

I

Toa Mahri Matoro journeys into the deep with a mysterious companion.

Toa Matoro swam silently through the black waters of the Pit. Behind him, the robot guardian Maxilos followed. To Matoro, it felt like having the shadow of doom hanging over him, for he knew what no else did: that the mechanical body of Maxilos was possessed by the spirit of the evil Makuta.

“Why so quiet?” asked Makuta in the hollow voice of Maxilos. “We have seen death and destruction today with the promise of much more to come. We have seen heroes behaving like villains. You yourself have done things even I would be reluctant to do. It is a time for celebration.”

“Shut up!” said Matoro. “I’m doing only what I have to do to save the life of Mata Nui, a life *you* put in jeopardy.”

Makuta laughed. “Think what you like, little Toa, and try to avoid admitting to yourself that you are one bad day, one moment of cruelty, one fit of rage away from being me.” Makuta swam past Matoro and then veered down toward the sea bottom. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“What?” asked Matoro.

“Call it an answer to some of your questions,” replied Makuta.

He led Matoro down to the depths of the black water. There they came to a great gap in the sea floor.

“I discovered this shortly after taking over the body of Maxilos. It’s an entrance to the original Pit, the prison once inhabited by the Barraki and others like them. There is something down there I think you should see.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trap?” asked Matoro.

“You don’t,” answered Makuta. “But surely a strong and brave Toa like yourself fears nothing. Follow me.”

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By Greg Farshtey

Makuta swam down through the opening. Matoro watched him go until the crimson form had disappeared into the Pit. The Toa of Ice checked his Cordak blaster, readied himself for anything that might happen, and followed his greatest enemy into the darkness.

## 2

Deep inside the Pit, Makuta shows Matoro the remains of traitorous Toa Tuyet.

Makuta led Toa Mahri Matoro deep into the dark recesses of the former prison known as the Pit. It was eerily quiet. Now and then, a sea creature darted past, keeping its distance from two beings it no doubt regarded as predators.

*Certainly one of us is, thought Matoro. Makuta has been preying on the fears of Matoran for as long as I can remember. And I — what have I become? As soon as I realized I wore a mask that let me reanimate the dead, I should have cast it aside; I never should have used it.*

“When you are through brooding, I have found what I was seeking,” said Makuta. “Here.”

Matoro looked where he was pointing. Half buried in rubble was a Kanohi Mask of Power, one whose shape seemed vaguely familiar. Scattered nearby was blue Toa armor. “What is this?” said Matoro.

“All that remains of a Toa of Water named Tuyet,” Makuta replied. “She was condemned here many thousands of years ago. She died here, though I don’t know why. Perhaps she was trying to escape.”

“Why was she sent here?”

“It is hard for me to give exact reason, since I did not even know ‘here’ existed until a few days ago. But I do know her crime. She tampered with an object of power that did not belong in her hands; it was too much for her. She went wild, was defeated by Toa Lhikan and Toa Nidhiki, and the object was destroyed, or so the heroes thought.”

“Get to the point,” said Matoro.

Makuta laughed. “I would have thought it would be obvious. Tuyet is dead; she is also the only one who might know how the powerful artifact, the Nui Stone, could be recreated. I want you to use your mask, Matoro, the Mask of Reanimation. I want you to bring her back.”

### 3

A taunting Makuta forces Matoro to reanimate Toa Tuyet.

Toa Mahri Matoro and Makuta stood over the battered mask and armor of the long-dead Toa Tuyet.

“You are insane,” said Matoro. “I won’t do what you ask.”

“I must have missed the part where I gave you a choice,” Makuta replied. “I want you to use your mask power to reanimate this corpse, and I want you to do it now.” After a moment, he added, “I could just kill you, Matoro, take the mask and do the job myself, but it’s so much more amusing this way.”

“Even if I bring her back, she won’t be able to help you recreate the Nui Stone,” insisted Matoro. “She’ll have no spirit! She’ll have no mind!”

“I have always found the minds of Toa to be vastly overrated anyway,” said Makuta. “Now get to work.”

Matoro concentrated, triggering the power of his Mask of Reanimation. He knew Makuta meant what he said — he would kill Matoro without a second thought. Beyond that, the Toa of Ice was curious to find out just what it was Makuta was up to here. Once he knew that, he could always send Tuyet back to the grave by cutting off the power of the mask.

At his feet, the Kanohi mask and armor began to move, slowly coming together. What had been a pile of junk a moment before now had taken on a form. Other pieces of armor were rising up through the layers of mud, struggling to rejoin the rest. It somehow managed to be amazing and sickening at the same time.

Slowly, the body that once belonged to Toa Tuyet rose from the floor of the Pit and stood unsteadily, waiting for commands. And that was when Matoro noticed something — incredibly tiny, almost microscopic pieces of crystal embedded in the dead Toa’s armor.

“Behold,” said Makuta. “When the Nui Stone exploded so many thousands of years ago, most of it vaporized, but some fragments survived buried in Tuyet’s armor. With these I can recreate the stone as it once was. All I need is the proper tool.”

“What tool?” asked Matoro.

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“The Staff of Artakha,” answered Makuta. “And unless I am mistaken, your old friends the Toa Nuva are about to get it for me.”

## 4

Hahli confronts Matoro, disguised Makuta, and Tuyet.

Toa Matoro, Makuta in the body of the robot Maxilos, and the reanimated Toa Tuyet swam away from the long-abandoned prison and into the open ocean. Matoro's mind raced. What did Makuta plan to do with the Nui Stone if he recreated it? What was the Staff of Artakha, and why did Makuta believe the Toa Nuva would help him get it? More importantly, how could Matoro stop this?

"Matoro!"

The Toa of Ice turned. Toa Hahli was swimming toward him. In the background, Matoro could see what looked like an ocean full of manta rays.

"Where are you going, and who is that Toa with you? She looks, uh... Matoro, what have you done?"

Matoro could hear Makuta's voice in his mind: *We have a meeting to attend, or have you forgotten? One of my Brotherhood waits near Mahri Nui, but he will not wait long... you wouldn't want to make us late, would you? And Matoro — breathe a word to Hahli, and neither of you will live to see another tide.*

"Hahli, don't worry, everything's fine — just trust me."

"I do trust you, but I think you have become a little too used to keeping secrets, brother. And I'm starting to wonder if you trust me, or any of us."

Matoro looked Hahli right in the eyes. "It will all work out. Everything is going just as planned. As smooth as that time Nuparu used his Mask of Flight to transport you over the chasm. Remember? Now I — we — have to go."

The three figures swam off, leaving Hahli disturbed and not a little angry. Then a memory suddenly came to her. *Wait a minute — when I flew with Nuparu, he dropped me. I almost got killed! Matoro was trying to send me a message — he's in trouble, and I wish I knew how to get him out.*

## 5

Makuta schemes to acquire the Staff of Artakha.

Matoro felt like he was in the middle of a nightmare, and he dearly wished he could wake up. On his journey with Makuta and the reanimated Toa Tuyet, they had been attacked by Karzahni, the mad ruler of a realm of misery for Matoran. Karzahni sought the Staff of Artakha they carried, but Makuta was not about to give that up without a fight. When the battle began to go against him, Karzahni summoned a horde of Manas crabs to his aid. ‘Manas’ — the word meant ‘monster’ in Matoran, for that’s what they were.

The Toa of Ice’s heart froze as the Manas moved in. He hurled his ice power at them, but they shrugged it off. Once it had taken six Toa to stop only a pair of Manas, and now he and Makuta faced hundreds. Strangely, the master of shadows did nothing. He didn’t hurl shadow bolts or chain lightning. He just waited and watched until the crabs were well within striking distance. Then he reached out with his mind, his most powerful weapon. Using his power to control beasts of land, sea, and air, he seized control of half the Manas and turned them against the others. It was a horrible sight as the huge, savage Manas tore at each other. Karzahni looked on in shock as his army disintegrated before his eyes. Matoro looked away. Makuta simply laughed.

“Pests,” said the master of shadows. “They do make such a mess. Perhaps, Karzahni, I should set the survivors on you.”

Now it was Karzahni’s turn to smile. He had powers of his own, powers Makuta could not hope to cope with, he was sure. Triggering his ability, he thrust a vision into Makuta’s mind. Now Makuta saw, as surely as if it were really happening, the future day when the Toa Nuva would awaken the Great Spirit Mata Nui. He saw Mata Nui rise, whole for the first time in a thousand years. And then he saw the Great Spirit’s power surge through the universe, seeking out those who would dare to rebel against him. He saw the terrible vengeance of Mata Nui and knew the final punishment that waited for him. And Makuta screamed.

## 6

Brutaka and Botar foil Makuta's attempt to recreate the Nui Stone.

If Makuta was at all rattled by his fierce battle with Karzahni, he didn't show it. Nor had he displayed any particular emotion when he and Matoro had met with Makuta Icarax, who had brought the Staff of Artakha to the waters above the Pit. He had simply taken the object from his fellow Brotherhood member and dismissed Icarax with a nod. Now he and Matoro stood over the shadowed remains of Toa Tuyet's armor. A single fragment of the Nui Stone gleamed in the darkness.

"That is all the staff needs," said Makuta quietly. "One piece, and its power will recreate the stone as it once was."

"And what good will that do you?" asked Matoro. "What do you plan to do with it?"

"Very well, my curious little Toa," Makuta replied. "Think on this. Tuyet, and later Nidhiki, were not the only Toa to ever turn bad. And if the next one should happen to fall under my sway, well, what better than to use the Nui Stone to increase his power a hundred-fold, a thousand-fold; imagine an all-powerful Toa at my command, wiping your kind from the face of this planet."

Makuta aimed the Staff of Artakha at the Nui Stone fragment, and triggered its power. Slowly the pieces of the stone began to float through the water, drifting toward each other, joining together for the first time in a thousand years.

"I can't let you do this!" yelled Matoro, charging forward.

Makuta waved his hand and a stasis field froze the Toa of Ice.

"And I can't let you stop me," said Makuta. "No one can stop me now."

A blast of sheer, raw power struck the master of shadows squarely in the back. Makuta staggered, dropping the staff.

"Who dares?" he snarled.

"In my time, I've dared lots of things. Maybe too many things," came the reply. "I fell a long way from the light, and I can never find my way back."



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Makuta whirled. Hovering in the water was Brutaka, former guardian of the Mask of Life, now mutated prisoner of the Pit. Wisps of energy were still drifting from his open hand. His body had changed, twisted spikes now jutting out of his armor, and what looked like a long dorsal fin running down his back. Brutaka stood, ready for battle.

“But the darkness is not so complete that I can’t recognize a monster when I see one.”

Makuta hurled a blast of shadow energy at Brutaka. The warrior sidestepped and dove past Makuta, snatching up the Staff of Artakha, even as he shouted, “Botar!”

Events happened quickly then. The Order of Mata Nui agent known as Botar appeared suddenly in the midst of battle, taking the staff from Brutaka. He spared a moment for a nod of thanks to his former teammate before vanishing once more.

“It’s gone,” Brutaka said to Makuta. “The staff is gone where you cannot reach it. You’ve lost.”

“If I have lost the staff, *you* are about to lose everything,” said Makuta.

Brutaka did not tremble at the threat, or back away. Instead he just laughed — a long, hard laugh with a little trace of madness in it. “You seem to have me mistaken,” he said, “for someone who has anything at all left to lose.”

## 7

Matoro escapes the confrontation between Brutaka and Makuta.

“Get out of here, now!” Brutaka shouted to Matoro. “Get back to the other Toa — I’ll handle Makuta!”

“As you handled the Toa Nuva and the Toa Inika?” sneered Makuta. “Are you fool enough to think you can trust him, Matoro?”

Toa Matoro weighed his choice. Brutaka had once been a member of the Order of Mata Nui before he had turned bad, but Makuta? His spirit had been black from the day he had been created. There was no choice at all. He swam away as fast as he could, heading for a rendezvous with his teammates.

“You cost me the Nui Stone,” growled Makuta, hurling a burst of shadow energy at Brutaka. “You have become... an annoyance.”

But the shadow bolt never reached its target. Triggering the power of his Kanohi mask, Brutaka opened a dimensional portal and shunted the energy into the Zone of Darkness, where it could harm nothing.

“Then let’s see if I can move up to an irritation,” said Brutaka, firing his own blast of energy from his sword. The blast knocked Makuta’s weapon from his hand. “You know, Makuta, we could do this all day, but it won’t get you what you want.”

“And that is?” asked Makuta, even as he used his control over gravity to slam Brutaka into a nearby mountain.

“Ow!” said Brutaka. “Well, you don’t want the Mask of Life. If you did, you would never have hired those bumbling Piraka to get it for you. But you do want to be there when it’s found, pulling everyone’s strings. You want to decide who has it, how they use it, and when. Am I getting warm?”

“A little too warm for comfort,” answered Makuta, throwing a stasis field around Brutaka. But the former Order of Mata Nui member demolished the field with one swipe of his blade.

“Please,” said Brutaka, “I was getting out of stasis fields when you were still on Destral raising archives moles.”

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“What is it you want, Brutaka?”

“Once I would have said I wanted the mask myself,” Brutaka replied. “Once I would have seen myself ruling a universe with it. Now I guess you could say my vision’s improved, and I just want to see you sweat.” Brutaka smiled. “Oh, and by the way, Nocturn had the mask last I saw, but Hydraxon was about to take it away from him. And who knows what *that* lunatic will do with it. So maybe you better go see.”

Makuta’s instinct was to continue the battle, but Brutaka was right — he couldn’t afford to lose control of events, not at this late stage. “This isn’t over,” warned the master of shadows.

Brutaka ran a finger along the razor-sharp edge of his sword. “Oh, Makuta, I’m counting on that!”

## 8

Makuta muses on his past.

Makuta, in the body of Maxilos, swam rapidly through the dark waters of the Pit. As he did so, his mind drifted back to the past and the journey that had brought him to this place and time. Had it really only been some hundred thousand years ago that he first saw the light of day, along with his fellow Makuta? Chirox, Antroz, Vamprah, Mutran, and the others?

They had been selected by the Great Spirit Mata Nui for a special purpose. It would be their job to bring into being the plants and animals needed to keep the universe running smoothly. Over time, their role expanded. The Brotherhood of Makuta became responsible for watching over the lands and seas of the Matoran Universe. Internal threats to the power of Mata Nui were crushed by armies led by Makuta.

While the Great Spirit focused on matters of cosmic importance, the day-to-day safety and security of the world fell on the shoulders of the Makuta. Oh, there were Toa, of course, blundering about and noisily dealing with what they laughingly referred to as menaces, but the true power to create and destroy rested with the Brotherhood.

Logic dictated that the Matoran would come to realize how much their puny lives depended on the Makuta and would behave accordingly. But no, when they held their Naming Day festivals, they did it in honor of Mata Nui. When they finished a day's work, they thanked Mata Nui for the successful completion of their labors. Mata Nui, who was so far above them, they might as well have been fireflyers scurrying about his feet.

So many millennia of being passed over led to jealousy, and jealousy to resentment, and resentment to hatred, until just beneath the surface of every Makuta burned a desire to see the Great Spirit humbled.

But it was not until the failed rebellion of the Barraki that the Makuta of Metru Nui began to think maybe, just maybe, something could be done. But his plan extended beyond just Mata Nui's defeat. No, it was a labyrinthian scheme: a plot that drew into its web multiple teams of Toa, Dark Hunters, Bohrok, Visorak, and more. And yet despite all its twists and turns, the plan was also breathtaking in its simplicity.

"There is a small Rahi called a water wraith," he explained to the rest of the Brotherhood some eighty thousand years ago. "So small, so insignificant is it that larger fish do not even consider it

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a worthy meal. But every now and then, a bold water wraith will attack a creature much larger and more powerful than it. It is a one-sided battle, of course, that ends with the poor water wraith in the mouth of its foe. Of course, what the larger fish quickly discovers is that the outer shell of a water wraith is coated with deadly poison. The larger fish dies instantly, and the water wraith escapes to feast for months on its very foolish and very dead opponent.”

“Sometimes, my brothers,” he had said, seating himself on his obsidian throne, “the best way, the *only* way, to win... is by losing.”

## 9

Mysteries of the Mask of Life are revealed at last.

Makuta was cold. Colder than he had ever been. Colder even than the darkness he inhabited. On his way to prevent Hydraxon from acquiring the Mask of Life, he had been ambushed by Toa Matoro, and frozen inside super-hard ice. Now even his energy was beginning to crystallize, not at all good from his point of view.

Through the clear ice, he could dimly make out the forms of the Toa Mahri, Barraki, and Hydraxon in a mad scramble for the artifact. None of them, he was sure, had the slightest idea what the mask could really do. To them, it was just a bright, golden treasure to be warred over like hungry Rahi after a meal. Makuta, of course, knew better. He had pieced together half-remembered legends, whispered rumors, even fragments of information retrieved in the long-past raid on the island of Artakha.

The Mask of Life was intended as more than just a cure-all for the Great Spirit Mata Nui in the event of his illness. No, no, the Mask of Life was a quick solution to another problem altogether. The Great Beings had created a universe, but they could not be certain it would operate as they wished. And if it did not, if the population plunged into war, if pestilence and famine took hold, if all hope was gone... the mask would activate, draining all life from every being and ending the universe once and for all time.

When the time came, the mask would first turn from gold to silver, and eventually to black when the end time had arrived. Axonn, Brutaka, Umbra — all the noble guardians of the Kanohi Ignika had never realized that they were protecting an item that could bring about complete annihilation. But Makuta knew its true importance and had factored that into his great Plan.

Of course, death by freezing had not been a part of this scheme.

That was when Makuta noticed something, something quite wonderful. A lone drop of water was falling down the outside of his icy prison. Then he saw why — Jaller had created a wall of flame. The heat was melting Matoro's ice and freedom was moments away. The powerful limb of Maxilos shattered the prison, and Makuta guided his new body into the battle.

It was time to move the plan one step closer to completion.