



## Chapter 1

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?"

## Chapter 2

*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."

"Why...?" 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...”

## Chapter 3

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 Jerbraz 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 devastating 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 to 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 ...

## Chapter 4

*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 head. 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 the brute in one swift motion. The guard charged 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?

## Chapter 5

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."

## Chapter 6

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."

"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 mid-air, 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?

## Chapter 7

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."

## Chapter 8

“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.

“Hmmm,” 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 a 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 it was, 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."



## Chapter 9

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/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 Makuta 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.”

**To be continued in “Reign Of Shadows” ...**