BIOLGICAL CHRONICLE

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The creature slithered, grasping with unseeing feelers on the pale earth, blood-dried stains littered the wall...This was its age, its time of life. Once it had been held by that one, that one of the shadows...it did not fear the one, fear was not in its nature. It was terribly shocked when it found itself in a vat of others like it though. For eons there had been no other...then their voices cascading down upon him almost seemed to flush him from existence. They yelled and scampered, some shivering in corners and others staring into the abyss as all hope was lost. There was no desire hidden, as these creatures, the one it was part of, all shared a single mind. And in that mind, they formed a plan.

Makuta's work was only partly finished. These strange worms he had discovered had an odd feel about them...he was reminded of his Kraata when he took a glance into the vat where hundreds of them stewed. They were different, of course, longer, with much more developed legs and they were not under his control. He had wondered about them, finding no reference anywhere, by Matoran or Dark Hunter, of their existence. They seemed to have no defense, but caked the walls wherever he went, so he was sure some other must have seen them. Obviously, that other had never returned to tell the tale. It was only when he spun around with a vat of sizzling Protodermis that he found something most peculiar. The containment tub was empty.

Where had they gone?

The creature's plan was a simple one. Together, they could form a chain over the lip of the holding pen, and out they would go. The ones on the bottom would crawl over its brethren, and then slink away to the corners. The others soon made it out, and they stayed together with their newfound companions. They feared recapture, but Makuta had been right about them, except for the exciting method of smothering their prey under their collective mass, they had no defense. That was when one's memories played back, and so all the things knew at once what was to be done.

Makuta had strolled his caverns, travelling into even the deepest of the Mangaia to seek the little creatures he had lost. Being outwitted was not something he was used to. He didn't like it...not at all.

It was a simple sort of shock to find the Bohrok's nest shattered, and when Makuta found it he ascertained that these creatures had a great will. Using their mass together once more he assumed, they had to have broken into the pods. He wasn't quite sure what the robotic, insect-like power houses could be used for...but he reminisced that the things hadn't been too far bigger than those Krana that usually stationed themselves in the headplate... he smiled, his darkened skull twisting in that unfamiliar expression. These things were smart when they got together!

Getting used to the shell was hard for the creatures. They were squished out of shape by the confined space of the headplate, and interfacing with the network that controlled movement was no easy feat...but by trial and error, along with the collective mind that made no mistake twice, they found the way. They traversed the hallways, searching out victims with their newfound power...yes, they had been weak once, but soon they would be strong... VERY strong...
Turaga Nuju walked alone down a winding, rocky pathway that led to the sea. He had no doubt he would find Vakama on the beach, gazing out at the horizon. For a Turaga of Fire, Vakama spent an awful lot of time by the water.

Nuju felt uncomfortable. Ordinarily, he never ventured forth without Matoro, his assistant and translator, by his side. In the centuries since Nuju had abandoned use of the Matoran language, Matoro’s full-time job had been rendering the Turaga’s speech understandable to others. The Matoran had been present for even the most confidential councils of the Turaga. He had heard things that must have shocked him. But he never repeated a word of what he had heard to anyone.

Matoro’s sense of duty to his Turaga was so strong that he never even asked why Nuju was going somewhere without him. Perhaps he realized it was not intended as any insult, but was rather an act of mercy on Nuju’s part.

_He carries a heavy burden_, thought the Turaga. _To know so many secrets and be forbidden to share them with his friends, even when that knowledge might benefit them. In that way, Matoro has the strength of a Toa. I will not add to his burden today._

Nuju came over a rise and saw Vakama standing at the edge of the sea. For the last several days, the elder of the village of Fire had been sharing tales of the past with the Toa Nuva. He had related how six Matoran were mysteriously turned into heroes, the Toa Metru, and fought to save their city of Metru Nui. When the city was badly damaged and its population cast into an endless sleep by the actions of the evil Makuta, the Toa Metru had escaped with a small number of Matoran and made it to this island.

But the Toa Nuva were not satisfied with what they had learned. They wanted to know how the rest of the Matoran escaped Metru Nui. And Vakama was preparing to tell them.

_Up to now, I have been content to let him share his tales, thought Nuju. But he is about to go too far._

The Turaga of Ice stalked across the sand, whistling and chirping angrily. Vakama turned, surprised, and held out his hands.

“Slow down,” he said. “You know I can’t understand you when you shout.”

Nuju made a series of violent slashing motions in the air, followed by a short burst of whistles. When he was finished, he glared at Vakama as if daring him to disagree.

“I know it is probably not wise,” the Turaga of Fire answered. “I am on the verge of sharing stories of a time we would all rather forget, myself most of all. But wisdom and necessity often do not walk side by side.”

Nuju chirped loudly five times in rapid succession. To anyone else, it would have sounded like the language of the birds in the trees of Le-Wahi. But Vakama knew the tone was one of frustration about to boil over.

“No one says you and the other Turaga must sit in council while I tell our story,” he said. “But you may be called upon to explain your absence someday.”
The Turaga of Ice picked up a rock and hurled it with all his might into the water. Then he walked away, eyes on the ground, as if wrestling with an enormously difficult decision.

When he turned back, Nuju looked directly into Vakama’s eyes. And for the first time that Vakama could remember in many, many years, Nuju spoke a Matoran word. It was a mere three syllables, but it was a terrible sound, a word not uttered by any Turaga in over a thousand years.

“Hordika.”

Vakama’s reply was a whisper. “Yes. If I must… the Toa Nuva will learn the truth about the Hordika.”

Nuju shook his head and walked away. Vakama was left behind to wonder if their friendship had just come to an end.

The Toa Nuva waited impatiently around the Amaja circle for Vakama to arrive. At the Turaga’s request, the only Matoran present were Matoro, who translated Nuju’s clicks and whistles into speech, and Hahli, in her role as the new Chronicler. Takanuva, Toa of Light, sat next to Hahli, looking uncomfortable. Not having been a Toa for very long, he still felt strange about being part of these councils.

Pohatu Nuva, Toa of Stone, noted that his Turaga was absent. He couldn’t imagine why Onewa would not have wanted to be here, or why Turaga Nuju sat apart from the other elders. But it seemed that ever since Vakama had promised to share at least one more tale, there had been a great strain among the Turaga. It filled Pohatu’s heart with apprehension. What were they about to hear?

Vakama stepped out of the shadows to take his seat. Yet, to Pohatu’s eyes, it seemed he did not leave the darkness completely behind. His mood was grim. He nodded to Tahu Nuva, but never once looked at the other Turaga.

“Hear, then, my tale,” he began softly. “When the Toa Metru first beheld the island we now call Mata Nui, it was like nothing we had ever seen before. Peaceful, beautiful, bathed in sunlight, we could not have hoped for a more wonderful home.

“But even as we explored, we knew that duty would soon require us to leave this place behind…”
Toa Matau had a secret, one he had not even wanted to admit to himself. It was a dark and shameful fact, something he hoped none of the other Toa Metru would ever learn: He had gotten lost. For a native of Le-Metru, transport hub of Metru Nui, to lose his way was completely humiliating. A Le-Matoran could track a chute from one end of the city to the other, or keep an airship on course just by spotting landmarks far below. And now here was the Toa Metru of Air, already wandering and confused after only a day in this new land!

It had started out simply enough. Each of the Toa Metru had gone in a different direction, looking for the best place to eventually settle their metru’s Matoran. Only Nokama had remained behind, content that their original landing spot was the best place for a new Ga-Metru. Matau had made immediately for a lush, green part of the island. To him, it seemed to most resemble the controlled chaos that was Le-Metru. As it turned out, “chaos” was accurate, “controlled” was not. The ground was soft and clung to his feet, making walking a chore. The ceiling of branches was so thick that he could not fly through it. Worse, it cut off the sunlight, making the journey akin to wandering through an Onu-Metru mine.

Then Matau saw reason to smile. He spotted what looked like a long, green cable with a red stripe down the side, similar to the ones that fed magnetic force into Metru Nui chutes. Any native of Le-Metru knew that following a cable would eventually lead to a control center. So Matau kept his eye on the cable as it snaked through the tangle overhead, traveling deeper and deeper into the heart of the jungle. Confident that this clue would lead somewhere worthwhile, the Toa paid little attention to where he was going or how far he had walked.

After a few hours, he reached the end of the cable. But the discovery he made was an unpleasant one: It wasn’t a Metru Nui force wire, it was a vine. It didn’t lead to chute controls or anything like that, but just to more trees. Now here he stood, lost in a dense jungle and unsure what would be worse, roaming around with no idea how to get out or having to shout for help.

This is not Metru Nui. It will never be Metru Nui, he said to himself. I had better start remembering that.

Nuju stood at the summit of a huge mountain, looking out over a snow-covered land. He had been intrigued to discover that the peak was not made of crystal, like the Knowledge Towers back home, but was rather rock covered with ice.

He triggered the telescopic lens built into his Mask of Power to take a closer look at his surroundings. He was at a loss to explain the varied terrains and climates present on this island. It was almost as if the island had evolved with the needs of the Matoran in mind.

Down below, he spotted a snowfield protected from the worst of the elements by an overhanging glacier. This, he decided, would be the perfect spot for a new Ko-Metru. Although, since it will be more a village than a part of a larger city, he noted, perhaps Ko-Koro would be a more accurate name.

Satisfied, he began the long trek down the side of the mountain. As he did, he remembered the words of the Ko-Matoran sage who had first recruited him for work in the Knowledge Towers. Nuju had
been wondering how long it might take him to become a seer, a position of great importance in Ko-Metru. His mentor had simply smiled.

“You are mistaken, Nuju,” he had said. “All of life is a journey, and the journey is not about how high you climb or how far you walk. It is about what you learn on the way, and how you choose to use that knowledge. Use it to help others, and the glory of Mata Nui will live inside you. Use it only for yourself, and though you may walk among us, you will have no more spirit than a block of protodermis.”

My journey has certainly taken some unexpected turns, thought Nuju. And none quite so overwhelming as this, having to build a civilization from a wilderness. But the words of my mentor will be my guide. And if I should forget them, this peak will serve to remind me.

Nuju turned and looked back up at the summit. “In the memory of a friend, who now sleeps the sleep of shadows,” he said to the mountain, “I give to you his name. From this day on, you will be Mount Ihu.”

Vakama moved carefully across a sea of molten protodermis. His eyes scanned the landscape with a very particular goal in mind, one that went far beyond simply the best spot for a new settlement.

He paused on a rocky ledge and pondered. He and Onewa had discussed at length what life might be like on this island in the years to come. Neither Toa Metru believed they had seen the last of Makuta. Even if they succeeded in bringing the Matoran from Metru Nui to this place, and somehow awakening them, they might never know peace. If Makuta escaped the prison they had created for him, he would not stop his efforts to dominate the Matoran.

That was why, when Vakama looked around, he did not see simply rock and fire. He saw points of vulnerability that would need to be better protected, perhaps by walls or a moat of some sort. He noted spots that could be easily defended, even by only a few well-trained Matoran. By combining the natural terrain with the ingenuity of Ta-Matoran, Vakama was sure he could create much more than a village.

This will be a fortress, he told himself, one whose gates will never be breached. The Matoran will learn how to do the job of the Vahki, defending their homes against any threat.

Even as he thought those words, pain ripped through his mind. It was another of his visions of the future. They had plagued him all his life, but had grown worse since he became a Toa Metru. This time, it produced not so much a visual image as a feeling, as if he were being drained of all energy. It passed quickly, but not before he realized exactly what it was he was experiencing: the loss of his Toa power.

Even after so long, Vakama was unsure just how accurate his visions might be. But if this one was true – if, somehow, he and possibly the other Toa Metru were going to cease to be Toa – then something would have to be done to insure the safety of the Matoran.

But it will not be easy, he knew. And it will not be something I can do alone.

He fitted his disk launcher on his back and mentally triggered its rocket pack function. Then Vakama soared into the sky and headed for the rendezvous point, wondering how he would convince his friends that their time as Toa might soon come to an end.

Onewa was pleased. He had succeeded in finding a portion of this island that closely resembled Po-Metru. There was plenty of room for a village and scores of caves in which carvings could be stored. The natural canyons would give the new Po-Metru some protection and be a reminder of home for the Matoran.

Now he had more practical matters to worry about. In order to escape the Vahki, Onewa had been forced to use his power to destroy the subterranean waterway that led from Metru Nui to the island. A rain of stone had been enough to down the order enforcement squad, but it had also effectively blocked the Toa Metru from ever returning to the city that way. If they were going to go back and save the rest of the Matoran, a new route would have to be found.

The caves are the key, he thought. Who knows how far underground they might extend? It’s always possible that one of these leads all the way back to Metru Nui, and if so I’m going to find it.
He chose to first explore a cavern whose mouth was high up on the slope of a mountain. He had thought to take one of the lightstones from the transport. Now it provided a dim illumination as he entered the cave.

It was empty. There were no signs that anyone had ever passed through here before, nor that any Rahi had ever made it his home. After only a short distance, the ground began to drop sharply. Onewa smiled. Down was exactly where he was hoping to go, after all.

He heard a scuffling sound up ahead. Something large was heading toward him at a rapid pace. Onewa glanced around, but there were no side passages or recesses in the wall in which to take cover. Whatever was coming, he would have to face it head on.

The Toa of Stone braced himself and held up his lightstone. The sounds grew louder. Suddenly, a massive shape came into view, claws and stinger-tail gleaming in the light of the crystal. Onewa gasped. It was a Nui-Jaga, one of the nastier Rahi of Po-Metru, a powerful scorpion-like creature capable of shattering a stone sculpture with one swipe of its tail.

Onewa forced himself to relax. His Kanohi mask was designed for just this sort of situation. He reached out with its power of mind control to take over the Nui-Jaga.

The Toa reeled as if he had been struck with a hurled boulder. His mental probe had slammed into a solid wall of raw emotion in the mind of the Rahi. The impact shattered the efforts of the mask to claim control of the Nui-Jaga and it was only with supreme effort that Onewa remained conscious.

The Rahi now had the perfect opening to attack. Instead, it rushed past Onewa, knocking him off his feet, and continued to race for the surface. Recovering his wits, the Toa pursued. He was amazed that something as big as a Nui-Jaga could move so fast.

Onewa rounded a corner to see the creature rushing toward the cave mouth. Without slowing, without making any effort at all to stop, the Rahi shot out of the tunnel and plunged into space. The Toa made it to the opening in time to see the Nui-Jaga strike the rocky ground far below. There was no need to go down and check the body. The Rahi was dead.

I’ve never seen anything like that, Onewa thought. What could have made it run so hard it went off a cliff?

Then he remembered the overwhelming surge of feeling he had encountered when he reached into the Rahi’s mind. That held the answer, or at least part of one. It hadn’t been anger, or hunger, or even madness that had driven the Nui-Jaga to race to its death. It had been stark terror.

Onewa glanced down at the stone resting at his feet. Then he looked back at Vakama.

“You realize, of course, that you are completely insane, fire-spitter,” he said.

The Toa Metru had assembled on the beach where they had first come ashore. Matau had been the last to arrive, for reasons he refused to explain. When they reached the rendezvous point, they found Vakama was already there and had placed six stones in a circle in the sand.

No one needed to be told what they were meant to be. Each of them recalled the day Toa Lhikan visited six Matoran in Metru Nui and handed them Toa stones. Lhikan had invested each of the stones with some of his Toa power. It was that power that had turned the Matoran into the Toa Metru they were today. But sharing his power had resulted in Lhikan transforming from a Toa into a smaller, weaker Turaga.

“Forget this thought-plan,” said Matau. “I am a Toa-hero, and I intend to stay a Toa-hero.”

“Keep calm,” said Nokama. “No one is being forced to do anything. Let’s hear Vakama out.”

As briefly as possible, the Toa of Fire explained his vision. Nokama, Nuju, and Whenua listened attentively, but gave no indication whether they believed him or not. Matau shrugged. Onewa turned away, shaking his head.

Vakama hurled a ball of fire in the Toa of Stone’s path. Angry, Onewa whirled back around, but Vakama cut him off before he could speak. “This is important! Whether the feeling I had means anything
or not, we are not immortals. What if one or all of us should die trying to rescue the Matoran? Shouldn’t we act to ensure that other Toa can follow us someday?”

“But past experience says that if we put our power into those stones, we will become Turaga,” said Whenua. “Then who will there be to save the Matoran?”

“I’m not becoming a Turaga,” Matau insisted. “I will swing from the trees like a Rahi first.”

“Lhikan invested his energy into six stones,” said Vakama, picking up one of the perfectly smooth rocks. “Each of us will put a portion of ours into only one. Then we will hide them on this island, in places that only someone with the heart of a true Toa could ever reach.”

None of the Toa Metru said anything. Vakama looked from one to the other, searching for some show of support. Finding none, he placed the stone in the palm of his left hand and then held his right hand over it. Concentrating, he sent a fraction of his Toa power into the stone. It was a strange and unsettling experience. It felt as if the rock was actually hungry for his energy. Only with a supreme act of will was Vakama able to break off the transfer before he had surrendered too much power.

Nokama waited until Vakama was done. Then she bent down and picked up her stone. A moment later, Nuju and Whenua followed suit. Then all three looked at Matau.

“Fine,” said the Toa of Air, snatching up the stone and tossing it from hand to hand. “But no other Toa-hero will want to follow me. How could another ever compare?”

Only the Toa of Stone still stood apart. Nokama picked up Onewa’s Toa stone and held it out to him. “The Toa need to be six united. Air, fire, water, earth, ice… what are we without the strength of stone?”

Onewa took the small rock from her hand. “All right,” he said. “I’ll do it because you ask, Nokama.”

The Toa of Fire reached out and grabbed Onewa’s wrist. Their eyes locked as Vakama, in a voice as hard as solid protodermis, said, “No. You will do it because it is the right thing to do.”

Onewa shook off Vakama’s grip. “All right, all right. Who died and made you Mata Nui anyway?”

“No one,” said Vakama softly. “And I am going to make sure no one ever does.”
Hiding the six Toa stones took a good part of the rest of the day. Most of the Toa Metru used it as an excuse to do more exploring. Matau, who had already had quite enough of trees, vines, and swamps, grumbled that after all this it would probably be some curious Matoran who stumbled on them by accident. “No heart of a true Toa-hero needed,” he muttered. “Just feet that want to wander.”

After he had found a suitable place to stash the stone, Matau scrambled to the top of a tree and launched himself into the sky. His destination was Po-Wahi, the barren, stony area Onewa had claimed as his own. From high above, he could see the other Toa making their way to the same spot, each in their own way. For a moment, he considered challenging Nuju to a race, ice slide versus glider wings. Then he suddenly realized that would involve asking the Toa of Ice to do something fun.

“This place is making me thought-crazy, he said to himself.

Onewa was standing at the opening of a cave when the other Toa arrived. Knowing they would ask, he hurriedly explained about the dead Nui-Jaga at the bottom of the slope. “If a Rahi could get up here from Metru Nui, it stands to reason that we can get back the same way,” he concluded. “And I think we should get started, before more start showing up.”

As usual, Whenua was put out front for the journey, since his Mask of Night Vision could light the way. He paused for a moment at the cave’s mouth, gloomily surveying the rock walls within. “Tunnels. Why does it always have to be tunnels?”

“Tell you what,” said Matau, smiling. “I will wear the torch-mask and explore the tunnels from now on, and you can live in the mud-swamp. What do you say?”

“I say there’s nothing like a good tunnel,” Whenua replied, leading the way inside.

They had been journeying only a short while when Whenua called for a halt. “There’s a cavern up ahead, and I thought I saw…”

The Toa of Earth’s voice trailed off as the light from his mask played across the cave. Arrayed against the walls were hundreds of cylinders, each containing a sleeping Bohrok. Whenua had seen the creatures before in the Metru Nui Archives, but only Onu-Matoran miners had ever seen them in their nest. The sight managed to be fascinating and deeply disturbing at the same time.

“I never liked those things,” Matau shuddered. “Let’s move quick-fast and not wake them up.”

Recovered from his surprise, Whenua walked up to one of the cylinders and slammed his earthshock drill against it. The resulting clang echoed throughout the tunnels, but that was the only effect. The Bohrok inside never stirred.

“I don’t think they can awaken, at least not in the sense you mean,” said the Toa of Earth. “Miners have transported them up several levels to the Archives and they have never flickered to life.”

“So they are dead?” asked Nokama, keeping her distance from the nest.

“Sleeping,” corrected Nuju. “Waiting for the day they will be needed, though I cannot imagine what crisis would require their services.”
“It’s funny,” said Vakama, approaching one of the cylinders. “These remind me of the spheres the Matoran are trapped in down below, sleeping their dreamless sleep. Do you think that perhaps—”

The rest of his question was never voiced. No sooner had his hand brushed the cylinder than a vision exploded in his head. He saw hundreds, thousands of Bohrok rampaging across the island above, destroying forests, mountains and rivers. Natural features that had stood for ages were swept away in an instant. When the swarms were done, they left behind a ravaged land.

“No... no...” Vakama moaned. “It must not be...”

“The Bohrok. One day, they will awaken and Mata Nui will fall before them... I saw it!”

“These things!” said Onewa, laughing. “They do nothing but sleep! What are they going to do, snore Mata Nui to death?”

“Vakama’s visions have been correct before,” Nokama reminded him.

“Vakama’s visions should be carved onto a tablet and titled, ‘Tales to Frighten Matoran,’” Onewa shot back. “Just because he accurately guessed that a rampaging plant might be a bad thing in Metru Nui doesn’t mean—owww!”

Onewa jumped back. He had been struck by a drop of liquid that had fallen from the ceiling. Now it sizzled on the surface of his armor. “Makuta’s eyes, what was that?”

Whenua turned to look. The light from his mask revealed a rivulet of silver liquid flowing from the tunnel ceiling down to a small pool at the base of the wall. At first, he thought it was simply liquid protodermis, but the color and texture seemed slightly off. He leaned down to touch the substance, but Nuju stopped him.

“Not a good idea, librarian,” the Toa of Ice said. “If that is what I think it is, touching it is the last thing you want to do.”

Nuju knelt down to examine the pool. The other Toa crowded around him. “Nokama, you know, don’t you? The labs in Ga-Metru were trying to produce this based on ancient records in the Knowledge Towers.”

“Energized protodermis,” Nokama said, awe in her voice. “Yes, some were trying to reproduce it, but with no success. I never thought I would see the real thing.”

“What is it?” asked Vakama. “An acid?”

“More than that,” Nuju replied. “If the tablets are to be believed, energized protodermis can produce mutations of the most bizarre kinds. Under the right circumstances, a being exposed to it could be physically changed, granted new powers, or possibly turned into some sort of monster. There’s no way to predict its effects.”

Matau smiled. “So if I took a quick-swim, I could come out as a new kind of Toa?”

“If it was your destiny,” said Nuju. “If not...”

A stone rat scurried across the tunnel floor. It paused for an instant at the sight of the Toa, then darted around them and right into the pool. There was a horrible hissing sound. The small creature struggled to free itself from the liquid, but the protodermis clung to it like a second skin. Then the rat spasmed, smoke rising from its body. Before the horrified eyes of the Toa, the small creature dissolved, leaving no trace it had ever been there.

“The secret of energized protodermis,” Nuju said quietly. “What it doesn’t transform... it destroys.”

No one spoke for a long time.

Nokama walked beside Vakama. The Toa of Fire’s expression was grim. He had already prevented Whenua from investigating two new species of Rahi, and snapped at Matau for lagging behind. Nokama had never seen him act quite this way.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked gently.
"We are not making this trip for pleasure," he replied. "But it seems some of us don’t realize that. The longer it takes us to reach the city, the greater the chance that some new danger will threaten the Matoran."

"You mean Makuta might free himself?" The Toa Metru had left their nemesis trapped in solid protodermis marked with a Toa seal. In theory, only the powers of the six Toa could release him.

"He might," Vakama acknowledged. "Or there might be worse things than Makuta. I don’t know. But it seems obvious we will never get there without someone acting as leader."

"You always said you didn’t want that role."

"I didn’t want to see my friends and my Turaga trapped, or my city wrecked, either," he answered, never taking his eyes from the path ahead. "But I did."

"Yes, you did," Nokama thought. "And it has changed you. But for the better… or for the worse?"

Matau had caught up to Whenua. Bored, the Toa of Air was using his Mask of Power to shapeshift into whatever came to mind, much to his friend’s annoyance.

"So how did you like the island?" Matau asked while in the shape of a Kikanalo beast.

"Good, deep soil and rock," Whenua answered. "Perfect for digging."

"Yes, that’s what I look for in a home, too," Matau answered, wondering if perhaps Onu-Matoran had something wrong behind their masks. Why would anyone want to live underground when they could have the sky?

"How about you?"

Matau shrugged, shifting to a copy of the late Dark Hunter named Krekka. "Mud-swamp. Thorn-vines. Too much mud for riding, too many trees for flying. It needs work."

"I am sure the Le-Matoran will manage," Whenua answered. "If you can’t build chutes, you can always swing from the vines."

"Right," snorted Matau. "Good happy-joke."

Whenua’s foot slipped. He stuck a hand out barely in time to keep from falling. He looked down at his feet, the beam from his mask illuminating a coating of fine-grained sand on the tunnel floor.

"That’s odd. We are a long way from any beach. How did sand get here?"

There was a blur of motion. The sand whipped itself into a storm in the narrow passage. For a moment, Matau thought he spotted a shape in the center of the cyclone. Then both he and Whenua were sent flying by hammerlike blows.

Matau struck the tunnel wall hard enough to rattle his mask. He decided the impact was making him see things. There couldn’t really be a Kranua, armor gleaming in the light of Whenua’s mask, blocking their path… could there?

Kranua were a special model of Vahki, built in secret by Nuparu and a select crew of Po-Matoran engineers. Their intended purpose was riot control, in particular containing mass Rahi breakouts from the Archives. Their designers had given them the ability to reduce their forms to a mass of sandy protodermis grains, and then reform at will. This allowed them to slip through tiny cracks, vanish through gratings, and then suddenly reappear when least expected. In practice, the Kranua were used against Matoran smuggling rings and other organized groups of lawbreakers, which always seemed to Matau like swatting a fireflyer with a two-ton rock.

Now the massive order enforcer was standing square in their way. It hadn’t moved forward to press its advantage, but it showed no signs of stepping aside either. Cautiously, Matau glanced over at Whenua. The Toa of Earth was still stunned. That left it up to him.

Slowly, carefully, Matau got to his feet. "Pleasant day for a slow-walk," he began, taking a step forward. "My friends and I are just passing through. Is this your tunnel-home?"

Matau edged toward the Kranua’s left side. The elite Vahki’s head moved to track the Toa, its attention drawn away from Whenua. When he was sure he had the thing’s full attention, Matau leapt toward the tunnel ceiling as if making a break for it. The Kranua shifted its body to sand, not knowing it was falling into a trap.
The Toa of Air launched a wind blast at the Vahki, scattering its grains all over the tunnel. Matau grabbed Whenua and hauled him to his feet. "Come on, while the sand-thing is busy, we have to tell the others!"

They turned and ran back the way they had come, but made it only a few steps. A wall of sand as hard as stone suddenly loomed before them. Then it dissolved into a tidal wave, burying the two Toa and cutting off their air. Blinded and suffocating, Matau and Whenua lashed out, only to find there was nothing substantial to hit.

Desperate, Matau unleashed his power. His winds slammed into the Kranua, but instead of providing the Toa relief, all they did was transform their enemy into a sandstorm. Worse, it seemed that Matau and Whenua were caught in the cyclone as well, for they were lifted off the ground and sent flying.

The two Toa Metru crashed to earth at the feet of Nuju. "Travel by telekinesis – a new method even for you, Matau," said the Toa of Ice.

"You need long-work on your landings," groaned Matau.

Vakama and Onewa stood side by side, watching the Kranua coalesce. "I worked on one of those things," said the Toa of Stone. "It's slow, but a lot stronger than your average Vahki."

"That's all right," said Vakama. "So are we. Give it something to think about, Onewa."

Concentrating his power on the rock wall, Onewa tore a stone loose by force of mind and sent it hurtling at the Kranua. Spotting the danger, the complex machine transformed itself to soft sand to let the object pass through. As soon as it did, Vakama sent an intense blast of flame into the tunnel, so hot and bright it sent Onewa stumbling backwards.

When the Toa of Stone could see clearly again, an incredible sight greeted his eyes. The Kranua, caught in mid-transformation by Vakama's fires, had been fused into a statue of glass. Now it stood, unmoving, looking like some sculptor's nightmare. The other Toa moved in closely to examine it, but Vakama was already moving deeper into the tunnel.

"Leave it," he said. "It's not going anywhere."

Whenua watched him go, muttering to no one in particular, "Ever wonder why he needs us?"

"Perhaps he no longer thinks he does," answered Nuju. "We had best keep moving, before he saves the Matoran, builds the new koro, and awakens Mata Nui all by himself."

One by one, the Toa walked past the crystalline form of the Kranua. Matau was the last in line, and he stopped to gaze at the machine that had almost killed him. "I will tell you a dark secret," he whispered to the glass Vahki enforcer. "But only if you promise not to share."

Matau took a step to follow the others, then turned around and gave the Kranua a gentle shove.

It fell over and smashed into thousands of tiny fragments of crystal.

"Surrender and run aren't the only choices anymore," he said, walking away.
The tunnel widened as the Toa Metru marched on. The air grew warmer and more humid, which only seemed to quicken Vakama’s pace. It was only when he reached what resembled a Matoran-made archway that he stopped.

Here the tunnel ceased to be enclosed for a distance, becoming instead a stone bridge over a chasm. Down below, scores of Rahi scuttled among the rocks, so many that it was almost impossible to see the ground beneath them.

“Scorpions,” Vakama said to Nuju. “Thousands of them. I never imagined there were so many different species.”

“And some of them are quite… unique,” said the Toa of Ice. “The red-gold one on the far right ledge has three stingers. The black one fighting off his companions to the left has no legs. Many of them are dead, though I can see no signs of violence on their bodies.”

“I always forget about that telescopic lens in your mask,” Vakama replied.

“I never do. Being able to see clearly is so important, don’t you agree?”

Before Vakama could answer, Nuju was using his Mask of Telekinesis to lift a small specimen of the dead Rahi into the air. He deposited it on the bridge and knelt to examine it, while Vakama watched impatiently.

“I was right,” Nuju said. “This creature didn’t die in combat. It suffocated. It has no lungs, it has gills.”

“You mean it’s a sea creature? Then how…”?

“I am not sure what it is, or what the rest of those beasts are,” the Toa of Ice said, using his powers to lower the scorpion gently to a ledge. “And that troubles me.”

Matau grimaced as he watched Vakama and Nuju inspecting a bug. After all the hurry-rush, now they are blocking the path with an Onu-Matoran science project. Well, Mata Nui take this, I want to keep moving.

The Toa of Air took off, flying over the heads of his two comrades and farther into the tunnels. He could hear Vakama behind him calling for him to come back, but ignored it. The fire-spitter is getting a little too good at giving orders, he said to himself.

It wasn’t easy flying through a tunnel network. Worse, the twists and turns were coming much faster now. What had started out as a fairly straight course was rapidly turning into a maze, made navigable only by the presence of lightstones embedded in the stone walls. Matau landed to get his bearings. The last thing he wanted was to get lost a second time.

A wet sound came from his right, as if something was slithering across the ground. Matau unhooked his aero slicers from his back and set himself. He waited, still and silent, for the intruder to show itself.

When it did, the Toa of Air leapt backwards as if scalded. Coiling before him was a serpent perhaps twenty feet long, with bright reddish skin and the head of a Rahkshi. Long, sharp horns curved up from
The Rahi’s brow. Behind it came other creatures, some crawling, some walking on two legs, others staggering as if about to drop from exhaustion.

The Rahkshi serpent hissed. Matau slowly backed away. He had no doubt he could win a fight against this beast, probably even most of its companions. But there were more coming up the tunnel every moment, with no end in sight, and Matau did not feel like battling an entire wing of the Archives.

He reached back to feel for the tunnel opening. The serpent’s eyes caught the aero-slicer blade reflecting in the light. It reared back, energy crackling along the length of its horns and flowing from their tips to meet above the creature’s head. A bolt flew from where the two streams joined, slamming Matau into the tunnel wall. Millions of volts surged through his body as he was forced back into the rock. Unconsciousness, when it came, was a mercy.

Nuju spotted the flash of light. “I believe Matau has found something.”

“Or something has found him,” said Onewa. “Do you think all Toa of Air blunder into things, or is it just him?”

“Let’s find him,” Vakama muttered, “so he can live and learn.”

The five Toa broke into a run through the winding tunnel, Onewa in the lead. The Toa of Stone took a corner at high speed, only to smash into a Rahi Muaka coming the other way. The great cat barely took notice of the figure that struck it, which flew backwards from the impact. It simply growled a warning to anyone else that might be foolish enough to do the same thing that Onewa did.

None of the other Toa Metru were in a hurry to repeat Onewa’s mistake. None of them had ever seen a Muaka quite like this in any Archives exhibit. It wasn’t just the extra sets of fangs or even the armor plating on its back and sides. No, it was more the hard protodermis thorns growing out of its legs, the ones gouging chunks out of the tunnel walls as it moved.

“Do you think Matau encountered this beast?” Nokama asked.

“If he did,” replied Nuju, “I believe we may be short one Toa.”

The Muaka lumbered forward, still ignoring the unconscious Onewa. It snarled at the Toa, but made no threatening moves. Vakama raised his hand, saying, “A burst of flame should confuse it, Nuju, and then you can ice it over.”

“Wait a moment,” broke in Nokama. “You may be the leader of this team, Vakama, but it is still a team.”

“Is this really the time for a debate?”

“No,” said the Toa of Water, taking a step toward the Rahi. “But it is a time for discussion.”

Looking into the beast’s eyes, Nokama gave a soft growl. The Muaka’s eyes narrowed. It sniffed the air, then let out a deafening bellow. Nokama was unfazed, responding with a series of growls and snarls. Completely puzzled by this little creature speaking its language, the Muaka roared.

“He’s in pain,” Nokama said, not taking her eyes from the Rahi. “I can’t… I can’t get it clear, but I don’t think he expected to find us. And I don’t think he means us harm.”

“Tell that to my head,” said Onewa, slowly stirring. “How do we know he didn’t hurt Matau? What are you suggesting, Nokama, that we pat him on the head and send him on his way?”

“Onewa has a point,” offered Whenua. “If we let this Rahi pass, who is to say it will not take up residence on our new island home?”

Vakama frowned. Whenua was right, but a fight against this beast in a confined space would waste time, and that was assuming the Toa would win. If this Rahi made it to the island… well, that could be dealt with later.

“We let it go,” he said. “Stand aside, brothers.”

“What?” cried Onewa. “This thing flattens me, and we’re just going to –”

The Muaka turned its head to look back at Onewa and gave a long, low growl. “I don’t think he likes your attitude,” Nokama chuckled.

The Rahi took a step forward, eyeing the Toa warily. When no one moved to stop his progress, he kept going, giving a final snarl as he went. All eyes turned to Nokama.
“What did he say?” asked Nuju.
“Two words,” Nokama replied. “Turn back.”

Vakama joined Whenua in the front of the group, using his flames to light the way so the Toa of Earth could take a rest. Nokama had helped Onewa to his feet, but the Toa of Stone insisted he needed no assistance to walk. Nuju brought up the rear, wondering if letting the Muaka pass was a decision they would regret in the future. Perhaps it truly represented no danger to the Toa, but who could know the mind of a Rahi?

They worked their way through the narrow, winding tunnels as swiftly as they dared. Whenua sensed no movement in the earth, but all that meant was that enemies could be waiting in ambush up ahead. Vakama was ready to hurl a spread of fireballs in a split second if an attacker appeared.

The Toa of Fire turned a corner and stopped, stunned. At first, he thought he had stumbled on some strange carving in the tunnel wall. But a closer examination revealed that this was no ancient work of art – it was the living form of Matau, somehow fused with the rock wall. The Toa of Air could not speak, but his eyes reached out to Vakama, pleading to be set free.

The other Toa were equally shocked. Matau had become part of the stone, with only a few inches of one aero-slicer blade and one hand still protruding from the wall. “Can’t we just pull him out, somehow?” Nokama asked.

Onewa shook his head. “He is of the rock, and the rock is of him now. Pull him out by physical force and you would bring down the entire tunnel. No, this requires a more delicate approach. Vakama?”

The Toa of Fire focused his flames into as narrow a jet as possible. Then, slowly and carefully, he sliced through the rock around Matau. Whenua caught the slab as it came loose and gently lowered it to the ground.

Onewa knelt down and concentrated. In his time as a Toa Metru, he had used his elemental powers to achieve some amazing things. But never had the task been so difficult or the stakes been so high: a single slip, the slightest distraction, and it would mean Matau’s life.”

With unrelenting force of will, Onewa commanded the stone to reject that which did not belong. He could sense that the rock had interwoven with the substance of Matau and there would be no way to rip the Toa free. The rock would have to set him free. Painfully, inch by inch, he felt the stone retreat. Driven back by the power of the Toa Metru, it released its hold at last on Matau.

The Toa of Air gasped and scrambled to his feet. His mind reeled from the memories of being something else – not quite Toa, not quite stone, but some immobile hybrid of the two. He decided that he never again wanted to be anything but himself.

“What happened?” asked Onewa. “Who did this to you?”

“I will do better than speak-say,” answered Matau. “I will show you while I make it pay.”

It didn’t take the Toa long to pick up the trail of the Rahi. Whenua could feel them moving along the tunnels. They had evidently turned the wrong way after attacking Matau and were headed deeper into the maze rather than toward the surface.

Nokama felt torn about the action they were about to undertake. True, the Rahi might have killed Matau. But she was convinced from talking with the Muaka that the beasts were acting out of panic, not rage. It might be that they needed the help of the Toa Metru.

Her foot caught on something and she almost stumbled. She looked down to see a clump of moss growing out of a crack in the floor. Now that she noticed it, there was moss all along the walls of this tunnel. She could not recall seeing any elsewhere on their journey. As a Matoran, she would have dismissed this as inconsequential. As a Toa, she had seen far too much to ignore anything out of the ordinary.

The tunnel forked. Whenua crouched down and tried to get a sense of which direction the Rahi had gone. He sensed traces of movement both to the right and the left, but nothing substantial.

“We go right,” said Matau.

“Why?”
“Because I remember what happened the last time we went left,” Matau replied.
They stumbled across the first dead Rahi about a quarter mile down the tunnel. It was a winged centipede about six feet long. Whenua didn’t remember seeing anything like it in the Archives. A little more walking turned up a Rahkshi, a dozen ice bats, a lava eel that inexplicably had six legs, and a Kane-Ra bull that had none, all of them deceased.
Nuju and Whenua examined the bodies one by one. Just as with the scorpion, there were no marks of violence. But unlike Nuju’s past find, there was no obvious reason why these creatures should be dead.
“It almost seems as if they just… turned off,” the Toa of Ice muttered. “But that makes no sense.”
“Nothing else does,” said Onewa. “Why should this be any different? Let’s just hope whatever ‘turned them off’ doesn’t decide to do the same to us.”
Vakama signaled for the Toa to keep moving. They stepped carefully around the corpses, doing their best to stay focused on the task at hand. Perhaps that was why none of them noticed a portion of the slate gray tunnel wall detach, uncoil itself to its full length, and shift colors to the bright red of the Rahi serpent.
With the pale, dead eyes of a born hunter, it slithered after the Toa Metru.
Onewa cleared away some of the gray-green moss and inspected the walls of the tunnel. “Nokama, what do you make of this?”

The Toa of Water looked where he was pointing. A carving had been made in the wall, perhaps thousands of years ago judging by the Matoran dialect used and the erosion of the words. She focused the power of her Great Mask of Translation.

“It says Bohrok… and below, krana… and there’s more,” she reported, scraping away more of the moss. Strangely, the plant growth seemed to move aside just before she could tear it free from the wall. “Pictures. Two monstrous creatures, identical in size and shape, putting something into a pool – I cannot make out what – and drawing forth krana from its depths.”

“You said that when we were sailing to the island, you spotted carvings on the walls beneath the water, didn’t you?”

Nokama nodded. “I couldn’t read them. The water had washed them away over time.”

“These tunnels are not natural. Neither was the waterway leading from the Great Barrier to up above,” said Onewa. “Someone dug them out of the stone, and I think I may know why. The Bohrok… what Vakama saw in his vision… these are the access tunnels for them to reach the surface.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in Vakama’s vision,” Nokama replied, smiling.

“Po-Matoran carvers don’t believe in anything they cannot see, touch, and hit with a hammer,” the Toa of Stone answered. “And if they do… they keep it to themselves.”

“What do you think will be waiting for us in Metru Nui?” Whenua asked Vakama. It was a question that had been running through his mind for days. While he knew they had to return for the Matoran, he dreaded seeing what had become of his home.

“I don’t know. With luck, the Matoran are still safe beneath the Coliseum. The power will be out and most of the chutes have probably collapsed. If the molten protodermis lines are ruptured, there is no telling what condition Ta-Metru is in. What about the Archives?”

“After the incident with Mavrah’s Rahi years ago, they were reinforced to withstand shocks. But I am not sure the builders had such a massive quake in mind. If the Archive gates are down… if the stasis tubes within shattered… Whenua looked at Vakama. His voice was grim. “Then there may not be a city to go back to.”

Matau walked quickly and in uncharacteristic silence. Up to now, being a Toa had been fun, even when it seemed that danger was closing in from every side. After all, he was one of a select few beings who knew the thrill of adventuring and the satisfaction of saving an entire city. He had never seriously considered the possibility that he might get killed.
But in just the past few hours, he had twice confronted creatures that would have been more than happy to see him dead. It was a sobering reminder of what could happen to any of the Toa Metru, one that left him feeling as vulnerable as any Matoran.

The Toa of Air glanced at Nju, who walked beside him. “I am sorry for being so mouth-closed.”

“Actually, I was enjoying the change, but wondering about the reason for it,” Nju answered. “I came close to being cold-dead. No more Toa-heroics, no more flying, no more fun… just the dark-sleep. Makes me think.”

“Another change,” murmured Nju. “You’re right, Matau. Any of us could be killed at any time. It’s the risk of being a Toa. It’s the price we pay for acting on our destiny, rather than allowing it to act on us. But don’t forget one very important fact.”

“What’s that?”

Nju clanked his fist against Matau’s, so quickly that Matau thought he might have imagined it.

“You’re still alive,” said the Toa of Ice.

A whirl of lights and color. A sudden lurching feeling, as if the body was split apart from the spirit. Then a moment of crystal clarity, every detail of the surrounding area etched bright and clear as if bathed in sunlight.

Other senses returned quickly: the feel of stone beneath the feet; the sound of footsteps echoing in the distance; the acrid taste of hunger; and the scent… yes, the scent of the hated ones. The aroma of raw elemental power was so strong as to be almost overwhelming. The great beast did not know to where it had teleported, but it was certain now why it had been drawn to this spot.

There were Toa near. Heroes confident in their strength, secure in the rightness of their cause, and blissfully unaware of how little time they had left. The beast roared a challenge to its intended prey, a dire warning if they had the wits to perceive it:

The Rahi Nui was coming.

And it was coming to feed.

Whenua, linked to the earth as he was, first sensed the vibrations in the ground. It felt as if a thunderstorm was raging in the rock below their feet. Matau and Nokama, both attuned to nature in their own way, could hear the scratching and clawing of panicked Rahi scrambling to get out of the way of… something.

Then even the others, who had spent most of their lives focused on their work and not the world around them, could sense something was wrong. It was not a feeling they could put into words, rather the sensation that the universe had shifted somehow. A new element had been introduced, one that did not belong. Long before the sound of the Rahi Nui’s footfalls reached them, all six Toa were ready for battle.

“This time, no long-wait,” muttered Matau. “This time, cyclone first, questions later.”

“And what if whatever is coming is friendly?” Nokama asked. Then she looked around. The others were staring at her as if she had just nominated Makuta to be a seventh Toa. She shrugged. “Well, the kikanalo were friendly,” she added, under her breath.

“If one of us should be injured –” Nju began.

“We keep fighting,” Vakama said, cutting him off. “Retreat isn’t an option. The Matoran are depending on us. No one should forget that.”

“I hadn’t,” Nju replied coldly. “I was going to say, if one of us is injured, I will make an ice barrier to shield them. It might afford a few moments of protection, at least. And it might help if you remember you are not the only Toa in the room, Vakama.”

Vakama’s reply was drowned out by the roar of the Rahi Nui. The Toa formed a ring, ready for anything – except, as it turned out, for the Rahi Nui to suddenly materialize behind them.

They whirled to see a monstrous creature towering over them, one that made the things they had already encountered look like the occupants of a Rahi petting zoo. Its head was that of a Kane-Ra bull,
complete with razor-sharp horns. Its forearms were the powerfully muscled limbs of a Tarakava. The body and hind legs belonged to a great Muaka cat, and huge insectoid Nui-Rama wings sprouted from its shoulders. The nightmarish picture was made complete by the massive tail of a Nui-Jaga scorpion. So heavy was the Rahi Nui that the stone floor partially buckled beneath its feet. Every aspect of this horrible amalgamation felt like an offense to nature.

The Rahi Nui looked from one Toa to the next. In its long existence, the creature had rarely come across such a feast in the making. Six of the small ones, each practically aglow with energy, and each doomed to fall, as had so many before them.

When it reached Vakama, it paused. The beast could see defiance in the Toa’s eyes, a most pleasing sight. The brave were always the most reckless, and their energies tasted so sweet.

Vakama was seeing something quite different when he looked at the Rahi Nui. Instead of seeing the face of a Kane-Ra, he saw the features of Nidhiki and Krekka superimposed on the monster. It took the Toa of Fire a moment to realize that this was another of his visions.

*This beast is no simple Rahi,* he said to himself. *It served the Dark Hunters. It hunted and killed at their command. There is no fear of Toa in its heart – to this creature, we are only prey.*

True to his word, Matau did not wait for the Rahi Nui to attack. Aiming his aero slicers, he sent twin cyclones at the beast. They struck with sufficient power to tear the Coliseum from its foundation and send it hurtling into the sea. But the Rahi Nui stood in the middle of the storm, unmoved.

The other Toa acted now. Fire, ice, water, stone, and earth rained down upon the Rahi Nui to no effect. If anything, the creature seemed to be growing stronger. Through it all, the beast made no effort to defend itself or to stop the Toa Metru’s attacks.

“Why is it just standing there?” wondered Nuju.
“Why shouldn’t it?” answered Matau, bitterly. “We are doing nothing to pain-harm it.”
“You’re wrong, brother,” said Nuju, grasping the truth at last. “Our attacks have been very effective… just not in the way we wanted. This isn’t a fight for this monster – it’s feeding time.”
“What?” asked Vakama, as he signaled for the Toa to try and surround the beast.
“It isn’t trying to stop us because we are giving it what it wants,” Nuju continued. “Elemental energy. Our energy. It will soak up our powers until we are bone dry, given the opportunity.”

There was wisdom in Nuju’s words, Vakama knew. If this thing did feed on the powers of Toa, that would explain how it was able to hunt them. To the Rahi’s trained senses, elemental energy had a scent that could be traced.

“Then we use mask powers,” he said. “And let’s hope it doesn’t consider those dessert.”
“I prefer the direct approach,” said Onewa, ripping a jagged stone from the wall. He hurled it with all his might at the Rahi Nui and his aim was on the mark. The rock clipped the creature’s leg, doing visible damage. The Rahi Nui roared in anger.

“There, see?” said the Toa of Stone, smiling. “When Toa powers don’t work, try throwing a rock.”
“You may want to look again,” said Nokama. Onewa turned to see that the damage to the beast’s leg was healing before his eyes. He had never seen the like before, except in Metru Nui when –

The revelation went off in his mind like an imploding force sphere. *Matoran work crews can make a damaged building “heal” that way, using Kanoka disks of regeneration,* he remembered. *And the way it appeared in our midst without any warning, almost as if it had… teleported.*

“Uh oh,” said the Toa of Stone.
Vakama turned to him. “Did you just say ‘uh oh’?”
“Yeah. I meant it, too,” Onewa replied, keeping his voice low. “Load a disk. Pretend it’s a powerhouse, and let our new friend know it.”

Vakama nodded. He made a show of loading a disk into his launcher, saying, “The rest of you better shield your eyes and brace yourselves. There may not be much of the cavern left when this hits.”

If the Rahi Nui did not understand the words, it did the tone. It snarled as Vakama took aim and fired. The disk flew on a straight course directly toward the spot between the beast’s eyes, and then… the Rahi Nui was gone.
“That was some disk,” said Matau, in wonder.

“That wasn’t the disk, Matau,” said Onewa, his eyes scanning the stone floor. “It wasn’t a teleport either. Our Rahi didn’t want to stay around to see what was in that disk, so it shrank out of the way.”

“Shrank?” repeated Whenua. “Something that size… it’s not possible… without a Kanoka disk to…” Then the answer came to him as well. “The disks! Mata Nui, it has the powers of the disks!”

“Then it may well be unstoppable,” Vakama said. “Prepare, brothers and sister, for what may be our final battle.”

“And happy-cheer is here again,” added Matau, meaning not a word of it.
The Toa Metru waited in silence. They knew the monster was still in the cavern with them, too small to see, and could strike at any moment. Whenua had suggested that Nuju simply freeze over the floor, but was reminded that the beast fed on elemental energies.

"Perhaps we should seek a narrower tunnel, where its bulk will work against it," suggested Nokama.

"A good thought, sister," agreed Onewa. "But then we would be unable to attack it together."

"And some of us need room to quick-move," said Matau, smiling. "Maybe I can dazzle it with my style — after all, it worked on you, Nokama."

"I think we need to get you back above ground," the Toa of Water replied. "Your brain has frozen."

The attack, when it came, was too sudden and swift to be defended against. The Rahi Nui shot back up to full size in the midst of the Toa, sending them flying. Whenua was the first to try to rise, only to be smashed almost into unconsciousness by the Rahi Nui’s powerful forearm.

Matau mentally triggered his aero slicers, taking off with the intention of mounting an assault from the air. Seeing the creature moving to finish off Whenua, he dove. But the Rahi Nui’s move had been a ruse to draw the Toa of Air in closer. As soon as he was near, the beast jerked its head and caught Matau on its horns. Then another sudden movement sent the Toa crashing to the hard ground.

"Barely fighting a few seconds and we’ve lost a third of our number," thought Vakama. In front of him, Nokama used her hydro blades to fend off the beast’s blows. Onewa and Nuju were attempting to scale opposite sides of the Rahi Nui, hanging on despite the creature’s efforts to shake them off.

The Toa of Fire launched a flame blast at the ceiling above the beast’s head. His fires melted through the stone, bringing a rain of red-hot magma down on the Rahi. Enraged, the beast roared and abruptly grew in size. Nuju managed to jump clear and use an ice slide to reach the ground, but Onewa had almost reached the back of the Rahi. The sudden growth caught him by surprise and he was flung from the monster to plunge to the cavern floor far below.

Nokama spotted the danger and broke into a run. She knew she would have to time her leap perfectly, or both she and Onewa were going to wind up nothing but shattered pieces. At just the right moment, she used her powerful legs to launch herself into the air. She caught the falling Onewa in mid-leap, then hurled a blast of water at the floor. The jet of water acted as a brake, lowering them gently to the ground.

"Next time, hang on tighter," Nokama said gently. "Or fall closer to Nuju, he would love tossing some ice your way."

Onewa’s eyes widened. "Nokama, look out!"

The Toa of Stone shoved her hard, but too late. The Rahi Nui’s stinger slammed into Nokama and buried itself in the armor of her back. Onewa’s power surged from him, causing a stone vise to come
forth from the floor and grip the monster’s tail. Angered, the Rahi yanked hard to free itself, smashing the rock and at the same time releasing Nokama.

The Toa of Water pitched forward. Onewa caught her before she could hit the ground. Her eyes were dark and her heartlight was flashing erratically. She was barely breathing as Onewa laid her down.

Onewa lifted his eyes, rage filling his heart. He triggered his mask power, but not to try to control the Rahi Nui. No, this time he sent his mental energies like a lance into the monster’s brain. *What I can control, I can destroy,* the Toa of Stone thought darkly.

The Rahi Nui paused, feeling something strange coming over it. Then a pain more intense than anything it had ever known exploded in its mind. The beast bellowed and staggered as the power of the Mask of Mind Control tore through its thoughts.

“I don’t know what you are, or what you have done before,” Onewa snarled. “But you have never faced anything like me. Feel my power and fall!”

And, indeed, it looked as if that was about to happen. This attack was not something the Rahi Nui could defend against, and it reeled as Onewa increased the pressure, shrinking back to its normal size. But the beast had very little mind to blast, and after what seemed like forever, it suddenly realized the horrible pain would not get any worse. The creature drew strength from that thought. Forcing itself to ignore the blistering attack, the Rahi Nui charged.

Focused completely on tapping the mask’s powers, Onewa could not get out of the way in time. The horned head of the Rahi Nui smashed the Toa of Stone into the wall and sent him down into darkness.

Now only Vakama and Nuju stood against the beast. Ordinarily, there was little that fire and ice could not accomplish when they worked together. But against a creature that could so easily demolish four Toa, what chance did they have?

Vakama turned to see that Nuju had evidently cracked under the strain. With the menace of a massive Rahi looming over them, the Toa of Ice was busy examining the creature’s footprints in the shattered stone.

“Nuju!” he shouted. “You’re not in a Knowledge Tower now! Stop analyzing and start fighting!”

“I think I have the key,” the Toa of Ice said. “Buy me time!”

Vakama threw up a wall of flame, cutting the Rahi Nui off for a moment. Then he raced over to Nuju, still half-convinced the Toa of Ice had simply lost his mind. “What key?”

“Look at these,” said Nuju. “This footprint is from the monster at normal size… this one from when he grew larger. There’s something very curious about the differences between them.”

The Toa of Fire glanced at both. He still didn’t see what Nuju was talking about. “There are no differences. They’re identical.”

“That is what’s very curious,” Nuju replied, rising. “There should be a difference.”

Beams shot out from the Rahi Nui’s eyes, freezing the wall of flame. Then a single blow smashed it into icy shards. But the barrier had done its job, and Nuju’s words had sparked an idea in Vakama’s mind. Perhaps there was a way to defeat this creature, after all…

“We need to make him grow, and I know how,” said the Toa of Fire. He attached his disk launcher to his back, preparing to use it as a rocket pack.

Nuju shook his head. “You saw what happened to Matau. That thing will swat you like a fireflyer.”

“Not if I get high enough, fast enough. What other choice do we have?”

Nuju had to admit that there was none that he could see. Without another word, Vakama activated the launcher and soared into the air. The beast swiped at him as he flew by, but missed. Once Vakama had reached a high enough altitude so as to be out of the creature’s reach, he began tossing fireballs that burst in midair.

Below him, the Rahi Nui grew angry. It was impatient to finish off these last two small ones and feast upon their elemental energies. But this one persisted in buzzing about and filling the air with bright light and heat. Although the Toa-created flames were in fact food for the creature, in its dim mind it still had the instinctive dislike of fire common to most Rahi. Again and again, it lashed out, only to have Vakama dodge its blows.
On the ground, Nuju waited impatiently. He had grasped Vakama’s plan – it was the only course of action that made sense, now that he thought about it – but it depended on the reactions of the beast. *If the beast is too simpleminded to realize the best way to stop a flying foe, he thought. Or if Vakama should fly too close…*

Nuju thought he glimpsed a change, if a small one. Activating the telescopic lens in his mask, he focused on the Rahi Nui. Yes, it had begun to grow, but slowly. He wondered if the combat with the Toa had begun to tax its energies.

“Well, we cannot have that, can we? the Toa of Ice thought to himself, readying his crystal spikes.

High above, Vakama had spotted the monster’s size increasing as well. He gave a signal to Nuju, then launched twin streams of fire from his outstretched hands. At the same time, Nuju hurled ice blast after ice blast at the massive creature. As Vakama expected, this had the same effect as tossing a torch into a Ta-Metru fire pit: It added to the Rahi Nui’s already considerable power. Practically glowing with raw energy, the beast continued to grow larger and larger.

The Toa of Fire narrowly evaded another blow. The monster was easily half the size of the Coliseum now, and its growth rate showed no sign of stopping. For a moment, he wondered if he had been wrong in his guess about the beast’s nature.

*If I am, I won’t live to regret it,* he knew. *One blow from that massive arm and I’ll be shattered into shards.*

Caught up in his questions, Vakama never saw the Rahi Nui’s next attack. Moving incredibly fast, its tail stinger slashed through the air, aiming directly for Vakama’s chest. Too late, the Toa spotted the danger and tried to jet out of the way. The stinger descended, death just inches away… it struck… Vakama waited for the pain and the darkness.

But he felt nothing. The Rahi Nui’s stinger had passed through his body as if its owner were a ghost. The beast, still growing, looked confused. It struck again and again with its powerful arms, only to find itself unable to make contact. Vakama could see the creature’s form wavering like a heat mirage. It roared, but the sound was a hollow one.

Vakama dove as the creature continued to grow and its form grew less and less distinct. Now its head and shoulders had disappeared from view, passing through the ceiling of the cave. The two Toa continued to pour elemental energy into the Rahi Nui, even as it grew larger still and faded from view. With a final, mournful wail, the beast was gone, disappearing as if it had never existed.

Nuju cut off his ice blasts and dropped to the ground, exhausted. “Let’s… not… do that again,” he said, making an effort to catch his breath.

“But it worked,” Vakama replied. “You were right, the footprints were the key.”

Nuju ran his hand along the outline of one of the huge imprints the creature had left in the stone. “Increased size without increased weight. Its body was expanding, but not its total mass. So when we made it grow, and then fed it even more power…”

“Its growth outraced its mass,” said Vakama. “It eventually got too big to retain any density, and its atoms drifted apart.”

Nuju glanced around at the damage done to the cave. “Let us hope it takes a long, long time to pull itself together. A thousand years would be just about right.”

Behind them, Matau and Whenua had made it back to their feet. In a corner, Onewa had awakened also and was trying to rouse Nokama. Nuju didn’t need his enhanced vision to see that something was very wrong with the Toa Metru of Water.

Onewa looked up at his friends, panic in his eyes. “She’s dying… Nokama’s dying!”
Whenua looked down at the still form of Nokama. The spark of life was barely present in her. He had no doubt it was only her strong will that was keeping her clinging to existence. “We have to turn back,” he said. “If we return to the island, we can at least make her comfortable before…”

“He’s right,” said Onewa. “These tunnels are full of dangers. We can’t risk further harm to her.” Matau scooped up Nokama in his arms. Onewa and Whenua had already started walking back the way they had come and now Matau fell in line behind them. They didn’t look back, assuming that Vakama and Nuju would be following.

“We’re not going back,” said Vakama. “Neither are you. We keep on for Metru Nui, all of us.” Shocked, Onewa whirled on Vakama. He was even more surprised to see Nuju standing with the Toa of Fire, his silence saying he agreed with this ridiculous statement. What was wrong with them?

“And then what?” demanded Onewa. “Even if we make it back, even if Nokama doesn’t die on the way, there is no one there to help her! The city is in ruins. The Matoran are locked in Makuta sleep.”

“Exactly,” replied Vakama. “Hundreds of Matoran have had their lives stolen from them. They are depending on us to save them. That has to be more important than any one life, even Nokama’s. I’m sorry.”

Onewa unlimbered his proto pitons and started for Vakama. “Not as sorry as you’re going to be, fire-spitter!”

Nuju stepped in between the two Toa. The look in his eyes said it would not be wise to challenge him. “Stop it now. It is an insult to Nokama for us to stand here arguing while her life slips away. Onewa, returning to the island is condemning her to death, for there is nothing there that can cure her.”

The Toa of Ice turned to Vakama. “And you should remember that there are better reasons to return to Metru Nui than just our mission. There may be ancient lore in the Knowledge Towers that could save Nokama.”

“If we are going down-side, we had better go,” said Matau. “She is growing worse.”

The Toa headed out of the cave in an uncomfortable silence. Whenua offered to carry Nokama, but Matau shook him off. “I will keep my Toa-friend safe,” he vowed.

They moved at a much faster pace now, ignoring carvings on the walls or side tunnels. Onewa stayed close to Matau, as if he thought his proximity might somehow keep Nokama’s heartlight flashing that much longer.

The tunnels grew narrower as they descended and the moss covering the stone seemed to be everywhere. Onewa’s shoulder brushed against a clump and it clung to his armor. He brushed it off, disgusted, saying, “What is this stuff?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it in the mines,” Whenua answered, reaching out to examine some. To his surprise, it moved to avoid his touch. “Now that’s strange.”

“Can we not think-worry about plants?” snapped Matau. “Our Toa-sister needs us.”
The Toa of Air went to take another step, only to find that his foot would not move. He looked down and saw that hundreds of tiny vines had sprung from the stone floor and wrapped themselves around his ankles. All of the other Toa were similarly afflicted. Vakama sent a narrow stream of fire to burn off the vines. As soon as flame touched his bindings, a thicker, thorned vine shot out from the wall and wrapped itself around his throat, choking him.

Vakama seized hold of the vine, struggling to get it off him. But it took the help of Nuju to overcome its strength and tear it loose. Vakama gasped, filled with dread at the thought that an old enemy might have returned.

“Morbuzakh…” he whispered.

The voice that answered him came from everywhere at once, sounding like the snapping of dead branches. It was not the sibilant hiss of the Morbuzakh, but was heavy with the same feeling of corruption and decay.

“No,” it said. “I am what the Morbuzakh wished it could be.”

Nuju unleashed his ice power, covering one wall of moss in a thick frost. Harsh laughter filled the tunnel. An instant later the ice shattered like glass. “I am not that weakling, Nuju. Oh, yes, I know who you are. I know all my enemies.”

Onewa succeeded in wrenching one leg free. “Enemies? We have never encountered you before. And before you set yourself against us, you might want to think about how the Morbuzakh wound up: ash in the wind.”

Vines like tentacles snaked down the tunnel toward them. One by one, they wrapped themselves around the Toa Metru, pulling them free and dragging them deeper into the darkness. Matau protested as a vine grabbed Nokama out of his arms and carried her unconscious form away.

“Come to me,” said the voice. “Come and learn why I hate you beyond all other beings, save one. Come and learn how you have wronged me, and how you shall pay.”

Matoran legend speaks of a time long, long before the founding of Metru Nui, perhaps even before the coming of the Great Spirit Mata Nui himself. In those ancient times, Matoran labored ceaselessly and in darkness, little knowing the reasons for the work they did. Those Matoran who did their jobs well would be rewarded by being allowed to journey to a place called Artakha, where they could work in the light and with no fears about their future. In time, Artakha became known in myth as the “Great Refuge” where all Matoran would be safe from harm.

But life was very different for those Matoran who worked poorly. They were consigned to a place that made the Ta-Metru Great Furnace look like a minor heat source. No one knew what happened there, but it was said that no Matoran who went to that place ever returned. This frightening location never had a name of its own, but was instead referred to by the name of the being who ruled it:

“Karzahni,” a voice whispered.

Vakama was startled to hear that dreaded name spoken by the plant creature that held him prisoner. But he had to admit that the cavern to which he had been brought might well have been a home to that figure of myth. While there were no flames to be seen, the cave was littered with mutant Rahi, some dying, some very much alive. But he sensed it was not death that ruled here – it was fear, so overwhelming as to be almost toxic.

The plant itself looked little like the Morbuzakh. It was less a creature of vines than of twisted trunk and branches, resembling a warped, mangled version of one of the trees on the island above. Its substance was interlaced with the rock of the cave, even more so than the Morbuzakh’s had been with the Great Furnace.

“You know the name,” the creature whispered. “Of course you do. It amused my creator to give me the name of a being so hated and feared by Matoran past… as if somehow that power to evoke dread would then live on in me.”

“What do you want of us?” asked Nuju.
“Want? I want nothing,” the Karzahni replied. “Petty desires are for lesser beings. But need? Ah, there is much that I need, and much that you can provide. And to start, a gift…”

The Toa’s eyes followed one of the vines, as it moved slowly toward a far wall. Pinned against the rock was a form Matau recognized all too well: the huge serpent that had attacked him in the tunnels.

“A friend of yours, I believe,” said the Karzahni. “I found him snaking through the passages, no doubt planning to strike at you again. The foolish creature thought he could escape my notice.”

The Karzahni’s voice dropped lower. Its tone suggested he was talking with trusted co-conspirators. “That is why his kind will not survive, Toa… and mine will rule.”

A half-rotted branch gestured toward the other Rahi that slithered, crawled, and staggered through the cave. “My needs are simple: power and revenge. Power I have, over such as these – failed experiments of my creator. But revenge… that you cheated me of, Toa Metru, and so my vengeance shall fall upon you.”

“What is he talking about?” Onewa whispered to Nuju.

“I don’t know,” replied the Toa of Ice. “But if there is one thing we learned from the Morbuzakh, it is that it is useless to argue with vegetation.”

“Wouldn’t your revenge be sweeter against all six of us?” Vakama asked their captor. “How can you take the full measure of satisfaction from it when one of our number is dying?”

“We are all dying here, Toa,” the Karzahni said, as calmly as if he were discussing the weather. “I simply intend to make sure that I die last.”

The vines released the six Toa, even laying Nokama gently on the cavern floor. Matau knelt to check her condition, but it had only grown worse in the time since their capture. “What trouble-harm have we caused you, monster, that you keep us from saving our friend?” demanded the Toa of Air.

“You have robbed from me, Matau,” came the answer. “You attacked my creator, imprisoned him in a place I cannot reach, and for that you must atone.”

Of course, thought Vakama. Why didn’t we see it before? “Makuta,” he breathed. “Makuta created you and we defeated him. Now you’re angry because you want to rescue your creator.”


The Toa stood in stunned silence, hardly able to believe what they had just heard. For a long time, no one spoke. Then Whenua’s curiosity could not be contained anymore. “If Makuta created you,” he began, “then why…?”

“Created me… and rejected me,” rumbled the Karzahni. “He made me too well. I am too powerful and too wise. I would not have been content to drive the inhabitants from the outskirts of the city, or even to rule Metru Nui. I would have brought down the places of the Matoran, all of them, and ended their reign! I did not want their obedience or their loyalty, as Makuta did – only their destruction.”

Vakama could think of nothing to say. All of this fit with theories he had formed during the journey to the island, but now it had all been confirmed. Makuta had created the Morbuzakh and unleashed it on Metru Nui, as a prelude to his plan to doom all the Matoran to centuries of sleep. The Karzahni had been his first attempt, but it was too powerful for Makuta’s purposes.

But where he failed to defeat us, thought the Toa of Fire, this thing just might succeed.

Nokama moaned. The Karzahni’s branches moved toward her, but Matau slapped them away with his aero slicers. For a moment, it seemed as if the branches would attack, but instead they slowly lowered to the ground.

“Your friend has little time left,” the Karzahni said. “And as Vakama suggested, I have need of all six of you, though for reasons he cannot suspect. I can heal her, temporarily. Then you will do a task for me. Succeed, and I might be persuaded to cure the Toa of Water’s affliction.”

Onewa glanced at Nuju, then at Vakama. It was obvious that none of them believed the Karzahni for a moment. But if Nokama were to be restored to health, even for a brief time, they would at least have a fighting chance. And that was all Toa ever needed.
One of the branches moved anew. Matau went to defend her again, but Vakama shook his head. The Toa of Air stepped aside, never taking his eyes off the arm of the plant. It hovered over Nokama and then twisted itself again and again, finally squeezing a few drops of thick, silvery liquid from itself. They fell into Nokama’s mouth. In a matter of moments, light returned to her eyes.

“Where am I? What…?” she said, sitting up.

Matau reached out to give her a hug. Nokama pushed him away, saying, “Have you gone crazy, brother? And what is that… that thing? Where is the great beast we were fighting?”

“Same day, different monster,” said the Toa of Air, helping her to her feet.

Vakama took a step forward. “And what is this task, then?”

“A simple one, for such brave heroes,” the Karzahni answered, mockingly. “You six will take the south passage from this cave. Along the way, you will find a vault set in the wall of the tunnel. From that you will take a black vial. You will use that vial to collect a sample of energized protodermis from one of Makuta’s many lairs and bring it back here to me.”

“If it’s so simple, why don’t you do it?” asked Onewa.

The Karzahni’s branches rustled in annoyance. “I am not built for mobility – this you would see, Toa of Stone, were your head not filled with rocks as well.”

Onewa ignored the insult and looked at the cave with a tactician’s eye. He had little doubt that the Toa Metru assembled could fight this creature and win. But then what? If it crumbled as the Morbuzakh had, then there would be no way to get more of the antidote for Nokama. Hard as it was for him to admit, they did not need a battle right now, they needed time to think.

Vakama evidently agreed, for he said, “All right, Karzahni. We will do your errand. But if you plan any treachery –”

“Oh, come now,” replied the Karzahni. “The false Turaga Dume… the Vahki… Ahkmou… even Makuta himself – you of all beings should understand, Vakama. What is life without a little treachery?”
When Whenua first went to work in the Onu-Metru Archives, he made a classic beginner’s mistake: He got lost. He had been sent to the fourth sublevel to check on an ash bear exhibit, but lost count and wound up two levels down. Unknown to him, this area had been used by Mavrah for an experiment with Kinloka rodents some time back, but the rodents had broken free and the level had been quarantined. Over time, the Kinloka had eaten the barriers and the lightstones and it was only their instinctive fear of the Nui-Rama on the level above that kept them from rampaging throughout the Archives.

Even now, he could remember walking through the dark and deserted wing, hearing the Kinloka skittering all around him. Now and then, one or two would rush up and snap at him, then dash away. It had been bad when he wasn’t sure what was down there with him – and worse when he realized, because everyone knew Kinloka would eat anything that didn’t eat them first. Every instinct in Whenua told him to run as fast as he could, but his mind told him that was the best way to end up lost forever.

Walking through the south tunnel brought back those memories in full force. As unscientific as it seemed to a veteran archivist, the atmosphere of these tunnels felt evil. Even if he ignored the carvings of bizarre Rahi and the twisted creatures that crawled and flew past him, he could not escape the fact that monstrous things had been done in this place. The sooner they were away from here and back in Metru Nui, the happier he would be. After all, even quake-damaged, the city had to be better than this.

Vakama was directly behind Whenua, but kept stopping to pick up the Kanoka disks that littered the passage. Their appearance here had been a mystery until he spotted a broken vault containing a few disks and carvings of Kanohi masks unlike any he had seen before. Evidently, Makuta had been dabbling in mask making, but with what success it was impossible to tell.

Onewa had the hard job on the journey. Using his connection to stone, he was attempting to sense hollow spaces in the walls that might house the vault they were looking for. Nokama was sticking close to him, if only to escape Matau, who had been hovering over her since her return to consciousness.

“Are you getting anything?” she asked, for the fourth time in as many minutes.

“I’m not sure. There’s something just ahead here, but it doesn’t feel like… wait.” Onewa ran his hands slowly over a section of the wall. “Behind here. I don’t know what’s inside, but it’s definitely a compartment of some kind.”

The other Toa crowded around. Whenua offered to use his drills to open the vault, but Onewa turned him down. “This way is more fun,” he said, rearing back to punch a hole in the wall.

Toa fist met stone, and stone lost. The heroes struggled to see the contents of the chamber through the cloud of rock dust. Impatient, Onewa leaned forward. “I think I spotted something.”

A shape shot from the inside of the chamber, so fast it was just a blur. Then Onewa staggered backwards, hands to his mask, screaming, “Get it off!”

Nokama rushed to him. There was something clinging to his Kanohi, but she had never seen its like before. It had the ridged features of Bohrok krana she had seen in the Archives, and the longer,
A serpentine shape of a Rahkshi kraata. But there was no time to analyze it, for she could already see the effect it was having on the Toa of Stone.

Onewa’s arms had dropped to his sides. When he spoke, his voice had become mechanical, the way Nokama imagined a Vahki might speak if its programming allowed it to do so. “They… they… they…,” he repeated, again and again.

Whenua moved to tear the creature off of Onewa’s Kanohi, but Nuju blocked him. “Wait. Let him talk,” said the Toa of Ice. “We may learn something of value. Onewa, ‘they’ who? Who are you talking about?”

The Toa of Stone turned slowly to look at Nuju. His eyes were vacant. “They… too late… too late for anything… all must end. Visorak. Visorak.” Onewa began to tremble violently. “Visorak! The end! They wait. They watch. They know. They… they know…”

“Nuju, stop this!” cried Nokama.

Vakama stepped forward. “To blazes with knowledge, this is one of us,” he said, launching a firebolt. The flames consumed the creature, reducing it foul-smelling ash. So precise was Vakama’s control that Onewa’s mask was not even singed. The Toa of Stone staggered backwards, reaching back to the wall to keep from falling.

“Are you all right?” asked Nokama.

“Yes… I will be…” he replied, badly shaken. “But… I would not wish that experience on anyone else.”

“What did you see? What are Visorak?” Nuju pressed.

Onewa shook his head, confused. “I don’t know. Those were not my words, not my thoughts. I remember… something… something horrible, everywhere… stealers of life… but I cannot see more. Vakama? Is this what your visions are like?”

The Toa of Fire shrugged, uncomfortable at the question. He had never grown used to his erratic visions of the future. “I suppose so. Sometimes.”


Whenua had turned his attention back to the vault. If anyone had asked, he was simply searching for the vial they were here to find. But secretly, he half-hoped there might be a second one of those creatures inside. *What a Rahi for study,* he thought. *A hybrid, perhaps, and a symbiote… I would stake my reputation on it. Nuju was right, we could have learned so much – but not at the risk of Onewa’s sanity.*

To his disappointment, there was nothing else alive in the vault. But nestled in the back there was a vial made of a peculiar, black metallic substance. Whenua grabbed it and turned to the other Toa, “We have begun. Now we only need the energized protodermis.”

Matau smiled. “Librarian, that is like saying we ‘only’ need to clean-polish a Muaka’s teeth… from the inside.”

After all they had been through on the journey thus far, the Toa Metru hoped for an uneventful passage to Makuta’s lair. They were badly disappointed. The closer they came to their destination, the thicker and faster came the Rahi, both creatures they were familiar with and mutants not even a mad Matoran could have dreamed of. Some fled, and some fought, but the Toa found no glory in the battles. Even Nuju, who had never encouraged any connection between himself and the natural world, could sense that these beasts attacked out of desperation, not evil. The realization chilled even the Toa of Ice.

It might have been after their tenth victory, or their hundredth, that Nuju gave voice to his thoughts. They had all lost count of how many Rahi they had defeated, and dreaded the new waves that were sure to come. Matau had looked around at the scene of the struggle, saying, “Even trapped, Makuta has many guard-fighters. He must need his alone-time when he is making monsters.”

“They aren’t guards,” Nuju said. “Maybe they were at one time, but they aren’t trying to stop us from reaching our destination.”

“Then why all the slash and roar?”
“It’s not so strange, Matau. How would you react if you were trying to escape someplace, and others blocked your way?”

Nuju’s words stopped Vakama in his tracks. He grasped their implications immediately, and wished he could just dismiss the Toa of Ice’s theories as nothing more than dark fantasies springing from this terrible place. The only problem was Nuju had a nasty habit of being right.

“Think about it,” the Toa of Ice continued. “The Nui-Jaga who ran to its death… the Muaka whose pain Nokama sensed… and the strange creatures we have encountered all along this journey. We have grown so used to battle that we see enemies even when there are none, brothers and sister. These beasts are not charging toward us – they are running away from something.”

“Do you remember the stone rat plague?” asked Whenua. “You know, when they swarmed up out of the streets of Ta-Metru and devastated the district for weeks? Everyone thought it was hunger and instinct that drove them to the surface… until we discovered the Nui-Rama swarm loose in the maintenance tunnels, preying on the rats’ nests.”

Vakama’s memories of that terrible time were all too vivid. Even Toa Lhikan, who had defeated the mightiest Rahi, almost found himself helpless before an assault by some of the smallest. “They hadn’t mounted an attack on the metru,” he remembered aloud. “They were just trying to get away from something worse than themselves.”

The Toa stood in silence, thinking about the scores of monstrosities they had faced since entering this maze of shadows. And the same question echoed in all their minds: *What could possibly be more terrible than what we have seen?*
There were no carvings to point the way to Makuta’s lair, no signs warning the Toa to go back if they valued their lives. Only darkness greeted them as they descended ever deeper – darkness and the incessant whisper of the Karzahnii, speaking through the plant growth on the tunnel walls.

“Now, Toa,” it said urgently. “You draw closer to my birthplace. Already you can feel your spirits grow cold and your minds rebel. This place is alive with memories, twisted memories of madness. Tread carefully, my allies.”

“Allies,” muttered Vakama. “I would sooner team with Makuta himself.”

“Makuta is not here,” whispered the Karzahnii. “And I am. It is truly a circumstance ripe with possibilities.”

The argument was ended by Whenua, who stood before a dead end in the tunnel. “I think we have found it, Vakama. But I can feel something in the ground… a power… movement. Something is in there, I’m sure of it.”

“Then let’s not keep it waiting,” said Vakama. Placing his hand on the metallic gateway, he melted a hole through its substance. Then he stepped aside to allow Whenua to reach inside and grab hold. With a great heave, the Toa of Earth tore the door from its hinges.

The smell of smoke, rot, and molten protodermis struck the Toa Metru like a fist. They half expected to see the winged, armored shape of their nemesis emerge from the darkness within, but nothing moved beyond the entryway. Hesitantly, the Toa stepped into the chamber, every sense alert for danger.

Massive stone pillars stood in the four corners of the lair, carved with symbols so ancient even Nokama’s Mask of Translation proved useless. The walls were lined with large stasis tubes, much like the ones used in the Archives. Some were shattered, others still housed Rahi, most of them dead. The creatures were altered beyond all recognition, and in some cases, it seemed impossible that they could ever have existed.

The dominant feature of the chamber was a huge, silvery pool of energized protodermis in the center of the floor. Its surface was so calm that Nuju almost thought it might be a sheet of ice. The Toa Metru gathered around the circular pit that held the object of Karzahnii’s desire.

“Imagine,” Matau said. “If this can do what Nuju speak-says…”

“The power to create, and to destroy,” Nuju whispered. “What could be greater? With this, one could be elevated to heights undreamed of.”

“Or be doomed to the darkness below,” said Vakama. “Let’s not forget that the Morbuzakh, the Karzahnii, and a legion of monsters were spawned in this place, born of Makuta’s madness and power like this.”

The Toa of Fire took the vial from Whenua and knelt down to take a sample from the pool. “The sooner we have what we seek and get away from here, the better I will like it.”
At the slightest touch of the vial, the energized protodermis began to boil. Matau pulled Vakama away from the edge as the liquid grew more agitated, as if building to an explosion. Then, before the startled eyes of the Toa Metru, something rose from the pool.

At first, they thought it was simply a wave of protodermis that would engulf them. But the liquid hung suspended and then began to reshape itself, forming a head and two arms. Features began to appear on the face and hands to grow from the ends of the limbs. Yet, through it all, the substance never changed, only the shape, as it took on the semblance of the Toa Metru. When all was done, what hovered above the pool was a living entity made entirely of energized protodermis.

“I am the guardian of this place,” it said. Though its tone was calm and emotionless, its voice rumbled like thunder in the chamber. “You have come to take that which is forbidden. It is not to be.”

“Who are you to deny us?” asked Vakama boldly. “We are Toa Metru from the city of legends, seeking only a small portion of what you protect for a vital mission.”

“Do you seek to create, or to undo creation?” asked the protodermis being.

“Neither,” said Nuju. “We are attempting to buy safe passage to Metru Nui from the Karzahni, with hopes of saving the Matoran trapped in eternal sleep in that place.”

A ripple ran through the being as it pondered Nuju’s words. Then it fixed its eyes upon the Toa of Ice and said, “The Karzahni is known to me, for I was there at its birth… a pretender to the throne of shadows, it was, from its first moment of existence. I have no love for it, yet still you may not have what you seek.”

“But the Matoran –”

“What are the Matoran to me?” snapped the entity. “They are but the living. I am life. Behold.”

The being raised an arm and a stream of energized protodermis flowed from its hand. It struck a tiny buzzing insect that flew near the ceiling. The Toa watched in awe as the insect metamorphosized, growing to a thousand times its original size, its wingspan easily 200 feet across, its stinger replaced by a jaw filled with metallic teeth. It dove at the assembled Toa Metru.

“Scatter!” shouted Vakama. “Together we are too easy a target!”

Nuju aimed an ice bolt at the flying monstrosity. The creature responded by flapping its wings so fast they became a blur. The ice projectile stopped just short of the beast and rebounded toward Nuju, striking the Toa of Ice squarely and knocking him off his feet.

“Interesting,” murmured the protodermis entity. “Its defense mechanisms have been enhanced, so that wing vibration generates a field capable of reflecting back force hurled against it.”

“This isn’t some experiment!” Whenua shouted, narrowly avoiding another pass by the mutated insect. “This is real!”

“As real as the Metru Nui Archives?” replied the entity. “Did you worry about the feelings of the lesser beings you caged and studied and gawked at? No, Toa. I am as far beyond you as you are from the lowliest Rahi. You are all insects to me.”

Onewa backflipped out of the way of the monster’s snapping jaws. “Great. We’re getting battered and he’s giving lectures.”

As the other Toa fought a holding action against the entity’s creation, Nokama stood to the side and studied its movements. Although now far more dangerous, the beast’s instincts had not changed, and nor had its strategies. Instead of charging and demolishing its foes, it persisted in diving and then retreating, as a small insect would. She saw an opening, and knew that there was no one better to take advantage of it than her – after all, her hours were numbered regardless.

When the creature dove again, she jumped on its back. It immediately climbed toward the ceiling, but she hung on, inching her way up toward its head. Positioned as she was, the beast could not turn to snap at her, but it swooped and dove in an effort to shake her off.

Nokama readied her hydro blade. Before the beast could react, she had slipped the tool across its neck and then grabbed it with her other hand. Then she pulled hard on the blade, back and to the right. Faced with the prospect of turning or choking, the creature veered to the right.

“What is that crazy teacher doing?” asked Onewa.
"Steering," replied Nuju.
"I wonder if that would work with Gukko birds?" wondered Matau.

High above, Nokama was engaged in a war of wills with the creature. Every time it tried to dive toward the Toa Metru, she yanked hard and forced it back up. It made a noise that was a combination of a buzz and a screech. Using the Mask of Translation, Nokama replied, "I am not letting go. You can crash into a wall and kill us both, or you can work with me."

Nokama’s fellow Toa watched as the creature slowly went from flying wildly and erratically to circling near the cavern ceiling. Even having previously seen Nokama engage in conversation with a Kikanalo herd chief, they found it hard to believe she could tame such a beast. The protodermis entity had watched her efforts with interest as well, but the expression on his liquid features indicated he had lost patience with the display.

"What I begin," he said, raising his arm, "I can also end." A jet of energized protodermis flew from him to strike the airborne creature. It writhed at the touch of the fluid and plummeted to the ground. Nokama leapt from its back and used blasts of water to slow her descent until Matau could safely catch her.

The Rahi hit the ground and lay still, before finally dissolving into nothingness again. "It was not this creature’s destiny to transform a second time," said the entity. "And so its time is done. Learn from the example, Toa."

Vakama loaded a weakness disk into his launcher and took aim. "The only thing we have learned is that you are as coldhearted as Makuta your master," he snarled, sending the Kanoka disk toward its target.

The entity watched the Kanoka's approach impassively. The disk struck him head-on and immediately disintegrated. "Master? I have no master. Can anyone hope to master a force of the universe? Take your foolish beliefs and begone, Toa. Do not tempt my wrath."

The entity punctuated his words with another jet of energized protodermis, this one aimed at Matau. Whenua tackled the Toa of Air just before the liquid would have struck. "Get down!"

"But I might have been – ouch! – transformed," said Matau as he hit the ground. "I could have become a new-power Toa."

Whenua glanced up at where the protodermis had struck the wall, eating it away. "You know, brother, sometimes I think you have all the common sense of that wall," he muttered, "and are at least twice as thick."

In rapid succession, the entity mutated worms, microbes, a dozen different creatures who in their natural form were no threat. But touched by the power of energized protodermis, they became monstrous versions of their former selves, each one strong enough to defeat a Toa.

The Toa Metru defended themselves, with elemental and mask powers against the creations of the protodermis entity. At first, it seemed like they would be brought low by sheer numbers. But when Whenua’s Mask of Night Vision succeeded in blinding a rock worm and driving it back below the surface, the others took heart. Inch by inch, they advanced on the creatures until the horrors had all fallen or fled.

With that conflict done, Vakama signaled for the Toa to spread out and surround the pool. He, Nuju, Onewa, and Nokama each took up a position in front of one of the chamber’s four pillars. The entity made no effort to stop them.

"The wrath of a puddle," said Nuju. "That might be amusing. Show us, creature, just how angry a pail of water can become."

The entity hurled its substance forth again, but not at Nuju, past him. It struck the far wall, but this time it did not dissolve the stone. Instead, a bipedal creature of rock detached itself from the wall and lumbered toward the Toa of Ice.

"I think this is the part where we ‘lesser beings’ are supposed to scream and run away," said Onewa. "You know what we do with rock in Po-Metru, friend?"

The Toa of Stone sent his elemental powers against the entity’s creation. Instantly, the legs crumbled beneath the rock monster. "We smash it."
Another wave of power and the arms detached neatly and fell to the floor. “We carve it.” A final burst of energy and the rock creature crumbled to dust. “And sometimes we just give up…” Onewa said. Concentrating, he drew the rock dust and shattered pieces back together to form a boulder. “And start over again.”

Onewa folded his arms and looked at the protodermis entity. “But then, we’re not on your level, are we?”

Something in Onewa’s tone sparked anger in the entity. It hurled another blast of protodermis. Onewa dodged and it struck the pillar, devouring the stone. Vakama saw this and smiled.

“I would have thought a superior being would have better aim,” he shouted. “Or do you only fight through pawns?”

The entity whirled and sent forth another blast, missing again and melting another pillar. Then it, too, smiled. “Ah. I see what you are doing. You would have me destroy all four pillars and bury us all.”

“Well, bury you,” said Matau. “Us, we are not much for rock-blankets.”

“You’re right,” said Vakama. “You are wiser than we are, so there is no point in trying to trick you. And no one of us could ever hope to defeat you…”

The Toa Metru had come a long way together since defeating the Morbuzakh in Metru Nui. They had survived betrayal, stopped Makuta, and fought their way to a new island home and now back. So all knew Vakama’s statement was not just mere words, but a call to action.

The Toa of Fire was first, triggering his rocket pack and heading for the ceiling. Onewa and Whenua were next, using their powers to call forth walls of earth and stone around the pool. As the entity brought them down, it found itself confronted by more barriers of rock and ice. High above, Matau and Nokama combined their powers to form a violent storm inside the cave. Forked lightning bolts struck near the pool, charring the stone floor.

The protodermis entity turned this way and that, unsure where to strike first. It could easily end the existence of any of these Toa, but where to concentrate its powers? Targeting one would leave it vulnerable to the efforts of the others, and though they could not harm him, they might somehow damage the pool.

Matau shot past, using his aero-slicer blades and power over wind to propel him through the air. The entity tracked him and launched a blast of protodermis at a point in front of the Toa of Air. Matau chuckled and made a 180-degree turn straight up, avoiding the stream, which instead hit the third pillar.

The entity cried out in rage at the sight.

Vakama signaled the others to halt their actions. He descended to the ground, standing face to face with the entity, mere inches away. “One pillar left,” said the Toa of Fire. “We could never have brought down four before you stopped us, but one? That we can do.”

“Go ahead,” sneered the entity. “Rain a thousand tons of rock upon me. I will burn my way through it and still repay your defiance.”

Nuju walked over to join Vakama. “Perhaps. Or perhaps another of Makuta’s interesting little projects is up above… a creature that eats energized protodermis would seem to suit his warped ends. Maybe you would like to study that specimen?”

Onewa leaned casually against the fine pillar. “Sounds interesting. Let’s not keep the two of them apart.”

“You are speaking without knowledge,” said the entity. It did not sound as if it believed its own words.

“Then Onewa can bring down the rock and we can all find out,” said Vakama. “Or we can make a trade. We get our vial of protodermis and walk out, unharmed, and no further damage gets done to your chamber.”

The entity paused in thought. Then it bowed its head slightly, and said, “Very well. As a superior being, I can afford to be… generous.”
Vakama dipped the vial into the pool, emerging with a small amount of the precious liquid. Then he backed slowly away, never taking his eyes off the entity. When he and the other Toa were near the entrance, they turned and headed for the tunnel.

Nokama was the first to hear the rushing sound, as if a wall of water was heading toward them. She turned to see that the entity had formed itself into a tidal wave and was bearing down upon them. She shouted a warning, but by then the other Toa had sighted the danger as well. Onewa lashed out with his elemental energies and shattered the last pillar, bringing the stone ceiling crashing down.

The entity’s substance hung suspended for only a moment, as if in shock. Then an avalanche of rock plummeted down upon it, the great weight breaking through the floor beneath. Safe in the tunnel, the Toa Metru watched as the entire chamber collapsed into the darkness.

“That’s the problem with superior beings,” said Onewa. “They lie a lot.”

“Such a waste,” Nokama said, shaking her head sadly. “Makuta, the Karzahni, and now this… so much power, so much knowledge, but no spirit – only the drive to destroy.”

The Toa turned as one and walked quickly, leaving the chamber far behind them.
The Toa of Water could feel the “eyes” of the Karzahni upon her as they made their way back to its subterranean dwelling place. She could practically sense its anticipation as they drew nearer with the energized protodermis. Right then, she decided that she would not allow the others to bargain with that evil creature, even if it meant her own death.

The plant-thing’s branches opened as if in welcome as they entered the cave. “I am amazed to see you have all survived,” the Karzahni whispered.

“More than survived,” said Vakama, producing the vial. “We have what you asked for. Now keep your word and cure Nokama.”

The myriad parts of the Karzahni rustled. A vine reached out to snatch the vial away, but Vakama pulled his hand back. “I gave you no word to keep,” said the creature. “And I must test what you have brought me, mustn’t I? Let me have it, or know that you have doomed your friend.”

“As you’re doomed!” asked Nuju. “This journey has not been what it seemed, from the beginning. We fought creatures we thought meant to harm us, but who only sought escape. And you, so sure of your power… you have little time left, isn’t that right, Karzahni?”

The plant’s appendages drew closer to the trunk, as if preparing for an attack. “You are very clever, Nuju. You should have been a Vahki.”

“You said it yourself,” Nuju replied. “Everything here is dying. Makuta designs his creations with a limited lifespan, doesn’t he, so they can never be a threat to him.”

The Karzahni laughed. “No, Toa of Ice. He simply does not want to be confronted by his ‘failures’ on and on, throughout the centuries. But with what is in that vial, I will surpass him. I will do all that he could not, and in the end, I will be the master and he the slave. Now give me that vial!”

Vakama lifted the tube of energized protodermis into the air and tilted it slightly, as if intending to pour it out on the ground. “I will test it for you.”

“You wouldn’t,” snapped the Karzahni.

The Toa of Fire’s smile sent a chill even through the other Toa. “Karzahni, after what I have been through these past weeks… there is very little I wouldn’t do.”

A portion of the ground erupted at the feet of Nokama. A small root forced its way up through the stone. “Eat of that,” the Karzahni said to her, “and you will be healed. What one of Makuta’s creations can do, another can undo.”

Nokama hesitated. Perhaps this thing meant to poison her? But no, then its hold over the Toa Metru would be gone and her friends could safely flee with the vial. She knelt down, plucked the root, and placed it in her mouth. Its taste was bitter, yet she could already feel the strength flooding her limbs again. She looked up at Vakama and nodded.

The Toa of Fire extended the vial.

“Are you crazy?” said Onewa. “You can’t give that kind of power to this thing!”

“Toa keep their word,” Vakama replied. “Otherwise, we are no better than the things we fight.”
The Karzahni’s vine grabbed the vial and brought it close to the trunk. “Yes, it is the stuff of life,” the plant creature said, voice bubbling with dark pleasure. “It will transform me into more than what I am. I will be free to walk, to grow, to conquer in ways my creator could only dream. Just a few drops…”

The Toa stood transfixed as the silver liquid splashed upon a branch of the Karzahni. For a moment, the entire plant seemed to sway as if caught in a gale wind. Then the vial was flung to the ground as the Karzahni screamed.

“It burns! It buuuuuurrrrrrnnnns!”

Chaos seized hold of the plant-thing, its limbs spasming as the power of the energized protodermis coursed through it. Unlike the stone rat and the mutated insect, the Karzahni did not dissolve, but was instead ravaged by fires within. An acrid smell of dying plant flesh filled the air as one by one the monster’s limbs decayed and dropped to the ground.

“This isn’t what it thought-wished for, is it?” asked Matau.

“It was not the Karzahni’s destiny to transform,” answered Nuju. “That left only one other choice.”

“This… this is horrible. Isn’t there something we can do?” whispered Nokama.

Nuju shook his head. This was not a fate he would have wished even on Makuta, but the Karzahni had made its choice. It valued power even more than life, and so had lost both.

Then it was over. The withered, blackened form of the Karzahni sagged, with only its root structure embedded in the wall keeping it from hitting the ground. “Makuta’s final jest,” it said weakly, “the promise of eternal power masking the reality of doom.”

“Yes,” said Vakama. “Makuta has a fondness for… masks.”

“I could still muster enough strength, somehow, to defeat you all,” said the Karzahni. “But… I will not. Hear my words, Toa: You have not stopped Makuta, only slowed him. You return to a Metru Nui much changed, and for the worse. Only fear and disaster wait for you there. But I will let you go… for only Toa can hope to bring an end to my creator. And… he must be… ended.”

Then the Karzahni spoke no more. Nuju inspected the creature for a moment before turning to the others. “The power of the protodermis has consumed it,” he said. “Like Ahkmou, like Mavrah, like too many others, all victims of the darkness within them.”

Vakama knew he should say something. Wise and reassuring words were what were needed, but none came to him. Instead, he felt a great weariness. Being a Toa, it seemed, meant facing the darkness and overcoming it, time after time.

But what of the ones of whom Nuju spoke? he wondered. What must it be like to fall before the darkness inside yourself?

The Toa of Fire hoped and prayed that none of them would ever find out.
“The telling of the tale is done,” said Turaga Vakama, his voice barely more than a whisper. “In time, we made our way back to the shores of the silver sea. Metru Nui lay before us, filled with Matoran trapped in endless sleep.”

He rose, using his staff to support himself. “Before his death, Toa Lhikan had asked that we safeguard the heart of Metru Nui. That heart was the Matoran. Now we were prepared to enter our wounded city and save them all. Our moment of destiny was at hand.”

Vakama’s eyes met Tahu Nuva’s. “And now I have told all that I wish to… perhaps all that I dare. You know what I must now ask, Tahu.”

The Toa Nuva of Fire rose. “Then you must also know my answer, Turaga.”

The other Turaga present rose in protest, but Vakama gestured for them to be silent. “It is decided then. But, hear me, Tahu – I will share my tale with you, and only you. Then you must decide if other ears can bear to hear.”

“More secrets, Turaga?”

Vakama bowed his head and walked slowly away. “There are some words never meant to be uttered, Toa Tahu,” he said. “There are some stories never meant to be told.”
Turaga Vakama and Toa Nuva Tahu looked down on the former site of their home village. Ta-Koro had been a mighty fortress whose walls had never been breached by a foe. But that was before the terrible night when the Rahkshi came, raining destruction down and leaving the village to sink into the lava.

"Why have you brought me here?" asked Tahu. "Surely there was some other secluded spot in which you could tell me your tale of Metru Nui."

"There are many such spots," Vakama agreed. "But none that will serve as well as this one. You see, Tahu, this was your home on the island, and now it is gone. When Ta-Koro fell, you felt loss, grief, guilt, rage… isn't that so?"

"You know it is."

"Then it is the best place for you to try to understand the history I have to share with you," the Turaga of Fire continued. "One thousand years ago, there were six heroes, the Toa Metru, of whom I was one. We lived in a great city called Metru Nui. But Makuta struck at our city, and despite our best efforts, the Matoran were imprisoned and the city… the city was damaged worse than we could know."

Vakama shook his head slowly as the painful memories flooded his mind.

"We escaped and found a new home, this island we call Mata Nui. But we had to return to save the Matoran and bring them here. There was no other way."

"You sound as if you regret doing it," Tahu said, puzzled. "You were Toa. Protecting the Matoran was your duty. What else could you do but try to rescue them?"

"We could have done it with wisdom!" snapped Vakama. "We could have done it with unity! If we had, perhaps the horror that was the Hordika would never have happened… perhaps the web of the Visorak would never have been spun."

"Hordika… Visorak… I don't know these names," Tahu replied.

"Be glad you do not," said Vakama. "Be glad they do not haunt your dreams as they have done mine for, lo, these thousand years."

Vakama reached into his pack and removed a black stone. Tahu knew it well. When stories of the past were told in the sand, this stone represented the evil Makuta, enemy of all Toa and Matoran.

"I don't understand," said Tahu. "You and the other Toa Metru defeated Makuta and imprisoned him in an unbreakable shell of solid protodermis. Surely he was not lying in wait for you when you returned to Metru Nui?"

Vakama held up the stone. "No. Tell me, Tahu, have you ever really looked at this Makuta stone? It is no ordinary rock gathered from the beach of Mata Nui. No, it is far more than that. It is… a reminder. And before my tales are done, you will know how it came to be."

As darkness fell, Vakama began to speak once more of times long past. Tahu sat silently, taking in his words, and fighting a strange sensation. Had he not known better, he would have sworn that the shadows themselves had gathered to listen to Vakama's tale.
In his brief time as Toa, Vakama had come close to being crushed by Morbuzakh vines, devoured by stone rats, and absorbed into Makuta’s essence. He knew that he risked death every time he challenged a foe. By now, he had envisioned a hundred different ways he might meet his end.

As it turned out, though, the Toa of Fire was about to die from a cause that would never have made his list in a million years: white-hot flame. Falling to his knees before the onslaught of his enemy, one thought kept going through his mind.

_The other Toa will never believe this._

His mission had started out simply enough. The Toa Metru had finally made it to the shores of the silver sea that surrounded the city of Metru Nui. In the heart of that city, far beneath the Coliseum, were hundreds of pods containing sleeping Matoran. Unless the Toa could rescue them, these Matoran might slumber for all eternity. It was to save their friends that the Toa had made the journey back to the sea.

Unfortunately, they had forgotten one thing. On their first trip across the ocean, the Toa had sailed a Vahki transport with pods lashed to the bottom to keep it afloat. Pods and transport were now on the beaches of the island refuge the Toa had discovered. With no boat, the only other option was for those Toa who flew to carry those who did not across the ocean, far too great a distance to be practical.

That left only one choice, searching until they found some other way to make the journey. Matau had volunteered to look for old chutes that might traverse the bottom of the sea. Onewa and Whenua were going to try to build a craft, if they could find the right raw materials. Nokama and Nuju were convinced that there was some ancient vessel hidden nearby, left behind by whoever had carved the tunnels to the surface. None of these plans sounded very likely to succeed to Vakama, so he had gone off on his own to explore.

He had discovered a number of vaulted chambers left over from when Makuta had used this area as a base. Most had long since been abandoned by whatever Rahi the dark one had left on guard. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be seen that would be of help to the Toa Metru.

He was about to turn back and join Nokama and Nuju when he spotted another vault door. This one was so well camouflaged by its stony exterior that it looked like just another part of the tunnel wall. Reasoning that anything Makuta wanted to keep hidden would have some value, Vakama melted the lock and opened the massive gateway.

The dim glow of a single lightstone illuminated the chamber. The walls were lined with shelves, all of them cluttered with Vahki and Kralhi parts. Other robotic limbs and clockwork mechanisms were scattered around the floor. It looked like one of the Vahki assemblers’ villages back in Po-Metru where the mechanical order enforcers had been constructed.

_Why would Makuta have all this?_ Vakama wondered. _The Vahki were a Matoran creation, intended to protect us. Makuta had nothing to do with their creation, unless…_
The Toa of Fire frowned. The Matoran had been very careful to design the Vahki so that they would not cause physical harm. It was possible that Makuta had been attempting to redesign the order enforcers to make them more vicious and dangerous for his own purposes.

_Metru Nui will not miss you, Makuta, _Vakama thought. _I only pray you stay trapped forever._

Something else caught his eye. He shoved aside some of the Vahki parts to uncover a pair of insectoid legs, the same ones used for Vahki transport locomotion. Searching a little more uncovered more transport parts. He allowed himself a moment to consider the irony that Makuta’s experiments might end up helping to save the Matoran, then began gathering the parts in the center of the chamber.

A blast of heat struck him from behind, as intense as a flame geyser from a Ta-Metru fire pit. Vakama turned to see something taking form in front of the doorway. At first, it was simply a red and orange blur surrounded by shimmering waves of heat. Then it coalesced into a figure of flame, blazing between Vakama and the exit.

“Can you speak?” asked the Toa of Fire.

The flame creature did not respond.

“If you serve Makuta, your master will not be returning,” _Vakama continued. “You can leave this place. Do you understand?”_

The creature blazed even brighter. Even Vakama, whose Toa form was resistant to fire, had to stagger back a step from the sheer magnitude of the heat. As if sensing weakness, the creature began to advance.

Vakama rapidly loaded and launched a Kanoka disk. A tongue of flame reached out from his foe’s body, encircled the disk, and melted it in midair.

The Toa of Fire hurled a ball of fire, already suspecting it would be ineffective. The creature responded with one of its own, and the two collided, canceling each other out. Vakama struck again, this time melting the stone floor under his opponent’s feet. The fire being never moved. Instead, it used its powers to create a thermal updraft that held it aloft.

_I could learn some things about my powers from this creature, _thought Vakama. _The problem would be living long enough to put them to use._

The temperature in the chamber, already high from the battle, began to rise even more. The fire being was acting as a furnace, trying to weaken Vakama with intense heat before finishing him off. To the Toa’s surprise, it was working. He could see the Vahki and transport parts beginning to soften and melt, and worse, feel his own Toa armor melting as well.

_I use fire, but it is fire, _he thought. _A nova blast might stop it… but it would also destroy these tunnels and the other Toa in them._

_Vakama racked his brain. There had to be a way to defeat this thing! He found himself wishing Nuju were there, both for his knowledge of tactics and his ice power. Maybe the cold could counteract…_}

The Toa of Fire stopped short. Cold was the answer, and perhaps he didn’t need Nuju for that. It was something he had never tried before. But there was no time to gauge the risks, not if he wanted to avoid becoming a puddle of protodermis on the floor.

He reached out with his elemental powers, mustering all his concentration and forcing himself to ignore his weakness. In the past, he had saved himself and Onewa by absorbing open flames into his body. This was something far more dangerous: actually absorbing all the heat in the room.

Little by little, the temperature in the chamber began to drop. The fire being seemed confused, pushing itself more and more to fight off the sudden cold. Vakama was relentless, calling on more of his power and drawing every last degree of heat into himself. The Toa’s body glowed like a star. Through a red haze, he could see ice forming on the walls and floors. Now it was the fire creature’s turn to back away, trying to escape the fatal chill.

_Vakama pushed himself to his limit, and then beyond. The cold was making his limbs feel like lead. More power than he had ever known threatened to consume him. The fire being stumbled backward and collapsed, frost forming atop its flames. As the Toa of Fire watched, a thick coating of ice covered his foe._
The Toa of Fire knew in that moment he had won, but there was no cause to celebrate. He was almost frozen solid and perilously close to passing out. If he lost consciousness, the power within him would run wild and explode outward, killing himself and who knew how many others.

He forced himself to move, the sheath of ice that covered his body cracking as he did so. He raised his arms, ignoring the fact that it felt like he was trying to lift the city of Metru Nui. Then Vakama unleashed his newfound power, blasting the back wall of the chamber to atoms, along with the miles of tunnel that stretched beyond it.

In the last moment before the darkness closed in, the Toa of Fire realized that he had just faced, and conquered, a dark version of himself.

But I don’t think I could do it again.

When the other Toa found him, he was still lying unconscious among the rubble. The fire being was gone. Nokama used cooling water to revive him as the others gathered the pieces of the transport. It would take some effort to repair the parts and put the vehicle back together, but it seemed their best option.

That left them with only one problem. “It won’t swim-float,” pointed out Matau. “The other transport stayed afloat for maybe a minute before we lashed the pods to the bottom. And we have no Matoran-pods to use this time.”

“No, but we might have something that can replace them,” said Onewa. “Come with me, and bring your aero-slicers.”

An hour later, the two Toa returned, both of them carrying armloads of blackened logs. They didn’t have to explain where they had got them. The Toa had only recently witnessed the death of the Karzahnii, a plant creature created by Makuta with an appetite for conquest. Onewa had decided to put the trunk and branches to good use.

If the idea of using the Karzahnii to help them make it back home bothered any of the Toa, they didn’t say anything. Vakama welded the parts of the transport together while Onewa, Matau and Whenua turned the logs into a crude raft. When the transport was done, they lashed the raft to the bottom and pushed it into the water. It wasn’t the most seaworthy vessel ever to ride the waves, but it didn’t sink either.

As they boarded the new boat, christened Lhikan II, none of the Toa noticed a small, green shoot growing from one of the logs. It would be an oversight they would come to regret.

Matau sat in the cockpit. He was just about to start the transport’s insectoid legs moving when he noticed Nuju’s disapproving gaze.

“What?”

“I think I should drive,” said Nuju.

“You?” laughed the Toa of Air. “A Ko-Metru librarian, steer-piloting a machine like this? Why?”

“Because I remember what happened the last time you drove.”

“Yes, we only found a beautiful home-island, Nuju. Nothing very important or special,” Matau replied, sarcastically.

The Toa of Ice shook his head. “How is it that you manage to remember only the good things, never the bad?”

Matau grinned. “Practice, brother. Lots and lots of practice.”

Onewa crouched at the bow of the vessel, his eyes locked on the silhouette of Metru Nui. He expected the city to be dark, and it was, nor was he surprised that only one sun now shone in the heavens. Makuta had drawn upon great and terrible forces when they fought him in Metru Nui. There was no telling what damage might have been done to the city of legends during that conflict.

Still, something about the look of the city was nagging at him. He might not have spent his life in crystal towers like Nuju, or soaring through chutes like Matau, but he knew Metru Nui. He knew its
rhythms, its feel, almost as if it were an old and trusted friend. Even stripped of its population, there were things that could not change about Metru Nui.

And yet they have…

“What do you see?” asked Whenua.

“Mist, everywhere, shrouding the city… can’t you spot it yourself?”

“You know my eyes are not strong in the light,” said the Toa of Earth. “Maybe that is why I can’t see what you do.”

“Or maybe you just don’t want to.” Then, more gently, Onewa continued, “You really didn’t want to leave, did you?”

“Of course not. It’s our home. Battered, bruised, but still the only place we have ever known. We could have stayed and rebuilt. We still could.”

Onewa said nothing. The same thoughts had occurred to him many times over the past few days. It had been Vakama’s visions that told them they must move on to a new land, beyond the Great Barrier, a place where Matoran could live in peace. What if the Toa of Fire was wrong?

He pushed the idea out of his mind. True, he had doubted Vakama from the beginning, but each time he had been proven wrong. It was too late to begin regretting the course of action they had all agreed upon. More than that, it was simply too painful to consider the possibility that they were abandoning Metru Nui for nothing.

His eye was drawn to movement in the city. With all the Matoran trapped in slumber, nothing should have been darting across the rooftops. Could Makuta already be free? Are we sailing into a trap?

“Nuju!” he called. “I have need of your vision.”

The Toa of Ice moved to stand beside him. Onewa pointed to the southern tip of the city. Nuju focused the telescopic lens of his mask on that point. He stared straight ahead for a long minute, never speaking, until Onewa could no longer contain his impatience.

“What is it? What do you see?”

“Something is preparing to welcome us home,” Nuju answered quietly. “We should make certain we do not attend the celebration empty-handed.”
Whenua watched, puzzled, as Nuju and Nokama practiced complicated tactical maneuvers on the deck. Using both tools and elemental powers, they engaged in mock battle with the same intensity as if they were challenging a Vahki. Nokama hurled water blasts and Nuju froze them; Nuju tried to trip her up with his crystal spikes, only to be felled himself by her hydro blades.

"Is this really necessary?" asked the Toa of Earth. "What is in Metru Nui that we can’t handle?"

"It never hurts to be fully prepared," Nuju answered, narrowly evading a blow from Nokama's tool.

"Nuju saw Rahkshi – lots of them – on the rooftops," Nokama said, parrying strikes from the Toa of Ice. "If they have emerged from the tunnels, it must mean the Vahki are either shut down or else too busy to challenge them. Either way, it means things could be worse than we thought."

"I wish I could have seen more," Nuju continued. "But the mist makes it difficult, and there was something more… something I couldn’t make out. It was everywhere, obscuring the buildings and spires of the city. I fear for Metru Nui."

Vakama’s reaction to the news had been to urge Matau to increase their speed. The Toa of Air was never one to turn down a chance to make a vehicle go faster, but the choppy seas were beginning to make even him nervous.

"The skies are gray-dark," he said. "Lots of lightning, too. Might not be the best time to cross."

"We keep going," answered Vakama.

"And then there is what Nuju spotted," said Onewa. "We should send one or two of us ahead as a scouting party. I would volunteer. Make sure we know what we are walking into."

Vakama shook his head. "We can’t afford the delay. I don’t want the Matoran trapped in those sleep pods any longer than they absolutely have to be."

"If we end up Rahi bones on the shore, they will be sleeping a good long time," Matau muttered. "Vahki transports are built for calm seas, not storm-tossed."

A wave washed over the deck of the transport. Vakama and Onewa held onto the railing to keep from being swept overboard. But the sea’s argument made no more difference to the Toa of Fire than did Matau’s.

"Waiting increases the risk that Rahkshi or something else will break into the Coliseum and harm the Matoran," he said firmly. "So we go on. If we wanted smooth seas and safety, we should never have become Toa."

Matau watched the Toa of Fire walk away, and said to himself, "Or one of us shouldn’t have, anyway."

Ga-Matoran in Metru Nui had a special fondness for boat racing. In their off-time, they would often gather at the canals with miniature replicas of Ga-Metru vessels and sail them against each other to
see which was the fastest. The truly daring would wait for those times when the channels were opened to the sea and huge tides of liquid protodermis would sweep through the canals. More than one little boat was swept up by the current in those races and smashed to shards against the walls.

Nokama was beginning to get an idea of how those vessels felt. Twin storms had converged on the Lhikan II, hurling it this way and that. Tidal waves threatened to swamp or sink the boat. Vakama had ordered Nuju, Whenua, and Onewa below to lessen the chance they would be swept overboard. He remained near the cockpit, keeping watch as Matau struggled to keep the transport on course for Metru Nui. For her part, Nokama was straining her elemental powers to try to calm the raging seas.

“It’s no use!” she cried. “The storm is too strong for me to control! We need to turn back!”

“Nowhere to turn back to now!” shouted Matau. “It stretches all the way to the Great Barrier. Forward-sail or backward-sail, the end is the same.”

“If we can’t outrun it, we will just have to plow through it,” said Vakama. “Keep on course.”

“I never knew Ta-Matoran were such ever-smart sailors,” snapped the Toa of Air. “What do you think I’m trying to do?”

The ocean ended the argument. A massive swell lifted the vessel high into the air. At the apex, a lightning bolt slammed into the bow, shearing off a large chunk of the hull. Then the wave pitched the ship forward, sending it plunging at high speed toward the shoreline of Metru Nui.

“Hang on!” shouted Vakama.

Like one of those miniature Ga-Metru toy boats, the Lhikan II slammed into the sea and disintegrated on impact. The tide swept the shattered pieces of the transport and the Karzahni cuttings in every direction, but of the Toa there was no sign.

A small Rahi reptile skittered across the rubble-strewn shores of Le-Metru. Now and then, small fish would work their way this close to the city’s edge and become trapped among the rocks, making them easy prey. The larger animals stayed away from the water, especially in a storm, so it was a safe place to find a meal.

Something stirred in the muck. The reptile paused, eyes wide, waiting to see if it was dinner or some marine predator driven to shore by the violent seas. When Toa Onewa’s head popped up out of the mud, the Rahi leapt in fright and raced off.

“Well, that… stunk,” said the Toa of Stone.

A second figure rose up, covered in mud and seaweed, looking like a creature even an archivist couldn’t love. Onewa let out an involuntary cry of surprise and struggled to free his proto pitons from the mud. The figure raised a muck-encrusted arm and scraped the mud from its face, revealing the familiar mask of the Toa of Ice.

“It would appear there was an error in our transport,” he said slowly. “Pilot error.”

Matau’s head and shoulders suddenly burst from a pile of rubble between the two Toa. He shot Nuju a look of annoyance. “Hey, I was only order-taking. Vakama was order-giving.”

“No need to be critical, Matau.”

The three Toa turned to see Nokama emerging from the water. “Regardless of how gracefully,” she continued, “we made it.”

“Yeah, well… whatever,” grumbled Matau. His attempt to shrug was foiled by the rock and mud that surrounded him. “Could somebody dig me out of here?”

Whenua approached and used his earth-shock drills to clear away some of the debris. Then he reached down, grabbed Matau’s hand, and pulled the Toa of Air loose.

“Thanks,” said Matau.

“It’s what I do,” replied Whenua. “Good to see we are all intact. But where is –?”

“Are we going to stand around all night?” yelled Vakama, emerging from the darkened streets of the city. “Or are we going to rescue Matoran?”
The little Rahi reptile ran as fast as its legs could carry it. It had seen many strange things since the great shadow fell on the city, but tall ones who spring from mud were something new and most unwelcome. So panicked was the tiny creature that it never stopped to think just where it was heading until it was too late.

It rounded a pile of shattered masonry at top speed and hit a thin, but strong, web head on. Its own struggles to free itself only entangled it more, until it hung helplessly waiting for its captor.

After a few moments, the weaver of the web appeared. The black spider-creature eyed its catch with disdain. It had hoped for one of the larger Rahi who were running wild through the city. Instead, here was this miniscule, jabbering thing, barely worth wasting a cocoon on.

The reptile was panicked. It knew far too well what this creature was – it had seen the like all over Le-Metru. Bigger Rahi ran in terror from the spiders, but they never made it very far. Most wound up wrapped in webs, not quite dead, not quite alive.

Thinking quickly, the little creature decided that if it explained its trespass, maybe the spider would let it go. It spoke rapidly, relating how it was simply looking for a meal when these larger beings with two faces chased it.

The spider paused. The beings described sounded suspiciously like the ones Roodaka had demanded the hordes watch out for. Perhaps there would be some use for this Rahi besides just the usual. Roodaka might even reward the messenger that brought such news.

The Visorak spider plucked the squirming reptile from the web with its mandibles and began the long journey to the Coliseum.

Roodaka tapped her claws on the arm of her throne, deep in thought.

Strictly speaking, of course, it was not her throne. It belonged to Sidorak, master of the Visorak hordes. But he was away, overseeing another hunt, which was fine with her. Sidorak was a skilled commander, and had his uses, but his company could be tiresome to say the least. She needed time to plan.

Her peace was disrupted by a Visorak called Oohnorak carrying a small Rahi in its jaws. The interruption irritated her, which did not bode well for her visitor. Visorak who annoyed Roodaka rarely lived to see another hunt.

“It is too small to be tribute,” she said, eyeing the struggling Rahi, “and too scrawny to be lunch. So I assume this sad, malodorous creature serves some other purpose? Some extremely important purpose?”

Oohnorak squeezed his mandibles a little tighter on the Rahi. His catch responded by babbling out the entire story again. Roodaka listened, bored at first, then gradually growing more interested when it became obvious who the little creature had encountered.

“So the Toa have returned, as I knew they would,” she said softly. “They conquered Makuta, but they left without their prize, those wretched little Matoran. No one can ignore the spoils of victory, not even heroes. It was only a matter of time.”

She gestured to the Rahi. “Set the puny beast free.”

The Visorak looked at her. Something about its attitude suggested it was actually considering questioning her order. Then, realizing what a fatal mistake that would be, it opened its jaws and let the reptile scamper away.

“Let it enjoy a few more hours of life,” Roodaka said. “This city is ours. Where can it go? As for the Toa…”

She rose, the dim light reflecting off her sleek, ebon form. “Find them. Now. And when they are found… you know what to do.”

Roodaka watched the Visorak depart to carry out her commands, and allowed herself a smile. Fate had delivered right into her claws – the only thing she needed to complete her plans. Now it was just a matter of time.
The Toa Metru walked through the quake-damaged Le-Metru. Their progress was slow. Most of the city’s lightstones had gone dark, and those that still worked produced only dim illumination. The streets were strewn with rubble and strange plants had overgrown entire blocks. This, combined with the absence of any Matoran, created the impression of a dead city. Worst of all were the webs, a combination of thick and thin strands with the strength of solid metal that hampered all forward movement.

Whenu was up ahead, using his Mask of Night Vision to try and light the way, accompanied by Matau. Vakama and Nokama stayed close behind, with Onewa and Nuju on their flanks.

“When were you? I mean, after we crashed,” asked Nokama.

“Scouting,” the Toa of Fire replied. “I wanted to make sure there was no immediate danger.”

“You might have helped your brothers first. They could have been injured. I’m surprised you didn’t think of that.”

Vakama paused for a moment before replying. “I did. But if I went looking for them, and there was something lurking nearby, we might have been caught unaware. I made a decision to scout first, and seek later.”

Nokama said nothing. They walked on in an uncomfortable silence for a while before she turned back to him. “You don’t have to feel bad, you know.”

“What?”

“The wreck. Even if we had turned back earlier, we might still have been swept up in the storm. It wasn’t your fault.”

Vakama glanced at her, as if surprised she had brought it up. “I don’t feel bad. We had to get back to Metru Nui. I wasn’t going to let a little rain get in our way.”

A little rain? Nokama shook her head. She had seen Vakama angry, frightened, confident, uncertain, and in a whole host of other moods, but this new attitude was beyond her. She wasn’t sure whether to be irritated or worried by his recklessness.

As if sensing that she did not approve of his actions, Vakama stopped and looked her in the eyes. “Listen, Toa Lhikan was captured by the Dark Hunters because I could not help him. He gave me a mission— save the heart of the city, the Matoran — and I failed. He died taking a blast meant for me, because I wasn’t good enough to stop Makuta before that.”

Vakama’s eyes blazed. “I won’t fail again. The Matoran will be saved, with the rest of you… or without you.”

“This is not Le-Metru,” Matau repeated for the fifth time. “It is a bad thought-dream.”

“I am sorry,” said Whenu. “But it is real. And I am sure the rest of the city looks just as bad.”

“Nothing could be as bad as this,” Matau replied. “So many chutes broken… streets buckled… green-growth everywhere… buildings shattered… if this is what happens when we win a fight, I hope we never lose one.”

“It could all be repaired,” Whenu said quietly. “But Vakama says we have to leave and start fresh on the island.”

“The thought of trying to fix all this does not bring happy-cheer,” said Matau. “But neither does trying to ride Ussal carts through that swamp in our new home.”

“What do you really think of his visions?”

Matau shrugged. “They have been right, so far.” He paused, before adding, “Often enough that we might follow one’s lead, even if he simply made it up.”

Whenu looked at Matau. Had the Toa of Air just suggested that the entire move to the island might be the result of a lie on the part of Vakama? Why? What could Vakama hope to gain by leading them to a strange new land?

The problem with questions, he decided, is that they are impossible to forget, once they have been asked. If you cannot forget them, then you have to find answers for them, even when you would rather not.

He was almost grateful for the noise that interrupted his thoughts. It had come from off to the right, site of some of the thicker vegetation that now choked the streets. Something was in there, most
likely a Rahi. Whenua silently signaled for Matau to circle to the right and see if he could flush out the creature. Once it was out in the open, the Toa of Earth could use his Mask of Night Vision to blind it until it could be subdued.

Matau had gone perhaps four steps into the tall grass when he found himself tangled in web. Unlike some of the other ones that had been old and brittle, this one was fresh and stubbornly clung to him. He started to hack at it with his slicers before realizing that thrashing about would just draw the attention of the hidden Rahi.

He was half-right. His movements did attract unwanted notice, but not from Rahi. Instead, three Vahki Rorzakh rose out of the tangle of grass and vines. Their eyes flashed scarlet as they spotted Matau, now helplessly tangled in the web.

As one, the Vahki shifted from four-legged to two-legged mode. As one, they raised their stun staffs and aimed them at Matau. Even more shocking, as one – they spoke!

“Surrender, intruder… or perish.”
Matau braced himself and prepared to move. Vahki stun staffs affected the mind only, so he didn’t have to worry about physical damage. The trick would be dodging while stuck in the web.

“Surrender, intruder,” the Vahki repeated. Their voices were harsh, mechanical, and riddled with static. That was not half so disturbing as the fact that they even had voices. Vahki had always communicated via ultrasonics, never in an understandable language.

Matau heard Whenua’s earthshock drills revving. So did the Vahki, two of their number breaking off to investigate. “Whenua, watch out! Vahki!” the Toa of Air shouted.

One of the remaining Vahki unleashed a blast from his stun staff. Matau barely managed to duck his head out of the way. The bolt struck the web and promptly incinerated a large portion of it.

Behind his mask, Matau’s eyes widened. Vahki stun blasts couldn’t do that! They were specifically designed not to cause property damage or injure Matoran. What was going on here?

Another blast sounded to his left. He heard Whenua grunt and hit the ground. The other Toa would be there any moment, but there was no guarantee they would be in time. The Vahki’s bolt had weakened the web, not much, but it would have to be enough.

Matau threw himself forward as if he were going to do a somersault. Some of the web ripped away from his back, as his slicers cut through more. Twin bolts struck him before he could free himself, blasting him back through the web and into a clearing. He was loose, but close to unconsciousness.

Whenua was having his own problems. The Vahki had caught him by surprise, the impact from their stun staffs even more so. Now they were standing over him, demanding he decide between surrender or a sudden halt to his life processes.

He went with a third option. Sending forth his elemental power, Whenua caused two pillars of earth to rise rapidly out of the ground, carrying the Vahki high into the air. Then he sat up and sheared through the pillars with his drills, sending the robotic order enforcers plummeting to the ground. As soon as they recovered from the shock, they would go into flight mode, but that gave Whenua time to head back for the other Toa.

He was halfway down the path when he heard two crashes behind him. Looking back at the sparking, ruined machines, he wondered why they hadn’t thought to fly.

The two Vahki lay silent, their robotic bodies mangled by the fall. Then, with painful slowness, their mechanical parts began to twist and bend, reshaping themselves. Limbs that had been twisted beyond repair were now straight and whole again. Shells that had been all but shattered were made solid once more.

Light returned to the eyes of the Vahki. They rose, using their staffs as forelegs and listening intently for the sounds of intruders. Hearing something that seemed out of place, they quietly moved down the path Whenua had followed.
Their programming was crystal clear. Their duty, as it had always been, was to prevent disorder in the city of Metru Nui. Unfortunately, living creatures were a constant source of disturbance to the natural order of things. But although the recent cataclysm had badly damaged the city, it had also opened the Vahki’s eyes to a simple truth that changed their mission forever.

After all, there would be no disorder in Metru Nui... if there was nothing left alive.
A pair of Visorak clung to a web high above the district of Le-Metru. Any other creature would have been unable to see much of anything below, due to the thick vegetation and dense mist. But the keen eyes of the Visorak saw all that went on in the ruined streets of Metru Nui.

The Earth Toa and the Air Toa had joined forces again and were approaching the others. All to the good – the hunt would go faster if they were all together. The Visorak were about to send a signal through the web to summon others of their kind when they spotted more movement in the streets. Vahki. Perhaps a dozen of them were now closing in on the Toa’s location.

This was a problem. Roodaka demanded that these Toa be brought to her, not necessarily alive. However, the Vahki would leave nothing, not even remains, to be presented to the queen. In that case, her wrath would be terrible indeed.

One of the Visorak set the web to vibrating, a message that would be picked up by its kind all over the district. All were instructed to monitor the Toa and the Vahki and, if necessary, take action. How shocked the heroes of Metru Nui would be if they discovered the identities of the ones who had saved their lives.

Later on, of course, after they had met the Hordika, the Toa would probably wish the y were dead. And who could say, perhaps if she were feeling generous, Roodaka might oblige them.

“Vahki that talk?” asked Nuju, his voice heavy with disbelief. “And fire destructive blasts? I think the strain is getting to you, Matau.”

“I saw it too,” said Whenua. “They were ready to kill me.”

“But they didn’t,” Vakama cut in. “And we don’t have time to worry about Vahki. We have Matoran to save. If they get in our way, we will deal with them then.”

“If they get in our way?” snapped Matau. “They weren’t throwing a happy-surprise Naming Day for us back there!”

“Relax, Matau,” said Onewa. “Did either one of you notice anything different about the Vahki? How they looked?”

Matau shook his head immediately. Whenua thought for a long moment, and then said, “Yes, there was something. I hardly noticed at the time, but… there were marks on their skull casings. Scorch marks.”

Onewa turned to the Toa of Air. “Where is the central taskforce hive for Le-Metru?”

“Near the Moto-Hub. Why?”

“Let’s go,” said the Toa of Stone. “I think I know what happened here. And if I’m right, Vakama, getting the Matoran out of Metru Nui just became much more difficult.”

Matau tried not to look at the Moto-Hub as the Toa drew closer to it. As a Matoran, he had spent almost all his spare time there, watching the assemblers work or testing new vehicles on the track. Now a portion of the dome had caved in and vines and creepers covered the outside walls. The surrounding
grounds were littered with rubble and vehicle parts. For the first time, Matau considered that maybe the Matoran were lucky to have slept through all this.

"Best not to think about it," said Nokama, as if she had read his mind. "I am hoping we won’t have to go to Ga-Metru at all. I dread seeing what has become of my school and the Great Temple."

Matau said nothing. He had already decided to limit his flying as much as possible. The less he saw of the new Metru Nui, the better.

"Over here!" Onewa called. Matau and Nokama hurried to join the others at the remains of the Vahki Le-Metru subdivision hive. Whenua tore the metal door off its hinges while the others braced for a possible attack.

Nothing sprang out at them. Whenua used his mask to illuminate the interior. It was a tangled mess of wires leading to and from power cradles. When not on patrol, the Vahki rested in these frames and were recharged with energy from the power plant.

"Shine the light over here," Onewa said as he began rummaging through the debris. "My first clue was when you said you could understand what the Vahki were saying."

"That’s right," answered Whenua. "Everyone knows Vahki don’t speak Matoran."

"Correction. Everyone outside of Po-Metru thinks they know that," said Onewa. "Remember, an Onu-Matoran may have designed the Vahki, but Po-Matoran built them."

The Toa of Stone fished a charred Vahki head and arm out of the rubble. "Blown to pieces. I bet that happened to a lot of them. Otherwise, the city would be overrun already."

He tossed the robot head to Whenua. "Vahki always spoke Matoran. They just spoke it at such a high pitch and speed that no one could understand them. When you said they were making sense, I knew something had happened that affected their speech centers, and maybe the rest of them too."

Onewa bent down, grabbed one of the power cradles, and with a mighty heave, tore it loose. He dragged it out of the hive and dropped it at the feet of the Toa. The metal frame was scorched and partially melted.

"There. When Makuta overloaded the power plant, the feedback shot through the hives. Most of the Vahki were destroyed by it. The ones who weren’t absorbed the energy surge and were… changed."

A half dozen energy bolts sizzled through the air around the Toa Metru. The heroes scattered as the blasts tore holes in the hive. Right on the heels of the attack came the sight of three Nuurakh and three Keerakh closing in on the location.

Vakama raised his disk launcher and Nuju his crystal spikes, ready to defend themselves. Matau slipped between them and forced their weapons down. "No!" he whispered. "I don’t want Le-Metru damage-scarred worse than it already has been. Hide in the Moto-Hub. I have an idea."

Running and hiding didn’t sit well with any of Matau’s comrades. But one of the most important parts of being a Toa was respecting the rights of another when in his metru. This was Matau’s home, so it had to be his choice. Silently, the other five heroes vanished through a crack in the Moto-Hub wall.

The Toa of Air triggered the power of his Mask of Illusion, transforming himself into a duplicate of a Vahki Rorzakh. He was careful to make sure that the scorch marks Whenua had spotted were in the right place. Once the shapeshifting was done, he stepped boldly out to face the oncoming order enforcers.

The lead Nuurakh looked him up and down. "Hive and subsection," it said.

Matau thought fast. "Um, there is no time to waste on protocol. The intruders have escaped!"

"Hive and subsection," the Vahki repeated.

"I can tell you to which hive and subsection I will be going next: yours, to report you for incompetence," Matau replied. "They were headed for Ta-Metru. If we hurry, we can run them down."

One of the Keerakh stepped forward. "They were here? You saw them?"

"Yes."

"And you let them escape?"

Too late Matau realized he had walked into a trap. "Well, not really… you see, they were already…"
The Keerakh turned to the Nuurakh, totally ignoring Matau. “A properly functioning Vahki does not allow a lawbreaker to escape. That unit is therefore not functioning properly. I recommend that its processes be completely shut down until repairs can be made.”

The Nuurakh nodded. All six Vahki raised their staffs, aimed them at the Vahki/Matau, and prepared to execute their new command.

Inside the Moto-Hub, the Toa Metru walked carefully among the debris. Whenua had shut down his mask power so that the bright light would not attract the attention of the Vahki. Onewa stumbled on a piece of pipe and almost fell.

“Rahi bones!” he cursed. “I’m guessing this place was a mess before the quake.”

“When did Po-Matoran start caring about neatness?” asked Nju.

“When I started tripping over somebody else’s junk,” Onewa replied. “What’s taking Matau so long?”

“He’s probably in command of the squad by now,” Whenua chuckled. “And leading them to…”

The Toa of Earth’s voice trailed off.

Nokama turned around to look at him. She could barely see Whenua’s outline in the dim light. He was facing the wall, examining something she could not make out. “What is it?” she asked.

“Look for yourself,” answered Whenua, shining a narrow beam of light onto the metal wall. Hanging from the ceiling was another web, but this one had an added feature that they had not seen before. A partially torn cocoon nestled in the center of the web.

“What do you think that held?” asked Vakama.

“I don’t know. But whatever it was, it got out,” said Whenua. “And I would guess it is in here with us.”

Matau did his best to ignore the stun staffs pointed his way. It had been his decision to send the Toa Metru into the Moto-Hub, while he stayed here to lure the Vahki away. If it hadn’t worked, well, at least he could still buy time for his friends to escape. He wondered if his form would immediately shift from Vahki to Toa if he was unconscious or dead. He hoped so – otherwise, the Vahki might decide to disassemble their “malfunctioning” target right on the spot.

The Vahki prepared to launch their energy bolts. Matau waited, eyes open, refusing to give them the satisfaction of showing any fear.

Something caught his eye in the distance. He couldn’t make it out clearly, but it seemed to be spinning through the air at a high altitude. As he watched, it dropped rapidly, headed for the Vahki.

The object whirled in front of the order enforcers, striking each of their staffs in turn. Wherever it hit, acid burned through the tools, shearing them in half.

“**What was that?**” wondered Matau, watching the spinning object soar away. **And how can I get my hands on one?**

The Vahki whirled and immediately went into a defensive posture. Their optical receptors scanned the area, searching for whoever dared to interfere with their operations. Matau took advantage of their distraction to slip away into the Moto-Hub.

High above, the hard, cold eyes of the Visorak watched events unfold. The Vahki would move off to search for easier prey, while the Toa huddled in the Moto-Hub, foolishly believing themselves to be safe.

One of the creatures unleashed a second whirling sphere of energy, this time burning through an overhanging beam on the face of the Moto-Hub. It crashed to the ground, bringing a ton of masonry with it, blocking the entrance through which the six heroes of Metru Nui had passed. Once that was done, a new signal was sent through the steel like strands that shrouded the city, a summons not to be disobeyed.

And the end of the Toa came crawling, crawling across a thousand webs, a vast moving shadow that engulfed all in its path. Rahi fled at the sight, streaming out of Le-Metru in a blind panic. Those who
could not run burrowed beneath the wreckage of a ruined city and shivered in the darkness, one thought holding their hearts in a grip of fear: The Visorak, the stealers of life, were on the march once more.
Matau heard the crash behind him and assumed the Vahki were venting their anger at his disappearance. He moved rapidly through the corridors of the Moto-Hub, searching for the other Toa. As badly damaged as it was, the building was an old friend to the Toa of Air and he could easily navigate it even in darkness.

The voices of the other Toa drifted down from up above. They had evidently traveled in the direction of the test track. Matau found a ladder and began to climb.

The sound of his armored feet striking the rungs roused a creature who slumbered in the darkness. Red eyes snapped open, focusing immediately on the stranger in its new lair. Its long body uncoiled even as leathern wings unfolded to their full span. It launched itself into the air and began to silently follow Matau.

Despite the severe damage done to the city, the Le-Metru test track had remained relatively intact. Its original construction had included layers and layers of reinforced solid protodermis, proof against even some of the spectacular crashes Matau had been part of. Vakama doubted that even the Vahki’s newfound powers could have pierced the walls.

Whenua had brought the remains of the cocoon with him and was examining it carefully. It was unlike any substance he had seen before, thin and delicate yet incredibly strong. It took effort to even tear one of the strands. He triggered one of his earthshock drills at low speed and reached inside to see how easily he could make a hole in the webbing.

The Toa of Earth suddenly grunted in pain and dropped the damaged cocoon on the ground. Whenua looked down at his hand, mystified.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nuju.

“Something in that mass of webbing stung me,” Whenua answered, holding out his hand. “Look.” Nuju extended his telescopic lens. Yes, there was a small wound visible. The Toa of Ice retrieved the cocoon and inspected the interior.

“Barbs,” he said. “The inside of the cocoon was lined with them.” Nuju reached inside and very gently snapped one of the sharp strands of webbing off. A drop of copper colored fluid was pooled inside the barb.

The Toa of Earth frowned. “What is that? Some new kind of energized protodermis?”

Nuju peered intently at the liquid. “No. The color and consistency are all wrong. I think this is something organic… some kind of venom, perhaps.”

Venom. The word echoed in Whenua’s mind. A memory was struggling to come to light. It had first been awakened by Onewa’s use of the word “Visorak” while his mind was enthralled by a strange creature in the tunnels between Metru Nui and the island above. Then when the Toa arrived in the city to find it shrouded by webs, the feeling grew stronger. Somehow, in some way, Whenua knew what all this meant, but the knowledge was just beyond his reach.
“What do you think made this cocoon?” the archivist asked. “I don’t know,” said Nuju, already walking toward the others. “I don’t know far too many things, like what this venom does, how many cocoons there may be, and what they are being used for. But I think our future might depend on finding out.”

Matau was almost at the top of the ladder. The entrance to the test track was not far away. He was anxious to tell the Toa all about the spinning object he had seen that could cut through Vahki tools. Something like that might be a real help when it came time to rescue the Matoran from the Coliseum.

He stopped in mid-climb. Something was at the top of the ladder. It was a dark shape, with two arms and two legs but no defined features. Grasping the sides of the ladder, it was crawling down headfirst toward Matau.

Quick-climbing, but not very big, thought the Toa. Maybe I can scare it off instead of having a hard-fight. “Clear the way,” Matau said loudly. “I am a Toa-hero on a mission. Very powerful, very angry!”

The dark figure paused. Then it slowly and deliberately raised a fist and slammed the wall. An explosion of sound erupted in the chamber, tearing Matau loose from the ladder and sending him plunging to the floor far below.

The other Toa Metru raced down the corridor. Nuju’s theory on the cocoon had been forgotten as soon as the sonic shock struck the building. They rounded a corner to find a dark, nebulous figure waiting for them.

Nuju called on the power of his Mask of Telekinesis and hurled a piece of masonry over the creature’s head as a warning. To his surprise, the entity hurled itself into the air and allowed the stone to strike it. The impact triggered another sonic explosion, this one hurling the Toa Metru backward and slamming them against the walls.


The Toa of Stone summoned a ring of rock to surround their adversary. It took only split seconds to bind the being in stone. Onewa expected it to rage or scream, but the figure’s response was a simple shrug. When its substance struck the rock, the newly made prison shattered into fragments that buried themselves in the floor, walls and ceiling. The Toa barely ducked the stones in time.


Onewa went silent. Whenua knew that usually meant his friend was hatching a plan, usually one that involved insane risk and almost no chance of success. Those were Onewa’s favorite kind of plans.

“Stay here,” the Toa of Stone said finally. “I will be back soon. Keep this thing busy, but whatever you do, don’t strike it.”

“And what are you going to be doing while we are inviting our friend to play akilini?” asked Vakama. “I have an idea,” Onewa answered, already running and leaping over the creature. “But it needs Matau to work.”

“Oh, I see,” said Whenua, watching him go. “I was worried there for a moment, but you have an idea that needs Matau to work. That changes everything.”

“You’re not worried now?” asked Nokama. “No. Now I’m terrified.”

Onewa ran at top speed down the corridor. When he reached the ladder that led below, he dropped to his knees to peer down into the darkness. He suddenly wished he had thought to ask Whenua to swap masks.

“Matau!” he yelled. “Onewa!” the Toa of Air said weakly. “Where are the others?”

“Fighting up above, and we need you,” the Toa of Stone answered. “Are you hurt?”

“Hang-clinging to what’s left of the ladder,” came the reply. “Sore, but alive.”
“Can you fly?”
“Straight down, maybe.”

Onewa dug the end of his proto piton into the floor and lowered himself down the hole. He had a general idea of where Matau was now. Extending his piton as far as he could, he stretched the other down toward his fellow Toa. “Grab on!”

An instant later, he felt a tug on the piton. Bracing himself, he told Matau to let go of the ladder. The next moment, Onewa was suddenly supporting the weight of a Toa as Matau swung free in the darkness. Slowly, painfully, Onewa hauled himself and Matau back to the floor above.

“Come on, brother,” he said. “We will talk on the way.”

By the time they made it back to the other Toa, Matau understood the plan. It had come to Onewa when he recalled Vakama’s confrontation with the fire creature, but this idea was even more dangerous than that encounter had been. One mistake and any or all of the Toa would be dead.

The Toa Metru had not fared well in their absence. The creature had apparently grown tired of waiting for an attack and had begun hurling portions of its substance at its enemies. When they struck, it was like standing in the middle of a thunder cloud during a storm. The barrage of sound kept the Toa off-balance and on the defensive.

Onewa and Matau took up positions behind the creature. “Nuju, I need airtight walls on both ends of the corridor. Now!”

If any of the Toa felt like arguing, they chose to wait until the fight was over. Mustering their elemental powers, Onewa and Nuju crafted stone and ice walls behind both their group and their enemy. When they were done, the Toa Metru were sealed into a small portion of the hallway with the nebulous figure.

“Matau?” said Onewa.
“I know, I know. Don’t hurry-rush me.”

The Toa of Air closed his eyes and concentrated. Vakama had been able to draw heat and fire into himself, so that meant Matau should be able to do the same with air. But he could already tell it was going to be harder than he had imagined, especially with his head still ringing from the explosion.

By now, both Nuju and Vakama had figured out what Onewa had in mind. “Hold your breath,” Vakama said to the other Toa. “And whatever you do, don’t open your mouths.”

Whenua had a response in mind, but a sharp look from Nokama convinced him to keep it to himself. He took a deep breath and kept a wary eye on the dark figure, who was becoming agitated. If it unleashed another sonic boom in this confined a space, they would be scraping the Toa off the walls.

Matau summoned more and more of his power. He had long ago passed his limit, but his task was not yet done. If even a single molecule of air remained in the room, Onewa’s plan would fail.

When his instincts told him the space was at last airless, he opened his eyes and nodded to Onewa. The Toa of Stone gestured to Nuju, who hurled a stream of solid ice at the dark being. The Toa braced themselves for another explosion of sound.

Ice struck the gleaming surface of the strange being. But this time, there was no sonic attack in response. Instead, the foe shattered like dark crystal and melted away, leaving no trace behind.

Matau didn’t wait for Onewa’s signal. He unleashed a hurricane wind so powerful that it blew down one of the stone and ice walls. Then he collapsed to his knees, exhausted.

“What just happened?” asked Nokama.
“Sound,” said Onewa. “The creature was made of sound. Strike it and you set off a sonic explosion.”

“So Matau created a vacuum,” Nuju continued. “If there is no air, there is no sound. We could strike him without being struck in return.”

“Amazing,” said the Toa of Water. “Is there any end to the new dangers we will find here?”
“A better question is, did this thing come from the cocoon we found?” asked Whenua.
“I don’t think so. But I would prefer not to meet the original contents in a confined space,” Nuju replied. “Let’s get out of this place.”

“Hard-ground entrance is blocked,” said Matau. “We will have to use the test track emergency hatch. It’s a short high-climb.”

The Toa Metru headed for the test track. None of them looked back, preferring for the moment not to know if something was gaining on them.

The Le-Metru test track was designed to determine the performance capability of new vehicles. Designers from different metru would bring their plans to Le-Matoran builders, who would decide what was worth testing and what was not. Then a crude prototype would be built and run on the test track by volunteer drivers like Matau. If the vehicle survived the high speeds, steep ascents, and rapid descents, it might be considered for mass production in the Moto-Hub.

Now, the test track was dark and deserted. As the Toa climbed the ladder that led up through the archway to the emergency hatch, no one spoke. They were all aware of the good memories that Matau had of this place. He had spent most of his spare time here, and had even been on the track when Toa Lhikan gave him his Toa stone.

The Toa of Air wrenched open the emergency hatch, intended for quick escapes by drivers should their vehicles burst into flame. It was wide enough for two Toa to climb through at a time and he and Nuju were first to exit. They stood on top of the archway, looking up at the sky. Through the perpetual mist, thousands of glittering points of light could be seen.

“Look, brother,” Matau said, smiling. “Even in this dark-time, the stars keep shining. I don’t think I have ever seen so many, even from Po-Metru. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Get back inside!” Nuju snapped, practically shoving Matau back through the hatch.

“What —?”

“Those aren’t thousands of stars looking down upon us, brother,” said the Toa of Ice, leaping in after him. “Those are eyes!”
“Gukko birds?” asked Matau, hopefully.
“No,” replied Whenua. He was focusing the power of his mask on the wall of the archway, seeing through the metal to the crowd of strange creatures up above.
“Stone rats? Ussal crabs? Really big protodites?”
“No, no, and what are you thinking?”
“Then what are they?” demanded Vakama. “Why are they up there, watching this place?”
Whenua turned to the Toa of Fire, but then looked away, as if he could not meet his friend’s eyes.
“Vakama… they are Visorak. They are sitting on the webs they created, waiting, knowing we have to come out sometime.”
“Visorak?” Vakama repeated. “Wait, Onewa used that term on our journey back to the city, when his mind was controlled by that strange parasite. If you knew the name, why didn’t you say so then?”
“I… I didn’t make the connection,” Whenua said quietly. “It’s an obscure reference. I saw a portion of a carving once, long ago, that contained the name. It took actually seeing them and their webs to make me remember.”
“You’re an archivist!” Vakama exploded. “You are supposed to be able to identify the Rahi we run up against! Otherwise, what good are you?”
The others stared at the Toa of Fire, shocked at the outburst. Whenua, stunned and hurt, said nothing. It was Onewa who jumped to his friend’s defense. “If we had turned back when the storm started, or sent a scouting party, like I suggested, we wouldn’t be in this mess. But you were in such a hurry to get back here so we could leave again that—”
“I am in a hurry to save the Matoran, as you should be,” Vakama shot back. “I made a promise to Toa Lhikan, and I intend to keep it.”
“Did you make that promise when you let him get captured, or when he died saving your mask?” the Toa of Stone said, turning away. “I am starting to think it is not very healthy to be your friend.”
“Far healthier than being my enemy,” Vakama answered, a nimbus of flames surrounding his hands. “If you have a problem with me or my leadership, carver, let’s hear it.”
Onewa spun on his heel, took three long strides forward, and thrust his mask right up to Vakama’s.
“I have a problem with you, your leadership, your attitude, and your akilini-headed idea that only you have to live up to the legacy of Lhikan. We all do! We all have friends lying in Makuta-sleep under the Coliseum, and we all want to save them! We all know the price of failure! So get down off your Toa statue before I knock you down!”
Nokama stepped in between them, only to have Onewa take a step back and unlimber his protopiton. “I will fight alongside anyone – Toa, Rahi, Vahki, even the Dark Hunters themselves – to save the Matoran,” said the Toa of Stone. “But Makuta take me if I will be a sidekick to a fire-spitter who couldn’t find his way out of a forge!”
Matau’s aero-slicer flew through the air and plunged into the ground between Vakama and Onewa. “Stop the loud-shouting! Now! The enemy is out there, not in here. And we cannot win a Toa-victory if we are traveling in six different chutes—someone has to lead.”

Nuju glanced at his fellow Toa. This was very bad. How could they save the Matoran, let alone build a new life on Mata Nui, if they persisted in behaving like squabbling ice bats? He made a mental note that, if they survived to see the island again, he would impress upon his Matoran the virtue of self-reliance. Other beings are just… annoying, he decided. Never before has so much been spoken and so little of worth said. It makes one question the point of having a language at all.

“All right,” said Onewa, slowly lowering his tools. “This is a bad time for an election. We have a mission to perform, so let’s just do it. If you’re going to lead, Vakama, then lead, but do it without treating us like we’re your little fire drones. If you can’t do that, get out of the way.”

“And you, Onewa— if you are going to follow, then do it without constant argument,” Vakama replied. “Otherwise, stay here. We will come back for you.”

“You two are forgetting that we may all be staying here, for a very long time,” said Nuju.

“No. No, we won’t,” Nokama replied, already heading down the corridor. The other Toa followed. “You have all forgotten that there is another way out of this building. If we cannot go up, we will go—”

“Down,” Whenua finished for her, “and through the Archives.”

“Then let’s go,” said Vakama. “And I want to hear more about these Visorak on the way.”

There was little for Whenua to share. The carving he had seen had been indescribably ancient and far from intact. It described a “poisonous scourge” that ravaged entire domains, imprisoning living beings in its webs. The lucky ones stayed wrapped in the cocoons forever. Those less fortunate emerged from the webs mutated into monsters beyond all imagining.

“Why have we never heard of these things before? If they were in Metru Nui, surely the Vahki would have caught one or two.”

“That’s just it,” said Whenua. He peeled back a section of flooring, opening a shaft for the Toa to climb down. “They shouldn’t be here. Remember, before the earthquake, Turaga Dume ordered all the gateways to other lands sealed off. At least, we thought it was Dume… we could not know Makuta had replaced him.”

“He sent Toa to close the passages,” Vakama said grimly. “None ever returned.”

“They must not have closed them all,” said the Toa of Earth. “Visorak do not come from our region. If they are here now, they had to have migrated from elsewhere.”

Nuju, lost in thought, had to be reminded by Nokama to start climbing. Their destination was the lower level vehicle assembly plant, from which the Archives could be accessed via floor hatches. But the Toa of Ice could not stop thinking about the image of a horde of dangerous creatures sweeping toward Metru Nui, outrunning everything in their path, or…

“Driving them to Metru Nui,” he whispered.

“What?”

Nuju stopped climbing. “It all makes sense now. All of those Rahi we encountered on our way back to the city, the ones who were fleeing in terror from the city. They were running away from the Visorak.”

“Isn’t that a little hard to think-believe?” asked Matau. “So many creatures, big and small, afraid of these… well, whatever they are.”

Vakama was having no trouble believing it to be true. “Whenua, how many of the Rahi in the Archives are native to Metru Nui?”

There was a long silence as the archivist did some mental calculations. Then he said, “Hardly any. Do you mean to say—?”
“He does,” Nokama said quietly. “All of the Rahi who have attacked our city over time… the ones we built Vahki to defend ourselves against… they were all fleeing something worse than themselves. They ran from the Visorak until they could run no farther, and wound up here.”

“We won’t run,” said Yakama, an intensity in his voice that was almost frightening. “If the Visorak stand between us and the Matoran, it will be too bad for them.”

Nuju glanced upward. Something was blocking the top of the shaft. Then that same something was power diving toward the Toa, screaming as it flew. The sound of its cry tore through the ladder just above Nuju. Freed from the wall, the segment of ladder bent from the Toa’s weight, leaving Nuju hanging over empty space.

His attacker had already flown past, heading for the others. A sweep of its long tail knocked Matau and Onewa off the ladder. Yakama, Whenua, and Nokama flattened themselves against the wall to keep from being torn loose themselves.

The Rahi slowed as it reached the bottom, then turned and started another pass. Yakama hurled a fireball as much for the light as to ward off the creature. The bright flare revealed a beast far too familiar to the Toa Metru.

Matau, hovering in the air and hanging onto Onewa, was closest. “It’s a Lohrak!” The winged serpents had almost overwhelmed the Toa the last time the heroes were in Metru Nui. It had taken a combination of their Toa powers to seal up the colony.

A second look revealed that this was no ordinary Lohrak. The creatures were nasty, but not particularly large. This one was 10 feet from serpentine head to tip of tail, with a wingspan easily twice that. Only the narrow confines of the shaft were keeping it from flying rings around the Toa Metru. The Lohrak screamed again, this time shattering the ladder below Yakama into dust. That, too, was new – Lohrak had always been more than happy just to squeeze the life out of prey. Sonic powers were not part of their natural tools.

Nuju had already guessed there was a connection between the sound creature that had assailed them above and the Lohrak’s new and more dangerous abilities. Before he could share his conclusion, he lost his grip on the ladder and plunged toward the ground below.

Twisting in midair, Nuju fired a blast of ice from his crystal spikes. The ice block cut off the Lohrak from the Toa, also forming a safe, if not comfortable landing for Nuju. The Toa of Ice landed hard and lay there stunned. Beneath him, the ice began to crack.

“Matau! Grab Nuju!” Yakama shouted.

“I can’t lift-carry two Toa!” Matau replied. “We’ll all hard-fall!”

“Then drop me!” said Onewa. “I’ll be all right.”

Nokama hesitated for only a few seconds before saying, “Do what he says. And Matau – I would guess that Lohrak has a hard time making friends. What do you think?”

The indistinct shape of the Lohrak drew closer and closer to the layer of ice. Matau wished for help from the Great Spirit. Then he dropped the Toa of Stone and flew as fast as possible toward where Nuju lay dazed.

Everything happened at once. Onewa hurled his proto piton, digging it into the wall and bringing his fall to a halt. Matau grabbed Nuju and strained to get altitude. The Lohrak screamed, smashing the ice block to pieces. A hail of jagged ice crystals temporarily blinded the creature, hindering its pursuit of Matau.

The Toa of Air put the delay to good use, using his Mask of Illusion to take on the appearance of the Lohrak. If Nokama was right, this thing had seen precious few others like it.

The Lohrak paused in mid-flight. Above it was what looked like another of its kind, with a squirming Toa clutched in its claws. But something was not quite right… the scent, the way the wings moved, conveyed a sense of something “other.”

Whenua peered at the creature, now close enough to him to touch. “Vakama, look,” he whispered. “Those little wounds on its side… they’re in the same positions as the barbs inside the cocoon. I think this thing came out of there.”
“But that cocoon was nowhere near this size.”
“Then the Lohrak grew,” said Whenua. “And it grew quickly.”
“Can we measure it later?” snapped Onewa. “Less archiving, more action, Whenua!”
“Oh, go chew on a rock,” the Toa of Earth muttered as he revved up his drills. “Vakama, I have an idea. Maybe if we –”

But the Toa of Fire wasn’t listening. He had already jumped from the ladder to grab the Lohrak’s tail. The Rahi screamed in protest, sending a devastating shock wave up the shaft. The sheer sonic force blew the Lohrak/Matau and Nuju back up through the hole.

When that did not produce the desired effect – Vakama was still hanging on – the Lohrak took a more direct approach. Whipping its tail back and forth, it slammed Vakama into the sides of the shaft.

Nokama reached out with the power of the Mask of Translation. She did her best to copy the Lohrak’s cry, asking what it wanted and why it was trying to hurt them. The creature’s answer was a cry of its own that blew a hole through the shaft and the exterior wall on the other side, sending Nokama hurtling out of the building.

“Guess it doesn’t want to chat,” said Onewa. “But I think it just made us an exit.”
“We can’t leave without the others,” replied Whenua.
“Who says we’re going to? Catch Vakama.”
“What? He’s not falling.”

Onewa concentrated. Pincers of stone grew from the sides of the shaft and grabbed the Lohrak’s tail, squeezing it hard. It swung its tail about violently, smashing Vakama into the wall. Stunned, the Toa of Fire let go and fell, right into the waiting grasp of Whenua.

“Looked like he was falling to me,” said Onewa. “Let’s go. We can grab Nokama and come back for the other two.”

Onewa, Whenua, and Vakama made it to the gap in the wall just as the Lohrak broke free of the pincers. Before them they could see the darkened city, mist hanging over it, Visorak webs everywhere, and six flying Vahki carrying Nokama. The squad was headed right back to where she had come from, on a straight line for the other Toa.

“Or maybe we can’t go that way,” said the Toa of Stone.
The three Toa scrambled out of the way as the Vahki soared through the opening. The last one carried the barely conscious Nokama. Whenua tapped the Vahki on the shoulder with his earthshock drill. When it turned, Vakama grabbed it from behind as Onwea snatched Nokama from its grasp.

The Toa of Stone knew the shaft was going to be no place for Nokama. He swung out through the hole and dug his proto piton into the wall. Now the problem was, which way to go? Up meant running into Visorak, down meant Vahki, Rahi, and Mata Nui knew what else. *Maybe it is not so much a question of where I go, as how fast I get there,* he decided.

Down seemed the better option. Vahki and Rahi he knew… Visorak were something unknown. He was more than willing to postpone the pleasure of meeting them until all six Toa were together and ready for a fight.

Throwing Nokama over his shoulder, he began the long climb down the outside of the Moto-Hub. His attention had to be totally focused on the descent. One wrong move would doom them both. Concentrating, he never saw the three Visorak that slipped from their web and began to climb down after him…

Matau and Nuju peered over the lip of the hole and were shocked by what they saw. In the few moments they had lain there stunned, a full-scale battle had erupted between the Toa Metru, the Vahki, and the Lohrak. So far, the Lohrak seemed to be winning easily.

The Toa of Air had yet to change back to his normal form. Nuju glanced over and found it disturbing to be side by side with a 10 foot long serpent. “Change back,” he said.

“Why?” answered Matau. “Maybe I like being a giant snake. No one would dare to give me grief-trouble now!”

Nuju slowly and deliberately aimed his crystal spike right at Matau’s serpent head. “I would, and it wasn’t a request. Change back.”

“No.”

The Toa of Ice shrugged. But instead of launching a blast of ice at Matau, he simply created a thin sheet so clear that it served as a mirror. Then he directed the Toa of Air to look at the reflection of his new face.

One glance and Matau said, “Think I will quick-change back to handsome me.”

As the Toa of Air mentally switched off the power of the Mask of Illusion, Nuju rose to his feet. “Good idea. We have to help Vakama and Whenua, and there’s no point in giving the Vahki two Lohrak to worry about.”

“You have a thought-plan?”

“Don’t I always? You are the transport expert – tell me, why do Le-Metru airships only fly so high?”
Matau thought for a moment before replying, “Safety. Fly too high-sky, and then you go straight down, because…” He grinned. “Because ice forms.”

Nuju nodded and sent waves of frost out of his Toa tools toward the Lohrak. Its wings were soon covered with a thick coating of ice. Despite the creature’s great strength, it could not compensate for the added weight and keep them beating. Nor could it use its sonic scream to clear them without destroying its own wings. Sensing the trouble was confined to the shaft, the Lohrak used its powers to blow a bigger hole in the wall and forced itself out into space. Vakama saw it turn in midair and head for Ta-Metru, no doubt seeking a source of heat to melt the ice.

If Nuju was hoping the Vahki would pursue, he was disappointed. Apparently, four Toa Metru close by were worth more than a Lohrak on the wing. “I’d hoped we could avoid a fight,” said the Toa of Ice.

“We can,” answered Matau. Without another word, he summoned a cyclone in the shaft. The winds swept up Vakama, Whenua, and the Vahki, lifting them higher and higher toward the opening at the top. Matau crouched down, eyes fixed on the rapidly rotating shapes in the whirlwind. At just the right moment, his hands darted into the windstorm and snatched the wrists of Whenua and Vakama.

Seeing what he was doing, Nuju raced over to get a grip on the two Toa as well. Once certain they were both secure, Matau shut down the cyclone. Startled by the abrupt halt, the Vahki plunged down into the darkness. A few moments later, a resounding crash signaled that the machines had landed.

“That’s what’s missing from Metru Nui these days,” said Matau, hauling Whenua and Vakama up out of the shaft. “Not enough crash-bang.”

The three white Visorak spiders watched as Onewa and Nokama vanished underground. This breed of Visorak, known as Suukorak, generally preferred high altitudes where the air was crisp and cold. Roporak were far better suited for a subterranean hunt, but they were gathered on the other side of the Moto-Hub. The Suukorak would just have to proceed, or else report to Roodaka that they had allowed Toa to escape. She would no doubt order them bound up in their own webbing and hung out as bait for flying Rahi.

Shuddering a little at the thought, the Visorak marched in single file after their prey.

Onewa laid Nokama down gently, then tried to get his bearings. They were in the Archives, that much he knew, but carvers rarely bothered to visit this place. He had no clue which direction to travel in or what might be lurking nearby. Whenua would know, but the Toa of Earth was back in the shaft. Everything in Onewa told him that he should go back now and help the others, but he knew that wasn’t what they would want. They were counting on him to stay free, and Nokama with him. If anything happened, they might be the only Toa left to carry out the mission.

He waited impatiently for the others to arrive. Nokama stirred. Onewa went to help her to her feet. “Easy. You took the brunt of quite a blast.”

“I’m all right. Where are the others?”

Onewa heard the hatch open up above. “That must be them now. I guess they finished off that overgrown rock worm.”

The Toa of Stone turned to greet his friends. Instead, he found himself face to face with a Suukorak. A spinning wheel of energy erupted from the creature’s back and struck Onewa. Instantly, a field of electrical force surrounded the Toa. It did no damage, but moved with him wherever he went. Worse, the more he tried to break away from it, the faster it began to shrink around him.

Onewa could see the creatures’ true plan taking shape through the jagged bolts of lightning. Rather than challenge two Toa, they locked one up inside a prison of electricity so they could focus on the other. As he watched, they spat streams of webbing at Nokama, which she barely blocked with her hydro blades.

Inevitably, despite her skill, some got through. The webbing wrapped around her ankles, toppling her to the ground. The Suukorak moved in.
Then they suddenly stopped dead. An instant later, Onewa heard voices—it was the other Toa! He glanced up toward the hatchway for only an instant. When he brought his eyes back to Nokama, all three of the spiders were gone as if they had never been there.

The electrical field faded as Vakama and the others entered. Nokama was already struggling to rip the webbing off herself. In answer to the Toa’s questions, Onewa said he was pretty certain they had just met Visorak in person.

“They ran off when they heard you coming,” said the Toa of Stone. “Nasty, but not very brave, I guess.”

“No,” said Whenua. “Don’t think that. First thing you learn as an archivist is you can’t judge Rahi behavior by what we do. That’s a good way to wind up a deceased archivist.”

Nuju could see Onewa was readying a wise-crack. He spoke quickly and cut the Toa of Stone off. “Then what do you think happened, Whenua?”

“I think they heard us coming and withdrew rather than risk a fight they might lose,” said Whenua. “Why take the chance? We’re not going anywhere. They have all the time they need.”

“You talk like they are making plans,” Onewa replied. “They’re just Rahi.”

“Rahi who have taken over the city,” the Toa of Earth said quietly. “Rahi who are powerful enough to frighten beasts five times their size. Three of them almost defeated two Toa Metru, Onewa, and there are hundreds of them out there… maybe thousands.”

“All the more reason to keep moving,” said Vakama. “We’ll work our way through the Archives until we are close to the Coliseum. Then we can get our job done.”

“What if these Visorak are in the Coliseum too?” asked Matau.

“I doubt it,” Vakama answered. “My guess is that the Vahki are still guarding the place. We will deal with them and get the Matoran out before the Visorak know what we are doing.”

The team headed into the Archives, with only Matau lagging a bit behind. I hope you are right, Toa-brother, he thought. But somehow I know you’re wrong.
Nokama heard the noise first. It was faint, but unmistakable – something nearby was in pain.

“We need to go right up ahead,” she said.

“The path to the Coliseum is straight, then left,” corrected Whenua. “We aren’t far.”

“I heard something. I think there has been trouble.”

“That would be a sudden-shock,” grumbled Matau. “No trouble on this ground-walk so far, right?”

Nokama turned to the others. “Go on ahead, if you wish. I will catch up. I have to check on this.”

“It is too dangerous to be alone down here just now,” Nuju replied. “So we will all go.”

Vakama started to protest. Nuju silenced him with a glare. “It is possible what you heard, Nokama, maybe a Visorak trap,” the Toa of Ice continued. “In which case, it makes sense for all of us to investigate.”

Nokama led the way, with Whenua close behind. “What’s down here?” she asked the archivist. “I mean, what was down here before…?”

“Isolation ward. Rahi that were constantly attacking archivists and each other were sent down here. If it seemed their behavior wouldn’t change, they were moved down to the deeper sublevels where security was better.”

“So anything on this level is dangerous?”

Whenua chuckled. “No more dangerous than laying down in front of a Kikanalo stampede. There’s a reason that only the real akiini-heads on the staff were assigned here — no point in risking good workers being hurt.”

The cry came again, this time loud enough for all of the Toa to hear. Whenua put a hand on Nokama’s shoulder and slipped past her. “Better let me go first,” he said. “You have to know how to approach a wounded Rahi and gain its trust. Otherwise —”

A huge paw slashed out of the darkness, hurling Whenua backwards against the wall. He slammed into the stone and toppled forward, barely getting his hands out in time to catch himself.

“Otherwise you get knocked on your mask,” said Onewa.

Nokama took a step into the darkness. A harsh growl greeted her from within. “Sister, don’t!”

The Toa of Water ignored him. She kept her eyes forward, trying to pierce the shadows. She could just barely make out a large shape huddled on the stone floor. “Shhhh, it’s all right,” she said softly. “No one is here to hurt you. Let me help.”

“Be ready,” Onewa whispered to Nuju. “If that thing attacks —”

“Give Nokama her chance. I don’t claim to understand her instincts in these situations, but she seems to have a connection to the natural world that we lack.”

“And she can keep it,” said the Toa of Stone.

Nokama took another careful step. The Rahi lashed out weakly, its paw never even reaching her. “It’s all right. You’re not alone anymore.” Without turning her head away from the Rahi, she said, “Whenua, shine your light here.”
The Toa of Earth did as she asked. The beam from his Mask of Night Vision revealed a young ash bear roughly the size of a Toa. Even an untrained eye could see that she was badly hurt.

"Trampled," Whenua said sadly. "She must have been caught in a rush to get out of here after the quake. I don't think she will last very long, Nokama."

The Toa of Water knelt beside the Rahi. The ash bear was too exhausted and in too much pain to fight. Nokama summoned a cooling mist to comfort the beast. "Is there anything we can do?" she asked Whenua. "We can't just leave her here to die."

"We may not have a choice," said Onewa. "Don't forget there are Visorak down here, and maybe Vahki, and who knows what else. We can't take the time to play healer for a Rahi."

"The Matoran need us," added Vakama. "We have to go."

"The Matoran have been asleep for weeks, unaware of what is going on around them," Nokama shot back. "This creature is alone and afraid... and I will not see any being die with fear in its heart."

Nuju looked over the Rahi. The ash bear's injuries were too severe to move her. Of them all, only Whenua really knew anything about taking care of Rahi, and he was ready to give up. That was all the evidence Nuju needed that the animal had no future.

"Let's go, sister," said Onewa. "It's just a Rahi."

"Yes. Yes, it is," said Nokama. "And to Makuta, our friends were all 'just Matoran.' Beings that were not as smart or powerful as he, so not worth caring about. We are supposed to be better than that. Go on, if you want to, I am staying with her."

"Toa-power," said Matau. All eyes turned to him. He looked startled at first, as if not realizing he had spoken aloud. "Toa-power... maybe that can help somehow. Look what the energies did for us. Maybe if we work together..."

"It's never been done," answered Whenua.

"Ever been tried?" asked Matau.

"Well... no."

"Then that's why it's never been done," said the Toa of Air. "If we stop loud-shouting and at least try it... and it doesn't work... I am sure Nokama will be willing to ground-walk with us again. Right?"

Nokama shrugged. "All right. If it will get the rest of you to help, I promise -- if it fails, we make her as comfortable as we can and then we go."

The other Toa nodded in response.

"Good-fine! We are agreed," said Matau. "So... what do we do?"

Nokama knelt by the head of the ash bear, her hands cupped above its face. Matau knelt by the Rahi's feet. Two Toa were on each side, Toa tools extended and crossing each other.

"We have to all act as one," said Nokama. "Concentrate. We have grown so used to using our powers to fight; maybe we have ignored their ability to heal."

One by one, the Toa summoned their unique elemental energies. The outflow of power had to be tightly controlled -- it would not do to burn, freeze, or encase the Rahi in stone. As Nokama formed a sphere of water in midair, the other five Toa Metru focused miniscule amounts of their raw energy into it. When it was fully charged, Nokama released the sphere and let the liquid wash over the ash bear.

The Toa watched, questions racing through their minds. Would this treatment cure the Rahi, or kill her? What effect would surrendering even a small amount of their Toa power have on them? None of them knew whether Toa energy reconstituted itself over time, or whether any amount expended was gone for good.

The ash bear twitched and tried to raise her head. It took her a few tries, but once she had fully revived, she let out a roar and rolled onto her feet. The Toa Metru instinctively took a step back, but the Rahi made no move to attack. She simply regarded each of them in turn, meeting their eyes but not making a sound. Then she gently pushed past Whenua and Nokama and lumbered into the darkness.

"That... was amazing," said Nokama.
“Now she has to find a place of safety,” said Whenua. “I am not so sure there are any on Metru Nui these days.”

“She will be fine,” assured Matau. “One day, she will be quick-bounding out of the trees on the island up above, scaring the masks off of Matoran. Wait and see.”

“There won’t be any Matoran there if we don’t get moving,” said Vakama. “Whenua, lead the way. Take us to the Le-Metru hatch closest to the Coliseum.”

“I still say this is a mistake,” said Onewa. “We could be walking right into an ambush.”

“My visions would have warned me,” the Toa of Fire said calmly. “And they haven’t. You’ll see, Onewa, before you know it we will be safely back on the island with our friends. We are Toa, after all – a few spiders aren’t going to stop us.”

An aged pair of eyes watched the Toa depart. The heroes never saw the being who watched them, for he did not wish to be seen. There would be time enough for a meeting later.

He darted through the darkness as if it were bright sunlight, surefooted and swift. Pouks would see to the ash bear’s safety, while Iruini led the Suukorak on a futile chase deep into the Archives. He knew the winding, twisted halls better than any being alive. The Visorak would have no hope of catching him.

Norik’s task was to keep watch on the Toa Metru. They were walking into danger, and worse, doing it with their eyes wide open. He could not fathom the depths of their recklessness. Did they not have eyes? Could they not see what had taken hold of their city?

Norik’s mind flashed back to times past. How many lands had he seen fall to the Visorak? How many thousands of living beings had been brought low by their insatiable hunger for conquest? And all the while, the faces of Sidorak and Roodaka loomed over all, laughing as lives were ruined and great works ground into dust.

He picked up the pace. The Toa Metru were moving very quickly, as if in a hurry to meet their doom. And if Norik did not catch them in time, their lives and all hope for this city would be lost forever.

Whenua opened the hatch, slowly and carefully. He looked from side to side, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just your usual quake-ravaged, blacked out city of legends, he said to himself.

“It’s as safe as it’s going to be,” he whispered. “Come on.”

The Toa Metru climbed out of the Archives and onto the street. The Coliseum loomed over them. None of the heroes could look on that imposing edifice and not remember the horrible sight of Matoran being loaded into stasis spheres while Makuta stole the power of an entire city. The earthquake had followed hard upon that moment, but far more than the city was shattered. Something in the Toa Metru had crumbled as well.

“What is our plan?” asked Nuju.

“Get to the Coliseum, down any Vahki guards there, and get the spheres,” answered Vakama. “Then we get them out of the city before the Visorak find us.”

“How?”

“We could lash together Vahki transports and sail back the way we came. Then we can carry the spheres overland through the Karzahni’s lair and back to the island.”

“Where do I begin to list the reasons that won’t work?” said Nuju.

“Forget it,” Vakama replied. “We will worry about getting them to the island once they are safely in our hands. Follow me.”

As they moved out behind the Toa of Fire, Matau was struck by the utter silence. He had never heard Le-Metru so quiet. It wasn’t just the absence of Matoran voices, though that was eerie in itself. There was no birdsong. Ordinarily, nests of Rahi flyers could be found in the tangle of cables, but now they were all gone. He wanted to think they had simply fled after the earthquake to a more hospitable home, but the Toa of Air knew better. The Visorak had been here, and nothing had been left behind.
Up ahead, Vakama was marching confidently as if he owned the metru. He had not bothered to send a scout ahead or even have Matau keep watch from the air. Onewa and Nuju were so tired of protesting that they were now just going along with whatever the Toa of Fire said.

Next to him, Nokama was lost in her own thoughts. She felt she knew Vakama as well or better than any of the Toa, but his actions now mystified her. He had been so dedicated to living up to Lhikan’s memory, yet he was ignoring every lesson the Toa had taught. Where Lhikan was cautious, Vakama had become reckless; where Lhikan valued the wisdom of others, Vakama was ignoring the other Toa to pursue his own course.

Now it felt as if events were rushing to a conclusion, as water rushed over the protodermis falls. Every part of her being screamed they should stop, turn back, run away. Something was closing in on them, something ancient and evil beyond measure. It would seize them, twist them, and taint them with its touch. But when she opened her mouth to speak, the words would not come. Vakama would not turn back on the strength of her bad feeling. He would lead them into a fire pit if it meant fulfilling his promise to Lhikan.

“Almost there,” said the Toa of Fire. “When we get there, Whenua, you and Onewa can begin digging passages into the storage chamber. The more openings we have, the faster we can get the job done. The rest of us will try to awaken some of the Matoran so they can help us move the spheres.”

“I will high-fly and keep watch while you work,” said Matau. “That way, no crawlers can sneak up on us.”

“We need every pair of hands below,” Vakama replied. “The faster we move, the less chance of any problems.”

“I will high-fly and keep watch,” Matau repeated. “I don’t want to back-walk into a Visorak, thank you, and neither should you.”

Vakama shrugged. There was no point in arguing. When they got there, Matau would see they had nothing to worry about and agree to work like the others.

The Keelerak watched the Toa Metru pass below. As Roodaka had predicted, they were on their way to the tall structure that now served as the spawning grounds. Given the opportunity, they would damage the cocoons and delay the fall of Metru Nui.

The spider creatures began to scuttle across their webs. It was their job to make sure the Toa Metru did not get the opportunity to oppose the will of the horde.

They moved as silently as a shadow stealing across the wall. Each member of this squad was a veteran, instincts and skills honed in a thousand marches. Each had savored the fruits of victory countless times, gloating over the sight of foes trapped forever in the center of their webs. It would be no different with these Toa. If anything, the Keelerak found themselves wishing for a greater challenge.

“Why?” Nuju said to himself, loud enough for Onewa to hear.

“Why what, librarian?”

“Why did the Visorak allow us to escape through the Archives? If Whenua is right, and they chose to withdraw, they could have summoned others to strike at us. Yet they let us depart and make our way to our goal.”

“Like I said… not too bright,” said Onewa.

“I wish I had your confidence, brother,” said Nuju. “But I cannot help but feel that there are more webs than the ones above us and around us. I think we are walking on one even now, and just when we think we have escaped, it will snap shut around us.”

“Amazing,” said Onewa. “I have finally found it.”

“What?”

“Someone who makes Whenua sound cheerful.”

“Quiet!” whispered Vakama. “Watch for Vahki. Maybe we will be lucky and there won’t be any around. But you see? All the way to the Coliseum, and not a Visorak in sight.”
A swirling, rotating wheel of energy flew from the shadows to strike the Toa of Fire squarely in the back. Instantly, Vakama stopped dead in his tracks, paralyzed by the spinner’s force. Before the other Toa could react, they too were struck and all movement frozen — forward movement anyway. Off-balance when he was struck, Whenua toppled over and struck his friends, causing them all to fall hard to the ground.

“Is everyone okay?” asked Vakama.
“We’re right behind you, Vakama,” said Matau, making no effort to hide his sarcasm. “Literally.”
“Bickering won’t get us out of this, Matau,” admonished Nokama.
“No, but think-talking before charging straight into a trap might have.”
“If you have something to say, say it,” snapped Vakama.

Any further argument was cut off by the sound of multiple figures approaching. Noises came out of the darkness, scratching, scuttling noises that sent chills through the Toa. It sounded like a legion on the march, coming to surround the helpless heroes.

“What’s that?” whispered Onewa.
“We’ll soon find out,” Nuju replied.
The Toa could do nothing but wait and watch for the intruders.
Ill-defined shapes in the mist moved closer and closer, finally emerging from the fog. Keelerak, the green-hued breed of Visorak spider, crawled into the clearing, their mandibles gnashing and slimy webbing oozing from their mouths. Mounted on their backs were what looked like launchers. Everything about them was revolting, as if they sent out some psychic poison that churned up every dark emotion in those who saw them. Soon, the Toa were surrounded.
Unable to move his head to see them clearly, Matau said, “Let me guess – Visorak?”
“Yes,” answered Whenua. “In their tongue, ‘the poisonous scourge.’”
“Do they even have tongues?” asked Onewa. “All I see are teeth!”

Seeing that the Toa were no longer any threat, the Keelerak began to close in. As the Toa watched, an energy spinner formed inside the launcher of one of the green Visorak and then was fired high into the air. A swarm of bat creatures scattered at its approach. But the spinner was not meant as an attack. It was rather a signal that the battle had been won.
Nokama wanted to scream as the Visorak’s very presence filled her with an emotion beyond horror. Instead, she glanced down at the Toa of Fire. “Vakama, what do we do?”
But Vakama had no answer. All he could think of was that he had led his team into a situation they could not think or fight their way out of. His failure meant that not only they, but all the Matoran trapped beneath the Coliseum, were doomed.
“I… I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I don’t know.”
Then the Visorak began to spin their webs…

A lone Visorak crawled swiftly toward the Coliseum. It struggled not to surrender to a run, for that might be seen by other members of the horde as a sign of weakness. Instead, it did its best to look purposeful but not panicked.
It scuttled through the gateway and into a massive hallway lined with silver spheres. The Visorak had discovered these in the vaults below shortly after taking possession of this structure. The spider creatures were at first unsure of what they were, but Sidorak, king of the hordes, had instructed they be treated with care.
Sidorak. The name reminded the creature of just why it was in such a rush. If Sidorak learned the news from some other source, he would be sure to take it out on his unfortunate courier for being late. Or worse, he might turn the offending Visorak over to Roodaka for her amusement.
The Visorak reached the throne room. Sidorak sat in the chair once used by Makuta, master of shadows and mentor to the horde king. He looked at the approaching creature with a combination of boredom and cruelty in his eyes. “It’s nothing important, I hope,” he said. “Seeing as you’re late.”

The Visorak courier bowed and began to gnash its mandibles together, conveying in its native language that there was news to share.

Sidorak leaned forward. “This had better be good.”

The spider creature took a breath and made a single, sharp sound. It was enough to get the horde king’s undivided attention.

“Toa?” Sidorak said. “So they have returned for the Matoran – Matoran that now belong to me. I assume your telling me this without twitching uncontrollably means the Toa have already been captured?”

The Visorak nodded in the direction of the great window that dominated one wall of the room. Sidorak rose to look out over the city he now commanded. His eyes immediately focused on a new element that had been added to the scene: six cocoons, each containing a Toa Metru, hanging suspended from web lines far above the streets of Metru Nui.

“Thank you,” said Sidorak. “Kill them.”

The Visorak nodded again and turned, happy both to follow the order and to have an excuse to leave the throne room. Sidorak was known for his sudden changes of mood and might reward a Visorak one moment and crush it the next. The creature had almost made it to the exit when a new voice brought it up short.

“Is it to be so simple, Sidorak?”

The Visorak courier did not dare turn around. It knew to whom that voice belonged. Every member of the horde knew, and feared, Roodaka, and with good reason. But in Sidorak’s eyes, she was a figure to be trusted and coveted.

“My queen,” he said, reverence in his voice.

“No, not your queen,” replied Roodaka. “Not yet.”

“Of course. Formalities,” said Sidorak. “You have something to say?”

“Only that leaders are judged by the quality of their enemies. History teaches us this.”

It took Sidorak only a moment to realize to whom she was referring. “The Toa?”

“A fantastic adversary, my king,” Roodaka said, gesturing to where the six hung helplessly, watched by Visorak on every rooftop. “Worthy of your rule – and therefore worthy of a demise that will be remembered for all time.”

Sidorak considered. Now that he sat on the ebony throne, he found that it suited him well. True, it did not really belong to him – it was Makuta’s rightful place, after all – but the master of shadows was not here, and Sidorak was. Perhaps, with the right additions to his legend, a Visorak king could hope to become much more. After all, where was it written that the shadows could only serve Makuta?

He smiled. Where he ruled through might and intimidation, Roodaka embodied the more subtle qualities that fueled conquest. She understood fear, dread, and the power of symbols to evoke both. Her advice was always welcomed by him, not the least because he hoped she would one day be far more than just an aide in his campaigns.

Most of all, Sidorak trusted Roodaka. That was his first mistake.

“I suppose I could allow the situation to become more… legendary.”

With her subtle prodding, Sidorak agreed to leave the Toa in the cocoons long enough for them to experience the unique properties of Visorak venom. They would perish just the same, but she would have gained valuable knowledge of the effects of the poison on Toa.

“I have always admired your judgment,” Roodaka hissed approvingly. “Only be sure your method allows for some proof. For posterity’s sake…”

“Proof?”

Roodaka’s answer came in a voice as cold as the ice that capped Ko-Metru Knowledge Towers. “Bring me their bodies.”
Roodaka smiled as she watched a small group of Visorak crafting another web. This one connected the Coliseum to another of the Knowledge Towers of Ko-Metru. It seemed appropriate that these creatures comprised her army, for in many ways she too created snares for the unwary.

There was far more to web-spinning than simply the right location and a few strands of silk. It had to be reinforced and supported so that if wind or a storm tore a section loose, the entire structure would not collapse. In much the same way, Roodaka’s plans were constructed so that no one setback could destroy them. Even events that might seem disastrous at first could be turned to her advantage.

Atop the Coliseum, Visorak jostled for position. After days of capturing nothing but Rahi, finally there was to be an “M and D” (mutation and disposal) worth watching. Toa were a rare prize – most were too smart to walk into a Visorak trap, or strong enough to fight their way out of them. Fortunately, for all their victories, these Toa Metru were evidently still new to their roles and prone to making mistakes.

One too many Boggarak tried to secure a good viewing position. When the Oohnorak next to it refused to move, it gave a shove and sent the spider creature tumbling into space.

Toa Whenua watched this happen from his unique vantage point. He would have gladly given up his place for a Visorak, if he’d had the opportunity. But it was unlikely any of the horde would want to be hanging miles above the city in a web cocoon, dangling precariously from a web line, as Whenua and his fellow Toa now were. Whenua watched the Visorak fall through a narrow gap in the webbing until the creature was lost from sight.

“That’s encouraging,” he muttered.

Matau glanced toward where Vakama hung, shrouded by webbing. “Well, fire-spitter, we can’t say you didn’t show us the city,” he said, his voice rising in anger. “Course, we can say that you got us captured, poisoned, and, seeing as I don’t think we’ve been brought up here for the view, imminently smash-dashed!”

Vakama struggled to think of what to say in reply. His head and body hurt all over. He could feel the barbs of the cocoon biting into him and the Visorak venom coursing through his form. He glanced at the other Toa, now all facing destruction because he had made the wrong decisions.

Onewa was about to say something when he noticed the strands of webbing that held his cocoon to the line were beginning to give. When he did speak, it was muffled by the webbing that covered his mouth. “Mmmmpfff!”

“He agrees,” said Matau.

“This is not Vakama’s fault!” snapped Nokama from her cocoon. When four pairs of eyes all shot skeptical looks at her, she added, “Well, not entirely.”

“Don’t bother, Nokama,” said Vakama. “I tried to lead you as best I could. I wish I was better at it, but if I’ve learned one thing from all we’ve been through… it’s that I am what I am. And no matter how much I might want to, I can’t just change.”

A spasm gripped Vakama, sending violent shudders down his body. Suddenly, an arm tore its way free of his cocoon. He looked at it, confused. Surely, that twisted, bizarre limb did not belong to him.
From the balcony of the Coliseum, Sidorak and Roodaka watched as Vakama’s transformation began. Smiling, the viceroy of the horde slipped a hand onto Sidorak’s shoulder, signaling her approval of the nightmare to come.

The effect was spreading to the other Toa. Their bodies warped and mutated, masks changing shape, muscles expanding, their very minds feeling like they were being torn apart and reassembled. It was a pain beyond pain, made worse by the certain knowledge that there was no way to stop whatever was happening to them.

“I’m not liking this!” shouted Matau.

Nuju managed to shift his focus from the rapid changes happening to his body. As the Toa’s bodies mutated, they were tearing through the webs that made up their cocoons, the only things that were keeping them in the air. At this rate, they would not have to worry about their new forms for very long.

“You’re going to like it even less in a moment,” he said.

Nokama glanced at Vakama. He had been the first to change, and so his cocoon was in the worst shape. “Vakama!”

The Toa of Fire locked eyes with his friend even as the last of the webbing shredded and fell away. “I’m sorry I let you all down,” he said. Then he fell, to the sound of wild cheers from the Visorak.

Whenua felt himself losing his grip. The webbing could no longer support his increased weight. He tried to think of something profound to say before he dropped, but could only manage, “Uh… bye.”

Matau watched as Whenua, Onewa, and Nuju plunged toward the ground. It was hard to believe this would be the last moment of his existence. He looked at Nokama, saying, “Nokama, I want you… no, I need you to know that I’ve always…”

But before he could finish his statement, he, too, fell. Nokama closed her eyes, preferring not to see herself follow the lead of her brother Toa. Then she fell, feeling the wind rushing up to greet her, and knowing the pavement was doing the same.

Vakama reflected for a moment that he must have gone insane. Here he was, dropping hundreds of feet to hard, unyielding ground, and he was bracing for impact. As if that will make any difference at all, he thought. Even Toa armor cannot survive a fall from this height… and I am not even sure if Toa armor is what I am wearing now.

He saw a blur of motion out of the corner of his eye. At first, he thought it was one of the other Toa passing him on the way to the pavement. Instead, he felt an impact in his side as something snatched him in midair. The jarring knocked the wind out of him and the world went black.

High above, Nokama saw it happen. “What was –?” she began, before she, too, was grabbed and saved from a crushing death.

One by one, the other Toa followed, each saved by a mysterious rescuer. Matau was the last, and at the first sign of a motion blur, he shouted, “Easy! Don’t snatch-scratch the armor!”

Vakama stirred. The ground was moving underneath him, but he was not walking across it. No, he was being carried by someone… or something. He couldn’t make out quite who it was, or where they were heading.

“Wh – what’s happened to me?” he asked.

His rescuer said nothing, just continued putting distance between them and the Coliseum. Vakama wondered if perhaps he had fallen out of the molten protodermis vat and into the furnace. What if his new “friend” was some pawn of the Visorak, carrying him off to a fate even worse than death?

“Answer me. I am a Toa!” said Vakama.

The strange figure who carried him chuckled softly. “Not exactly,” was the reply.

Matau woke up facedown in a gutter. He had been unceremoniously dumped there by his rescuer, who had disappeared. He lifted his head and looked around, noting that it was the middle of the night and he was somewhere in the ruins of Ga-Metru.

No answer came from the darkness. Matau shrugged and, with some reluctance, added, “Vakama?”

When no response came, Toa Matau reached up to clear the grit from his eyes. The first sight that greeted his newly cleared vision was his own reflection in the liquid protodermis pooled by the gutter. But the face that looked back at him was not that of a Toa. It was the face of a monstrous beast.

“No!” Matau shouted. His hands shot to his face, desperately seeking evidence that what he saw was not real. But it was. He could feel the rough contours of his features where once there had been the smooth, hard metallic surface of a Kanohi mask.

“But this isn’t me,” he said softly. Then anger rose in him—anger at the way he looked, anger at Makuta for destroying his city, anger at Vakama for leading them into the trap. He swiped at the puddle, stirring its surface and distorting his reflection.

As if it could get any more distorted, he thought.

Nuju opened his eyes. The being that held him was like none he had ever seen before. Bent and twisted, it looked like a cross between a Turaga, a Rahkshi, and some other Rahi species. Despite its small stature, it seemed to have no difficulty scaling walls or swinging from loose cables. If Nuju’s weight was a burden to the strange creature, it gave no sign.

Their journey came to an end in the ruins of Ga-Metru. The other Toa were already there, all of them transformed into freakish combinations of their own forms and the bodies of beasts. They were confused and horrified by what they had become.

The Toa of Ice turned to ask his savior a question, only to find that all six of the little creatures were gone. Mysteries built atop other mysteries, he thought. And none of them helping to solve the greatest of them all—what have we become?

His mood was not improved by the discovery that his mask powers no longer worked. Whether that was a result of damage to the mask itself as a result of the transformation, or some side effect of the transformation on his own mind, he did not know. Even worse, his ice powers no longer responded to his commands. His Toa tools were gone as well, replaced by strange pieces of equipment whose function he could not comprehend.

He looked at his friends—where they had once been powerful, noble Toa, now they resembled something that would be hidden in a sub-level of the Archives. Matau looked by far the worst. Nokama instinctively moved to comfort him.

“It’s all right,” she whispered.

Matau looked up at her, then at the others. They were no longer Toa, they were not even Matoran or Turaga. They were beasts…monsters…things out of a Matoran scare-story.

“All right?” he snapped. “You call this all right?”

“We’re all alive,” Nokama replied. “We’ll find a way. Together.”

“That’s what friends do,” Whenua added, his tone more gentle than Matau had ever heard it.

Matau rose and turned to Vakama, thrusting his face right up to the Toa of Ta-Metru. “I don’t hear you saying that, smelthead. What’s the matter—too busy cooking up another master plan? Maybe you can get us killed next time, instead of just turned into monster-beasts!”

Vakama stepped back, snarling, “I’m through making plans.”

“Well, that’s the first happy-good thing I’ve heard since I became ugly,” Matau replied.

Nuju frowned. Bickering was going to get them nowhere. Their future as Toa, or whatever they might be now, was going to depend on the decisions made in the next few moments.

“Regardless of how we look, it might be better if we use our energy to find out how and why we’ve become…whatever it is we are.”

“The sooner we do that, the sooner we can rescue the Matoran,” Nokama agreed. “But where do we start?”

Matau turned to them, unconvinced. “How are we to be-saving when we’re the ones that need-saving?”
No one had an answer. Then a voice laden with age and wisdom broke the stillness, its source nearby yet unseen. “If you are wise... if you wish to be yourselves again...”

Six strange figures emerged from the shadows. Each had a face much like that of a Rahkshi and walked hunched over like a Rahi beast. The one in front was dark red, and he surveyed the Toa one by one.

“Then you will listen,” he said.

All six Toa turned at the strange voice, half wise sage, half snarling beast. The strange beings that had saved them from their fall had reappeared, seemingly out of thin air. They regarded the Toa, not with fear or horror, but with sadness and resolve.

Norik spoke again, “You have become something both more and less than what you were,” he said. “You walk a road that is all too familiar... we know how it begins, and we know how it can end. You must act now, Toa, or there is no hope for you or your city.”

A surge of hope ran through the Toa. True, these creatures resembled old foes a little too much for comfort, but if they knew how this change could be reversed...

“Tell us how to undo this, wise ones, and I'll personally build a field full of statues in your honor,” growled Onewa.

“You would be doing Metru Nui and the Matoran, as well as us, a great service,” said Nokama.

“We know of your plight,” Norik replied. “We have been living in the shadows of this city since before the cataclysm. We are aware of what happened to the Matoran, as well as what terrible plans the Visorak have for them. But we can do little to stop them. It is you who must act.”

Roodaka stood in the gloom of the sundial chamber. The great timing devices had stopped dead during the dual eclipse in Metru Nui – the moment Makuta had waited for had come and gone, the moment when he would seize his destiny. But the Toa had frustrated him, defeated him, and now he lay trapped behind a sealed layer of protodermis.

The ebony viceroy of the Visorak gazed at the stone in the palm of her hand. It was rough and black, like obsidian, carved by her from the outer surface of Makuta’s prison. Even so small an effort had cost her much pain, for only a Toa could pierce the shell that surrounded the master of shadows without paying the price.

“Rest, my Makuta,” she crooned to the stone. “Sleep, and know that as you do, I draw close to waking you.”

She smiled, an expression that would have sent even the bravest Visorak running for refuge. “The Toa have returned, as you said they would. Even now, their broken bodies are being brought to me so I may drain them of their elemental powers. Powers I will use to shatter the wretched seal they bound you with and that keeps us apart!”

Roodaka gently, lovingly placed the Makuta stone into her breastplate. It began to pulse like a heartlight. “And then, there will be no need for these charades,” she whispered. “Together, you and I will...”

She stopped abruptly. Her expression turned as hard as the stone. Coldly, she demanded, “What is it?”

A Visorak stepped out of the thick shadows, looking like it wanted more than anything to run. But if the message it carried was not delivered, Roodaka would track the unfortunate spider creature down and then... It shuddered at the thought and began its report.

Roodaka listened intently. After only a few moments, she interrupted. “The Toa? Why do you speak of them as if they're still alive?”

The Visorak’s mouth was dry. It glanced about, making note of where all the chamber’s exits were. Then, very quietly, it answered her question.

Roodaka’s reaction was immediate. Whirling, she smashed a pillar into dust. The Visorak backed away before she decided to vent her anger on it. But the viceroy of the hordes had no interest in one
mere spider. No, her rage was reserved for a very specific group of individuals, whose name she spat out as if it were poison: “Rahaga!”

“Keetongu.”

After he had spoken the word, Rahaga Norik waited for some reaction. But the looks on the Toa’s faces indicated that none of them had ever heard the name before.

Onewa, at least, was willing to pretend he understood. “The key to Nongu,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Norik shot the Toa of Stone a look, then continued. “Keetongu is a most honorable Rahi, skilled in the way of venoms – not to mention our only hope to stand against the Visorak horde. If you are to be the Toa you once were, it is Keetongu you must seek.”

“But… what are we now?” asked Nokama.

“The Visorak cocoons injected you with Hordika venom. It now courses within you. If it is not neutralized, it will take root, and Hordika you will be forever. Half-Toa, half-beast, prisoners of your own instincts, your own rage… until the day your Rahi nature takes hold completely, and you are no better than gibbering things bringing destruction wherever you roam.”

Nokama shuddered at the thought. This could not be their destiny! It could not have been why Mata Nui blessed them with the power of Toa!

“I am a Rahaga,” the being continued. “Norik is my name. These others are Gaaki, Bomonga, Kualus, Pouks, and Iruini.”

A moment of silence followed. It was finally broken by Matau, who said awkwardly, “So… how’s that working out for you?”

“It has its moments,” Norik replied. “This is not one of them.”

None of the Toa knew quite what to say. It was hard enough to believe all this had happened to them, let alone that such bizarre looking creatures were their only hope. Finally, Nokama spoke up.

“Rahaga, can you take us to this Keetongu?”

The Rahaga called Iruini laughed. Norik shot him a stern look, then turned back to Nokama.

“What Iruini so inappropriately suggests is that this will be… difficult. We Rahaga came to Metru Nui in search of Keetongu, and there are those of us that, well, doubt his existence entirely.”

“Oh, wonderful,” said Onewa. “Our only hope is a myth.”

“And you?” Nuju asked Norik. “What do you believe?”

“I believe in legends,” said Norik.

“Then so must we,” agreed Nokama.


The Toa of Stone and the Toa of Earth said nothing. They had both dared to hope that their transformation might be reversed, only to find out that the whole thing hung on nothing more than simply another legend. Vakama never took his eyes from the ground as he said, “I say we returned to Metru Nui to rescue Matoran, not to hunt down mythical beasts.”

“And you have a way of doing this?” Norik asked sharply. “Perhaps using your new Hordika powers? Powers you have not yet learned to use.”

“I don’t know,” said the Toa of Fire. Something in his voice told Nokama he was dangerously close to an explosion.

“Don’t know, or don’t want to include the rest of us in your plans?” Norik prodded.

“Either,” Vakama replied. Then he rose and stalked away.

“Vakama!” Nokama cried after him.

Norik started after the troubled Toa Hordika. “I will talk to him.”

“What about us?” asked Matau.

Norik gave him a smile, one laced with a hint of menace. “Prepare yourselves. We’ve a legend to prove.”
It was some time before Vakama returned to the group. An uneasy silence lingered for a long while before he spoke.

“I can’t tell you all what to do,” the Toa of Fire said. “It’s obvious that my orders led us to this disaster. It’s equally obvious that some of you no longer wish my company,” he said, looking at Matau and Onewa.

“Vakama, they didn’t…” Nokama began.

Vakama cut her off. “But I think we can all agree that our problems pale next to those of the Matoran. We have to be sure they are safe before we can worry about how to reverse this transformation.”

Nuju nodded. “As much as I wish it were otherwise, you are right. Placing the Matoran first puts us at risk of being Hordika forever, something I would not wish on anyone. But seeing to ourselves before saving them may doom an entire population to this fate, or worse.”

“We are Toa-heroes, even if we don’t look like it,” said Matau. “We have two problems – rescuing the Matoran from the Coliseum, and then getting them out of this city. If you will think-plan on the first, I may have an idea of how to do the second.”

“Then let’s get started,” Onewa said, bounding on top of a pile of rubble. “We are not getting any younger, and Matau is not getting any better looking.”

Norik watched the Toa talk and plan as they journeyed back to Le-Metru. It was good that they had a mission and goal in mind to keep them from thinking about their fate. He knew better than most what Toa were capable of, but in his heart, he doubted that these heroes could avoid their doom.

He signaled to the other Rahaga to spread out and keep to the shadows. If there were Visorak near, the Rahaga would spot them. The Rahaga had survived this long by avoiding the hordes, running, hiding… but no more.

Metru Nui will be our final showdown with these creatures from the pit, he told himself. And before it is done, either Visorak or Rahaga will be no more.

Roodaka sat on the throne that had once belonged to Makuta. Sidorak had departed to gather his legions in preparation for hunting the Toa Hordika. He would rely, as he always did, on the overwhelming force of numbers to achieve his ends. The Visorak would sweep through the city like a plague, never resting until their prey had been run to earth.

But will that be enough? she wondered. These are Toa… mutated, yes, burdened with the dual nature of the Hordika, but Toa just the same. This is their city. They know its hiding places, and they have the cursed Rahaga to aid them. With luck and skill, they might evade the hordes.

That would never do. She needed the Toa to achieve her ultimate plan, and by Makuta’s dark power, she would have them.

The viceroy of the Visorak rose and walked to the massive sundial that dominated the chamber. Once this device had measured the amount of time remaining before Metru Nui was wracked by cataclysm. Now it counted down the hours the Toa Hordika had left to live.

Roodaka smiled. Let Sidorak lead his legions on a chase through streets and alleyways. She would make plans of her own, plans so subtle and so devious that even the master of shadows would applaud, were he free.

Soon, she thought. Very soon, now. By my hand will the light be banished from this city, and darkness left to rule for evermore.

And deep in the bowels of the Coliseum, the sleeping Matoran trembled in the grip of nightmares that would not end…
Turaga Vakama took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had thought that somehow sharing this tale after so many years would relieve some of his burden. But it had not. If anything, it made the wounds of so many years ago feel freshly made. Perhaps Nuju was right, he thought. Perhaps no good can come of this.

Tahu Nuva was silent for a very long time. Vakama expected horror or revulsion, but the Toa’s mask did not betray his feelings. Finally, the red-hued hero leaned forward and clasped the Turaga’s hand.

“You survived much to come to these shores,” said Tahu. “More than any of us ever knew. And there is more to your tale, is there not?”

“Yes, Tahu.”

“Will I have to beg to hear it?”

“No. Despite what my brothers may wish, the time of secrets and lies is over with. You made a choice to hear the tale of the Toa Hordika, and so you shall. As you have seen, sometimes we can be as foolish as any sand snipe and as blind as an ice bat.”

“Meaning what, Turaga?”

Vakama rose, using his staff to support himself. “Meaning you are Toa, not children who need to be protected from the truth. We knew all that went on in those years, and Makuta knew, but you did not. That ignorance might have cost you your lives. Hiding all this from you was as great an error as any we committed as Toa Metru.”

Tahu raised his sword and shot a bolt of flame high into the sky. “The other Toa must hear this tale, Vakama. It is a one of triumph, after all.”

The Turaga shook his head, confused. Triumph? Had Tahu not been listening at all? “I do not understand you, Toa Tahu.”

“Well, you overcame, didn’t you? You saved the Matoran, you became Turaga... you were victorious.”

Turaga Vakama laughed. It was a sad and hollow sound. “Victorious, were we? Perhaps, in your eyes, that might be so. But we paid a price for that victory, Tahu, and so did every Matoran... Makuta’s bones, what a price we paid.”

No more words would be spoken until the other Toa Nuva arrived. When they were all assembled, Vakama resumed his tale...
Turaga Vakama knelt before the Amaja Circle. Before him sat the six Toa Nuva, Takanuva, and Hahli, the Matoran currently serving as Chronicler. All of them were waiting for him to continue a story he dreaded having to tell.

“You know, not long after the Matoran came to this island of Mata Nui, their memories of the past disappeared,” he began. “All that had happened in the city of Metru Nui, the good and the bad, was lost to them. Sometimes… sometimes I think they were most fortunate in that regard.”

Hahli looked down at the tablet on which she was carving Vakama’s words. She had never heard the Turaga sound so defeated, as if the weight of a thousand years was on his shoulders. She could not imagine what happened in Metru Nui that could so affect him. For the first time, she found herself wishing someone else was the Chronicler.

“We had escaped Metru Nui, we six Toa Metru, with a small number of Matoran. Each of them was locked in a deep sleep, induced by Makuta as part of his grand scheme of conquest. We had found a new land – this land – where the Matoran would be safe. Now we had only to return to the quake-ravaged city and recover them all.”

Vakama scattered a number of small black stones in the sandpit. “What we could not know was that, in our absence, the city had been seized by the spider creatures called Visorak. Due to our… my… overconfidence, we were captured shortly after we returned there. Trapped in cocoons, we were mutated by Visorak venom into half Toa, half beasts called Toa Hordika. Only the actions of six strangers, the Rahaga, saved us from death.”

The Turaga’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Better we had perished… that is what some of us thought at the time. The Rahaga told us we must find a cure for our condition within a limited time, or risk remaining as Hordika – or worse – for all eternity. Instead, we chose to focus our efforts on saving the Matoran, worrying about ourselves when they were safe.

“It was a difficult decision. The rage of the Rahi ruled our hearts, and in none more than mine. We faced enemies of great power and great cunning, and we had to do it stripped of our mask powers, stripped of our traditional Toa tools, yes, stripped of our very selves…”
Roodaka, viceroy of the Visorak hordes, stood in what had once been Turaga Dume’s box in the Coliseum. A red Visorak, Vohtarak, stood beside her, awaiting her commands. Down below, Visorak scurried to and fro, carrying cocooned Rahi. These would be placed in the webs that lined the arena as trophies of another conquest.

Soon, the Toa would be joining them, she knew. The six heroes of Metru Nui had combined their powers to trap their foe, Makuta, in a protodermis prison sealed with the symbol of the three Matoran virtues: unity, duty, and destiny. With such a “lock,” even Makuta could not break free. Only the power of the Toa could undo what they had done.

“Vakama and his allies made two great errors,” Roodaka said. “The first was thinking Makuta helpless. Though his body is frozen, though his power is stalemated, his mind is free to roam. His thoughts reached out to us and now Metru Nui is ours.”

The Vohtarak nodded agreement enthusiastically. Not agreeing with Roodaka was almost inevitably a fatal mistake.

Roodaka smiled as she recalled the Toa’s return to Metru Nui. So proud they were, so confident, so convinced that nothing could defeat them. But the venom of the Visorak changed all that. Now the Toa were Toa Hordika, half-hero, half-Rahi, forced for the first time to confront the shadows within.

“They should have fled far from this place,” Roodaka reflected. “They should have traveled to a star of which even Mata Nui never dreamed. Now there is no hope for them. In a matter of hours, days at most, the hordes will track them down.”

Roodaka glanced at the Vohtarak. “But why am I telling you this? You are not even a Visorak… are you?”

The Vohtarak hesitated for a moment under Roodaka’s piercing glare. Then, with a shrug, the Visorak transformed into a perfect replica of Toa Nokama.

“Once again, you are correct.” The voice was Nokama’s, but the Toa of Water had never worn such an expression of hatred. “I am Krahka. I am a Rahi, one of those your hordes have been hunting in this city. And I have come to strike you down like the monster you are.”

Roodaka’s answer was laughter, long and shrill, carrying with it more than a little trace of madness.

Krahka circled warily. The shapeshifting Rahi had faced many foes in her life, including the six Toa Metru. But this Roodaka was something different. Every move she made was carefully calculated and all part of a grand strategy. There was no wasted motion, no scrambling to react to Krahka’s changes of shape.

For her part, Roodaka was enjoying this. She could have had Krahka slain immediately, but chose instead to face the Rahi in single battle. The arena floor had been cleared for them. Now the Visorak watched as their leader prepared to claim another victim.
Krahka had abandoned the guise of Nokama in favor of a subterranean creature whose appearance would be enough to drive a sane Matoran mad. She now towered twelve feet high, with a slimy, pale white body and six long, bony spines coming out of her sides. Each spine was extremely flexible and could be cracked like a whip. At the end of the spines were wickedly curved claws that could rip through six inches of metal with one swipe.

It should have been no contest. The Krahka had strength, height, and reach over Roodaka, and a body designed to make it impossible for any blow to land solidly. But the Visorak viceroy slipped away from every one of Krahka’s strikes, then struck with her own talons. Worse, Roodaka struck so swiftly and so often that Krahka had no opportunity to shapeshift.

Roodaka slipped through her defenses and landed two quick blows, staggering her opponent. Then she launched her Rhotuka spinner, whose power could transform Krahka permanently into a figure out of nightmare. At the last split second, the Rahi shifted into a small burrowing creature and vanished underground.

Silence descended on the arena. Some of the Visorak believed Roodaka had won, while others were not so certain. Roodaka herself stood perfectly still, waiting for Krahka’s return in a new form.

The ground shifted slightly beneath the Visorak viceroy’s feet. Before she could react, the arena floor was crumbling beneath her and she was falling into the massive, tooth-filled maw of a Po-Metru troller worm. Some of the horde charged forward as if to save her, while the rest seemed perfectly happy to see Roodaka devoured.

They were destined to be disappointed. Roodaka latched onto the sides of the hole with her claws and pulled herself out right before the huge jaws snapped shut. Once back on solid ground, she paused and listened to the sound of the great worm moving beneath the surface. Moving too quickly for the eye to follow, Roodaka plunged her arm through the ground and seized the Krahka/troller in her claws. With a mighty heave, she pulled the giant worm up through the arena floor.

As soon as she realized her predicament, Krahka shifted to a smaller lava eel. Her now fiery hot hide burnt Roodaka’s hand, forcing her to release her grip. Krahka slithered away and shifted again, this time taking the form of one of the gigantic Kahgarak spiders that guarded the gates of the Coliseum. Then she spat a stream of webbing at Roodaka, binding her to the arena wall.

“You… cannot defeat me… with my own creatures,” Roodaka hissed. Flexing her muscles, she tore free of the web. “And at that size, you are too big of a target to miss, Rahi.”

Roodaka launched another spinner. Krahka started to shapeshift, but too late as the whirling energy struck her. The Rahi’s own powers blunted the effects of the mutating force, but it was still enough to send her sprawling in the dust. Now back in the form of Nokama, she struggled to regain her feet.

The Visorak viceroy was upon her before she could rise, a talon held to Krahka’s throat. “I could end this now,” said Roodaka. “But you have… possibilities, creature. I did not get where I am by wasting potential resources.”

Krahka cursed. Roodaka grabbed her by the neck and forced her to look around the arena at the hundreds of Visorak assembled to watch the match. “At a single word from me, even a nod, they would bind you and turn you into something so horrible you would die of fright at your own reflection,” said Roodaka. “Or we can come to an arrangement. You decide.”

Roodaka let the Krahka go. The Rahi got to her feet, still in the shape of the Toa Metru of Water. “What sort of… arrangement?”

“Not every Rahi need end up in our web, Krahka. Those who are useful will survive intact, even thrive, under my rule. You can be one of them. Your particular skills and your past experience with the Toa Metru – oh yes, I know about that – make you ideal for something I have in mind.”

Krahka pondered the offer. If she refused, she had no doubt that Roodaka and the Visorak would defeat her… or worse. If she accepted, there might still be some opportunity to get her revenge on Roodaka later on.

“All right,” said the Rahi. “Very well. What do you want me to do?”
Roodaka smiled. “Sidorak and the hordes are hunting for the Toa Hordika. If they catch them, all is well; but just in case they do not, I intend to make sure that the Toa will be unable to oppose me.”
“How?”
Roodaka put an arm around Krahka’s shoulders and led her away. “We are going to do the heroes of Metru Nui a favor, you and I. We are going to tell them the truth about themselves.”
“I want the truth,” said Nuju. “What are we doing here?”

He was standing on the outskirts of Ko-Metru, a district devastated by earthquake and overrun with Visorak spiders. The crystal surface of a Knowledge Tower reflected his distorted appearance. Once a powerful Toa, the venom of the Visorak had transformed Nuju and his friends into monstrous Toa Hordika.

Nuju studied his reflection. His mask and tools had been warped beyond all recognition. His body was stronger, but twisted like that of a Rahi. Worse than that were the changes he felt inside. The Toa and beast halves of his mind were at war now. It took all his willpower to fight down the animalistic rage that threatened to consume him.

He turned to see that Rahaga Kualus was not listening to him. The small, bizarre figure’s eyes were trained on the sky. Nuju followed his gaze and saw nothing but the occasional ice bat swooping across the sky.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Kualus whispered. “Perfectly aerodynamic. Completely efficient distribution of mass. And their flight speed – did you know that an ice bat can outpace a stampeding Kikanalo herd?”

“No,” Nuju replied coldly. “I did not.”

The Toa Hordika wished he could just walk away and leave this strange little being to his obvious obsession with flying creatures. But circumstances dictated that he could not. There was a mission to perform and he needed Kualus’ help to complete it.

“We are wasting time,” growled Nuju. “We have a city of sleeping Matoran to save. We came here to salvage parts needed to build transport, not to admire birds.”

“Rodents,” said Kualus. “Ice bats are rodents. Surprised a scholar like you wouldn’t know that. What were you looking at all those years in the observatory?”

The Rahaga pointed toward a lone bat flying shakily toward the ground. Its wing had been damaged in a collision with a Knowledge Tower. Unable to control its flight, it was headed straight for a Visorak web.

“Stay here,” Kualus said, already leaping over rubble to follow the ice bat.

“What are you doing?” said Nuju. “It’s just a bi… a rodent!”

“I am doing the same thing Toa do,” replied Kualus. “I am saving one who cannot save himself.”

Keen eyes tracking the bat’s flight path, Kualus unleashed the spinner attached to his back. It flew straight and true through the air until it reached the bat. The spinner immediately adhered to the flesh of the flyer and steered it back toward the waiting Rahaga. Kualus snagged the spinner and removed the wounded creature from it. Then he began to gently tend the Rahi’s wounds.

“Handy little thing, isn’t it?” said Kualus. “They are called Rhotuka spinners.”

“Yes,” said Nuju. “If I ever need a bat catcher, you are the first one I’ll call.”
Kualus hastily improvised a splint for the bat’s wing. Once he was done, he placed the creature inside a niche in a damaged Knowledge Tower. When the ice bat tried to leave the shelter, the Rahaga began talking to the Rahi in clicks and whistles, all the while making sharp gestures with his hands. What was even more amazing was that the ice bat seemed to be listening.

“What is that gibberish?” asked Nuju, his impatience growing by the moment.

“Not gibberish,” Kualus replied, smiling. “Language – the language of the flyers, or at least as close to it as a non-flyer can come. Just as they don’t waste any energy when in the air, they don’t waste words when they speak. Perhaps you might like to learn?”

Nuju shook his head. “No. Now can we move on?”

Kualus sprang to his feet. “Very well, Toa Hordika. Lead, and I shall follow… as long as I like where you are leading.”

Toa Hordika Nokama and Rahaga Gaaki swam silently along the eastern coast of Metru Nui. All along the shoreline, Gaaki could see Visorak Boggarak webbing up the sea creatures they had captured. Some of the unfortunate captives would be mutated by venom, the rest simply condemned to endless sleep.

Nokama had taken no notice. She was at one with the ocean, moving through the water with strong, smooth strokes. It seemed that she could sense every movement in the water, from small currents and eddies to the passage of even the tiniest fish. Sensing the approach of swells, she let her body go limp and rode with them. She had never known such complete peace, certainly not since she had become a Toa Metru. It seemed strange that such a monstrous mutation as becoming a Hordika could bring such a feeling.

“No. It is not all bad,” said Gaaki. “Allowing the animal to guide you can be so tempting, you might never wish to turn back.”

“Would that be so terrible?” asked Nokama. “I can still serve my city. I can still protect the Matoran… even like this.”

“But can you protect your friends? Can you protect yourself?” asked Gaaki. “It takes a being of great willpower not to succumb to the lure of the Hordika. Yes, you may discover new powers and new ways of being, but you may also revert to a primal state and bring destruction to everything you hold dear.”

Nokama wished the Rahaga would just shut up. She was not going to destroy anything – the very thought was absurd. Instead, she was going to use her new abilities to be an even better protector of Metru Nui than before.

Gaaki was just jealous, she decided. Even in this form, Nokama was lithe and strong. Of course, Gaaki envied her that.

I shall let her remain by my side, thought Nokama. But I shall keep an eye on this one. I do not know that I trust her.

High above Le-Metru, a member of the Visorak Roporak species kept a careful watch. Its brown coloration allowed it to fade into the tangled mass of cables and webbing that shrouded the Metru. Beside it, an unfortunate Gukko bird tried in vain to escape a cocoon. The creature would fail, of course, and soon cease to be any threat.

The Roporak had to forego the pleasure of watching its captive’s struggles. The green Toa and his companion, the Rahaga named Iruini, had appeared only moments before. Their behavior was puzzling, to say the least. The Rahaga traveled rapidly over the rubble, but constantly had to stop and urge the Toa on. The Roporak could not understand everything that was being said, of course, since Visorak knowledge of the Matoran language was rudimentary at best. But it could recognize the tone. It was the same tone that the viceroy of the Visorak, Roodaka, got in her voice just before she dropped one of her guards from a high place.
The Roporak had already sent a message through the webs to let others know the Toa was here. Since their escape from the Coliseum, the six Toa Hordika had been on the run. They had so far managed to evade a few halfhearted efforts by the Visorak to catch them, and no doubt thought they were superior to the hordes. Little did they realize the spiders were simply testing their defenses before beginning the hunt in earnest.

Nearby, the Gukko bird had finally exhausted itself and given up. In a short while, it would be locked in sleep, with no more worries, cares, dreams, or desires. Its system would slow to such a point that nutrition would no longer be required. There would no longer be any need to seek food, or fly over the city, or build a nest in the cables. The Roporak wondered what such complete isolation from the world would be like. The idea of having no Roodaka to answer to was strangely appealing.

The Visorak caught itself just in time. True, Roodaka couldn’t read its thoughts – hopefully – but the dark one she served… that one knew all. It was best to concentrate on the hunt, and not risk thinking thoughts that could lead to an early end to existence.

The Toa and the Rahaga had vanished inside of the large buildings. The Visorak had no idea what they were seeking there, but it really did not matter. Vibrations in the web indicated that the horde was closing in.

The first Toa to fall would serve as bait for the rest. The heroes would walk right into the center of a web… and never walk out again.

“This was your idea,” said Iruini. “Now you are having second thoughts.”


The Toa cleared away some rubble that blocked their path. The Rahaga was right. It had been Matau’s suggestion that the Toa use airships to transport the Matoran out safely. But the Visorak had wrecked all the existing vessels in Le-Metru, which meant building more. The Toa had split up to find the necessary materials and anything of importance they might need to bring on the journey. Odds were that if – when, Matau corrected – the Matoran were rescued, there would be precious little time to load the ships and go. They had come to this airship hangar in search of undamaged protodermis membranes that could be used for new vessels.

“What would you rather be doing?” asked Iruini.

“Finding that Rahi you spoke of,” said Matau. “Keetongu – the one who can cure me of… this.”

Iruini snorted. “I suppose you still believe that Mata Nui comes through the chutes on Naming Day bringing gifts to good Matoran, too. Keetongu is a myth, Matau. Some of the other Rahaga believe in him, but I don’t. A Rahi as big as that existing for so long without being found? Please.”

“Oh,” said Matau. “Then there’s no hope? We will remain Hordika forever?”

Iruini ran, leapt, grabbed an overhanging pipe and did some lightning fast gymnastics. Then he let go, somersaulting three times in midair before landing on his feet. “It’s not so bad. You get used to it.”

Matau looked at the Rahaga in surprise. “You mean you –?”

Iruini crouched atop a pile of rubble and smiled. “Do you think I always looked like this? Did you think my name was always Rahaga Iruini? Not so.” The Rahaga jumped to the ground, rolled, and sprang up again in front of Matau. “Toa Iruini, it was, once… long ago. But you never forget, brother. Trust me, you never forget.”
Toa Hordika Onewa and Pouks crouched atop a canyon wall. Down below, a small herd of Kane-Ra bulls stirred uneasily in front of a cavern entrance. With all the Po-Matoran gone, the herd had staked out this area as their own territory. They had already been forced to defend it against Muaka cats and so were alert and on edge.

“All right,” said Pouks. “Half a dozen Kane-Ra between you and your goal, Onewa. What’s the plan?”

“That’s easy. I use my Kanohi Mask of Mind Control on the herd leader and make them stampede.” Pouks shook his head. “Masks don’t work for Hordika, carver. Try again.”

Onewa shrugged, obviously annoyed. “Then I use my power over stone. I cause a rockslide and scare them off.”

“Better. Not good, but better.” Pouks’ tone was mocking. “Got another guess?” Onewa stood up and tore a chunk of rock out of the canyon wall. “I take this boulder and I throw it at them,” he shouted. “And I keep throwing more until they are buried underneath them. I might even save one for you, Rahaga, if you don’t shut up. Then I march over the Kane-Ra and I get what I came for!”

Pouks walked over and put a hand on Onewa’s arm. He exerted a gentle pressure, trying to get the Toa to drop the rock, but Onewa continued to hold it aloft. “That’s the Hordika part of you talking,” said Pouks. “That’s the part that wants to hurt and destroy.”

The Rahaga pointed down into the canyon. Two Kane-Ra were charging each other, heads lowered and sharp horns primed to pierce each other’s flanks. “You can overcome that part of you, Toa, or you can end up no better than them.”

Glaring at the Rahaga, Onewa lifted the rock a little higher. Pouks looked into his eyes, searching for some sign that a hero of Metru Nui still lived inside that monstrous shell. *If the Hordika side has already taken over, I am in for a disappointment*, he said to himself. *A crushing disappointment.*

Since becoming a Toa, Whenua had been in a number of strange places and situations. After being transformed into a bestial Hordika, he fully expected to be in even more bizarre settings. But somehow he had never pictured himself lying half-buried in dirt outside an Archives entrance.

“What exactly are we doing?” he asked.

The Rahaga named Bomonga said nothing. He didn’t even turn to look at the Toa.

“We are supposed to be gathering levitation disks,” Whenua tried again. “Remember?”

This time, Bomonga glanced at his companion. Then he went back to staring into the darkness.

“What are we looking for?” Whenua asked, irritated. “And why are we doing it from under a pile of dirt?”

Bomonga’s answer was more silence. Whenua started to get up. The Rahaga grabbed his wrist and, showing surprising strength, yanked him back down to the ground. “Hey!” snapped Whenua.
The Rahaga pointed into the darkness. An instant later, a night creeper came scurrying across the broken pavement. Roughly seven feet long, with six powerful legs, the creeper’s jaws snapped open and shut as it hunted through the rubble for food.

Whenua was about to say something about there being a time and a place for Rahi watching when something else entered the scene. It was a black Visorak spider crawling rapidly toward the creeper. When the nocturnal Rahi realized its danger, it was already too late. The Visorak spat a stream of webbing, entangling the creeper.

Bomonga’s eyes narrowed. With a guttural snarl, he launched his spinner. The whirling disk flew silently through the air to strike the Visorak and adhere to its body. The spider froze in place. Without waiting for Whenua, the Rahaga sprang from the dirt and began tearing at the webbing that bound the creeper.

By the time the Toa reached the spot, the Rahi was already free. It raced off into the night without a backward glance. Bomonga gestured toward the Visorak, which still stood like a Po-Metru statue. “Learn,” said the Rahaga.

The Hordika part of Whenua rebelled at getting too close to the Visorak. It was an instinctive revulsion, one which took all of the Toa’s willpower to overcome. He reminded himself that before becoming a Toa or a Hordika, he had been an archivist. This was a chance to study the enemy.

Somewhere in the night, a rock raptor howled. Whenua paused, listening to the mournful sound. He wanted to be out there in the shadows, too, exploring, hunting, fighting for survival. A Rahi had no responsibilities, no duties or obligations to others. The more he thought about it, the more that sounded like the right way to live.

He took a step away from the Visorak, then another, as if being pulled by a magnetic force. Bomonga vaulted over a slab of rock and put himself in Whenua’s path. “Learn!” said the Rahaga.

“But…”

Bomonga shook his head, saying, “You learn, you survive. You don’t…”

Reluctantly, Whenua turned back to the Visorak. But in his heart he knew it would not be long before he would be unable to resist the urge to join the Rahi prowling the city. When that time came, no Rahaga would be able to stop him.

Vakama smashed open the door to his old forge. He kept pounding on it long after the lock had given way, until the metal was dented and misshapen beyond repair. Then he looked around for something else to hit.

“Was that necessary?” asked Norik.

“No. But it was fun,” answered Vakama. “Didn’t you think so?”

Norik followed Vakama into the darkened chamber. “All I saw was destruction with no purpose.”

“So? I’m a Toa. All we do is destroy, didn’t you know that? Our friendships, our homes, our city… all just rubble. We save no one, nothing. Rahaga. Not even ourselves.”

Vakama picked up a handful of mask making tools and dashed them against the wall. “This place is full of useless junk,” he growled. “We shouldn’t have come back here.”

“You spent many happy days here, did you not?” asked Norik. “Even after you became a Toa, you sometimes wished that you could go back to being a mask maker again, right here.”

“I did a lot of stupid things when I was a Toa. That was the least of them.”

“Anger rules your spirit, Vakama. It makes the burden of responsibility that you bear that much heavier, I know.”

Vakama whirled, seized Norik, and lifted him into the air. “You don’t know anything, little one! You don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me. So stop pretending you do!”

For a moment, Norik thought Vakama would strike him. But the Toa Hordika simply shrugged and dropped the Rahaga as if he were a broken mask. “Stay out of my way until this is finished,” Vakama warned. “Or I won’t be responsible for what happens to you.”

“I can take care of myself,” Norik answered, brushing himself off. “Can you say the same?”
Vakama didn’t answer. Instead, he began rummaging through a pile of tools, half-finished items, broken masks, and other remnants of his past life. “I know they’re here. Where are they?”

Norik watched him search, noting how casually he threw things aside that must have once had meaning for him. From what the others said, Vakama had always been the most driven of the Toa Metru. Now it seemed that trait was causing him to succumb to his Hordika side that much faster.

“What are you looking for?” the Rahaga asked. “Maybe I can help find it.”

“Just before Lhikan was captured, I had gotten an order from Le-Metru for a half dozen sets of airship controls. I made the parts, but I never had the chance to send them out for assembly. They should still be here.”

Vakama searched his work table and a few other piles on the floor, all without success. Frustrated, he picked up a Kanoka disk and hurled it across the room. It struck the wall, the impact triggering the disk’s weakness power. The outer surface of the wall crumbled away, revealing a small compartment.

One glance at Vakama told Norik that the Toa Hordika had not been expecting this. He made it across the room in three quick strides and tore the hatch off the hidden compartment. He reached inside and emerged holding a fiery red Kanoka disk with the image of a Kanohi mask engraved upon it.

Vakama looked down at the disk as if it were a Lohrak serpent ready to bite him. “This makes no sense,” he muttered. “None. It’s not possible.”

Norik climbed up the pipes and hovered over Vakama’s shoulder. The mask depicted on the disk was definitely not the Toa Hordika’s, nor did it belong to any of the other Toa. “What is this disk?”

Vakama raised the disk and slammed it against the ground. Fire erupted from the Kanoka. Toa Hordika and Rahaga watched it burn out in silence.

When Vakama finally spoke, he sounded like a lost being. “I don't understand. This is a Toa disk, Norik, for a Toa of Fire. It’s like the one I found in the suva the day I became a Toa Metru. It had an image of my Mask of Concealment engraved upon it, a sign that I was destined to be a Toa by the will of Mata Nui.”

The Toa Hordika picked up the still hot disk. “The mask on this Toa disk belongs to Nuhrii, a Ta-Matoran. He found one of the six Great Disks and helped us save Metru Nui from the Morbuzakh plant.”

Vakama dug into his pack and pulled out his own Toa disk. Even though he no longer had his launcher, he still carried the disk as a symbol of what used to be. Now he looked at it as if seeing it for the very first time. Even from his high perch, Norik could see that something was very wrong.

“Something has been scratched out,” Vakama said quietly. “I never noticed it before. Something was here and it was wiped away… and my mask carved on top of it.”

The Toa Hordika slumped to the floor. “Can’t you see? If all this is what it seems to be then it was Nuhrii’s destiny all along. I am a… mistake. I was never meant to be Toa of Fire!”

Norik struggled to find words of comfort, but none came. He wanted to tell Vakama that there was some error, that this interpretation of the evidence must be mistaken. Instead, he said nothing. Silence, he decided, would be far better than lying.
Nokama and Gaaki approached a rear entrance of the Great Temple. They had been expecting numerous Visorak patrols to be guarding the place, but to their surprise, there were none. Even more amazing, the temple was largely intact.

The Toa Hordika opened the door and hesitated. Finally, she took a step forward, only to stop again. “What’s the matter with me? Why does this feel wrong?”

“Because you are no longer wholly connected to Mata Nui,” Gaaki said softly. “The Hordika side of you is a corruption. That’s the same reason Visorak prefer to avoid places like this. Mata Nui is a spirit of creation, while they are creatures of destruction.”

“We will need the Great and Noble Masks stored in here when we return to the island,” Nokama replied. “So my Toa half will just have to be stronger.”

Steeling herself, she took a step into the darkness of the temple, then another, and another. None of them got any easier. She made straight for the special chamber in which Kanohi masks were stored following their creation in Ta-Metru. The faster she got what she came for and got out of here, the happier she would be.

Nokama tore the lock off the outer door to the chamber and opened it wide. She stopped dead at the sight that greeted her. A small creature, perhaps a foot and a half in height, stood between her and the inner door. It regarded her quizzically, but did not seem to pose any threat. Still, when she sidestepped, it moved with her to block her advance. By the third time this happened, Nokama had lost patience.

“Stand aside!” the Toa Hordika snapped.

By this time, Gaaki had caught up with Nokama. “Who is that?” the Rahaga asked.

“I don’t know. It seems to be guarding this place. But why against me?”

“It is no Matoran, or Matoran creation,” Gaaki said with certainty. “It is a creature that should not exist.”

Nokama went down to one knee to be on eye level with the guardian. “Listen to me. I am Toa Nokama, the Toa Metru of Water. I need the masks inside that chamber. You have to let me in for the sake of the city.”

The little figure looked at her intently. It was almost comical in appearance, but she was in no mood to laugh. It flicked out its foot as if to kick away a stone in its path. Nokama suddenly found herself flying across the room. She slammed into the far wall, stunned.

“Should not exist,” repeated Gaaki. “But obviously does.”

Inside the mask chamber, Krahka paused in her work to listen to the sounds of battle. She could recognize Nokama’s voice and knew she might have only moments to finish her task. Still, the thought of flinging open the door and crushing the Toa of Water was very appealing…

No, she told herself. Time enough for that later. Roodaka’s plan will weaken the Toa, making them easy victims whenever I so choose. But Roodaka falls first.
She shapeshifted into the form of Vakama and stepped over to where the masks were stored. They were sorted into six slots, silver-gray Great and Noble masks just waiting for someone to don them and use their power. Above each slot was a hieroglyph representing one of the six elements, but that was not what concerned Krahka. No, she was more interested in what wasn’t there.

According to Roodaka, a Ko-Matoran seer had made a special trip to the Great Temple shortly after the first appearance of the Morbuzakh plant in the city. He had carved names above each of the six slots, names of those Matoran destined to be Toa Metru. When this was discovered by Ga-Matoran, they had hastily filled in the carvings, preferring that the will of Mata Nui not be revealed in such a way. It was Krahka’s job to bring those names to light again.

Using pinpoint control of heat and flame, she quickly melted away the protodermis used to fill in the carvings. One by one, the names reappeared. As she read them, Krahka could not stop a smile from playing across her lips.

Oh, yes, she thought. Whatever else Roodaka may be, she is cunning. Too cunning to be allowed to survive.

The sounds of battle grew louder from the other side of the door. Her work completed, it was time for Krahka to make her exit. Willing herself to transform, she shifted into a duplicate of a gaseous creature once encountered far beneath Onu-Metru. Then she slipped beneath the crack at the bottom of the door and drifted into the outer chamber.

Nokama was a little too busy to notice the mist that floated by just below the ceiling. Her efforts to go around and over the guardian had all met with failure. Without so much as touching her, it had been able to flatten her time after time. With each blow, her rage grew. She could feel her Hordika side taking control, but she no longer cared.

Gaaki had hung back and watched the uneven conflict. There had to be an answer to what was happening here, and it had to be found while Nokama was still rational enough to listen to it. The Toa Metru of Water would have given up on charging headfirst long ago, but a Toa Hordika had little concept of strategy… only savagery.

Nokama leapt. The guardian lashed out with a kick. The Toa Hordika dropped in mid-leap and slammed into the floor.

It’s making the moves, but never making contact with her, thought Gaaki. At least… not that we can see.

Gaaki waited until Nokama mounted another attack, then launched her Rhotuka spinner at a point several feet above the guardian’s head. It wouldn’t do any damage if it struck, but it might solve a mystery. The guardian never noticed it coming, being too busy knocking Nokama flat again. Gaaki’s keen eyes followed the spinner as it flew straight and true, then seemed to strike an invisible wall. The spinner fell to the ground, its energy dissipating.

The Rahaga rushed over to where Nokama was trying to rise. “It’s not what it looks like!” Gaaki said hurriedly. “That’s the answer!”

Nokama shoved Gaaki aside with a snarl, but the Rahaga refused to back down. “Nokama, listen to me! Listen! All a Hordika knows is brute force, but brute force won’t work here!”

“Then what will?” Nokama exploded. “Tell me!”

“Do you remember the cave fish? When it’s threatened, it makes itself appear larger. This guardian does the opposite – it makes itself look smaller!”

Nokama struggled to comprehend what she was being told. It was difficult for the words to penetrate the haze of anger in her brain. “Smaller?”

“The guardian you see is mimicking the movement of the guardian you don’t see,” said Gaaki. “It’s projecting a miniature version of itself as a deception while it strikes out at you.”

Nokama nodded. “The real guardian is invisible… water could change that. If I still had my powers…

93
“You do,” said Gaaki, helping Nokama get to her feet. “Your Rhotuka spinner, Toa. Concentrate and launch it!”

Nokama had tried not to think about the strange spinner and launcher that had become part of her body after her transformation into a Hordika. Now that she tried using it, she found it extremely difficult. It required more willpower than triggering elemental powers ever had before. Then, suddenly, it happened – a whirling sphere of energy flew from the launcher and shot across the room at the guardian.

An instant after it struck, a torrential rainstorm began inside the chamber. The drops formed an outline of the guardian’s true shape, which was easily seven times the size of the miniature version. Nokama smiled, but there was no good humor in the expression. It was the smile of a predator on the hunt.

“Now let’s see how good you are in bad weather,” she said, hurling herself at the guardian.

The miniature guardian launched a vicious kick, a move duplicated by its far bigger true self. But now that Nokama could see her foe, she was able to dodge the blow, dive and roll. Striking the guardian’s legs, she upended it. Like a felled tree, the creature toppled over and slammed into the opposite wall. Nokama sprang and pinned her enemy to the floor.

“I am a Toa,” she growled. “I am! I am!”

“It’s all right, Nokama. It’s over,” said Gaaki. “You’ve won.”

Slowly, reason returned to Nokama’s eyes as she forced her Hordika side down. She looked up at the Rahaga, ashamed. “I… I lost it, didn’t I? I lost myself.”


Nokama rose and opened the inner door leading to the mask chamber. She vanished inside. An instant later, Gaaki heard her gasp. The Rahaga rushed in to find out what was the matter.

The Toa Hordika was staring at the wall of compartments holding the Kanohi masks. Carved above each slot was the name of the Matoran destined to wear these masks as Toa. Gaaki squinted to make out the one Nokama’s eyes were locked upon.

It was inscribed beside the symbol of water, and it read: “Vhisola.”

“Wrong name. Wrong, wrong, wrong.”

Kualus was walking through the long central corridor of a Knowledge Tower, glancing at records and muttering to himself. Far ahead of him, Nuju was doing his best to ignore the Rahaga and focus on his mission. But it was growing increasingly difficult to shut out the constant stream of comments.

“Oh!” exclaimed Kualus. “No, no. Who thought of that?”

Nuju stopped in his tracks and turned around, slowly. He glared at Kualus. The Rahaga was looking at a collection of carvings relating to Rahi, all of which were on loan from the Archives. “What is it?”

“Gukko? What kind of a name is Gukko?” replied Kualus, as much to himself as to Nuju.

“That is what that species of bird is called. That is what it has always been called.”

“Well, it’s not what they call themselves, I can tell you that,” said Kualus. “The word ‘Gukko’ might even be an insult in their language. I don’t know, I would have to ask.”

“Some other time,” said Nuju flatly. “We have work to do.”

“Always so focused on the task at hand,” said Kualus, walking quickly to catch up to the Toa Hordika. “How admirable. Why, I’ll bet the air could be filled with flying creatures of all kinds and you would never notice.”

“If they made as much noise as you do, I would,” Nuju said under his breath.

The Toa Hordika led his companion into the heart of the Knowledge Tower. Before them was a vast junction of transport chutes, as big as any in the city. Protected by the walls of the tower, these chutes had survived the quake largely intact. Though the exteriors were frosted over, Nuju could make out the movement of the liquid protodermis within.

Nuju walked to a niche in the wall and pulled out a long, curved blade that seemed to pulsate with energy. “All right. This is simple. Le-Matoran do it all the time.” He handed the blade to Kualus. “Get up
on top of the chutes and slice one in two places about 1.5 bios apart. As it falls, I will use my Rhotuka spinners to freeze both ends and seal in the liquid protodermis. But first –”

The Toa Hordika launched three wheels of energy, sending them curving beneath the tangle of chutes. The result was an ice ramp that would allow falling chute sections to roll safely near where Nuju and Kualus stood.

The Rahaga looked from Nuju to the blade and back to the Toa again. “Why?”

“Propulsion,” answered Nuju. The protodermis builds up tremendous force in the chutes. By fitting the sections into an airship, and then creating a small opening in the ice covering the rear of the chute, that force will propel us forward.”

Kualus looked doubtful, but he dutifully bounded to the top of one of the chutes and raised the blade. With a final glance at Nuju, he brought it down, slicing into the magnetic field that lined the transport tube.

Suukorak exploded from inside the chute, knocking Kualus off balance. The Rahaga fell, barely catching the blade into the underside of one of the tubes and hanging on for dear life. The horde launched multiple spinners at Nuju, trapping the Toa Hordika inside an electrical force field. Assailed by bolts of lightning and unable to move, he could only watch as the Visorak spiders turned their attentions to the Rahaga. Nuju closed his eyes and waited for the screams to start.
“Where is it? I know I saw it here last time.” Whenua was rummaging through an Archive storage room, tossing priceless artifacts this way and that as he searched. Bomonga watched in silence. He had no idea what the Toa Hordika was looking for, nor did he care enough to ask.

With a cry of triumph, Whenua pulled a fragment of an ancient tablet from the pile. He blew the dust off it and proudly displayed it to the Rahaga. “This is where I first saw the name Visorak,” he said. “It was brought to Metru Nui by traders long ago. It might contain information we can use.”

Bomonga nodded. Reminding Whenua of the importance of knowledge had been wise. It had kept the archivist connected to the Toa Metru and the Matoran he used to be, vital if he was to resist the lure of his Hordika nature.

“No one knows where the Visorak came from or why,” Whenua read. “Those few who have mastered their language claim that Visorak means ‘stealers of life’ and others say it means ‘poisonous scourge.’ Either way, no truer words have been spoken. Fear them, for they are a plague upon the land, leaving nothing but pain and fear behind them.”

Whenua shook his head and peered closely at the tablet. “This next part is too worn to read… but the next… evidently, some Visorak Roporak tried to rebel against the horde rulers, Roodaka and Sidorak, and Roodaka…”

The Toa Hordika abruptly stopped reading. After a few moments, Bomonga said, “She killed them?”

“No,” replied Whenua. “That would have been merciful by comparison.”

Bomonga decided it was best not to let Whenua dwell on whatever he had read. “Let’s get what we came for,” said the Rahaga. “Time is short.”


It was an easy matter finding an armful of increase weight Kanoka disks in the Archives. These would be fitted into the airships along with levitation disks to make it possible for the vessels to take off and land. Once Whenua had them safely tucked away, he and Bomonga made their way toward an exit.

Surprisingly, they were traveling farther down rather than up toward the surface.

“Might be faster to go through the lower levels than try the streets,” the Toa Hordika explained. “Just keep your eyes open.”

“Always,” answered Bomonga.

Whenua took the shortest route possible. Part of this was because, even with so many of the former inhabitants now free to roam the city, this was still a dangerous place. The other part was that the Archives made his Hordika half feel trapped, as if the walls were closing in. He needed to be outside where he could see the sky.

Toa and Rahaga suddenly stopped short. Sounds of battle were coming from up ahead. Whenua peered cautiously around the corner and saw a gray Rahkshi confronting a huge Visorak spider. The Rahkshi was faster and more agile, but the Visorak was easily able to block its blows.
“How bad?”
“Watch.”
The Rahkshi made another effort to slip past its opponent, only to be batted away by one of the Kahgarak’s powerful legs. At this point, the spider evidently became bored with the whole conflict. It launched its Rhotuka spinner at its foe. When the spinner struck, a field of shadow suddenly appeared around the startled Rahkshi. An instant later, the Rahkshi was gone, swallowed completely by the darkness.
“Right,” said Whenua. “Let’s try another direction.”
The two turned around and moved quietly back the way they came. They had gone only a few steps when a shape loomed out of the darkness before them. It was another Kahgarak, its eyes fixed on them, its spinner about to launch.

“You were a Toa?” said Matau, dumbfounded. “But you’re… you’re…”
“Short? Ugly? A little too Rahkshi-like for comfort?” said Iruini. “You can say it. I’ve said the same to myself for ages, and worse.”
“But how…”?
“Norik is the storyteller of the group, not me. I don’t know, those fire types always seem to want to tell tales. Must be all that hot air around them all the time.” Iruini did a back flip from a standing start and landed atop a pipe.

“Who did this to you? How long ago?” asked Matau.
Iruini smiled. He could tell what Matau was really thinking. The Toa Hordika was worried he was going to wind up looking like a Rahaga. If he’s not careful, he may wind up as something worse, but no point in telling him that, thought Iruini. He’s barely hanging on as it is.

“Norik is the storyteller of the group, not me. I don’t know, those fire types always seem to want to tell tales. Must be all that hot air around them all the time.” Iruini did a back flip from a standing start and landed atop a pipe.

“You didn’t completely answer my question,” said Matau.
Iruini swung from the pipe, did a somersault in midair, and landed on top of a piece of machinery. “That’s right. You wanted to know who would be cruel and sadistic enough to do this to another living being… what kind of monster could take delight in the suffering of another. Well, she has seen you, Toa, even if you have not seen her yet. She’s the one who made you Hordika.”

The Rahaga stopped and stood still, his eyes fixed on the ground as memories flooded back to him. He remembered the freedom and power of being a Toa and the satisfaction that came with protecting others. He recalled how good it felt to know that nothing could stand in his way as he fought for right. Then the horrible memory intruded, as it always did, of the night something ended his days as a hero.

“Roodaka did this,” he said quietly, never looking at Matau. “She did it, and she laughed. The others may be here to save Rahi from the Visorak or search for some creature from an old Matoran tale. Me? I’m here to make sure Roodaka never laughs again.”

Matau was not sure what to say. He had been so occupied dealing with what he had become and worrying about how to reverse it that he had not stopped to ponder vengeance. But he supposed that if you were condemned to a lifetime of living like the Rahaga, there might be little else to think about.

The Toa Hordika was about to end the awkward moment by suggesting they get on with their search, when Iruini held up a hand. Then the Rahaga dashed off toward the door. By the time Matau reached there, Iruini had shut it tight and was piling rubble in front of it.

“They’re coming,” he said. “Help me block this door.”
Matau didn’t need to ask who he was referring to. He could already hear the Visorak scratching on the outside of the door. It sounded like dozens.
“Are there other ways in?” asked Iruini.

“Windows, but they are tight-locked,” said Matau, struggling to think. The nearness of the Visorak was making his Hordika side want to flee. “The… the hangar doors on the roof… if they were damaged by the quake, they could be open.”

Without waiting for the Rahaga, Matau ran up the stairs that led to the roof. Along the way, he glanced out the windows to see Visorak crawling up the side of the building. The undersides of their bodies glowed grotesquely in the light of his torch as they passed over the panes. If they reached the roof first, he would never be able to shut the hangar doors in time to keep them out.

The sound of crystal smashing came from up ahead. One of the Visorak had thrust its leg through a window and was groping for the lock. Matau picked up a piece of pipe and struck at the spider, forcing its limb back outside. He could hear the scraping of spider legs through the walls. Death by big bug is not the way for a Toa-hero to go, he thought. Even one who looks like I do.

He looked up. Starlight was spilling through the hangar doors. They were wedged open by debris. A moment later, the stars were obscured by the bodies of Visorak as they gathered on the roof.

This will make a very dark-bad Chronicle, Matau said to himself. If anyone is left alive to write it, that is…

Pouks looked up at Onewa. The Toa Hordika was shaking, not from the weight of the stone he carried, but from the war going on within him.

“There is always another way,” Pouks said, pointing to the rock wall on the other side of the canyon. “All you have to do is look for it.”

Onewa glanced in the direction the Rahaga was pointing. There was a cave mouth high up on the side of the wall. It was not a natural cave, rather the mouth had been carved out, with the edges in a distinctly jagged shape. Onewa smiled and hurled the boulder across the canyon and directly into that cave.

A response was not long in coming. Three rock raptors emerged from the cavern, looking about for who had dared to attack them. These bizarre looking Rahi made their home in Po-Metru and hunted creatures far larger than they. Their arms, each tipped with a blade for carving, waved in the air as they scanned the area. Their eyes rapidly fixed on the herd of Kane-Ra far below.

The Rahi immediately went to work. They swarmed over the rock wall, chipping away at the stone. In a matter of seconds, the entire face of the slope was loosened. The stone slid down and crashed beside the herd, panicking them. As they scattered, the rock raptors dropped from above and went after the slowest of the beasts. Soon the entire canyon was deserted.

“See?” said Pouks. “Sometimes you charge like a Kikanalo, and sometimes you sneak like a stone rat. They both work.”

“We better get down there before the raptors come back,” Onewa replied. “They don’t normally bother Toa or Matoran, but I don’t look much like either… and neither do you.”

The Toa Hordika and Rahaga scrambled down the slope. Their destination was a cave in which Po-Metru Kanoka disks were stored. Onewa had no doubt there would be some levitation disks in there, which were vital to constructing airships. Once they had those, they could return to Le-Metru and meet the others.

Onewa led the way. The disks were right where he remembered they would be. He had begun gathering them when he heard the sounds of crumbling rock from further in the tunnel. “Stay here,” he said to Pouks as he went to investigate.

“Hold on—”

“Stay here, I said!” Onewa snapped. “If there’s something back there… well, one of us has to get these disks back to the others.”

The Toa Hordika moved cautiously down the tunnel. At one point, a stone snake slithered toward him, a good six feet long and powerful enough to crush rock in its coils. Ordinarily, this would have been a problem. But the snake seemed as disturbed by the Hordika as Onewa was by it and made a quick exit.
The source of the noise was easy to spot. An entire section of tunnel wall had collapsed, revealing a cavern beyond. It wasn’t until Onewa stepped through the hole that he realized it was a chamber carved out of the rock. His Rahi side sensed danger. It took more willpower than he thought he possessed to keep from fleeing.

Even with the enhanced senses of a Hordika, it was hard to see. He reached out for the wall. His hand passed over a series of carvings, made relatively recently by the feel of them. Onewa ran both hands over them, trying to make out what they represented.

A chill ran through him. The carvings were a formula of sorts, the kind of thing Ko-Matoran in Knowledge Towers might study. He wished Nuju were here to interpret this. He wished almost anyone else was here in place of himself.

_Twin suns… a time of shadow… the Great Spirit trapped in slumber… the universe gone dark._ Onewa jerked his hand away from the carvings as if he had been burned. Suddenly, he knew what this place was, and who it had belonged to.

_This was one of Makuta’s lairs, he thought. This was where he calculated when the suns would go dark and planned his crime against the Matoran. No wonder my Hordika side is raging inside me. It senses the evil that was done here._

Onewa turned to leave and stumbled. He bent down to discover a tablet lying on the floor. It was too dark to tell what was written on it, so he picked it up and carried it out with him. _Perhaps it will contain some valuable information,_ he hoped. _A key to reversing this transformation or finding this Keetongu the Rahaga spoke of. Something, anything, to change our destiny!_

At the mouth of the cave, Pouks watched the stone snake slither by, winding its way rapidly into the mountains. Serpents were not his specialty – that was Norik’s domain – but something about that creature just didn’t feel right.

He glanced behind, but Onewa was nowhere in sight. If he was correct, there was no time to waste trying to find the Toa Hordika. He would have to do this job himself.

Pouks readied a spinner and set off after the stone snake. _If I catch it, maybe I can find out what it is that’s disturbing me,_ he reasoned. _And if it catches me…_

He decided it was best to not even think about that.

“Pouks, I found –”

Onewa stopped short. The Rahaga was gone. He looked around, but there was no sign of a struggle or any trail. Half Rahi he might be, but a skilled tracker Onewa was not.

He looked at the tablet and began to read. After a few moments, the experience began to remind him of the time he had fallen into a troller nest. The sand and slime had clung to him and little by little he began to sink into the morass. He thought he would never escape… and he knew that, even if he did get away, he would never feel clean again.

His eyes fixed on one sentence. He read it over again, then a third and a fourth time. He kept hoping the words would change, but they didn’t. Suddenly, everything made sense to Onewa, and at the same time nothing did at all. He only knew one thing: he had to get this to the other Toa.

_They have to know the truth,_ he said to himself, _even though it will destroy us all._
Vakama knocked the door down with one kick and stalked inside, Norik right behind him.
“You can’t do this,” the Rahaga insisted. “You’re dishonoring his memory!”
“His memory? What about my life?” Vakama snarled. “I gave up everything – my home, my job, my friends – because I was chosen to be a Toa. If it was all a lie, I have a right to know!”
“But to break into Toa Lhikan’s chambers…”
“He won’t care. He’s dead,” replied Vakama. “Or didn’t you know that? He died because he picked the wrong Matoran to be a Toa Metru.”
A large cabinet stood in a corner of the simple room the late Toa Lhikan had called home. It was locked. Vakama raised a fist and smashed the cabinet into shards. A single tablet fell to the ground.
“You don’t know that!” insisted Norik. “Maybe this is all some misunderstanding. Are you going to abandon your friends, forget about saving the Matoran, all because of this? What if you’re wrong?”
“I’m not,” Vakama answered, tossing the tablet to Norik. The Rahaga barely caught it. “Read it. It’s all there.”
Norik scanned the stone. It had been written by Lhikan not long before his capture by the Dark Hunters. It read:

I am more convinced than ever that something is wrong with Turaga Dume. But if I am right, what can I do? I am one Toa against a Turaga and an army of Vahki… not to mention Nidhiki, who I am sure I spotted in the city the other day. I must have help!

But who? Who is worthy of becoming a Toa Metru? Logic would dictate it would be the six Matoran who discovered the location of the Great Disks. Surely that is a sign from Mata Nui! But when I awoke this morning, I realized it was perhaps too obvious an omen, meant to divert me from the ones truly destined to be Toa. Vakama… Onewa… Whenua… Nju… Nokama… Matau… those are the ones my heart tells me are to be the Toa Metru. They are the ones I must rely on to save the city.

Norik put down the tablet and looked at Vakama. “This proves nothing, other than that he had a change of mind.”
“It proves he knew,” replied the Toa Hordika. “He knew who the correct Matoran were, and something… or someone… changed his mind and made him choose us. I am going to find out –”
Norik ran out of the room before Vakama could finish. The Toa followed him. Outside, the Rahaga pointed at the webs overhead. Hundreds of Visorak spiders were traveling across the thin strands, all going in the same direction.
“They are on the move,” said Norik. “And heading for Le-Metru. You know what that means?”
Vakama nodded. “It means Matau should have stuck to Ussal riding.”
“I could use some help here!”
Nuju opened his eyes. Through the nimbus of electricity, he could see Kualus hanging by one arm from the bottom of the chute while he frantically beat back Visorak with his staff. But there were too many and the Rahaga was obviously tiring. It was only a matter of time before he fell, or worse.

The Toa Hordika reached out, only to be jolted by the electrical field that surrounded him. As long as it was in place, there was no way he could aid Kualus. When the Suukorak were done with the Rahaga, they would come for him.

No! I have the power of a beast now, he reminded himself. I have the mind of a Toa to let me channel that power. I can – I will – make it through this barrier!

Nuju lunged forward, hurling himself through the field. It felt like a thousand white-hot needles being jammed into his body. He screamed as the voltage slammed into him again and again. The Hordika side of him panicked and wanted to retreat, but it was his intelligence that dominated. Inch by agonizing inch, he forced himself through the field. When he finally emerged on the other side, he was drained and exhausted. But the Visorak would give him no time to rest.

The spider creatures had spotted him. A half dozen electrified spinners flew at him, but Nuju somehow managed to dodge them all. He responded with a flurry of spinners of his own, all of them carrying his elemental ice power. Wherever they struck, Visorak froze over.

He was fighting a losing battle, and he knew it. For every Visorak he stopped and every one driven back by Kualus, a hundred more took their place. It was going to take a miracle to survive this, and all he was getting was Kualus whistling and clicking and then whistling some more.

“What are you doing?” Nuju snapped, using his tools to fend off a Visorak. “This isn’t the time to show off how you talk to Rahi!”

“Can you think of a better time?” Kualus asked, smiling. The expression looked bizarre on a face that so closely resembled a monstrous Rahkshi. “I am just inviting some friends.”

Tiny shrieks echoed then through the halls of the Knowledge Tower. Even recognizing what they had to mean, Nuju could not believe it. He shot a glance down the corridor and there they came, hundreds, thousands of ice bats. They poured into the chamber from every opening, hurling themselves at the Visorak, striking and then flying away. So thick were their numbers that the Toa Hordika could not even see his enemies anymore. He turned and almost bumped into Kualus who was now standing beside him.

“They will keep the Visorak busy and then retreat,” said the Rahaga. “Something we should do as well.”

“We need the chutes,” said Nuju, still stunned by the chaos all around him. He had seen small groups of ice bats before, but never this many at once. The sight of them battling Visorak was so insane he wondered if perhaps he was really dead after all and this was all in his mind.

No, he decided. I can’t believe fate would be so cruel as to condemn me to an eternity with Kualus by my side.

“We can get chutes elsewhere,” said Kualus. “As much as I would love to stay and watch my pretty ones frustrate the Visorak, we have a date on top of this tower.”

The Rahaga ran off, leaving Nuju no choice but to follow. He wanted to ask why they were running upstairs instead of down. If they were trapped on the roof by the Visorak, it would mean either capture or a very long and fatal fall to the street below.

Kualus burst through the roof door and immediately began babbling in his strange language. A few moments later, Nuju spotted two large Gukko birds soaring toward the Knowledge Tower.

“No, no,” said the Toa Hordika, shaking his head. “I refuse to believe any of this.”

The two birds landed on the rooftop. Kualus immediately climbed on top of one. Realizing the Visorak might well be on their way up, Nuju decided to escape now and argue later. He wrapped his arms around the Gukko’s neck and just barely made it on top before the great bird took off.

“You haven’t lived until you have flown one of these,” said Kualus, happily.

Nuju glanced down at Ko-Metru, far below. “You haven’t died, either.”

The Rahaga laughed. “You see, Nuju, there is something to be said for speaking to Rahi, and not just at them. If the Onu-Matoran had learned that, they might have had less trouble in the Archives.”
“I’ll be sure to tell Whenua if I ever see him again,” said Nuju.
“Now the next question is, which way should we go? Other than away from here?”
The Toa Hordika looked to the southeast. Hundreds of Visorak were crossing the webs, moving inexorably toward Le-Metru. “That way,” he said, pointing toward Matau’s home metru. “And let’s hope we are in time.”

Whenua ducked as the Kahgarak’s spinner flew past and struck a display case. A moment later, the case and its contents were swallowed by the darkness.
The second giant spider was approaching from behind, trapping Toa Hordika and Rahaga between the two. Bomonga looked from one to the other, calculating whether he could get two spinners off before they attacked.
One of the Kahgarak launched again. Whenua shoved Bomonga out of the way as the wheel of energy flew at him. It narrowly missed the Toa, flying on to strike the second Kahgarak. It, too, was claimed by the darkness.
“I found our exit,” said Whenua. “Let’s use it.”
Bomonga shook his head. “More that way. Launch a Rhotuka and catch it between your tools.”
The command seemed strange to Whenua, but he did what he was told. As the spinner flew from his launcher, he caught the energy between his two Hordika tools. Instantly, he felt something like an electric shock go through his body. “W-what’s happening?”
“Charging the spinner,” said the Rahaga. “Makes it more powerful. Now let it go.”
With an effort, Whenua disengaged his tools from the spinner. The energy flew downward and struck the floor. Its earth power unleashed, the spinner ripped open a massive chasm, sending Toa, Rahaga, and Kahgarak tumbling down.
“You were supposed to aim it!” shouted Bomonga.
Whenua grabbed onto the Rahaga’s hand. “Hold on! There’s water below and I think –”
The Toa Hordika didn’t finish his sentence, at least not in the world he knew. The Kahgarak managed to get off a spinner even as it fell, striking Whenua. The darkness effect encompassed both Toa and Rahaga, plunging them into shadow.
“– we can hit it, and…” said Whenua. “Um… where are we?”
He looked around. They were no longer falling. In fact, it felt as if they stood on solid ground. But all around was darkness. Only Bomonga was visible, and even he only dimly.
“Inside the dark,” said the Rahaga. “Maybe forever.”
“Oh, no,” answered Whenua, the panic of a trapped animal creeping into his voice. “I won’t be confined. I can’t be. I need to be free to run, to climb, I need to –”
“Help your friends,” reminded Bomonga. “Save the Matoran.”
“Yes, of course. That too,” said Whenua. “We have to find a way out!”
Something brushed against the Toa Hordika. He jumped. He couldn’t see anything, but he could feel the presence of another creature and sense its movements in the ground. It was large, multi-legged, and walking away from them.
“The other Kahgarak!” he whispered. “It’s here!”
Now Bomonga could sense it too. “Follow,” he said. “Don’t let go of me or you will never find your way out.”
Toa and Rahaga moved cautiously through the pitch darkness, following the sounds of the Kahgarak up ahead. It reminded Whenua of trying to labor while wearing a blindfold, an exercise Turaga Lhikan had said would help him master his Toa powers. He had not been good at it, but there was much more than self-knowledge at stake now.
“Where are we going?”
“Where it’s going.”
“What if it’s going nowhere?”
“Then we will have a new experience,” said Bomonga.
“Oh good,” muttered Whenua. “Mata Nui knows I haven’t had any of those lately.”

“You slithering needs work,” said Pouks, out of breath. He had trailed the stone snake halfway up the canyon wall. It had never turned back to look at him, but he was not so foolish as to believe he had trailed the creature undetected. More likely, it simply didn’t think he was worth noticing.

Once he spoke up, the serpent twisted its body and hissed at him. Pouks simply shrugged. “Now where I come from, the snakes know how to slither. Used to drive Norik crazy trying to catch them. You could learn something from them.”

The stone snake shot forward and wrapped its coils around the Rahaga. Pouks made no effort to resist or escape. Instead, he looked almost bored. “You could learn something from me, too. Of course, you won’t, not if you crush me to death. But go ahead, if you want to. Maybe Roodaka will even pat you on the head if you’re good.”

The stone snake’s face suddenly twisted into an expression of rage. It kept on twisting, along with its body, until the serpent was gone, replaced by a perfect replica of Roodaka. Pouks looked the image of the Visorak viceroy up and down, saying, “Your power is amazing, even if I don’t think much of your taste in subjects.”

Krahka regarded Pouks through the eyes of Roodaka. “Why were you following me?”

“You’re a Rahi,” the Rahaga replied. “I hunt Rahi.”

“And now you are hunted in return.”

“We all are,” said Pouks. “Anything that stands in Roodaka’s way will end up in a cocoon, you and I included. Unless…you made a deal with her? Is that why you were sneaking around that cavern?”

“I am the last of my kind,” Krahka replied. “I do what I must to survive.”

Pouks snorted. “You are the last of your kind here, Rahi. But here is not the end of the universe.”

Krahka grabbed Pouks and lifted him into the air. “Speak! Tell me where the rest of my kind can be found, or I will show you pain beyond even what Roodaka could inflict!”

“No need for that,” Pouks said. “No need. I knew where others like you once lived. It was a green and peaceful place, until the Visorak came. Oh, your brothers held out the longest, but they too fell in time. The last I saw, they were trapped in a webbed tomb just like the Rahi of Metru Nui have been.”

Krahka tossed him aside. Pouks struck hard against a rock and lay still.

“Roodaka promised me freedom in return for my service,” the Rahi said. “I am not ready to challenge her again. I must follow her orders until I am ready. But…”

“That’s right. Do what she says, Krahka.”

The Rahi whirled to see Onewa standing on a ledge. The Toa Hordika smiled. The expression was a gruesome one on his bestial face. “Be a pawn. Be a tool. Be another soldier in Roodaka’s army who always follows orders, no matter what. The last time we met, I thought you were a creature of pride and intelligence. But I guess you’re just another dumb beast.”

Krahka’s mind flashed back to her first encounter with Onewa and his fellow Toa. They had invaded her home beneath the Archives, or so she had believed. Her efforts to oppose them met with failure, but she had vowed to return and challenge them another day. Now the Toa had fallen to someone else, but she felt no joy. Instead, she realized that a being powerful enough to mutate a Toa Metru could do infinitely worse to her and every other Rahi in the city.

The shapeshifter transformed into a squat, slime-caked creature with wicked blades for hands, something that made even a Hordika look good. “I have no love for Toa,” she hissed. “Less for those pathetic Matoran you insist on protecting. This city should belong to me and my Rahi brothers! But… I cannot rule a ruin, and that is all Roodaka and her kind will leave behind.”

Krahka’s new form stretched itself to twice its height, a truly gruesome sight. Onewa never blinked or turned away. “So, you have a plan?” said Krahka.

The Toa Hordika glanced up. Visorak of all types were creeping across the webs, heading for Le-Metru. “No. But I think they do.”
Krahka watched the spiders marching toward another conquest. From what she had heard during her time posing as one of them, she could guess where they were going. The Toa had little time left.

“Come,” she said. “We have much to talk about, you and I, and a… friend to pick up along the way.”

Onewa revived Pouks and together Toa, Rahaga, and Rahi moved off into the rocky passes of Po-Metru. Their attention was fixed on the small army of spiders ahead of them, so none noticed the Visorak Roporak appear as if by magic where they had been standing. Its color shifted from the sandy shade of the rocks back to its normal dark brown. There were times, it reflected, that being able to match perfectly any background and stand completely still for hours was a most useful talent indeed.

Effortlessly, it scaled a nearby web, but it did not follow the other Visorak. Instead, it veered southeast, heading for the Coliseum and Roodaka, with a most interesting tale to tell.
Matau reached the top of the staircase even as the first Visorak began pouring into the hangar. There was no time to make a plan. Instead, the Toa Hordika launched air spinner after air spinner, summoning hurricane winds to blow the spider creatures away. At the first opportunity, he wrenched the door shut and shoved a pipe through the handles to bar it. The Visorak immediately began pounding on the other side, denting the metal of the hatch.

Somewhere, another window shattered. Matau looked down and could not see Iruini. *This is very dark-bad,* he thought. *Too many open-ways to keep closed. We will never keep the Visorak out.*

“Matau! Help!”
The voice did not belong to the Rahaga. It was Nokama!
“Matau! Let me in! Please!”

The Toa Hordika raced down the stairs. The pleading voice was coming from the other side of the main doors. Nokama and Gaaki would be trapped out there among the Visorak.

“Hang on, Nokama! I will let you in!” he shouted, already pulling apart the barricade Iruini had erected.

“Hurry! They’re everywhere! I –” Her words were cut off by a scream.

Matau was about to push aside the last pile of debris when Iruini slammed into him, knocking him off his feet. Though small, the Rahaga’s strength was surprising as he managed to pin down the Toa Hordika.

“Don’t open that door!” Iruini shouted.
“But Nokama –”

“Matau! Please! They’re killing us!” Nokama pleaded from outside.

“That’s not Nokama!” said Iruini. “It’s a trick. If you open that door, we’re as good as dead!”

“Matau! What are you waiting for?”

Nokama’s words pierced Matau’s heart. She was a friend, and at times he wished she could be more than that. He could not leave her outside to die, no matter what the consequences. He knew her voice. It was her. *And why should I believe some Rahkshi-headed freak over my own instincts?* he asked himself.

Matau threw Iruini off and ran for the door. The Rahaga scrambled to his feet and went after him.

“Ask her something!” Iruini said. “Ask her something only she would know!”

Nokama screamed again. Matau pushed Iruini away. “This is no time for a quick quiz! She is dying!” Matau tore away the last of the barricade. Ignoring Iruini’s protests, the Toa Hordika undid the lock and flung the door open.

A dozen black Visorak stood on the other side. There was no sign of Nokama or Gaaki. The lead Visorak, Oohnorak, gnashed its teeth, but the voice it produced belonged to the Toa Hordika of Water.

“Thank you, Matau,” said the Visorak in Nokama’s tones. “We knew we could count on you.”
At that moment, the real Nokama and Gaaki were crossing back into Le-Metru. They had successfully hidden the Masks of Power for loading on the airships later. Now they traveled through the waterways, breaking the surface occasionally to scout the area.

It was Nokama who first spotted the tower. It looked like a bad imitation of one of the Coliseum towers, but as she drew closer, she saw the truth was far worse. The tower was made of debris and Visorak webbing. Cocoon containing various Rahi hung all along the sides. At least a hundred Visorak of all types swarmed over the structure, reinforcing it. At the top of the tower stood a powerful crimson figure, obviously directing the horde. This was no Visorak—he stood on two legs and towered over the spiders, wrapped in an aura of command.

“Who is that? What is that?” whispered Nokama.

“The who is Sidorak, king of the Visorak hordes. He commands them in the field,” said Gaaki. “A good tactician, brutal, his answer to everything is overwhelming force. That has worked well for him... so far.”

“And that tower? I am no expert on Le-Metru, but that wasn’t there before.”

“The Visorak build them as bases,” the Rahaga answered. “Staging areas for attacks. My guess is they know Matau and Iruini are here. They are planning a devastating strike to capture them both.”

“This is a disaster,” said Nokama.

“No,” replied Gaaki. “This is an opportunity. You must learn to know the difference, Nokama.”

Nuju and Kualus spotted the tower as well, from high above. Nuju immediately began urging his Gukko bird down toward a nearby rooftop. Kualus watched him, shaking his head.

“That’s not a very good idea,” said the Rahaga.

“Scouting out the enemy’s location and gaining knowledge is always a good idea,” said Nuju as his winged mount dove.

“I didn’t mean that,” Kualus yelled after him.

The Gukko came in for a perfect landing on the roof of an abandoned vehicle factory. As soon as Nuju had dismounted, the bird flew off again. The Toa Hordika looked around for the best vantage point from which to monitor the tower. Before he could find it, six Visorak Vohtarak suddenly appeared around him.

“That’s what I meant,” Kualus shouted from above. “Invisibility. I really hate that.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Onewa asked for the fourth time.

Krahka had led him to the edge of a massive hole in the center of Ta-Metru. Onewa had never seen the spot before, but Nokama and Matau had told him what had happened here. While searching for the missing Toa Lhikan, they and Vakama had encountered a rampaging monster called Tahtorak. Using weakness disks, they had succeeded in causing the pavement to give way beneath the beast, but not before it had destroyed a large section of the metru.

“Do you have a better one?” asked Krahka, transforming herself into a winged insect four feet in length. “We need allies against Roodaka.”

“And we can’t be too choosy about them,” said Pouks.

Onewa looked down at the tablet in his hand. He had been wondering ever since he encountered Krahka in Po-Metru just how it was that he had so conveniently discovered Makuta’s lair. For that matter, the tablet had been strangely easy to find as well.

“Speaking of proof,” he began, “you planted this, didn’t you?”

Krahka shrugged. “Yes. Roodaka wanted you to learn the truth about yourselves, for her own reasons. I was told to deliver it to you.”

“Truth? What this says... this has to be a lie,” insisted Onewa. “If it isn’t...”

Krahka looked down from where she hovered in the air. “The only deception was in how you found it. The words are real, their meaning is real. That is why Roodaka considered it her ultimate tool against you.”
“Well, she had that right,” Onewa muttered as Krahka vanished down the hole. “When the others find out about this… even if we win, we lose.”

Whenua and Bomonga had been following the Kahgarak for what felt like years. At one point, a noise to the right distracted the Toa Hordika and he almost lost sight of their quarry. Had Bomonga not grabbed his hand and pulled him ahead, Whenua might well have been completely lost in the darkness.

“How much farther?” he asked.

“No way to know,” replied the Rahaga. “It may be lost, trying to find a way out.”

“Just like us. And if it can’t find an exit—”

“Then neither will we,” said Bomonga. “Ever.”

Roodaka sat on Makuta’s throne, impatient. Sidorak had left some time ago to oversee operations in Le-Metru. By now, he should have returned with at least Matau and Iruini, if not the whole miserable group of Hordika and Rahaga.

Unless he has bungled it, she thought. If that is the case, then Makuta will be displeased. Once the master of shadows is free again, Sidorak will be out of favor and I will rule by Makuta’s side.

She smiled. Ever since she and Sidorak had turned six Toa in to wretched, twisted Rahaga, they had been competing with each other for Makuta’s favor. So far, neither Sidorak’s victories in the field nor Roodaka’s subtle schemes had secured either one the role they coveted: command over all of Makuta’s lieutenants. She knew that the battle for Metru Nui might be her last chance to seize power from Sidorak and secure the right to rule by Makuta’s side. She was determined to succeed, even if she had to crush the king of the Visorak hordes in the process.

Her dreams of destruction were interrupted by the approach of a single Visorak Roporak. She recognized it as the one she had ordered to keep watch on Krahka. The news it related came as no surprise.

“Of course, she betrayed me,” said Roodaka. “It is just what I would have done. She is not as different from me as she would like to believe.”

The Roporak continued its report, detailing how Onewa and Krahka had left together, apparently planning to follow the horde to Le-Metru. Sidorak had summoned Visorak from all over the city for a strike against a Toa and Rahaga hiding in a Matoran airship hangar. Even now they were assembling at the tower in Matau’s district, waiting for the order to advance.

“As usual, Sidorak would topple a building to swat a fireflyer,” said Roodaka. “But in this case, he may have blundered on to a plan. The movements of the horde will attract the attention of the other Toa Hordika. They will race to Le-Metru to save their friend, like flies hurrying into a web. And you know what happens when something is caught in our web, don’t you?”

The Roporak nodded.

“Go to Le-Metru. Find Sidorak,” Roodaka ordered. “Tell him to summon a Kahgarak and have it open a portal. The time has come to unleash the stalker in the shadows, the Zivon, once more.”

The Visorak turned and fled the chamber. As it raced across the webs heading for Le-Metru, it could not suppress a shudder. In the past, the hordes had done many things that other species might view as monstrous or evil, and they had done them happily. But releasing the Zivon for any reason – that was beyond horror, beyond evil. That was madness.

It will surely mean the end of the Toa Hordika, thought the Roporak. Let us hope it’s not the end of the Visorak as well.
Four Vahki Zadakh moved cautiously through the streets of Ta-Metru. They were far from the canyons of Po-Metru they normally patrolled, but the changes in Metru Nui meant every Vahki enforcer had to do its part to preserve order.

Their goal was the Coliseum. Metru Nui’s tallest building soared high into the sky before them, though it lacked the grand appearance it once had. Now the facade was cracked and the entire structure was shrouded in webs. High levels of Visorak activity had been registered here. The Vahki’s mission was to eliminate these creatures of disorder as a first step toward pacifying the entire city.

The patrol leader signaled for the rest to spread out. It had no doubt that these Rahi would fall easily to the power of the Vahki, but tactical programming suggested that approaching from multiple angles was practical. Once all four were in their proper position, the march resumed.

The Vahki on the far left flank was the first to encounter the target. A Visorak Boggarak crawled along a web leading from the Coliseum to one of the empty Ta-Metru forges. The Vahki raised its staff and unleashed a blast which knocked the Visorak off the web. The Boggarak scrambled to its feet and glared at the Vahki. A low hum filled the air.

The Vahki took another step and stumbled. It looked down and noted that its right leg was no longer functioning properly. Somehow, what had been a solid limb a moment before was now a rapidly dispersing gas. Worse, the effect was spreading across the Vahki’s form. In a matter of seconds, it was no more than wisp of silvery gas floating in the air, its awareness dispersed over millions of molecules.

The Vahki patrol leader paused. Several Visorak were on the move between it and the nearest Coliseum entrance. The Zadakh turned to tell its second in command to wait until the creatures had passed before proceeding. But its lieutenant was not there.

Puzzled, the Vahki did a visual scan to all four points of the compass. There was no sign of any of the other three patrol units. The Zadakh took a step and then paused at a strange rustling sound from
overhead. A glance up revealed its source: a Vahki cocooned in webbing, being carried across the webs toward the Coliseum by a pair of Visorak.

The patrol leader did a quick calculation. *Four Vahki departed on this mission. One remains,* it said to itself. *This will need to be reported. While success in this mission is vital, order can only be maintained if a strict accounting of the whereabouts of all Vahki is kept. New priority: prompt return to central hive.*

Naturally, it would not run. Vahki never ran unless in pursuit of a lawbreaker. Faced with the disappearance of three of its kind in a matter of seconds, though, the Zadakh was perfectly willing to walk very, very fast.

It glanced behind. No Visorak were following. That would look good in the report. The patrol had obviously scared the Visorak into staying out of Ta-Metru. That accomplishment might even mean elevation from patrol leader to squad leader.

Pale sunlight suddenly gave way to shadow. The ground shook. Believing it to be another earthquake, the Vahki searched for cover. It raced toward a large green and brown structure nearby.

A second tremor struck, then a third. The building rocked so hard it almost appeared to be moving. It was only after the Vahki was safely underneath the structure that it remembered there were no green and brown buildings in Ta-Metru.

The Vahki looked up, just in time to see the massive, clawed foot of the Tahtorak descending upon it. Then it didn’t see anything else, ever again.

Forty feet above, on the Tahtorak’s broad back, Onewa winced at the sound of Vahki being crushed. He was no fan of the order enforcers, but the more he saw of the Tahtorak, the more he was starting to think luring it back to the surface had been a mistake. It had already smashed half a dozen buildings to fragments and damaged countless more, and that was with Krahka directing its journey. What would happen if it went on a rampage?

One thing was certain – Onewa had never seen anything like this beast. When the Tahtorak climbed out of the hole, he was certain nothing could be that big. The Rahi regarded Onewa as if the Toa Hordika were a light snack. The Tahtorak’s reptilian face was ringed by silver fins and his fierce jaws snapped in anticipation of a meal. His forelegs were surprisingly short, but the rest of his body was overwhelmingly huge and powerful. A single sweep of his tail was enough to turn a building into a pile of bricks.

“I want the answer!” the Tahtorak snarled. “Give it to me!”

“What is he talking about?” asked Pouks.

“I don’t know,” said Krahka. “That is all he would say when I found him down below. So I told him the Visorak have the answer, and they don’t want him to know it.”

Onewa shook his head, smiling. “If you weren’t… what you are… you would have made an amazing Toa.”

Krahka shifted her form to a perfect replica of Onewa, and said simply, “I know.”

Nuju stood back to back with Kualus as the Visorak closed in. His ice spinners had managed to hold them off so far, but each one drained his energy that much more. He had already decided that if the Visorak began spitting web, he would grab Kualus and leap, counting on his spinners to form an ice slide beneath them. Any risk was worth taking to avoid being in those cocoons again.

The building shook beneath his feet. A few seconds later, it did it again. “Is this the Visorak’s doing?” Nuju asked.

“I don’t think so,” Kualus answered. “They seem as disturbed as we are.”

Nuju glanced past the ring of spider creatures. Now the source of the tremors was all too clear, not that the Toa Hordika believed it for a moment. After all, who ever heard of two Toa Onewa and a Rahaga riding a Rahi four stories high?

“I knew being a Toa would do this eventually,” Nuju said quietly. “I have lost my mind.”
Now the Visorak saw the newcomers as well. A few of them braced to launch spinners at the oncoming Rahi. Then the Tahtorak casually shrugged, bringing down two buildings and a major chute intersection in the process. That was enough to make the Visorak fall back, forgetting Nuju and finding more defensible positions on another rooftop.

“If you lost yours, mine went with it,” said Kualus, smiling. “A Tahtorak! Imagine! I never thought I would see one in the flesh!”

Seeing that the name meant nothing to Nuju, Kualus continued, “It’s a predator from one of the lands south of Metru Nui. Down there, oh, there were whole packs of them filling the plains. Once they had eaten everything they chose to on one island, they would walk across the sea and start someplace else. But I can’t imagine how one got this far north, or why it would be traveling alone.”

The Tahtorak was upon them now. Nuju tried not to gag from the stench of its fetid breath. Both Onewas jumped off and landed on the roof, while Rahaga Pouks stayed on the Tahtorak.


One of the Onewas shifted into the form of Nuju. “Is this better?” the figure said in Nuju’s own voice.

“For obvious reasons, I prefer to avoid mirrors just now,” the Toa Hordika replied. “I had hoped to avoid you as well, Krahka.”

“I want the answer!” bellowed the Tahtorak, the sheer force of his yell almost blowing Toa Hordika and Rahaga alike off the rooftop.

“So do I,” said Nuju. “A lot of them.”

“Where are the others?”

“We saw Vakama, Norik, Nokama, and Gaaki heading this way from the air,” said Kualus. “As for Matau and Iruini… no sign.”

“They were supposed to be searching one of the hangars,” said Nuju.

“I’m guessing that one,” Onewa replied, pointing off in the distance. “The one the Visorak are pouring into.”

“We will have to go get them, then.”

“What?” snapped Krahka. “You are wasting time! Every moment you delay brings Roodaka and her horde closer to complete control of this city. What is one Toa more or less, compared to that?”

Onewa and Nuju said nothing in reply. Using their spinners to form bridges of ice and stone, they hurried toward the hangars.

Kualus looked up at Krahka. “If you can’t understand, then they can’t explain it to you.”

“Light!” Whenua shouted, pointing up ahead.

The Kahgarak paused for a moment before resuming its march. “Keep quiet,” said Bomonga. “If it hears us and turns back…”

Whenua understood, but it was hard for him to curb his excitement. A pinprick of light had appeared up ahead in a world where all was dark. The Kahgarak was moving right toward it. Whenua felt certain it had to be an exit.

Bomonga was keeping a careful eye on the creature. If that point of light was a gate, it would vanish the instant the creature passed through it. They would have to go through right behind or risk never finding the point again. He watched as the light grew bigger and brighter, mentally counting down the seconds.

“Run!” he said abruptly, racing off to reach the Kahgarak. Taken by surprise, Whenua was a few steps behind. The creature reached the light and passed through. Bomonga and Whenua dove, barely making it through before the gateway disappeared.

They hit the pavement. Compared to the total darkness they had been traveling through, the brightness of this spot was like being hit by a fist. It took Whenua a long few moments to adjust to the glare so he could see again. Then he wished he had not bothered.
Toa Hordika and Rahaga were on the ground in Le-Metru. The Kahgarak was up ahead, standing beside a powerful, red-hued figure. Visorak were everywhere, swarming into and around a tower. As soon as the spiders noticed the new arrivals, they advanced to surround Whenua and Bomonga.

“How convenient,” the figure exclaimed upon seeing the Toa Hordika. “You come to us, instead of us having to hunt you down. For that, you have the gratitude of Sidorak, king of the Visorak horde.”

“A worthless gift,” growled Bomonga.

Sidorak laughed. “Not at all. You two will be privileged to see the emergence of the Zivon into this city. It will no doubt be hungry after its journey. You two will make a fine meal, don’t you think?”

Matau and Iruini retreated further into the hangar. All their efforts to stop the advance of the Visorak had failed. Every exit was blocked by the creatures as well. They both knew that, at best, they were delaying the inevitable.

“Any last words?” Matau said, throwing another piece of equipment at the horde.

“Yes,” said Iruini. “Next time, keep the door shut.”

Matau heard a crash behind him. He turned to see more Visorak coming toward them from the rear. They were trapped between two small armies of spider creatures.

“That mud-swamp on the island up above is looking better all the time,” he said, launching an air spinner at the oncoming Visorak.

It never reached its destination. Instead, a second spinner flew down from above, striking the floor. A wall of fire suddenly sprang up, cutting off the Visorak. Matau looked up and saw Vakama and Norik standing at the top of the stairs.

Now chaos erupted in the hangar. Water, ice, fire and stone spinners were raining down on the Visorak. Battered by the sudden onslaught of elemental powers, the creatures retreated. Matau could guess why. Indoors, they were vulnerable to attack from too many hiding places. But with the Toa Hordika all in the hangar, the Visorak could go back to laying siege and eventually capture them.

Vakama, Nokama, Nuju, and Onewa assembled at Matau’s side, while Norik and Gaaki secured the doors.

“I melted through the doors on the roof,” Vakama replied, his voice hard. “I am – I was – the Toa of Fire. It’s what I do.”

“Unfortunately, you made an entrance for the Visorak that we can’t close,” said Iruini. “They will be back.”

“I did what I had to do!” snapped Vakama. “I didn’t see you coming up with any great ideas, Rahaga.”

“There must be some way we can get out of here before they return,” said Nokama. “Matau, is there a way out through the Archives?”

Before the Toa Hordika of Air could answer, a tremor shook the building. Then it rocked on its foundations as the roof was torn off, sending Visorak flying every which way. Startled, they looked up to see Pouks smiling down at them as the Tahtorak crushed the hangar roof to dust in his hands.

“Oh, good,” said Nuju. “Our ride is here.”

Bound with webbing, Whenua and Bomonga could only watch as the Kahgarak opened another gateway into the field of darkness. Visorak backed away, scurrying for cover. Whenua wished he could join them as the Zivon began to emerge.

It was gigantic, a horror so great the Toa Hordika had to make an effort to keep his sanity. Even in his days as an archivist, he had never seen such a thing. Towering over the nearby buildings, it looked like some obscene hybrid of a Visorak, an Ussal crab, and who knew what else. Its head was pure spider, but the twin claws that snapped buildings in two like dry twigs belonged to a sea creature. It moved about on six legs, its scorpion-like tail lashing out to level anything that caught its eye. Even Sidorak looked like he was questioning the wisdom of bringing this thing into the world.
The Visorak were keeping their distance, those that were not running away outright. One of the spiders made the mistake of running along a web too close to the Zivon. It snapped the unfortunate Visorak up in a claw and tossed it into its gaping jaws.


“What is that thing?”

“No one knows its true name,” said Bomonga. “It lives in the darkness we just passed through. It’s not Visorak, but it has aided them in the past.”

“Why?”

“It likes to keep its food source handy,” the Rahaga replied. “The Zivon eats Visorak. It has been known to celebrate a victory by devouring half the horde it fought beside.”

“Then why bring it here?” asked Whenua, shocked.

“Sidorak wants the Toa dead,” Bomonga replied, “even if he has to destroy Metru Nui and everyone in it to make that happen.”

High above, the Zivon’s eyes narrowed at the sight of the helpless Toa Hordika and Rahaga. Saliva dripped from its mandibles, falling like rain on the Visorak tower, as it lumbered toward its next meal.
Vakama lifted his blazer claw and angled it to reflect the dim sunlight. On a nearby rooftop, Nokama did the same. One by one, the signal was repeated by all the Toa Hordika, relaying that they were in position for the strike.

“I am not sure I like this plan,” said Nuju. “How are we supposed to take them by surprise with the Tahtorak wandering around?”

“The city is full of Rahi. He’s just one more,” replied Kualus. “Granted, a very big one.”

It had only been a minute since Gaaki had reported seeing a monster emerge from out of nowhere to menace Whenua and Bomonga. All thoughts of waiting until dark or putting together a sophisticated plan had been scrapped then. If they did not move quickly, Whenua and the Rahaga were as good as dead.

Now the Toa were positioned about a block away from the tower. Onewa was on the ground near the buildings closest to the Visorak base. High above, Krahka, in the form of the hunting falcon Nivawk, circled and looked for points of weakness. The Tahtorak, impatient, was rooting up chutes and throwing them into the sea.

Krahka/Nivawk screeched. It was a signal. Onewa unleashed his spinners at the ground, sending huge cracks running through the pavement. When they reached the already weakened buildings that ringed the tower, the cracks became chasms. One by one, the structures toppled over onto the assembled Visorak.

That was the signal for the rest of the Toa Hordika and Rahaga to go into action. All four remaining Toa launched their spinners into the cloud of dust and debris. Outnumbered as they were, their only hope was to sow confusion among the enemy.

The Zivon at first ignored the battle going on around it. After all, it really didn’t care if the Visorak were killed – dead ones tasted just as good as live ones. Then a fire spinner struck it in the side, just painful enough to be annoying. Inches away from devouring Whenua and Bomonga, it turned to seek out the source of the attack.

“You don’t know this group of Toa,” answered Whenua. “We make our own luck. Now let’s get free of this webbing before that thing remembers we’re here.”

Onewa, Nokama, Matau, and Nuju were down off the rooftops now. They could hear Sidorak bellowing for the Visorak to regroup and advance. Barriers of ice, stone, and earth kept barring their way, cutting off small groups from rejoining the horde. Then the Rahaga would launch spinners into the knots of Visorak, further adding to the chaos. Up above, Yakama hurled weakened fire spinners designed to give off lots of smoke without much flame.

Krahka was the first to spot the Zivon moving toward the Toa Hordika of Fire. Used to living in darkness, the smoke and dust could not obscure the Zivon’s vision. Krahka swooped down and dug her talons into the Tahtorak’s flesh, spurring it on toward the Visorak’s monstrous ally.
Vakama saw his danger too late. The Zivon’s claw slashed toward him, only to be knocked aside by a sweeping blow from the Tahtorak’s tail. Vakama leaped from the roof even as the Zivon charged, slamming into the Tahtorak’s midsection and driving the beast back.

Nuju spotted Whenua trying desperately to free himself from the Visorak web. He launched a spinner and froze the webbing solid. A shrug was enough to shatter it then.

“This isn’t the healthiest place to be right now,” said the Toa Hordika of Ice.

“It was even less so a few moments ago,” replied Whenua. “What’s going on?”

Nuju gestured toward the tower, now being bombarded by air, stone, and water spinners. “We’re giving the Visorak something to think about.”

Bomonga watched as four Boggarak tumbled off the tower and onto a web far below. “They won’t forget this.”

“Good. We don’t want them to… let them remember, and fear.”

On the far side of the tower, Onewa had forgotten the first rule of this operation. The spinners gave the Toa the chance to strike from long range. Closing in on the Visorak gave the spider creatures too many advantages. Caught up in the heat of the fight, Onewa had gotten too near. Now he was pinned against a wall with a half dozen Visorak moving in.

“All right, come on,” he shouted. “Any Po-Matoran could take you! All they would need is a big enough stick!”

The Oohnorak launched their spinners. Onewa managed to dodge all but one, which struck his right arm, numbing it. The Visorak, sensing weakness, advanced.

“Oh, one arm,” said Onewa. “I can beat you with one arm. Don’t let how I look fool you – you’re not fighting some dumb Rahi now. You’re fighting a Toa!”

An Oohnorak leaped, crashing into Onewa and knocking him to the ground. Its mandibles grabbed the Toa’s good arm while the Visorak closed in.

A short distance away, Matau was fending off the enemy with a long piece of pipe when he spotted Onewa disappear beneath a pile of spiders. An air spinner might blow Onewa away along with his attackers. Matau dodged a Roporak spinner and broke into a run. At just the right moment, he planted the end of the pipe into the ground and vaulted over the horde. At the apex of the vault, he let go, crushing feet first into the Oohnorak.

Before the Visorak could recover, Matau helped Onewa to his feet. “Thanks, brother,” said the Toa Hordika of Stone.

“I couldn’t let you go dark-sleep,” Matau replied. “Who would there be for me to annoy?”

“I am sure you would find someone,” said Onewa. “What do you say we pay these monsters back a little of what we owe?”

Vakama landed hard and lay stunned. All around him, the other Toa Hordika were fighting for their lives. He knew he had to get up and help them. But something held him back. He had faced death, and worse, many times since becoming a Toa, yet never like this. Never before had he gone into battle with the knowledge that he was not meant to be a Toa… that this destiny belonged to someone else. And if it was not his destiny, then he might well die here, fate erasing a cosmic mistake.

He looked up. Through blurry eyes, he saw that the Visorak groups were starting to link up. In a few moments, the horde would be reassembled. Once that happened, the Toa and Rahaga would have no chance. They would fall, the Matoran would never awaken, and no one would be left to remember that Toa Metru had ever fought here.

And maybe it’s better that way, he said to himself.

The Tahtorak smashed into a building. Krahka barely managed to avoid being thrown off. The Zivon’s claws and mandibles were snapping at the Rahi’s flesh, but hadn’t yet been able to penetrate its
scaly hide. Snarling, the Tahtorak reached down and grabbed the Zivon with his forelegs. Before his enemy could react, the Tahtorak had lifted it into the air and slammed it down onto its back.

But the Zivon was far from helpless. Webbing shot from the tips of its legs, tangling up the Tahtorak. Taking advantage of the distraction, it rolled over and got back to its feet, hissing and spitting venom.

Krahka shifted her form to that of a razor-fish and dove, slicing through the webbing on her way down. Just before she hit the ground, she transformed again, this time into an insectoid Nui-Rama. She flew straight for the Zivon’s eyes. Behind her, a very angry Tahtorak freed himself from the last of the web.

Flitting and buzzing around in the Zivon’s line of sight, Krahka succeeded in distracting it. By the time it saw the Tahtorak’s tail sweeping toward it, there was no time to do anything. The blow connected, sending the Zivon flying toward the tower.

From the top of the tower, Sidorak had been watching the struggle unfold. The Toa Hordika had taken his horde by surprise, that was true, but the momentum was already beginning to shift. Already, the Visorak were moving to isolate the Toa and Rahaga and finish them off. Barring the unforeseen, he would be sharing a victory celebration with Roodaka before the day was done.

A shadow passed over the sun. Sidorak looked up. At first, he wondered when the Zivon had developed the ability to fly. By the time he realized it hadn’t, it was much too late.

Nuju and Whenua had fought their way over to join Nokama at the base of the tower. She did not look happy. “It’s too big and too well made,” she said. “And half the horde has retreated inside. I don’t think we can take it.”

“Maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way,” said Whenua. “Thinking too much like Toa. Try thinking like Hordika.”

Nokama shuddered. “I would rather not, if it’s all the same to you. I did that once already.”

Nuju smiled. “No, he has a point. Tell me, archivist, what do Rahi hate the most?”

Whenua thought back to his years on the job, and then to the sensations he had experienced since becoming a Toa Hordika. The answer was easy. “Confinement. All wild things hate to be trapped.”

“Exactly. The Visorak are trying to keep us from getting in the tower. What if we tried keeping them from getting out?”

Whenua’s answer was cut off by an impact that shook the building. All three Toa looked up in time to see the monstrous form of the Zivon plunging toward them.

“Your friends need your help,” said Norik.

Vakama looked down at the Rahaga. “They can do better without me. I am sure Matau or Onewa could tell you that.”

“You are still angry about what you read in Lhikan’s journal? Vakama, does it matter so much why you are a Toa, so long as you are one? You have the power – that gives you a responsibility to use it.”

Vakama said nothing, but instead sprinted away toward Onewa and Matau. Norik wanted to see that as a success, but he could sense that something was happening inside of the Toa Hordika of Fire... something dark and dangerous that, like an inferno, might well consume them all in time.

The impact of the Zivon striking the ground shook all of Le-Metru. Amazingly, the creature rose again, although it did stagger a bit in its first few steps. Krahka had shifted her shape once more, this time into a cousin of the Nui-Rama capable of hurling its stingers from a distance. She bore in on the Zivon, launching her barbs, only to see them bounce off its hard shell.

The Tahtorak, too, saw the enemy rise again. Ripping up the support struts of a chute, he threw them at the Zivon. The creature batted them away with its claws and charged.
The Kahgarak watched the Zivon mount its attack. The giant spider had been unconscious for part of the battle, so it had no idea where the massive lizard like Rahi or the flying insect creature had come from. But it certainly knew where they were going.

Spinner already energizing, it started after the Zivon.

Sidorak clung to the top of the tower. The nearest web was a long way below and there was no guarantee he would not simply plunge through it and end up a very messy blotch on the ground. Better to climb back up and reassess the situation.

A rumble came from below. He looked down to see a wall of earth rising up to surround the tower. At the same moment, water spinners produced a drenching rain centered on the structure. The ledge grew slick. Sidorak made a last effort to pull himself back to the roof, but his claws slipped. He hurled himself as far from the building as he could, aiming for what looked like a strong section of web.

The king of the horde struck the web like a rock, but the product of the Visorak held fast. He shook his head to clear it, then glanced at the tower. The earth now surrounded it, and ice spinners were turning the rain to sleet. Ice was building up on the soil, turning it into a wall as hard as stone surrounding the tower on every side. Every exit was blocked, with most of the horde trapped inside. Given time, they could force their way out again, he knew. Still, Sidorak had been leading the creatures a long time. He had seen what happened when Visorak were stuck in a confined space together. If he was lucky, there might be 50 or 60 left in the end out of the hundreds in there now.

Sidorak cursed in a language that had been old when Metru Nui was new. He knew this was only a temporary setback. He would return with another horde and free the tower in a matter of days. But now the Toa Hordika had seen that the horde was not invulnerable. They would not look at the Visorak with the same horror in their hearts again.

Then there is only one answer, he said to himself. We must give them new reasons to fear.

Vakama thought as fast as he ran. Turning the ground to tar beneath them would not stop the Visorak from launching spinners or shooting web. Fire bursts might slow them down, but not defeat them. A wall of fire would trap Onewa and Matau as surely as the spiders.

He was almost ready to give up in frustration when he noticed the overhang. The upper half of the building behind Onewa and Matau had been damaged in the quake, and it now hung out over where the Oohnorak were assembled.

For the first time in a while, Vakama smiled.

Onewa and Matau had watched the wall of earth and ice go up around the tower. It was an amazing sight – and possibly also the last one they would ever see. The Oohnorak were mounting charge after charge, barely held back by the stone and air spinners. Exhausted, neither Toa Hordika felt they could hold out much longer.

The lead Oohnorak sensed their weakness. The hunt was about to end. It took a step forward, another, and another. Then something struck its back, liquid, sizzling hot. The Visorak screeched and thrashed itself back.

Now a rain of molten hot protodermis had begun. Onewa and Matau watched in shock as the white-hot droplets poured down on the Visorak. Here was something they could not fight. A hastily woven web simply melted at the touch of the liquid.

Matau pointed upwards. Fire spinners were striking the overhang. It now glowed red and was rapidly melting. As he watched, one spinner went off course, striking further down the building. Fire spat from it, tearing through the weakened structure.

“Move!” yelled Matau, diving at Onewa. The two Toa Hordika barely managed to get clear as the upper part of the structure came crashing down.

“Are you all right?” Vakama was standing over them.
“Except for almost getting flat-crushed, sure,” said Matau. “Your aim was a little off on that last one.”

“A lot of things are off,” said Vakama.

Onewa rose and helped Matau up. “More than you know, fire-spitter. More than you know.”

“Give me the answer!” bellowed the Tahtorak. “Give it to me now!”

The only answer the Zivon gave was a slash with its claws. When the Tahtorak evaded, the Zivon charged and grabbed its foe. Then its stinger began to strike, once, twice, three times, each time deeper than the last. The Tahtorak roared in pain.

Krahka dove for the ground, transforming into a Lohrak as she flew. She wrapped her snakelike body around the Zivon’s stinger in a desperate attempt to hold it back. Spared from the blows for a moment, the Tahtorak tore off a portion of a nearby building and slammed it on top of his foe.

The Zivon reeled and snapped its stinger forward. Krahka lost her grip and flew into the Tahtorak. The Rahi batted her aside and she slammed into a wall. Masonry rained down upon her.

The Tahtorak reached the Zivon just as it sprang. They collided, toppling over, locked in a fierce struggle. The Tahtorak had strength and weight, but the claws, mandibles and stinger of the Zivon gave it multiple ways to hurt its foe. Seeing an opening, it struck with its stinger, looking to end the battle quickly.

But this time the Tahtorak was ready. It caught the offending limb in an iron grip and, with a supreme effort of its powerful muscles, snapped the stinger off. The Zivon screamed and scrambled away.

On a pile of rubble nearby, the Kahgarak had seen enough. It sent its spinner flying through the air at the Tahtorak.

Stirring, Krahka saw the whirling wheel of energy heading for the Tahtorak. She knew what it meant. If the Tahtorak fell, then the Zivon would ravage all of Metru Nui, with nothing to stop it. Forcing herself to rise, she found she was too weak to fly. Instead, she summoned her memories of the six Toa Metru, her body taking on aspects of each of theirs.

There was no time to risk an elemental power blast, and her mind was too scattered to focus it anyway. Instead, she ran, harder and faster than she ever had before. She could already tell she would be too late. At the last split second, she veered off and hurled herself at the Zivon.

The spinner struck. The field of darkness opened to consume the Tahtorak, drawing the Rahi into eternal shadow. At that instant, Krahka struck the Zivon full force, driving it into the Tahtorak. With all three in physical contact, the shadow swallowed them whole. In an instant, they were gone.

Onewa could not believe his eyes. With a howl of rage, he unleashed a stone spinner at Kahgarak. The massive creature turned in time to see it coming, but too late to stop it. A moment later, it was buried beneath a ton of stone.

The Toa Hordika stood for a long time, watching the rock dust settle. Pouks scrambled over the rubble to stand by his side.

“It’s not much of a marker for her,” said the Rahaga.

“Best I could do,” said Onewa. “And more than she expected, I’d guess. I’m still not sure what happened.”

“You six are Toa, dealing with the Rahi inside,” Pouks replied. “Maybe she was a Rahi who discovered a little Toa inside.”
The battle was over. Those Visorak still free had retreated to the border of Le-Metru until further orders. Now, days later, the Toa Hordika surveyed the field of victory and prepared for what was to come.

Onewa and Nuju had worked together to tear down the wall around the Visorak tower. It was hard work, made more so by the need to keep an eye out for spider creatures who might be waiting to leap out. When the last piece of ice and earth had been removed, they opened the hatch leading inside, ready for anything.

The first thing that struck the Toa Hordika was the stench. Visorak did not smell particularly good under normal circumstances. Trap them together for a few days and it was far worse. A rustle of spider legs was followed by the appearance of a dozen or so battered Boggarak. None of them seemed at all interested in a fight.

"Do we stop them?" asked Onewa.

"Instinct would say we should," Nuju replied. "But I am no longer sure I trust my instincts. They are no threat. It may be best to save our energies for the fresh hordes that will come against us."

The Toa Hordika spent most of the next day cleaning out the tower, chasing away surviving Visorak and burying the dead. When the ugly task was finished, they stood looking at the structure, puzzled.

"Now what?" asked Whenua. "Knock it down?"

"What purpose would that serve?" asked Norik.

"No purpose," said Vakama, looking hard at the Rahaga. "It just feels good."

"That's the beast talking," Pouks muttered. "Go ahead, think like Rahi. Act like Rahi. I could tell you stories about how many Rahi have escaped the Visorak over the years. They're really short stories."

"I think we can find another use for this," said Iruini. "That's if this pack of wild Muaka calling themselves Toa has the patience to do something worthwhile."

"Talk," said Nokama. "We'll listen."

Onewa hauled another piece of rubble toward the tower. It was backbreaking work, even with the enhanced strength of a Toa. As he walked, he remembered Iruini's words.

"We won this fight," the Rahaga had said. "We may win the next one, or we may not. You may take the Coliseum and free the Matoran... or free only a few and then be driven back. You need a place of safety to which you can retreat. This tower can be that place."

Onewa could remember his reply too. "You're crazy. I know something about stone. This tower is strong, sure, but eventually the horde would batter down the hatch and that would be the end of it. Even barricading it would only buy us a little extra time."

"Not if you use my idea of a barricade," the Rahaga had said, smiling.
Onewa came up over a pile of shattered stone to see the results of the Toa’s labors. A new gateway had been constructed at the front of the tower. At Nokama’s suggestion, it resembled a huge Kanohi mask, like the gates of the Coliseum. A strong portcullis had been put into place as well. The Toa Hordika of Stone paused to survey the structure, then shook his head and said, “Still not enough.”

“Drop that and come here,” said Iruini. “All of you, gather around.”

The six Toa Hordika did as they were asked. Norik passed among them, gesturing for them to raise their tools and lightly touch the surface of the new structure. For an instant, their tools blazed to life, only to fade out again.

“What was that?” asked Nuju.

Iruini scampered away, picked up a rock, and threw it at the portcullis. Just before it struck the bars, bolts of fire and ice shot from the walls of the gateway and disintegrated the rock.

“Just as your tools can charge your Rhotuka spinners with greater elemental power,” said Norik, “you can charge other physical objects as well. You will have to repeat it numerous times to maintain the charge, but while it has a portion of your power, it will be a formidable barrier.”

“Let’s invite some Visorak to be our home-guests,” said Matau. “I want to try this out.”

“You’ll find out, Toa, that the Visorak have a very bad habit,” said Kualus. “They never wait for an invitation to come calling.”

Roodaka stood on a rocky crag overlooking the protodermis sea. Here on the Great Barrier, she could view the entire city, enjoying the sight of it slowly being strangled by Visorak webs. She often came to this spot when she needed time to plan, far away from Sidorak’s ranting.

Of course, that was not the only reason she journeyed here atop a mutated Nui-Kopen wasp. The true attraction was a slab of protodermis marked with a Toa seal. Behind this slab lay imprisoned the master of shadows, Makuta. Her power, Sidorak’s power, even the might of the assembled hordes was not enough to free her sovereign.

But the Toa have the power, she thought. What they created, they can undo. And undo it they shall, if I have to rip the Toa power out of them.

Sidorak didn’t understand. To him, Metru Nui was just one more game of conquest. He hated the Toa Hordika because they were not surrendering before his might. Their resistance might serve to embolden the Visorak to rebel. In addition he knew that by now the Rahaga would have spun their wild tales of Keetongu, the Rahi said to have the power to undo everything Sidorak had built. If such a creature existed, and if the Toa found it…

“Nonsense!” she spat. “It is an old Rahaga’s tale they have told for decades, trying to keep their wretched spirits up. There is no Keetongu. There never was. And even if it existed… I know how to deal with Rahi.”

Roodaka turned and peered at the crystalline protodermis shell, trying to glimpse Makuta’s face. All she could make out was a dark blur, but it was enough. She knew he was in there. She knew his mind was aware of her presence, even if his body could not move.

“Soon, Makuta,” she whispered. “I have used the most devastating tool I could imagine against the Toa: the truth. Already, it must be eating away at their resolve. They will fracture… their spirits will crumble to dust… and in their last moments, they will know their return to Metru Nui served only to free their greatest enemy.”

Makuta did not answer. But the shadows grew deeper around Roodaka, as if their master was offering a sign of his approval.

The Toa Hordika and Rahaga sat in a clearing near their newly christened “Tower of Toa.” Vakama had used his Rhotuka spinner to start a fire. The Toa Hordika didn’t really need the warmth – in fact, the fire put off their Rahi sides – but the Rahaga were not quite so immune to the elements. Despite their successes, the mood around the flames was grim.

“We did well,” said Nokama, “considering.”
“Considering what?” asked Matau.
Vakama glanced at the Toa Hordika of Water. He knew the answer to his question before he asked, “You learned the truth as well?”
“Yes,” she replied. “We were never meant to be Toa Metru. The destiny belonged to others. But I suppose it is our destiny now, for good or ill.”

Onewa rose. “I think I can answer that. But you won’t like what you hear.”

When none of the Toa responded, he continued. “Think back. Toa Lhikan suspected something was wrong in the city. Makuta, in the guise of Dume, sent the Dark Hunters to stop him. But the false Dume couldn’t be sure they would succeed before Lhikan was able to create more Toa.

“So Makuta studied the signs in the stars. He discovered that the Matoran who had found the Great Disks were destined to be Toa. They were far from perfect candidates, but with Lhikan to lead them, they might have been an effective team. I guess he never considered that Lhikan might have to sacrifice all his Toa power to create a new team.”

Matau wished he could find some way to drown out Onewa’s voice. He could guess what was coming next.

“Makuta planted the thought in Lhikan’s mind to choose other Matoran. Without his even being aware, Lhikan was being directed toward picking six strong-willed, stubborn types who would never get along, let alone follow any leader or be able to function as a team. In other words, us.”

“It cannot be,” whispered Nuju.

“I found Makuta’s lair in Po-Metru,” said Onewa. “I read the story in his own words. We are Toa Metru, brothers and sister… by the grace of Makuta.”

“Born from shadows to defend the light,” Vakama said quietly. “Is it any wonder the beasts inside us are so strong?”

“So what do we do now?” said Whenua. “Now that we know where we came from?”

Nokama looked at each Toa Hordika in turn. “We worry about where we’re going… not where we’ve been. Makuta wanted us to turn on each other, fight among ourselves, so that he could succeed. But we stopped him. And we will go on stopping him and others like him. It’s who we are – it’s what we do.”

The other Toa nodded their agreement. But in their hearts, doubts grew where none had ever been before, and the coming dawn felt very, very far away.
Silence reigned for a long time after Vakama finished speaking. When it was broken, it was in a most unexpected fashion. Tahu began to laugh.

“... a grand joke, Turaga,” he said. “Toa owing their power to Makuta... a wonderful tale, but surely not one meant to be taken seriously.”

Vakama looked up at the Toa Nuva of Fire. In that instant, Hahli could swear she saw the rage of the Toa Hordika in his eyes. “This is not a jest, Tahu. This is deadly serious. Even you, who have faced Bohrok and Rahkshi, cannot know what it is to have your very spirit turned against you.” The Turaga dropped his gaze. His voice grew quiet. “But I know. Mata Nui, how I know.”

“Then all of that, everything you and Onewa learned -- it was the truth?” asked Gali.

“It was... a truth,” Vakama replied. “But there was more, and worse... much worse... to come.”

“Whatever your origins, Turaga, you wore the mantle of Toa with honor;” offered Kopaka. “You lived by the three Matoran virtues: unity, duty, and destiny, in all that you did. Despite your differences, you stood beside each other and faced every menace as a team.”

Now it was Vakama’s turn to laugh -- a long, cold laugh that would haunt the Toa Nuva in their dreams. “There is more to tell,” said the Turaga. “Much more, but it must wait for another night. The stars shine too brightly on this evening, and the fire brings too much warmth. This story is one that must be told on a night as dark as Makuta’s heart, when the cold grips your bones like Zivon’s claws. We will wait for such a night... and then we will continue.”

The Toa Nuva watched him depart, hearing his final words in their mind. We will continue... was it a promise, they wondered. Or was it a threat?
Turaga Vakama carefully placed stones in the sandpit known as the Amaja Circle. The Turaga of Mata Nui had used this spot for hundreds of years to tell stories of the past or share visions of the future. But never before had any of the elders had to share so dark a tale.

He looked at the face of each Toa Nuva in turn, all of them assembled to hear his story. Then he glanced at Takanuva, the Toa of Light, who seemed as if he wished he were anywhere else. Next to him sat Hahli, the Matoran who acted as Chronicler. Vakama realized he had delayed long enough — it was time to begin.

“Gathered friends, listen again to our legend,” he began, moving the stones into their proper places for the beginning of the tale. “In the time before time, six Matoran were called by the Great Spirit and transformed, made mighty Toa. These Toa Metru – myself, Nokama, Matau, Whenua, Onewa, and Nuju – risked all to vanquish our sworn enemy, Makuta.

Vakama positioned the six stones that represented the Toa so that they formed a circle in the sandpit.” We succeeded. Makuta was imprisoned, encased in impenetrable protodermis and sealed there by the combined force of the Toa’s elemental powers.

“With Makuta vanquished, we journeyed to a new and wondrous home – the island of Mata Nui – a place where it seemed the Matoran could one day live in peace. All seemed well in the world. But such a victory is not won without cost…”

The Turaga of Fire hurled the black Makuta stone into the center of the pit, letting its shadow fall upon the other stones. “Many Matoran were left behind, held in sway by the dark power of Makuta. We, the Toa, united in dutiful pledge, knew we would one day return to their old home, and rescue those we could not before.”

Vakama glanced up at the Toa Nuva. Though he was now a Turaga, far removed from the events he was relating, Vakama let on that in his mind he was back on Metru Nui once more.

“That day came all too quickly,” he said, sounding like the Toa he had been. “But the journey would not be an easy one for the Toa Metru – for Makuta did not leave the slumbering Matoran unprotected.”

Gali Nuva suppressed a shudder as Vakama continued. “Their resting place was guarded by creatures of the night, hordes of the shadows, those that would poison and deceive any traveler true of heart. Their name alone was enough to strike fear: Visorak.”

The Toa Nuva’s eyes were drawn to the pit. The Makuta stone had pierced the rock below the sand, and now a spiderweb of cracks had formed, threatening to topple the Toa stones. Vakama smiled grimly at the sight, and resumed his tale.
Despite their recent victory, the Toa Hordika were left more fragmented and disturbed than before. They were rapidly mastering the Rhotuka spinners they now carried, but had less luck mastering the Rahi sides of themselves. Too often, they had allowed anger to rule their spirits almost to the point of disaster. Vakama, in particular, had been filled with anger for days and had finally reached a point where he avoided the others completely. He spent most of his time wandering the ruins, straying farther away from the camp each day, as if straining against an invisible chain that bound him to Nokama and the rest. He surveyed the wreckage of the once proud city, reflecting on what the Toa were, what they had been, and what they had become.

So lost in thought was he that he sometimes forgot just how much Metru Nui had changed. With the Archives destroyed by the earthquake, every Rahi that had ever been housed there was now loose and roaming the city. A near fatal reminder of that came on one of his walks, when a savage Muaka cat sprang from the rubble to confront him. It snarled at Vakama, muscles tensed to spring and claws ready to rend the Toa Hordika.

Vakama reacted purely by instinct. He hunched down, blazer claws raised, and growled like a Rahi. There was no strategy behind his actions, just an animalistic show of strength. Even without his willing it, a Rhotuka spinner took shape in the launcher that was now part of his anatomy.

The Muaka took a step back. This creature looked like one of the two-legged ones that had captured the Rahi long ago, but it did not act like one. It acted like a beast, and a formidable beast at that. Deciding there had to be easier prey than this, the Muaka turned and disappeared into the darkness.

Vakama forced himself to relax. With enormous effort, he pushed down the Hordika in him and let his rational side return to dominance. “What was –?” he began.

“It meant you no harm.”

The Toa Hordika of Fire turned to see Norik approaching. The Rahaga had been silently trailing Vakama since he had left the camp. In time, Vakama’s Hordika senses would make it impossible for him to be followed.

“I beg to differ,” Vakama replied.

Norik glanced in the direction the Muaka had gone. “It was just scared. Muaka are loners by nature, and uncomfortable being close to others.” He gestured to Vakama. “There’s a bit of them in you now.”

It was then that the Rahaga noticed Vakama’s Rhotuka spinner was still active and waiting to be launched. “Careful with that,” he said quietly. “It’s a most powerful tool.”

Vakama had not even realized the fire spinner was there, but now he willed it to dissipate. Still, it gave him some satisfaction to know it could intimidate the Rahaga just as it had the Muaka.

“I certainly mean to find that out… wise one,” he replied, with more than a little sarcasm in his voice. Then he turned and walked away, only to be stopped by Norik’s voice.

“And what about your friends?”

123
Vakama spun on his heel, growling, “Former friends. If they think being a leader is so easy, they can try it themselves!”

“True,” Norik said, nodding. “But they won’t succeed without you. Or you without them.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I don’t.” Norik conceded. “But the Great Spirit does. Unity, duty, and destiny. If you Toa are to rescue the Matoran, you must do so together. This is something you can’t change.”

Vakama stared at the Rahaga for a long moment, digesting his words. Then he turned again and stalked off into the shadows.

“Watch me,” he snapped.

Norik watched him go. Yes, Vakama, that I will do, he said to himself. You bear watching in these dark days, perhaps even more than you know.
Nokama sat alone in the center of the Toa’s makeshift camp, waiting for Norik and Vakama to return. She understood why the Toa Hordika of Fire was so upset – they had all been extremely harsh to him, although his arrogant attitude had almost invited such treatment. Still, understanding did not make her any less angry with him. After all, their quest to save the Matoran was not being made any easier by his hostility.

She heard the sound of someone approaching. “Vakama?”

But it was not the Toa Hordika, only Norik. Nokama was relieved to see him, but could not conceal her disappointment that Vakama was not with him. “Norik, it’s good you’re back.”

“Vakama has a lot on his mind,” the Rahaga said. “We must give him time to find his destiny.”

“And if he finds a particularly bad one?” asked Onewa.

“Now then – we should begin our search for Keetongu at once,” Norik replied, ignoring the question. Nokama and Onewa exchanged glances, wondering why the Rahaga did not want to address the issue of Vakama.

Matau, on the other hand, was more than happy to focus on the new topic. “Right! Keetongu! Getting turned back into our old, ever-handsome selves. Let’s get on that.”

“But where to start?” asked Nuju. He was still skeptical that a creature like this Keetongu could have been in the city without anyone being aware of it.

“Somewhere you know well,” Norik replied. Then he walked off, followed by the rest of the Rahaga. The Toa looked at each other, then decided that Norik’s abrupt departure was meant as a signal that they should join him. They rose and trailed after the Rahaga, wondering just where he was leading.

Some distance away, Vakama continued to walk aimlessly. He kept replaying his conversation with Norik over in his head. Unity… what does that mean? Were the other Toa showing any unity when they kept criticizing the job I was doing? Okay, so I made some mistakes… like Onewa never has, or Matau – he’s the king of mistakes.

I did what Lhikan would have wanted me to do, he said to himself. I put saving the Matoran first, above personal safety or anything else. It just… didn’t work out. And considering what I learned – that Lhikan’s choice of the six of us as Toa was inspired by Makuta, not the Great Spirit – why should anyone be surprised that we – I – fouled up?

“I can do it alone,” he said aloud. He pictured the shocked looks on the faces of the others when they saw that he had rescued the Matoran all by himself. “I’ll show them all!”

Vakama scrambled over a pile of rubble and found himself at the edge of a steep precipice. The chutes that had once run from this spot had long since been destroyed. Now there was nothing but a view of the vast, web-shrouded city of Metru Nui. The Toa Hordika looked out over his home and was struck again by how big it really was. He frowned. What had he been thinking? How could he believe he could challenge an entire city full of Visorak alone? How would trying that benefit the Matoran?
“Who am I kidding?” he muttered. “Maybe Norik’s right. Maybe I can’t do this without the others. Maybe I don’t want to do this without the others.”

His thoughts were interrupted by a Rhotuka spinner whizzing past his head. Vakama leapt, rolled, and came up on his feet to find himself confronting a Boggarak, the blue Visorak that commonly stalked Ga-Metru. Vakama remembered Gaaki saying that on land, Boggarak spinners had the power to totally dehydrate a target and reduce it to dust.

“Thanks for the warning shot,” he said, readying himself to dodge again.

The Boggarak launched a second spinner. Vakama evaded it with ease. The Toa Hordika energized one of his fire spinners, saying, “All right, so you’ve just got bad aim. Watch and learn.”

Vakama launched the spinner. Just as it was about to strike the Boggarak, another spinner struck the wheel of energy and deflected it from its course. The Toa Hordika turned to see three more Boggarak closing in. With the cliff at his back, and the four Visorak in front of him, he was effectively trapped. His Hordika side rose to the fore—all Rahi hate to be cornered—and he gave a fearsome growl.

The Visorak ignored him. They were used to Rahi making threatening noises when the trap was sprung. That was part of the fun of the hunt. Their only regret was that this hunt would be over so soon, but there were still five more Toa Hordika to track down once Vakama was finished.

Those five Toa Metru stood with the six Rahaga before the Great Temple in Ga-Metru. Despite all the damage done to the city, the temple still stood proudly, as if it were a symbol of the fact that, though the Great Spirit Mata Nui now slumbered, he had not been destroyed.

“Here?” Matau asked in disbelief. “I’m sure it could have great-helped our old Toa selves, but now?”

“We’ll never find a way to change back if you keep talking like that,” Onewa snapped.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Matau answered, sharply. “Oh, that’s right—some kind of Rahi monster!”

Norik shot looks at both Toa. “If you’re quite done, we should go inside.”

All five Toa Hordika hesitated. Nakama had already been back to the Great Temple since their transformation, and she remembered how hard it had been for her to enter the structure as a tainted Toa. Now the others were feeling that as well. It just did not seem right to enter—yet, if Norik was correct, their only hope of ever being Toa Metru again lay inside. Still, none of them could take that first step.

Is this it, then? Whenua wondered. Are we already so far gone that the temple of the Great Spirit rejects us? And if that’s true, have we already lost our fight?

Toa Hordika Vakama expected to wake up in a cocoon, or a cage—that’s assuming he was going to wake up at all. When the Boggarak paralyzed him, he had fallen and hit the ground just hard enough to stun himself. Now, as he looked around, he wondered if he was still unconscious and dreaming.

He was alone in a chamber he had never seen before. His wrists were bound with thick Visorak webbing that also served to anchor him to the floor. He pulled at his bonds, but they would not give, even to his Hordika-enhanced strength.

His thoughts raced. Confined. Trapped. Again. I hate being trapped! I hate being helpless! I am a Toa… a Toa of Fire… I am… I am… a Hordika!

A howl split the night, a primal sound of rage and despair. For a moment, Vakama wondered what sort of Rahi would make such a sound. Then he realized with a start that it was coming from his own mouth.

“What’s happening to me?”

A tall figure stepped into the room. She moved as gracefully and noiselessly as if she were made of darkness. Her face and body were as black as shadow, but her eyes blazed like the Ta-Metru fire pits. Vakama had never seen her before, but from Norik’s description, he knew who she had to be.

“You are… becoming,” purred Roodaka.
“Yes, but what?”

The viceroy of the Visorak stopped in front of her prisoner. “A friend… or a foe. That’s for you to decide. It’s why I have invited you here.”

Vakama tugged at his bonds again. “Some invitation.”

Roodaka smiled. “Then perhaps this one will be more to your liking — walk with me. I’ve a… proposal for you.”

Vakama’s Rahi senses were on full alert, screaming that there was danger near. He chose to ignore them. “And if I don’t want to hear it?” he asked.

Roodaka reached out to trace the outline of his misshapen features. “Be reasonable, Vakama.”

With that, she turned and began to walk away. Then, as if suddenly remembering his condition, she waved her hand. The webbing binding him fell away and crumbled to dust.

“What harm could come from listening?” she asked, her voice as soft and cold as the winter wind.
Roodaka and Vakama stood on the Coliseum balcony overlooking the ruins of Ta-Metru. He was still not sure why he had followed her out here. Perhaps it was curiosity… a desire to know his enemy better… or perhaps it was just a certainty that she would not have freed him if there were any chance for him to escape. Or perhaps he was genuinely interested in what she had to say?

No, no, he assured himself. That can’t be it.

The viceroy glanced around to make sure they were alone. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Secrecy is such a burden, but Sidorak mustn’t know we spoke.”

“Sidorak?”

“King of the Visorak.” She made no attempt to disguise the contempt in her voice.

“And he doesn’t know you’ve captured me?” Vakama was unsure whether he believed all this. Norik had told him of Roodaka’s talent for treachery. But why would she pretend to dislike her king?

“Not yet,” she answered flatly.

Vakama shrugged. “Some leader.”

“I agree.”

Vakama’s eyes widened. It was one thing to show a lack of respect for a king, quite another to be so open about one’s disloyalty. What was this creature up to? Despite himself, he was intrigued by the sheer darkness and danger of this Roodaka.

He looked to either side. Boggarak lurked in the shadows. “You’re not worried they’re going to tell him you said that?”

“They are loyal to me,” Roodaka replied.

Vakama almost laughed. “Right. Like you are to Sidorak?”

“Yes,” the viceroy said, her tone hard. “They obey me because I am strong. They fear me, and therefore do not dare to question my authority. That is leadership, Vakama. That is how the other Toa should treat you.”

She moved in a little closer, her words wrapping around him like a tentacle. “Maybe then they wouldn’t say such awful things…”

He glared at her. She could read the unspoken question in his eyes. How could she know of such things? And how much more does she know?

“The Visorak horde is legion, Vakama, and has twice as many ears,” she answered. Nearby, the Boggarak made a sound that passed for laughter among their kind.

“I trust my fellow Toa –” Vakama began.

Roodaka cut him off. “To do what? Hold you back? They’re not worthy of a leader like you… which is why I’ve brought you here.”

Vakama gazed out at the Metru Nui night. He could make out the familiar skyline of furnaces and forges, those that had survived the quake mostly intact. “Ta-Metru,” he said sadly. “When I was a Matoran, it was my whole world. It meant everything to me.” He turned to look again at Roodaka. “It still does.”
“It can be your home again, Vakama – to rule as you see fit. All you need to do is lead those who will obey you properly.”

Leaning in close to him, she hissed, “Lead the Visorak horde!”

Norik was halfway through the entrance to the Great Temple when he realized the Toa Hordika were not behind him. He turned and saw them still standing uncomfortably a few feet from the gateway.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

Nokama looked at the others. Having experienced what they were feeling, she decided it was best that she speak for them all. “It might be best if we wait here. The Great Temple is sacred to Toa. Given what’s happened… I’m not sure it would be right.”

Norik pondered her words for a moment, then nodded. “I understand. Our work here will not go unnoticed. I must ask that you buy us the time it takes to complete it at all costs.”

“Consider it done,” answered Nokama. She turned and headed back to the bridge that connected the Great Temple to Metru Nui, the others following. Only Matau remained behind.

“Wait!” he called after them. “Don’t you think we should think-talk about –”

“No!” the four Toa shouted in unison.

Outvoted, Matau shrugged and loped after his friends. He did not want to remain at the temple alone.

Better to be with my pack… my team, he corrected himself. This place is full of hidden dangers now. They might come from almost any direction… even the one you would least suspect.

“I… don’t know.” Part of Vakama could not believe he was even considering Roodaka’s offer. He was a Toa! He had been entrusted with power by Lhikan himself! How could he give as much as a moment’s thought to the idea of taking command of the Visorak horde?

But another, stronger voice spoke in his mind as well. I am not a Toa – not anymore – and I was a failure when I carried that burden. Think about it: Do I really think six Toa Hordika and six freakish Rahaga can overcome hundreds of Visorak and free the Matoran? How many will die in that attempt? How many Matoran will never see the sunlight on the island above?

Vakama tried to drive away these thoughts, but they just came faster. If I accept her offer – if I take the power that is being given me – I could order the Matoran to be freed! I could convince Roodaka to let the Toa Hordika leave with them and head to safety. And if it means I have to remain behind in Metru Nui… well, no one will miss me. Of that, I am sure.

Roodaka interrupted his musings. “I understand your reluctance. You require proof.”

She turned to her personal Boggarak guard and gestured toward the low balcony rail and the darkness beyond. “Throw yourself off the edge,” she ordered.

Without a sound or a moment’s hesitation, the Visorak marched obediently forward. To Vakama’s horror, they plunged off the edge of the balcony, one by one. He rushed forward to look.

The Toa Hordika of Fire peered over the rail, expecting to see nothing but all-consuming blackness. Instead, to his surprise, he spotted the Boggarak sprawled on a ledge about ten feet below, unharmed.

“I didn’t know there was a ledge,” he said, relieved.

Roodaka smiled. “Neither did they.”

She took a step closer to him, saying, “Obedience. This is but the first of many lessons I can teach you.”

“And this is something your ‘king’ would allow?”

“There is a way.”

Vakama made his decision then. It wasn’t one the other Toa or those old fools, the Rahaga, would ever be able to understand. He knew that. But it would ensure their safety in the end, he hoped, and free
him from the shadow of Toa Lhikan. He would no longer try to be something he was not cut out for – instead, he would be a leader of a different kind.

“I’m listening,” he said quietly.

Roodaka allowed an undertone of triumph to enter her voice. “Six ways, Vakama… six ways.”

Rahaga Gaaki worked feverishly. The inscription she was translating was old and in a Matoran dialect she had not mastered. She wished she had access to Toa Nokama’s Mask of Translation, but such power had been denied her for far too many years. She had to rely on her own experience and wits.

A soft sound distracted her from her work. She turned to investigate, only to see Norik entering the Great Temple chamber. “Are you all right, Gaaki?” he asked.

“Norik, I… I heard something.”

“Probably just my approach,” he said. “Age makes us loud as well as wise.”

Gaaki wanted to be comforted by his words, but somehow she could not be. She knew the sound she had heard did not belong in this place. “No. This was a creature.”

“Visorak?”

She shook her head, but said nothing.

That’s the thing – I can recognize everything that walks, crawls or flies in this world by sight, sound, or smell,” she said, frustrated. “But not this.”

Norik was worried. Gaaki was a skilled tracker, on land as well as in the water. She and the other Rahaga knew the Rahi kingdom like no one else ever had – they had to in order to survive. For her to admit being baffled, this mystery creature would have to be…

No. By Mata Nui, it cannot be, he thought.

Doing his best to hide his fears, he reached out a comforting hand to Gaaki. “I’m sure it’s nothing. A ‘glitch’ brought on by processing such an elaborate translation.”

“I guess I have been working kind of hard,” she conceded.

“Gather your brothers and go outside. Check on the Toa,” he said.

“What about you?”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Norik lied. “Find the Toa.”

Gaaki turned and ascended a set of spiral steps that led to the temple exit. Norik waited until he could see and hear no sign of her before shifting his attention back to what appeared to be an empty room. But appearances could be deceiving, Norik knew. Creatures who seemed like horrible monsters could have good and noble hearts, and those who claimed to be heroes could be the worst villains of all. Beneath every being’s thin shell of civilization, there lurked always a Rahi beast, longing to emerge. All it needed was the slightest crack to slip through into the daylight, and becoming a Hordika was more than a crack – it was a chasm.

“Show yourself!” he demanded.

Behind the Rahaga, a figure flitted from one shadow to the next. Had Norik seen it, he would have been hard pressed to identify it, for it seemed more Rahi than anything else.

“I doubt you’d recognize me,” said the dark figure.

Norik wheeled. That was Vakama’s voice! But the Toa Hordika was nowhere to be seen. Silently, the Rahaga thanked the Great Spirit he had thought to get Gaaki out of harm’s way.

Vakama’s voice came again, this time from a different corner of the room. “I’ve got some bad news. Gaaki’s not going to find her brother Rahaga upstairs.”

“What have you done with them?” snapped Norik. For a moment, he wondered if Vakama could have gone so far as to kill the other Rahaga. If he had… no matter the difference in their power, Norik vowed to make him pay in kind.

The Toa Hordika’s reply came from yet another corner of the room. “Nothing,” he said. “Yet.”

Norik turned left and right, trying to spot the Toa, but his quarry had learned to use the shadows too well. “Then it’s not too late, Vakama. You don’t have to do this…”

130
There was a long pause. Then a voice that sounded more like that of the hero of Metru Nui said, “Give me one reason I shouldn’t.”

“The other Toa. They need you to lead them.” As soon as he spoke the words, Norik knew he had made a mistake.

“It’s always about what’s best for the others!” Vakama growled. “She was right about them, Norik. About me.”

“Who have you been talking to, Vakama? Who put these thoughts into your head?” Norik asked, though he was already certain of the answer.

“You’ll find out,” Vakama chuckled. “I’m counting on it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to understand the message, Norik,” Vakama said, his tone dark with rage. “Just carry it.”

“This message – what is it?”

The Toa Hordika’s answer was a growl that sounded as if it had been torn from deep inside him. Norik looked up barely in time to see Vakama, now completely in thrall to his Hordika side, plunging down from above.

Then Norik saw nothing but darkness.
Dawn was breaking. Nokama felt the pale sunlight warming her armor and awoke. For a few seconds, she wondered what had happened to her city. Where were all the Matoran? Why were the chutes not running?

Then a flood of memory returned. Dume who was not Dume, but Makuta in disguise; a thousand Matoran forced into spheres and rendered comatose; darkness falling over the suns, the ground shaking…

She shook her head to clear the visions away. There were more immediate problems to worry about, she reminded herself. *If we cannot reverse what has happened to us, all that has gone before will seem like just a spirited game of akilini.*

Nokama rose and walked to the Great Temple gateway. Beyond that impressive arch was the bridge that led to the most venerated structure in all Metru Nui. Amazingly, it still stood, exactly as she remembered it. Only one thing was missing…

“Matau?”

The Toa Hordika of Air had agreed to take the final shift on guard. But he was nowhere to be found. *Has something happened?* she wondered. *Could the Visorak have taken him by surprise, capturing him before he could give a cry of warning?*

Small bits of rock and wood suddenly rained down upon her. Puzzled, she looked up to see Matau in the eaves of the arch, building what looked suspiciously like a nest. After a few moments, he noticed Nokama down below.

“Uh… yes?”

“I thought you were keeping watch,” said Nokama.

“I was.”

She gave him a skeptical look, inviting him to try again.

“And building this,” he continued. “But much more with the guard-watching. It was quite a night, me and the… watching.”

Nokama gestured toward the bizarre structure of wood, mud, and stone Matau had been building. “Surely, this must be the most impressive thing ever built by an insane Toa in all of Metru Nui,” she said flatly. “Seriously – what are you doing?”

Matau jumped down from his perch on the arch to land beside her. “That’s the thing,” he confessed. “I have no idea. I just had this… urge. To nest-make!”

To his surprise, Nokama did not snap at him. Instead, she looked away, saying, “I get them, too. Ever since –” She gestured at herself, then at him, and he knew she was referring to their transformation.

“It’s nearly morning,” she said. “We should find the others and see what the Rahaga have learned.” She headed for their makeshift camp, Matau following quickly after. “These urges,” he said hopefully. “They wouldn’t involve me, would they…?”
Nokama and Matau woke up the others, and together they started across the bridge toward the Great Temple. “Norik seemed so concerned,” she said. “But no one saw anything all night?”

“Nothing,” Whenua said. “Lots of nothing.”

“Yeah, boring,” Onewa agreed.

“I don’t know,” Nuju said, a little bit wistfully. “I found the sounds of the night fascinating.”

Matau gave the Toa Hordika of Ice a look. “Riiighht. Anyway, I wonder what’s taking the Rahaga so long. I mean, how hard is it to get directions?”

“When they’re written for a creature that has not been since the time before time?” Nuju answered. “Hard.”

“Be patient, Matau,” said Nokama.

“I have no patience for ever-looking like this!” Matau quickened his pace, swiftly outdistancing the others. “We’ve already spent-wasted a whole night! The way I see it, the faster we get to –”

He stopped abruptly, too shocked by what he saw to say any more. Then, weakly, he finished, “the Great Temple.”

Now the other Toa Hordika could see it, too. The Great Temple looked like a Tahtorak had rampaged through it. Smoke wafted from the building and curled into the night sky. And all of them felt a fear worse than any they had ever known before clutch at their hearts. As one, they raced across the bridge.

The interior of the Great Temple looked even worse than its exterior. The structure had been gutted, and as they entered, much of it was still smoldering. A fine layer of ash lay over everything.

“Norik?” Nokama called. They had not seen a trace of any of the Rahaga. None of the Toa cared to voice their collective fear that their new allies might not have survived the fire.

“I can’t see anything,” said Nuju.

“What should we do?” Onewa asked.

Nokama looked at Matau, but the Toa Hordika of Air just shook his head. He had no answers.

“I wish Vakama was here,” she said softly.

“He was.”

Nokama turned, startled. The voice was weak, but it was definitely Norik’s. The Toa Hordika found him buried under a pile of rubble. Whenua immediately began digging him out. Nuju noted as he did so that the pieces of stone covering the Rahaga were fragments of the tablet Gaaki had been translating. Their best, perhaps only, hope of finding Keetongu had been shattered.

Norik looked up at his rescuers, but there was no relief in his eyes, only an incredible sadness.

“He was,” the Rahaga repeated.

Vakama stood at the gate to the Coliseum, banging on the massive door. By his side was a large, unwieldy object covered in a veil of Visorak webbing. He had been pounding away for some time now, unmolested by the spider creatures who seemed more puzzled than anything else by his sudden appearance.

The voice of Sidorak suddenly boomed from the Coliseum speakers. “You must be confused, Toa. We do not welcome your kind here – we exterminate it.”

“It’s you who is confused, Sidorak,” Vakama replied boldly. “I am no simple Toa.”

A gleaming telescope extended from the gate and then paused, as if studying Vakama. Sidorak knew, of course, what it would reveal, but even he was amazed at how swiftly and dramatically Vakama had changed.

“Hordika,” breathed the king of the Visorak. “Why have you come here?”

“To join you.”

Sidorak laughed, a sound made more terrible by the echoing of the speakers. Undeterred, Vakama shouted over it. “And to present you with proof of my worth.”
The Toa Hordika of Fire yanked the webbing off his burden. Beneath the veil were the five Rahaga, bound, helpless, and about to be delivered to their mortal enemy.

Sidorak’s laughter stopped. A moment later, the great doorway of the Coliseum swung open. Vakama stepped inside, dragging the Rahaga behind him, and was swallowed by the shadows within.

It always amazed Norik how little time it took to relate events, yet how devastating the tale could be. As he looked around at the Toa Hordika, he could see how deeply shocked they were by his news of Vakama’s attack upon him.

“Vakama would never do such a thing!” Nokama insisted. She turned to the others for support. “Right?”

None of the other Toa responded. It was left to Norik to extend a sympathetic hand to Nokama and say gently, “You are right, Nokama. The Vakama you know would not.”

“But?”

“He’s changed,” said Norik. “Just as you all will if we do not find Keetongu. I fear Vakama has given himself completely to the beast that lurks within us all.”

Onewa glanced down at his new body and made a lame attempt to lighten the mood. “Beast? I’m pretty sure it’s just me in here.”

No one laughed.

“The ancient. The primal,” Norik continued. “The parts of ourselves that we like to think progress has made us forget. ‘Hordika’ is its name.”

“I don’t think I want to be Hordika,” decided Whenua.

Norik shrugged. “It’s not all bad, Whenua — not if you don’t allow it to be. Being Hordika grants you certain gifts, abilities you would have never thought possible before.”

Nokama found herself remembering Matau’s nesting, and her newfound connection to nature. Were these the “gifts” Norik spoke of? If so, she would gladly return them for the chance to be a Toa Metru once more.

“Assuming you’re right,” she said, “we must find Keetongu and rescue the Matoran before the beast overcomes us, too.”

“Yes,” Norik replied, looking away from her. “But I must warn you… Vakama may already be beyond anything even Keetongu could do.”

“Well, we have to try,” broke in Matau. “We owe the fire-spitter that much. I was kind of hard on him…”

The other Toa nodded. They had all been hard on him, even before they returned to Metru Nui. Rather than consider what he might have been going through, all they had worried about was how his behavior affected them.

“And if you cannot help him?” asked Norik.

Matau’s tone grew dark. “You leave that to me.”

A beat of uncomfortable silence followed. Then Nuju broke the tension, saying, “So. Back to searching.”

“Not exactly,” the Rahaga replied.

“Quick-speak,” urged Matau.

“We were able to translate much of the inscription before Vakama’s attack. It read, ‘Follow falling tears to Ko-Metru, until they reach the sky.’”

The Toa glanced up at the Great Temple. A steady stream of liquid protodermis was rolling off its carved face, like makeshift teardrops.

“It is there we will find Keetongu,” finished Norik.

“Protodermis that runs upward?” asked Matau, skeptical.

“Hey, it’s not much of a plan,” answered Onewa. “But it is a plan.”
Iruini struggled against his bonds. The Rahaga were packed together tightly and had been webbed to the facing of the Coliseum’s observation deck, like trophies on display. The Rahaga looked up to see the Toa Hordika of Fire looking down upon him.

“Vakama…”

“That name means nothing to me,” Vakama answered.

“It did once,” Iruini said. “It can again.”

“That’s true. It can.”

The voice was Roodaka’s, coming to join her new ally. “If you want to be weak again,” she added.

“Never,” replied Vakama.

Roodaka looked down at her Rahaga captives without a trace of pity in her face. “Save your strength. Bait is most alluring when it squirms.”

The viceroy of the Visorak smiled and placed a hand on Vakama’s shoulder. “You’re everything I hoped you’d be,” she hissed. “Come. It’s time you got a glimpse of your future.”

She turned away and headed for the inner chamber. After a brief glance back at the Rahaga, Vakama followed. Iruini watched him go, wondering if he had just been witness to the final death of all hope for the Matoran.
In times past, the Toa’s journey from Ga-Metru to Ko-Metru would have been a quick and simple trip through the transport chutes. Any one of a dozen chutes connected the two metru, most running near the Coliseum. But with so many chutes destroyed and the Coliseum now in the hands of the Visorak, Nokama and the others had to take a longer, slower overland route to Nuju’s metru.

Upon reaching the border of Le-Metru and Ko-Metru, they found that the canal once bridged by chutes now played host to a very different kind of span. Visorak had constructed a bridge of webbing to connect the two metru. Nokama, Nuju, Whenua, and Norik crossed over immediately, leaving Onewa and Matau behind to guard the rear.

The Toa Hordika of Stone now stopped to listen. They had done their best to avoid attracting the attention of Visorak along the journey, but he was fairly certain a squad of Oohnorak had spotted them as they neared the border. The strange sounds he heard only confirmed his fear.

“What was that?” he asked Matau.

The sounds grew nearer, the scuttling noise produced by a dozen Visorak closing in on their position.

“I’ll give you one guess, as long as it’s Visorak,” Matau answered. “Beat-feet!”

Onewa started to take a step onto the bridge, then hesitated. “You think it’ll hold?”

“I don’t know. But I’d rather take my chances with it than them.”

“Good point,” said Onewa.

On the other side of the span, Nokama turned back to see her two fellow Toa Hordika still lagging. “Matau, Onewa – hurry!” she shouted.

The Toa Hordika of Stone gingerly put his foot on the bridge. Instantly, he knew it had been a mistake. Strained beyond its breaking point, the webbing snapped violently. Onewa fell backward as Nokama, Nuju, Whenua, and Norik were launched into the air as if from a slingshot.

The three Toa Hordika managed to catch hold of ledges on the chasm wall and scramble up the other side. Nuju looked around and noticed that one member of their party was absent. “Where’s Norik?”

“Up here!” The voice came from above. They looked up to see that the Rahaga was ensnared in a part of the bridge’s webbing. “This is not entirely pleasant.”

“Yeah,” said Whenua. “Been there, done that.”

Nokama glanced back over the bridge. Onewa and Matau were now effectively stranded. Worse, she could see the vague forms of Oohnorak approaching them through the mist. In a matter of moments, her two friends would either be captured by the Visorak or forced off the edge and sent plunging into the canal to their doom.

*And the terrible thing is, I am not sure which fate would be worse,* she said to herself.
Vakama stood in what had once been Turaga Dume’s inner chamber in the Coliseum, later converted by Makuta for his own dark purposes. The centerpiece of the room was a dark, twisted throne. Even empty, there was no mistaking the fact that this was a seat of power.

“Go ahead,” Roodaka beckoned. “Touch it.”

Vakama reached out and let his fingers brush the throne. In that instant, his mind was flooded with shadows, images of evil deeds past and those to come, and a vast, all-consuming contempt for any who stood in opposition to his desires.

No, not my desires – Makuta’s, he realized. But in this moment, they are the same… we are the same. The eclipse, the earthquake – Makuta caused them by sending the Great Spirit Mata Nui into unending slumber. The Matoran and the Rahi and everything else that lives would be sealed away until such time as they could be awakened to live under our… under his rule. That is why the Visorak are here, that is why they have marched through and conquered land after land, and there is nothing on Metru Nui that can stop us… them… us.

The Toa Hordika of Fire yanked his hand away from the throne as if the chair had bitten him. It felt as if he had been touching it and awash in its corruption for an age, when in reality only a split second had passed.

“What did you see?” asked Roodaka.

Before Vakama could answer, Sidorak entered the chamber. “You can look, Vakama, but don’t touch.”

Vakama turned to see the king of the Visorak approaching, flanked by two Oohnorak. Sidorak sat down heavily on the throne.

“I wanted to thank you personally,” he said to Vakama. “Because of you, the Rahaga will meet a fitting end. Just as soon as I think of one.”

“It is just the beginning of what he can offer you,” Roodaka said softly.

“Is that so?”

“It is, my king,” the viceroy purred. “Vakama is my gift to you. A fitting master for your horde.”

Sidorak shook his head. As much as he respected Roodaka’s wisdom, she was wrong in this case. The horde was far too large for any one field commander to manage. “Hordika or not, there’s only one of him —”

But Roodaka was prepared for this objection. “Which is why the other Toa are on their way here. With Vakama leading your horde, they will be captured and… trained… just like him. Will all six be enough to please you?”

“A fine offer, Roodaka,” Sidorak said.

“Consider it an engagement gift,” Roodaka pronounced, smiling.

“Well, then,” Sidorak replied, glancing at Vakama. “We should introduce you to the horde.”

Matau looped another strand of webbing around two rock outcroppings. Satisfied with what he had created, he looked at Onewa. “Come on.”

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking,” said the Toa Hordika of Stone.

Matau pulled the webbing taut and tested its strength. Then he stepped into the center of the makeshift slingshot and backed up against the resistance of the webbing, stretching it out.

“Yes. You are,” said Onewa, stepping over to join the Toa Hordika of Air in the center. “I knew there was a reason I always liked you.”

Working together, they forced the webbing back, back, until it was strained to the limit. “Tight-hold!” said Matau.

Onewa grabbed on to his fellow Toa. Then they both lifted their feet from the ground and the slingshot snapped forward, launching them out over the chasm just as the Oohnorak burst into view behind them. Spotting Norik entangled below, Onewa reached down and grabbed him. “Going our way?”

“We did it!” shouted Matau. “We’re going to make it!”

But the Toa Hordika of Air had spoken too soon. With the added weight of Norik, their momentum was spending itself too soon. They began to arc down toward the water below.
“Or not,” added Matau.
The Toa Hordika and Rahaga slammed into the water. Above, their three allies watched with concern. “What do we do now?” asked Whenua.
“Seeing as Norik is the one that knows the way to Keetongu,” said Nokama, “we swim!”
She ran and jumped off the ledge, executing a graceful dive into the canal. A moment later, she disappeared beneath the surface of the liquid protodermis.
Whenua looked at Njū. “Oh, brother.”
The two Toa stepped to the edge, steeled themselves, and jumped off.

Sidorak marched boldly through a Coliseum tunnel, Vakama dutifully following behind. The king of the Visorak reflected on what he had accomplished this day. An “engagement” with Roodaka would have many positive effects. As queen of the hordes, she would share equally with Sidorak in the rewards of conquest, making it less likely she would try to undercut his power in future. This ridiculous competition to earn Makuta’s favor would end. Best of all, Sidorak would now have standing in Roodaka’s land – and given the power of those said to dwell there, that was no small achievement.

Vakama was another matter, of course. Sidorak saw no reason not to trust the Toa Hordika’s defection, and it was true that no other horde master would be better suited to anticipate the strategies of Toa. Still, the king was determined that Vakama’s ambitions would start and end with being field commander, and not extend to the throne. Sidorak knew from experience how quickly a ruthless being could ascend to power.

“You know, Vakama, you remind me a bit of myself at your age,” he said. When Vakama made no reply, he added, “That was a compliment.”
“Thank you, my king,” Vakama said half-heartedly.
“Think nothing of it. Such is the generosity of my rule,” the king continued. “My horde is an obedient one. They will do anything you command. Unless I command differently, of course.”
“Of course,” Vakama replied.

Sidorak slapped the Toa Hordika on the back, almost knocking him off his feet. “Good. Now then...”

They stepped out onto the Coliseum observation deck. Assembled below were hundreds of Visorak of every type, waiting for their orders.

“Meet the troops!” boomed Sidorak.
The eyes of the Visorak spiders went from Sidorak to Vakama. Then, as one, they bowed before their new commander. Despite himself, Vakama felt a flush of pride. These were experienced hunters, crack teams that had ravaged a thousand lands, and yet they were prepared to follow his leadership. Where five Toa had scoffed at him, a thousand Visorak were now ready to fight at his command.

“Perhaps you’d like to say a few words?” suggested Sidorak.

Vakama’s Hordika side rose in full fury. He gave a roar that shook the Coliseum. The Visorak horde rose to its collective feet and responded with a roar of its own. From a distance, Roodaka watched the scene unfold with pleasure. As viceroy, she had limited authority over the horde, and many of the Visorak refused to do anything without Sidorak’s stated approval. But now Vakama ruled the horde, and she would rule Vakama.

Sidorak doesn’t know it, she thought, but he just became expendable.

Toa Hordika flew through an underwater chute at a frightening rate of speed. Unlike the above-ground chutes, this one was still functional, evidently from some power source previously undiscovered by the Matoran.

That explains how the Visorak got to Metru Nui, thought Nokama as she rocketed along. There must be other chutes under the sea that are still operating, though I can’t imagine how.

Her eyes, more accustomed to seeing underwater than those of the others, detected something strange ahead. The chute curved upward abruptly and seemed to be ruptured in places. She could feel a
chill in the water as she drew closer to that spot. The next instant, she was no longer in liquid protodermis, but skidding along a sheet of ice inside the chute!

Water, she could handle – ice was another matter. Unable to check her flight, she went hurtling out of the chute, followed closely by Nuju and Whenua. All three sailed through the air before slamming into a snowbank.

Shaken, Nokama looked around. They were in a white world, so bright it was almost blinding. It looked like Ko-Metru, but a Ko-Metru where the weather had gone mad. “Where are we?” she asked.

“Home,” said Nuju.

Whenua shook the snow off himself. “Good. Then you know where we are?”

Nuju looked around. With surprise in his voice, he answered, “No.”

Whenua shook his head. “Always watching the stars. But the earth has its secrets, too.”

Norik’s head suddenly popped out of the canopy of snow above them. “Keetongu has never been found, my friends. It follows that where he lives hasn’t been, either.”

“I don’t believe it.” It was Matau’s voice, coming from somewhere off to the left. Nokama turned to see the Toa Hordika of Air pulling himself out of a snowdrift and pointing into the distance.

“It does sky-touch,” he said, in awe.

Norik and the Toa Hordika looked in the direction he was pointing. Liquid protodermis from the ruptured chute had jetted into the air at some point, only to be frozen solid, forming a mountain of crystal-clear ice.

“Come!” shouted Norik, already racing toward its base.

On the floor of the Coliseum, the Visorak horde drilled in preparation for another battle. High above, Vakama watched over his legions, noting every aspect of their movement style and tactics.

“Is it everything I promised you?”

He glanced behind him to see Roodaka approaching, then turned his attention back to the Visorak.

“We’ll soon find out,” he answered.

“Yes, a night of great consequence falls. Be ready – before it is over, many things will change.” She gestured toward the approaching Sidorak. “Here comes one of those things now.”

The king of the Visorak joined his viceroy and new general. “How is my horde, Vakama?”

“Obedient,” answered the Toa Hordika. “And ready, Sidorak, for anything that comes.”

“Including Toa?”

“Especially Toa,” said Vakama.

Sidorak surveyed the scene. As king, he felt he should be issuing some order or offering counsel, but Vakama seemed to have everything well under control. “Well, then… what now?”

“The hardest part,” answered Vakama, gazing out over the city. “We wait.”
Using his fang blades, Matau had easily outdistanced the others in climbing the ice mountain. As he neared the summit, he turned back to see Norik, Nokama, Whenua, Onewa, and Nuju struggling to catch up.

“Hurry up, you guys!” he shouted. “It’s amazing!”

Matau pulled himself up to the summit. He rose and looked around at the empty, frozen expanse. There was nothing there but ice and more ice.

“Not,” he added.

By now, the others had reached the top of the peak as well. The Toa Hordika looked confused – was this what they had made the climb for? Only Norik seemed unconcerned about the apparent lack of any sign of Keetongu.

“Don’t be so quick to judge, Matau,” the Rahaga said. Then he turned and began speaking to the barren ice and frigid air. “We are sorry to disturb your rest, noble one, but the duty of these Toa requires that they ask for your help.”

For a long moment, nothing happened. Matau felt like an idiot. Why had they believed all this talk of lost Rahi with amazing powers? It was all just some Rahaga’s imagination at work. More importantly, how were they going to get back?

“May I be judgmental now?” he asked, disgusted.

As if in answer, the mountain began to shake violently, almost knocking the Toa off their feet.

Norik turned to Matau, smiling. “Yes.”

What happened next was a sight no one present would ever forget. From the depths of the ice rose a creature unlike any they had seen before. His armor looked as if it had been forged from the sun, and his very presence radiated power. His right arm ended in a whirling array of shields, while his left hand held a wickedly sharp pickax. A hatch in his chest partially concealed a Rhotuka spinner launcher. The Rahi looked over the beings assembled before him with a single great eye.

In a voice that had not been heard by any living being for centuries, the creature said, “Toa.”

Norik gazed up at the mighty being who had answered his summons. A part of him wanted this moment to never end, for it was the culmination of so many years of work and hardship.

“Keetongu,” he said, the word carrying all the awe, hope, and joy he was feeling.

A long moment of silence followed. Finally, Matau spoke up, saying, “So, big guy, about that favor-gift…”

“— All of which is why we came here, and why we need your assistance,” Norik finished. “Will you help us get Vakama back?”

The Toa Hordika, Norik, and Keetongu were sitting in the underground cavern that the Rahi called home. It was bitterly cold and damp and the aroma was none too pleasant, but most of the Toa were willing to ignore all that if it meant gaining this powerful new ally.
Keetongu looked at Norik and grunted a simple, “No.”
“Well, thanks just the same,” said Onewa, already rising and eager to get out of the dark space.
“We’ll be going, then.”
Whenua clamped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and kept him still. Keetongu was speaking again, but this time in a language none of the Toa could understand. Only Norik, listening attentively, seemed able to comprehend what was being said.
“Keetongu cannot start a battle on your behalf,” Norik translated. “But he can aid those loyal to the three virtues. Those like Toa. In fact, doing so is his sworn duty.”
Matau smiled. “So he’ll change us back into our good-looking, Toa-hero selves?”
Keetongu looked at the Toa Hordika of Air and said, “No.”
“I’m confused,” said Whenua.
Keetongu began speaking again. After a few moments, Norik nodded and said, “Of course, of course.”
“What is it?” asked Nokama.
“Keetongu sees with one eye what we have not with all of ours,” Norik explained. “If you are to save Vakama, you must use your new forms and abilities, not be rid of them.”
Matau threw his hands into the air. “So we’ve come all this way—just to find out we didn’t have to come all this way!”
Keetongu made a series of strange sounds. It took the Toa a moment to realize it was laughter.
“He thinks it’s funny, too,” reported Norik.
“Right. Funny,” Matau said bitterly. “That’s what I was thinking.”
Keetongu spoke to Norik again. The Rahaga said, “Your story and devotion to your friend have touched Keetongu. He says it probably helps that it’s the first story he’s heard since the time before time. But just the same, he finds your quest worthwhile.”
The Rahi grunted. Norik seemed shocked by the sound, so much that he forgot to translate until Matau prodded, “And—?”
“And…,” Norik said quietly, “he would like to offer us his help.”
Nokama smiled, feeling for the first time that there might be hope of success after all. She thrust her fist forward. One by one, Nuju, Onewa, Whenua, and Matau met her fist with theirs. She looked at Norik, her eyes holding an unspoken invitation to join them.
“I would be honored,” said the Rahaga, adding his fist to the circle.
Matau looked up at Keetongu. “You, too, big guy.”
The Rahi extended a hand to complete the circle. Now they were united in a common goal—but no one in the chamber could forget that Vakama was missing. And each, in his or her own way, made a vow to find him and save him from the shadows… no matter what it took.

Vakama tested his blazer claws for the hundredth time. He was sick of waiting. He wanted to be running, fighting, anything to keep his mind off of where he was and what he was doing.

He had no doubt the other Toa were out there with Norik, plotting against him. They would never understand the choice he had made, or that it was the only way to save the Matoran. They are fools, like I used to be, he thought. Caught up in the image of being a Toa, and the notion that a mask and a tool and some armor make you the equal of anyone you fight.

A thin, hot flame erupted from his claw. Well, they don’t. Sometimes the odds are too great… sometimes what’s inside the armor isn’t strong enough to overcome them. If I fought beside them, we would all die and the Matoran would be lost. This… this is the only way.

The Toa Hordika of Fire stared into the mist, trying in vain to spot his former friends.
“Where are they?” asked Roodaka.
She didn’t have to wait long for an answer. Something smashed into the Coliseum gates, knocking them off their hinges. A couple of battered Visorak sentries followed, hurled into the arena by whatever
had felled the doors. As the smoke cleared, Vakama saw five Toa Hordika march into the Coliseum, looking for all the world as if they had already conquered it.

“Vakama!” shouted Nokama.

Her voice struck a chord in the Toa Hordika of Fire. It had been easy to dismiss his old allies from his heart when they were absent, but now, seeing them again… remembering their adventures… all he could do was whisper, “Nokama…”

Roodaka saw what was happening. She leaned over the rail of the observation platform and said, “Not the one you know, Nokama.”

“I didn’t hear him say that,” snapped Matau.

Roodaka looked at Vakama. He did not disappoint her. “She’s right,” he said. “You’re not here for the reason you think.”

Whenua pointed up at his former leader. “We came here to save you!”

“The only ones you can save now are yourselves,” Vakama replied. “Bow down and pledge your allegiance to me!”

Off to the side, Sidorak coughed loudly.

“To the Visorak,” Vakama added.

Sidorak coughed again.

Vakama finally got the message. “To the Visorak king!”

Onewa took a step forward. “And if we don’t?”

The Toa Hordika of Fire raised a blazer claw, the implied threat was obvious to all. “I’ll make you.”

Nokama looked at her companions. Each of them nodded in turn. They had not come so far only to turn back now, let alone surrender to an apparently demented fire-spitter. She looked back at Vakama, holding her fin barb aloft, and said, “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah,” said Matau, stepping up to stand beside her. “You and what battle-army?”

Vakama reached out and snapped off one of the sharpened flagpoles that lined the observation deck. He hurled it down toward the Toa Hordika, its point burying itself in the ground in front of his former friends.

More than an answer, it was a signal. The Visorak horde emerged from all around the Toa, their numbers rapidly filling the stadium. Once they were all in position, each spider creature activated its Rhotuka spinner, all of them aimed right at the Toa.

“Oh, right,” Matau said. “That one.”

Nokama willed her own spinner to life. “As we discussed,” she said. “Ready…”

The other four Toa followed her lead, the energy of their spinners crackling in the misty air. “You really think this is going to work?” asked Matau.

Nokama ignored him. “Aim…”

The Toa shifted as one. Their spinners were no longer aimed at the horde, but rather at the uppermost levels of the Coliseum. At Nokama’s signal, they each extended a Toa tool into the whirling field of energy. Merged with the spinners, the tools were held fast. Now wherever they went, the Toa Hordika would be pulled along behind.

Nokama glanced at Matau. “Ask me again in a minute.”

All around them, the Visorak spinners were making an angry hum like a maddened swarm of fireflyers. Onewa had come to know that sound all too well. It meant they were about to be launched. “Uh, Nokama?” he said.

The Toa Hordika of Water was watching the Visorak carefully, waiting for the right moment. If she moved too soon, they would change their target and nail the Toa as they ascended. She had to wait until the spiders had committed to their launch, no matter how risky that might be.

Roodaka was growing impatient. The Toa Hordika were at their mercy, surrounded with no way to escape. What was Vakama waiting for? If you want an enemy ground into the dust, you have to do it yourself, she decided.
“Fire!” Roodaka shouted.
The Visorak spinners launched, even as their viceroy flipped a switch, causing the observation platform to ascend. Down below, Matau watched with panic as hundreds of spinners flew right toward him.

“What she said!” he shouted.
The five Toa launched their spinners and then held on to their tools for dear life as they were pulled into the air. The Visorak spinners converged on the spot where they had been standing, utterly decimating the ground.

Onewa glanced over his shoulder at the horde and shouted, “Gotcha!” Unfortunately, taking his eyes off where he was going proved to be a bad idea, as he slammed headfirst into the side of the Coliseum.

Nokama, Nju, and Whenua stuck to the plan. With great effort, they climbed up their tools and mounted the spinners. None of them had ever tried anything like this before – actually riding a wheel of energy – and they all knew it was only the electromagnetic field around the wheels that supported them. The instant the spinners weakened, they would fall to their deaths. For now, though, they were proving quite effective at slicing through Visorak webs.

Nokama’s orders had been for all five Toa to head into the Coliseum’s maze of hallways, but Matau had other plans. Once he saw they were safely inside, he steered his spinner up toward the observation deck and Vakama.

The time has come to settle things between us, fire-spitter, he said to himself. I’m coming back down with you… or I’m not coming back down.

Earth-shaking sounds rattled the Coliseum. At first, it had felt like something was advancing toward the structure, but now it was as if that something was pounding on the building itself – a prospect Sidorak did not find comforting.

“Still, that sound,” he said uneasily. He reached out and flipped the switch, bringing the observation platform to a halt. Leaning over the side, he saw something that froze his black heart.

It was Keetongu, body radiating raw power, climbing up the wall of the Coliseum. With the horde in hot pursuit of the Toa Hordika, there had been no Visorak to warn of his approach.

“What is that?” asked Sidorak, shocked.

Vakama glanced over the side, seemingly unconcerned. “I guess it’s Keetongu.”

“But Keetongu doesn’t exist!”

Vakama met the Visorak king’s gaze and said flatly, “I guess you’re wrong about that.” The Toa Hordika of Fire turned his attention to Roodaka, saying, “I’ll take care of him.”

She reached out a hand to stop him. “No, Vakama. It is not your place.”

Roodaka smiled and extended her clawed hand to Sidorak. “It is that of a king.”

A million thoughts flew through Sidorak’s mind at once. Facing Keetongu would, of course, be potentially suicidal. But refusing to do so would mean losing the respect of Roodaka, perhaps even being so shamed that the horde would no longer obey him. In the end, he really had no choice, and he knew it.

And so did Roodaka.

Sidorak drew himself up proudly and took his viceroy’s hand. “If Keetongu wasn’t a myth before, he soon will be.”

Roodaka and Sidorak headed for the platform’s exit and a confrontation with the legendary Rahi beast, leaving Vakama behind.

“Where is my place?” he asked.

Roodaka never looked back as she said, “The future, Vakama. The near future. As I told you before… be ready.”

Then they were gone. Vakama walked back to the railing, muttering, “The future – I wish it would hurry up and get here.”

“It has!”

143
Vakama turned barely in time to see Matau, being pulled along by his spinner, flying toward him. Before the Toa Hordika of Fire could react, Matau had grabbed him and yanked him off the platform and into the air. They soared high above the Coliseum, Vakama struggling all the while.

“Put me down!” he yelled.

But Matau had no intention of letting go. It was only when Vakama finally managed to wrench Matau’s fang blade loose from the spinner’s field that their ascent stopped abruptly. Without the Rhotuka’s power to keep them aloft, the two Toa Hordika plunged toward the Coliseum’s central spire. Together they smashed through the dome of the atrium that crowned the spire, landing amid its fragile framework.

It was Matau who made it to his feet first. “You wanted down,” he snarled, “you got down.” Vakama leapt from the debris, eyes blazing, pain and anger bringing the Hordika side of him to the surface.

“You wanted down, Vakama. Now. With us,” said Matau. “We’re here to rescue the Matoran.” Vakama’s answer was a growl of rage.

“You remember, don’t you?” Matau asked hopefully.

This time, his old friend’s response was an impossibly fast leap that sent him crashing into Matau.

Keetongu had almost reached the top of the central spire of the Coliseum. No Visorak had dared challenge him. Warriors they might be, but fools they were not.

Not everyone ran from the Rahi, however. A bolt of pure shadow struck him in mid-climb, tearing him free of the building and sending him toward the ground. Halfway down, he slammed his sharpened tool into the wall, checking his plunge.

High above, Roodaka stood, wisps of dark energy still swirling around her fingertips. Seeing that her prey had somehow managed to save himself, she muttered, “I’m almost impressed.”

Worried, she was not – she and Sidorak were in a perfect position to pick off the Rahi beast at their leisure. Taking careful aim, Roodaka let loose another blast. This one shattered his tool. Again, Keetongu fell.

It is only right, she thought. A legendary Rahi must meet a legendary death, after all.
What thoughts went through the mind of the Rahi called Keetongu as he plunged toward the Coliseum floor far below? Did he wonder if this was some sad trick of fate, that he should emerge after having been hidden for so long, only to die? Did he fear for the safety of the Toa Hordika once he was gone? Did he face his end with courage, or the blind, unthinking panic of a beast?

There was no way for anyone to find out before he struck the tiled floor like a meteor, creating a massive crater. The impact triggered the last reserves of power in the arena, activating the floor and causing individual tiles to rise and fall like ocean waves. When it finally ground to a halt, the Coliseum pavement was a tiered field of random heights and treacherous drops.

“Well, that's that,” said Sidorak.

“No!” snapped Roodaka. Then, realizing Sidorak was looking at her in surprise, added gently, “I mean… shouldn't we be certain?”

Sidorak glanced down at the crater and the unmoving Keetongu. Emboldened by the victory, he said, “If doing so would make you feel better, my soon queen.”

He headed inside the spire to make the journey down to the arena floor. Roodaka followed, her soft comment dripping with insincerity and acid. “Yes, if only you’ll protect me.”

Matau staggered toward the narrow ledge that surrounded the atrium. Another step, and he would be nothing but a green smear on the ground so far below. Not that Vakama seemed to care about that, given how he was advancing on his fellow Toa.

“I said I wanted to talk, Vakama, not anger-fight!”

“I don’t take orders from you,” growled Vakama. “I give them!”

For the first time, Matau truly saw how his old friend had changed. Whatever Vakama’s reasons for allying with the Visorak – good ones, or bad – it seemed that he had now plunged so deeply into shadow that he had lost himself.

“What’s happened to you?”

Vakama snarled, a savage grin on his face.

“You know, outside of the obvious,” Matau added.

“Don’t fight it, Matau,” Vakama replied, in a voice brimming with darkness. “It is our destiny.”

Before Matau could answer, Vakama charged again. Knocked off balance, Matau fell over the ledge. But his Hordika reflexes saved him as he caught hold of a bust of Sidorak. Dangling helplessly from it, he could only watch as his attacker advanced, ready to bring their conflict – and Matau's life – to an end.

Sidorak and Roodaka stood over the fallen Keetongu. The beast lay unmoving, his armor blackened and scorched by the viceroy’s power. He looked like he would no longer be a menace to an Archives mole, let alone to the ruler of the Visorak.

“On your feet, thing,” snarled Sidorak.
In response, Keetongu tried to rise. But the blasts and the impact were too much. He slumped down again.

“Whatever,” muttered the Visorak king. “The final blow is yours, Roodaka.”

“Just like all the others?” Her tone was no longer respectful and submissive – in fact, it sounded positively insolent. Sidorak turned to find another surprise: Roodaka was walking away.

“Where are you going?” he demanded. “Finish him!”

“You’re the great king, Sidorak,” she challenged. “You do it.”

Sidorak looked away from her, back to Keetongu. The Rahi had finally made it to his feet, battered, bruised… and very, very angry.

“But I can’t defeat him myself,” Sidorak pleaded in a harsh whisper.

Roodaka smiled. “I know.”

It was then, even as she disappeared among the pillars of protodermis, that Sidorak finally knew. She had engineered it all. Her blasts had been calculated to wound the Keetongu, but not to kill, leaving Sidorak at the mercy of a maddened Rahi. And why? Because there was another way for Roodaka to take control of the horde, one much faster and easier than a marriage of convenience.

The death of the king.

A shadow fell on Sidorak, but now he realized it was not the shadow of Keetongu. It was the shadow of his own doom. The fate he had visited upon so many others over the centuries was now to be visited upon him. As Keetongu raised his great fist, Sidorak wondered if his viceroy realized that in a way she was acting in the interests of justice – a concept she despised.

“Roodaka,” the king said weakly as the blow fell. As last words go, not very memorable. But in the moment of his death, Sidorak did something he had never done before: He gave credit where credit was due.

Roodaka heard the sound of rending metal, a sign that the battle had ended the way she knew it would. So engrossed was she by the thought, she never noticed hundreds of Visorak eyes narrowing at the sight of her betrayal. “The king is dead,” she said, smiling.

Her gaze drifted to the top of the spire, where Vakama was about to seal his fate by killing a fellow Toa. Once that act was completed, there would be no going back for the Toa Hordika of Fire. He would belong to the shadows.

“Long live the king,” said Roodaka, a peal of dark laughter on her lips.

Matau was being extremely stubborn. He wouldn’t surrender. He wouldn’t fall and die. Vakama was determined that his old ally would do one or the other, and he was no longer certain he cared which. Figuring what the Toa Hordika of Air needed was a little motivation, Vakama stepped on his fingers.

“You’re weak, brother,” he hissed.

Matau winced at the pain, but somehow hung on. “You’re right, Vakama – I am weak. Nokama, Whenua, Onewa, Nuju – we all are.”

“So, at last you see the truth.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Matau answered. “I’ve made a lot of fool-mistakes lately, Vakama. That’s what happens when you’re brave-tough enough to make decisions. I understand that now.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe that, coming from you,” Vakama said, making no effort to hide his bitterness. He raised an armored fist, snarling. “Now let’s finish this.”

“Wait!” yelled Matau.

Vakama came to a sudden stop, the final blow still poised to strike his former friend. “Not for long.”

“I just want you to know that I’m sorry. For ever-doubting you… you see, Vakama, that’s the reason we’re so deep-weak. We don’t have you.”
Was that a flicker of awareness in Vakama’s eyes? Some remnant of his Toa spirit fighting to break through the shroud of Hordika rage? Matau wasn’t sure, but he saw his opening and was going to take it. If Vakama killed him, well, at least he would have had his say.

“Our Toa-strength comes from our unity, Vakama,” he said urgently. “Which means you can’t be ever-strong without us, either — no matter what some screw-brained monster like Roodaka tells you.”

Vakama’s fist began to shake. Matau’s words were forcing him to remember feelings he had buried. He struggled to remember the reasons he had allied himself with Roodaka — they had been good reasons, he was sure — but instead he found only questions. Why had he been so filled with rage, beyond what even the Hordika mutation should have caused? Why had his power to see visions of the future failed him?

“I’m better — stronger — alone,” he said. Even in his ears, the words sounded hollow.

“I don’t trust-believe that. And I don’t think you do, either.” Matau looked up at Vakama again.

“Things change — but you’ll always be my friend and Toa-brother. And something more — something it took all of this for me to learn-see.” Matau’s eyes locked on those of Vakama. “You’re our leader, Vakama. You’re my leader.”

The Toa Hordika of Fire began to lower his fist. He wished Matau would shut up and stop confusing him. It would be so easy to silence his chatter. One blow, and no more Matau. Why couldn’t he do it? Why did he even want to do it? What was wrong with his mind?

“And in case you’ve quick-forgotten, we’ve got a job to do,” Matau continued. “A Toa-duty. One we have to work together to get through.”

“The Matoran,” answered Vakama. Did Matau think he had forgotten them? Everything he had done, he had done for...

No. Wait. That isn’t right, Vakama thought. How would killing Matau possibly help the Matoran? I was going to order the Matoran freed… the Toa freed… and here I am, about to swat one like I would a fireflyer.

“I knew you’d remember,” Matau said, smiling. “If you ask me, rescuing the Matoran is maybe the reason we were made Toa-heroes. Our destiny. One that’s better than any other someone else could offer you.”

Mata Nui, why won’t he just shut up? thought Vakama. All that chatter, all those words… they never stop.

“I didn’t ask,” the Toa Hordika of Fire said, his expression darkening.

Matau knew he had maybe pushed too hard, too fast. Holding on above a high-fall will make you impatient, he thought.

“You’re true-right, you didn’t,” he said to Vakama. “I guess I just needed you to hear it. And if there’s any of the Toa-hero Vakama I know left in there, he’ll know what to do with it… and what’s going to happen next.”

“Matau! Don’t!”

But Vakama’s cry was too late. The Toa Hordika of Air had let go of the bust of Sidorak and was falling to his death, as surely as if Vakama had pushed him.

In that instant, Vakama knew he had to make a decision. He could hear Roodaka, promising him power beyond imagining in return for betraying his fellow Toa. He could hear Turaga Lhikan saying, “I am proud to have called you brother, Toa Vakama” — those were the last words that hero had spoken before dying for Metru Nui.

Matau was right, Vakama realized. I do know what to do.
Nokama, Nuju, Onewa, and Whenua made their way through the twisting corridors of the Coliseum. Their goal was the subterranean vault in which the sleeping Matoran were kept, locked inside silver spheres.

“Keep moving,” urged Nokama. “We’re almost there.”

“The Matoran are in the next chamber,” said Nuju.

The four Toa Hordika rushed into the vault and past a pair of massive pillars to reach the storage racks. All around them were stacks of Matoran spheres. The knowledge that they were so close to completing their mission, despite all the obstacles they had faced, filled the Toa with a feeling of triumph.

“We made it!” shouted Onewa.

But Whenua was not ready to join the celebration. His enhanced Hordika senses told him something was wrong. It was what felt like a draft in a room far removed from any outside exits. With a shudder, he realized that it was not a draft—it was something breathing.

The pillars moved, revealing themselves to be huge legs. The ceiling shifted as a massive creature bent down, the monstrous face of a Kahgarak coming into view. The Toa had seen these elite Visorak guardians before, but never one quite so large.

“And that’s a good thing?” said Whenua.

Onewa shook his head. “We are so gonna feel this…”

With a sharp hiss, the Kahgarak attacked. An instant later, the Toa Metru were flying through the Coliseum wall and out into the center of the arena. Debris rained down around them, half-burying them in a pit.

“Weren’t we just here?” asked Nuju, dazed.

Nokama glanced up. Visorak of every type were fast converging on the pit. The Toa were completely surrounded.

“On your feet,” she barked to the others. “Now!”

Standing back to back, the Toa Hordika prepared for what would surely be their last stand.

Matau heard the wind whistle past him as he fell toward the arena floor. Letting go had been a desperate gamble, and it appeared headed for failure.

“What a dark-mess,” he muttered. “I was stupid to think I could quick-save Vakama.”

“You did, Matau.”

The Toa Hordika of Air looked up. There was Vakama, plunging down after him, arms outstretched. “Vakama!”

“Yes,” said the Toa Hordika of Fire. “The one you know.”

Now they were both falling, but Matau hardly noticed. With his brother Toa at his side, he suddenly felt like they could overcome anything.
“Well, feel free to return the favor, brother,” he said. “There’s no shortage of Toa-heroes who need saving.”

Vakama smiled. “Yes. I have a plan for that.” He grabbed Matau.

“Great,” replied Matau. “But do you have a thought-plan to make us –”

His sentence was cut off by the abrupt halt in their fall. Puzzled, Matau looked up and saw that Vakama had a strand of Visorak webbing tied around his ankle. Its elasticity had stopped their plunge without snapping them in two, for which Matau was grateful. He was less so about what was going to happen next.

Stretched to its limit, the webbing suddenly snapped back, sending the two Toa hurtling up toward the observation deck.

The five Rahaga struggled in vain to undo their bonds. They had seen the valiant fight the Toa Hordika were putting up against the hordes, futile as it might be. They knew once the Toa were downed, Roodaka would have no further use for her “bait.”

“It’s no use,” said Bomonga. “What would Norik do?”

None of the Rahaga had an answer for that. Then a reply came from an unexpected direction – up above!

“Watch, and I’ll show you!”

The Rahaga followed the direction of the voice to see their missing friend flying toward them on top of his energy spinner.

“Norik!” shouted Kualus, overjoyed.

“I knew you’d come for us!” said Iruini. “What took you so long?”

Norik landed and unlimbered his staff, using its edge to slice through the Rahaga’s bonds. “My flying isn’t what it used to be. I’m not exactly a Toa, you know.”

“Not exactly,” agreed Bomonga.

“Now then,” said Norik, “let’s go help those who are.”

The Rahaga reached the arena floor just as the Visorak’s determined attack was about to overwhelm the four Toa Hordika.

“This is it,” said Nokama, almost too tired to lift her fin barbs. “May the Great Spirit welcome us.”

“Mind if we lend a hand?” shouted Norik.

“Or twelve of them?” said Iruini.

“We’re going to need them all,” answered Onewa.

In truth, they were going to need far more than the help of the Rahaga to win the day. The Visorak came in waves, and even with the addition of new allies, it was only a matter of time before the Toa’s defenses were broken.

“Norik, even with your help –” Nokama began.

“I know, noble Nokama,” the Rahaga answered. “And it’s all right.”

Roodaka’s voice cut through the din of battle. “I’m glad to hear you have made your peace, Rahaga.”

The viceroy of the Visorak was riding atop the Kahgarak, the horde assembled around her. If the Visorak were less than enthusiastic to be following the murderer of their king, they were keeping it to themselves.

Roodaka dismounted and looked at the four Toa. “But first, you have something I want.”

“What more could you possibly take from us?” asked Nokama.


Matau landed hard in front of her. “Yeah. That would be me.”

149
Vakama followed right after him, taking up a position next to Roodaka. “Thank you, Vakama,” said the viceroy. “Now about those powers…”


The five Rhotuka spinners slammed into Roodaka, unleashing their elemental fury. She was staggered by the onslaught, but not felled. Instead, her response was chilling laughter.

“All right,” said Matau. “Who quick-launched the tickle spinner?”

“Fools!” snapped Roodaka. “Your powers are nothing.” She gestured to Vakama, who still stood silently beside her. “If they are not united.”

Roodaka raised a claw and summoned the dark energy that coursed through her. “And as Vakama stands with me—”

“Actually…,” said the Toa Hordika of Fire.

Roodaka turned to see him activating a fire spinner, aimed squarely at her.

“I wanted to talk to you about that,” he finished.

For only a moment, the viceroy showed fear. Then she regained her composure and gestured toward the horde. “You can defeat me, Vakama, but not all of them. Strike me down, and they will surely destroy you and your friends. Think about it.”

“I have,” answered Vakama. “And seeing as you convinced Sidorak to have the horde obey me…”

He turned to the assembled legions of spider creatures. “Get out of here, all of you. You’re free. That’s an order.”

For a split second, the outcome was in doubt. The Visorak had been conditioned for years to blindly follow the orders of their leader. Sidorak had led them to conquest after conquest, and Roodaka was his successor by virtue of his death. Ordinarily, even the orders of their commander could not make them turn on their leader. But too many of them had seen Roodaka lure Sidorak to his death… and betrayal could not, must not, be rewarded with loyalty. Without so much as a glance in her direction, the horde dispersed, abandoning her as she had abandoned their king.

“Traitors!” Roodaka screamed after them.

“You can’t betray someone you’re enslaved to,” said Vakama.

“And to think I thought you could be king,” she sneered.

“I lead only those who choose to follow me,” Vakama replied. “That’s the difference between being a leader and being a tyrant. A certain Toa taught me that. And something else… our destinies are not written in stone, set in place. They are something we have to find for ourselves.”

His spinner rose and hovered in the air. “I’ve found mine.”

Everything happened at lightning speed. In the instant before the spinner was sent on its way, Roodaka pried open a plate on her armor to reveal an ebony stone. Seeing this, Norik rushed forward and screamed, “No, Vakama! Don’t!”

It was too late. Vakama’s spinner crossed the short distance between him and Roodaka and struck her. Its energies combined with those she had already absorbed, setting off a chain reaction. There was an explosion of brilliant light so bright it blinded them all. When the glare had faded, Roodaka was no more, with only shards of the stone remaining to mark her passing.

“Vakama, you have no idea what you’ve just done,” said Norik.

“Her heartstone,” Vakama replied.

“Yes, carved from the same protodermis you sealed the Makuta in. In destroying it, you’ve broken the seal.”

“And set Makuta free,” concluded the Toa Hordika of Fire. He looked at his brothers and sister, safe and together once more. “For some reason, he doesn’t scare me anymore.”

Vakama turned at the sound of an impact behind him. He saw Keetongu on the ground, spent from his efforts against Sidorak and Roodaka. The Toa Hordika gathered by the Rahi’s side.

“You owe me nothing, Keetongu, especially in light of all you’ve already done,” said Vakama. “But my duty requires that I ask – will you change us back?”
Keetongu’s answer came in his own language. Norik translated, “He wants to know why you would want that, now that you have made peace with the beast within? That you might even be the better for it…”
“‘There’s a promise we must be our old selves in order to keep,’ Vakama answered.
‘Then so will you be,’” said Keetongu.
Vakama held out his fist. The other five Toa Hordika touched theirs to his, forming once more the circle of six.
“All right, big guy,” Matau said to Keetongu. “Hit it.”
Keetongu drew upon his unique power and released his energy in a wave, letting it wash over the mutated forms of the Toa Hordika. The Rahaga looked on, silently imploring the Great Spirit to make things right once more.

The door to the Matoran vault opened once more. This time, it was Toa Metru who stepped over the threshold, not Toa Hordika.
“Time to wake up, my friends,” Vakama said, looking around at the multitude of spheres. “We’re going home.”
It took many hours of labor by the Toa, the Rahaga, and Keetongu to remove the spheres from the vault. They were then loaded into the airships the Toa had constructed for just this occasion when they were Hordika.
“Nice ships,” Matau commented, looking over his own handiwork.
“Just don’t crash them this time,” replied Onewa, smiling.
Nearby, Vakama and Norik stood together. The Toa Metru of Fire took a long, last look at his city, knowing it might well be years before he saw it again. “I guess this is it,” he said.
“No, Vakama,” said Norik. “This is just a different beginning.”
“Of what?”
Norik smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of spoiling it for you.”
“Well, whatever it is, thank you.”
“You are most welcome, Vakama,” replied the Rahaga. “But it is I who should be thanking you.”
“I don’t understand.”
Norik smiled broadly. “It’s not every day I get to see a legend, you know.”
The Toa of Fire nodded toward Keetongu. “Yes, he is quite a sight.”
“Indeed,” the Rahaga replied. “But I wasn’t talking about Keetongu.”
It took a moment before Norik’s words sank in. The Rahaga was right—what they had accomplished would live in legend, from this day forward. “The Great Rescue,” said Vakama.
“It’s funny,” said the Rahaga. “You spend your whole life chasing something, only to find when you finally catch it that the pursuit was what was important. That it’s changed you. That you’ll never be exactly the same.”
Vakama nodded. “I guess I’ve changed, too.”
Norik placed a hand on the Toa’s armored shoulder. “And in doing so, freed us Rahaga to be what we are… knowing that the new world and its Matoran are in most capable hands. Which means the last time I will ever use this gesture…,” Norik finished, holding out his fist in the Toa salute, “is to say thanks. I like that.”
“Me, too,” said Vakama, meeting the Rahaga’s fist with his own.

The small fleet of ships had lifted off and were heading out to sea. Aftershocks from Makuta’s earthquake had widened the gap in the Great Barrier, and Vakama believed new tunnels might be found leading to the surface. For a change, no one argued with him.
Riding in the lead ship, Nokama, Vakama, and the other Toa looked down over the city.
“Will you miss it?” asked the Toa of Water.
Vakama glanced down and saw the Rahaga and Keetongu on the observation deck of the Coliseum, their eyes tracking the slow passage of the ships. “Some things,” he answered.

As they neared the Great Barrier, Onewa pointed down to the rocks, alarmed. “Makuta! He’s gone!”

Vakama could see that he was right. The protodermis prison was shattered and the master of shadows had disappeared. “Not for long,” he said. “I imagine we’ll be seeing him again very soon.”

“And when we do?”

“We’ll find a way to defeat him,” said Vakama, steering the ship toward the rift in the barrier. “Because that’s what Toa do.”

* * *

“…Because that’s what Toa do.”

With those final words, Turaga Vakama brought his tale to an end. With one smooth motion, he scooped up the stones from the Amaja Circle. Tahu Nuva took particular note of how he handled the black stone that represented Makuta, the sole surviving shard from that entity’s prison of long ago.

“I was right,” the Turaga said. “Makuta would follow us here, and threaten to cast our new world and all who came to call it home into everlasting shadow.”

Jaller, still caught up in the tale, could barely contain himself. “And…?”

Vakama smiled. “I believe you already know that story, Jaller. Come now, enough of old legends for one day.”

The Turaga rose and walked away, followed by the Toa Nuva, Takanuva, Jaller, and Hahli. “Where are we going?” asked the Ga-Matoran Chronicler.

“To make new ones,” answered the hero of Metru Nui.
From the Chronicles of Hahlí, as related by Turaga Vakama...

As we prepare to start our journey back to the city of Metru Nui, I cannot help but remember the Rahaga. I wonder if they are still in my homeland, or if they have moved on to continue their work elsewhere. Of all the beings I have encountered, they were among the wisest and bravest. And were it not for them, neither I, my fellow Turaga, nor the Matoran who walk Mata Nui today would be here.

Rahaga Norik rarely wanted to talk about his past. Fortunately, Rahaga Iruini was not so close-mouthed. It was from him that Matau learned the Rahaga had once been Toa in another land – and not just any Toa. Clad in armor forged from precious metals, and wielding both Toa tools and Rhotuka launchers, they were the elite. Each of the six wore a Kanohi mask forged in the shapes worn by the great heroes of the past. Their duty: Protect Makuta, he who was sworn to protect and defend all Matoran.

They did their job nobly and well. Ironically, they were most often called on to defend Makuta against Rahi attacks (for so powerful a being could not dirty his hands fighting beasts). Believing him to be a good and honorable servant of the will of Mata Nui, Norik and his Toa did not hesitate to aid him.

Then came the day the light of truth dawned, and the Toa were confronted by a horrible reality. Makuta, and the Brotherhood to which he belonged, were not protecting Matoran. They were oppressing and enslaving them. Even the very masks Norik and the others wore had been forged by Matoran working under threat of punishment – or worse. In addition, the Brotherhood of Makuta had allied itself with a foul mercenary band known as Dark Hunters. They converted the Exo-Toa mechanoids, first built as guardians of the Matoran, into sentries for their own fortresses.

Burning for justice and revenge, the Toa mounted an attack on a Brotherhood base. Arrayed against them were Dark Hunters and Exo-Toa, prepared to sacrifice all in the service of their dark masters. Separated in the conflict, the Toa fell one by one, but not at the hands of these enemies. No, they were felled by treacherous attacks from the shadows by Roodaka.

Finally, only Norik and Iruini remained. Cunning in their strategy and absolutely fearless in their actions, they succeeded in driving off the Dark Hunters and destroying most of the Exo-Toa. Makuta battled them to a stalemate until he, too, left the field, badly weakened. Now the two Toa had to find their companions.

Find them, they did – shrunken, weakened, turned into monstrous mockeries of Turaga. In what she no doubt regarded as a fine jest, Roodaka had mutated them, giving them the heads of Rahkshi and twisted bodies that would frighten all who saw them. Creatures such as these, she believed, would be shunned by any Matoran they approached. Their days as heroes would be over.

Relying on stealth, Norik and Iruini were able to rescue their friends. But they were discovered by Sidorak and Roodaka and struck by her mutation spinners. Strangely, she then allowed them to escape, perhaps convinced they would never prove a danger to her. Six who had once been powerful Toa were now Rahaga.
At first, they were grief-stricken over the change. But Kualus and Norik rallied them. “Our bodies have been changed,” said Kualus, “but not our hearts. Not our spirits. No matter how we look, every breath we take, we take as heroes in the service of Mata Nui.”

Norik gave them new purpose: to find Keetongu, a mythical Rahi said to have the power to counteract any attack. Only he might have a hope of defeating Sidorak and Roodaka. Some, like Iruini, doubted that this being even existed. Still, they agreed to follow Norik’s lead, knowing that unity was essential to the Rahaga’s survival.

From that day to this, the Rahaga have wandered from island to island, seeking Keetongu and studying the ways of the Rahi. Often, their efforts have brought them into conflict with the Visorak hordes, and many a beast has been saved from certain death by the Rahaga. Sidorak has vowed to destroy them, while Roodaka wonders whether there is some way to use them to further her own ends.

At last, their journey brought the Rahaga to Metru Nui. Knowing the Visorak must inevitably find their way to the city of legends, they hid in the Archives, observing with horror as their ancient enemy, Makuta, returned and rained destruction on the city. They saw the valiant efforts of the Toa Metru that led to his defeat. And they noted with dread that the heroes then left the city, leaving it defenseless before the Visorak horde.

By the time the Toa returned, the Visorak were in control of Metru Nui. Worse, the Toa fell into a trap and were mutated into Toa Hordika. The Rahaga could wait no longer. Risking discovery by Sidorak, they rescued my friends and me. They armed us with truth and gave us the will to fight on.

Whether they wait for us still in Metru Nui or not, Hahli, they deserve to be remembered as the greatest of Toa.
3,000 years ago...

Toa Lhikan crept silently through the dark streets of Ta-Metru. The night was utterly silent, as if his adopted home had become a city of the dead. Even the shadows seemed touched by the fear that gripped Metru Nui.

He started to summon a small flame, then stopped. Turaga Dume had warned him about betraying his position through the use of his powers. The enemy would track back to the source of the flame, and if he were to be caught too far from the Coliseum... well, he had seen what was left of other Toa who had gotten careless.

You can afford a mistake or two against a Rahi beast, he reminded himself. But not against these opponents. All they need is the slightest opening, and –

A sound came up from above – metal scraping against stone, no doubt from one of the rooftops. An ambush? The Dark Hunters were more than capable of that – and worse. Lhikan activated his Mask of Shielding, throwing a force field around himself, and readied his fire great swords. Whoever – or whatever – was after him was in for a surprise.

A familiar mask appeared over the edge of the foundry roof. “Relax, brother. It’s me!”

Toa Nidhiki leaped down and landed beside his comrade. His emerald armor was scarred and pitted from countless battles. “Midnight walks, now?” he whispered. “What’s the matter, the war not giving you enough exercise?”

“You were supposed to stay at the Coliseum, with the others,” Lhikan replied.

“I got bored. Besides, six Toa to guard one Turaga should be enough.”

“Not if I’m right,” said Lhikan, his expression grim. “Not if he’s been targeted by who I think. Half the legion could be in that building, and he still would not be safe.”

Beneath his Kanohi Mask of Stealth, Nidhiki flashed a smile. “You worry too much, brother. You always have. Remember the time the tops of all those Ko-Metru Knowledge Towers were being shattered? You were sure the Kanohi Dragon was back. Turned out to be Ice Bats with attitude.”

“Then humor me,” said Lhikan. “I’m going west and circling around. You go north. Use your mask, stay out of sight, and for Mata Nui’s sake, if you see Dark Hunters, go for help this time.”

“You take all the fun out of constant violence, Lhikan,” Nidhiki chuckled, already fading into the shadows.

Toa Nidhiki wandered through the broad avenues of Ga-Metru, past temples and schools and canals. Of all the Metru in the city, this was his least favorite. It just seemed so clean and orderly. He got the feeling that if a little water sloshed onto the street, they would call out half a dozen Vahki patrols and declare a metru-wide emergency.

He had long ago shut down his Mask of Stealth, which allowed him to travel in a ghostlike form, barely visible and completely silent. As effective as the mask was, he found it disconcerting not to be able to hear his own footsteps. Lhikan would have called his action “taking an unnecessary risk.” But Nidhiki
seriously doubted that any Dark Hunter would be caught dead in the picture-perfect, sky-blue, oh-so-proper pit of a metru.

Something scuttled through the shadows to his right. He jumped a little at the sight of a Chute Spider heading off on its night hunt. It was something he would never admit to his brother Toa, but Nidhiki had always had a morbid disgust of chute spiders, Nui Jaga, Nui Rama… really anything insectoid. Were it up to him, Metru Nui would have been purged of multilegged crawling things a long time ago.

Nidhiki waited until the spider was well out of sight before moving on, a little more cautiously than before. It was only that extra bit of wariness that allowed him to spot the figure that flitted from shadow to shadow. It was the first time he had ever seen anyone who seemed as at home in the shadows as he did. Intrigued, he followed.

Two things rapidly became apparent. The first was that his quarry wasn’t a Toa – she wore no Kanohi mask and she was much too good at slipping unseen and unheard through the night. Toa, as a general rule, were not very good at sneaking. It went against their image of being proud and very public heroes. Nidhiki was an exception to that rule. Where he came from, Toa struck from the shadows or they did not live very long.

The second was her destination. She was on a direct course southwest toward the Coliseum. Normally, it wouldn’t have worried Nidhiki, not with the kind of security around that place. But what if this Dark Hunter was good enough to make it inside, and then do who knows what to Turaga Dume?

Nidhiki stopped, unlimbered his scythe, and aimed for where she would be, not where she was. Then he unleashed a narrow, focused, hurricane-strength blast of wind at his target.

She never turned. She never cried out. She simply leaped aside as if he had soft-tossed a Kodan Ball at her, landed silently, and spun in his direction. Her smile was a challenge.

“I appreciate the little breeze,” she said softly. “Hunting is hot work.”

“Then maybe you need a little more chilling,” he replied. This time he sent elemental air power from both sides of his tool, bracketing her. To his amazement, she did a somersault from a standing start, neatly evading both blasts. Before she had even reached her feet, she had hurled two daggers at him. One whistled past his mask while the other sliced his right shoulder armor as it flew by.

“I guess they don’t teach dodging in Toa training,” the female Dark Hunter said. “No wonder your city is falling.”

Nidhiki glanced from the new gash in his emerald armor to his foe. She had missed on purpose, he was certain. With her aim, if she had wanted to kill him, he would be dead.

“Not my city,” he replied. “But a place I am protecting just the same.”

“Oh. A matter of honor?”

Nidhiki paused before answering. “Let’s say no better offers.”

He took his eyes off her for a fraction of a second to ready his scythe. When he looked back up, she was gone, vanished like a wisp of smoke in the night wind. Nidhiki stood completely still, not even breathing, his legs tense and ready to spring. A veteran of a thousand fights, he knew better than to panic. Not knowing where she was, any move he made could be the wrong one. He mentally triggered his mask and disappeared into the shadow.

“Oh, you’re good.”

Her voice was coming from above. She was perched among the chutes, watching. It was a perfect hiding place – a wind strong enough to dislodge her would bring the chute braced down on his head, while climbing up after her would be nothing short of suicide.

“I could kill you now, Toa,” she continued. “But I’ve filled my quota today. So I am just going to leave you here and go finish off your precious Turaga. If you’re scared of the dark… well, you probably should be.”

Nidhiki kept silent, until another dagger buried itself in the wall behind him.

“Don’t stay quiet on my account,” the Dark Hunter said. “I already know where you are. I can smell your fear.”
The Toa forced himself to relax. He had been in tough spots before and talked his way out of them. This was just one more. “You'll never make it. It’s too well guarded.”

“Watch me. Unless… you have a better plan?”

“We’re on opposite sides, remember?”

“We don’t have to be.” Her voice was above and behind him now. He whirled around, but still could not see her. “How many Toa did you start out with? A hundred? Two hundred? And what do you have left, maybe a few dozen? The Dark Hunters have half the city, and we’ll soon have the other half. When it’s over, you’ll be just one more mask in the pile.”

The words struck hard. In the months since Turaga Dume had refused the Dark Hunters a base on Metru Nui, countless Toa had fallen. Most were struck down from the shadows, never knowing their enemy was there. Oh, there had been some victories – Nidhiki had routed more than his share of the enemy, and Lhikan was worth six Toa in battle – but they all knew the numbers were against them. It was only a matter of time.

“If you want to die, I will be more than happy to oblige,” she added. “But if you want to live… something might be arranged.”

A long moment went by. Then Nidhiki lowered his scythe. A second later, the Dark Hunter known as Lariska dropped to the ground in front of him. She still had her daggers at the ready.

“The Shadowed One – my employer – is always looking for new talent,” she said. “Help us capture the Coliseum and you can name your price.”

The full impact of what he was to do struck Nidhiki then. If he betrayed the Toa, his name would go down in infamy… or would it?

Who’s going to tell? he asked himself. The Toa will all be dead. Matoran? They’ll believe whatever they are told to believe. And the Dark Hunters? Right, like anyone’s going to listen to them.

“Metru Nui,” he said firmly. “I give you Dume, Lhikan, and the rest, and I get the city to rule. That’s my price, take it or leave it.”

Lariska grinned. “Actually, I think my choices are take it or kill you where you stand. But I’ll let that pass. Meet me here tomorrow night – I’ll give you our answer.”

The next day lasted for an eternity. Nidhiki spent his time wandering the hall of the Coliseum, imagining himself in control of it all. Now and then, he felt a little twinge of guilt over what he was about to do. But then he reminded himself that it was Dume’s fault, and the other Toa’s fault, for ever thinking they had a chance against the Dark Hunters.

As the twin suns set, Lhikan approached. “Nidhiki, there you are. There’s a boat coming from the south, carrying supplies. I need you to meet it.”

“Sure,” Nidhiki replied, grateful for an excuse to slip away. “Can’t have a siege to the bitter end without supplies, right?”

He left before Lhikan could answer.

“It’s a deal,” said Lariska. “Tomorrow you lead Lhikan and the Coliseum guard into the Canyon of Unending Whispers in Po-Metru. We’ll be scattered in the caves and foothills. Once it’s over, I’m to take care of Dume personally… and the city will be yours, Nidhiki. What do you plan to do with it?”

Nidhiki sat down on a bench and stretched his legs. “Maybe you should stick around, Lariska, and find out.”

Nidhiki’s news struck the Coliseum like a lightning bolt. The Dark Hunters had established a base camp in a Po-Metru canyon. All their operations were being coordinated from there. One swift strike and the war would be over.

“But we’ll need every Toa we can muster,” he told Lhikan. “We can’t afford to lose this opportunity because we left some behind to guard the Coliseum.”

Lhikan looked at Dume. The Turaga nodded. “Nidhiki speaks the truth. We may never have such a chance again.”

157
“All right,” said Lhikan. “I’ll assemble the guard. We move out at once.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were on the march, over one hundred Toa with Lhikan and Nidhiki in the lead. Clouds of dust kicked up under their armored feet as they traveled well-worn paths through Po-Metru. Each of them had lost a brother or a sister Toa in this war, and all wanted it to end. But not before they had made the Dark Hunters pay in full for their crimes.

Side by side, they marched into the Canyon of Unending Whispers. The clang of their footsteps echoed again and again. The sun baked the barren rock for as far as the eye could see. A few Rahi flyers swooped and dove in the bright sky. Of a Dark Hunter base camp, there was no sign.

“Where is it?” demanded Lhikan, turning to Nidhiki. “You said the war could end today.”

“And so it will,” replied the Toa of Air. All around, Dark Hunters rose from their hiding places, weapons leveled at the assembled heroes. “Sorry it had to be this way, brother.”

Lhikan shook his head. “Not as half as sad as I am… and don’t call me ‘brother’ again.”

The Toa of Fire’s arm shot up. Suddenly, Toa rose up from the tops of the canyon walls, a dozen, a hundred, then two hundred, and still more. They said nothing, merely aimed their tools at the now-surrounded Dark Hunters. The hunters were now the hunted, and they looked to Lariska for guidance. She assessed the odds, then shrugged, dropped her daggers and rose.

“Very neat,” she said to Nidhiki. “You had me fooled.”

Lhikan shoved Nidhiki toward the Dark Hunter lines. “He didn’t deceive you. Though I wish he had.”

“How did you know?” the Toa of Air asked his former friend.

“The other night. The boat carrying supplies,” Lhikan replied. “You left without asking where it was docking. I went after you to give you the information, and stumbled on your meeting with your deadly new friend.”

“And all these new Toa?”

“The ‘supplies’ we were promised from the south. With Dark Hunter eyes and ears everywhere, Dume and I thought it best not to talk of reinforcements out loud. Once I knew what you were planning, I ordered them here to spring a trap of our own.”

“And now what?” asked Lariska. “Do you march us all into the sea?”

The Toa of fire met her gaze, his eyes cold. “A messenger was sent to the Shadowed One before you even reached the canyon. You will be allowed to walk out of here the same way you walked in, provided the Dark Hunters leave Metru Nui and never come back.” He turned and pointed to Nidhiki. “Starting with him.”

Nidhiki’s expression was one of disbelief. “Go with them? But I’m a Toa, Lhikan. I’m your brother in arms!”

Lhikan turned his back on the traitorous Toa of Air. “No. No, you’re not. You lost the right to call me ‘brother’ when you betrayed us all. Get out, Nidhiki – of my sight and of this city. Get out before I kill you.”

Six months later…

Nidhiki sat on a bench, watching a team of Dark Hunters train. Their mission was to penetrate a heavily defended island and steal a stone known as the Makoki. He didn’t know all the details, but apparently the Shadowed One intended to split the rock up into six pieces and thus make six times the profit in ransoming it back.

The Dark Hunter squad was, for the most part, professional and efficient. They made it over and around every obstacle Nidhiki had set up, and effectively eliminated any target dummies that popped up. All of them, that is, except for one big blue brute who lacked any semblance of grace, style, or stealth. After watching him demolish a barrier he was supposed to slip quietly under, Nidhiki had seen enough.

“Krekka!” he snapped. “You just woke up every Toa for kios around. A Toa of Fire has spotted your team and you’re about to be the guest of honor at a Dark Hunter bake. What are you going to do?”
The blue Dark Hunter pondered for a very long time. Then he smiled and said brightly, “Smash him?”

“He’s up there,” Nidhiki said, pointing up to a nonexistent fortress. “You’re down here.”

Krekka looked up to where his instructor was indicating, but saw nothing. “He’s not up there. Did he run away?”

“No, but why don’t you?”

“Because I like it here.”

Without another word, Nidhiki stalked off. It was time he and the Shadowed One had a talk.

“They’re ready,” Nidhiki reported. “All of them but the blue fool. Keep him here, send me, and we’ll get your rock for you. I promise.”

The Shadowed One smiled, but did not look up. “And we all know what your pledges are worth, don’t we, ‘Toa’ Nidhiki?”

Nidhiki restrained himself from saying what came to mind. He had seen how the Shadowed One dealt with insubordination. Instead, he tried a different approach. “I know how Toa think. I know how they will try to defend the stone. I should be going on this mission.”

“You know your former allies makes you too valuable as a trainer for me to risk losing,” said the Shadowed One, not even trying to sound convincing. “Krekka goes. You stay.”

Nidhiki felt fury rising in him. In the six months since he had come to the Shadowed One’s island, he had done nothing but help prepare other Dark Hunters for missions, wander among the rocks, and stare at the ocean. If there were such a thing as a Toa of Boredom, he would be it. And now to be passed over for that hulking, clumsy mass of muscle – it was too much.

“He’s a moron,” he said through clenched teeth.

That got the Shadowed One’s attention. He locked eyes on Nidhiki and rose to his full height. His voice sounded like ice breaking. “And you’re a traitor. You turned your back on your ideals, your friends, your city, all to save your own worthless hide. Why would you ever think I would trust you, Nidhiki?”

The Toa of Air had nothing to say. After all, the Shadowed One was correct. He had turned against everyone who relied on him. The Toa didn’t want him, and the Dark Hunters were just using him for his knowledge. He belonged nowhere.

“But… I am not without appreciation of your talents,” the Shadowed One continued. “So perhaps you are right – perhaps you would serve us best in the world beyond this island. I assume you would want only the most dangerous missions?”

Nidhiki smiled, hardly able to believe the Shadowed One had come around to his way of thinking. “Those are the ones with the greatest reward.”

“Indeed. Too dangerous for any Dark Hunter to do alone, however. You will need a partner. Fortunately, the very one for the job is waiting outside my chamber.”

Nidhiki turned to the door, confident he knew who was about to walk through. He and Lariska had been close companions since the disaster on Metru Nui. There would be no one better to team up with him.

The door opened. Nidhiki started to say her name… and then the sound died in his throat.

Standing in the doorway… in fact, so broad he had cracked the doorway… was Krekka.

“Tell me the plan again.”

Krekka started to reply, then stopped, as if the thought in his head had just flown away like a hungry Guukko bird. He looked lost for a moment. Then he suddenly brightened as he remembered what it was Nidhiki asked to hear.

“We get there. I keep quiet and try to look scary. When we find the spot, I smash open the gate. You go inside. I stay outside.”

“Why?” asked Nidhiki.

“Because you said so.”
“Then what?” This was the fourth time Nidhiki had run Krekka through the plan, start to finish, and he would do it four more times if he had to.

“You smash up the place and then come out. We leave and come back here. You turn the weapons over to the Shadowed One and I keep my mouth shut, and… and…”

Nidhiki frowned. “And no one gets hurt.”

“Oh, right!” said Krekka. “I always forget that part.”

It was a fairly straightforward job. Some Matoran on a nearby island had developed a new kind of launcher. Nobody knew just what it was meant to fire, but the Shadowed One wanted it anyway. Supposedly, there were only a few models in existence. Once they were stolen, and the equipment used to create them smashed to bits, it would be a while before any more could be built.

There were problems, of course. There was a Toa on the island, but Lariska had agreed to go ahead and set up a diversion. The Matoran posted guards around their village but did not cover one access point, which involved a climb up a sheer cliff. They assumed no one could get up that way.

They had never met Krekka.

The big blue Dark Hunter slammed his fist into the side of the cliff, creating an instant handhold. He began to climb, punching holes in the rock as he did so. Nidhiki came up after him. They were halfway up when Nidhiki realized something was very wrong.

“Wait a minute, Krekka,” he said. “I thought Lariska said you could fly?”

Krekka responded with his usual look of puzzlement. The he nodded vigorously. “Oh, that’s right. Forgot.”

“If I pushed him right off this cliff, no one would ever know,” Nidhiki grumbled to himself. “And I would too, except the Shadowed One said I’m responsible for his well-being.”

Krekka walked quickly to the door of the armory and smashed it down with one swing. Then he obediently stopped, turned around, and allowed Nidhiki to get in alone.

The launchers were easy to find. There were three of them, but Nidhiki grabbed only one for transport back to the Shadowed One’s island. Then he dug a hole in the rocky floor of the building and placed the other two inside. No one would ever think to look for stolen goods in the very place from which they were stolen – and now that Nidhiki knew where they were, he could come back and grab them anytime. After all, he might have a use for them someday that the Shadowed One would not approve of.

He was just beginning to fill the hole when the shadow of Krekka fell on him. “What are you doing?” asked the big Dark Hunter.

“I told you to stay outside!”

“I just remembered, Shadowed One said I have to stay with you all the time on a job,” Krekka answered. “What are you doing, Nidhiki?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? Listen, Krekka, we’ll bring one back to the Shadowed One, and then we’ll keep the other two for us. Wouldn’t you like a new toy to play with?”

Krekka shook his head. “Shadowed One says everything goes back to him. Nothing gets left.”

“Krekka —”

“Shadowed One says no!” Krekka said, slamming his fist into the wall. The whole building shook as it might come down on top of them. Worse, the volume of his voice was attracting Matoran attention. Nidhiki could hear guards coming this way. He had been told to make sure the Dark Hunters’ involvement in this theft was kept secret, and that was now in jeopardy.

“All right,” said Nidhiki, gathering up the three launchers and wishing he could use them on Krekka. “But just because you asked so nicely.”

Nidhiki first spotted the stranger walking through the stone courtyard of the Shadowed One’s fortress. Tall, powerful, with jet-black armor, she moved like a serpent, her eyes darting from left to right. She was new, and anything new on the island was always of interest to him.
“I wouldn’t,” said Lariska. She had appeared beside him without him ever being aware she was near. “She’s trouble.”

“What kind?”

“She wants Dark Hunter training, and she’s willing to pay. But she’s not joining. Says she has plans of her own. So the Shadowed One is giving her a few hours to change her mind, then she’s being sent back where she came from.”

“And she needs our skill – so her plans involve theft, murder, and betrayal,” Nidhiki muttered. “Sounds like my kind of evening.”

Before Lariska could stop him, he was on his way to greet the new arrival.

“Get out of my way.”

Nidhiki didn’t move. He had found out the newcomer’s name was Roodaka, but precious little else about her. Still, he could make a few educated guesses and the best way to confirm them was face-to-face. If you can call what she’s got a “face”, he noted.

“Just trying to make you feel welcome,” he said lightly. “This is a very friendly island we have here – heavily defended, home to several hundred killers, and unfailingly lethal to trespassers… but friendly.”

Roodaka started to push past him. “I have no need of friends.”

Nidhiki blocked her again. “Then how about a business partner? Listen – I’ve been stuck on this rock for over a year now. The only time I get off is when they send me on some errand, with a drooling fool. I want out of here.”

“And this concerns me how?”

“You’re looking to get hired on by someone, or you’re already working for them,” Nidhiki replied. “Someone who needs beings with my kind of talent. Introduce me. If I get in, I’ll see you’re rewarded.”

Roodaka nodded. When she spoke again, it was in a conspiratorial tone. “And what of the Shadowed One and the other Dark Hunters?”

Nidhiki shrugged. “They will keep doing what they do. I was meant for bigger things. I was – I am – a Toa. I should be running puny islands like this, not working on them.” The tall ebony figure smiled. “I think we can do business together. Meet me at the dock in full darkness. We will conclude our arrangement then.”

Midnight found Nidhiki standing by the water’s edge. The island was silent, much like Metru Nui had been a year before, the night he met Lariska. He hadn’t told her about his meeting with Roodaka or his plans to leave the island. She wouldn’t have understood. She was a Dark Hunter, by profession and by nature. The notion that in some part of his heart he still saw himself as a Toa would have been laughable to her.

She was too short-sighted, he decided. Her horizon stopped on the borders of the island. He still had the lean, powerful look of a Toa. He still had a Toa’s powers. All he would have to do would be to find some island where they never heard of Lhikan or Dume or Metru Nui, and the population would line up to welcome him. Anything he wanted would be his, and maybe… maybe he might even be a hero again.

After all, I look the part, he reminded himself. Of course, that won’t matter if Roodaka doesn’t show up soon.

He stared out at the ocean, wondering about his past and his future. He remembered the first time he saw Metru Nui. It was the day he and a handful of other Toa arrived in answer to a summons to help fight the Kanohi dragon. They were strangers to each other, but brothers just the same – they all shared the responsibilities and the risks of being Toa. It was a special bond, nothing like what the Dark Hunters shared. And, to Nidhiki’s surprise and dismay, he found he missed it. Sure, maybe they weren’t really his friends… maybe they were too quick to turn on him, instead of trying to understand why he did what he did… maybe they couldn’t see past their jealousy and resentment of the only Toa smart enough to look out for himself.
If it weren’t for me, the war would still be going on, he reminded himself. The Shadowed One would be sitting in the Coliseum right now. But do I get gratitude? No, I get exiled. Well, I’ll find a place where they need a Toa, and aren’t too particular about that kind. And if Lhikan or one of those Metru Nui heroes tries to take it away from me, I’ll make them regret the day they put on a Kanohi. All I need is for Roodaka to help me get what I deserve…

Rhotuka spinners, being pure energy, make very little noise when they fly. Even if the one Roodaka launched had, Nidhiki would never have heard it over the noise of his own thoughts. All he knew was the black pain when it struck, the world spinning in front of his eyes, the bizarre sensation of his muscles shifting, altering, becoming something alien.

It lasted for six seconds. To Nidhiki, it lasted for an eternity. When it was over at last, he walked… no, he wasn’t walking, at least not like before… to the water’s edge. All he could see were the dark waves.

“Let us help.” The voice belonged to the Shadowed One. A moment later, the entire beach was bathed in torch light. And now Nidhiki could see his reflection in the water.

He screamed for a very long time.

Roodaka watched with amusement as Nidhiki tried to master his new body. He was stumbling about on the sand, trying to move like a Toa but a prisoner of the monstrous form her mutation spinner had given him. She turned to the Shadowed One.

“Can I assume I have purchased my training?” she asked.

“Most definitely,” the Shadowed One replied. He thought again how amazing her powers seemed to be. Nidhiki’s head and arms had changed their shape. Most grotesque of all, his lower body now resembled that of a huge, four-legged insect. The sight was too much even for some of the assembled Dark Hunters. Lariska had already fled back to the fortress.

“You really should have known,” the Shadowed One said to Nidhiki. “Roodaka wanted something from me. She attempted to use the report of your conversation to buy it, but I insisted on more. If you were still deluding yourself that you could go back to being a Toa, that you could wash the stain of treachery off your spirit that easily, I was going to strip that dream from you once and for all.”

The Shadowed One laughed, a harsh and grating sound. “You are a monster, Nidhiki. Matoran seeing you would run screaming. You will never be cheered, never be admired, never be hailed as a savior by the crowds. What are you now? A Toa of Nightmares? A hero, Nidhiki, or a horror? No, I think you will find your place is now, and forevermore, with the Dark Hunters. For who else would have you?”

Nidhiki’s eyes blazed with hatred. The Shadowed One paid no heed. Instead, he simply smiled and put a hand on the ex-Toa’s shoulder.

“It’s ironic, in a way,” said the leader of the Dark Hunters. “Your friend Lhikan could have ended your misery back on Metru Nui, but he chose not to. No doubt he thought he was doing you a favor when he allowed you to leave, unharmed, with us.” The Shadowed One turned and walked away, saying, “Someday, you really should thank him properly.”

One by one, Roodaka and the others departed. No one spoke of a word of mourning for the Toa who had just died… and no one spoke a word of welcome for the Dark Hunter that had just been born.
The Island of Mata Nui
500 years ago...

“This is the biggest canoe I’ve ever seen,” said Amaya as she sat between Maku and Marka in the three-bio-long boat. Behind her, Marka adjusted herself. “You know Kai and her ideas. If she could, she’d have made the boat big enough to fit the entire village!”

“A rowing club!” exclaimed Maku. “I wish I’d thought of that!” Amaya chuckled. Her gaze moved past Maku to the prow, where Kai was cupping her hands around her mouth.

“Ga-Matoran!” she called. “Ready oars!”

Maku leaned back to speak over her shoulder. “That’s those stick things, Amaya.”

“I know what an oar is,” said Amaya. She set her feet against the block under Maku’s seat. Her eyes scanned the floor. “Uh… where are they?”

Maku patted the u-shaped swivel hooking on the boat’s side. “Right where they belong. In the oarlocks.”

“Yeah, uh-huh, sure,” said Amaya. “Oarlocks.” She grabbed her oar handles. “I can’t believe I let you two talk me into this.”

Marka laughed.

“Back it up!” commanded Kai. “Into position!”

Along with the five other rowers, Amaya pushed on her double oars to turn the boat away from the Ga-Koro lily pad and move it into starting position.

“Good!” shouted Kai. “Ready, row… and row… and row…”

Aware of the water surface skimming by, Amaya concentrated on the steady rhythm of Kai’s commands. This wasn’t that bad. The team worked as a unit. Turaga Nokama would be proud—

The boat jerked. A shriek erupted from behind Amaya.

“Hold water! Hold water!” screamed Kai. “Stop the boat—” The boat’s stern tipped downward and Kai tumbled forward.

The sky whirled overhead as Amaya fell backwards into Marka.

“Help me!” Marka’s scream mingled with those of the other Ga-Matoran. Amaya struggled to shove herself upright, twisting her body to see the stern. She gasped. A thick tentacle gripped Marka’s torso.

“Help!” cried Marka, pushing against the tentacle. “Get it off! Get it off!”

Amaya searched about her. “My oar! Where’s my oar!” Her hand slid along the boat’s side until her fingers wrapped around the handle. Of course. In the oarlock, right where it belonged.
She yanked the oar free and slammed it down on the tentacle. Marka screamed. Amaya raised her oar but froze in mid-strike as the creature dragged Marka over the side. Water covered her head, silencing her final cry.

“No!” Oar still in hand, Amaya flung herself into the water.

Through a flurry of bubbles, she saw a multi-armed, dark shape loom to her left. Two glowing eyes blinked at her. She hesitated a moment, then started jabbing at the eyes again and again with the handle of her oar.

The water exploded around her as Kai and her four Ga-Matoran teammates dropped into the sea. Amaya glanced at them and thrust her oar toward the Rahi’s eyes again. Quickly, her teammates joined with her, stabbing and slashing at the Rahi. Another bubble storm blinded them, and they paused their attack. The water cleared. Marka floated face-up before them. The Rahi had released her.

Amaya snatched Marka and carried her to the surface. One by one, the others surfaced beside her. They stared at the capsized boat and the bubbling wake of the fleeing Rahi.

“What was that thing?” someone asked.

“Where’s it going?” said another.

Kai’s eyes traced the direction of the Rahi. “Ga-Koro!” she said. “Quick! After it!” While the others raced off, Amaya stared into Marka’s unconscious face. Her dark blue Hau was gone, and her heartlight blinked faintly, but she was still breathing. “I’ve got to get you to shore,” said Amaya.

Churning water halted Amaya a short distance from Ga-Koro. She bobbed in the water and watched the Rahi’s attack. Huge tentacles reached onto the lily pad, tearing off pieces and dragging huts and equipment into the sea. The Ga-Matoran villagers attempted to beat off the Rahi with fishing staffs.

“They need help!” said Amaya.

Shifting Marka’s weight, Amaya continued with strong, swift strokes until she reached the far western edge of the lily pad.

“You’ll be safe here,” she said as she set Marka on the pad. She spied a coiled rope, and, with an idea in mind, she snagged it.

Amaya dived underwater and sped in the direction of the battle. The beast’s enormous tentacles whipped the water ahead, but Amaya didn’t slow. Ga-Matoran swam around the beast, stabbing at it with fishing staffs. Village debris floated and bobbed in the water.

Uncoiling her rope, Amaya darted into the twisting tentacles. She wrapped her rope around the nearest tentacle. Something knocked against her, pushing her back. She dashed in and wrapped the rope again, and again. Beaks at the ends of the tentacles snapped at her from all directions.

If I can just get –

A tentacle wound around her neck. Amaya grabbed at it with one hand and flung the rope around it with the other. The tentacle tightened. She pulled to loosen it, but it wouldn’t budge. It began yanking her upward. She raised her eyes to the snapping, beak-like mouth above.

Uh-oh.

Amaya jammed the rope into the Rahi’s mouth. It spit it out.

The exertion of the battle and lack of air weakened her. She felt faint. She tried to stuff the rope in again but missed. A tentacle slapped against her Komau, knocking it loose. A beak bit into her leg. She shoved again with the rope as the mouth loomed closer. She needed to breathe. She needed… Something clutched her foot, but she hardly felt it.

I need…

Her grip on the Rahi loosened.

I need…

Her world went black.

“Amaya.”

Amaya stirred. The Rahi! The fight! She bolted upright. “The village!”
Turaga Nokama quieted Amaya with a hand to her shoulder. “The village is safe.” Amaya looked around. She was lying on the Ga-Koro lily pad. She held her breath. Marka. What about Marka? “Marka? Is she…”

“I’m right here!”
Amaya’s eyes flew past the Turaga to see Marka, grinning and waving.
“Marka!” said Amaya. “You’re alive! And you have your Hau!” Marka nodded at the Ga-Matoran on Amaya’s other side. “Maku got it for me!”
Amaya smiled up at Maku, who smiled back.
“She said you saved me,” added Marka.
“She saved us all!” said Maku. “Tangling the Rahi up in a rope! That was brilliant, Amaya! Brilliant!”
“It was foolhardy and reckless,” Turaga Nokama admonished. “You nearly drowned, Amaya. Or worse.”
“I was certain of it,” said Amaya. “What happened? How did I get here?”
“I had your foot,” said Maku. “And I wasn’t letting go. With the Rahi tangled, we went at it full force until it dropped you and swam away. Well, tried to swim. Hard to swim when you’re all knotted up like that.” She chuckled. “That was a sight.”
Amaya turned her gaze to the Turaga. “What was it? Do you know?” Turaga Nokama stared out at the sea and shook her head.
Marka wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “I guess the big question is, will it be back?” Amaya surveyed the wreckage of the lily pad. Huts down, the shoreline shredded… The amount of damage a Rahi that size could do…
She shivered, too.
Everyone shivered.
“Let’s hope not,” said Turaga Nokama.
Now...

Turaga Vakama stood at the bow of a small boat making its way across the waters to Metru Nui. All around him, the hastily assembled Matoran fleet was cutting through the waves, bearing the former residents back to the City of Legends.

It had been a long, hard journey to reach this point. One thousand years ago, the Toa Metru had succeeded in saving the Matoran from the ruins of this city. They had sacrificed their power and become Turaga to awaken the villagers, and then built a new world on the island of Mata Nui. There they suffered Rahi attacks and other disasters spawned by the evil Makuta, who desired complete control over the Matoran.

Finally, after so many years, six Toa had arrived to defeat Makuta’s minions and restore hope to the Matoran. Thanks to their efforts and those of the Toa of Light, Metru Nui had been rediscovered. The Matoran were going home at last.

A great weariness overtook Vakama. He had spent many nights telling the Toa Nuva the tales of Metru Nui. Some had been inspiring stories of heroism against great odds, and some tales filled with fear and regret. Now the heroes were armed with truth as they joined the Matoran on their journey home.

The sight of the Metru Nui skyline, even as badly damaged as it was, should have filled Vakama with only joy and relief. But there was another emotion mixed with those, one harder to define. There were memories here for him that the other Turaga did not share. Another tale had taken place here, one that he had never told his friends or the Toa Nuva.

As the boat drew closer to the shore, Vakama closed his eyes and remembered a day when he and the other Toa Metru were leaving their city far behind.
Toa Matau stared hard at Toa Vakama. The two were almost mask to mask, Matau’s eyes boring into his friend’s as if Vakama were some previously unknown breed of Rahi beast. After a few moments, Matau broke off and started walking around the Toa of Fire, all the while muttering to himself.

“What are you doing?” Vakama demanded finally.

“I always knew you would go crazy one day,” Matau replied. “Not Hordika-crazy, just mad-crazy all on your own. I want to remember the sight.”

At one time, Vakama would have reacted with anger to Matau’s joke. But he had recently learned all too well what happened when one allowed the darker emotions to dominate. Instead, he said quietly, “I’m not crazy. All I said was, I am going back to Metru Nui. The rest of you take the Matoran to the island above, and I will join you soon.”

At the controls of the airship in which they flew, Onewa sat shaking his head. They had just finished a terrible struggle to overcome the Visorak horde and escape the city. In the holds of their small armada of ships were a thousand silver spheres, each one containing a Matoran trapped in an endless sleep. It had been a miracle they had made it out of Metru Nui at all, let alone that they managed to save the whole population. And now Vakama wanted to go back!

“After all this time, I know better than to argue with you,” Onewa said over his shoulder. “But do you mind telling us why? Did you leave a lightstone on or something? Forget your favorite Kanoka disk? What?”

Vakama gazed out of the cockpit at the dark city below and the silver sea that surrounded it. “Something a little more important than that, Onewa. With all that has happened to us, I’m not surprised it slipped your mind… though I would not have thought it easy to forget the Mask of Time.”

Those three final words were enough to bring the conversation to an abrupt halt. All of the Toa present remembered how Vakama crafted the Kanohi Vahi, the Mask of Time, with the power to slow down or speed up time around a target. Keeping the powerful mask out of the hands of the evil Makuta had nearly cost Vakama his life, and had led to the death of Turaga Lhikan. During the course of the battle, the Vahi had fallen into the sea.

“It’s still down there,” said Vakama “If it should fall into the hands of Makuta, all that we have done here, and all our hopes for a new life, will be erased. I have to find it.”

“We’ll all go,” Nokama said. “If it’s that important –”

Vakama shook his head. “You have to get the Matoran to safety. If I am wrong, and Makuta has forgotten the mask, he will go after them. If I am right, then at least I can delay him long enough for you to escape… perhaps even to destroy the mask. I’m not ordering my fellow Toa to accept this, Nokama, I am asking my brothers and sister to understand.”

Vakama executed a perfect dive, hitting the water clean. A few moments later, he broke the surface, gasping for air. From below, he could see the airships moving slowly away.
Good, he thought. I knew I could trust Onewa. He will make sure the ships get well clear of Metru Nui and the Matoran make it to safety. With luck, I won’t be far behind.

He turned and began to swim toward the Great Barrier. It was beneath the waters near that imposing wall of rock that he knew he would find the Vahi.

If Makuta has not found it already, he added grimly. And if he has, it is too late for us all.

From their vantage point aboard the airship, Nokama, Matau, and Nuju watched their friend begin his journey. “Mata Nui, keep him safe,” whispered the Toa of Water.

“He will, sister,” replied Matau. “Mata Nui loves ever-brave fools; that is why he made so many of us.”

Nuju glanced at the Toa of Air and made a complicated series of clicks and whistles, punctuated by sweeping hand gestures.

“What was that?” asked Matau, puzzled. “I didn’t quite catch it.”

“He’s been talking like that ever since we left Metru Nui,” said Nokama. “It’s the language of flying Rahi, or something close to it. The Toa of Ice has evidently decided that if we want a conversation with him, we will have to work for it.”

“But will it be worth working for?” asked the Toa of Air.

Nuju made an abrupt slashing motion in the air and followed it with two shrill whistles.

“I think I’ve just been insulted,” said Matau. “I would dare him to speak-say that again, but I wouldn’t understand it the second time either.”

Nokama laughed. After a moment, Matau joined in, and even Nuju cracked a smile. After so much danger and tension, the Toa Metru had finally become a team. Now they needed only Vakama to return to make them complete.

Be careful, Toa of Fire, Nokama thought. I may not have visions of the future like you do, but even I can sense something terrible is waiting down there. Do not let it find you.

Vakama took a deep breath and plunged beneath the waves for a third time. He had already realized he must widen his search area; the undersea currents could easily have carried the Vahi far from where it was dropped.

A Takea shark took notice of the new underwater presence and turned to get a closer look. Vakama saw the predator at about the same time. A moment’s thought sent a wave of heat through the water, enough to frighten the shark away without doing any real harm to it.

The Toa of Fire scanned the sea floor, searching for the distinctive yellow gold of the Mask of Time. The rocky bottom was littered with the carcasses of dead Rahi, fragments of Matoran boats, and assorted other jetsam that had collected over the years. At one point, he thought he saw something gleam from amid the debris, but it turned out to be an old Kanoka disk launcher.

His lungs were beginning to strain. He wondered if perhaps this was a futile search after all. The Vahi might have been swept away to any point in the ocean, carried off by a Rahi, or simply been buried beneath the mud and silt and invisible to the naked eye. Odds were good it was lost forever.

Probably better that way, thought Vakama. No being—not even a Toa—should command such power. Time is a fundamental force of the universe and the Vahi tampers with it. Even Mata Nui himself would not dare to do that.

Resolved to give up the search, Vakama turned to head for the surface. As he did so, his eye caught a disturbance in the water. He changed direction to make a closer examination.

What the Toa of Fire saw was staggering. In a small area, the natural order of things had apparently gone insane. Plant life was growing at a fantastic rate, then dying before his eyes. Rahi that swam too close would stop dead, every life process seemingly suspended, for long moments before finally moving on. The effect seemed to come in waves, rippling a short distance through the water before dissipating.

Being careful to avoid the affected area, Vakama swam closer. Now he could clearly see the source of the bizarre changes. The Kanohi Vahi was wedged beneath a rock, a minute crack running along its side.
It had changed color from gold to a dull orange, the result of exposure to the sea. Time distortions were emanating from it like waves of heat from a pool of molten protodermis.

The ache in Vakama’s lungs reminded him he needed to surface. He shot upward, while the maskmaker in him debated what he had seen.

*This makes no sense,* he told himself. *If the mask is damaged, it shouldn’t work at all. Even the tiniest crack wrecks a mask. Instead, it’s pouring out power like I have never seen before, and if it sustains any more damage…*

Vakama caught a quick breath of air on the surface and then plunged back down again. A plan was already forming in his mind. As things stood, there was no way he could retrieve the mask. He would have to risk trying to repair it underwater.

He came as close as he safely could and began to count. He would only have a few seconds between time waves to act. His control would have to be pinpoint, or else he risked making things infinitely worse.

Concentrating harder than ever before, he sent an impossibly thin beam of fire at the mask. It struck at the base of the small crack, welding the two sides together. It was the work of an instant for the entire job to be done, but Vakama felt like a year had passed.

*And with this mask, it very well might have,* he reminded himself as he wrenched the Vahi free.

Pumping his legs furiously, Vakama made for the surface. He had a long journey ahead of him to reach the island above. With the only known water route blocked off, he would have to travel overland through one of the tunnels. With luck, the Rahi who had infested them had moved on to the surface.

He was calculating the quickest and safest way to travel when he felt the disturbance in the water. He glanced down to see a waterspout forming below him. It was rocketing up toward him at amazing speed. Knowing he could never outdistance it in the water, Vakama seized the only option he had.

With only a fraction of a second’s hesitation, he slammed the Vahi over his mask. If he could muster the willpower, he could slow down time around the waterspout and buy a few moments to escape. He turned in the water to face the oncoming surge. It had picked up speed. Vakama struggled to settle his thoughts and focus on the mask, but it was already too late. The waterspout smashed into him like a pile driver, catapulting him out of the water and toward the Great Barrier.

Desperately, Vakama twisted his body to absorb the impact. He crashed into the solid rock wall and began to slide back down toward the water. Too stunned to use his elemental or mask powers, he could only reach out and grab on to a ledge. Vision blurred, strength rapidly waning, he tried in vain to pull himself up.

Then there was someone else there. It was a huge figure, power radiating off of it, but not someone Vakama recognized. His first thought was that Makuta had found him, but the aura of this being was different somehow. He fought to make his eyes focus, but the collision with the Great Barrier had been too devastating.

“Help me…,” he said.

The figure stood over him, seemingly unsure of what to do. Then it reached down and ripped the Vahi off of Vakama’s mask. Once it had the powerful Mask of Time in its possession, it lost interest in the Toa of Fire and began to climb the Great Barrier.

“Wait!” Vakama shouted weakly. But the figure never even looked back.

The Toa of Fire had no more time to worry about this. The world was rapidly going black. His hand lost its grip on the ledge, and Vakama fell down into the unforgiving sea. He hit the water, plunged deep beneath the surface, and did not rise again.
Far from Metru Nui, in a place never before seen by Matoran eyes, a lone being sat and brooded. His true name had not been spoken by anyone in more than two millennia. It was doubtful anyone even remembered it, or, if they did, that they would presume to be so familiar as to use it. Those who dared to address him called him the Shadowed One.

In the corridors outside his chamber, servants scurried to and fro as quietly as possible, lest they make a noise and disturb his meditations. Even the Dark Hunters training below his tower did so in unnerving silence. The last member of that order to shatter the peace with a shout had been moved into a new career as a practice dummy.

All who had seen the Shadowed One on this day knew it was a particularly bad time to risk his wrath. The reason was no secret: A short time before, he had dispatched two Dark Hunters, Nidhiki and Krekka, to the city of Metru Nui at the request of Makuta. Neither had returned, nor had Makuta been heard from. He was confronted with the very real possibility that his two operatives were dead.

He would not shed any tears for either. Nidhiki was a traitorous ex-Toa who had attempted to betray Metru Nui to the Dark Hunters ages ago and then fled the city when his attempt failed. Krekka was an idiot, worthwhile only for his brawn and his infantile sense of loyalty. No, losing those particular individuals was not the problem—what infuriated him was that anyone would dare to harm a Dark Hunter at all.

In all the centuries since the order had been founded, certain rules had remained unchanged. Dark Hunters would take on any employment if the reward were sufficient, regardless of the risk to themselves or others. Hiring a Dark Hunter without good reason or refusing to pay after the task was completed would bring immediate punishment. Slaying a Dark Hunter would bring the full force of the order down upon the offender. And now someone had dared to erase not one, but two, from existence.

The Shadowed One lightly tapped a crystal that hung suspended by his throne. In response, the dark, twisted creature that served as his Recorder crawled into the chamber and took up a position beside his master. It was the Recorder’s job to preserve the wisdom of the Shadowed One for the ages, as well as to keep an account of the Dark Hunters’ successes.

“I have pondered,” the Shadowed One began, “and I have decided. The deaths of two Dark Hunters cannot go unpunished. Those responsible must be struck down as an example to others who might contemplate such action.”

“How have you discovered who these offenders might be?” asked the Recorder, furiously scratching his master’s thoughts onto a tablet.

The Shadowed One nodded. “There is only one group of beings who would be so foolish as to do such a thing: Toa. I do not yet know if it was Lhikan or some other of his kind in Metru Nui who committed this act, but whoever they are, they will pay. Sentrakh and I will travel there ourselves to see to this.”
The Recorder paused in his writing, surprised. “You will go? You will not merely send more Dark Hunters?”

“Those who did this have obviously lost their fear of the order,” the Shadowed One replied. “Respect is born from fear… obedience as well. And so fear must be restored in the hearts of those who would stand against us.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” the Recorder said. If he wasn’t fully convinced of the wisdom of the plan, he certainly wasn’t going admit it. “After all, what Toa could successfully oppose you? Your power is second only to that of great Makuta himself.”

The words had barely been spoken before the Recorder realized the error he had made. Slowly, he started to back out of the room, even as the Shadowed One’s eyes blazed with anger.

“Second to –?” the leader of the Dark Hunters hissed, springing from his throne to grab the Recorder by the neck. “Understand this, scribbler – I am second to no one! Least of all that scheming, arrogant, walking scrap of shadow…”

The Recorder would have apologized profusely had he been able to breathe. To his great relief, the Shadowed One decided he was not worth killing, and simply threw him the length of the room. The jarring impact was almost welcome compared to what the alternative would have been.

“Get out of my sight,” ordered the Shadowed One. “Tell Sentrakh we depart immediately.”

The Recorder scurried out of the chamber. After he was gone, the Shadowed One returned to his throne and remembered Metru Nui. For far too long, that city had been a thorn in his side. Perhaps, when its Toa had been reduced to helplessness, it would be time to remove that thorn once and for all.

The Shadowed One walked down a winding stone staircase that led to the training chamber. No one was scheduled to be using it at this time, but from the sounds of combat emanating from below, it was obvious that someone was. He had no doubt it would be the Dark Hunter he was seeking.

The Shadowed One paused in the doorway. Lariska was there, moving with the grace and agility of a Rahi panther as she spun, leaped, and plunged her twin daggers into wooden targets. Without breaking stride, she went into a roll, then sprang up to throw her dagger between the eyes of a mounted Muaka head.

“I thought you preferred live practice targets,” the Shadowed One remarked.

Lariska retrieved her dagger and went into another routine, never looking at her visitor. “I do. Finished all of them. They’re stacked outside.” She did a midair somersault and sliced off the head of a mannequin. “Better do something before they start to smell,” she added as she hit the ground.

“You are back sooner than I expected,” said the Shadowed One. “Unable to carry out the mission?”

Lariska laughed sharply. “You know better than that.” She jumped from a standing start into the rafters, executed a series of complicated gymnastic tricks, and then did a perfect dismount to land in front of her leader. The Shadowed One could not help but be a little amazed at her fluid skill, considering that her left arm was completely mechanical.

“I thought you preferred live practice targets,” she said, making no effort to hide her sarcasm.

“The Toa?”

“Dead.”

“The Turaga?”

“Fled.”

“The payment?”

“In the vault.”

“All of it?” the Shadowed One asked pointedly.

Lariska glanced at her mechanical arm, then back at the ruler of the Dark Hunters. “All of it. I remember my lessons well, Shadowed One, especially the painful ones.

The Shadowed One smiled. “I find it hard to believe even you could eliminate an experienced Toa so quickly. Tell me the tale.”
Lariska shrugged, already restless. She liked to be moving all the time. Standing around and talking was torture for her, which is precisely why the Shadowed One made her do it. “Usual routine. I scouted him for two weeks. He was a Toa of Gravity. His standard response to an attack was to dodge the first strike and then erase the gravity around an opponent and send them floating upward. I practiced fighting in zero gravity using levitation disks, so when he tried that, I was ready.”

A dark smile crept onto her lips. “And he wasn’t ready for my being ready.”

“I am leaving the island for a short while,” the Shadowed One said abruptly. It was better not to let his Dark Hunters dwell on their successes – it made them prideful and thus dangerous. “You will oversee things here in my absence.”

Lariska couldn’t take the idleness anymore. She did a backflip and executed a rapid series of feints with her daggers. The Shadowed One noticed that the blades were stained green, a sign that she had applied poison to them before the session.

“Why me?” she asked.
“Because the other Dark Hunters are afraid of you,” he replied. “And you are afraid of me.”

Lariska suddenly hurled a dagger in his direction. “Am I?”
The Shadowed One erupted into a blur of motion. He grabbed a dagger off of a table, threw it, and knocked hers out of the air. “If you are wise,” he said, “then yes, you are.”

“Where are you going?”
“That does not concern you.”
“When will you be back?”

“When I return. In the meantime, accept only those commissions that promise high reward. Keep the Recorder informed of all arrangements. And Triglax returned with only two pieces of equipment when the contract specified three. Have his quarters and usual hiding places searched, then teach him the error of his ways.

“What curriculum?” Lariska asked, already looking forward to her confrontation with the obnoxious Triglax.

“I want him able to walk on his own,” the Shadowed One answered. “But unable to breathe without pain for, oh, six weeks. That should be sufficient.”

“Hands?”
“Intact,” he said. “I believe enough hands have been removed this year.”

He started to go, then stopped. “Tell me, Lariska. If I turned my back on you right now, would I find a dagger in it shortly after?”
She shook her head. “No.”

“Then, before…”

“That was… play,” she answered, smiling. “I know you. You would never turn your back on anyone without guards in the shadows ready to cut them down if they made a move. So, no… the day I kill you, Shadowed One, you will see it coming. I want you to see it coming.”

The Shadowed One turned and walked away, confident that in his absence he was leaving the Dark Hunters in just the right pair of ruthless hands.

Vakama opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that he was not underwater. In fact, he was lying on a comfortable sleep pallet, staring up at a strangely familiar stone ceiling.

The second thing he noticed was that, for a Toa who had just been slammed into the Great Barrier, he felt great. His muscles didn’t ache and his lungs seemed fine despite his almost drowning. Still, something felt… wrong. Granted, Toa had great strength and resiliency, but he felt almost too good. Almost as if the waterspout and the impact with the rock wall had never happened.

He sat up, and suddenly everything made sense, and at the same time nothing did at all. His Toa armor was gone. His legs, arms, and torso were all shorter.

Vakama went numb with shock. How could this have happened? When? It shouldn’t have been possible but… I’m a Matoran again!
Now he knew where he was. This was his home in Ta-Metru, a home he knew had been leveled in the earthquake that followed Makuta’s efforts to seize power in the city. He had lived here for countless years, working first as a toolmaker and later as a maskmaker. His forge was only a short walk away, just past Takua’s dwelling. For a moment, he wondered how Takua was doing these days.

“No! No, no, no!” Vakama shouted. “Takua is gone. He’s with the other Matoran, asleep in the spheres and heading for the island above. My home is gone. My metru is fire, smoke, and rubble. And I… I am a Toa!”

“What are you shouting about?”

Vakama glanced up to see Jala poking his mask into the doorway. He looked none the worse for wear for a Matoran who had been kidnapped by Vahki and forced into a coma. For just a second, Vakama forgot the impossibility of the entire situation and felt a surge of joy at seeing his friend again.

“Jala? Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me, akilini-head. Who else would it be? You better get up or you’ll be late for work.”

“Work!” Vakama repeated, as if he had never heard the word before.

“Yes, work,” Jala replied, exasperated. “You know, that thing you do all day? That thing Takua is apparently allergic to? Work. And if you’re not there on time, the Vahki Nuurakh will give you a wake-up call you won’t forget.”

Vakama hopped off the bed. “You mean the foundries are operating? The forges? When? How?”

“When have they ever stopped?” asked Jala. “Hey, are you all right? You look like someone stepped on your favorite lava eel. Were you on the wrong end of a Vahki stun staff or something?”

“I… no, I don’t think so,” Vakama said quietly. “But I’m not quite myself today. Maybe I shouldn’t go to work.”

Jala shrugged. “If you want to chance that, go ahead. But if Turaga Dume was expecting me to hand over the Mask of Time today, I think I would make a point of being at my forge.”

Vakama almost lost his balance. “Turaga Dume? The Mask of Time? But the Dume who wanted that mask was Makuta in disguise… and the mask is… is…”

He looked around the room. There was no sign of the Kanohi Vahi. Then he remembered the hulking brute who had taken it from him as he clung to the rocks. At least, he thought he remembered that. If there was any truth to the memory at all, Metru Nui was in deadly danger.

“The Toa!” he snapped at Jala. “Where are they?”

“Where they always are,” the Matoran responded, edging away from the door. “They are at the Coliseum with Turaga Dume and Turaga Lhikan. The Toa of Fire is discussing ways to defeat the Morbuzakh plant.”

“But I’m—” Vakama began. Then he caught himself. The world had gone crazy, and Jala obviously hadn’t noticed. Insisting he was a Toa wouldn’t do anything but convince his friend he was crazy. Still, that left one very important question he wished he didn’t have to ask.

“Jala… who is the Toa of Fire?”

“You are a few flames short of a fire, Vakama. Everyone knows the Toa of Fire!” Jala answered. “It’s Toa Nuhrii!”

At one time, so many stunning revelations one on top of the other would have overwhelmed Vakama. But that was before he became a Toa in more than just name. He had overcome his insecurities and his fears. He had confronted the darkest part of himself during the struggle with the Visorak and emerged stronger for it.

Or did I? Did any of that happen at all? Was I ever really a Toa, or did I just dream it all?

Too many things did not add up. He grabbed his maskmaking tool and a stone tablet and began to burn a list of them all into the rock:

1. The Morbuzakh is still alive, when I know we destroyed it using the Great Disks.
2. Lhikan is a Turaga. But he became a Turaga when he turned Nokama, Nuju, Onewa, Matau, Whenua, and me into Toa Metru. And he’s dead, killed in battle with Makuta.

3. The city is undamaged. There has been no earthquake. The Vahki are still functioning. The Matoran are still working.

4. Turaga Dume is running the city. But is it the real Dume, or Makuta in disguise?

5. Nuhrii is the Toa of Fire.

That last one was the hardest to take. During the battle with the Visorak, Vakama and some of the other Toa had discovered evidence that Nuhrii, Ehrye, Ahkmou, Vhisola, Orkahn, and Tehutti had been destined to become Toa Metru. Makuta had subtly influenced Lhikan to choose Vakama and his team instead. By doing so, he had gone against destiny and the will of Mata Nui, which perhaps explained the number of disasters that had followed. More than once, Vakama had wondered if some of the terrible events might have been avoided if Lhikan had made the right choices.

Evidently, he did, Vakama thought. Somehow, everything that happened from before the time Lhikan helped us become Toa Metru has been wiped out. What could have the power to do that? The Vahi? But the legends of the Mask of Time said nothing about this sort of thing being possible.

There was, of course, another alternative, one Vakama preferred not to think about. It was possible nothing had been erased or rearranged. All of his experiences as a Toa Metru might have been nothing more than a dream or hallucination. Everything – Makuta’s betrayal of the Matoran, their capture, the Visorak, the Toa Hordika – might have been nothing but a delusion brought on by overwork.

Vakama shook his head. “No. I won’t accept that. It was real. I know it was real. And I know the Matoran who can help me prove it.”
Matoran from other parts of the city rarely traveled to Ko-Metru. It wasn’t so much that Ko-Matoran were unfriendly, although they often were. It had more to do with the overwhelming silence that blanketed the district, day and night. Takua had once said that he always started speaking in whispers as soon as he crossed into Ko-Metru, although he was never sure why.

The last time Vakama had been here, the metru was deserted of everything but Rahi. The Knowledge Towers still stood but were badly damaged by the earthquake that had rocked the city. At least, that was the last time Vakama remembered being here – and there was certainly no evidence now that any of it had ever happened. Ko-Matoran filled the streets, the Knowledge Towers stood tall and proud, and even the chutes were running on time. Under ordinary circumstances, seeing the metru intact again would have been a dream come true. Today, it felt more like a nightmare.

Vakama was so lost in thought that he almost walked right into a huge ice sculpture. He looked up to see it was the figure of a Toa wearing a Great Mask of Illusion. Carved at the base was the name Toa Ehrye.

Of course, thought Vakama. He would have been Toa of Ice if Lhikan hadn’t chosen Nuju. More proof that either the universe has gone insane, or I have. I vote for the universe.

On a quiet side street, he found the Knowledge Tower in which Nuju had worked as a Matoran. The scholars inside the front doors firmly insisted that he could not ascend to the upper levels for any reason. It was only when he mentioned bringing a piece of equipment that would make Nuju’s telescope ten times more powerful that they agreed to let him pass. They were so excited by the prospect of a better view of the stars that they never even asked to examine the part, a good thing since it did not exist.

Nuju, a Matoran once again as well, was hard at work scanning the skies for astronomical evidence of Mata Nui’s will. He didn’t even turn around at the sound of Vakama’s entrance.

“Whatever it is, leave it,” said Nuju. “If you can’t leave it, then take it back out with you. If it’s too heavy to carry back out, then how did you get it in here in the first place?”

“Nuju, I need to speak with you.”

The Ko-Matoran peered over his shoulder at his visitor. The eyepiece of his mask extended and retracted as he took a closer look. “You’re Vakama, aren’t you? The one who built the telescopic lens into my mask?”

“That’s right,” Vakama replied. “I need your help. It’s about the Mask of Time.”

That was enough to get Nuju’s attention. “You finished it? Where is it?”

“I… don’t have it with me. I need to know if there are any legends about the powers it is supposed to have.”

Nuju flung his arms up into the air. “Legends! There are legends about everything, Vakama. Sometimes I think all Matoran do all day is make up legends. Be specific.”

“Nuju, I—something is very wrong in this city,” Vakama began.

“I know. We’re under attack by savage foliage,” Nuju said acidly. “Is that all?”
“No, I mean things are not the way they are supposed to be. You… you should be a Toa!”

Nuju stared at Vakama for a moment in stunned silence. Then he burst out laughing. The noise sounded doubly loud because Ko-Metru was always so quiet.

“Me, a Toa? Not for all the purified protodermis in Ga-Metru,” Nuju said, turning his back on Vakama. “All right, you had your little joke. You can leave now.”

Vakama took three quick steps, grabbed Nuju, and spun him around. “I’m not joking! None of this should be here! The Knowledge Towers have been shattered, the power plant destroyed, the Archives broken open, and their Rahi on the loose in the city. I’ve seen it, and so have you! Don’t you remember?”

Nuju nodded slowly. “Sure, Vakama. Whatever you say. And you think the Mask of Time had something to do with this? Well, I could be of more help to you if I could examine the mask. Is it somewhere you can get it?”

“No, I –” Vakama paused in mid-sentence. For less than a split second, the chamber had changed. The walls suddenly had great cracks in them. Ice bats were nesting in the ceiling. Nuju was not there. In fact, Vakama was standing alone… and he was a Toa.

As quickly as it had changed, the room flashed back again, becoming the neat, orderly workplace of a Ko-Matoran seer. Nuju was waving a hand in front of Vakama’s mask.

“Hello?” asked the Ko-Matoran. “Are you in there? I don’t think the Mask of Time is the problem, friend. I think maybe your own mask is on too tight. But go and get me the mask you made and I will see what I can find out.”

Vakama was about to explain that he didn’t have the mask, someone had stolen it. But he thought better of it before the first word was spoken. Something was telling him that maybe it was better if no one else knew about that – at least, not until Vakama had a better idea of what was going on in Metru Nui.

As it turned out, he wouldn’t have had the chance to say anything to Nuju anyway. The Knowledge Tower observatory window was shattered by a squad of Vahki Keerakh. They stormed into the chamber and advanced on Nuju, stun staffs at the ready.

“No!” cried the Ko-Matoran. “I was working! He interrupted me! Look, I was right in the middle of –”

The Vahki staffs flashed. The power of confusion they contained took effect instantly, as Nuju lost all sense of where he was or when.

And he’s not the only one, thought Vakama grimly as he ran from the room.

Vakama took a chute to Ga-Metru. Just like every other spot in the city, it looked perfectly normal. Scholars and educators traveled back and forth from school to school, most of them so buried in their notes, they could have walked into a giant Muaka without noticing.

He spotted Nokama talking with a blue Toa. As he approached, he recognized the hero as Vhisola, an old friend of Nokama’s and evidently now the Toa of Water. She was giving the Matoran a pretty stern lecture.

“You should know better!” said Toa Vhisola. “All research and experiments have to be approved by a Toa. That’s the law. If I reported you to the Vahki –”

“I know, Toa Vhisola,” Nokama answered quietly. “Thank you for not informing the Vahki Bordakh, Toa Vhisola. I won’t do it again.”

“See that you don’t.” Vhisola caught sight of Vakama approaching and snapped, “What do you want, Ta-Matoran?”

“Just, um, passing through,” Vakama answered, looking up into the Great Komau, the Mask of Mind Control, that Vhisola wore. “I had a delivery to make at a school near here.”

Vhisola nodded, though she did not look convinced. “All right. I don’t have time to waste talking to Matoran. I’ll see you later, Nokama. Remember what I said.”

The Toa jumped into one of the protodermis canals and swam off. Vakama watched her go. When he turned back, Nokama was walking quickly away from him. He had to run to catch up with her.
“Where are you going?”
“Back to work, Vakama,” she said, not looking at him. “That’s where I belong. I have… classes to teach, and…” Her voice broke.
Vakama put a hand on her shoulder. “What is it, Nokama? What’s the matter?”
“Oh, it’s just… it’s my own fault,” she said. “I was experimenting with energized protodermis, trying to figure out how it does what it does. But I didn’t ask permission of Toa Vhisola first. You know that any new study has to be cleared by the Toa or Turaga Dume.”
“Um, right,” Vakama answered. “Remind me, why was that law passed?”
She looked at Vakama as if he had grown another head. “Why, to keep us from becoming Toa, of course. After Vhisola and the others became Toa Metru using the Toa stones, they convinced the Turaga that six Toa were enough for one city. Just in case there was some other way for a Matoran to become a Toa, they banned all research to make sure no one accidentally discovered it.”
“That’s crazy!” Vakama snapped. When he saw a Ga-Matoran staring at him, he lowered his voice.
“Becoming a Toa is destiny at work. You can’t pass a law banning destiny.”
Nokama shrugged. “Tell that to the Toa. My friend Onewa stumbled on an unexplored cave in Po-Metru, and Toa Ahkmou caught him. Ahkmou turned him over to the Vahki, and Onewa hasn’t been the same since. He goes from work to home and back again and jumps at every shadow.”
“Turaga Dume – the real Turaga Dume – would never stand for this,” said Vakama.
“What do you mean, the real Turaga Dume? There’s only one, you know.”
“It’s a long story,” Vakama answered. “Listen, I need your help. I’m trying to research the Mask of Time – what it can and can’t do, that sort of thing. I thought you might know where there are some carvings about it, something the Knowledge Towers don’t have.”
“There might be something in the Great Temple, but I couldn’t take you there,” Nokama said. “If Vhisola or the Vahki caught us –”
“Then they won’t. Maybe Onewa is in no shape to help us, but I’m sure Whenua and Matau would.”
Nokama stopped in her tracks. “Matau? That’s not very funny.”
“What?”
“Vakama… Matau died a month ago, when the chute he was in was attacked by a Morbuzakh vine. Everyone knows that.”

The two Matoran said nothing to each other for the remainder of the trip to the Great Temple. Vakama was more convinced than ever that someone had misused the Mask of Time and made all this happen. But if Onewa had become a coward and Matau had been killed, he was no longer sure even the mask could set things right again.

And that’s assuming I ever find it, he reminded himself. If I’m right and someone took it from me when I was a Toa, I still have no clue who that someone might have been. It didn’t look like Makuta, but then, who knows what Makuta really looks like?

“So you made the Mask of Time?” Nokama asked. “I mean, that is why you want to research it, right?”
“Yes, I made it.”
“I hope you have a good hiding place for it. Otherwise, the Toa will be sure to take it from you.”
Vakama chuckled. “It’s so well hidden, even I’m not sure where it is.”
“I’m serious,” Nokama said sharply. “Maybe you should tell me where you hid it, just in case. You might think it’s a safe spot and it’s not, and I could suggest a better place. After all, you were never good at hiding things, Vakama – disks, tools, Toa stones, chute passes – I won every game of lose-and-seek we ever played.”
Vakama glanced at his companion and smiled. “Yes, you did, didn’t you? Except for that game near the Great Furnace – if the Vahki had come by that time, we would have both lost.”
Nokama laughed loudly. “Um, yes, you’re right. That was some game! I do remember that.”
“I was sure you would,” Vakama replied. “I’ve lost a lot of games lately. I think it’s time I started winning some.”

The two continued on their journey toward the spiritual center of the city. Vakama got a sudden flash of the Great Temple as a burned-out ruin and the surrounding protodermis canals cracked and leaking. He almost turned to look at Nokama, but then stopped himself, because he was not at all sure what he would see.

Lose-and-seek, he thought. Is that what I’m playing? I lost my Toa power, my friends, my past, my whole reality, but where do I seek it? How do I get it back? And most important of all – who am I playing against?
Sentrakh steered the boat unerringly toward the gateway that led to the Metru Nui Sea. It had been a long journey, but neither he nor the Shadowed One had slept. Having lived among potential enemies far too long to take chances, the Shadowed One rarely closed his eyes except behind locked doors. Sentrakh had no need for sleep or much of anything else beyond his duty.

Virtually all of the sea gates that led from Metru Nui to other lands had been closed by order of Makuta some time ago. Only this one remained open, by virtue of someone, or something, having torn the metal wide open. The Shadowed One guessed this was the work of Krekka, as he and Nidhiki made their way to Metru Nui.

As the boat sailed through the portal, a dull gray object caught the eye of the Dark Hunter leader. He ordered Sentrakh to halt and stepped out onto the narrow rock ledge that bordered the gate. A closer look confirmed his suspicion: This was a Kanohi Mask of Power he had spotted, a Mask of Speed, to be precise.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked Sentrakh. "A Kanohi mask – one of the most valuable possessions of a Toa. It no doubt belonged to some brave hero who ventured here from Metru Nui, looking to close this gate, thinking he was doing what was best for his city. He succeeded, but only after a great battle, and finally succumbed to his injuries. Only his mask was left behind."

The Shadowed One turned to look at his guardian, who was still staring straight ahead. "Did he find a hero's grave in these waters, do you think?" The Dark Hunter idly kicked the mask into the sea, watching it disappear beneath the waves. "Or just a final resting place in the mud for a fool?"

Vakama and Nokama knelt beside a canal and eyed the Great Temple. Vahki Bordakh were patrolling the site, just as they always had in the past. Ordinarily, Matoran could come and go as they pleased without too much trouble, provided that they stayed in the public sections. But the Ta-Matoran doubted that was the case in this new, harsher Metru Nui.

"We'll never make it past them," Nokama whispered. "This is foolish."
"No, we'll get in," Vakama assured her.
"You sound so confident."
"Why wouldn't I? I'm with you," he said, smiling. "Besides, I know a way in."

Vakama's memories of being a Toa Hordika included one occasion when he had slipped into the Great Temple past the Toa guards. It wasn't a very proud moment. He had gone there to kidnap and intimidate, all in the service of the vile Roodaka. He had been trying hard to forget those events, but he still remembered the route inside.

He led Nokama to a spot at the far end of the bridge leading to the temple. A partially hidden hatchway in the ground led down into an old pipe. It had once been used to transport purified protodermis from the Great Temple to the city but had been replaced years before by newer conduits. The pipe ran underwater and up into the center of the temple.
“You expect me to go in there?” Nokama asked. “Think of it as a challenge,” said Vakama. “Something to brighten up your quiet, boring Matoran life.”

The pipe was narrow and dark and stank of damp. Little things were crawling along with Vakama and Nokama, but it was impossible to see what they were, which was probably for the best. As the pipe dipped below the sea, the pressure increased until it felt like two great hands pressing against their heads. Finally, they made it out the other side, emerging in one of the Great Temple’s protodermis purification chambers. Vakama motioned for Nokama to follow him quietly, since there were Ga-Matoran workers in the room who wouldn’t appreciate the sight of intruders. Together, they slipped through the shadows and made their way out into the corridor.

“But now where?” asked Vakama.

“Everything that exists on the Mask of Time is just legends,” Nokama replied, looking around. She was obviously uncomfortable about being here. “No one even knew for certain that it could be made. How did you –?”

“Never mind,” Vakama said. This was no time to go into the origin of a mask that he wasn’t even certain he had created. He had carved the Mask of Time when he was a Toa Metru, but in this new world, he had never been a Toa Metru. That meant the Mask of Time he suspected had caused all this shouldn’t even exist anymore. The paradox made his head hurt.

Nokama led him into a small chamber piled high with stone tablets. “All of this is supposed to go to the Knowledge Towers once it’s translated,” she said. “Most of it was brought by traders from other cities before the sea gates were closed. We’ve barely begun to catalog it, but maybe there is something here.”

Methodically, the two Matoran began going through the tablets. Since Vakama could not read any of the inscribed text, he simply looked at any images carved on the stone to see if they looked like the Mask of Time. If they didn’t, he put the tablet aside and went on to the next one.

After a while, he said, “How bad are things in the city?”

“Bad. Very bad,” Nokama replied. “The Morbuzakh has taken over almost all of Le-Metru. Toa Orkahm made a valiant effort to fight it off, but he waited too long before acting. He’s still recovering from his injuries. Without the work being done in that metru, chutes are breaking down and airships are grounded. The city is coming to a halt.”

“Do the Toa have a plan to stop the Morbuzakh plant?”

“Too Vhisola said something about finding the Great Disks,” Nokama answered. “But they can’t seem to locate them.”

Another paradox, thought Vakama. *I used the Great Disks to make the Mask of Time. In this reality, they evidently don’t exist.*

He picked up another tablet, glanced at it, and felt a chill of recognition. The figure carved into its face resembled the being who had taken the Mask of Time from him on the Great Barrier.

“Who is this? What is this?” he asked.

Nokama took the tablet and began to read the carvings. “It’s a… I think the name is Voporak. ‘Very powerful…,’ I can’t read this part, ‘serves the Dark Hunters in order to…’” Nokama’s eyes widened. “Vakama, it was bred to seek out the Mask of Time!”

“What? Tell me everything!”

“It has the ability to sense fluctuations in time, the sort it was believed the mask would create,” she said. “If the Mask of Time came into existence, the Voporak would seek it out wherever it happened to be and seize it for the Dark Hunters.”

Nokama glanced up at Vakama. “Why is this so important? Tell me the truth – have you seen this thing in Metru Nui? Now do you see why I said the hiding place is so important – maybe too important to be entrusted to you?”

Vakama nodded. “Maybe you’re right, Nokama. Come with me. I think it’s time the truth was revealed.”
High atop a Ga-Metru roof, Sentrakh watched Vakama emerge from the protodermis pipe. If the unliving guardian of the Dark Hunter fortress was surprised by the identity of Vakama's companion, he did not show it. After all, it was not his place to have an opinion, merely to carry out orders.

The Shadowed One stood and pondered the pair of travelers wandering through the metru. At first, the scene made no sense to him. Why was Vakama wandering through a metru not his own? Where were the Toa he expected to find? Surely a Toa of Fire by himself could not have slain two Dark Hunters...

Then an idle thought wandered through the Shadowed One's complex, twisted mind. He seized upon it, examined it, and followed where it led. He began to see the outlines of a plot almost as devious as one of his own. This Vakama was at its center, whether the native of Ta-Metru knew it yet or not.

"We follow him," said the Shadowed One. "He will lead us to the answers we are here to find. Once we have those answers, Sentrakh, you will dispose of him... in a way that will haunt the nightmares of Toa everywhere for ages to come."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Nokama for the sixth time.
"Po-Metru," Vakama replied. He had found an Ussal cart and persuaded the driver to let him borrow it. Under ordinary circumstances, an Ussal driver would never let his vehicle or his animal out of his sight. But these are far from ordinary circumstances, Vakama reminded himself.

"Is that where the Mask of Time is hidden?"
"Something is hidden there," he said. "If I'm right, something just as destructive as the mask... something I had hoped never to see again."
"Speak plainly!" Nokama snarled. "Tell me where we are going and why, fire-spitter, before I--"
"Why, Nokama, calm down," Vakama answered. "Here I always thought you had the most patience of us all. You don't want to prove me wrong, do you?"

They crossed the border into Po-Metru. Roads gave way to pathways through the canyons, and buildings were replaced by low warehouses and shacks. The sounds of carvers' tools striking rock rang out all over the district. In the distance, Vakama could see a small herd of Kikanalo beasts on the move.

"It's really quite a remarkable place," Vakama muttered. "It's a shame we did not appreciate what we had."
"What are you talking about?"
"All this," he continued. "The metru. The Rahi beasts. The suns, the sky... Metru Nui was a beautiful place. The universe was well ordered and benevolent, all under the watchful gaze of the Great Spirit Mata Nui. We thought it would always be that way, so we didn't appreciate it while it lasted. None of us, not even you."
"Things change," answered Nokama flatly. "We can't always know the reasons for it. We have to trust that those with more power know what is right for us all."
"You mean like Toa Vhisola? I wasn't aware that Toa power automatically brought wisdom with it."

Nokama laughed harshly. "I was talking about real power, Vakama. Not the raindrops and wisps of a breeze Toa produce. The power to shape the future... the power to rule... the power to change the lives of others for all time... that is what I mean."
"What if those others don't want their lives changed? What if they're happy as they are?"
Nokama shook her head. "It makes no difference what they want. They will live in whatever world their superiors create for them, because it's all they know how to do. If Mata Nui had not wanted them herded, he would not have made them so easily led."

Vakama reined the Ussal cart to a stop. "Well, my leading you is almost at an end. Our destination is that cave over there."
"The Mask of Time is not in there," Nokama said stiffly.
"How do you know?"
"I just do. I'm not going in there."
Vakama was about to comment that it was a good thing, then, that he was the one driving. But before he could speak, the cart rocked violently, throwing him to the rocky ground. He looked up to see a Morbuzakh vine whipping through the air, about to grab him in its powerful embrace.

The sight brought back bad memories. The Morbuzakh plant creature had been created by Makuta as part of his plan to take over Metru Nui. It had taken six Toa Metru armed with Great Kanoka Disks to stop it. Reduced to a Matoran, Vakama would have no chance against it alone. That fact made it all the more disturbing that Nokama was still sitting in the cart as if nothing were wrong.

“Nokama! Do something!” he shouted, narrowly avoiding the vine’s blow.

“This is a bad place,” the Ga-Matoran replied. “We should leave.”

Now, there’s a shocking bit of news, Vakama thought as the Morbuzakh went after him again. He picked up a rock and threw it at the vine. The Morbuzakh caught it in midair and smashed it on the ground. Dust and bits of rock flew into the air, blinding Vakama.

The plant creature saw its chance. Two vines snaked around Vakama and began to pull him toward the hole in the ground from which they had emerged. Vakama dug his feet into the ground and struggled with all his might, but could not break the plant’s grip. In a matter of seconds, he would be below the surface and probably lost forever.

This was enough to rouse Nokama to action. She leaped off the cart with speed and agility Vakama had never seen before, charged the vine, and threw her arms around it. For a moment, he wondered if she seriously believed she could wrestle the Morbuzakh into submission. Then, to his amazement, the vines abruptly dropped him and retreated down the hole, trailing a thin stream of black sap.

Nokama turned to look at Vakama, but did not offer a hand up. “Now can we go?” she asked.

“You can if you like,” Vakama answered, brushing himself off. “I have to see someone about a mask.”

He climbed into the Ussal cart and took the reins. Reluctantly, Nokama took her place again beside him.

In a cavern far below their feet, the plant creature nursed its wound. The blue one had hurt it, although not badly. Still, pain had not been part of the arrangement. It might, the creature thought, be time to reconsider this deal. I play a small role in this grand plot, it’s true, the plant-being continued. And yet I may be the only one who knows the true power behind events. So I will wait, and I will watch… and Vakama will hear from me again.
Vakama walked through the dark cavern, Nokama a step or two behind him. He had never been here before, only heard about the place from Onewa. Despite his assurances to his companion, he really had no idea if he would find what it was he was seeking here. But if this place was not the end of the journey, perhaps it would at least point him in the right direction.

He reached a dead end at the back of the cave. When Onewa had been here, an earthquake had weakened the stone, revealing a chamber beyond. In this strange, different Metru Nui, there had been no quake. Yet there had to be a way inside, and Vakama was determined to find it. He closed his eyes and ran his hands across the stone, searching for the part of the wall that did not feel quite right.

After what felt like hours, he found it. There was a tiny, recessed portion of the rock that even someone as unschooled in caves as Vakama could tell was not natural. Taking a deep breath and steeling himself for whatever might come, he pressed on the stone.

The wall slid aside. Vakama saw something moving impossibly fast. Then it slammed into his face, adhering to his mask. He fell over, but never felt the impact. His mind was somewhere else, lost in a whirling haze of color and sound. Thoughts that were not his own invaded his mind. Memories of things he had never experienced washed over him. He fought to maintain his sanity against this mental assault.

Finally, the pressure subsided and a form took shape in his mind’s eye.

“It was a Toa, that much was certain, but not one Vakama had ever seen before. His armor looked sleeker and more streamlined than that of a Toa Metru, almost like the carvings of ancient heroes Vakama had seen in the Archives. Yet somehow he sensed this Toa was not some figure from the past.

“I am Toa Krakua,” the figure stated. “I greet you, brother, in the name of all the Toa who have gone before and all of those who have yet to be.”


The strange Toa shook his head. “No, Vakama, you are seeing as only you can see. Remember? You were gifted, even as a Matoran, with the power to see fragments of the future. I am one of those fragments, a Toa who will never come to be unless you succeed in your task.”

“What task? What am I supposed to do?”

The Toa raised his sword. The tool began to vibrate and hum, and then sonic waves shattered a solid stone wall. “Find the truth, no matter what barrier blocks your way. Deception can strike you down, as surely as any blow from an enemy. You are a Toa without armor in a chamber of swords, Vakama, and only the truth can protect you.”

Krakua paused, and then said, “You do not believe me.”

Vakama was startled. He had doubts, certainly, about what he was seeing, but he felt that nothing in his expression would have betrayed them.

“And nothing did,” said Toa Krakua. “I wear Kanohi Suletu, the Mask of Telepathy. Your thoughts are open to me.”
“What truth am I supposed to find?” Vakama asked. “Why won’t you speak plainly?”
Toa Krakua smiled. “The future can only share so much with the past, Vakama. That is a law even
a Toa does not have the power to change.”
“Isn’t there anything you can tell me?”
“Two things will I share with you – I said before that if you fail, I will never exist. You must be
prepared to fail, brother. If necessary, you must be willing to destroy the future and all that is now to stop
evil from spreading.”
“And the second?”
“Six heroes will one day be called upon to make a perilous journey into the darkest place you can
imagine. They will brave the lightning… they will walk through the fire… they will stare into the eyes of
evil, and if they waver even once, they will die. And you, Vakama, will bear the most terrible burden of
all.”
Vakama could see where this was going. “I will have to lead them.”
Toa Krakua shook his head. “No, nothing as easy as that. You will have to send them on this
quest, knowing they may never return… and knowing you can do nothing for them but wait and hope.”
The mysterious figure opened his mouth as if to say more. Then a wave of shadow passed over
him and he was gone, carried away by the darkness. Vakama’s eyes snapped open and he realized with a
start that he was still in the cavern. The creature was gone from his mask, but not very far.
“I thought you might prefer your Kanohi mask without this accessory.” Turaga Lhikan stood there,
holding the squirming thing in his hand. It looked like a cross between the small krana that lived inside
Bohrok and the serpent-like kraata that lurked inside the creatures called Rahkshi. Vakama had seen such
a thing once before, when it attacked Onewa near one of Makuta’s lairs.
If it is here, then I’ve found the place I sought, he said to himself. Now I just have to get out of here alive.
“Are you all right?” asked Lhikan as Vakama rose to his feet.
“Are you dead?” Vakama replied.
“Of course not!”
“Then I’m not all right.” Vakama looked around. The walls were covered in carvings. He tried to
read them but they were in an unfamiliar language. He had a feeling even Nokama would have a har
time translating all this, and he knew better than to ask the Matoran who stood silently beside him. Long tables
lined both of the walls, littered with Kanoka disks, fragments of ancient tablets, and other artifacts.
“It was lucky for you I was here,” Turaga Lhikan said. “If I had not gotten that creature off of you
…”
“I might have learned more than you want me to know,” Vakama finished for him. “Your mask is
excellent – I’m a maskmaker, I should know. But as always with items made by amateurs, you left a flaw.”
Vakama sprang to one of the tables, grabbed a Kanoka disk, and flung it with all his might right at
Nokama’s head. Startled, the Matoran never moved. The whirling disk hit her mask – and passed right
through.
Now Vakama knew what he had suspected was true: This wasn’t Nokama. The instant he
completely stopped believing that she was genuine, her form began to ripple and change. In fact, everything
around him was changing and transforming, as the elaborate illusion he had been living abruptly collapsed.
His own perspective on the world changed, too, and he now saw himself for what he truly was and always
had been: the Toa Metru of Fire.
The image of Nokama was gone now, replaced by the reality of a Visorak Boggarak. It had been
cloaked in an illusion of Nokama all this time, and her voice had been created by the power behind the
ruse. Vakama felt a shadow fall on him and knew that behind his back “Turaga Lhikan” was changing, too.
No surprise, he reminded himself. And whatever I must face, I will face it as a Toa.
Slowly, Toa Vakama turned to confront his enemy.
Outside the cave, the Shadowed One and Sentrakh waited. It had been a long time since Vakama
and his Boggarak companion had gone inside. To anyone else watching, it would have been a bizarre scene
to see a Toa and a Visorak walking side by side, with the Toa having a one-sided conversation all the while. But the Shadowed One had seen this sort of thing before and was not easily impressed.

“I would have expected something more original,” he said to Sentrakh. “It is an old strategy – if an attack on the body might fail, then attack the mind. I do not know exactly what Vakama was seeing or who he thought he traveled with, but it was all a sham, staged for his benefit. Now what could a Toa possess that would make someone go to such trouble to trick him?”

Sentrakh whirled at the sound of a heavy footstep on the rocky ground. In the distance, he could see the monstrous form of the Voporak coming toward them. The creature held something in its hand that gleamed even in the dim sunlight of Metru Nui.

It had taken the Voporak a long time to sense its master’s presence in the city. The fulfillment of its life’s purpose – the acquisition of the Mask of Time – had blinded it to any other concern. Now it came to present proof of its triumph to the one being it revered.

The Shadowed One saw his creature approaching and smiled. Even from far away, he could recognize the legendary shape of the Mask of Time. So it had come into being, at last… and the Voporak had done what it was created to do, track down and seize the mask from its owner.

Now it all made sense. Vakama’s presence here… the complicated effort to convince him the world was not as he knew it to be… all one big trap to wrest knowledge about the Mask of Time from the unsuspecting Toa. And all the while, the mask itself was in the hands of the Voporak and about to become the property of the Dark Hunters.

The Shadowed One turned to Sentrakh and gestured toward the cave. “We have what they are seeking,” he said. “We do not need them anymore.”

Sentrakh nodded. A moment later, he unleashed a Rhotuka spinner at the mountain. It struck a boulder high above the cave. The result was a massive rock slide that buried the mouth of the cave.

“One less Toa to prove an annoyance,” the Shadowed One said approvingly. “And as for the other… when we return, we will send a venom flyer to the Brotherhood of Makuta expressing our sympathy for their loss. They will brood and rage, but they will never be able to see our hand in this. And without proof, the Brotherhood will not risk a war.”

The Shadowed One took the Mask of Time from the Voporak and admired its craftsmanship. It was hard to believe that this simple mask had enough power to change a universe – or destroy it. It felt good in his hand, as if it belonged in the possession of someone who would know how to use it.

And I do know, oh yes, the Shadowed One thought. Soon, every living being will tremble at the news – the day of the Dark Hunters has arrived.

The shock of the rock slide shook the cave, knocking Vakama off balance. He scrambled to his feet to find himself confronted by his worst nightmare.

The being who stood before him was an armored colossus who radiated power and evil. Crimson eyes gleamed with menace behind a rusted and pitted Kanohi mask. Great skeletal wings moved gently in a nonexistent breeze. His presence made every shadow in the cave seem deeper, every hope seem more distant, every bit of light seem suffocated by darkness.

“Makuta,” Vakama whispered.

“Yes, little Toa,” the giant rumbled. “Makuta, free to pursue my destiny once more… once I have the Mask of Time. I thought I’d get it from you with guile rather than force, but somehow you penetrated my illusion.” He leaned forward, his eyes boring into Vakama’s. “Tell me how.”

The Toa of Fire took an involuntary step backward. “You were… sloppy,” he said. “It almost worked. But then Nokama said something about how bad I was at hiding Toa stones – something that she and I didn’t do until after we had become Toa. If we had never been Toa, how would she have known about it? That was what started me thinking. So I ‘reminded’ her of a game played near the Great Furnace – an event that never happened – and she recalled it well.”

Vakama’s hand edged toward a Kanoka disk as he kept talking. “If she wasn’t real, then was any of the rest of it? I had been thinking the Mask of Time caused all the changes, but if it hadn’t… then something,
or someone, else had. Since that would be a sadistic, cruel, demented thing to do, I naturally thought of you.”

Makuta smiled. “Brave words from a Toa with no place to run,” he said, gesturing toward the buried cave mouth. “But once I have the mask, I can easily free myself. Where is it, Vakama?”

“I don’t have it,” Vakama replied, bracing himself for whatever might come next. “It was stolen from me by a creature called Voporak.”

In the past, Vakama had seen Makuta in triumph, in pain, angry, desperate, and defiant. He had never seen anything like the rage that now distorted the entity’s features. Makuta was too furious even to form words. Before the Toa could move to defend himself, Makuta raised an armored hand and unleashed a shattering surge of dark energy, blasting Vakama into oblivion.
A jolt of pain awakened the Toa of Fire. Makuta had him by the arm and was dragging him through a stone tunnel like he was a load of broken tools headed for the reclamation furnace. Anger flared in Vakama. He’d had quite enough of being led around by Makuta. He willed the external temperature of his arm to shoot up several thousand degrees. Unprepared, Makuta released him with a cry of pain.

Vakama sprang to his feet, ready to fight. To his surprise, Makuta was laughing.

“You have spirit, little Toa,” the armored figure said. “Spirit we will need in the coming battle.” When Vakama did not respond, he added. “The Dark Hunters have something that belongs to me. I am going to get it back. And you are going to help me.”

Now it was Vakama’s turn to smile. “When Makika toads fly,” he replied. “Why should I help you? What difference does it make to me if the Dark Hunters have it or you do? You’re both foul.”

Makuta grabbed Vakama by the throat and slammed the Toa against the wall. “Don’t assume that all Dark Hunters are bitter ex-Toa like Nidhiki or bumbling masses of muscle like Krekka,” he hissed. “Some of them would be enough to make my flesh crawl… if I had flesh.”

Vakama lifted his arm and summoned a bright burst of fire. The sudden light blinded Makuta, forcing him to let go. As Makuta staggered back, Vakama followed up with more and more flares.

“You’ve been in the darkness too long,” the Toa snapped. “Try a little light for a change!”

Makuta lashed out, striking Vakama and knocking him to the ground. “Enough!” bellowed the master of shadows. “While we squabble like Gukko birds, the mask we both covet may be on its way out of the city.”

Vakama shook his head to clear it. He was lying at Makuta’s feet and at his foe’s mercy, but the giant made no hostile move. “What are you saying?”

Makuta’s eyes glowed bright red. “A truce, Vakama. Neither one of us attacks the other until the Mask of Time has been recovered. Once it is in my hands, if you are bound and determined to die fighting for it… I will obliged you.”

Vakama didn’t trust Makuta for a second. But he also knew that one Toa alone would not be able to defeat a team of Dark Hunters, and if Voporak succeeded in getting the Mask of Time out of Metru Nui, he might never find it again.

Suppressing a shudder of revulsion, Vakama said, “All right. You have a deal.”

The two unlikely allies had been traveling for some time. Although Makuta had the strength to dig his way through the rubble, he was determined not to take a predictable course of action. There was another way out of this lair, he insisted, one that would give them the advantage of surprise.

Vakama found himself wondering where the Rahaga and Keetongu might be, and if they might appear to tip the balance of power. It was possible that they might have left the city to go help Visorak victims elsewhere. But he hoped that was not the case. Any aid would be welcome right now.
Thoughts of absent allies made Vakama wonder about the blue Visorak that had posed as Nokama. It was not trailing behind them. “What happened to the Boggarak?”

“It exited another way,” Makuta answered. “It will show itself to lure the Dark Hunters away, and no doubt be killed for its efforts. The world will not miss one Visorak, more or less.”

“Your attitude is revolting.”

Makuta paused and turned to face Vakama. “The Visorak know their place. They exist to serve those they are not powerful enough to defeat. You could learn from their example.”

The master of shadows resumed walking. Vakama called after him, “As I recall, we did defeat you.”

“A momentary setback, caused by my energies having been divided,” Makuta replied. “Absorbing Nidhiki, Krekka, and Nivawk, and overcoming their collective wills was more… distracting… than I’d expected. To put it in terms your simple mind would understand – I disagreed with something I ate.”

He raised a hand to call a halt to their march. Vakama watched as Makuta grabbed a metal ring on a huge stone slab and began to lift it. Slowly, inch by inch, the rock began to move as Makuta pitted his power against the massive weight.

The Toa of Fire shrugged, pointed, and unleashed a blast of flame that melted the slab into a molten puddle. “Try my way,” he said. “It’s faster.”

Makuta threw the metal ring to the floor of the tunnel. “You do have your uses, I suppose.”

“I must, or you wouldn’t need my help,” said Vakama.

Makuta’s mouth twisted into an evil smile. “Oh, yes, little Toa. You are the best kind of ally – one who is completely expendable.”

Voporak stood, silently watching the buried mouth of the cave. The Shadowed One and Sentrakh had taken the Mask of Time and departed, leaving orders that Voporak should wait and deal with anything that emerged from the rubble.

An idle breeze swept through the canyon and stirred the pile of dust that a short time before had been a Visorak Boggarak. It had chosen a direct attack, evidently ignorant of its foe’s true power. The touch of Voporak’s hand had caused the Boggarak to live out its entire lifespan in a matter of seconds before disintegrating.

Any other being would have been bored or restless doing sentry duty in such a lonely and desolate spot. But Voporak felt no stirrings of discontent or any urge to be someplace else.

It had, after all, nothing but time.

Makuta and Vakama watched Voporak from high atop the rocks. “It doesn’t have the mask,” the master of shadows growled. “You said it did.”

“I said it took the mask from me,” Vakama corrected. “And maybe I could have gotten it back if I hadn’t been playing your mind games.”

“You were instants from drowning. I saved you. You wouldn’t be here arguing now, if not for me.”

Vakama bristled. “My city wouldn’t be in ruins, my friends wouldn’t be trapped in spheres, and the Mask of Time wouldn’t have been at the bottom of the ocean to start with, if not for you!”

“Details. Trivialities. Your mind is cluttered with such things. Focus on the present,” said Makuta. “This prize is too valuable for Voporak to be here alone – I suspect his master, the Shadowed One, is in Metru Nui as well. He must have the mask. Once we are past Voporak, we will run the Shadowed One to ground and take it.”

Makuta waited a moment, then gestured toward Voporak and growled, “What are you waiting for? Destroy him.”

“Toa aren’t killers,” Vakama replied. “If we were, we would have started with you.”

“Very noble. Perhaps that explains why there are so few Toa around these days. Do you think Voporak would be so foolishly merciful? Or the Dark Hunters?” Makuta’s next words were deadly quiet. “Or me?”
Vakama chose not to answer, instead drawing on his elemental power to create a white-hot fireball. He spent a long moment deciding who he would rather throw it at, and then hurled it toward Voporak. It flew straight and true, aimed perfectly to serve as a distraction.

The Toa of Fire readied himself to spring as soon as Voporak’s attention shifted to the fireball. But to his surprise, the flames sputtered and died as soon as they came close to the creature. Voporak never even glanced in the direction of Vakama’s attack.

Frustrated, the Toa tried again. Fire bolts, rains of flame, even a fiery cage, all were extinguished as soon as they came close enough to affect Voporak. Vakama muttered something that would have gotten him tossed out of a Ga-Metru school, which seemed to amuse Makuta.

“Watch,” said the armored giant. He picked up a boulder and threw it at the seemingly invulnerable being. Mere inches away from Voporak’s body, the rock crumbled to dust.

“What kind of power?”

“Time,” answered Makuta. “Any force directed at Voporak ages before reaching it. Anything it touches grows old in its grasp, unless Voporak wills it otherwise. No power is immune to the ravages of the years, little Toa.”

“Then how can it be defeated?”

Makuta’s eyes narrowed. “It is a pawn. It is best handled by other pawns.” The master of shadows gestured toward a canyon to the west. “Behold, Vakama – the sons of Makuta!”

At first, Vakama saw only a cloud of dust as if some great and terrible herd of Rahi were heading toward them. Then he began to make out forms and faces, and a chill ran through him. It was a mob of Rahkshi, the monstrous creatures who dwelled below the Archives. There were hundreds of them, in dozens of different colors, all of them charging headlong at Voporak.

Vakama couldn’t bear to look, and at the same time could not bring himself to look away. The first line of Rahkshi reached their enemy and collapsed as their armor disintegrated and the wormlike kraata inside them withered and died. Another wave followed, only to meet the same fate, followed by another and another. Still, they kept coming, heedless of their brothers’ fates, marching blindly to their doom.

“They are born of my darkness,” Makuta said, with what sounded like pride in his voice. “Each one carries a part of me within their gleaming armor. They live, and they die, in my name.”

“If you controlled this kind of army, then why resort to trickery to capture the Matoran?” Vakama asked, horror-stricken. “Why not just unleash these monsters on the city?”

“If I had, there would have been no city left to rule,” Makuta replied. “Now we must go, while my legions keep Voporak busy by dying at its feet.”

When Vakama hesitated, Makuta grabbed him roughly by the arm and pulled him away from the spectacle. The Toa angrily shrugged off the grip and fell into step behind his hated foe. All through the long march down the mountain, Vakama did his best to ignore the angry hisses of kraata as they died.
At one time, not so very long ago, the Great Temple had been the grandest, most beautiful building in Metru Nui. Now it was a burned-out ruin, thanks to the Visorak. As he and Makuta approached, Vakama could not take his eyes off of the wrecked structure, as if it were a symbol of all the evil that had befallen his city.

“Ah, my brother’s temple,” said Makuta. “Once so glorious, now dead like the creatures upon which it is built.”

The strange comment shook Vakama out of his thoughts. “Dead… what are you talking about?”

“Many centuries ago, a group of Matoran decided to grasp for greater power,” the Dark One explained. “They exposed themselves to energized protodermis and became reptilian creatures called protocairns. They emerged from the sea just up there and destroyed the shoreline of Ga-Metru, including the Great Temple. Turaga Dume, the fool, had no idea what to do. Fortunately for the city, they died on their own. Their bodies merged together to form a new land mass, including the spit of dirt upon which the current Great Temple sits.”

“Sounds like one of your plans,” Vakama snapped.

Makuta laughed. “Little Toa, you have not yet begun to see even the barest outlines of my plans. I have schemes within schemes that would boggle your feeble mind. You may counter one, but there are a thousand more of which you know nothing. Even my… setbacks… are planned for, and so I shall win in the end.”

The strange pair crossed the bridge that led to the Great Temple. Vakama could not help but remember his encounter with “Toa Vhisola” in Makuta’s illusion. Ever since he had learned that six other Matoran were destined to be Toa Metru, and that his team was the result of Makuta’s tampering with destiny, he had felt like a fraud. No matter how many heroic acts he and the other Toa performed, they would always know Makuta was responsible for their power.

“Why?” Vakama asked.

“Why are you a Toa?” Makuta answered. “No, I did not read your mind, Vakama – it is too quick a read. Your worries are transparent. I looked into the stars and saw the names of six Matoran destined by Mata Nui to be Toa: Nuhrii, Ahkmou, Vhisola, Tehutti, Orkahm, and Ehrye. Not a particularly heroic group, but weak-willed enough that they could have been molded by a strong leader like Toa Lhikan.”

Makuta raised a hand, and shadows blotted out the stars. “And so I chose the six most argumentative, strong-willed, stubborn Matoran I could think of, and I planted their names in Lhikan’s mind. He ignored destiny and chose you and your friends to be Toa Metru. I believed you would fail – as you ultimately will – and even if you do not, I have had the satisfaction of frustrating the will of Mata Nui.”

Their conversation had brought them to the gates of the Great Temple. Makuta gestured for Vakama to go inside. “The Shadowed One must come here to learn whatever can be learned about the mask. You will wait in ambush. I have other matters to attend to.”
Vakama considered arguing. He didn’t trust Makuta out of his sight, especially not in a place still so filled with artifacts of power. But an argument would cost time, and time was something they did not have. He went into the temple.

Makuta waited until he could no longer hear Vakama’s footsteps. Then he turned and said softly, “You can come out now.”

The powerful Rahi called Keetongu emerged from the shadows of the temple. Makuta greeted his arrival with a grim smile of satisfaction.

Vakama had taken up a perch in the rafters of the temple, from which he could see the floor below. He rapidly grew restless. If the Dark Hunters did need information on the Mask of Time, he had no doubt they could go to other sources. Perhaps Makuta just sent me in here to get me out of the way, he thought.

He was about to climb down when he heard sounds of movement from below. He retreated deeper into the shadows and waited. A moment later, a bizarre figure moved swiftly through the chamber below. Vakama could not see it clearly, but the intruder was obviously a being of power.

Vakama sprang from rafter to rafter in pursuit, all the while thinking, I really hate it when Makuta’s right.

Sentrakh heard the telltale sounds of a Toa trying to be silent. He did not bother to look up or give any indication that he knew he was being watched. He had a mission to fulfill in this ruined place. If a Toa, or a group of Toa, wished to watch him, that was no concern of his.

If they chose to try and stop him, they would be captured and brought to the Shadowed One. He would no doubt pry the secrets from their minds. Regrettably, the heroes would have very little mind left when the process was done. That, too, mattered not at all to Sentrakh, beyond the pleasant anticipation of eliminating helpless Toa when the Shadowed One was finished with them.

Of such small moments of amusement was a happy life made.

Vakama had no idea who the creature below him might be, only that he had no business being in the Great Temple. He decided it was time to provide a “Keep Out” sign in words of fire.

Vakama loaded his Kanoka disk launcher and took careful aim. Before he could fire, his target launched a Rhotuka spinner, and the rafter on which the Toa was perched disappeared. Vakama dropped like a stone and hit the floor of the Great Temple.

Sentrakh turned to see what he had caught. He was not impressed. The red Toa was staggering to his feet and taking uncertain aim with a disk launcher. Sentrakh decided it was easier to just keep his new foe distracted rather than engage in all-out battle. Another gesture surrounded Vakama in a sphere of darkness that even his flames would not dispel.

That was Sentrakh’s first mistake. There was a time when impenetrable darkness would have been a barrier to Vakama. But during his time as a Toa Hordika, he had befriended the shadow and learned to use it for his own ends. Blinded to the world around him now, Vakama held his breath and listened.

Dripping water… the cries of Rahi birds… the groaning of the rafters… his mind sifted through all these and rejected them. There — the sound of metal scraping against stone. Vakama whirled and fired his Kanoka disk in the direction of the sound.

Sentrakh never saw the disk coming. One moment, he was functioning normally, the next he was 20 feet high and slamming his head into the rafters. A second later, a second disk hit and he was reduced
in size to six inches. His concentration shattered, the darkness shrouding Vakama disappeared. The Toa took two quick strides and scooped up his enemy in his hand.

Now it was Vakama’s turn to have assumed victory too soon. Even reduced in size, Sentrakh’s power had not diminished. Calling on his molecular transmutation abilities, he turned the muscles shielded by Vakama’s armor into solid protodermis. The effect spread slowly throughout the Toa’s body, paralyzing him, and he knew there was worse to come. If Vakama could not find a way to stop the change, his organs would turn to stone as well. Soon, he would be a new piece of very dead statuary to decorate the Great Temple.

Makuta eyed Keetongu. The Rahi’s shield array was rotating rapidly and his bladed tool was raised in preparation for combat. He could obviously sense the evil in Makuta and it was driving him into a rage.

“So. You are the one who destroyed Sidorak,” the master of shadows whispered. “Now you follow me here from Po-Metru, no doubt intending the same fate for me. Unfortunately…”

Coils of solid shadow leaped from Makuta’s hand and wrapped themselves around Keetongu, constricting him.

“I am not Sidorak,” Makuta finished.

Keetongu was an instinctive fighter, not a strategist. Now his instincts told him that these bonds were tied to the will of his attacker. No amount of struggling would shatter them – it was the mental focus of his enemy that had to be targeted. Snarling, Keetongu charged and slammed into Makuta’s armored form, knocking his foe off his feet. Robbed of the concentration needed to maintain them, the bonds vanished.

“You dare?” spat Makuta, rising. He hurled another bolt of darkness, but this time Keetongu was ready. The Rahi absorbed the energy with his shield, channeled it through his armor, and shot it back at Makuta in a Rhotuka spinner.

The spinner struck home. Keetongu advanced to follow up his score, only to find his enemy unhurt.

“You cannot harm me with my own power, beast!” Makuta said. He grabbed Keetongu’s wrist and began to force the rapidly spinning shields toward the Rahi’s throat. “Let us see if the same can be said for you.”
Voporak surveyed the canyon. Its rocky floor was littered now with thousands of fragments of Rahkshi armor and the withered husks of countless kraata. Makuta’s creatures had kept coming for hours, until finally their numbers were depleted.

He felt no sadness at the sight, only irritation. These things had no chance against him, after all, and it was a waste of time making him prove it.

Or was it?

Voporak glanced at the cave mouth. It was still buried in rubble. With suspicion nagging at the back of his mind, he bounded up the rocky slope. The first thing he saw was the melted slab of rock through which Makuta and Vakama had escaped.

So it had all been a trick, he realized. Rather than face him in battle, Makuta and the Toa had dishonored themselves by fleeing, and dishonored him in the eyes of the Shadowed One. For that, they would get the rare privilege of watching as their lives sped by in seconds and death rushed to claim them.

Voporak looked down at the rocks. Tiny scratches and scrapes in the stone revealed where his enemies had walked. He would track them until they fell. Then he would make sure they did not rise again.

All Ta-Matoran maskmakers were, at heart, mathematicians. Getting a mask exactly right was a matter of figuring the precise volume of liquid protodermis needed, the proper angles of the carving, and a hundred other calculations. It was that solid background in math that enabled Vakama to know with certainty that he had only 9.6 seconds to live.

The Kanoka disk power had worn off. Sentrakh was back to full size and had not wavered since beginning his attack. Vakama guessed that total focus was required to maintain the flow of energy that was turning him to stone. What was needed was something to break Sentrakh’s concentration—or just break Sentrakh.

The transmutation effect had not yet reached Vakama’s eyes. He cast them about looking desperately for an answer. Almost ready to give up hope, he spotted something two chambers away, or thought he did. From where he was, it looked like a black vial, the same kind that the Toa Metru had once used to collect energized protodermis. Ga-Matoran had experimented with that substance in the past, trying to artificially recreate it. If there was energized protodermis in that tube… and if it was flammable…and if he could do something about it before his time was up…

There was no time to worry about the odds. As it was, Vakama needed to buy an extra two seconds for his plan to have a chance to work. Fortunately, Sentrakh’s power was affecting only Vakama’s body, not his mind. He mentally triggered his Kanohi Huna and turned invisible. As he did so, he fought the stiffness in his wrist and moved his hand ever so slightly, sending a thin beam of fire from his index finger at the vial.
Startled by the disappearance of his target, Sentrakh let up just slightly on his attack. His first thought was that the Toa had been teleported somehow. He never noticed the narrow jet of flame until it was too late.

Fire struck the vial, superheating its surface. The temperature of its contents rose by several thousand degrees. Pressure built up in the sealed vial with no way to escape, as precious seconds ticked away.

*If this doesn’t work, I’m my own stone memorial,* Vakama thought. *But if I get really lucky, I only have to worry about being blown through a wall by an explosion. It’s certainly good to be a Toa again!*

Makuta threw all his strength against Keetongu. The Rahi fought back with his own enormous might, with the rapidly whirling shield array between them. It was a deadlock, and with these two entities involved, it might last for eternity.

Then the master of shadows did the unexpected. As Keetongu bore down upon him, Makuta suddenly stopped fighting. With no more resistance, the Rahi could not keep from being propelled forward by his own strength. Makuta rolled backward, hurling Keetongu over him and slamming the Rahi onto the ground.

Before Keetongu could react, Makuta struck again. Heat vision shot from his eyes and struck Keetongu’s armored chest, welding shut the compartment that hid his Rhotuka launcher. Robbed of his ability to use that tool, Keetongu had no way to release any energy he absorbed.

“I see fear in your eyes, beast,” said Makuta. “Perhaps now you see that Sidorak’s power was a mere fraction of my glorious darkness. How do you think the Rahaga will feel when they discover the body of their mighty Rahi ally? Will they mourn you, or just decide it is one less animal to clean up after?”

Keetongu lashed out with his pickax and landed a solid blow. Makuta grunted and unleashed chain lightning against the tool, sending electricity coursing through Keetongu’s frame. Makuta’s metallic wings carried him up off the ground and he hovered above his fallen foe.

“Now, how best to finish you off? Carry you out to sea and dash you against the rocks? Stake you out and leave you for hungry Rahi? So many things to choose from, but then the future ruler of the universe must get used to making difficult decisions. I believe I will select—”

An explosion ripped through the Great Temple. The shockwave struck Makuta in midair, sending him tumbling end over end out to sea. Keetongu, too, was blown away, barely catching on to a rocky cliffside with his pick. Neither was in any condition to see Vakama and Sentrakh come flying out of the building.

The Toa of Fire lay on the ground, waiting for the pinwheels of light to stop flashing in front of his eyes and the gongs to stop going off inside his mind. His Toa armor had come through the explosion largely unscathed, but the muscle beneath it was aching. Sentrakh lay nearby, unmoving. Vakama doubted his enemy was dead—he wasn’t sure the thing even could die—but it seemed no threat now.

He painfully rose to his feet. In the distance, he could see Makuta winging his way back to the Great Temple. He was stunned to spot Keetongu climbing over the edge of the cliff, looking like he had been stepped on by Tahtorak. Before Vakama could call out to him, the great Rahi collapsed, unconscious.

Vakama started running toward his fallen ally. He had gone only a few steps when a block of solid, crystalline protodermis formed around his feet and ankles and he toppled forward onto the hard ground.

“No need to hurry, Toa,” a voice said behind him. “Your race is over.”

At first, Vakama thought this was the betrayal by Makuta he had been expecting. But Makuta was still far out to sea, though closing fast on the Great Temple. The Toa rolled over onto his back and saw two figures looming over him. One was Voporak, the other a monstrous being carrying a spear and one thing more: the Mask of Time!

“I am the Shadowed One,” the being said in a harsh whisper. “Doubtless you have not heard of me, but you knew two of my agents: Nidhiki and Krekka. You and your kind killed two Dark Hunters, Toa, and now you must pay in kind.”
Twin beams shot from the Shadowed One’s eyes. Halfway to Vakama, they mysteriously disappeared in midair, only to reappear several yards away. They struck part of the Great Temple and that section vanished from existence.

A winged shadow fell over Vakama. Makuta had arrived.

“Why do you interfere, great Makuta?” the Shadowed One demanded, saying “great” as if the term was an insult.

Makuta alighted on the ground. “Because it amuses me to do so. A simple trick, to teleport your eyebeams from the air and redirect them as I chose.”

“Beware,” said the Shadowed One. “The Dark Hunters have a right to revenge. You will not save this Toa.”

Makuta’s eyes glittered with malice. “The Toa? What care I for a Toa? If you want his life, you may have it – give me the Mask of Time and he is yours.”

Wonderful, thought Vakama. Two of the most evil beings in existence and I’m stuck between them. Here’s hoping they don’t decide to split the difference, and me along with it.

The Shadowed One shook his head. “Ah, so you value this little bauble, do you? I would be unworthy of my high office if I deprived the Dark Hunters of such a powerful tool. I am afraid, great Makuta, that I must keep the mask, and the Toa.”

“Unacceptable,” Makuta replied. There was no implied threat in his voice. There was no need. He was Makuta – his very existence was a threat to all who lived.

The Shadowed One gestured toward Voporak. “We are two to your one.”

Makuta unleashed blasts of shadow energy, not at his foes, but at the ground beneath their feet. A great pit yawned before them and only swift reflexes kept Voporak and the Shadowed One from falling into what might have been their grave.

“A hollow advantage, Dark Hunter, when that ‘one’ is Makuta,” said the master of shadows. “I will have my mask.”

Vakama felt like he had walked into a realm of madness. Makuta was power personified, and this Shadowed One was provoking him. Voporak’s abilities tampered with a fundamental force of the universe, and Makuta did not seem to care. A full-scale conflict would destroy Metru Nui, unless he did something about it. He willed the imprisoned parts of his body to superheat, hoping to melt or shatter his bonds, all the while watching the conflict brew around him.

“The Mask of Time, and this Toa’s life, are my compensation for the loss of two Dark Hunters,” said the Shadowed One. “They were sent here at your request and did not return. That cannot go unpunished.”

Vakama felt himself rising into the air. Makuta had negated gravity underneath him and he now hovered between the two villains.

“If it must be, it must be,” Makuta sighed. “Very well. Kill the Toa, if it will satisfy your need for revenge, and then we two will discuss the fate of the mask like civilized beings.”

Vakama had heard enough. He was a Toa, not some trinket to be bartered over at a market. Anger fueled his fire, and the solid protodermis that bound him shattered, sending fragments of crystal flying everywhere. Startled, Makuta lost control of gravity and Vakama fell, twisting in midair to land on his feet.

The Toa of Fire took a step back, raising both hands, palms out, and pointing them at Makuta and the Shadowed One. White-hot flame swirled in his palms, just waiting to be launched at his foes.

“This stops now,” he said. “My city has suffered enough at the hands of such as you.”

“Foolish Toa,” replied the Shadowed One. “Any of the three of us could cut you down where you stand in an instant.”

“That will be an instant longer than I need to turn you to ash, Dark Hunter,” said the Toa. “So who wants to be first?”

The Toa looked from Makuta to the Shadowed One and back again. As he expected, both were waiting for the other to make the first move and pay the price for it.

The Shadowed One looked at the winged, armored figure who stood before him. He had seen Makuta in different guises before, but now that he examined him closely, he could see parts of the master of shadows were disturbingly familiar. It seemed as if Makuta had become an amalgamation of himself, Nidhiki, Krekka, and some other creature, a situation that was only possible if –

“You killed them!” the Shadowed One hissed. “You summoned Dark Hunters to your side and then sacrificed them to your own insane ambitions. Even a member of the Brotherhood of Makuta cannot treat the Dark Hunters this way! Now it is to be war between us!”

Makuta shrugged. “And to the victor goes the mask. Shall we?”

“We shall,” the Shadowed One replied. At his signal, Voporak advanced. Makuta readied himself for that being’s attack, taking his eyes off the Dark Hunter leader for a crucial second. The Shadowed One used that moment to strike, his eyebeams disintegrating Makuta’s wings. The master of shadows bellowed in pain.

Forgotten in the conflict was Vakama, who took advantage of the respite to check on Keetongu. The Rahi was badly weakened but still alive. Vakama had no doubt that whoever won the fight would target him and Keetongu next, unless he gave them something better to do.

Voporak had moved in on Makuta. Even the master of shadows was at a disadvantage against a foe that could use time as a tool. Rather than strike out at him, Makuta was using his mind-reading power to anticipate and dodge Voporak’s blows. All the while, Makuta strategized, looking for a weak point in his enemies’ defenses.

“First you will fall, then the rest of your Brotherhood,” vowed the Shadowed One. “With the Mask of Time in my hands, no one—not you, not the Toa—will be able to stop the Dark Hunters.”

Then I will have to get it out of your hands, thought Vakama. He attached his Kanoka disk launcher to his back and triggered its flight pack function. But instead of heading toward the fight, he rocketed high into the air over the ocean.

Voporak landed a glancing blow. Pain wracked Makuta where his foe had touched him, as that small portion of his form aged rapidly. The shock took his breath away… and suddenly he had the answer.

When Voporak charged again, Makuta summoned his ability to create a vacuum. Accelerated time would affect almost any kind of power, but this was not an attack vulnerable to the passage of years. No amount of time would create air where there was none, and even Voporak needed to breathe.

The Shadowed One saw his minion stumble, trying in vain to fight off the lack of air. The leader of the Dark Hunters aimed his spear at Makuta and unleashed a blast of solid protodermis. The crystalline substance bound Makuta’s arms to his sides.

“This held you before. It will do so again,” said the Shadowed One. He held the Mask of Time high to taunt the master of shadows. “Perhaps I will even allow you to live, to witness my conquest of time itself.”

This was the moment Vakama had been waiting for. He went into a screaming power dive, aiming straight for the Mask of Time in the Shadowed One’s hand. Moving so fast that he was only a blur, he swooped down and snatched the mask from the Dark Hunter leader and rocketed off with it.

Enraged, the Shadowed One hurled his eyebeams at the fleeing figure. By chance, they struck Vakama’s flight pack, badly damaging it. The Toa Metru spun out of control.

“Go after him!” the Shadowed One barked at Voporak. But the time-bending being was no longer listening. Makuta’s vacuum had starved his brain of air and he had collapsed.

“Then I will do it myself,” said the Shadowed One. He turned away from Makuta, saying over his shoulder, “And when I have that Toa’s mask on the end of my spear, I will return to deal with you.”

The Shadowed One took three steps before the sound of Makuta’s voice stopped him.

“Dark Hunter.”

He glanced behind to see his enemy still bound.
“If you believe you can ‘deal with’ me,” the master of shadows said, “then you know nothing of Makuta!”

With that, the armored figured flexed his muscles and shattered his protodermis bonds. Then he advanced on the Shadowed One, his crimson eyes raging. The Shadowed One hurled more solid protodermis, only to have Makuta bat it aside. In desperation, he launched his eyebeams and dissolved a portion of Makuta’s breastplate. But still the master of shadows kept coming, never hesitating for a moment, his eyes locked on the Shadowed One’s.

“You have challenged me,” Makuta said coldly. “Wounded me. Imprisoned me. Dared to place your petty ambitions above my wishes. You sought to make time your ally, Shadowed One – now let it be your death!”

Makuta lifted the Shadowed One high into the air and hurled him at the prone form of Voporak. As soon as he struck his minion, Voporak’s defensive time field took effect. The Shadowed One could feel countless years slipping by him, his body weakening, his final moments now a yawning chasm before him.

Satisfied, the master of shadows turned and stalked away toward Ta-Metru. Vakama had been heading in that direction and he still had the Mask of Time. The moment had come to deal with that annoying Toa, once and for all.

Behind him, a now-ancient Shadowed One succeeded in pushing himself away from Voporak. He had aged perhaps three thousand years in a matter of seconds. He could not be sure how much time he had left in this life. But as he watched Makuta depart, he vowed that every moment of it would be devoted to making the master of shadows pay for this moment… and pay… and pay.
Toa Vakama was about to die.

His flight pack was so badly damaged that it would not even function as a Kanoka disk launcher anymore. He was spiraling out of control, headed for the pile of rubble that used to be the Ta-Metru Great Furnace. There wasn’t so much as a puddle of water down below that he could aim for. His only consolation was that the Mask of Time would be smashed beyond repair by the fall.

He was just realizing why that would be a very bad thing – even worse than his dying – when the ground started to shift underneath him. All of a sudden, it did not look like pavement and stone below, but more like a nest of snakes that had been disturbed. No, that wasn’t right either – those things writhing below him weren’t greenish black serpents – they were vines!

This is impossible, Vakama thought. Another of Makuta’s tricks. The Morbuzakh plant is gone. We killed it in the Great Furnace!

Then there was no more time for questions. He crashed to the ground, but without the shattering impact he expected. Instead, the vines had formed a bed of sorts underneath him. As he struggled to recover his senses, they wrapped around him and dragged him down below the street.

Vakama’s eyes were taking too long to adjust to the darkness. He summoned a small jet of flame from his hand to light the surrounding area, only to have the vine around his wrist yank hard.

“No fire,” a voice whispered. Vakama knew that voice, laden as it was with the feeling of death and decay. It was a voice he had never thought to hear again.

“Karzahni…,” he breathed.

The vines released him and slithered away. Now he could see the dark mass in the corner, looking like a monstrous, half-dead tree. The Karzahni had been Makuta’s first attempt to create a plant creature, but the result had been a being too willful and stubborn to serve Makuta’s ends. The master of shadows had exiled it from Metru Nui, where the Toa Metru first encountered it some time later. The Karzahni had blackmailed the Toa into retrieving a vial of energized protodermis for itself, and then died when that substance caused the plant to burn up from within. Later, the Toa used parts of the plant creature to keep their boat buoyant on the return trip to Metru Nui.

“You’re dead,” said Vakama. “This is another illusion. I have had enough of Makuta’s madness.”

“As have I,” the Karzahni whispered. “But I am very much alive. I am of the earth and the green, Vakama – I do not die as flesh dies.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When you submerged parts of my former self in the liquid protodermis of the sea, a tiny shoot grew from within. In time, that tiny piece of plant matter grew into a new Karzahni, with the memories and intelligence of the old. I am reborn.”
The Karzahni obviously expected some momentous emotional reaction from Vakama. But the Toa had been through so much the last few days, all he could manage was a flat, “Good for you. What are you doing here?”

“Not everything you saw before was an illusion,” the Karzahni replied. “Makuta and I achieved a truce and I agreed to play at being the Morbuzakh to make his false world more convincing. But now he is coming for you, Toa, and you have not the power to defeat him. You need an ally.”

“Thanks anyway,” Vakama replied acidly. “I’ve had one ally too many this trip. Unless you have some awesome Toa tool hidden in all that foliage, I don’t see—”

“I have the ultimate weapon against Makuta,” the Karzahni said, vines rustling and slithering about the chamber. “The truth.”

One of the vines reached up and tore a chunk of rubble loose. Vakama looked up and saw the sky above Metru Nui ablaze with stars.

“You cannot fight him, Vakama, because you believe you were not meant to be a Toa,” the Karzahni continued. “Makuta looked up at the stars and saw that Nuhrii, Ahkmou, and the rest were to be Toa Metru, and so he convinced Toa Lhikan to empower six other Matoran. He wanted you and your contentious friends to be the new Toa. That is what you have been told, is it not?”

Vakama nodded.

“And it is all the truth,” the Karzahni said. “It happened just like that. Still, someone did lie, Toa, and that lie brought you into being.”


Another vine moved, winding its way slowly upward. Vakama watched it as it pointed up to the sky. “The stars,” Karzahni said softly. “The stars lied. They told Makuta that Ahkmou should be Toa of Stone, Vhisola Toa of Water, and so on, and he believed them. In an attempt to alter destiny, he planted your name and the names of your friends in Lhikan’s mind so you would become Toa Metru. But have you never wondered, Vakama… who planted your names in Makuta’s mind?”

Vakama’s head was spinning. If what the Karzahni said was true, then Nuhrii, Ahkmou, and the others had never been meant to be Toa – the message in the stars had been false. It had all been a trick played on Makuta. But who would have the power to alter the path of the stars, except –

“Mata Nui?” Vakama said, stunned.

“The Great Spirit,” Karzahni replied. “The Great Spirit who had been struck down by Makuta’s treachery and knew that his only hope of recovery was to get the Matoran out of this city before it was too late. To do that, he needed Toa Metru, but he knew Makuta was watching the stars. The master of shadows would do anything to prevent those new Toa from coming into being.”

It was all becoming clear to Vakama now. “So Mata Nui deceived him. He made the stars name six other Matoran to be Toa, insuring Makuta would never allow them to be given power. And then he planted in Makuta’s mind the names of the six who truly were intended by destiny to be Toa.”

The Karzahni chuckled, a sickening sound. “Believing himself to be thwarting Mata Nui’s will, Makuta turned around and used his powers to influence Lhikan into making you and your friends Toa Metru – the very Matoran Mata Nui had wished to be heroes all along! The Great Spirit knew there was only one way to make sure the six destined for greatness would have the chance to be Toa Metru, and that was to trick Makuta into making it happen himself.”

Vakama sat down on the stone floor, still trying to accept what he had just learned. All his life he had heard of the glory of Mata Nui and how he was responsible for the sun that shone and the breezes that blew and all the gifts nature had given the Matoran. But in all that time, he had never heard of the Great Spirit intervening directly to make things right. Now, more than ever, he realized what a crime it had been that Makuta had cast Mata Nui into unending sleep.

“Wait,” said the Toa of Fire. “Wait a moment. I saw a Toa disk with Nuhrii’s mask on it. Nokama saw Kanohi mask niches with the names of the other six Matoran. How is all that possible, if they were not meant to be Toa?”
“Ah, Vakama – your fire burns so bright, yet you remain so blind,” Karzahni chided. “Makuta has his Brotherhood, the Shadowed One his Dark Hunters… has it never occurred to you that there are some in this vast universe who are sworn to the service of Mata Nui, and he alone? It was they who manufactured the evidence to help convince Makuta, and they did a masterful job, it seems.”

It made sense, and it was certainly easier to accept than the idea of Ahkmou as a Toa. But one question still remained unanswered. “How do you know all this, Karzahni?”

The plant-thing laughed as if at a private joke. “Oh, one of those servants of Mata Nui’s will happened to wander too close to one of my tunnels some time ago. He told me the whole story, all that I have just told you, before he died.”

A dozen more questions sprang to Vakama’s mind. What was this mysterious order whose members apparently knew the will of Mata Nui? How many were there, and how long had they been in Metru Nui? Lhikan had never spoken of them, nor had Turaga Dume – was it possible even they did not know this group existed?

He wasn’t going to get answers from the Karzahni. A bolt of shadow came from above and struck the plant-thing dead center. Darkness spread like a plague down its vines and branches, forming a chitinous shell that covered every inch of the plant. In a matter of moments it was completely trapped inside, cut off from all heat and light.

Vakama looked up. Makuta was above, staring down through the hole in the chamber ceiling. The breastplate of his armor was damaged and greenish black energy was leeching out of him. A faint wisp of shadow drifted from his open palm, the remnants of the power used to fell Karzahni.

“Come out, little Toa,” Makuta said. “If I have to come in after you, it will be most unpleasant.”

Vakama hurled a fireball, but not at Makuta. Instead, he threw it against the far wall, melting a hole in the stone. He jumped through the gap and found himself in an Archives tunnel, one of several that stretched beneath Ta-Metru. He ran then, while behind him an angry Makuta smashed down what remained of the wall.

Bolts of chain lightning flashed around Vakama as he hurtled through the narrow passages. He could hear Makuta’s heavy tread behind him, coming nearer all the time. At some point the master of shadows was going to catch up to him, and then what? As Karzahni had said, he alone did not have the power to defeat Makuta.

Then again, I’m not alone, he thought, looking at the Mask of Time he carried. If Makuta wants this mask so badly, maybe it’s time to let him have it.

Vakama climbed up the next access ladder he came to and emerged on a Ta-Metru street, near the Protodermis Reclamation Yard. That, he decided, would make a perfect setting for his confrontation with Makuta.

No allies, he told himself. No Keetongu, no other Toa, just me, Makuta, and this mask. Mata Nui altered the stars themselves to ensure that I would become a Toa – it’s time to show the Great Spirit he made the right decision.

Makuta climbed the ladder slowly. He would never have admitted it to anyone else, but the Shadowed One had wounded him far worse than any other being ever had. His Kanohi mask and armor held his dark energies in place. With his breastplate damaged, precious power was slipping away from him. But there was no time to make repairs, not with Vakama on the loose with the Mask of Time.

He will give it to me willingly, or I will take it from his corpse, Makuta thought. In fact, I hope the fool tries to fight – it will make my victory that much sweeter. Perhaps I will send his remains to the other Toa Metru so that they may enjoy a few moments of fear before I destroy them, too.

He looked around, searching for signs of Vakama. He had no doubt the Toa was hiding somewhere nearby, making some feeble plan for an ambush. Perhaps he was even thinking of using the Mask of Time again, not that that would do anything but buy him a couple more minutes of life.

“Show yourself, Toa!” Makuta shouted. “Give me the Mask of Time and I will let you go on your way. I am sure your fellow ‘heroes’ are missing you by now.”
The only answer was silence. In a strange way, that enraged Makuta more than open defiance would have.

"Why do you persist?" the master of shadows continued. "You will gain nothing from this but death, Vakama, here, alone in this ruined city. There will be no one to mourn you here, no one to even notice your passing. You will not die a hero – just a pathetic Matoran playing at a role that was never meant for him. Why do you risk death? Why do you insist on opposing me?"

Vakama stepped out from an alleyway in the Protodermis Reclamation Yard, one hand hidden behind his back. "Because I'm a Toa," he said, his voice strong and clear. "And battling monsters is what I do."

Makuta's smile was chilling. "I, a monster? For knowing my spirit brother, Mata Nui, required a good, long rest after his many labors? For offering my benevolent leadership to the Matoran in his absence? For saving Metru Nui from the threat of Nidhiki and Krekka?"

Vakama saw that Makuta was circling as he spoke, hoping to distract the Toa while he got into a position to strike. But he wasn't dealing with a novice Toa Metru now. "Yes, Makuta," said Vakama. "The Dark Hunters you brought and then murdered… just like you murdered Turaga Lhikan… and sentenced an entire city to a sleeping doom. Yes, I call you monster – and worse."

Makuta eyed his enemy. Vakama was standing next to a stopped conveyor belt upon which rested a line of damaged Kanohi masks. He was startled to see that the Vahi, intact, was among them. And all that stood between him and one of the most powerful Kanohi masks in creation was one foolish Toa.

"Your words are like your powers, Vakama – fiery, but in the end, meaningless," said the master of shadows. "Now I will take that mask you so jealously guard."

Makuta took a step forward. Vakama took his hand from behind his back, revealing that he held a Ta-Matoran crafter's hammer. With blinding speed, he lashed out and smashed one of the damaged masks to fragments.

"Not just yet," said the Toa. "How much do you know about the Mask of Time? Do you know, for example, that it still works even when damaged? I found that out the day I retrieved it from the ocean floor."

Vakama smashed a damaged Mask of Water Breathing.

"The merest crack and the power of time leaks out of it, affecting everything in the vicinity," the Toa of Fire continued. "Isn't that fascinating?"

He shattered another mask, and then another. There were only two more between his hammer and the Mask of Time.

"Stop this childishness," Makuta hissed. "You wouldn't destroy your greatest creation, maskmaker."

"Yes, I suppose that would be hard to live with," Vakama said, smashing yet another mask. The sound echoed through the empty streets of Ta-Metru. "But, then, if I were to shatter the Mask of Time, neither of us will be living, the way we think of living… and neither will anyone else."

Makuta watched him carefully, calculating odds. A rapid burst of shadow energy would destroy the hammer, as well as stun Vakama. But if he should miss?

"Explain," he said, edging closer to the Toa.

"Time, Makuta," Vakama replied, as if speaking to a child. "The force of time is contained within that mask. Destroy it, and that power is unleashed upon the universe. Past, present, and future all existing at once – warps and rips and hours folding in upon each other – madness and chaos as no two moments ever follow one another… think of it."

"I am," said the armored figure. "It sounds glorious."

"Really?" Vakama said, shattering another mask to splinters. "Imagine your body trapped between seconds, or half of you aging while the other half regresses. Does it still sound appealing to you? All your plans and schemes would come to an end, because no matter what you attempted, I could walk into the past and undo it. Kill me today, and I will be waiting for you in some tomorrow to avenge my death."

201
Vakama’s hammer hovered over the Mask of Time, ready to strike. “Think of it—can you rule a future that is in the past? Or a present that is still a century away? Could you ever be sure what you have done and what you haven’t, when months and years have merged together?”

Makuta pondered. If Vakama was telling the truth, destroying the Kanohi Vahi would bring the universe to a crashing halt. Still, he could not believe a Toa would willingly visit such a fate upon the Matoran he had sworn to protect.

“Believe it,” Vakama said, as if he had read his mind. “To save those I love from an eternity of your tyranny, I will end everything right now.”

Makuta looked into Vakama’s eyes. They were the eyes of a being who had been driven beyond madness, only to return. They had looked upon a darkness as deep as any Makuta had known, and yet somehow turned back to the light. They were not the eyes of a being who was bluffing.

“What do you want, Toa?” Makuta said finally.

“Safe passage from Metru Nui for myself and this mask,” Vakama said. “Your pledge not to harm Keetongu, Turaga Dume, or the Rahaga…and to leave the Matoran in peace.”

Makuta took two quick steps forward, propelled by anger. It was only the sight of Vakama swinging the hammer that brought him up short. “You ask me to sit in the darkness, doing nothing, affecting nothing!” the master of shadows snapped. “You sentence me to a living death, and I say no! Go ahead, destroy the mask, and we will watch time end together.” Vakama began to lower the hammer. “Wait!”

Makuta cried. Vakama stopped, his hammer mere inches from the mask.

“Then what is your offer?” the Toa asked calmly. “And make it quick—my arm grows tired.”

The armored titan snarled. He was not used to negotiating with lesser beings, but there was one consolation. As long as the Mask of Time existed, it might still be his one day. “Very well,” he said. “I will respect your allies here, as long as they stay out of my way. I will even let you leave unharmed. And I will grant you one year of peace on the island above, and one year only. Then…you will hear from me again.”

Makuta considered. He knew the other Toa would never accept such a deal, simply because they would never believe Makuta would honor it. They would insist on battle, even Nokama, to end his threat here and now… despite the fact that such a battle would leave Metru Nui damaged beyond all hope of restoration.

“Do not try my patience,” Makuta growled. “Your possession of the Mask of Time may leave me inclined to stay my hand, but we both know there are a thousand ways I could destroy you right now. And 941 of them hurt.”

Vakama lowered his hammer and picked up the Mask of Time. “How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

Makuta smiled. “You don’t. But what is life without a little risk, Toa?”

Vakama was about to reply when the world vanished around him. The next moment, he was standing at the mouth of one of the tunnels that led to the island above. He still had the Mask of Time with him.

Makuta has expelled me from my city, he thought. But we will make a new home above, master of shadows, one we will defend against you to the death. And one day, when you have finally been defeated, we will return to the City of Legends. This I vow, in the name of all Toa and Matoran!

* * *

Makuta stood at the edge of a subterranean waterway. Once, this river had been the means of escape for six Toa Metru and six pods filled with sleeping Matoran. Here they had encountered ancient Rahi sea beasts and done great battle. They had won in the end and made it to the island above.

All of this Makuta had read in Vakama’s mind, plus one thing more: Not all the pods had made it to safety. One had been torn loose from the boat by a Rahi and now lay abandoned on the river bottom.
Makuta summoned the power of magnetism to raise the metallic sphere from its watery resting place. It broke the surface and floated in the air before finally coming to rest at the armored feet of the master of shadows.

The pressing of the latch opened the pod. Inside there slept a Po-Matoran named Ahkmou. Makuta smiled at the sight. This Matoran had already attempted to betray the Toa and his home city once before. He would be ideal for what Makuta had in mind.

An infinitesimal fraction of the Dark One’s power brought consciousness back to Ahkmou. The Matoran opened his eyes and looked around in panic. “Where am I? How did I get here? What is this place?”

Makuta had expected just this sort of reaction. The pods were designed to erase the memories of those inside, making them more easily influenced when they revived. He reached down and helped the Matoran out of the pod. “Yes, little one, your mind is filled with questions now. But I will provide you with answers, and in return, you will do something for me in the time to come.”

Together, the master of shadows and the Po-Matoran began a long journey into perpetual darkness.

“Let me tell you a tale,” said Makuta as they walked. “A tale of a city called Metru Nui and of a band of beings called Toa who conspired to keep greatness from you and then abandoned you to spend eternity at the bottom of this river. They feared you, as they do me, but now I have rescued you. Together, we will seek justice against them for their crimes.”

Ahkmou nodded. He did not remember how he had gotten into the pod or ended up in this awful place. But there was no question this heroic figure had saved his life. As he listened to the intricate web of lies spun by Makuta, Ahkmou vowed that one day he would have revenge on Toa, Turaga, and Matoran, wherever they might hide.
Turaga Vakama heard the hum of excitement throughout the boat as the shoreline came into sight. He allowed himself a moment’s satisfaction, knowing that he had fulfilled his vow to someday return.

After leaving Metru Nu for the last time, he had made his way back to the island above. He told the other Toa that he had successfully found the Mask of Time, along with evidence that proved they had been meant to be Toa Metru all along. About the events he had witnessed and been part of in the city, he said nothing. The knowledge that Makuta waited down below might have spurred them to attack, and a war at that point would have left the Matoran in dire jeopardy.

Makuta was as good as his word. One year to the day after the Toa Metru woke the Matoran, he unleashed Rahi attacks on their new villages. It was a frightening time, but Vakama knew that if Makuta had wanted to destroy the Matoran, he could have easily done so. No, he was trying to keep them off balance, afraid, and as far away from Metru Nui as possible.

It took more than one thousand years and an entirely new team of Toa, but Makuta’s plans had been undone. The master of shadows had fallen to the power of light, and the way was open for the Matoran to return to their homeland. The first step had been taken toward awakening the Great Spirit Mata Nui and restoring balance to the universe.

Ta-Matoran leaped out of the boat and pulled it the last few yards to the bank, while other crews did the same all around them. Turaga Dume and the six Rahaga were already rushing down to greet the new arrivals. Vakama could not suppress a smile as he set foot in Metru Nui for the first time in over a millennium.

The City of Legends belonged to the Matoran once more. And no one, Vakama vowed – not the Dark Hunters, not the Brotherhood of Makuta, nor anyone else – would ever take it from them again.

As past, present, and possibly even future Toa met on the shore, Vakama stood apart and watched. He could not help but wish Toa Lhikan had been there to witness this moment. Still, even if that great hero was not present physically, Vakama had no doubt his spirit was watching over them all.

“Turaga Vakama?”

Vakama turned to see Hahli, the Chronicler, approaching. “Yes, little one?”

“Do you have any more tales to tell of the past?”

Vakama smiled and shook his head. “There will always be new tales to be written and new tales to be shared. But it is time to stop speaking of the past, Hahli – we have a future to build, together.”
500 years ago...

Screams filled the air as Matoran and Rahi alike ran for cover. Every few seconds, another creature would fall to the ground, covered in strands of green web as the Visorak continued their assault. Norik could only watch in horror as the other five Rahaga, Keetongu, and Turaga Dume were all captured and mutated by the poisonous spiders. After nothing else was left standing, the monstrous insects turned on him...

Norik awoke with a loud gasp, his heartlight flashing rapidly. Realizing it had only been a dream, he tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use, so he got up and relieved Bomonga of watch duty. Since power was still out in the city, a fire had been lit on the balcony of the Coliseum—the place where Keetongu, Turaga Dume, and the six Rahaga had been living for the past five hundred years while they healed the city’s Rahi and sent them back to their homelands as well as the odd effort at repairs. The red, hunched figure sat down by the fire and began to stoke it with his staff and brood over his nightmare.

“Do we know that the hordes are really gone?” he asked himself out loud. “No, Vakama disbanded them and their leaders are dead,” he reasoned after a few minutes. “Everyone here is safe now.”

I wouldn’t be too sure about that, thought the dark figure hiding in the shadows behind Norik. As the being activated his powers of concealment and slipped away back to his home in the Archives, he allowed himself a small chuckle. Not about the Visorak and especially not about you being safe.

Rain fell from the perpetually dark sky of Metru Nui as a score of Visorak crawled up the coastline. Water ran down their backs in streams and mixed in with the viscous venom dripping from their mouths; the sight of Visorak arriving anywhere was a sight no one ever forgot. Long ago, this particular group had been separated from the rest of the horde, but they had reached their destination at last. The group’s self-proclaimed leader, a Keelerak, looked around at the partially broken buildings of the city in confusion: they were clean, not a single strand of green. Out of the corner of its eye, it caught the tiniest hint of motion and instinctively fired a web at it. With a loud howl, a Kavinika fell to the ground, struggling to free itself. The Keelerak scuttled forward, sank its pincers into the canine Rahi, and injected its mutative venom.

Perhaps, the green Visorak reasoned as its prey began to writhe as the mutation took hold, we’re just early. With that, it ordered its band to fan out through the city and mutate everything in sight.

Keetongu bolted upright and, growling, ran to the edge of the Coliseum’s outer balcony. Norik got up from the fire to ask what the problem was, but before he had even gone two steps, the giant, yellow Rahi gave a loud roar, jumped onto the nearest building, and bounded away through the city. Frozen only momentarily with shock, Norik quickly roused the other Rahaga and Dume and told them about Keetongu’s disappearance.

“So he just left?” asked Bomonga incredulously.

“No… he did say one word before he leapt from the balcony…” Norik replied tentatively.
“And that word was...?” said Iruini expectantly.
“Visorak,” said Norik darkly.
“Well then, we had better make sure that there is still a city left for Yakama and the others to come back to,” said Turaga Dume, picking up a disk launcher with burning determination in his eyes.

The Dark Hunter named Dweller slunk into the shadows of the Coliseum and watched seven small figures leave it. Shielding his eyes from the rain which had just started up, he noted their direction and followed them.

*If they are as wise as the Shadowed One says they are, then they will know exactly where to go to find their precious Keetongu,* he thought. *And when they do, I will have the perfect report to give my master. Dweller quickened his pace. I need to make sure that I’m present for the entire battle – wouldn’t want to deprive the Shadowed One of knowing what it looks like when a Rahaga dies, now would I?*

After only a few minutes of walking, Keetongu could be seen up ahead trying to fend off twenty Visorak simultaneously, but it was clear that he was tiring. A Keelerak saw the Turaga and six Rahaga and ran up to them, but instantly stopped when Dume fired a Kanoka of poison removal at the ground in front of the creature, and, although it did not unleash its power, it did knock out a large piece of pavement.

“Take one more step, monster, and I will show you what it feels like to be mutated yourself,” he warned, loading a disk of random reconstitution into his launcher. The Keelerak made as if to consider his proposal, but instead it fired a projectile of its own that barely missed the red Turaga.

With a huge crash, Keetongu fell to the ground, unable to fight any more. The fifteen Visorak that had been crawling on his body scuttled off and faced their new opponents.

“Stop!” cried Gaaki. “The horde is no more! You are free now!” The Keelerak ignored her and began hissing what were obviously attack commands. As Rhotuka began to fly through the air from both sides, Dweller crept into a dark alley to watch the fight from a safe place.

The Keelerak then blasted a Rhotuka at Pouks’s feet, but he was able to jump out of the way in time. When he landed, he locked eyes with Dume and they both nodded. The brown Rahaga fired a lasso Rhotuka and dragged the green spider into the small crater that Dume had made. Just as the Rhotuka’s energies dissipated, though, Dume activated his Noble Kiril and closed the hole in the pavement around one of the Visorak’s feet. Then, true to his word, Dume blasted it with a random reconstitution disk causing the Keelerak to transform into a spiky blob with neither legs nor mouth.

Deprived of their leader, it was not long until the other Visorak were defeated. Using his staff, Kualus summoned the island’s last flock of ice bats to distract the spiders while the other Rahaga and Dume helped Keetongu to his feet. Fully recovered and fueled with vengeance, Keetongu opened the recently repaired hatch in his chest that held his Rhotuka launcher and fired a wheel of energy that had the equivalent power of fifteen Visorak attacks back at the group that sent ten of them skidding across the pavement. The rest, he swung at with his shield while the Rahaga captured them with their Rhotuka.

When the final Visorak fell to the ground under the effects of one of Norik’s snare Rhotuka, Dweller could scarcely believe the scene that had just unfolded before his eyes. Somehow the Rahaga, Turaga, and Keetongu had won, and easily at that. As the elusive Dark Hunter returned to his home in the Archives, he was torn between how he felt about the outcome.

On one hand, this meant that the island city was still inhabited, but on the other, it meant that the Brotherhood of Makuta had failed once again to take over Metru Nui so it would be easier for the Dark Hunters to do so later. In the end, he decided that the latter was more appealing for the residents of Metru Nui would be conquered sooner or later and he was willing to wait.

*Once again, screams filled the air, but not due to Visorak this time. The Matoran, Toa, and Turaga all ran for cover as buildings exploded and powerful beings ran through the city attacking everything in sight. In the heart of all the chaos and destruction was an evil face laughing manically – it was the Shadowed One.*

Like the previous night, Norik awoke breathing heavily and with his heartlight flashing frantically. Iruini, who was tending to the fire, looked at him quizzically.
“Is everything all right, brother?”
“Yes,” said Norik in a relieved tone, “It was only a dream.”

For now, perhaps, thought Dweller as he deactivated his power to induce nightmares and stealthily returned to the shadows.