



Destiny War

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Chapter 1

Axonn charged across the landscape of Voya Nui, weapon at the ready. He had just spied two figures materializing in The Green Belt. One looked something like Botar, but obviously wasn't. The other resembled a Toa, but wasn't one Axonn knew. The first thing he had learned after being assigned to this place was subdue first, ask questions later.

The Botar look-alike spotted Axonn first, and tried to block him. A sweep of an armored fist sent him sprawling. Axonn was on top of the Toa in the flash of a heart light, axe blade at the intruder's throat.

"Who are you?" growled Axonn. "What do you want here? Talk!"

"My name is Krakua," the Toa answered, trying in vain to push the axe away from his neck. "I was sent to find you. You're needed."

"Who sent you?" asked Axonn.

"Toa Helryx. Use your mask, you'll see I'm speaking the truth."

Axonn did just that, calling on the powers of his Kanohi Rode, the Mask of Truth. To his surprise, it told him that his captive was indeed being honest. He got up and let Krakua get to his feet. "You're Order of Mata Nui, then," Axonn said. "I see recruiting standards have slipped a little."

Krakua paid no attention to the remark. Instead, he said, "Come with us. Your presence is required on Daxia."

Before Axonn could object, the Botar type had come close and activated his teleportation power. The three of them vanished from Voya Nui, only to reappear in the Order of Mata Nui fortress on Daxia. Axonn had been there before, so its appearance was no surprise to him. The sight of his former partner Brutaka was, though. Not to mention the huge dragon next to him whose bulk almost filled up the great hall.

"Things must be desperate if they're calling on an old war Rahi like you," Brutaka said with a smile. "Oh, by the way, have you met tall, green, and gruesome here? Don't mind

the scales and teeth, but you might want to stay downwind of him."

"Brutaka!" said Axonn. "What are you - how did you get out of the Pit?"

"They let me out early for good behavior," Brutaka smiled. "But I'm the least of the shocking faces around here. This is it, my friend. The Order is about to come out of hiding after all these years. Helryx told me so herself."

"What did she say?"

"Two words," said Brutaka, his smile disappearing. "Destiny war."

The Dark Hunter known as Ancient stood on the beach of the island of Odina. Behind him, rebuilding of the fortress destroyed by Pohatu Nuva went on rapidly. His eyes scanned the waters, watching for the return of Lariska from her mission. He was anxious to hear just what she had seen and heard.

A cry made him look up. It came from a bat-winged Rahi wheeling through the sky, one not native to Odina. He recognized the creature as one bred for long distance flying. More than once the Dark Hunters had used them to send messages back and forth to agents on other islands. But the flying creature up above did not come from another Dark Hunter. As a half dozen more joined it, they began flying in a pattern recognizable to no one on the island but Ancient. It

was a message intended for him, and one that was urgent. The time had come. He had to seek out the Shadowed One and try to make him see the only possible future for the Dark Hunters. And if the Shadowed One, his old friend, failed to see reason, Ancient would have to kill him.

Elsewhere, Vezon paced in his cell on Daxia. Across the corridor were two great water tanks. In one swam the six Piraka, now mutated into water snakes. In the other was a bizarre looking being others referred to as Karzahni, who seemed to Vezon to be quite insane. And Vezon knew insane.

When Brutaka's team had first escaped the island of Artidax with Makuta Miserix, they had flown to a barren island in the middle of nowhere. After a short time, Brutaka had them on the move again, this time to a place called Daxia. Brutaka explained that the location of the island had always been a secret before, but that secrecy didn't matter anymore. Neither, apparently, did gratitude, as Vezon and Roodaka were both thrown into cells immediately upon arrival.

Vezon, frankly, was disappointed. Sure, he had tried to steal the Mask of Life, and, yes, he had tried to kill the Toa Inika once, well, twice. And, okay, he had made an effort to trade their lives to the Zyglak in exchanged for his, but it's not like that had worked. And he had volunteered, well, been forced, well, actually been threatened with bodily harm if he didn't help, but he did aid in the rescue of Makuta Miserix.

And what was his reward? A cold cell, an uncaring guard, and nothing nearby he could use to kill the Piraka. Was that justice?

His musings were interrupted by the crimson armor of Trinuma. The Order member took a long look at Vezon, shrugged, and shook his head. Then he unlocked the cell door and threw it open. "It's your lucky day, misfit," said Trinuma. "You're getting out."

"I am?" said Vezon. "I mean, of course I am. Keeping a being of my brilliance locked away is a terrible waste of resources. No doubt your masters want to consult me on matters of strategy and tactics."

"No," said Trinuma. "I think they said something about needing someone who could die horribly without being missed. So, naturally, they thought of you."

Vezon's addled brain processed what Trinuma said, and somehow decided it was a compliment. "Well, naturally," he replied. "Lead on, and let me show you all how dying's done."

Chapter 2

Axonnn crouched down behind a low stone wall and watched the fire and ice bolts fly by overhead. Beside him, Brutaka was peering around the crumbling bit of cover now and then, hurling a blast from his sword.

"Knock on the front door," grumbled Axonn. "Great strategy. I think all that time in Mahri Nui left you with a waterlogged brain."

"Oh, come on," said Brutaka, smiling. He picked off an attacker with a bolt of energy, then winged another. "You love this, and you know it. After thousands of years sitting around on Voya Nui waiting for something to happen, you need the exercise."

A green-fleshed Skakdi climbed over the wall, spiked club in hand. Axonn quickly made him regret it.

"This was supposed to be a nice, simple job. Go to Zakaz, find warlord Nektann, arrange an alliance between the Order and the Skakdi. Not get pinned on a beach by an angry horde."

"Are we pinned? We're not pinned," said Brutaka. "Watch."

Brutaka popped over the wall and fired an energy bolt at a half-crumbled building. Shearing through its only support, he sent the structure toppling down on a mob of Skakdi. When

the dust cleared, all of them were trapped beneath the rubble.

"Now those guys, they're pinned," said Brutaka.

Axonn sighed. "Just like the good old days," he said. "Now I remember why I hated them so much."

"If you liked that idea, you'll love this one," Brutaka replied. Before Axonn could react, Brutaka had grabbed him by the back of the neck. He dragged Axonn to his feet and stood beside him, free arm in the air. "We surrender!" Brutaka shouted to the Skakdi army. "Take us, we're yours."

Elsewhere

A trader on the island of Stelt would, over the course of his life, see pretty much everything at least once. The place was a crossroads for the crooked, the desperate, and those just looking for fast money or a deal best kept hidden from Toa.

This particular trader, though, had recently seen more than he would have wished. A small group of warriors, including the hated Roodaka, had stolen one of his best ships. Worse, they had done it in such a way that no one would even believe it had happened. Things had at last settled down though; he had managed to find a replacement ship and recover those members of the old crew who were still alive. It was back to business as usual; at least until a 20 foot-tall dragon tore the roof off his shop.

"Where's Teridax?" the dragon growled.

"Teridax? Who or what is that? And how would I know?" said the trader, reaching frantically for a weapon and coming up with nothing better than a cracked Kanoka disk.

"I know Stelt," said the dragon. "A Nui-Rama doesn't buzz on the Tren Krom Peninsula without you scum hearing it. So I'll ask again, where is he? Where is the Makuta of Metru Nui?"

"I don't know! I swear it!" shouted the trader.

The dragon scooped his victim up in a great claw. "I don't have time for this. I have places to be, and bodies to break. I want you to send out a message to all your friends, to everyone who sails in and out of this island. Tell them Miserix is back, and when I find him, Teridax is dead!"

Elsewhere once more

Vezon sat in a small skiff with a jet black sail. Trinuma sat at the bow, keeping an eye out for potential threats. If he considered Vezon one, he didn't show it. For his part, Vezon was just happy to just be out of his cell. Prison was far too... confining, but then he guessed that was the point of it. Speaking of points, Trinuma had given him a lovely dagger. Vezon had said "thank you" by not trying to plunge it into his companion's back.

"Where are we going?" asked Vezon, "Why are we going? Are we going at all, or just sailing in a big circle? Or is it a spiral? I went down a spiral once: a big stone tunnel that went down and down and down, and ended in Zyglak. Whoever built it had no decorating sense at all."

"Would you be quiet?" said Trinuma, "This is a secret mission. Do you understand that?"

"Sure," answered Vezon, "Secret mission means if you get killed, I won't tell anyone. And you still haven't answered any of my one hundred and ten questions, or my follow-ups."

Trinuma sighed in resignation. "We're going to a place called Destral. Once we get there, your job starts. If you succeed, you live to babble another day. If you fail, you die horribly. Okay?"

"Destral... Destral... wait a minute, that's a Makuta base! Spiriah was a Makuta. At least, he was until Miserix killed him. I flew with Miserix, did I tell you that? At least until he did those loops and threw me off his back. Ocean water is really cold, don't let anyone tell you different. So what am I supposed to do on Destral? Theft? Assassination? Running with sharp objects?"

"You have the most important job of all," said Trinuma, "You're going to betray the Order of Mata Nui and the entire universe, and this is how you're going to do it."

Chapter 3

One of the peculiar things about a Skakdi warlord's base is the lack of any kind of a dungeon, torture chamber, or prisoner of war camp. History has shown that there's very little point in torturing a Skakdi, as they never talk except in trade, usually for their freedom, which few captors will agree to. And keeping prisoners means listening to them whine for trivial things like food, water, and a good-sized club to use on the Stone Rats who keep paying midnight visits.

So when Brutaka and Axonn were marched into warlord Nektann's camp, no one seemed quite sure what to do with them. Killing them immediately came to mind, but then it would be impossible to find out why they were on the island to start with. Unlike the famed necrofinch of the Zakaz mountains, most beings did not continue to sing after they were dead. It was Axonn who insisted that they be brought before Nektann himself.

Nektann was larger than the average Skakdi, or at least appeared so sitting on his throne made from the fused weapons of his foes. He was accompanied by his pet, which looked like a Muaka cat covered in spiked armor. Nektann, ever the gracious host, asked them if they had anything to say before he had them painfully disassembled.

"Yes," said Axonn, "The Brotherhood of Makuta."

Nektann spat on the ground. The Muaka growled. "What about them?" asked the warlord.

"We offer you a chance to sack their fortresses, loot their weapons, and slay their warriors," Axonn said.

"We'd throw in 'Make their women weep,' but have you ever seen a female Makuta?" added Brutaka. "It's not pretty."

"Why should I listen to you when it would be so much quicker and easier to throw you into the Tahtorak pens?"

"Because we've already been to see the other warlords of Zakaz," lied Axonn. "What, did you think we would come to this puny hole first? They have all agreed to ally with us. If you refuse, you can sit on your petty throne and watch as they grow rich and powerful."

Nektann frowned, the only expression uglier than a Skakdi's smile. No self-respecting warlord wanted to be left out of a chance at glorious battle and even more glorious loot. In the end, he nodded.

"Why did you tell him we had talked to the other warlords?" whispered Brutaka. "We still have to go to all their camps and talk them into an alliance."

"That's a lot of work," Axonn agreed, "so I guess you better get started."

Toa Mahri Jaller stood in the center of Metru Nui, gazing up at the statue of the late Matoro. It had been constructed by

Turaga Onewa himself as a tribute to the fallen hero. It was good to know his comrade was remembered and always would be, but it did little to dispel the grief he felt over his death.

He had to admit, thoughts of Matoro distracted him. When the other Toa Mahri left to search the city for Takanuva, he chose to remain behind. When they returned, reporting there had been no sign of the Toa of Light, he hardly paid any attention. It still troubled him that the Toa Mahri had been unable to fulfill their destiny without losing one of their own.

Behind him, he could hear the other Toa in conference. Metru Nui was quiet for now, with the Kardas Dragon subdued and most of the other Rahi back in the Archives. Still, the heroes could never relax. Who knew where the next threat could come from?

There was a sudden flash of light. When Jaller could see again, six Toa stood in front of him. He didn't recognize any of them. Instinctively, he readied his weapons.

"Welcome to Metru Nui," said Jaller, "Who are you? Why have you come here?"

One of the newcomers, a Toa of Fire also, stepped forward, "My name is Norik, of the Toa Hagah. I ask you and your teammates to stand aside. We have no wish to see anyone hurt while we carry out our task here."

"The Toa Mahri stand aside for no one," said Toa Hewkii, stepping forward. "Tell us your business here, or be considered our enemies."

"Our business?" said Norik. "It is as simple as it is terrible. We have come to destroy the Coliseum."

Vezon landed hard on the stone floor of the Makuta Fortress of Destral. He had been captured by Rahkshi less than two minutes after Trinuma had dropped him off on the shore of the island. Vezon had never met a Rahkshi before and found he disliked them. Most beings had a scent, either pleasant or unpleasant; Rahkshi smelled of cold metal and death. The Makuta who came to greet him wore armor of purple and crimson. Although Vezon was polite enough to introduce himself, the Makuta did not bother to share his name. Vezon was tempted to complain about this, but the spear at his throat, the one dripping acid, convinced him to save it for another time.

"Who are you?" said the Makuta. "What are you? And how came you here?"

"My name is Vezon, your darkness, and I was brought here by an agent of a power that wishes you and your Brotherhood harm. They wanted me to come and tell you that they exist and plan to attack this island, but I'm not gonna do that, no no no!"

"You just did," said the Makuta. Behind Vezon, three Rahkshi moved a little closer, staffs at the ready.

"Well, of course I did, but only to tell you that I won't!" said Vezon, exasperated. How could this being hope to conquer the universe and yet be so slow? "It's all a trick, you see. They want me to pretend to betray them. They want you to concentrate your forces here against an attack that won't come. But I decided, why pretend to betray them when actually doing it would be so much more fun?"

The Makuta grabbed Vezon by the throat and slammed him against the wall.

"Speak, fool! And let only truth and clarity come from your mouth if you wish to continue having one."

"Truth and clarity... truth and clarity... I don't think I know them," answered Vezon. "Will you settle for 'white-lipped and trembling'? This Order of Mata Nui, it plans to mass an army and a navy, threaten Destral, force you to teleport it away from where it is now, and then..."

When Vezon did not continue speaking right away, the Makuta tightened his grip.

"Alright, alright! I was only pausing for effect. They have a spy inside this fortress. They've sabotaged your means of teleportation. When you try to use it again... well, I wouldn't start reading any long tablets, let's put it that way.

And now that you know, tell me, what are we going to do about it?"

Chapter 4

Axonn and Brutaka stood on a steep rise, overlooking a battlefield. Down below, the assembled might of the Skakdi of Zakaz were locked in combat with a small army of Rahkshi. The setting was an unnamed island in one of the southern chains, set up as a staging area by the Brotherhood of Makuta for an invasion of the mainland continent. The Rahkshi had been brought there in secret and allowed to practice their skills on the scattered Matoran residents.

Needless to say, there were no longer any Matoran on this island. Initially, the Skakdi had suffered horrible losses, but they were capable of something that the Rahkshi could only pretend to: rage. Hungry for victory, and filled with hatred for their enemy, the barbarians regrouped and tore through the Rahkshi ranks. It was overwhelming, thrilling, and sickening all at once.

"Come on," said Brutaka, tearing himself away from the spectacle. "You know what we're here for."

Together they walked down the hill and deep into a small canyon. In the center, buried beneath a slab of rock, was a square metal trapdoor with an iron ring. After Axonn split the rock with his axe, Brutaka grasped the ring and pulled open the door. A stench rose from within: the smell of age and neglect, decay and rot. The two Order of Mata Nui members climbed down into the hole.

Axonn sent energy through his axe, illuminating the chamber. It was obvious that no one had walked here since perhaps the beginning of recorded time. The place was bare stone, with the only interesting feature a pool in the center. The waters were greenish-black and swirled angrily, despite there being not even the slightest breeze to stir them.

"So this is it?" asked Brutaka.

Axonn nodded. "Yes, this is the place the Great Spirit created the Makuta. And the only place new Makuta could ever spring from. From that pool came their substance, made into living form by the powers of the Great Spirit until time turned it all into pure energy."

"Then if we destroy the pool?" said Brutaka.

"Yes. There can be no more Makuta ever. But do we have a right to end a species?"

Brutaka was looking at the pool, eyes wide. "I'd love to get into a philosophical debate with you, old friend, but I think we have a problem."

The waters of the pool suddenly exploded up and outward. Foul, scalding liquid struck Axonn and Brutaka, seeping into the openings in their masks and armor. It hissed and writhed, like a thing alive, burning wherever it touched.

Temporarily blinded and in pain, the two warriors staggered and then stumbled, plunging into the pool itself.

Toa Helryx sat in the command chamber of her fortress on Daxia. The war against the Brotherhood of Makuta had begun, and it had not begun well. Although the Order, through the Dark Hunters, now held Xia, they had been unable to dislodge Makuta forces from the island of Nynrah. In other places, the Order's surprise attacks had met unexpectedly fierce resistance from Rahkshi and Exo-Toa.

Being a leader meant making difficult decisions, something she had always known. In her time, she had sent agents on missions she knew they might well not come back from. She had ordered the deaths of everyone who knew the location of Artakha, and now she had to make two more vital choices that might lead to victory or disaster.

The first had been easy. She dispatched a messenger to Metru Nui, carrying the Heart of the Visorak. This artifact could be used to summon the Visorak hordes from anywhere in the universe. It was to be placed in the hands of the Toa Mahri, with instructions to bring it to the volcanic island of Artidax and use it there.

The second was more difficult. Brutaka had informed her of the presence of Hydraxon in the Pit, as well as the events that took place there. A second messenger had been sent to the Pit with orders for the jailer. She could not be sure he would follow them, given their nature, or she would

simply be trading the Brotherhood in the end for a worse evil. But it had to be done. Sometimes she hated being the one in charge.

Hydraxon paced the dark, cavernous chamber that was the Pit. In his hand, he held a tablet that contained orders from Helryx. The instructions carved in the stone were almost impossible to believe. The chamber door opened. It was Toa Lesovikk, bringing back another escaped prisoner. Although the two had clashed on first meeting, they had since become allies in the effort to recapture the former inmates of this vast prison. Hydraxon hesitated to show the orders to Lesovikk. After all, the existence of the Order of Mata Nui was supposed to be a secret, but if the situation, as outlined on the tablet was true, then he guessed it was a secret no longer.

Lesovikk let out a low whistle as he read the tablet. "So what are you going to do?" he asked.

"What I've always done," Hydraxon answered. "Follow orders."

He climbed down the iron ladder that led to the lowest tier of cells. Here, Pridak, Kalmah, Mantax, and Ehlek were imprisoned. The four Barraki looked at their jailer with undisguised contempt.

"Have you come here to mock us?" snarled Mantax.

Pridak smiled, revealing rows of sharp teeth. "We killed you once, you know. We can do it again."

Hydraxon ignored the obvious insanity. After all, he was alive and well, so obviously he had never been dead. "I have an... offer for you," he said, forcing out each word. "There's a war going on. A war to bring the reign of the Brotherhood of Makuta to an end. Agree to fight against the Makuta, and you will get your freedom."

"And if we refuse?" said Kalmah. "Why should we risk our lives to fight someone else's war?"

"If you refuse," said Hydraxon, "You will find that there are places you can be buried far deeper than this Pit."

"Another chance," said Pridak. "Another chance to fight, to lead armies, to conquer. And when the Brotherhood falls, the League of Six Kingdoms will rise again."

Chapter 5

The Shadowed One—master of the Dark Hunters, mortal enemy of the Makuta, thief, assassin, and conqueror—was bored. Since he and his people had been dispatched to occupy the island of Xia by the Order of Mata Nui, there had been precious little to do. The island had been pacified in a matter of hours. Except for the occasional two or three Dark Hunters tapped by the Order for a mission, the bulk of their forces had yet to act.

The Shadowed One did not like feeling penned in on this island, or ignored. That was why this day found him prowling the factories of Xia seeking amusement. Despite his pressure to get all manufacturing centers working again, many of the buildings were still badly damaged by the battle between the Tahtorak and the Kanohi Dragon. It was while walking through one such building that he came upon a Vortixx frantically clearing away rubble.

"What are you doing here?" asked The Shadowed One.

The Vortixx gasped, surprised. When he saw who was addressing him, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. The Vortixx, it seemed, had a long history of knowing when and to whom to submit.

"Nothing, Great Lord," said the Vortixx, "just... cleaning up so all factories can be working again as you ordered."

The Shadowed One said nothing. He knew what a lie sounded like. He had told enough of them himself. After several moments, he said, "Then I will help you."

"No!" the Vortixx cried out, "That's... that's unnecessary. This is work for a laborer, not a ruler like yourself."

Power flashed out from the Shadowed One's staff. A band of crystalline protodermis appeared around the Vortixx's mouth, gagging him.

"I said I will help you," repeated The Shadowed One.

Striding over to the heap of rubble, the Shadowed One began to dig, never taking his eye off the Vortixx. The deeper he got, the more visibly upset the Xian native seemed to be.

What, he wondered, was waiting at the bottom of this hole?

He soon found out. Several feet down, he came upon a protosteel box. Burned into the lid was the symbol of the Brotherhood of Makuta. The box was locked, but the lock was no match for the now very curious Dark Hunter. He opened it carefully—after all, this might be some clever trap. But when he saw what the box contained, his eyes widened.

"Oh, my, my," said the Shadowed One, as he gazed on something that soon might make him master of the world.

Vezon, it could truly be said, had a unique perspective on life. Perhaps it was the fact that he had only been truly alive

for a matter of weeks. Perhaps it was his time spent wearing the Mask of Life. Or perhaps it was just the fact that he was hopelessly insane. But the perspective he had today, he had to admit, was a new one: upside-down. The Makuta he had encountered in the fortress of Destral, who identified himself with a laugh as Tridax, had not entirely believed Vezon's story about cross and double-cross. In fact, he decided some follow-up questions were in order, the kind delivered while your guest is hanging from the ceiling by his ankles.

"I have checked our teleportation technology," Tridax said. "There is no sign of sabotage. You are a liar."

"Well, no one ever said Makuta were observant," said Vezon. "How can you be so sure? Suppose I sabotaged it myself using my incredible powers of the mind."

"You have no powers," said the Makuta, picking up a wickedly sharp blade. "You have no mind. You are about to have no head."

"You're right! You're right!" babbled Vezon. "There is no army, there is no navy, I simply wanted the pleasure of your company. Well, pleasure might be too strong a word. Did I tell you I once wore the Mask of Life? One stray thought back then, and you wouldn't even have left ashes. I do miss those days. Anyway, take pride in being correct. There's no threat to Destral at all."

The walls of the fortress suddenly shook violently from an incredible impact.

"Except that one." Vezon added helpfully.

Rock-dust fell from the ceiling, masks and weapons clattered to the floor, and even the anchors of Vezon's chains came loose. A second blast tore a hole in the wall and sent mangled Rahkshi flying into the chamber. This time, the anchors came loose all the way, and Vezon fell to the stone floor.

Makuta Tridax was paying no attention. His orders were clear: maintain Destral in its current location unless attacked. In the event of a serious threat from Toa or Dark Hunters, teleport the island off the shores of Metru Nui and seize that city. He stalked off to carry out those commands. Vezon followed behind, unnoticed.

That's right, thought the deranged ex-prisoner. Lead me to your secrets. Ah, this plan is so cunning it might almost be one of mine. And perhaps it will be before I'm done.

Far to the west, Pridak watched a fortress burn and smiled at the sight. He had been fortunate since his release from the Pit. His captors had provided him with ships and the resources with which to raise an army. From the worst holes in the universe, he had found ex-Dark Hunters, exiled Vortixx, even a Skakdi or two for his crews. Before Kalmah had even devised a battle plan, Pridak had sounded off

without him on a voyage of conquest. It felt good. Good to sack and burn and destroy again. Good to feel the warm glow of the lightstones on his body, even if his water-filled helmet kept him from smelling the wonderful smoke and the stench of battle. He was back, and back to stay.

His men had routed the forces of the Makuta who occupied this place but had found no actual Brotherhood member. Now, as he surveyed his conquest, a few things captured his notice.

The structure was not original; it had been rebuilt on the site of an earlier strong point. The lower levels were still incomplete, and it was while exploring them that he found a strange room. Deep below the basement was a room of rubble. The walls had been smashed, leaving only packed earth behind, and the remnants of those walls were littered around the floor.

Intrigued, he picked one of the pieces up, only to find there was an inscription on it. The symbols made no sense to him, and he was about to throw it away, when he noticed that another piece also had such an inscription. In fact, all the pieces did. There was some sort of message here, or there had been, he realized. Someone had tried to destroy it by shattering the walls, but the message was still here for someone who had the discipline to decipher it. And if someone had thought whatever information it contained worthy of destruction, it must be quite interesting indeed.

With the infinite patience of a born hunter, Pridak began to assemble the stones.

Chapter 6

Axonn was drowning. The greenish-black fluid filled his mouth and lungs before he could react. His mighty arms flailed about, trying to find something to grab on to, and failing. As he sank further toward the bottom, Axonn knew that here, in the birthplace of the Makuta species, he was going to die.

Then he was suddenly rising rapidly up through the murky liquid. A strong hand had a hold of him and was yanking him away from his fate. A moment later he felt the hard stone of the floor beneath him. He choked and gasped. When the colors finally stopped swirling in front of his eyes, he looked up at his rescuer. Brutaka floated three feet off the floor. Green fire crackled from his eyes and the tips of his fingers. His armor had cracked in numerous places as the tissue it covered expanded. An aura of pure power surrounded him, so bright that Axonn had to raise a hand to protect his sight.

"Axonn," said Brutaka, "we are glad to see you have survived."

"We? Brutaka, what's happened to you?"

"I... we are the essence of the Makuta species. We know what they were meant to know, but have forgotten. We see the error. The flaws. So much to repair; but it cannot be done."

Axonn stood, axe at the ready. He knew the effects the Makuta Antidermis had on Brutaka. Absorbing it somehow made him stronger, but he had never seen or heard anything like this. It was Brutaka's body and Brutaka's voice, but the words had not come from his old friend.

"Spherus Magna, the Shattering," Brutaka muttered, seemingly more to himself than to Axonn, "The three that must be one; the two that must make them one." Brutaka abruptly reached out and seized Axonn's arm in a grip of iron. His touch burned, but Axonn fought back the urge to scream.

"He must remember, he must be made to see, or the journey of 100,000 years will be for nothing. He hides beneath, preparing to meet his destiny. We must go there, we must right the wrong. So many wrongs before the Shattering can end."

Ancient climbed a low-rise, stepping carefully to avoid tripping over the rubble that was once a Xian factory. He had been searching for The Shadowed One for the better part of an hour. They were supposed to be discussing the defense of the city, but the Dark Hunter leader was nowhere to be found. He was concerned.

Toa Helryx had asked Ancient, her spy within the Dark Hunters, for regular reports on the state of things at Xia and The Shadowed One's actions. She fully expected a Brotherhood of Makuta attack on the island, and he was

already overdue with his latest dispatch. Ancient reached the top of the rise. The first thing he saw was The Shadowed One, standing amid a pile of debris. He was holding a small chest, which was open, and staring at the contents with a nasty smile on his face. As Ancient drew closer, he noticed two other things: a dead Vortixx on the ground, his face encased in Crystalline Protodermis; and just what was in the chest: three vials.

"What have you found?" asked Ancient, "And why would a Vortixx be foolish enough to challenge you for it?"

The Shadowed One looked up, surprised. Then seeing it was Ancient, he visibly relaxed.

"A most amazing thing," he said, "Have you ever heard of Makuta Kojol?"

Ancient nodded. He knew the story from the Order of Mata Nui: Kojol had been visiting Xia to discuss having a virus added into a weapon the Vortixx were building for the Makuta. During his visit, he was "accidentally" killed by a different virus. Except it was no accident, but an Order operation to remove him.

"He brought a number of viruses with him when he came to Xia," The Shadowed One continued, "some were never found. The story was they were incinerated along with his armor. But they weren't, and I have found them."

Ancient tried not to look as worried as he felt. Weapons like this in the hands of the Dark Hunters was a disaster in the making. "Excellent," he said, "We could ransom these for a good price."

"Ransom them?" said The Shadowed One, "No, no, I intend to make use of them. I will learn what they are and what they do, and then Helryx and the Makuta will answer to me! But I will need time... a great deal of time and privacy to work. No one must know I have them. That is why the Vortixx here had to die. And it's why..."

Two beams of power lanced out of The Shadowed Ones' eyes, striking Ancient. The veteran Dark Hunter vanished, disintegrated by the force of the blast.

"Apologies, old friend," The Shadowed One said, "but you know the old saying: 'A secret shared is no longer a secret.'"

Vezon stalked through the halls of the fortress of Destral, following Makuta Tridax and doing his best to remain unseen. The walls of the ancient structure shook from a ferocious pounding: the Order of Mata Nui had launched its attack on the Makuta base at last.

His mission was simple, purposely so that even his deranged mind could keep it straight: He was to follow Tridax, find the means the Makuta use to teleport their island from place to place, and then disable it. He would then be most likely killed by Tridax, but then no plan was perfect.

At first it seemed like all was proceeding as expected: Tridax made his way to a sub-basement, seemingly oblivious to being followed. At the bottom of the basement was a massive chamber. What waited within that chamber staggered even the deeply disturbed Vezon.

The walls towered forty feet, all around. Lining them were Stasis Tubes, close to one-hundred. And each tube was occupied by an identical figure. A few had armor of jet-black, most white-and-gold, but it was obvious they were all the same being. They were in some kind of stasis. Tridax walked to the center of the room, where a small table sat. On the table was a Kanohi mask. Tridax reached for it, then suddenly whirled and hurled a blast of Shadow at Vezon. Before he could dodge, the shadow had pinned him to the wall.

"Did you think I could not hear your clumsy attempt to follow me?" said Tridax, "Very well, Skakdi trash. You want to learn the most powerful secret of Destral? You want the satisfaction of knowing what hides here before you die? Look around."

Vezon did, but he didn't learn anything more by doing that.

"Quite a collection," he said, "I prefer sea-shells, myself. Sometimes leaves. Oh, and the heads of my enemies, though those take up so much space." Tridax smiled and held up the mask.

"Do you know what this is? A Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates. One of only two known to be in existence. Not long ago, my fellow Makuta Mutran and I began experiments to develop a creature called a Shadow Leech; a creature that could drain the Light of others and turn them into beings of Shadow. That was what sparked my idea. I knew the mask could reach not only other places of this dimension, but other realities as well. And so I have begun traveling to those other realities and collecting the Toa Takanuva of each, bringing him back here, and feeding his Light to my pets. When I am done, I will have an army of Shadow Toa, all made from the most dangerous enemy of the Makuta."

The walls shook again.

"I think you'd better hurry up and finish then," suggested Vezon.

"No need," said Tridax. "I have only to release the Shadow Takanuva I have already made, and they will dispose of the attackers. And then I can go back to work in earnest. And then I can..."

Tridax stopped at the sound of crystal shattering. Startled, he let his Shadow power lapse. Vezon slumped to the ground, but not before he saw the Makuta looking at his arm in horror. Something was dissolving his armored gauntlet before his eyes, and his Antidermis was leaking out into the air. Two beings stepped out of the shadows. One

was a Matoran, the other another species, very tall and very dangerous in appearance. He looked at the Makuta and laughed - a harsh and malicious sound.

"The most dangerous enemy of the Makuta?" said Tobduk, "Get ready, you're just about to meet him."

To be continued in Brothers In Arms part 6.

Chapter 7

Toa Helryx, leader of the Order of Mata Nui, picked her way across the remains of a battlefield. She was on the beach of the island of Nynrah, site of a struggle between the Brotherhood of Makuta and the Order. After a long and furious battle, the Order had won. Driving the Brotherhood forces from the island or crushing them on the beach. Now she wandered the sands, occasionally picking up a piece of Rahkshi armor, studying it for a moment and then discarding it.

There was a method to her madness. Using her Mask of Power, Helryx could read the past of an object simply by touching it. Her goal here was simple: Rahkshi were created using a powerful substance called Energized Protodermis. The Order wanted to know every source of that substance used by the Makuta so they could capture or destroy those sources. Without them, no new Rahkshi could come into being.

So far, all the ones she had identified here were sources the Order already knew about. Still, it was worth the effort. It would be far easier to defeat the Brotherhood by cutting off their source of power, rather than beating them in battle.

She picked up a piece of crimson Rahkshi armor and called on the power of her mask. This time, she saw a place she did not recognize. Makuta Chirox was there, and a silvery

pool, but not just any pool, no, this one had a figure emerging from it. A being actually made of energized protodermis. She concentrated hard and the location came to her: an island just north of the one her newest ally came from.

Helryx dropped the piece of armor and turned to Keetongu. The Rahi had reluctantly agreed to break off his efforts to save the victims of Visorak long enough to help in the war. In return, Helryx had promised him the Visorak would never again be a threat to anyone else.

"We have to go," she said. "There's another source."

It was a short journey. Their destination had at first seemed uninhabited, but that illusion didn't last long. Helryx spotted... things skulking among the rocks. They weren't Matoran, or Rahi, but looked like something in between.

The overall feeling was that something was very wrong here. The air, the ground, the inhabitants all felt off, somehow, in a way that obviously made Keetongu uneasy. There were no buildings on the island... none left standing, anyway. The most prominent feature was a large cave. Helryx and Keetongu entered cautiously. The passage narrowed considerably once they were a little ways in, forcing them to crawl to make any forward progress. Helryx couldn't help but think how easy it would be to get trapped in here.

As the passage widened again, Helryx saw more creatures. These obviously were Rahi beasts, but not like anything she'd seen before. They were short, pale bipeds, with large yellow eyes and spindly arms and legs. They backed away and moved to the side as she and her ally passed. But as soon as the two had moved on, they assembled into a group and followed close behind.

Helryx and Keetongu came to a huge chamber. In the center of it was not a pool of energized protodermis, but an actual lake of the stuff. And rising from the center was the figure of a living being. A head, two arms, a torso ending in the lake itself. Its features were barely there, and its substance was the silver color of Energized Protodermis. The sight triggered a memory. An agent on Metru Nui had reported that Turaga Vakama had once mentioned an Entity his team had fought when they were Toa Metru. Could this be the same being?

"I have been expecting you," said the figure. "I have felt your kind at work in my pools throughout this universe. Destructive, but ultimately futile. Cap one source of my substance and it will emerge somewhere else."

"Then we will destroy it there too." Helryx answered.
"What are you?"

"I am creation and destruction," the Entity answered. "I am the power to transform and to destroy. I am every drop of Energized Protodermis that exists, and every drop is me. I

am as far beyond you, creature of armor and tissue, as you are beyond an insect."

"And your purpose here?" asked Helryx.

"I did not choose to come here," the Entity replied. "I lived in the core of a planet, until one day a portion of my substance forced its way to the surface. It did not take long for the inhabitants of that world to discover my power, or to begin warring over it. But some of what makes up my form was taken and placed inside this universe, and so escaped before cataclysm overtook that world."

"And now?" said Helryx.

"Now I experiment on the creatures and things I find around me," said the Entity. "I have even let others make use of my power if I found their intentions intriguing enough."

"You have helped create beings that have brought terror and death to thousands," said Helryx. "It has to stop."

"Is a weapon responsible for the actions of the one who wields it?" asked the Entity.

"Perhaps not," said Helryx. "But a weapon can be broken and so never used again."

A soft sound that might have been laughter escaped from the Entity.

"I have met your kind before. So confident in your power to contain me, control me, or destroy me. You are no more than Stone Apes reaching for the stars, believing you could extinguish them if only you could get them in your grasp."

The lake began to boil and churn; a huge wave of energized protodermis rose up behind the Entity, so wide it spanned the whole chamber, and began to speed across the surface towards Helryx and Keetongu.

"Transformation, or destruction," said the Entity. "Which will be your fate? Let us find out, together."

Chapter 8

There was nowhere to run. There was nowhere to hide. A tidal wave of Energized Protodermis was headed right for Toa Helryx and Keetongu. When it struck them, it would do one of two things: transform them forever into who knew what, or destroy them both. Desperate, Helryx reached out with her Elemental Power. Despite many thousands of years of honing her control over water to perfection, it did no good. Energized Protodermis, though in liquid form, was not water and was immune to her abilities. Doom was coming in a great silver wave.

Keetongu growled. Helryx glanced at him to see that his attention was directed behind them - specifically, he was looking at a hole in space that had just opened. Thoughts raced through Helryx's mind. Had Brutaka come to save them? Where did this portal lead? But there wasn't time for answers, only escape. Grabbing Keetongu's wrist, she pulled him toward the hole. They dove in together with no idea of where they would emerge.

At the same moment, a figure appeared in the portal. He stepped out into the chamber. If anyone had been present to see, they might have recognized him as the mad criminal Vezon, his face hidden behind a Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates. And if they peered closely, they might have seen his eyes widen at the sight of a wall of Energized Protodermis coming right at him.

"Uh-oh," he said.

Turaga Vakama walked slowly through the corridors of the Coliseum. It had been his work place since his return to the city of Metru Nui. Now it was his home as well, along with that of all the other Turaga.

Much had changed in the city in recent days, not all of it good. Despite his confinement, he had been able to pick up snatches of information here and there. The fortunes of war had evidently turned against the Brotherhood of Makuta. Numerous Makuta-held islands had fallen, including, rumor had it, Destral itself. It was almost too much to hope for - perhaps the Great Spirit would awaken to find his arch-enemies vanquished for good.

He passed his chamber and headed down a flight of stairs to a secure room. Here were kept weapons, memorials to the Toa Mangai, and one very important Kanohi mask. Although Vakama knew that it was one of the safest spots in the city, he still checked on it every day. If the contents of that room were to fall into the wrong hands... he didn't even want to think about it.

He was halfway down the stairs when he heard the crash. He raced down to find a half a dozen, heavily armed Ta-Matoran, scattered like leaves in a wind storm. The door to the chamber had crumpled with age, and stepping through it was a being Vakama had hoped to never see again. A little over a thousand years ago, when he was still a Toa, Vakama

had battled a being called Voporak. Surrounded by a field that aged anything it touched, Voporak seemed impossible to beat, and it took a Makuta to do it in the end. Voporak worked for the Dark Hunters and sought one thing in Metru Nui: the thing he now held in his great claw, the Kanohi Mask of Time.

Vakama froze. He wanted to attack, to avenge his fallen friends, but he knew that no attack of his would stop this creature. Voporak knew it too. He looked at Vakama with something like contempt. Then he shrugged and turned his back on the Turaga, walking away. Vakama followed. A few minutes later he watched Voporak walk out of a hole in the side of the Coliseum.

A four-armed warrior wielding a multi bladed axe bellowed at the sight of the thief and charged. Voporak reached out and grabbed his attacker. In a matter of seconds, the warrior aged tens of thousands of years before collapsing on the ground. Voporak kept going, and there was nothing, Vakama knew, that could hope to stop him.

Kalmah moved warily through the main factory complex of Xia, flanked by Mantax and Ehlek. He did not want to be here. It would have been far more satisfying to be leading his new fleet against the Brotherhood of Makuta, but Pridak had contacted him and assured him that their old dream of overthrowing the Great Spirit might live again.

Up ahead, sitting on a makeshift throne was The Shadowed One, leader of the Dark Hunters. He eyed the three Barraki coldly. Perched on the rafters above was Darkness, who watched over The Shadowed One, though not out of any desire to guard him. No, Darkness waited for a sign of weakness in the leader, to kill him so another could take his place.

"Shadowed One, we bring you greetings from Pridak," said Kalmah. "And congratulate you on your seizure of this island."

The Shadowed One simply nodded, his gaze never leaving Kalmah's hideous face.

"It is Pridak's belief that the Barraki and the Dark Hunters would be well served by an alliance," Kalmah continued. "After this chaos is ended, someone will need to pick up the pieces of this universe. We see an opportunity."

"And what do you have to bargain with, besides your fearsome reputations?" The Shadowed One said, mockery in his voice.

Kalmah simply smiled. "Information. We know that Makuta Teridax struck the Great Spirit Mata Nui down, and we know how. We also know that a prototype of the virus used to do it was hidden on this island, and we believe you have it."

"I?" said the Shadowed One. "I am the humble administrator of Xia, a mere servant of the people. Nothing more."

Kalmah laughed. "You are a lying, treacherous sack of Doom Viper breath. But you are also very thorough. Oh yes, we've heard all about you and your organization since our release from captivity. If that virus is on Xia, you have it."

The Shadowed One's expression darkened. A lesser being would have quaked with fear at the sight. The Barraki, though, were not lesser beings.

"And if I do?"

"You know where it is, we know how it can be used. And so, a bargain."

The Shadowed One considered. He could just kill these three as he had Ancient, but if they really did know something about how the vials he had found could be turned against the Great Spirit, well, that was knowledge worth gaining. He could always kill them later, after all.

"On one condition," he said. "Pridak and I will meet on neutral ground, the land of Karzahni. If I am satisfied with what he has to offer, then, perhaps, Dark Hunter and Barraki will walk side-by-side into a new dawn."

Chapter 9

It took the Mahri a long time to make it back from Artidax back to Metru Nui. Jaller's first thought upon arriving is that it had been way too long. Metru Nui was under attack. At first, he thought that was Metru Nui; it was surrounded by high walls with weapons mounted at the top of them, weapons belching fire and smoke at the attackers. The walls were manned by warriors of all sorts, none of which Jaller recognized. Wait, check that. The berserker battling three opponents at once looked a lot like Hewkii.

"What's going on?" said Nuparu. "Looks like we've walked into a full-scale war."

"It's been going on for a while," said Hahli. "But I think it's come home."

It was an awesome sight. Ships flying the banner of the Brotherhood of Makuta ringed the island-city, flying Rahkshi were assaulting from every direction, firing bolts of energy from their staffs while others pounded on the walls. In one section, a portion of the wall had already crumbled, and warriors fought in the gap, trying to keep the invaders out.

"They're breaking through!" shouted Nuparu.

"Let's go," said Jaller. "We stand or fall with our city."

The three Toa hit the gap from behind, using Fire, Water, and Earth to tear through the ranks of Rahkshi. They made

it through the wall of the city. Beyond the ranks of Order of Mata Nui agents, they spotted a Turaga manning barricades.

Jaller rushed up to Vakama. "Turaga, what's happening, how did this battle begin?"

"We can thank the Order for that," Vakama replied. "Now our problem is how to end it before the city is destroyed."

"The Mask of Time," said Hahli. "Can one of us use it to, I don't know, slow down the Rahkshi somehow?"

"I wish you could," said Vakama. "But the mask is gone, stolen by a Dark Hunter. He made the gap in the wall you came through."

Jaller looked around. In his days as captain of the Ta-Koro Guard, he had learned a thing or two about battle strategy. A quick glance was enough to tell him that the Order had badly underestimated the ferocity of the Makuta attack. The Rahkshi had already gained the tops of the walls in three or four places, and in one southern section, had made it inside the walls as well. As he watched, the defenders of the wall fell back, and the invaders began pouring through.

"We need an edge," said Jaller. "Something the Rahkshi wouldn't expect."

"There are more Toa coming, but they won't get here in time," said Vakama. "But there might be one Toa here now who could help us. Listen well..."

It was Hahli who found the Toa in question, a Toa of Sonics named Krakua. When he heard Vakama's plan, he looked at her as if she had lost her mind."

"Let me get this straight," he said while blasting Rahkshi with sonic beams. "Vakama wants me to cycle through multiple frequencies until I find the one that will awaken something called the Bohrok?"

"Yes," said Hahli. "We know, well, we suspect, the signal that awakens them is sonic, but we don't know what it is or how to trigger it. If we can awaken the ones under Metru Nui, and if the Rahkshi try to get in their way, well, it might buy us some time for something else we're planning."

"All right, I'll try," said Krakua. "No promises."

Hahli left. Her next move was to be using her power to disturb the ocean to try to wreck the Makuta ships. But before she could do so, everything changed all around her. The stars brightened overhead, the breeze turned warm, the earth shook in a gentle tremor. She didn't know how, but somehow she was certain: the Great Spirit had awakened.

Beyond the city walls, a storm rose, tossing the Makuta fleet about like toys. Yet that did nothing to deter the Rahkshi, who kept on coming. They had broken through the walls in four places and were rampaging through Ta-Metru. Nothing could stop them, it seemed. At least until the ground erupted in front of them and a horde of Bohrok emerged. It was not a large number, only those specimens that were

asleep in the archives and the small nest below it, but it was enough.

The Rahkshi attacked immediately, and the Bohrok responded. The two sides were locked in combat, and as they fought, the Mahri and the Order agents picked off Rahkshi at will. The battle seesawed back and forth, with the Rahkshi never realizing that all the Bohrok wanted was to get to the island of Mata Nui. Had the Rahkshi just gotten out of their way, the fight would have been over.

The city slowly shook from a series of explosions, an Order agent from atop the walls yelled, "Fliers! Incoming!" Hahli looked up to see three incredibly fast aircraft soar over the city, bank as one, and head back to where the ships waited. One slowed and dipped its wing to her, and she recognized Pohatu in the pilot's seat. The Toa Nuva had come home.

Pohatu flew his vessel back out of the city to finish off the ships. Meanwhile, Lewa and Kopaka dove, peppering the Rahkshi with blasts of light. The sight seemed to rally the city's defenders, who surged back toward the gaps in the walls, led by Jaller and Hewkii, they drove the Rahkshi back.

Finally, the storm was over. The Brotherhood ships had gone to the bottom of the Silver Sea, the walls around the city had been battered down, but the rubble was littered with dead Kraata and shattered Rahkshi armor. Those of the invaders that were intact had flown away, provided they could escape the blasters of the Jetrax, Rockoh, and Axalara. Metru Nui was safe, and as the Toa Nuva confirmed, the Great Spirit had awakened. The power of the Brotherhood of Makuta was broken for all time. Turaga

Dume and Turaga Vakama appeared side by side to announce that tomorrow would be a city-wide day of celebration in the Coliseum.

But Hahli did not feel like celebrating, even now. She could not help but remember Matoro, who had given his life that Mata Nui might live. And despite all the wounded and the dying among the defenders, she could not help but feel it had all been a little too... easy.

True, there had been some unexpected help: the airships, the Bohrok, the storm. But they had faced an army of Rahkshi. Something told her they should not have won, at least not with so much of the city still intact. She smiled. Turaga Nokama would have chided her for worrying so much. No matter how things seemed, the Great Spirit was awake for the first time in over one thousand years. Light had triumphed over darkness, hadn't it? The Toa had achieved their destiny and saved the universe, hadn't they? And that meant all was well again; nothing very bad could happen now, could it?

Hahli turned to head toward Ga-Metru, humming a song Nokama had once taught her. One written long ago that spoke of hope for tomorrow. Perhaps, if not for the music, she might have heard the sound of dark laughter on the wind.

**To be continued in Reign of
Shadows**