Dreams of Destruction

By Greg Farshtey

I

Rescue!

The Ta-Matoran named Sarda had no doubt he was living his last moments. He and his friends had been captured by Pridak, leader of the Barraki, and imprisoned in a sea cave. When Pridak grew angry at their refusal to give him information, he grabbed Sarda and hurled him out of the cave, right into the middle of a school of hungry Takea sharks.

Sarda had no doubt what was going to happen next. He wouldn't be able to hold off a hoard of sharks for more than a couple moments. He hoped the end would at least be quick.

Something darted toward him — but it wasn't a Takea shark. It was a masked figure on a mechanical sea sled, wielding a sword. In a flash, the newcomer had slammed into the center of the school, scattering the sharks. Before they could reform, a waterspout pulled them in and whirled them far from the site.

Stunned, Sarda watched his rescuer approach. Was there something familiar about him? Sarda wasn't sure. But it certainly seemed like the stranger knew the Matoran.

"Sarda?" he said. "Is it really you?"

"Of course it's me," Sarda replied. "And right now, I have friends back in that cave that need rescuing. If you're any good with that sword, I could use your help."

The newcomer looked at the cave mouth, then in the distance, where the sharks were already massing for an attack. Then he turned back to Sarda. "Somebody once told me that knowledge is a sharper weapon than a sword. Before I charge into a fight, I could use a little more of that."

Something about the stranger's words sparked a memory in Sarda. He peered closely at the unexpected arrival.

"Toa Lesovikk?" asked Sarda, almost afraid to hope he was right about the newcomer's identity. "But… it can't be… how could you be here?"

The Toa flashed a sad smile. "Yes… I am Lesovikk, though no one has called me Toa in a long time. As for how I got here… it's a long story, my friend."

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As Toa Lesovikk began to began to share his tale with Sarda, neither was aware they were being watched with eyes that gleamed with madness…

The being known as Karzahni had journeyed far to reach the watery depths of the Pit. His travels had begun in his own isolated, forbidding realm. There he had encountered six wandering Matoran and attempted to imprison them as he had so many others over the millennia. But these Matoran escaped him, though not before he learned from them about beings much more powerful than he — the Great Spirit Mata Nui and the evil Makuta.

Mata Nui was asleep, he learned, and Makuta was presumed dead. That meant there was an opportunity for a brilliant, ruthless leader to seize power. He trailed the Matoran to an island named Voya Nui and watched them transform into more powerful figures called Toa. He witnessed their battles with thieves called Piraka over possession of the powerful Mask of Life. When the Toa journeyed down into the depths of the ocean, Karzahni followed, staying far enough behind that he was not noticed.

Reaching the Pit, he had become disoriented as the black waters mutated him. He lost track of the Toa and wandered for some time before chancing on this strange Toa speaking with a Matoran. He didn't know who this "Lesovikk" was, or why he was here — perhaps searching for the Mask of Life as well? But he had learned enough about Toa in the last few days to know they could be powerful enemies.

Unlimbering one of his chains, he willed it to burst into flame. Whirling it above his head, he let it fly. It wrapped itself around the startled Lesovikk, who yelled in shock and pain. Karzahni yanked him off his feet even as the Ta-Matoran nearby charged.

"Stop! Leave him alone!" yelled Sarda.

"Nonsense," said Karzahni. "There is a war to be fought in this place, and a universe to win. But first… I need to sharpen my claws in combat. When I am done with the two of you, I will be ready at last… ready to conquer!"

3

Lesovikk struggled in vain to escape the fiery chains of Karzahni. All the while, the smiling face of Karzahni loomed over him.

"Don't bother to fight," said his captor. "No one, not even the legendary Manas crab, has been able to break those bonds."

"You… don't… remember me, do you?" Lesovikk said. "No, I guess you wouldn't — but we have crossed paths before. It was many, many thousands of years ago. I came to your realm seeking to free my friends, who had been sent there by a mad Turaga. I was driven off by your Manas crabs, but I came again, and again… only to fail each time. By the time I slipped past your guardians, my friends had been exiled from your realm, I knew not where."

Karzahni laughed. "Then failure is nothing new to you, Toa. You can take comfort that your defeat today will come as no surprise."

"He's not a failure!" Sarda shouted. "I… I remember! I remember Lesovikk defending our home from Rahi beasts and anything else that threatened us… I remember when he and his team left, never to return… at least not while I was still there. He's not a failure — he never was — he's a hero!"

Lesovikk looked up at the Matoran. It had been a very, very long time since anyone had called him "hero." The word acted on him like a bolt of energy. Drawing on every last bit of his power, Lesovikk flexed his muscles and snapped Karzahni's chain.

"Impossible," whispered Karzahni. "You were downed… defeated… stunned."

"I am stunned," said Lesovikk, rising to his feet. "Shocked and amazed too, that you thought mere links of metal could hold a Toa."

There was something in the veteran warrior's eyes now that made even the mighty Karzahni hesitate. Exhausted, weakened, Lesovikk still stood, weapon at the ready and primed for battle.

"Now, you rancid remains of a Rahi's dinner," said the Toa of Air. "Let's try this again."

4

Lesovikk stood, ready for battle. Before him stood his ancient enemy, Karzahni. Faced with a fighting-mad Toa, Karzahni should have been at least a little worried. Instead, he was smiling.

"We have no reason to fight, Lesovikk, none at all," said Karzahni. "Why should I waste my energy on you, when there is easier prey to be found?"

The emerald-hued villain turned his gaze to Sarda, the Ta-Matoran who swam nearby. Using his power to make others see what could be and what might have been, he touched Sarda's mind. The Matoran stiffened as a vision filled his thoughts, a vision of the day the city of Mahri Nui broke off of its island and sank beneath the waves.

In real life, Sarda had survived the plunge, saved by finding a bubble of air emitted by the airweed below. But in the vision Karzahni gave him, he did not survive — none of the Matoran did — they all drowned before they ever reached the waters of the Pit. It was a horrible sight and Sarda's eyes widened in fear.

"Stop it!" shouted Lesovikk. When Karzahni didn't respond, he unleashed a mini-cyclone from his sword, striking the villain dead on. That was enough to break Karzahni's concentration, but the damage was done: Sarda had passed out on the ocean floor from sheer shock and fear.

"I have better things to do than toy with the likes of you," growled Karzahni. "So will you fight me, or will you help your little friend?"

Lesovikk wanted to batter the smile off Karzahni's face. But he could see that Sarda's air bubble had disappeared — the Matoran was drowning!

"This isn't over, Karzahni," said the Toa. "Wherever you go, you had better be looking over your shoulder — because one day, I will be there. And I promise I will be the last thing you'll ever see."

5

There was no time to waste if Sarda was going to be saved. Scooping up the drowning Matoran's body, Toa Lesovikk rushed him to a nearby, free-floating air bubble. What followed was one of the strangest things Lesovikk had witnessed in tens of thousands of years.

At first, it seemed to be working. Sarda gasped, choked, but the life-giving air was doing his job. Then it suddenly seemed as if he were drowning again, this time in air. It was then that Lesovikk noticed the changes to Sarda's body. No longer protected by a personal air bubble that surrounded him, the waters of the Pit were mutating the Matoran. He had become a water-breather, and air was poison to him now!

Hastily, Lesovikk pulled him free of the bubble. Sarda took a deep "breath" of water and his spasms ceased. "Are you all right?" Lesovikk asked.

Sarda smiled weakly. "You… you promised me a story."

Lesovikk nodded and began to speak. In as few words as possible, he told Sarda how he and his team of Toa had gone on a vital mission many ages ago. Lesovikk had hesitated for a crucial second in battle, with the result that his entire team had been killed. Haunted by guilt, he returned home — only to find that all the Matoran he had befriended had been sent to the realm of Karzahni.

Unable to free them, Lesovikk had become a wanderer. He had picked up new equipment along the way, including a combination sky and sea sled. And he had done some good, but never enough to atone for his past mistakes.

"Then maybe this is your chance to do that," said Sarda. "Karzahni is a menace. If he were to ally with the Barraki, Mahri Nui wouldn't stand a chance. We have to stop him!"

Lesovikk shook his head. "If he is stopped here, he will just return to his realm and do more evil to his Matoran captives. No, Sarda, we need to do more than stop him — we need to destroy him."

6

Karzahni yanked hard on his burning chain, tearing the black fire sword from the grasp of the Maxilos robot. With a second strike, he shattered the Toa of Water who swam behind the robot into pieces.

He had been heading for the Matoran settlement when he spotted Maxilos, the now destroyed Toa, and a Toa of Ice swimming in the opposite direction. His keen hearing picked up the robot saying something about a "Staff of Artakha." Karzahni knew Artakha well… and hated him… and if something of his was down in this Pit, it had to be seized or destroyed.

The Toa of Ice turned as if to attack. Karzahni hit him with a nightmarish vision of failure, so horrible it would have driven anyone other than a Toa into gibbering insanity. That left only the robot to deal with.

"Speak, machine," said Karzahni. "I know you have a voice. I am Karzahni, and I would know — what is this Staff of Artakha, and where can I find it? Or do I need to dismantle you and tear the information out of your mechanical mind?"

The robot said something in reply, but so softly even Karzahni couldn't hear it. He swam closer to Maxilos, then closer still. The robot was, after all, unarmed.

"Interesting," said Karzahni. "Even if the design was not familiar, you have the stink of Artakha about you. Reason enough to turn you to scrap. Speak up, you miserable machine, I cannot hear your words!"

The right arm of Maxilos lashed out faster than anything Karzahni had ever seen. The robot's hand gripped Karzahni around the throat and squeezed.

"I said, so this is Karzahni," came the reply. "Karzahni, the jailer of Matoran… Karzahni, the would-be avatar of evil… Karzahni, the fool… and soon to be a dead fool."

"Who are you —?" Karzahni demanded.

"I am Makuta," the robot replied. "I am power. You have broken my Toa and delayed my passage…"

Makuta, in the Maxilos robot, hurled Karzahni down toward the sea floor. He plowed through a rock ledge and landed hard, half-buried in the mud. With Karzahni's concentration shattered, Matoro shook himself free of the illusion that had paralyzed him.

"And I hate to be late," Makuta finished.

Karzahni forced himself to his feet, forcing a twisted arm back into place. "Yes. I've heard of you, Makuta — a tin-covered tyrant who wishes to be lord of the Matoran… as if being worshipped by insects had some meaning. I do not know where you were going… but your journey is about the end."

Matoro felt a great disturbance in the water. He turned to look for its source and then gasped at the sight. It was Manas crabs — hundreds of them — huge and hungry, and all with only one thought in their bestial minds:

Kill the enemies of Karzahni.

Continued in Into the Darkness*, chapter five…*

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Makuta's scream slowly died away into silence. Matoro wondered what had happened — had Karzahni's power broken the villain, driven him mad… even killed him?

But a glance at the Maxilos robot Makuta possessed gave the answer. The eyes were fixed on Karzahni with a gaze that was made all the more frightening by the complete lack of emotion in it. After a long moment, Makuta spoke.

"You… made a… mistake, Karzahni," he said. "You see, I don't get nightmares…"

With one backhanded sweep of an armored fist, Makuta sent Karzahni sprawling. "I give them."

Standing over his fallen foe, Makuta whispered, "Your shadow plays are impressive, tyrant — but never forget who is the true master of shadows."

With that, Makuta plunged telepathically into the mind of Karzahni. It was a complex parchment of mad dreams, burning ambitions, twisted memories, and long-buried fears. Makuta considered all the subtle ways he could attack, and rejected them all. Karzahni had hurt him. Karzahni must pay in full.

Grasping Karzahni's mind with his own, Makuta tore it to shreds. Then, with the merest sample of his magnetic power, he sent the dictator hurtling through the ocean until he was lost from sight.

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Toa Lesovikk had watched the battle with Sarda and Idris. They had discovered the Ga-Matoran, mutated by the waters as Sarda had been, and recruited her in their task. Now both Matoran wondered if their quest was even necessary anymore.

"Karzahni doesn't seem like he would still be a threat," said Sarda. "Not after what Maxilos just did to him."

"I'm not sure who this Maxilos is or what his powers are," said Lesovikk. "But I once ran into a rock lion, half-dead from injuries received in battle, mad with pain. I thought it would be easy to end it and put the poor thing out of its misery." He paused, then said, "That fight lasted three days… and the rock lion won. Don't underestimate a wounded foe."

Lesovikk began to swim in the direction Karzahni had traveled. "If anything, our enemy may be more dangerous now than ever before."

8

Toa Lesovikk, Sarda and Idris swam slowly through the Pit, keeping an eye out for predators. They had been following the wounded Karzahni for the better part of a day, and had seen him finally take refuge in a sea cave. Lesovikk was fairly certain Karzahni had not spotted them, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

"This is what we're going to do," he said to the two Matoran. "I spotted some equipment in a Barraki weapons cache. We're going to make a trap, and then lure Karzahni into it. And then we can —"

Lesovikk abruptly stopped speaking. The world around him had changed. He wasn't underwater anymore, side by side with two mutated Matoran in pursuit of a mad being. No, he was with his old Toa team — his long dead Toa team — and they were battling for their lives against a massive cloud of acid. Two dozen Rahi and a handful of Matoran had already died on this island, turned to ashes by tendrils of the gaseous menace. Now it was bearing down on the eight Toa who dared to stand against it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Lesovikk knew this had happened before. He had hesitated for the briefest of moments and the cloud had destroyed his teammates. But here he was, and here they were, and maybe he had a second chance. He summoned his elemental power and sent a cyclone at the cloud, tearing apart its substance and scattering it to the winds.

And just like that… it was over. His fellow Toa were smiling and bumping fists with him, already talking about the next adventure they would have. Grateful Matoran were pouring out of their homes to thank the heroes who had saved them all. He had done it! He had defeated the creature and his team was together and alive!

"Lesovikk?" said Toa Nikila. She was a Toa of Lightning and his closest friend on the team. "Are you all right? You seem so far away."

"All right?" he responded. "Yes… no… it's just… this doesn't feel right somehow. Like it wasn't supposed to happen this way."

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course it was — we won, didn't we, thanks to you. We're Toa. Don't we always win in the end? So stop frowning and come on, the Matoran are putting on a celebration for us."

Lesovikk followed along, but his thoughts were still elsewhere. He couldn't escape the feeling that he wasn't supposed to be here, that there was something else he should be doing right now. But for the life of him, he couldn't think of what it was. And he wasn't sure that he wanted to… because one thing he did know was that right now, this moment, he felt the happiest he had in a long, long time.

He was with his team, and that was where he intended to stay. No one and nothing would take him away from them, ever again.

Sarda and Idris stared with increasing concern at Lesovikk. He seemed to be in a trance of some kind and nothing they had done had been able to rouse him. It was Sarda who put their fears into words.

"Lesovikk said Karzahni can show you alternate events — usually horrifying ones, intended to terrify you. But, Idris… what if he showed you a future — or a past — that you wished for? And what if you wanted it so much… that you stayed trapped in that vision forever?"

9

"This is crazy!" whispered Idris, swimming fast to keep up with Sarda. "Would you just hold up for a second and listen?"

Sarda shook his head. "You saw what happened outside. Karzahni did… something to Lesovikk, I know he did. That leaves only us to fight him, and that's what we're going to do."

The two villagers swam deeper into the sea cave. Lurking somewhere inside was the maddened Karzahni, a figure of fear for every villager. Was it bravery that drove the two Matoran to dare challenge him, or insanity? Even Sarda couldn't say for sure.

"Now, remember the plan," said Sarda. "I was able to find the material Lesovikk mentioned and rig a makeshift trap. We get him to chase us, he trips the trap, and wham!"

"I just hope it's wham for him," said Idris, "not wham for us."

Outside the cave, Toa Lesovikk remained trapped in a vision of what might have been. His Toa team, which in reality had died thousands of years before, lived again in his Karzahni-created hallucination. There they were — Toa of Fire, Lightning, Sonics, Iron, Stone, Gravity, and Water, banded together in the first ever Toa team.

In his mind, millennia had passed, filled with hard-fought battles and great victories. Most recently, they had saved a band of Toa besieged by frostelus on a remote island. A novice Toa, Lhikan, had shown such bravery in the fight that Lesovikk was considering recruiting him. As he looked around the battlefield, Lesovikk knew that all was right in his world.

"That was fun," said Toa Nikila, smiling. "I never get tired of bashing a few heads together. Hey, some of the guys were suggesting we patrol that zyglak hunting ground next week – what do you think?"

"Sure, I —" Lesovikk began, and then stopped. Something she had said had suddenly triggered a flash of memory. In it, Nikila and the others were dead, killed by the acid cloud they had defeated so long ago… but wait, that wasn't right. They weren't dead, they were alive… weren't they? And they weren't killed by an acid cloud…

"Zylglak," the Toa of Air said abruptly. "You were killed by zyglak."

"What?" asked Nikila. "Those losers kill me? Not on their best day."

But Lesovikk could see it all now, as clearly as he saw Nikila's armor, her trident, and her Mask of Possibilities. They had been in a battle, long ago, but not with an acid cloud, with a horde of zyglak. He had seen them coming, but hadn't acted fast enough, and… and…

And his teammates died. They all died.

He looked at Nikila. She was fading, breaking apart, like the trick of the mind she had been all along. She pleaded with him to help her, but he forced himself to close his eyes and turn away. He had lost his chance to help her, or any of the others, long ago.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back in the Pit. His friends were gone; his future was gone; and all that was left him was revenge.

10

Toa Lesovikk was about to charge into Karzahni's cave when he saw red and blue streaks heading out of it. They turned out to be Sarda and Idris, with Karzahni in maddened pursuit behind them.

Lesovikk glanced around. The crude trap was already in place. As Sarda and Idris emerged from the cave, he grabbed them and threw them roughly to the side. Unable to halt his lunge, Karzahni struck the trap, which promptly slammed shut around him.

The Toa of Air had waited a long time for this moment. Now Karzahni would pay for his crimes against the Matoran. But as Lesovikk looked at what remained of the once fearsome ruler — now a maddened, pathetic shell, thanks to his previous battle — the Toa turned away, sickened. There was nothing more he could do to Karzahni than had not already been done… and leaving him alive was a worse punishment than killing him.

"That Toa who told me about this place… Krakua, I think his name was… he said if Karzahni was captured, someone would come to take him away," Lesovikk muttered.

"Wherever they take him, I hope they have strong chains," said Sarda. "But… now what? Idris and I have become water-breathers — we can't live in our own village anymore! What's going to become of us?"

Lesovikk turned away in time to see a strange figure disappearing with Karzahni. (This was Botar from the Order of Mata Nui, still a stranger to Lesovikk.) "Follow me," said the Toa. He led the two Matoran to a small cave in which were scattered fragments of equipment.

"I think this used to be some kind of breathing system," said the Toa. "I found it when I was scouting around. It won't work for breathing air, but I might be able to repair it for water-breathing. Only thing is, there's only enough equipment here for one unit."

Idris looked at Sarda, then back at Lesovikk. "You take it, Toa. The world needs you. Two Matoran more or less won't matter."

"I don't know that there's any place left for me in the world I've known," Lesovikk replied. "Maybe there is in this one. Anyway, I am in no hurry to leave."

"Then neither am I," said Sarda. Before Idris could object, he cut her off. "You take it, Idris. Go back to Mahri Nui. Tell them… tell them I wanted a new adventure."

Idris wanted to argue, but the look in Sarda's eyes told her it would do no good. After many hours of work, Lesovikk had fashioned a crude helmet that would allow Idris to breathe sea water that would be held inside the device. Sarda kept his goodbye to her short, but Lesovikk could see how hard it was for both of them.

"Where will you go now?" the Toa asked.

"With you," Sarda replied. "I don't know everything you've been through, but I think maybe you could use a friend."

Lesovikk thought for a long time, and then slowly nodded. "And a reminder of what I once was… and maybe could be again."

Together, Toa and Matoran swam off into the depths of the ocean, both being careful to look only ahead, never back.