



## Chapter 1

Vezone opened his eyes, astonished to still be alive. The last thing he remembered, he was surrounded by Zyglak, who seemed immune to his wit and charm. Then there was a flash, the sensation of being grabbed by someone far stronger than he, a weird sensation of travel, and darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, yes," Brutaka muttered, shaking his head. "This is going to work out just fine."

## Chapter 2

Roodaka was furious. As she walked along the waterfront, clad in a cloak made of plant fibre, she imagined over and over again all the disgusting things she would someday turn Brutaka into with her Rhotuka spinner. One way or the other, he was going to pay for this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ever again,” Vezon chimed in, smiling.

Splash. Splash. Splash.

The trader looked over Vezon, who was nowhere near as physically imposing as the rest of the team. How much damage could he do? “All right,” said the trader. “One blow – a light one! – just to look convincing.”

Vezon’s grin grew wider. Roodaka struggled against Carapar’s grip. Brutaka walked casually away from the scene, surveying the boat. Vezon drew his fist back. Then, in one smooth motion, Brutaka whirled and whacked the trader in the back of the head. The trader crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brutaka laughed as the ship moved slowly away from shore. “Who’s going to believe anyone stupid enough to stand still and get hit?”

### Chapter 3

Brutaka and his bizarre crew had been at sea for three days when he called them all together. "It's time to let you know our mission. And before you ask, you were all chosen for this trip for one very good reason: You're expendable. No one is going to care if any of you live or die, which makes you ideal for this job."

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

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

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

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

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

Brutaka smiled. "You get to live another day."

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

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

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

"Zyglak!" he shouted.

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

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

over weather to keep the ship in place.

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

Vezon looked horrified. He had spent many days a captive of the Zyglak not so long ago. It wasn't an experience he was anxious to repeat. “Friends? Zyglak don't have friends... just meals they haven't eaten yet.”

“They are outcasts,” said Spiriah. “And so am I. Now, Brutaka, I am taking command of this ship. We will be setting a new course, for the island of Zakaz. It was there that I met defeat and disgrace – there that my grand experiment failed, because the inhabitants were too savage to know what to do with my gifts. It is their fault I was cast out of the Brotherhood – and now they are going to pay!”

## Chapter 4

It had been three days since Spiriah's takeover of the team's vessel. Since then, they had steered a course for the island of Zakaz, surrounded on every side by boats filled with murderous Zyglak. Spiriah had been acting every inch the captain of the ship, ordering the others about and being particularly hard on Brutaka. Through it all, Brutaka said nothing and made no attempt to strike at Spiriah.

"To think, we were beginning to feel a little afraid of him," Takadox said, gesturing toward Brutaka.

"Speak for yourself," Carapar replied.

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

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

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

"Better that than being another word for 'failure,'" Roodaka muttered.

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

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

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

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

Shocked by the abrupt annihilation of his force, Spiriah was unprepared for Brutaka's attack. An energy blast knocked him off his feet, a well-placed kick kept him on the ground, and then Brutaka's blade was pressed against his chest armor.

"Go ahead," Brutaka said, coldly. "Use one of your powers. Think you can do it before I rip open your armor? And how long do you think your energy will last out here, with no body to occupy? Or maybe I should just throw you overboard right now."

"How...?" Spiriah began.

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

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

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

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

"This is the last member of our team," said Brutaka. "Treat her as you would me... and be sure she will treat you even worse than I do. Her name's Lariska."



## Chapter 5

Lariska stood at the bow with Brutaka, watching the ship cleave through the water. Behind them, the other members of the team were keeping a careful eye on Makuta Spiriah - not that they could have done much to stop him if he tried to make a break. But Brutaka had done a little math and explained to Spiriah how many hours he was likely to survive once the Brotherhood of Makuta knew where he was. Then he assured Spiriah that if the ship and its occupants were all destroyed, the Brotherhood would be notified immediately where to start looking.

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't have any powers, freak," Carapar roughly reminded him.

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

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

Brutaka approached, carrying the weapons. Takadox took a long, thin blade, while Carapar grabbed a broadsword. Roodaka pounced on a Rhotuka Launcher. Brutaka handed Spiriah a projectile weapon and warned him with a cold smile not to point it at

himself... or anyone else. Vezon got a spear, which he turned over in his hands with no real enthusiasm.

"What's it do?" he asked.

"Nothing," Brutaka answered. "But with your powers, you don't need it, right?"

Vezon brightened. "Right," he agreed, having forgotten once again that he had no powers. Carapar growled in frustration and stalked away.

"We have what we came for," Takadox said nervously. "Let's go."

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

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

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

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

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

"Visitors," said the voice. "At last."

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

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

"Now," said the entity that held him in its grip. "Now tell Tren Krom of your power."

## Chapter 6

Brutaka tried to close his eyes. It didn't help. He couldn't get the image of Tren Krom out of his mind - a writhing, crimson mass of tentacles emerging from a gelatinous central core, with two dead yellow eyes that somehow followed every movement without ever moving themselves. At least, that was what he had seen at a glance – somehow, Brutaka knew to gaze for long at Tren Krom would be to invite madness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What... what do you want with us?" whispered Vezon. "And please don't say someone to hold your mirror for you."

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

"Why ask us?" said Lariska. "You obviously don't really care."

"Would you shut up?" hissed Carapar. "Rule number one: don't annoy the giant, tentacled monster, or don't they teach that one in The Shadowed One's school?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carapar brought his blade down, confident he had taken his enemy by surprise. Then a third eye suddenly appeared on Tren Krom, one gazing right at Carapar. The Barraki froze in mid-blow. A shaft of energy shot out from the eye, bathing him in its glow. The

next instant, Carapar shattered into fragments as if he had been made of crystal. Then there was nothing left of him but a pile of glittering dust on the stone floor.

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

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

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

No one was going to take the time to argue. Gathering up Brutaka and Lariska, they fled the cave even as the stone walls that surrounded the island receded into the sand. Only Takadox paused to look back at the cavern where Carapar had died, wondering for a moment just what it would take to end the life of a being older than the stars.

## Chapter 7

Brutaka and Lariska stood together, watching Takadox standing silently by the rail of the ship. "I worry about that one," said Lariska. "He has not spoken a word since we left Tren Krom's island, after the death of his friend Carapar."

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

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

"Welcome to Artidax," said Brutaka.

Vezon approached, chuckling. "Hope we survive our stay."

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

Brutaka and Spiriah, being the two most powerful team members, led the way to shore. As they trod on the ebony sands, all seemed quiet. "So you know nothing about the defenses here?" asked Brutaka.

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

"What?"

"Freeing Miserix," said Spiriah. "He can't stop the Plan. All we will find here is an early death. Listen, we -- "

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

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

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

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

“On the contrary,” said Lariska. “I think you would be very useful. Anyone ever hear of a stalking Kinloka?”

Surprisingly, Vezon was the only one who nodded. When everyone turned to look at him, he shrugged. “Vezok. He saw lots of things, and since I came from him, I saw them too. Say, when we are done here, who’s up for killing him? I’ll even clean up after.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lariska turned. “There! Look out!”

Brutaka turned to see Takadox bringing his blade down on the vine. In the moment before an avalanche of rocks cut them off from the Barraki and trapped them in the tunnel, they all could see his evil smile.



## Chapter 8

Brutaka pushed aside a pile of rubble and struggled to his feet. Around him, Spiriah and Roodaka were using shadow energy to blast themselves free. Vezon and Lariska were nowhere to be seen.

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

"I've got him!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No Carapar, no Takadox," said Vezon in a sing-song voice. "Who will go next? Spiriah the Sullen? Brutaka the Boorish? Vezon the Vanquisher? Or Lariska --"

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

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

"What are we going to do with this legendary Makuta when we find him?" asked

Roodaka. "What makes you think he will help the likes of you?"

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

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

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

Roodaka smiled. "And who, might I ask... are 'we'?"

Brutaka smiled back, the grin of a Kavinika about to feast. "Now, now ... what you don't know won't cut you in two and dump you off this bridge."

"I hear something," said Lariska. "Up ahead... it might be a voice... or the rumble of the volcano."

"I hear something too," said Vezon.

"Shut up," replied Roodaka.

"And I see something as well," Vezon continued. "But since you aren't interested..."

"We're not," Roodaka snapped.

"Personally, I always find my comments and observations most interesting," Vezon rambled on. "You haven't truly lived until you have seen the world through the eyes of madness. Why, half the time I don't know if what I see is what's really there, or what I wish was there ... or what I pray, I beg, I plead is not."

"Why did we bring him again?" said Spiriah.

"He breaks up the monotony," said Lariska.

"I'd like to break something much more satisfying," hissed Roodaka. "I hear Skakdi make a most appealing sound when you snap them into pieces."

"But, since you seem to have no interest," Vezon continued, utterly disregarding his teammates' comments. "Well, then, I won't tell you that the floor is moving. You can find out on your own."

"The floor is...?" Brutaka repeated. He looked down. Far below, the tangled growth of dead branches had indeed begun to shift. The reason why rapidly became clear: they weren't branches at all, but the twisted limbs of thousands of crimson insects, now disentangling themselves from each other. Apparently, it was time to wake up and they were ready for their morning meal.

Swifter than anyone could have predicted, they began to swarm up the walls of the canyon on every side. In an instant, they had blocked the openings on both ends of the bridge. The surrounding rock was now gone, buried beneath a skittering sea of red and thousands of unblinking, predatory eyes.

"No, no, no," said Vezon, shaking his head. "Too late to apologize. Much, much too late."

## Chapter 9

Brutaka scanned the cavern with narrowed eyes. The glowing eyes of the insects all around made it feel as if he were trapped in some lunatic starfield. Behind him, he could hear Vezon humming softly to himself, as if out for an afternoon stroll.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are they following?" asked Brutaka.

"They don't seem to be," Lariska answered. "Maybe they don't like to leave their nest."

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

"Maybe there's another way out up ahead," said Brutaka.

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

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

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

"What ... is that?" asked Lariska.

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

"Miserix," whispered Spiriah.

"All right, we can take him home," said Vezon, "but don't expect me to clean up after him."

## Chapter 10

Vezon looked from the massive, chained form of the dragon-like beast to his partners, then back at the dragon, then over to Brutaka. He opened his mouth to speak, but Brutaka cut him off.

“Don’t say it,” said Brutaka.

“We’re going to need --” Vezon began.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miserix’s eyes glowed red. A burst of laser vision struck Vezon, sending him tumbling backwards. “Gnat,” muttered the Makuta.

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

Spiriah took a reluctant step forward. At the sight of another Makuta, the dragon smiled. “Spiriah. I do remember you. When Teridax rose against me, you were one of

the first to be by his side. I have so looked forward to meeting you again.” Brutaka tightened his grip on his weapon. He did not like Miserix’s tone at all.

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

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

“But you did not come,” rumbled Miserix. “So now I shall benefit from yours.”

A hand made of living shadow erupted from the dragon’s chest, grabbed Spiriah, and pulled him into Miserix’s body. There wasn’t even time for a scream.

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

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

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

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

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

“Not without causing him great pain.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miserix lowered his head and leaned in so that his massive face was up against Roodaka’s. When he spoke, it was in a whisper. “Little one, I am Makuta Miserix. I am no one’s pawn. I am no one’s ally.” His next words came in a roar that drove Roodaka back into the rock wall. “And I am no one’s fool!!”

Brutaka watched, looking unimpressed. “Are you done?”

Miserix nodded slowly. “Let us go. I have a universe to rediscover.”

Brutaka loaded the stunned Roodaka and the now semi-conscious Lariska and Vezon onto the dragon’s back. Then he climbed on himself. Miserix unfurled his wings and stepped out into the open air. They soared high above the island, pausing only long enough for Miserix to make a muttered vow to come back and destroy the place one



day. Brutaka noted that the team's boat was gone – Takadox had gotten away after all, then.

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

Miserix spread his wings and turned toward the north, carrying his passengers into the unknown.

**The End.**