BIONICLE

Journey's End

By Greg Farshtey

Prologue

Over 100,000 years ago…

Angonce walked purposefully toward a blank stone wall in the rear of his chamber. As the tall, spare figure approached, the blocks that made up the wall softened and shifted, forming an opening. He gazed out this new window at the mountains and forest below, sadness and regret in his dark eyes.

He had often stood here before, reflecting upon the beauty of Spherus Magna. From the southern desert of Bara Magna to the great northern forest, it was a place of stunning vistas and infinite opportunities for knowledge. Angonce had spent most of his life discovering its mysteries, and had hoped for many more years in the pursuit.

But now it seemed that was not to be. He had run every test that he could think of, and checked and rechecked his findings. They always came out the same: Spherus Magna was doomed.

How did it come to this? Angonce wondered. *How did we let it get so far?*

He, his brothers and sisters were scholars. Their theories, discoveries and inventions had transformed this world and changed the lives of the inhabitants, the Agori, in many ways. In gratitude, they had long ago been proclaimed rulers of Spherus Magna. The Agori called them the "Great Beings."

But the business of running a world – settling disputes, managing economies, dealing with defense issues, worrying about food and equipment supplies – all of this the Great Beings found a distraction. They wanted to build, study, invent, not oversee, adjudicate, and set policy. Those were vital duties, they realized, but better that someone else do them.

And so, the Great Beings did what they always did when they had a problem: they created a solution.

Choosing six warriors, one from each village, the Great Beings endowed them with the power to control, respectively, fire, ice, water, plant life, rock, and sand. They altered the warriors' very body chemistry to make each closer to being one with his element. Finally, they gave their newly created Element Lords weapons and armor that made them look like symbols of the natural forces of the world.

The Great Beings also gifted the Element Lords one more thing: the responsibility of ruling over the six tribes of Agori. They would shoulder the day to day duties the Great Beings so despised, and in return, they would be allowed to rule without interference.

Our first mistake, thought Angonce, *though far from our last.*

He turned away from the window, which transformed instantly back into a solid wall. It was time to face the truth. Any seeker of wisdom will, at some point, encounter an experiment that goes wrong. When that happens, the best thing to do is learn from it and move on. Naturally, the results of that experiment must be destroyed to prevent any unforeseen damage from being done.

The Element Lords had been an experiment that had gone horribly wrong. Now the Great Beings would have to unleash a new invention to destroy an old one.

Angonce left the chamber and walked down a long corridor, passing a sealed door. Behind it, he knew that Heremus and the others were completing work on an ultimate weapon to be used against the Element Lords. He had no desire to witness this. Rather, he felt the need for a vision of hope, something that spoke of better tomorrows and not the tragedies of today.

Leaving the fortress, he walked into a clearing – and there it was. Already standing millions of feet high, the giant before him was the last, best hope of Spherus Magna. Heremus had said that if it could not carry the physical heart of the planet within, it could at least carry the great spirit of this once beautiful world.

Angonce had liked that thought. When it came time to give this new creation a name, he knew just what to choose. Using the programming language that would guide the giant, he christened it "Mata Nui."

The Great Spirit.

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By Greg Farshtey

I

A lone figure stood before an ancient fortress. His journey had been a long and treacherous one. Now it seemed as if it had come to a sudden, and very frustrating, end.

The structure in front of him had no visible doors or windows. There was no sign that anyone lived inside or had for years. However, the fresh footprints of an Agori nearby said this might be the place. The answers he sought were inside, he was certain of it, but far less sure of how to reach them.

His name was Mata Nui. Once, only mere months before, he could have reached down from the heavens and torn the roof from the building. A complex array of sensors could have located the Agori or any other person or object he sought from a world away. One stride could have carried him many kios across the land.

That felt like a lifetime ago. Then, his mind and spirit lived inside a miracle of engineering, towering some 40 million feet in the air. But he had been driven from that body and exiled to the desert world of Bara Magna. If not for the power of the Mask of Life he wore, he wouldn't even have a body now. As it was, he was only a little over seven feet tall, vulnerable to pain and hunger and thirst, and from removed from the power to shake worlds.

Seven feet tall, thought Mata Nui. *I really hate being short.*

Bara Magna had been a revelation to Mata Nui in many ways. He had found friends among the Glatorian and Agori who lived here. He had been drawn into their struggle against the marauding Skrall and bone hunters. He had even found proof that the Great Beings, his creators, had once walked these sands.

Part of that evidence had been a coin found by an Agori scavenger named Berix. Made of a metal said to have been mined to the north, the design on the coin's face matched that of the one on the Skrall shields. At first, it looked like just a bunch of interconnected lines. But as Mata Nui learned more about this planet, particularly about the Great Beings and their works, he realized the design was far more than decorative. It was not just artwork or a symbol of some abstract concept. It was a map.

But, he wondered, a map of what?

That answer came courtesy of an Agori named Crotesius, who told him that he had been part of a failed expedition to the north in search of the "Valley of the Maze." He had returned without finding it, but one of his companions, Tarduk, had left again to resume the search. Mata Nui resolved to seek the valley and find out what might lie at the heart of the maze.

Now that mission had brought him here, to a fortress with no doors in the center of a vast stone maze. After weeks of traveling and many dangers, here he was, confronted by yet another mystery with no easy solution.

"By the Great Beings, I have had enough of this," Mata Nui growled. His voice echoed off the peaks all around.

Amazingly, there came an answer. The words came from the fortress, though there was no sign of anyone to speak them. They floated through the air on a whisper so soft he almost missed it over the sound of the breeze.

"What do you seek?"

Mata Nui took two quick strides forward and stared up at the fortress. "Entrance," he said.

There was a long silence. Then the voice repeated, "What do you seek?"

"I wish to enter," Mata Nui replied, more loudly. "But I see no way to do so."

This time, the voice did not hesitate to respond. When it did, there was a trace of iron in its tone, as if the speaker were losing patience.

"What do you seek? What is your burden? What brings you life, and death?"

So it's not asking questions, thought Mata Nui. *It's posing riddles. This fortress, and the maze that surrounds it, were designed to keep out anyone who might use the power of the Great Beings for selfish reasons. So if I don't give the right answers here…*

He allowed himself to wonder if Tarduk had made it this far, and if so, had he given the wrong answers? What, then? Had the Great Beings rigged traps to destroy potential intruders? Were his creators really that ruthless?

What do I seek? It's a very good question, he admitted. *When I first came to Bara Magna, all I wanted was to escape and save my people from the evil of my enemy, Makuta. I didn't know then that this place was tied to my origins. I didn't know I might find answers here to questions I had never asked.*

Mata Nui sat down on the ground and stared at the stone walls of the fortress. He was going to have to give this answer a lot of thought.

§ § §

"Where is he?" Kiina asked. She was standing amid the dunes of the Bara Magna desert, her eyes fixed on the northern mountains. "He should be back by now."

Beside her, Ackar nodded. "Perhaps. But we've got no idea how far he had to travel, or what he might have found."

"Or what might have found him," Kiina added, grimly. "We should have stayed with him, no matter what he said."

The two were warriors and Mata Nui's closest friends. He had helped them free their villages from the threat of the Skrall, but not stayed around for thanks. Shortly after the villages had agreed to unite into one mega-city, Mata Nui had departed to track down the meaning of Berix's coin. Ackar and Kiina, accompanied by another warrior, Gresh, and Berix had gone with him.

The way had been fraught with danger and the battles had been fierce. After Berix was badly wounded, Mata Nui had insisted that the others turn back and return to the desert. Ackar had argued that it was too perilous for Mata Nui to go on alone, but Mata Nui remained adamant.

"No, my friends," he had said. "You are needed there, with your people. I have to find a way back to mine."

Now, weeks had passed with no sign of him. Ackar felt the same worries Kiina did, but saw no reason to make her feel worse.

"We have to believe Mata Nui knows what he's doing. It's not the first time he's gone off on his own," he reminded her. "Last time, it was to save your life."

"Right," said Kiina. "So I owe him … and I pay my debts. With or without you, I'm going after him."

Ackar knew there were some things on Bara Magna that one couldn't argue with: an enraged Skopio, a hungry swarm of scarabax beetles, and Kiina once she had her mind made up.

Besides, there came a point where being a true friend to Mata Nui meant *not* respecting his wishes on everything.

"Okay," he said. "I'll get supplies. You find Gresh. He's going to want to come too."

Ackar started to turn away, but Kiina reached out to stop him. When he turned back to her, he saw real fear in her eyes.

"Do you think he's okay?" she asked. "I mean, he couldn't be… you know… could he?"

"If anyone can come back out of those mountains in one piece, it's Mata Nui," Ackar answered. "So let's make sure we're there to greet him."

§ § §

Mata Nui had been staring at the fortress for hours, rolling the questions around in his head. He had moved on from trying to divine the correct answer to the first, and focused on the second.

What is my burden?

That was easy. He had left behind a universe full of beings that depended on him, Toa and Matoran willing to sacrifice their own lives on his behalf. His carelessness had allowed evil to usurp rule over his home and placed all those lives in jeopardy. Now here he was on Bara Magna, with little clue how to make things right again, reduced to trying to figure out maddening riddles. It was beyond frustrating. He had a duty to save his people, and he was wasting time like —

Wait a minute, he thought. *Duty… it's duty that drives me on, the responsibility I feel for the people of my universe. Duty is my burden!*

Everything suddenly made sense. The Great Beings had taught him about three "virtues," which he and the Matoran he protected were to live by. They were unity, duty and destiny. If the answer to the second question was duty, then perhaps…

Mata Nui rose. "I seek… unity!" he shouted.

"What is your burden?" the mysterious voice asked.

"Duty," answered Mata Nui.

"What brings you life, and death?"

The same thing that brings it for everyone else, thought Mata Nui. "Destiny," he said.

Before his eyes, the stone blocks in the center of the fortress seemed to soften and melt together. A square gap about eight feet high appeared at the base of the building. Then the stone became stone again, with a doorway now in place.

Mata Nui glanced at Click, the scarabax beetle who he had befriended on his arrival on Bara Magna. It now rode on his shoulder, but did not look very happy about that fact just now.

"Looks like an invitation," said Mata Nui. "What do you think?"

The beetle clicked its pincers together furiously, a clear sign of displeasure.

"That's what I thought you'd say," Mata Nui replied. "Well, sorry, old friend, we didn't come all this way to stand outside."

Mata Nui entered the tower. He half-expected another maze inside, but it was quite the opposite. A stairway leading down awaited him, but no other exit. Sword at the ready, he descended the stairs.

They seemed to go on for days, winding around and around with no end in sight. Then Mata Nui began to feel the heat, an overwhelming wave that almost staggered him. It grew worse the further down he went, but he pressed on. There was, after all, no other choice.

When he finally reached bottom, it took him a moment to take in the incredible scene. A large chamber stretched out before him, bare of any furniture. In the center of the floor was a pool of lava, boiling, churning, and glowing red hot.

And hanging suspended above it, upside down and bound in chains, was Tarduk.

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"Help… me…" the Agori croaked.

"Hang on," said Mata Nui. He took a few steps backward, broke into a run, and leaped toward Tarduk. Catching hold of the chain, his momentum carried it and the Agori away from the lava. When they were almost at the far wall, Mata Nui slashed through the links with his sword. The chain snapped and he and Tarduk fell to the stone floor.

"I can't… I can't believe you did that," gasped Tarduk. "I thought I was cooked."

"What is this place?" asked Mata Nui, getting to his feet and helping Tarduk do the same.

"I don't think you'd believe me if I told you," the Agori replied. "But you can believe this: we've got to get out of here, now!"

"You go," said Mata Nui. "I came here for answers and I'm going to get them."

A violent tremor shook the chamber. Gouts of lava shot up from the pool, raining down on the stone floor and burning through the rock.

"The only answer you'll get here is what happens after death," said Tarduk, already running for the door. "Come on!"

Mata Nui stood rooted to the floor for a moment. He had gone through so much to reach this place, and now he was supposed to flee from it? But Tarduk was right, something very bad was happening here. The stone all around was melting, but not from the heat. No, the structure was shifting, turning into something else as he watched. If he didn't move, and quickly, he would be trapped here — so he ran.

Tarduk was already halfway up the stairs. When he reached the top, he dashed out the door and up into the rocks. Mata Nui followed not long after. Both turned to see the entire tower melting like a block of ice in the sun.

"Incredible," said Tarduk.

Mata Nui said nothing. His attention was riveted on the scene before him. Something was rising out of the ground beneath the tower, and the tower itself was sliding away as if to make room for it. The first thing he saw was the molten lava, followed quickly by what looked like an entire mountain pushing its way up from beneath the earth. It was an awe-inspiring sight — an actual volcano, given birth in a matter of moments.

"Incredible isn't the word," muttered Mata Nui. "It's impossible."

Tarduk pointed up at the river of lava flowing slowly from the crater. "Looks pretty possible to me. But what could cause it?"

Mata Nui gestured at the maze. "The same that caused all this – the Great Beings. That's no natural volcano."

"How do you know?"

Mata Nui smiled. "Let's just say I know something about volcanoes that aren't really volcanoes, and leave it at that. Stay here. I'm going in."

"Into that?" Tarduk said, shocked. "You'll be killed!"

"I don't think so," Mata Nui said, already walking toward the eruption. "I think I was meant to go in there… or someone was."

Ignoring the heat and the ominous rumbles coming from inside the mountain, Mata Nui began to climb the slope. He hacked at the rock with his sword, trying to make an entrance. To his surprise, the rock crumbled easily, to reveal smooth, polished metal underneath. He struck at the gleaming metal, but his sword bounced off without leaving so much as a scratch.

Even more determined now, Mata Nui continued to chip away at the rock. After several minutes, he had uncovered what appeared to be a hatch. Grasping the handle and pulling with all his strength, he was able to force it open just wide enough for him to slip inside. Warning Tarduk again to stay put, Mata Nui went into the volcano.

Mata Nui knew what the inside of a real volcano looked like. He had seen his share on hundreds of worlds, some of which made Bara Magna seem like a little corner of paradise. They looked nothing like what he was seeing now.

The inside of the "mountain" was a mass of pipes, conduits, and wires, all vibrating from a low hum that filled the entire structure. It was so crowded that it took an effort for him to even move ahead. The pipes were hot, no doubt from pumping the "lava" toward the top of the edifice, where it could be disposed of. *Efficient and deceptive*, he thought, *two hallmarks of the Great Beings' work.*

Forcing his way through a nest of cables, he found himself in a small, open area. The first thing he noticed were plans on the wall for a giant robot, the same plans he had earlier seen in a cavern near the village of Tajun. Mata Nui smiled. He had been right. There were answers to be found here, for there was a connection between here and the construction of his original body.

Next to the plans was a blank screen. Mata Nui reached out and brushed his fingertips against it and it flared to life. A series of images flashed by at mind-numbing speed: schematics,

calculations, notes, details of design and construction. It all went so quickly it was impossible to consciously focus on any one thing, yet Mata Nui could feel the knowledge flowing into his mind just the same. It was overwhelming and painful, but he endured. This is what he had come here for — this was his origin story.

He saw it all now. The early experiment that had failed, the one that resulted in robot pieces scattered all over the Bara Magna desert; the discovery of protodermis, an artificial substance that could exist in multiple forms, the key to the creation of his original body and the nanotech that dwelled within it; and more, he saw why he had been created and for what purpose.

A conflict raged, a Core War over a substance Mata Nui recognized as energized protodermis. Even the Great Beings were not sure of its properties, but the silvery liquid transformed or destroyed whatever it touched. It was flowing up from inside the planet and the various tribes all wanted to claim it. But tapping the power of the volatile substance would result, the Great Beings discovered, in the destruction of the world.

When their efforts to end the war failed, they built a giant robot they called Mata Nui. His purpose: to leave the planet before it shattered and travel the universe, gaining the knowledge to prevent such a terrible war from happening again. After 100,000 years, the pieces of Spherus Magna would be stable enough to be brought together once more. And that was why Mata Nui truly existed — his mission was to undo the errors of his creators and to heal the world.

That's it! That's what I'm supposed to do, he exulted. *My destiny is to recreate Spherus Magna as it was before the Shattering… to make the three pieces of the planet one again.*

Now it all became clear to him. He had been on his way back from his exploration of the universe, heading for Bara Magna, when he was attacked from within by the evil Makuta. Rendered unconscious, he crashed into the ocean of Aqua Magna. The impact had temporarily damaged the memory core of the robot, causing him to forget his mission. Even when he was reawakened by a band of heroes called Toa, he had been without purpose. Before he could initiate self-repair and retrieve the knowledge he needed, Makuta had seized control of the robot and exiled Mata Nui's consciousness into space. By chance or design, he had ended up on Bara Magna, his original destination.

He was armed with the knowledge he needed at last, but staggered by its implications as well. To achieve his mission, he needed his original body, or something close to it. More, the task of reconstructing the planet required the power of not one, but two robots.

There was supposed to be a second one, he realized. *The Great Beings were supposed to build another Mata Nui! But they never did… maybe the planet's end came too fast, or maybe they were killed. And… I can't do my mission alone. I can't do what I was created to do.*

Mata Nui sank to the floor. For the first time in his existence, he felt truly defeated. The hope he had held onto, even through his exile, was extinguished. Even if he got his old body back, he couldn't —

"What's the matter?"

He turned at the sound. It was Tarduk, who had followed him in despite Mata Nui's orders. Being smaller and more agile, the Agori had had no trouble navigating through the jungle of iron and wires.

Seeing no reason to keep it secret, Mata Nui laid out what he had learned. Tarduk listened intently. When the tale was done, the Agori walked over and pointed up to the plans.

"I don't know what you can do about your old, um, body," he said. "But from what you said, you already have a second one. It's lying in the Bara Magna desert, isn't it?"

Mata Nui nodded. "Yes, but it's been dead for well over 100,000 years. It has no power, and even when it was active, it was unstable."

Tarduk frowned. "Not sure about stability, but as for power… what does this remind you of?"

Mata Nui looked around. Of course. He had been so caught up in learning about his past, and then the overwhelming odds against achieving his mission, that he never realized.

The "volcano" was a power plant.

"The plans," he said, rising. "That's what was created here — the power source for my body! And if they planned to build a second robot —"

"Then there might be a second power source," finished Tarduk. "It's worth searching for, right?"

3

Raanu, elder of the city, looked at Mata Nui as if his guest had just transformed into a sand bat. "Ridiculous. Insane. Impossible!" he said, his voice rising. "How could you even ask such a thing??"

Well, you couldn't expect an enthusiastic yes, Mata Nui said to himself. *You're not just asking a lot of these people… you're asking everything of them.*

Ackar, Kiina and Gresh shifted uncomfortably behind their friend. Mata Nui had explained what he needed and why, but even to them it sounded bizarre, if not mad. But their faith in their friend outweighed their doubts. If Mata Nui said he had to do this, then they would help in any way they could.

Raanu looked at the three Glatorian in disbelief. "You stand with him. Don't tell me you support this… this… this lunacy?"

"We know how it sounds, believe me," answered Ackar. "Still, Mata Nui has earned the right to be heard, hasn't he? Without him, we would all be slaves to the Skrall."

"I don't expect you to just take my word, Raanu," said Mata Nui. "Let me show you what I'm talking about. Please."

Raanu wanted to snap, "No!" and throw these maniacs out of his chamber. If Mata Nui was telling the truth, he didn't really want to know it, because the consequences to the Agori could be catastrophic. Yet if there were facts he was refusing to face, where would his honor be then? Ackar was right: they all owed Mata Nui more than they could repay.

"Very well," the elder said. "We'll go now. But I make no promises."

"I don't ask for any," Mata Nui assured him.

Less than an hour later, they were standing on the slope of a peak, looking down upon the city. Not long ago, the tribes of Bara Magna had lived in individual villages, built around massive metallic structures that dated from ancient times. After the war with the Skrall, it became obvious that the best way for the Agori to defend themselves from future threats would be to unite their villages into one giant. With enormous effort, they dragged the huge structures across the desert and linked them together.

Mata Nui, Gresh, Berix, Kiina and Ackar were standing at this very spot when the pieces came together. In shock, they saw that the shelters when assembled formed not just a city, but a body — a gigantic robot body. Mata Nui couldn't help but see the resemblance between it and the body that had once been his.

Raanu had heard all the rumors about what the city looked like, most of them coming from Berix. He had been too busy setting up a new government for the Agori and arranging defenses against bone hunters and Vorox to worry about it. Now that he saw it, he couldn't deny what it appeared to be.

"Interesting," Raanu said, as he looked down at his city. "Perhaps it was something the Great Beings built — or tried to — ages ago. But what of it?"

"You're right. They did create it," Mata Nui replied. Even having seen it before, the image of the robot body stretched out across the sand still shook him. "But something went wrong. It exploded, raining parts all over the desert. And they stayed scattered until the Agori brought them together again."

"You haven't answered my question," Raanu said. "So it's a failed experiment. It's also our home and our only protection against our enemies. What does it have to do with you?"

Mata Nui pointed down at the city. "I guess you could say it's my… ancestor. I once had a body much like that, before I came here. And if I am going to get it back again, I need to… borrow… that one."

Raanu glared at Mata Nui, his eyes as hard as shards of volcanic rock. "We're done here," he said. Without another word, he began the trek back down the mountain.

§ § §

That night, Mata Nui sat around a fire with Ackar and Gresh. The mood was somber.

"Are you sure you have to do this?" asked Gresh. "There's no other way?"

Mata Nui never took his eyes from the flames. "I've told you about my universe and my people, how I failed them, how my enemy, Makuta, seized control of it. But there's one thing I left out."

"What do you mean?" asked Ackar. He had never heard this tone in Mata Nui's voice before. It worried him.

"One universe won't be enough for him," said Mata Nui. "Makuta is hungry. He's waited tens of thousands of years for the power he has now, and now that he has it…" His voice trailed off.

"We thought the Skrall couldn't be beaten," Ackar reminded him. "You showed us different. Whatever force this Makuta commands — however big his army — he can't be invulnerable."

Mata Nui abruptly rose and stalked off from the fire. "You don't understand! The power at his fingertips… it's the power I used to wield. I know what it can do. He could crush us all under an armored heel and never notice, or sweep the entire city away with a gesture."

He turned back to Ackar, a fierce intensity in his eyes. "Makuta could destroy this planet, before any of us could raise a sword against him. Believe me."

Gresh's eyes widened. He looked at Mata Nui as if he had never seen him before. "You mean you…?"

Mata Nui nodded. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes, Gresh. Before I came to Bara Magna, I could do all that and more."

"And did you?" asked Ackar.

"No," replied Mata Nui. "That wasn't why I was created."

The only sound then was the crackling of the fire. After a few moments, Ackar walked up to Mata Nui and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. Anything I can do, just say the word."

Ackar turned to Gresh. "How about you, kid?"

Gresh looked Mata Nui right in the eyes. "I've fought for the people here. All the Glatorian have, and long before you ever got here, Mata Nui. We thought you were one of us, or at least something close."

"Gresh!" Ackar snapped.

"It's all right," said Mata Nui. "Let him have his say."

"I'll have my say, all right," said Gresh. "Now you tell us you were some kind of — I don't know what — with more power in one finger than every warrior on this world put together. And you say you want the city — that robot body — why? So you can have that power again? We didn't overthrow the Skrall so some armored giant could rule over us."

"That's enough," said Ackar.

Mata Nui took his sword and offered it, hilt first, to Gresh. When he spoke, there was no anger in his voice, but an almost frightening calm. "I'm not here to rule anyone. I'm trying to save your people and mine. But if you can't believe that, my friend, then take my weapon and lock me in a cell. I won't fight you."

Gresh hesitated.

"Take it," Mata Nui repeated.

Again, Gresh made no move to do so. Mata Nui finally put the sword back in its sheath. "Then help me," he said to Gresh. "Or else get out of my way."

§ § §

Not far away, Raanu sat in his chamber, deep in thought. He had half-expected this day to come ever since the villages had been united. After all, he knew far more about the Great Beings' creations than anyone else suspected.

Once, Bara Magna had been part of a larger world called Spherus Magna. Then came the Core War, a global conflict that resulted in the shattering of the planet. During the dark days of that war, Raanu had briefly served the Great Beings as they attempted to stop the fighting.

It was during that time that he saw firsthand something the Great Beings were constructing. It was a massive robot with the power to fly into space. At first, he thought that perhaps it was intended to carry all the Agori away to safety. When it turned out that wasn't the case, he rejected it as just one more idle experiment by rulers who had lost touch with those they ruled. In the struggle for survival after the Shattering, he had forgotten all about it.

Then Mata Nui arrived. He began to hear tales about his exile from another universe, his knowledge of the Great Beings, and plans he had uncovered for a huge robot. Kiina said he seemed to recognize them, and more, to have some connection to them. That was when Raanu began to suspect there was more to this visitor than there at first seemed to be.

Now he knew. The "universe" Mata Nui had been exiled from was the body the Great Beings had built — he didn't know how or why such a thing could have happened, but then he never understood the Great Beings' science in the first place. Now Mata Nui wanted a new body to replace his old one, even if that body was the city of the Agori.

Could he say no? After all, without Mata Nui, there would be no city. The Skrall would have enslaved all the Agori, slain all the Glatorian, and hold Bara Magna in an iron grip. He couldn't deny it was Mata Nui's heroism and inspiration that saved his people.

Yet, how could he say yes? With no city, the Agori would be little better than Vorox or bone hunters, forced to survive in the harsh desert with little protection. And all for what? Mata Nui acted like this was a matter of life or death, but never specified whose life and whose death he was concerned about.

Raanu had consulted with the other Agori leaders and some of the other Glatorian. They had all agreed that they would leave the decision up to him, confident he would choose the wisest course.

The Agori rose to leave. He would have to talk to Mata Nui — he owed the warrior that much. And he would have to prepared for whatever might happen, if he told Mata Nui no.

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Raanu found Ackar and Gresh just outside the city, near the ashes of a fire. They said Mata Nui had gone off on his own into the desert. Ackar offered to accompany the Agori leader if he was going to seek Mata Nui out, but Raanu said no. Torch in hand, he followed Mata Nui's tracks into the dunes.

He found the object of his search sitting on rock, staring up at the stars. Raanu decided to waste no time. "I know who… and what… you are. At least, I think I do."

Mata Nui glanced down at the sand, then at Raanu. "Then you should know that I was created for a reason. I have a destiny to fulfill, and to do that, I need —"

"I know what you need," Raanu said. "The Agori need it, too. Why are you more important than they are?"

"Raanu, when I came here, I didn't know where I was or why," Mata Nui answered, his voice low. "Now I have my answers. I know I am asking a lot of you, of all of you, but you have to believe me. I'm here to help. Give me the tools to let me do that."

"From what you've said, your own people believed in you, and it didn't get them very far," said Raanu.

Mata Nui started to reply. Then he stiffened, his gaze locked on the stars again. "He's coming."

"Who?" asked Raanu, annoyed. "Don't think you can trick me —"

"It's no trick, you…" said Mata Nui. He caught himself before saying something that might insult the respected elder. "Can't you see? Makuta has found me and he's coming here. I can sense it — I lived in the body he wears for 100,000 years — I can feel its approach. Raanu, I'm the only one with a prayer of stopping him. You have to grant my request before it's too late!"

Raanu had never felt the burden of leadership rest quite as heavy on his shoulders as it did right now. It would be easy to dismiss Mata Nui as lying or insane and forget the whole thing. The problem was he knew it would be an injustice. Mata Nui wasn't crazy, or being deceitful, he

realized. The warrior was genuinely afraid for himself and Bara Magna. And if a being who faced down an entire Skrall legion on his own felt fear, there had to be a good reason for it.

He almost could not believe the words that next came out of his mouth. He wasn't aware of making the decision. But once it was made, he knew that no other decision had been possible.

"Very well," said Raanu. "I am putting the survival of my people into your hands, Mata Nui. I will give you what you ask. But know this… betray us, and no suit of armor will protect you from my revenge. That artificial body existed as shattered parts once before, and it can do so again."

Before Mata Nui could say thank you, Raanu turned and walked back toward the city. "We will begin the evacuation at dawn," the Agori leader said over his shoulder. "Be ready."

I have been ready for this since the moment I arrived here, thought Mata Nui. *But the bigger question is — am I ready for Makuta?*

4

Months had passed since Makuta seized power in Mata Nui's universe, and yet he had still not grown used to the energies that were now his to command. As he soared through the void of space, heading for Bara Magna, he thought about how it all began.

The Makuta species had been created by Mata Nui. They were to live inside of Mata Nui's then massive robot body, serving his interests and protecting the nanotech workers called Matoran. Their primary job was the creation of animals, fish, birds, and insects, collectively called "Rahi," who would serve various purposes within the "universe" that existed inside Mata Nui.

Over time, the role of the Makuta changed. They became actively involved in protecting Mata Nui from various internal threats, from races like the Barraki, the Skakdi, and others. To aid them in this task, they created a species of armored warriors called Rahkshi. These lethal creatures were made from the Makuta's own substance and were loyal, fierce, and relentless in battle.

The important responsibilities they hadshould have been enough for the Makuta. But from the start, they were cursed with ambition. They looked around and saw the Matoran honoring Mata Nui — the source of light, heat, and virtually everything else in their lives — and it frustrated them. After all, it was the Makuta who had created the birds that filled the skies and the fish that swam in the waters. Why did no one honor — or better still, *worship* — them?

Frustration led to anger, which led to thoughts of revenge. If the Matoran admired nothing short of ultimate power, then the Makuta would seize that power and conquer their universe. That meant turning against Mata Nui and bringing him down. The risks were enormous. If their plan failed, Mata Nui would have no choice but to purge them. But if it succeeded…

Teridax, leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta, hatched a complex, multi-layered plot. It began with the use of a virus to infect Mata Nui's robotic systems. When the systems crashed, Mata Nui lost consciousness and crashed into the waters of the planet Aqua Magna. Taking advantage of the chaos, the Makuta attempted to seize power, only to be driven off by heroes called Toa.

Defeat simply fed the Makuta's ambitions. Teridax resolved that if he could not run the universe in Mata Nui's absence, he would *become* the universe. He would take control of the gigantic robot body and leave the Toa, Matoran and other denizens no choice but to obey him.

It took 1000 years of patience, manipulation, and even a few feigned defeats for his plans to come to fruition. Badly damaged by the crash, Mata Nui finally died. A Toa named Matoro, wielding the Mask of Life, brought the robot back to life at the sacrifice of his own existence. But before Mata Nui's spirit could return to his body, Makuta's consciousness took control of

the robot. Since no form could have two guiding spirits, Mata Nui now found himself barred from his own body.

Teridax's revenge wasn't done. He destroyed the rest of the Brotherhood of Makuta to make sure they could never recreate the virus that had downed Mata Nui. Then he forced Mata Nui's spirit into the Mask of Life and ejected the mask into outer space.

At the time, Teridax had been confident he had seen the last of Mata Nui. He thought surely the mask would float endlessly through space, or be burned up by a sun, or shattered by an asteroid. He was wrong.

Only days ago, he had managed to get all of the robot's sensors working again. Immediately, he detected the Mask of Life's energies on another planet, a place identified by electronic records as Bara Magna. If the mask still existed, then so did Mata Nui. This Teridax could not allow. Even though it was doubtful Mata Nui could pose any threat, Teridax wouldn't begin his conquest of the greater universe with a potential enemy on the loose.

Mata Nui had to be destroyed.

Activating the jets built into the robot, Makuta rocketed into space toward a final showdown with Mata Nui. It would be absurdly simple: land on the planet, crush the mask beneath his armored foot, and perhaps some of the inhabitants too, for good measure. Bara Magna would become a base from which to launch future attacks on other worlds, and its residents slave labor and (if they were lucky) part of Makuta's new army.

Makuta Teridax increased his speed. He was anxious to eliminate the last remnant of his past and begin his glorious future. His strength was beyond compare, his power enough to destroy a world, and his resolve like iron.

How could anyone stand against him?

§ § §

Tahu, Toa of fire, was frustrated and furious.

Months had passed since he first learned that his universe — every land mass, ocean, even the sky and the stars — were part of the interior of a giant mechanical being. Worse, he discovered this after the universe had been taken over by Makuta.

Since then, he had led a rebellion against his now far more powerful enemy. But despite some minor victories, he and his allies had been unable to truly harm Makuta. It ate at him. Here he was, a Toa — a hero — created to protect the Matoran villagers from harm. Yet he and his teammates had been unable to provide safety or security to any inhabitant of the universe. Now

they were scattered, fighting skirmishes against Makuta's armored warriors, the Rahkshi, and accomplishing nothing.

His frustration had only grown in the last few hours. He and Onua, Toa of Earth, had prepared an elaborate ambush for a dozen Rahkshi. Just as they were about to stumble into the trap, the creatures turned around and silently departed.

"What happened?" snapped Tahu. "Did they spot the trap?"

Onua rose, watching the column of Rahkshi through narrowed eyes. "No," he said, with certainty. "Something else happened here, and I think we better find out what it was."

Tahu spotted something, coming in low on the eastern horizon. It was a winged figure, one who looked vaguely familiar even from far away. As the newcomer drew closer, he recognized her as a member of the secretive Order of Mata Nui, skilled fighters dedicated to the cause of the Great Spirit. They had been some of the most powerful warriors in the fight against Makuta, but had also suffered terrible casualties in their ranks.

The winged female fluttered tattered wings as she hovered above the two Toa. "I've been sent with a message. Rahkshi are on the move all over, heading south. No one knows why, but they're massing into an army."

South? wondered Tahu. *But there's nothing down there.* The lower part of the robot was a scattered group of islands, largely uninhabited and of no strategic worth. Why would Makuta — and it surely was his work — sending the Rahkshi there?

There was only one way to find out.

"Find as many other Toa as you can," he told the Order agent. "Tell them we're going in pursuit of those Rahkshi."

"Tahu, what if this is a trap? What if Makuta wants us to leave everyplace else defenseless?" asked Onua.

"If Makuta wanted to destroy all of us, plus every Matoran, he could do it in an instant," said Tahu. "He doesn't need tricks, not anymore. But if we can pen up his Rahkshi and wipe them out, maybe we can slow down whatever he has planned."

He looked back up at the flying figure. "Do it. Find whatever help you can. We have an opportunity, and I'm not going to waste it."

§ § §

BIONICLE: Journey's End

By Greg Farshtey

Nektann stood atop the ruins of a once great structure and watched the Rahkshi march past. The armored "sons of Makuta" had been sent to the island of Zakaz to pacify its residents, the Skakdi race. They had not been gentle in doing their job.

It was still shocking to realize that Zakaz and everything around it was not part of a world, but just the insides of a giant robot. Nektann knew about being a warlord, but he was not an engineer and did not comprehend how large machines worked. Wouldn't each part of a machine have to play a role? And if so, what was the role of the Skakdi?

His people had always been warriors, savage and brutal. Then a member of the Makuta race came and changed them, tinkering with their nature and making them even more violent and merciless. His goal had been to turn them into an army, but the result had been battle-crazed fighters who destroyed their own cities in an all-out civil war. Other species had feared and hated the Skakdi ever since, and the Skakdi had hated the Makuta.

Now a Makuta ran the entire machine, and things had changed. Nektann had been the first Skakdi warlord to ally himself with the new power in the universe. The other members of his species who objected to Makuta's rule had been taken care of by the Rahkshi. And so Nektann's legion fell into line behind the marching Rahkshi, heading for boats that would carry them south.

Nektann didn't know what was waiting for him or his troops among the uninhabited islands, but he did not hesitate to give the order to move out. After all, Makuta had promised them a new world to conquer.

5

It was a testament to the respect the Agori had for Raanu that, at his request, they packed up what few things they owned and abandoned their new city. Yes, there were questions and some complaints, but they trusted the elder of Vulcanus. If he said they had to leave, there had to be a reason for it.

Now Mata Nui stood inside the head of this long unused robot body. In his hands, he held a small, metal box containing a tiny spark of energy. Retrieving this from inside the volcano had almost cost him his life. Anyone looking at it would have wondered how something so small could possibly bring so massive a robot to life.

Mata Nui could not have answered them. But he knew from what he had learned in the tower that using anything but the most miniscule amount of this blindingly bright energy would just result in a second explosion. The pieces of the robot might be blown across Bara Magna again, or simply disintegrate. There would never be time to retrieve them and try again before Makuta arrived.

"You sure about this?" The question came from Kiina. She had just finished a last check of the city to make sure all the Agori and Glatorian were gone from inside it.

"No," Mata Nui answered. "But it's what I have to do."

"You could be killed," she said. "You might kill a lot of other people too, if this thing blows up. Have you thought about that?"

"Of course," said Mata Nui. "If I don't try, though, I will be dead, and so will who knows how many others. Anyone Makuta doesn't see a need for, he will destroy. That's just fact."

Kiina nodded. She looked up at the ceiling high above, still having a hard time comprehending that this was the interior of a robot's skull case. The Great Beings had done some pretty crazy things in their time, but giant robots was a new one to her.

Mata Nui nudged Click off his shoulder and onto his hand. He extended it to Kiina. "Take him. I don't want him hurt."

Kiina accepted the insect with a little reluctance — she was not a fan of bugs. But she knew how important this beetle had been to her friend, so she did what was asked.

"It's never going to be the same, is it?" she said quietly.

"What isn't?"

"You, for one thing," Kiina answered. "You fought with us, laughed with us, wept for our dead, and helped us rebuild after the Skrall invasion. You've been one of us, and now you're going to be… this."

"But still the same person," Mata Nui assured her. "Still your friend."

"A friend who's millions of feet high?" she said, with a harsh laugh. "I'll look smaller than an insect to you from up there. We all will. And you'll have about as much in common with us as we do with scarabax beetles."

Mata Nui put a hand on her shoulder. "I won't forget you, Kiina… or my promise. I will get you to a new world. Once, I made the mistake of ignoring others because they weren't part of my mission, taking for granted they would always be there to do what I needed them to do. If I had paid more attention… well, a lot of bad things wouldn't have happened."

He smiled. "But amid all the bad, some good came out of my mistakes. I met you."

Kiina rushed forward and hugged Mata Nui. "Don't make me cry," she said softly. "I'm a Glatorian. We don't do that."

After a few moments, Mata Nui gently pulled away. "You had better go. This is going to be dangerous."

"I could stay and help," she said. "You might need me."

Mata Nui shook his head. "Go, join Ackar and Gresh. Tell them … tell them thank you. I've seen many worlds, but you all showed me one I had never discovered —the world of friendship and faith and trust."

Kiina's voice wouldn't come. She nodded quickly and walked away, headed for the nearest exit to the desert. Once outside, she climbed on to her mount and rode for the far desert, where the rest of her people waited. And as she rode, sands that had never known rain were kissed by her tears.

§ § §

It was time.

Mata Nui fitted the box into a slot designed for it within the skull casing. There was a massive burst of light as the energy coursed through the robot body, fusing the pieces together and powering up systems. A low hum filled the air.

He waited, holding his breath. This body was unstable, Mata Nui already knew that. The innovations the Great Beings had used to build his original body had not yet been developed when this early effort was created. If the spark of energy proved to be too much, Mata Nui knew he would never survive the explosion.

None came. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee there wouldn't be one later — the Great Beings' records had been vague on just how long this prototype had been in operation before it catastrophically failed. Still, he had no choice about what to do next.

Slowly, he reached up and put his hands on the Mask of Life he wore. The power of the mask had created the body he now had from the sands of Bara Magna. As soon as he removed it, his body crumbled away, going back to the scattered atoms it had been originally. As his hands vanished, the mask fell to the ground.

So far, Mata Nui's theory had been right. Although his body was gone, his mind survived inside the Mask of Life. Now he had to do something he had never tried before: project that mind into another shell.

It was hard, almost unbelievably so. It went against every instinct to hurl his consciousness into a void. There was no way to be sure he could inhabit the robot, or that he could find his way back into the mask if he failed. His mind and spirit might just float forever, bodiless and helpless to prevent what was soon to come.

No, he thought. *That won't happen. I owe too much to too many to allow it.*

Mata Nui concentrated on the robot, picturing every bit of it, imagining himself in control of the huge construct. Throwing every bit of his formidable mind into the struggle, he willed himself out of the mask.

There was a terrible feeling of confusion. The world began to spin. He felt like he was flying, but with no control over his speed or direction. At one point, he passed through the robot's skull and saw Bara Magna from the air. Then his unfettered mind plunged down through one of the great eyes and ricocheted throughout the body.

I'm not used to this, he admitted. *The Makuta are masters at leaping from body to body, but it's not something I was ever meant to do. But I'd better learn fast.*

Mata Nui forced himself to turn back toward the head of the robot. It was like trying to turn a huge ship into the wind. He could feel the environment resisting him, but he would not give in and lose control. Without a body to inhabit, he knew he would soon go mad.

There was what felt like a violent lurch. Suddenly, he was looking up at the sky. Had he overshot his target? Was he outside of the robot again? Would he even be able to find his way back? *Maybe*, he wondered, *I should try to get back into the mask. Maybe there is some other way to stop Makuta than with this ancient machine.*

Mata Nui tried to make his mind move, but this time, nothing happened. Then it dawned on him that the world was no longer spinning crazily. His gaze was fixed on the sky. He was seeing through the robot's eyes!

I did it, he said to himself, hardly believing it. *I did it! This body is mine now.I have another chance to do what I was created to do — and this time, I won't fail. I swear it.*

§ § §

Far across the desert, Ackar, Kiina, and Gresh stood with the rest of the Agori and Glatorian. They had seen the bright flash of energy that had come from the robot. Kiina wanted to go back, convinced Mata Nui was in trouble, but Gresh restrained her.

"We can't help him now," he told her. "This is something he has to do on his own."

"What in the name of —?" whispered Ackar. "Look! It's moving!"

It was true. The robot was slowly rising, sand raining down as it did so. As the Glatorian watched, it got to its knees, then rose to its full height. They looked up in awe as the mechanical being towered above their world.

No, thought Kiina, *not 'it' — not a robot. That's… Mata Nui.*

"He made it," said Ackar. "I can't believe it."

"Now what?" asked Gresh. "Can we still talk to him? Will he hear us, from way up there?"

"Maybe we can get his attention," answered Ackar. Raising his sword and calling on the new powers Mata Nui had given him, he hurled a fireball high into the air.

The robot's head turned slightly toward the flaming signal. Then Mata Nui looked down toward where his companions waited. He activated the speech centers of his new body, taking care to make sure his voice would not be too loud. At full volume, the robot's voice could shatter skulls all over the planet.

"Well done, Ackar," he said. Even spoken "softly," his words were like sonic booms down below. "Tahu could not have done better."

Kiina glanced at Gresh. "Who's Tahu?"

Gresh shrugged. "Maybe some Glatorian we don't know."

"Mata Nui, can you hear me?" Ackar shouted up at the robot.

"No need to shout," answered Mata Nui. "My sensors can pick up a beetle's breathing, if I want them to. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Kiina replied. "But how about you?"

"I had almost forgotten…" Mata Nui began. "This body is… different from my old one in many ways. But hopefully it has the power to do what must be done."

Even as he said it, Mata Nui knew there was really little hope at all. To carry out his mission, he needed a second robot, equally as powerful. And the only other one he knew to be in existence was under the control of a maniac.

I have to try, he said to himself. *Otherwise, what was all this for? I can't have come all this way, gone through so much, just to fail.*

"Get to shelter," he said to the assembled crowd below. "I don't know if what I am going to attempt will work, or what will happen if it does. I need to know you're safe before I begin."

"Shelter?" said Gelu, an ex-Glatorian from the ice village. "What shelter? Isn't he wearing our shelter?"

"There are caves nearby," said Ackar. "We'll get everyone into them."

§ § §

Mata Nui watched as the Glatorian and Agori moved off to safety. Kiina had been right about one thing — they did look like insects from up here. But if she ever believed he would think of them that way, she was very wrong. Every one of those moving dots so far below was an intelligent being with hopes and dreams. If Mata Nui had anything to do with it, those hopes would be realized and those dreams would come true.

He swept his sensors across the face of Bara Magna. Vorox, Bone Hunters, and Skrall were still active in the desert. Though he doubted they would listen, he had to try to warn them.

"Attention," he said, his voice carrying all over the world. "After 100,000 years, it's time for the damage to Bara Magna to be undone. Your original world, Spherus Magna, can live again. But the dangers are unknown — seek shelter now, for your own safety."

He waited a few moments to see what effect his warning might have had. Frightened by the voice that came at them from every direction, most Vorox had retreated underground. The

Bone Hunters and Skrall had stirred, but that was about it. That was about all that could be expected. Those two groups were sure to think the whole thing was some trick, even with the sight of Mata Nui looming over them to back up his words.

There was no point in delaying any further. Mata Nui raised his eyes to space.Bara Magna and its two moons, Aqua Magna and Bota Magna, had once all been part of one planet, Spherus Magna. Recreating that world meant bringing all three planets together again and fusing them together.

Mata Nui raised both arms and unleashed streams of concentrated energy from his hands. The energy was artificial gravity of enormous power. But on its own, did it have the strength to move two moons?

His sensor web showed that the beams had sliced through space to impact their two targets. But it also showed something else: an object approaching Bara Magna at high speed. In a matter of moments, the object had blotted out the sun, plunging the planet into darkness.

What better way to announce his arrival? thought Mata Nui grimly. *Shadows were always his herald.*

A roar of wind swept across the surface of the world, stirring up lethal sandstorms. A bolt of power slammed into the western desert, blasting a huge crater. A mighty impact struck Bara Magna, triggering planet-wide earth tremors.

Mata Nui looked across the world at a figure that dwarfed even him. The blazing red eyes of the newcomer bored into Mata Nui, chilling him to his core.

"Hello, brother," said the visitor. "I thought it was time for a family reunion."

With those words, there could no longer be even the slightest doubt.

Makuta had arrived.

6

The impact of Makuta's landing shook the cavern, bringing down a rain of rock and dust. While Raanu and Ackar worked to keep the assembled Agori calm, Kiina and Gresh peered out the mouth of the cave. What they saw astonished them.

Two gigantic robots stood in the open desert, facing each other. One they recognized as Mata Nui. The other, bigger and stronger in appearance, was unknown to them. But they could take a wild guess at who it was.

"Two of them?" said Gresh. "There's two of them?"

"The big one must be Makuta," said Kiina. "Mata Nui told Raanu he was coming. This is bad."

"How bad?"

"Well, take a look at him," snapped Kiina. "If he flicks a toe, he could bring the whole mountain down on top of us. We have to find a way to help Mata Nui."

Gresh hefted his shield and started out of the cave. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Kiina put an arm up to block his exit. "A plan, and the right moment, kid… right now, we would just be something else for Mata Nui to worry about. Let's wait and watch for a while."

Gresh looked at her, a trace of disbelief in his expression. "When did you start talking like Ackar?"

Kiina smiled. "When I got smart — so listen, and maybe you'll live long enough to do that too."

§ § §

Mata Nui stared into the crimson eyes of the mechanical nightmare that stood before him. He knew his thoughts should have been on how to defeat Makuta, how to save his people trapped inside that robot, and how to keep Bara Magna from being destroyed in the process. But he couldn't help asking himself — *Is that what I used to look like? Is that why the Great Beings designed the robot to be able to conceal itself, so it wouldn't terrify everyone who saw it?*

"Silence?" said Makuta. "No threats? No denunciations? No vows of revenge? You disappoint me."

"I don't need to do any of those things," Mata Nui answered. Although he was speaking quietly, the sound of his words still echoed all over the planet. "I don't need to prove my power in useless combat with you, either. We don't need to fight."

Makuta chuckled, a harsh, metallic sound. "No, of course we don't. You could just lie and down and die right now. You would save me at least a few minutes' effort, and yourself a lot of pain." He raised his right arm. "Or do you need persuading?"

A burst of power shot from Makuta's armored gauntlet. It sizzled past Mata Nui's head and struck one of the peaks of the distant Black Spike Mountains. The terrific heat melted the mountain in an instant. Mata Nui's sensitive sensors picked up the screams of faraway Skrall warriors in the split second before they were covered in magma.

"I could do that all day," said Makuta, "and into the next. You would fight back, naturally, and between the two of us we would lay waste this planet… which suggests an idea."

Makuta lifted his arm again and Mata Nui prepared for another attack. But this time Makuta opened his hand and turned it palm up. "Join me," he said. "In these bodies, we have the power to decimate entire universes. Together, we could rule all of reality."

"You know so much, and yet you understand so little," said Mata Nui. "You look at the body you stole from me and see only an engine of destruction, a weapon to be wielded against anyone you choose. Didn't you ever wonder why the Great Beings created it to be so powerful? Or why you felt compelled to seize control of it?"

"You mean your 'destiny'? said Makuta, acid dripping from his words. "Yes, I know all about your mission — your great quest to reunite the three wandering pieces of Spherus Magna. Let me show you what I think of it."

Power lanced from Makuta's outstretched hand. It struck Mata Nui in the shoulder, staggering him and tearing a gash in his robotic shell.

"Ah, I see," Makuta said. "You must be wearing an old model. Cheap materials, cheap construction… I'm surprised you would be caught dead in that."

"Makuta, listen to me!" answered Mata Nui. "My destiny… it's yours, too. We're supposed to work together to restore Spherus Magna to what it once was."

Makuta took two lumbering strides forward and backhanded Mata Nui. The huge robot the Agori had reconstructed toppled, flattening an entire mountain range when it fell. Makuta stood over his fallen opponent, contempt in his eyes.

"Why?" he sneered. "Because the Great Beings said so? Where are they? Let them come forth and tell me themselves what I 'must' do."

There was a terrible silence. Nothing stirred in the desert, and even the carrion eaters circling overhead quieted their cries.

"As I thought," said Makuta. "They have abandoned this world to its fate. So should you, Mata Nui. There is nothing here for you to fight for. Or do you think the miserable peasants who inhabit this pile of sand will craft legends of you and sing songs to your glory?"

Mata Nui rose. His new body was cracked in several places now. "I'm not here for glory," he said. "I'm here to do justice to these people after so many long years."

"The people," Makuta said quietly. "I am surprised at this new level of concern for the little things that scurry across the sands. You never seemed to care very much about those whose work kept you alive. And yet, here you are, trying to be the hero to the Bara Magnans."

Makuta pointed toward a mountain to the south. The sensors in his body identified hundreds of living beings hiding inside caves within that rock. Triggering the gravitic power of his robot form, he tore the mountain loose from the ground, exposing the Glatorian and Agori who had been concealed inside. They looked up fearfully at the mountain that hovered above their heads.

"Shall I drop it?" asked Makuta. "What do you think they will feel about their 'hero' in their last few moments of life? Will they die cursing you in their hearts?"

Mata Nui's head dropped to his chest. "You would really do that, wouldn't you? Kill all those innocents just to prove some warped point? You're a fool." He glared up at Makuta. "That body does not make you a giant. Stand 40 million feet high, or 100 million, you are still an insect."

He raised both arms, hurling a twin blast of energy at his opponent. "And here on Bara Magna," yelled Mata Nui, "we know what to do with insects."

§ § §

Inside the robot body Makuta controlled, a violent earthquake rocked every land mass. Buildings toppled, trees were hurled into the air, tidal waves smashed into coastlines and the inhabitants of countless islands fled in panic. They had known something like this once before, a little over 1000 years ago, and called it the Great Cataclysm.

Tahu had been standing beside Takanuva, Toa of Light, when the quake hit. Both were knocked off their feet from the quake. Tahu glanced up to see a mass of metal falling right toward them. He unleashed his power of flame, vaporizing the solid iron.

"What… what was that?" asked Takanuva. "An attack by Makuta?"

"I don't think so," Tahu said, struggling back to his feet. "I think our old enemy just ran into someone who knows how to throw a punch."

The Toa of Fire pointed up ahead. The Rahkshi had been scattered like leaves in the wind by the tremors. They were only now regaining their feet and continuing their journey south.

"Are they ever going to get where they're going?" asked Takanuva. "We've been traveling for days."

"And picking up Toa as we go," Tahu reminded him. "Let them keep going. By the time they stop, we'll be ready for them."

§ § §

Mata Nui knew he had to act with blinding speed. The surprise attack had hit Makuta hard, but it had also caused him to drop the mountain he held suspended. With no time to spare, Mata Nui fired a second blast, turning the falling mass of rock to dust just before it would have crushed the Agori and Glatorian.

"Go!" he shouted. "Get far away from here!"

Down below, Ackar turned to Raanu. "Do what he says. Take the Agori and head east, as fast as you can. Take nothing except what you need."

"What about you?" asked Raanu. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Ackar's blade glowed red-hot. "I think Mata Nui could use some help against that monster. If nothing else, I can be a distraction, maybe buy him a few seconds."

"We can do more than that," said Kiina. "Gresh has a plan."

"I don't know whether to be intrigued or scared," Ackar said, smiling.

Kiina looked at Gresh, then back to Ackar. "All things considered, old friend, I'd go with scared."

§ § §

Makuta was smiling.

"So predictable," he said, as he rose to his feet to face Mata Nui once more. "And you don't even see it, do you?"

Mata Nui didn't respond.

"No, of course you don't," Makuta continued, "even though my strategy would be clear to a blind tunnel crawler. All I need to do is threaten the inhabitants of your little ant farm here to make you expend power to save them. Needless to say, I have more power in this form than you do in yours. I can threaten them long past the point where you can rescue them."

Makuta glanced down at the damage done to his robot body by Mata Nui's attack. "Who knew you had such a temper, brother? You seem to have forgotten, in your righteous rage, that your precious Toa and Matoran live inside of me. Damage me… and you kill them."

Mata Nui knew Makuta was right. There was no way to bring his enemy down without risking injury or death to the population that lived inside of him. But what was the alternative? Surrender, and let Makuta conquer this world and then many more? No. The Toa and Matoran had risked their lives more than once to stop the schemes of Makuta. They would accept whatever had to happen now. At least, that was what Mata Nui had to tell himself.

Something began to flash in front of Mata Nui's eyes. It was a "heads-up display" built into the robot. The green light showed the speed and trajectory of the two other pieces of Spherus Magna that he had tried to pull toward Bara Magna. Both were drifting off course and would require more power to return them to the right trajectory. As he had feared, he didn't have the energy to achieve his mission on his own.

The green light was replaced by a flashing red one. It warned that the structural integrity of his robot body was in serious danger. The power that was keeping the robot moving was slowly destroying it, and the damage done by Makuta had only made things worse. In less than an hour, the complex mechanism was going to collapse in a heap and Makuta would have won.

It was a bad situation.

It was about to get worse.

7

Gresh's plan was simple. While Ackar, Kiina and the rest distracted Makuta as best they could, he would try to slip by the robot unnoticed and find a way inside it. It was true that the Glatorian were too small to pose any real threat to the invader, but Gresh hoped that by focusing their Thornax launchers on joints and other potentially weak spots, they might at least annoy the enemy. Once inside, Gresh would secure the entry point and the other Glatorian would join him, smashing whatever they found inside.

With this in mind, the Glatorian charged. Halfway to Makuta, Kiina broke off with one squad and Ackar with the other, while Gresh veered to the west. As soon as they were in range, the Glatorian began firing their Thornax at the ankle joint on Makuta's left leg.

"Concentrate your fire!" shouted Ackar. "Target one spot and punch a hole in it!"

Kiina was already doing that, but she didn't see much effect. Whatever the robot was made out of, it was tough. One explosive Thornax could blow a big hole in most things, but dozens had barely made a scratch in this metal. And if this Makuta had even noticed their attack, he wasn't showing it.

Well, okay, thought Kiina. *If he hasn't noticed us, maybe he won't notice Gresh either.*

That did, indeed, seem to be the case. Gresh had made it all the way to the foot of the massive robot without being stepped on, blasted, or pulverized. Better still, he had found what appeared to be a hatch in the side of the appendage. Now the only challenge would be getting inside… and surviving whatever might be in there.

§ § §

Makuta may not have acted to stop Gresh and the others, but he did know they were there. His sensors had recorded their approach and his damage control systems were monitoring the effects of the Thornax explosions.

None of this came as a surprise. Makuta knew that Mata Nui would somehow manage to find followers. No doubt they would be as foolhardy as the Toa and Matoran had been and throw themselves into danger on his behalf. Like Mata Nui, these heroic sorts were predictable. By now, it really took no effort for Makuta to think two steps ahead of them.

As soon as he laid plans for an attack on Bara Magna, he mentally ordered his forces inside the robot to move out. By now, large numbers of Rahkshi and Skakdi warriors were assembled, ready to be unleashed on the desert. He had just been awaiting the proper time.

That time was now.

§ § §

Gresh had found a stress point in the hatch, apparently damaged by some past impact. A few well-placed Thornax might make an opening.

He was just taking aim for his first shot when a hissing sound came from the hatch. The next instant, it began to slowly open. Instinctively, he took cover behind a nearby rock. What he saw next was staggering.

A horde of armored figures charged out of the hatch. In the lead were vaguely reptilian looking creatures of all different colors, although yellow seemed to be the most common hue. Each carried a staff. Right behind them came some of the strangest beings he ever saw, warriors with huge jaws and weird,serpent-like external spines lined with spikes. These were armed with swords, axes and other hand weapons.

With hisses and howls, the invaders charged across the sands. They slammed into Ackar and Kiina's band, battering their way part startled Glatorian. The finest fighters on Bara Magna fell before the savagery of Rahkshi and Skakdi.

"Pull back!" Ackar yelled. "Regroup!"

Kiina leveled her vapour trident at one of the yellow Rahkshi and launched a powerful jet of water at it. Twin beams of heat vision flashed from the eyes of the foe, turning the water into steam. For a moment, Kiina could not see her enemy through the cloud. Then the Rahkshi came barreling out of the fog and smashed into her, knocking her off her feet.

Dazed, Kiina raised her trident to defend herself. The Rahkshi's heat beams turned the weapon too hot to handle and she dropped it with a cry. The creature drew back with its staff to deliver a killing blow.

Suddenly, there was a horrible crunch and the Rahkshi's head went flying. Ackar grabbed Kiina's hand and hauled her to her feet. "It got in the way of my sword," he said, smiling. "It won't do that again."

The Rahkshi's armored helmet hit the sand and tumbled to a stop. A moment later, a revolting slug crawled out from inside it.

"What is that?!?" cried Kiina.

Ackar aimed his sword and hurled a blast of fire, incinerating the slug. "Whatever it is… *was*… it's not anymore."

Kiina scooped up her trident just in time to parry the attack of a Skakdi. "Those metal things, they're just worms in armor?"

Ackar nodded as he slammed a Rahkshi to the ground.

Kiina gave a wolfish smile. "Good. Then I don't have to worry about a mess when I smash them to bits."

§ § §

Gresh was torn for an instant. Did he go help his friends, or take advantage of the opening to get inside the Makuta robot? Then he realized there was really no choice at all. Kiina and Ackar would put saving the world first. He had an opportunity to do that, and he wasn't going to waste it.

He started for the open hatch, then stopped short. More figures were coming out of it. Gresh braced for a fight.

The first two beings to step into the sunlight were a red-armored warrior and another in white and gold. Gresh greeted them with a cyclone that slammed them against the metal. Before he could follow up, a blast of light blinded him. He staggered, trying to clear his vision before the attack he knew was coming.

"Who is he?" one voice said. "He doesn't look like one of Makuta's creations."

"Maybe Makuta had agents here already," another voice replied. "Take him out. We don't have time to waste."

"Wait!" shouted Gresh. "I'm no friend of Makuta's! I thought you were!"

The glare was starting to fade now and Gresh could make out the shapes of dozens of warriors streaming from the hatch. One came up and grabbed his arm.

"So those are your pals out there, fighting the Rahkshi?" asked Tahu.

"Yes," Gresh answered. "But what are Rahkshi?"

"We call them the 'sons of Makuta,' where I come from," said Tahu. "They're killers… and your friends are in more trouble than they know."

He turned back to the warriors, large and small, who stood behind him. "Let's go. These people need our help." Tahu looked over his shoulder at Gresh. "You coming?"

"I'm going inside," the Glatorian replied. "I have to stop this Makuta."

The white and gold warrior, Takanuva, laughed. There wasn't any humor in the sound. "What do you think we've been trying to do for months? You can't do any good in there — you'll just get yourself killed. So stay here, or fight with us."

"Then I'm with you," answered Gresh, already racing toward the battle. "Let's do this."

"Eager sort, isn't he?" asked Takanuva, following behind.

"Yeah," chuckled Tahu. "Reminds me of you."

Takanuva laughed. "I guess I was like that, wasn't I?" he said, looking back at Tahu. Then he stopped in his tracks.

Tahu wasn't moving. He was standing in the middle of the sand, staring straight ahead, as if in a trance. Takanuva ran back to him and started to shake the Toa of Fire.

"Hey, Tahu!" said Takanuva. "What's the matter? Come on, speak to me!"

But Tahu couldn't hear him.

§ § §

From high upon a rise, Stronius watched the battle below. Once, he had been one of the most elite of Skrall warriors. His tribe had seized control of the city of Roxtus and threatened all the villages of Bara Magna. Under the leadership of Tuma, and with the help of an Agori traitor, the desert was about to be theirs.

Then fate played a joke on the Skrall. A warrior named Mata Nui appeared on the planet. He rallied the villages against the Skrall and actually defeated Tuma in single combat. In the battle that followed, the Skrall broke and fled the city. Now most were scattered all over the mountains and desert. Stronius had managed to gather together only a few warriors to strike for revenge. But they would be enough.

In the distance, he could see the two giant robots fighting. He did not know who they were, nor did he care. He wanted Mata Nui, but that miserable desert rat was nowhere to be seen. His friends, though — Ackar, Kiina, and the others — they were in the middle of the fight of their lives. It was a conflict that could go either way, and just the sort of situation Stronius could use.

Let Mata Nui hide wherever he will, thought Stronius. *I will send my Skrall to aid the invaders and wipe out the Glatorian. And then he can live with the knowledge that his friends died for him.*

"Go!" he yelled to his warriors. "Attack! Our vengeance begins today!"

8

Tahu was standing on a lava field. The place seemed familiar, but he could not… yes, of course, now he knew. He was back in Ta-Wahi, the region of flame and magma he had first visited more than a year before. It was here he had begun his quest for the Kanohi Masks of Power, and here his battle against Makuta had begun.

There was a mask hovering in the air before him, but… wait, this wasn't right. It was no mere Kanohi he saw, it was the Mask of Life itself. How could that be possible?

The Mask of Life was never on that island, Tahu thought. *It was someplace else entirely, and my team did not find it. It was other heroes who achieved that. So why am I seeing it where I know it cannot be?*

A voice came from the mask, although its "mouth" never moved. Tahu simply heard the words in his mind.

You are seeing what you need to see, said the mask. *A message has been sent; a message has been received. Now I must pass the knowledge on to you.*

"So that's it. I'm inside an illusion," said Tahu. "I can hear myself speaking, but I'm not really talking at all, am I? It's all in my head. This is some trick of Makuta's, and I'm going to —"

There was a blast of color and sound, cutting him off. A billion images shot through Tahu's mind at once. He saw his universe, beings both familiar and unfamiliar, adventures he had not been part of yet now knew must have happened. In that micro-instant, he was more than certain than he had ever been of anything that what he was now experiencing was no trick.

The hordes of the Makuta are unstoppable, said the mask. *The Glatorian and Agori will fall.*

"Thanks for the inspiration," Tahu said. "Well, I didn't go through all I have been through — fighting Makuta, taking an energized protodermis bath and transforming into a Toa Nuva, almost getting killed a hundred times — to give up now."

Yes, a Toa Nuva, the mask said softly. *To do what you must, you must be what you were. Becoming a Nuva gave you great power, but it cannot be allowed to stand.*

"What? What are you —?" Tahu began.

It was already too late. The power of the Mask of Life washed over him, undoing what the energized protodermis had done to him months ago. His body, mask and armor changed, going back to what they had been when he was first created. Tahu could already feel his elemental power weakened by the change.

"What have you done?!?" he raged. "The battle of my life, and you reduce my power?"

The ways of Life are not for you to question, the mask replied. *The Great Beings planned for much, though not all. They knew a rampant infection might one day threaten their robot, and they meant for a Toa to stop it. To do so, they gave me the knowledge to create a golden suit of Toa armor.*

"I wore a golden mask once," Tahu said, still bitter over the mask's actions. "It was powerful, but it couldn't do what you claim."

It was a candle beside a bonfire, said the mask. *I can create the armor, but be warned… it can be used but once, and there is no telling what its use will do to you, Tahu.*

The Toa of Fire felt the world spin around him for an instant. Then he was once more in the Bara Magna desert, with Takanuva shouting at him.

"Tahu! Wake up!" yelled the Toa of Light.

Tahu gently pushed him away. "I'm… I'm all right."

"No," said Takanuva. "No, you're not. Tahu, you're not a Toa Nuva anymore. You've… changed."

Tahu reached up and felt his mask and armor. It hadn't been just an illusion, then. The Mask of Life really had turned him back into what he had been a year before. No longer could his Mask of Shielding protect others besides himself, nor would his fire power be enough to stop the army Makuta had assembled.

"That cursed mask," Tahu said, in a tone of barely controlled fury. "It's ruined me."

Takanuva tore his eyes from the strange sight of Tahu transformed. Something was happening up above. Shafts of golden light were erupting from one of the two giant robots. Wherever they touched the sand, a piece of golden armor formed. Takanuva watched as five segments took shape, followed by a sixth in the shape of Tahu's Mask of Shielding.

Tahu and Takanuva rushed forward, each grabbing one piece. But before they could gather the rest, the larger of the two robots hurled a burst of energy down at them. It struck with a massive explosion, scattering the two Toa and the remaining pieces of armor.

It took a few moments for Takanuva to recover his wits. He lifted his head from the sand. Beyond the newly formed crater, he spotted a yellow-armored Rahkshi snatching up one of the armor pieces.

"Tahu? Was that armor really important?" asked Takanuva.

"Yes," said Tahu.

"Then I think we have a problem."

§ § §

Hundreds of yards away, Gresh had used a controlled cyclone to send a half dozen Rahkshi flying. He was about to go to Ackar's aid when something struck the ground just in front of him. He whirled about, thinking it was another attack, but no enemy was near.

Glancing down, he saw the missile had been a piece of golden armor, now half-buried in the sand. Gresh reached down and picked it up.

What is this? Where did it come from?

There wasn't time to puzzle it out. A Skakdi warrior with a twin-bladed axe was charging toward him. Gresh tucked the piece of armor in his pack. There would be spare moments to worry about it when this battle was over.

§ § §

Nektann smiled as his Glatorian foe fell. These desert dwellers were good fighters, it was true, but no match for a Skakdi warlord.

He was already considering which portion of this pile of sand he would ask to rule when the war was won. It did not look like a very appealing place, though it was not much worse than his native island of Zakaz. Still, he hoped there was some other region, perhaps to the north, with a few more obvious resources. Conquest was great fun, but conquest with no water for miles was not.

Not far away, a Rahkshi was losing a fight with a warrior and two villagers. Nektann's first instinct was to let the armored creature die. More than a few Skakdi had perished over the years at the hands of Rahkshi. Then he reminded himself that he had agreed to an alliance with the loathsome things. It wouldn't do to anger Makuta by not honoring his agreements.

Batting aside an Agori who tried to stop him, Nektann started for the embattled Rahkshi. He was halfway there when he stumbled over something. Looking down, he saw it was a piece of golden armor, no doubt all that remained of one of the fools opposing Makuta's army. Nektann scooped it up — it would be of no further use to its former owner, after all, and perhaps it would be worth something. This battle was going to be too short for his taste, it seemed, so he might as well get some loot to make the whole thing worthwhile.

§ § §

Towering above the fight, Mata Nui and Makuta were glowing like stars as they expended all their energy in their own personal struggle. Mata Nui had managed to do some additional damage, but the fight was clearly not going his way. Makuta had the advantages of size, strength, greater energy reserves, and sheer brutality. It was only his righteous anger and his knowledge of what would happen if he fell that kept Mata Nui on his feet.

"I don't know what that light show was about," said Makuta, as he forced Mata Nui back. "Did you hope to light the way for your Toa across the sands? Oh, yes, I saw them pursuing my Rahkshi. Gali and Pohatu have already devastated half a legion. I really must make an example of those two."

"You thought you could slaughter the inhabitants of this planet," Mata Nui spat. "But they won't surrender to you, anymore than the Matoran or Toa did."

"And look how well that worked out for them," Makuta said, landing a solid blow and cracking Mata Nui's chest armor.

Mata Nui fired a bolt of pure power, striking the same spot he had before. Makuta growled as he felt circuits fuse. His readouts indicated a molten protodermis pipeline had been severed inside him, causing cascading failures in his systems. Visorak spiders had already been dispatched to try to contain the damage.

"You rely too much on the bravery and spirit of your followers, brother," Makuta said, his voice heavy with menace. "Even here, on your adopted world, you gathered starry-eyed fools around you who think you can save them."

Makuta's lowered his right arm, palm pointed toward the site of the battle below. Mata Nui could seen energies gathering around his hand, but not the sort of power he had been hurling up to now. No, this was something worse, something fundamental in nature and terrifying in its potential for destruction.

Gravity, Mata Nui realized. *He's going to unleash the power of gravity on Bara Magna.*

Makuta's red eyes gleamed with triumph. "You know, don't you? A single blast of gravitic power and this planet will fold in on itself, destroying everything and everyone on it. I will survive… perhaps you might as well… but everyone else will be a memory."

"You can't do that! The consequences —"

"I stopped caring about consequences long ago," Makuta answered. "Those sorts of worries are for the weak, and I am strong, Mata Nui. By right of power, I claimed your universe — and now I claim this one, starting here and now!"

Energy erupted in waves from Makuta's gauntlet, a planet-killing force that could not be stopped…

9

The minutes before the blast…

Gresh was the first to see the band of Skrall approaching from the west. Like carrion eaters, they had come to finish off the fallen. He felt a fury grow inside him that he had never known before.

He turned and headed for the Skrall. The last time he had faced this many warriors on his own, he had been beaten and badly wounded. But that was before Mata Nui had gifted him with the elemental power of air. Now he was ready to blow the Skrall back to the Black Spikes… and it would be a pleasure.

He was about to launch his first attack when he spotted something in the hand of one of the Skrall. The warrior was carrying a piece of golden armor.

So, Gresh thought, *it belongs to them. Some kind of weapon? Then they are the last ones who should be allowed to have it.*

Concentrating, he summoned hurricane-force winds that whipped sand at the oncoming Skrall. One gust tore the piece of armor from the Skrall warrior's hand and sent it flying toward Gresh. The Glatorian snatched it out of the air, stashing it away with his other piece.

Three Skrall had battled their way through the windstorm and were coming for him. Gresh smiled.

This was going to be fun.

§ § §

Not far away, Takanuva was dodging the heat vision of the yellow Rahkshi. In the past, his light powers had been enough to stagger these creatures, but not this time. Makuta had evidently created improved Rahkshi models.

Right, he said to himself, *as another Rahkshi blast sliced a nearby rock in half. Like they needed improving.*

Takanuva fired a laser at the Rahkshi. The creature countered it in mid-air with his heat vision. It was a stalemate at first, then slowly Takanuva started to gain the advantage. The Rahkshi hissed in anger.

Okay, maybe this won't be so hard after all, thought the Toa of Light.

He caught a glimpse of yellow out of the corner of his eye. Another Rahkshi was charging at him from the left. Before he could react, it hit him broadside with a blast of searing heat. Takanuva cried out and fell.

The two Rahkshi closed in on the fallen Toa. Takanuva knew he had to take a chance. There was a new trick he had been working on for some time, but he had no idea if it would work in combat. He was going to have to find out.

Concentrating, Takanuva used his power over light to create a hologram between the two Rahkshi. He didn't have the skill yet to make it perfect or very imaginative — all he could manage was a duplicate of himself. If the Rahkshi looked closely, they would see it was transparent in too many places. But in the midst of battle, they weren't going to take time to examine the sudden appearance of a new enemy.

The creatures whirled as one and shot out beams of heat vision at the light image of Takanuva. They passed right through the light image to strike the Rahkshi. Before they could recover from the shock, Takanuva used his lasers to slice through the creatures' armor. Both crumbled to the ground, dropping their staffs.

Takanuva got to his feet. One of the Rahkshi was reaching out for its weapon. The Toa stepped on the Rahkshi's armored hand, shattering the metal into fragments. The two kraata slugs that had controlled the Rahkshi crawled out of the helmets, only to meet their ends by the power of light.

The Toa of Light grabbed the piece of golden armor. He headed back toward the battle, never looking back at the shattered remains of the Rahkshi. But in his heart, he made a vow that this would be the last fight with Makuta. The time had come to crush this evil once and for all.

§ § §

"I'll crush you!" bellowed Nektann.

Tahu barely blocked the Skakdi's blow with his sword. He had spotted Nektann in the midst of the battle, hanging onto a piece of golden armor. At least three Toa and a dozen Matoran and Agori lay dead around him. A wave of heat had driven the other Skakdi and Rahkshi away from his side, but Nektann hadn't fallen. Instead, he seemed to actually welcome Tahu's attack.

"Go ahead, Toa," the Skakdi taunted. "Use your flame power. Use your mask. You 'heroes' can't win a battle with just your strength and your wits, right?"

Tahu gave a grim smile as he bored in on the Skakdi. Enemies had done this to him before — try to strike at his pride, make him sloppy, try to get him to make mistakes. But it hadn't been

so long ago that Tahu had fought others of Nektann's kind and suffered a bitter defeat. If it hadn't been for a brave group of Matoran villagers, he would have died. The experience made him take a hard look at himself. Nektann was about to regret that.

"This is the part where I'm supposed to say, 'I don't need my power to deal with you,' right?" said Tahu. "I take it as a challenge. Can I outfight you?"

"You can't, and you know it," growled Nektann. "That's why you have to cheat."

Tahu triggered his elemental power, heating up his sword to several thousand degrees. His next blow melted right through the Skakdi's weapon, cutting it in half.

"Look around, barbarian," Tahu said. "All around you, warriors are fighting and dying. This isn't a game. There are no rules. It's not about honor, or pride, or who's better — it's about winning."

Disarmed, Nektann still smiled that ruthless Skakdi smile. "So. You did learn something from your enemies, Toa. Maybe we won in the end, then — we made you like us."

"Not like you. Never like you," Tahu said. "You fight to take lives. I fight to save them."

Nektann charged, slamming into Tahu and carrying him into the midst of fight between Glatorian and Rahkshi. "Go ahead, burn me. But your Toa power will burn your friends too."

"You still don't understand," said Tahu, as he flipped the Skakdi over his hip and slammed him to the sand. "You and your kind were what I was created to stop. You've terrorized villagers, murdered Toa, and now you serve a monster that would enslave worlds. I'm going to do whatever I have to."

Nektann shot up faster than Tahu could have imagined, grabbing the Toa by the throat and lifting him off his feet. "You don't have the guts, anymore than those Toa I killed, or the villagers who had more courage than sense. Some of them didn't even have time to scream before they died."

The Skakdi squeezed harder, starting to choke Tahu. "Talk, talk, talk. That's all Toa are good for. Try talking when I'm crushing your —"

Nektann stopped. Something was very wrong. Tahu's eyes were gleaming and blistering heat was running down Nektann's arm. Before the Skakdi's eyes, his armor began to melt. It fell in molten drops to the sand, first his gauntlet, then the plate on his arm, then his chest armor. Tahu never moved, never spoke, as he fed his power into Nektann's armor.

"What are you doing?" shouted the Skakdi. "My armor —!"

"Be grateful you were wrong," Tahu said, as Nektann fell to the ground in a mass of liquid metal. "Be grateful I never learned from my enemies how to kill. You'll live, Skakdi, but you won't forget."

Tahu picked up the Skakdi's satchel and removed the piece of golden armor. "And, Mata Nui help me, neither will I."

10

Mata Nui saw the gravity wave being unleashed by Makuta. As swiftly as he could move, he threw himself at his foe, grabbing Makuta's arm. He jerked it up in the air, sending the gravitic power surging into the sky.

It was an act of pure desperation, and pure luck, and pure genius, all rolled into one. The power beam struck the moons of Bara Magna, adding itself to the power Mata Nui had already sent into space. The moons returned to their original course, heading for home.

Makuta roared and pushed Mata Nui away, but the hero would not be stopped now. His robot body was minutes away from failure and Bota Magna and Aqua Magna were rushing toward their reunion with Bara Magna. Mata Nui's mind raced. None of this would matter if Makuta won the battle. He had to be stopped.

With a ragged yell, Mata Nui struck Makuta, sending the robot body sprawling backward. He kept up a relentless attack against the bigger, stronger Makuta, not giving his enemy time to respond. Red lights were flashing all over his internal monitors. Stress levels on his robot form were well beyond tolerance. Mata Nui's only hope of surviving this fight was to conserve energy.

But my survival doesn't matter, he knew. *Only my destiny matters. Others died to give me this chance. Can I risk less?*

It couldn't last. Both he and Makuta knew that. Just as he pushed Makuta to the furthest northern reaches, the power in Mata Nui's robot body ran down. He didn't have the strength to finish off his foe.

Makuta smashed a metallic fist into Mata Nui's chest, sending the robot toppling to the ground with a tremendous crash. Makuta stood over him, triumphant.

"You made an excellent effort," Makuta said. "But they don't remember who tried the hardest… only who won. Today, that is I. Goodbye, brother."

§ § §

Tahu had found Takanuva again in the midst of the chaos. Between them, they had four pieces of golden armor. Where were the other two?

"There!" yelled the Toa of Light. He had spotted Gresh in the middle of a fight with a Skadi, golden metal visible in the Glatorian's satchel. The two Toa raced to his side, using a combination of heat and light to fell his opponent.

"The armor!" said Tahu. "We need it!"

"What?" said Gresh, even as Takanuva started pulling the pieces out of his bag. "All right, take it. What's it for?"

"We don't know," said Takanuva. "That's what we're going to find out."

Hurriedly, Tahu clamped five of the armor sections onto his own crimson armor. Then he removed his Mask of Shielding and replaced it with the golden one.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Takanuva.

"I haven't been sure of anything in 100,000 years," said Tahu, smiling. "So why start now?"

The Toa of Fire concentrated, focusing his thoughts just as he would do to activate a mask power or control flame. But this time, he was willing the golden armor to do whatever it could to end this battle.

Power surged through him. He screamed as its electricity locked his muscles and suffused his body with a blinding light. Tendrils of energy shot from him, coiling around every Rahkshi on the battlefield. The creatures fell to the ground, seized by spasms as their power raced back along the tendrils and into Tahu. As combatants on both sides watched, the Rahkshi's armor disintegrated and the kraata slugs inside them exploded into shards of shadow.

Tahu was still screaming as the energies of hundreds of Rahkshi threatened to overwhelm him. Then, abruptly, the nimbus of power around him disappeared and he dropped like a stone.

Just that quickly, the battle was over. With the Rahkshi gone, the Skakdi and Skrall were badly outnumbered by the Glatorian and Tahu's Toa legion. Some surrendered, others scattered back into the desert to fight another day.

But no one was celebrating. They all knew victory meant nothing if Makuta killed Mata Nui, and it seemed there was nothing they could do to prevent that.

§ § §

What none of the fighters on the ground realized was that they already had done more than they realized. Each kraata was bound to its creator in some way, in this case, Makuta. While he did not feel their pain, he could sense their deaths, and the loss of so many at once made him hesitate for just a moment. For that instant, Makuta was paying no attention to the world around him… or the sky above him.

Mata Nui saw it coming. It was why he had forced Makuta to this northern edge of Bara Magna. His last gambit was about to pay off, and by a miracle, he was going to live to see it.

A shadow fell over the robots, the shadow of the moon of Bota Magna returning to its place of origin. Using the last of his energy, Mata Nui rose and shoved Makuta backward into the path of the planetoid. Its edge impacted the robot, smashing in the metallic head with a sickening crunch. Makuta's armored form began to topple toward Mata Nui and the Bara Magna desert. Using every bit of mechanical muscle he possessed, Mata Nui caught Makuta and pushed him aside, causing the massive robot to fall onto the Black Spikes. The impact of the robot crushed the mountains to powder, even as the twin collisions of Bota Magna and Aqua Magna shook the entire world.

The three fragments of Spherus Magna were one once more. Destiny had been achieved. But the journey was not yet at its end.

Epilogue

The battle was over.

The Bara Magna desert was a disaster area. The surrounding mountains had been pulverized or flattened and massive scorch marks scarred the sands. The ground was littered with the bodies of those who had lost their lives in the clash, along with countless shattered pieces of Rahkshi armor. Dominating it all, of course, was the fallen robot that once had been Makuta's greatest weapon.

Tahu and Takanuva stood on a dune, looking at the metallic shell inside which they had lived their entire lives. No doubt the inner workings had been heavily damaged and there would be casualties. But as they watched the multitudes streaming out of the robot, they saw many familiar figures. More than likely, most had taken shelter after the initial quake and so survived the much larger shock. They stumbled out onto the sands — Toa, Matoran villagers, Vortixx traders, Skakdi barbarians, agents of the Order of Mata Nui, Dark Hunter bandits, animals, birds, insects and more — shielding their eyes against the bright sun of their new world.

"Do you think Makuta's really gone?" asked Takanuva.

Tahu nodded. "Yes, I do. He never saw it coming, so he had no time to will his spirit out of that body. I think — I *hope* — he died with the robot."

"And what about the rest? The Matoran, the other Toa… us … can we all survive here?"

Tahu looked out over the vast desert. Already, he could see Agori coming to the aid of Matoran, Glatorian talking with Toa, and members of other species already scouting for someplace to settle and regroup.

"You know what, Takanuva? I think we're going to be just fine."

"I'm just happy you're alive," said Takanuva. "When you fell over like that, I thought sure you were dead. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure," Tahu said smiling. Two thin beams of heat vision shot from his eyes then, striking the sand and burning three words into the ground:

Unity.

Duty.

Destiny.

§ § §

Mata Nui looked down at the various populations meeting so far below and felt like he was seeing the future. The Matoran and Agori had much to learn from each other. The Toa teamed with the Glatorian would safeguard both sets of villagers from any threat. Natural alliances were being forged even now.

He turned his attention to the fallen form of Makuta. There was another alliance that should have existed, but never came to pass. Had he and Makuta worked together, they could have restored Spherus Magna without the devastation and loss of life. But Makuta's greed and ambition wouldn't allow that. In the end, both his mad dreams and the body he had stolen were wreckage.

Makuta was the past. It was time to worry about today and tomorrow for this world.

When he had gone to Raanu and asked to take the Agori's city away from them, MataNui had made a vow to himself. If he succeeded in rebuilding the planet, he would not stop there. He would give the Agori a new life, a new chance to thrive here. Now it was time to begin that work.

Mata Nui scanned the body he wore. It was badly damaged and power levels were barely high enough to do what had to be done. But if he could call upon the Mask of Life one last time, combine its energies with the robot's, then maybe…

Of course, there was one other aspect of what he was about to do that he tried to ignore. There was no way he would survive it. The robot was already dangerously unstable and channeling so much power through it at once would surely mean its destruction. Mata Nui would die with it.

If that was how it had to be, so be it. The Great Beings owed this world and its people a debt, and he was going to pay it.

Mata Nui looked toward the sky and stretched out his arms. He summoned the energies that coursed through his body, even as he called out to the Mask of Life. The mask at first resisted — it, too, knew that it might well not survive this, and it did not want to cease to exist. Mata Nui could have forced it to aid him — he had a stronger will — but he did not. Instead, he simply pictured in his mind how Spherus Magna could be if this was successful. He knew the mask would sense what was in his thoughts and that it would know this would be the ultimate use of its power.

A moment later, Mata Nui felt the power of the mask merge with what little remained of his own. Then he willed that power to flow from his body and sweep across the planet.

Everywhere it touched, mountains rose, forest flourished, life appeared where none had been before. In the desert of Bara Magna, time seemed to flow backwards as barren sand gave way to a jungle teeming with trees and plants and long-dead rivers returned to life.

The vast ocean of Aqua Magna felt Mata Nui's touch as well. Underwater, plants flourished, providing a bounty for the fish that swam in the sea. The power of the Mask of Life touched even the twisted, mutated beings who lived in the depths, curing them of the worst of their afflictions while leaving them able to survive beneath the waves.

In the great forest of Bota Magna, the giant, bio-mechanical reptiles created so long ago by the Great Beings watched, amazed, as their homeland shifted and changed all around them. Areas where trees and foliage had ceased to grow suddenly were green again. Smaller animals scurried from their hiding places to feast on the new growth.

Agori and Glatorian stood in the once-desert and were speechless. This was not the world they once knew — it was better. After 100,000 years of struggling to survive, of scraping for every morsel of food and drop of water, now there was enough for all. As they watched in awe, clouds gathered above their heads for the first time in living memory, it began to rain in Bara Magna.

"He did it," whispered Kiina. "I can't believe it."

"It's amazing," said Ackar, in shock. "I can't even… I don't know how to put it into words…"

"He promised me, Ackar," Kiina continued. "He promised to bring me to a new world. Instead, he brought the new world to me."

"Wait," Ackar said, a new note of urgency in his voice. "Look at Mata Nui! He's… he's collapsing!"

It was far worse than that. The overwhelming strain had taxed Mata Nui's robot body past its limit. The metal that made it up was disintegrating rapidly, along with its interior mechanisms. Even from a distance, the two Glatorian could see the destruction spreading rapidly.

"Come on!" yelled Kiina. "He needs our help!"

Ackar and Kiina leapt atop sand stalkers and urged the beasts forward. Kiina couldn't give voice to what she was feeling inside — Mata Nui, her friend, was dying for them. He had given his last bit of energy to defend them from Makuta and save their world, and there would likely be nothing they could do for him in return.

Except mourn, she said to herself.

Before they got too close to the site of his fall, they had to rein the sand stalkers to a halt. The air was filled with metal dust — along with a few larger pieces of the body scattered here and there, this was all that remained of the giant robot.

"We're too late," Kiina said softly. "He's gone."

Ackar stood silently amid the metallic refuse that had once been inhabited by his friend. Mata Nui had done more than save the Agori from the Skrall. He had saved Ackar from himself. The veteran Glatorian had been on his way to forced retirement, and a life spent training young fighters who didn't remember him or wandering between villages trying to find one more match. Mata Nui had been the one who showed him he still had value, that a Glatorian was more than a strong right arm and a suit of armor. He'd had faith in Ackar when Ackar had none in himself.

"Our troubles weren't his," said the fire Glatorian. "He could have gone north in search of his own answers and left us to deal with the Skrall, if he had wanted. Instead, he fought beside us and risked his life for people he didn't even know. There will never be another like him."

Kiina looked around. Toa, Agori, Matoran, and Glatorian had gathered now, drawn by the sight of the great robot's collapse. Some looked grief-stricken, others merely puzzled, and some fearful. Mata Nui had granted them a new life and a new world, and no doubt they expected him to lead them into the future. Instead, he was gone and they were on their own again.

She turned back to the pile of wreckage, damp from the gentle rain. For a moment, she thought a shaft of sunlight had forced its way through the clouds, for there was a faint glow in the center of the rubble. But then the glow grew brighter. Ackar saw it, too, and climbed over the twisted metal to reach the source. He reached down and emerged with the Mask of Life, now gleaming brighter than a sun.

"Watch out!" yelled one of the Toa. "That's dangerous!"

Ackar returned to Kiina's side, cradling the mask in both hands. He knew the Toa was probably right and holding onto this object wasn't a smart move. But something told him he was meant to retrieve it and keep it safe.

The mask flared so brightly Ackar and all those present had to close their eyes for a moment. When they opened them again, the Mask of Life was hovering in mid-air. As if that was not enough to astonish them, a voice came from the mask as well — the voice of Mata Nui.

"My friends," he said. "The debt owed to all of you has been repaid. You have your world back again. Live on it in peace."

"Mata Nui?" said Kiina. "We thought you were dead."

"My mind and spirit lived inside this mask for so long that when the body I wore died, it was drawn back to it," answered Mata Nui.

"The mask can do amazing things," said Toa Tahu. "You could use it to make a body for yourself, couldn't you? We could all use your wisdom and your guidance."

"I think…" There was a pause. "I think perhaps this is not the time for me to walk among you. You all have a new life to build. My destiny is fulfilled, but for many of you, it has yet to be written. You need to find your path without my shadow hanging over you."

"But… but all the battles we fought, all that we endured, was to bring you back to us," said Takanuva.

"And in so doing, you grew as a people past the point where you needed a Great Spirit to guide you," Mata Nui said gently. "The true power does not reside with me. It lives inside all of you."

"So this is… goodbye?" asked Kiina.

"Never goodbye," answered Mata Nui. "Even I cannot predict the future, or if the time will come when I shall be at your side once more. But until that day arrives, I have something I must ask of you."

"Anything," said Ackar. "Name it."

"The Great Beings," said Mata Nui. "They vanished 100,000 years ago, not long after creating me. They were tormented by guilt over what they knew would happen to Spherus Magna, and their role in causing it. Find them… tell them the planet is whole once more… convince them to share their gifts with you. I learned what it can mean to have friends, not subjects; allies, rather than workers or soldiers. Perhaps they can do the same."

"If that's what you want, it's done," said Ackar.

"The time has come," said Mata Nui. "All journeys must come to an end, but this time, there is a new beginning as well. There will be challenges to face and enemies to fight, but I know you will overcome. All that has gone before, my friends, has only served to give birth to this new day.

"Let unity, duty and destiny be your guides. Be well, be strong, care for this world and for each other. Farewell."

The light faded from the mask until it was the dimmest of glows. But no one present doubted that, somehow, Mata Nui's consciousness still lingered there.

Kiina caught the Mask of Life as it slowly fell to the ground. She stared at in silence for a long time, before saying, "I always knew it would end one day. I never thought it would end like this. It's too soon, Ackar."

"I think any time would have been too soon," said Ackar "I hope none of us ever have cause to regret what just happened."

"No. Mata Nui was right," said Tahu. "We will honor him, and all those who fought for him, in our memories. But the time has come to move on."

Tahu reached out. After a moment, Kiina handed the mask to him. He cradled it in his hands, remembering all the victories and defeats, the arguments, and the moments of revelation. He recalled the times it seemed there was nowhere to go next, no way to solve a mystery — and how things would suddenly fall together and the way became clear. He thought about the Matoran villagers, whose curiosity could sometimes drive him to distraction… but whose love for Mata Nui and for justice and peace could never be questioned. It was the Matoran who lived to hear the tales of the past, and it was they who would keep those tales alive in the future. True, there were dangers on this world, both known — Skrall, Skakdi, and more — and unknown. But as they always had before, somehow they would find a way to overcome.

"Come, my friends," he said, at last. "It is time to go."