

BIONICLE Legends #9

Shadows in the Sky

By Greg Farshtey

Introduction

One week ago...

Tanma idly dragged his swords along the hard ground, humming part of a tune he had composed himself. Every now and then, he would fire a little burst of light from the end of one of his weapons, chipping off a piece of rock and sending it flying over the edge of the land. Then he would peer over and watch it as it went down and down, finally vanishing into the mist far below.

Despite being a bit bored, Tanma had decided that life was generally good right now. It had taken a thousand years, but all of the villages had recovered from the Fall and the Matoran had adjusted to their new environment. Now it was just the routine work of maintaining things — gathering food, keeping the vine bridges in good repair, and making sure the scareRahi were in place. That last task was the job Tanma and Gavla had been given today, and more mind-numbingly dull work Tanma could not imagine.

Of course, it didn't help that he was partnered with Gavla. Although they were both Matoran of Light, Gavla acted more like one of those ice-cold Ko-Matoran types. She always had her mask in the air, like she was better than everyone else. As a result, no one really wanted to be around her.

"Are you going to work, or are you going to stand around?" Gavla snapped. Her voice always reminded Tanma of the high-pitched shriek of the wind just before a storm.

"Keep your mask on," Tanma grumbled. "It's not like we really need these things anymore."

That was true. Although flying Rahi had been a problem in Karda Nui for centuries, lately they had almost completely disappeared. No one knew why, but they weren't going to question their good fortune.

Three Matoran shot past, heading down toward the swamp. Their improvised booster packs let them fly for short distances, so long as they used them wisely, they could make the trip up and back. Tanma guessed they were going down to harvest vines, as one of the bridges between the villages was looking a little worse for wear.

Something flashed past the corner of his eye. He whipped his head around, but saw nothing. For a moment, though, it looked like a huge, black-winged shape had shot past. Some new kind of Rahi, maybe? Tanma hoped not. The village would need much larger scareRahi if the creatures were going to be that big.

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There it was again! This time, Tanma got a better look at it before it vanished over a rise. It was jet-black, with small, scalloped wings on its shoulders and long, sharp claws. As it flew, it dropped something, but Tanma couldn't tell what it was. He broke into a run. Gavla was over that way and she might have gotten a better look.

"Gavla, did you see — ?" he shouted as he ran down the slope. But Gavla was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the shadowy winged visitor.

Okay, so I'm imagining things, Tanma said to himself. Only I didn't imagine it — I saw something, and Gavla must have, too. But where is she? Hiding, maybe? She doesn't seem like the "run and hide" type, but maybe...

"Come on out!" he yelled. "It's safe! Gavla? It was just some kind of a flier."

Something slithered out from behind a rock, but it wasn't the missing Matoran. What slipped past Tanma was a slime-covered leech about two feet long, faintly glowing with a pale, sickly light. Tanma had turned to follow it when he heard a faint noise behind him.

He looked back to see a sight that would haunt him all the rest of his days. It was Gavla... and yet at the same time, it wasn't. She had changed in horrible ways. Her feet had sprouted claws, and wings had emerged from her shoulders. Her blades had transformed into talons that were fused to her hands.

At first, Tanma thought it was all some kind of joke. Matoran of Light had the ability to alter how others perceived the color of their armor, an effective means of camouflage. But the wings, the claws... no Av-Matoran could change their shape like that.

Gavla was walking toward Tanma now, slashing the air with her talons, undisguised hatred in her eyes. Tanma was torn between trying to figure out what had just happened and simply getting as far away as possible. His legs voted for running, and since there were two of them, majority ruled.

He raced back toward the village. Gavla followed, never altering her pace or saying a word. *It's almost as if she isn't trying to catch me, thought Tanma, just keep me moving in that direction.*

Two bolts of shadow energy flew past his shoulder. Tanma turned to see they had come from Gavla. He hurled a burst of light back, striking the Matoran. The noise she made in response was horrible, something between a scream and an angry hiss. She fired another beam of shadow from her blade. This one hit Tanma, knocking him off his feet. It wasn't so much the impact that had downed him as the shock of the ice-cold darkness.

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“Why did you make me do that?” asked Gavla, her voice soft and almost gentle. “I don’t want to hurt you. I want to help you.”

“What... what happened to you?” Tanma replied. “Your mask... your armor...”

“Oh, that,” Gavla said, chuckling. “You might say I’ve seen the light... by peering into the darkness. And now you’re going to see it, too.”

Tanma scrambled to his feet and started to run. As he drew closer to the village, he stopped dead. There was not one, but three of the winged beings circling his home. Darkness spread from their wings as they flew, until it seemed as if the shadow was a physical thing trying to crush the town beneath its weight. And everywhere he looked, there were Matoran — his friends, his neighbors — wandering the streets, transformed into creatures of shadow.

“It doesn’t hurt, you know.”

Tanma turned to see Gavla approaching.

“It’s quick,” the shadow Matoran continued. “The light is drained from you, and what’s left is... sharper, clearer. You know what you have to do... and you know you won’t let anyone stop you.”

“I hope you won’t mind if I try,” said Tanma, already running right toward the other Matoran. When Gavla tried to grab him, he dodged, then used a sweeping kick to knock the shadow Matoran off her feet. There was no question of staying to continue the fight, though.

I have to get to the other villages, Tanma thought, his eyes on the nearest bridge. I have to warn them, before shadow is all that’s left of this land.

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I

Antroz perched on a high ledge and looked down over Karda Nui. His searching gaze took in the Matoran villages, built atop fallen stalactites, and the great swamp far below. Cutting through the center of it all was a massive waterfall which flowed from the sky and fed the marsh.

Not so very long ago, this place would have been thought beautiful by Matoran standards of beauty. But today it was a place of chaos and fear, betrayal and grief — and Antroz looked upon this, and saw that it was good.

He spotted his ally, Chirox, in the distance, circling above the Matoran settlements. After a few moments, the bat-winged being came to a gentle landing beside Antroz.

“These Matoran are stubborn,” Chirox grumbled. “All but one of their villages captured... their friends turned to our side... their position hopeless... and yet still, they resist!”

Antroz smiled and shook his head. “Of course they do. The Great Beings made the Matoran to be more than just laborers — they gave their creations spirit and passion, even if misguided. That is something you would not know about.”

Chirox tensed at the jibe. In his time, he had created Rahi beasts of all types. The doom viper and the lohrak, among others, had resulted from his efforts. But his Rahi always seemed to come out twisted in mind and spirit. Unlike the creations of others, like the Muaka cat or the Kane-Ra bull, Chirox’s contributed nothing to the ecosystem but death and destruction. It was a touchy subject with him, and Antroz knew it.

“I was working on something new before the call came to travel here,” Chirox said, very softly. “You might want to see it sometime. I’m sure it would like to see you.”

Antroz laughed. “You take everything too seriously, my friend. Take this village — you can be annoyed at its resistance, or you can take pleasure in the fact that its Matoran are still free and available for torment.”

Chirox snorted. “This is a first — someone expecting a being born of the shadows to look on the bright side.”

Antroz spotted Vamprah diving toward the intact village. “What is our silent ally up to?”

“Hunting,” replied Chirox, “as only he can.”

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Radiak darted from building to building, hoping to stay under cover. The skies were clear of enemies, but that meant nothing. He knew from past experience how quickly the foe could strike.

Venturing out alone was beyond dangerous, but it had to be done. The lightvine that surrounded the village was torn and broken in one spot. It had to be restored before the shadow Matoran took advantage of the gap. This light-producing plant was toxic to those who had only shadow inside them, so it made an effective defense against those Matoran who had been lost to the enemy.

He was perhaps forty feet away from the damaged spot now, but it was over open ground. Radiak scanned the sky again, saw nothing, and also saw no shadow Matoran anywhere near. If he was going to move, it would have to be now.

The Matoran of Light took off running. Now he was thirty feet away... twenty feet... fifteen feet... ten... almost there...

Radiak never heard Vamprah's approach. The dark flier hurled a bolt of energy from his claw, striking the Matoran in the back. Radiak lurched to a stop, held transfixed as the light was drained out of him from a distance.

At first, the Matoran tried to fight the change he felt coming over him. After all, he was a hero, respected and admired by his friends for his courage. He had always tried to live by the three virtues of unity, duty, and destiny. He had devoted his life to working and fighting for the will of the Great Spirit Mata Nui. Even though he and the other Matoran knew with an awful certainty that Mata Nui had just died, there had never been any thought of surrender.

But the new voices he heard in his head were so insistent, so persuasive. Why spend the rest of your lifetime in the service of a Great Spirit who is no more? And the virtues, the voices whispered — what had they ever done for him? He was brave, strong... he needed no help from other Matoran; they were just burdens to him. Duty? Destiny? A duty to what — endless, back-breaking labor? To achieve a destiny of exhaustion and more mind-numbing toil?

No, he realized, that wasn't for such as him. Lost in the seductive call of the darkness, Radiak knew that the forces of shadow held the true power in the universe, and he belonged on their side. It was time to start looking out for his own interests, after all.

High above, Vamprah finished his feeding. The foolish Matoran who had dared to emerge from hiding belonged to the Brotherhood now. His armor remained crimson but his spirit was now black. Vamprah flew off, his hunger sated for now in a most pleasant way. After all, what could be more satisfying than dining on another being's hopes and dreams?

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Vamprah saw his two comrades flying to meet him. He took the most direct route toward them, passing directly through the central waterfall that bisected the realm. So intent was he on his journey that he never noticed a white-armored Toa plunging down through the water just above him. Had he chanced to glance up, he would have noticed that the Toa — Matoro, by name — was holding the powerful Mask of Life as he fell.

One shift in Vamprah's gaze and all of history might have been changed. But everything — Toa, Makuta, and even Masks of Power — has a destiny to fulfill, and its course is not so easily altered.

Antroz flew close, his mouth curved in a vicious-smile. "Chirox is upset with you," he said to Vamprah.

"What am I going to have left for my work if you keep consuming all their light?" Chirox snapped. "I was promised material for my studies."

Vamprah said nothing. He never spoke, of course, but no one was certain if he couldn't or simply wouldn't. Wordlessly, he turned back toward the village, the other two flanking him.

The hunt had begun again.

The Matoran named Photok paced the stone floor of the shelter, now and then pausing to shoot a hard look at Tanma. *What is he waiting for? Radiak should be back by now. We need to go find him!*

If Tanma noticed his friend's expression, he gave no sign of it. He already knew the situation, but he couldn't afford to worry about the fate of any one Matoran. The entire population of the last free village left was crammed into this underground chamber. Even through the thick walls, it was possible to hear the frustrated hissing of the shadow leeches as they looked for ways in. He knew that meant the enemy was in the air overhead. If Radiak was out in the midst of that, he was already lost.

After a week of fighting, Tanma knew better than to try and stage a rescue. Rushing out while the leeches were still outside was an invitation for more Matoran to be turned to the side of shadow. Fortunately, the creatures did not live long. Once they expired, it was usually safe to go up above and try to harry the retreating foes.

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Tanma hated hiding as much as Photok, Solek, or any of the others did. But the alternative was a quick defeat and all of Karda Nui in the hands of the enemy. This way, perhaps they could hold out long enough for help to arrive.

He caught himself, struck by the absurdity of his last thought. *Help? Help from who? Who even knows we're here?*

Not for the first time, Tanma missed Kirop. In the absence of a Turaga, he had been the leader of the Karda Nui Matoran. Both wise and a warrior, he had kept everyone's morale up in the first years after the Fall. If not for him, civilization might have ceased to exist here in this massive cavern.

Tanma could have used Kirop's counsel now. But that was impossible. The Karda Nui leader had led an attack on the foe six days before and fallen prey to a shadow leech. Now all his knowledge of the Matoran defenses belonged to the enemy.

Still, he had given one "gift" to his people before that last battle. He had told them who they were facing.

"Ancient legends say we must always keep our true nature hidden," Kirop had said. "This is the reason why. This is the enemy it was foretold we might one day face — the warriors of shadow, the dwellers in darkness — the Brotherhood of Makuta!"

Solek interrupted Tanma's memories, muttering something too low to be heard. "What was that?" asked Tanma.

"I said Toa wouldn't act this way," Solek replied. "Tahu, Kopaka... they would be out there fighting. Not sitting here, hiding and waiting."

Tanma shook his head. Kirop had filled Solek's head with a lot of legends about Toa who had supposedly once dwelled in Karda Nui. The six figures had become Solek's heroes, and they were all he ever talked about. Ordinarily, this preoccupation was no big deal, but right now, it was enough to push Tanma over the edge.

"Tahu! Kopaka! Right. If they're so great, why aren't they here?" he raged. "Where were they when all my friends got turned into those... things? Why aren't they protecting us?"

Solek didn't answer. Instead, he was looking up at the ceiling, as if straining to hear something. "Hey," he said. "I think it stopped outside."

Tanma had to agree. The hissing sounds were gone, as were the noises of the Tridax pods that carried the shadow leeches striking the roof of the shelter. Tanma gestured for the others to sit

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tight while he went to peer out of the hatch. Cautiously, he undid the seals and pushed the hatch up a quarter of an inch.

The first thing he saw was shadow leeches disintegrating, a revolting sight he had never grown used to. Glancing up, he saw the three winged Makuta soaring away. Then his attention was drawn to the massive waterfall that fell from the sky through the heart of the land. Was that someone plunging down through the falls?

Yes, it was. He couldn't make out who it was from this distance, but it was definitely a figure. The newcomer was wearing a mask that glowed more brightly every second. Suddenly, for reasons he couldn't name, Tanma knew something either very good — or very bad — was about to happen.

He slammed the hatch shut. "Get down!" he shouted. "All of you, now!"

The Matoran looked at him, confused. But after all they had been through the last week, they weren't about to argue. They hit the hard floor and waited. The only sound was their harsh breathing.

Then came the light, brilliant, blinding — it seeped through solid stone, through walls and roof and hatch, illuminating the entire chamber. It was as if a trillion lightstones had been turned on all at once... on second thought, that would have seemed like a dim glow compared to the radiance that filled the chamber and all of Karda Nui.

It lasted an instant, and it lasted forever. Each and every Matoran felt a surge of hope as bright as the light had been, as if some measure of balance had suddenly been restored to the universe.

Tanma suddenly realized he had closed his eyes. The light had been so bright that it had made no difference. Opening them, he checked to make sure everyone was all right. Satisfied that they were, he went to the hatch, opened it, and peeked out.

The three Makuta were still in the air, but something had changed. They no longer flew straight and true, but wheeled crazily through the sky. There was a faint glow attached to everything, as if an inferno had raged a moment before and then been extinguished, leaving burning embers behind.

"What is it? What do you see out there?" asked Photok.

Tanma took a long time to answer. When he did, it was to say, "I really don't know. Maybe it's the start of something... or maybe the end of everything."

2

Photok avoided, just barely, a bolt of shadow energy aimed at him. He maneuvered higher and peppered his two attackers with a barrage of light bursts. It didn't stop them — barely even slowed them down — but it still felt good.

Even a few hours ago, it would have been impossible for the Matoran to meet the Makuta head-on in the sky and try to drive them off. But Tanma had been right— that soundless explosion of light *had* changed things. Caught out in the open, the powerful trio of Makuta had been blinded by the energy surge. Whether it was permanent or temporary, no one knew, but it gave the Av-Matoran an edge, and they were going to take advantage.

The Makuta had wasted no time in improvising. They had begun using the shadow Matoran of their creation as “eyes.” Each Makuta would carry a Matoran rider into battle. Of course, not every shadow Matoran was quick-witted enough for the job. Those who weren't were returned to the captured villages, although not always gently.

Photok glanced to his right. Tanma, Solek, and their squad were barraging the Makuta with light, trying to drive them toward Photok's force. As he watched, the attack turned into a disaster. The Makuta used their gravity powers to send half a dozen Matoran plunging toward the swamp, and it took the combined efforts of the rest of the squad to halt their descent. Bolts of chain lightning then hit the entire group, shocking some unconscious and driving most back to the village. Tanma and Solek darted toward Photok.

“We have to pull back,” said Tanma, “before they cut us off from home.”

“I think they have other plans!” yelled Solek. “Look out!”

The three Makuta had gained altitude, flying up near the ceiling of the chamber. Once they were over the Matoran, they unleashed the Tridax pods they carried. The pods split open on release, raining shadow leeches down. Before the Matoran force could react, two of their number had been hit. The leeches rapidly drained the light out of the unfortunate villagers, turning them into shadow Matoran. Photok hurled light blasts at both, stunning them.

“Let's go!” he shouted. The remaining Matoran rocketed back toward the village, dodging leeches and blasts of shadow energy as they went. Amazingly, the way home was clear. It looked as if they were going to make it.

That is, until six powerful figures suddenly appeared right in their path.

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Pohatu Nuva had been a Toa of Stone his entire life. In that time, he had seen a lot of strange things. There was the voice of the Makuta of Metru Nui coming out of a Matoran body; hordes of mechanical Bohrok attacking his village; hissing Rahkshi on the rampage; monstrous Bahrag and robotic Exo-Toa; and, of course, a Matoran suddenly becoming a Toa of Light. And that had all been in one year!

But a squad of flying — *flying?* — Matoran headed right for him, pursued by shadowy, bat-winged figures? That was a new one.

A less experienced Toa would have been too shocked to react. One moment, he and the rest of the Toa Nuva were knee-deep in snowdrifts on Artakha. The next, they were here — wherever here was, though it did look vaguely familiar. Yes, a novice Toa would have been wondering how he was managing to hover in mid-air, how come he wasn't crashing to the ground, and how he got here in the first place.

But not Pohatu Nuva. He had a clear, simple view of life that served him well. It was a pretty good guess the big nasties with darkness trailing behind them were the bad guys, and the Matoran darting all over the sky were the good guys. He was a Toa, always had been, probably always would be. That meant it was time to kick some bat-winged tail.

I love this job, he said to himself as he soared into battle.

Kopaka Nuva, Toa of Ice, watched Pohatu go charging right into the thick of things. His other partners had shown the good sense to scatter and try and figure out the situation before acting. But not Pohatu, no, he was swooping and diving like a crazed Gukko bird.

Logically, Kopaka should have hung back until he had a better idea of the enemy's abilities. Plunging into battle with no plan was a sure way to get defeated. Cold, clear analysis dictated that Pohatu had made his choice; it was the wrong one, and no one else should be put at risk because of it.

There was only one problem. Kopaka liked Pohatu. The Toa of Stone was everything Kopaka wasn't — open, warm, friendly — so the two of them being friends was hard for most to picture. Kopaka, after all, was guarded, icy, far from trusting, and sometimes downright rude. But Pohatu had never asked or expected him to be anything else, which set the Toa of Stone apart from most.

Maybe that was why, grumbling all the way, Kopaka shot through the air toward the scene of battle.

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Lewa Nuva was happier than he had ever been. The Toa of Air was in his element, soaring through the skies, and he was doing it without just a Mask of Levitation and wind currents to glide on. His new armor let him rocket through the sky, and that was fine by him.

He had narrowly avoided a collision with the oncoming Matoran. Looking behind, he saw some of them were turning around. *Probably want to quick-find out who we are*, he thought. *Like to ask them the same question, after we clean up the mess here.*

Up ahead, Pohatu, Onua, Kopaka, and Tahu were all having problems mastering combat in the air. Only Gali, used to fighting underwater, was easily holding her own in the new environment.

One of the monstrous fliers was closing in on Onua Nuva. Some kind of pod was dropping from the creature. Lewa doubted it was a Naming Day present. He hit it with a blast of air and it shattered, sending dark leeches flying through the sky. Lewa was about to create a mini-cyclone to trap one, knowing Kopaka would want to study it, when something slammed into his back.

“No! Leave it alone!”

Lewa twisted his neck to see who was now sitting on top of him. It was one of the Matoran — a green-armored Le-Matoran from the look of him — now riding Lewa like the Toa was a flying Rahi beast.

“Are you crazy?” said Lewa Nuva. “Get off me! I don’t carry-fly passengers!”

“Stay away from that shadow leech,” Tanma insisted. “And — watch out! The Makuta’s coming back this way!”

“Makuta? Where?” asked Lewa, looking around. All he saw was the bat creature heading toward him, with a black-armored Matoran riding it. “You mean that Matoran?”

Tanma yanked hard on Lewa’s neck, forcing him to veer to the left. Irritated, Lewa reached back and hit his rider with a cyclone wind, blowing the Matoran off his back. “I hate backseat drivers,” the Toa muttered.

Lewa glanced down to make sure the Matoran was safe, only to see that his flight pack was starting to sputter. As he began to fall, Lewa swooped down underneath so that the Matoran landed on the Toa’s back.

Images suddenly flashed through Lewa’s mind of events he had never witnessed. He saw Matoran going down to the swamp below and never returning; panic as the three bat creatures

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attacked, again and again, turning entire villages into places of shadow; and the soundless explosion of light and power that changed everything in Karda Nui.

The experience shook Lewa so much that he almost crashed into one of the captured villages, veering up only at the last moment. It took him a second to realize someone else was inside his head, and he was viewing their memories. Fortunately, Turaga Onewa back on the island of Mata Nui had taught all the Toa Nuva something about shielding their minds from intrusion.

“Hey!” he snapped. “Get out of my head-thoughts!”

“Why would I want to be in your head?” Tanma shot back. “Who are you anyway? You look like something Solek would dream up.”

“I’m a Toa-hero, here to save you from... whatever you need saving from,” said Lewa. “And what’s a Solek?”

Tahu Nuva, Toa of Fire and leader of the Toa Nuva, wished it was the old days again. As he answered shadow energy bursts with jets of flame, he was remembering a time when he would have plowed right into the middle of a battle without thinking twice.

Experience had taught him it was better to have a plan. Make one, be sure your partners know it, and stick to it — that was the best approach.

Life, unfortunately, wasn’t going to stop while you did that. And sometimes it dropped you right into the midst of an all-out war without so much as a “Guess where you’re going?”

Even with that, some things hadn’t changed. His Kanohi Nuva Mask of Shielding still worked, although it did look different. He was able to throw a force field around himself, Gali, and Onua in time to protect them from a bolt of shadow. And Onua Nuva was still one of the best strategists he had ever met. It was the Toa of Earth who had spotted the enemy’s weakness.

“They can’t see well, or maybe at all,” Onua had said. “I should know; with all the light in here, I can hardly see myself. That’s why they need the Matoran.”

“Then we aim for the Matoran,” said Tahu. “See if we can knock them off their backs.”

“Tahu! We’re supposed to protect Matoran,” Gali said. “What if those riders are being forced to help?”

“Simple rule,” the Toa of Fire replied. “First priority goes to protecting Matoran who *aren’t* shooting shadow at me.”

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Tahu's strategy seemed to work — at least, the bat-winged beings broke off their attack. If it was more a matter of the enemy wanting to take stock of a new factor in the battle before continuing to fight than concern for their Matoran riders, it still meant a chance for the Toa Nuva to regroup.

"Um, so, nasty Rahi they've got around here," said Lewa.

"You know that isn't what they are," answered Kopaka.

"I know," Lewa said, shrugging. "Just didn't want to be the first one to speak-say it."

"Too many questions," said Kopaka. "Let's hope the Matoran have some answers."

"Right. Way too many," agreed Lewa. He began to count them off on his fingers. "What happened to our armor and masks and weapons? What does the Brotherhood of Makuta want with this place? Who are all these Matoran and why are they here? And *where is here?*"

Pohatu looked around. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, clawing to be free like a stone rat trapped in its hole. And then suddenly he remembered.

"Wait, wait," he said. "It's different now, very different, but... don't you recognize it? Guys... we've come home."

3

Back in the lair, Antroz sat in his now perpetual darkness and listened. Someone — probably Chirox, from the weight of his footsteps — was storming around the cave, smashing Tridax pods on the ground and then grinding the pieces to dust under his clawed foot. For a being who was more scientist than warrior, Chirox took any setback in battle extremely hard. Antroz, on the other hand, knew that any encounter where you learn something about your foe is a partial victory.

“Calm yourself,” he said sharply. “We were told this day would come.”

“We were told,” Chirox repeated, hurling another pod against the wall. “Like we were told what would happen if we were too close to the Mask of Life when it went off? How come Makuta Teridax left that little bit of information out?”

Antroz had to admit he had wondered the same thing. Teridax was the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta, assigned long ago to the region including Metru Nui. It was he who had conceived the plan to strike down the Great Spirit Mata Nui and seize control of the universe. On the face of it, it seemed a simple scheme: send Mata Nui into an unending sleep and then take over the city of Metru Nui and its Matoran. With that crucial site in Brotherhood hands, the Great Spirit would never awaken.

But nothing was ever simple with Teridax. The running joke was he had a backup plan in place even for his breakfast. His ultimate plot spanned thousands of years and relied on precise timing — and even the unwitting help of Toa! Antroz hadn’t seen the point — why not just kill the Toa and enslave the Matoran and be done with it? But after seeing what happened to the other Brotherhood members who spoke out against “the Plan,” he wisely decided to go along.

Unfortunately, Makuta Teridax only had one virtue — persistence — and apparently hadn’t even told his allies the whole truth. When Karda Nui was discovered by Vamprah a week ago, the Brotherhood followed standing orders to invade. They knew the Mask of Life would have to be brought there, but not that its use would blind them. They also knew six Toa Nuva would eventually show up, but not when. The hope had been that all of Karda Nui would be conquered before the heroes arrived.

And it would have been, thought Antroz, with more than a trace of bitterness. Conquest is easy. A little destruction... a little chaos... some Matoran ending their lives in memorably gruesome ways... and the rest of the population falls right in line. It’s always worked before.

But not here. Makuta Teridax didn’t want the Av-Matoran killed. “They will be of far more use to us alive,” he had predicted.

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“And far more trouble to us, as well,” muttered Antroz.

He heard the distinctive scraping of Vamprah’s claws on the stone floor. The fact that his partners could no longer see had not inspired Vamprah to start speaking again. In fact, of all of them, Vamprah was the only one who did not seem fazed by the accident. It just made his hunts a bit more of a challenge.

Antroz reached out and found Vamprah’s arm. “I need you to find our twisted genius and his mad little assistant,” said Antroz. “I want to make a welcome gift for our Toa visitors... one they will never forget.”

The Toa Nuva followed Tanma down into the shelter. It had been hewn out of a fallen stalactite long ago, intended for use as storage. Now it was a sanctuary for those Matoran who had not yet been corrupted.

But the Toa were paying no attention to their surroundings. Pohatu’s words had awakened memories in all of them. The realization that they had been in Karda Nui before, and hadn’t remembered, had shaken them.

“I know our minds were shatter-scattered when we got to the island of Mata Nui,” said Lewa Nuva. “But this is ridiculous.”

“My earliest memory is training on Daxia,” said Kopaka. “Then... then we were sent here. There were Matoran working, and we were needed to protect them from... something.”

“Energy,” said Tahu. “Energy spikes were affecting the Rahi here... We had to contain them...”

Pohatu nodded. “Right. Then the Matoran left, and we... we... What did we do?”

The Toa of Stone looked at each of his partners in turn, but all he saw were blank expressions and shrugs. Whatever had damaged their memories had done an effective job.

Suddenly, Lewa brightened. “Kirop... there was a Matoran named Kirop, I think!” He turned to Tanma. “Is he here?”

“Yes,” Tanma replied, his voice tired and harsh. “You fought him out there five minutes ago. Could we maybe stop with the happy memories and concentrate on *now*?”

“One more question, if you please,” said Onua. “What happened to this place? It’s not how I remember it.”

“Later,” said Tanma. “The battle isn’t over, just interrupted.”

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“Well, we should be able to help with these,” Pohatu said, looking at the large, shoulder-mounted weapon he carried. It had appeared when his armor transformed upon arrival in Karda Nui. He wasn’t sure what it did, but it certainly looked formidable. While examining it, his finger accidentally brushed against some kind of control. A sphere of light flew out of the end of the weapon, hit a nearby wall, and punched a neat and smoking hole in it.

“Oh,” said the Toa Nuva of Stone. “That’s what it does.”

“Good,” said Tanma. “We’ll need weapons like that. We have to be ready when they come back again.”

“Who?” asked Tahu, fearing he already knew the answer.

“I’d think you would know,” said Photok, “if you are the Toa that Solek says you are. Those are Makuta out there trying to kill us all, with a little help from our friends.”

Makuta Mutran was annoyed. As a Rahi creator and virus master, it was important that he have a clean and orderly place to work. He had so far not achieved that ideal situation, and someone was going to pay for it.

“Vican!” he growled. “I told you to kick that last experiment over the ledge and into the swamp. I can’t have it screaming and melting all over the cave. I keep slipping in it.”

The Makuta’s bizarre Matoran assistant scurried into view and began kicking the subject of Mutran’s complaint across the floor of the hive. Due to its habit of dissolving into liquid when upset, this was a long and tedious process. But Vican kept at it, knowing from experience what it meant to disappoint his master. Finally, he succeeded in shoving the unfortunate creature over the ledge. He decided not to tell the Makuta that, as it turned out, this particular creation didn’t fall, but flew.

Fortunately, despite still having his sight, Mutran had not noticed. He was busy monitoring the condition of a new batch of shadow leeches. They were the third group to be specially bred in tanks with an eye toward giving them a longer lifespan. So far, the experiment had not been a success. The first batch had died instantly; the second had wound up carnivorous and almost made a meal of Vican.

“Look at them,” Mutran said softly, tapping on the crystal wall of the tank. “They begin their lives as kraata, nothing but the essence of a Makuta given solid form. But a bit of this... a bit of that... and they become ever-hungry stealers of light. Have you ever truly watched one feed? It is so repulsive as to be almost beautiful.”

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Vican shuddered. When Mutran got like this, it reminded him of the days when he was just another Le-Matoran, seeking adventure. Being changed into something more powerful seemed like an exciting prospect — so when Makuta Mutran came to his village seeking subjects, he had volunteered. His memories after that were hazy, which was probably for the best. He had not come out on the other side as a Toa or a Makuta or even as a better Matoran. In fact, he really wasn't sure what he was anymore, and soon decided it was better not to think about it.

A barely audible flutter of wings drew Vican's attention to the hive entrance. Vamprah had opened it and now stood in the gateway. He glared in the direction of the Matoran, causing Vican to duck farther back into the shadows. Everyone knew that, to Vamprah, "Matoran" was just another word for "victim."

Mutran spotted his visitor. He reached into the tank and gingerly lifted one of the shadow leeches. "See? Alive and thriving, even after three hours. Plus I expanded their capacity to consume — this little one could drain the light out of Mata Nui and still have room for a Toa or two."

Vican tensed. Asking a blinded Makuta to "see" was like poking a Manas crab with a sharp stick.

Vamprah walked in the direction of Mutran's voice. His senses told him where the leech was, and he bent as if to examine the squirming creature. Then he raised his claw and gently rapped the leech on the head. The creature shattered, little crystalline pieces of its form raining down on the floor.

Mutran watched the last of the fragments draining through his hand. Then, calmly and casually, he smashed the tank with his fist. The leeches disintegrated on impact. Mutran turned his back on the mess and pointed a clawed finger at Vican.

"Clean this up," he said. "Now."

Vamprah grabbed Mutran by the arm and started to drag him toward the hive entrance. Mutran shook himself loose, saying, "You know, I've discovered a way to force a being to shape-shift, and then lock him into just one form. Grab me again and you will spend eternity as a very angry frost beetle... with a broken arm."

Vamprah turned, his cold, unseeing eyes fixed on Mutran's for a very long time. To his credit, Mutran met his stare and held it, at least for a few moments. Then Mutran abruptly broke away and leaped out of the hive, his gray wings carrying him toward the main lair of the Makuta. Vamprah silently followed, a grim smile on his face.

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The Toa Nuva had barely had time to digest the news that the Brotherhood of Makuta was making an all-out attack on Karda Nui when they got a second shock. This one came from Tanma, who told them of seeing a falling figure in white armor carrying a glowing Kanohi mask. “This was right before the explosion of light,” the Matoran said. “And then we all just... knew, somehow... that the Great Spirit Mata Nui had returned to life.”

The Nuva looked at each other. They knew, of course, that Mata Nui lived again, but they didn’t know how it had been achieved. From Tanma’s description, one of their fellow Toa — Matoro, from the sound of it — had sacrificed himself to save the universe. There was a leaden silence that lasted a long time. Then Kopaka suddenly seemed to remember something.

“The mask this Toa was carrying,” he asked Tanma. “Where is it? What happened to it?”

The Av-Matoran shrugged. “I don’t know. If it was caught in that explosion, it was probably destroyed.”

“Say it wasn’t,” said Pohatu. “Where would it be?”

“In the swamp,” said Photok. “That’s all that’s down below.”

“It’s the Mask of Life. It has to be,” said Tahu Nuva. “And we need to find that mask before the Makuta do... if they haven’t already.”

“Agreed,” said Kopaka. “But we also need to defend these Matoran and stop whatever the Makuta have planned.”

“Then we split up,” said Lewa. “I’ll stay here, since I am the only Toa-hero good at flying. Kopaka, you should jump-dive into the swamp, I think.”

“Why?” asked the Toa Nuva of Ice.

Lewa smiled. “‘Cause I ever-always end up on your team, and you’re not exactly a Matoran sack of laughs.”

The sides were quickly chosen. Lewa, Kopaka, and Pohatu would remain with the Av-Matoran and fight the Makuta in the sky. Gali, Tahu, and Onua would travel down to the swamp and search for the missing Mask of Life.

Prior to the departure of Tahu’s team, Tanma and Photok sat with all six Toa Nuva to share information. “We don’t know much about what’s below,” said Photok. “We only went down there long enough to grab vines and head back up. So you’re pretty much on your own.”

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“There may be shadow leeches down there, too, we don’t know,” Tanma continued. “The Makuta make them somehow, but we don’t know how or where. The walls of Karda Nui are honeycombed with caverns, many shrouded in mist, so it’s impossible to tell just where they come from. But we know what they can do all too well. Even a Toa would not be immune to the leech’s power, so beware — otherwise, you may wind up the first known Toa of Shadow.”

Good-byes were short and subdued. These six Toa had been through the worst this universe had to offer and come out the other side. All of them realized that this fight in Karda Nui might be their last, so there was no need to put that into words. They knocked fists together in the traditional salute, then the Toa Nuva of Fire, Water, and Earth dove from the edge of the fallen stalactite toward the swamp far below.

“What do you think they’ll find down there?” asked Pohatu.

“Their destiny,” Kopaka replied. “And quite possibly ours.”

4

Solek approached the Toa Nuva of Ice nervously. All his life, he had collected legends about Kopaka and his team, now Toa Nuva. He probably knew more about their early adventures than even they did. But to meet one in person, well, that was pretty overwhelming.

“Um, Kopaka? Do you have a moment? I have something for you,” he said.

Kopaka turned. Keeping in mind what these Matoran had been through, he forced himself to look less intimidating. “Yes, we can talk.”

The words burst forth from Solek despite his efforts to rein them in. “I’ve studied all the legends about you. I even know about the time you fought three dozen Zyglak all on your own and defeated every one! You have always been the Toa I most admire... that’s why I altered my color to white. But I’m afraid I’ll never be as skilled as you, or even become a Toa.”

“Slow down,” Kopaka said, smiling. “I don’t remember the battle you spoke of, but then, there is much about the past I don’t remember. You remind me of another Matoran I knew, Takua — he dreamed of being a Toa, too, and his dream came true.”

“Takua?” said Solek, eyes wide. “You know Takua? Where is he? What happened to him? We were best friends, then one morning, he was just gone, along with some of the others. We searched, but couldn’t find any of them. I can’t believe Takua’s alive!”

“Oh, he’s alive, though no longer the Takua you knew,” replied Kopaka, thinking about Takanuva, the former Takua, now the Toa of Light. “I will tell you tales of him later. But for now, you said you had something for me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Solek, fishing in his bag. He emerged with a fragment of a stone tablet. “This is part of a keystone. The legends say you would need this if you ever had to awaken Mata Nui. Unfortunately, it got broken and scattered over the ages. Kirop has one piece, and our attackers seized another from one of the villages. I don’t know where the other three might be.”

Kopaka took the stone. The inscription on it was written in a very old Matoran dialect, but one he found himself surprisingly familiar with. There wasn’t much there, but what there was told a clear story — this keystone detailed how the Great Spirit Mata Nui could be awakened.

“Thank you, Solek,” said Kopaka quietly. “You may not be a Toa, but you may have done just as much to save the universe as any of us.”

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Lewa Nuva stood at the edge of the lightvine barrier, gazing up at the sky. It had been a day and a half since he and the others had joined the defense of the Av-Matoran village. In that time, they had fought off a score of attacks by dark Matoran, shadow leeches, and one particularly nasty Makuta. Half a dozen Matoran of Light had been lost in the battles, and Pohatu Nuva's shoulder had required emergency repair. But the village still stood.

The Toa of Air had volunteered to keep watch. Now and then, a shadow Matoran could be seen flitting across the ceiling of the cavernous chamber, but no Makuta were visible this hour.

"They're just keeping an eye on us," said Tanma, joining Lewa. "They stay well out of range. Just like to remind us they're there."

Lewa's eyes narrowed as he tracked a dark Matoran's flight. Then he raised his air saber and hurled a blast of hurricane-force wind at his target. It struck the flying villager and sent him spiraling out of control. Toa and Tanma watched as the corrupted Matoran struggled in vain to regain altitude before finally landing hard in a distant village.

"Out of range for you," Lewa said. "Not for me."

"Great," said Tanma, sounding unimpressed. "There are only a hundred or so more where he came from. I don't think this is a problem that can be solved with a little target practice."

Watching through the open hatch, Kopaka had to agree with Tanma. Hiding behind lightvines and walls, trying to hang on for one more battle, was a quick route to disaster. At best, the presence of the Toa Nuva would buy the village and its people another few days or so. Maybe he and Lewa and Pohatu could even down a careless Makuta and a few dozen of their shadow Matoran. But in the end, the odds were too great.

I can't even spot where the shadow leeches are coming from, he thought. Something in the substance of the mists blocks my mask's X-ray vision. There's no getting around it — darkness is going to win here.

It was a sobering realization and one that Kopaka hated admitting to himself. His dislike of it was even more intense because he knew it was something Tahu would never even consider. The Toa of Fire simply didn't believe in the possibility of defeat. In Kopaka's eyes, that made him a fool — but it also, he had to admit, somehow made Tahu a great leader of Toa.

Maybe, just this once, I need to be more like him, thought Kopaka. Facts — cold and hard as ice — say one thing. But maybe they don't say everything.

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His decision made, he climbed out of the hatch and used his power to form an ice bridge. He slid rapidly toward one of the captured villages, the site of the shadow Matoran's abrupt landing a few moments before. Kopaka Nuva knew he had to work fast, before the other corrupted villagers were drawn to the spot.

"You don't know it yet," the Toa of Ice said, gathering the fallen villager into his arms. "But you're about to help your old friends."

Chirox stood in Mutran's cavern, his unseeing eyes fixed on that hard-at-work member of the Brotherhood of Makuta. Antroz had ordered the creation of a new flying Rahi capable of traveling a great distance at high speed and dealing with any obstacles that might get in its way. Specifically, he had asked Mutran to do the job, but Chirox had no intention of letting that lunatic create such a thing on his own. Thus far, there had been precious little creation anyway, mainly Mutran muttering about the primitive equipment he had to work with in this hidden site.

"Bigger," said Chirox. "More teeth."

Mutran turned from the vat where organic tissue was fusing to mechanical parts. He glared at Chirox. "Bigger means slower," he said, his voice growing louder as he spoke. "Adding another virus to give it sharper teeth risks the integrity of the mix. And you can't even see it, so how do you know what it needs?"

"I know you," Chirox replied, in an acidic tone. "Your first tries are always too small and get stuck gumming their prey."

"Stop breathing..." Mutran snapped. A long beat passed before he added, "On my creation."

Chirox grunted. "What about intelligence? Will this thing be smart enough to evade the Toa Nuva and make it out of Karda Nui?"

Mutran didn't answer. His smarter creations had a habit of rebelling, so he had tended to keep his Rahi beasts short on brains.

The silence answered Chirox's questions. Irritated, he called for a shadow Matoran to attend him. When the villager approached, Chirox seized him and hurled him into the vat. Fluid churned and frothed as Matoran mingled and fused with still-developing Rahi.

Mutran watched with growing rage as the new creature took shape. When the process was done, he reached in and removed the beast, now a revolting amalgamation of Rahi and Matoran.

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“Worthless. Disgusting,” grumbled Mutran, eyeing the struggling thing in his claw. “If it doesn’t die of shock, it will wind up mixing the worst elements of both species. Antroz will say —”

“He will say it’s perfect,” said Antroz. He approached the two Makuta and their creation. “I need something that can make it out of Karda Nui and through Toa-held territory to reach our base at Destral. If it’s as bad as you say, the sheer horror of its appearance will delay the Toa from striking for the crucial moments it needs to escape.”

The Brotherhood of Makuta field leader turned to Mutran. “Tell Vican he leaves on this new mount immediately. He is to take the western passage out of the swamp and fly to Destral as quickly as possible. When he gets there, he is to deliver my summons to Icarax.”

At the sound of the name, Chirox did his best to hide his shock. Mutran didn’t even bother trying.

“Icarax?” said Mutran. “For a handful of Toa and half a village of Matoran? Isn’t that like calling in a Tahtorak to squash an acidfly?”

“A handful of Toa?” Antroz repeated, chuckling softly. “A handful of Toa stole the Mask of Light from Destral itself once. Another prevented the conquest of Metru Nui, kept the Mask of Time from us, and even dared to imprison a Makuta! Still another — this very group — defeated Rahi, Rahkshi, and Bohrok swarms, and invaded Makuta Teridax’s very lair. One thing I have learned is that you underestimate Toa — *any* Toa — at your peril.”

Antroz reached out and stroked the “newborn” Rahi. It cooed in a most repulsive way. “No, we must crush them completely. And since I prefer not to make that my life’s work, I turn to Icarax. Let him dirty his claws on the Toa Nuva — after all, who are we to deny a fellow Makuta his heart’s desire?”

In the depths of the swamp, something stirred.

It was barely a flicker of energy, flaring for a moment and then subsiding. So minute was the disturbance that even the strange creatures who resided in the murky waters took no notice. But if any of them had possessed senses acute enough, they might have detected the merest trace of — what? Consciousness? Confusion? Fear?

No, not fear. More like curiosity.

Reaching out with a tendril of power, it examined its surroundings. Water. Mud. Plant life. Sea creatures much like the ones it had encountered in its last environment... and one thing more,

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something quite disturbing. It sensed the presence of intelligent life in the swamp — three powerful and evil beings not very far away.

The object known as the Kanohi Ignika, or Mask of Life, sensed danger. The mask had no doubt those three would attempt to obtain it. Should it create guardians from the sea life around it, to serve as protection?

Memories were sifted. The last few guardians created — an evolved venom eel and the warrior known as Hydraxon — had been, in the end, unsatisfactory. Another course of action would be necessary.

Another recollection intruded on its analysis. It was the memory of being held by a Toa named Matoro, a noble being who sacrificed himself to save the universe. This Matoro had shown no fear in the face of certain doom. In fact, he had gone to his death bravely, with his last wish being the salvation of his friends. He had been a true hero.

Friends... hero... they were alien concepts to the mask. It was, after all, an object — coveted by many, feared by almost all. Even its creators had been afraid to touch it, and with good reason. Matoro had been the first one to hold the Ignika with no trace of fear or regret... and the first to care so strongly about others that his feelings even touched the up-to-then emotionless mask.

What would it have been like to be Matoro, or any other of his kind? the mask wondered. To have lived — to face death — to fight for others, as opposed to just being fought over, as this one has been for so long? What would it feel like to be trusted, honored, respected, rather than simply needed and feared? For that matter, what would it feel like just to feel?

Particles of protodermis began to swirl on the swamp floor. The Mask of Life drew the bits of organic and inorganic matter to itself, binding and shaping them. Its will gave them form and function, crafting torso and limbs, hands and feet. The body that grew, the one that now wore the mask on its “face,” sat up unsteadily — and immediately knew something was very wrong.

The mouth was full of something — the water of the swamp, the mask supposed — and the body could not breathe this substance. This was an error in creation, for, after all, Matoro could breathe water. The body, the mask decided, should have been modeled more closely on his and not on those of other Toa it had met in its existence. Still, since it did not intend to remain underwater, it was best not to modify. Rather, a way was needed to escape the swamp.

Calling upon its power once more, it forced matter into the shape of a vehicle, something like those the Matoran of Mahri Nui had possessed. This one, of course, would be better than theirs, for the Ignika had brought it into being. (Modesty was not a quality the mask had discovered quite yet.)

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Hesitantly, still getting used to the sensation of independent movement, this new being — “Toa Ignika,” it decided it would call itself — climbed on board its vehicle. Craft and passenger rocketed from the waters of the swamp into the open air, senses alive to everything around. It could sense the evil beings down below, feel their frustration — and sense still more up above, these filled with rage and hatred. But it also felt the presence of others — a familiar presence, though it had never been in contact with these six before. Still, it knew what they must be.

Toa...

Aiming its craft toward the sky, Toa Ignika rushed up to greet its new... friends? Perhaps, it hoped... perhaps indeed.

5

Kirop woke up in a cell. It took him a moment to remember what had happened to him. Then he recalled spying on the Toa Nuva of Air and Tanma from above, a blast of wind, and a sudden slam into the ground.

Looking around, he recognized the chamber he was in as one of the smaller ones in the Av-Matoran shelter. The shadow Matoran chuckled. It was funny: Here he was, the former leader of Karda Nui, now captured by his own people.

Ignorant fools, he thought. *They can't keep me locked up. Already, I see a way out. And they will pay dearly for their lack of respect!*

He sat up. It was then he realized his bag was gone and, with it, the fragment of keystone he carried. He knew he should have told the Makuta about possessing it, but he had figured he might be able to use its existence someday to win influence with them. Now it was in the hands of the Toa Nuva.

Yet another reason to escape, he thought. *The Makuta have to be told the Toa possess at least two of the pieces now.*

It would take only a few moments to blast open a weak spot in the ceiling with his shadow energy. He raised his arm — then hesitated. He could hear voices coming from a nearby room. What were they saying? He put his audio receptor to the wall to listen.

It was two of the Toa Nuva, that was obvious, though he did not know which ones. They were talking about the Brotherhood of Makuta and the shadow leeches.

“Are you certain-sure this is going to work?” asked one.

“Very sure,” replied the other. “With what we know now, we can destroy all the shadow leeches and the ability of the Brotherhood to make more. They will have corrupted their last Matoran of Light!”

“Then what are we long-waiting for? Let's do it!”

“Give me a few hours. I need to make sure the Matoran know what they have to do. Then we strike.”

Kirop got to his feet, startled and worried. Had the Toa discovered the location of Mutran's hive? And what was this about a means to destroy shadow leeches? Mutran had to be warned!

He unleashed a blast of dark energy at the ceiling, blowing a hole large enough for him to pass through. An instant later, he was free and headed for Mutran's hidden hive.

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The three Toa Nuva watched him go. Pohatu smiled. “Well, he fell for it. Now what?”

Kopaka Nuva checked his Midak Skyblaster and then mounted it back on his shoulder. The weapon’s name had come from Pohatu and Lewa. “Midak” was an Onu-Matoran on the island of Mata Nui, a very strange one, who much preferred being out in the light to being in the dark tunnels of his village. Despite having weak eyesight in bright sunshine, he still spent most of his time outside and told anyone who would listen about the thrill of pure light. Most Matoran thought he was nice, if a little off, and most Onu-Matoran had slightly harsher descriptions of him. But Pohatu considered him a friend and thought this would be just the sort of weapon he would have enjoyed using.

As for “Skyblaster,” Lewa had always wanted a weapon called that. So, since none of the other Toa Nuva cared enough to debate, the new weapons became “Midak Skyblasters.”

“Now we give him a minute’s head start, then go after him,” said Kopaka Nuva. “With luck, he will lead us right to the home of the shadow leeches.”

“That was sharp-smart to fool him into thinking we already knew where it was,” said Lewa. “Of course, it would never have worked without my acting talent.”

Pohatu laughed. “That’s true, brother — after all, you’ve been acting like you were a Toa for years.”

Lewa Nuva smiled at the joke. “And a most ever-convincing performance it has been.”

“Five other Toa to choose from, and I am stuck with two that are just this side of being Rahi,” muttered Kopaka. “Let’s go.”

“Not without us.” Tanma was standing in the doorway, flanked by Photok and Solek. “This is our home. It’s our people who have been corrupted. No one else is going to fight for them.”

Kopaka Nuva wanted to argue, but he knew there was no time. “All right, then the six of us will go. You ride with us. The fewer potential targets we give the Makuta, the better. Stay low, keep your mouths shut, and try not to get killed.”

“Listen to him,” added Lewa Nuva. “Trust me, I’ve never done any of those three things... and look where I wound up.”

Kirop flew as fast as he could toward the eastern side of the vast cavern that was Karda Nui. He shot through layers of mist that obscured the cavern entrances, focused on reaching his

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destination. Occasionally, he would allow himself to think about the vast reward Antroz would surely give him for his information. Perhaps his actions might even lead to the deaths of three Toa Nuva — wouldn't that be wonderful?

So intent was he on his mission that he never noticed the Toa Nuva pursuing him, with three Av-Matoran riding along with them. They were staying some distance behind, so as not to alert Kirop to their presence. If he so much as looked over his shoulder too soon, the whole plan would fail.

Kirop would have been shocked if he had glanced behind and realized he had been duped. He would have been even more surprised if he had turned in time to see three Toa suddenly become four.

"We're being followed," said Lewa Nuva.

"I know," Kopaka Nuva replied.

"You know?"

"Mask of Vision, remember?" said Kopaka. "It's not just a cute name... unlike, say, 'sky-blaster.'"

"So who is he? Another of the Makuta?" asked Pohatu, looking back at their pursuer. The figure didn't look like a Makuta — it looked like a Toa. Then again, being shape-shifters, the Makuta could look like whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

"I've never seen him before," said Solek.

"So far, he's just following," said Kopaka. "If he makes a hostile move, then we'll deal with him. Right now, we need to worry about Kirop."

"He's pulling away," said Pohatu. "If we don't speed up, we're going to lose him!"

The words were barely out of Pohatu's mouth when he and Photok suddenly shot forward so fast they were a blur. They were almost on top of Kirop before the Toa Nuva of Stone recovered from his surprise and veered them away. When he and Photok had rejoined the others, Pohatu finally allowed himself to exclaim, "What the rampaging Rahi was that?!"

Photok shook his head, smiling. "No idea. But it was sure fun! I just thought about us going faster, and zing!"

"Nothing like that ever happened to you before?"

"No," said the Av-Matoran.

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“And I didn’t trigger the Mask of Speed,” said Pohatu, puzzled. “Well, whatever it was, next time, warn me.”

But Photok wasn’t paying attention. He was looking up to where a huge, winged, multi-headed Rahi was heading right for them. “Warn you — got it — is now a good time?”

Kopaka and Lewa saw the menace at the same time. But before they could form a battle plan and attack, their mysterious pursuer had shot up into the sky to confront the beast. The Rahi eyed him with barely disguised glee, no doubt seeing a sure meal in its future.

The strange figure raised a hand, as if bidding the creature to halt. That was weird enough, but then the Rahi actually did stop in midair. A slight quiver ran down the length of its body. Its eyes grew wide and its breathing incredibly rapid. An instant later, it dropped like a rock and plummeted toward the swamp.

The Nuva’s mysterious pursuer — the self-styled Toa Ignika — watched the Rahi fall with a mixture of regret and satisfaction. The Mask of Life did not like killing any living thing — it felt wrong. But it — *no, now I have a body, now I am “he,” not it*, the new being thought — did not have enough experience in this new body to know how to stop the Rahi without ending its existence. So he chose the most merciful option, simply speeding up the creature’s life processes until they reached their natural point of exhaustion.

Of course, the three Toa Nuva did not know that. All they knew was that a being who looked like a Toa stopped a multi-ton Rahi by holding up his hand. And now that same being was hovering in the sky, watching the Toa in silence, as if waiting for an invitation to join them.

Kopaka looked at Pohatu and Lewa. Then, with a grim smile, he gestured for the new Toa to come along.

“And now,” said the Toa Nuva of Ice, “we are seven.”

Unaware of what was going on in the skies behind him, Kirop approached the fog-shrouded leech hive which hung suspended from the roof of the vast cavern. He was perhaps two hundred yards from it when its entrance suddenly opened. Vican flew out, riding on top of what Kirop first thought was another Matoran. Then he got a look at what the creature really was as it flew by, and even the shadow Matoran felt sickened by the sight.

Still, this wasn’t the time to be sentimental. He had a message to deliver. He flew straight toward the once-again-concealed opening. A mild bolt of shadow energy triggered it to slide aside once more.

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“Mutran!” Kirop shouted as he landed on the hive floor. “The Toa Nuva are planning an attack on the shadow leeches! You have to prepare!”

Mutran took two steps forward and savagely backhanded the Matoran, sending him sprawling on the stone. “The Toa Nuva? You mean *those* Toa Nuva? The ones you led here?” he snarled, pointing through the rapidly closing entrance. Kirop turned and could just see four Toa and three Matoran bearing down on the hive.

Kopaka Nuva saw the entrance slam shut. It was a puzzle why he had been unable to spot this hive before using his Kanohi mask— perhaps something in the mist blocked his power. That would be a mystery for later. He looked over at Pohatu. “You want to do the honors?”

“Sure,” said Pohatu. “I’ll knock.”

The Toa of Stone summoned his willpower and materialized a half dozen good-sized boulders, hurling them toward the hatch. They struck hard, battering the gateway. “They aren’t answering,” said Lewa. “Let me ring the greet-bell.”

The Toa of Air sent a burst of air at the entrance so powerful that it seeped through the cracks and formed a cyclone on the other side. The winds caught Kirop, slamming him into the walls, but Mutran stood rooted to the ground.

Kopaka Nuva gave Lewa a few moments and said, “Perhaps no one is home. Let’s see if they left the door open.” He readied an ice blast, but Solek reached out a hand to stop him.

“Let us. Please,” said the Av-Matoran.

After a moment’s consideration, Kopaka nodded. The three Matoran raised their weapons and sent light energy at the weakened hatch. Their bursts hit on target, blowing the gateway in. It flew into the hive, only to be caught by Mutran.

“Toa are always so noisy,” hissed the Makuta. “No wonder I could never get any work done around your kind in the old days.”

The Toa and Matoran charged ahead. They saw no sign of the shadow leech tanks, but they did discover something else quite strange. The hive was far bigger on the inside than it seemed from the outside, with slime-covered tunnels that wound deep into its interior.

“Use the skyblasters,” Kopaka said. “Find the shadow leeches and target them. Solek and I will handle this Makuta.”

Pohatu, Lewa, Tanma, Photok, and the Toa Ignika charged ahead. Surprisingly, Mutran made no effort to stop them. He just watched them fly past on their way deeper into the hive. Then he

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turned back to the hovering Kopaka Nuva, arms outstretched, and said, “All right, Toa, handle me... if you can.”

Vican did his best to steer the flying Rahi beneath him where it was supposed to go. It wasn't easy. Having Matoran-level intelligence, the beast was willful, not to mention extremely unhappy with its current appearance.

He had been lucky so far. The Toa Nuva had been so intent on following Kirop they hadn't noticed his exit. He dove as soon as possible so as to be lost in the mists of the swamp before they changed their minds. Now he was skimming over the waters, headed for the portal out of Karda Nui.

Vican would have much preferred being back in the cave helping Mutran with one of his experiments — or even *being* one of his experiments — to this task. He had heard enough about Icarax to know this was a suicide mission. When other Makuta consider one of their number to be too violent and destructive... there's a problem.

The sealed portal was just ahead. He steered the Rahi right for it, despite its protests. At the last possible moment, it opened just wide enough to admit the two of them. Then it slammed shut again.

He was out of Karda Nui and on his way to deliver Antroz's message. He wasn't sure who he pitied more: himself, or the Toa Nuva. Neither was likely to survive a meeting with Icarax.

6

It had been much too easy.

Lewa Nuva, Pohatu Nuva, their Matoran companions, and their mysterious new ally had made it through at least a mile of tunnels with no opposition. That was the good news. The bad news was they had seen no sign of shadow leeches or anything that could be used to make shadow leeches.

“Maybe we missed something,” suggested Pohatu.

“I know they’re here,” said Tanma. “They have to be. Where else would Kirop have fled to?”

“I don’t understand,” said Photok. “How can this place be bigger on the inside than on the outside?”

Pohatu shrugged. “Saw a legend once in a Ko-Metru Knowledge Tower. It said the Brotherhood uses some kind of dimensional gate power to move their home island around. Maybe they’re using something like that here — maybe we aren’t even still in the hive, but in some kind of pocket dimension.”

“Well, wherever we are, we’re running out of tunnel-path,” said Lewa. “Dead end ahead.”

“Let’s ask our silent friend,” Pohatu said. “Maybe he knows something.”

Lewa looked back to where the strange Toa had been following, and gasped. He was gone — and in his place was something out of a nightmare. It was long and serpent-like, with a toothed, funnel-like mouth easily twenty feet in diameter. Its pale white flesh glistened from a thin sheen of slime, and it wriggled and squirmed toward the flying Toa. Its bulk took up the entire tunnel, making it impossible to fly over or around.

“Small Rahi beasts,” muttered Lewa. “Whatever happened to the small Rahi beasts?”

“Maybe it doesn’t mean any harm,” said Pohatu. “I know, what are the odds, but let’s just take it —”

Tanma fired a light burst from his blades, striking the creature dead-on. It hissed in pain and rage.

“— easy,” Pohatu finished. “Kopaka always told me don’t work with Rahi or Matoran, but did I listen? No.”

“Oh, come on,” said Lewa, firing his Midak Skyblaster at the oncoming creature. “When’s the last time we met a giant, slimy, jaw-mouth full of teeth, *peaceful* Rahi?”

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Pohatu shrugged, already creating and hurling boulders that did little but bounce off the creature's thick hide. "Well, there was... and then there was that time... hmmm..."

"It's coming closer!" yelled Photok, furiously blasting light at the beast. "Isn't there some special Toa technique you have for dealing with these kinds of things?"

Lewa shook his head as he summoned a cyclone. "Being a Toa-hero doesn't come with a handbook. Besides," he added with a grin, "Pohatu can't read."

"You just saw our technique," said Pohatu. "We laugh in the face of danger."

The creature lashed out, beams of pure force emanating from its eyes. They struck Pohatu, sending him and Photok crashing into the back wall.

"But sometimes," grumbled the Toa of Stone, "danger doesn't get the joke."

Toa Ignika started out surprised... then he became puzzled... and now? Now he was enraged.

He had been following along behind the two Toa Nuva and their Matoran companions. Not yet comfortable with spoken language, he had not joined in any of their conversations. But he still felt as if he were welcome at their side in the coming battle.

Then they suddenly turned around and reacted as if they had never seen him before. One of the Matoran fired a light blast, and then the Toa followed up with stone and a cyclone. It was all very confusing. What had he done? Why were they attacking him?

Finally, it got to be too much and he had struck back. That only seemed to make things worse. The Toa Nuva and Matoran were all attacking now, although many of their blasts sailed over his head or to the sides. Either they were very poor shots, he decided, or else they thought he was much bigger than he truly was. Regardless, they had shown themselves to be enemies, not allies. He had joined them out of a desire for friendship and been repaid with violence.

Toa Ignika thought back to the flying Rahi outside of the cave. He hadn't wanted to kill it, nor had he felt at all good when it was done. But he hadn't seen any other choice... just like now.

If the Toa Nuva were going to continue to assault him without cause, then they were not worthy of the gift of life. He would simply have to take that gift back. It would sadden him to end their existences, of course. But periods of sadness were a part of being a living thing, or so he believed. Best to get used to the feeling now.

The Toa Ignika said a silent good-bye to the Toa and Matoran. It was, it seemed, more than time for them to die.

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Kopaka Nuva knew exactly what he had to do. First, a blast of ice to distract his foe, followed by an all-out attack with the skyblaster. Done right, he would be able to keep the Makuta off balance long enough for Lewa and Pohatu to do their job.

He glanced at Solek, unconscious on the hive floor, thanks to a blow from Mutran. The Toa Nuva knew he would have to strike hard and fast if he was going to save himself and the Matoran.

But now something made him hesitate. The thought of creating ice sent an actual chill through him. Ice was so cold... hard... if he lost control of his power, he might fill the chamber with it. He would be buried in ice, unable to move or breathe, dying slowly in a frigid tomb.

No, that's insane, he told himself. I'm a Toa! I have used my power hundreds of times and never lost control. I am one with the ice. I control it... don't I?

Certainty turned to doubt, and doubt began to turn to fear. What if this was the fight where Kopaka's precarious hold over the power of ice slipped, even a little? What if, once he started, he couldn't turn his power *off*? He might doom all of Karda Nui to a frozen eternity.

None of this was logical. None of it made sense. But Kopaka Nuva found his mind filled with such thoughts, and so he hesitated, just an instant too long. Mutran was on him in two quick strides, armored hand around Kopaka's throat, lifting the Toa into the air.

"I don't just experiment with the physical form, you see," Mutran whispered. "I like to play with the mind as well. You Toa always have such interesting minds — filled with grief over all the horrors you have seen, fear of disappointing others, anger at your enemies. You are all flood tides of emotion, Toa Nuva, and I am about to break the dam."

With his free hand, Mutran tore the Midak Skyblaster from Kopaka's grasp and hurled it away. Then the Makuta increased the power of his mental assault. To Kopaka's credit, though his eyes widened and his breath came in ragged gasps, the Toa never screamed.

"A little rip here, a little tear there," Mutran said, in an almost sing-song voice. "Before you know it, your mind will be torn to pieces. Of course, Antroz would probably want you intact for questioning. So we had better be finished before he finds out you're here, hmmm? Yes, we had better get right to work."

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Photok was the first to sense something was terribly wrong. A feeling of weakness washed over him unlike anything he had ever felt. Instinctively, he knew what it was — the life was being drained from him.

He saw Tanma slip from Lewa's back and fall to the floor. A few moments later, the two Toa were noticeably weakening. *No, not weakening*, he realized. *Dying*.

He looked up at the creature the four of them had been fighting. It was just standing there, unmoving, making no attempt to take advantage of its enemies' distress. That made no sense. If it was out to destroy them, why not do it? And how could it have the power to steal their lives without even touching them?

Suddenly, for an instant, the creature was gone, replaced by the mysterious third Toa. Pohatu saw that, too, and knew instantly what was going on.

"An illusion," he cried out. "The monster's an illusion! We've been attacking our fellow Toa!"

Lewa, too weak to stand now, reached out toward his attacker. "Stop! We didn't mean to hurt-harm you! You're killing us!"

Pohatu wasn't about to wait for this strange new Toa to see reason. He took his best guess at where his foe was standing, then used his power over stone to make the ground erupt at Toa Ignika's feet. The distraction proved to be just enough to disrupt the new Toa's attack.

The image of the creature abruptly vanished. In its place was a slightly stunned Toa Ignika. Pohatu summoned all of his strength and charged, slamming into his attacker and pinning him to the wall.

"Who are you?" shouted the Toa Nuva of Stone. "Why are you here? And don't try that little life-draining trick of yours again, or you're going to live between a rock and a hard place, get me?"

Toa Ignika's eyes blazed. So this, the new being decided, is what rage feels like. What was the proper response to this emotion? Past experience told him living things commit acts of violence when angry. Then, since he was now living, that was what he would do.

Before any blow could be struck, Pohatu released him and stepped back, looking confused. "Wait a second," muttered the Toa of Stone. "Your mask... I didn't get a good look at it before. I know that mask — I've seen carvings of it on Voya Nui. You're... you're wearing the Mask of Life! Who in Mata Nui's name are you?"

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Solek struggled painfully back to consciousness, and immediately wished he hadn't bothered. The sight that greeted him was horrible. Kopaka Nuva was huddled on the ground, unmoving, eyes open but just staring into space. Makuta Mutran stood over him, smiling wickedly.

"I didn't think it would be so easy," Mutran was saying. "I have always known Toa to proclaim their strength and resolve. But you melted like an icicle in a pool of lava, Kopaka. It will be a mercy to finish you off."

Mutran raised his hand, preparing to fire a bolt of shadow energy. Seeing this, Solek raced across the room and dived toward Kopaka. But his dive fell short — he wouldn't be able to block the bolt with his body. All he was able to do was to grab Kopaka's arm and cry out, "Stop!"

The shadow energy flew from Mutran's claw, but it never reached Kopaka Nuva. A shield made of light erupted from Solek's hand, intercepting and reflecting the shadow bolt. Both the Av-Matoran and the Makuta were taken by surprise, so much so that neither noticed the gleam of intelligence return to Kopaka's eyes.

The Toa Nuva sprang up, firing ice from both hands at the startled Mutran. Rock-hard hailstones the size of boulders pummeled the Makuta, while razor-sharp icicles pinned his armor to the wall.

"You're all right?" Solek asked, in disbelief.

"A little trick Lewa, of all beings, taught me," said Kopaka, never taking his eyes from Mutran or letting up on his devastating attack. "When attacked by an ash bear, it pays to play dead."

Mutran grimaced, trying to summon a chain lightning attack against both Toa and Matoran. Kopaka, noticing the expression, intensified his assault until the sight of Mutran was lost amidst the ice and snow.

"I knew, given time, Mutran would win," Kopaka continued. "So I let him think he already had, to buy time. But how did you create that shield?"

"I don't know. It never happened before," answered Solek. "Is he beaten?"

Kopaka shook his head. "Not even close. Delayed, at best. Where are the others? We need to finish what we came to do and get out of here!"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that." The words came from the hive mouth, where Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah stood with two of their shadow Matoran. "Judging from the temperature, I am guessing Toa Nuva of Ice," Antroz continued. "That would make you Kopaka, would it not?"

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“Yes,” the Toa answered. “A few degrees colder, and your fellow Makuta will be permanently frozen... so I suggest you not make a move.”

Chirox smiled. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you, Toa, how it was that Makuta evolved into pure energy encased in armor? We found we didn’t need our bodies. We can strike down our enemies without flexing a finger or taking a step.”

Vamprah suddenly plunged the entire cavern into darkness with just a push from his mind. Chirox’s shattering power opened a crevasse in the cave floor, knocking Kopaka and Solek off their feet. Antroz finished the attack, using his power of magnetism to slam metal-armored Toa and Matoran against the hive walls until both were unconscious.

Radiak scampered over the bodies to the block of ice that imprisoned Mutran. “The Makuta is trapped. Shall I try to free him?”

“Oh, leave him that way,” said Chirox. “If he can’t free himself, he is worthless to our cause.”

“More importantly, Toa are like spiked fire worms,” said Antroz. “Where you find one, you find more. And like the worms, it is best to grind them beneath your heel. Call it a lesson to any other foolish creatures who might try to get in your way.”

7

Later, Lewa Nuva would remember that sound.

It was a high-pitched, keening wail that threatened to split his head open. Pohatu, their strange new ally, and the Matoran heard it, too. The two Av-Matoran dropped like stones. The Toa remained standing long enough to see their attackers, three Makuta. Then they, too, succumbed to the pain and passed out.

When they awoke, it was to find themselves chained to a wall in the hive. Chirox and Vamprah were gone, leaving Mutran and Antroz to greet them.

“The challenge of being a Makuta is choosing which power to use to eliminate your enemies,” said Antroz. “It gets so boring using the same ones all the time. Variety is the spice of destruction, after all.”

Lewa yanked on the chains. They were made of protosteel, one of the hardest substances in the universe, and so thick even Pohatu would have a hard time breaking free by sheer strength alone. Of course, a quick use of their elemental powers could get them loose, and the Makuta had to know that.

“If you are thinking of escape, don’t,” said Antroz, as if he were reading Lewa’s mind — *which he might well be*, thought the Toa of Air. “You will notice your Matoran friends are conspicuous by their absence. They are with Vamprah and Chirox, having a... discussion. Attempt to break free or attack us and a telepathic flash will alert my two allies, who will immediately kill Photok, Solek, and Tanma. Is that understood?”

Lewa glanced at Pohatu and Kopaka to his right, and their new companion, still unconscious, to his left. No one answered. Antroz nodded at Mutran, who walked toward the opposite wall. For the first time, Lewa noticed that it was lined with bubbling vats.

“Little tricks of the mind,” Mutran chuckled. “You saw my precious toys as a blank wall as you flew by... and then your ally as a monster to be destroyed.”

“You are expecting to die, of course,” Antroz said to the imprisoned Toa. “We will question you about how you got here, how many other Toa might be on their way, and you will bravely refuse to answer. You will stay true to your heritage and never break, until we are forced to kill you. And then four more names will be added to the roster of dead fools.”

Mutran reached into the tank and fished out a large, squirming shadow leech.

“But, you see, you’re not going to get off so easily,” Antroz continued, his sightless eyes darting along the wall where his prisoners were chained. “You will get no chance to be heroes. No

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Chronicler will remember you with honor. Instead, you will be branded as traitors and your names will be cursed by all free Matoran... for the short time they have left.”

Mutran walked to Lewa, holding out the shadow leech, still dripping liquid protodermis. It hissed as it drew close to the Toa’s Kanohi mask.

“You came here looking for the shadow leeches,” Mutran said, smiling. “Isn’t it time you met them face-to-face?”

Elsewhere, Vican was about to have a meeting of his own. If it wasn’t quite as frightening and final as an encounter with a shadow leech, it was just as much to be dreaded.

He had been expecting a much longer journey to reach the bleak and barren island of Destral. Surprisingly, he had arrived there in less than half an hour. Had Vican thought about it, he wouldn’t have been so shocked. Destral had been known to teleport through space, appearing wherever its occupants chose. Once the location of Karda Nui was discovered, some member of the Brotherhood of Makuta had moved their base as close as possible to one of the entrances.

The island itself was little more than a jagged rock in the silver sea, dominated by the massive Brotherhood fortress. Down below, a huge number of Visorak, Rahkshi, and mechanized Exo-Toa battlesuits could be seen on patrol. The only area that seemed relatively clear was the rocky shoreline, most likely because it was lined with traps for any unwary visitors. Anyone who attempted to land on Destral would be captured within moments and hauled to the fortress for interrogation... or worse.

As for the fortress itself, it was bigger than Vican’s entire home island. It took up the entire landmass of the island, with the exception of a small portion at the southern tip. Constructed entirely of stone and metal, it looked like some obscene growth that had erupted from the core of the island. A blisteringly hot wind rustled the Brotherhood banners that hung from the parapets. Vican wondered for how many beings this fortress had been the last sight ever seen.

He reached into his pack and fingered the Brotherhood tablet of transit, just to reassure himself it was still there. With this hand-sized piece of stone, he would be allowed to enter the fortress and carry out his mission. Without it, he would be seen as an intruder, tossed in a cell (if he was lucky), and never heard from again.

Vican guided his flying mount to a landing before the massive gates. As soon as he touched down, a half dozen Visorak and a silver Rahkshi converged on him. He scrambled to take out the tablet of transit and then held it before him, as if it were a talisman to ward off evil. The

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Rahkshi stopped in its tracks at the sight. The Visorak kept coming, pulling him from atop the Rahi and herding him toward the gate.

The huge portal opened at his approach. Hesitantly, he stepped inside. When the doors slammed shut behind him, he jumped half a foot. The corridor in which Vican found himself was dark and cold, with a ceiling at least five hundred feet high. Mounted on the walls were trophies of past Brotherhood conquests — Toa masks and weapons, Rahi heads, and a few things so grotesque even Vican looked away with a shudder.

Antroz had given him precise instructions for where to look for Icarax. Turned out they weren't necessary, because that Makuta was not making himself hard to find. Instead, the powerful, black-armored warrior was sitting on the ebony throne normally reserved for Teridax, the Makuta of Metru Nui — and he was wearing Teridax's Mask of Shadows!

Vican felt like his heartlight was in his throat. What was going on here? Had Icarax staged a one-Makuta revolution in the absence of the other members and taken over Destral? If so, how would he react to Antroz's summons? Right now, Vican wished he was anywhere else. A nice, long spell in a Rahi creation vat even seemed like an appealing alternative.

He stood in the doorway of the central chamber, too scared to move or speak. Icarax was busy sharpening his twin-bladed, rotating sword. Then his eyes flicked up, and he caught sight of Vican.

"You tempt fate, approaching without announcing your presence. I might have killed you," Icarax said, his voice like distant thunder. He leaned forward, eyes locked on Vican's. "I still might."

The mutated Matoran somehow managed to find the will to move. He held up the tablet of transit. It did not seem to impress Icarax, but the Makuta made no move to spring on his visitor and rend him to bits. Vican took that as an encouraging sign.

"Um... forgive me... um," he stammered. "I... I..."

A wisp of shadow energy drifted from Icarax's spiked claw. It wrapped itself around Vican and began to squeeze.

"You have thirty seconds in which to be extremely amusing," said Icarax. "After that..."

Vican could feel the breath being forced out of his lungs. His arms were already close to snapping from the pressure. He struggled to speak. Icarax rose, walked over to him, and held his sword to the Matoran's throat.

"Short," said the Makuta. He glanced down at the blade, then back at Vican. "Or to the point."

"Antroz sent me," Vican gasped. "He wants you in Karda Nui. He said... he said immediately."

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Icarax frowned and withdrew his sword. The shadow chain around Vican dissipated. The Matoran inhaled a big breath of air.

“Antroz,” Icarax said, so quietly Vican could barely hear it. “I journeyed to Metru Nui, to the very home of the Toa of Light, to retrieve the Mask of Shadows lost there by Teridax. I returned and claimed this throne. And I arrive to find Antroz presumes to give me orders.”

“He — all of us — we’re just following the directives of Makuta Teridax,” Vican said. He knew it was a mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

Icarax yanked hard on a chain hanging from the ceiling. A section of the floor slid away, revealing a pool of energized protodermis far below. The Makuta grabbed the Matoran and held him by his ankle over the pool.

“What do you think? Will that liquid transform you, or destroy you?” said Icarax, his manner deadly calm. “A gamble, you see — Teridax has always been fond of gambles. His entire plan is a colossal wager against destiny. If all do their part, then perhaps, maybe, ultimate power will be ours, he pledges.”

The Makuta hurled Vican to the floor. “I believe in certainties. The strength of my limbs, the power of my mask, the sharp edges of my blades — that is what I build my plans around. Trickery, deception, complex strategies, they are for the weak! If you want power, and another has it, you get it not by outwitting him — you get it by stepping over his corpse.”

Icarax kicked Vican toward the door. “Run back to your master. Tell him Icarax comes. If he is wise, he will tremble.”

Vican got to his feet and fled out of the chamber, down the corridor, and beyond the gates. He slammed into a Visorak so hard he knocked it off its feet, then scrambled atop his flying Rahi. An instant later, he was on his way back to Karda Nui to deliver his message. After that, he decided, it might be wise to dig a hole, climb in, and pull the stones down on top of him. He didn’t think he wanted to see what was soon to happen.

Pohatu Nuva was certain that at some point in his storied career, he had escaped from a tougher trap. He just wished he could remember when.

Not that he had much time for recollection — Lewa Nuva was about two seconds from being introduced to a shadow leech. Once that happened, the light would be drained out of him and he would become a dark Toa. The other Toa Nuva, if they survived, would have to fight him, just as the Karda Nui Matoran were battling their former friends every day.

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Pohatu racked his brain. If he used a mask power or his power over stone in any obvious way, their three Matoran allies were dead. *But what if I do it in a way that isn't easy to spot?* he thought. *What if I can take them by surprise?*

Everyone knew what a Toa of Stone could do — create rock, shape it, make it strike at his command. It was a good power, but it wasn't the whole story. *What a Toa can create, he can also destroy*, thought Pohatu. *And I just love to break things.*

He closed his eyes, hoping the Makuta would just think he was afraid to watch Lewa's fate. Then Pohatu used his power over stone in a way he hadn't in ages — to weaken the rock in the floor of the hive. It was a delicate procedure — fractures had to be created with pinpoint precision — and Toa of Stone weren't known for being delicate. But done wrong, Mutran would spot signs of it too early, and Tanma and his group were as good as dead.

The shadow leech had made contact with Lewa's mask. The Toa of Air screamed. There was no more time to wait.

Pohatu Nuva gave a mental yank on the section of stone he had weakened. The floor beneath Antroz's and Mutran's feet gave way, throwing them off balance for one crucial instant.

As soon as he saw them start to fall, Pohatu triggered his Kanohi Mask of Speed. By vibrating his body's molecules at high speed, he was able to pass his wrists through the chains and free himself. Increasing his vibration, he rocketed forward, using his hand to slice through the chains that bound the other three Toa. Then he was gone, headed for the chamber where the Matoran were being held.

By now, Mutran and Antroz had regained their footing. Lewa and Kopaka had retrieved their weapons and, along with a newly revived Toa Ignika, were ready for them.

"The doom vipers," said Kopaka. "Back when we first got back to Metru Nui."

"Gotcha," said Lewa. "What about our silent friend?"

"He'll figure it out," said the Toa of Ice.

Pohatu suddenly reappeared, the three Matoran in tow. "Whatever we're doing, we better do. The other Makuta are right behind me."

"Doom vipers in Ga-Metru," Kopaka replied.

Pohatu smiled. "Oh, yeah. Good choice."

One of the things that made Kanohi Nuva masks unique was the ability of the user to share their power with whomever happened to be close by. In this case, it was Pohatu conferring the

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power of super speed on the other three Toa and the Matoran. Before Mutran's eyes, all six seemed to vanish.

"Move, you fool!" Antroz snarled. "I can hear them. They are headed for the vats!"

It was already too late. The speeding heroes smashed the vats to shards, sending half-formed shadow leeches tumbling out onto the cave floor.

Chirox and Vamprah arrived just at that moment. "Stay there!" Mutran yelled. "Block the exit!"

Pohatu wanted to stay and fight. Racing at top speed had been enough to confuse and defeat a half dozen deadly doom vipers, after all, so it might work as well on Makuta. Speed was one of the few powers Makuta *didn't* have. But a tap on his shoulder by Kopaka signaled that retreat was the better option.

Concentrating, he used the mask to set all six bodies to vibrate at just the right frequency. Then the party shot forward, actually vibrating right through the bodies of Chirox and Vamprah. Unwilling to leave without a parting shot, Pohatu slowed everyone down just enough that their passage disrupted the Makuta's substance. The two cried out in excruciating pain.

Then Pohatu and his team were out of the hive mouth and into the sky.

"Let's bring it down," said Kopaka, pointing to the hive.

Lewa, Pohatu, and Kopaka combined their powers, striking at the relatively slender stone cord that held the hive suspended. But it remained intact, the damage they did being healed almost as quickly as they made it.

"That's not normal stone," said Pohatu. "It looks almost organic."

Toa Ignika suddenly pushed forward, shouldering the other Toa aside. Before they could react, he had triggered his own unique power, weakening the living stone. It snapped in two, sending the hive plunging toward the swamp below. The Toa Nuva could see the Makuta and Matoran fleeing from it as it fell.

"What just happened?" asked Lewa Nuva, giving Toa Ignika a long look.

"We won!" shouted Solek.

Kopaka shook his head. "We survived. And we made them angry."

"Is that a good thing?" asked Photok.

"Mad-angry types get stupid," said Lewa, tearing his attention away from their silent ally. "A stupid fighter beats himself."

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“With a little help from us,” added Pohatu, smiling.

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The Makuta regrouped in Antroz's cavern. Mutran had wanted to go after the Toa immediately — after all, they had just destroyed countless samples of his best work. All that was left of the shadow leeches were the ones Chirox had been examining. It would take days, maybe weeks, to get the equipment needed from Destral and regrow the leeches.

"No," said Antroz. "Let them think they have won a battle. Let them grow overconfident. It will make their destruction that much sweeter."

Mutran was in no mood to listen. His labors had been wiped out in an instant by a mere four Toa and some idiotic Matoran — and he knew whose fault it was.

"You!" he screamed, advancing on a frightened Kirop. "You led them to the hive! This is your failure!"

"Mutran!" snapped Antroz. "Inflict your punishments later! We have a war to win."

"Shadow Matoran," spat Chirox. "They are just as much a waste of space and air as they were before we transformed them. Why do we need to keep any of them alive?"

"You know why," Antroz answered. "Matoran of Light have an unusually high potential to become Toa. If that happens, we want them to be *our* Toa."

"Our Toa? Our Matoran? Why not simply give up our dreams of conquest and settle into quiet lives as very tall Turaga?" The words came from Makuta Icarax, who was standing in the passageway, his tone heavy with contempt.

Antroz seemed unfazed. "Good. You've arrived. I have work for you."

Icarax laughed. "I am not seeking employment, Antroz. You called, and I came, but only to tell you I am not some Rahi for you to order about. I care not at all for you, or the Brotherhood's precious plan."

"Do you care about the Mask of Life?" interrupted Mutran. "I know its shape. I've seen the carvings, as we all have. I didn't realize it before, but that silent Toa — the one who brought down the hive — he was wearing the Kanohi Ignika."

"That makes no sense," said Chirox. "Six Toa Nuva came here. Three are with us, the others are being hunted by our brothers down below. And none of them are wearing that mask!"

"Is that enough to pique your interest, Icarax?" asked Antroz, making no effort to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "We are going to lay waste to Karda Nui, seize the remaining Matoran, and kill the Toa Nuva. Make yourself useful — find that mysterious Toa and get that mask."

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Icarax swung his blade, sparks flying from it as it struck the stone wall. “Since you ask so nicely, brother, what can I say? I will return with his mask... shall I bring it with or without the head that wears it?”

Antroz turned his back on the warrior, saying simply, “Amuse yourself.”

The final attack began with lightning and shadow. Five Makuta dived down toward the last surviving village of Karda Nui, spreading darkness as they traveled until it hung like a fog over the dwellings of the Av-Matoran. Even the glow of the lightvines could be seen only dimly. Then the shroud of shadow was split by forked lightning fired by Icarax and Mutran, which struck the roofs of the Matoran dwellings.

At this point, those two Makuta split off from the rest. Antroz, Chirox, and Vamprah, along with their shadow Matoran, kept on straight for the village. Their job was to use powers that would affect a wide area to keep the Toa Nuva and Matoran penned in their shelter. As Antroz summoned a violent storm, Vamprah and Chirox blanketed the village with alternating sonic attacks and destructive cyclones. Within a few minutes, virtually no buildings were left standing. Even the lightvine barriers were shredded by the assault, leaving nothing to bar the way of the Makuta.

Only the underground shelter of the Av-Matoran remained, and that would not last for long. As Mutran used plasma to melt the exposed roof, Icarax tore the hatch off its hinges. In a matter of moments, it seemed, it would all be over.

Icarax walked confidently down the steps into the hatch, ready for anything the Toa Nuva might hurl at him — anything, that is, except what he found.

“There’s no one here!” he roared, turning back to the other Makuta. “It’s empty!” Mutran went to check for himself. He almost shoved Icarax aside, before reminding himself how unhealthy that might be. A moment later, he emerged from the shelter, as puzzled as Icarax was enraged. “He’s right. They’re gone.”

“Gone where? The swamp?” wondered Antroz, circling high above the ruined village. “Or have they abandoned Karda Nui completely?”

It was Gavla who spotted part of the answer. Perched atop Vamprah, she flew over one of the captured villages, seated atop another fallen stalactite. Her keen eyes spotted shadow Matoran bound with lightvines. Alarmed, she told Vamprah of her find, and the two flew down to investigate.

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The first shadow Matoran freed told the tale. “The Toa Nuva... they struck so fast.. said they were going to wait here for your attack.”

“Are they still here?” asked Gavla.

The dark Matoran shook his head. “No. As soon as they saw you heading for the Light village, they flew off, up there.” He pointed in the direction the Makuta had come.

“The caves?” said Gavla.

Vamprah struck a nearby outcropping of rock, shattering it. Then he held up one of the pieces.

Gavla immediately understood his message. “The third keystone! While we’re here, they and their pathetic Matoran are stealing it.”

Vamprah vaulted into the sky, Gavla barely hanging on. Quickly, he gathered the other Makuta and they bolted back for their cavern base. They were halfway there when massive stone missiles began to drop from the ceiling, one almost impaling Mutran.

“Hey, down there,” Pohatu Nuva called from above, even as he wrenched another huge stalactite loose from the cave roof. “This place has really gone to Karzahni since we were here in the old days. Thought it could use a good cleaning up — starting with you.”

Antroz fired a blast of heat vision at the sound of Pohatu’s voice. Kirop’s warning of what was about to happen came too late. Kopaka Nuva rocketed in front of Pohatu, catching the vision blast on an ice shield and reflecting it back. The beams punched through the armor on Antroz’s shoulder, allowing his precious energy to start leaking out.

Snarling, Chirox and Kirop flew toward Pohatu. They had almost reached him when Lewa Nuva suddenly swooped down from his perch on the ceiling, firing his Skyblaster. The sphere of light struck Kirop, knocking him off Chirox’s back. Startled, Chirox slowed for just a second. But it was long enough for Pohatu to bring the stalactite down on him like a club, sending Chirox spiraling down toward the swamp.

Lewa Nuva’s smile of triumph was short-lived. He spotted two Av-Matoran flying from the cave, eager to join in the fight. He shouted for them to go back, but it was too late. Icarax trapped them inside a powerful cyclone and then directed it toward the cavern wall.

“Do something!” shouted Tanma, flying close to Lewa. “They’ll be killed!”

Lewa concentrated, creating a whirlwind of his own in the path of Icarax’s. The two collided, the Toa’s funnel setting up a counterforce that kept Icarax’s cyclone from advancing. Shrugging,

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Icarax suddenly made his vanish, sending the two Matoran inside plummeting toward the swamp.

Kopaka and Solek flew after them. The Toa Nuva of Ice caught one with a chain made of ice, while Solek created a small scoop made of light to snag the other. Unfortunately, the rescue left them vulnerable to attack, and Mutran didn't miss the opportunity. His power scream ripped through their minds, forcing them to flee or fall.

Antroz was back in the fight now, swooping down toward the shaken Kopaka. His armored hand crackled as he built up his shattering power. One touch, and the Toa of Ice's armor would be fragments.

Pohatu spotted the danger. He hefted the stalactite like a spear and threw it at Antroz. It struck the Makuta with a glancing blow, knocking him off course. By the time he righted himself, Pohatu and Photok were on him. They flew in ever-tightening circles around him at incredible speed, Pohatu striking him on each pass, delivering a thousand blows in a matter of seconds.

Hovering nearby, Icarax smiled. It was good to see Antroz getting pounded. Served him right for not wiping out the Av-Matoran a long time ago. Still, as fun as this was, it was best not to let the Toa Nuva start thinking they could possibly win. Focusing his gravity power, he made Pohatu and Photok too heavy to speed, too heavy to fly, and sent them both falling like stones. Antroz plummeted as well.

I guess I forgot not to include my fellow Makuta as a target, Icarax said to himself, smiling. I suppose after almost 100,000 years, your memory begins to go.

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It wasn't so much the fall that bothered Pohatu. It was not being able to see where he was heading. The thick layer of mist and fog obscured everything below and made it hard to aim for a soft spot. *Not that there are likely to be any, anyway*, he reminded himself.

An image appeared in his mind of a place he had never seen. It was another fallen stalactite, smaller than the rest, its tip buried in the swamp. Its wide, flat end was not too far below, hidden in the mist. He suddenly realized he was seeing something Photok had seen some time ago — somehow, the Matoran's memories were in his head now as well.

Regardless of how he knew, that stalactite was the best chance to break their fall. Pohatu strained against the pull of gravity to change his course even a few feet. It took almost all his strength, but he did it. Then the rocky surface of the stalactite was rushing up to meet him. "Hang on!" he yelled to Photok.

The impact was terrible, driving Pohatu and the Av-Matoran deep into the stalactite. The stone split in half with a loud crack, both ends starting to fall toward the swamp. And Pohatu and Photok were falling again...

Toa Ignika had watched the battle for some time. He was fascinated by the ebb and flow of it, first one side winning, then the other. When he had been just the Mask of Life, he had created warriors to fight for him, but never been in battle himself. The feelings were so overwhelming that he was too caught up in them to take action.

That is, until he spotted Icarax's attack on Pohatu. That reminded him the Toa Nuva were both outnumbered and outpowered here. If he wanted them as allies and friends, he had better do something.

He steered his craft directly at Icarax and swung his sword, striking the Makuta with all of his might with the flat of the blade. Startled, but unhurt, Icarax turned to see his attacker.

"Oh, it's you," the Makuta said. "The one Antroz spoke of. Will you hand over your mask, or do I take it, and your life with it?"

Toa Ignika said nothing, and simply readied his blade for another strike.

"The silent sort, eh?" said Icarax. "Well, if you can't talk, I am sure you can scream... and what sweet music that will be, if too short a tune."

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Toa Ignika swung his blade. Icarax altered his body's density, allowing the weapon to pass right through. Then he altered it again to the hardness of protosteel and struck Ignika with an armored fist. The Toa flew off his vehicle, catching the end of it at the last moment before he fell. He clung to the edge even as Icarax drew closer. The Makuta reached down toward his mask.

Something inside the Toa Ignika suddenly flared to life. In all of the millennia the Mask Of Life had existed, no one had been allowed to touch it unless destined to do so. Those who laid hands on it were cursed. And now this Makuta had dared to strike it a physical blow and attempted to seize it for himself.

That will not be, thought Toa Ignika.

He hurled the power of Life at Icarax. Immediately, he sensed the Makuta was not like other beings he had encountered. Icarax was armor and energy only, with no organic tissue anywhere in his body. Had it always been this way? Or had the Makuta once been something other than simply pure power housed in black armor?

Toa Ignika decided to find out.

Extending his power, he gave the Makuta a push back down the road of evolution. Swirling energy coalesced into solid matter; muscles and organs grew where they had not been for tens of thousands of years, but found no place to exist. The current generation of Makuta armor was designed to hold energy only, not organic tissue. As the old form struggled to replace the new, the pain was, to say the least, excruciating. The sound that came from Icarax rebounded again and again off the walls of the mammoth cavern. For a moment, all the combatants were frozen in place, the battle halted by that sound.

No one could remember the last time they had heard a Makuta scream.

Far below, Pohatu abruptly found he could fly again. The tremendous pull of gravity had eased, as if Icarax's power had just been cut off. Smiling, he began to ascend again.

"Look!" said Photok. "Chirox is up ahead, fighting with Kopaka."

"Then let's give ol' frosty a hand," said the Toa of Stone. "I still owe him one."

"For what?"

"Well, we were in Ko-Wahi, and there was this avalanche, and he made a shield, and... I'll tell you later."

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Mutran was a scientist, not a warrior. As he saw Icarax in agony, Antroz falling toward the swamp, and Chirox fighting two Toa Nuva, he knew what the next step had to be.

The problem would be Vamprah. He was fighting an aerial battle with Lewa Nuva, a fight he should have won with ease. But the Toa was so skillful in the air it seemed he was born flying, and he was using his Midak Skyblaster to keep Vamprah at bay. Other Av-Matoran had joined in as well, peppering the Makuta with blasts of light.

We can destroy them, Mutran told himself. We will destroy them. But, as much as I hate to admit it, Antroz is right — the Plan is what matters. While we are battling here, the other three Toa Nuva may be finding the rest of the keystones. And it is too soon for that, much too soon.

Hovering right in the center of the ongoing battle, Mutran did something he had never done before. He gathered within himself every last bit of shadow energy he possessed and unleashed it all in one devastating explosion of darkness. It was enough to send Toa, Matoran, and even the other Makuta reeling. Mutran almost collapsed from the effort, but Vican appeared on his mount to keep him from falling.

“Find Vamprah, Chirox, and Icarax,” Mutran ordered. “Tell them to join our brothers in the swamp. We will kill the other three Toa Nuva before they find the keystones... and these, too, if they dare to follow.”

Vican flew off to do as he was bade. Chirox didn’t hesitate, and Icarax was in no shape to refuse. Vamprah wanted to finish off Lewa Nuva, but even he understood the Plan was more important than any one battle. The three Makuta headed for the swamp, with some shadow Matoran trailing behind, others locked in battle with Av-Matoran.

Mutran was about to follow when he found himself surrounded by the three Toa Nuva and Toa Ignika. Skyblasters were aimed directly at him. Toa Ignika had no such weapon, but the look in his eyes reminded Mutran that what he had done to Icarax, he could easily do again.

“Where did the other Makuta go?” demanded Kopaka.

“Below,” said Mutran. “I hope you said goodbye to your friends before they traveled to the swamp... you won’t be seeing them again.”

“The keystones,” said Kopaka. “I have read enough of the three we captured to know the secret to reviving Mata Nui lies in that swamp. If the Makuta seize it and hold it, it will take an army of Toa to pry it from their claws.”

“And we don’t have an army,” said Pohatu. “We barely have a kolhii team.”

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“Then we quick-fly down there now,” said Lewa. “Stop the Makuta, find the secret, wake the Great Spirit, and get home in time for disk-surfing.”

“Just another day in the core of the universe, huh?” replied Pohatu.

“Not quite,” said Kopaka. “If we’re not very careful, this might be the last day for all of us.”

Epilogue

Makuta Teridax, leader of the Brotherhood, originator of the Plan, was at the moment far from Karda Nui. He was in a part of the universe even he had never visited before, though it lived in more than a few legends. Vast and complex, even he had never seen anything quite like it.

Getting here had not been easy. He existed only as a free-floating cloud of energy, having abandoned his last body in the depths of the Pit. As it turned out, that was the only thing that had saved him. The defenses of this place — and there were many — were intended to deal with intruders with a physical form. The weaponry, while formidable, could not destroy a being that was pure power unleashed.

He knew that right now the rest of the Brotherhood would be in combat with the Toa Nuva in Karda Nui. The odds favored the Makuta in that fight, but odds were meaningless when it came to Toa. Despite the raw power, ruthlessness, and brutality of their enemies — perhaps even because of it — he had no doubt the Toa would find some way to achieve their destiny.

In fact, thought Makuta Teridax with a smile, *you could even say I'm counting on it.*

He had never been a believer in unity or duty, those virtues the Matoran clung to like drowning stone rats cling to driftwood. But the third one they cherished, destiny? Ah, yes, he believed in destiny.

And it is time for mine to be achieved, he thought, hovering before the carving of a Kanohi Hau, symbol of the Great Spirit Mata Nui. *Isn't that right, dear brother? Yes, there are schemes within schemes, falsehoods layered upon deceptions, and imaginings so dark only I can see into their shadows... and it is time at last to share them with the universe.*

Without wasting another moment, the leader of the Brotherhood of Makuta set about his final task.