



Chapter One

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 ... Vortixx 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 Vortixx. 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 to me to insure 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."

Chapter Two

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 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.

“His 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 got 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!”

Chapter Three

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 his way through with his Mask of Diminishment. 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 mid-air 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. Being 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 kio 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?” said 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.”

Chapter Four

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.

“Pipes,” said Hewki dismissively. “Dirt. Stone Rats. Maybe an underground stream or two. There’s nothing down there.”

“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.

“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.

Chapter Five

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.”

Chapter Six

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 one 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 ...

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.”

Chapter Seven

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."

Chapter Eight

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 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 akilini 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.

Chapter Nine

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.”

“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.”