antroz said to the imprisoned Toa. “We will question you about how you got here, how many other Toa might be on their way, and you will bravely refuse to answer. You will stay true to your heritage and never break, until we are forced to kill you. And then four more names will be added to the roster of dead fools.”

Mutran reached into the tank and fished out a large, squirming shadow leech.

“But, you see, you’re not going to get off so easily,” Antroz continued, his sightless eyes darting along the wall where his prisoners were chained. “You will get no chance to be heroes. No Chronicler will remember you with honor. Instead, you will be branded as traitors and your names will be cursed by all free Matoran... for the short time they have left.”

Mutran walked to Lewa, holding out the shadow leech, still dripping liquid protodermis. It hissed as it drew close to the Toa’s Kanohi mask.

“You came here looking for the shadow leeches,” Mutran said, smiling. “Isn’t it time you met them face-to-face?”
Elsewhere, Vican was about to have a meeting of his own. If it wasn’t quite as frightening and final as an encounter with a shadow leech, it was just as much to be dreaded.

He had been expecting a much longer journey to reach the bleak and barren island of Destral. Surprisingly, he had arrived there in less than half an hour. Had Vican thought about it, he wouldn’t have been so shocked. Destral had been known to teleport through space, appearing wherever its occupants chose. Once the location of Karda Nui was discovered, some member of the Brotherhood of Makuta had moved their base as close as possible to one of the entrances.

The island itself was little more than a jagged rock in the silver sea, dominated by the massive Brotherhood fortress. Down below, a huge number of Visorak, Rahkshi, and mechanized Exo-Toa battlesuits could be seen on patrol. The only area that seemed relatively clear was the rocky shoreline, most likely because it was lined with traps for any unwary visitors. Anyone who attempted to land on Destral would be captured within moments and hauled to the fortress for interrogation… or worse.

As for the fortress itself, it was bigger than Vican’s entire home island. It took up the entire land mass of the island, with the exception of a small portion at the southern tip. Constructed entirely of stone and metal, it looked like some obscene growth that had erupted from the core of the island. A blisteringly hot wind rustled the Brotherhood banners that hung from the parapets. Vican wondered for how many beings this fortress had been the last sight ever seen.

He reached into his pack and fingered the Brotherhood tablet of transit, just to reassure himself it was still there. With this handsized piece of stone, he would be allowed to enter the fortress and carry out his mission. Without it, he would be seen as an intruder, tossed in a cell (if he was lucky), and never heard from again.

Vican guided his flying mount to a landing before the massive gates. As soon as he touched down, a half dozen Visorak and a silver Rahkshi converged on him. He scrambled to take out the tablet of transit and then held it before him, as if it were a talisman to ward off evil. The Rahkshi stopped in its tracks at the sight. The Visorak kept coming, pulling him from atop the Rahi and herding him toward the gate.

The huge portal opened at his approach. Hesitantly, he stepped inside. When the doors slammed shut behind him, he jumped half a foot. The corridor in which Vican found himself was dark and cold, with a ceiling at least five hundred feet high. Mounted on the walls were trophies of past Brotherhood conquests – Toa masks and weapons, Rahi heads, and a few things so grotesque even Vican looked away with a shudder.

Antroz had given him precise instructions for where to look for Icarax. Turned out they weren’t necessary, because that Makuta was not making himself hard to find. Instead, the powerful, black-armored warrior was sitting on the ebony throne normally reserved for Teridax, the Makuta of Metru Nui – and he was wearing Teridax’s Mask of Shadows!

Vican felt like his heartlight was in his throat. What was going on here? Had Icarax staged a one-Makuta revolution in the absence of the other members and taken over Destral? If so, how would he react to Antroz’s summons? Right now, Vican wished he was anyplace else. A nice, long spell in a Rahi creation vat even seemed like an appealing alternative.

He stood in the doorway of the central chamber, too scared to move or speak. Icarax was busy sharpening his twin-bladed, rotating sword. Then his eyes flicked up, and he caught sight of Vican.

“You tempt fate, approaching without announcing your presence. I might have killed you,” Icarax said, his voice like distant thunder. He leaned forward, eyes locked on Vican’s. “I still might.”

The mutated Matoran somehow managed to find the will to move. He held up the tablet of transit. It did not seem to impress Icarax, but the Makuta made no move to spring on his visitor and rend him to bits. Vican took that as an encouraging sign.

“Um… forgive me… um,” he summered. “I… I…”

A wisp of shadow energy drifted from Icarax’s spiked claw. It wrapped itself around Vican and began to squeeze.

“You have thirty seconds in which to be extremely amusing,” said Icarax. “After that…”

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Vican could feel the breath being forced out of his lungs. His arms were already close to snapping from the pressure. He struggled to speak. Icarax rose, walked over to him, and held his sword to the Matoran’s throat.

“Short,” said the Makuta. He glanced down at the blade, then back at Vican. “Or to the point.”

“Antroz sent me,” Vican gasped. “He wants you in Karda Nui. He said… he said immediately.”

Icarax frowned and withdrew his sword. The shadow chain around Vican dissipated. The Matoran inhaled a big breath of air.

“Antroz,” Icarax said, so quietly Vican could barely hear it. “I journeyed to Metru Nui, to the very home of the Toa of Light, to retrieve the Mask of Shadows lost there by Teridax. I returned and claimed this throne. And I arrive to find Antroz presumes to give me orders.”

“He – all of us – we’re just following the directives of Makuta Teridax,” Vican said. He knew it was a mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

Icarax yanked hard on a chain hanging from the ceiling. A section of the floor slid away, revealing a pool of energized protodermis far below. The Makuta grabbed the Matoran and held him by his ankle over the pool.

“What do you think? Will that liquid transform you, or destroy you?” said Icarax, his manner deadly calm. “A gamble, you see – Teridax has always been fond of gambles. His entire plan is a colossal wager against destiny. If all do their part, then perhaps, maybe, ultimate power will be ours, he pledges.”

The Makuta hurled Vican to the floor. “I believe in certainties. The strength of my limbs, the power of my mask, the sharp edges of my blades – that is what I build my plans around. Trickery, deception, complex strategies, they are for the weak! If you want power, and another has it, you get it not by outwitting him – you get it by stepping over his corpse.”

Icarax kicked Vican toward the door. “Run back to your master. Tell him Icarax comes. If he is wise, he will tremble.”

Vican got to his feet and fled out of the chamber, down the corridor, and beyond the gates. He slammed into a Visorak so hard he knocked it off its feet, then scrambled atop his flying Rahi. An instant later, he was on his way back to Karda Nui to deliver his message. After that, he decided, it might be wise to dig a hole, climb in, and pull the stones down on top of him. He didn’t think he wanted to see what was soon to happen.

Pohatu Nuva was certain that at some point in his storied career, he had escaped from a tougher trap. He just wished he could remember when.

Not that he had much time for recollection – Lewa Nuva was about two seconds from being introduced to a shadow leech. Once that happened, the light would be drained out of him and he would become a dark Toa. The other Toa Nuva, if they survived, would have to fight him, just as the Karda Nui Matoran were battling their former friends every day.

Pohatu racked his brain. If he used a mask power or his power over stone in any obvious way, their three Matoran allies were dead. But what if I do it in a way that isn’t easy to spot? he thought. What if I can take them by surprise?

Everyone knew what a Toa of Stone could do – create rock, shape it, make it strike at his command. It was a good power, but it wasn’t the whole story. What a Toa can create, he can also destroy, thought Pohatu. And I just love to break things.

He closed his eyes, hoping the Makuta would just think he was afraid to watch Lewa’s fate. Then Pohatu used his power over stone in a way he hadn’t in ages – to weaken the rock in the floor of the hive. It was a delicate procedure – fractures had to be created with pinpoint precision – and Toa of Stone weren’t known for being delicate. But done wrong, Mutran would spot signs of it too early, and Tanma and his group were as good as dead.

The shadow leech had made contact with Lewa’s mask. The Toa of Air screamed. There was no more time to wait.
Pohatu Nuva gave a mental yank on the section of stone he had weakened. The floor beneath Antroz's and Mutran's feet gave way, throwing them off balance for one crucial instant.

As soon as he saw them start to fall, Pohatu triggered his Kanohi Mask of Speed. By vibrating his body's molecules at high speed, he was able to pass his wrists through the chains and free himself. Increasing his vibration, he rocketed forward, using his hand to slice through the chains that bound the other three Toa. Then he was gone, headed for the chamber where the Matoran were being held.

By now, Mutran and Antroz had regained their footing. Lewa and Kopaka had retrieved their weapons and, along with a newly revived Toa Ignika, were ready for them.

“The doom vipers,” said Kopaka. “Back when we first got back to Metru Nui.”

“Gotch’a,” said Lewa. “What about our silent friend?”

“He’ll figure it out,” said the Toa of Ice.

Pohatu suddenly reappeared, the three Matoran in tow. “Whatever we’re doing, we better do. The other Makuta are right behind me.”

“Doom vipers in Ga-Metru,” Kopaka replied.

Pohatu smiled. “Oh, yeah. Good choice.”

One of the things that made Kanohi Nuva masks unique was the ability of the user to share their power with whomever happened to be close by. In this case, it was Pohatu conferring the power of super speed on the other three Toa and the Matoran. Before Mutran’s eyes, all six seemed to vanish.

“Move, you fool!” Antroz snarled. “I can hear them. They are headed for the vats!”

It was already too late. The speeding heroes smashed the vats to shards, sending half-formed shadow leeches tumbling out onto the cave floor.

Chirox and Vamprah arrived just at that moment. “Stay there!” Mutran yelled. “Block the exit!”

Pohatu wanted to stay and fight. Racing at top speed had been enough to confuse and defeat a half dozen deadly doom vipers, after all, so it might work as well on Makuta. Speed was one of the few powers Makuta didn’t have. But a tap on his shoulder by Kopaka signaled that retreat was the better option.

Concentrating, he used the mask to set all six bodies to vibrate at just the right frequency. Then the party shot forward, actually vibrating right through the bodies of Chirox and Vamprah. Unwilling to leave without a parting shot, Pohatu slowed everyone down just enough that their passage disrupted the Makuta's substance. The two cried out in excruciating pain.

Then Pohatu and his team were out of the hive mouth and into the sky.

“Let’s bring it down,” said Kopaka, pointing to the hive.

Lewa, Pohatu, and Kopaka combined their powers, striking at the relatively slender stone cord that held the hive suspended. But it remained intact, the damage they did being healed almost as quickly as they made it.

“That’s not normal stone,” said Pohatu. “It looks almost organic.”

Toa Ignika suddenly pushed forward, shouldering the other Toa aside. Before they could react, he had triggered his own unique power, weakening the living stone. It snapped in two, sending the hive plunging toward the swamp below. The Toa Nuva could see the Makuta and Matoran fleeing from it as it fell.

“What just happened?” asked Lewa Nuva, giving Toa Ignika a long look.

“We won!” shouted Solek.

Kopaka shook his head. “We survived. And we made them angry.”

“Is that a good thing?” asked Photok.

“Mad-angry types get stupid,” said Lewa, tearing his attention away from their silent ally. “A stupid fighter beats himself.”

“With a little help from us,” added Pohatu, smiling.
Axonn crouched down behind a low stone wall, and watched the fire and ice bolts fly by overhead. Beside him, Brutaka was peering around the crumbling bit of cover, now and then hurling a blast from his sword.

“Knock on the front door,” grumbled Axonn. “Great strategy. I think all that time in Mahri Nui left you with a waterlogged brain.”

“Oh, come on,” said Brutaka, smiling. He picked off an attacker with a bolt of energy, then winged another. “You love this, and you know it. After thousands of years sitting around on Voya Nui waiting for something to happen, you need the exercise.”

A green-fleshed Skakdi climbed over the wall, spiked club in hand. Axonn quickly made him regret it.

“This was supposed to be a nice, simple job. Go to Zakaz, find warlord Nektann, arrange an alliance between the Order and the Skakdi. Not get pinned on a beach by an angry horde.”

“Are we pinned? We’re not pinned,” said Brutaka. “Watch.”

Brutaka popped over the wall and fired an energy bolt at a half-crumbled building. Shearing through its only support, he sent the structure toppling down on a mob of Skakdi. When the dust cleared, all of them were trapped beneath the rubble.

“Now those guys, they’re pinned,” said Brutaka.

Axonn sighed. “Just like the good old days,” he said. “Now I remember why I hated them so much.”

“If you liked that idea, you’ll love this one,” Brutaka replied. Before Axonn could react, Brutaka grabbed him by the back of the neck. He dragged Axonn to his feet and stood beside him, free arm in the air. “We surrender!” Brutaka shouted to the Skakdi army. “Take us, we’re yours.”

A trader on the island of Stelt would, over the course of his life, see pretty much everything at least once. The place was a crossroads for the crooked, the desperate, and those just looking for fast money—or a deal best kept hidden from Toa. This particular trader, though, had recently seen more than he would have wished. A small group of warriors, including the hated Roodaka, had stolen one of his best ships. Worse, they had done it in such a way that no one would even believe it had happened.

Things had at last settled down, though: he had managed to find a replacement ship and recover those members of the old crew who were still alive. It was back to business as usual—at least until a 20 foot-tall dragon tore the roof off his shop.

“Where’s Teridax?” the dragon growled.

“Teridax? Who or what is that? And how would I know?” said the trader, reaching frantically for a weapon, and coming up with nothing better than a cracked Kanoka disk.

“I know Stelt,” said the dragon. “A Nui-Rama doesn’t buzz on the Tren Krom Peninsula without you scum hearing it. So I’ll ask again, where is he? Where is the Makuta of Metru Nui?”
“I don’t know! I swear it!” shouted the trader.
The dragon scooped his victim up in a great claw. “I don’t have time for this. I have places to be, and bodies to break. I want you to send out a message to all your friends, to everyone who sails in and out of this island. Tell them Miserix is back, and when I find him, Teridax is dead!”

Vezon sat in a small skiff with a jet-black sail. Trinuma sat at the bow, keeping an eye out for potential threats. If he considered Vezon one, he didn’t show it. For his part, Vezon was just happy to just be out of his cell. Prison was far too confining – but then, he guessed that was the point of it. Speaking of points, Trinuma had given him a lovely dagger. Vezon had said “thank you” by not trying to plunge it into his companion’s back.

“Where are we going?” asked Vezon. “Why are we going? Are we going at all, or just sailing in a big circle? Or is it a spiral? I went down a spiral once: a big stone tunnel that went down and down and down, and ended in Zyglak. Whoever built it had no decorating sense at all.”

“Would you be quiet?” said Trinuma. “This is a secret mission. Do you understand that?”

“Sure,” answered Vezon. “Secret mission means if you get killed, I won’t tell anyone. And you still haven’t answered any of my one-hundred and ten questions – or my follow-ups.”

Trinuma sighed in resignation. “We’re going to a place called Destral. Once we get there, your job starts. If you succeed, you live to babble another day. If you fail, you die horribly. Okay?”

“Destral… Destral… wait a minute, that’s the Makuta base! Spiriah was a Makuta, at least he was until Miserix killed him. I flew with Miserix, did I tell you that? At least until he did those loops and threw me off his back. Ocean water is really cold, don’t let anyone tell you different. So what am I supposed to do on Destral? Theft? Assassination? Running with sharp objects?”

“You have the most important job of all,” said Trinuma. “You’re going to betray the Order of Mata Nui, and the entire universe, and this is how you’re going to do it.”

* * *

The Kingdom universe…

Turaga Takanuva led Toa Takanuva out of the Coliseum and into the eastern portion of the vast city. Toa Tanma trailed along behind, not saying much. He wasn’t sure whether to be grateful another Toa of Light had arrived to help him, or upset that the Turaga didn’t think he could handle the job on his own.

They arrived at a small, narrow building in an alleyway, not far from the shore. There was no knob or handle on the outside of the front door, nor any carving to indicate who lived there. Turaga Takanuva rapped twice with his staff.

A small panel opened about halfway up the door. No eyes were visible through it, but a Matoran voice said, “What’s the password?”

Turaga Takanuva looked at the two Toa. “They’ve lived among us for ages, and still like to play at secrecy.” Turning back to the door, he said, “This is Turaga Takanuva. Open up.”

“Wrong password. Not even close.”

“Try this one,” said the annoyed Turaga. “I have a troop of Bohrok with nothing to do. If you’d like, I can have them tear down this building and turn it into a park.”

There was a pause. Then the voice said, “Close enough,” and the door swung open.

The three visitors entered a dark hallway, which twisted and turned far more than one would expect, given the size of the building. A door at the end led to a small workshop, cluttered with all sorts of armor, weapons, and other gadgets. A lone Fe-Matoran was tinkering with a nasty looking projectile launcher when they walked in. He looked up at Turaga Takanuva, surprised and annoyed.

“You know the routine,” he said. “Leave your request in the slot outside, and we’ll get to it.”

“Yes, I know that’s how you Nynrah crafters prefer to work,” Turaga Takanuva replied, making an effort to keep his temper. “But this is a crisis. I have a Toa who needs weaponry.”
The Matoran looked Toa Takanuva up and down. “Looks like his color scheme could use some work too. But… I might just have something here that could be of use.”

After a few minutes of rummaging through claw catchers, Rhotuka launchers, and parts of a Visorak battle wagon, the Matoran emerged with a tri-bladed lance. He handed it to Toa Takanuva and said, “Now, aim at that far wall. Just use a little bit of power, not even enough to singe the stone.”

The Toa took the lance, aimed it, and focused on releasing just the tiniest sample of his elemental light. The next instant, a blast of energy blew a hole the size of a Kanoka disk in the wall. “How…?” said Takanuva, looking down at the lance.

“Most Toa tools just channel power,” the Matoran said, smiling. “This one amplifies it. And if that’s not enough—”

The Matoran searched some more, this time emerging with a launcher. “We don’t have a name for this one yet, too new. Draws light from the environment and fires it as a sphere. It hasn’t been tested yet, though.”

“Fine,” said Turaga Takanuva. He turned to the two Toa. “I suggest you start right away. There’s no telling how much time we have.”

Once they were back on the street, Tanma wanted to head right for the nearest light barrier, but Toa Takanuva held him up. “There’s something I want to do first,” said Takanuva. “I want to see Matoro.”

“That coward?” spat Tanma. “If not for him, we would still have our homes, our universe. You can go see him if you like—I want nothing to do with him.”

Takanuva expected that Matoro would be living in the region inhabited by the Ko-Matoran and Frostelus. But he evidently hadn’t been welcome there. Tanma directed his new comrade to an area of what was once Po-Wahi, now home mostly to Skakdi. There, in a small hut made of stone, sat Toa Matoro.

“What do you want?” the Toa of Ice said, not even looking up at his visitor. “Go away.”

“Matoro, I…” Takanuva began. “You’re needed. You have to come with me.”

Toa Matoro laughed. It was a bitter sound. “I was needed 10,000 years ago. My destiny was before me, and I hesitated… and a universe died. So don’t try to tell me I’m needed now. Just leave me alone.”

“I heard what happened,” Takanuva said. “But I also know that, in your heart, you’re a hero. I know how hard you fought on Voya Nui, on Mahri Nui. And I know if you could have saved the universe, you would have… you would have done anything to do that.”

Takanuva, overcome with emotion, had to stop talking. Here was Matoro, who was dead in his universe, having sacrificed himself to save Mata Nui and every other living thing. Here he was, alive, but dead inside, knowing he had failed his people when it mattered most.

Matoro looked up at him. “Who are you? No one in the Kingdom talks about me that way.”

“I’m from… another kingdom,” Takanuva answered. “One where people think of you as a hero.”

“I see,” said Matoro. “Escaped from an asylum, did you?”

“Okay,” said the Toa of Light. “You want to sit here and feel sorry for yourself. You blew your chance to be a hero—well, here’s another one. Here’s a chance to show everyone you aren’t a failure or a coward. Here’s an opportunity to bring some honor to your name… do you have the courage to take it?”

“Why do you care?” asked Matoro. “I don’t even know you.”

“Maybe I know you,” said Takanuva. “Or someone very close to you. Now, come on—we have a kingdom to save.”

Tanma was not at all happy to see Matoro along, but there wasn’t time for a prolonged argument. Fortunately, the most likely problem spot was in the same area as Matoro’s hut. The area around Kini-Nui was too well traveled for Rahkshi to have emerged from there unnoticed, but the old Bohrok tunnels in Po-Wahi were out of the way and largely ignored. If the light barrier in the main tunnel had come down, it would be easy for Makuta to send legions up through those passageways.

“Why not just block the tunnels? Bring them down?” asked Takanuva.
“Pohatu and Hewkii tried that during the evacuation,” said Tanma. “The Rahkshi smashed their way through and killed them both before Tahu, Jaller and Kopaka drove them back. No, light was the only effective means of stopping them – intense light, more than their kraata could stand.”

“And they couldn’t just, I don’t know, dig their way around the barrier? Or use density control and float up through the rock?”

“They could,” Tanma agreed. “But Onua made sure the ground is warded. Any attempt to dig through it or pass through it, and we’d know.”

Matoro had said nothing. Takanuva turned and said, “What do you think?”

“I think… never mind,” said the Toa of Ice.

“What he thinks doesn’t matter,” snarled Tanma.

“It does to me,” Takanuva replied. “Tell us, Matoro.”

“Well… what if the barrier didn’t go down? What if they’ve found some way to shield themselves against the light?”

“Then we have a problem,” said Takanuva.

Cautiously, they started down the tunnel. Even this close to the surface, Takanuva could feel the chill in the air. The only light came from Tanma, who kept up a low level illumination using his Toa power. “We can’t go down too far,” he said. “There’s no heat down there and what air there might still be is foul. Most of the universe is flooded and a lot of the water has mutagen in it. So whatever did survive the end probably isn’t still recognizable…”

Takanuva glanced at Matoro. Every word that Toa Tanma said was like a dagger in his heart.

They had walked perhaps a kio when the tunnel brightened. Tanma pointed ahead to a wall of light in their path. “That’s the barrier. It’s still intact. So the problem isn’t here. Mangaia, maybe? Or some other access point we don’t know about?”

“Perhaps,” said Takanuva. “But what if Matoro’s right? What if the barrier simply isn’t stopping them anymore?”

“I don’t have time for Matoran myth,” said Tanma. “We have to check other possibilities. Are you coming or not?”

Takanuva glanced at the barrier, at Matoro, and then back at Tanma. “All right.”

The two Toa of Light started back up the tunnel. Neither noticed Matoro wasn’t following until they heard the sound of ice blasts coming from behind them. Takanuva turned and ran back down, followed closely by Tanma.

There was Matoro, battling four Rahkshi on his own. Behind them, more were breaching the barrier, each clad in armor made of deep shadow. The armor couldn’t survive the passage through the barrier, dissolving not long after making contact with the light. But it lasted just long enough to get the Rahkshi through to the other side.

Takanuva and Tanma both dropped to one knee and opened fire with their light powers. Takanuva’s power lance took out two Rahkshi, while Tanma drove a third back into the barrier, where its kraata burned to ashes. Matoro froze the fourth in a block of ice up to its head, just long enough to reach in and yank out its kraata. He threw the squirming creature on the ground and stepped on it.

“Excellent,” said a soft, sinister voice, which seemed to come from every shadow. Takanuva knew it well – it belonged to Teridax, leader of the Brotherhood. “I see that at least one of you has an imagination. Matoro, my old friend… it seems like yesterday we were teamed against the Barraki and their hordes.”

“You,” said Matoro, his voice shaking. “Why aren’t you dead? So many others died… why not you?”

“What is there left when the light dies, Toa? Darkness. Only darkness,” Makuta replied. “And I thrive in the dark. Oh, my brothers perished, one by one… Icarax was the first, driven from his body by my attack so I could possess it, his essence left to die in the cold of the void… but my hatred will not let me die. Hatred of Mata Nui; hatred of all who escaped the end of this universe; most of all, Matoro, hatred
of you… you turned away from your destiny. Mata Nui was meant to cheat death… instead, I was cheated of my revenge.”

Now the Toa heard a clanking of armor, as if a colossus were coming toward them. The next moment, a 20-foot giant clad in shadow armor erupted from the barrier. As the shroud of shadow fell away, they could see their foe. He was a bizarre amalgam of the Makuta who had attacked Karda Nui and others who were unfamiliar. He was a monstrosity, now truly as ugly on the outside as his spirit was within.

“As my brothers were about to die, I absorbed them into my body,” said Teridax. “I used their mass to grow. I used their knowledge to create armor to pierce this barrier. And now your Kingdom will surrender, or it will suffocate in a sea of shadow.”

Tanma, Matoro, and Takanuva attacked. Bolts of ice and spears of light rained on Teridax’s armor, but the damage was negligible. “I have had 10,000 years to prepare for this battle,” the Makuta hissed. “You cannot win.”

“Excuse us if we try,” said Takanuva, blasting with his power lance directly at the Mask of Shadow. The blow knocked the mask off. Makuta bent to retrieve it, but Tanma was too fast, hitting it with full power and melting it to slag.

“Now do you see?” said Makuta. “You must—”

Makuta stopped dead. Then he smiled at Takanuva. “Oh, I see… oh, how intriguing. You are from… somewhere else… somewhere… where Matoro died, and Mata Nui lived. The Plan proceeds there to its inevitable conclusion. Did you flee, then, Takanuva? Did you have the wisdom to escape before my reign begins?”

“I… died?” said Matoro quietly.

“Yes,” Takanuva replied. “You did. You gave your life so billions could live. In my universe, you are considered the greatest hero ever to bear the title of Toa.”

“And here you are just one more insect to be crushed,” said Makuta, advancing. “Or perhaps… there is some other use for you. The Mask of Life still exists, and you were connected to it… you have knowledge I can use, Toa of Ice.”

A hand made of shadow emerged from Makuta’s chest, heading right for Matoro. Takanuva made a move to get between them, but the Toa of Ice hit him with a barrage of ice shards, driving him back.

“Matoro, what are you doing?” Takanuva cried out. “He’s going to kill you!”

“I should have died 10,000 years ago,” Matoro said. He stood erect, hands at his sides, waiting for the hand to seize him. “I should have saved everyone, but I didn’t. If you think about it, Takanuva, neither of us is meant to be here.”

The shadow hand took Matoro in its grasp and drew him, unprotesting, into the substance of Makuta. Takanuva got to his feet, blasting light from his power lance and shadow from his other hand, screaming, “Murderer!”

Strangely enough, Makuta did not counterattack. In fact, the colossus actually looked a bit unsteady on his feet. He took a step back, reached out an armored hand to support himself, then dropped to his knees. Both hands went to the side of his head, as he shouted, “No! My will must prevail! I am the stronger! I am—”

Then another voice came from Makuta’s mouth. It was Matoro’s! “No, Makuta. You once told the Toa Mata that you could not be destroyed, because you were nothing. You were wrong — it is because you are nothing that I can destroy you. You have no heart, you have no spirit, you have no reason to exist — even your hate is a pale reflection of what once burned in you. You survive out of habit, monster, and habits… and minds… can be broken.”

The scream that came from Makuta then was a long, loud, and strangely hollow. An instant later, the giant collapsed to the ground and lay unmoving. Takanuva edged closer, and confirmed what he already
knew: Makuta was dead. Just to be sure, he used his power to send searing light to every corner of the tunnel, but there was no sign of the master of shadows’ antidermis. He had not escaped this final confrontation.

Takanuva pondered for a long time as he walked back up to the surface. Turaga Vakama had once told him that when a Makuta absorbs a body, he must crush the will of his victim immediately. Otherwise, he risks other minds intruding upon his own. Matoro had heard the same tales. He had known if Makuta absorbed him, he could fight back from within.

At one time, such an effort would have been impossible – Makuta’s will would have been too strong. But Matoro had been right. Makuta truly had nothing to live for. He survived and plotted his vengeance, but it was a hollow pursuit. He had lusted for a control of a universe, only to see that universe destroyed… and there was no place for him in the Kingdom.

Takanuva would tell the ruling council what had happened down below, and warn them to beware of any other Rahkshi who might still lurk below, clad in shadow armor. He would stay long enough to see a statue erected of Matoro, the Toa who had been granted that rarest of commodities: a second chance to make things right.

Turaga Takanuva would ask his Toa counterpart to stay, even knowing what the answer would be. In the end, the Brutaka of this universe would use his Kanohi Olmak to send Takanuva back into the space between dimensions, on his journey to Karda Nui. There was much to be done, and still a very long way to go.

*      *      *

At times like this, Iruini looked back fondly on his days as a Rahaga. It wasn’t so bad, being short and twisted and spending all your time chasing after Brakas monkeys. At least you didn’t have to stand on rolling decks, staring at the crazed leader of the Dark Hunters as he prepared to slaughter an entire island full of… well, not so innocent Vortixx.

“You know I can’t let you do this,” Toa Iruini said.

“I know you can’t stop me,” The Shadowed One replied, smiling. “My new partner suggested I occupy Xia… but I must have misheard. I could have sworn she said ‘destroy.’”

Iruini was about to make a smart comeback when the seas started to churn and heave. The next moment, a tidal wave big enough to swamp the entire Dark Hunter fleet rose from the ocean depths. It towered hundreds of feet in the air… and just stayed there, looming over the ships like the shadow of doom.

“Is that enough water to clean out your ears?”

Iruini turned. Standing on the bow of the ship was a Toa of Water he did not recognize, carrying a spiked mace and a shield. She was flanked by a warrior in golden armor and a four-armed giant with two long horns coming out of his head. He alone was heavy enough to almost swamp the ship. He carried a multi-bladed axe and a small object covered in a cloth.

The female Toa stepped down to the deck and marched up to The Shadowed One. Although he was taller than she, her bearing made her seem to dominate everyone on board.

“I hired the Dark Hunters for a simple task,” she said, her voice as quiet as a dying breath. “If you can’t do it…”

She held the mace aloft. The tidal wave suddenly rushed forward toward the ships, almost colliding with the flagship. It stopped dead again as she lowered her weapon.

“I’ll find someone who can,” she finished.

Iruini looked from the Toa to the obviously concerned Shadowed One, and back again. “Nice,” he said. “What do you do for an encore?”

The Toa nodded and the golden warrior vanished. He reappeared an instant later with the other five Toa Hagah in tow. They arrived to see The Shadowed One in intense whispered conversation with
the Toa of Water. It ended when the Toa blasted three nearby Dark Hunters into the sea as casually as
someone else might swat a gnat. Then she turned to the assembled Toa Hagah.

“Ah. Good,” she said. “I have a mission for the six of you.”

“Wait a minute!” snapped Norik. “Who are you? What’s going on here?”

“And we don’t take requests from anybody wearing a mask,” said Kualus. Then he turned to Norik
and added, “Do we?”

Norik shook his head.

“My name is Helryx,” said the Toa of Water. “I run an organization you never heard of called the
Order of Mata Nui. We are at war – and you’ve just been drafted.”

“And if we say no?” asked Toa Bomonga.

Helryx gave a slight smile. Her eyes darted toward the ocean off the starboard side, where the
three Dark Hunters were desperately trying to tread water. Then she looked back at the Toa Hagah.

“Yes, you don’t take requests, as I understand it – good thing I’m not making one.”

“What is it you want us to do?” asked Toa Pouks. Seeing Iruini’s glare, he said, “Well, it doesn’t
hurt to ask.”

Helryx took a few steps closer and lowered her voice so the Dark Hunters could not overhear.

“We are mounting an attack on the Brotherhood of Makuta, but their leader eludes us. Our best
information is that he was last known to be inside a Maxilos robot near Mahri Nui, but where he may
have gone to since then is unknown. We need Makuta Teridax found.”

“Why us?” asked Iruini.

“You’ve fought him before. You’ve beaten him before,” Helryx replied.

“And we all remember how well that turned out,” muttered Iruini.

Helryx ignored him. “If I am right, Teridax has gone somewhere no one else has ever dared to
venture. Left free, he could do untold damage.”

“And just how are we supposed to track him down?” asked Bomonga. “Knock on the doors at
Destral and ask if he can come out to play?”

Helryx chuckled. “There may not be doors left to knock on soon… but that’s another story. You
will have a guide – someone who has generously offered to work with you in exchange for his freedom.”

The four-armed giant took a step forward, and at first they thought Helryx meant him. But instead
he took the cloth off the object he carried, which was revealed to be a globe filled with water, and
something else… what looked like a green sea snake with hate-filled crimson eyes.

“The name is Zaktan,” said Helryx. “He’s not as friendly as he looks. If he acts up, just haul him
out of the tank and let him gasp for air a few times. That’s what I always do. And now I think it’s time you
get started.”

The Toa Hagah looked at each other. One by one, each of them nodded… all except Gaaki. She
was backing away, shaking her head, hands up to the sides of her mask. “Death,” she whispered. “All
around… we are going to a place of death… and one of us will not return!”
The Makuta regrouped in Antroz’s cavern. Mutran had wanted to go after the Toa immediately – after all, they had just destroyed countless samples of his best work. All that was left of the shadow leeches were the ones Chirox had been examining. It would take days, maybe weeks, to get the equipment needed from Destral and regrow the leeches.

“No,” said Antroz. “Let them think they have won a battle. Let them grow overconfident. It will make their destruction that much sweeter.”

Mutran was in no mood to listen. His labors had been wiped out in an instant by a mere four Toa and some idiotic Matoran – and he knew whose fault it was.

“You!” he screamed, advancing on a frightened Kirop. “You led them to the hive! This is your failure!”

“Mutran!” snapped Antroz. “Inflict your punishments later! We have a war to win.”

“Shadow Matoran,” spat Chirox. “They are just as much a waste of space and air as they were before we transformed them. Why do we need to keep any of them alive?”

“You know why,” Antroz answered. “Matoran of Light have an unusually high potential to become Toa. If that happens, we want them to be our Toa.”

“Our Toa? Our Matoran? Why not simply give up our dreams of conquest and settle into quiet lives as very tall Turaga?” The words came from Makuta Icarax, who was standing in the passageway, his tone heavy with contempt.

Antroz seemed unfazed. “Good. You’ve arrived. I have work for you.”

Icarax laughed. “I am not seeking employment, Antroz. You called, and I came, but only to tell you I am not some Rahi for you to order about. I care not at all for you, or the Brotherhood’s precious plan.”

“Do you care about the Mask of Life?” interrupted Mutran. “I know its shape. I’ve seen the carvings, as we all have. I didn’t realize it before, but that silent Toa – the one who brought down the hive – he was wearing the Kanoji Ignika.”

“That makes no sense,” said Chirox. “Six Toa Nuva came here. Three are with us, the others are being hunted by our brothers down below. And none of them are wearing that mask!”

“Is that enough to pique your interest, Icarax?” asked Antroz, making no effort to hide the sarcasm in his voice. “We are going to lay waste to Karda Nui, seize the remaining Matoran, and kill the Toa Nuva. Make yourself useful – find that mysterious Toa and get that mask.”

Icarax swung his blade, sparks flying from it as it struck the stone wall. “Since you ask so nicely, brother, what can I say? I will return with his mask… shall I bring it with or without the head that wears it?”

Antroz turned his back on the warrior, saying simply, “Amuse yourself.”

The final attack began with lightning and shadow. Five Makuta dived down toward the last surviving village of Karda Nui, spreading darkness as they traveled until it hung like a fog over the dwellings of the
Av-Matoran. Even the glow of the lightvines could be seen only dimly. Then the shroud of shadow was split by forked lightning fired by Icarax and Mutran, which struck the roofs of the Matoran dwellings.

At this point, those two Makuta split off from the rest. Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah, along with their shadow Matoran, kept on straight for the village. Their job was to use powers that would affect a wide area to keep the Toa Nuva and Matoran penned in their shelter. As Antroz summoned a violent storm, Vamprah and Chirox blanketed the village with alternating sonic attacks and destructive cyclones. Within a few minutes, virtually no buildings were left standing. Even the lightvine barriers were shredded by the assault, leaving nothing to bar the way of the Makuta.

Only the underground shelter of the Av-Matoran remained, and that would not last for long. As Mutran used plasma to melt the exposed roof, Icarax tore the hatch off its hinges. In a matter of moments, it seemed, it would all be over.

Icarax walked confidently down the steps into the hatch, ready for anything the Toa Nuva might hurl at him – anything, that is, except what he found.

“Theres no one here!” he roared, turning back to the other Makuta. “Its empty!” Mutran went to check for himself. He almost shoved Icarax aside, before reminding himself how unhealthy that might be. A moment later, he emerged from the shelter, as puzzled as Icarax was enraged. “He’s right. They’re gone.”

“Gone where? The swamp?” wondered Antroz, circling high above the ruined village. “Or have they abandoned Karda Nui completely?”

It was Gavla who spotted part of the answer. Perched atop Vamprah, she flew over one of the captured villages, seated atop another fallen stalactite. Her keen eyes spotted shadow Matoran bound with lightvines. Alarmd, she told Vamprah of her find, and the two flew down to investigate.

The first shadow Matoran freed told the tale. “The Toa Nuva… they struck so fast… said they were going to wait here for your attack.”

“Are they still here?” asked Gavla.

The dark Matoran shook his head. “No. As soon as they saw you heading for the Light village, they flew off, up there.” He pointed in the direction the Makuta had come.

“The caves?” said Gavla.

Vamprah struck a nearby outcropping of rock, shattering it. Then he held up one of the pieces.

Gavla immediately understood his message. “The third keystone! While we’re here, they and their pathetic Matoran are stealing it.”

Vamprah vaulted into the sky, Gavla barely hanging on. Quickly, he gathered the other Makuta and they bolted back for their cavern base. They were halfway there when massive stone missiles began to drop from the ceiling, one almost impaling Mutran.

“Hey, down there,” Pohatu Nuva called from above, even as he wrenched another huge stalactite loose from the cave roof. “This place has really gone to Karzahn since we were here in the old days. Thought it could use a good cleaning up – starting with you.”

Antroz fired a blast of heat vision at the sound of Pohatu’s voice. Kirop’s warning of what was about to happen came too late. Kopaka Nuva rocketed in front of Pohatu, catching the vision blast on an ice shield and reflecting it back. The beams punched through the armor on Antroz’s shoulder, allowing his precious energy to start leaking out.

Snarling, Chirox and Kirop flew toward Pohatu. They had almost reached him when Lewa Nuva suddenly swooped down from his perch on the ceiling, firing his Skyblaster. The sphere of light struck Kirop, knocking him off Chirox’s back. Startled, Chirox slowed for just a second. But it was long enough for Pohatu to bring the stalactite down on him like a club, sending Chirox spiraling down toward the swamp.

Lewa Nuva’s smile of triumph was short-lived. He spotted two Av-Matoran flying from the cave, eager to join in the fight. He shouted for them to go back, but it was too late. Icarax trapped them inside a powerful cyclone and then directed it toward the cavern wall.

“Do something!” shouted Tanma, flying close to Lewa. “They’ll be killed!”
Lewa concentrated, creating a whirlwind of his own in the path of Icarax’s. The two collided, the Toa’s funnel setting up a counterforce that kept Icarax’s cyclone from advancing. Shrugging, Icarax suddenly made his vanish, sending the two Matoran inside plummeting toward the swamp.

Kopaka and Solek flew after them. The Toa Nuva of Ice caught one with a chain made of ice, while Solek created a small scoop made of light to snag the other. Unfortunately, the rescue left them vulnerable to attack, and Mutran didn’t miss the opportunity. His power scream ripped through their minds, forcing them to flee or fall.

Antroz was back in the fight now, swooping down toward the shaken Kopaka. His armored hand crackled as he built up his shattering power. One touch, and the Toa of Ice’s armor would be fragments.

Pohatu spotted the danger. He hefted the stalactite like a spear and threw it at Antroz. It struck the Makuta with a glancing blow, knocking him off course. By the time he righted himself, Pohatu and Photok were on him. They flew in ever-tightening circles around him at incredible speed, Pohatu striking him on each pass, delivering a thousand blows in a matter of seconds.

Hovering nearby, Icarax smiled. It was good to see Antroz getting pounded. Served him right for not wiping out the Av-Matoran a long time ago. Still, as fun as this was, it was best not to let the Toa Nuva start thinking they could possibly win. Focusing his gravity power, he made Pohatu and Photok too heavy to speed, too heavy to fly, and sent them both falling like stones. Antroz plummeted as well.

I guess I forgot not to include my fellow Makuta as a target, Icarax said to himself, smiling. I suppose after almost 100,000 years, your memory begins to go.
Five years ago…

Sometimes, a being does something so completely unexpected, so totally surprising, that it shocks even them. On this day, that being was Vultraz – and what he did was wake up.

After falling off a cliff, Vultraz fully expected to be very dead. Instead, he was lying on a slab in a darkened chamber, being tended to by… well, they were Rahi of some kind, and he preferred not to know just what type or why they were prodding him. He wondered if he had somehow survived the fall, only to be dragged off by wild animals as an evening snack.

He tried to move, thinking maybe he could make a quick escape. But his arms and legs were tied down with some kind of vines. These were either really intelligent Rahi, or else there was someone else involved.

That someone else chose that moment to walk in. Vultraz gasped. He had only caught a fleeting glimpse of her a few times, but he knew Makuta Gorast just the same. He tried to pretend he was still unconscious, even though he knew it would not fool her.

“I can read your thoughts,” the Makuta hissed. “And your fear, little Matoran. But you have nothing to be afraid of… you are safe here.”

If he had dared, Vultraz would have laughed. No one knew what happened to Matoran who wound up in Gorast’s clutches, but there were plenty of rumors. Each of them was worse than the last and some were downright revolting. Vultraz had done some pretty bad things in his life, but he was a cuddle-Rahi next to Gorast.

“If that were true, I would have let you fall, instead of having Rahi there to save you,” Gorast said. “True, you were damaged… badly… but you survived.”

“What…” Vultraz stopped. His voice did not sound like his voice. He looked down at his hands – the armor on them was completely different. What had happened here? What had she done?

“You are well known on the peninsula,” Gorast replied, once again reading his thoughts. “Too well known for my purposes. But your enemy is busy spreading the word of your death, and the changes I have made will insure no one will recognize you.”

“Just… just what is it you want me to do?” Vultraz asked, already knowing he wouldn’t like the answer.

“I want you to find a Matoran for me,” said Gorast. “A Matoran named Krakua… and when you find him, here is what I want you to do…”

Mazeka returned to his village, bringing word of Vultraz’s fatal fall. Some greeted him as a hero, though he did not feel like one. He had failed to regain what Vultraz had stolen, failed to capture him – and while the Ta-Matoran’s death brought his evil to an end, it was still not something he could bring himself to celebrate.

He was seated alone in his hut that night when someone rapped on the door. When he opened it, there was no one there. Annoyed, he slammed the door and went back to his sleep mat. It was then
that he noticed the chair in the center of the room had moved out of position. He went to move it back to where it was, and found he couldn’t—it was as if it were rooted to the ground.

“ I wouldn’t do that,” said a deep, rasping voice. “You’re only going to hurt yourself.”

Mazeka jumped back a good four feet. There was no one else in the room, but someone was talking to him. He grabbed a weapon and spun around. “Who’s here? Show yourself?”

“ Ah, if only I could,” the voice replied. “Unfortunately, not every experiment has happy results. By the way, the only thing you will get from spinning is dizzy. I am in the chair.”

“ Who are you?” demanded Mazeka, half-convinced he was just hallucinating the whole thing.

“ My name is Jerbraz, once one of the most handsome and dashing members of my little circle of friends—that is, back when I could be seen. Now I have to rely on my charm alone to make an impression… that and this nasty sword that conveniently turned invisible with me. If you see someone’s head just suddenly go flying off for no reason, it’s not your imagination.”

Mazeka backed up against the wall, trying to get as far from the chair as he could. “Is that why you’re here? To kill me? But I’ve done nothing to you.”

“ No,” Jerbraz replied. The chair moved back, as if he had risen and pushed it away. “But you did do something quite permanent to a foul little fellow named Vultraz. And the people I work for appreciate that kind of initiative. We want to hire you.”

“ Who do you work for?” asked Mazeka, still not fully willing to accept the reality of invisible beings offering jobs.

“ If I told you, and you declined the offer, I would have to… well, you know. So I guess you will just have to accept or reject…” Jerbraz gave a low chuckle. “…Sight unseen.”

“ Then can you tell me what the job is?” said Mazeka.

“ Yes,” replied Jerbraz. Mazeka could tell his visitor was standing right beside him now. An instant later, he felt an invisible hand resting on his shoulder. “It’s stopping people like Vultraz—there are more of them than you might think—and protecting their would-be victims. Specifically, to start with, one potential target—a Matoran named Krakua.”

Mazeka thought about Vultraz, all the evil things he had done, all the people he had harmed. If there were others out there like him, stealing and killing and ruining lives, how could he turn down a chance to stop them?

“ All right,” said the Matoran. “As long as I don’t have to turn invisible too… I’m in. Just tell me what I have to do…”

*   *   *

Now…

Plunging through the void between dimensions, Takanuva, Toa of Light, could hardly believe what had happened to him in the last day.

While patrolling the shores of Metru Nui, he had been attacked by a creature he later learned was a shadow leech, and barely survived. When he awoke, he discovered that his light had been partially drained, leaving him with the ability to fire light from his left hand and shadow from his right.

His rescuers turned out to be members of a secret organization called the Order of Mata Nui, who tasked him with a vital mission: he was to bring important information to the Toa Nuva in Karda Nui, and if he failed, the six Toa were surely doomed.

The fastest way to get him there was using the power of a Mask of Dimensional Gates, worn by reformed member Brutaka. But the mask was ever so slightly damaged, and the ride had already been a rough one.

A circle of light opened ahead of him. He plunged through it, hoping he had reached Karda Nui in time. Instead he landed flat on his mask in the familiar surroundings of the city of Metru Nui. Or was it familiar? The city was intact and beautiful as it had been when he’d left, but something was odd. There
were statues of Toa everywhere: Tahu, Gali, and the others, but not in their Nuva forms – as they had been before they transformed.

There were other statues too, of Toa Takanuva did not recognize, and looming over them all was a massive sculpture of a Kanohi mask – the Mask of Intangibility. *How long have I been gone?* wondered Takanuva. *And who decided to redecorate?*

He spotted a Matoran he knew well, Kapura, scurrying quickly through the street. Takanuva stepped in front of him and said, “Wait, friend! I don’t think I’ve ever seen you run before. What’s the hurry?”

Kapura looked up at him. There were shock and fear in the Matoran’s eyes, but no recognition. “Forgive me, great Toa!” he said so fast the words tumbled over themselves. “Was I not running fast enough? I promise I will try to do better!”

“Kapura, it’s me! It’s Takanuva! What’s come over you?”

“Nothing, nothing!” insisted Kapura. “All is well, great Toa! For how could it be anything else with such wise and benevolent leaders?”

“Alright, I’ve had about enough of this,” said Takanuva. “Where’s Turaga Vakama? Where are the Toa Mahri?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” insisted Kapura. “Let me pass, please, before –”

The temperature suddenly dropped all around. The next moment, Kapura was locked in a foot-thick shell of ice from his neck down. The Matoran cried out from the intense cold.

Takanuva looked up, only to see Tahu and Kopaka standing nearby, frost still drifting from the sword of the Toa of Ice. “Tahu! Kopaka! Thank the Great Beings you’re here!” said Takanuva. “Something’s wrong with Kapura, maybe with the entire city!”

“The only thing wrong here, stranger, is you,” said Tahu. “Who are you? Why are you here? Where is your identity tablet?”

“I-I’m Takanuva! I live here! You know me – and I don’t know what an identity tablet is!”

Kopaka raised his sword and unleashed a hail of ice at the shocked Takanuva, knocking the Toa of Light to the ground. Standing over him, Kopaka held the point of his sword to Takanuva’s neck. “Well, Takanuva – if that is your name – you are now a prisoner of the Toa Empire, against which you have committed an act of war.”

Tahu and Kopaka dragged a protesting Takanuva to the Coliseum. Vahki guardians saluted and stepped aside to let the Toa enter. Wordlessly, they hauled Takanuva through winding corridors, finally tossing him into a cold, dark cell.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Tahu. “Someone will be back for you when Toa Tuyet is ready to question you in a day, or a week.”

“If this is some kind of a joke, it isn’t funny anymore,” said Takanuva. “What is going on around here?”

But Tahu and Kopaka had already walked away.

“What’s going on, stranger, is that you came to the wrong place at the wrong time,” said a weak voice behind Takanuva.

The Toa turned, surprised to find he was not alone. Hanging on the wall from chains around his wrists and ankles was a Matoran. Using the merest fraction of his light power, Takanuva illuminated the cell. He stumbled back against the cell door in shock. The imprisoned Matoran was none other than Takua – a fact that seemed impossible since Takanuva had been Takua before becoming a Toa.

“This is insane!” said Takanuva. “You’re me – I mean, I’m you – how…”

“I see,” said Takua. “You’re not one of the smarter ones. You wouldn’t happen to know how to pick a lock, would you?”

Takanuva shook his head. If this was a dream or an illusion, it was a whopper. But just in case it wasn’t, he fired a thin beam of laser-light from his left hand and sliced through Takua’s chains. A quick move let him catch the Matoran before he fell to the stone floor.
“That’s a neat trick,” said Takua. “So what are you in for?”
“I-I don’t know,” said Takanuva. “I’m not even sure where I am.”
“Metru Nui, City of Legends,” said Takua. “Of course, these days all the legends end with ‘And the Toa crushed anyone who got in their way.’ Or, in my case, spent more time wandering than working. When the Vahki treatment didn’t take, they put me here.”
“I can’t believe this,” said Takanuva, “Tahu and Kopaka insane or worse, Matoran jailed, and me sitting here talking to myself. Listen, where’s Gali?”
“In Ga-Metru, of course,” the Matoran replied. “She and Karzahni run the re-education center.”
“Listen, umm…” Takanuva paused, unable to bring himself to say the name ‘Takua’. “What happened here? How did things get so crazy?”
“It was about 3,500 years ago now,” said Takua. “Toa Tuyet tapped into the power of something called the Nui Stone, which gave her the power of maybe a hundred Toa. When Toa Lhikan tried to stop her, he got killed by her and his traitorous friend, Toa Nidhiki. And that’s it. Tuyet took over Metru Nui and convinced the other Toa it was their destiny to smash anyone who posed a threat to the Great Spirit. That meant everyone from the Makuta, to the Dark Hunters, to Toa who didn’t seem enthusiastic enough, and Matoran who didn’t work quite hard enough.”
Takanuva suddenly reached up and took off his mask of power. Before Takua could protest, he had placed it on top of the Matoran’s mask. Nothing happened. Takua tore the Mask of Light off, saying, “What are you trying to do, smother me?”
“Just testing a theory,” said Takanuva, rising and putting his mask back on. “Come on, we’re getting out of here.”
“And go where?” asked Takua.
“We have a date in the Archives,” the Toa of Light answered. “Or rather, below them. And here’s hoping Yakama’s stories about what’s down there – who’s down there – were all true.”
In her time, Gorast had taken some pretty hard blows. Some brute named Krekka once tried to stop her from going where she wanted to and made his case with a solid shot that sent her through a wall. (He paid for that, in full, not too long after.) Then there was the time she had been on the wrong end of a Tahtorak charge.

But nothing before could equal Onua Nuva seizing her, lifting her high into the air, and slamming her down with every bit of force his own power and the Mask of Strength could afford him. Even for the raw might of a Makuta, the world spun.

“Stay down while I check on Gali,” Onua said, his tone that of an earthquake about to erupt. “And if she’s hurt, so help me, I will send you back where you came from in pieces…”

Onua took a few steps back so he could keep an eye on Gorast while looking to his fallen friend. Gali was still breathing and didn’t seem badly hurt, only dazed. Whatever this thing was – another Makuta or some form of Rahi beast – and whatever it had been doing when Onua arrived, it evidently had not gone too far.

Gorast hadn’t moved, just lay in the mud eyeing Onua with… rage? No, the Toa realized, it was something else. Something far more disturbing: hunger.

Gorast scrambled to hers at the same time.

"You are Onua, aren’t you? The wise one!” hissed Gorast. “Brilliant and strong, yet never the leader – always forced to follow the orders of fools like Tahu. The Brotherhood would make you a king. You would have all of Metru Nui to rule, Toa… all you have to do is stand by my side.”

“Your armor’s black,” Onua replied. “That doesn’t mean my heart is as well. The answer is no.”

Gorast surged forward. Onua met her with a geyser of mud summoned from the ground. As she fought her way through that, he scooped Gali up in his arms and flew, heading toward where the fireball had been. He had to find Tahu so the three of them could stand together.

Gorast took off after him. She knew full well where he was going and wasn’t worried at all. The light of three Toa would be a feast to long remember.

Tahu’s mind raced even as his body’s energy faded away. He had managed to figure out what was happening to him. Krika drained energy from his victims. If there was no one nearby, he took it from the environment. That explained the temperature drops that accompanied his appearances. Now Tahu just needed to figure out a way to stop him.

Temperature… heat… cold… that’s the key, he thought. Wherever he goes, the air turns cold… if that’s what he’s used to… maybe I should serve up a little baked Makuta.

Flame was beyond his abilities just then, but Tahu could still generate heat. He poured what remained of his energy into the ground, willing the soil and water to grow searingly hot until the mud was
boiling. Krika gave out a cry of pain and then turned intangible. He drifted above the seething cauldron that a moment before had been just a mere spot of soft ground in a vast swamp.

Tahu didn’t care that Krika had escaped. All that mattered to him was that the drain on his energy had stopped. Maybe it was the burns, maybe it was changing to his ghostly form, but Krika’s mealtime was over.

The Toa of Fire glanced up and saw more good news. Onua and Gali were on their way. True, they had two vicious-looking creatures on their tails, but the sight of his two teammates was still the best thing he had ever seen.

Tahu absorbed the heat of the ground back into himself long enough for Onua and Gali to land. Krika floated above the three of them while Onua’s pursuers circled like Nui-Rama wasps. Tahu forced himself to rise and used his mask power to throw a shield around the three Toa Nuva.

“I see you brought company,” he said to Onua.

“It couldn’t be helped. Gali has been weakened, and you don’t look too well yourself.”

“My shield will take a few blasts, and then…” Tahu replied. His eyes were suddenly drawn to something in the sky. “Wait, what’s that?”

Onua turned to look and noted that all three Makuta were doing the same. What they had spotted was another Makuta, Chirox, plummeting from the sky. He obviously wasn’t in control of his flight. Onua guessed he had been on the receiving end of a solid blow from one of the three Toa Nuva battling in the skies above.

Gorast, Bitil, and Krika reacted immediately, flying or floating to intercept their brother. It seemed the perfect time to make an escape, although with Tahu and Gali both low on energy, Onua wasn’t sure how far they would get.

“This way,” said a small voice off to the left. “Come this way, now.”

Onua saw that the voice came from an Av-Matoran. The figure was beckoning to the Toa through some swamp foliage. “I can take you to safety,” the Matoran said.

The Toa Nuva of Earth knew it might be a trap, but at this point, he had to take a chance. Tahu nodded his assent, and the three heroes followed the Matoran deeper into the swamp.

They ended up in a small clearing surrounded by lightvines, the plants the Matoran of Karda Nui used as protection against the Makuta. Natural light producers, the vines were painful for the masters of shadow to come near. But what struck the three Toa was what lay on the ground—the bodies of at least a dozen Matoran, all apparently in the midst of some strange transformation.

Onua started to rush toward the fallen villagers, but the Matoran who had guided them there blocked him. “Don’t interfere. It’s their time, just as it will soon be mine.”

“Their time? For what?” said Gali, pushing past Onua and the Matoran. She rushed to the nearest villager. What she saw made her gasp and take a step back.

The Av-Matoran’s body was changing before her eyes. Muscle tissue and lung tissue were dissolving, being replaced by metallic protodermis. The shape of the body was changing too, becoming bigger and broader, even as the normal features of a Matoran rapidly disappeared. But that wasn’t what shocked Gali and the other Toa Nuva. No, it was that they recognized all too well what the Av-Matoran were transforming into.

“Bohrok,” whispered the Toa of Water, shaken to her core. “By the Great Beings, they are turning into Bohrok!”

Krika was the first to notice that the Toa Nuva were gone. Bitil and Gorast wanted to immediately pursue, but Krika waved them off. “Where can they run to? You know as well as I that they cannot leave the swamp without this,” he said, raising his foreleg to reveal a keystone embedded between his spikes. With a casual movement, he tossed the stone to Bitil.

“What if they don’t find the other five?” asked Gorast.

“They will,” answered Krika. “They will because it’s difficult, dangerous, and perhaps impossible to do… and because they are Toa.”
“Be careful, brother,” said Bitil. “You are starting to sound like you admire them.”
“I respect them and their power,” corrected Krika. “You would do well to do the same. We have swept down like a plague and exterminated Toa wherever we found them. Those who have survived have learned to turn any mistake by a foe into a chance for victory.”
“Then be careful,” said Gorast, leaning in close and locking her gaze on Krika. “Be very careful that you make no mistakes, brother – not now, not when a universe is almost in our grasp.”
Krika triggered her mask power. The Kanohi Crast, or Mask of Repulsion, sent Gorast hurtling away from him at high speed. She smashed into a nearby stalactite with a sickening thud and hit the mud, dazed.
“I am always careful,” said Krika. “And that is how I have survived.”

Bohrok. It was a word the Toa Nuva had heard all too often over the last year, and one they had hoped not to have to hear again.
Shortly after their arrival on the besieged island of Mata Nui, the Toa had been faced with a swarm of the insectoid mechanical beings. The Bohrok cut a path of destruction across the island, annihilating forests, mountains, rivers, and anything else that was in their path. It took a desperate effort by Tahu and his team to slow them down and eventually defeat the queens of the swarm. Only recently had the Toa discovered that the Bohrok did serve a benevolent purpose, and the heroes themselves ended up making it possible for them to be unleashed again. Just why the island of Mata Nui needed to be “cleansed” of so many of its natural wonders, the Toa still did not know.
Now, here they stood, watching what had once been a dozen Matoran of Light rise from the earth as new Bohrok. They lacked krana, the small creatures that provided direction for the mechanoids, but in other respects, they looked like every other Bohrok the Toa had ever encountered.
“This is insane,” said Gali, horrified. “It can’t be true… were all the Bohrok we fought once Matoran?”
“Maybe it’s not so farfetched,” answered Onua. “I remember reading a theory in the Metru Nui Archives that the Bohrok had once been bio-mechanical life and evolved into fully mechanical, artificial life. Isn’t that what we just saw happen?”
“It is the way of things,” said their Matoran companion. “As the first Bohrok sprang from the first Av-Matoran, so shall the next generation spring from among us. As Bohrok, we serve the will of Mata Nui just as you do. From being merely beings you must protect and look after, we become truly your brothers.”
“Of course,” muttered Tahu. “When we attacked the queens of the swarm, remember… they asked how we could dare to oppose our ‘brothers.’ We never suspected…”
Before Gali’s still startled eyes, the twelve Bohrok faded away. “Where have they gone?”
“To join the others and be fitted with the krana that will guide them the rest of their lives,” the Matoran replied. “They now have a new role to play… as do you. And yours requires this.”
The Matoran dug into a pouch he carried and produced a keystone. He handed it to Tahu. “You will need all six to enter the Codrex. Once there, you will know what needs to be done.”
“Codrex?”
The Matoran gestured back the way they had come, toward the strange spherical structure Tahu had discovered. “The place of your beginning… and your probable ending.”
Tahu wanted to ask him more questions, but the Av-Matoran had begun to transform. In a matter of moments, the intelligent being before him had become a mechanized Bohrok. Then it was gone, transported by some unknown means to one of the many nests beneath the island of Mata Nui. And it wasn’t the bizarre sight of this change, or even the revelation of the Matoran–Bohrok connection that left Tahu feeling strangely empty – it was the realization that he had never thought to ask the Matoran his name.
And now, he no longer has one, thought the Toa of Fire grimly. *Another sacrifice in the name of the Great Spirit... and why? Does Mata Nui have so grand a purpose in life that it warrants so much loss? Or are we all so small in his eyes that he doesn’t even notice when one of us is gone?*

Dark thoughts for a dark place, he decided. Tahu sensed a vague memory, buzzing around in the back of his mind like a fireflyer. Someone was speaking to him, a very long time ago, and saying something that would prove to be all too true: “This universe, like all others, demands a price from its heroes.”

Tahu understood what that meant. But as he looked around at the now empty swamp-land, he wondered again why the price had to be quite so high for quite so many.
One of the peculiar things about a Skakdi warlord’s base is the lack of any kind of a dungeon, torture chamber or prisoner of war camp. History has shown that there’s very little point in torturing a Skakdi, as they never talk except in trade – usually for their freedom, which few captors will agree to. And keeping prisoners means listening to them whine for trivial things like food, water, and a good-sized club to use on the stone rats who keep paying midnight visits.

So when Brutaka and Axonn were marched into warlord Nektann’s camp, no one seemed quite sure what to do with them. Killing them immediately came to mind, but then it would be impossible to find out why they were on the island to start with: unlike the famed Necrofinch of the Zakaz mountains, most beings did not continue to sing after they were dead. It was Axonn who insisted they be brought before Nektann himself. Nektann was larger than the average Skakdi, or at least appeared so sitting on his throne made from the fused weapons of his foes. He was accompanied by his pet, which looked like a Muaka cat covered in spiked armor.

Nektann, ever the gracious host, asked them if there was anything to say before he had them painfully disassembled.


Nektann spat on the ground. The Muaka growled. “What about them?” asked the warlord.

“We offer you a chance to sack their fortresses, loot their weapons and slay their warriors,” Axonn said.

“We’d throw in ‘Make their women weep,’ but have you ever seen a female Makuta?” added Brutaka. “It’s not pretty.”

“Why should I listen to you when it would be so much quicker and easier to throw you into the Tahtorak pens?”

“Because we’ve already been to see the other warlords of Zakaz,” lied Axonn. “What, did you think we would come to this puny hole first? They have all agreed to ally with us. If you refuse, you can sit on your petty throne and watch as they grow rich and powerful.”

Nektann frowned, the only expression uglier than a Skakdi smile. No self-respecting warlord wanted to be left out of a chance at glorious battle, and even more glorious loot. In the end, he nodded.

“Why did you tell him we had talked to the other warlords?” whispered Brutaka. “We still have to go to all their camps and talk them into an alliance.”

“That’s a lot of work.” Axonn agreed. “So I guess you better get started.”

Toa Mahri Jaller stood in the center of Metru Nui, gazing up at the statue of the late Matoro. It had been constructed by Turaga Onewa himself as a tribute to the fallen hero. It was good to know his comrade was remembered and always would be, but it did little to dispel the grief he felt over his death. He had to admit, thoughts of Matoro distracted him. When the other Toa Mahri left to search the city for Takanuva, he chose to remain behind. When they returned, reporting that there had been no sign of
the Toa of Light, he hardly paid any attention. It still troubled him that the Toa Mahri had been unable to fulfill their destiny without losing one of their own.

Behind him, he could hear the other Toa in conference. Metru Nui was quiet for now, with the Kardas dragon subdued and most of the other Rahi back in the Archives. Still, the heroes could never relax. Who knew where the next threat would come from?

There was a sudden flash of light. When Jaller could see again, six Toa stood in front of him. He didn’t recognize any of them. Instinctively, he readied his weapons.

“Welcome to Metru Nui,” said Jaller. “And who are you? Why have you come here?”

One of the newcomers, a Toa of Fire, also stepped forward. “My name is Norik, of the Toa Hagah. I ask you and your teammates to stand aside. We have no wish to see anyone hurt while we carry out our task here.”

“The Toa Mahri stand aside for no one,” said Toa Hewkii, stepping forward. “Tell us your business here or be considered our enemies.”

“Our business?” said Norik. “It is as simple as it is terrible. We have come to destroy the Coliseum.”

Vezon landed hard on the stone floor of the Makuta fortress of Destral. He had been captured by Rahkshi less than two minutes after Trinuma had dropped him off on the shore of the island. Vezon had never met a Rahkshi before and found he disliked them. Most beings had a scent, either pleasant or unpleasant – Rahkshi smelled of cold metal and death.

The Makuta who came to greet him wore armor of purple and crimson. Although Vezon was polite enough to introduce himself, the Makuta did not bother to share his name. Vezon was tempted to complain about this, but the spear at his throat – the one dripping acid – convinced him to save it for another time.

“Who are you?” said the Makuta. “What are you? And how came you here?”

“My name is Vezon, your darkness, and I was brought here by an agent of a power that wishes you and your brotherhood harm. They wanted me to come and tell you that they exist, and plan to attack this island – but I’m not going to do that, no no no!”

“You just did,” said the Makuta. Behind Vezon, three Rahkshi moved a little closer, staffs at the ready.

“Well of course I did, but only to tell you that I won’t,” said Vezon, exasperated. How could this being hope to conquer the universe and yet be so slow? “It’s all a trick, you see. They want me to pretend to betray them. They want you to concentrate your forces here against an attack that won’t come. But I decided, why pretend to betray them when actually doing it would be so much more fun?”

The Makuta grabbed Vezon by the throat and slammed him against the wall. “Speak, fool! And let only truth and clarity come from your mouth if you wish to continue having one.”

“Truth and clarity… Truth and clarity… I don’t think I know them,” answered Vezon. “Will you settle for ‘white-lipped and trembling?’ This Order of Mata Nui – it plans to amass an army and a navy, threaten Destral, force you to teleport it away from where it is now and then…” When Vezon did not continue speaking right away, the Makuta tightened his grip.

“Alright, alright! I was only pausing for effect. They have a spy inside this fortress: they’ve sabotaged your means of teleportation. When you try to use it again… well, I wouldn’t start reading any long tablets, let’s put it that way. And now that you know, tell me: what are we going to do about it?”

* * *

Toa Iruini dove for cover, barely dodging Toa Hewkii’s chain. Not far away, Norik was locked in a stalemate with Jaller, while Bomonga was having a hard time even finding the stealthy Nuparu. All in all, it was not one of the Toa Hagah’s better days.
They had hoped that their return to Metru Nui – the city they helped save when they were Rahaga – would be a joyous one. Instead, they were here on a mission from a shadowy organization called the Order of Mata Nui. Their goal: track down the missing Makuta Teridax before he could execute the final stages of his Plan.

Unfortunately, that was not as easy as it sounded (and it didn’t sound that easy). They had been saddled with a mutated Piraka, Zaktan, they had to carry around in a water-filled sphere. His information was that Teridax would be heading to an inaccessible spot below the Metru Nui Coliseum. As antidermis, he could slip through cracks too small even for Norik to make through with his Mask of Shrinking. The only way to follow him would be to shatter the foundation of the Coliseum, which would bring the structure down.

Needless to say, popping in and saying, “We’re here to wreck your most important building” had not sparked joy in the Toa Mahri. Given Takanuva’s recent unexplained disappearance, they were on edge to start with. This just set them off.

Hewkii swung his chain again. This time Iruini grabbed it in midair and yanked the Toa of Stone forward. At the last moment, Iruini sidestepped, letting his opponent slam into a rock wall. “Stone, meet stone,” muttered Iruini. “Now will you listen?”

Toa Kualus had teamed with Bomonga in an effort to pin down Nuparu, whose Mask of Stealth made him almost impossible to spot. A hastily created snowstorm revealed the Toa Mahri of Earth, but finding him and stopping him were two different things. Sixty feet in height just made Bomonga an easier target and a barrage of earth kept him off-balance.

Kualus frowned. He remembered these Mahri when they were Matoran villagers. He understood their suspicion and hostility, given the circumstances, but if this kept up, someone was going to get hurt. This called for drastic measures. Summoning the power of his Mask of Rahi Control, he touched the mind of a massive Rahi dwelling in the Archives not far below. In response, a huge claw smashed its way through the pavement and grabbed Nuparu.

“Let him go!” shouted Toa Hahli, blasting Kualus with a powerful jet of water. Even as he staggered from the impact, Kualus realized what was about to happen. The creature had been roused by his mask power, but his concentration was now broken. The Rahi was no longer under his control.

It erupted from below ground in a shower of rock and earth. Well over 60 feet high, it scanned the battlefield with its three heads. Muted light from the sunholes reflected off its brown scales as it spread its batlike wings. Its cry of triumph shattered crystal structures as far away as Ko-Metru.

The word “Toa” means “hero” in Matoran. And one of the characteristics of a hero is the ability to put aside personal feelings in a crisis. Thus it was that the Mahri and the Hagah forgot their fight in the face of this monstrosity from below. Still reeling from Hahli’s blow, Kualus could not reassert control. But Jaller and Norik had already discovered the beast feared fire, and their twin blasts drove it back toward the barren plains of Po-Metru.

The creature wasn’t about to go quietly. It hurled Nuparu through the sky at deadly speed. Hewkii whirled and used his Mask of Gravity as he never had before, applying just enough power to slow the Toa of Earth without ripping him apart.

Bomonga, still at his maximum size, landed a rain of blows on the Rahi. He might as well have been a Toa of Water summoning a light spring rain for all the good it did. Now it was Kongu and Iruini’s turn, as they combined their air power with the powers of the Toa of Fire to create a swirling tornado of flame.

The Rahi was directly in the eye of the storm, which was so hot it melted nearby mountains into slag. It roared and attempted to fly out of the trap, but its wings were already blazing. Finally, overcome by the heat, it toppled over. The impact shook the ground for kios around.

Eleven weary Toa stood around the unconscious beast. Already, Onu-Matoran would be on their way to help prepare the creature for its return to the Archives. Po-Metru was a disaster area, the ground scorched and burned. Not far away, Po-Matoran labored to put out fires in their villages, aided by Hahli and Gaaki. Only the fact that this area of the metru was sparsely populated had kept this from being a true cataclysm.
Norik glanced at Jaller. “We either need to stop fighting,” he said, “or find someplace uninhabited to settle things. Otherwise, Matoran are going to get killed – and neither of us wants that.”

“What do you think will happen if you destroy the Coliseum?” asked Jaller.

“We’re not trying to hurt anyone,” said Pouks. “We’re trying to save them.”

“Yes, and we’re all idiots,” added Iruini. “We have almost a dozen Toa here… we should be able to figure out how to do what we have to and keep the building intact.”

“Just what is it you have to do?” asked Jaller. “Why are you here?”

“Listen to me,” said Norik. “The Toa Nuva are in the core of the universe right now, fighting for the Great Spirit. But the true mysteries, the true secrets… all the hidden knowledge about this cosmos and its workings aren’t there. They are somewhere beneath your feet, in a place no Toa, Matoran, Turaga has ever been. Right now, we think Makuta has reached that place – and if we’re right, then it may already be too late for us all.”

It took hours of planning, more to convince the Turaga the Toa hadn’t all lost their minds, and another half a day on top of that to complete the work needed. When they were ready, Jaller, Norik, Pouks and Nuparu used their powers to crack the foundation and create a tunnel where none had been before. Outside, Hewkii’s gravity power, Kualus’ ice power, and Bomonga’s vast strength struggled to keep the building intact. Once the tunnel was in place, Hahli and Gaaki used their water power to cool down the walls. Iruini and Kongu watched over Zaktan, with Kongu more than ready to send the Piraka’s glass case hurtling into the air at the first wrong word.

The hardest part came last. Bomonga and Kualus had to let go of the Coliseum to join the others as they prepared to venture into the unknown. That left Hewkii supporting the vast structure alone.

“My team will go with you,” said Jaller to Norik.

“No,” the leader of the Toa Hagah responded. “If we fail… if Teridax escapes… you may be the last hope to stop him. We will go, and Pouks and I will seal the tunnel behind us. Hurry, Hewkii cannot last long.”

Jaller wanted to argue, but Norik was right – the Toa of Stone was on the verge of collapse. He watched as the Toa Hagah disappeared below ground. A moment later, the powers of stone and fire resealed the entrance. He signaled to Hewkii, who slowly, slowly, eased back on his mask power to lower the Coliseum back to the ground. Then the Toa of Stone passed out.

“He’ll be all right,” said Hahli, after checking on their fallen friend. “But I still think we should have gone along. They may be facing great danger.”

“I know,” said the Toa of Fire. “I kept thinking as I watched Pouks and Norik closing the tunnel behind them… I have never seen anyone seal their own tomb before.”

* * *

The Toa Empire universe...

“Where are we going?” asked Takua.” How did you take out those Vahki guards so fast? What's down here? Have you been down here before?”

“Would you be quiet!” Takanuva snapped. He had never realized before just how annoying he was as a Matoran. “There’s no telling who, or what, is down here, and I’d rather not have unexpected company.”

In truth, it was more than Takua’s chattering that was bothering Takanuva. In his universe, the Metru Nui Archives were filled with exhibits of Rahi beasts, carvings, tools and other things that Olu-Matoran and Ko-Matoran scholars might study. But in this strange world that he had stumbled upon, the Archives were more like a museum of conquest. A long dead and mounted Visorak stared from the shadows with glassy eyes. A collection of weaponry was nearby, each item identified with a small inscribed tablet. The staff of the Shadowed One, the Spear of Fusion, zamor sphere launchers, Rhotuka launchers and more. Next to that was the most amazing sight of all: the Kanohi Mask of Shadows, once the property of the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta, now nailed to the wall like just another trophy. Moving
further into the depths of the Archives, the Toa and Matoran came upon a group of stasis tubes. These were used to keep Rahi in suspended animation so they could be studied – at least that’s what they had been used for in Takanuva’s universe. In this dimension, he saw with shock that they served a quite different purpose. One tube stood apart from the others, the glow of a lightstone playing upon its face. Takanuva wiped the dust from the crystal and gasped: inside, trapped in stasis, was Turaga Dume, ruler of Metru Nui.

“I can’t believe this,” Takanuva said. “Even Toa as mad as they are here would never do this.”

“Dume talked too much,” said Takua sadly, “and coming from me, that’s saying something. When Toa Tuyet took over, he stood up and said that true Toa value justice and mercy, and she had neither in her heart. You had to admire him for it, all the way up to the moment that they hauled him off and stuck him in there.”

Takanuva fired a beam of laser-light from his left hand, slicing open the crystal case. Takua grabbed his arm, trying to pull it away.

“Are you crazy?! What if there are alarms? You can’t do that!”

“I just did,” said Takanuva, catching the falling Dume. Consciousness slowly returned to the Turaga, and when he saw Takanuva, he said, “Who are you?”

“I’m… a friend,” Takanuva replied.


“I don’t have time to argue with you,” said Takanuva. “Somewhere down here there is an intelligent Rahi called a Krahka – at least I hope she’s here. We need to find her. Something is very, very wrong in this world, and I’m going to need help if I’m going to make things right.”

“Help is exactly what you need, Toa,” said a voice behind Takanuva.

He whirled to see the one figure he never expected. Takua and Dume both backed away in fear. Standing before them was the leader of the Toa Empire, the wielder of the Nui Stone and the unquestioned ruler of the known universe: Toa Tuyet.
It wasn’t so much the fall that bothered Pohatu. It was not being able to see where he was heading. The thick layer of mist and fog obscured everything below and made it hard to aim for a soft spot. Not that there are likely to be any, anyway, he reminded himself.

An image appeared in his mind of a place he had never seen. It was another fallen stalactite, smaller than the rest, its tip buried in the swamp. Its wide, flat end was not too far below, hidden in the mist. He suddenly realized he was seeing something Photok had seen some time ago – somehow, the Matoran’s memories were in his head now as well.

Regardless of how he knew, that stalactite was the best chance to break their fall. Pohatu strained against the pull of gravity to change his course even a few feet. It took almost all his strength, but he did it. Then the rocky surface of the stalactite was rushing up to meet him. “Hang on!” he yelled to Photok.

The impact was terrible, driving Pohatu and the Av-Matoran deep into the stalactite. The stone split in half with a loud crack, both ends starting to fall toward the swamp. And Pohatu and Photok were falling again.

Toa Ignika had watched the battle for some time. He was fascinated by the ebb and flow of it, first one side winning, then the other. When he had been just the Mask of Life, he had created warriors to fight for him, but never been in battle himself. The feelings were so overwhelming that he was too caught up in them to take action.

That is, until he spotted Icarax’s attack on Pohatu. That reminded him the Toa Nuva were both outnumred and outpowered here. He had wanted them as allies and friends, he had better do something.

He steered his craft directly at Icarax and swung his sword, striking the Makuta with all of his might with the flat of the blade. Startled, but unhurt, Icarax turned to see his attacker.

“Oh, it’s you,” the Makuta said. “The one Antroz spoke of. Will you hand over your mask, or do I take it, and your life with it?”

Toa Ignika said nothing, and simply readied his blade for another strike.

“The silent sort, eh?” said Icarax. “Well, if you can’t talk, I am sure you can scream… and what sweet music that will be, if too short a tune.”

Toa Ignika swung his blade. Icarax altered his body’s density, allowing the weapon to pass right through. Then he altered it again to the hardness of protosteel and struck Ignika with an armored fist. The Toa flew off his vehicle, catching the end of it at the last moment before he fell. He clung to the edge even as Icarax drew closer. The Makuta reached down toward his mask.

Something inside the Toa Ignika suddenly flared to life. In all of the millennia the Mask of Life had existed, no one had been allowed to touch it unless destined to do so. Those who laid hands on it were cursed. And now this Makuta had dared to strike it a physical blow and attempted to seize it for himself. That will not be, thought Toa Ignika.
He hurled the power of Life at Icarax. Immediately, he sensed the Makuta was not like other beings he had encountered. Icarax was armor and energy only, with no organic tissue anywhere in his body. Had it always been this way? Or had the Makuta once been something other than simply pure power housed in black armor?

Toa Ignika decided to find out.

Extending his power, he gave the Makuta a push back down the road of evolution. Swirling energy coalesced into solid matter; muscles and organs grew where they had not been for tens of thousands of years, but found no place to exist. The current generation of Makuta armor was designed to hold energy only, not organic tissue. As the old form struggled to replace the new, the pain was, to say the least, excruciating. The sound that came from Icarax rebounded again and again off the walls of the mammoth cavern. For a moment, all the combatants were frozen in place, the battle halted by that sound.

No one could remember the last time they had heard a Makuta scream.

Far below, Pohatu abruptly found he could fly again. The tremendous pull of gravity had eased, as if Icarax's power had just been cut off. Smiling, he began to ascend again.

"Look!" said Photok. "Chirox is up ahead, fighting with Kopaka."

"Then let's give ol' frosty a hand," said the Toa of Stone. "I still owe him one."

"For what?"

"Well, we were in Ko-Wahi, and there was this avalanche, and he made a shield, and... I'll tell you later."

Mutran was a scientist, not a warrior. As he saw Icarax in agony, Antroz falling toward the swamp, and Chirox fighting two Toa Nuva, he knew what the next step had to be.

The problem would be Vamprah. He was fighting an aerial battle with Lewa Nuva, a fight he should have won with ease. But the Toa was so skillful in the air it seemed he was born flying, and he was using his Midak Skyblaster to keep Vamprah at bay. Other Av-Matoran had joined in as well, peppering the Makuta with blasts of light.

We can destroy them, Mutran told himself. We will destroy them. But, as much as I hate to admit it, Antroz is right – the Plan is what matters. While we are battling here, the other three Toa Nuva may be finding the rest of the keystones. And it is too soon for that, much too soon.

Hovering right in the center of the ongoing battle, Mutran did something he had never done before. He gathered within himself every last bit of shadow energy he possessed and unleashed it all in one devastating explosion of darkness. It was enough to send Toa, Matoran, and even the other Makuta reeling. Mutran almost collapsed from the effort, but Vican appeared on his mount to keep him from falling.

"Find Vamprah, Chirox, and Icarax," Mutran ordered. "Tell them to join our brothers in the swamp. We will kill the other three Toa Nuva before they find the keystones... and these, too, if they dare to follow."

Vican flew off to do as he was bade. Chirox didn’t hesitate, and Icarax was in no shape to refuse. Vamprah wanted to finish off Lewa Nuva, but even he understood the Plan was more important than any one battle. The three Makuta headed for the swamp, with some shadow Matoran trailing behind, others locked in battle with Av-Matoran.

Mutran was about to follow when he found himself surrounded by the three Toa Nuva and Toa Ignika. Skybusters were aimed directly at him. Toa Ignika had no such weapon, but the look in his eyes reminded Mutran that what he had done to Icarax, he could easily do again.

"Where did the other Makuta go?" demanded Kopaka.

"Below," said Mutran. "I hope you said good-bye to your friends before they traveled to the swamp... you won't be seeing them again."
“The keystones,” said Kopaka. “I have read enough of the three we captured to know the secret to reviving Mata Nui lies in that swamp. If the Makuta seize it and hold it, it will take an army of Toa to pry it from their claws.”

“And we don’t have an army,” said Pohatu. “We barely have a kolhii team.”

“Then we quick-fly down there now,” said Lewa. “Stop the Makuta, find the secret, wake the Great Spirit, and get home in time for disk-surfing.”

“Just another day in the core of the universe, huh?” replied Pohatu. “Not quite,” said Kopaka. “If we’re not very careful, this might be the last day for all of us.”
Five years ago...

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" whispered Mazeka.

"No," answered the invisible Jerbraz. "But it’s the only idea I have."

The two were on the outskirts of a small village on the Tren Krom peninsula. Mazeka had never seen it before, and he had explored much of the peninsula over the years. At first glance, it looked like any other village—a series of huts, a central meeting area, Matoran wandering about. The only thing that marked it as strange was the absolute silence that permeated every inch of the place.

What’s going on?" Mazeka asked, so quietly he could barely hear himself. Despite that, one of the Matoran stopped and looked around.

"They are De-Matoran," answered Jerbraz. "Matoran of Sonics. Very sensitive to noise, so they train themselves from early on to not make any more than is necessary. On the plus side, their hearing is so acute that they are probably listening to every word we say... and would be even if we were a kio away."

Mazeka considered that. "Then why are we whispering?"

"Out of respect. Plus they hate loud sounds – that’s why no Toa are allowed into the place. Where Toa go, battles follow... and battles are noisy."

Mazeka felt the invisible hand of Jerbaz tap him on the shoulder. "Krakua is over there, to the left of the clearing – he’s the one you’re after. Looks like just another villager to me, but the people in power say he matters. So you go in and bring him out... before someone else does."

The one Jerbraz had identified was standing off by himself, but not by choice. The other Matoran were avoiding him, and giving him nasty looks besides. Mazeka quickly figured out why: Krakua was humming to himself.

"Someone thinks he may wind up a Toa someday," Jerbraz continued. "I can see why. Matoran with the calling sometimes are a little... eccentric. Almost like their brain knows something it isn’t telling them."

At Jerbraz’s urging, Mazeka slipped into the village and beckoned to Krakua. He was careful not to call out to them. No point in drawing unwanted attention to himself. When Krakua joined him at the outskirts, Mazeka said, "You don’t know me, but I’ve been sent here to find you."

"By whom?" asked Krakua.

"I can’t tell you that," answered Mazeka.

"Okay. How about why?"

"I can’t tell you that either," Mazeka replied, already feeling very uncomfortable.

"Is there anything you can tell me?" asked Krakua, frustrated.

Mazeka looked over Krakua’s shoulder. Something was rolling into the center of the De-Matoran village. "Yes!" he yelled, diving for Krakua. "Trust me!"

The two hit the ground, hard. Mazeka clamped his hands over Krakua’s audio receptors just in
time. A wall of sound struck the village, excruciatingly loud for a being with normal senses, beyond devastatizing for the Matoran of Sonics. Matoran hit the ground almost instantly, overcome by the sound. Mazeka almost passed out as well, but he fought to stay conscious and do what he could to protect Krakua.

When the effect finally ended, Mazeka couldn’t hear his own voice. He called out Jerbraz’s name a few times, but couldn’t have heard the answer if it came and felt no taps on his shoulder. Had the Order agent deserted him?

Before he could worry about that, someone entered the clearing. It was a Ta-Matoran, though not one Mazeka recognized. He idly picked up the device used to fell the villagers, smiled, and tossed it away. Then he surveyed the unconscious Matoran as if he were looking for someone in particular. Now and then, he would use his sword to roll one over and get a better look.

Mazeka took his hands away from Krakua’s head. Using hand signals, he told Krakua to follow him. Mazeka started away, but stepped on a branch, snapping it. He was still unable to hear, so he never noticed the noise. But the Ta-Matoran did.

An instant later, Krakua was spinning Mazeka around. As he did, a dagger thrown by the Ta-Matoran buried itself in a nearby tree. Mazeka drew his own blade, ready to fight. But the Ta-Matoran didn’t advance – in fact, he seemed a little startled.

“Go!” Mazeka yelled to Krakua. “Get out of here! I’ll handle this.”

Krakua hesitated. Then his feet left the ground and he was flying into the jungle. Mazeka almost smiled – Jerbraz hadn’t left after all. He was carrying Krakua to safety.

The Ta-Matoran advanced. Mazeka leaned back a little on his heels, ready to meet the attack. The Ta-Matoran made a few tentative attacks, then went to work, hacking and slashing. Mazeka parried the blows, even landing a few of his own. All the while, something was nagging at him. There was something familiar about his enemy – not how he looked, nor how he sounded, since he hadn’t said a word. No, it was his moves in combat. Once in a while, he would do something that struck a familiar chord, then it would be gone.

Unfortunately, the middle of a fight is not the best time to try and jog one’s memory. The Ta-Matoran took advantage of his distraction to disarm him. Mazeka tried to retrieve his blade, but the Ta-Matoran got in between him and his weapon. A swift stroke and Mazeka had lost his mask. He stumbled and fell to the ground.

His enemy stood over him, smiling. He lifted his blade for the killing stroke, twirling it over his head for a moment.

And then Mazeka knew. Someone or something had changed his appearance, but that habit of twirling his blade before a final attack… only one person did that in Mazeka’s memory.

“Vultraz!” he gasped. “You’re… alive?”

“More than I can say for you,” whispered Vultraz, as he swung his razor-sharp sword at Mazeka’s head…

* * *

Now…

Axonn and Brutaka stood on a steep rise, overlooking a battlefield. Down below, the assembled might of the Skakdi of Zakaz were locked in combat with a small army of Rahkshi. The setting was an unnamed island in one of the southern chains, set up as a staging area by the Brotherhood of Makuta for an invasion of the mainland continent. The Rahkshi had been brought there in secret, and allowed to practice their skills on the scattered Matoran residents. Needless to say, there were no longer any Matoran on this island. Initially, the Skakdi had suffered horrible losses, but they were capable of something that the Rahkshi could only pretend to: rage. Hungry for victory, and filled with hatred for their enemy, the barbarians regrouped and tore through the Rahkshi ranks. It was overwhelming, thrilling, and sickening all at once.
“Come on,” said Brutaka, tearing himself away from the spectacle. “You know what we’re here for.” Together they walked down the hill and deep into a small canyon. In the center, buried beneath a slab of rock, was a square metal trapdoor with an iron ring. After Axonn split the rock with his ax, Brutaka grasped the ring and pulled open the door. A stench rose from within: the smell of age and neglect, decay and rot. The two Order of Mata Nui members climbed down into the hole.

Axonn sent energy through his axe, illuminating the chamber. It was obvious that no one had walked here since perhaps the beginning of recorded time. The place was bare stone, with the only interesting feature a pool in the center. The waters were greenish-black and swirled angrily, despite there being not even the slightest breeze to stir them.

“So this is it?” asked Brutaka.

Axonn nodded. “Yes, this is the place the Great Spirit created the Makuta. And the only place new Makuta could ever spring from. From that pool came their substance, made into living form by the powers of the Great Spirit, until time turned it all into pure energy.”

“Then if we destroy the pool?” said Brutaka.

“Yes. There can be no more Makuta ever. But do we have a right to end a species?”

Brutaka was looking at the pool, eyes wide. “I’d love to get into a philosophical debate with you, old friend, but I think we have a problem.”

The waters of the pool suddenly exploded up and outward. Foul, scalding liquid struck Axonn and Brutaka, seeping into the openings in their masks and armor. It hissed and writhed, like a thing alive, burning wherever it touched. Temporarily blinded and in pain, the two warriors staggered and then stumbled, plunging into the pool itself.

Toa Helryx sat in the command chamber of her fortress on Daxia. The war against the Brotherhood of Makuta had begun, and it had not begun well. Although the Order, through the Dark Hunters, now held Xia, they had been unable to dislodge Makuta forces from the island of Nynrah. In other places, the Order’s surprise attacks had met unexpectedly fierce resistance from Rahkshi and Exo-Toa. Being a leader meant making difficult decisions, something she had always known. In her time, she had sent agents on missions she knew they might well not come back from. She had ordered the deaths of everyone who knew the location of Artakha, and now she had to make two more vital choices that might lead to victory or disaster.

The first had been easy. She had dispatched a messenger to Metru Nui, carrying the Heart of the Visorak. This artifact could be used to summon the Visorak hordes from anywhere in the universe. It was to be placed in the hands of the Toa Mahri, with instructions to bring it to the volcanic island of Artidax and use it there.

The second was more difficult. Brutaka had informed her of the presence of Hydraxon in the Pit, as well as the events that took place there. A second messenger had been sent to the Pit with orders for the jailer. She could not be sure he would follow them, given their nature, or if she would simply be trading the Brotherhood in the end for a worse evil. But it had to be done. Sometimes she hated being the one in charge.

Hydraxon paced the dark, cavernous chamber that was The Pit. In his hand, he held a tablet that contained orders from Helryx. The instructions carved in the stone were almost impossible to believe.

The chamber door opened. It was Toa Lesovikk, bringing back another escaped prisoner. Although the two had clashed on first meeting, they had since become allies in the effort to recapture the former inmates of this vast prison. Hydraxon hesitated to show the orders to Lesovikk. After all, the existence of the Order of Mata Nui was supposed to be a secret – but if the situation as outlined on the tablet was true, then he guessed it was a secret no longer.

Lesovikk let out a low whistle as he read the tablet. “So what are you going to do?” he asked.

He climbed down the iron ladder that led to the lowest tier of cells. Here, Pridak, Kalmah, Mantax, and Ehlek were imprisoned. The four Barraki looked at their jailer with undisguised contempt.

“Have you come here to mock us?” snarled Mantax.

Pridak smiled, revealing rows of sharp teeth. “We killed you once, you know. We can do it again.” Hydraxon ignored the obvious insanity. After all, he was alive and well, so obviously he had never been dead. “I have an offer for you,” he said, forcing out each word. “There’s a war going on. A war to bring the reign of the Brotherhood of Makuta to an end. Agree to fight against the Makuta, and you will get your freedom.”

“And if we refuse?” said Kalmah. “Why should we risk our lives to fight someone else’s war?”

“If you refuse,” said Hydraxon, “you will find that there are places you can be buried far deeper than this Pit.”

“Another chance,” said Pridak. “Another chance to fight, to lead armies, to conquer. And when the Brotherhood falls, the League of Six Kingdoms will rise again.”

* * *

The Toa Empire universe...

Takanuva, Takua and Turaga Dume walked in single file through the depths of the Archives, followed by the silent Toa Tuyet. The ruler of the Toa Empire had not spoken a word since capturing the three of them – simply gestured with her barbed broad sword for them to get moving. They marched for what seemed like hours, through twists and turns, past long forgotten exhibits, and into regions that probably even the Archive caretakers didn’t know existed.

Takanuva was puzzled. Tuyet could have just brought them back to a cell on the surface – or for that matter, killed them. Why go on a tour of the Archives? Things got even more disturbing and bizarre as they rounded a corner and entered a large chamber. In the back were a half-dozen badly damaged Rahkshi and an Exo-Toa armored suit missing its right arm. Even more surprising was the sight of two figures clad in black armor, who sprang to their feet at the sight of the newcomers, shadow energy crackling in their hands. Takanuva turned around, but Tuyet was no longer there. Standing in her place was another Makuta, this one wearing a scarred and pitted Kanohi Hau. When he spoke, it was in the familiar grating voice of the Makuta of Metru Nui.

“A simple strategy,” he said. “Tuyet has left us with little choice but to use our shapeshifting powers when we venture out. Even then we were captured, just as we have captured you.”

“I don’t understand,” said Takanuva. “Why aren’t you wearing the Mask of Shadows? I saw it hanging in the Archives.”

Makuta gave Takanuva a look that would have chilled the snow atop Mount Ihu.

“The mask is warded. If it is so much as touched, Tuyet and her minions will know at once. She keeps it there, unguarded, as a taunt to me, knowing I long for it and cannot touch it.

The two other Makuta, and those Rahkshi that could still move, closed in.

“But you are not so protected, Toa. Give me one good reason why we should not kill you now, as your kind has killed ours for so many centuries.”

“I’m not…” Takanuva began, then stopped, as he debated how much to tell his captors. These were, after all, Makuta, the most evil beings in the universe from which he came. Here though, they were hunted fugitives in a world gone mad. “I’m not one of Tuyet’s Toa. My name is Takanuva – I am a Toa of Light.”

The three Makuta recoiled. Takanuva could understand why: a Toa of Light was the ultimate weapon against beings of shadow.

“Listen to me,” he continued. “I come from… someplace else, where there is no Tuyet, no Toa Empire. I can’t claim I understand what happened here, but I do know this: I don’t belong here, and I need to get back to my own universe.”
The three Makuta were silent for a moment. Then they began to laugh, a horrible sound that echoed throughout the chamber for long minutes.

“And just how,” said the Makuta of Metru Nui, “do you propose to get back to this universe of yours, my poor, mad Toa?”

“By finding the one who sent me on my journey,” Takanuva replied. “A being named Brutaka.”

One of the Makuta nodded. He was tall, with armor lined with short, curved and very sharp blades.

“I have heard legends of a Brutaka. It’s said he is a great hero who guards a valuable treasure. But in Matoran legend, every pile of rocks is a treasure, every Rahi larger than a stone rat is a monster, and anyone who doesn’t scream and run when the thunder cracks is a hero of great courage.”

“Very true, Krika, very true indeed,” said the Makuta of Metru Nui. “Very well then. You, Toa, are either a liar, a fool or a mad man, I know not which. But if you need our help, you’ll have to pay a price.”

“And what is that price?” asked Takanuva.

“A Matoran expedition escorted by a pair of Toa left Metru Nui weeks ago, bound for the island of Artakha,” said Makuta. “They were to retrieve an object of power: the legendary Mask of Time, one of the few weapons that might be effective against Tuyet. By now they have it and are on their way back. I want you to attack their force and steal the mask for us. In return, we will smuggle you out of the city so you can find your Brutaka. But be warned, the Matoran leader is a fanatic who’d rather die than surrender his prize. You will have to grant him his wish.”

“And just who is this leader?” asked Takanuva.

“No one you would know,” said Makuta Krika. “A Ta-Matoran, someone named Jaller.”
Tahu, Gali, and Onua picked their way carefully through the swamp. The Makuta had left a trail a blind Archives mole could have followed. It was obviously a trap, but the Toa Nuva had no choice but to walk into it. They had still found no sign of the Mask of Life, and there was always the chance the Makuta already had it or knew where it was.

“What’s the plan when we find them?” Gali whispered.

“Do you remember the one we used when we cleaned out that Nui-Jaga nest on Mata Nui?” Tahu replied.

Gali paused, trying to recall. Then she said, “Wait a second, we didn’t have a plan then. You and Kopaka were having one of your arguments. You hurled a fireball, missed, and set the brush on fire. The smoke drove the Nui-Jaga out, and we had to fight them all.”

“That’s the plan,” said Tahu.

“Then it’s too bad Kopaka isn’t here,” Onua said. “You two haven’t butted masks in days.”

“Onua, you’re not helping,” said Gali. Turning back to the Toa of Fire, she said, “Tahu, please tell me we actually have some idea of how we are going to deal with three Makuta.”

Tahu stopped walking and looked at Gali with a smile. “Watch this – little trick I learned from Pohatu.” He looked away from her, concentrating on a spot in the empty air. After a moment, he relaxed again.

“Um… nothing happened,” Gali pointed out.

“Wait for it,” said Tahu.

An instant later, a small ball of fire appeared in midair, right in the spot Tahu had been looking at. It shot down to the ground, starting a miniscule fire. Onua helpfully stamped it out.

“Pohatu and Onua would be best at it, but we all can do it,” said Tahu. “At least, I think so.”

“Do what?” asked Gali, growing exasperated.

“Let me try to explain,” Tahu said, keeping his voice low. “As a Toa of Fire, I control flame… I also control heat, without which you can’t have any flame. If I start the process of combustion in a spot, I can time when it actually happens. Then, once it does, I can make the resulting fireball go where I need it to go the same way I would any flame.”

Gali looked down at the still-smoldering patch of earth. “So you’re saying you can plan a fireball for later?”

“Exactly, the same way Pohatu can set a stone to crumbling inside without it actually collapsing until later. Maybe it’s a Nuva ability, I don’t know. But I do know we can use this to our advantage and here’s how we’re going to do it.”

Following Onua’s directions, the three Toa approached Krika’s haven, taking care to keep as quiet as possible. As Tahu had hoped, all three Makuta were there. Better still, they seemed to be hiding some artifact in a hastily dug pit. The Toa Nuva hoped that might be the Mask of Life.
“Spread out, and be careful,” Tahu whispered. “We think with our heads, not our fists, and we’ll get what we came for.”

Gali tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. This was a far cry from the Tahu who used to charge into Bohrok nests at the drop of a mask. I guess we’ve all grown up in the last year, she thought.

The three Toa scattered. Tahu took a position to the north of Krika’s camp, Onua to the east, Gali to the west. As soon as they were in position, they each put their elemental power to work. Tahu started the process of crafting a huge fireball, Gali a high-pressure jet of water, and Onua a violent quake.

Tahu’s creation appeared first, and he used his control over fire to send it hurtling into the Makuta settlement. As soon as it was on its way, Tahu was on the move. He glanced back to see Gorast coming to investigate.

Next came Gali’s water stream, which she was able to steer right into Bitil. Furious, the Makuta charged out of the camp looking for the source of the attack, but Gali was already gone.

That left Krika alone and wary. But nothing he could do could guard him against the earthquake Onua unleashed. Once he recovered his balance, Krika used his mask to repel the ground itself, sending him into the air to search for the Toa Nuva of Earth.

It would take the Makuta only seconds to realize their attackers were nowhere to be found. But that was time enough for Tahu, Gali, and Onua to have circled around and entered the camp from behind.

Onua dug up the pit while Gali and Tahu searched the rest of the area.

“Nothing,” Gali reported. “No mask.”

“Or here,” said Tahu, disappointed.

“Or here,” said Tahu, disappointed.

“I’ve got something,” Onua said. “It’s not a mask, but potentially useful nonetheless.”

The Toa of Fire and Water turned to see that Onua held in his hand a keystone. That made three they had found. If the other Toa had been as fortunate, they had all six. It was a small victory, even if the Kanohi Ignika continued to elude them.

“We had better get out of here,” said Tahu. “The Makuta won’t be fooled for long.”

“Or at all,” said Krika. He was standing on the edge of the camp, flanked by Gorast and Bitil. All three looked amused. “Did you really believe we would fall for that transparent ruse? We simply wanted you in one place so we could take care of all three of you at once.”

The Makuta fired their ghost blasters as one, but Tahu was too fast for them. His mask power threw a shield up around himself and his team, deflecting the Makuta’s attack.

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“It’s no good, you know,” said Krika. “How long can you maintain that shield? An hour? A day? And when it falls, we will take control of your bodies and make you battle each other for our entertainment. Who knows, if one of you survives, maybe we will permit him or her to serve as a permanent slave of the Brotherhood.”

“I say we batter the shield down now,” snarled Gorast, “and kill them where they stand.”

Krika chuckled. “Please excuse my sister – she has always been light-thirsty, even before the swamp changed her. She has a point, though. Time spent here is time wasted in our search for the Mask of Life.”

Tahu glanced at Gali and Onua. Both looked just as surprised as the three Makuta. The Mask of Life was a Toa now? It was fighting? What was going on here?

“Time for us to go,” Tahu mouthed, no sound escaping his lips.
Gali nodded. She triggered her elemental power, adding more and more moisture to the air in the immediate area until a dense fog began to form. As soon as they were hidden from view, Onua rapidly dug a tunnel in the soft earth. The three Toa vanished into it and were gone by the time the fog dispersed. “They’ve escaped!” yelled Gorast. “We must pursue!”

Krika sighed. “Of course we must. We don’t want this to be too easy for them now, do we? Bitil, stop worrying about Icarax – he was a miserable heap of Zivon spittle and no great loss.”

Bitil nodded and activated his mask power, plucking three past versions of himself out of the timeline. “Do we follow them?”

Krika shook his head. “Teridax told me once about a remarkable machine the Matoran of his region made called a Keerakh. From his tale, I learned that it is not necessary to chase your quarry – simply be waiting at their destination.”

With that said, Krika used his mask to repel the ground and launch into the air. He was followed by the four Bitils and Gorast. “They will be headed for the Codrex,” said Gorast. “Do you think the other Toa will join them there?”

Krika glanced skyward, his twisted mouth forming a cold smile. “One can only hope, sister.”

Tahu had been many things in his time as a Toa leader – decisive, arrogant, brave, contentious, noble, and almost ridiculously stubborn. One thing he had rarely been was stupid, and he didn’t intend to start now.

“Wait,” he said quietly to Onua. The Toa of Earth stopped digging as all three listened. They heard nothing.

“They aren’t following?” wondered Gali. “Perhaps we should emerge then and head for the Codrex. From what that Matoran said, it seems to be a place of importance.”

“Which is exactly why we’re not going there,” Tahu replied. “Onua, loop the tunnel around. We’re heading back where we came from.”

The Toa of Earth turned his head as best he could in the cramped space to look at Tahu. “Is that really wise?”

Tahu gave a soft laugh. “Come on, Onua – you’re the one who taught me that you never go wrong doing the unexpected.”

The Makuta circled the Codrex warily. The energy field around the structure was a challenge even for their powers. Only the six keystones could allow someone to pass through it unscathed. They saw no sign of the Toa Nuva, which suited Krika fine. It meant that they had succeeded in getting there before their prey.

“Take to the shadows,” he ordered. Then he added, more to himself than to the others, “They are, after all, the prisons we have chosen for ourselves.”

Each Makuta took up a position and waited, alone with their thoughts. Bitil banished his duplicates. He could always call them up if he needed them, but sometimes being around his past selves was annoying. They always seemed somehow naïve compared to who he was now. Actually, the mask power as a whole was more a curse than a blessing. He would suddenly find himself with injuries and no knowledge of how he had acquired them, because some future version of himself had summoned his current self into battle. It was hard to be certain how much power he could call on at any given time, since he might have expended some in a fight he didn’t remember having.

He really didn’t care that much about Teridax’s grand Plan. Bitil’s focus was on himself and his place in the Brotherhood. If he died fighting the Toa Nuva, then that would be the end of him. But if Krika or Antroz died, then perhaps he would move up, with the potential to go still further. Krika had told him once that it was a Makuta’s fate to only be able to hold onto one dream – that of gaining more and more power. It was a dream Bitil embraced.

Gorast was just the opposite. Her eyes scanned the skies for the enemy, and as soon as she spotted them, they were hers to slay. It might seem odd to some that death was what she lived for, and
in the end, it wasn’t wholly true – death in the service of the Plan was her passion. She considered herself a Makuta of vision, just like Teridax. She could imagine what the universe would be like if the Plan succeeded… hear the cries of the Matoran, smell the smoke from burning villages, see armies of Rahkshi rampaging throughout the universe… and it pleased her no end.

As for Krika? He believed in destiny. As far as he was concerned, the Brotherhood of Makuta had sealed its fate, for good or ill, the day they decided to follow Teridax in his plan to overthrow Mata Nui. That set events in motion that nothing could stop. All he, the other Makuta, the Toa, or the Matoran could do was play their parts. He had no illusions about what the future held, regardless of whether or not the Plan succeeded. One way or the other, he thought, this universe is heading for a very bad end.

From high above, Tahu Nuva eyed the three Makuta. He and his team had opted not to fly low over the swamp where they might be spotted, but instead to go straight up and hide in the upper reaches of the mist. Now they had circled above and behind their foes and were poised for the attack.

“Gali, you go right; Onua, left. I will target Krika,” said Tahu, steel in his voice. “Hit them hard, and remember – we get one shot at this. So make it count.”

Gali and Onua nodded. Then the three Toa Nuva went into power dives, screaming through the air toward a final clash with the Makuta.
Five years ago...

Mazeka forced himself to keep his eyes open as Vultraz brought the blade down toward his head. He wouldn’t give his enemy the satisfaction of seeing he was afraid.

The razor-sharp steel came closer, closer… Mazeka accepted that it would be his last sight in life…

And then the sword stopped, less than a quarter of an inch from Mazeka’s mask. When he looked beyond the blade, Mazeka could see that Vultraz was smiling.

“No, I don’t need to kill you now,” said the Ta-Matoran. “I’ve beaten you. Every breath you take from now on is only because I allow it. No matter where you go, who you fight, how many battles you win – you’ll know you’re only walking, talking, living because of me.” Vultraz laughed. “I just saved your life, Mazeka… I think that rates a thank you, don’t you?”

Mazeka said nothing, just glared with hate-filled eyes at his enemy.

“Of course, it’s a shame that I lost the little De-Matoran, but no worries – I’ll catch up to him later, and give him what I didn’t give you,” Vultraz continued. “As for you… live a long life, Mazeka. I want you around to remember this day.”

With that, the Ta-Matoran withdrew his sword and vanished into the jungle. Mazeka got to his feet, ready to pursue him and settle things once and for all. But an invisible hand restrained him.

“That’s not what we’re here for,” said Jerbraz. Mazeka could hear him clearly, though he could not see him. “We got what we came to get. Be satisfied with that.”

“But…” Mazeka began, angry and frustrated. Then he stopped. Jerbraz was right. If this Krakua was so important, getting him before Vultraz did was what mattered most… wasn’t it?

“Krakua is someplace safe,” said Jerbraz. “Now he can be trained. There’s a reason you don’t see a lot of Toa of Sonics around – they are vulnerable to their own power. One of the Great Beings’ little jokes, I guess. We’ll make sure he can use his power – all of it – when he becomes a Toa someday… because we’re going to need it.”

Mazeka was only half listening. His mind was on his fight with Vultraz – a fight he vowed wasn’t over. “Listen,” he said. “I did what you asked. Now I want a favor in return. I want training.”

“What kind?” asked Jerbraz.

“I want to learn how to fight,” said Mazeka, his tone grim. “I want to learn how to win clean… and win dirty. When I’m done, I want to be a master with a blade, with my fists, with any kind of weapon – and then I want you to get out of my way.”

“You’re going after that Ta-Matoran, I’m guessing?” said Jerbraz.

Mazeka walked away from the voice, deeper into the jungle. “We’re wasting time. You have a Matoran to deliver… and I have a hunt to get ready for.”

Now...

Mazeka walked into an inn in one of the nastier parts of Stelt. The whole island was in an uproar
– something about a monstrous, reptilian thing tearing the roof off a building. He didn’t see any sign of any giant creatures, so he dismissed it as just another wild Steltian story.

He was here to see a Fe-Matoran whose name changed every few months. A rogue Nynrah crafter, the Matoran had a bad right arm, the result of an accident in a forge. Of course, any Nynrah worth his tools could have made a new mechanical part to replace the damaged one, but he hadn’t – story was he kept it as is as a reminder that even the best can make a mistake.

Two big, blue warriors stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor. They made it clear that no visitors were allowed. Mazeka nodded, turned as if to leave, then spun and delivered a devastating kick to the knee joint of the nearest. When the second went for his blade, Mazeka’s own dagger flashed. His disarmed and Mazeka evaded, winding up behind his larger opponent. Before the guard could turn, Mazeka did a leap from a standing start, got one hand onto the big warrior’s shoulder, and then slammed both knees into his face. It didn’t do much more than daze the bruiser, but that was all Mazeka needed to do. He took advantage of the situation to race up the stairs.

The door to the Fe-Matoran’s workshop was locked. Mazeka brought it down with a kick. The Matoran of Iron grabbed for a weapon, but Mazeka’s dagger was already primed to throw. “I just want to talk,” said Mazeka.

“You’ve got a noisy way of saying hello,” the Fe-Matoran answered. “I’m open for business – all you had to do was knock.”

“I know all about your business,” said Mazeka. “Someone will be talking to you about it another day. Right now, I just have one question – where’s Vultraz?”

The Fe-Matoran did his best to look confused. “I don’t know any Vultraz.”

“You helped him modify his vehicle,” Mazeka replied. “And he used it to raid a village on an island not far from here. Two Matoran were killed, 12 more were hurt. You’re responsible for that.”

“Why me!” said the Fe-Matoran. “I didn’t do that! He did that!”

Mazeka twirled his dagger, then hurled it at the Nynrah crafter. It struck his mask, knocking it off. The Fe-Matoran staggered and reached for his lost mask, but Mazeka was there first and kicked it away.

“Vultraz. Now.”

“I don’t know anything!” the Matoran sputtered. “Give me my mask back!”

Mazeka held his foot poised over the fallen mask. “Tell me what I want to know or I’ll shatter it. And then you and I can have a nice long chat until you pass out. So what’s it going to be?”

“He said… he said he was going to get in good with a Makuta,” the Fe-Matoran said. “Said he was heading to the core… that’s all he said, I swear, the core… to bring something to somebody named Icarax.”

Mazeka nodded. That fit with other scraps of information he had picked up.

“Okay, thanks for the information,” he said. Almost casually, he brought his foot down and broke the mask to pieces. “Next time, don’t take so long to answer.”

Mazeka left the room, so lost in thought he almost didn’t notice the two guards waiting for him outside. He was distracted enough that it took him all of ten minutes to get away from them. On his way back to his swamp strider, he wondered – what was Vultraz up to now? And how could he stop him?

* * *

The five Toa Mahri stood in a semi-circle, staring at the base of the Coliseum. A few moments before, the Toa Hagah had vanished down a tunnel in the foundation, heading for Mata Nui knew what. Now it seemed there was nothing for the Mahri to do but wait.

“What do you think they’ll find down there?” asked Nuparu.


“How can you be so sure?” asked Jaller.
“Onu-Matoran have been all over beneath this city,” Hewkii replied. “If there was something down there, they would have found it by now.”

“Maybe,” said Nuparu, sounding not at all convinced.

“Let’s go,” said Hahli. “We’re not accomplishing anything standing here.”

The Toa Mahri of Water turned to head back to Ga-Metru. That was when she saw the golden crystal floating in the air. She reached out to touch it, and it moved away from her. “What is this?” she asked.

“Something you need.”

The Toa Mahri spun around to see an ebon-armored female standing just behind them. For a second, they thought she was a Vortixx, but a closer look revealed her to belong to a species they had never seen before. She carried a shield, but no weapon that they could see.

“They call it the Heart of the Visorak,” the figure continued. “It is active now and its power grows. Wherever it is, the Visorak will come, traveling from everywhere in the known universe to find it. You Toa must take it to the island of Artidax and plant it there. Draw the Visorak to that place, where they can be imprisoned forever.”

“Right,” said Jaller. “And who guards Metru Nui while we’re gone? You?”

“It will be protected, never fear,” said the woman. She produced a small stone tablet bearing a map to the island and handed it over. “Now you must take the Heart and go, before the Visorak descend on this city in search of it. Go now!”

Before the Toa could question her further, the armored woman’s body shattered into a million crystalline fragments. The fragments scattered on the breeze. In moments, they were gone.

“Before the Toa could question her further, the armored woman’s body shattered into a million crystalline fragments. The fragments scattered on the breeze. In moments, they were gone.”

“Well, that was… weird,” said Kongu.

“So what do we do?” asked Nuparu. “If she was telling the truth… this city isn’t ready for another full-scale infestation.”

“It’s a big ‘if,’” said Jaller. “So Kongu, Hewkii, you stay here. Hahli, Nuparu and I will go to this Artidax place.”

The three Toa Mahri departed by ship within the hour. Kongu and Hewkii watched them go, then spent some time agreeing on how best to split up their patrols of the city. Once that was done, they started back for the Coliseum.

Neither one noticed a cloud of crystal shards coalescing behind them into the form of their mysterious visitor. And once her shield struck them, knocking them both unconscious, they noticed nothing at all.

The trip to Artidax was long, but uneventful. Nuparu kept a careful watch out for Visorak, but saw none the first few days. As they got closer to the island, he would catch a glimpse of the spiders on the shores of islands that they passed. If their visitor was correct, the entire horde would be in pursuit of them now.

The first thing Jaller noticed when they reached the island was a set of recent tracks. A number of older ones had been partially obscured by the actions of wind and tide, but these looked like they had been just made. Nearby, various bits of wood floated in the water, apparently the wreckage of a ship or boat.

“Well, someone’s been here,” he said.

“And still is.” The voice belonged to a tall, blue biped, monstrous in appearance, wearing a water-filled helmet on his head. He held a crude stone dagger in his hand.

“Takadox!” said Jaller, in surprise. He and his team had fought Takadox, along with the other Barraki, in the Pit. “How did you escape? And where are your friends? Talk, you miserable insect.”

“I escaped,” as you put it, out of a desire to do my bit for Mata Nui,” Takadox answered, with a cold smile. “As for my fellow former rulers, they are no doubt rotting in cells by now, where they belong. But what brings you to this garden spot of the universe?”
“They do,” said Nuparu, pointing toward the ocean. It had become a sea of Boggarak, skating across the water’s surface, heading for the island. Behind them, floating on pieces of flotsam and jetsam of all types, were thousands more Visorak. All of them were coming right for Artidax.

“They’re after us,” Jaller said to Takadox. “But, don’t worry, we won’t be staying long… of course, they will be.”

“The entire horde?” said Takadox. “You’re carrying the Heart of the Visorak… I’ve heard of it, though never seen it, of course. And you’re leading them here… that explains a great deal.”

“Talk straight, Takadox,” said Hahli. “Or we’ll leave you here as company for the spiders.”

“Not at all a bad idea,” said Takadox. Summoning all his willpower, he focused his gaze first on Hahli, then on Jaller. When Nuparu tried to shield his eyes, his two allies grabbed him and forced him to meet Takadox’s stare. In moments, all three were in a hypnotic trance.

“That is more like it,” said the Barraki. “A short time ago, two strange beings appeared on the beach in a flash of light. They did not notice me, and I chose to follow and watch. I saw them mounting something on the slope of the largest volcano on the island… and even I could tell what it was for: they were planning to trigger an eruption. And when it happens, this island and everything on it will be ashes.

“They disappeared as quickly as they came, leaving me with no way to escape the disaster… until you arrived. Now I will take your boat and leave this rock — again — while you three stand nice and still, waiting for the end. If you’re lucky… very lucky… that volcano will explode before the Visorak get their pincers on you.”

Chuckling, Takadox climbed on board the Toa’s boat. Raising the anchor and adjusting the sail, he started it moving away from the coastline of Artidax. Behind him, the three Toa Mahri stood like statues, helpless to stop his departure. And as Takadox’s ship vanished over the horizon, and the volcano moved closer and closer to eruption, the first Visorak set their claws on the sands of the island.

*      *      *

**The Toa Empire universe…**

Toa Takanuva had experienced many strange things since arriving in what he now knew had to be some kind of alternate universe. But nothing quite equaled what he was experiencing right at the moment: the sensation of flying under his own power over a vast stretch of ocean. Even stranger was the fact that he had Makuta to thank for this ability. After telling him roughly where to look for the caravan that would be carrying the Mask of Time, Makuta Krika had commented that he would never be able to intercept them in time by sea, even if he managed to steal a boat and slip away from Metru Nui. Flight was the best choice. Before Takanuva could argue that he didn’t have the ability to fly, Krika had blown a fine powder into his face. The Toa of Light couldn’t help but breathe it in. With a laugh, Krika explained that he had just been exposed to a Makuta virus, which would, at least temporarily, give him the power of flight. If it had any other side effects, Krika chose not to say. Takanuva didn’t know whether to thank him, or hit him.

Still, his directions had been good. Up ahead, on the land, Takanuva spotted an Ussal crab-drawn cart driven by a Matoran, flanked by a Toa of Ice and a Toa of Earth mounted on Muaka tigers. Takanuva could only guess that both cart and Rahi had been loaded and unloaded from a ship, since part of the journey to Artakha had to be made by sea. Despite the Makuta’s warning that he would have to kill the Toa — and the Matoran with them, Jaller — Takanuva had another idea. He was a Toa, after all, in a world dominated by them. It was worth trying, anyway. He landed right in front of the cart, prompting Jaller to reign it to an abrupt halt. The two Toa raised their spears and shields and took a step forward.

“Who are you?” said the black-armored warrior. “Speak or face the power of my seismic spear.”

“What my grim friend is trying to say,” said the Toa of Ice, “is that we were not expecting visitors, not even multi-toned ones such as yourself. Surprises make us nervous, and when we are nervous, other beings sometimes… get hurt.”
“Lower your weapons,” said the Toa of Light. “My name is Takanuva. I am here on business of the Empire.”

“I am Toa Kualus,” said the white-armored Toa. “My surly friend is Toa Bomonga. And what might your business be, Takanuva?”

“I don’t trust him,” said Jaller. Takanuva barely recognized him in his red Kanohi Komau. “Kodan keeps a record of every Toa in the universe, and I’ve never seen his name before.”

Takanuva fired a thin beam of light at Jaller, shooting the reigns out of his hands. Pewku, the Ussal crab, reared up, startled.

“When I want your opinion, Matoran, I’ll ask for it,” Takanuva said, trying to sound like a Toa from this universe.

Kualus’ response was a blast of ice from his sub-zero spear, but Takanuva easily shattered it with another light beam. Bomonga made a move to attack, but the Toa of Light temporarily blinded him with a flare.

“If you’re done,” said Takanuva, “Tuyet has received word of a plan to steal the Mask of Time. She has decided that two Toa are not enough to guard it – particularly you two – so she has sent me to join you.”

“And just what makes you the right choice?” growled Bomonga. The Toa of Light thought fast. “Have you ever heard of… Takutanuva?”

Both Toa shook their heads.

“How about Graalok the mighty ash bear?” Again they shook their heads.

“And I suppose you haven’t heard of the beasts of Mount Ihu, or the flame serpents of the Tren Krom Break, or even…” he dropped his voice for effect, “…even the Kolhii creature of Ga-Wahi.”

“We haven’t heard of any of those things,” said Kualus. Takanuva smiled, raised his lance high, and then plunged it into the sand in front of the two Toa. “There is a reason you haven’t heard of them, brothers… and if I could defeat them, I could surely handle a threat to the Vahi.”

Bomonga and Kualus glanced at each other, then Kualus shrugged. “Very well, brother, you may travel with us to Metru Nui. But since you are so powerful, why don’t you walk in front of us? That way you can meet any challenge head-on. Incidentally, who is it that plans to try to steal this mask from us?”

“A very powerful and evil being called Brutaka,” Takanuva replied. This time, the two Toa obviously recognized the name. Bomonga even smiled.

“You know of him, then?” asked Takanuva.

“And well I should,” said Bomonga. He plunged his spear into the ground next to Takanuva’s lance. “After all, I killed him.”
By the time the Makuta picked up their first telepathic warning of the attack, it was too late. A fireball hurled by Tahu struck Krika in the arm, the pain making him drop his Nynrah blaster. The muddy earth opened to swallow Bitil. A sphere of water appeared around Gorast’s head, catching her just after she exhaled and cutting off her air. Not in a particularly forgiving mood, Gali followed with a blast from her own weapon, catching the Makuta in an energy pincer.

Tahu wasn’t going to give the Makuta time to recover. He led the Toa in another run, all three hurling whatever power they had at the enemy. Only by keeping the Makuta too off-balance to use their formidable powers did the Toa have any chance of victory.

Down below, Krika took stock of the situation and decided on a plan. He tracked Gali through the air and blasted her with shadow energy, almost knocking her out of the sky. The impact made her lose concentration and freed Gorast from the water sphere. Krika shouted at Gorast to go free Bitil from his muddy trap.

Onua broke off to pursue Gorast while Tahu zeroed in on Krika. The Makuta turned intangible, letting the Toa’s fire bolts pass right through him. Incredibly, Krika was actually laughing.

“Tell me, Tahu, have you ever seen a kavinika in battle with a lohrak? It can end in one of two ways – either the lohrak kills the kavinika, or the kavinika sinks its teeth into the lohrak and slays him. What makes it amusing is that the organic tissue of a lohrak is poisonous. The instant the kavinika bites down… it dies.”

“Is there a point to this story?” Tahu snarled, throwing his shield up just in time to blunt a blast of shadow energy.

“It’s very simple,” said Krika, passing unharmed through a ring of fire that had erupted around him. “Even if the kavinika wins, it loses. You might well want to keep that lesson in mind.”

Not far away, Gorast was finding it rough going. Every few steps, the earth erupted, sending a half-ton of mud flying into the air. Up ahead, Bitil had managed to scramble out of the mud pit and get into the air. He had Gali on the run, or so it seemed. At the last moment, she dropped, looped around, and hurled a water blast. Bitil barely managed to evade it, but in so doing, allowed her to gain altitude. Now she was using her weapon to create obstacles made of energy in the air, forcing Bitil to fly an evasive pattern.

Still, the Makuta was not without resources of his own. Triggering his mask power, he summoned two duplicates of himself. They materialized behind Gali, swooping down and each seizing one of her arms. Together, they hurled her with tremendous force toward the swamp.

Onua spotted the flash of blue out of the corner of his eye. He whirled in midair and fired his weapon, creating a flexible platform made of energy above the swamp waters. Gali hit it hard, but it gave beneath her, lessening the damage. Onua followed it up with a hastily created land bridge linking the platform to the Codrex.
Spotting his distraction, Gorast attacked. She rocketed up from the ground and slammed into his midsection. The land bridge instantly collapsed under Gali, but she had recovered enough to stay aloft. Meanwhile, Onua grappled with Gorast, who was trying to bring her light-draining abilities to bear.

“Admit it, Toa,” said Gorast. “You have always wished for a spirit as black as your armor.”

“Actually, I do have a wish you could make come true,” said the Toa Nuva of Earth. He reared back and struck a mighty blow, sending the Makuta spiraling downward. “A world without Makuta!”

Not far away, Tahu and Krika were locked in a duel, flame against shadow. Neither had managed to gain the upper hand. Although Tahu didn’t show it, he was worried. The Toa’s surprise attack hadn’t been able to finish off the Makuta, and now the three of them were in for the fight of their lives.

“I would almost call this a stalemate,” said Krika. “Except, of course, that you are about to surrender and beg for my mercy.”

“You’ve been breathing too much swamp gas,” Tahu replied, countering another bolt of shadow energy with a shield made of fire.

“The Codrex, Tahu,” continued Krika. “Oh, we can’t get in either, but Bitil is a master with energy fields. He tinkered with this one here and there. In a few minutes, it’s going to implode and take the entire sphere and all its contents with it. And there will go your hope of awakening your precious Mata Nui.”

Tahu had a moment of conflicting impulses. Part of him wanted to burn Krika down, while another part wondered if the Toa Nuva should surrender and hope to get a chance to undo whatever Bitil had done.

But this was not the Tahu of even a year before. He had been through too much, learned too much – most especially he had learned not to let his own nature control him. The essence of fire was action, but action without thought was like a fire that burned unchecked – it left nothing but devastation in its wake.

So, in the end, Tahu rejected both his ideas. Instead, he smiled and said, “You’re bluffing, Makuta. You would no more destroy the Codrex than I would pet a Rahkshi.”

“Are you so sure?” asked Krika. “Do you really want to gamble the future of your universe based on nothing but your lack of trust in others? Why would I lie about such a beautiful act of destruction?”

“If you wanted it wrecked, you had plenty of time to do that before we even got down here,” Tahu answered, dodging shadow blasts as he did so. “No, there’s something you want in there, or it would be gone by now. What’s more, I think you want us to get it for you.”

Krika chuckled. “You are just a wealth of bad theories today, Tahu. Explain that one.”

“Simple. The keystone we stole from your camp – you never would have left it unprotected unless you wanted us to have it. In fact, this has all been too easy from the start. It has “Makuta trap” written all over it. And by the way, since you like the cold so much – have some on me.”

Tahu hovered in midair and began rapidly absorbing all the heat from around Krika. Sensing what was about to happen, Krika tried to turn intangible again. But Tahu was faster, and Krika began to ice over halfway between his solid and ghostly state.

“Very… good, Tahu,” Krika said, his voice sounding hollow and far away. “Too easy… perhaps but it is about to become much more difficult. Look behind you.”

“Do you really think I am going to fall for that old trick?”

“No… I am counting on the fact you won’t,” answered Krika. “Since there really is something behind you…"

Against his better judgment, Tahu looked over his shoulder. Diving down toward him were Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah, and their three shadow Matoran. All of the sudden, his team was badly outnumbered.

This would have to be the first time a Makuta has told the truth, he said to himself. “Onua! Gali! Hunt cover!” he shouted.

It was useless, of course. Antroz’s first blast of shadow energy shattered the ice forming around Krika. Vamprah flew to join Bitil, and the two closed in on Onua. Chirox hauled Gorast out of the mud,
and the two circled Gali, arguing over who would make the kill. Tahu managed to land some fireballs on Antroz, but not to any great effect.

Now the six Makuta formed a V-shaped wedge in the sky and bore down on the Toa Nuva, their attacks forming a solid wall of shadow energy. Tahu, Onua, and Gali were driven back until they were pinned down near the Codrex field. One more step backward and they would hit the protective energy around the sphere and be hurled straight toward the oncoming Makuta.

“Any ideas?” Onua asked Tahu.

“Yes,” said the Toa of Fire. “We take as many of them with us as we can when we go.”

The Makuta hovered in midair now. “It appears your theory that we need you alive is about to be proven wrong,” said Krika. “Good-bye, Tahu.”

Antroz raised his arm, shadow energy swirling around his claw. Just as it was set free in a devastating burst, a sphere of super-hard ice materialized around both shadow bolt and hand. Blocked, the energy fed back into Antroz, jolting him like an angry avohkah.

“I hate good-byes, personally,” said Kopaka Nuva. He had plunged out of the mists above, flanked by Pohatu and Lewa. Not far behind came the Matoran villagers Solek, Tanma, and Photok.

“Yes too,” said Pohatu. “In fact, we hate ‘em so much we couldn’t let three Makuta take off without us.”

“Ever-cute idea, Antroz,” chuckled Lewa. “Making your quick-retreat from above look like a planned attack on below. Did they teach you that at lying slime-sack school?”

On the ground, Tahu smiled. The Toa Nuva were still outpowered by the Makuta, but now the numbers were even. And he would take his team of Toa against any enemy, any day of the week.

“Well,” he said to Onua and Gali. “Are we going to let those three show up late and have all the fun?”

“I’m for a rematch,” said Onua. “How about you, sister?”

Gali bumped armored fists with her two partners. “Let’s get them.”

The three Toa Nuva lifted off from the ground, soaring into the final battle.
The Shadowed One – master of the Dark Hunters, mortal enemy of the Makuta, thief, assassin and conqueror – was bored. Since he and his people had been dispatched to occupy the island of Xia by the Order of Mata Nui, there had been precious little to do. The island had been pacified in a matter of hours. Except for the occasional two or three Dark Hunters tapped by the Order for a mission, the bulk of their forces had yet to act. The Shadowed One did not like feeling penned in on this island – or ignored. That was why this day found him prowling the factories of Xia seeking amusement. Despite his pressure to get all manufacturing centers working again, many of the buildings were still badly damaged by the battle between the Tahtorak and the Kanohi Dragon. It was while walking through one such building that he came upon a Vortixx frantically clearing away rubble.

“What are you doing here?” asked the Shadowed One.

The Vortixx gasped, surprised. When he saw who was addressing him, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. The Vortixx, it seemed, had a long history of knowing when and to whom to submit.

“Nothing, Great Lord,” said the Vortixx. “Just… cleaning up so all factories can be working again as you ordered.”

The Shadowed One said nothing. He knew what a lie sounded like – he had told enough of them himself. After several moments, he said, “Then I will help you.”

“No!” the Vortixx cried out. “That’s… that’s not necessary. This is work for a laborer, not a ruler like yourself.”

Power flashed out from the Shadowed One’s staff. A band of crystalline protodermis appeared around the Vortixx’s mouth, gagging him.

“I said: I will help you,” repeated the Shadowed One.

Striding over to the heap of rubble, the Shadowed One began to dig, never taking his eye off the Vortixx. The deeper he got, the more visibly upset the Xia native seemed to be.

What, he wondered, was waiting at the bottom of this hole?

He soon found out. Several feet down, he came upon a protosteel box. Burned into the lid was the symbol of the Brotherhood of Makuta. The box was locked, but the lock was no match for the now very curious Dark Hunter. He opened it carefully – after all, this might be some clever trap. But when he saw what the box contained, his eyes widened.

“Oh, my, my,” said the Shadowed One, as he gazed on something that soon might make him master of the world.

Vezon, it could truly be said, had a unique perspective on life. Perhaps it was the fact that he had only been truly alive for a matter of weeks. Perhaps it was his time spent wearing the Mask of Life. Or perhaps it was just the fact that he was hopelessly insane. But the perspective he had today, he had to admit, was a new one: upside-down.
The Makuta he had encountered in the fortress of Destral – who identified himself with a laugh as Tridax – had not entirely believed Vezon’s story about cross and double-cross. In fact, he decided some follow-up questions were in order, the kind delivered when your guest is hanging from the ceiling by his ankles.

“I have checked our teleportation technology,” Tridax said. “There is no sign of sabotage. You are a liar.”

“Well, no one ever said Makuta were observant,” said Vezon. “How could you be so sure? Suppose I sabotaged it myself using my incredible powers of the mind.”

“You have no powers,” said the Makuta, picking up a wickedly sharp blade. “You have no mind. You are about to have no head.”

“You're right, you're right!” babbled Vezon. “There is no army, there is no navy, I simply wanted the pleasure of your company – well, pleasure might be too strong a word. Did I tell you I once wore the Mask of Life? One stray thought back then, and you wouldn’t even have left ashes. I do miss those days. Anyway, take pride in being correct. There is no threat to Destral at all.”

The walls of the fortress suddenly shook violently from an incredible impact.

“Except that one,” Vezon added helpfully.

Rock dust fell from the ceiling, masses of weapons clattered to the floor and even the anchors of Vezon’s chains came loose. A second blast tore a hole in the wall and sent mangled Rahkshi flying into the chamber. This time, the anchors came loose all the way and Vezon fell to the stone floor.

Makuta Tridax was paying no attention. His orders were clear: maintain Destral in its current location unless attacked. In the event of a serious threat from Toa or Dark Hunters, teleport the island off the shores of Metru Nui and seize that city. He stalked off to carry out those commands. Vezon followed behind, unnoticed.

That’s right, thought the deranged ex-prisoner, lead me to your secrets. Ah, this plan is so cunning it might almost be one of mine. And perhaps it will be before I’m done.

Far to the west, Pridak watched a fortress burn, and smiled at the sight. He had been fortunate since his release from the Pit. His captors had provided him with ships and the resources with which to raise an army. From the worst holes in the universe, he had found ex-Dark Hunters, exiled Vortixx, even a Skakdi or two for his crews. Before Kalmah had even devised a battle plan, Pridak had sailed off without him on a voyage of conquest. It felt good – good to sack and burn and destroy again, good to feel the warm glow of the lightstones on his body, even if his water-filled dome had kept him from smelling the wonderful smoke and the stench of battle. He was back, and back to stay.

His men had rounded up the forces of the Makuta who occupied this place, but had found no actual Brotherhood member. Now, as he surveyed his conquest, a few things captured his notice: the structure was not original, it had been rebuilt on the site of an earlier stronghold. The lower levels were still incomplete, and it was while exploring them that he found a strange room.

Deep below the basement was a room of rubble. The walls had been smashed, leaving only packed earth behind, and the remnants of those walls were littered around the floor. Intrigued, he picked one of the pieces up, only to find there was an inscription on it. The symbols made no sense to him and he was about to throw it away, when he noticed that another piece also had such an inscription – in fact, all the pieces did. There was some sort of message here, or there had been, he realized. Someone had tried to destroy it by shattering the walls, but the message was still here for someone who had the discipline to decipher it. And if someone had thought whatever information it contained worthy of destruction, it must be quite interesting indeed.

With the infinite patience of a born hunter, Pridak began to assemble the stones.

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The Toa Empire universe...

Back when Takanuva was Takua, a Matoran of the village of Ta-Koro, he had once found himself walking through a stretch of jungle being stalked by a monstrous Nui-Jaga scorpion. Whenever he moved, the scorpion moved. If he stopped, it stopped. If he turned to face it, it would kill him, but if he led it back to the village, it might harm others before it was driven off. He was finally saved by a sudden inspiration: he changed direction and led the Nui-Jaga straight toward a Muaka-cat cave. Angered at the intrusion into its territory by the other Rahi beast, the Muaka attacked the Nui-Jaga, and Takua escaped.

Which just goes to show, thought Takanuva, nowadays there's never a Muaka around when you need one. Here he was, trudging across the barren plains of Karzahni in this weird alternate universe. Behind him were two Toa, Bomonga and Kualus, both of whom served the oppressive dictatorship of the Toa Empire. Between them was Jaller, a Matoran who, in Takanuva's world, was the Toa of Light's best friend. In this universe, he was a servant of the Empire, transporting the Mask of Time back to Metru Nui. That wasn't the worst of it, though: Takanuva needed to find Brutaka and the Mask of Dimensional Gates if he was ever going to make it back to his own universe, and Bomonga had just announced that Brutaka was dead, killed by him. All of which left Takanuva exactly nowhere.

"Ah, Brutaka," said Bomonga. "He fought well, but when he turned to fight Gaaki and Pouks, I hit him from behind and that finished him."

"Not very… fair," muttered Takanuva.

"Fair?" asked Bomonga. "He was an enemy of the Empire. He tried to prevent our lawful exploration of Voya Nui. Who cares how he died, as long as he's dead."

"Our friend Takanuva seems to be carrying a conscience," said Toa Kualus. "That is a heavy burden in a place like this. You would be amazed how many poor, dead beings I see on the side of the path who just couldn't go one more step with that load on their backs."

"Spare me the philosophy," snapped Takanuva. "What about Brutaka's weapons and his mask? What happened to them?"

"You should know," said Bomonga, "if you really serve Toa Tuyet as you claim. Any treasure like that gets brought to the Coliseum in Metru Nui for safe-keeping."

"Right, naturally," said Takanuva.

This was going to be a problem. How was he going to get into what had to be the most heavily guarded spot in Metru Nui to get that mask?

"You know, you remind me a little of someone," said Bomonga. "A Toa of Water, one of Lhikan's old team. What was her name? Toa Naho, that was it. She came along on one of our missions to Odina to clean out that nest of stone rats. Offered to go after the Shadowed One herself, take all the risks. Turned out she was helping that creep escape. He got away, she didn't. Tuyet turned her over to her friend Roodaka and, well… she wound up an interesting exhibit in the Archives."

Takanuva knew he should keep quiet, but he couldn't. "Do you think this is what Tuyet really wanted? Toa betraying other Toa, Matoran living in fear of their heroes. Toa were supposed to be respected, and looked up to!"

"But we are," said Kualus. "Everyone respects what they fear, and they can't help but look up to us – we always look down on them."

Takanuva heard a stirring behind him. He could guess what it was: Bomonga and/or Kualus getting ready to blast him from behind. While there was no choice, he would have to try and take them both out and get the mask from Jaller. It would take a lot of luck, probably more than he could hope for, but…

Then he heard other sounds: a rush of wind, startled cries from the two Toa which receded in the distance, then the sound of a cart crashing. He turned to see a strange Toa standing amidst the wreckage of Jaller's Ussal cart. He was retrieving the Mask of Time, which lay next to the unconscious Jaller. When he noticed Takanuva, he stopped.

"You're not one of them," the Toa of Air said. "That's why you're still alive. Don't make me regret that decision."

"Who are you?" asked Takanuva. "What do you want here?"
“What do I want?” said the Toa. “I want some peace, but I’m never going to get any while that crazy Toa of Water is running things. So I keep an eye out for things she wants, like this mask here, and I take them from her. That’s why if you ever see her list of enemies of the Empire, you’ll find my name at the top: Toa Lesovikk.”

Under the cover of darkness, Toa Lesovikk and Toa Takanuva darted through the sculpture fields of Po-Metru. They had slipped back to Metru Nui via underwater chute a few hours before. Lesovikk knew a few that were closed for repair but were still functioning, and best of all, unguarded.

“Where are we going?” whispered Takanuva. “The Coliseum is the other way! And Brutaka’s mask is in there—that’s where I need to go.”

“Right,” said Lesovikk. “But if you want to get in and out of there alive, we do it my way. And my way starts at the Throne of Stone.” The Toa of Air pointed straight ahead. Not far away, there was indeed a huge throne made of rock, mounted atop a base of Rahkshi parts. Po-Matoran bearing torches surrounded it, and seated in the great chair was Toa Pohatu himself.

“Umm, excuse me,” said Takanuva. “I ran into Tahu and Kopaka not long ago, and…are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Trust me,” said Lesovikk, smiling.

After a few hours, the Po-Matoran left to go back to their homes. As Pohatu descended from his throne, Lesovikk scraped three times with his armoured boot against a nearby rock. The Toa of Stone stopped, head turned to listen. Then he said, “Lesovikk, you are out of your mind.”

“It helps,” said the Toa of Air, leading Takanuva to where Pohatu stood. “This is my new pal, Takanuva. He’s looking for the five widget tour of the Coliseum, particularly the Hall of Masks.”

“Wait a minute,” said Takanuva. “I don’t understand any of this. Tahu, Pohatu and the rest were supposed to stay asleep until they were needed to awaken Mata Nui. But Mata Nui never fell asleep here, so why are they here?”

“He talks a lot, doesn’t he?” Pohatu said to Lesovikk. Lesovikk shrugged.

“Ok, glowfish, let me tell you a story,” Pohatu said. “Toa Tuyet found out where we were from Artakha. She sent some Toa in to find us, but none of them survived the trip. That was when she found a spot in the Coliseum no one had ever seen before: a place from which she could fake the signal that would launch our canisters. Next thing you know, here we are. She laid it all out for us: how the Makuta and the Dark Hunters were plotting to take over, how it was our duty as Toa to stop them dead. It was the only way to make the universe really safe. So we all signed on, but after a while I started to have doubts.

“They turned into fears when I found out that Tuyet had sent a squad headed by Toa Nidhiki to wipe out the Nynrah Ghosts, just because they might someday make something that would be used against her. Four dozen Matoran dead. Still makes me sick. That was when I made contact with Lesovikk, and we’ve been working together ever since. Of course, Tuyet doesn’t know that.”

“You’re a regular stone Wall of History,” said Lesovikk. “But it’s going to be light soon. We need to get the troops together and get ready for a raid.”

Pohatu led the two Toa back to his cavern. Once inside, he used his power to send a mild tremor the length of Metru Nui. Not enough to cause damage, just enough to signal those who would understand and respond. They started filtering in through underground tunnels not long after. Nuju, Ahkmou, three Dark Hunters: Guardian, Darkness and Primal, one Toa: Krakua, and a Po-Matoran that Lesovikk introduced as Kodan.

“It’s handy to have the Toa’s Chronicler on our side,” said Lesovikk. “Helps us stay informed.”

“So what’s the plan?” asked Takanuva. “We sneak in, steal the mask and get out?”

“He thinks small, too,” Pohatu said to Lesovikk. Lesovikk shrugged.

“Listen, junior. I don’t know where you came from or why,” said Pohatu. “But I’m betting Tuyet doesn’t know either, and maybe that gives us an edge. So we’re putting everything on one Akilini play. Ahkmou here has alerted the Makuta in town, Darkness took care of any Dark Hunters nearby who were still on two legs. Everybody’s in.”
“In what?” asked Takanuva.
“Tuyet’s had her own way for too long.” Pohatu answered, grabbing a protosteel ax off the wall. “It’s time to take her down.”
Tahu Nuva skimmed just above the swamp waters of Karda Nui, every sense on alert. He had been locked in aerial combat with Makuta Vamprah, until that bat-winged hunter vanished into the mists. Now it was a lethal game of hide-and-seek as he waited for the inevitable attack.

He found himself almost envying Pohatu, Kopaka, and Lewa, who had appeared from above with Matoran riding on their backs. A second set of eyes would have been welcome right about now.

There was a quick flash of shadow on the muddy water. Tahu rolled in midair and unleashed a stream of fireballs above and behind him. But there was no sign of an enemy, just empty sky.

*Take it easy, Tahu told himself. This is no worse than walking blindfolded through a Bohrok nest.*

He could hear the sounds of battle from far ahead. The other Toa Nuva were fighting with Vamprah’s fellow Makuta, with most of the action centered around a spherical structure in the swamp called the Codrex. The Toa had been told that they had to get in there, for it held their “beginning and probable ending.” The heroes possessed all six pieces of the keystone that would allow them access, but so far, had not been able to fight their way past the Makuta and get inside.

Tahu heard a soft whistle, as if something was falling nearby, followed by a harsh click. He had come to hate that noise. It was the sound of a Tridax pod opening up to unleash its cargo of shadow leeches. One leech could drain the light out of a Toa, Matoran, or any other being, leaving them a dark and corrupted pawn of the Makuta.

He glanced up. The four creatures were falling fast and right at him. It was too late to dodge, but not too late to trigger the power of his Hau Nuva mask. The Mask of Shielding threw a field of energy around him that kept the leeches from striking him. Amazingly, they attached themselves to the shield itself! Tahu shuddered at the sight of the disgusting beasts trying in vain to feed off the mask’s energies.

Diving as close to the swamp water as he dared, he abruptly shut the field off. The leeches tumbled into the water, which began to froth. Toa Onua had been the first to discover that the water was mutagenic, able to transform anything exposed to it. That was why the Toa avoided it at all costs. Now the shadow leeches were being changed… probably into something worse than what they were before.

Tahu had no wish to hang around and see what that would be.

He caught a glimpse of Lewa, Onua, and Kopaka on a patch of ground up ahead, pinned down by shadow bolts fired by the Makuta. Gali and Pohatu were caught up in their own battles, so any help was going to have to come from him.

*So it’s time to take care of my Makuta problem,* he decided. *Good thing I love the smell of burnt bat in the morning…*

“You know,” said Lewa Nuva, Toa of Air, “this reminds me of a story.”

He, Kopaka Nuva, and Onua Nuva had their backs to a stand of trees in the swamp of Karda Nui. They were alternating firing their weapons and hurling elemental power at the attacking Makuta.

“Dare I hope it’s one that doesn’t end with six dead Toa Nuva?” joked Onua.
“Please tell me it’s not the one about the three Matoran, the Manas crab, and the bucket,” said Kopaka. “Last time you told me that, it took me a week to get the picture out of my head.”

“No, no,” Lewa replied, using a mini-cyclone to send four shadow leeches flying in opposite directions. “It’s the one about the three Matoran, the Nui-Rama swarm, and the carry-basket of bula berries.”

Onua glanced at Kopaka, even as a shadow bolt splintered the tree behind him. “I don’t think I know that one.”

Kopaka shook his head. “I am sure I am going to regret this, but neither do I.”

“Once, there were three Matoran,” Lewa began. Kopaka cut him off. “Is this really the time?”

“Once, there were three Matoran,” Lewa repeated, more firmly. “They had gone out for a quick-walk to gather bula berries for dinner. Suddenly, they were attacked by a swarm of Nui-Rama. They were outnumbered and certain-doomed!”

“I don’t need to hear this story,” grumbled Kopaka. “I’m living it.”

“But notice the Makuta are keeping their distance,” chuckled Onua. “They must have heard Lewa tell a story before.”

“As I was speak-saying,” continued Lewa. “The Matoran were trapped, with no way out. Finally one of them said, ‘I think they want the bula berries. Let’s just give the berries to them.’ Well, everyone thought this was an ever-fine idea – better to be hungry than dead.”

“I am still waiting for the part where heroic Toa Lewa saves the day,” said Kopaka, battering a flight of shadow Matoran with an ice storm.

“So they left the basket of bula berries and backed away,” Lewa continued, ignoring Kopaka. “And the Nui-Rama quick-flew down to it. But the next second, they started fighting among themselves over who would get the juicy berries. Before too long, there were no Nui-Rama left! So the three Matoran came out of hiding, took their berries, and went home.”

“And the moral of the story is…?” asked Onua.

“Travel with berries,” said Kopaka.

Lewa sighed. “No, no… the key to beating the Nui-Rama was figuring out what they wanted. What do the Makuta want here?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same question,” admitted Onua.

“It’s obvious,” said Kopaka. “They want the six keystones that can be used to open the Codrex.”

The Toa of Ice pointed to the large structure a few hundred yards away. It was protected by a field of energy so strong that even touching it sent one flying halfway across the swamp.

“Doesn’t make sense,” said Onua, summoning a wall of earth to block a Makuta lightning bolt.

“The Brotherhood was here for days before we were, and they knew about the keystones. If they wanted in, they could have gotten in before we arrived. No, they have something else in mind, and I can prove it.”

“How?” asked Lewa.

Onua pointed to the six Makuta in the air, each possessed with incredible power far outclassing any Toa. “Simple – we’re not dead yet.”

High above, Makuta Krika surveyed the battle raging all around him. It was a seesaw contest, with the Makuta driving the Toa back, and then the Toa mounting a spirited counterattack. An outsider viewing the conflict might think it could go on forever, but Krika knew it would not.

And that is what worries me, he thought. Not whether we will win or lose here in this pesthole, but what happens when the battle is over. What kind of universe will remain? Would we be doing the Toa a favor by sparing their lives here, or committing the worst possible crime against them?

A powerful jet of water passed through Krika’s intangible form, doing him no harm. He turned to see Toa Gali flying toward him, her ghost blaster ready to fire. If the Toa expected cries of rage or shouts of defiance from Krika, though, she was disappointed.
“Must we dance this dance, Toa?” asked the Makuta. “You may not know how it must end, but I do.”

“Then let me in on the secret,” Gali said, firing her blaster. Bars of energy appeared from thin air around the Makuta.

“There is an old saying on the island of Zakaz,” Krika replied. “Only a fool fights in a burning forest. While you waste your time battling us, your universe is burning to the ground, little Toa.”

Krika suddenly passed through the bars and shot forward. Before Gali could react, he had turned solid and grabbed her, draining some of her energy in the process. “Come with me,” said the Makuta, steering her flight away from the battle, “and I will tell a tale that will freeze your heart and turn your hopes to ashes.”

Pohatu saw Gali being carried off, but was in no position to help. He had been slugging it out with Makuta Gorast for what seemed like an eternity. So far, she had plowed her way through a hail of light spheres, shrugged off boulders, and survived direct hits by uprooted trees. He had even flown around her at super-speed, delivering a thousand blows in a second, and done little more than shake her up.

“Fall down already,” the Toa of Stone grumbled. “You’re making me all frustrated.”

Gorast’s response was an amused hiss, followed by a crushing blow that sent Pohatu and his Matoran companion, Photok, flying toward the Codrex. When they struck the energy field, they were hurled in the opposite direction, right toward Gorast. She met them with another blow. They crashed down into the mud and lay there, barely moving.

“Toa of Stone,” Gorast laughed. “Toa of Clay would seem more accurate. Did you truly think you could stand against a warrior who has ground armies beneath her heel?”

Pohatu painfully raised his head out of the mire and wiped mud from his mask. “Well, it seemed like — ow! — a good idea at the time.”

“You Toa Nuva will die here,” Gorast continued, floating closer to the fallen pair. “And the Matoran will join with us in darkness. The Plan will go forward. You cannot stop it.”

Pohatu made it to his hands and knees. Beside him, Photok was stirring. “Wouldn’t dream of it. But maybe you should tell me what this big Plan is, so I can make sure I don’t get in its way.”

Gorast smiled. “I have a better idea,” she said, reaching out to touch Pohatu’s armor and triggering her Mask of Disruption at the same time.

Instantly, the Toa felt his elemental power building up inside of him. Then it was being released against his will, flowing out of him and creating stone all around. Within moments, he and Photok were buried by a ton of rock, then two tons, then three, with no end in sight. The sheer weight carried them down into the swamp inside a shell of stone, the product of a Toa’s power gone wild.

“You Toa truly are remarkable,” Gorast said, watching as the rock vanished from view beneath the mud. “It is not every being who can create their own tomb.”
Toa Norik moved carefully through a narrow passage below the Coliseum of Metru Nui. Behind him, the other Toa Hagah walked single-file, eyes and ears alert for any threat. All of them knew they were in uncharted territory – going somewhere no Toa, Matoran, Turaga, or other intelligent native of this universe had ever gone before.

Well, that was not completely true. If what the Order of Mata Nui suspected was true, Makuta Teridax had traveled this route not long ago. Of course, that information came from an evil Piraka, Zaktan, who was now traveling along with the Toa Hagah. His recent mutation into a sea creature meant Zaktan had to be carried by Kualus in a water-filled globe.

“This reminds me of the Archives,” Toa Iruini whispered. After a pause he added, “I pretty much hated that place too.”

“You have to admit, though, Teridax fits right in here,” said Pouks. “Dark, dank, the kind of place only a stone rat could love.”

“We’re not looking for a new home,” snapped Norik. “Focus on the job.”

“That’s right, fight among yourselves,” hissed Zaktan. “You Toa are all alike – all mewling idiots.”

“Well, not all alike,” Kualus chuckled. “I, for one, am much clumsier than the average Toa. In fact, I feel your globe slipping from my fingers even as we speak. Certainly hope I don’t drop it.”

Zaktan cursed. Kualus responded by dropping the globe for an instant, then catching it again.

“Whoops. There I go again,” said the Toa.

Up ahead, Norik had come to a stop. Using a small portion of his flame power, he was illuminating one of the walls of the tunnel. On it was a series of inscriptions, apparently very ancient in origin.

“Is that Matoran? It doesn’t look like it,” said Norik. “I don’t recognize the language.”

“Let me see,” said Bomonga. Being something of a master of the underground, Bomonga had seen more than his share of old inscriptions. “It’s not Matoran, I don’t think… maybe some kind of root language. I can make out a little of it… not much… I think it’s some kind of record.”

“A record of what?” asked Gaaki.

Bomonga stared at the writing for a while before answering, “I can’t tell. All I can make out is a name… not sure if it’s a person or a place… ‘Bara Magna.’”

No one said anything as they searched their memories for that name. After a few moments, all realized they had never heard it before. If it was somewhere in the universe they knew, then it must have been in an unexplored region.

“Does it say anything about how to stuff a Makuta into his armor and then flush it away?” asked Iruini.

“I wish,” muttered Bomonga.

“All right, let’s keep going,” said Norik. “Zaktan, how much farther do you think it is?”

“I don’t know,” snapped the Piraka. “I haven’t been here either. I just know that the inscriptions I read hinted that this was where the Makuta had to come. I’m not sure he even knew for sure what was
down here, or that ‘here’ actually existed – I think he was guessing.”

“Nothing worse than a Makuta who’s a good guesser,” mumbled Iruini.

“I expected this trip to be more… dangerous,” said Pouks. “From the way Gaaki was talking when we left… about it being a place of death, and all that… I expected loads of traps and nasty Rahi. So far, this is a stroll through Metru Nui.”

The tunnel was suddenly filled with a low hum, which grew louder by the moment. Too late, Iruini cried out, “Out! Everybody out!” The next instant, he was slammed against the wall, followed by the other Toa Hagah. It was only by sheer luck that Kualus was able to twist his body so that Zaktan’s globe did not get smashed to pieces by the impact.

Now all six Toa Hagah were trapped, pinned to the wall by a powerful magnetic force. Norik immediately called on his power of fire, but the tunnel was fireproof. Each of the others tried their powers in turn, only to find that the wall was somehow impervious to their elemental energies.

“Makuta?” asked Iruini.

“I don’t think so,” Norik answered. “He’s not this subtle. I think this is one of those traps Pouks was so relieved we missed out on.”

“Well, it could be worse,” said Kualus. “I mean, given time, I’m sure we can figure a way to get free.”

“Why do I think time is the last thing we’ll be given?” said Bomonga. “Do you smell that?”

They all did. It was a hot, metallic scent that wafted from the tunnel up ahead. They all knew what it was, but Norik was the first to speak it aloud.

“It’s molten protodermis,” he said quietly. “And it’s headed this way.”

* * *

Daxia was a good place to visit, providing you were a member of the Order of Mata Nui and had been invited. There were places to relax and to train, libraries full of tablets on every imaginable subject, and a central well of energy for when one got hungry. Of course, there was also an armory, an equipment storehouse, and a vehicle center that members could access before going on missions.

If, on the other hand, you weren’t welcome… well, that was another story, as Mazeka was finding out. He had been to Daxia before, during his training, and had even been given his swamp strider vehicle by Toa Helryx, leader of the Order. With some reservation, she had approved his pursuit of Vultraz, providing it didn’t get in the way of other work she needed him to do. But it was also made clear to him that return trips to Daxia had to be cleared first, so the Order could make sure he was not being followed to their secret base.

This day, Mazeka had not done that. He had stormed the coast of Daxia, seeking information. His old enemy, Vultraz, was heading for someplace called the core, carrying something for a Makuta named Icarax. Mazeka was determined to stop him, but first, he had to learn what the core was and where it was. And he knew who would have the answers.

“Helryx!” he shouted, as he ran through the central corridor of the Order base, two guards in pursuit. “I request an audience!”

“Grab him!” one of the guards yelled. “He could be a Brotherhood spy!”

Mazeka stopped suddenly and dropped to the ground. The lead guard tripped over him and went sprawling. Mazeka shot up, grabbing the second guard’s wrist. With a quick movement, he tossed the guard over his shoulder, sending the sentry crashing to the ground.

“Sorry,” Mazeka said. “But I don’t have time for official channels.”

Both guards were getting back to their feet, so Mazeka took off. While he couldn’t become invisible like his old trainer, Jerbraz, he knew how to “disappear” when he had to. The shadows were his friend. He found a hiding place and waited for the guards to rush past before moving out again.

Mazeka knew where Helryx’s chamber was – he also knew all the traps and guard stations along the way. Jerbraz had trained him to pay attention to things like that. You never knew when you might
need the knowledge. Now he used it to evade observation as he made his way to the center of the base.

Under normal circumstances, this would probably have been impossible to do. But with the Order now at war with the Brotherhood, the number of members on Daxia had dropped. Most agents were out leading operations against Makuta strongholds, meaning that many fewer guards to dodge.

Forcing his way into Helryx’s chamber would be impossible – too well protected. But he had noted an escape tunnel built into one wall and had made a point of searching for where it came out. Now he went in that hidden exit and followed the tunnel along, all the way back to his goal.

But when he emerged, he saw that Helryx wasn’t there. Instead, it was a senior Order of Mata Nui agent, Tobduk. This was just about the last person Mazeka wanted to see.

Tobduk was tall – easily 10 feet in height – and although he looked very lean, it was deceptive. He was all wiry muscle. He wore a Kanohi Sanok, the Mask of Accuracy, an appropriate one for him – for he was a killer.

This particular Order member got the ugly assignments, and thrived on them. He was most famous within the group for planning the deaths of or personally slaying everyone who knew the location of the island of Artakha – including other Order members and a Makuta. Although one would expect someone like him to be cold and calm, Tobduk was in a perpetual rage – he fed on anger, his and others, it made him stronger.

Mazeka had battled Tobduk a few times during his training. He had always lost. Despite the Matoran’s best efforts, frustration and anger would grow in him during the fight, making Tobduk even stronger. Then the fight would be over in seconds.

“Come out, Mazeka,” Tobduk said, with the grin of a hungry kavinika wolf. “I know you’re there.” There was no point in denying it or postponing the inevitable. Mazeka kicked open the entrance to the tunnel and stepped out into the light. “I would have thought you would be out killing something,” he said. “Did Helryx ground you?”

“My time is coming,” Tobduk snapped. “I was made for war.”

“Great,” said Mazeka. He forced himself to stay calm and collected, so he could deny Tobduk any extra strength. “I hope you and your battles will be very happy together. I need information. Where’s Helryx?”

“Out. And you don’t come to us… we call you,” Tobduk growled menacingly.

“Vultraz is heading for the core, bringing something to a Makuta,” Mazeka explained. “I need to follow him, but I don’t know where the core is.”

“I do,” said Tobduk. His eyes somehow managed to gleam and yet remain cold and dead at the same time. “And I could tell you… but not yet.” He picked a dagger up off Helryx’s desk and toyed with it. “Jerbraz says you have come far. But do you have what it takes to kill?”

Here it comes, thought Mazeka. He’s going to challenge me to combat for the information I seek. And I’m better than I once was, but not better enough to beat him.

To Mazeka’s surprise, Tobduk put the dagger into a sheath on his hip and smiled. “No. Cutting you down wouldn’t even be sport anymore, not when there are so many better targets out there. I have a job to do, Mazeka… and I could use a little help. You aid me and I will tell you what you want to know… or you could refuse, and the guards will haul you off to a cell for interrogation while Vultraz roams free.”

Mazeka had no choice. His need for revenge on Vultraz mattered more to him than anything else. If he had to team with someone like Tobduk to achieve his goals, then so be it.

“What do I have to do?” asked Mazeka.

“Nothing too terrible,” said Tobduk, already walking out of the chamber and obviously expecting Mazeka to follow. “We’re just going hunting.”

*   *   *
The Toa Empire universe...

Takanuva crouched behind a wall, a wounded Lesovikk beside him. All around, elemental power bursts were flying, warriors were screaming, and a disaster beyond his imagination was taking place. It had all started out so well: Lesovikk's band had made it close to the Coliseum before being spotted. As planned, Takanuva had used his newfound shadow powers to blind the guards. Pohatu followed with a massive fist of stone that cracked the walls of the huge structure. To the east, Makuta Teridax led Krika, Kojol, Turaga Dume and Takua into battle. At first, they made short work of the Matoran and Toa who guarded Tuyet's fortress. Then it all went wrong: a Toa of Iron appeared on the walls and a hail of spikes spelled the end of Takua. Takanuva watched in sheer horror as his other self collapsed and died. Kojol fell next, his armor crushed by the Toa's power, and his essence incinerated by a Toa of Plasma. Teridax was forced to pull back.

Things were going no better for Lesovikk's squad. Primal had run into Tahu at the eastern entrance and killed the Toa of Fire, but the sudden appearance of Gali, and a sphere of water around the Dark Hunter's head, left him to drown on dry land. Toa Krakua hit Gali with a wave of solid sound, blasting apart her mask and armor. Pohatu cried out, too late: Ahkmou had already dashed ahead and slain the fallen Toa of Water. He didn't get to enjoy his triumph long. Kopaka flash-froze Ahkmou, and a swipe from Onua's claws shattered the Matoran into little pieces of crystalline protodermis.

Now it was no longer one battle, but a dozen separate ones being fought at once, the lines moving back and forth. Pohatu fought his way into the Coliseum, but found himself too evenly matched with Onua to make much progress. Lesovikk fell with an ice dagger in his shoulder, but rallied to blow Kopaka off his post high atop the Coliseum. Takanuva winced as the Toa of Ice hit the ground and lay still.

"Now," said Lesovikk to Takanuva, "Darkness will lead the way. Get in there and do what you have to."

"What about you?" asked Takanuva.

"We'll give them something to remember," said Lesovikk.

Takanuva took one last look around. Nuju was side-by-side with Guardian, keeping a Toa of Magnetism too off-balance to use his powers. Teridax's forces had charged again: Krika used his vacuum power to absorb Lewa's attacks until Teridax could summon a bolt of lightning powerful enough to turn a Toa to ashes.

Darkness was already on the move, slipping through the cracks in the Coliseum walls. Takanuva used his shadow power to enlarge them and followed.

Inside, the Coliseum was strangely silent. One would never know a battle raged outside its walls. A team of Toa rushed by on their way to join the fight. Steeling himself, Takanuva fired laser blasts at the ceiling, bringing the rubble down on top of them. He still found himself hoping he had only stunned them, not killed them.

Together, Toa and Dark Hunter fought their way to their goal: the Hall of Masks. They had made it to the chamber door when Darkness paused — he heard something. The next instant, the door exploded outward as a wall of water erupted from within, sweeping Darkness away. Takanuva managed to grab hold of the doorway, holding on with all his might and holding his breath.

Outside, Teridax's attack had met with success as Toa fell before him and Krika. Turaga Dume had rallied Lesovikk's group, although not before Nuju had been pulled into the Archives by plantlife gone wild. Guardian, too, fell, but took half a dozen Toa with him.

Back in the Coliseum, the deluge had finally stopped. There, framed in the chamber doors stood Toa Tuyet, Nui Stone in one hand, Mask of Dimensional Gates in the other.

"I know who you are," she said. "Or rather, I have guessed. You don't belong here."

"Neither do you," said Takanuva. "You don't exist in my world. True Toa must have stood up and stopped you before you went too far."

"In my world, I am much more... competent," she replied. "How unfortunate for you."

"Alright then," said Takanuva. "For Takua, for Lesovikk, and for all the Toa and Matoran whose lives you have ruined, I strike."
“We were not always like this, you know,” Krika said, with something in his voice that Gali never thought she would hear from a Makuta: regret.

The Toa of Water was still feeling weak and dizzy from Krika’s attack. She did her best to ignore it. One of her strengths had always been the ability to listen and to try to understand both her friends and her enemies. She had a chance to do that now with this Makuta, and she wasn’t going to blow it.

“I know,” she replied. “The swamp water must have mutated—”

Krika shook his head, sadly. “I’m not talking about how we look. I’m talking about what we are. A piece of advice, Toa – if you keep focusing only on the now, there isn’t going to be any later.”

The Makuta turned ghostly and floated up off the ground. “There was a time, back when Makuta Miserix led us, that the Brotherhood stood for something. Oh, you would not remember him – you were asleep at the time – but he embraced our true mission. Under his guidance, we created Rahi beasts that are still of use to the Matoran today. When the Matoran civil war happened on Metru Nui, it was Miserix who decreed we Makuta must get more involved in the world outside our laboratories.” He paused for a moment, then added, “That was the beginning of the end.”

Gali knew the rest of the story all too well. The Brotherhood rebelled against the Great Spirit Mata Nui, casting him into an unending sleep and plunging the universe into a time of darkness. The mission of the Toa Nuva was to undo that criminal act and awaken Mata Nui once more.

“When we saw the universe beyond our towers, we discovered how Mata Nui was honored, respected, and loved by the Matoran,” said Krika. “That was love and devotion we felt we deserved for the thousands of things we had done to better their lives. Jealousy turned to resentment, and resentment to hate. And when Makuta Teridax proposed we strike at Mata Nui and seize power, we turned away from Miserix and followed his lead.”

“And what happened to Miserix?” asked Gali. She could feel her strength returning. If she could keep Krika talking, she would soon be able to make a break for freedom.

“Teridax wanted to kill him,” Krika replied. “Makuta Spiriah and I were given the job, but Spiriah didn’t have the stomach for killing mask to mask. I told him I would handle it… but instead, I brought Miserix to a volcanic island in the south and imprisoned him there.”

“So you disobeyed,” said Gali. “I didn’t think Makuta had the spines to do that.”

Krika shrugged, sending a strange ripple of motion through his intangible form. “Perhaps we do not,” he said quietly. “Should the volcanoes erupt with enough force and for enough time, Miserix will have no hope of survival. I gave him a chance, that’s all.”

Gali said nothing. She was remembering how Tahu and Kopaka had been dispatched by the Order of Mata Nui to stop a series of volcanic eruptions on a southern island, shortly before the team came to Karda Nui. Could it have been the same place that Miserix was imprisoned? Was that why the Order wanted the eruptions blocked?
“As I now give you one,” said Krika. He pushed something toward her through the mud. Gali picked it up and used the slightest bit of her elemental power to wash the soil away. She saw it was a piece of stone, about the size of her hand, with the symbol of the Brotherhood of Makuta engraved on it.

“With that, anyone – even you – can pass unharmed through the forces of the Brotherhood,” Krika continued. “Take it. I will lead you to an exit from this place. Return to Metru Nui, Xia, anywhere that is not here. Just go, Gali, if you value your universe.”

Gali was surprised at the urgency in his voice, but unconvinced by his plea. “If you want me gone, why not just kill me? You have the power.”

Krika smiled. The expression gave Gali chills. “The Makuta have a legend. It says that when one of us dies, all that we have put out into the universe comes back to us. For tens of thousands of years, I have put fear, pain, and death out into the universe, Toa. Perhaps I want to add a strain of mercy to that mix.”

Gali studied the Makuta. Was this a trick? Some attempt to weaken the Toa’s ranks? None of it made sense.

“Why?” she said finally. “Why do you want me gone? Or is it that you simply want one less Toa Nuva in Karda Nui?”

Krika laughed softly. It was a hollow and horrible sound, somehow worse to Gali’s ears than a scream of rage would have been. “You should have been a Makuta, Gali, you are far too clever to be a mere Toa. You Nuva are here to awaken Mata Nui, a mission that requires all six of you. I tell you that if you do this, you and everything you know, everything you love, will be doomed to a future more horrible than you can imagine. Leave here now, and that future cannot come to pass.”

Tahu racked his brain. Vamprah had proven impossible to shake and far more skilled at aerial combat than the Toa. Mere fire bolts weren’t going to stop a Makuta who had a natural resistance to fire. Something much bigger was going to be needed.

Nova blast? No, that might harm my friends as well, thought Tahu. I need something sudden, unexpected…

He glanced around, looking for something that would inspire an idea. He found it in a pile of rotting vegetation atop an islet of mud off to the east. They reminded him of something he had seen once in the swamps of Le-Wahi on the island of Mata Nui. Turaga Matau had said something about some of the plants on the island not being like those in Metru Nui. They didn’t seem to be made of protodermis and didn’t break down the same way when they died. Tahu realized that in the end they resembled these dead plants in Karda Nui.

It makes sense, thought the Toa of Fire. Matau said some of the plants might have come from other islands. The plants here might have come in with the waters that flooded Karda Nui from outside. And he warned me not to use my powers around them when they started to rot, because…

Tahu smiled. Oh no. Wouldn’t dream of it.

He turned then and remained hovering in the air, not far from the decaying plant matter. Vamprah never hesitated, flying straight toward him, hungry for a fight. Tahu waited until Vamprah was just over the islet before tossing a fireball. But he didn’t aim it at the Makuta – he aimed it at the plants.

As soon as the fire came near its target, there was a huge explosion of flame. The shock sent Vamprah reeling and even Tahu rolled through the air before finally regaining control. When he looked back, a shaken Vamprah was clinging to a tree, the only thing keeping him from plunging into the swamp.

Score one for swamp gas, Tahu said to himself. One spark, and boom! I guess Matau was right after all.

“Pohatu! Wake up!” Photok said frantically. He and the unconscious Toa were inside a tiny air pocket beneath tons of rocks. Already, the atmosphere was getting thin.

At first, the Av-Matoran thought he could use his light powers to blast their way free. But his first shot produced nothing but a rain of rubble. It was obvious they would be crushed to death long before that method of escape would work.
The Matoran shook the fallen Toa, but it did no good. Then he hit him with a little light blast, followed by a bigger one. When neither did the trick, he upped the power one more time. This time it worked, with Pohatu awakening so abruptly he almost crushed Photok against the rocks above.


“If you would — ow — not flatten me, maybe I could tell you,” grumbled Photok. “We have a problem. But a little speed like we used before and I bet we can fly right out of here —”

“And into the swamp water,” Pohatu cut him off. “Onua warned me about that stuff. Maybe we’d be fast enough that it wouldn’t affect us, but why take the chance? I’ve got a better idea.”

Pohatu closed his eyes and lay perfectly still. Photok was going to ask just what in Mata Nui’s name he was doing, but thought better of it. Maybe the Toa of Stone was concentrating, and it just looked like he was taking a nap. He decided to give it a few more seconds and see if anything happened.

That was when something did. First, Photok saw the rocks above and below fuse together into a solid mass. There was a sensation of motion, and the Matoran felt a little dizzy for a moment. Then he realized what was happening: He, Pohatu, and all the rock that surrounded them were rising. The Toa was using his mastery of stone to levitate them from the swamp at an amazing rate of speed.

“Wish I had my Mask of X-Ray Vision right about now,” Pohatu muttered. “I’d drop us right on Gorast.”

The Toa felt the slightest decrease in resistance to their movement, which told him they were out of the water and back in the air. Making sure Photok was securely on his back, he unleashed his power and split their rocky prison wide open. Before the two halves had even hit the swamp, Toa and Matoran were soaring back into the battle.

Halfway to the Codrex, they were joined in flight by Tahu. “Have you seen Gali?” the Toa of Stone asked.

“No,” answered Tahu, instantly concerned by the tone of his comrade’s voice. “What happened?”

Pohatu explained how he had seen Krika carrying off the Toa of Water. In the past, Tahu would have ordered Pohatu into the fight while he went and searched for Gali. But time and experience had made him less a warrior and more a leader of Toa.

“You’re fastest,” Tahu said. “Go find her and bring her to the Codrex. I’ll help the others and we’ll meet you there. And, Pohatu…”

“Don’t worry,” said the Toa of Stone. “She’s my friend, too, remember?”

Nodding, Tahu jetted toward the Codrex. Pohatu and Photok turned and headed in the opposite direction, both hoping against hope they would find the Toa of Water still alive.

High above the swamp, Ignika, the Toa of Life, stood guard over the fallen Makuta Icarax. Not long ago, Ignika had simply been a Mask of Power. Using its control over all life, it had fashioned a body for itself from the molecules in the swamp in an attempt to be a hero like the Toa.

It had not been easy. Ignika’s first battles were awkward, and at one point he even clashed with the Toa Nuva. But when Icarax challenged him, Ignika defeated the powerful Makuta decisively. Now, in pain and barely conscious, the Makuta looked up at Ignika with hatred in his eyes.

“Why do you hesitate?” he sneered. “Does the Toa of Life not have the stomach to bring death?”

Ignika, puzzled, did not respond. He was not aware of the Toa code that prohibited killing, nor had he kept Icarax alive out of any sense of mercy or forgiveness. He simply didn’t see Icarax as a threat, so not worth the effort of eliminating.

“Go ahead,” said Icarax. “I’ll only be beating everyone else here to nonexistence by a few hours.”

Again, Ignika didn’t react. The Makuta sat up and stared at his foe. Then Icarax’s eyes widened and he began to laugh. “You don’t know! The great Mask of Life doesn’t even know what it is here for! Oh, this is too fine a joke!”
Icarax rose painfully to his feet. Ignika braced for another attack, but one wasn’t coming. Instead, the Makuta pointed at the Mask of Life. “Look at your mask, Toa. Everyone knows the legend of the golden Mask of Life, but your mask isn’t gold – it’s silver with shades of black. Don’t you know what that means? It means the end of everything.”

Icarax laughed again, a sound heavy with malice and madness. “Makuta Teridax told us all about you. The Great Beings created you not only as a cure for what might ail Mata Nui. You were their way to fix any mistakes they might have made in the creation of this universe. If the universe is too far out of balance, a countdown begins. Your mask turns to silver... and then to black... and when it is as black as a Makuta’s spirit, all life in this universe will cease to exist. All ‘mistakes’ will be erased, and the Great Beings, wherever they are, can start again somewhere else.”

Toa Ignika knew very little about how to look for lies and deception. But even if he had, he would not have found any in Icarax’s words. The Makuta was telling the truth, and somehow Ignika knew that. And that meant the Toa Nuva were racing a doomsday clock and didn’t even know it!

Icarax forgotten, Toa Ignika climbed aboard his skyboard and rocketed down toward the swamp. The Nuva had to be warned before it was too late.
The Toa Empire universe...

Toa Tuyet stood over the battered, semi-conscious body of Takanuva, Toa of Light. He did not stir. Being blown through half-a-dozen walls by a focused tidal wave would do that to you. Tuyet smiled.

“Pathetic, truly pathetic. If you are an example of what Toa are like in your universe, it’s a wonder you haven’t all been hunted to extinction by now.”

The ruler of the Toa Empire slipped off her Mask of Intangibility, and replaced it with the Kanohi Olmak, the mask Takanuva had come seeking. This mask alone had the power to open gateways to interdimensional space, and it was Takanuva’s only hope of escaping this twisted world.

“Your friends outside are dead, or soon will be. I admit I was surprised to find they still had some fight left in them after 3500 years. But, they can’t be allowed to rob the Matoran of the peace I have brought them.”

Takanuva managed to get to his hands and knees, rubble sliding off his back as he did so. He looked at Tuyet with eyes that held equal parts of contempt and pity.

“Peace?” he said in disbelief. “Is that what you call perverting the Toa into secret police, terrorizing the villagers, killing anyone who opposes your rule?”

“I did what had to be done. I made the world right. And who are you to judge me? You are nothing but an alien from some other dimension.”

Takanuva hurled a blast of shadow at Tuyet, temporarily cloaking her in darkness. By the time she could see again, he was gone. But his voice came from high above her, saying:

“That’s true, my world is messier than yours, more dangerous in some ways. But it is a world that’s better, because you’re not in it, Tuyet.”

The Toa of Water unleashed her power, bringing the ceiling down, but Takanuva was not there. Instead, he sprang from the opening at the far end of the hall, hurling blinding light at Tuyet as he made a grab for her mask. She spun, caught him by the arm and threw him hard to the floor.

“I have hundreds of times your power. You are nothing but a lightstone to be ground to dust beneath my heel.”

Takanuva attacked again, hurling bolts of shadow and light. To his amazement, Tuyet parried them with ease. Seeing his surprise, she laughed.

“You know, we had no Toa of Light in this universe. We didn’t need one. And in a few moments, we will be back to being without one.”

Takanuva charged. The next few seconds were a blaze of battle. Lasers turning water to steam, waves crashing against walls, a race to see what would happen first: Takanuva drowning in the tide, or Tuyet drowning in darkness. When the fight was through, Tuyet stood once more triumphant.

“Enough! I have wasted enough time on you. Your rebellion is finished, and now, so are you.”

Tuyet was about to strike when a strange sound penetrated the damaged Coliseum. Takanuva raised his head and glanced at a hole in the wall. He saw hundreds — no, thousands — of Matoran marching toward the building, all of them armed. In the distance he could see airships and sea-going vessels carrying...
other Matoran, Dark Hunters, Vortixx and others. All of them were descending on the city, their eyes
fixed on the Coliseum.

“Still think the rebellion is over?” Takanuva asked. “Or maybe it’s just beginning.”

“The fools. With my power, I can sweep them all away in a flood like no one has seen before.”

Takanuva looked right into Tuyet’s eyes.

“Then who would there be left to protect? Who would you have made your perfect universe
for?”

Tuyet smiled.

“Very clever, Toa. True, a universe with only drowned Matoran would not be of much use to
anyone. But they must be taught respect.”

“Why? If they’re so ungrateful, why not use your mask to travel somewhere else? Some place that
needs you. Start over again, in another Metru Nui, one where they might welcome a ruler like you.”

Tuyet glanced down at the street. The mob was coming closer, and though she could easily kill
them all, it would leave her as the ruler of an empire of corpses. Perhaps Takanuva was right. At the least,
she could leave and return with an army of Toa from another dimension, enough to stamp out every last
visage of rebellion in her own world.

She turned away and activated her mask. A portal into inter-dimensional space opened before her
and she prepared to step in. That was when Takanuva made his move. He somehow managed to hurl
himself at Tuyet, snatching the mask from her face. For the second it lost contact with her, its power shut
off and the portal began to close. Takanuva, mask in hand, dove through, but Tuyet was not about to let
him escape so easily. Even as he cleared the portal, she grabbed on to his leg, trying to follow him. She
blasted him with hard bolts of water, catching his hand and tearing the mask from his grasp. It floated away
into the space between dimensions.

Takanuva turned back. What he saw horrified him, but his shout of warning came too late. Tuyet
was halfway through the portal, trying to drag Takanuva back in. She was so consumed by rage that she
never noticed the portal closing until it was much too late. She screamed as reality slammed shut on her
body, leaving her upper half in the void and the lower half in the Coliseum on her world. Mercifully, death
came instantly.

Takanuva hovered in space for a long moment. He wondered what would happen in Tuyet’s
universe with her gone. Would the Toa become protectors again? Would the Matoran take control? Or
would some group of the Dark Hunters and Makuta become new dictators? Perhaps someday, if he was
able, he would return to find out the answer.

He turned his head away from the remains of Tuyet, wondering how a Toa could go so wrong,
and realizing with a shudder what a fine line it could be between justice and tyranny. Tuyet’s life had been
wasted, but the lives of no more Toa would be lost if he could prevent it. With grim resolve, he resumed
his journey to Karda Nui.

* * *

Axonn was drowning. The greenish-black fluid filled his mouth and lungs before he could react.
His mighty arms flailed about, trying to find something to grab on to, and failing. As he sank further toward
the bottom, Axonn knew that here, in the birthplace of the Makuta species, he was going to die. Then he
was suddenly rising rapidly up through the murky liquid. A strong hand had a hold of him and was yanking
him away from his fate. A moment later he felt the hard stone of the floor beneath him. He choked and
gasped. When the colors finally stopped swirling in front of his eyes, he looked up at his rescuer. Brutaka
floated three feet off the floor. Green fire crackled from his eyes and the tips of his fingers. His armor had
cracked in numerous places as the tissue it covered expanded. An aura of pure power surrounded him,
so bright that Axonn had to raise a hand to protect his sight.

“Axonn,” said Brutaka, “we are glad to see you have… survived.”

“We! Brutaka, what’s happened to you?”
“I... we are the essence of the Makuta species. We know what they were meant to know, but have forgotten. We see the error. The flaws. So much to repair – but it cannot be done.”

Axonn stood, ax at the ready. He knew the effects Makuta antidermis had on Brutaka: absorbing it somehow made him stronger – but he had never seen or heard anything like this. It was Brutaka’s body and Brutaka’s voice, but the words did not come from his old friend.

“Spherus Magna, the Shattering.” Brutaka muttered, seemingly more to himself than to Axonn. “The three that must be one, the two that must make them one.”

Brutaka abruptly reached out and seized Axonn’s arm in a grip of iron. His touch burned, but Axonn fought back the urge to scream.

“He must remember, he must be made to see, or the journey of 100,000 years will be for nothing. He hides beneath, preparing to meet his destiny. We must go there, we must right the wrongs – before the Shattering can end.”

Ancient climbed a low rise, stepping carefully to avoid tripping over the rubble that was once a Xian factory. He had been searching for the Shadowed One for the better part of an hour. They were supposed to be discussing the defense of the city, but the Dark Hunter leader was nowhere to be found.

He was concerned. Toa Helryx had asked Ancient, her spy within the Dark Hunters, for regular reports on the state of things in Xia and the Shadowed One’s actions. She fully expected a Brotherhood of Makuta attack on the island, and he was already overdue with his latest dispatch.

Ancient reached the top of the rise. The first thing he saw was the Shadowed One, standing amid a pile of debris. He was holding a small chest, which was open, and staring at the contents with a nasty smile on his face. As Ancient drew closer, he noticed two other things: a dead Vortixx on the ground, his face encased in crystalline protodermis – and just what was in the chest: three vials.

“What have you found?” asked Ancient. “And why would a Vortixx be foolish enough to challenge you for it?”

The Shadowed One looked up, surprised. Then, seeing it was Ancient, he visibly relaxed. “A most amazing thing,” he said. “Have you ever heard of Makuta Kojol?”

Ancient nodded. He knew the story from the Order of Mata Nui: Kojol had been visiting Xia to discuss having a virus added into a weapon the Vortixx were building for the Makuta. During his visit, he was “accidentally” killed by a different virus. Except it was no accident, but an Order operation to remove him.

“He brought any number of viruses with him when he came to Xia,” The Shadowed One continued. “Some were never found. The story was they were incinerated along with his armor. But they weren’t, and I have found them.”

Ancient tried not to look as worried as he felt. Weapons like this in the hands of the Dark Hunters was a disaster in the making.

“Excellent,” he said. “We could ransom these for a good price.”

“Ransom them?” said the Shadowed One. “No, no, I intend to make use of them. I will learn what they are and what they do, and then Helryx and the Makuta will answer to me! But I will need time... a great deal of time – and privacy to work. No one must know I have them. That is why the Vortixx here had to die. And it’s why...”

Two beams of power lanced out of the Shadowed One’s eyes, striking Ancient. The veteran Dark Hunter vanished, disintegrated by the force of the blast.

“Apologies, old friend,” the Shadowed One said, “but you know the old saying; ‘A secret shared is no longer a secret.'”

Vezon stalked through the halls of the fortress of Destral, following Makuta Tridax and doing his best to remain unseen. The walls of the ancient structure shook from a ferocious pounding – the Order of Mata Nui had launched its attack on the Makuta base at last. His mission was simple, purposely, so that even his deranged mind could keep it straight: he was to follow Tridax, find the means the Makuta used
to teleport their island from place to place, and then disable it. He would then be most likely killed by Tridax, but then, no plan was perfect.

At first it seemed like all was proceeding as expected. Tridax made his way to a sub-basement, seemingly oblivious to being followed. At the bottom of the basement was a massive chamber. What waited within that chamber staggered even the deeply disturbed Vezon.

The walls towered forty feet, all around. Lining them were stasis tubes, close to one hundred. And each tube was occupied by an identical figure. A few had armor of jet-black, most white-and-gold, but it was obvious they were all the same being. They were in some kind of stasis.

Tridax walked to the center of the room, where a small table sat. On the table was a Kanohi mask. Tridax reached for it, then suddenly whirled and hurled a blast of shadow at Vezon. Before he could dodge, the shadow had pinned him to the wall.

“Did you think I could not hear your clumsy attempt to follow me?” said Tridax. “Very well, Skakdi trash. You want to learn the most powerful secret of Destral? You want the satisfaction of knowing what hides here before you die? Look around.”

Vezon did, but he didn’t learn anything more by doing that.

“Quite a collection,” he said. “I prefer seashells, myself. Sometimes leaves. Oh, and the heads of my enemies, though those take up so much space.”

Tridax smiled and held up the mask.

“Do you know what this is? A Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates. One of only two known to be in existence. Not long ago, my fellow Makuta Mutran and I began experiments to develop a creature called a shadow leech – a creature that could drain the light out of others and turn them into beings of shadow. That was what sparked my idea. I knew the mask could reach not only other places in this dimension, but other realities as well. And so I have begun traveling to those other realities and collecting the Toa Takanuva of each, bringing him back here, and feeding his light to my pets. When I am done, I will have an army of Shadow Toa, all made from the most dangerous enemy of the Makuta.”

The walls shook again.

“I think you’d better hurry up and finish then,” suggested Vezon.

“No need,” said Tridax. “I have only to release the Shadow Takanuva I have already made, and they will dispose of the attackers. And then I can go back to work in earnest. And then I can…”

Tridax stopped at the sound of crystal shattering. Startled, he let his shadow power lapse. Vezon slumped to the ground, but not before he saw the Makuta looking at his arm in horror. Something was dissolving his armored gauntlet before his eyes, and his antidermis was leaking out into the air.

Two beings stepped out of the shadows. One was a Matoran, the other another species, very tall and very dangerous in appearance. He looked at the Makuta and laughed – a harsh and malicious sound.

“The most dangerous enemy of the Makuta?” said Tobduk. “Get ready, you’re just about to meet him.”
From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

My name is Takanuva, Toa of Light. For the past – day? month? year? – I have been traveling through other dimensions trying to find my way to Karda Nui. I was sent on my journey by the Order of Mata Nui, who gave me vital information I must share with the Toa Nuva. Unfortunately, the mask whose power hurled me into the space between dimensions was damaged, so the trip has been a rough one. Hopefully, my next stop will be my own universe.

I see a point of light in the distance. After three wrong destinations, I can only wish that this is Karda Nui. Fighting the currents of interdimensional space, I make for the spot. It is a portal opening to another reality. Desperately, I dive for it. On the other side, I land hard on a small island of mud. All around me is murky water and weird plant life. Have I found Karda Nui, the core of the universe, or simply another strange world not my own?

* * *

It had been two hours since Takanuva, Toa of Light, stumbled through a hole in space and fell face-first into the mud. His journey had begun in the city of Metru Nui, courtesy of a Great Mask worn by a being named Brutaka. His mission was to travel to Karda Nui and bring vital information to the Toa Nuva.

Since his arrival, he had been flying east, looking for some sign of the Toa Nuva. He had spotted figures flitting through the sky and what might have been battles, but he was too far away to make out clearly who they were or what was going on.

That was about to change. He spotted Gali Nuva on a spit of mud, being menaced by what looked like a giant insect with an attitude. Takanuva hesitated for just a moment – he had all too painfully learned the dangers of judging by appearance in recent adventures – but he couldn’t escape the fact that Gali was lying on the ground and that thing was closing in on her.

Takanuva fired a warning blast of light in front of the insectoid’s path. The being turned his head to look at the Toa, and Takanuva would forever remember the expression on his face. It wasn’t fear or anger – more like sadness, as if the bone-white creature had finally accepted his fate.

The Toa of Light braced for an attack. Instead, the insectoid being turned ghostly and vanished into the ground. Gali got to her feet as Takanuva joined her. The two spoke at the same time.

“How did you get here –?”
“Are you all right –?”
“It’s a long story,” said Takanuva. “Where are the others? I have news you need to hear.”
Gali glanced down at the spot of ground into which Krika had disappeared. "They're back that way. Karda Nui is under attack by the Makuta, and —" She glanced up at Takanuva, eyes wide. "What happened to you? Your armor... your mask... and is it me, or are you bigger?"

"I don't know about the last," Takanuva said grimly. "But as for the rest - I'll tell you while we travel." He reached behind and took something off his back. Gali recognized it as a smaller version of the sundial Lewa had retrieved from the island of Mata Nui.

"What are you going to do with that?" she asked.

Takanuva put the sundial on the ground and then shot a beam of light at it from his left hand. The arrow on the sundial cast a shadow that pointed to the east. Takanuva had no way of knowing it, but it was pointing right toward the Codrex.

"Okay," he said softly. "So I still go that way."

Gali looked at him, thoroughly confused.

"I was told Lewa Nuva retrieved this from the island of Mata Nui not too long ago," the Toa of Light hurriedly explained. "It was shrunk down and given to me for my journey here. When I focus light upon it, the sundial points toward the spot from which the Great Spirit can be awakened."

Gali was going to ask more questions, but she was distracted by the arrival of Pohatu and Photok, who came to a landing in front of the two Toa. Pohatu looked Takanuva up and down for a few moments, finally saying, "Hmm. Can't say I think much of the color change."

"You should talk," Takanuva muttered. "You're orange!"

"Yeah," Pohatu smiled. "But I wear it well."

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva's journal...

I am in a swamp, surrounded by mist. Now and then, I spot a fin or a tentacle break the surface of the muddy water, but I don't see many other Rahi around. Am I where I am supposed to be? Using my new power of flight, I rise into the air. That's when I spot her - a Toa of Water, being menaced by a pale-white, skeletal monstrosity. I don't know if that's Gali or not, but I know a Toa in danger when I see one. Let's see if I can shed a little light on this with my power lance!

A burst of light made the creature menacing my fellow Toa stop and take notice. I expected it to attack, or scream out its rage, or do something else I wouldn't enjoy at all. Instead, the look on its face was almost one of... sadness and resignation. Almost as if it knew that I, or someone like me, was coming, but had hoped against hope I wouldn't show up. Then it drifted down through the mud like a spirit and vanished. Wherever I am... this is a very strange place.

Using my newfound ability to fly (the result of a Makuta virus I was exposed to in an alternate universe), I traveled to where the Toa was just getting to her feet. As I got closer, I realized that despite the differences in her appearance, it was Gali. And despite how I looked, she recognized me. "What are you doing here?" she asked, even as I said "Are you all right?" I told her it was a long, long story, and there wasn't time to tell it. We had to find the others - they had to know how much danger they were in!

Gali looked at me as if she were just seeing me for the first time. "What happened to you?" she asked. "Your armor... your mask... and is it me, or have you grown bigger?" The darkening of my armor and mask I already knew about. It was a side-effect of the shadow leech attack on Metru Nui. But I had grown in size? Yes, I guess I had, though I had no idea why. What did it mean? Would it stop, or would I keep growing larger? A Turaga might know the answers, but there were none around. Like far too many situations I had been in lately, I would have to learn as I went.
Gali was ready to head off in search of the other Toa Nuva, but I had something I felt I had to do first. I unlimbered the sundial I carried with me and placed it on the muddy ground. I shone a beam of light on its face and the shadow that resulted pointed to the east. “Okay, so I keep going that way,” I said. Gali looked at me, confused. “Is that the sundial Lewa retrieved from the island of Mata Nui? How did it get so small? And what are you using it for?” Those, at least, were questions I could answer.

“You know of the Order of Mata Nui,” I said to Gali. “They told me you did. They shrunk the sundial down and gave it to me. When I shine light upon it, it points toward the spot from which the Great Spirit can be awakened.” Gali looked at me as if I had grown two more heads… which, the way things were going, I would have believed. She was about to ask me if I was quite sure I was okay when we both spotted a gleam of orange off to the east. It was closing on us rapidly, and the dark side of me urged me to prepare to attack. It was getting harder and harder to resist those impulses — and maybe in this case they were right. After all, I didn't know any orange Toa…

I was ready for anything as the orange figure approached, flying at impossibly high speed. Gali, though, look undisturbed by the new arrival. She placed a hand on my arm, a signal that all was well. And it turned out the new arrival was Pohatu, though he did not look much like the Toa of Stone I remembered.

He looked me up and down for a moment, before saying, “I can’t say I think much of the color change.”

“You should talk,” I replied. “You’re orange.”

“Yeah, but I wear it well,” said Pohatu, with a grin.

* * *

Makuta Mutran was extremely unhappy. The Toa Nuva had succeeded in destroying his original hive along with the vats he used to create shadow leeches. He had been forced to relocate his operations to an island in the swamp, using whatever extra equipment he’d had stored outside the hive. The situation was neither efficient nor ideal, especially to an “artist” like Mutran.

“Impossible,” he growled. “I can’t work in this mud pit! I can’t create under these conditions!”

His Matoran assistant, Vican, stayed far away, knowing better than to even speak when Mutran was like this. Since the day he had been turned into a shadow Matoran and then mutated by his master, Vican had lived a life that could be compared to tiptoeing through a nest of sleeping doom vipers. He never knew what might inspire Mutran to toss him into a vat and see what new changes could be made.

Still, Vican couldn’t help but be curious about today’s project. Mutran was making some kind of winged, insectoid Rahi beast, but it wasn’t at Antroz’s request. And when Mutran did things on his own, the results were unpredictable.

Summoning his courage, Vican edged a little closer. “Um… great Mutran… what might that be?”

Mutran turned, surprised that Vican had dared to interrupt, but eager to show off his work. “That is a klakk. I made several very, very long ago — nasty little things, but excellent sentries. Since our new location is more exposed than the hive, I felt it might be of use. It should be ready to emerge from the vat soon.”

Vican eyed the creature. It didn’t look like it was going to follow Mutran’s schedule. It was ramming against the side of the vat and cracks were starting to appear in the crystal. Mutran noticed and plunged his spear into the tank, trying to drive the Rahi back, but all that did was irritate the klakk. With a final thrust, it shattered the vat and burst free.

Mutran made a grab for it, but the klakk was too fast. It shot on a straight line for Vican, a horrible shriek coming from its mouth. The sound was so loud and sharp it felt like a physical blow. Vican was knocked off his feet and, for a few moments, the world went black.

The next thing he knew, Mutran was hauling him out of the mud. He felt strange and sick, but he wasn’t going to show any sign of weakness to his master. His… master? Somehow, that didn’t sound at all right.
“It flew off,” snarled Mutran. “Go and bring it back!”

Vican could see the klakk, already well away from the island. He could see something else too. There were three Toa, one of whom he didn’t recognize, flying in the same general direction. The sight made Vican hesitate.

There are a thousand other places these Toa could be right now, safe places, far away from this, he thought. But they come here and risk their lives for Matoran they don’t even know. And what have I done? Everything I could – no, everything I was told to do – to stop them.

Vican took flight, moving more slowly than he normally would have. Something was happening inside him. He had never had any regrets about his actions, not since the day Mutran’s shadow leech drained the light from him. Things like conscience and regret went with it, leaving just darkness behind. So why did he suddenly care about this place, these Toa and Matoran, now?

Troubled, he winged away, his mind full of questions.

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

Pohatu, Gali and I flew to the east, toward where my two friends said the other Toa Nuva could be found. Along the way, they brought me up to date on what had been happening – their arrival in Karda Nui, the discovery of the Makuta here, and the revelation that they had been turning Matoran of Light into shadow Matoran. That last sickened me. I knew now that I must have been a Matoran of Light in the past, though those memories were blocked. I probably worked alongside some of the Matoran the Makuta had corrupted. They might have even been good friends. Right then and there, I swore that no matter what – even if it meant Mata Nui stayed asleep, even at the cost of my own life – I would see to it that the shadow Matoran were cured.

We had only been flying a few minutes when Gali spotted something down below. A moment later, so did I – half a dozen insectoids, each about seven feet high, flying close to the surface of the swamp. Each had four arms with nasty stingers on the ends. “What are they?” I asked.

“I heard they’re called Niazesk,” answered Pohatu. “Some little pets of the Makuta who got transformed somehow into the big pests you see. Better off staying away from them, they’re –”

An angry buzz interrupted him. The Niazesk spotted us and were coming in our direction!

“We don’t have time for this,” growled Pohatu. He used his power to hurl stone blocks down at the approaching Niazesk. But they were good flyers and evaded his attack. Gali took down one with a water burst, but they were closing fast. I didn’t need to be told that a sting from one of them could do more than itch. I started to lower my staff to use a light blast against them… but then I thought, what if it isn’t powerful enough? What if one or two get through and Pohatu or Gali gets harmed? I made my decision… I raised my right arm to call upon the power of shadow.

I unleashed a blast of pure darkness at the oncoming Niazesk. It struck them like a solid wall. They spun, reeled, and then plunged down into the swamp. I turned to Pohatu and Gali, expecting to get congratulations for winning the fight. Instead, what I saw in their eyes was fear.

“What… was… that?” asked Pohatu. And he was actually aiming his weapon at me as he said it!

“There have been some… changes,” I answered.

“So I see,” said Pohatu. “I wondered whether the Makuta of Metru Nui was still alive, and if so, where he had got to – I guess I know now, don’t I?”

“Are you crazy?” I said, staring at Pohatu. “You think I’m a Makuta?”

“Well, you don’t look much like a Toa of Light,” the Toa of Stone replied, his weapon still aimed at me.

“And we’ve all been fooled by Makuta before.”
Gali looked from Pohatu to me. Even she was showing some doubt now—and who could blame her? I had grown in size and my armor color had changed from white and gold to white and grey. Frankly, if I had been a Makuta trying to impersonate a Toa of Light, I’d be doing a really lousy job.

I wracked my brain trying to come up with some way to prove I was me (try it sometime, it’s not easy). I could use my light powers, but Pohatu might think that just a Makuta illusion. I could use my mask power to promote trust in him, but I had a feeling the second he felt a shift in mood, he would blast away.

“If you’re really Takanuva, then I’m sorry,” said Pohatu. “But if you’re not, all of our lives aren’t worth a widget. So I’m giving you to the count of 10 to tell me why I shouldn’t skyblast you out of existence. 1… 2… 3…”

“6… 7… 8… 9…”

“What’s a Toa?” I suddenly shouted.

Pohatu paused in his countdown and looked at me, puzzled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The first time you woke up on Daxia,” I said, the words tumbling out of my mouth in my haste. “You were told you were a Toa, and your response was, ‘What’s a Toa?’ There were no Makuta there, so how could one know about that?”

“There’s only one problem,” said Pohatu. “You weren’t there either.”

“But I saw it,” I insisted. “I saw your creation, your training, I saw the team fighting avohkah here, and I saw the storm— that’s why I’m here.”

An idea struck me. I turned to Gali. “Remember, last year, when I was still Takua the Chronicler? You forged a mental link with me so I could see what you saw when you fought Makuta. Do you think you can do it again?”

“I… I don’t know,” said Gali.

“Don’t do it,” said Pohatu. “Makuta would just love to get inside your head.”

“She has to,” I said. “It’s the only way. She has to look inside my mind, and if she doesn’t like what she sees… you can kill me dead, right here.”

Toa Gali shut her eyes. After a few moments, I felt the unique sensation of her mind reaching into mine. For an instant, I could see myself through her eyes (which was pretty disturbing—even I hadn’t realized how much I had changed). Then I felt the link snap as she pulled away. Pohatu reached out and grabbed her to keep her from falling.

“Amazing,” she said softly. “A place where Mata Nui died… another where the Toa rule as dictators… your journey here was… eventful, Takanuva.”

“Then he is—?” asked Pohatu.

“He is,” confirmed Gali. “Darker, perhaps, and not quite the innocent Takua or the eager hero we remember… but he is our friend.”

“What’s the situation here?” I asked.

Pohatu pointed towards the east. “The Makuta are putting up a good fight, but we’re holding our own. We’ll have Mata Nui awake again before you know it!”

“That,” I said, taking to the sky, “is what I am afraid of.”

Pohatu had just brought up the fact that even he didn’t recall the story I had told of his early adventures when we arrived in the midst of a full-scale battle. The Toa Nuva were fighting a group of Makuta I had never seen before. Pohatu and Gali split off to attack from the flanks, while I rammed right up the middle. If my appearance took the Nuva by surprise, it seemed to do even more than that to the Makuta. My light powers tipped the balance and the masters of shadow retreated to the east.

Tahu wasted no time on welcoming me. He produced six fragments of stone and asked us all to read them. They contained, he said, the secret to awakening the Great Spirit. I really wished I could share in the moment… so close to achieving their destiny… but the time had come to tell what I knew.
The appearance of Takanuva was a surprise for both the other Toa Nuva and the Makuta. With his light power added to the battle, the Toa earned a victory, though at best a temporary one. The Makuta retreated toward the Codrex.

Tahu wasn’t going to waste this time. He collected all six keystones that the Toa had collected and fitted them together. As the Matoran had told them, the inscriptions on the stone told how the Toa could awaken the Great Spirit Mata Nui.

Tahu read them over carefully, then had the others do the same. The process would be a long and complicated one, but not impossible. If they could hold the Makuta off long enough, they could awaken the Great Spirit and end the Brotherhood’s dreams of conquest.

“We have to get into the Codrex,” he said. “We have the keystone. Now we just have to get past the Makuta. Once we do that, we can start the awakening.”

“Wait. You… must… wait.”

The voice was harsh and raspy, as if the speaker had not used it in ages. The truth was Toa Ignika, who now hovered above the Toa, had never spoken aloud in all of his short existence in this form.

“What is it?” asked Onua. “What do you know?”

In halting, uncertain speech, Ignika told the Toa what Icarax had told him. “I hadn’t realized before, but… it has changed color,” Kopaka said. “Remember? When we talked with Axonn on the island of Voya Nui, he described it as a ‘golden mask.’”

“Since when do Makuta tell the truth about anything?” asked Pohatu.

“Do you want to be the one who risks all on the notion they might be lying?” Kopaka replied. “Then we move fast,” said Tahu.

Gali read over the keystones again. “Tahu, we don’t have any way of knowing how long we have before this… countdown… reaches its end. What if we can’t complete this process in time?”

Now it was Takanuva’s turn to speak up. “We have another problem. If we succeed in waking up the Great Spirit, all of this place is going to be hit with an energy storm so big it will kill everything in Karda Nui. If we don’t get ourselves and the Matoran out of here in time…” There was no need to finish the statement.

“So if we fail, everyone quick-dies. And if we succeed, everyone quick-dies,” said Lewa Nuva. “Oh, those Great Beings and their whacky sense of humor.”

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

I was about to speak up when someone new arrived – yet another Toa, though the others seemed a little wary of him. When he spoke, it sounded like he had just learned to use his voice. He related a stunning story. Apparently, he wasn’t just wearing the Mask of Life – he was the Mask of Life. Worse, he was a Mask of Life on a countdown to the annihilation of every living being in the universe… something about things being out of balance and this the only way to make things right.

I gave the others a moment to absorb the news. Then it was my turn to add a little more cheer to the gathering. “We have another problem,” I said. “If we succeed in waking up the Great Spirit, this place is going to be hit with an energy storm that will destroy everything in Karda Nui!”
Toa Jaller stood on the beach of Artidax, his body locked rigid by Takadox’s hypnotic trance. Next to him, Hahli and Nuparu stood, similarly paralyzed. None of the three were aware of what was going on around them, which was probably for the best.

Artidax was about to be the scene of a disaster. Its volcano was mere moments away from exploding, raining fire and ash on anything unfortunate enough to be around. Not knowing this, the Toa Mahri had brought the Heart of the Visorak here, a beacon that would summon the entire Visorak horde to this spot. The idea had been to strand them here. What no one knew was that Takadox was hiding on this island, and he hypnotized the three Toa and stole their ship, intending to make his escape.

Worse, the Visorak had arrived, and were even now scuttling across the beach toward the Toa Mahri.

All in all, not the best day the Toa Mahri ever had…

Visorak, it is said, never forget. The specimens now approaching the Toa Mahri had seen Toa before, 1000 years or so ago in Metru Nui. It had been a different team, of course, but to Visorak, one Toa looks much like another. They could remember, if dimly, the pain the Toa had caused them, and they could remember the hate.

But they recalled one thing more. Toa might appear weak, beaten, or defeated, and then suddenly lash out with devastating effectiveness. It wouldn’t do to rush up to their apparently helpless foes and possibly walk into a trap. So they hung back a bit, cautiously probing to see if the Toa would react. Others began to scout – if these Toa really were frozen, as they seemed to be, something had done it to them. Could that something still be on the island, waiting to do it to the Visorak?

Jaller had a thought. This was very strange, as he wasn’t capable of thinking at the moment. But some tiny part of his consciousness that was still active realized the answer: the thought was not his.

This is no way for a Toa to die.

That little spark of awareness was followed by a slightly larger one of recognition. He had heard that voice before. It belonged to Makuta. Although it had sounded different when it came from the mouth of the robotic Maxilos, the arrogant tone was the same.

The voice continued. Paralyzed on a beach, about to be slain by Visorak or incinerated by lava? Is that the stuff of which legends are made? I think not.

No, don’t bother looking around for me… not that you could, in your condition. I am not on Artidax, but somewhere far away. Still, my powers have increased, so I can see and speak to you just the same. Jaller, Jaller… Vakama had such hopes for you, and look at you now. As a Toa, you make a good statue.

Of course, I should object to what you had planned for my Visorak… you and whoever set the volcano to erupt. But you didn’t know about that, did you? And it would be such a shame to miss “seeing” your expression when you find out the truth…

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Jaller felt a sudden jolt of pain, sharp and agonizing. It cut through the fog caused by Takadox’s hypnosis. In that moment, he awakened, his mind reeling. Someone had been talking to him… but who? What had they said? What had just happened?

There wasn’t time to puzzle it out, not with Nuparu and Hahli in trances and Visorak now closing in. With no other choice, Jaller hurled small fireballs at his two partners, just enough to singe them. As he hoped, the pain shocked them awake.

“Hey!” snapped Nuparu. “What’s the idea?”

“Not dying, that’s the idea,” said Jaller. “We need to get off this island.”

Hahli was already at work, summoning a wall of water to smash into the oncoming Visorak. Jaller threw up a wall of flame to block those coming from behind. Both Toa and Visorak alike froze at the sound of a rumble like thunder, coming from the volcano.

“Uh oh,” said Nuparu. “I may not be the lava fan you are, Jaller, but I know enough about volcanoes to know what that sound means. It’s going to blow!”

“Mata Nui,” whispered Hahli. “Do you think that was why we were supposed to bring the Visorak here? So they could be killed?”

Something was nagging at Jaller, a memory of something he had heard, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. But somehow he knew he was speaking the truth when he said, “Yes. I think someone planned this… and I’m not sure they cared if we got caught in the middle.”

“Our ship is gone!” said Nuparu. A half dozen Visorak moved on them. A shot from his Cordak blaster convinced them to back off.

“Then we swim,” said Jaller.

“To where? We’re in the middle of nowhere,” Nuparu pointed out.

“It’s swim, fry, or be a Visorak’s lunch,” said Jaller. “Take your pick.”

“Did I ever tell you how much I love the water?” said Nuparu. Triggering his elemental power, he churned up the ground in front of the Toa, creating a path temporarily free of Visorak leading to the water.

“Go!” yelled Jaller.

The three broke into a run and dove into the ocean. Behind them, the Visorak milled about for a moment, confused. Their prey was getting away, but the Heart of the Visorak was here. They had to stay where the Heart was, didn’t they?

Out in the water, the Toa were battling their way through more of the Visorak horde, all headed inexorably for the island. Jaller looked over his shoulder. For a moment, he was tempted to destroy the Heart. But that would mean having a horde of Visorak on he and his friends in a moment.

It’s what a Toa should do, he thought. Toa don’t kill, after all… or help someone else do it. But maybe this is a new world – one where you can’t trust your friends or your enemies. Maybe all we can do is try to stay alive.

The Toa were still too close when the Artidax volcano exploded. Hahli grabbed her two friends and pulled them underwater just as flaming chunks of rock started landing all around them. On the beach, the assembled Visorak found themselves too close to the disaster to escape. The horde, which had brought pain and death to so many, now reaped the reward for their acts.

“Now what?” said Nuparu, when the Toa had surfaced again. “We’re a long way from home.”

“We’ll get there, one way or the other,” said Jaller. “And then we’re going to have a little talk with a certain black-armored female and get some answers… or we’re going to start a war of our own.”

* * *

Mazeka grabbed Vezon’s arm and yanked him away from where Makuta Tridax and Tobduk were fighting. “Come on, you fool,” the Matoran said. “You want to get killed?”

“Well…” Vezon said, as if he were seriously debating the question. “Anyway, I want to see the end.”

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“Trust me, there will be plenty of endings to see,” Mazeka said, with some bitterness in his voice. “Everything ends eventually… and sometimes, you’re not sure why.”

“How profound. How deep,” said Vezon. Then he added, “How boring. Who are you and why are you here?”

“I’m here to kill you,” said Mazeka.

“Oh,” brightened Vezon. “I knew there was something about you I liked.”

Tobduk watched the last of the Makuta’s armor dissolve before the protosteel-eating virus. That left just his free floating antidermis to deal with. Meanwhile, the fortress of Destral continued to shake and crumble before the onslaught outside.

“You Makuta,” Tobduk said, shaking his head. “In the end, you’re just wisps of corruption, aren’t you? No substance at all. Not like these Toa you have imprisoned all over the place in this chamber.”

Tobduk looked around. He didn’t recognize the Toa in the cases, but could tell they were somehow – all the same being. “Someone’s been tampering with things best left alone,” he said, in a vaguely sinister, sing-song voice. “I’ve heard enough Turaga tales to know what that leads to.”

The antidermis floating in the middle of the room turned a darker shade of black and green. Tobduk had no doubt the Makuta was trying to mentally attack him… or perhaps even telepathically beg for his life? But with his mental shields up, nothing was getting through. That was okay, though. He hated to hear a grown gas cloud cry.

“I can guess what you’re thinking,” Tobduk said. “With all these Toa here, no one would dare destroy Destral. No one would risk the damage to all those other realities. No one would sacrifice all these lives.”

Tobduk smiled and pulled out a nasty looking staff. Its shaft was inscribed with Matoran symbols and its head was carved in the shape of a doom serpent’s head. “Well, let me tell you something. I used to live on an island to the east of here… just a simple place, where a few of us tried to get by day to day. We had a little Rahi trouble now and then, nothing too serious. That is, until the day a Makuta showed up.

“He had a little experiment he wanted to do. He mixed a little of this, a little of that, and before you knew it… he had a great big spider… and then a lot more. But that wasn’t enough… he had to see what they could do. So he unleashed them on our village… it was over in minutes. When they were done, the Makuta renamed the island Visorak in honor of their pets.”

Tobduk shuddered a little, from the memory. “I made it off the island… a few others did, too… and got to Nynrah, and from there, to Stelt. By the time we made it there, the horror of all I had seen had… changed me. When my new friends took me in, they named me ‘Tobduk,’ which I hear means ‘survivor.’ Their idea of a joke, I guess.”

Tobduk’s eyes gleamed with a mixture of rage and madness. “Cause, you see, I didn’t survive. I don’t even know who I used to be. I’m not who I was… and I’m not what the Order wanted to make me. I am no one.”

A beam of white-hot energy lanced from Tobduk’s staff. It struck the antidermis in midair, incinerating it in a matter of moments. Tobduk didn’t turn the weapon off until every last particle was gone.

“Impressive,” said Mazeka from the doorway.

Tobduk shrugged. “It passes the time. Where’s the other one? He’s a loose Rahi… needs to be contained.”

“He’s dead,” Mazeka lied. He had no idea who Vezon was, but had no reason to murder him either. He decided to let him take his chances with the army outside the gates, slim though those chances might be.

“You owe me,” the Matoran continued. “You said if I helped you, you would tell me how to find the core.”

The fortress was rocked by an explosion. The ceiling of the chamber cracked and rubble began
to fall. “So I did,” said Tobduk, seemingly unconcerned about the destruction all around him. “Very well, Matoran, I will point you in the right direction.”

“What about all these Toa?” asked Mazeka.

“Wrong place, wrong time,” answered Tobduk. “They don’t belong here and we don’t have time to send them all home. They’re casualties of war. You can stay and try to save them if you like, but I’m done here… so I am going. If you want the secret of the core, you’ll come with me.”

Mazeka considered. The lives of a bunch of Toa he didn’t know vs. stopping whatever evil Vultraz had planned. He knew what a Toa would do – risk everything to save the helpless and let the villain escape, maybe putting more lives at risk in the long run. But maybe that was why there were only 50+ Toa left in the universe – and anyway, Mazeka wasn’t one of them.

“Okay,” said the Matoran. “We go.”

When the Matoran and the Order agent had vanished from the chamber, Vezon stepped out of the shadows. Destral was falling to pieces all around him, but he ignored it. His eyes were on all those crystalline cases and the Toa sleeping inside.

He had mocked Makuta Tridax’s “collection” not so long ago. But as the madbeing traced a finger along one of the cases, he couldn’t help but wonder:

*What couldn’t I do with an army of Toa by my side?*
“Eight of us, six of them,” said Pohatu. “I like those odds.”

The Toa, Takanuva, and Toa Ignika were assembled about half a mile from the Codrex. Of the Makuta guarding the structure, only Icarax and Mutran seemed to be missing. The rest were waiting impatiently for the Toa attack they knew would be coming.

“Surprise is out,” said Tahu. “We hit them and hope some of us make it inside. Don’t get tied down by individual fights. And if one of our own falls, keep moving. Don’t stop. This may be our only shot at this.”

“Hold on,” said Kopaka. “They know we’re coming, but not when, so maybe we should announce it. Consider this…”

When Kopaka was finished speaking, the Toa took their positions. Gali had to guide Ignika to his spot and remind him what it was he had to do and when. As the Mask of Life, Ignika had never had to worry about complicated battle plans in the past. That was left to the guardians the mask created for itself.

“All right,” said Tahu. “Let’s soften them up.”

Lewa, Gali, and Takanuva struck first. Combining their powers, the Toa of Air and Water conjured a storm with deafening claps of thunder. At the same time, Takanuva used his light power to create a brilliant, blinding flash.

While the Makuta were still dealing with the assault of sound and light, Tahu used his power to turn one of the massive stalactites red hot. As soon as it glowed crimson, Pohatu brought it down in a rain of rubble on the assembled Makuta. Those who tried to fly out of the way were grabbed by hands of earth created by Onua and pulled down.

Now it was Kopaka’s turn. He knew well the resistance to cold each Makuta had. But now he combined subzero chill with Toa Ignika’s weakening of the Makuta’s life force. The enemy was slowed, but not yet out.

“Go!” yelled Kopaka. All eight Toa shot forward, protected by Tahu’s Mask of Shielding, elemental powers blasting in every direction. From the ground, Gorast fired a bolt of molecular disruption, shattering the Toa’s shield.

“Separate!” ordered Tahu. The Toa immediately peeled off from their formation, each coming toward the Codrex from a different direction and peppering the Makuta with elemental energy. The Makuta fought back with chain lightning, heat vision, and sonic attack. Onua was the first to go down, hit by Bitil’s power scream.

Seeing the Toa of Earth fall from the sky, Gali swerved toward him. She caught him just before he hit the swamp, then struggled to regain altitude while dodging cyclones created by Antroz. “Save yourself!” Onua shouted over the wind. “Those were Tahu’s orders!”

“Sorry, brother,” Gali said, smiling. “I can’t hear you over this big breeze.”
The way ahead was littered with molten rock, tornadoes, lightning bolts, Matoran of Light locked in combat with Matoran of Shadow, and Makuta pursuing Toa. Gali dodged the cyclones much as she had once dodged water-spouts beneath the endless sea, her eyes locked on the Codrex.

Up ahead, Gorast had caught up to Toa Ignika and slashed deep into his armor. Ignika turned in midair and regarded her as if she were some interesting new form of creature he had found under a rock. Then he casually waved a hand in her direction. In response, the molten rock assembled itself into a giant, its flaming eyes fixed on Gorast. Even as the Makuta used her shattering power to reduce it to fragments, the giant caught her with a backhanded blow that sent the Makuta flying.

With the immediate threat dealt with, Ignika glanced down at his damaged armor. Employing only a minor surge of power, he repaired the armor. Then he glanced at the fallen Gorast, with an almost childlike rage. She had tried to harm him. If she so much as moved, he would do far worse to her.

“Tao-brother!” Lewa yelled, grabbing Ignika’s arm.

Ignika turned to look at him. Was this another attack? No, this was the green one. Ignika liked green; it was the color of plant life. “What do you want?” he said, haltingly.

“We have to go!” Lewa replied, pulling Ignika along. “Now, while they’re scattered!”

Tahu slammed the keystone into place, dropping the field around the Codrex. “Come on!” he yelled as loud as he could. The other Toa rocketed toward his voice. A door opened in the spherical structure, and the heroes stormed inside. When they were safely in, Tahu retrieved the keystone and darted in himself, even as the field re-established itself.

“Seal the door!” the Toa of Fire shouted. But the door had already sealed itself. Through a small window that formed in the door, they could see the Makuta circling the Codrex like hungry kaviniaka after a kill.

“What now?” asked Takanuva.

“Well, first we –” began Pohatu. He stopped when he realized he had to look up to see the Toa of Light. “Hey! When did you get bigger?”

“Fascinating,” said Kopaka, eyeing Takanuva, who was now several inches taller than anyone else in the room. “It’s similar to the way the Matoran of Light are taller than any others we have known. Perhaps it’s this place, the energies of it, working on their unique systems.”

Normally, Onua would have been in the middle of this conversation, but something was nagging at him. He walked slowly around the interior of the Codrex, looking at everything. When he turned back to the group, he sounded mystified and puzzled. “I know this place… why do I know this place?”

Now that he had mentioned it, the others felt it, too – a sense that they had stood inside the Codrex before, but no clear memory of when it had been or why. Lewa looked the most uneasy.

“I seem to remember fighting here, arguing,” he said. “And then… it’s all a blank.”

“Maybe this is the answer,” said Kopaka. He was pointing at six empty slots that, from their shape, must have once held large, cylindrical objects. “Just about the right size for Toa canisters, wouldn’t you say?”

“You mean…?” began Gali.

“This is the place!” said Pohatu, stunned. “This is where we came from!”

When the Toa had first emerged on the shores of the island of Mata Nui a year before, they had come out of vehicles called Toa canisters. Their memories were largely a blank. They knew instinctively they had been in the canisters a very long time, but they had no idea where they had been before the island they now saw before them. Their pasts had been a mystery. Now part of that mystery had been solved.

“We all felt as if we had seen Karda Nui before,” said Kopaka. “Now we know why. At some point in the past, we came here and entered the Codrex. Then we climbed into Toa canisters to wait until we were needed.”

Silence fell on the chamber for a few moments. It was Tahu who finally broke the mood. “We don’t have time for memories,” he said. “When this is over, maybe we can sort it all out. For now, we have a job to do.”
The interior of the Codrex was dominated by complex machinery. Tahu doubted that even a skilled inventor like Nuparu would be able to make sense of any of it. But the keystones had given clear direction on what they had to accomplish here. Onua walked to the bank of machines on the far left and ran his hand across a panel. It flared to life, and as it did so, the Toa Nuva heard a harsh rumble.

Before the startled eyes of the Toa, the section of floor that had once held their canisters began to descend. As it did, it revealed a vast sublevel the heroes had never dreamed existed in the Codrex. Slowly and silently, the segment settled into place far below. The moment it did so, six huge lightstones rose out of its surface, one by where each canister had once rested, forming a circle.

Using their flying abilities, the Toa descended through the hole to investigate. So caught up were they in this new discovery that none of them realized they had company: Antroz, hidden by his chameleon power and following the sounds of the Toa's voices and movement. He had left Radiak behind, since his ability to disguise his presence would not extend to the Matoran. That left him vulnerable, but right now, he didn't care. He sensed an amazing source of power down below, and he was going to find it.

The chamber was laid out like a huge wheel, with the lightstone ring in the center and three spokes leading off it. The Toa landed on those spokes and then moved in different directions to explore. Pohatu reached the wide end of a spoke first. As soon as his armored foot touched a certain plate in the floor, there was a sound of machinery humming. The next instant, Pohatu was looking at a metallic cocoon that had abruptly locked into place beside him, with sound and light coming through cracks in its shell. When it withdrew, it left in its place an impressively large crimson air vehicle, looking as new as if it had been assembled the day before. It was a technological marvel, practically radiating power even while sitting still. It bristled with weaponry and the advanced engine and sleek lines hinted at enormous speed.

Pohatu turned to see that Lewa and Kopaka had made similar discoveries. Of the other two vehicles, one was green and the other blue. Lewa, in particular, was delighted at the find. Tahu was more interested in the ring of lightstones, which had been mentioned in the keystone inscriptions.

"Okay, we may have been here before," said Lewa, smiling. "But we never saw those. I would have ever-remembered."

Gali crouched down and read the inscriptions carved beneath the vehicles. "Axalara T9... Jetrax T6... Rockoh T3. None of those names mean anything to me. How about the rest of you?"

"Why hide things like that in here?" wondered Onua. "Were we supposed to use them somehow?"

"Look at the weapons," marveled Lewa. "Those are for fighting!"

"Could be," agreed Pohatu. "Or maybe escape, if everything goes real wrong."

Kopaka gave a sharp laugh. "If 'everything goes real wrong,' brother, there won't be anywhere to escape to."

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva's journal...

I expected shock or anger or even panic at my news. I should have known better. "Then we'll just have to move fast," said Tahu. "We need to get into the Codrex. So we hit the Makuta hard and hope some of us make it inside. This may be our only shot at this."

I didn't have time to ask what a Codrex was before we were in the air and in combat with the Makuta. Lewa and Gali combined their powers to call down a raging thunderstorm while I struck with my light powers. The Makuta started to give way, and that's when I saw it through the mist—a great spherical structure, half-buried in the tip of a fallen stalactite, and looking like it had been here forever and was at the same time totally alien to this place. That, I realized, was a Codrex.

We forced our way inside the Codrex, using the keystones to get us past a force barrier around it. Once inside, the Toa stopped short. This place, they realized, was where they had been for almost 100,000 years,
sleeping in their canisters, waiting for the time they would be needed. I noticed that Tahu looked uncomfortable, but having only been a Toa such a short time, I didn’t feel right asking him what was wrong.

Onua started examining some of the machinery in the chamber. He must have hit something, because the floor in the center of the room started to descend. Curious, we peered down into the darkness to see what waited below…

* * *

With great effort, Icarax had made his way down to the swamp. No doubt by now Toa Ignika had found the Nuva and warned them of the imminent destruction of everything. He wondered how they had reacted. Fear? Hesitation? Or a fierce determination to keep fighting? Probably the last, he decided. Toa were just stupid enough for that.

Down below, he could see Vamprah, Chirox, Gorast, and Bitil surrounding the Codrex. To anyone else, it would have looked like they were putting their all into breaking through the energy field that surrounded the structure. Icarax knew better. They wanted to get in, that was true, but when the time was right, not before. Thanks to the grand Plan of Makuta Teridax, the Brotherhood’s leader, the proud Makuta had been reduced to timekeepers.

He was surprised to see Krika hovering in the air, not far from the Codrex but not close enough to be part of the effort to break in. Icarax had never particularly liked Krika, seeing him as another Makuta who spent more time thinking than doing. But with the Plan so close to success, Icarax didn’t have the luxury of choosing his allies.

“They will never get in there in time, you know,” he said as he approached the ghostly figure.

“In time for what?” replied Krika.

“To stop them from waking up Mata Nui, of course,” said Icarax. “The Toa are about to undo the only part of this Plan that ever made any sense, while we stand around and do nothing about it.”

Krika shot an irritated glance at his companion. Everyone knew Icarax wanted to be leader of the Brotherhood, and achieving that meant proving he had a better plan than the current leader. Unfortunately, Icarax’s plans were about as subtle as an axe to the head and only half as interesting. “And what is it you expect to do about it?”

“I expect us to act,” Icarax snapped. “You know what will happen if the Toa wake up the Great Spirit. There will be no turning back then. We have to strike while his body still sleeps – we have to destroy the Codrex and the Toa with it!”

Krika was tempted to reject the suggestion completely, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Hadn’t he been hovering here, thinking much the same thing? The Toa were inside the structure; it was just a matter of time now. And once the Toa achieved their destiny, well, Great Beings help the world that would result from their actions.

“All right,” Krika said. “Speak. I will listen.”

Icarax’s plan was daring, bold, and naturally, incredibly risky for someone other than him. The energy field around the Codrex had to be brought down. A joint attack by multiple Makuta could do it, but that wasn’t going to happen, at least not in time. That was where Krika came in.

The field had been designed by the Great Beings to repel known forces. But Krika’s powers were the result of a mutation, something that couldn’t be foreseen. As he descended in his ghostly form toward the Codrex, he remembered Icarax’s final words.

“I will be surprised if you survive.” Icarax had said, his tone suggesting it wouldn’t be an altogether pleasant surprise. “But if you do not, at least you are dying in battle. Can anyone ask for more?”

Krika descended as rapidly as he could toward the Codrex. He could see Bitil pointing toward him. If the other Makuta guessed what he was about to do, they would try to stop him. He wasn’t going to let that happen. Icarax was right: This was the last chance to prevent disaster.
Steeling himself, he reduced his mass as much as he possibly could. This was the crucial moment. Would the field simply repel him like it did everything else? Or would his form be ghostly enough to pass at least part of the way in?

The tip of his foreleg struck the field... and made it through! Krika pushed forward, but each succeeding moment made the going harder. The field was adjusting to block him. It felt like he was trying to swim through thick mud.

When he was about halfway through, all progress was stopped. He knew he was about an instant away from being ejected from the field. The time to act was now. Willing himself to become solid, he materialized in the energy field. The pain was excruciating as the defensive shield threatened to tear him apart. Sparks flew in every direction and the only question was, which would die first – Krika or the field?

“Krika has betrayed us,” said Gorast, biting off her words. “He knew when we were to pierce the field. He is trying to sabotage the Plan!”

“Then stop him!” raged Bitil.

She was already in the air with Vamprah beside her. “It’s already too late,” Gorast said. “But we can have our revenge.”

Inside the Codrex, the Toa felt a jolt of energy as the field disintegrated. “Something’s disrupted it,” said Onua. “It’s going to come down."

“And they’re going to come in,” added Pohatu.

“Not if we go out there first,” said Kopaka, nodding toward the three vehicles.

Lewa smiled. “I like it. I like it.”

The disruption and destruction of the field was complete. Unable to eject an object partway through its substance – Krika – the field’s energy fed back on itself. The device in the Codrex that had created the protective shield overloaded. With a blinding flash and an explosion of pure force, the field came down.

So did Krika. He fell a long way, too stunned to turn intangible, and so hit the ground hard. He ended up almost completely buried in the mud. When he had shaken himself out of his daze and crawled back to the surface, he expected to see Gorast or one of the other Makuta standing over him, ready to strike. But there was no one there.

A glance upward revealed the reason why. Gorast and Vamprah were closing in on Icarax. Their target hadn’t noticed yet, though – he was too busy destroying the Codrex.
Toa Helryx, leader of the Order of Mata Nui, picked her way across the remains of a battlefield. She was on the beach of the island of Nynrah, site of a struggle between the Brotherhood of Makuta and the Order. After a long and furious battle, the Order had won – driving the Brotherhood forces from the island or crushing them on the beach. Now she wandered the sands, occasionally picking up a piece of Rahkshi armor, studying it for a moment and then discarding it.

There was a method to her madness. Using her mask of power, Helryx could read the past of an object simply by touching it. Her goal here was simple. Rahkshi were created using a powerful substance called energized protodermis. The Order wanted to know every source of that substance used by the Makuta so they could capture or destroy those sources. Without them, no new Rahkshi could come into being.

So far, all the ones she had identified here were sources the Order already knew about. Still, it was worth the effort. It would be far easier to defeat the Brotherhood by cutting off their source of power, rather than beating them in battle.

She picked up a piece of crimson Rahkshi armor and called on the power of her mask. This time, she saw a place she did not recognize: Makuta Chirox was there, and a silvery pool, but not just any pool – no, this one had a figure emerging from it, a being actually made of energized protodermis. She concentrated hard and the location came to her: an island just north of the one her newest ally came from.

Helryx dropped the piece of armor and turned to Keetongu. The Rahi had reluctantly agreed to break off his efforts to save the victims of Visorak long enough to help in the war. In return, Helryx had promised him the Visorak would never again be a threat to anyone else.

“We have to go,” she said. “There’s another source.”

It was a short journey. Their destination at first seemed uninhabited, but that illusion didn’t last long. Helryx spotted… things skulking among the rocks. They weren’t Matoran or Rahi, but looked like something in between. The overall feeling was that something was very wrong here. The air, the ground, the inhabitants all felt – off somehow, in a way that obviously made Keetongu uneasy. There were no buildings on the island… none left standing, anyway. The most prominent feature was a large cave. Helryx and Keetongu entered cautiously. The passage narrowed considerably once they were a little ways in, forcing them to crawl to make any forward progress. Helryx couldn’t help but think how easy it would be to get trapped in here.

As the passage widened again, Helryx saw more creatures. These obviously were Rahi beasts, but not like anything she’d seen before. They were short, pale bipeds, with large yellow eyes and spindly arms and legs. They backed away and moved to the side as she and her ally passed. But as soon as the two had moved on, they assembled into a group and followed close behind.

Helryx and Keetongu came to a huge chamber. In the center of it was not a pool of energized protodermis, but an actual lake of the stuff. And rising from the center was the figure of a living being: a
head, two arms, a torso ending in the lake itself. Its features were barely there, and its substance was the silver color of energized protodermis.

The sight triggered a memory. An agent on Metru Nui had reported that Turaga Vakama had once mentioned an ‘Energized Protodermis Entity’ his team had fought when they were Toa Metru. Could this be the same being?

“I have been expecting you,” said the figure. “I have felt your kind at work in my pools throughout this universe. Destructive, but ultimately futile. Cap one source of my substance and it will emerge somewhere else.”

“Then we will destroy it there, too,” Helryx answered. “What are you?”

“I am creation and destruction,” the Entity answered. “I am the power to transform and to destroy. I am every drop of energized protodermis that exists, and every drop is me. I am as far beyond you, creature of armor and tissue, as you are beyond an insect.”

“And your purpose here?” asked Helryx.

“I did not choose to come here,” the Entity replied. “I lived in the core of a planet, until one day a portion of my substance forced its way to the surface. It did not take long for the inhabitants of that world to discover my power – or to begin warring over it. But some of what makes up my form was taken and placed inside this universe, and so escaped before cataclysm overtook that world.”

“And now?” said Helryx.

“Now I experiment on the creatures and things I find around me,” said the Entity. “I have even let others make use of my power, if I found their intentions intriguing enough.”

“You have helped create beings that have brought terror and death to thousands,” said Helryx. “It has to stop.”

“Is a weapon responsible for the actions of the one who wields it?” asked the Entity.

“Perhaps not,” said Helryx. “But a weapon can be broken, and so never used again.”

A soft sound that might have been laughter escaped from the entity.

“Have I met your kind before – so confident in your power to contain me, control me, or destroy me. You are no more than Stone Apes reaching for the stars, believing you could extinguish them if only you could get them in your grasp.”

The lake began to boil and churn. A huge wave of energized protodermis rose up behind the Entity, so wide it spanned the whole chamber, and began to speed across the surface towards Helryx and Keetongu.

“Transformation… or destruction,” said the Entity. “Which will be your fate? Let us find out together.”

* * *

The Toa Hagah had, in their time, gone through some pretty bad days. Finding out the Makuta they had been chosen to protect was a traitor who intended harm to the Matoran; getting turned into Rahaga by the power of evil Roodaka; getting attacked by a Toa Hordika gone bad in Metru Nui – all of those were pretty high up on the “bad day” scale.

But nothing quite compared to being magnetized to the walls of an underground tunnel while molten protodermis surged toward you and searing death was only a handful of seconds away. That was in a class by itself.

“Anyone got any great ideas?” asked Iruini.

No one answered.

“Then how about last words?”

The hissing sound of the protodermis as it drew closer was suddenly drowned out by the sound of smashing stone and tearing metal. Rock and dust rained down from above. The Hagah looked up to see a huge hole had been torn in the tunnel ceiling. Looking down at them through it was what looked like a giant reptilian creature.
“And what have we here?” the being rumbled. “Six Toa and their fish tank in danger?”
“It talks,” said Bomonga.
“I don’t care if it sings, dances, and can juggle Kanohi blindfolded,” said Iruini. “Can it get us out of here?”
The great beast nodded. “I can. I will… at least until I find out who you are. If I am not satisfied with the answer, then I will throw you back.”
There was a moment of terrible vertigo and complete disorientation. The next thing the Hagah knew, they were in another part of the tunnel. The beast was with them, though noticeably smaller in size. Also present was the water tank containing Zaktan.
“Now – by the right of salvage, I ask who you are, who you were before, and why you are here,” said the beast.
As swiftly as possible, Toa Norik explained the history of the Toa Hagah and then their mission in the tunnels. He left out any mention of Toa Helryx or the Order of Mata Nui. The beast listened, nodding occasionally, and when he was finished, it smiled.
“So the Makuta saw the need of protection, one day in the distant past? How… amusing. I am a Makuta as well – my name is Miserix – no doubt you have not heard of me, for which we can thank our mutual enemy, Teridax.”
Bomonga and Kualus were immediately ready to fight, but Norik gestured for them to hold back. Whoever this Miserix was, he had saved them.
“Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but how did you find us… and how did you save us?” asked Iruini.
“Ah, just like a Toa,” said Miserix. “Always assuming the universe revolves around you. I had no idea you were here. I was seeking Teridax. As for how I prevented your premature melting, teleportation – a minor, if useful, talent.”
“What makes you think Teridax is down here?” asked Toa Pouks. The others knew Pouks was just buying time. His mask was analyzing and copying Miserix’s power, but that took a while to do.
“I could say I smelled his stench,” said Miserix. “But the truth is, I found a Makuta who preferred talking to being shredded by my claws. He pointed me in the right direction… and in return, I did not tear him apart. He was quite intact when I absorbed him into my body. And by the way…”
Miserix lashed out, knocking Pouks against a wall. The Toa’s mask flew off.
“I dislike being… imitated,” the Makuta growled.
Gaaki helped Pouks to his feet and retrieved his mask for him. “So what now?” said the Toa of Water.
“Now?” said Miserix. “Now we best Teridax in his lair. Enough time has been wasted on that pretender to power.”
Miserix turned and walked away. If he was worried that the Toa Hagah would not follow, or that they would attack him from behind, he showed no sign of it. In truth, he was concerned about neither. If they didn’t come along, it mattered not a bit to him. If they attacked, he would kill them all.
They followed.
“He’s a Makuta,” Zaktan said, in a harsh whisper. “Your sworn enemy! Why don’t you kill him?”
“You’re a Piraka,” replied Pouks. “Also our sworn enemy. Why don’t we kill you? Because we need you, serpent – and we may well need him too.”
After what felt like hours of travel, the tunnel at last came to a stop. It ended in a mid-sized chamber, lined with sophisticated machinery. But that wasn’t what captured the attention of the Hagah. No, they were focused on the two corpses in the room.
Kualus was the first to check over the still, armored forms. Bomonga joined him. After a few moments, the Toa of Earth said, “They have been dead many, many thousands of years. They look something like Toa… as you can see, one is in red armor, one in green… and they wear masks, as we do. But there’s something… different. Maybe a lot of things.”
Miserix extended a claw and scraped a piece off the armor of one of the bodies. He examined it
carefully. “Fascinating. This armor is not made of protodermis. I would guess nothing about them is, from their organic tissue to their masks. Yet all things are made of protodermis. If they are not, that can only mean—”

“That they’re not from around here,” finished Norik. “But what were they doing here, miles beneath Metru Nui? How did they die? And what is this place?”

Before Miserix could answer, there was a crackle of ozone. The group turned to see a hole forming in space behind them. Within the hole, they could see nothing but darkness at first… then the vague outline of figures coming toward them from the void.

“I believe we are about to have company,” said Miserix. “Perhaps, Hagah, we will get to see just how effective you are at ‘protecting’ a Makuta, after all.”
For the first time since his killing of Botar, that teleporting tool of the Toa, Icarax was having a
good time.

He had savored the sight of the energy field collapsing and allowed himself a moment to decide just how best to destroy the Codrex and the Toa inside. With that done, Mata Nui could never be awakened and the great Plan of Makuta Teridax would die a quick death. He finally settled on the direct approach: a surge of gravity to crush the structure and its occupants like a madu fruit.

The metal of the Codrex was already starting to buckle with a most satisfying crunching sound. He could imagine the panicked Toa inside, frantically using their powers to try to stave off doom. That might even work for a while, but eventually the power of a Makuta would be too much for them.

*And then, oh, and then, Mata Nui will sleep forever. Makuta Teridax will be blocked, his grand plan in tatters. If the Brotherhood still wishes for universal domination, they will have to do it my way – with thunder and protosteel.*

Icarax increased the output of force. He was impatient to see the Codrex flattened and the matter of Teridax’s leadership settled once and for all. He would be a just ruler, a fair ruler – only a handful of Makuta would have to die horribly for their loyalty to the fallen Teridax. Mounting their Kanohi masks on poles around the fortress of Destral would serve as a warning to anyone else that might show poor judgment in the future.

*And speaking of fools, thought Icarax. He had caught the approach of Vamprah and Gorast out of the corner of his eye. This, he decided, was going to be fun.*

While not panicked, the Toa Nuva and Takanuva were certainly worried. The roof and walls above were starting to cave in.

There was no need to talk. They knew what they had to do. Onua, Pohatu, and Kopaka created pillars of earth, stone, and ice to try to brace the roof. Lewa increased the air pressure along the sides of the chamber in an effort to force the walls back into shape.

“It’s not working!” said Pohatu. “We need to think of something else!”

“We have to take the vehicles and get out there,” Kopaka said to Tahu. “It’s the only way. Maybe we can buy enough time.”

Tahu looked into the eyes of the Toa of Ice, with whom he had frequently clashed over the past year. He saw the determination in them and knew he couldn’t talk Kopaka out of his plan. “I’ll go, too,” said the Toa of Fire.

“No,” said Kopaka. “If this doesn’t work, you will need to think of something else.” He turned to the other Toa. “Who wants to go for a ride?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” answered Lewa. “If I gave up a chance to fly-ride one of these beauties, Turaga Matau would never forgive me.”

“I’ll go,” offered Pohatu. “I’m no use in here. Besides, this place gives me the creeps.”
Lewa was already climbing into the cockpit of the largest craft, the red Axalara T9. “One question. How do we get these things out of here?”

“Well, this button says, ‘Launch,’” said Pohatu, seated in the Rockoh T3. “Maybe the wall opens or something.”

“Then we’d better go while there still is a wall,” said Kopaka.

Before the question could be debated further, the figure of Antroz suddenly appeared, descending from the upper level. Following the sound of Kopaka’s voice and the power radiating from the Jetrax T6 that the Toa of Ice stood near, Antroz headed for the cockpit of that vehicle. He landed at the controls, and the instant he did so, beams of force shot from the console and into his mask. Suddenly, he felt at one with the ship. He could see what its scanners could see, react as fast as the ship’s systems could do.

With a shout of triumph, he launched the Jetrax. It surged forward, brushing against one of the lightstones as it did so. A spark flared, sending energy coursing through the ship and making its armor glow yellow. Then the Jetrax shot straight up through the hole leading to the upper level and right for the solid ceiling.

Just as it was about to strike that barrier, the vehicle and its pilot shifted out of phase, becoming ghostly in appearance. The next instant, Antroz and the Jetrax T6 passed unharmed through the ceiling. Antroz found himself in a bizarre series of metallic tunnels that wound and twisted for an impossible distance. His link to the ship made navigation easy, but he wondered just where these tunnels would lead to. Those questions were cut off by the discovery that Lewa and Pohatu were in pursuit, the Toa of Air in the Axalara T9 and the Toa of Stone in the Rockoh T3. Antroz laughed – they would catch him, all right, but they might not be very glad they did.

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

We barely had time to marvel at the vehicles we discovered in the depths of the Codrex – for there were three – before disaster happened. A red armoured Makuta suddenly appeared in the cockpit of the Jetrax T6. Before we could react, he had flown off! Pohatu and Lewa wasted no time in leaping into the Axalara T9 and Rockoh T3 and heading off in pursuit, leaving the rest of us to wonder what would happen next.

* * *

Back in the Codrex, there wasn’t time to be shocked over what had just happened. The force of gravity still threatened the structure. The pillars created by the Toa were shattering. And they had barely begun the process of awakening Mata Nui. But Takanuva’s thoughts were elsewhere.

“I have to go out there,” he said quietly.

“We need you here,” Gali answered. “If the Makuta should break in –”

“The Makuta need to pay for what they’ve done!” Takanuva suddenly raged. “‘Destroying Ta-Koro... killing Toa Lhikan, and who knows how many others... corrupting innocent Matoran... they need to be crushed! And I have the power to do it – with my light energy, I can shred their armor and incinerate their energies!’”

It was Tahu who grabbed Takanuva and spun him around. “Listen to yourself!” the Toa of Fire said. “Lost in fury, steeped in violence... you sound like a Makuta.”

Takanuva shuddered. He knew Tahu was right. Ever since the attack of the shadow leech on Metru Nui, he had been fighting against the dark side of himself. Now it seemed like he was losing.

“All the more reason for me to leave,” he said. “What if I lose control in here, with all of you? And there’s more... I put two and two together, Tahu. I know I had to have been a Matoran of Light once, long before I ever lived on Metru Nui. Otherwise, I couldn’t have become a Toa of Light. I don’t know what happened or how I was made to forget that, but those are my people out there.”
Tahu nodded. He knew he would have said the same thing if there were Matoran of Fire outside the walls of the Codrex.

“If they are out there when that energy storm hits, they are all dead,” Takanuva continued. “I won’t – I can’t – let that happen. I have to find a way to get them out of Karda Nui.”

“You’ll never make it,” said Gali. “The Makuta will destroy you before you’re six steps from the Codrex.”

“Oh no,” said Takanuva, with a grim smile. He held out his hands, one crackling with light energy, the other with shadow. “Trust me – they’ve never seen anything like me before.”

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

I knew I had to go back into the swamp. In the moments after Pohatu and Lewa left, I found myself filled with rage. The Makuta had to pay for what they had done, both here and in the rest of the universe. I existed to destroy them – I knew that now. More, I knew that at some point I must have been a Matoran of Light (even if, for some reason, I didn’t remember being one). That meant those people were my people out there, fighting for their freedom. Although Tahu and Gali tried to talk me out of it, I left the Codrex and headed back to the fight.

* * *

The three vehicles had emerged from the Codrex into Karda Nui.

“Look out, Brotherhood of Bats and Bugs!” shouted Lewa, knifing through the air in pursuit of Antroz. “Here comes Lewa, king of the sky!”

Lights began to dance in Lewa’s eyes. It took him a moment to realize that his mask had changed shape again, and the points of light he saw represented Makuta in flight. His Kanohi now had a built in scanner feature, and that was not good news for his enemies.

Lewa spotted Bitil moving to intercept. The Toa of Air flipped a red lever on the cockpit console. The side panels of the ship dropped down, revealing two Midak Skyblasters. Lewa veered right and dove toward, firing light spheres at the Makuta. Bitil immediately summoned duplicates of himself from his past in an effort to outnumber and overwhelm the Toa.

“Yeah, I heard about that quick-trick you do,” Lewa yelled down at the crowd of Bitils. “You know, making doubles of yourself. Go ahead, I won’t worry-mind – just gives me more targets!”

As it turned out, Lewa had laughed a little too soon. Half the Bitils unleashed magnetic power that pinned the Axalara in place, while the other used laser vision to start shearing the vehicle’s armor off.

Lewa’s air power was enough to blow some of the Makuta away, but the rest hung on and pressed their attack.

Pohatu saw what was happening. Steering his craft toward the battle, he rammed the Rockoh into the mob of identical Lewa, scattering them like pebbles in a rockslide.

Antroz had slowed the Jetrax to see what had happened to his pursuers. He was so engrossed in the battle that he did not realize until it was too late that Radiak had climbed on board the vehicle.

“What do you want?” Antroz snarled.

“To help,” answered Radiak. “To aid you in destroying the Toa Nuva and seeing the great Plan succeed.”

Antroz frowned. The process of corrupting these Matoran had worked well, but at times their parroting of trite Brotherhood phrases grew tiresome. “Does it appear I need your help?”

Radiak looked confused. “But… but your sight… I mean… you said we would go into battle together…”

“I no longer need you to be my eyes,” said Antroz, hurling him out of the ship. “You’re just excess baggage now.”
Kopaka, newly emerged from the Codrex, spotted Radiak falling. He knew from Onua what happened to anyone who fell into the waters of the swamp, how they were mutated and twisted by that murk. So he never hesitated, soaring to catch the shadow Matoran before he hit the swamp.

There was a sudden burst of light from the direction of the Codrex. Then Takanuva was flying toward Kopaka, dodging bolts of shadow as he came. The Matoran Photok, Solek, and Tanma were right behind him. “I’ll take care of the villager,” Takanuva said. “You go after your ship.”

“Take care of me?” laughed Radiak darkly. “You can’t even take care of yourself! Toa of Light, hah! You look more like a Toa of Twilight to me.”

“Shut up, Radiak,” Tanma said. “That isn’t you talking – it’s what the shadow leech did to you.”

“And I like it,” Radiak said, with a sickening smile.

“Enough,” said Takanuva. “This is my job, Kopaka. Go and do yours.”

*     *     *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

Kopaka had preceded me out. I caught up to him as he was pursuing the Jetrax and tangling with Radiak. I offered to deal with the shadow Matoran so he could go after the vehicle. Radiak jibed at me, calling me a “Toa of Twilight.” I had to fight down an urge to show him just how much light power I still had. But seeing him reminded me of something else—that he wasn’t a shadow Matoran by choice. He had been corrupted by the Makuta, and it was up to me to find some way to save him and the others. More, I had to get them out of Karda Nui before the energy storm hit.

*     *     *

Inside the Codrex, Gali, Onua, and Tahu labored as Toa Ignika watched, puzzled. What they were trying to achieve was not, in itself, enormously difficult. According to what was inscribed on the keystones, the presence of a Toa would send multiple pulses of energy through the lightstones to awaken Mata Nui. Each one had to be progressively stronger, acting like a jolt to the Great Spirit’s system. With luck, they would shock him awake.

There were problems, though. For one thing, there was no telling what would happen to a Toa in the middle of all that. Plus, sending one pulse after another took time, and time was in short supply.

“There has to be a faster way,” said Tahu.

Onua nodded. “I’ve been doing some math. Ignika says when his mask goes from silver to black, we’re all doomed. At the rate it’s changing, we won’t make it in time.”

Gali glanced at Tahu. His eyes were narrowed and there was a gleam in them she recognized all too well. It usually meant he was about to suggest something incredibly dangerous and utterly insane. He didn’t disappoint her. “Then we need to do it all at once – one massive jolt.”

“That would wake him up,” Onua agreed. Then he added, quietly, “Or kill him.”

Gali looked again at the lightstones. “Impossible,” she said. “We’ll blow up all this and the Codrex and maybe all of Karda Nui.”

“If we build up the power through the lightstones, yes,” Tahu said. “But what if we had another source? Something so incredible it could feed all the energy we need into this system, all at once?”

“Sure,” said Onua. “But where are we going to find something like… that…” Onua’s voice trailed off. He turned to look at Toa Ignika. Tahu and Gali were already doing the same.

“Come here, brother,” Tahu said to Ignika. “We need to have a little talk.”
Takanuva held tight to the struggling Radiak as he flew. He had no idea how he was going to get the Matoran out of Karda Nui safely, let alone how he would convince all the shadow Matoran to come. But it hadn’t been so very long ago that he was one of them, just a villager doing his job (well, sometimes) and trying to survive in a dangerous world. When the Toa came to the island of Mata Nui, he looked up to them as heroes just as the other villagers did. Now it was time for him to be a hero for these Matoran.

He was so lost in thought that he didn’t spot Vican until Photok called out. Takanuva fired a warning burst of light at the flying figure, followed by one of shadow. Vican stopped and hovered in the air.

“Are you… are you a Toa?” the Matoran asked. He sounded like someone waking up from a dream. “Yes, you must be. Please, you have to listen to me! Something’s happened!”

Takanuva hesitated. This certainly didn’t look like a Matoran of Light, or any other kind, not with the wings and claws. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“My name is Vican,” the flying figure said. “I was… I am… a Le-Matoran. I worked for Makuta Mutran… he was making a Rahi, and it attacked me… and now… I don’t feel like myself. Or rather, I do, but like the old me, not the new me.”

“Slow down,” snapped Takanuva. “You’re not making sense.”

“He never did,” grumbled Radiak.

“I hate to agree with Radiak,” said Solek. “But I wouldn’t trust him. He’s one of them.”

“No! Mutran used a shadow leech on me, before we came here,” Vican explained, talking so fast his words tumbled over each other. “It changed me, how I felt, how I looked at the world. All I cared about was darkness and destruction… the things I helped Mutran do and create… Mata Nui forgive me.”

For a moment, Vican was too choked with emotion to go on. When he had recovered himself, he continued. “After the Rahi attack, suddenly I realized how far into the darkness I fell. I saw myself for what I became and it made me sick. But I’m not that twisted thing anymore – I’m not! You have to believe me.”

Radiak chuckled. “Nice one. I’ll have to remember this trick after I get free from ol’ Twilight here.”

“It’s no trick!” insisted Vican.

“We’ve seen this before,” said Tanma. “Shadow Matoran coming back, playing on our feelings, trying to win our trust so they can trap us. I know what to do with his kind. Let me –”

Takanuva made a sharp gesture to cut Tanma off. He was remembering how a shadow leech attacked him on Metru Nui, leaving him half in light, half in shadow. If what this Vican was saying was true, then there might be a way to undo what the leech did, not only for himself but for the shadow Matoran as well.

“Where is this Rahi now?” Takanuva asked.

“Don’t tell me you believe him?” said Photok.

“Answer the question,” Takanuva persisted.
“It flew off to the east, then headed up to the clouds,” Vican replied. “I was chasing it.”
“All right,” said the Toa. “Now we are chasing it.”

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal...

I had managed to collect Photok, Solek, and Tanma, and together we dragged a struggling Radiak through the sky. I had no idea how I was going to accomplish my task. But I knew I had to try. As a Matoran, I had looked up to the Toa and dreamed of being like them. Now I was, and it was time to live up to being a hero. I was still lost in thought when I heard Photok cry out, and looked up to see a shadow Matoran flying right toward me!

That was when things got really strange. The Shadow Matoran, whose name was Vican, insisted that he was no longer a slave of the Makuta. He said a Rahi’s attack had shattered the hold Shadow had over him. The other Matoran told me not to believe him, but something in Vican’s eyes, his voice, made me wonder. I knew what it was like to be attacked by a shadow leach, as Vican claimed he once had been, if what he was saying was true now, then maybe there was a way to cure the Shadow Matoran of Karda Nui. It was a chance I had to take.

* * *

Icarax couldn’t help but laugh. Only two Makuta dispatched to stop him, and one of them blinded and relying on a Matoran to be his eyes? If he wasn’t so amused, he would have been insulted.
Vamprah was no problem, of course. Icarax hurled a bolt of shadow energy to the Makuta’s left. When Vamprah veered right to dodge, he moved right into the path of a blast of laser vision. It hit its target – not Vamprah, but Gavla. She toppled off the Makuta’s back.
Icarax smiled at Vamprah’s reaction. The bat-like Makuta had been blinded days ago. He was able to see thanks to a telepathic link with Gavla, activated whenever the two were in physical contact. With Gavla now falling to her death, Vamprah was truly blind.
Vamprah hurled a sonic blast in the direction of Icarax’s voice. The energy knocked Icarax back, but did no real damage.
“So the bat has fangs, does it?” Icarax said. “When I run the Brotherhood, we will have to see about pulling them.”
“You will never lead!” The harsh words came from an angry Gorast. She had rescued Gavla and deposited the shadow Matoran on a mud bank. Now she was ready to settle things with Icarax.
“Stop and think,” said Icarax. “My way offers much more opportunity for battle than our current leader’s ever can. Join with me!”
“Never!” screamed Gorast, slashing with her wing blades. Her blow tore open part of Icarax’s chest plate. She flashed a look of evil triumph. Any moment now, she knew, the energy of which all Makuta are made would come seeping out of the gash and the battle would be won.
To her shock, nothing happened. Icarax clutched the wound in his armor and smiled bitterly. “Did I forget to tell you? I ran into Toa Ignika. In an effort to defeat me, he changed me from pure energy back to a true bio-mechanical being, muscle and tissue connected to armor. So I can’t be beaten just by cutting a gap in my shell and letting my essence leak out.”
Icarax’s multi-bladed sword began to rotate faster and faster, as he said, “Too bad, Gorast, that the same can’t be said of you.”

Divide and conquer, Pohatu thought as he piloted the Rockoh through a tight turn.
The Makuta forces had split up. Gorast and Vamprah had gone after Icarax; Krika had vanished; Mutran, too, was nowhere in sight; and as soon as he spotted Takanuva, Antroz had sent Bitil and Chirox after him. That left Antroz alone against Lewa, Pohatu, and Kopaka.

Not that the Makuta seemed to mind. In full control of the Jetrax T6, he had darted around, over and through every obstacle Pohatu or Lewa had thrown in his way, and outpaced Kopaka with ease. Hitting and running, he had already done significant damage to the Rockoh.

Now Lewa was on Antroz’s tail in the Axalara T9. The Toa of Air was buffeting Antroz’s ship with gale-force winds in an effort to crash it into the forest of stone pillars created by Pohatu. Earlier, Antroz had used his magnetic power to send the Axalara into a spin, and only quick action by Lewa had kept it from crashing into the swamp.

Antroz spotted the Rockoh and fired. The Jetrax’s skyblasters hit their target, sending the Rockoh into a spin. Pohatu fought to right the ship, but it was headed for one of the stone pillars he had created. Quickly, he used his elemental power to shatter the rock before the ship collided with it.

Lewa banked to the left, trying to flank Antroz. The Axalara was a more powerful ship, but the Jetrax was faster. He needed to box Antroz in somehow.

Further behind, Kopaka had been working at the same thing. But every ice wall he threw up got blown to pieces by the Jetrax’s weapons or smashed by the vehicle itself. Every rain of hailstones had been shrugged off by Antroz and bounced harmlessly off the Jetrax’s armored hull.

Pohatu was back in the fight now, and he was angry. Timing it just right, he made a hand of stone erupt out of the swamp and grab the Jetrax. Before Antroz could power it free, Pohatu hit the controls and pulled the Rockoh’s wings in for a dive. Firing as he flew, he raked the side of the Jetrax with bolts of energy.

Antroz jolted the craft free of the stone hand and wheeled in midair, firing at the Rockoh. When Pohatu dodged, Antroz used his gravity power to send the Toa’s ship plunging toward the swamp.

Lewa closed in, rocking the Jetrax with fire from the Axalara’s skyblasters and shattering the Makuta’s concentration. Free of the increased pull of gravity, Pohatu managed to right his ship just as it skimmed the surface of the water.

Then it was Kopaka’s turn. He used his power to drop the temperature around the Jetrax hundreds of degrees in an instant, slowing down the vehicle’s engines and cutting its speed. Lewa and Pohatu closed in from both sides, ready to destroy the wounded craft.

Only Kopaka was close enough to see what happened next. Just as the two Toa vessels came in range, Antroz disappeared from the cockpit using his power to teleport. Acting quickly, Kopaka threw up ice barriers in front of the Axalara and the Rockoh, shouting, “Stop!”

Neither craft could turn in time, smashing into and through the ice. But the barriers had delayed them just long enough for Kopaka to climb behind the controls of the Jetrax. “All right,” said the Toa of Ice. “If this is the final battle, let’s make it one to remember.”

Tahu’s heartlight was flashing wildly. His breath was coming in ragged gasps. Pinned against the wall by Toa Ignika, he knew he was about to die from an overdose of the power of Life.

The Toa of Fire had been trying to explain his plan. Using the Mask of Life, the Toa would try to accomplish all at once what it would otherwise take hours to do. The mask’s power, delivered in one great jolt, would awaken Mata Nui abruptly. Tahu couldn’t be sure it would work, because the mask might not be able to feed into the lightstones. But the only way to find out would be for the Ignika to give up its body and its attempts to be a real living being, and go back to being just a mask.

Toa Ignika hadn’t taken this well.

Onua and Gali had rushed up and were trying to pull Ignika away from Tahu. “Let go!” yelled Onua. “You’re killing him!”

Tahu had no choice. Summoning his control of heat and flame, he drove the temperature of his armor up 1,000 degrees in a split second. Crying out in pain, Ignika let go. Tahu staggered, trying to catch his breath.
“That’s… that’s the problem with being alive,” the Toa of Fire said. “You can feel pain. You can die. Just like everyone in this universe is going to die if we don’t awaken Mata Nui and bring balance back to the universe. We need you to do that!”

Ignika flung Onua and Gali off of him with such force they slammed against the walls. He began to advance on Tahu again. Bracing for the attack, flames crackled around Tahu’s hands.

Gali got to her feet and got in between the two. “Ignika, stop and think! Think! Why did you want to become a Toa? Why did you want to become like us? There had to be a reason!”

Toa Ignika stopped in midstride and frowned. Searching his memory, he came up with a name. “Matoro…”

Gali glanced at Onua, who nodded. “That’s right, Ignika, Matoro,” she said. “We know he died a hero. He sacrificed everything so a universe could live. And if he inspired you to be a hero too, then can you do less than he? If Matoro were here in your place, what do you think his answer would be?”

There was a long moment of silence. Each of the Toa waited, their eyes searching Ignika’s features for some sign of what his answer would be. This one single instant would decide the fate of an entire universe and all its people.

“He would say…” Ignika began. “He would say yes.”

Toa Ignika stood straight and looked at Tahu. Gesturing toward the mask he wore, Ignika said, “I will do what must be done. Then I will be like Matoro. I will be a hero.”
Mazeka piloted his swamp strider through the outskirts of Karda Nui. It had taken too much time to get the directions to this place from Tobduk, and more time to retrieve his vehicle from Daxia. Mata Nui only knew what kind of trouble Vultraz could have caused in the meantime.

The strider moved quickly across the murky water. Magnetic force from the tips of its legs kept it aloft a few inches above the surface of the swamp. Now and then, a tentacle… or something worse… would emerge from the muck and try to grab the vehicle, and Mazeka would have to deal with it.

The sounds of battle were all around. Toa were locked in combat with bat-winged nightmares Mazeka assumed were Brotherhood of Makuta members. His sources had told him that Icarax had been summoned here, and that Icarax in turn had summoned Vultraz. There could only be one reason for doing that, and it was one that sickened Mazeka.

Five years before, Mazeka and his mentor had been hard at work, researching the origin of all things. Everyone knew about the Great Beings and the Great Spirit Mata Nui, but how much was myth, and how much fact? The two were determined to find out. Although they were nowhere near close to learning all there was to know, they had discovered much, including one dread secret: the origin of the Makuta. Carved on one of their tablets was their best theory of how the Great Spirit had brought the Makuta into being, and where. That tablet was among the many stolen by Vultraz.

At the time, it was a terrible crime. Now it could be a disaster. A Makuta armed with that knowledge could create an army of his brothers, or perhaps a more powerful form for himself. Mazeka wasn’t sure when Icarax learned what Vultraz knew, or why he wanted the information now, but he knew one thing for certain – Icarax could not be allowed to get his claws on it.

That was easier said than done. Karda Nui was an enormous place, so finding Vultraz would not be easy. And he had to do it while avoiding being drawn into the battle between the Toa and the Makuta.

One of these days, I really have to stop picking all the easy jobs, he thought.

Vultraz flew his skyfighter high above the waters of the swamp. He felt like he had visited a wonderland. Down below, Toa were getting pounded by Makuta, shadow Matoran were hunting down their former friends. It was a little slice of paradise.

He remembered what he had been like before becoming a shadow Matoran. In truth, there wasn’t much difference. He was a bit more powerful now, but he had never had much use for justice and morality before, so his new outlook on life was much like his old one.

Icarax’s weak telepathic summons had reached him on Destral. The Makuta was obviously badly injured. Vultraz had to first track down where he had hidden the tablets he had stolen so long ago, to verify his information. It would be a suicidally bad idea to give Icarax bad data.

He banked to the left, following the mental call from Icarax. It was then that his eye caught movement far below and well to the west. At first, he figured it was a Toa or one of the Av-Matoran, most likely fleeing. Then he picked up the distinctive outline of a swamp strider and knew at once who it had to be.
Vultraz smiled. Somehow, this was fitting. The Brotherhood was about to win its greatest—its final—victory... and fate had delivered his old enemy, Mazeka, into his hands. His only regret was that Mazeka would not live to see the triumph of shadow.

Icarax momentarily forgotten, he sent his craft into a power dive, right for Mazeka.

Mazeka spotted Vultraz with mere seconds to spare. The skyfighter was flying low over the water now, on a collision course with the swamp strider. As Vultraz opened up with his skyblasters, Mazeka did the same, even as he charged his vehicle right toward the oncoming flyer.

The two old enemies hurtled toward a final clash, or perhaps mutual destruction... but never reached each other.

A portal opened in space right between them. It was too late to stop, too late to turn... too late to do anything but plunge inside of it. And then they both were gone from Karda Nui...

There was a sickening moment of darkness and disorientation. When the lights came on again, the swamp strider was heading right for a massive tree banded with golden metal. Mazeka yanked hard on the controls and turned the vehicle. Thrown off balance, it toppled over. He jumped clear just in time.

Not far away, Vultraz found himself headed for what looked like a lake. It was only when he got close that he saw the “waters” undulating like some vast organism. Seconds later, shards of razor-sharp crystal flew from the depths of the pseudo-lake, slicing pieces off the skyfighter. Knocked out of control, the vehicle went into a spin. Vultraz leapt off just before it hit the surface of what he now believed to be a creature. The instant the vehicle made contact, it transformed into sheer energy and disappeared.

Vultraz, clinging to a tree branch, said, “Well, that was weird.”

Mazeka turned at the sound of someone approaching through the woods. He was surprised to see a Ga-Matoran emerge, followed by a Toa of Water. “Who are you?” he asked. “And... where am I?”

“Where are —?” the Ga-Matoran said, then laughed. “Oh, I see. Another test. All right, I'll play along. You are on Spherus Magna, and I am Toa Macku. This oversized mass of muscle is one of my villagers. Always happy to meet another hero of the Melding.”

“Spherus Magna?” said Mazeka, as he and Vultraz trod along behind their hosts. “What in Mata Nui’s name is a Spherus Magna?”

Toa Macku turned to look back at him. “You must have really hit your head when you crashed. And what’s a Mata Nui?”

“What’s a —” Mazeka responded, shocked.

“Hmmmm,” said Vultraz. “I don’t think we’re in Karda Nui anymore. Maybe if I tap my red feet together three times and wish real hard...”

“This is Spherus Magna,” Macku said, gesturing at the woods all around. “It’s the whole world. You should know, you helped save it.”

“I did?” said Mazeka.

“Of course we did,” said Vultraz. “Those were great times, right, Macku? I never get tired of hearing that story.”

Macku smiled. “Me either. But my Matoran friend Helryx here, she gets pretty sick of that story, I think.”

“That’s not true,” said the tall, blue-armored figure. “I just wish I could have been of some help, that’s all.”

“I know, I’m kidding,” Macku replied. “But you know the Great Beings intended for us Toa to take on the tough jobs – that’s why they made us so agile and fast, if a little small. You big Matoran are supposed to do the work the village needs done in order to thrive.”

Mazeka felt like the world had turned upside down. Matoran villagers were Toa here? And Toa were villagers? And Helryx – leader of the Order of Mata Nui – had been helpless in any situation? This was crazy.
“Vultraz is right, though,” he said, thinking fast. “It’s a great story. I bet you tell it well, too, Macku.”

“Not as well as Takua, but I do my best,” Macku said, pride in her voice. “Well, it was a little over 100,000 years ago. Some villagers discovered a silvery liquid leaking out of a fissure and went to see what it was. They touched it and – poof! – no more villagers. Later on, someone else tried to scoop a little up and their tool turned into a trident. Weird.”

Mazeka frowned. That sounded like a description of energized protodermis. He had always thought that was something created by the Great Beings, but now it sounded like it came from the core of this world.

“Anyway, it was obviously pretty powerful stuff. So everyone started fighting over it… never paying attention to the fact that it was spreading all over. But the Great Beings saw what was happening, and they knew if it didn’t stop, the planet would be shattered into pieces.”

The four travelers emerged into a clearing. There was a village here, filled with beings like Helryx. There were no other beings visible the size of Macku.

“Welcome to Ga-Koro,” said Macku. “As I was saying – I guess the Great Beings rejected their first few ideas, whatever they were, but then finally arrived at a way of helping the situation. They created a handful of powerful beings called Toa – that’s us – with elemental powers and mask powers. And we went underground to retrieve the liquid in special containers and try to fix the damage. Wasn’t easy – there were already plenty of cave-ins, so good thing we weren’t as big as Helryx here. Took the better part of five years, but we managed to meld the planet back together.”

“And you’ve never heard of Mata Nui?” asked Mazeka.

Macku shook her head. “No. I can ask Toa Kapura next time I see him, if you like.”

“Oh, yes,” said Vultraz, chuckling. “Please do.”

Mazeka had had just about enough. “Macku, my companion and I, we’re… not from around here. And we need to get back home. It’s a long trip… I have a feeling a really long trip… and we’re not sure how to go about it. Do you know anyone who can help?”

Macku paused in thought. “Well, there’s Gali,” she said finally. “She runs a canoe business. I hear she’s been as far south as the mountains, but not much past that. I don’t think there’s much beyond the peaks worth seeing.”

“I think we’re going to need more than a canoe,” said Mazeka.

“What’s the rush?” said Vultraz. “I think I could get to like it here. ‘Toa Vultraz’… has a nice ring, doesn’t it?”

“If you’re really worried, I suppose there’s only one thing to do,” said Macku. “You’re going to have to go see the Great Beings. They know this world better than anyone, from the Great Sea to the Northern Frost. I am a little busy, but I am sure I can find you a guide, if you like.”

“Yes, thanks,” said Mazeka. After Macku had left, he turned to Vultraz, furious. “We don’t belong here. We are going home, before we do damage to this… whatever this place is.”

“You couldn’t stop me in our own universe, where you had the whole Order of Mata Nui and real Toa behind you,” sneered Vultraz. “Here in the peaceful forest, with half-sized Toa, oversized villagers, and no Great Spirit to be found, you haven’t got a chance.”

Vultraz grinned. “Give me a month, Mazeka, and I’ll be running this place. And you – if you’re still alive – you’ll be Spherus Magna’s most wanted.”

* * *

There was nowhere to run. There was nowhere to hide. A tidal wave of energized protodermis was headed right for Toa Helryx and Keetongu. When it struck them, it would do one of two things – transform them forever into who-knew-what, or destroy them both.

Desperate, Helryx reached out with her elemental power. Despite many thousands of years of honing her control over water to perfection, it did no good. Energized protodermis, though in liquid form, was not water – and was immune to her abilities. Doom was coming in a great silver wave.
Keetongu growled. Helryx glanced at him to see that his attention was directed behind them—specifically, he was looking at a hole in space that had just opened. Thoughts raced through Helryx’s mind. Had Brutaka come to save them? Where did this portal lead? But there wasn’t time for answers, only escape. Grabbing Keetongu’s wrist, she pulled him toward the hole. They dove in together with no idea of where they would emerge.

At the same moment, a figure appeared in the portal. He stepped out into the chamber. If anyone had been present to see, they might have recognized him as the mad criminal Vezon, his face hidden behind a Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates. And if they peered closely, they might have seen his eyes widen at the sight of a wall of energized protodermis coming right at him.

“Uh-oh,” he said.

Turaga Vakama walked slowly through the corridors of the Coliseum. It had been his workplace since his return to the city of Metru Nui. Now it was his home as well, along with that of all the other Turaga. Much had changed in the city in recent days—not all of it good. Despite his confinement, he had been able to pick up snatches of information here and there. The fortunes of war had evidently turned against the Brotherhood of Makuta. Numerous Makuta-held islands had fallen—including, rumor had it, Destral itself. It was almost too much to hope for—perhaps the Great Spirit would awaken to find his arch-enemies vanquished for good.

He passed his chamber and headed down a flight of stairs to a secure room. Here were kept weapons, memorials to the Toa Mangai, and one very important Kanohi mask. Although Vakama knew that it was one of the safest spots in the city, he still checked on it every day. If the contents of that room were to fall into the wrong hands... he didn’t even want to think about it.

He was halfway down the stairs when he heard the crash. He raced down to find a half-dozen heavily-armed Ta-Matoran, scattered like leaves in a windstorm. The door to the chamber had crumpled with age, and stepping through it was a being Vakama had hoped never to see again.

A little over a thousand years ago, when he was still a Toa, Vakama had battled a being called Voporak. Surrounded by a field that aged anything it touched, Voporak seemed impossible to beat, and it took a Makuta to do it in the end. Voporak worked for the Dark Hunters and sought one thing in Metru Nui. The thing he now held in his great claw: the Kanohi Mask of Time.

Vakama froze. He wanted to attack, to avenge his fallen friends, but he knew that no attack of his would stop this creature. Voporak knew it too. He looked at Vakama with something like contempt. Then he shrugged and turned his back on the Turaga, walking away.

Vakama followed. A few minutes later he watched Voporak walk out of a hole in the side of the Coliseum. A four-armed warrior wielding a multi-bladed axe bellowed at the sight of the thief and charged.

Voporak reached out and grabbed his attacker. In a matter of seconds, the warrior aged tens of thousands of years before collapsing on the ground. Voporak kept going—and there was nothing, Vakama knew, that could hope to stop him.

Kalmah moved warily through the main factory complex of Xia, flanked by Mantax and Ehlek. He did not want to be here. It would have been far more satisfying to be leading his new fleet against the Brotherhood of Makuta, but Pridak had contacted him and assured him that their old dream of overthrowing a Great Spirit might live again. Up ahead, sitting on a makeshift throne, was the Shadowed One, leader of the Dark Hunters. He eyed the three Barraki coldly. Perched on the rafters above was Darkness, who watched over the Shadowed One—though not out of any desire to guard him. No, Darkness waited for a sign of weakness in the leader, to kill him so another could take his place.

“Shadowed One, we bring you greetings from Pridak,” said Kalmah. “And congratulate you on your seizure of this island.”

The Shadowed One simply nodded, his gaze never leaving Kalmah’s hideous face.
“It is Pridak’s belief that the Barraki and the Dark Hunters would be well-served by an alliance,” Kalmah continued. “After this chaos is ended, someone will need to pick up the pieces of this universe. We see an opportunity.”

“And what do you have to bargain with, besides your fearsome reputations?” the Shadowed One said, mockery in his voice.

Kalmah simply smiled. “Information. We know that Makuta Teridax struck the Great Spirit Mata Nui down, and we know how. We also know that a prototype of the virus used to do it was hidden on this island – and we believe you have it.”

“I?” said the Shadowed One. “I am a humble administrator of Xia, a mere servant of the people. Nothing more.”

Kalmah laughed. “You are a lying, treacherous sack of Doom Viper breath. But you are also very… thorough. Oh yes, we’ve heard all about you and your organization since our release from captivity. If that virus is on Xia, you have it.”

The Shadowed One’s expression darkened. A lesser being would have quaked with fear at the sight. The Barraki, though, were not lesser beings.

“And if I do?”

“You know where it is, we know how it can be used. And so, a bargain.”

The Shadowed One considered. He could just kill these three as he had Ancient, but if they really did know something about how the vials he had found could be turned against the Great Spirit… well, that was knowledge worth gaining. He could always kill them later, after all.

“On one condition,” he said. “Pridak and I will meet on neutral ground – the land of Karzahni. If I am satisfied with what he has to offer, then – perhaps – Dark Hunter and Barraki will walk side-by-side into a new dawn.”
Mutran was growing impatient. He had sent Vican off after the klakk a long time ago, and he had not returned, nor had the escaped Rahi. There was no excuse for this. Maybe it was time he gave Vican a few extra wings and maybe a tentacle or two, to teach him to focus on his job.

His grumbling ceased at the sight of Antroz materializing in front of him. The crimson-armored Makuta had made several short teleports to reach this part of the swamp and his fatigue showed.

“It’s time,” said Antroz. “We have to be prepared.”

Mutran furled and unfurled his small wings, a sure sign he was uneasy. He dropped his voice to a whisper and said, “Is this really wise, letting them wake up the Great Spirit? What if he remembers who put him to sleep in the first place?”

Antroz shot a fierce look at Mutran. “You know the Plan. You agreed to it and profited from it and you will carry it out. Our orders were clear: delay the Toa Nuva until the appointed hour; allow them to awaken Mata Nui; and then eliminate them as a threat. Only they could revive the Great Spirit, so they had to remain alive to do so – but we don’t need to suffer their presence one moment past that.”

“All right,” said Mutran. “What do you want me to do?”

“Find Radiak or another shadow Matoran so my sight can be restored. Then go help Gorast against Icarax. If he kills the Toa Nuva before they carry out their mission, the Plan is doomed.”

Mutran nodded and took to the air to carry out his new instructions. But knowing Antroz could not see him, he did not fly very fast. He saw no reason to fly headlong into the blades of Icarax.

Gorast could have used the help. Icarax’s strategy was as simple as it was deadly: Slash open her armor and then use laser vision to incinerate her energy as it leaked out. The success of this method had forced her to keep her distance from Icarax and left Vamprah alone in the fight.

But now she had a plan of her own. In combat, Icarax had no equal, but his love of battle could also be a weakness. Gorast knew this well, for it was a weakness she shared. Still, for her scheme to work, she needed a distraction.

That was when she spotted Mutran, far off to the west. He was dispatching a shadow Matoran on some unknown mission, and when that was done, he glanced toward where Vamprah and Icarax were fighting. He looked about as eager to join that battle as a Matoran of Stone is to join a group swim.

_Too bad the fool doesn’t have a choice_, Gorast said to herself as she shot toward him. Before Mutran could protest, she was dragging him toward the scene of the clash.

“I need you to send your thoughts into Icarax’s mind,” she hissed. “Any thoughts. Screams. Babble. Anything so that he does not pick up on what I am sending to Vamprah.”

Mutran nodded. That seemed relatively safe — safer, at any rate, than saying no to an enraged Gorast.

“Then do it now.”
Mutran sent a telepathic wave of white noise at Icarax. As he did so, Gorast sent a mental message of her own to Vamprah. Once she was sure it had been received, she moved in to attack.

Gavla had made her way back to Vamprah’s back, so the Makuta could see once more. He darted and dodged, staying out of reach of Icarax’s blades and parrying his blasts of laser vision and his hurled lightning. This gave Gorast the chance to swoop in behind Icarax and land a crushing blow with two of her four arms.

As Icarax whirled to face this new opponent, Gorast backed off, laughing. “No need to worry, Vamprah,” she said. “Mutran brings a message from below. The Toa Nuva are about to awaken Mata Nui. The Plan will succeed!”

She knew how Icarax would react. All his hopes of someday leading the Brotherhood of Makuta depended on showing he had a better plan than the one they were following – and that meant the current plan had to fail. He couldn’t allow the Toa Nuva to achieve their destiny.

Vamprah and Gorast blocked him from the Codrex. But he was a Makuta, with all the power that came with it. He would not be prevented from the battle he craved with the Toa, the battle he knew he had to fight if his dreams of conquest were to ever come true.

“I will deal with you later,” he growled, his body shimmering as he began to teleport away.

“Now!” screamed Gorast, grabbing Icarax and triggering her ability to make his power run wild.

Vamprah unleashed a burst of energy. Even as the act of teleporting transformed Icarax’s body into scattered atoms, Vamprah’s attack disrupted those atoms. The combination of the two plus Gorast’s attack was devastating. The sparkling molecules of Icarax’s body shot off in a million different directions. Icarax’s scream went from earsplitting to a mere ghostly echo in a split second.

Mutran stared at the empty space that Icarax had once occupied. “What just happened?” he asked.

“And that was repulsive – so how could we make it happen again?”

“When you teleport, your atoms are scattered and then drawn back together at your destination,” Gorast answered. “By increasing his power and then disrupting them at the crucial moment, they flew all over the known universe in an instant.”

“So Icarax will never finish his teleport?”

“Oh, he will finish,” Gorast smiled. “Part of him will finish in Karda Nui… and part in Destral… and part in Metru Nui… and part in the southern islands… and other parts in a thousand other places. You get the idea.”

Mutran returned her smile. Icarax had always wanted to be a presence throughout the universe. This method of achieving it was probably not quite what he’d had in mind.

Takanuva, with the three Matoran of Light and Radiak in tow, had climbed through the sky to the Matoran villages. So far, it had been a frustrating search for this Rahi that Vican claimed was called a “klakk.” The one thing everyone agreed on was that klakk was a really odd name.

It was Radiak who spotted it first. If he hadn’t said or done anything, the others might have missed it completely. But instead he fired a shadow bolt in the klakk’s direction, which went wide. The near miss was enough to anger the flying Rahi, which circled back and screamed at the shadow Matoran.

Takanuva was bracing to cut off another attack by Radiak. It turned out that wouldn’t be necessary. Radiak blinked, shook his head, and dropped his hands to his sides. This time, when he struggled to get free of Takanuva’s grasp, the Toa of Light let him go. Photok and Tanma immediately protested, but Takanuva cut them off.

Radiak made no effort to escape. Instead, he looked around at the three Matoran of Light as if they were long-lost friends – which, of course, they were. “Are you… all right? I didn’t… hurt anyone… did I?”

“Oh, please,” Tanma said, disgusted that anyone was buying this obvious act.

“Tanma, wait a second,” Solek said. “Radiak, do you remember what happened to you?”

Radiak nodded, eyes downcast. “I fought you… I tried to kill you.”

“Radiak,” said Photok. “If you’re really back on our side – what are the Makuta planning?”
“I overheard Antroz talking once. He said the Makuta wanted the Toa to wake up Mata Nui, but he didn’t say why. Then, once the Great Spirit was awake, they… we… would kill the Toa and corrupt any Matoran of Light who were left.”

Takanuva pondered. Radiak’s transformation seemed incredible, but there had to be an explanation for it. Perhaps whatever the shadow leeches did to drain light from their victims also created some kind of barrier to prevent light from returning later. The sonic tones of the klakk’s attack somehow shattered that barrier. With the return of light to the being, the corruption of the Makuta faded away.

If Radiak was telling the truth—how could the Makuta possibly benefit from Mata Nui waking up? If they wanted him awake, why put him to sleep 1,000 years ago in the first place? And if his awakening was part of their plan, what did that mean? Did the Toa Nuva have to abandon fulfilling their destiny?

“Find the rest of the shadow Matoran,” he said to his four companions. “Get them here. We’re going to keep this Rahi good and angry, and cure all the rest of them. And then we’re getting all the Matoran out of this place.”

“What?” said Tanma. “You mean we’re going to give it up to the Makuta? No way! This is our home and we’ll fight for it.”

“Listen to me!” said Takanuva, grabbing Tanma by the shoulders and resisting the urge to shake some sense into the Matoran. The anger in his tone shocked the others to silence.

“Listen to me!” he snapped. “In a little while, this isn’t going to be anyone’s home. When Mata Nui awakens, this place will be hit by the biggest energy storm anyone has ever seen. And that’s why I am getting every Matoran out of here, even if I have to drag you!”

So wrapped up were Takanuva and the Matoran in the argument that none of them noticed the ghostly form of Makuta Krika hovering nearby. At the news that all of Karda Nui would be engulfed in a lethal storm as soon as the Great Spirit was awakened, a grim smile came to Krika’s mouth.

“Very neat indeed, he thought. Makuta Teridax sends his top lieutenants to Karda Nui to make sure all goes according to the Plan. But he neglects to inform us that our “success” here will end with us all dead. In one move, he achieves his ambitions and eliminates his potential rivals.

Krika made a decision. Despite the risk—he had, after all, allied with Icarax against the Plan—he had to tell the other Makuta what he had learned. Teridax was betraying them all and had to be stopped.

Krika flew down toward the swamp, desperately trying to think of a way to convince his fellow Makuta that their greatest enemy was their leader.

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

In a strange twist of fate, it was Radiak himself who found the Rahi he sought. Spotting it flying through the air, he hurled a bolt of Shadow at it. He missed, but managed to irritate the creature. It emitted a loud cry, the sheer volume of which seemed to stagger the Matoran. He struggled to get free of my grasp, and this time I didn’t try to stop him. He looked around at Photok, Solek, and Tanma, as if he they were friends he had not seen in ages. “Are you all right?” he asked. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Tanma, of course, did not believe Radiak had returned to the side of the Av-Matoran. But the change seemed real. When pressed, Radiak revealed that the Makuta planned to allow Mata Nui to wake up, then slay the Toa Nuva and corrupt the rest of the Av-Matoran. But why? Why would they want to let the Great Spirit awaken, I wondered?

“Get the rest of the shadow Matoran here,” I told Tanma. “We’re going to cure them all, then we’re getting you out of here.” “This is our home,” the Av-Matoran protested. “And we’ll stay and fight for it.”

“Listen to me,” I snapped. “In a little while, this isn’t going to be anyone’s home. When Mata Nui awakens, this place will be hit by the biggest energy storm anyone has ever seen. And that’s why I am getting every Matoran out of here, even if I have to drag you.”
Little did I know, as Tanma and his companions flew off, that I was about to come under attack.

* * *

Two of those Makuta were much closer than Krika thought. Chirox and Bitil had followed Takanuva and the Matoran. Now that all four of the Toa’s Matoran companions had scattered, the time had come to attack.

Chirox struck first, using his mask power to make it impossible for Takanuva to hear their approach or call for help. Then it was Bitil’s turn, using his mask to summon half a dozen other versions of himself from the past. Against eight Makuta, Takanuva wouldn’t have a chance.

The attack began with a hail of shadow bolts, which struck Takanuva from behind. Under ordinary circumstances, that would have been enough to kill him. But since being partially corrupted by a shadow leech and drained of some of his light power, his resistance to shadow had increased. He turned to face his attackers.

Since losing a portion of his light, Takanuva had struggled against the dark impulses that filled him. He was quicker to anger and had to resist the urge to strike out violently at obstacles in his way. But the sight of a horde of Makuta coming toward him stripped away the last of his self-control. Screaming soundlessly, he unleashed a barrage of light bolts.

The Makuta scattered, but continued to advance. Three of the Bitil doubles were trying to circle around behind him. Takanuva responded with lasers that sliced their protosteel weapons to pieces. Then he wheeled and hurled a flare right at Kirop, the Matoran who rode atop Chirox and served as the Makuta’s eyes. The sudden flash temporarily blinded the shadow Matoran, and the resulting loss of sight broke Chirox’s concentration. Takanuva could hear and speak again.

“Come on, then,” the Toa of Light growled. “Come on! This won’t be some kolhii match passing for a battle – any Makuta who gets near me dies!”

Chirox laughed. “You would be violating your code, Toa. Don’t you know your kind never kills?”

Takanuva’s response was a light bolt that punched a small hole in Chirox’s armor. Immediately, the green-black energy that made up a Makuta’s substance began to leak out through the gap.

“But I’m not my ‘kind,’ not anymore – your shadow leeches saw to that,” said Takanuva. “I’m half Toa of Light, half Toa of Shadow. This was what you wanted, wasn’t it? Toa consumed by darkness, Toa not hampered by things like mercy or morality. Well, now you can choke on it.”

Takanuva rocketed forward, blasting light and shadow as he went. If he had been in his right mind, he would have realized charging into a mob of Makuta was suicide. But all he felt was his rage and all he knew was these beings were his enemies, and his enemies had to be destroyed.

The Makuta had other ideas. One of the Bitils had managed to get above and behind Takanuva, and was raising his blade for a fatal strike. Then a blast of light from an unexpected direction knocked the weapon from his hand.

“You look like you could use a hand, brother,” shouted Kopaka, piloting the Jetrax T6. Wisps of light energy were still curling from the vehicle’s skyblasters.

Takanuva ignored him. He was fighting like a lunatic, tearing his way through Makuta too startled to react. There was no strategy or plan behind his attack, just sheer, brute force and unleashed rage. It was Kopaka who recalled what Toa Onua had said about Bitil’s mask power. Targeting the one Bitil who was hanging back from the fight, Kopaka hit him with a skyblaster bolt. Startled, Bitil lost control of his mask power and his doubles vanished from view.

Again, Takanuva didn’t notice. He was bombarding Chirox with light bolts, too fast for the Makuta to be able to staunch the leak of his energy from his armor. Then the Toa of Light tore Kirop off Chirox’s back and hurled the Matoran down toward the swamp!

Kopaka had seen enough. He swooped down in the Jetrax and caught Kirop before racing back to Takanuva. Trapping Kirop in ice bonds and setting the vehicle to hover, Kopaka leapt out into space and grabbed Takanuva.
“Toa! Stop this, now!” he shouted. “Remember who you are!”
“I know who I am!” Takanuva replied savagely. “I am what they made me!”
“Then you’re letting them win, brother,” Kopaka said, forcing his voice to be calm. “You’re admitting you are no better than they are.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Takanuva forced his violent emotions down. Seeing an opening, Bitil unleashed chain lightning, striking both Toa. By the time they recovered and looked around, Bitil and Chirox were gone.
“This makes no sense,” said Kopaka. “He had us right where he wanted us. Even with Chirox wounded, why flee?”
“Because,” answered Takanuva. “They know the Toa Nuva are destined to awaken Mata Nui – but they don’t know which of you are needed to do it. Kill the wrong one and their whole Plan goes out like a light.”
“Their Plan depends on us?” asked Kopaka, in disbelief.
“It’s a long story,” said Takanuva. “And I better tell it to you – because whatever’s going to happen, it’s going to happen soon.”

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

There were eight of them. Makuta Chirox and seven different incarnations of Makuta Bitil. Under ordinary circumstances, one Toa against eight Makuta… I wouldn’t have stood a chance. But since being attacked by a shadow leech and walking the fine line between light and darkness… I wasn’t the same being. And these weren’t ordinary circumstances.

Light can do a lot of things. It can illuminate. It can welcome. It can warm. As it turns out, it can also make laser beams that slice through protosteel. “Come on, then!” I shouted. “This won’t be some kolhii match masquerading as a battle! Any Makuta who gets near me, dies!”

I confess, I remember little of what happened next. I recall blasting a hole in Chirox’s armor, then charging into the midst of the Makuta. All I felt was rage. In that moment, the shadow was the closest it had ever been to taking control. I was so caught up in the battle that I never noticed one of the Bitils about to strike me down.

But he never got a chance. A bolt from the Jetrax T6, piloted by Kopaka, saved me. A second rocked Bitil so much that he lost control of his mask power, causing his duplicates to disappear. But I wasn’t done fighting. Chirox was mine, and he was going to pay.
Hewkii was the first to awaken. Kongu was beside him, still unconscious. The Toa of Stone’s mind was full of questions – How? Where? Why?

The “how” was easily answered. Someone had attacked the two Toa Mahri from behind shortly after Jaller and his team left for the island of Artidax. Who that might have been, he had no idea, but he certainly looked forward to meeting them again.

“Where” was easy too – they were in the Coliseum in Metru Nui. He half-expected to wake up locked in a cell, but that wasn’t the case. He didn’t even see a guard out in the corridor. Their weapons were gone, but they still wore their masks.

“Why?” That was what he was about to find out. He gave Kongu a hard rap on the mask. “Wake up, stiff breeze!” he said. “We have work to do.”

“Hmmm? What?” said Kongu, shaking his head. “Where are we, and why are you hard-hitting me?”

Hewkii was already up and on his way out the door. “Let’s find out.”

He had gone only a few steps out into the corridor when a cloud of black, crystalline shards appeared in front of him. It rapidly coalesced into the form of the black-armored female who had first told the Mahri they had to go to Artidax. Hewkii suddenly thought he knew who the “who” had been.

“So,” he said. “It was all some kind of trick.”

“If you wish to think of it that way,” the figure replied. “I am Johmak, an agent of the Order of Mata Nui. For reasons of its own, the Order wanted the Toa Mahri out of Metru Nui for a time. And we wanted the Visorak taken off the board… hence our decision to kill two Gukko with one stone.”

Kongu was standing behind Hewkii now. “But you thought we would all quick-leave, didn’t you?” Johmak nodded. “And when you didn’t, we had to step in. We couldn’t have you interfering.”

“With what?” asked Hewkii.

Johmak fragmented again and flew down to the end of the corridor. There was a window here that looked out over southern Metru Nui. As she reformed, she said, “With this!”

Hewkii and Kongu looked out at their city, stunned. It no longer looked like the place they had been living in for weeks. Now it resembled nothing so much as a fortress. High walls had been constructed on the coastline, with huge weapons mounted atop them. Weapon emplacements were also visible atop buildings. Streets leading to the Coliseum were barricaded, with Order of Mata Nui agents on guard. Matoran of all kinds were visible frantically building more defenses.

“What is going on here?!” Hewkii exploded.

“The Makuta have suffered serious defeats, but they are not yet vanquished,” said Johmak. “We know we will need one final battle to destroy them, but we want to pick the spot. So we leaked word through servants on Stelt that we have turned the Great Furnace into a virus works to replicate the protosteel-eating virus that killed Makuta Kojol.”

“You made Metru Nui a target?” said Kongu, in disbelief.
“It already was a target,” said Johmak. “We just made it a better prepared one.”

“Where are the Turaga?” demanded Hewkii.

“The Turaga proved… uncooperative,” Johmak replied. “They have been… asked… to remain in the Coliseum for the duration.”

“And just what is it you will be asking us to do?” asked Kongu.

“Nothing,” said Johmak. “Nothing at all. Stay out of our way. Your interference may well get Order agents killed… not to mention yourselves.”

With that, Johmak turned back into a cloud of crystal and floated out the open window. Hewkii watched her go, his anger building with every moment.

“Nobody picks a fight using my city, then tells me to stay out of it,” the Toa of Stone growled. “Nobody!”

Makuta Miserix and the six Toa Hagah turned as one to see figures emerging from the dimensional portal. They were ready for anything, except perhaps for what they saw.

Toa Helryx emerged first, followed by Keetongu. The portal began to shrink behind them, then suddenly widened again to admit two more figures. The Hagah recognized neither one, but it was obvious that Helryx did.

“Axonn! What are you doing here? And… what has happened to Brutaka?”

Axonn explained rapidly how he and Brutaka had tracked down the pool where the Makuta species was created, only to be attacked by it. Brutaka had been changed by it somehow and insisted that they come here immediately – wherever “here” might be. He had used his Mask of Dimensional Gates to make the journey.

“Then… was it that which opened a gate allowing us to escape where we were?” wondered Helryx.

“No,” answered Brutaka, in a voice like thunder. “There is another Olmak… and it has been misused… and worse. It may well threaten us all.”

“It’s going to have to wait in line,” said Toa Iruini. “Listen, we all came down here looking for Makuta Teridax, on your instructions. Then we were told it was full of traps and a ‘place of death.’ Well, so far, I see no Teridax, I’ve run into one pretty good trap, and nobody’s died. When do things start happening?”

A bolt of energy shot out from a bank of machinery nearby. It struck Brutaka, shattering his mask to pieces.

“You had to ask,” Bomonga grumbled to Iruini.

“My apologies for the abrupt greeting,” said the voice of Teridax. It was strangely soft, and seemed to be coming from all around. “But I couldn’t have Brutaka helping you to leave prematurely. Not when we have so much to discuss.”

“Makuta!” said Helryx. “I know what you’re planning. You won’t get away with it.”

“You know?” Teridax repeated, amused. “If you knew, you would be fleeing in panic, Toa. No, you suspect… just as Zaktan does. Or perhaps he does more than that?”

A loud hum filled the room. A moment later, both Zaktan and the water tank in which he dwelled exploded.

“I suppose now we will never know,” said Teridax. “Now what shall we talk about? The economy of Stelt? The latest akihini scores? The efforts to turn Metru Nui into an armed camp? No, I know – let’s discuss the end of your universe as you have known it.”

The island of Destral was in ruins.

The fortress of the Makuta had been pounded largely to rubble. Vezon, the sole living and conscious occupant of the fortress, had already departed using a Mask of Dimensional Gates. Occupiers were already moving through the shattered rooms, looking for survivors or loot.

Inside a subterranean chamber, a lone figure awoke. He knew his name – Takanuva – and he
remembered being kidnapped from his universe by a Makuta. After that, everything was a blank until he woke up here, in a cracked canister.

He kicked the lid of the canister to pieces and stepped out into the chamber. All around him were duplicates of him, some dead, some still trapped in suspended animation. That answered one question – he had not been the only one taken.

Something was nagging at him… something else that was not as it should be. What was it? He was certain that his armor had not been all black before… so that was one possibility. But was that the answer? No, no, it wasn’t. He was almost positive that one other thing had been different prior to his awakening.

He was pretty sure – could have sworn, really – that he hadn’t wanted to destroy the world before. But now?

The dark Takanuva just couldn’t wait to get started.

* * *

If Mazeka thought he had been rocked by all the differences between the world of Spherus Magna and the universe he was used to, he was in for an even bigger shock. Toa Macku returned with a guide to the fortress of the Great Beings – a tall, white-armored being he introduced as Makuta Teridax. The newcomer greeted both Vultraz and Mazeka and suggested they get started right away, as it was a treacherous journey in the dark.

“So, your title is Makuta?” asked Mazeka. “What do you do?”

“Whatever is necessary,” Teridax replied. “My role is to aid the Toa in looking after the villagers; to create new life forms, as needed; and to teach the virtues of unity, duty and destiny to those I and my brothers bring into being.”

Vultraz thought he was going to be sick. What had they done to the Makuta here? Where was the delicious evil, the complex plans, the ruthless ambition? Or… if the Makuta’s actions had been fueled by a hatred for/jealousy of Mata Nui, and there was no Mata Nui here, had things turned out differently?

“Must be a tough job,” said Vultraz.

“It is… time-consuming,” said Teridax. “A Makuta must be a being utterly without doubt, or fear, or any trace of shadow, so it takes long years of meditation before one is ready to assume the title. The powers that once ran this world were mad with a hunger for power – the Great Beings created the Makuta as an answer to that.”

No one spoke for the rest of the journey. Mazeka was filled with questions, but he wasn’t sure it would be wise to ask them. If the Maku found out where he and Vultraz were really from, he might decide to imprison them, or worse. After all, why would the beings of Spherus Magna want those of a universe as war-torn as Mazeka’s to know about them, or their dimension?

It was a long and dangerous trip through thick forest and high mountains. Now and then, a great roar would shake the earth. The two Matoran didn’t ask the source – neither really wanted to know – and Teridax did not offer.

They came at last to a vast fortress made completely of crystal and iron. Two more Makuta guarded the main gate. Mazeka and Vultraz recognized them as Gorast and Icarax, also in white armor. They allowed the party to pass through unchallenged. The only uncertain moment was when Vultraz glanced at Gorast and muttered, “Like the outfit.” Gorast’s response was to lift him in the air telekinetically and then slam him down on the ground. It was her version of a gentle warning.

The trip to the fortress had been a long one. The journey from the main gate to the central chamber took even longer. After the 100th twist and turn, Mazeka became convinced this was all on purpose. The Great Beings evidently did not welcome visitors, and didn’t want those they did have to remember how to find them.

Mazeka expected to be ushered into a vast laboratory. Instead, the room Teridax brought them to looked more like a council chamber. A semi-circular stone dais sat at the far end of the room. The only illumination came from lightstones embedded high in the ceiling, and that was barely enough light to see
one’s hand in front of one’s face. He thought he could dimly make out six figures seated at the dais, but then they were gone. Perhaps, like so many things, it had been a trick of shadows and light.

A soft voice, no more than a whisper, broke the stillness. “Who have you brought to us, Makuta, and why?”

“They say they came from another land, and seek to return there,” said Teridax. “They look like Toa, but I believe looks are deceiving. And one of them… one has a spirit filled with shadow.”

Mazeka cursed under his breath. He had been an idiot – Makuta were telepathic. Order of Mata Nui training meant his mind was shielded, but Vultraz had no such protection against mental intrusion. Teridax had read his mind and knew all now.

“Step forward,” said another whisper. Mazeka was struck by how ancient the voice sounded. He took a step. Vultraz hesitated until Teridax shoved him forward. There was an eternity of silence. Then more whispers came.

“Our work… but not our work. Interesting.”
“And one filled with shadow? How intriguing… was there a flaw in his creation, I wonder?”
“Perhaps we should take him apart and see.”
“No, no… too extreme. But there should be testing, I agree.”
“Now, wait a minute,” said Vultraz. “I’m not volunteering to be a lab Rahi.”
“We simply wish to go home,” said Mazeka. “We have… business to settle there. I ask that you let us leave.”
“It is a lost opportunity,” one of the Great Beings whispered.
“Perhaps not. Perhaps not. An exchange can be made.”
“What is your name, visitor?”
“Mazeka.”
“Mazeka, yes,” came the response. “We have many wondrous creations, Mazeka… some even loyal Teridax does not know about. Your visit is, in truth, fascinating, but not a surprise to us. We are well aware that we have counterparts elsewhere in the vast, uncounted realities that exist. It was only a matter of time before one of their creations pierced the dimensional walls… and considering the chaotic state of their creations, not an event we anticipated with glee.

“And so, we offer an exchange. You will be allowed to return from whence you came. We will keep your companion – I feel certain you have quite enough darkness in your universe, and do not need more. And we would be interested to see just where our other selves went wrong in his creation. In return, you will be allowed to bring one being from our universe back with you, to maintain the balance between the two realities.”

Mazeka wasn’t sure what to say. He hated Vultraz, had for years, but he wanted to beat him fairly and see him brought to justice. Instead, this would mean stranding him in an alien reality and facing who knew what future.

“I’m sorry,” Mazeka said. “I cannot agree to your request.”
“That would pain us greatly,” the Great Being answered, “if it had been a request. It was not.”
Chirox and Vamprah appeared out of the darkness and seized Vultraz. Mazeka moved to stop them, only to find his way blocked by Teridax.
“I have seen the rot in his spirit,” the Makuta said. “And much more… things that shame me. I have peered into a distorted mirror, one I wish I could smash to bits. He will get no more and no less than he deserves.”
“You don’t understand,” said Mazeka, as Vultraz was dragged away. “He’s my responsibility.”
“He is no one’s responsibility but his own,” said Teridax. “If you learn nothing else from your time here, learn that.”
“Make your choice,” said one of the Great Beings. “It is time for you to go.”
Mazeka considered. Did he want to bring someone back with him, and if so, who? Macku? Kapura? A Great Being? Was there anyone who could help in the struggle going on back home? And then the answer came to him. He turned to Teridax and said, “You.”
Teridax nodded. “Through the mirror, then…”
“And your chance to smash it,” said Mazeka.
“Then make ready,” said the Great Being. “We do not envy you your journey or your destination. But it is a journey that must be made all the same… and a destination perhaps only you can save.”
Tahu, Ignika, and Gali stood alone in the Codrex. Onua had left a short time ago to join the fight. Now they stood, poised to do what they had been created to do.

“This is it,” said the Toa of Fire. “All the battles we’ve had, all the adventures, all the danger and death… all for this moment.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Gali agreed. “You know, there were so many times when I hated you – when it seemed like you were being stubborn just for its own sake. But now I realize that you were just trying to do your best. It couldn’t have been easy leading this group.”

Tahu Nuva looked away from the one who was perhaps his dearest friend on the team. For a long time, he didn’t say anything. Then he turned back to Gali.

“Do what we set out to do. If the worst happens, maybe, somehow, you’ll be safe in here. Maybe the Codrex can protect you from the storm.”


“Because I remember now, sister… I remember everything that happened,” said Tahu, his voice heavy with grief. “Seeing this place again awoke the memories. We were here before.”

“I know that,” said Gali. “We all felt some recognition of Karda Nui when we first arrived. That doesn’t explain –”

“No, I mean we were in the Codrex before,” he said. “Pohatu and Kopaka were right – our Toa canisters were housed here and launched from here. I led us into this structure 100,000 years ago, knowing they would be here, knowing that we might never leave again.”

He related the story to her as quickly and simply as he could. How he had learned during his team’s initial training what their true mission was and what it would involve; how he knew about the energy storm that would hit Karda Nui back then, and purposely delayed so that the Toa would be trapped in the Codrex by it; how he gave them a choice – climb into the canisters to sleep and wait for the time they were needed, or perish in the storm. The only thing he left out was that, at the time, Kopaka had known all this as well. But the Toa of Ice no longer remembered, and he saw no reason to damage Gali’s regard for Kopaka by telling her about it.

When he was done, Gali did something he never would have expected: She smiled. “No wonder you didn’t want to talk about it when Pohatu brought up the empty canister slots. Tahu, I can’t say I am okay with how you did what you did – but I understand why you did it. You had to make a hard decision, but if you hadn’t made it, we might not be here now. There might be no one to awaken Mata Nui.”

“Thank you,” said Tahu. “I should have known if anyone would understand…” His voice trailed off. “But I still need to go. My place is out there, fighting this battle, leading my team.”

“It would take the Great Beings themselves to keep you away from a fight, I know,” Gali said, laying a hand on his arm. “But, listen to me. We will make it out of here. We will win this day, and then someday we will look back on it and wonder how we survived.” She laughed. “After all, with Lewa Nuva as a fighter pilot, how can we fail?”

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Tahu didn’t answer. His thoughts suddenly seemed to be elsewhere. When he returned his attention to Gali, he was smiling. “That’s it. The vehicles, like the one Lewa is piloting – that’s how we can get out of here in time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Remember how fast they are, how they passed right through the ceiling when they launched? If they can do that, they can carry us out of Karda Nui in the seconds we’ll have before the storm erupts full-force.”

Tahu nodded toward Toa Ignika, then looked at Gali. “Give me three minutes, and then go ahead. We’re going to get home, Gali, all of us. I promise.”

Before she could respond, he was out of the Codrex. She began counting down to the moment when the destiny of the Toa Nuva would finally be achieved.

It wasn’t hard to get the shadow Matoran to chase the Matoran of Light back up to the sky. Hunting their former friends was, after all, what shadow Matoran loved to do.

Running into an angry klakk, however, was not part of their plans. Feeling threatened, the Rahi attacked anyone who came near and its sonic scream shattered the barrier that kept light from reaching the corrupted Matoran. One by one, they dropped out of the fight as the Makuta’s hold on them dwindled away. Finally, only one Matoran remained in the grip of darkness. That was Gavla, the first to fall to a shadow leech when the Makuta invaded Karda Nui.

“Can you lead the Matoran out of here?” Takanuva asked Tanma.

“I think so,” Tanma answered. “Vican says there’s a portal to the outside in the western wall – he went through it to find Icarax. Of course, there’s a Makuta base on the other side, but if we move fast enough –”

“Good,” said the Toa of Light. “I’m going after Gavla. When you get out, take the Matoran north, to Metru Nui. There are Toa there, so the place should be well-defended.”

After giving Tanma directions as best he could to the island city, Takanuva said good-bye. He headed back for the swamp, in search of the only Matoran left to be rescued. He found her wandering along the shore of a mud islet, not far away from where Vamprah stood with Chirox. Takanuva flew faster than he ever had before and grabbed her, carrying her up to the sky.

As he knew she would, Gavla fought all the way. Takanuva ignored her screams and rants, knowing that in the end she would be happy to be free of the taint of shadow. Sighting the klakk, Takanuva fired a bolt of shadow at it to bait the creature.

The klakk responded as it had each time so far, with a sonic scream, this time targeted at both Takanuva and Gavla. The Toa of Light immediately felt something change inside him, as light returned to fill the void now occupied in his spirit by darkness. It would take a while, he was sure, before his armor changed back to white and gold from white and gray – but at least he knew the damage done by the shadow leech was being reversed.

Gavla’s reaction was quite different. She howled with rage even after the klakk’s attack had undone what the shadow leech had done to her. When Takanuva moved to see what was wrong, she struck out at him with a bolt of light.

“Who asked you to save me!” she raged. “Don’t you understand? The Makuta accepted me – they had use for me – which is more than my fellow Matoran ever did! I finally found a place where I belonged, and you took it away from me.”

“But... but you were evil,” Takanuva said. “You were threatening people who had been your friends for years.”

“Friends?” Gavla said bitterly. “They were never my friends. But you wouldn’t understand – you’re a Toa. Every Toa is your brother or your sister. You all rush around thinking whatever you do must be right. Well, sometimes it’s not.”
Takanuva saw it was useless to argue. He wasn’t sure how to feel about what she’d said, angry or just sad. “Tanma is gathering the Matoran at the old village to take all of you out of Karda Nui while there’s still time. You had better go if you want to join them.”

Gavla gave him a long look, her eyes full of sadness and resignation. “I guess I will have to,” she said, as she flew past him. “You’ve left me nowhere else to go.”

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

It was Kopaka who stopped me… who brought me to my senses before I killed the Makuta. As they fled back to the swamp, I told the Toa of Ice what I had learned: that the Makuta wanted Mata Nui awakened, for reasons I could not imagine. Kopaka left me to warn the others, while I tracked down the last shadow Matoran needing to be saved. This was Gavla, and despite her protests, I managed to put her in the path of the klakk’s scream… and myself as well. I could feel the barrier within me shatter and the light begin to return. I was cured, and so was she… but she was not so happy about it. The shadow, apparently, had been a place she felt she belonged, and I had taken her away from it.

I sent her after Tanma and the others. They would be making their way to the western portal and escape from Karda Nui. I had to rejoin my friends.

* * *

Down below, the battle was raging more fiercely than before. Gorast, Bitil, and Mutran, with what limited assistance Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah could provide, were trading bolts and blows with the Toa Nuva. Makuta resistance had stiffened, as they tried to force the Toa back toward the Codrex. Gorast’s strategy was simple: pen the Toa into a small area so they would be easy to destroy once Mata Nui was awakened.

Tahu and Gorast were locked in a fight, the Toa using his rotating blade to try and keep her at bay. He knew from Pohatu what would happen if she touched him – loss of control of his elemental powers. If that happened when he was near his allies, he might incinerate all of them.

“The final moments have arrived,” Gorast said. “Soon, it will be too late for anyone to change the course of events. The Plan will succeed, and the world as you know it will be history.”

“I’ve heard words like that from Makuta before,” Tahu shot back. “They were wrong then, too. Where is the leader of the Brotherhood, by the way? Too cowardly to face us?”

Gorast hissed as a fire bolt scorched her armor. “Do not worry, Toa – you will hear from him soon enough, in words like thunder.”

Tahu parried Gorast’s blow, but left himself open to a sonic attack that cracked his adaptive armor. “You fool, no one is going to hear anything if we don’t get out of here! When Mata Nui awakes, an energy storm will kill anyone who’s still here.”

“He’s telling the truth!” It was Krika, flying toward them. “I heard the Toa talking up above. Makuta Teridax has set us all up to be killed!”

Krika had done many things in his life, most of them evil, some bordering on insane. But if he had thought Gorast would ever listen to him, that was truly madness. She turned on him with hatred in her eyes, Tahu totally forgotten now, and charged. Before Krika could stop her, she had grabbed his arm and triggered her Mask of Disruption.

“Gorast, no! Don’t you understand? You’re all doomed!” Krika yelled as he felt his powers slipping out of his control.

“I only understand that you are a traitor,” she replied. “And there is only one punishment for traitors!”
Krika screamed then, as his ability to reduce his mass to intangibility ran wild. With his will no longer able to control his power, he grew more ghostly as his atoms became less and less substantial. Finally, with a cry of pure anguish, he vanished completely from view.

“Gone,” Gorast said, satisfied. “Less than a phantom, now, and soon not even that.”

Tahu fired his blaster, forming a clamp that pinned Gorast’s arms to her sides. Before she could break free, he used his elemental powers to increase the temperature around her until her armor began to soften.

“I ought to let you melt,” Tahu said. “How long would your energy survive here, with no body to possess? Krika was trying to save your miserable life, and you repaid him with death.”

“Tahu!” Kopaka shouted. “We need to get back to the Codrex. The Makuta want us to wake up Mata Nui—at least, that’s what Kirop says. Could this all be some trick?”

Gorast began to laugh. It started out as a soft giggle, then grew into insane peals of mirth that chilled Tahu’s spirit. “It’s too late, too late,” she cried. “Can’t you feel it? It has begun—the Great Spirit awakes!”

It was true. The air in Karda Nui had begun to sizzle with energy. Everywhere Tahu looked, the light was growing brighter, dispelling the shadows of the Makuta. In the distance, he could see the Matoran of Light speeding toward the west and, hopefully, safety.

“She’s mad,” said Tahu. “They all are. The Makuta have been fighting us every step of the way, and now I’m supposed to believe they wanted us to succeed all along? They have a funny way of showing it!”

“What if we’re missing something?” asked Kopaka.

“Look around you,” said Tahu. “You know what’s about to happen. We’ll have to worry about ‘what if’s’ later.”

Kopaka glanced at the still laughing Gorast, who was clearly either caught up in a feeling of triumph or completely insane. “Let’s hope there is a ‘later,’ then.”

Toa Ignika rose slowly, majestically, into the air, then descended into the center of the ring of lightstones. For an instant, nothing happened. Then energy lanced from the mask into the six crystals. Toa Ignika staggered as his body began to sparkle, each point of light scattering in a different direction. In a matter of seconds, the body had returned to the random assortment of molecules it had been before the Mask of Life created it. And then it was done, leaving only the mask hovering in the air, trapped in a nimbus of overwhelming power.

A whip of energy suddenly lashed out at Gali. But it caused no pain—instead, it was raw emotion that it carried. At first, she felt a great emptiness. Then there was the sensation of a great mind embracing awareness, reaching out to feel and experience all there was in the universe. She felt joy, a sense of triumph, even a desire for vengeance on the entity’s enemies, and something more... something indistinct and far away, which she could not quite identify. Perhaps the consciousness was just so powerful, so alien, that it was beyond her ability to understand. She hoped that was all it was.

Then there was another strange happening. The mask itself began to vibrate violently. Power was no longer flowing only from the Kanohi Ignika into the lightstones, but now something was flowing back into the mask! Worried that the energies unleashed might destroy the mask, Gali reached out to tear it free. As soon as she made contact, there was an explosion of force, and she was slammed into the wall.

When she regained consciousness minutes later, it was to see Onua standing over her. “Gali, we have to go. It may already be too late!”

“But the mask...” she began.

Onua glanced at the Ignika, which was vibrating so fast now it was just a blur. “There’s no time. Life here is coming to an end, and if we don’t leave, we’ll end with it.”

* * *

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It took the Mahri a long time to make it from Artidax back to Metru Nui, and Jaller’s first thought upon arriving was that it had been way too long: Metru Nui was under attack. At least, he thought that was Metru Nui. It was surrounded by high walls with weapons mounted atop them, weapons belching fire and smoke at the attackers. The walls were manned by warriors of all sorts, none of which Jaller recognized – wait, check that. The berserker battling three opponents at once looked a lot like Hewkii.

“What’s going on?” said Nuparu. “It looks like we walked into a full-scale war.”

“It’s been going on for a while,” said Hahli, “but I think it’s come home.”

It was an awesome sight. Ships flying the banner of the Brotherhood of Makuta ringed the island city. Flying Rahkshi were assaulting from every direction, firing bolts of energy from their staffs while others pounded on the walls. In one section, a portion of the wall had already crumbled, and warriors fought in the gap, trying to keep the invaders out.

“They’re breaking through!” shouted Nuparu.

“Let’s go,” said Jaller. “We stand or fall with our city.”

The three Toa hit the gap from behind, using fire, water, and earth to tear through the ranks of Rahkshi. They made it through the wall of the city. Beyond the ranks of Order of Mata Nui agents, they spotted the Turaga manning barricades.

Jaller rushed up to Vakama. “Turaga, what’s happening? How did this battle begin?”

“We can thank the Order for that,” Vakama replied. “Now our problem is how to end it before the city is destroyed.”

“The Mask of Time,” said Hahli. “Can one of us use it to, I don’t know, slow down the Rahkshi somehow?”

“I wish you could,” said Vakama, “but the mask is gone, stolen by a Dark Hunter. He made the gap in the wall you came through.”

Jaller looked around. In his days as captain of the Ta-Koro Guard, he had learned a thing or two about battle strategy. A quick glance was enough to tell him that the Order had badly underestimated the ferocity of the Makuta attack. The Rahkshi had already gained the tops of the walls in three or four places, and in one southern section, had made it inside the walls as well. As he watched, the defenders of the gap fell back, and the invaders began pouring through.

“We need an edge,” said Jaller. “Something the Rahkshi wouldn’t expect.”

“There are more Toa coming, but they won’t get here in time,” said Vakama. “But there might be one Toa here now who could help us. Listen well…”

It was Hahli who found the Toa in question – a Toa of Sonsics named Krakua. When he heard Vakama’s plan, he looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, while blasting Rahkshi with sonic beams. “Vakama wants me to cycle through multiple frequencies until I find the one that will awaken something called the Bohrok?”

“Yes,” said Hahli. “We know – well, we suspect – the signal that awakens them is sonic, but we don’t know what it is or how to trigger it. If we can awaken the ones under Metru Nui, and if the Rahkshi try to get in their way… well, it might buy us some time for something else we’re planning.”

“All right, I’ll try,” said Krakua. “No promises.”

* * *

The storm, as most storms do, had started out small. First, the glow beneath the swamp had grown painfully bright. Then a tiny vortex of energy sprang to life just above the murky water. It rapidly grew bigger and bigger, bolts of power flying from it in all directions. Now it was spreading out across the swamp and stabbing upwards toward the sky.

Although the Toa Nuva had been expecting it, the Makuta were the ones who noticed it first. Unable to see, Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah could only feel the power crackling in the air. Gorast had
managed to free herself from the Toa and greeted the storm as if it were a sign of final victory. Bitil was not so sure, and had Gorast not been looking, he would have been wings his way out of Karda Nui.

Mutran was the most curious about the new arrival. Had Vican been around, he would have sent the Matoran into the eye of the storm to check it out. Since he was gone, along with the rest of the Matoran, Mutran steeled himself to check it out on his own. True, it looked dangerous, but it was raw power – if he could tap it, feed it into his creations, who knew what amazing Rahi he might create?

Tentatively, he flew along the very edges of the storm. Yes, it was everything he imagined it to be. The energy was devouring everything in its path: water, stalactites, Rahi beasts… everything. But there had to be a way to harness it. He was a Makuta, after all, no mere whirlwind of power was too much for him to master.

Then he saw it – the answer! “It’s so absurdly simple,” he shouted. “I can control this storm! All I have to do is –”

A crimson bolt of power erupted from the heart of the storm. In a flash, it had disintegrated Mutran’s protosteel armor and vaporized the energy being within. In a microsecond, a 100,000 year-old Makuta was gone, leaving not even a cloud of dust to mark his passing.

Now even Gorast realized something was very wrong. The storm was growing in size and strength at blinding speed. “No,” she whispered. “It isn’t possible…”

“What is it?” demanded Antroz. “What’s going on?”

“We have to get away,” said Bitil. “Curse us for fools, we’ve been betrayed!”

“Krika was right. Krika was right,” Gorast kept muttering.

“Lead us out of here,” Antroz ordered Bitil. But that Makuta shook his head.

“You, Vamprah, and Chirox would only slow me down,” Bitil replied, already in flight. “Find your own way home.”

Antroz cursed Bitil as he flew away, while Chirox sought out Gorast. But the female Makuta was making no effort to escape. She was simply standing on the shore of the swamp, transfixed by the storm – whether it was the sheer destructive beauty of it, or the elegance of the betrayal it represented, not even she could say. Perhaps it was simply the realization that her leader, Makuta Teridax, had sent her and the others to this place knowing that if their mission was successful, this storm would erupt and slay them all… perhaps it was facing that truth that drove her mad.

Bitil would try to teleport to escape the onrushing storm, but it was already too close. Waves of energy interfered with his power and he went nowhere. He pushed his flight ability to its limit, but could not outrace the vortex. And, as Pohatu Nuva once observed, the one power no Makuta had was superspeed.

* * *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

The storm had begun.

It started out small, just in the center of the swamp, but grew bigger rapidly. It was terrible and beautiful at the same time, light and power released in a fury that nothing could compare to. Even I, releasing all my power in one mighty blast, could never have equalled what was going on below.

As I flew by, I saw Makuta Mutran tentatively hovering near the edges of the storm. It seemed as if he was trying to study it… the last foolish act of a wasted life. A bolt of lightning incinerated him as I watched. I didn’t have it in me to feel any regret… perhaps in some ways, what I have been through has changed me for good.

Along with my friends, I clung to one of the three vehicles discovered in the Codrex as we raced to escape Karda Nui. Around me, I could see the Makuta being consumed by the storm, and I thanked the Great Spirit I had been able to save the Matoran. Nothing could have survived this.
The Toa Nuva and Takanuva had climbed aboard the three vehicles. Their only hope of escape was that the flying craft could somehow outdistance the storm that signaled Mata Nui’s rising.

“Go!” shouted Tahu, and the three rocketed toward the western wall. Karda Nui and the storm that consumed it became a blur as they flew, three in the cockpits, the rest clinging for dear life. Pohatu spotted what he thought was the Mask of Life flying through the air… but then it was gone, and he had to wonder if it had ever been there at all. One sight he was certain of was that of the Makuta, fleeing before the storm and doomed to fail in their effort to escape.

“Tahu, the Makuta,” shouted Pohatu. “They won’t make it! Should we…?”

The Toa Nuva of Fire considered for a split second. It was against the code of a Toa to knowingly kill an enemy or allow one to die if it could be prevented. But he knew in his heart that there was no way to save the Makuta now, and trying would only mean the loss of his team.

“They lit this inferno,” he replied. “Let them burn in it.”

The vehicles were going beyond fast now and still picking up speed. They were heading for the portal in the western wall through which the Matoran of Light had escaped. But just as the vehicles approached it, a wave of energy rocked them. Suddenly, the Toa were headed for a solid wall.

“Hang on!” Lewa shouted.

The Axalara, Jetrax, and Rockoh shimmered out of existence, along with the Toa, just long enough to pass unharmed through the walls. The next moment, the Toa were racing through the darkness and hoping to find the light.

*   *   *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

Toa operate by a code, one that says we do not kill our enemies. To do so would make us no better than them. But when Pohatu called attention to the Makuta, now in mortal danger from the storm, I have to confess – I felt nothing. They had brought this upon themselves. They had chosen to tamper with the natural order of this universe in a petty effort to seize power, and now the universe was setting itself right. And it was a universe that had no room for such as them.

I heard Pohatu say he thought he saw the Mask of Life. Gali told us of Toa Ignika’s sacrifice, his decision to give up his new “life” to awaken Mata Nui. Although Ignika could not die, as Matoro had, he still put the universe before his own needs and desires. I wondered if I would have the strength to do the same, under similar circumstances.

I thought surely we were going to crash. A wave of energy had rocked the vehicles and now we were headed for a solid wall. But at the last moment, all three and their passengers shimmered out of existence, only to reappear inside a twisting array of tunnels. How Lewa, Pohatu, and Kopaka ever managed to pilot us through there, I do not know. Behind us, the storm had reached its peak… anyone and anything that was still inside Karda Nui was now disintegrated. The threat of the Brotherhood of Makuta was destroyed… or so I hoped.

*   *   *

Behind them, the storm had grown to its maximum. The Makuta, the Matoran villages, the swamp, and stalactites were gone, incinerated by the unleashed energies. And the Toa Nuva had, at last, achieved their destiny – after a thousand years of slumber, the Great Spirit had awakened.
Beneath the endless ocean, in the heart of the massive cave, energy pulsed course through rock. Machines which had sat immobile for a thousand years shuddered and slowly moved, shaking the universe. Power raced through long-disused conduits and streamed further and further from Karda Nui.

Water rippled around the barren island of Mata Nui, stripped of all life and vegetation by Bohrok hordes. Powerful quakes shook the earth, and massive megaliths of mountain and bedrock crashed into the ocean. An immense chasm ripped upward through the middle of the doomed island, each side sliding toward the ocean as something massive pushed up from below.

Far away, to the south and east and west, water foamed and boiled as underwater shockwaves spread from the movement beneath the sea. Gigantic whirlpools formed and disappeared. The sea itself heaved up towards the sky. Two halves of the island churned the already-frothing waters as they slid apart and dissolved into the maelstrom.

A tremendous head made of metallic protodermis rose from beneath the shattered remains of the once-beautiful island. Water, soil, and rock cascaded off its face as it rose higher and higher into the sky. Titanic shoulders breached the ocean, and an equally immense chest pivoted upwards. Slowly, the robot climbed to its feet and towered above the clouds for the first time in a thousand years. Yellow light gleamed from its eyes as it surveyed the ocean below.

Mata Nui had risen.
Hahli’s next move was to be using her power to stir up the ocean to try to wreck the Makuta ships. But before she could do so, everything changed all around her. The stars brightened overhead. The breeze turned warm. The earth shook in a gentle tremor. She didn’t know how, but somehow she was certain: the Great Spirit had awakened.

Beyond the city walls, a storm rose, tossing the Makuta fleet about like toys. Yet that did nothing to deter the Rahkshi, who kept on coming. They had broken through the walls in four places and were rampaging through Ta-Metru. Nothing could stop them, it seemed. At least until the ground erupted in front of them and a horde of Bohrok emerged. It was not a large number – only those specimens that were asleep in the Archives and the small nest below it – but it was enough. The Rahkshi attacked immediately, and the Bohrok responded. The two sides were locked in combat, and as they fought, the Mahri and the Order agents picked off Rahkshi at will. The battle seesawed back and forth, with the Rahkshi never realizing that all the Bohrok wanted was to get to the island of Mata Nui. Had the Rahkshi just gotten out of their way, the fight would have been over.

*      *      *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

We felt the universe jolt and tremble, as if the Great Cataclysm had happened again. But somehow we knew that this was no second disaster, but a sign of renewal and hope. I looked at the Toa Nuva, and I could see in their eyes that they know – after so long, they have achieved their destiny. Mata Nui is awake once more!

The journey to Metru Nui took ages, or so it seemed, despite the speed of the vehicles. We were all exhausted and just longing to see our friends again. No doubt Jaller and the other Toa Mahri were wondering where I had disappeared to. I had no idea what had been happening in the universe since I left Metru Nui. Had the Order attacked the Brotherhood? Had the Toa Mahri been pressed into service? Was Metru Nui still standing?

Home! I can see the Coliseum, the spires of Ko-Metru, the Great Forge of Ta-Metru, and the beautiful gem that is the Great Temple. We made it… We’re alive… and we have won!

*      *      *

The city suddenly shook from a series of explosions. An Order agent atop the walls yelled “Fliers! Incoming!” Hahli looked up to see three incredibly fast aircraft soar over the city, bank as one, and head back to where the ships waited. One slowed and dipped its wing to her, and she recognized Pohatu in the pilot’s seat. The Toa Nuva had come home.
Pohatu flew his vessel back out of the city to finish off the ships. Meanwhile, Lewa and Kopaka dove, peppering the Rahkshi with blasts of light. The sight seemed to rally the city’s defenders, who surged back toward the gaps in the walls. Led by Jaller and Hewkii, they drove the Rahkshi back.

Finally, the storm was over. The Brotherhood ships had gone to the bottom of the Silver Sea. The walls around the city had been battered down, but the rubble was littered with dead Kraata and shattered Rahkshi armor. Those of the invaders that were intact had flown away, provided they could escape the blasters of the Jetrax, Rockoh, and Axalara. Metru Nui was safe — and as the Toa Nuva confirmed, the Great Spirit had awakened. The power of the Brotherhood of Makuta was broken for all time. Turaga Dume and Turaga Yakama appeared side-by-side to announce that tomorrow would be a city-wide day of celebration in the Coliseum.

But Hahli did not feel like celebrating, even now. She could not help but remember Matoro, who had given his life that Mata Nui might live. And despite all the wounded and the dying among the defenders, she could not help but feel it had all been a little too… easy. True, there had been some unexpected help: the airships, the Bohrok, the storm. But they had faced an army of Rahkshi. Something told her they should not have won, at least not with so much of the city still intact.

She smiled. Turaga Nokama would have chided her for worrying so much. No matter how things seemed, the Great Spirit was awake for the first time in over one thousand years. Light had triumphed over darkness, hadn’t it? The Toa had achieved their destiny and saved the universe, hadn’t they? And that meant all was well again. Nothing very bad could happen now, could it?

Hahli turned to head for Ga-Metru, humming a song Nokama had once taught her. One written long ago that spoke of hope for tomorrow. Perhaps, if not for the music, she might have heard the sound of dark laughter on the wind.

*      *      *

From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

Turaga Dume welcomed us warmly, even sparing me a lecture about deserting my post. There must be a celebration, he says, of the Toa Nuva’s triumph and the awakening of Mata Nui. More, there must be a tribute to those Toa who lost their lives in the fight against the Makuta.

What an experience this has been. I have been a part of many celebrations of the Toa’s heroics — after they first defeated the Makuta, after the Bohrok were driven off — but to be a part of one as a Toa is an amazing thing. I look back at some of the things I have seen in recent days — a dimension where evil Toa ruled, another where there was no evidence of any Toa at all — and I realize how fortunate I am to have adventured beside heroes like Tahu, Gali, and Kopaka. Hopefully, this day is the start of a new era of peace for our people.

Turaga Dume made a beautiful speech, honoring the heroes who had given their lives to save the universe. Looking back, I wish I could remember Toa Lhikan, or that I had gotten to know Matoro better. Somehow, you expect your friends to live forever… but I guess nothing lasts forever. Who knows? Someday, all that we have done, all that we are, may be nothing more than faded carvings on some long-abandoned Wall of History. But now isn’t the time for such grim thoughts… this is a celebration, after all.

I am writing this from deep in the Archives… Gali is missing… Tahu badly injured… I don’t understand… how could this have happened? They’re coming… we have to keep moving… Onua says he knows a place we can hide and regroup. More later…
Tahu Nuva stood in the center of the great Coliseum of Metru Nui, listening to the cheers of over a thousand Matoran, among them Tanma and the Matoran of Light. Beside him stood his teammates, and nearby were Takanuva and the surviving members of the Toa Mahri. All of them could not help feeling a surge of pride in this moment— even Kopaka was smiling.

After so much struggle, so many battles won and lost, at last the quest was over. It had been dangerously close, but they had been successful. The Great Spirit was awake, the core of the universe had been cleansed of the Makuta, and balance had been restored to the universe. While none of them had seen the Mask of Life since their escape, they felt sure its countdown to destruction had stopped.

“Now this is what I’m speak-talking about,” said Lewa. “This is being a Toa-hero!”

“I’m just glad we all survived,” said Gali, glancing over at the Mahri. Somehow, their team seemed so incomplete without the presence of Toa Matoro, who had given his life to save the universe.

“I never doubted it,” said Lewa, smiling. “As soon as we got there and saw those dark-bat losers, I knew it would be as easy as taming a Gukko bird.”

“Oh, really?” said Kopaka. “Funny, you didn’t seem that confident when you were trying to figure out how to steer the Axalara.”

“Yeah, how many stalactites did you crash into? Three? Four?” laughed Pohatu.

“Quiet,” said Gali. “Turaga Dume is about to speak.”

The wise Turaga stood in his box high above and looked out over the assembled crowd of Toa and Matoran. For a moment, he was overcome with emotion and could not speak. Then, at last, he found his voice.

“My friends, we are gathered here today for a great celebration,” he began. “But we must do more than honor the heroes who stand before us. We must use this time to remember all who have given their lives to bring us to this point. Toa Matoro, Toa Lhikan, and hundreds of other Toa whose names we may never know fought and died to keep the Brotherhood of Makuta from victory. Without their efforts, none of us would be standing here today. Without their light, shadow would rule the land.”

There was a long moment of silence, then Dume spoke again. “Over one thousand years ago, the Makuta struck at the Great Spirit, casting him into a deep slumber and robbing us of his protection and guidance. For this crime, they have paid the ultimate penalty. Now, at last, we are free of them, forever.”

The cheers began again then, rocking the very structure of the Coliseum. Dume made no effort to quiet the crowd. He knew this was an outpouring of happiness that was long overdue.

When the noise had finally subsided, he raised his staff of office and gestured toward the Toa Nuva. “We have emerged from the darkness and into the light. And we have the six heroes who stand before us to thank on this great day—”

His words were cut off by a fleeting shadow that passed over the twin moons and an ice-cold breeze that cut through the Coliseum. Tahu glanced at Gali, confused and troubled. They had all felt something like this before, but never expected to feel it again.
“Look!” said Kopaka, pointing up to the sky. “The stars! Look what’s happening to the stars!” High above, the stars of Metru Nui were darting across the sky, spinning wildly. It looked as if the universe itself was being undone and remade at the same time. Slowly, the stars began to realign, coming to rest in a pattern both bizarre and horribly familiar. From random stars in the skies, they had arranged themselves into a shape – and it was the shape of the Mask of Shadows.

“This is impossible,” said Tahu. “Why would the stars shift to look like Makuta’s mask? Unless…”

“No,” said Onua. “No, it couldn’t be.”

“What does it mean? What can it mean?” asked Gali.

“I think I can guess,” Kopaka answered. “Radiak said the Makuta wanted Mata Nui to be awakened, but we could not guess why. Now Great Beings protect us if I am right about what has happened…”

The reply came from everywhere at once. A dark, humorless laugh boomed from every stone, every star, from the ground, the sky, the ocean. Matoran huddled together in fear at the sound even as the Toa drew their weapons.

“Makuta!” shouted Tahu. “We thought you were destroyed, but if we were mistaken, we are ready to correct that mistake! Show yourself!”

The reply came in a rumble of thunder. “Show myself, you insignificant flea? Look around, Toa Tahu – I am everywhere. I am everything you see.”

“What new crime have you dared commit?” yelled Turaga Dume.

“No crime, wise one,” answered Makuta, his voice as soft as the breeze that heralds a storm. “Your heroes brought Mata Nui back from death… but before his spirit could return to his body, mine slipped in and took its place. And so when the Toa Nuva awakened Mata Nui, they awakened his body… with my mind.”

“We have fought you before,” said Kopaka, “and we will do so again!”

Makuta chuckled, sending a tremor through the Coliseum. “Will you fight the air you breathe, Toa? The ground you walk on? Understand – I no longer need to battle you in hopes of ruling the universe. I am the universe.”

“Of course, you do have one hope,” continued the Master of Shadows. “Mata Nui himself. Too bad for you that I have banished his spirit into the Mask of Life and now…”

The ground shook violently as a surge of energy flowed through all existence. “Now I have banished the mask from this universe. I hope you have enjoyed your fleeting moments of happiness, Toa… they are the last you will know for an eternity to come.”

* * *

Hours ago…

The dark depths below the city of Metru Nui were a “place of death,” Toa Gaaki had warned. She had been right, at least for the Piraka named Zaktan, who had just been killed by Makuta Teridax. That was bad enough – worse was that it was impossible to tell just where Teridax was, as his voice came from everywhere. But of his body, there was no sign.

A formidable amount of power was arrayed against him in this chamber. Toa Helryx, leader of the Order of Mata Nui; Keetongu, powerful Rahi beast; the six Toa Hagah; Makuta Miserix; Axonn and Brutaka, agents of the Order. Of them all, Brutaka was the strangest, glowing green as he was and floating several inches off the floor. Even with his Kanohi mask shattered by Teridax, he seemed frighteningly powerful.

“Show yourself, you traitorous vermin!” bellowed Makuta Miserix. “Let us settle once and for all who rules the Brotherhood!”

There came the sound of soft laughter from every corner of the room. “The Brotherhood? There is no more Brotherhood, Miserix. In a very short time, the Makuta of Karda Nui will be dead. Makuta Tridax has died already, as have Spiriah and others. The Order of Mata Nui has been most helpful in that regard.”

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“And you seem unconcerned that your allies are perishing,” said Helryx. “Why?”
“I have no allies,” Teridax replied, “for I have no equals.”

A hum rose in the room, growing louder and louder until it drowned out all thought. All that existed was that head-splitting sound, which drove even Axonn to his knees. Only Brutaka stood. He lashed out with a bolt of power from his sword, shouting, “Enough!” The energy struck the machinery on the far wall and the sound stopped.

Teridax laughed. “A mere... sample... of what is to come.”
“I know all that you have forgotten,” Brutaka said. “I know that you put millions of lives at risk with your foolish grab at power. This is not what you were meant to do. This is not why you were created.”

“He is in the machines,” Miserix muttered. “Of course. So if we destroy the machines...”
The exiled Makuta hurled a bolt of gravitic power at the banks of machinery. Where it struck, metal began to crumple, folding in on itself as its gravity increased 100 times. But it was not Teridax who struck back at him – it was Brutaka! A blow from his sword sent Miserix sprawling.

“No! You do not understand!” shouted Brutaka.
“Then enlighten them,” said Teridax. “Please.”

Brutaka nodded. “We... we stand in as close to the mind of Mata Nui as it is possible to be. If we destroy this place, we destroy that mind, and doom the universe.”
“I don’t understand,” said Toa Norik. “If this is Mata Nui’s mind... where is his body?”

Brutaka gestured broadly, indicating everything around them. “It is our universe, Toa. We live inside the Great Spirit. But now Teridax has taken root in that body and controls it... controls all. As soon as the Toa Nuva awaken the body, Teridax will be unleashed to rain darkness on all who live.”
“How do we stop him?” said Toa Iruini.
“I will show you how!” Miserix roared. He reared back and hurled attack after attack at the machinery, the chamber walls, the ceiling, doing untold damage. Axonn, the Toa and Keetongu tried to stop him, only to be batted aside. “Let us all die,” Miserix continued. “Let the universe burn! I only want Teridax dead!”

“How... one dimensional of you,” Teridax replied.
Before the horrified eyes of the party, Miserix’s body began to change. It wavered, grew blurry, the colors seeming to run into each other. There was an explosive release of energy, blinding in its intensity. When the heroes could see again, a picture of Miserix existed on the wall of the chamber, but he himself was gone. Or was he?
“He makes a very unique decoration, does he not?” said Teridax.
“We’ll fight you,” said Toa Norik. “We’ll find some way.”
“You were the first Toa to do so,” said Teridax. “No doubt you would find a way... maybe even a way to win, if I allowed it.”

A wave of mental energy struck the six Toa Hagah, but did not seem to harm them. In fact, they seemed quite energized by it, even happy. They turned as a team and headed back out of the chamber, laughing and talking with each other as if this were the best day of their lives.

Helryx watched them go, shocked. “What... what did you do to them?”
“Call it... mercy,” said Teridax. “In their minds, the battle is over – and the forces of ‘good’ have won. They remember seeing me defeated at their hands, and in the reality they will perceive from now on, there is no Teridax, no rule by Makuta, no Toa and Matoran in peril. All they will see will be peace and happiness wherever they look.”
“That’s monstrous!” said Axonn. “Toying with their minds – were you afraid to face them in battle?”

Teridax ignored him. “Unfortunately, I cannot do the same to Axonn, or Brutaka, or you, Helryx – your minds are too well shielded. Given time, I could break those shields... but why waste the energy? And as for Keetongu... I am on the verge of becoming a Great Spirit. I have no time for pets.”
“You are tampering with fate,” Brutaka warned. “And you will be punished.”
“But not by you, and not today,” Teridax replied.
Brutaka winked out of existence, followed by Axonn, then Keetongu. Only Helryx remained.
“Do not worry, they are not dead,” said Teridax. “Merely teleported to the southern edge of this universe, to lands so dangerous even Makuta never dared travel to them. You will see them again, I am sure… if they survive.”
“And what of me?” said Helryx. “Will you banish me, too?”
“No,” said Teridax. “You see, Mata Nui’s great failing is that he had no one to share his thoughts with, no one with whom he could communicate. He did not have a ‘friend,’ for want of a better term. I will not make that mistake. You will remain here, Helryx, where all your needs will be met… and you will share in the brilliant darkness that is my mind. My plans, my dreams, my hopes, I will share with you… for at least as long as your sanity remains intact.”
Anyone else would have been filled with dread at Teridax’s words, but not Helryx. She saw an opportunity. She would be alive, her memories would be her own, and she would be in the center of Teridax’s thoughts. Right then, she made a vow – she would not break. She would not crumble before the weight of his darkness. No matter what, she would defy him, and somehow find a way to help others do the same.
“This isn’t over,” she said quietly. “You know that, don’t you, Teridax? No matter what your power, no matter what you can do to us all… this isn’t over.”
“Of course it isn’t,” Teridax answered. “How boring it would be if it was.”

* * *

Now…
Somewhere in the endless void between here and there, the Mask of Life flew. Free of the bounds of the Matoran Universe, it had turned from silver back to gold once more. It carried within it the mind and spirit of Mata Nui, on a journey whose destination no one could know. But if anyone were able to hear the being within the mask, one statement would have been clear, ringing through the void like the tolling of a bell:
*I will return.*
From the diary of Makuta Teridax...

Entry 1:
I am Makuta Teridax, and this is the story of how I came to be the supreme ruler of all that is and all that ever will be in this universe. In the beginning, the Great Beings created a universe, filled it with life, and appointed the Great Spirit Mata Nui to watch over it. Mata Nui created myself and my fellow Makuta to help him.

For thousands of years, we created the beasts that roamed and swam and flew. We watched over the Matoran villagers and protected the peace. And then came a day when we led our armies against the rebellious Barraki warlords, defeating them. They had hoped to overthrow Mata Nui and seize power. That was when I realized that they could never hope to achieve such a goal... but I could do it. I could rule a universe!

Entry 2:
Ah, how strange it is, now that I have achieved ultimate power, to look back on the Makuta I was. It has been a long journey from overseeing Metru Nui to embodying the universe, but the end has made it worth every moment’s trial.

I cannot recall just when it was that I grew dissatisfied with my existence. I know that I had always found it troubling that the Matoran would fall all over themselves to honor Mata Nui, yet ignore myself and my brothers. Had we not created the Rahi they used each day in their labors? Did we not protect them from themselves? And where was Mata Nui? Keeping the stars in the sky, making the suns rise, with no idea what his people were up to at any given time.

After my glorious defeat of the Barraki, I began to ponder if overthrowing the Great Spirit might be possible. It was Mutran who showed me that it could be done, but it would take a being of great skill and daring to achieve it. I knew I was that being.

At first, of course, my ambitions were small. I sought only to disable Mata Nui and show the Matoran who they should truly be worshipping. I proposed this plan to my brothers, but as I expected, Makuta Miserix refused to agree to my idea. I knew it was time to take the final step. I challenged Miserix’s leadership and others stood with me. He was forced from power and I took over leadership of the Brotherhood.

My first command was Miserix’s execution, along with those of the Makuta who had supported him. It was only later I would learn that Krika had disobeyed me and merely imprisoned Miserix on the island of Artidax.

With that done, I set to work crafting the virus that would send Mata Nui into an unending sleep. At the same time, I acted to remove potential threats, such as the Mask of Light created on Artakha. I
slowly and quietly mustered an army of Rahkshi, Visorak and Exo-Toa, and put the Dark Hunters to work eliminating Toa and Turaga around the universe.

Entry 3:

When I launched my plan to take over this universe, I will admit that I did not think big enough. I thought I could be satisfied with seizing power in the city of Metru Nui. By doing that, I could control the flow of energy from the city’s power plants to the rest of the universe, not to mention being able to decide when – or if – the Great Spirit would ever awaken again.

Now, as I look back at my setbacks there, I realize it was fate’s way of telling me I was meant to rule more than just one city. Oh, the Plan began well enough – I captured and imprisoned Metru Nui’s pathetic ruler, Turaga Dume, and took his place. I reprogrammed the robot guardians of the city, the Vahki, to serve me. I hired Dark Hunters to eliminate Toa Lhikan and his teammates, and I found a foolish little mask maker, Vakama, and demanded he create for me a Mask of Time.

I was like a Visorak spider in the center of its web, watching as my prey became entangled in the strands. One by one, Toa were made to disappear, until only Lhikan remained. The Matoran of the city accepted me as Dume, never once questioning my order to close the sea gates and isolate Metru Nui from the rest of the universe.

If there was a moment when it began to go wrong, it was when Nidhiki and Krekka failed to prevent Lhikan from handing out Toa stones to six worthless Matoran. Those six became the Toa Metru, a new team of meddlers determined to interfere with my plans. I had unleashed an intelligent plant menace of my own creation, the Morbuzakh, on the city, driving the Matoran into panic. The Toa Metru used the Great Disks and destroyed it.

But even that I was able to use to my advantage. They had temporarily used up their elemental powers in the fight and had not yet mastered their mask powers. When they couldn’t show either to a crowd of assembled villagers, I branded them as frauds and ordered their arrest. But my Vahki and Dark Hunters were only able to capture three, leaving Vakama, Nokama, and Matau free.

I would not allow any delay in my plans. While some Vahki pursued the three Toa, the rest captured the city’s Matoran and put them into canisters where they would be forced into a deep sleep. Over time, they would lose their memories of how they had been imprisoned. Then I would free them and they would hail me as their rescuer, gladly giving me their loyalty and complete control of Metru Nui. Of course, it would take many centuries for that to happen… unless I had the Kanohi Vahi, the Mask of Time, and could speed time up for the sleeping Matoran.

Vakama had succeeded in making the mask, by combining the six Great Disks. But before the Vahki could get it away from him, he and his allies had succeeded in freeing the other three Toa Metru and Lhikan, who had now become a Turaga. Then they dared to mount an attack on me – me! – totally ignoring how hopeless their cause must be.

Needing more power for the coming fight, I absorbed the energies of the Metru Nui power plant, along with the bodies and minds of Nidhiki, Krekka, and my flying Rahi, Nivawk. Shapeshifting into a large, winged form, I challenged Vakama for possession of the Vahi, even as earthquakes crumbled the city around us. He was tricky, ducking and dodging and hiding from my sight until his friends could arrive.

Even then, I would have absorbed him as I had the Dark Hunters had he not suddenly realized how to use the Mask of Time. He slowed time down around me, delaying my revenge. But the fool could not control the Vahi’s power and trapped himself in the time slowdown as well. I knew I had only to wait until his will weakened and he would be mine.

I never saw Turaga Lhikan running toward us, or his leap in between us, but when time at last flowed normally, it was Lhikan who took the blast meant for Vakama and died. Given a second chance at life, the Toa Metru attacked, trapping me inside a prison of solid protodermis locked with a Toa Seal.
They thought me defeated and helpless, of course… Toa often make that mistake. They could not know that I was reaching out with my mind to a pair of servants, who would soon arrive in Metru Nui and avenge my defeat…

Entry 4:
For almost 1000 years, I attacked the Matoran of Mata Nui with wild Rahi, storms, and plagues, all designed to break their spirits. Just when I believed they might be ready to crack, the Toa Mata arrived, to give them new hope. Or were they really the Toa Mata? I had to find out, and so set Rahi against them, knowing true Toa would be able to defeat them with ease.
That they did, battling their way even past the Manas crabs who guarded my lair and the Shadow Toa I unleashed upon them. When they reached Mangaia, I warned them of the power they faced, but they would not surrender. Instead, they attacked. Unwilling to waste my energies in battle with them, I let them believe they had beaten me. But even as they departed, secure in their victory, I was plotting to strike again.
A simple sonic signal awakened the Bohrok, creations of the Great Beings whose mission was to scour clean the island of Mata Nui (for reasons not even I understood at the time). In the tens of thousands, they swarmed across the island. Mountains crumbled, forests fell, rivers turned to dust before them. The Toa Mata were overwhelmed, trying to fight everywhere at once.
Oh, the “heroes” had their successes, such as discovering how helpless the Bohrok were without the krana, small creatures that controlled them. They were wise enough to ignore the swarms and strike at the two Bahrag, queens of the Bohrok, who lived below ground. While the Matoran battled the Bohrok above using their own mechanical creations, the Toa Mata made use of armored Exo-Toa suits they had found in the Bahrag chamber.
The Bahrag, of course, never had a chance – only a fool would have thought they could defeat six Toa. But they had achieved what I had wished, by delaying and exhausting the Toa. My victory was not complete, however – shortly after defeating the Bahrag, the Toa fell into tubes of energized protodermis. That strange substance transformed the Toa, giving them new masks, new weapons and armor, and greater power than before.
They called themselves the “Toa Nuva”… and they were about to find out that power can be a curse… and the loss of it even worse.

Entry 5:
It was not long after the Toa Nuva’s transformation that something most disturbing took place. Thousands of years ago, the Toa Hagah succeeded in stealing the Mask of Light from my fortress and concealing it somewhere. As it turned out, the mask had been smuggled to the island of Mata Nui, hidden inside a marker stone. A millennium later, it was found by a miserable Matoran named Takua… and suddenly, for the first time, I had reason to be concerned.
I am a creature of shadow, like my brother Makuta. Light is our enemy, and the possibility of a Toa of Light coming into being was a cause for dread. I had resisted unleashing Rahkshi on Mata Nui, knowing the destruction they could cause, but now I had no choice – the mask had to be recovered before a Toa of Light could be created!
My Rahkshi did what they did best – destroying, crushing, terrorizing. And they brushed aside Toa Nuva as if the heroes were fireflyer bugs. But for all that, they could not corner Takua and his friend, Jaller, long enough to take back the mask. Even my efforts to fill the Matoran with fear did not completely deter them from searching for the “Seventh Toa.”
In the end… ah, in the end, I was forced to improvise. My Rahkshi went down in dismal defeat before a reunited team of Toa Nuva. Takua himself turned out to be the destined Toa of Light, Takanuva.
Worse, he was not satisfied with surviving long enough to transform – he was determined to invade Mangaia and challenge me!

I thought with the speed of chain lightning. I knew that the Matoran returning to Metru Nui would be the first step toward the reawakening of the Great Spirit, but I also knew that inevitably they would find the city again someday… and perhaps the time was right for them to do so. I also could not be certain that I could walk away from a battle with Takanuva and his allies undamaged.

Thus when Takanuva confronted me, I allowed him to think he had defeated me. I knew that if the Toa believed me beaten, they would move on, never imagining what I was truly planning. Oh, all did not go smoothly… a stumble into energized protodermis resulted in Takanuva and I being merged into one being, Takutanuva, a truly revolting experience I hope never to repeat. And when we returned to our own individual selves, a collapsing gateway shattered my armor… an annoying turn of events.

Entry 6:

The Matoran had found their home once more… the Toa Nuva were triumphant… and the threat of the Makuta was over… or so I wished them to think.

For a Makuta, being without a body is most… disturbing. We exist as energy, but still we need a shell to inhabit – if not our armor, then a robot body or a living form with no spirit inside it (as difficult to find as an intelligent Toa). If we are without a body for more than a few weeks, we lose the ability to keep our energy intact, and we die.

I had been floating in Mangaia for some days in my energy state, pondering my next move. I had sensed that the Great Spirit was dying. I knew the Toa would soon realize this as well, and would seek out the legendary Mask of Life to save him. If I could delay their finding it, my ultimate plan could still succeed. But how?

The answer came when six ex-Dark Hunters calling themselves “Piraka” came to loot my lair. Subtly influencing their minds, I implanted the idea that they should journey to Voya Nui, rumored hiding place of the Mask of Life. They were thieves by nature, so it took little effort to convince them to go. I also made a few other “suggestions,” including the construction of a great crystal vat to house my energies on the island.

Did I truly believe this collection of misfits, robbers, and brutes would succeed in stealing the mask? No. But they would frustrate and delay the Toa, and turn time into my ally. They successfully invaded the island – posing as Toa! – and used Zamor spheres filled with a small portion of my substance to take over the minds of the Matoran population.

Then they began their search for the Mask of Life (looking in the wrong place, the fools), and stupidly allowed six Matoran to escape and hide in the mountains. They managed to forge an alliance with a warrior named Brutaka, although there was something about him I did not trust. But when the Toa Nuva arrived – a surprise to the Piraka, if not to me – they outdid themselves. Although it did not suit my plans to see Tahu and his little band killed on Voya Nui, I will admit to enjoying what happened next…

Entry 7:

I once told my assembled brothers that there are times one can only win by losing… or, at least, appearing to lose. Anyone who had been present during the final battle between Axonn and Brutaka would have thought I had been defeated. The vat holding my essence had been shattered by Axonn’s axe, leaving me without a body again, and the Mask of Life was in the deep ocean, seemingly out of my reach.

Naturally, anyone who thought that would have been wrong. But then, you know that already, don’t you? By now you know that had I truly wanted the Mask of Life, nothing would have stopped my getting it. But I didn’t want it – I simply wanted to control when and how the Toa Mahri got their hands on it.
I could not let them know that, of course, so I behaved as they expected me to. I possessed the body of Toa Inika Matoro to sow confusion and doubt among them, then allowed myself to be forced out of that body. I moved to the armored shell of a Maxilos robot, taunting Matoro by letting him know I was there. I even enlisted his help in a ridiculous scheme to harvest the fragments of the Nui Stone from the remains of the late Toa Tuyet – a marvelous diversion, if I do say so myself.

I must confess to finding Mahri Nui a most interesting place. Where else can one find a heavily armed jailer who was a Matoran the day before and has no memory of it? And the Barraki – 80,000 years later, the same brutal bunglers, whose plans had the same delicate touch as a rampaging Tahtorak. How amusing it was to watch them fight pitched battles for the mask, scheming against and betraying each other.

(That is not something that will ever happen among my allies. Only one will matters: mine. Only one voice can be heard: mine. Only one fist holds the universe in its grasp: mine.)

Having won in the end, I can afford to admit that all did not go as smoothly as I might have wished. The pathetic attempt by Karzahni to stake a claim to power was an annoyance, and his efforts to frighten me with visions of my possible future a joke. I reached into his mind and tore at it until he saw himself for what he was… a sight he could not stand, as it turned out.

I had ordered one of my brothers to bring to me an artifact called the Staff of Artakha. My stated reason was that I wished to use it to restore the Nui Stone. In fact, I simply wanted to study it. Anything that powerful with that sort of potential for creation could also be turned into an incredible weapon of destruction. He did bring it… but I did not get to keep it.

Brutaka chose that moment to decide to be a hero again. He stole the staff back from me, and before I could get it back, he had passed it on to another with the ability to teleport. Just that quickly, the staff was gone from the ocean to I knew not where.

I turned on Brutaka, prepared to destroy him for interfering. He was a formidable foe, and fought with the reckless courage of someone who has nothing to lose. But even with that, I would have easily won in the end, had it not been for one fact he shared with me. The being calling himself Hydraxon had taken the mask and intended to destroy it.

This could not be. If the mask were smashed, there would be no way to restore life to Mata Nui if he should die. The universe would collapse and I would be left the ruler of ashes. I needed that mask far more than I needed the joy of crushing Brutaka. So I left him there, with a vow that we would one day meet again, and when to seek out the mask and make sure it wound up in the hands of the Toa.

Naturally, I could not suddenly start acting like their ally. I had to make a show of trying to take the mask away from Jaller. But when he passed it on to Matoro, I smiled inside. My plan was proceeding. The only possible flaw was the Barraki, who might take the mask back or in some other way interfere with my timing. So I challenged them, revealing my true identity, and providing the Toa with the time they needed to sever the cord. Then I let the Barraki “destroy me,” so they would be free to delay the Toa just long enough for my purposes.

Of my adventures on Metru Nui, Mata Nui, and Voya Nui, I have already written. But let me make it clear – I knew from the beginning my actions might result in Mata Nui’s death. I planned for it… I anticipated it… one might even say that at some point I hoped for it. I did not need him dead, at least not at the start – but he had outlived his usefulness. He was like one of the prehistoric Rahi so loved by the Matoran, Mavrah – big and slow and unfit for survival in this modern universe. Taking his rule, even his life, would be to show mercy to all those who lived here. For too long, they had been directionless, lost without their Great Spirit – now they would have a purpose again – and that purpose would be the greater glory of Makuta Teridax.

Still, I could plot and plan… I could try to anticipate every contingency… but in the end, I could not make this plan succeed. I had to rely on others. What is most amazing is that I had to rely on Toa! I had to trust in their nobility, their unwillingness to ever admit defeat, their ability to overcome every
obstacle, and their long history of winning out, no matter the odds. I needed the Toa Mahri and the Toa Nuva to play their parts in this drama I had crafted... and if they did, it would be I who would finally bring down the curtain on the long reign of the Great Spirit Mata Nui.

Entry 8:

How does victory feel? What is its scent, its taste? Can a being relive a moment of triumph again and again, or does it blow away like ashes in the wind?

I know the answers to those questions. You could even say I know the answers to all questions now -- for I am the answer to each and every one.

The Toa Nuva and Takanuva escaped Karda Nui, of course -- I wouldn't have had it any other way. As for the Makuta, they would live only long enough to realize Krika had been right. The triumph of the Brotherhood would be my victory, and I had no intention of sharing it. No, I sent Antroz and Krika and the others to Karda Nui because they were the Makuta most likely to one day challenge me. Far better to have them out of the way, without getting my hands dirty eliminating them myself -- and the storm did that quite nicely.

The heroic Toa returned to Metru Nui, even as the Great Spirit Mata Nui began to rise. Of course, no one but I truly knew what that meant. I had been to the places no one else had ever seen. I knew the ultimate truth -- that Mata Nui did not rule the universe of the Matoran -- he was the universe. The Great Spirit was a vast being of metal, a thing of armored power, within whom dwelled the Toa, Matoran, Makuta, Vortixx, Skakdi, Zyglak, and every other species. The land masses we dwelled upon were but parts of Mata Nui's substance, existing to keep him functioning. We had looked to the heavens for our Great Spirit, when he was truly all around us.

No, for the residents of the City of Legends, it was enough that he was awake. They celebrated, they cheered, they bowed their heads to give solemn thanks to all of those who had died so that they could see this day... all the while thanking Mata Nui that it hadn't been any of them called upon to die. All was right in their puny little world... or so it seemed.

I found I could not wait any longer. I sent a chill breeze through their assembly, and my laughter was the thunder overhead. Realizing I still lived, the Toa shouted their defiance. The poor fools still did not understand.

Mata Nui had died, not long before. As I expected, the Toa Mahri found some way to restore him to life. I had counted on that. In the microsecond between when the body was alive once more and Mata Nui's spirit returned to it, my own spirit entered it. Once I was in place, Mata Nui's consciousness was barred from residing in his own body, for there cannot be two spirits in one form. The Great Spirit rose, standing high above the unending sea... and it was I. No longer did I need to dream of one day ruling a universe -- I was the universe.

What did I do next? Did I destroy all the Toa? Enslave the Matoran? Rain fire and ice upon my enemies? No, there would be time enough for that later. I had an infinity of years with which to torment Tahu, Jaller, and all the rest. I was the ground they walked on and the air they breathed. They could no more escape me than they could escape the starlight or outrace the wind. My reign of darkness had at last begun.

Ah, such changes I would bring. The Rahkshi would become the enforcers of my law, stalking every settlement. Visorak would sweep once more across the known lands, overwhelming any resistance, crushing any hint of rebellion. The Toa and the Dark Hunters would scatter before the power of my shadow, reduced to huddling in fearful anticipation of when I would end their pitiful existences.

Only two things still concerned me. The first was Mata Nui himself, whose spirit might somehow find a way to... inconvenience me. The second was the Mask of Life which, if left alone, would surely end all life in my universe.

My solution was, of course, brilliant. I forced Mata Nui's mind and spirit into the mask, and then ejected the mask into the void beyond this universe, beyond the world upon which I stood. I know not
where the mask will land, if it ever does, nor do I care. Of one thing, I am certain – I have nothing more to fear from Mata Nui. But this universe and its people have everything to fear from me.