BIOLICAL CHRONICLE

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Book 9: Destiny
Strakk slammed his Ice Axe on the table so hard that the stone plate splintered with a sharp crack. The sound made Metus wince.

“No!” said Strakk. “No. Definitely not.”

Metus frowned. The Agori villager had been acting as trainer of warriors and promoter of matches for many years. He was used to dealing with stubborn warriors, but most of them weren’t as quick-tempered as Strakk. He should have expected it, though. Especially for a Glatorian like Strakk, everything was about profit. It was a running joke in the village of Iconox that Strakk wouldn’t even open his eyes in the morning unless it would benefit him somehow. For a moment, Metus considered giving up. Then he thought twice: Strakk’s agreement was very important to him.

“You owe me a favor,” Metus told him. “Where would you be without me? And how often do I ask a favor of you?”

“Hm, there was that match against Kiina last month,” Strakk replied. “And at your request I helped with the training of that bully, who then completely forgot it was just a practice match and sent me into a healer’s barracks for weeks. Oh, and then there was…”

“All right, all right,” snapped Metus. “You don’t need to tell me the story of your life. This is a quick and easy job, won’t take longer than a week, and it’ll be well paid. Do you want it or not?”

Metus was lying, of course. He had to lie often when negotiating with his fighters. The job he had offered Strakk would be neither quick nor easy. The village of Iconox had to send a shipment of the valuable metal exsidian to the village of Vulcanus, payment for a match a fighter named Gelu had lost. Under normal circumstances the carriage would take the shortest route, southeast through the Dunes of Treason and then directly to the Fire village. Not the safest route in the world, but one that was used very often. In recent weeks, though, a group of barbaric nomads called the Bone Hunters had changed the dunes into a lethal trap. For reasons they hadn’t revealed, they were about to sever trading connections between villages, particularly those with the Water Tribe village, Tajun. The result was that every caravan that moved through the desert was in danger. Worse, the Bone Hunters weren’t content with simply robbing the goods – they also killed the coachmen. But Iconox didn’t have a choice; the carriage had to be sent on its way. If they refused to pay after a lost battle, their fighters would no longer be welcome in the arenas of Bara Magna. So now it was about finding a route on which they could transport their goods safely all the way to Vulcanus.

“Well, let’s see,” said Strakk. “You want to send a fully loaded carriage eastward through the Black Spike Mountains, over the Dark Falls and then through Creep Canyon. Every single one of these places is more dangerous than a sand bat with sunburn. And you want me to guard this cargo on its way. Did I get that straight?”

“Yes,” Metus nodded.
“No,” said Strakk. “I’m a Glatorian. I fight for my village if it needs something from another and I’m paid well for it. I’m no guard or guide or errand boy. I fight against other Glatorian in an arena. I don’t fight against Bone Hunters. They have a nasty habit of killing everyone who fights them.”

Metus had to admit that Strakk was right. No one dealt with Bone Hunters if it could be avoided. Their mounts, called Rock Steeds, possessed rows of sharp teeth and scary, scorpion-like stinger tails. Their sense of smell was so fine they could sense a foe from miles away. And regarding the Hunters themselves, they hadn’t survived millennia in the Wastelands by being friendly. They were ruthless, violent and greedy. If they possessed any virtues, then it was their endurance – they rarely gave up a chase – and their thoroughness – after an attack there was nothing left standing. The Agori left Strakk’s shelter. The Glatorian followed him and kept talking.

“And don’t forget the Skrall – you remember them, don’t you – huge, black-armored, turning people to mincemeat just for fun? Who do you think lives up in the Black Spike Mountains?”

“Calm down,” said Metus. “Listen. We’ve hired the best.”

Metus pointed toward the fully loaded carriage. On the coachman’s seat sat an Iconox Agori – Kirbold – and a green-armored Agori from the village of Tesara. On the Sand Stalker next to the carriage sat a Glatorian Strakk identified as Gresh.

“Since when does Tesara send their Glatorian and Agori to help Iconox?” Strakk asked.

“Since the Bone Hunters’ attacks are starting to get them, too,” answered Metus. “They want to find out themselves whether this new route works. If that’s the case, they can use it too. The Agori’s name is Tarduk. He’s said to know the wilderness.”

Metus turned around and stared at Strakk.

“Iconox wants one of their Glatorian to join this tour – you’ll surely understand why. If you agree, I am sure I could manage to get you some matches in Vulcanus… to show everyone what heroism you will show here.”

Strakk laughed out loud. “I know everything about heroes. They’re the ones who get buried in holes in the ground. And when they’re lucky, someone will place a marker in the earth above their heads. But I’m not unreasonable… not much. So I shall go… for double the reward.”

Metus swallowed hard. That would mean Iconox would have to get a lot of weapons, armor and supplies for Strakk. But he obviously didn’t have any other choice. If Iconox were to neglect their payment duty to Vulcanus, the whole system of solving conflicts between villages by Glatorian matches would be at risk. In the end, that would mean he would lose his job.

“Deal,” the trainer said. “I will explain it somehow to the village elder. Get ready for departure.”

“I’m already ready,” Strakk said, smiling. “See to it that my prize is prepared quickly. I’ll soon be back to get it.”

_Only if you’re lucky_, Metus thought. _And where you’re going, you may need more than luck._

Sometime after sunrise, the carriage departed with its guards. Gresh would’ve liked to depart immediately at dawn, but Strakk had insisted on taking as much Thornax launcher ammunition and extra weaponry as possible. Gresh was of the opinion that they should move out with as little baggage as possible, so they could cross the desert more quickly.

“Oh, I know many traders that traveled with light baggage,” Strakk had replied. “That way they found death much faster. Listen, little one, Bone Hunters care only about one thing: can you kill them faster than they can kill you? If the answer is yes, then maybe – _maybe_ – you’ll have a chance of getting away with your life.”

“So you think we should engage them?” Gresh asked.

“No, no,” Strakk replied. “I think we shouldn’t even make this trip. But if it has to be done, we’ll do it the clever way. We strike first, and we don’t run headlong at them. Instead, we’ll outmaneuver them and use strategy.”

Strakk didn’t know Gresh very well. They had met once out in the Wastelands and rode together for some time to Vulcanus. Back then they had had a small skirmish with Bone Hunters, but got away
without too much trouble. Since then Strakk watched his back carefully. Bone Hunters had a long memory, especially when it came to their enemies. He’d also learned from that trip that he didn’t like Gresh very much. The Tesaran fighter was young and strong, but a little too honor-bound for his liking. The only Glatorian Strakk had ever really gotten along with was Malum, one of the fighters from Vulcanus. Even after he was exiled from his village for trying to kill Strakk in the arena, Strakk still respected him. As far as Strakk was concerned, Malum’s exile was only more proof of how little the villagers of Vulcanus knew about the life of a Glatorian.

Strakk moved his steed closer to the carriage. The two-headed Spikit that was pulling it kept all four eyes fixed on the bumpy path ahead. The Glatorian hoped the carriage was loaded with enough food. Even though a Spikit was a tough and enduring beast of burden, it would consume everything in its vicinity when it got hungry – including the carriage it was pulling, and everyone who was unfortunate enough to be sitting inside it.

“So, Tarduk,” he said to the Tesaran Agori holding the reins, “I heard you’ve done your share of exploring.”

“Sure,” the villager replied. “I collect artifacts – old armor, weapons, scrolls, small fragments of history. I spend a lot of time looking around ruins and searching for things.”

“That sounds… different,” Strakk said. And really, really boring, the Glatorian thought to himself. “I’ve always wanted to see the Black Spike Mountains,” Tarduk continued. “I bet there’s a lot of treasure to be found there!”

“Wait a second, you’re the guide,” said Strakk. “But you’ve never been to where we’re going?”


“He was the only one who was willing to go there,” Kirbold said, “so he got the job.”

“Don’t talk so much,” Gresh said quietly. “Our voices carry far. We don’t have to let every Bone Hunter in the whole area know that we’re coming.”

“You’re an optimist, my friend,” said Strakk. “If they’re out in the Wastelands – and they are – then they’ve known we’re on the way since the moment we left Iconox. At best, we can hope that they don’t know what we’re carrying.”

“And if they do know?” Gresh asked.

Strakk pointed towards the Thornax launcher Gresh was carrying.

“Then I hope you know how to use that, little one.”

To the untrained eye, Bara Magna might look like any desert. Certainly, there was sand in almost every direction as far as the eye could see, shaped into dunes by the wind or spread like a soft blanket over the sleeping earth. When the wind whips over the vast stretches of the Wastelands, the sand whirls around at such high speeds that even Glatorian armor can’t provide enough protection. And then there’s the heat, of course. Bara Magna’s sun burns hot, and around noon it reaches such high temperatures that only Bone Hunters and the desperate Agori traders hunted by them can be found in the sands. During the worst part of the day the sand is so hot that one touch can cause burns. Everyone who gets lost without water in the desert plateau will be dead within a day. Then, at evening, the sun disappears as suddenly as a torch is extinguished. The temperature sinks rapidly and the Agori must crowd together around their campfires. The desert becomes – if this is even possible – twice as dangerous in darkness. Nocturnal predators come out of their caves or from under their rocks, where they hide during the heat of the day. The Bone Hunters are getting bolder, sometimes getting close enough to a village to take out a sentry that has strayed too far from the torches. There is an old Agori saying: “At least you see death coming in daylight.” At night unfortunately, you are not so lucky. For those, however, who know Bara Magna well, the desert is much more than just a vast wasteland of barren, sandy plains.

Many do remember that, in earlier times, more waterways flowed than just the Skrall River, across green fields. They remember how the village of Tesara wasn’t just an oasis, but part of a giant jungle that stretched over the entire continent. They still hear the cries of sea birds from the ocean that existed far
to the south. All that changed about 100,000 years ago, when a terrible disaster changed the planet forever. After that there was no more time for memories of what once was: one was completely occupied with just surviving each new day. Still, while the carriage moved through the sand, Strakk thought of how things had once been. He wasn’t originally from Iconox, but from a land far to the north. He had been on a scouting patrol when the disaster that is now referred to simply as “The Shattering” had occurred, and he had suddenly been cut off from his homeland. He stayed in Iconox while the world around him changed: jungles transformed into desert, the ice melted in the horrible heat. He wasn’t sure if anyone would be able to survive the disaster. But there were survivors, including himself – and since then, his entire life was just about surviving.

Strakk glanced over his shoulder. Iconox was no longer visible. He reined his Sand Stalker to a halt. “Good, now we’re far enough away,” he said. “Now we can stop.”

Gresh slowed his mount down a little and looked at Strakk, puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you think?” Strakk said. “You didn’t seriously believe we were going to drag this whole load all the way across the Black Spike Mountains, did you? Did you honestly believe my talk of stirring sand and fighting down Bone Hunters from earlier? If so, then you really have spent too much time in the sun.”

“But that’s our job,” Gresh replied.

Strakk snorted. “Good. Then I’ll explain to you how this works. The Agori will get out of the carriage. We take all the exsidian metal, hide it, and shatter the carriage. Then we’ll tell the people in Iconox we were attacked by Bone Hunters who stole our cargo.”

The two Agori shared a look. Tarduk shrugged as if he wanted to say, “I don’t understand it either.”

“And then?” Gresh asked.

“In a few weeks we’ll return and dig the load out,” Strakk gloated. “We’ll divide it among ourselves and then go our separate ways again. And no one gets hurt.”

“Except the people of Iconox when Vulcanus thinks they don’t want to pay their debts,” Gresh said. He pointed casually with his Thornax launcher at Strakk.

“Now we’re going to do the following. You ride a little ahead of us. And should you try to leave us behind, then rest assured that you won’t get far.”

“Are you completely out of your mind!” bellowed Strakk. “There is a fortune to be made here!” Gresh gestured with his launcher. “Go, now! We’ve got a job to do, that’s how it is. And that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

Strakk glared at Gresh, but spurred on his Sand Stalker. Riding past the carriage, he muttered: “Dozens of Glatorian on this world, and they had to give me the only one who cares about doing the right thing.”

Gresh ignored him and turned to Tarduk. “Do you have any idea what’s waiting ahead of us? I hate surprises.”

“Anything might be ahead of us,” Tarduk replied. “In earlier times, this had been a quiet corner of the desert, until the Vorox infested the Dunes of Treason. They drove out a lot of sand bats and dune snakes, and even giant cave scorpions, into the north. The desert between here and the Black Spike Mountains is full of them.”

“But that’s not the worst part,” Kirbold said. “Have you ever been to the Sea of Liquid Sand?”

Gresh nodded. The “sea” was located south of the village of Vulcanus. It looked like any other desert track, but in reality most of it was a soft mud that swallowed all living things that tried to cross it. It was possible to get through, if one was clever or lucky enough. But most who tried it now rested at the bottom of the Sea.

“Scattered spots of liquid sand also exist here,” Kirbold said. “There aren’t many, but there are spots in the sand that are just as treacherous as the Sea… maybe even worse. You don’t see them until you are right in the middle of them and then…”

“Did you hear that, Strakk?” Gresh asked.
“Why wouldn’t I listen to such wonderful news?” the Ice Glatorian shot back. “I’m really glad you asked me to ride ahead.”

“Keep your eyes open,” Gresh said. “We’ll make it.”

“Sure you’ll make it,” Strakk said. “Just wait until I sink into the sand and when I do… stop. Simple.”

They rode in silence for some time. Before them the Black Spike Mountains towered in all their majesty. Even when Bara Magna had been a lush green place, this mountain range was the subject of numerous legends and rumors. Some of them were just the usual Agori talk – travelers who were journeying through the mountains and never returned. But the more convincing stories were those about villagers who did return, but who weren’t right in the head ever again. Gresh gave Kirbold a quick glance.

“What exactly were you chosen for this job?”

“I mined this metal,” came the answer. “It’s perfectly suited for patching equipment. Doesn’t rust and is very wear-resistant.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

“I dug it out. I dragged it up. Others will use it, but I found it. I feel that it’s my responsibility. Should the cargo be in danger, I want to be there.”

Gresh nodded. He had already heard crazier things. More than one Glatorian would never let anyone else tinker with his weapon or launcher for a very similar reason.

As the sun reached its peak, Gresh pointed towards a ledge. “Let’s set up our camp beneath that until the worst of the heat is over.” Kirbold and Tarduk steered the carriage under the ledge, then carefully fed the Spikit before they themselves ate something. Strakk sat down in the sand and closed his eyes, while Gresh kept a careful eye on the desert.

“What do you think is up there?” Kirbold asked Tarduk.

“Who knows?” the Tesaran Agori responded, smiling. “There may have lived an entire civilization in these mountains that we’ve never heard of. They may have left behind equipment, tools, maybe even records of their history. For someone like me, that is a treasure chest just waiting to be opened.”

“No, I mean… do you think there are monsters up there?”

“I do… if you regard Skrall as monsters.”

Kirbold lowered his gaze towards the sand.

“No, I don’t think they’re monsters. But if they ever were to attack us… well, then I don’t know where we could hide.”

Late in the afternoon, they resumed their journey. Strakk watched a sand bat explode out of a dune to throw itself onto a Sand Fox and then drag it underground. The Spikit saw the same and grunted in anger and fear.

“I hate those things,” Strakk said. “You never know where they are until they’re right in front of you.”

“Giant scorpions are even worse,” Tarduk said. Despite the heat, he shivered. “I’ve seen them several times while searching for artifacts in caves.”

“There’s an easy way of avoiding such encounters,” Strakk said.

“How?”

“Stop wandering around in caves,” the Glatorian replied.

“I can’t stand dune snakes,” Kirbold remarked. “You want to know why?”

“Why?” Strakk said.

“Because they are everywhere around us.”

Gresh’s Sand Stalker suddenly reeled in panic, followed by Strakk’s. The Spikit tore at the reins and made efforts to break free. However, Kirbold managed to hold the beast under control. Everywhere around them the dunes moved, the poisonous snakes slithering just beneath the surface of the sand. It looked like a sea of waves rolling under the dunes, but it was neither a peaceful nor comforting sight. The
bite of one of these serpents could lead to death within seconds, not to mention the snakes were absolutely fearless. They wouldn’t hesitate for a second to attack something larger than themselves. “We must have ridden right into a nest!” Strakk said. “What do we do now?”

Gresh tried desperately to get his Sand Stalker under control again.

“When your mount topples, jump off or you’ll be trapped beneath it.”

“Thanks, I certainly would never have thought of that,” Strakk growled. “If you had just listened to me…”

“Look!” Tarduk yelled. “A path!”

He was right. Somewhere to the right there was a strip of sand that wasn’t moving. It was clear to all of them that this was the best and only way out of danger.

“Let’s go!” shouted Gresh, who had already turned his Sand Stalker into the direction of the passage.

Strakk was already ahead of him, letting his mount jump over half a dozen snakes that had darted out of the sand. Behind the two Glatorian, Kirbold urged the Spikit forward. Strakk was now a good distance ahead of the group and didn’t look back. Suddenly his Sand Stalker toppled over. The next moment, he was up to his waist in liquid sand.

“Help!” he cried.

“We can’t help him,” Kirbold claimed. “If we get too close we’ll sink, too.”

“He’s a Glatorian. I can’t leave him behind,” Gresh said. “We can ride around the liquid sand and pull him out.”

“Not without riding through the snakes,” retorted Tarduk.

“It seems we don’t have a choice,” Kirbold said. “It’s either him or us.”
Gresh had no time to think. In several seconds, the sand had almost devoured Strakk, and the snakes had gradually formed circles around the caravan. The only escape was through the soft sand, but the trailer was heavy as stone. Suddenly he had an idea. It was about as crazy as suicide, but there was a small chance of success. Everything depended on how high Gresh could jump and how fast his Stalker was, as well as his knowledge of the dunes. If even one element of the plan failed, none of them would escape alive.

“Tarduk! I need the rope that’s attached to the exsidian! Now!” shouted Gresh.

The Agori quickly cut the rope and tossed it toward Gresh.

“Whatever happens now, nobody separate!” ordered Gresh. “Keep each other in sight and don’t talk, okay?”

Kirbold and Tarduk obeyed. Neither of them spoke a word. On the other side, they were approaching the dune snakes. Gresh took the rope, tied it to his Sand Stalker and galloped off. He had to execute each step with precision. Upon reaching the bank of soft sand, he forced his steed to jump. In that same instant, he hurled the rope over the treacherous sands in Strakk’s direction. Strakk caught the rope, and he was yanked free from the trap by Gresh’s Stalker.

“You saved me!” Strakk cried, delighted and surprised. “I can’t believe it!”

“I had to,” said Gresh. “Now get back to the caravan.”

“Are you crazy!” Strakk cried. “You want to go back into the jaws of the dune snakes? I care about exsidian, but I won’t risk my life for it.”

“No way!” Strakk shook his head.

“I haven’t got time to argue,” said Gresh. “You can have half my payment if you help me.”

Strakk’s eyes shone with eagerness. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

Strakk jumped from the smooth sand and grabbed onto the harness of his Sand Stalker, hoping that their mounts wouldn’t be caught by the serpents’ fangs. But instead of going back to the caravan, Gresh and Strakk both started spinning around. The Agori looked at the Glatorian in silence, both wondering if Gresh had lost his mind.

“Is there a reason for why we’re doing this?” Strakk asked.

“Yes,” said Gresh. “Dune Snakes are blind on the surface, right? So they don’t use sight when hunting.”

“They use hearing,” Strakk guessed. “So we’re making noise.”

“Exactly,” Gresh smiled. “It works, see?”

Strakk looked back. The snakes no longer surrounded the caravan, but now they were heading towards the Glatorian.

“Yiiiii!” Strakk shouted.

“Over here!” shouted Gresh.
The Tesaran Glatorian rode over the soft sand, with Strakk right behind him. Gresh’s mount jumped back over the deadly sand, with Strakk’s managing to do the same. The hungry Dune Snakes were unable to avoid the sand trap, which absorbed them without giving them a single moment to escape.

“Good thinking,” admitted Strakk. “Using one trap against another. Although it cost you half your pay…”

Several hours later, the travelers arrived at the foot of the Black Spike Mountains. They found a path between the rocks so narrow that only one rider could fit through at a time. Gresh had Strakk go first, while he himself covered the rear. Strakk showed little enthusiasm for this proposal, but Gresh explained that if someone had been following since Iconox, they would not plan a frontal ambush, but an attack from behind.

“You never know,” said Strakk. “I’ve seen traps in places where no one would’ve ever expected. But you’re too young to remember that.”

“When was that exactly?”

“During the war. At a time when Bara Magna was part of a larger world… long before the Shattering…”

Gresh had heard little of the war that changed the world 100,000 years ago. Other Glatorian were reluctant to talk about it. Apparently they just wanted to forget all memories of that event.

“Enlighten me,” said Gresh. “What has that got to do with this?”

“The Black Spike Mountains were one of the few places where there were no battles,” Strakk said.

“No one wanted to fight here?” said Gresh.

“No one dared to approach this place,” said Strakk. “Check out these rocks. I bet there are many deposits of precious metals and who knows what else. Do you think anyone would want to extract it? Not even the Skrall were foolish enough to come here.”

At the mention of the Skrall, Gresh strengthened his grip on the reins of his mount. It was no secret that the Rock Tribe was not from the desert regions of Bara Magna. Their home was among a land of volcanoes in the far north. They had lived there for many centuries, protected by their warriors, the Skrall. Not long ago, the Skrall and Rock Tribe appeared in the south, inhabiting the Black Spike Mountains and the surrounding land. When they founded Rox tus, it quickly became the largest village on Bara Magna. It was rumored that they had moved to the area running to escape something far more dangerous than even they themselves were, but with no evidence, the real reason remained a mystery.

It soon became evident that the newcomers were not dependent on forging friendships with other tribes. Although they sent warriors to battle in the arena, any sane Glatorian knew not to try and face them. Anyone who had to deal with them would face the leader of their tribe, Tuma, who would rather the Skrall simply take what they wanted.

However, the Skrall almost always followed the rules during arena matches. The fighting system in the arena was not a problem for them – the Skrall were lovers of battle, and no Glatorian had yet managed to defeat them. Gresh knew this better than most: not long ago, he lost a duel against a Skrall warrior in the Vulcanus arena. This Skrall was willing to break the rules while fighting in the arena, and had another Glatorian not intervened, the encounter would have been the last thing Gresh had done in his life. The memory brought him shame. Tesara had had its chance at victory, and he had failed them… Gresh pushed the memory aside. It was not the time to be thinking of the past. He and his companions had just entered the territory of the Rock Tribe. The only bad thing that could happen now was if they were attacked by Skrall.

“Look!” Kirbold said suddenly, pointing to the top of a hill.

Gresh looked up. The Glatorian saw three Skrall on the edge of the summit. However, as soon as he got a better look, he realized they were simply helmets and pieces of armor hanging on stilts above the sand.

“They’re only puppets,” Gresh said. “Probably to help deter uninvited guests.”
“Look at them more closely,” Strakk said.
“I did look at them. So what?”
“They’re not pieces of Skrall armor. One is red, another is blue, and the third is green. Where do you think they came from? They’re the spoils of dead Glatorian.”
“I don’t think so,” said Gresh.
“Go ahead, don’t believe me, rookie,” laughed Strakk. “They came to find the end of their lives.”
“You should remain silent,” a voice whispered.
The Glatorian turned quickly, raising their Thornax launchers toward where the ominous words had come from. Tarduk grabbed the reins of the Spikit, preparing to flee if necessary. Kirbold crouched down in case there were any enemy projectiles.
Looking up at the rocky hillside, the party saw a red-armored Glatorian. Strakk and Gresh recognized him immediately as Malum. At one time his name was spoken with great respect, but Malum’s wild temperament had caused problems. During a match in the arena, he had tried to kill a Glatorian who had conceded. For that crime, he was banished from the village of Vulcanus. Since then, the desert had become his home.
“Well, well, look who it is,” Strakk said. “And I thought you were eating sand bats.”
“Do something!” whispered Kirbold. “He’s after the exsidian!”
“Don’t worry,” said Strakk. “Who would look for exsidian in an area so remote? And besides, if Malum wanted it, he would have taken it before we entered the mountains. Right, old friend?”
Malum looked at Strakk with a cold stare. “I’ve never been your friend.”
“What do you want?” asked Gresh.
“I warn you,” Malum answered. “The Skrall have become more ambitious. Many of them are in the mountains, chasing something, or someone. Maybe you. And you should listen to their talk of Tajun.”
“Why would you care?” spat Strakk. “Will you regret it if we’re killed by the Skrall before you can take your revenge on us?”
A dark smile appeared on Malum’s face.
“To be honest… yes.”

Raanu, leader of the village of Vulcanus, had grave concerns. Without Malum, his village had just one experienced Glatorian available. There were several potential candidates to take Malum’s place, but they were young, and inexperienced. Regardless, the recent Glatorian duel with Iconox had ended in victory for Vulcanus. Iconox had to pay in exsidian, but the precious metal had not yet arrived, and Raanu had just discovered why. “Through the Spike Mountains? Are they crazy?”
Metus, Glatorian trainer of Iconox, spread his hands. “You know that with the Bone Hunters…”
“I know about the Bone Hunters,” Raanu interrupted. “I’ve heard that excuse before. But my people have justly earned the victory in the arena. If Iconox cannot deliver its payment…”
“Vulcanus will not be willing to pay up if Iconox wins the next fight,” Metus concluded.
“And if that happens, Metus… our system will collapse before our eyes. By stopping the practice of settling disputes with Glatorian warriors, we can expect only one thing: war.”
Metus gave the Vulcanus leader’s words some thought. Undoubtedly Raanu was right. Centuries ago it was made clear the Agori could not afford an armed conflict between tribes. Nobody wanted to remember the nightmare of destruction left by the last war. Thus, all disputes between tribes were settled with Glatorian. However, this system was based on mutual trust. The result of a duel in the arena was not subject to discussion and was absolutely accepted by all. If a village broke the rules or didn’t pay as agreed, the others would do the same.
“I hope that those Glatorian I hired for Iconox don’t disappoint me,” he said softly. “If the Bone Hunters or even the Skrall intercept that shipment… we’re in trouble.”
Malum vanished as quickly as he had come, disappearing into the rocks with the ease of someone who had been born among the mountains. Gresh didn’t even want to know where Malum had gone, but he did not take the former Glatorian’s warning lightly.

“Skrall…” Tarduk said. “I once tried to unearth some artifacts near Roxtus… bad idea, I know. I barely escaped. Had I been caught, I would have been a corpse.”

The road through the Black Spike Mountains to the east was still visible, but only barely so, due to little use over the years. The fresh mountain air brought some relief to the trip, especially for Strakk, who occasionally had to turn back down the mountain to help push the caravan uphill. The silence was broken only by the sound of the hooves of the Stalkers, the whistling of the wind passing between the peaks and the tranquil sound of wagon wheels. A sharp cry like that of a Mountain Striker made both Glatorian jump. A second cry made Strakk turn his gaze to the sky. Mountain Strikers were birds of prey whose wingspan could be as wide as five feet. Their claws could tear through armor as easily as an Agori could tear through dry parchment. They hunted mostly small animals, but if driven to great hunger, they wouldn’t hesitate to attack opponents much larger than themselves. Strakk and Gresh prepared to fire their weapons, hoping not to meet anything more dangerous than a Mountain Striker.

“I didn’t see anything. Do you think it was really just a Striker?” Strakk asked, his voice barely audible.

“It sounded more like a signal,” said Gresh.

“Skrall?”

“Exactly. Bone Hunters do not haunt these fields.”

Strakk shook his head.

“And if they made that signal, then the Bone Hunters are smarter than I thought.”

“What do we do?” Tarduk asked. “Try to escape? Or should we be ready to fight?”

“We heard his signal. That means they’re close. Too late to escape,” Strakk said. “Well rookie, you always wanted to be a hero. Now’s your chance to die as one.”

Gresh was deep in thought. He had to find a way to save them. They could pretend they hadn’t heard anything suspicious, and move on, trying to escape from the Skrall ambush. He could guess which option Strakk would choose: running as soon as possible and leaving the mountains behind. Wasn’t there any way to get the goods delivered to their destination? Too late. He had already wasted too much time trying to decide. As he looked up, warriors in black armor emerged from hiding. The Skrall had surrounded them.

“This is the land of the Skrall,” said one of them.

“Travel through these mountains is forbidden,” added a second.

“Unless you want to see Tuma,” added a third. “What’s in the caravan? Show us!”

“If we do, they’ll take the exsidian,” Kirbold whispered nervously.

“And if we don’t, they will kill us,” Tarduk replied, then turned slowly and uncovered the cargo.

Rarely did the Skrall show any joy; even a smile was uncommon. However, the party witnessed an incredibly rare sight: the Skrall were so pleased, they practically laughed. They were looking at a valuable treasure, and interposed between the precious metal and themselves were only two Glatorian and two Agori.

“Take the contents of the caravan out. Now!” ordered the group leader.

Strakk sighed with relief. Apparently, fate had been kind to them: the exsidian was lost, but at least he got to keep his head. They had been lucky that the “supply” sounded better than killing them.

“We have business with Iconox,” Gresh said confidently. “The burden is not ours. We can’t leave without the consent of the owner.” The Skrall’s faces became serious.

“Try it,” threatened a Skrall.

“I will,” said Gresh.

Why are you doing this? Strakk thought. They’ll kill us all!
“Iconox is in debt to Roxtus,” Gresh lied. “We have orders to deliver payment directly to Tuma as a humble apology for the delay. He wants to see it himself. Do you want to be the one to tell Tuma that you had not heard of the apology and sent us back into the desert?”

His words served to panic the Skrall. Tuma, their leader, was the only being who really frightened them. Sending back the payment would bring his anger upon them. He would break the bones of any Skrall who disappointed him. Nobody wanted to stand before him and explain why he hadn’t received what he had expected.

“You will come with us,” said a Skrall. “But unarmed.”

The two Skrall approached the Glatorian and took their Thornax launchers, along with Gresh’s shield and Strakk’s axe. Then they searched the carriage. They found an extra launcher, which they confiscated, and ordered the Glatorian to stay away from the caravan. Under the watchful eye of the Skrall, the team began to question their chances of survival.

“Great idea,” Strakk murmured. “Next you’ll want to give our hands over in addition to the exsidian.”

“No,” said Gresh. “It isn’t my intention to stay with them.”

“What?”

“Right,” replied Gresh, hitting Strakk over the head with an exsidian ingot. Surprisingly, the wounded Strakk gave no answer, but simply attacked Gresh in return. After a while both were fiercely fighting in the caravan.

“Stop!” a Skrall said, approaching the trailer to separate them.

“This is just what I expected,” said Gresh. Once the Skrall was within his reach, Gresh delivered a powerful blow with the exsidian. He then grabbed a Thornax launcher from the Skrall, and before anyone could react, he fired, hitting the rock wall on the right. He reloaded and fired again, this time at the rock wall on the left. Both shots caused an avalanche, dropping tons of rock upon the caravan and their escort. The Skrall fled before the avalanche. Gresh jumped onto his Stalker and shouted, “Ride, Kirbold!”

The Agori took the reins, and sent the Spikit running at full speed, something anyone in that situation would have done. The rocks fell toward the trailer’s sides, making the road even narrower.

“We need to go faster!” Tarduk cried.

“We can’t!” Strakk replied, “We’re driving a carriage with a few tons of exsidian. How can we go faster?”

“Come on!” yelled Gresh. “We’re making good ground!”

“It’s better to stop talking!” Strakk growled, massaging the spot on his head where Gresh had struck him. “The next time you plan something like that, would you mind telling me about it?”

Strakk snatched the Thornax launcher from Gresh and turned around. He pointed at the rocks that were rolling toward them and fired. The rocks shattered, creating another shower of stones. At that same moment, the entire hillside exploded, sending a gigantic piece of rock rolling down the hill toward the trailer.

“It’s heading towards the caravan!” Tarduk cried.

The Spikit stopped and stood near the convoy, almost blocking it, but managing to provide cover for Strakk and Kirbold. Gresh left his Stalker, grabbed its saddle, and placed it over the trailer as Tarduk jumped in. A wave of rocks hit the trailer, but were pushed off to the sides by the saddle.

A moment later, it was over. Where the Agori and Glatorian had previously been standing, there was now a pile of rubble. The air was stifling due to the dust. All was silent. The Skrall, who’d managed to escape alive, approached the pile. They attempted to push some of the larger stones out of the way, but were unsuccessful.

“What will we tell Tuma?” asked one of the warriors.

“Nothing,” said the leader. “There was no transport. No one saw it. If anyone ever finds out what happened to them, we’ll say that it was an accident… one of the many that can happen in a dangerous place like this.”
The Skrall looked down at the axe and shield in their hands – the Glatorian’s weapons. After some thought, they were thrown into the rubble.

“These are of no use to anyone anymore.”
Strakk couldn’t see; he could barely breathe. He wanted to see his surroundings to be a hundred percent sure…but knew that it wouldn’t be good. This is what I get, he thought. This is the last time I do something for others. I have a very soft heart, that’s my problem. Enough! It’s over! I will become a champion of the arena, and never take an escort job again in my life, no matter what.

Strakk clenched his fist and struck something hard. Something grabbed his wrist and pulled him out of the rocks. He was relieved when he touched the ground. The dust kicked up by the fall caused him to cough violently. When he looked around, he saw a faint light around the dust, forming a familiar silhouette.

“I’m alive!” Strakk sputtered after a while. “What happened?”

“You really need to ask?” replied Gresh, his voice laced with fury. “Your fire triggered an avalanche. We all fell down the slope.”

“But I’m alive, right?” Strakk murmured, rising. “If not, I would have gone where good souls go. I’m definitely not there.”

“The avalanche pushed us against the wall of the ravine. Then I saw a small opening in the canyon wall,” Tarduk said. “We went inside, but then the entrance was blocked by rocks.”

“What of the caravan? And the exsidian?” Strakk said, alarmed. “If exsidian is lost, I will not receive my payment and the whole expedition will have been a waste of time!”

“The Spikit is a bit battered, but the carriage is fine,” Kirbold said. “I’m glad you asked.”

While the others spoke, Gresh had returned to the opening. It was blocked. Pushing with all his strength, he tried to move the rock, but to no avail. “Even if we do manage to move the rocks from the inside, the other side would be blocked by debris and boulders. I’d prefer not to go out that way.”

Tarduk lit a torch, illuminating the dark corridor. “Is there another option?”

Strak stepped forward, carefully examining the surface of the walls. The rock was perfectly smooth and polished. He was looking for a second exit. If there was one, it was not located somewhere in the ceiling, so climbing was not an option. He walked around, looking for scratches, cracks or anything that indicated the existence of a door, but due to low amount of light provided by the torch Tarduk had, he couldn’t find anything.

“Where do we go from here?” Strakk asked.

“This is not a natural tunnel,” Gresh said. “Someone created it. But why? And where does it lead?”

“Well,” Tarduk shrugged. “It seems our only choice is to follow the path… unless you’d prefer to stay here and die.”

Everyone sighed with relief when they discovered that the corridor was wide enough for the caravan to pass through. According to Kirbold’s calculations, the corridor should be running roughly from east to west, almost the same direction of Vulcanus. Of course, if he was wrong, and the tunnel did not
lead in that direction, it would undoubtedly cross the Dark Falls and end in the eastern territories. Nobody liked that possibility. Anyone who traveled there, even the Skrall, never returned.

Tarduk’s torch was the only source of light in the hallway. They hadn’t yet encountered anything that indicated where they were, or where they were going. Tarduk also wondered why there were no signs of life. No doubt the sand bats would have dug holes to gain entry. If there was another way out, it would be closed. For a moment Tarduk wished that Bara Magna’s Glatorian could control the elements to which they belonged. If that were the case, the Jungle Tribe could control plant life, and the Ice Tribe would control ice. Strakk could freeze the boulders blocking the exit and break it in half with one blow of his axe. That idea was a nice one, but he knew it was impossible. Nearly a hundred thousand years ago the Glatorian had fought a major war on the planet. Tarduk preferred not to think about what would’ve happened if they’d had the ability to control their elements then.

“Hey, look,” Gresh said. “What’s that?”

Several strange symbols on the wall glowed brightly in the torchlight; a series of circles with lines drawn through them at various angles, forming strange inscriptions. Tarduk’s mouth curved into a smile.

“I saw something like that once!” he said, rushing to the wall to see the markings more closely. “I found these writings in some ruins!”

“Excellent,” Strakk said. “I hope this symbol means ‘Exit.’”

“I don’t know what’s written here. I can’t read them,” Tarduk said. “But based off where I found them, I think…”

“Spit it out!” Strakk grunted.

“…I think it has something to do with the Great Beings…” Tarduk ended in silence.

“That’s… good news,” Gresh said, uncertainly.

“That’s wonderful,” a stunned Strakk rubbed his head. “Just great. Things couldn’t get any better. Unless you see lava in here…”

“You know what? I think I left a flaming torch at the entrance,” Kirbold murmured. “I’d like to go back.”

Tarduk perfectly understood what his teammates felt. Even if no one had seen the Great Beings, all knew of them. Many people would forgive them for making Bara Magna a technologically advanced world. However, the vast majority blamed them for the catastrophe that had struck the world. Why they disappeared, Tarduk did not know – in time it became a legend. However, there was no doubting one thing: the Great Beings had committed a horrible act. The consequences of their negligence had resulted in a tragic disaster. Since then no one talked about the Great Beings. In the past, Tarduk had made several attempts to find them, but the leader of his tribe forbade him to look, considering his attempts to be a “waste of time.” But he’s not here now, thought Tarduk. Perhaps now, I’ll finally manage to learn something about them.

“Why would the Great Beings have dug a tunnel in the mountains?” asked Gresh.

“To reach the other side of the mountain?” Strakk guessed with a hopeful tone in his voice.

“Perhaps the Great Beings built this place… and left a guard?” Tarduk suggested. “It may be in here now.”

“After a hundred thousand years? Please!” Strakk scoffed.

Suddenly a sound echoed through the hall – a hollow sound, like something on the ceiling had been loose and dropped down from above. Everyone jumped.

“Someone’s here,” Kirbold whispered.

“Something’s wrong,” said Gresh, his voice a whisper. “Stay here, I’ll investigate.”

Before Strakk could protest, Gresh advanced. A few hundred feet down the path, the floor of the hall seemed a bit different. The smooth surface was replaced by thousands of ancient stones. On the walls were more symbols. As he continued he heard strange noises ahead – sounds of scraping and a quiet hiss of air. Gresh’s nerves were pushed to the limit.

“Gresh!” Tarduk cried. “The ground is moving!”
Gresh looked down. Tarduk was right. The “stones” in the path were actually Scarabax Beetles. The swarm covered the floor of the corridor from wall to wall. When the beetles were small they weren’t much of a threat – they could easily be trampled. But adult Scarabax shells were hard as rock. Gresh quickly stepped back, causing a violent commotion amongst the insects. If he didn’t move quickly, he would not be heard from again.

Suddenly he heard a roar in the tunnel, and a sand bat burst out of the darkness, heading right for him. Anyone who had been through the desert knew the sand bats were something to fear. They were large predators with a snakelike body and the wings of a bat. They preyed on creatures by leaping from the sand and quickly dragging their victims into the depths. Now Gresh had two problems to worry about; the beetles and the sand bat.

Gresh stumbled and fell back towards the bug infestation, Kirbold and Tarduk hurrying to help him. Strakk hesitated for a moment, then quickly ran after them. He knew that if he didn’t succeed in saving his companion, he too would end up as just another meal. The sand bat lunged at Gresh. The Glatorian’s memories flashed before his eyes; he remembered his people, the faces of his friends, Kiina and Vastus. He instinctively closed his eyes as the sand bat rushed toward him, baring its teeth. For a moment nothing happened, then a furious whisper suddenly echoed through the cave. The noise drowned all other sounds, all except one… the desperate cry of the sand bat.

Fero reined his steed to a stop to take a closer look at the area. He knew there was a mystery to be solved here. Fero belonged to the desert raiders known as Bone Hunters. He was one of the best, but recently a target had managed to evade him. The attack on the village of Vulcanus had ended in failure – a handful of Glatorian had been sent to stop him, and had succeeded. He wasn’t sure how this had happened, but he was humiliated in front of his tribe.

Pride wouldn’t allow him to live with such shame. Shortly after the failed raid he’d left his camp, although he had no intent to hunt or plunder the Agori caravans. No, Fero would track juicier prey – the Glatorian who had beaten him days earlier. He had vowed to pursue them, and would only be satisfied when the desert sand had consumed them all.

Fero had followed Strakk’s trail since leaving Iconox. He wanted to wait until nightfall to attack the Glatorian, leaving his knife embedded in Strakk’s flesh as a warning to others. However, during his watch he’d found that Strakk was with Gresh, a Glatorian of Tesara, and they were both escorting a load of exsidian. Fate had given him the opportunity to defeat two enemies, and gain a substantial reward, in one stroke. He just needed a plan.

Many experienced Bone Hunters wouldn’t have run the risk of facing two strong Glatorian, but Fero was patient. The two Glatorian had gone on a long journey, and Fero would wait for the right moment to attack them by surprise. The Black Spike Mountains had made them an easy target, but the Skrall had interfered with his plans. Furious, he had watched the group of warriors escort their prisoners and their valuable cargo towards the village of Roxtus. Then there was an escape attempt that ended with an avalanche. The Skrall left behind the debris – the purported resting place of the two Glatorian, two Agori and several tons of exsidian.

Fero understood why the Skrall didn’t believe anyone could’ve survived the catastrophe. However, something told him that appearances could be deceiving. Perhaps the instinct of a Bone Hunter, honed for years in the harsh desert, led him to conclude that Gresh and Strakk were still alive. Of course, he hadn’t gone to confirm this by digging through tons of stones; this type of work was not something Fero enjoyed. In addition, the Skrall could return at any time.

This brought Fero to another possibility: the only way to avoid death in an avalanche was to be in a cave. Caves often had a second exit. Perhaps the road that the Glatorian were taking would bring them to it. If so, Fero intended to find it and wait for them. He turned his steed and headed off the road. If Strakk and Gresh emerged from the cave, Fero would make sure his defeat in Vulcanus was avenged.
Gresh opened his eyes. The Scarabax swarm had emerged from the ground like a miniature tornado and flung themselves toward the sand bat. For a moment, the beast disappeared under a thick black cloud of insects. When the cloud disappeared, Gresh noted that the spot where the sand bat had been was now empty. Soon the beetles scattered in all directions, and Gresh, still in shock, stood up.

“What just happened?” Gresh asked hurriedly, while checking to see if any of the beetles remained attached to his armor.

“You ran straight into a Scarabax swarm. That was stupid,” Strakk explained. “Then you fell into a Scarabax swarm. That was also stupid. The sand bat was smarter than you.”

Gresh gritted his teeth, trying hard not to fire back a harsh response.

Kirbold intervened, preventing Strakk from making things worse.

“The Scarabax react to sudden movements. When the sand bat flapped its wings it caught their attention, so they forgot you and went after it instead.”

“Then why did they flee?”

“Who knows. Maybe they went to take a nap after lunch? At least they’re gone,” Tarduk shrugged. “That’s not even the most interesting part,” Strakk sighed. “No? What is then? Enlighten me,” a curious Kirbold responded.

“Sand bats don’t live in the caves.” Strakk’s voice was riddled with impatience. “They live in the desert, buried in the sand where they hunt things on the surface. In places like this, there’s no food for them. Get it?”

“They came here from outside, like us,” Gresh guessed. “Except that sand bat flew from the other side, and that means…”

“…That means there must be an exit!” Kirbold concluded. “We just have to find it!”

“Well, wise man,” Strakk said. “Can we hurry before those bugs appear again?”

The team continued down the corridor. The passage twisted, rose and fell, but Tarduk was more interested in the inscriptions on the walls. He still had no idea what they might mean. He couldn’t even tell if they were letters or numbers, and the group was moving too quickly for him to take a good look.

“I think I see something,” Kirbold said. “There, up ahead.”

Tarduk stared into the darkness. Kirbold was right – ahead of them shone a dim light. Without thinking, Gresh moved in that direction. Kirbold had the Spikit run faster to keep pace with him.

“What is it?” Strakk cried. “A door? Is it the exit?”

Gresh continued down the path. Through a narrow slit in the middle of the wall was a faint stream of sunlight. Placing both hands on the wall, Gresh tried to find a button or a lever to open it.

“I think so,” he replied. “If only we can find… Aha!”

The Glatorian pushed a square stone embedded in the wall. After a moment they heard the echo of an old mechanism working. However, it did not open any door. Something completely unexpected happened.

“This doesn’t look good,” Strakk said.

Tarduk jumped from the caravan and saw how right Strakk was: the corridor walls were starting to approach each other. At the rate the walls were moving, the group had only a few minutes to live before they were crushed. Gresh and Strakk desperately groped the wall in search of something that could stop the mechanism, but found nothing. Kirbold rushed to help, ignoring the growls of the Spikit, which, by nature, was terrified of enclosed spaces. Tarduk kept searching for another button on the wall. However, he was also staring at the engravings. He was sure they hid a suggestion to help them out of this problem. Each one had a circular shape. Many of them had lines in within the circle, while others contained smaller circles. He thought some were words, but could not identify any. They were in a language he didn’t know. Wait, wait, he thought. This symbol, here… is it possible?

One symbol was far from the others – a simple circle, with no extra lines or other patterns in the middle. His first thought was that it looked like a zero or the letter “O.”

It couldn’t be that simple, he thought, then hesitated. Could “O” be “Open”? 
Tarduk jumped and punched the symbol. Suddenly, the stone before them began to shake. The rock that was blocking the road slowly moved aside, filling the tunnel with light. The walls continued approaching each other, but finally an escape route had opened.

“Run!” Tarduk screamed.

Kirbold took the reins and urged the Spikit toward the exit. Behind the carriage ran Tarduk, followed closely by Gresh and Strakk. Only moments after they escaped the tunnel, they heard the sound of the corridor walls closing behind them.

“Phew!” Strakk let out a breath of relief.

“Look around,” said Gresh.

They were at the foot of the mountains. They could see where the mountains gave rise to the desert, and the dark waters of the Skrall River fell with a steady echo. They had made it through the Black Spike Mountains.

“It’s a shame that we can’t go back the way we came,” Kirbold said. “Well, unless we all lose a lot of weight.”

Gresh turned, having heard the impact of metal on rock. Seconds later something fell from the rocks above them and landed with a crash at his feet. Before them lay the body of a Bone Hunter. Gresh approached him carefully.

“It’s Fero,” Gresh said in amazement.

“Is he dead?” Strakk asked.

“He’s still alive, but badly wounded. It looks like he’s been in a rough fight.”

“But look at him, he’s a Bone Hunter. Who could have done this to him?” Tarduk asked, surprised.

Soon the reply came, though not in the form of an audible voice. In seconds, the team was surrounded by a group of Vorox. Amid the quiet circle appeared a warrior clad in red armor.

“We did this to him,” said Malum. “The only question is whether or not we should do the same to you.”

* * *

Weeks ago…

Tuma woke with a start. Sleep had been welcome, but the dreams it had brought had done nothing to soothe his spirit. Now he sat up in his darkened chamber, staring out the window at the starlit sky of Bara Magna.

He had never been one for deep thoughts, doubts, or reflection. His class within Skrall society – those intended by nature to be leaders and the fiercest of warriors – did not place great value on looking inward or backward. Life was simple: move ahead, conquer, secure what you have taken, and then move on. It was this which had made the Skrall such feared warriors in the great war, and which helped them to survive as a tribe after the Shattering.

Cut off from their homeland after that global disaster, the Skrall resolved to tame the lands in which they found themselves – the volcanic, unstable, and dangerous territory north of the Black Spike Mountains. Although some parts of it remained too treacherous even for them to explore even after tens of thousands of years, they became the undisputed masters of their empire.

Then everything changed. A new breed of warriors appeared, silent, lethal shapeshifters who struck from thin air and then vanished again. Skrall warriors died by the score, as did the other members of Tuma’s class until only he remained to lead the tribe. Although it went against his nature, Tuma finally assembled the Skrall army and the rock Agori and led them south through the Black Spikes to new territories and safety.

Tuma got up and walked out of his shelter. Even in the middle of the night, the city of Roxtus was busy. Skrall patrols were constantly on the move, while Bone Hunters rode up to the gates with captive Glatorian and Vorox to sell. Agori prisoners taken in the desert were hard at work building new walls and repairing Skrall weapons and armor. The work never stopped… it couldn’t be allowed to, Tuma knew.
He had learned many things during those last battles, when fighting raged from the Maze Valley to the very heart of the Skrall camps. His people could never hold too much territory, be too well defended, or hesitate even a moment in their march of conquest. Although the desert had little to offer in terms of resources, it did grant its owner one thing every leader wanted – space in which to fight. And one day they would fight again, Tuma was certain… one day, the things that stalked the northern mountains would follow them here.

For now, though, he could focus his attentions to the south. The villages of Bara Magna were scattered, their relations with each ranging from indifferent to tense. It was doubtful they would be able to mount much resistance if the Skrall attacked now, but “doubtful” was not good enough. Tuma was not going to risk a two-front war, with the Glatorian and Agori in front of him and his other enemies behind. When the Skrall were ready to strike, Bara Magna must be ready to fall.

The leader of a Skrall patrol appeared before him. Tuma eyed him for a moment, noting the damage to his sword and shield. The warrior had seen combat this night.

“Report,” snapped Tuma.

“Bone hunter attacks have isolated Tajun,” said the Skrall. “Your representative has met with the hunters to argue against their plans for a raid on Vulcanus.”

Tuma smiled. “And so guarantees the Bone Hunters will go ahead with it. Very good. And have their plans been drawn up?”

The Skrall nodded and produced a roll of parchment from his pack. He handed it to Tuma, who unrolled it and scanned its contents. After a moment, he looked back at the warrior. “The Bone Hunters do not know we have this copy?”

“No, leader,” said the Skrall.

“You realize, if I find out you are lying… or even mistaken… your head will decorate the walls of Roxtus?”

“Yes, leader.”

“Who did you battle tonight?” asked Tuma.

“A Glatorian from the fire village and a pack of Vorox, leader,” reported the Skrall. “We had paused our rock steeds north of the Skrall River when we were attacked.”

“You killed them all, of course,” Tuma replied.

The Skrall did not answer.

Tuma’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“They vanished into the sand.”

Tuma leaned in close. “Glatorian do not vanish into desert dunes, warrior. Why do I not see the crimson one’s armor and sword among your gear?”

The Skrall said nothing. He didn’t have to. Tuma knew who he had encountered in the desert – Malum, exiled from the village of Vulcanus, now afflicted with desert madness and living with the Vorox. Malum was the most dangerous kind of warrior – one who did not fear death, for it would seem a comfort compared to the life he lived now. He could be a fierce enemy… which meant he could also be a valuable ally.

“Get fresh rock steeds,” Tuma ordered, “and take a dozen warriors. I want Malum brought here to me, alive. Do not return without him… I am sure you remember the fate of the last patrol that failed me.”

The Skrall nodded. The patrol assigned to find the book of Certavus among the western ruins had come back empty-handed. They had been reassigned to punishment duty, feeding the two-headed Spikit in their pens. Spikit being as they were, the feeders inevitably wound up also being the food.

“It will be done,” said the Skrall warrior.

Tuma nodded once, a sign of dismissal. As the warrior left, Tuma turned and gazed at the northern sky. Despite how well everything was falling into place, he still felt uneasy. For a moment, he imagined he could hear the shouts of long-dead Skrall and the sound of the invaders’ weapons, as if the battles of his past were being fought again.
Not now. Not yet, he said to himself. But one day… after Bara Magna has fallen… the Skrall will take revenge.
One of the first things Strakk learned as a Glatorian was to always read his situation. Was his opponent confident or fearful? Was he admired by your audience or did they not care? Could the layout of the arena be used to gain an edge? These questions all had to be answered before the village leader announced the start of the fight. This technique was useful for keeping silent and organizing his thoughts. It allowed him to forget the fear and focus on the challenge he faced. But considering all the facts, options and risk factors... Strakk was ready to panic. Being surrounded by Vorox as he was, Strakk believed he could be forgiven for feeling this way.

"And what shall I do with you now?" Malum said. "I have many Vorox to feed."

"Listen, Malum," said Gresh. "We have nothing for you. We just want to go to Vulcanus. Take what you want from us, and let us continue on our way."

"Listen to this..." Gresh said suddenly, pointing with his launcher. "I'm a pretty good shot. If any of your Vorox fire at us... I'll do the same to you, Malum. They may beat us, but you will die first."

The tone of Gresh's voice caused anxiety among the Vorox. Several of them began to growl menacingly, flexing their tails, ready to attack.

"Quiet. Aggression is not the answer," Malum replied indignantly. "I came here to kill a small group of old... acquaintances."

"What did I say?" Strakk muttered under his breath.

"I do not want your exsidian. What would we use it for? The Vorox aren't toolmakers. What they cannot eat, drink or use in a fight is not useful to them. Or me."

"What do you want?" Gresh said.

"The Skrall have something that belongs to me," Malum said calmly. "I want it back."

Strakk laughed. "Is that all? They have the strongest army in Bara Magna. You want to knock on their door and ask for a refund? By all means, go get yourself killed. While I do the same to your Vorox."

"Shut up, Strakk!" cut in Gresh. "What do you mean, Malum? Why are you here? The Vorox live in the Dunes of Treason. The Skrall have not entered that territory."

Malum climbed onto a rock. Two Vorox left the circle and grabbed Tarduk and Kirbold. Strakk and Gresh tried to intervene, but more Vorox blocked them from rescuing their companions.

"Pathetic heroes. I will ensure that your friends will not leave without saying goodbye... I would not want something to happen, right? In regard to your question, Gresh... the Bone Hunters recently attacked one of our camps. We managed to beat them, but they stole a sword, and sold it to the Skrall. We came to retrieve it, but since you're here, you can do this favor for us."

"You're crazy!" Strakk cried.

Malum's eyes flashed with anger.
“Crazy? No! I’m surrounded by friends who want to rip you into pieces! I control the fate of your two small friends and your exsidian! So I advise you start planning how to retrieve my sword… before my Vorox lose their patience.”

Gresh and Strakk watched the Skrall city from behind an outcropping of rock. It was night, but Roxtus was always in motion, like a hive. The soldiers were keeping watch, or returning to the city for the night. The Agori were working and repairing weapons. From inside the walls they could hear the sounds of the warriors in training,

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Strakk said.
“I know,” said Gresh. “You’ve said that three times.”
“There are at least a hundred Skrall in there,” Strakk continued. “Not to mention that Agori with glowing swords, whom I’ve never seen before. The walls are two feet thick, probably strong enough to stop an army. And anyway, I see no invitation for two Glatorian.”
“Well,” replied Gresh, “that means they do not expect us.”
“And how do we get in, genius?”

Gresh looked toward the desert, and saw a caravan approaching the city. Each wagon was pulled by a two-headed Spikit, with a torch strapped to the front acting as a flashlight.

“They’re probably transporting food and water,” said Gresh. “We only have to get into a carriage and ride through the door.”

“Did I say that I had a bad feeling about this?” Strakk asked.

The two Glatorian ran to the carriages. They were beyond the reach of the torchlight emanating from the city, so they were invisible to the guards. They saw a small Skrall group returning from their rounds, but at the last moment managed to hide behind a dune.

When the caravan slowly crept by, Strakk, followed by Gresh, crawled under the wagons. When the vehicle stopped for a moment, Strakk used a rope hanging from the rear to hang from the bottom of it: nobody could see him unless they deliberately looked under the carriage. Gresh, however, had a more difficult task: hiding under the trailer, near one of the Spikit. Moving quickly toward it, he prayed that the Spikit wasn’t hungry, fearing that it would take him as a potential meal. Once he was under the trailer, he mimicked Strakk’s feat, gripping the underside of it.

Upon reaching Roxtus, the city’s gates seemed to take forever to open. Gresh’s muscles were burning from the effort of holding his body above the sand. When he heard the voice of the guard – an Agori named Atakus – allowing entry of the caravan, he was relieved. The first part of the mission was successful. When the carriages stopped, the Glatorian left the caravan and hid in the shadows, hiding from the Skrall guards approaching. They waited until the carriages had finished unloading and departed, then entered the city.

“Do you have any idea where to look?” Strakk asked.
“T...
“Just start looking around,” said Gresh. “When dawn breaks…”
“…we won’t be able to get out of town unseen. I know.”

The Glatorian efficiently separated to search the room. In no other village was there a place like this. The Rock Tribe didn’t use the room for sleeping or eating, or to store inventory: no, apparently all of their treasure was kept here. Gresh noted a map of Bara Magna placed on a large table. Was this simply used as a source of information, or for mapping out war strategies?

It was Strakk who found where the most valuable treasure was. There were a lot of different things. Some of them – helmets, armor and other objects stolen long ago – were easy to recognize, but others he had never seen before in his life. Malum’s sword was under a pile of objects unknown to him, surrounded by six stones engraved with symbols, which were of no importance. Strakk wanted to take everything he could, but, after a moment’s thought, he quickly abandoned the idea. He had nothing against robbing the Skrall, but carrying all that baggage would seriously hamper his escape.

Strakk took a closer look at the item they’d come here for. The sword was unique, its elaborate ornamentation shaped like a flame. The blade was made of exsidian, and the handle had been carved from volcanic rock. No wonder Malum wanted to retrieve such a beautiful weapon. He must have been attached to it, as even his name was written on the handle. But something was wrong. Strakk looked closer at the engraving. The inscription on the sword said… “Ackar.”

Whoa, Malum is a thief, thought Strakk. He dared to steal the sword of his fellow Glatorian, Ackar, and when the Bone Hunters took it, he asked us to steal it back for him! Did he stab Ackar in the back just out of spite?

“You found it?” asked Gresh, entering the room. He was carrying his shield in one hand, and a large sword Strakk didn’t recognize in the other.

“I thought this might be useful for getting out of here.”

“Of course I found it… but look.” Strakk showed Gresh the inscription on the sword. “Now what do we do with it?”

“We will return it to Ackar,” Gresh replied without hesitation.

“Maybe he’ll give us some kind of reward,” Strakk proposed. “But on the other hand, if we give it to Malum, perhaps the Agori live long enough to see Vulcanus again.”

“First, we need to get out of Roxtus,” Gresh said.

“I saw something that could help,” said Strakk. “Give me the sword.”

The two Glatorian left the building quietly. Gresh followed Strakk to a fenced area that smelled awful – something common for a Spikit pen.

“The Skrall have a weakness for these two-headed monsters,” Strakk whispered. “Probably because Spikit are the only things uglier than them. Let’s see how they like them running loose.”

Strakk brandished his axe, breaking the gates with a single blow. Seeing the opening, the animals hesitated for a moment, then broke into a run through the city.

Normally, stopping a herd of Spikit would not be a problem for the Skrall: block off some streets, kill a few of them, and the rest could quickly and easily be gotten under control. Unfortunately, the Agori caretakers had forgotten to feed them. The hungry Spikit were devouring everything, and everyone, within reach of their claws. A dozen wild, furious, and hungry Spikit ran throughout the village, and chaos soon engulfed the city. The Agori ran in panic as the Skrall used Thornax launchers to try to subdue the creatures. Gresh saw one of them trip and fall right in front of the pack. He did not rise again.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Gresh and Strakk climbed a wall near the city gates. The closed entryway kept the Spikit and the Skrall from following them. On the other side, Atakus was still on guard, with orders to take them down. Strakk jumped on him from above, knocking him out cold. The two Glatorian propped the unconscious guard against a wall, then ran into the desert as fast as they could. They paused for breath only when they were at a safe distance from the Skrall city.

“Do you think this was too easy?” Gresh mused.

“Don’t worry. We have the sword, and let some Spikit enjoy a meal. And besides, why should we worry about the Skrall? Do you think they’ll want this sword back that badly?”

Gresh shrugged. Maybe he was worrying too much, but he had a bad feeling. “Give me the sword.”
There wasn’t enough moonlight to see very far, but it was all he needed to inspect the sword. It didn’t appear to be anything special, but at the base of the handle Gresh felt a small, atypical depression. When he pressed it, a small compartment opened, containing a small metal object.


Gresh looked at it a good while before he recognized it. Suddenly, he threw it into the sand and crushed it with his heel.

“What are you doing?” Strakk protested. “That thing could have been valuable!”

“Our lives are worth more,” said Gresh. “We need to get out of here.”

They ran. Gresh occasionally looked anxiously behind him to see if someone was chasing them. But he didn’t see any Skrall following them out of the city.

“I saw something like this before,” said Gresh as they ran. “Once in the desert, I saw an Agori running from something. He had a metal collar. He mumbled something about being enslaved by the Skrall… it sounded like nonsense. I took the necklace and saw that in the middle was a strange object. It sent a signal…”

“A tracking device,” Strakk concluded. “But why would one be in the sword?”

Gresh climbed some rocks. He saw the Skrall approach the place where he had destroyed the transmitter. Even without the tracker to follow, they continued to give chase, attempting to follow the steps in the sand. However, daylight would be needed to clearly see the footprints left by Strakk and Gresh. They were safe for now.

“The Bone Hunters sold the sword to the Skrall. I don’t think the Skrall knew where it came from,” pondered Gresh. “Perhaps they thought that the Bone Hunters stole it from Ackar, and that he would come to get it. Maybe it was a trap for Ackar.”

“But why would they be interested in him? Ackar was a champion of the Arena, but lately we hardly hear about him. I have no idea why anyone would be interested in him.”

“Maybe it was for Skrall hunting practice…” said Gresh.

After some time, they finally managed to reach the Vorox camp. They saw no one following them. Recalling the great sense of smell that the Vorox had, they found a cave with the wind in their favor. They climbed a small hill near the camp and hid in the cavern. At the camp, they could see Malum standing next to the caravan and the two Agori.

“We still need to rescue the Agori,” reminded Gresh. “You take care of Malum while I distract the Vorox.”

Gresh approached some stones glittering in the depths of the cave. Their brightness wasn’t a reflection: the stones were a mineral that emitted light. Gresh crushed a few of the stones, and covered his armor with the dust. After a moment, he began to glow.

“Give me a minute, then you go for the caravan,” Gresh said and then walked away.

Strakk took a position near the cave entrance, and waited for the right moment. Suddenly he heard a scream so horrible that even he jumped in fear. Gresh, glowing bright as the stars, jumped from behind a rock and ran straight into the camp. The Vorox, superstitious by nature, mistook him for a vengeful ghost who had decided to stay in the desert and began to flee. Gresh came closer to get them to disperse.

Malum was not fooled. “Do not panic,” he growled. “He isn’t a spirit… but he soon will be.”

Strakk felt that this was the right time – the caravan wasn’t being guarded. He took a deep breath and entered the camp. He jumped on the wagon, took the reins and urged the Spikit into a gallop. The wagon jolted forward so violently that Kirbold and Tarduk almost fell out. Before the Vorox could notice that the caravan was gone, they were already far away.

“Where is Gresh?” Tarduk cried. “He was back there!”

“That’s his problem,” Strakk said.

Tarduk grabbed an exsidian doubloon, ready to strike Strakk.

“Now it’s your problem too. Go back.”

“No need,” Kirbold announced. “Look!”
A shining being was running toward them with a group of Vorox at his heels. Gresh leaped forward desperately. Strakk reined in, slowing the Spikit enough that the jungle Glatorian was able to jump onto the wagon.

“Get moving! Hurry!” Gresh shouted.

However, the Spikit could not pull the group’s combined weight fast enough, and the furious Vorox were gaining rapidly. Strakk frantically sought a way to lose their pursuers. Then he saw small hope of escape: a large hill up ahead. If they could reach the other side of it, they would be out of sight of the Vorox for a moment. They could leave the carriage, and hide somewhere until dawn. Strakk gripped the reins and had the Spikit run faster until they disappeared behind the hill. Then Strakk realized his mistake. It was not a hill: it was the deadly Dark Falls, leading the Spikit, cargo and passengers to their doom.

* * *

Weeks ago...

The Skrall patrol moved out at dawn. Their target, Malum, was living with the bestial Vorox now, and everyone knew Vorox were night hunters. During the day, they would be sleeping beneath the sand and prime targets for an ambush.

Despite this, there was a grim silence among the members of the unit. Of all the tribes on Bara Magna, only the Vorox showed no fear of Skrall. Maybe it was because their savage brains were too dull to know fear. Or maybe it was because, living their lives in the wasteland as they did, the prospect of death simply held no terror for them.

The leader of the patrol kept his eyes trained on the dunes ahead. Vorox were notoriously good at covering signs of their presence, when they felt the need to do so, but a good tracker could still spot where they had been. Their tunnels left a telltale disturbance in the sand, as if a miniature cyclone had touched down. Sighting such a thing didn’t mean there were Vorox right below ground, since they might have gone down one hole and emerged from another. But a fresh cluster of signs, as yet undisturbed by the wind, meant a good chance Vorox were somewhere nearby. And where they were, Malum would not be far away.

He spotted something up ahead. It looked like roughly a dozen tunnels had been made in a patch of sand beneath an outcropping. It was hard to tell how recent they were, as the rock would have protected them some from the wind, but it was the first sign the Skrall had seen. Even more interesting, there was a natural cave in the slope nearby. Shelter for Malum, perhaps, during the heat of the day?

The patrol leader held up a hand to stop the march. He gestured for half the troop to surround the tunnel entrances, and the others to stay back with him. It was time to set the trap.

Half a dozen Skrall rode up to the outcropping. Once they were there, they kept moving, pacing their rock steeds back and forth across the sand. If there were Vorox down there, they would sense the vibrations in the ground. Regardless of whether they thought what they heard was a potential meal or the presence of an enemy – often the same thing – they would come up to investigate.

Naturally, they would not come up the same way they went down. They would spring out of the sand behind the intruders and try to take them by surprise. That was why half the patrol had hung back, keeping their mounts perfectly still. Two could play at the ambush game.

The Skrall waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Twenty. Some of the warriors were starting to wonder if the Vorox were long gone from this place.

They got their answer, but not in the way they had expected. The ground suddenly opened up beneath the reserve Skrall, sending them and their mounts tumbling down into a pit. The Skrall near the outcropping turned and rode toward their comrades, just as two dozen Vorox emerged from their original tunnels. Howling, they hurled crude swords and spears at the backs of the Skrall riders. One spear found
its mark in the side of a rock steed, sending mount and rider tumbling down into the sand. The Vorox were on the unfortunate warrior before he could rise, insuring that he never would again.

Malum appeared at the entrance to the cave, watching the carnage with a smile on his face. After the events of the night before, only a fool wouldn’t have expected Skrall retaliation. He’d had the Vorox leave just enough traces to lure the patrol in, without making it so obvious that they would suspect a trap.

The Skrall patrol leader and his warriors had managed to scramble out of the pit, leaving their rock steeds behind. Dropping to one knee, they took aim with their Thornax launchers and fired. The explosive, spiked spheres sailed into the ranks of the Vorox, felling a number of the beasts. The still mounted Skrall turned in the saddle and fired a volley of their own, scattering their attackers.

Regrouping, the Skrall made ready to charge. That was when they heard a chorus of growls coming from behind. At least 50 Vorox had sprung out of the sand some 500 yards behind them. The patrol leader wasted no time, ordering the Skrall on foot to join their comrades on their rock steeds. Then they charged, leaving the small army of Vorox in the dust and headed right for the battered first wave and Malum.

“Aim high!” the patrol leader yelled.

The Skrall rode into the midst of the Vorox, striking at them with their blades. The Skrall mounted behind fired their launchers at the rocks above Malum’s cave. Their shots brought down a rockslide on the ex-Glatorian, pinning him beneath a pile of stone. Behind them, the mob of Vorox was closing in.

The Skrall upon whose rock steed the patrol leader rode slumped over and fell from the mount, a Vorox sword having struck him down. The leader grabbed the reins and urged the steed up into the rocks. Reaching the point where Malum was trapped, he coolly dismounted and aimed his launcher at the Glatorian’s head.

“Back to your holes,” he shouted at the Vorox, “or he dies.”

The beasts might or might not have understood the words – the Skrall weren’t sure. But they knew what they were seeing and they comprehended the tone. The Vorox didn’t retreat, but they didn’t keep attacking, either. They simply stopped and waited.

“We strike now,” said one of the Skrall warriors. “Make them pay for what they have done.”

“They are vermin, no better than scarabax beetles,” said another. “Exterminate them all.”

The patrol leader agreed. He hated Vorox. They were too unpredictable and too dangerous to leave alive. But he had his orders: bring Malum back to the city of Roxtus, alive. There would be time enough later to satisfy the need for vengeance and wipe out the Vorox.

“Enough,” he commanded. Reaching down, he grabbed the unconscious Malum by the throat and hauled him out from under the pile of rubble. “We have what we came for. Malum will face Tuma’s justice… and so will all these beasts, in time.”

Throwing Malum’s body over his rock steed, the patrol leader mounted up. Once they realized what was happening, some of the Vorox moved to attack, only to be cut down by Skrall Thornax. The rest backed away. Was it sadness in their eyes as they saw the Skrall riding away with their leader? Could beasts of the desert feel such an emotion? Or was it dread of the day the Skrall would return, for all of them?

No one… perhaps not even the Vorox themselves… could say.
It's true, thought Gresh. When you're about to die, everything seems to slow down. He looked around at his situation: he was, along with two Agori, one Glatorian, and a wagon carrying invaluable cargo, plunging into a chasm, probably to his death… and yet, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The water was drawing closer inch by inch, and he was conscious of every breath he took – in, out, in, out. His mind raced madly, even though he seemed to have all the time in the world before impact. Below them was the headwater of the Skrall River, where the water flowing down the Black Spike Mountains came together to feed the oasis of Tesara. The river ran farther south, but thanks to the great heat, it evaporated before reaching the region of Atero.

Gresh braced his body. Even if he hadn't spent all his life living near water, it would have been clear to him that all his bones would break during the impact, so he had to submerge cleanly. He dove headfirst to split the water's surface, but he had forgotten that, even here, the Skrall River wasn't very deep. His head hit a rock at the bottom of the river and everything went black.

Then, the darkness was pushed away by lively colors. Gresh stood amidst the Sea of Liquid Sand, and, despite the quicksand that surrounded him, managed to remain on his feet. Not far away, the village of Vulcanus was burning. The Agori and Glatorian burned, too, but walked around as if nothing was happening. He turned to his right to see Malum leading a horde of Vorox to Vulcanus. But instead of attacking, they passed through the village and charged into a group of Bone Hunters. Nearby sat a troop of Skrall watching the action. Once both sides were tired from fighting, the Skrall overwhelmed both, the Vorox and the Bone Hunters. Then something even stranger happened: a shooting star crossed the sky and lit up the desert night for miles around. It crashed down and burned a crater into the sand. Smoke and flame poured from the crash site, and finally a figure slowly rose… one Gresh had never seen before. At first he thought it was a Glatorian, but the creature kept growing and growing, and soon towered miles over Bara Magna. The figure grew and grew… or was it Gresh who was shrinking? He looked down at himself and noticed that his legs were half sunken into the quicksand. He was sinking! He called for help, but the Vulcanus Agori were too occupied with the fire and the battle with the Skrall. The giant figure stood high over the chaos, and called Gresh's name.

“Gresh… Gresh… Gresh!”

The Glatorian's eyes snapped open. The burning village, the quicksand, the Skrall and the giant were gone. He was lying in the sand and looked up at two Glatorian, Ackar and Kiina. Strakk, Tarduk and Kirbold sat nearby in the shadow of a cliff.

“You gave us quite a scare,” Kiina said, laughing.

“Don't try to get up,” Ackar advised. “You hit your head really hard.”

“What... how did you get here? Gresh asked, trying to get up despite Ackar's warning. Immediately everything began to spin and he had to lie down again.

“When the exsidian ore didn't arrive in Vulcanus, Raanu grew nervous,” Ackar replied. “If it isn't delivered, Iconox can't pay their debt to Vulcanus for the lost match.”
“Ackar convinced Raanu to wait a little instead of acting too hastily,” Kiina said. “He said we would either find you and help deliver the exsidian, or try to prove that Iconox sent the cargo on its way. We had just arrived when Strakk fished you out of the river.”

Gresh gave his companion a surprised look. He and Strakk were anything but good friends, and he knew that Strakk never did anything without wanting something in return.

Their gazes met. “Tarduk promised me a part of his next artifacts trove if I found you and got you out of the water,” Strakk explained. “So it was only reasonable to…” Kiina stared angrily at Strakk, looking like she wanted to teach him a lesson in manners with her trident.

Ackar had walked over to the shores of the river and stared into the water. “At least we found you. But according to Kirbold, the exsidian is lying at the bottom of the river. Raanu won’t be happy about this.”

“Worse,” Kirbold said. “If we don’t have a safe route anymore to send cargo from Iconox to Vulcanus and back, then it’s of no use for either village to challenge each other in the arena. When a village has got something the other one wants, there’ll be confrontations.”

“If we manage to get the exsidian to Vulcanus we may be able to avoid that,” Ackar said. “But your Spikit ran away, the wagon is shattered and the whole area is teaming with Vorox and Skrall… this situation is serious.”

Gresh forced himself to get up. Everything was spinning for a moment, quickly at first, then slowing down just enough so that he wasn’t sick. He staggered over to Ackar. The exsidian had probably buried itself deep into the riverbed. It would be possible to recover it with the proper equipment, but without the wagon, they could only transport a few ingots anyway. Even if they loaded a few ingots onto Ackar and Kiina’s Sand Stalkers, the expedition would be far from a success.

“Maybe we should get a wagon from Vulcanus?” Tarduk suggested. “We could probably save you the effort,” Kiina said. “Ackar – don’t you think there may be someone around who would be very eager to get some exsidian?” She nodded her head towards the north.

Ackar smiled.

“This is an absurd idea,” Strakk grumbled while trudging through the sand. “Not only absurd – suicidal, too. So of course they chose me for it.”

He kept himself from looking back. Strakk knew exactly where Ackar and Kiina were watching him from up between the rocks. It was allegedly to cover his back, but he knew the true reason: they wanted to make sure he didn’t make a run for it. Strakk marched from the Dark Falls to the southeast, in the direction of the open desert. Gresh had proposed heading north, toward Roxtus, but Kiina had been against it.

“Going that way he’ll never make it past Malum and his Vorox,” she said. “Plus, the Skrall aren’t stupid enough to think a Glatorian would voluntarily come to them if there was another solution. No, the encounter has to look accidental.”

Thus Strakk was wandering through the desert, beneath the burning sun, without any equipment. If he was “fortunate,” a Skrall patrol would cross his way. If not, he’d fall victim to the Bone Hunters or some hungry desert creature. Not for the first time he asked himself whether the match with Ackar he had been promised was worth all this. He stopped to drink something. During the accident he had lost his water canteen, but he had insisted on taking Kiina’s before he moved out. Kiina was afraid that the Skrall wouldn’t believe his story if he was carrying water, but Strakk refused to leave without it.

He took a large gulp. When he lowered the canteen, he saw something in the distance: riders, coming straight toward him. He couldn’t make out who they were through the heat waves rising from the sand, but he counted about half a dozen armed figures on Sand Stalkers. Strakk felt a surge of relief. Bone Hunters rode Rock Steeds, so the riders were probably not raiders. He at least didn’t want to fall into the hands of the wrong criminals. He forced himself to stop walking. Even though his mind was screaming “Run!” Strakk was in no way a coward – after all, you couldn’t be a successful Glatorian if you gave in to
fear. But he thought practically: should something happen to him, his compensation would have to be generous… that is, if it would still be of use to him…

The riders had now come close enough that he could make them out. It was a well-equipped Skrall patrol, eager for a round of “punch the Glatorian.” Strakk felt how his knees grew soft, but he kept himself together. He had to look exhausted and afraid if his plan was to succeed – that shouldn’t be hard, he thought.

The leader of the squad was an elite warrior Strakk hadn’t met before, named Stronius. He had watched many Skrall matches in the arena, with unmoving features and never speaking a word. Rumors say he came to supervise the Skrall warriors. Should one of them, by some miracle, lose – or simply not win fast enough – he had permission to punish them.

Apparently the Skrall need even more motivation to really beat up someone, Strakk thought sarcastically. Stronius rode directly towards Strakk, looking down on the Glatorian with a self-pleased smile.

“A long way from home… Glatorian.”

“I am…” Strakk began.

Stronius cut him off. “Maybe you need a meal and a bed. I’m sure we’ll find something for you in Roxtus.”

Strakk had to gulp. He’d heard a lot of rumors about Glatorian that went to Roxtus – or were taken there against their will – and were never seen again. It was said they were used as “guinea pigs.” And that was just the beginning: the other stories of why they were brought to Roxtus, and what happened to them there, were far worse. “I was on a journey with a few others,” Strakk explained. “Our wagon plunged down the Dark Falls. I… I am the only survivor.”

“A wagon?” Stronius asked. “What was the cargo?”

Strakk hesitated shortly before answering, just long enough to seem believable. “exsidian. We were bringing it to Vulcanus. But it is now at the bottom of the river.”

Stronius smiled. His eyes were gleaming with greed. “You are aware, Glatorian, that we could finish you off now and take the exsidian for ourselves?”

At least he’s honest, Strakk thought.

“But we don’t do such things,” Stronius continued. “As honest citizens of Bara Magna, we will do something else instead. I’ll send one of my men to Roxtus to get a wagon, and you will lead us to the spot where the exsidian sank. And then we will… get it out for you, and send you and your cargo on your way again.”

This can’t mean anything good, Strakk said to himself. The Skrall aren’t exactly known for being a charity organization.

The Glatorian looked down at the sand, then up at Stronius. If he agreed to this proposal too fast, it wouldn’t seem authentic – the Skrall knew that no Glatorian would seriously believe they would let him go, with or without cargo. Strakk pretended to struggle, then finally resign and accept. “Agreed.”

“You made a wise decision,” Stronius said, clearly meaning: Had you said no, you’d already be dead.

It took a few hours until the Skrall returned with the wagon. Stronius didn’t let Strakk out of his sight. Once or twice the Ice Glatorian was tempted to betray the plot, hoping that the Skrall would let him go home. But his intelligence won out – telling the truth would ensure he would never have the opportunity to lie again. When the Skrall finally returned, he brought the message that Tuma, leader of the Skrall, had doubts about Stronius’ plan. However, he agreed under the condition that the job would be done as fast as possible, and that any “excessive material” would be disposed of immediately. Strakk had been called many names, but “excessive material” was new to him.

They made their way to the Skrall River in silence. Strakk hoped the other Glatorian had stayed true to their word and were waiting for him. Should they have thought twice and left for Vulcanus, he’d be in serious trouble. When they reached a rise, Strakk saw the spot. Neither Gresh, Kiina, Ackar nor anyone else was to be seen. First he started to panic on the inside – they had betrayed him! Then he
noticed that no tracks could be seen in the sand at the shores, and calmed down a little. They wouldn’t
have had any reason to cover all their tracks if they were only on their way to the fire village. The plan
was still going, and he had to keep playing his role.
“I don’t see any trace of your comrades,” Stronius said. He didn’t sound distrustful, but simply
bored. After a year in Bara Magna he no longer found the tricks of the Glatorian amusing.
“The river carried them away,” Strakk replied, a little too fast. “I am the only one who survived.”
“I see,” Stronius said. “So if I send one of my men downstream, he’ll find them where the water
disappears into the sand.”
“Sure,” Strakk responded. What else was he supposed to say…?

Stronius gestured to three of his men. “Go and see whether you find something in the riverbed –
and be thorough. The life of a Glatorian depends on it.”

The three Skrall descended and stepped into the water. Only a few moments passed before their
armored heads reappeared at the surface. One of them swam to the shore and climbed onto the sand. In
one hand he was holding an exsidian ingot.

“Down there are the remains of a wagon,” the Skrall reported. “And more ingots like this one.”
“Very good,” Stronius said. “All of you go down and bring up the rest. Meanwhile, I will keep an
eye on our ‘friend.’”

The three Skrall warriors went to work. As with every labor they tackled, they were fast and thorough.
Again and again they would emerge with new ingots that were loaded onto the wagon. The higher the
stack got, the broader grew Stronius’ smile. No doubt he was already thinking of how Tuma would
welcome him when he returned with such a treasure. When the wagon was fully loaded, Stronius and his
men got back on their Sand Stalkers. The elite Skrall grinned at Strakk and aimed his Thornax launcher at
him. “Many thanks, Strakk. Your services to the village of Roxtus will be remembered forever… on your
gravestone.”

Strakk closed his eyes. The shrill whistle of a fired Thornax could be heard, followed by a sharp
cry. But it didn’t come from Strakk. The Glatorian opened his eyes and saw Stronius lying in the sand.

“Drop your weapons – now!” Ackar bellowed down from the nearby rocks. “Get away from the
wagon!”

The Skrall warriors opened fire with explosive Thornax ammunition. Strakk used the distraction
to run to the river, planning to cross it and make a break for the desert beyond. He had already made it
to the opposite side when Kiina appeared from behind a sand dune.

“Where are you going?” she snapped at him while continuing to fire Thornax at the Skrall.

“Out of the line of fire,” Strakk answered. “I’m unarmed, in case you missed that.”

“Being unarmed will be the least of your problems if you abandon us,” Kiina shot back. “Worry
more about me making you a head shorter. Here!” She gave Strakk her trident. “Start being useful. And
remember – point the sharp end at the bad guys.”

Even though the enemies outnumbered them, Ackar had managed to keep the Skrall away from
the wagon. Stronius had sent a warrior to sneak around and take out the Glatorian. He had already
managed it around and halfway up the rocks when he crossed paths with Gresh, who hurled a well-
aimed stone at him. The Skrall fell tumbling back into the sand.

“Are you ready?” Ackar yelled.

Kiina nodded and took aim. “Go!” she cried.

The two Glatorian fired their Thornax launchers in parallel, hitting the sand directly in front of
the Skrall. The explosive projectiles collided noisily, whirling sand through the air and into the eyes of the
Skrall. Temporarily blinded, they could do nothing as Gresh, Strakk and the two Agori raced to the wagon
and climbed aboard. Ackar rode over and brought Kiina her Sand Stalker, which she rapidly mounted.

“Go!” Kiina yelled as she drove the Skrall’s Sand Stalkers apart. Gresh spurred the Spikit onward,
and the wagon was rapidly racing away. Ackar turned around and fired at the Skrall who were reemerging
from the sand cloud.

“I can’t believe it worked!” Strakk said.
“It’s not over yet,” Gresh reminded him. “We still have to reach Vulcanus.”

“And I’m afraid they still have a score to settle with us,” Kiina said, pointing back.

Gresh looked over his shoulder. The Skrall had recaptured their Sand Stalkers and were in hot pursuit of the wagon. Spikit were strong and enduring, but not as fast as Sand Stalkers. It was only a matter of time till the Skrall caught up.

“Any good ideas?” Strakk asked the assembled group.

“Kiina and I could search for cover and stop them,” Ackar said, “while you keep riding to the village.”

“No way,” Gresh said. “This is our task. I won’t let anything happen to you because you helped us.”

“I don’t really think we need your permission, youngster,” Kiina replied. “Look for a good spot, Ackar, where we can catch them in our crossfire.”

“Wait a second,” Strakk interrupted. “There is someone up ahead – red-armored. Maybe Vulcanus sent some rookie warriors as support?”

“Whoever it may be, I hope they’re well-equipped!” Ackar said. “We’re about to have a rough confrontation.”

They quickly approached the distant figures. As they came into clearer view, Gresh felt his stomach become as tight as a knot. “Oh, I don’t think you have to worry about that. They’re well-equipped, that much is for certain.”

Strakk stared ahead. “I don’t believe it. We can’t possibly have that much bad luck.”

“Who are they?” Ackar asked, his gaze still fixed on the Skrall closing in behind them. Gresh wanted to answer, but the words caught in his throat. After everything they went through, he couldn’t believe their mission was about to come to an end…

“They aren’t coming from Vulcanus,” he finally said. “The red armor… it’s Malum. He and his Vorox are expecting us.”

“And the Skrall are right behind us,” Kiina remarked.

_Around us there is nothing but endless desert, Ackar thought to himself. No hiding places to be seen. We can neither escape nor defeat them, let alone do both._

“I’d say we have a good chance of being trashed,” Strakk said. “And we’re about to find out…”

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* * *

**Weeks ago…**

The first thing Malum saw when he opened his eyes was a pair of Vorox. His first thought was that all of it – the attack by the Skrall, his capture – had been a bad dream. He had certainly had plenty of those lately.

But, no – these Vorox were in chains. Being desert dwellers, the Vorox hated any kind of confinement. It was sheer torture for them. Malum had no doubt that a Vorox penned in too long would simply lose the will to live. Rage grew in his heart for whoever had shackled these “beasts,” and he already knew who that was: the Skrall.

He looked up to see two of that hated species standing over him. One was a warrior, like those who had attacked his camp. The other was much taller, clad in green and black armor, and obviously in command.

“I am Tuma,” said the leader. “And you are Malum, disgraced Glatorian and friend to… the animals.”

“You are the trash of the desert,” Malum growled. “And I am the one who will celebrate at your grave.”

The Skrall warrior walked over to where Malum lay and kicked him in the side.

“That’s no way to talk,” said Tuma. “I brought you here to have a conversation.”
Malum got painfully to his feet. His wrists and ankles were surprisingly not shackled. Tuma had a great deal of confidence, it seemed.

“You brought me here for revenge,” said the ex-Glatorian. “My people bloodied yours and you can’t stand that.”

The warrior moved to strike Malum again, but Tuma stopped him. “Stand down. You are… half-right, Malum. Your Vorox have proven to be an annoyance lately. But killing you, though no doubt a great deal of fun, would not change that. Believe me, if I wanted you dead, even your pets would be unable to find all the pieces.”

Malum looked around. He was in the city of Roxtus, filled with rock Agori and Skrall troops. The place was notorious for welcoming Glatorian inside and then never letting them leave. He could see Agori guards all along the walls and Skrall patrols entering and leaving at a constant pace. It was not a spot one dropped by for a visit.

“Then why am I here?”

“You control the Vorox,” said Tuma, gesturing to the pathetic, chained creatures. “They do what you command. That makes you a threat… or a potentially valuable ally. But before we could make any arrangement with you, we would have to see proof that you really can make these beasts do what you say.”

“And if I refuse?” asked Malum, already sure of the answer.

Tuma smiled. On him, it was an ugly expression. “Then we send you back to your friends, of course… so they can have a funeral, or whatever ritual they do to honor the dead.”

“That’s what I thought,” Malum replied.

The Skrall had it all wrong, of course. They assumed he had some mysterious power to control the Vorox, but he did not. He had won dominance of the pack by defeating its previous leader in single combat. As long as he led them to food and water and kept them away from unnecessary danger – in other words, as long as he was an effective pack leader – they would follow him. But they did it as free beings, not as slaves. The Skrall, he knew, did not want allies – they wanted soldiers they could sacrifice without hesitation.

“Take him to the arena,” Tuma ordered. The Skrall warrior grabbed Malum roughly by the arm and dragged him to the Glatorian arena in the center of the large settlement. Chained against the far wall were two more Vorox, both members of Malum’s own pack. A plan began to form in his mind, but it would depend on a great many unknown factors. How hungry and desperate were the Vorox? Too far gone to remember him? Would they understand what he was trying to do?

A half dozen Skrall warriors appeared, ringing the sides of the arena. A seventh took a position in a box behind the Vorox. At Tuma’s signal, he released the chains that held the beasts prisoner.

The two Vorox charged toward Malum. He could tell even from a distance they had been mistreated. They were eager for prey, and might not care who or what it would be. But he stood his ground, making direct eye contact with first one Vorox, then the other. Then he raised his right arm and brought it down slowly, all the while giving a low whistle.

The Vorox slowed, then stopped completely. They sank down to all fours and looked up at Malum, expectantly. To the Skrall watching, it looked like a miracle: two savage beasts tamed in an instant.

“It’s really quite easy, once you gain their respect,” Malum said, never taking his eyes off the Vorox. “Judging from their wounds, I would say they at least respect your capacity to inflict punishment.”

“My warriors could be trained to do this?” asked Tuma. The Vorox had been a problem ever since the Skrall started capturing them. Now and then, they broke loose and did a lot of damage before they could be subdued or killed.

“They have seen me do it,” Malum answered. “I am sure they could do it themselves now.”

The six Skrall warriors advanced on the beasts, who remained motionless at their approach. “Let them go,” Tuma said to Malum.

Malum gave a short, sharp whistle. The Vorox sprang to life, wild again. The Skrall grabbed them immediately and dragged them back to the other end of the arena, struggling to hold them still. Tuma
ordered the Skrall who had kicked Malum forward. He would be the lucky one to show his newfound mastery of the Vorox.

At Tuma’s signal, the other warriors released their bestial captives. The Vorox charged toward the lone warrior who waited for them. In a perfect imitation of Malum’s action, the Skrall raised and lowered his arm while whistling in just the same tone as he had heard. The effect was stunning, at least to him.

The Vorox didn’t stop. They didn’t even slow down. They struck the Skrall like twin avalanches, and once he was down, headed for Tuma. Malum took advantage of the confusion to snatch up the fallen warrior’s weapon. He sprang out of the arena and shattered the chains holding another pair of Vorox with one swing.

“This way, brothers!” he yelled, charging for the gate.

The Vorox fell back and started after him, the Skrall in pursuit. The Agori at the gate, seeing a crazed Malum and four Vorox headed for them, wisely dove out of the way. A Thornax blast took out one of the Vorox, and another blast wounded a second. But Malum and the surviving two made it through the gate and out into the desert.

Tuma angrily got to his feet, ignoring the wounds inflicted by the Vorox. “After them! Drag them back here!” he shouted.

The Skrall would dutifully fan out into the desert in search of the escapees, but they would not find them. The Vorox network of tunnels extended even here, and Malum and his two pack mates had found refuge underground. When night fell, they would emerge and start the long trek back home.

The desert is a place of extremes, Malum said to himself. Blazing heat, chilling cold, fierce loyalty… and deep hatred. The Skrall won’t forget this day… and to their bitter regret, neither will I.
Gresh looked back to see the Skrall were nearing them. He looked forward again to see Malum and his Vorox also approaching. Four Glatorian and two Agori with a cart full of exsidian between two opposing groups didn’t have much chance of survival.

“This is not good,” he murmured.

“Let’s abandon the caravan,” Strakk said suddenly. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… I don’t care about the exsidian.”

“I don’t know, think about it,” Ackar said, shaking his head. “You angered Malum, promising to get his treasure from Roxtus to keep him from stealing the exsidian… and just now, we deceived the Skrall to help us get the exsidian from the river. It seems to me that the metal’s been useful in finding you worthy foes, Strakk.”

“Yeah, that’s real funny,” Kiina replied, “but the Vorox are ahead of us and the Skrall are behind us. Maybe we should fight?”

“I have a better idea,” Ackar said. “Gresh, Strakk, who do the Vorox hate more than anyone?”

“The Skrall,” said Gresh.

“And who do the Skrall consider vermin to be eradicated?” Kiina continued.

“The Vorox,” Strakk smiled, guessing the intentions of Ackar. “Oh, no. This will end badly… I like it!”

Ackar ordered his Stalker to gallop faster, heading directly for the group of Vorox. Once they were close, he pulled the Spikit to a halt in front of them. He then quickly pivoted the cart around to face the Skrall.

“Our Vorox friends arrived just in time!” Ackar shouted with all the force in his lungs. “Attack the Skrall!”

Hearing this, the elite Skrall screamed in anger. Stronius despised the Vorox with all his soul. The fact that these creatures allied with the Glatorian only made him angrier. These wretched creatures of the sand act so boldly against us? Stronius thought. They will pay the price!

Malum also heard Ackar’s words, and immediately understood what his old friend planned. He knew he wouldn’t be able to escape from this trap without a fight. Ackar had used the eternal hatred between the Skrall and the Vorox to his advantage: now, the Skrall would have to deal with the entire group of Vorox.

“Shoot them!” Stronius cried. “Destroy them! The Glatorian and the Vorox alike.”

His warriors fired at the Vorox with their launchers. The Thornax made direct impact with the Vorox, seriously wounding three of them. The rest forgot Ackar quickly. They had been attacked by the Skrall – their instinct told them they should hit back. Infuriated, the Vorox rushed the warriors of the Skrall. As the Vorox pack attacked their most hated enemy, Ackar’s group decided it was an appropriate time to flee from the battlefield. The Glatorian, Agori and the cart left quickly. The sounds of exploding Thornax and the moans of the wounded soon died out.
“You thought we would lose,” Kiina said, delighted. “So you got them to fight amongst themselves.”

“No, I wanted this to end differently,” Ackar admitted. “We may not have good relations with the Vorox, but they did not deserve to die at the hands of the Skrall. But today our lives were at stake.”

“After all, the life of a Glatorian is more important, right?” Ackar reined their Stalker and turned around. Behind them was Malum, mounted on a Stalker, and armed with the sword and shield of a Skrall. He was alone. Ackar immediately drew his sword.

“I see that now you ally yourself with thieves,” Malum said. “We aren’t looking to fight you,” Gresh cut in. “You found us, remember? You asked us to steal the sword in Roxtus. And we did — and found out that you snatched it from Ackar.”

“Both sides suffered heavy casualties,” Malum said. “But the struggle continues. My Vorox know when to quit. I know the Skrall don’t know how to pursue us. We are numerous. We will recover.”

“The desert is unpredictable, Gresh,” Malum smiled coldly and shook his head. “The desert is unpredictable, Gresh. Sometimes beautiful and pleasant, other times a cruel killer. One day brings water to quench your thirst. The next day feeds you when you’re starving. But on the third day… my sword snatches your life.”

The former Glatorian pulled the reins of his Stalker and turned around. Then he disappeared into the distance.

The team traveled south. They remained vigilant, but were beginning to believe they might actually reach Vulcana. Kirbold had decided that, upon returning to Iconox, he would request Ackar and Kiina receive the same pay as Gresh and Strakk. Without their help, this mission would have ended at the Skrall River.

“Even if we make it back, we still have problems ahead of us,” Tarduk said. “I’m not sure we can really say this route was any safer than the one through the Dunes of Treason. What do you think?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Kirbold laughed. “We tangled with Bone Hunters, the Skrall, Malum and his Vorox, not to mention desert bats, snakes, and a deadly waterfall… I’d take the Dunes of Treason in a heartbeat.”

Kiina approached Ackar. “What are you thinking?”

“I see no signs that we are being pursued. If we can keep this pace, we should be alright. Worst-case scenario, we may run into Bone Hunters.”

“Even if all four of us faced him, we might not win. I know him,” Ackar sighed. “The important thing is that we take the exsidian to its destination. When the Skrall finish up with the Vorox they’ll probably come after us again.”

Kiina shrugged. “If I remember correctly, he doesn’t much like you.”

The Ice Glatorian knew Kiina was right. Malum once tried to take Strakk’s life during a match, which was what caused his expulsion from Vulcana.

“Even if all four of us faced him, we might not win. I know him,” Ackar sighed. “The important thing is that we take the exsidian to its destination. When the Skrall finish up with the Vorox they’ll probably come after us again.”
found nothing. To do this much damage without Thornax or an army of Vorox, it must have been something monstrous.

“How long ago do you think this happened?” he asked Kiina, who had already dismounted to examine one of the hunters.

“Maybe an hour ago.” Kiina approached the hunter. “What happened?”

The Bone Hunter barely raised his head, and his lips moved noiselessly at first. When he finally managed to speak, Kiina leaned in close. He uttered a single word before dying. Kiina turned gravely to her teammates. “Skopio.”

Strakk had all the information he needed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“If this was an hour ago, maybe the Skopio is long gone now,” Tarduk asked, hopefully.

“Or it might just be hidden in the sand beneath you, waiting to attack,” Strakk snorted.

Ackar thought hard. Skopio were the largest and most dangerous creatures in Bara Magna. The giant scorpion-like beasts weren’t very fast, but thanks to their size they could move several meters in a single step. Not much was known about Skopio behavior, so it was difficult to predict whether the creature was in the same place that it had appeared, or had gone to seek new territory. If the Skopio that had caused this disaster had left, they should be safe.

“We’ll keep going south,” Ackar finally said, “and hope the Skopio isn’t following us. Hopefully we can still make it to the village.”

They resumed moving in the direction of Vulcanus. After a few minutes, the ground beneath their feet began to tremble.

“Oh, no…” Strakk moaned.

The first tremor was small. The second was more intense – Ackar’s Stalker went haywire, almost throwing him off. Then there was an earthquake. Gresh fell face-first into the sand just before it opened with an enormous sound. A crater opened up and began to pull in sand, and would soon do the same to Gresh. Just before he was pulled under, Kiina grabbed his hand and pulled him into the wagon.

Then the desert exploded. A cloud of dust rose into the air and the Skopio appeared, ready for a fight. Then it became clear just how bad things were. As the cloud of sand cleared, Ackar saw a figure in golden armor riding the beast. That could only mean one thing: the beast before them was actually a machine. They stood in the way of the Skopio XV-I, and its pilot…

“Telluris!” Ackar cried.

Strakk shot Kirbold an angry look.

“When we get back to Iconox, I’m asking for a raise!”

“If we get back to Iconox,” Kirbold corrected him.

The Skopio XV-I was built to resemble a real Skopio, but it was faster and even more dangerous. The crazed Telluris had continually improved it over the years, using parts from other vehicles. Ever since the plague that ravaged his tribe 103,000 years ago, Telluris was obsessed with oppressing and torturing others. The XV-I was designed with that in mind.

The team moved as fast as they could. If they could make it to Vulcanus, there were many Glatorian in training there that could help fight this giant machine. But Telluris had no intention of giving them that chance. Pressing a button on his control console, he changed the configuration of the XV-I. The four legs of the vehicle folded flat, laying their treads flat against the sand. The vehicle may not have looked as impressive now, but it could reach a much higher speed. With an evil smile on his face, Telluris hunted his new victims.

“Split up!” shouted Gresh. “He can’t chase all of us.”

It was a good idea. Gresh and the Agori took the caravan, while the others split off to the sides. Regardless of whom Telluris decided to hunt, the others could go around and attack from behind.

Watching the Glatorian flee like a startled scarabax swarm gave Telluris great pleasure. Which would he destroy first? A carriage full of exsidian did not interest him. If he had wanted the exsidian, he would have taken it from Iconox and nobody could have stopped him. But the red-armored Glatorian apparently had a brain – he was shouting orders, planning a strategy. It would be useful to silence him.
Telluris pointed his gun, mounted on the tail of his artificial Skopio, at Ackar and fired. Ackar heard the Thornax whistle through the air. He pulled hard on his Stalker’s reins, turning quickly to the right. The projectile just missed him, but the force of its explosion sent him and the Stalker falling into the sand.

“Ackar!” Kiina cried when she saw her wounded friend. “Gresh, help him! I’ll take care of Telluris.”

Once she was sure that the Tesaran Glatorian had reached the wounded Ackar, she began to attack. Dodging a rain of Thornax, she rode directly toward the Skopio. Telluris accelerated, trying to run her over with his vehicle, but Kiina deftly evaded it. The Glatorian jumped from her Stalker and landed on the hull of the Skopio.

“What is she doing?” Ackar stared in amazement.

“We can help her by diverting Telluris’ attention. What do you think?” Gresh said.

Both Glatorian galloped towards the Skopio. Ackar shot at it, although he knew that Thornax wouldn’t damage the machine’s thick exterior. He just needed Telluris to focus on them rather than Kiina.

“Look out!” Ackar cried as Telluris fired at the m. Ackar’s Stalker barely managed to dodge all of the XV-I’s Thornax rounds.

“I have an idea,” said Gresh. “Head to the caravan.”

The Glatorian rushed to the caravan. Without stopping, Gresh leaned over in his saddle and grabbed two exsidian bars. Once he was near the Skopio, the Glatorian jumped to the ground, ran forward and shoved the two bars between the treads of the vehicle. On the other side, Ackar did the same.

exsidian was prized for its exceptional hardness and durability: it did not corrode or deform like other metals. In other words, the Skopio’s inner workings couldn’t compete with it. The sounds of metal screeching and parts collapsing inside Skopio’s treads indicated a clear winner between the exsidian and the XV-I. Meanwhile, Kiina climbed carefully onto the Skopio’s cab. At one point she slipped and toppled over the edge, only to grab the machine’s stinger at the last moment. After climbing back up, she jumped directly to the XV-I’s cockpit, landing just behind Telluris. He immediately tried to escape, but was caught by the ankle and soon found himself dangling upside down.

“You know, I’m pretty tired after all that climbing,” Kiina said, hanging Telluris’ head over the edge of the Skopio. “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on for. And if you insist on continuing to fight us… well, my launcher is aimed at the console of your toy.”

“You know what will happen if you shoot?” Telluris laughed. “There will be a big boom and we’ll all die. You, me, and your friends down below. You understand that?”

Kiina raised him up and gave him a cold stare. “Do you think I care?”

Telluris showed no fear. Either he was immensely brave, or entirely crazy. He replied calmly, as if talking about the weather. “What will you do?”

“I’ll let you choose,” Kiina said. “I kill you and keep your vehicle, or my teammates destroy it and leave you wandering alone in this wasteland. Or…”

“What?”

“Not far from here is a group of Skrall warriors,” continued Kiina. “You turn back, trash them, and return to where you came from, I’ll consider things settled.”

Telluris hesitated. He had not yet had to deal with the visitors from the far north. He knew that the Skrall were tough opponents.

“Well, what do you choose? Are you afraid of some Skrall?”

“Not at all,” Telluris said. “I’ll deal with them. But if I find you in my territory again, you will not escape so easily.”

Kiina smiled and held Telluris out over the edge of the vehicle.

“What are you doing? You said that you would let me go!” Telluris protested.

“I never said that,” Kiina replied. “You had a choice between leaving your vehicle or using it for my benefit. Me releasing you was not part of the deal.”

With that, she let go of his leg. Telluris’ screams could be heard for a while, until his body hit the sand. Ackar immediately approached where he’d landed.

“He’s alive,” Ackar said with some relief.
“Of course he’s alive. He excelled in the arena,” Kiina said, jumping down from the Skopio. “At least he won’t trouble us for a while.”

“I don’t understand,” said Gresh. “I heard what he said. He agreed to leave and fight the Skrall.”

“Oh, rookie,” Kiina shook her head. “When will you learn? He said: ‘I’ll deal with them,’ but thought ‘as soon as I take care of them, Glatorian, I’ll come after you.’ If you want to negotiate with a Glatorian, you need to learn the language of a scam.”

A few hours later, the characteristic shape of the large building at the center of Vulcanus appeared on the horizon. Soon after, the team approached the edge of the village, where they received cheers from the guards. Although Strakk never liked the fire village, he was more excited to see it than he’d ever been in his life.

Raanu, Vulcanus’ leader, was the happiest Agori in town that day. Ackar knew that his reaction was mostly due to the exsidian that had finally reached its destination. But it was also something else: Iconox had paid its debt to Vulcanus, recognizing the Glatorian’s victory for the Fire Tribe. There would be no war with the Ice Tribe. The Glatorian system had worked perfectly and nothing had changed.

Metus went over to congratulate Strakk, Gresh, Kirbold, and Tarduk. After a moment of celebration, Metus pulled Strakk from the group, and speaking softly, said “It’s all set up. Immediately after the Great Tournament, you’ll fight with Ackar. Raanu insisted that the fight take place here, so –”

“He saved my life… saved all our lives,” Strakk interrupted. “But I’d like the satisfaction of a victory and a good payout. Deal.”

At the edge of the village, Kiina and Gresh watched the sun set over the desert.

“We’ve seen that the northern route is too dangerous,” Kiina said. “So, mission partly failed. Was it worth going through all this?”

“Yes, I think so,” the Tesaran replied. “It’s true that I had to flee from the Skrall, fight the Vorox, and endure Strakk… but I also had friends. You and Ackar.”

“You have much to learn, but you’re really talented. If you find yourself in Tajun, we should practice together.”

“And you’ll teach me the move you used to get onto the Skopio?” Gresh smiled.

“I’ll teach you a lot of things,” Kiina laughed as they returned to the village. “We’ll start with how to survive the first round of battles during the Great Tournament.”

“Sounds good. If there’s anything I’ve learned from this adventure –” Gresh caught an exsidian block thrown by an Agori. “— it’s that surviving the fight is what matters.”
Gresh stood in the arena. He was wearing armor and carrying a Thornax shooter. On the other side of the arena stood Tarix. He also wore armor and carried his sword. As the villagers cheered, the contest began.

Tarix struck first, swinging his water sword. Gresh ducked, then he leaped in the air, spun, and swung his Thornax shooter.

But Tarix jumped out of the way and hit Gresh with the flat part of his sword. Gresh fell on the sand.

“I won,” said Tarix, smiling.

“This is only practice,” Gresh reminded him as he got up. “If it were a real fight, things might be different.”

Tarix laughed. “Not with those moves, my friend. I’ve seen that leap and spin too often. You need some new tricks.”

Gresh sat and thought for a long time. Maybe Tarix was right. Maybe he needed a new idea.

Just then Berix called to him.

“Um, excuse me, Gresh?” Berix said. “I heard what Tarix said, and… well, I thought you might want to see this.”

Berix handed him a torn piece of very old paper. Written on it was a name—Certavus. Every fighter knew that name. Certavus was famous for his skill.

“This might have come from a scroll or a book,” said Gresh. “Berix, I want you to show me where you found this!”

They made a deal. Berix would lead Gresh to the ruins where he found the paper, and in return, Gresh would stand guard while Berix searched for more valuable items.

Gresh and Berix began their long journey. They left the jungle behind and headed across the desert sands. To the north, they could see a chain of high mountains. To the south, there was more sand and the outlines of other villages, far in the distance.

Suddenly Gresh stopped. The sand all around them had started to move, but it wasn’t because of the wind.

He and Berix started to run toward some ruins. Behind them, six Vorox rose out of the sand dunes. The Vorox hid in the sands of the wasteland and hunted travelers.

Berix looked over his shoulder. The Vorox were chasing them and they were gaining.

Gresh picked up Berix and threw him over a low wall. The villager landed in the soft sand. “Stay down!” Gresh yelled. “I’ll handle them!”

Berix peered over the rock wall. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Gresh was fighting six Vorox! A few times, Berix was sure Gresh was about to lose. But Gresh always managed to drive the Vorox off.
After many hours, the Vorox pulled back. Gresh was too tired to go after them. He walked slowly
toward the ruins. Once he was there, he collapsed on the ground next to Berix.

“They are tough,” Gresh said. “I’m not sure I can stop them a second time.”

“They have to find a way out of here!” said Berix.

Gresh shook his head. “The Vorox are out there, waiting. What we need is some kind of new
trick I can use to beat them. We need that book.”

Berix scrambled to his feet. “Then let’s find it!”

They started searching the ruins. Long ago, this place had been a training center for fighters. Old
pieces of armor, weapons, and practice dummies were scattered all over the area.

“So do you really think this book is going to help?” asked Berix.

“It has to,” said Gresh. “Certavus was a great fighter. He had to know the secret to winning any
battle.”

Nearby, Berix had climbed a ruined wall. As he reached the top, he saw six warriors waiting for
him. He yelled and started to scramble back down. Then he stopped. They weren’t warriors at all, just
more practice dummies.

“Wow,” Berix said to himself. “If you look quickly, those seem just like the real thing. Hey, Gresh!”

Berix turned and stopped, his mouth open in shock. A Vorox was burrowing its way up through
the sand in the center of the ruins. Gresh saw it, too. He charged at the Vorox. It knocked Gresh to the
ground with its stinger.

“Hang on! I’m coming!” yelled Berix. He jumped from the top of the wall, but his feet got tangled
in the practice dummies. His jump turned into a fall and the dummies fell with him.

The Vorox looked up at Berix and then it did and amazing thing. It dove back into the hole in the
sand.

“How do you like that?” Berix said, smiling. “I scared him off!”

“Well, something did,” said Gresh. He looked around at the dummies lying on the sand. “But I’m
not so sure it was just you. Berix, I think I’ve been doing things all wrong.”

“How do you mean?” asked Berix.

“I’ve been trying to outfight the Vorox… and even Tarix back in the village,” said Gresh. “But
maybe the answer isn’t to be stronger than my opponent. Maybe I just need to be smarter… a lot
smarter.”

Gresh and Berix gathered every practice dummy and all the old armor and swords they could
find. Then they propped the dummies up all along the walls and gave them each a mask and a weapon.

When they were done, it looked as if an army was guarding the ruins. “But do you think this will
fool the Vorox?” asked Berix.

“If it doesn’t,” said Gresh, “it will be the last trick either of us ever plays.”

The first rays of morning sun lit up the ruins. Beyond the walls, the sand began to shift as the
Vorox prepared to attack again.

When the first Vorox emerged, Gresh drew his weapon. “These ruins are ours!” he shouted. “Go
away!”

Berix scurried from dummy to dummy, shaking them and waving the swords in their hands. Now
and then, he would yell, “That’s right!” or “Let’s get them!” using different voices each time.

The Vorox started to move toward the ruins. Then they stopped. They were confused. Were
those really more fighters, or was it a trick?

First one Vorox, then another and another, began to back away. Berix raced around, making the
dummies move all along the walls and shouting. Now all the Vorox were running away!

“We did it!” said Berix.

“We can celebrate later, when we’re back in the village,” said Gresh. “We better get out of here
before they come back.”
Berix was running to join Gresh when he noticed something poking out of the rubble. He pulled it out. It was an old, worn copy of a book. On the cover was the name Certavus.

“Gresh!” Berix yelled. “I found it! I found the book – the one on how to win any fight!”

Gresh looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Thanks, my friend. But you know what? I don’t think I need it anymore.”

Berix flipped open the cover. On the first page, these words were written:

“A fighter’s greatest weapon is his mind. The mind is a more powerful weapon than any sword and a more powerful defense than any shield.”

Berix smiled and closed the book. Gresh didn’t need to read this, after all – in these ruins, he had already learned the secret of Certavus.
Tarduk blinked the sweat out of his eyes. Times like this, he wished he didn’t have to work in full
helmet and armor. But even here, so close to the free city of Atero, it was a little too dangerous to be
out in the desert on your own and unprotected. His task here was routine: along with Agori from various
villages – Kyry, Crotesius, Scodonius, and Kirbold – he was in Atero to help prepare the arena for
the coming tournament. Even with care throughout the year, there was always a need to do minor repairs
before Glatorian from all over descended on the place.

Of course, Tarduk hadn’t kept at that work for very long – not when there were ruins not far
away that he could explore. Making an excuse about getting some supplies from his wagon, he had slipped
out of the city and found a likely spot to dig. It was hard work, and hot work. He could have used a helper,
but that wasn’t doable. Kyry was much too dedicated to the work in Atero, Kirbold just wanted to get
done and get back to Iconox, Scodonius was kind of a creep, and Crotesius he barely knew.

No, he decided, he digs best who digs alone. His tool hit somethin
g, buried about four feet down
in the sand. Fishing it out, he found it was a square of metal, about twice the size of his hand and obviously
broken off of something larger. Inscribed on it was a circle, with a much smaller circle inside and at the
bottom of it. Tarduk frowned. He had run across things like this before, with similar symbols. He had no
idea what they meant – and neither did anyone else, so far as he
knew. If they were a language, what
language and spoken by whom? It was frustrating, because
he had not found enough samples to even begin
trying to decipher the symbols.

He turned the piece of metal over, hoping there would be another symbol on the back. Instead,
he found something quite different. A map had been scratched into the metal. Some of the places on it he
recognized, some he did not. At the bottom of the map was a mountain chain that looked a great deal like
the Black Spike Mountains to the north. The features drawn just below the mountains seemed to bear
out that it was the same range. Most of the map was areas north of the mountains, though – a region he
was not familiar with. All he really knew about it was that the Skrall were said to have come from there.
At the top of the map, there were two more symbols, but different from the ones he had found before.
One was just a mesh of interconnected lines looking almost like a net, or a web. The other was a star.
What made that last interesting was that it was the only symbol that was colored: the star was red.

A red star? thought Tarduk. Whoever heard of such a thing? It was certainly fascinating – but
impossible to investigate, at least on his own. By traveling northwest, he could skirt the Black Spikes and
reach the northern region, but the map indicated raging rivers and other natural hazards along the way.
Going up there without aid would be beyond dangerous, and no Glatorian would hire out for the job this
close to the Atero tournament.

“Hey!”

Tarduk turned. Crotesius was walking over, looking annoyed. “Are you going to help, or play in
the sand? What’s that you have?”
Tarduk showed the Vulcanus Agori what he had found. Crotesius didn’t bother to take it – just looked at both sides and then shrugged.

“So what? It’s a piece of junk. Maybe you could use it to patch your wagon, but other than that…”

*What a Vorox…* muttered Tarduk to himself. Aloud, he said “You’re probably right. I mean, that red star – what’s that all about? After all, everyone knows there’s nothing valuable up that way. No hidden treasure, no city, and no water stones – nothing.”

This, of course, was a tremendous lie, and Tarduk knew Crotesius would never believe it – in fact, he was counting on that. Rumors flew faster than grains of sand in a sandstorm about what might be to the north. In Iconox, they said the mountains were covered with valuable exsidian. In Vulcanus, they said there were entire valleys of water stones, those valuable rocks that could be split open to reveal pure water inside. As for Tajun… well, they were pretty imaginative there. And the Agori of Tesara just didn’t want to even talk about it.

Now Crotesius reached out to take the piece of metal and get a closer look. “You know, if you like, I could take this… um… scrap metal off your hands. Maybe you’d like to trade?”

Later on, Tarduk would be unable to explain just why he said what he did. Maybe after years of digging in the sand and finding pieces of a puzzle, but no way to solve it, he had just had enough. If he didn’t take a chance, he would never find any answers. “Sure, I’ll trade you,” he said. “You can have the piece of metal… if you go with me to find that red star, whatever it is.”

“Go up there? Are you crazy?” said Crotesius.

“That’s the offer,” Tarduk said firmly. “We have enough time before the tournament starts to get there and get back.” He actually wasn’t sure that was true, but wasn’t going to tell Crotesius that. “Think about it,” he continued. “What if there’s something really valuable up there, something that changes everyone’s life in Bara Magna? We’ll – I mean, you’ll be a hero.”

Croteusius smiled. As a vehicle pilot in the arena, he was just one more Agori fighter in a world dominated by Glatorian. But if he did something truly great… well, Raanu wouldn’t live forever – maybe he could lead Vulcanus someday.

“Ohay Tarduk,” Crotesius said. “I guess you can… join my expedition, but we’re going to need more help. See if you can recruit a few more Agori – *without* telling them about the star. And we leave at dawn.”

Tarduk walked away, a grin spreading across his face. Sure, he hadn’t been completely honest, but sometimes you had to take shortcuts in the pursuit of knowledge, right?

Little did Tarduk know that shortcut was about to lead him right into a nightmare.
In the end, only Kirbold was willing to come along with Crotesius and Tarduk in search of the Red Star. Scodonius said it was crazy to go off on some wild Rock Steed chase so close to the date of the tournament, and Kyry was in a hurry to get back to Vulcus. Crotesius suggested they take vehicles north, but Tarduk vetoed that suggestion.

“Vehicles can’t go where we’re going, even tracked ones,” said Tarduk. “Plus they make noise, and noise attracts Bone Hunters. No, we’ll use Sand Stalkers.”

It took a certain amount of wheeling and dealing to borrow three of the beasts from an Iconox trader, especially since Tarduk wouldn’t say where they were going with them. But within a short time, the three Agori were mounted and ready to start their expedition.

The shortest route would be to go east to the Dark Falls, and then north toward the volcanic region above the Black Spike Mountains. But the presence of Skrall, Vorox, and Bone Hunters up that way made it also the most dangerous. So Tarduk led the small party northwest, past the village of Tesara and Elbow Peak and into the White Quartz Mountains. Kirbold, being a native of Iconox, knew this region fairly well – there were paths that traders took through the peaks in search of anything of value they could sell.

It was cold here, even worse than the desert by night. More than once, the Sand Stalkers almost lost their footing on the smooth face of the crystalline rock. Although it made all three Agori nervous, they had to travel by day – it would be too easy to stray off the path in the dark and possibly tumble right off a cliff.

After two days, they had moved far enough north that they were in completely unfamiliar territory. Whatever creatures lived in this region would never have been in the desert to the south, since they obviously thrived on cold. Crotesius was on constant alert. That was why he was the first to notice that they were being stalked.

“How many?” asked Tarduk.

“No,” snapped Crotesius, “that’s the worst thing we can do. We need to go faster. Maybe we can lose them.”

Tarduk doubted it. He had spotted one of their pursuers. It looked a little like one of the wasteland wolves that lived in the desert. Their paws had evolved to be able to traverse across the loosest sand and they were highly effective trackers. But, Tarduk reminded himself, though it looked like one, their stalker wasn’t one of those creatures. For one thing, this beast was half made of metal. Tarduk had never seen anything like it.

“How many!” asked Kirbold.

“More than one,” answered Crotesius. “Six or eight, maybe. They’re hard to spot.”

Tarduk was unsure how anything could move through the White Quartz Mountains unseen like this. As the day wore on, that became the least of his worries. No matter how fast the party moved, the wolves kept on their trail. No matter what trick they tried to evade pursuit – sending one Sand Stalker
off in another direction, doubling back on their own trail, even leaving some of the precious supply of food on the trail to distract the pack – the wolves kept coming. “What are those things?” Tarduk asked for the third time.

Now they had to ride through the night, like it or not. Kirbold shared Tarduk’s mount, and Crotesius led the way. Although it probably wouldn’t matter anyway, Crotesius refused to light a torch, figuring the wolves would see the light. Tarduk argued that they were probably tracking by scent, but it did no good.

They wound up on a narrow, winding trail. On the right side was the face of the mountain. On the left, a sheer drop into darkness. The good news was that there was no place for the wolves to hide here. They would have to follow the trail as well or give up, it seemed. The bad news was that even the Sand Stalkers were having a hard time finding their footing. One slip, and someone wouldn’t be coming back from this trip.

Moving as quickly as they dared, the three Agori made their way down the trail. Once, the mount carrying Kirbold and Tarduk stumbled and one pack of tools fell off and into the abyss. The sound of it striking bottom never came.

Kirbold looked back. In the bright light of the moons he could see no sign of their pursuers. “I think we lost them. Do you think we lost them?”

Tarduk glanced over his shoulder. He didn’t see anything either, but said, “No, I don’t think we lost them.”

“Neither do I,” agreed Kirbold.

The trail began to widen, becoming more of a plateau. Dawn was breaking, the first rays of light reflecting off the quartz peaks. Crotesius reined his Sand Stalker to a stop, and Tarduk did the same. They looked behind. There was no sign of the half-dozen fur- and metal-covered wolves that had been following them.

“Maybe they didn’t make it across the trail,” said Crotesius, “or they found easier prey. Either way, I’m glad they’re gone.”

“Um, there’s one other possibility,” suggested Tarduk. “They stopped following because they knew they didn’t need to anymore.”

Crotesius turned at the sound of a low growl, a hollow metallic sound that echoed throughout the mountains. Lined up on a ridge ahead were not six of the wolves, but sixty. They had evaded a hunting pack only to ride right into the den.
The three Agori sat on their mounts, frozen with fear. Before them stood dozens of wolves, their bodies a weird mixture of muscle and fur and dull metal. Their eyes were gleaming points of savage light in the darkness. Tarduk could smell their musky odor, mixed with the scent of cold iron.

"Watch out," whispered Crotiesius. "They'll try to circle around us so we're surrounded. Then they'll attack."

"Thanks for the nature lesson," Kirbold answered. "How do we get out of this?"

"Ride through them?" suggested Tarduk. "Maybe we can... I don't know, outrun them."

Crotiesius patted the flank of his Sand Stalker. "I don't think these animals are going a step closer to those things if they can help it."

Tarduk wished he could come up with another idea. Going forward was out. Going backward meant trying to race across a narrow trail with a pack of wolves at their heels – if they didn't fall into a bottomless abyss, they would have the fun of being eaten. He couldn't believe their journey was coming to an end so soon, and in such a horrible way.

Crotiesius was the first to spot a new arrival. Something - no, someone - was coming up behind the wolf pack. The figure was bent and twisted and walked with a bad limp. He carried a staff in his left hand and seemed to be relying on it to stay upright. Even with the moonlight, it was impossible to see the armored being clearly. But then he spoke.

"Down."

It was a simple word, but delivered in a voice that sounded to Tarduk like the limbs of dead trees scraping against a shelter. To the amazement of the three Agori, the wolves crouched down against the frozen ground. The figure started hobbling forward, moving unmolested through the wolves. All Tarduk could think of was Malum, who now lived among the bestial Vorox.

But it wasn't Malum coming toward them. Tarduk heard Kirbold gasp in recognition. The Agori from the ice village of Iconox said, "Surel? But you're --"

"Dead?" the crippled warrior said. "Close to it, perhaps, but still among the living. Lost in the chaos of war was I, and left behind, bent and broken, when the fighting moved on. And here I have been ever since."

It was too much for Crotiesius to take in. "You've been living in these mountains with these... these... things?"

"You are of the Fire people," Surel said, as if seeing the Agori's red armor for the first time. "So you wouldn't know about the Iron Wolves, one of the Great Beings' more... efficient creations. I trained this pack, led them into battle -- and when the world shattered, they stayed by my side. It was the wolves who brought me food and protected me from harm. And there were many in these mountains who would have done me harm."

Surel reached down and petted one of the wolves, brushing his hand across fur and metal. "Maybe you have forgotten -- or you never knew -- how things were before. Armies marching across the deserts,
the jungles, the mountains – battling to claim the energy in the core of the world. The Element Lords led us into war, and when their actions destroyed the planet, they were trapped. Yes, they were trapped.”

Tarduk shivered. Was it getting colder or was it fear that made him tremble? It would have been easy to blame the presence of Surel and his pets, but no – it was getting colder. The wind was picking up and snow had begun to fall: lightly at first, then more heavily. Soon he could barely make out the aged warrior and his wolves through the storm.

“Wait a minute,” said Kirbold, “I remember the war. I remember how it ended… and I remember the Element Lords. But you said ‘were trapped’?”

Surel nodded his head, a painful exercise due to his injuries. “I do not know why you have come here, but I tell you now to turn back. The Element Lords walk this planet once more, and the fortunate among you will die first.”

A roar filled Tarduk’s ears. He looked towards the source of the sound. A massive wall of white was surging down the mountain, an avalanche of snow from which there could be no hope of escape. And standing atop the mountain, watching as doom rushed down toward the Agori, stood a warrior made of ice.
Tarduk closed his eyes tight. A massive avalanche of ice and snow was roaring down the mountainside toward him and his allies. There was no way to outrun it or evade it. He and his two fellow Agori, Surel and his Iron Wolves, were all doomed.

In what he was sure would be his last few moments of life, he thought about all the artifacts he would never discover, all the mysteries he would never solve. Most of all, he thought about the map that had brought him north into the mountains, the one with the carving of a red star upon it. It would be easier to die if he could at least know the meaning of that symbol.

There was a flash of light so bright he could see it through his eyelids, and a wave of almost unbearable heat. Tarduk opened his eyes to see the mountainside ablaze, the flames so intense they melted the snow to water and turned the water to steam in an instant. The Iron Wolves growled and backed away, Surel going with them. The two Sand Stalkers the Agori rode reared up in panic, and it took all the riders’ skill to keep them from bolting.

Tarduk peered through the flames to try and see the ice warrior he had spotted before atop the peak. Yes, the crystalline figure was still there, his body language speaking of unbridled rage.

"We need to get out of here, now," Tarduk said.

"What convinced you?" asked Kirbold. "The avalanche or the firestorm?"

"The possibility of meeting the cause of either one," Tarduk replied.

This time, there was no need to worry about riding into the midst of the Iron Wolves – the fire had driven them all away. Surel, however, had lingered in the area. As they rode up into a pass, he emerged from behind a rock and hailed them.

"Go back," Surel implored. "There is nothing for you beyond here. Go back to the safety of your homes."

Crotesius laughed bitterly. "You obviously haven’t been to one of our homes lately."

"That jet of flames..." said Tarduk. "That wasn’t natural, was it? That was the Element Lord of Fire who saved us."

Now it was Surel’s turn to laugh. "Saved you? You are dust to him – not even dust. That was an attack on his frozen enemy. You were simply caught between them."

"Wait a minute," Crotesius interrupted. "I remember the Element Lords, and their armies, and the war – but the war ended more than a hundred thousand years ago."

Surel shook his head. "It ended for you, for their soldiers, and it ended for Spherus Magna, as all things did in that one horrible moment. But for the Element Lords, the struggle goes on."

Tarduk glanced behind. He saw no sign of anyone following them, and so thought it safe to continue. "A struggle over what?" he asked. "The core war was fought over energies from the heart of the planet, but the planet no longer exists. What is there left to fight over?"

Surel said nothing – simply raised a withered arm and pointed toward the north. Tarduk felt a chill run up his spine. He didn’t bother trying to convince himself it was just from the cold. He dug into
his pack and produced the fragment with the map. Surel glanced down at it. Tarduk heard a sharp intake of breath.

“The Red Star,” he muttered. “The Valley of the Maze.” He looked at each Agori and turned. “You seek the same secrets as the Element Lords, and you risk the same fate. The heart of the Maze holds the last riddle of the Great Beings. Many have entered the Valley in hopes of solving the puzzle. None have ever emerged again.”

“Let me guess,” said Crotesius. “You think we should turn back.”

Surel shrugged, not easy to do with a body so badly twisted. “I think the Red Star burns in your eyes and in your heart as it has for so many before you. I think you will go on, no matter what warnings I give you. And I know – I know you will die.”

Tarduk glanced at Crotesius and Kirbold. Neither looked afraid, or maybe they were just hiding it well. And he knew Surel was right. He had to discover the secrets hinted at on this map, even if it meant riding into danger.

“You’re right,” Tarduk said. “We will go on. Can you help us, tell us anything about what’s up ahead?”

Surel was silent for a long time. Then he shook his head and said, “We live in a broken world, Agori. And in such a place, nothing stays whole and untouched. The stream of life gets diverted, dammed up, misdirected, and even,” he said, glancing down at his own ruined body, “distorted beyond all imagining. What awaits you to the north? A realm of lies. A place where beauty hides a rotten heart, where trees provide no shelter, the air no cooling breeze, and where water does not quench your thirst. And the moment you believe what you see or hear, touch or taste – it will be too late for you.”

“Stop speaking in riddles!” snapped Crotesius. “If you have nothing useful to say, get out of our way.”

In a flash, Surel drew a dagger and had it at Crotesius’ throat. Tarduk could not recall ever seeing even a prime Glatorian move that fast.

“I could kill you now and spare you the horrors to come,” said Surel, eyes blazing. “But you don’t deserve such mercy. Ride on, Agori. Beyond this pass is the Forest of Blades – all who travel through become one with nature. And beyond that the oh-so-welcoming waters of the River Dormus. And if you survive, the Maze waits for you.”
Tarduk, Crotesius, and Kirbold had been riding for a full day. They had left Surel, his Iron Wolves, and his dire warnings behind, but none could forget his words. Kirbold had been silent since then, lost in his own thoughts. Tarduk was more watchful than ever, hoping to spot the next attack before it was too late. For his part, Crotesius had decided that Surel had gone mad after so many years in the mountains, and there was little point in paying attention to the ravings of a madman.

Tarduk paused to glance at the metal fragment he carried with the strange map inscribed upon it. Yes, they were almost far enough to the north. Soon, it would be time to turn east, and head for where the symbol of the red star was located on the crude chart.

Kirbold abruptly reined the Sand Stalker to a halt. “I’ve changed my mind. I want to turn back,” he said.

“We’re not turning back,” Crotesius answered without turning around.

“I don’t even know what we’re doing here,” snapped Kirbold. “Who cares what’s beyond the mountains? We have our own problems at home.”

“Maybe the two are connected,” offered Tarduk. “Maybe there’s something up here that can help us deal with the Bone Hunters, the Vorox and the Skrall.”

“We’re here for a weapon?” Kirbold asked. “If there was something that powerful up north, the elders would have sent Glatorian to get it.”

“Maybe they didn’t want something like that in the hands of Strakk,” muttered Crotesius. “Or Kiina, for that matter.”

“Shut up!” said Tarduk.

“Hey, I have a right to say what I think!” replied Crotesius.

“No, I mean shut up, I think I hear something up ahead,” Tarduk said.

All three went silent – now they could all hear it. A harsh, keening sound like the song sung by a chorus of the dead. It seemed to be coming from a forest in the distance.

“It’s the wind,” said Crotesius. “You know, big blast of hot air, enough to knock a person over – sort of like Scodonius after a win in the arena.”

“I know it’s the wind,” answered Tarduk. “I just never heard wind like that before.”

“The Forest of Blades,” said Kirbold. “Up ahead. Maybe that’s the place Surel was talking about.”

“I don’t see any blades,” said Crotesius. “I see trees. That means maybe there’s some fruit or something else we can eat. I’m hungry enough to eat Thornax stew at this point. Even cold Thornax stew.”

Tarduk started to say something back, but even the thought of cold Thornax stew was so nauseating that he had to swallow hard to keep from getting sick.

Crotesius had spurred his Sand Stalker on, and was riding ahead. Kirbold hesitated for a long moment before following. Sitting on the animal right behind Kirbold, Tarduk felt a moment of relief. He didn’t want to lose a team member, and he doubted Kirbold would be able to make it back to Iconox safely on his own. They needed to stick together.
As the small band rode closer, they noticed something strange. Faint sunlight was glittering off what appeared to be swords sticking out of trees. It almost looked as if the forest was armed, as strange as that seemed.

“Must be a weird kind of tree to grow branches like that,” said Kirbold. “I guess we know how the place got its name.”

“Do we?” said Tarduk. “Look closer.”

Kirbold peered through the morning mist. What he had thought was just a gleaming branch was in fact a sword, and it wasn’t sticking out of the wood – it was held in the hand of a warrior trapped halfway inside the trunk of the tree. Kirbold gasped. He suddenly realized that there were scores of warriors here, their bodies merged with the wood of the forest, still clutching their weapons. It was as if the trees had reached out and grabbed them and wouldn’t let go. He couldn’t tell if the warriors were still alive or not.

“That’s… horrible,” he said.

“What do you think?” Tarduk asked Crotesius.

The Fire Agori just stared at the awful forest for a long time. Then he said, “No natural forest behaves this way. I hate to say it, but Surel was right. The Element Lords were here. This is power over plant life at work. These warriors might have been here since the war, for all we know.”

“If they’re alive, we have to save them,” said Tarduk.

“That means going in there,” replied Crotesius.

Tarduk nodded. Kirbold yanked on the reins, turning the Sand Stalker around.

“You can get off right here, Tarduk,” said Kirbold. “I’m going back.”

Tarduk knew he should argue with him, but he couldn’t think of a good argument. The sane thing to do was to head back to the desert and try to forget this terrible place existed. But something told him there was more at stake here than just the discovery of new knowledge or the solving of a puzzle. More and more, he felt like they were on a mission – and a vital one.

Without a word, Tarduk jumped down from the Sand Stalker. Then he climbed up onto Crotesius’ mount.

“Be careful, Kirbold. The way back might be more dangerous than the way here.”

Kirbold nodded toward the Forest of Blades. “Same to you, friend. I think you’re crazy to go in there, but… I’ll make sure everyone back home knows you were trying to help others… and…”

His voice broke and he stopped speaking. Tarduk leaned over and shook his hand. In their hearts, both believed they would never see each other again.

Tarduk waited until Kirbold was well on his way before asking Crotesius to get the Sand Stalker moving. Together, they rode into the cool, green shade of the forest. They were so close to the warriors that Tarduk could have reached out and touched their armor, but he did not. He was doing his best to be brave, but he knew if one of the trapped warriors should suddenly move, he would have to scream.

None of them did. The two Agori rode deep into the forest. It was silent. No birds sang here, no rodents scurried across the leaf-strewn floor in search of a meal. It was a garden of sorts, but it was not a place of life. At least, that was how it seemed to Tarduk and Crotesius – right up until the moment when the wind gusted again, the howling noise rose, and the branches all around reached out to seize them both.
Before they could react, Crotesius and Tarduk had been yanked from their Sand Stalker. The forest around them had come to life, branches reaching out to grab them, and vines knotting themselves around the two Agori. In a matter of moments, they were tied to trees. Crotesius looked around at the countless warriors whose bodies merged with the wood of the forest, and wondered if that would be his fate, too.

“I've got a little knife I use in my digging,” said Tarduk. “Maybe I can cut the vines and get free.” With some effort, Tarduk got his hands on the blade, and sliced deep into one of the vines. The plant reacted instantly, wrapping one of its tendrils around his neck and squeezing until he was sure he would black out. It wasn’t until he dropped the knife that the pressure eased. “I guess they don’t want us to leave,” he said.

Not far away, a mini-cyclone whipped leaves into the air. More and more plant matter was drawn into its wake until an entire segment of the glade was filled with leaves, vines, and branches, spinning furiously in the grip of a tornado. Then a being emerged from out of the storm itself.

At first glance, Tarduk thought he might have been made of plants. He was tall and green, with thorns jutting out from his arms and legs, and intertwined roots crisscrossing his chest. His eyes were an emerald so dark they were almost black. His arms were long, with thick vines wrapped around them, and more thorns served as his claws. Even his sword looked like it was a green and growing thing, though sharp and deadly.

It was only when he took a closer look that Tarduk began to have doubts. Perhaps this being was a living plant creature—or perhaps it was simply armor that made him seem that way. Regardless, Tarduk had no doubt who he was: the Element Lord of Jungle, Master of the Green.

The newcomer looked at Tarduk, then at Crotesius. Then he gave a gentle shrug, which sounded like the snapping of twigs underfoot. “You don’t know the way,” the Element Lord said. “You are of no use to me.”

Tarduk was going to ask just what it was he was talking about, but Crotesius spoke first. “How do you know we don’t know the way? Why do you think we’re here?”

“What are you doing?” thought Tarduk.

The Element Lord walked up to Crotesius and scraped a thorny nail across the Agori’s helmet. “You’re Fire,” he said. “Fire only knows how to destroy. I have seen Fire try to penetrate the Maze and fail time after time.” He turned to Tarduk. “You came here by accident – but you are of the Green, Agori, so I will let you go. Your companion must remain, however, and join my Forest of Blades.”

“I remember you,” said Tarduk. “Before the war, you led my people. You made things grow. You brought life. How can you just kill, as if it means nothing?”

The vines abruptly released Tarduk, and he tumbled to the forest floor. When he looked up, the Element Lord’s eyes were blazing at him. “Have you ever been to the deep forest, Agori?” he asked. “There the creatures live in perpetual darkness because the roof of the woods is too thick to allow...
sunlight to pass through. Vines strangle the trees, leeching the life from them so they can take their place and capture whatever light they can find. Every living thing profits from the death of another."

Tarduk spotted a faint gleam of light in the distance beyond the Element Lord. He didn’t know what it was, but if there was any chance it was help on the way, he had to keep talking. “What are you that you could do this?” he asked.

“Once I was a warrior, like the ones held here,” the Element Lord answered. “Then I and five of my brothers were chosen by the Great Beings for the honor of leading the villages of Spherus Magna. We were changed by their power, made one with our elements, and given armor and weapons to defend our people. We were no longer like Agori, or anyone else. We became nature itself – as benevolent, giving, ruthless, and indifferent as that can mean. We –"

The Element Lord’s eyes suddenly went wide. He let out a ragged scream and whirled around, enraged. Behind him, Kirbold had appeared, carrying a torch. He had lit the vines that bound Crotesius on fire, and the Agori was free again. But the Element Lord had felt the pain of his creations, and Tarduk suddenly doubted very much any of the three villagers would make it out of here alive.

“The torch!” Tarduk yelled. “Throw the torch!”

Kirbold hurled the flaming stick. It landed at the Element Lord’s feet, among the leaves. Yellow-orange fire erupted, feeding off the plant matter all around. In seconds the Element Lord was surrounded by a blaze burning out of control.

“Run!” shouted Crotesius.

The three Agori took off as fast as they could, dodging trees and leaping over rocks. Only Tarduk looked back. The Element Lord was gone. Not dead, he was sure, simply vanished back into the forest. Possibly he was wounded, but more likely he was marshaling his power to stop the fire before it consumed the wood.

Tarduk saw trees and brushes and vines burning, all so that he and his two friends could escape, and he wondered about the Element Lord’s words: that every living thing profits from the death of another. Those words would echo in Tarduk’s mind for a very long time to come.
Tarduk, Croteusius, and Kirbold had left the woods well behind them, if not the memories of what had happened there. They had traveled in silence for the better part of a day. Tarduk had not even bothered to ask Kirbold why he had come back. He was just grateful the Ice Agori had changed his mind.

For much of the past several hours the group had been riding along the banks of a river. Tarduk had no doubt this was the River Dormus that Surel had spoken about. It certainly did not seem dangerous in any way. It was a placid and calm body of water without even any rapids visible. That alone made Tarduk a little nervous. His experience on Bara Magna was that anything that looked safe and welcoming usually wasn't either. At the same time, having spent much of his life in a desert, the sight of running water was an appealing one.

Eventually they reached a point where the river had to be forded if they were going to keep on moving north. Tarduk scouted until he found a spot that looked shallow enough.

"We'll cross here," he said. "According to the map, we're not too far from where we're going."

"That's a pretty old map," said Croteusius. "How do we know that 'Red Star' thing is even still there? Or anything else? The Skrall probably stormed all through this area before they came to Bara Magna. I doubt they left much standing."

"You just don't want to cross the river!" joked Kirbold. "You Fire types don't like to get wet, right?"

Croteusius frowned. He walked right up to the edge of the water and turned around to face his two companions.

"Right, I made it past the mechanical wolves and the hungry trees and everything else on this trip, and I'm scared of a stream? I'll cross it right now, and then --"

There wasn't time to shout a warning. Behind Croteusius, a giant hand made of water sprang forth from the river. In the blink of an eye it had seized the Fire Agori and pulled him below the surface. Tarduk and Kirbold rushed to the spot, heedless of their own potential danger.

"Do you swim?" asked Tarduk.

"I'll manage," said Kirbold. "What's the plan?"

"We go in after him," Tarduk answered. "Let's go!"

The two Agori had taken three steps into the water when the hand appeared again. This time, it grabbed both of them. The next moment, they were being pulled down into the river. To Tarduk's amazement, he wasn't drowning. Some air had been pulled down with them, and suddenly he had a bad feeling he knew why.

_The Element Lord of Jungle wanted information from us, he remembered. If this is the Element Lord of Water at work, maybe he wants the same thing – and we can't tell him anything if we’re dead. But what happens when he finds out we have nothing to tell?_
The water was dark and cold. Tarduk focused on a pinpoint of light up ahead. As they rapidly grew closer, he could make out Crotesius suspended in the water inside an air bubble. Soon, he and Kirbold were floating beside him.

Before them, the underwater current began to twist and writhe. The waters reshaped themselves into the semblance of a face easily as tall as one of the Agori. Its hollow voice came at them from every side.

“Do you know the way?” it said.

“One of your brothers already asked us,” said Tarduk. “You are the Element Lord of Water, right?”

“I have that honor,” the Element Lord answered. “And what did you tell my brother?”

Tarduk glanced at Crotesius. The Fire Agori gave the slightest of nods, signaling that he would back whatever play Tarduk wanted to make. As it turned out, Tarduk didn’t have to decide what to do next – Kirbold spoke up.

“The same thing we’ll tell you,” said the Ice Agori. “Sure we know the way. Would we have come this far out if we didn’t? But why should we tell you?”

The Element Lord of Water paused, as if he was actually considering his answer.

“Self-preservation,” he said finally.

This time, it was Crotesius who answered. “Highly overrated. Better a dead hero than a live coward, I always say.”

This seemed to set the Element Lord back a bit. He and his kind weren’t used to backtalk. Around the three Agori, the waters began to churn.

“Do you know how it feels to drown, villager?” asked the Element Lord. “To feel your lungs fill up with water and your vision go black? I could make you feel that a thousand times, and worse, never knowing when you will be allowed to finally die.”

“Sure you could,” said Tarduk. “But if you try, we’ll make sure it goes that one step too far. Dead, we’re of no use to you. Dead, we tell you nothing, and you’ll never know the way. But maybe if you tell us why you’re so desperate for the information, we could make a deal.”

The Jungle Agori couldn’t quite believe what he was saying. All this being had to do was increase the water pressure and he could crush the three of them into paste. But after such a long journey and so many dangers, Tarduk had had enough of riddles and threats. Whatever their reasons, the Element Lords were desperate for knowledge, and it was time to use that against them.

“Why?” asked the Element Lord. “Because at the end of the way, there is power to be had. Power enough to end the war the only way it can end. With a victory for one of us.”

Tarduk started to point out that the Core War had ended a hundred thousand years ago. Then he remembered something Surel had said: how the war had ended for the Agori and the soldiers, but not for the Element Lords. Their hate still burned, even in the depths of the water.

“We can’t tell you,” said the Jungle Agori. “It’s too complicated. You know, if you make a wrong turn, well, that would be that. We would have to show you.” Tarduk held his breath. The Jungle Element Lord had almost seemed able to read their thoughts – if this one could as well, they were doomed.

But the Element Lord of Water did not attack, or rage at them. Perhaps none of the Element Lords were able to read minds after all – perhaps Jungle just assumed no Agori would be carrying this kind of knowledge.

“Well,” said the Water Element Lord. “You will go forth, and the waters will go with you. You will show me the way, and in return…”

The three Agori never got to hear what their captor was willing to trade. The temperature of the waters around them suddenly plummeted. Crotesius looked downriver, and his eyes widened. The water was freezing rapidly and the effect was racing right toward them.

The Element Lord of Water let out a yell of rage and frustration. Ice had found him again. Now his essence would have to flee the river, or risk being frozen to death. Before the eyes of the Agori, the face in the water dissipated. Their captor had vanished, leaving them behind.
“It’s moving too fast,” cried Kirbold. “We’ll never make it to the surface in time.”
“I’m sorry,” said Tarduk. “I’m sorry.”
A few feet away, the river water turned to solid ice, from the surface to the bottom. Any living thing unlucky enough to be in the waterway was frozen instantly. That was about to include three very brave Agori.
The first thing Tardu noticed was that it was hot – really hot. That made no sense: the last thing he remembered was being beneath the River Dormus, about to be frozen solid by rapidly advancing ice. The second thing he noticed was that his mouth was full of sand – he was face down in the stuff. That ruled out lying on the banks of the Dormus, since there was no sand there.

With a little reluctance, he lifted his head. He was in the desert, surrounded by ruins. It looked like there had been some huge battle here not long ago. Tardu got to his feet and swayed, overcome by a wave of dizziness. When it passed, he started looking around. Right away, he saw Crotesius and Kirbold. Both were unconscious, but alive and apparently uninjured. Kirbold was lying next to a big chunk of stone half-buried in the sand. It had writing carved on it. Tardu cleared away the sand and read: ‘Atero Arena.’

What? thought Tardu. It can’t be. When we left to go north, the Atero Arena was whole, the Tournament was about to start. What could have done this?

Tardu searched the ground frantically for some clue. He saw Glatorian armor and weapons scattered all around, obvious signs of a struggle, and one thing more: a Skrall shield, planted in the ground like a victory banner.

That was it, then. The Skrall had attacked Atero and destroyed it. And now… what? Were they attacking the villages? Or had they perhaps gone north to find the same place of power he had been seeking? He had to find out.

Words rang in his head, then. Someone, not long ago, had said to him, ‘Rock is already unyielding. Give it the power of the Great Beings to wield and no world is safe.’ But who had said that, and where?

He had a vague memory of an archway, a slab of stone, and someone speaking to him – and then he walked into the archway and… suddenly it all came back to him, a flood of memories surging into his brain. Yes, he had been underwater with Crotesius and Kirbold. They had been captives of the Element Lord of Water. Then the river began to turn to ice, as the Lord of that element attacked. The Water Lord had been forced to flee, and moments later, the air bubbles that had kept the Agori alive vanished as well. But they would freeze long before they drowned.

Desperately, the three started swimming for shore. Even as they did so, they could feel a disturbance in the water coming from upriver. Tardu turned and saw a huge black shape racing toward them underwater. As it got closer, he saw it was a massive slab of rock. He barely had time to register that before he was flying up and out of the water, along with his two friends. Tardu landed hard on the muddy shore. He turned in time to see three pillars of rock retreating into the water. The next moment, there was the sound of a great impact, and shards of ice flew up from beneath the river. The huge rock had smashed the oncoming wave of ice to bits.

Tardu stood up. At first, he thought he must have hit his head when he landed. Standing before him was a mirror image of himself made from rock. But when it spoke, it was not his voice, but the unmistakable tones of a Skrall.
“Go back,” said the duplicate Tarduk. “You do not belong here. The Maze is mine to conquer, not yours.”

“We’re not looking to conquer anything,” said Tarduk. “We’re just looking for answers.”

“And some of us aren’t even sure of the questions anymore,” added Crotesius.

Tarduk expected the rock-thing to threaten them, or even attack. Instead, it just nodded. “You have encountered many dangers coming here, have you not? You are missing your homes.”

Crotesius and Tarduk said nothing. Kirbold just nodded.

“Then I will not delay your journey,” said the Element Lord of Rock – for who else could it be?

“But I will warn you. Rock is already unyielding. Give it the power of the Great Beings and no world is safe. That power will be mine and no one else’s. Travel on, learn what you must. Take nothing back with you. And never return.” With that, the rock statue of Tarduk crumbled to dust.

“Maybe it is time to go home,” said Crotesius.

“No, not after we’ve come so far,” said Tarduk. “We’re close, I know it.”

The three Agori traveled along the bank of the river, keeping a watchful eye out for another Element Lord attack. A few hours later, they had reached the headwaters. There before them was a massive archway decorated with ornate carvings. Written across the top in Agori were the words ‘Spirit’s Wish.’

Tarduk was stunned at the sight. “I thought that was just a legend.”

“You’ve heard of this?” asked Crotesius.

“Read a carving once that referred to it,” Tarduk replied. “According to the story, anyone who passes through it gets the dearest wish of their spirit, or something like that. If it works, maybe we can get where we want to go right away, instead of more traveling on foot. It’s worth a try.”

“Doesn’t look like we have any choice, anyway,” said Kirbold. “There’s no way around it. We have to go through.”

Steeling themselves, the three Agori walked beneath the arch. There was a flash of light, a horrible sickening feeling, and then utter and complete darkness… until Tarduk woke up in the sand.

And now it made sense. The arch wasn’t some magical wish-granter – it was a teleportation device, just the sort of thing the Great Beings would build. It was designed to scan the mind of anyone passing under, and send them where they wanted to go. Or maybe where the Great Beings wanted them to go. There was no way to tell.

But why did I end up here? wondered Tarduk. I wanted to go to the Maze. I wanted answers… Or was the Element Lord of Rock right? Did I somewhere, deep down, really just want to go home? And so that’s where it sent me.

Crotesius and Kirbold were on their feet now, looking around at the ruins of Atero in shock. Tarduk knew that they would want to head back to their villages, and so did he. But once he was certain Tesara was alright, he was heading back north. He had to. This time, he would make it through the arch and find what he was seeking. This time, he wouldn’t waver. Even if he had to go alone, he was making the journey. He had set out to solve a riddle, and it seemed some pretty powerful beings were trying to solve it too. It was still out there, tantalizing him: a question without an answer. But he would answer it somehow – and soon.

Tarduk looked to the north. His destiny lay that way, he knew. And nothing would stop him from achieving it.
Fero reined Skirmix to a halt and scanned the horizon. Little was moving on the sands of Bara Magna this day. Here and there, a Zesk crawled out of the sand in search of a meal. Scavenger birds wheeled in the sky, waiting for something to drop from the heat. The emptiness of the desert was no surprise. It was high sun, and only lunatics and fools would be out in this heat.

But the armored warrior was neither crazy nor stupid. Fero had a job to do. Any rider or caravan forced to travel at this time of day would be moving slowly – too slowly to evade a determined hunter.

He checked his weaponry. His blade was scored by sand and carried the scars of hundreds of battles, but it was still razor sharp. He had found it in the ruins of a Glatorian training arena a long time back. With luck, today it would help him in another successful hunt.

His rock steed growled. It didn’t like to stand still. Its body was designed to be self-cooling, but only if it kept on the move. Fero was about to spur on his mount when Skirmix began shaking its head and snapping its jaws together. The animal sensed prey.

Like all Bone Hunters, Fero had a second set of eyelids, which shielded his eyes from the sun. He closed them now, reducing the sun’s glare. Yes, there was something out there, far to the west. It was a lone transport driven by Agori villagers from Iconox. Riding alongside was a single Glatorian whom Fero recognized instantly.

Gelu, the Hunter said to himself. *Then this hunt is both business and pleasure.*

The Glatorian named Gelu was feeling pleased with himself this day. Even the extreme heat and the stench of the sand stalker he rode could not ruin his mood. He was, after all, on his way to becoming very rich.

For most of Bara Magna, the past few days had been nightmarish. For many years, the southern villages had enjoyed an uneasy peace with Roxtus, the Skrall city to the north. Skrall warriors dominated the Glatorian battles in the arenas, but in general, they followed the rules and respected the rights of other villages. Now all that had changed.

The changes happened little by little. First, the Skrall started challenging places like Tajun and Vulcano to matches to win anything, from caches of arms and equipment to access to oases and trade routes. Since the peoples of Bara Magna relied on Glatorian fights to settle their disputes, rejecting a Skrall challenge was impossible. The results of the battles were always the same: the Skrall would win and take what they wanted.

Then the Skrall got more aggressive. They started claiming land and resources without bothering to fight in the arena for them. When they did fight, they sometimes killed their opponents, later claiming the Glatorian deaths were just “unfortunate accidents.” Meanwhile, Glatorian fighters traveling between villages started disappearing. True, the wastelands were always dangerous, but too many were vanishing for it to be a coincidence.
Things came to a climax during the annual Glatorian tournament in the village of Atero. Everyone wondered what was going on when no Skrall fighters arrived to participate. They found out when an army of Skrall descended on the village, destroying the great arena and killing many Glatorian. Their days of pretending to be part of Bara Magna society were over. The Skrall had declared war.

Disaster for some, though, meant opportunity for others. Gelu now hired himself out as a bodyguard for Agori trade caravans and other travelers. He pledged to defend them against Skrall raiding parties, hungry Vorox, Bone Hunters, and any other threats. He also made sure he got paid up front.

The sand stalker snorted and reared. Gelu could see why. There were signs of a battle having been fought here. Broken weapons and shattered armor were scattered in the sand. The stalker could smell death, and it didn’t like the scent.

The villagers making up the transport were paler than their white armor. They were carrying badly needed goods to Tajun. Caravans to that village had become a prime target for Bone Hunters. The last three that went without Glatorian protection had never arrived.

“Relax,” said Gelu. “I’ve traveled this route a dozen times in the last two weeks. Outside of a few Zesk scavengers, I haven’t run into anything worth fighting.”

The driver nodded. “Tell that to the traders who vanished out here.”

“Sand seas,” offered Gelu. “Storms. Maybe rockslides, if they went through the mountains. Lots of dangers out here – not just Skrall and Bone Hunters.”

This, of course, was only half true. There were plenty of threats in the wastelands, from weather to wildlife. But Tajun-bound traders were being picked off by Bone Hunters, and everyone knew it. Still, why bring it up? It might frighten the customers. And frightened customers turn back and want their payment returned.

The Spikit pulling the wagon gave a menacing hiss. It was a two-headed reptilian creature, not too fast, but tough and aggressive. As long as it was well-fed, it would defend a wagon to the death. Let it get hungry, though, and it would eat your trade goods, your wagon, and you, not necessarily in that order. Growling from a Spikit meant one of two things: it sensed danger, or it had missed a meal.

Gelu scanned the sands. His eye caught a glint of sunlight on dull metal. He knew he was looking at a Bone Hunter. The good news was that there was only one. The bad news was that one was more than enough to make serious trouble.

The Glatorian spoke in a calm, steady voice, without turning to look at the Agori. “When I give the word, take off as fast as two-head can pull you. There’s a sandstorm building to the west. If need be, you can hide inside it. I’ll be along soon.”

“What is it?” asked one of the villagers. “Are we in danger?”

“Agori, you’ve been in danger since before Bara Magna had moons. Now do as I say.”

The Bone Hunter was on the move now, riding down from the high dunes. Gelu gave a yell, and the Agori started their transport moving. Gelu waited a few seconds to make sure they were well on their way before riding up to meet the Hunter.

By the time he reached Fero, Gelu wore a bitter smile of recognition. The two of them had clashed a number of times over the last few weeks. Sometimes Fero succeeded in smashing the caravan and stealing or destroying the goods. Other times, Gelu got his clients away clean. He had learned the hard way about having the Agori stand and fight. Better to let them risk the sands than face Fero.

“They’ll be long gone by the time you finish with me,” said Gelu.

“How do you know there aren’t more Bone Hunters waiting to ambush them?” Fero replied.

Gelu laughed. “They’re carrying a small fortune in food, spare parts, and whatever else they can trade in Tajun – and you don’t like to share.”

Fero suddenly swung his blade. Gelu ducked just before it took his head off. Skirmix snapped its jaws, trying to get at Gelu’s sand stalker, but the stalker backed away and kicked. Its hoof struck Skirmix in the left knee, and the creature lurched.
Fero had to drop his guard in order to grab onto the reins. Gelu hit him in the side with the flat of his ice blade, sending him tumbling off Skirmix. But Fero rolled on impact and came up on his feet. He aimed his Thornax launcher right at Gelu.

“Get down,” Fero snarled.

Gelu slipped down to the sand and faced Fero.

“Now toss your launcher far away,” said the Bone Hunter, his own launcher never wavering.

Not seeing any other choice, Gelu hurled his launcher to the side. He still had his ice blade. To his surprise, Fero did the same. The two faced each other armed only with swords.

Fero struck first and fast, driving Gelu back with a series of hard strikes. After only a few minutes of fighting, Gelu’s arms were starting to feel like they were made of rock. The heat was getting to him. He had to finish this blade fight fast, or he was the one who would be finished.

Sensing his opponent’s weakness, Fero bore down. He wasn’t going to give Gelu time to recover. He forced the Glatorian back, and back again.

Then Gelu unexpectedly ducked and kicked up his legs. He caught Fero in the midsection and propelled him into the air. Fero landed face-first in a dune while Gelu scrambled to his feet. He glanced to the side to ensure his sand stalker was keeping Skirmix out of the battle.

The Bone Hunter was starting to get up. Gelu took a few quick steps and kicked Fero’s sword away from him. That was when he spotted something else on the sand. It was a piece of parchment with what looked like a map drawn on it. Keeping his blade close enough to strike Fero if he made a move, he picked it up.

A swift scan showed it was a detailed map of the village of Vulcanus. There were a series of dates down the side with a number beside each.

“What is this?” asked Gelu.

“Go to the sand bog,” Fero spat. “I’m not telling you anything.”

Gelu snatched up his Thornax launcher and aimed it toward Skirmix. “Want to walk home?”

Fero looked at his mount, then back at Gelu. His expression was as cold as Iconox ice. “If I have to.”

Gelu frowned. It was said that a Bone Hunter’s jaws could clamp shut tighter than a rock dragon’s on a meal. If Fero didn’t want to talk, he wasn’t going to. Gelu wondered if he should kill the Bone Hunter, but decided against it. It would only paint a target on his back for every other member of Fero’s tribe.

Gelu got back on his sand stalker. He fired a Thornax above Skirmix’s head and one right in front of his nose. The beast backed off a half-dozen paces. Then Gelu urged his mount forward. The sand stalker stepped on Fero’s launcher, producing a very satisfying crunch.

“You might want to start learning to share,” said Gelu, as he rode away.

By the time he caught up to the transport, it was in pretty bad shape. A small band of Zesk had appeared out of the sand and made off with more than half of its contents before the Agori villagers could scare them off. They grumbled about being left to defend themselves. Gelu reminded them that Bone Hunters don’t scare as easily as Zesk. Fero wouldn’t have left them anything, including their lives.

The remaining ride to Tajun was uneventful and gave Gelu time to study the map he had taken from Fero. It seemed strange. For one thing, Bone Hunters usually wrote in their own language, which was different from Agori. It would be almost impossible for an outsider to read. Once or twice he had seen a Hunter carrying something with Skrall markings on it, most likely found when riding around the northern wastes near Roxtus. Bone Hunters wouldn’t be stupid enough to attack the fierce Skrall warriors, but weren’t above looting dead ones.

The notes scrawled on this map, however, were in perfect Agori. It was more than just a standard map of how to get to and from Vulcanus. Each outer wall was marked, along with every other defense the village had in place. Gelu had been to the village a week before, and there were things on this chart that hadn’t been there then. This had to be a brand-new document. But how did it get in the hands of a Bone Hunter?
Gelu was still pondering these questions as he walked the streets of Tajun. The village consisted of a single massive structure beneath which were a series of small, crudely made shelters.

Tajun was located on top of an oasis, so water was never an issue for the residents. For everything else, they relied on trade. With the Bone Hunters’ interference in recent months, the villagers were hurting. Even the small amount of goods in the Iconox transport was welcome.

Gelu spotted Metus, an Agori from his village. Metus was a Glatorian trainer and promoter. He traveled Bara Magna looking for good fighters and set up matches between villages. For him, Tajun was now the place to be.

“Never saw anything like it,” he said to Gelu. “These people need everything—food, tools, spare parts, you name it—and they’re willing to take challenges to get them. Tarix and Kiina have had six matches in the last week. They’re both starting to wear out.”

Gelu could understand that. The two Glatorian were both veteran fighters, but at that pace, and with so much riding on each match, anyone would get run down.

“Hey,” said Metus, eyeing Gelu as if for the first time. “You’re pretty good in the arena. Tajun will give you double what Iconox does if you win a few for them.”

Gelu shook his head. “Sorry, Metus, I’m out of that game... for now. I like doing escort work. Keeps me on the move.”

“Got it,” Metus replied, after a momentary look of disappointment. “Well, if you change your mind... So far, all I’ve managed to recruit is a kid named Gresh from Tesara. Not bad—still needs training, but not bad. We’re headed to Vulcanus for a match today.”

Gelu remembered the map in his bag. Someone in Vulcanus would probably be very interested in seeing it. And Gelu had to admit that he was intrigued by the mystery himself.

“A lot of Bone Hunters between here and there,” he said. “You could use an extra sword. Mind if I tag along?”
Beyond a brief greeting when he and Gelu were introduced, Gresh didn’t say much during the first part of the journey. Normally, Gelu would have written this off as nerves. Young Glatorian did one of two things around veterans: they asked questions non-stop, or shut up completely, afraid to sound stupid if they opened their mouths.

But Gresh wasn’t a typical newcomer to the game. He had won all but one of his matches for Tesara, and the one he lost was to a Skrall warrior. There was no shame in that. Back when Roxtus sent fighters to the arena, no one had ever beaten a Skrall.

Gelu liked the kid. Too many young fighters thought being a Glatorian was all about profit or personal glory. But the best of the breed knew it was a lot more than that.

“Who are you fighting?” he asked Gresh.

Before Gresh could answer, Metus did it for him. “He’s fighting Ackar. You know they kicked Malum out, right? He tried to kill an opponent who had already surrendered. So they’re down to Ackar and a couple of kids who are still so new they don’t know which end of the sword to hold.”

Gelu had done more than hear about Malum. He had spotted the crimson-armored ex-Glatorian a few times out in the wastelands. He had no idea how Malum was surviving out there on his own. But the look Gelu had seen in his eyes said maybe it was better not to know.


The kid had good eyes. Far off in the distance, an Agori transport had lost a wheel. The two drivers, both from Vulcanus, were struggling to get it back on while trying not to get too close to their hungry Spikit. As the Glatorian approached, one of the Agori looked up at Gelu. Then he looked away, shaking his head in disgust.

“Another Glatorian from Iconox,” the villager said. “He won’t help. Keep working.”

“You don’t think too highly of the ice village, I’m guessing?” said Gelu.

“We broke down two hours ago,” said the other Agori. “Not long after, a Glatorian from your village comes by. He offers to patch the transport and get us to Vulcanus. But says he’s pretty sure the pass ahead is full of Vorox, so his price is half the goods we’re carrying. We said no.”

Vorox were residents of a sand village who had backslid after the disasters of 100,000 years back. Now they were little more than beasts, hiding in the desert and pouncing on anyone who passed through their hunting grounds. If a traveler was lucky, he only lost his transport and his goods. If he wasn’t, well, then he wouldn’t have to worry about the heat anymore.

“Maybe ‘yes’ would have been a better answer,” Gelu said.

“Vorox? Did they say Vorox?” said Metus, trying to look in every direction at once. “Let’s go. These guys will be fine. We’ll take the long way.”

To Gelu’s surprise, Gresh dismounted from his sand stalker. “No. We’ll help,” the kid said.

The Agori put his hands on his hips, a look of defiance in his eyes. “We can’t afford you. Move on and let us get back to work.”
“No one wants your goods,” Gresh answered. “Stay here and you’ll be dead before another sunrise.”

“Wait a minute!” Metus said. “What am I hearing? Tell me you just want to fix the wheel, and then we move on.”

Gresh turned and looked at the promoter. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and even. “No. We’re going to fix the transport and then get them to Vulcanus. It’s the right thing to do.”

Gelu smiled. He respected Gresh’s guts, if not his sense of fair odds. He was one Glatorian with two Agori about to go up against potentially dozens of Vorox. It was suicide. Then again, Gelu remembered taking the same kind of foolish chances when he started out.

“You’re going to need an extra set of eyes,” he said, getting down off his sand stalker. “If you don’t watch both flanks, the Vorox will be on you before you can raise your shield.”

“I don’t believe this!” sputtered Metus. “You’re crazy, the both of you! Gresh, your village is counting on you – do you have any idea how upset Tesara will be with me if you get killed because you wanted to do someone a favor?”

Gelu laughed. “Don’t worry about it, Metus. If this goes bad, odds are none of us will be alive to take the heat for it. So get down and help with this wheel, okay?”

Repairs to the wagon went quickly, but it was still a little too close to sunset for anyone’s liking.

Metus suggested they make camp and set out in the morning, but Gresh disagreed. “We have a better chance of making it through if we are mounted and moving,” he said. “There’s no shelter here, nothing but sand. They could come up from underneath us whenever they wanted.”

Gresh and Gelu got back on their mounts. Both checked their Thornax launchers to make sure they were ready to go. Gelu scanned the pass up ahead, but couldn’t see any Vorox. That meant nothing, of course – by the time you saw them, it was usually too late.

“Let’s go,” said Gelu. He turned to the two Agori drivers. “If it comes to it, you jump on our sand stalkers and leave the transport. No matter what you’re carrying, it’s not worth your lives.”

The group moved out, traveling from sunlight into shadow. Gresh kept his eyes straight ahead, watching for movement in the sand that would signal Vorox about to emerge from below. Gelu swept his gaze over the rocks on either side.

Something gleamed in the fading sunlight on a high slope. “Up ahead, on the right,” Gelu said quietly.

“I see it,” Gresh replied.

A Vorox suddenly appeared, blade in hand, right where Gelu had indicated. The Glatorian aimed and fired his launcher in one swift motion, winging the bestial warrior.

A sword flew down from the left side of the pass, burying itself in the sand in front of Gresh’s mount. His sand stalker reared and almost threw him, but the Glatorian got it back under control. Metus looked at the weapon as they passed, his eyes wide.

“This is crazy,” he muttered. “We’re not going to make it through here.”

“Sure, we are,” said Gelu, smiling. “Just stay calm, Metus. Try not to look too appetizing, and you’ll be fine.”

“Left side!” snapped Gresh.

Gelu spun and quickly fired three spiked spheres from his launcher. He hit two of the Vorox that Gresh had spotted. The third ducked back behind the rocks. A soft sound made Gelu turn around just in time to spot another Vorox coming out of the sand. He swung his ice blade and disarmed it, then knocked it unconscious with a second blow.

Vorox began filing out of the rocks on both sides like insects from a disturbed sand hill. Gresh and Gelu used their launchers to try to keep them pinned down, but they were already leaping from ledges and charging across the sand. As soon as the Vorox were close enough to make this a hand-to-hand fight, it would be over.
Seeking some way the party could escape, Gelu's eyes fell on the transport. Most of the items in it were old and battered, but there were two pieces of armor that looked close to new. He bent over as he rode past, snatching them up. Then he tossed one to Gresh. "The leader! Throw it!" he shouted.

Gresh got the idea. He tossed the piece of armor to the lead Vorox on the left, while Gelu did the same on the right. The Vorox grabbed the items out of the air. Instantly, the rest of the pack noticed that two of their number had treasures. They started grabbing for the pieces of armor. When the new owners resisted, things turned vicious. A mad scramble started, as each Vorox who got his hands on the shiny items became a target for all the rest.

"Come on!" yelled Gelu. "This won't keep them busy for long!"

The Agori got the Spikit moving, while Gresh, Gelu, and Metus rode behind. No one slowed down until the pass was well behind them and smoke from the fires of Vulcanus was visible in the twilight sky.

Gelu looked back. No one was pursuing them. "Not bad," he said, turning back to Gresh. "You're pretty good in a fight, kid. If I were Ackar, I'd be worried."

The two Agori drivers couldn't meet the eyes of their Glatorian companions. Finally, one spoke up. "We... um... want to apologize. We thought you Glatorian fought only for money. I guess we were wrong."

"No, you weren't," said Metus. He glared at Gresh as he added, "That's the way it's supposed to be."

Gresh ignored him. Nodding to the Agori, he turned his mount and rode toward Vulcanus. After a moment, Gelu joined him.

"So," said Gelu. "You do that sort of thing often?"

"When it's needed," Gresh answered. "I'm bigger, stronger, and faster than the Agori. I've got a shield and a launcher, and I know how to use them. I'm a Glatorian. Doesn't that mean I have to protect people who aren't as strong as I am?"

Gelu was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Tell me something, Gresh – are you sure you're from this planet?"

The rest of the ride to Vulcanus was uneventful. The two Glatorian shared a meal of burnt sand bat and talked at the village inn. Slowly at first, Gresh began to open up. He talked with Gelu about the challenges he had faced in the arena and his worries that someday he might let his village down. For a Glatorian, the outcome of a single battle could mean the difference between a village thriving or one just surviving.

"Listen, friend, anyone who ever picked up a sword to fight for one of these sand pits has felt the same way," said Gelu. "Sometimes, it's easy to forget why Glatorian need to do what we do – even the Agori sometimes forget what started it all. Heck, I wish I could."

"You were there when...?" Gresh began.

Gelu nodded. "Oh, yeah, I was there, along with many others. Six armies, all fighting over a glittering silver liquid that changed or destroyed whatever it touched – some saw it as a power source, others as a weapon. Battles raged all across the planet, going back and forth, until somebody, somewhere, figured out a way to tap that power. And... well, you know the rest... The planet wound up in pieces."

The Iconox Glatorian looked around the inn. Agori were eating, talking, most of them in battered armor that should have been replaced ages ago. It was easy to see the places where the metal was patched, often with scraps that didn't quite match the original color. No one looked particularly happy or sad. Mostly, they just looked tired.

"That was, what, more than one hundred thousand years ago now?" Gelu continued. "Agori scattered all over, finding shelter where they could. Villagers couldn't afford another war, even if anyone still had an appetite for one. So somebody got the bright idea to hire veteran warriors to fight on the villages' behalf. If Vulcanus and Tesara had a disagreement, well, each one hired a Glatorian and they'd fight it out. The winner got whatever he needed – food, shelter, weapons, armor. Keep winning and you could get rich – well, as rich as you can ever be out this way. But the trick was to keep winning."
“Is that why you quit?” Gresh asked. Seeing the look on Gelu’s face, he said, “It’s not a secret. Kiina told me last time I was in Tajun. She said she hadn’t seen you in an arena in weeks.”

Gelu smiled. “Yeah, Kiina would notice that. It’s simple – nobody is going to be on top forever. Look at Ackar. They love him here now – they need him now – but watch him lose a few matches and see how fast he gets pushed aside. I decided I didn’t want to wait for that to happen to me – not when there’s so much money to be made getting people and things from place to place.”

Even as he said that, Gelu spotted Raanu coming into the inn. Raanu was the elder of the village of Vulcanus. He was tough and honest, even if sometimes stubborn beyond belief. He was also the keeper of anything of value in the place, which made him just the person Gelu needed to see.

“Excuse me,” he said to Gresh as he rose. “I have to see an Agori about a map.”
“This is bad. This is very, very bad,” said Raanu. He looked up at Gelu and waved the map. “Do you know what this is?”

“Bad!” offered Gelu.

“Worse than bad,” muttered the village elder. “There are walls on this map that didn’t even exist two weeks ago. With something like this, the Bone Hunters could go around or through any of our defenses. We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Good thing I found it for you then,” Gelu said. He waited then, eyes on Raanu. The elder would have to offer him some kind of reward for his service… wouldn’t he?

But Raanu was paying no attention to the expectant Glatorian. He was looking at his people gathered in the inn and wondering how many would survive a Bone Hunter attack. Not many, he guessed.

“A few Thornax launchers, some swords and spears, picks, shovels, hammers,” he said quietly. “That’s not going to stop those barbarians. They will ride in, take whatever we have, and leave us with nothing— that’s if they don’t burn the whole village down.”

Gelu had to agree. He had seen firsthand what Bone Hunters could do. No bunch of Agori, no matter how determined, would be able to stand up to a raiding party… not in direct combat, anyway.

“We may have to flee,” Raanu said, voice heavy with despair. “Go out into the wastelands and start again, maybe further south. Maybe if we let them have what they want, they’ll leave us alone.”

“Not likely.” The words came from Gresh, who had wandered over to find out what had upset Raanu. “If the Bone Hunters know you’re afraid of them, they’ll keep after you until you drop dead in the sand.”

“But we are afraid of them,” said Raanu. “And with good reason! It would take an army to stop them, and in case you didn’t notice, we have no army.

Gelu started to reply, then stopped. He had to think hard about his next words. They might land him in the middle of a bad situation. Then again, if he didn’t say them, Gresh would. At least if he did it first, he might be able to negotiate a fee.

“You don’t need an army,” Gelu said. “You need Glatorian— good ones, fast, experienced. A small team might not be able to defeat a legion of Bone Hunters, but they can make the fight so costly for them that they’ll turn back.”

Raanu beckoned for Gelu to go on, but it was Gresh who spoke. “I get it. Stall them. Trick them. Trap them.”

Gelu nodded. “Right. Ever try to get a dune spider out from under a rock? It sprouts thorns all over its body and legs. Eventually, you give up and go find easier prey. You need to make Vulcanus too prickly to hold.”

Raanu smiled. “Yes, yes… I like this idea. We’ll make them wish they never came here. Let them raid some other village instead— Vulcanus will not surrender! And you, Gelu? You will lead these Glatorian?”
Gelu was ready for this question. He would act humbled by the suggestion, make a show of thinking about it, then agree — after, of course, Raanu had made a very generous offer. “Me?” he began, looking down at the floor. “Well, I don’t know, Raanu. I’m not really in that business anymore, and—”

“He won’t do it. I will. It’s my job.”

All three turned. Ackar was standing in the doorway. If any Glatorian could be considered a living legend, it was he. Even those who had never fought him knew his reputation. He was older now, maybe not as fearsome as in centuries past, but when he spoke, other Glatorian always listened.

“Ackar,” said Raanu, seeming a little embarrassed. “I was just about to go get you.” He handed Ackar the map and explained the situation. The veteran Glatorian said nothing, just nodded slightly as he scanned the parchment.

“Not sure I agree with Gelu,” Ackar finally said. “I’ve seen three Hunters decimate an entire caravan... six destroy an outpost. What happens if they come at you with twenty, thirty, or forty of their number? What then?”

Raanu looked stricken. “So you’re saying we should give up? Flee?” Gelu had to suppress a smile on hearing the outrage in Raanu’s voice. Five minutes ago, it was the Agori who had suggested that same strategy. Now he acted shocked to hear someone else say the same thing.

“I said I didn’t agree with his idea,” Ackar snapped. “I didn’t say we wouldn’t do it. We need an army, but we haven’t got one. So we’ll have to make do with what we have.”

“I’m in,” said Gresh. “This isn’t my village, but I won’t stand around and let Bone Hunters take it.”

Ackar looked at Gelu. “How about you?”

Three Glatorian against any number of Bone Hunters? Crazy. This isn’t what he had in mind. He’d had it all figured. Raanu would agree to the idea and hire Gelu to go out and recruit Glatorian, for a nice price. He would earn a good sum and not take too much of a risk. But with Ackar insisting on defending the village with the Glatorian they had, things were different. Still, if he turned down the request to defend the village, he could forget ever showing his face here again.

“Okay,” Gelu said. “Count me in, too.” He didn’t add that he felt like his heart had become a block of ice or that he was already sweating under his armor. It wasn’t good to let other Glatorian know you were afraid.

“We’ll send the two Glatorian trainees we have here to Tajun tonight with a message for Kiina and Tarix — neither would miss a fight if they can help it,” Ackar said. “Gresh, head back to Tesara, find Vastus and whoever else you can. Gelu, you’re with me.”

“Do you think it’s smart to leave the village undefended?” asked Gresh.

“One or two Glatorian won’t stop the Bone Hunters,” said Ackar. “We need more — a lot more. And we need them now.”

Gresh glanced out the doorway to the charred and blackened main street of the village. “By now, Fero has let his people know he lost the map.”

“Right,” said Ackar, “which means they know we’ll be preparing for them. They are going to move fast. So we have to move faster. I don’t like leaving the village undefended, but we need to find allies. We’ll have to gamble that we make it back before the Bone Hunters arrive.”

There was no time for farewells. Gresh mounted his sand stalker and rode north. The two rookie Glatorian headed west, with strict instructions from Ackar to stay together and to be careful. Darkness had fallen over Bara Magna. It was the most dangerous time to be out in the desert.

Despite asking repeatedly, Gelu had been unable to find out where he and Ackar were going. He waited impatiently while the veteran told Raanu where to post look-outs and what to do if any Bone Hunter scouts appeared on the horizon. If things got truly desperate, he and the villagers were to burn anything they couldn’t carry, head south, double back under the cover of sandstorms, and hide in Iron Canyon. With luck, the Bone Hunters would keep heading south and find themselves in the Sea of Liquid Sand. “Remember, though, if they see one straggler heading for the canyon, they will know what you’re doing,” said Ackar. “Your lives won’t be worth a grain of sand then.”
Gelu had packed a few days’ worth of supplies onto his mount. Ackar saw what he was doing and nodded approvingly. “Good idea. We can use the food for trade.”
“I was planning to use it for eating,” answered Gelu. “I find it works much better that way.”
Ackar gave a bitter laugh. “You don’t want to be fattening yourself up, Gelu… not where we’re going.”
“Good luck to you both,” said Raanu. “The hopes of everyone in Vulcanus ride with you.”
“Then I hope they don’t need to eat,” muttered Gelu. “Cause that’s out, I hear.”

The two Glatorian struck out to the north. They rode in silence for a few hours until they reached the banks of the Skrall River. Once, enough water had flowed to provide for all the needs of nearby villages. Now it was barely a trickle, thanks to a dam built by the Skrall. Many Glatorian, including Ackar, had challenged the Skrall in the arena, over that dam. The Skrall won every time, and the dam stayed in place. Gelu expected they would cross and head northwest for Iconox, but instead, Ackar wheeled his mount to the northeast.

Now Gelu knew where they were going. And he didn’t like it one bit.
“Ackar!” the ice Glatorian whispered. “We’re heading right for Bone Hunter territory. Their camp is only a couple days’ ride from here.”
“I know,” Ackar answered. “We’re going to stop and pick up a… friend. Then we’re going to see if we can’t stop their plans before they start.”
“You’re going to make an attack on the Bone Hunters?” Gelu asked in disbelief. He offered his launcher to Ackar. “Here. Why not just kill me now?”
“Relax,” said Ackar. “They expect us to be hiding behind walls. The last thing on their minds is the possibility that we’ll attack them.”
“It was the last thing on my mind, too,” replied Gelu. “What are we going to use for an army?”
Ackar looked at Gelu for a few moments in silence. Then he chuckled softly and said, “You don’t want to know.”

Gresh rode hard. Tesara was a long way away from Vulcanus. He hoped Vastus or some of the other Glatorian would be there when he arrived. If they were traveling to a match, he might never find them. The idea of returning to Ackar empty-handed was something he wouldn’t accept.

He rode through lonely, barren country. Parts of Bara Magna had always been desert, but he had heard stories that some regions were once a little more green, like Tesara. The cataclysmic events that tore through the world 100 millennia ago had changed all that.

Not for the first time, he wondered about the Skrall. Everyone had known they existed, even before they moved south into the desert. Their homeland was said to be north of the Black Spike Mountains, near a volcanic region that dwarfed Vulcanus. They kept largely to themselves for thousands of years, shunning any contacts with Iconox or any of the northern villages.

Then all that changed. The Skrall stormed down from the north and made their home in the city of Roxtus, a ruin that they rebuilt. They restricted travel to their city, allowing only Glatorian coming to fight or select Agori trade caravans. Those who made the trip spoke of a huge arena almost as big as the one in Atero, of warriors everywhere they looked, and of Spikit and other vicious beasts unleashed on Glatorian for the amusement of the onlookers.

Many Glatorian who went there to fight never returned. The Skrall usually blamed this on “accidents,” or insisted the fighter had been fine when he left the city and must have met with some mishap on his way back home. Those few warriors who went there and made it back insisted they would never return.

The presence of the Skrall made all the other villages uneasy. Many wondered why they had bothered to migrate to such a barren region in the first place. Had they used up their own resources? Been driven out by some natural disaster? Or was there a more sinister reason for their sudden arrival?

Maybe no one would ever know why the Skrall did what they did. What mattered was that, after a period of pretending to want to be a part of Bara Magna society, the Skrall had shown their true nature.
They wanted to conquer this world, and they had the warriors and the will to do it. With the Bone Hunters making more and more raids every day on top of the Skrall threat, the villages were in terrible danger.

Gresh reined his mount to a stop. Why had the Bone Hunters worked so hard to cut off Tajun? And why would they be targeting Vulcanus? Bone Hunters went after travelers and trade caravans. They didn’t attack entire villages. Sure, Atero had been raided and sacked, but that hadn’t been the Bone Hunters.

It was the Skrall.

Could it be? He wanted to reject the whole idea. The Bone Hunters were nomadic and survived by stealing and worse. They had no use for alliances with any village or tribe. Nor would they need to team with the Skrall for their own security. No one knew the sands better than the Bone Hunters. If the Skrall took aim at them, they could vanish into the desert and never be found. It didn’t make sense that they might be working with – or for – the Skrall.

But what if they were? That question pounded in his brain. If the Skrall combined their organization, their weaponry, their sheer power with the Bone Hunters’ lightning tactics and knowledge of the region… it could be all over for every free village on Bara Magna.

All the more reason to get where I’m going and get help, he thought grimly, as he spurred on his sand stalker. We need to stop them at Vulcanus now, and stop them for good.

Fero heard riders, but he couldn’t see them. Dawn was still a few hours away and even the keen vision of a Bone Hunter could not pierce the darkness completely. But he could hear the rapid beats of sand stalker hooves in the soft sand, and he could smell the exhaustion of the animals… and the fear of their riders.

He smiled. He knew from their frantic pace that their mission was urgent and from their scents that they had ridden a long distance. He knew the riders were wise, for this was a place in which to be very afraid.

Fero turned to look at his four companions. Each carried a darkfire torch, which provided warmth in the chill desert night, but gave off no light. They were all veteran Bone Hunters, out for a night raid. With the Vulcanus map no doubt in the hands of Raanu, the expectation was that the village would be sending out a call for help and not waiting for daylight to do it. Fero would be willing to bet a month’s loot that the two riders down below had started from Vulcanus and were on their way to hire more Glatorian for the village’s defense.

Too bad they were never going to reach their destination.

Fero gave a whispered command, and the five hunters rode down the sandy slope. Halfway down, they split up, two heading west, three heading east. Fero and two of his comrades would cut off the riders and attack. When they inevitably turned to flee, they would find their line of retreat blocked by the other two Bone Hunters. It would be over in minutes.

And Vulcanus will take only a little longer than that, thought Fero. Let the Agori plan and prepare. Let them watch the sands for signs of our approach. They will never see us coming.

No one ever does.
After a few hours of riding, Ackar abruptly cut to the west across the riverbed. The sun was just beginning to rise behind them as they traveled over the dunes. Gelu could see the telltale marks in the sand that indicated Vorox had been through here. The further they went, the more numerous the signs. Vorox tunnels left a very unique pattern in the sand, and the two riders were surrounded by them now.

Gelu moved his hand close to his launcher.

Ackar pointed to a rise up ahead, dominated by a small mountain chain. Gelu could see a cave opening about halfway up the central peak. “That’s where we’re going,” said Ackar.

Gelu suddenly had a very bad feeling that he knew this “friend” of Ackar’s. But what was with all the traces of Vorox? At first, he couldn’t see any connection – a moment later he realized that he preferred it that way.

They were about 500 yards from the rocks when the Vorox appeared, erupting out of the sand all around them. Zesk, the smaller versions of the Vorox, were scattered about, too, chattering and making threatening gestures toward the two Glatorian. Gelu went for his launcher, but Ackar grabbed his wrist and kept him from reaching it.

“Do you really think you could shoot your way out of this?” Ackar said quietly. “If things go really badly, we’ll charge for the cave – it’s easier to defend. Until then, let me handle this.” Ackar paused, then said, “Scared?”

Seconds ticked by.

“Sure,” Gelu answered.

“Good. That means you aren’t crazy. I don’t like having crazy people watching my back.”

Ackar turned toward the cave. He shouted, “Malum! I need to talk to you.”

The assembled Vorox murmured among themselves and drew a little closer. One reached out to paw Gelu’s sand stalker. Gelu restrained himself from taking a swipe with his blade, but the look he gave the Vorox was enough to make the savage back off.

“Malum!” Ackar called again. “Show yourself!”

The exiled Glatorian appeared in the mouth of the cave. His scarlet armor was cracked in places and caked with sand in others. Malum had always been bigger and stronger than Ackar and his time in the wastelands hadn’t changed that. But Gelu was certain many other things were different now – living out in the sands would do that to a being.

“Ackar,” Malum said. His voice was almost too quiet to hear. The tone was a mix of surprise and satisfaction, as if seeing his old sparring partner again was something he had been looking forward to for some time. Gelu wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Malum barked a command in a language Gelu didn’t understand. Instantly, the Vorox backed away three steps, but they did not put their weapons away. If anything, they seemed to have changed from merely curious about the visitors to ready for an attack. Ackar was right about one thing – the two Glatorian were surrounded, so there would be no fighting their way free.
“What brings you to my… empire?” Malum asked Ackar. He gestured to the sea of sand that stretched out in every direction. “If you are seeking hospitality, I have none to offer. Food? Water? Whatever I have goes to feed my people.”

“You people?” Gelu said. “You mean the Vorox? They aren’t anyone’s ‘people.’ They’re just this side of sand bats.”

“You’re right,” said Malum. “But civilized society said it had no place for me. The Vorox found me, sheltered me, and made me part of their tribe. We want nothing to do with your world anymore, Ackar. But out of the friendship we once shared, I will allow you and your friend to depart with your lives… if you leave now.”

Gelu thought that sounded like a great idea. He was no coward – far from it, he would take on anyone in a fight, from a Skrall on down. But this place reminded him a little too much of the Agori “settlements,” the places for those who had spent too much time in the sun and sand and lost their minds.

“We need your help,” said Ackar. “Vulcanus is in trouble.”

Malum made a disgusted sound and turned back for the cave. “Go home, Ackar. Go home, while you still can.”

“Vulcanus sheltered you, Malum. It fed you, supplied you with arms and armor, and treated you like a king,”Ackar said, his tone blunt, but not cruel. “You owe it something.”

Malum wheeled around, pointing at Ackar. His features were contorted with rage. “I owe them nothing! Look at me. Look at what I am reduced to. A ‘king,’ yes, until they drove me out… until they said I wasn’t worthy of fighting and dying for them.”

“Maybe they were right,” said Ackar. “Maybe you’re not worthy.”

Dead silence. The Vorox edged closer. Gelu’s hand returned to his launcher. Sure, he wouldn’t stand a chance, but at least he would take some of the beasts down with him.

“You have a stake in this, too,” Ackar continued. “They’re Bone Hunters.”

Gelu thought he saw Malum flinch a little. Bone Hunters were long-standing enemies of the Vorox. While the Hunters might steal from, or even kill, Agori and Glatorian for food or supplies, they would go after Vorox for pure sport. Although wild and brutal, the Vorox weren’t smart enough to avoid Bone Hunter traps or fast enough to outrun their rock steeds. The best they could do was dive back underground, but the Hunters were willing to wait for them to come back to the surface. Bone Hunters were nothing if not patient.

“Tell me,” said Malum.

Ackar laid out everything they knew, which wasn’t much. He finished by saying there was a Bone Hunter camp to the east, most likely a place for them to prepare their attack on Vulcanus. “They’re getting bolder,” he said. And if they can take out a village today, they can take out your ‘kingdom’ tomorrow.”

Malum climbed down the mountainside in silence. As he approached the Glatorian, the Vorox parted to let him pass. “I care nothing about Vulcanus. Let it burn. But I would see the Bone Hunters burn first. What would you have us do?”

Gresh staggered into Tesara, leading his sand stalker. The animal had been just short of collapsing a few miles back, so the only way to get it to the village alive was to dismount and take it slow. He handed the reins to an Agori and headed for the arena.

The village’s veteran Glatorian, Vastus, was in the middle of a practice session. He had been training nonstop since Atero had fallen. He was determined that Tesara would not meet the same fate. He seemed surprised to see Gresh approaching. “I thought you were on your way to Vulcanus. Let it burn. But I would see the Bone Hunters burn first. What would you have us do?”

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“The village has bigger problems,” Gresh replied. He gratefully accepted a cup of water Vastus offered. It tasted like sand and iron, but he drank it down in one gulp anyway.

“With one Glatorian to fight for them, I’m not surprised,” Vastus laughed.

“Actually, it’s three now. Ackar, Gelu… and me. I’m hoping you’ll join us.” Gresh explained the threat to the village of fire as rapidly as he could.
When he was done, Vastus shook his head. “It’s a bluff. Don’t you see? The Bone Hunters want you to think they are going after Vulcanus, so they conveniently drop a map. But what they really intend to do is hit another village – Tajun maybe, or here. I won’t leave Tesara undefended… and your place is here, too.”

“What if you’re wrong?” asked Gresh.
“Then Tesara will be safe,” Vastus answered. “And we’ll open our gates to any refugees from Vulcanus who come our way. Listen, Gresh, the people in this village rely on us to help and protect them. We don’t do that by worrying about other places and other tribes – let them worry about themselves.”

“We’re all on the same world,” Gresh shot back. “What happens to them affects us, too.”
“No. This is our world – this, right here, shrouded in vines and too close to Roxtus for my liking. We both saw Atero crumble. Well, not again, not to my village.”
Gresh threw the cup on the ground. “But you’re fine with it happening to someone else’s,” he said, walking away. “Sorry I wasted your time.”

“This is a waste of time.”
Tarix glanced at Kiina. It wasn’t the first time she had said that. Knowing her, he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be the last.

The two were riding slowly across the sands, their eyes fixed on the ground around them. The two Glatorian of Tajun had been sent to investigate an Agori report that a small herd of wild rock steeds were in the area. Penned in and tamed, the animals would be valuable for trade. Left to run wild, they could cause enormous damage.

“Maybe,” he answered. “We’ll give it a little more time, though. It won’t look good if we turn around now and then lose a few Agori to hungry steeds, right?”

“We’re Glatorian,” grumbled Kiina. “We’re fighters – not scouts, not law enforcers, and not animal handlers. If they want me in the arena, fine. Otherwise, leave me alone.”

Tarix sighed. He understood how Kiina felt. No one wanted the world as it was. And people like Kiina just wanted to get away, somewhere, anywhere. But there was no place to go. The only answer was to make the best of the world they had.

They were a good few miles outside of the village now. It made Tarix a little nervous. With all the Bone Hunter activity around Tajun lately, he didn’t like straying too far from the village. One raid and the whole place could go up in flames.

“I don’t see any tracks,” he admitted finally. “Maybe the Agori was wrong, or the herd has already moved on.”

“Well, something came through here,” Kiina answered. “Look over there.”

Tarix saw what she was talking about. Off to the east, there were what looked like dark smudges on the sand. As the two Glatorian rode closer, the objects became more distinct. Both jumped off their sand stalkers and raced toward the site, launchers drawn.

Kiina knelt down to examine their find. Two Glatorian lay dead in the sand. There was no sign of their mounts, but there were tracks of sand stalkers and rock steeds all around. A broken Bone Hunter sword lay half buried in a dune nearby.

“They’re from Vulcanus, but I don’t know them,” she said. “This had to have happened last night. What were they doing way out here after dark?”

Tarix turned in a slow circle, checking out their surroundings. There was no sign of the Bone Hunters or anyone else. Whoever had done this was long gone.

“I don’t know. But maybe someone in Vulcanus does,” said Tarix. “We’ll take these two back to Tajun and bury them. Then one of us better head to their village and let them know they’ve lost two Glatorian.”

“I’ll go,” said Kiina. “You keep watch on the village. If there’s any trouble, send someone out to bring me back.”
Tarix looked toward the eastern peaks and said quietly, “You might be better off if you just keep on riding. If we get the kind of trouble I expect, one Glatorian more or less won’t matter.”

Kiina didn’t need to ask him what he meant. All she had to do was look at the Bone Hunter blade in the sand.
Ackar could tell the Bone Hunters were feeling confident. It wasn’t that they had fires burning in their camp at night, visible for miles around. It wasn’t even that they were talking and laughing among themselves, heedless of how sound carried in the desert. No, it was the strong smell wafting from their encampment that made it obvious that they did not think anyone to fear was around.

The spiky Thornax spheres fired from the launchers most Glatorian carried were not Agori-made, despite their appearance. They were, in fact, the fruit of a rare plant that grew in the deserts of Bara Magna. When allowed to ripen and grow hard, a Thornax became a powerful missile weapon, with spikes capable of tearing open armor.

Picked early in their development and boiled, Thornax could be softened enough to be eaten. The fruit was greasy and rubbery, the taste was foul, and the odor was worse. But for those who lived out in the wastelands, it was a delicacy. Bone Hunters picked Thornax in their travels and cooked it up into a particularly revolting kind of stew. It was that which Ackar smelled on the breeze.

Gelu and Malum stood on either side of him. There was no sign of any of the Vorox, but that was to be expected. Vorox did not march forth in armies. They burrowed under the ground and relied on taking enemies by surprise.

The two Glatorian had spent the day in Malum’s cave, planning strategy. Now and then, Malum would start ranting about his treatment by the villagers of Vulcanus. Gelu would give Ackar a look that said, “Are we sure about this guy?” but he already knew the answer was “No.”

Ackar crouched down and eyed the Bone Hunter camp. It was a cold night, even for Bara Magna, and the wind cut through his armor like a rusty blade. The long, mournful howls of dune wolves could be heard in the distance. The sounds were a summons to the pack, a signal that the hunt was about to begin.

“Everyone remember the plan?” said Ackar, rising. “We move fast, and we take out as many of them as we can.”

Malum looked up sharply. “In my first week in the wastes, the Bone Hunters came down on me. They took my food, my water, and would have taken me if I had not been skilled with a blade. Any plan that involves their deaths is one I can easily remember.”

“Umm, good,” Ackar said. “If we can drive off some of their rock steeds, great. But the point is to make them cautious, wary, worried about more attacks later. A cautious Bone Hunter moves slowly, and that buys Vulcanus time.”

At Ackar’s signal, the three Glatorian moved off to take up their positions. Ten seconds later, there was a shrill whistle and the desert exploded with violence.

Vorox burrowed up out of the ground around the Bone Hunter camp. Rock steeds reared, their scorpion tails flashing, as the bestial warriors appeared in their midst. Caught by surprise, the Bone Hunters struggled to mount a defense against the ferocious attack. The Vorox took down half a dozen Hunters in as many seconds, but the remaining formed a line and fired their Thornax launchers. The spiked
missiles tore through the ranks of the Vorox, killing some and wounding many more. But the strongest effect was to make the attackers bellow with rage and surge forward again.

A few of the wiser Hunters made it to their steeds and rode out of the camp. Ackar heard one of them yell and knew he must have ridden right to where Malum was waiting in ambush. To his right, Gelu was locked in combat with a couple more Hunters who were trying to escape the Vorox attack on foot.

Ackar mounted his sand stalker and charged the line of Bone Hunter marksmen. He smashed into them from behind, scattering them like grains of sand in a storm, then wheeled around and did it again. This time, the Hunters were ready. A slash from a sword almost unseated Ackar, but he held on to the reins until he was clear of the camp.

When he turned his mount around, he saw one of the Bone Hunters darting toward the campfire and throwing something in. The next moment, the small fire erupted, turning into a white-hot blaze twenty times its original size. Under the cover of the flames, the Bone Hunters counterattacked. This time, the Vorox broke, fleeing into the desert or trying to retreat back into their tunnels. The Bone Hunters pursued, cutting them down as they fled. Malum rode in to defend his followers, fighting hard to cover their retreat.

Deciding they had done what they could here, Ackar rode to where Gelu was still struggling with two Hunters. He charged into the fray, knocking both Hunters to the ground, then scooped Gelu onto the back of his mount. Together, they rode from the burning campsite. Then Gelu leapt from Ackar’s sand stalker to his own, and they headed back to Malum’s cave.

Malum was already there when they arrived, surrounded by the remnants of his force. Many Vorox had been lost in the fight, many more wounded, but Malum seemed satisfied. “We have dealt them a blow,” he said, pride in his tone. “They will not lightly pass through our region again. Now they know the jaws of a Vorox bite deep!”

The battered Vorox raised their weapons in the air and roared. Ackar and Gelu both felt chills run through them.

“The Hunters will almost certainly come looking for revenge,” said Ackar. “Maybe not now, but they won’t let this go unpunished. Watch your back, Malum.”

“They will not find us,” the exiled Glatorian replied. “We can disappear like a single grain of sand in a vast desert.”

“You’re sure you won’t help us defend Vulcanus?” asked Ackar. “We could use your sword.”

Malum shook his head. “Those days are past. But I wish you strength in the battle to come.”

“Thank you,” said Ackar.

Malum turned to Gelu, reaching out to grasp the Glatorian’s sword arm. “Die well, warrior.”


Ackar and Gelu rode from the camp as dawn broke over Bara Magna. Both were tired and sore, with the real fight still ahead of them. But this first skirmish had been won.

Raanu watched as Agori villagers placed rocks atop a makeshift wall along the western edge of Vulcanus. Since the discovery of the map, he had ordered all other work to be stopped and every resident to start constructing walls both inside and outside the village. What had existed up to now was enough to keep desert creatures away, but wouldn’t slow down a Bone Hunters’ raiding party or a Skrall attack.

He glanced at the map again. Yes, he decided, his strategy made perfect sense. The Bone Hunters would be attacking from the north and west. They could never make it through the sea of sand to the south, and treacherous Iron Canyon to the east. No sane military expedition would choose to go through its dark and winding pathways.

A cry went up from one of the villagers. Raanu looked up to see a blue-armored Glatorian riding in. He recognized Kiina immediately and went to greet her.

“You got our message, then?” he said. His smile faded at the look in her eyes.
“No,” Kiina replied. She reached into her pack and tossed him a few fragments of broken weaponry. “I got your messengers. Or, rather, the Bone Hunters did. What were you thinking, sending them out in the middle of the night?”

Raanu flinched at the angry tone in her voice. Still, her reaction was no surprise. Kiina was fiercely protective of her fellow Glatorian. Villages that put them in reckless danger, or worse, didn’t pay on time, could always expect to hear from her.

He hurriedly explained the situation. As he did, her expression changed from furious to concerned to grim. She dismounted and walked over to him.

“You need to leave Vulcanus. Now,” she said, keeping her voice just above a whisper. “No one respects Ackar more than I do, but he’s wrong. A handful of Glatorian won’t stop a Bone Hunter raid. They’ll just add to the body count.”

Raanu turned away. Deep down, he knew she was probably right. But Gelu and Ackar had given him hope that the village could be defended. It wasn’t just the loss of homes or resources he worried about. If they started running now, where would it stop?

“I’ve thought about that,” he said, his voice flat. “But what happens when we run out of desert to hide in? The Bone Hunters will track and kill us all, and all we will have bought ourselves is a few extra weeks or months to live like cowards. I’d rather fight and die, here and now, than die by inches on the run.”

“And your people? What about them?” asked Kiina, her words cracking like a whip. “What if they would prefer a chance at life, rather than certain death? Who are you to make this decision for them?”

Raanu turned to face her, his body shaking with barely contained rage.

“I am the leader of this village! These people have placed their trust in me, and I will do what I think is best. I owe it to them to let them fight and die standing straight and tall like Agori, not slinking away into the night like rock jackals. If you don’t want to help, get back on your animal and leave our village.”

Before Kiina could answer, the muffled sound of sand stalker hoofbeats came from behind her. She drew her weapon and spun, ready for a Bone Hunter attack. To her relief, it was just Ackar and Gelu riding in. They and their mounts looked exhausted.

“We slowed them down,” Gelu reported, “with a little help from Malum.”

“Malum?” Raanu said. There was both surprise and contempt in his voice.

“Yeah,” Gelu said, leaping down from his beast. “He’s a little weird – make that, a lot weird – but he came through for you when it counted.”

“It’s good to see you, Kiina,” said Ackar. He dismounted and handed his sand stalker off to an Agori, who would give it food and water.

“I wish I could say the same,” she answered. “Why are you telling these people they can save their village? You know what Bone Hunters can do.”

“Yes, I do,” said Ackar. “But if we run from them, what do we do when the Skrall come? We might as well give up our weapons now, kneel down, and wait for them to take our heads off.”

Ackar reached out and took her hand. “I know you don’t think much of Bara Magna,” he said, a little more gently. “But it’s the only world we have. I’m not going to let scum like the Bone Hunters have it without a fight.”

“And the fight’s coming,” Gelu added. “They’re moving slow, probably on the lookout for more Vorox attacks, but only a couple days away at most.”

“They know we have the map,” said Ackar. “You would think they would come at us full speed, before we can prepare for them.”

“Maybe they aren’t worried about us preparing,” said Gelu. “They don’t think we can stop them. It wouldn’t be the first time Bone Hunters were overconfident.”

“They have no need to rush,” Ackar observed. “Vulcanus isn’t going anywhere.”

“Well, if we want to keep it that way, we’d better get to work,” said Gelu.

Hours passed as the Glatorian helped the Agori strengthen the village’s defenses. After standing aside and watching for a while, Kiina finally shrugged her shoulders and pitched in, as Ackar knew she
would. They had been friends a long time. She wouldn’t let him face this alone, even if she would never admit it.

“Thanks,” said Ackar. “There’s no one I’d rather have beside me in a fight.”
Kiina looked away, so Ackar wouldn’t see her smile. In her gruffest tone, she said, “Save it. I’m only doing this because maybe the fight here will take down enough Bone Hunters and they’ll leave Tajun alone for a while. Not because I think we have any hope of winning.”
“Your optimism is a joy to behold,” muttered Gelu.
“Riders!” shouted an Agori guard.

The three Glatorian rushed to the western walls. Gresh was on his way in, riding alongside an Iconox Glatorian named Strakk and a few others from Tesara that no one recognized. Ackar guessed they were apprentices.

Gelu pulled Gresh aside as soon as he was off his stalker. “You got Strakk to come? How did you manage that?”
“I told him Vulcanus is sitting on top of a fortune in high quality exsidian,” Gresh whispered. “And that we get to divvy it up among ourselves if we beat the Bone Hunters.”
“What? They haven’t had exsidian in Vulcanus in fifteen thousand years at least,” Gelu said.
“Everyone knows that.”
“Everyone but Strakk,” Gresh smiled. “You know him, he won’t pick up a sword unless there’s a reward involved. So I let him think there was one.”
“What happens when he finds out that Vulcanus is sitting on top of nothing but sand and rock?”
Gresh ran a finger along the edge of his shield, testing its sharpness. When he was satisfied, he looked at Gelu and said, “If we live long enough for that to happen… I’ll worry about it then.”

The Tesaran fighter headed for where Ackar stood with the others. Gelu followed behind.

“News,” Gresh said. “I met up with an Agori on the way here. He said the Skrall tipped him to the Bone Hunter’s plan of attack.”

“What was an Agori doing talking to Skrall?” asked Ackar, clearly skeptical.

“It was right before the Skrall raid on Atero,” Gresh answered. “He was recruiting Glatorian for Raanu. After all, the village is undefended whenever you’re traveling for a match, Ackar. Anyway, this Agori was nuts enough to think a Skrall would help out. What’s even crazier is that the Skrall hands over a Bone Hunter battle plan – says he ‘found’ it.”

“Sounds like a trick,” said Ackar. “Even before Atero, the Skrall had no reason to help Agori.”
Strakk laughed. “But they might have had a reason to hurt the Bone Hunters. Now that the Skrall are in the raiding business, aren’t the Hunters competition?”
“Well, the Skrall are sneaky,” he agreed. “And Strakk knows sneaky, if anyone does. What did this Agori have to say?”

Gresh picked up a stick and drew a quick map of Vulcanus and the surrounding area in the sand. On the eastern side of the circle that represented the village, he drew a series of short, sharp lines.

“They’re going to attack from the east, not the north and west like we thought,” he said. “They’re coming through Iron Canyon.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Raanu. He grabbed the stick away from Gresh and added his own lines and crosses to the path Gresh had sketched out. “Stone falls, narrow twists and turns, paths so steep even a rock steed wouldn’t try them… they would have to be insane to take that route.”

Ackar crouched down and looked more closely at the map. Then he glanced to the east. The sun was at his back, its rays illuminating the jagged peaks that made up the canyon. Anyone who knew the Vulcanus region knew how treacherous Iron Canyon could be. He had once fought a month-long battle there, in the days before the disaster that rocked the entire planet. It turned into a lethal game of hide-and-find, as two armies crept though passages too narrow for more than one warrior to pass through at a time. If the leader of the column got killed, he would block the path, leaving all those behind him exposed to the spears and arrows of the enemy in pursuit.
The veteran fighter stood and walked across the village to the rim of the canyon, the other Glatorian following silently behind. He looked down at the vast expanse, still able to hear the shouts of the wounded and see the bodies of the fallen. No one who had lived through the battles of Iron Canyon could look at the place and see just piles of rock and a dried-up riverbed.

It was a killing ground.

Ackar picked up a rock and threw it into the canyon, listening to the sharp crack as it ricocheted off the face of a peak. “Attacking from this direction is ridiculous and crazy and something no sane raider would do,” he said. “That’s exactly why they’re doing it… because it’s the last thing we would expect.”

“All our defenses face the north and west,” Raanu said, a trace of fear in his voice now. “If they come from the east… Ackar, we have to get to work. We have to build new walls along the canyon rim, and—”

“No,” said Ackar. “Leave everything as it is.”

Kiina nodded her agreement. “He’s right. Let them think they’ve surprised us.”

Ackar regarded her, a small smile creeping onto his lips. “Us? Does that mean you’re staying?”

Kiina shrugged, refusing to look at him. “Well, if you’re all determined to get yourselves killed and leave me with having to spread the news, forget it. I hate playing messenger. I’d rather go out fighting and let someone else tell the tales.”

Gelu scanned the canyon, then looked at Gresh. “What do you think?”

Gresh idly kicked some pebbles and watched them fall into the canyon. “I think the Bone Hunters are about to make a very big mistake,” he said. “And we’re going to help them make it.”

Fero growled a curse at the other members of his raiding party. Since they had broken camp, Hunters kept riding off into the wastes to slay Vorox or Zesk. Ordinarily, Fero didn’t mind a little recreational killing, but it was slowing down the march. Not to mention that losing the Hunters on his flanks put the rest of the squad in danger.

“Forget the beasts,” he snapped. “There will be time to settle with them later.”

“We waste time,” one of the younger Hunters muttered. “Vulcanus has nothing we need, yet we prepare to strike it. Bone Hunters should not be a club to be wielded by another.”

There was a low rumble of agreement among the ranks. It was an open secret that the decision to attack Vulcanus was not one made by the Bone Hunter leaders alone—they had been “pointed” in that direction by a helpful new ally. Fero had to admit he had his own questions about that. Who benefited the most from this raid? Were the Bone Hunters being used?

As Fero, veteran Bone Hunter, he could have these thoughts. As assigned leader of the raid, he could not allow himself to question the task—or let anyone else question it, either. He wheeled Skirmix and rode up to the young Hunter. Moving almost too swiftly for the eye to follow, he drew his blade and struck, killing the rebellious youth. Then he kicked the corpse off the back of its rock steed and watched it hit the sand with a dull thud.

Silence.

Fero looked up from the body and glanced at the faces of his raiding party, one after another. Some had glared defiance, but quickly masked the expression. Others could not meet his eyes at all.

“Anyone else with something to say?” he asked. There was cold steel in his voice.

No one answered. Satisfied, Fero returned to his place at the front of the column. “Then we ride,” he said.
Seated atop his makeshift throne, Tuma smiled.

In his time as leader of the Skrall, he had faced victories and defeats. The years had hardened him and taught him a great deal. He had learned that a wise ruler does not waste his own people in a war if he can trick others into doing the fighting for him. He had also learned that razor-sharp cunning could cut deeper than any blade.

These past weeks had been his masterpiece in a long career of deception, manipulation, and conquest. First, he had managed to rein in his Skrall warriors who wanted to raid, kill, and raze the Agori villages from the start. Tuma counseled patience. First, he wanted to see the strength of the Glatorian and how unified the villages were. He played along with the villages, dutifully sending his Skrall to fight in the arena for things they were more than strong enough to seize.

Once he realized the villages were fractured, he carried out an experiment. He secretly helped the Bone Hunters “discover” that a trade caravan was headed for the village of Tajun. The Hunters, naturally, raided it. More such tips led to more raids, with neither the Agori nor the Bone Hunters knowing the information was coming from the Skrall. Instead of coming to the aid of Tajun, the other villages tried to profit from their misery and happily took control of resources when their Glatorian beat Tajun’s in the arena. That was an important lesson – an Agori village would not go out of its way to defend another from attack.

Tuma had another weapon in his arsenal about which the villages knew nothing. One of the Agori had betrayed his people. He was feeding information to the Skrall, and then from the Skrall to the Bone Hunters. The Hunters used that information to strike where it would hurt the Agori most: their caravans and their resource-gathering sites. The result was that the Glatorian and Agori focused on the Bone Hunters as their most dangerous enemy, ignoring the real threat of the Skrall until it was too late. The fall of Atero took the Agori completely by surprise. But instead of uniting against a common foe, each village just built higher walls to protect itself. And none of them realized that their worst enemy was behind those walls, one of them.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of Stronius. As one of the very few Skrall warriors to be honored with an actual name, Stronius commanded respect from the other residents of Roxtus. His support of Tuma’s plans had helped quell any discontent among the other warriors.

“It’s done,” said Stronius. “The Bone Hunters’ battle plans are in the hands of the Vulcanus Glatorian, as you wished. Leader… with all faith in your wisdom and power… I wonder if—”

“You wonder why I would risk Vulcanus knowing the Bone Hunters will attack from the east?” Tuma finished for him. The Skrall leader grasped his sword and rose. He towered above Stronius.

“No, I wouldn’t question, only…” Stronius hesitated. His choice of words here might be the difference between getting an answer to a puzzle that plagued him and getting his head cut off. “Don’t you want Vulcanus to fall?”
Tuma’s eyes narrowed for a moment and his grip tightened on his weapon. Then, deciding that Stronius was simply asking for information, not seeking to challenge his authority, he relaxed. “Vulcanus is a test,” he said. “I already know my Skrall can sack a village – they proved that in Atero. But can the Bone Hunters do the same? That is what I wish to find out. By arranging for Raanu and his people to expect the attack, I have simply made the test a little harder.”

The Skrall leader smiled again, the broad, predatory grin of a sun-rock dragon. “If the Bone Hunters win, Vulcanus is eliminated as a player in this game and there are that many fewer Glatorian to oppose us. If the Hunters lose, their ranks will have been thinned and they won’t be making plans of rebellion.”

Tuma brushed past Stronius and headed for the exit to the courtyard. “Either way… as it always has been, as it always will be… the Skrall win.”


The Tajun Glatorian was standing over an Agori, who was lying on his stomach on the ground near the canyon’s rim. In the Agori’s hands was a Thornax launcher, the same kind used by the Glatorian. As actual Thornax were going to be needed for the coming battle, the launcher was loaded with rocks.

The target for the budding marksman was a small pile of rocks atop a nearby peak. So far, he’d had a hard time just hitting the mountain, let alone anything on the mountain. This time, though, he was sure he would do it. He yanked back on the trigger, the weapon jerked up in the air, and the rock went flying… straight up. Kiina pulled him out of the way before his shot could come back down and smack him on the head.

“I said, squeeze!” snapped Kiina. “You’re not ripping a fireroot out of the ground. When the Bone Hunters come through, every shot is going to count.”

“I know,” said the Agori. “I’m sorry. I just… I don’t know how to fight.”

Kiina’s tone softened. “I know. Must be nice.”

She reached down and gently took the launcher away from him. “Can you use a knife? Go talk to Gresh. He’s going to need people to cut the vines at the right moment.”

The Agori smiled, scrambled to his feet, and hurried off. Kiina watched him go. The Agori as a whole had a lot of enthusiasm for this fight. Had it really been so long that they no longer remembered what war was like? She wondered how many sunrises some Vulcanus villagers had left to see.

Forcing the thought from her mind, she handed the launcher off to the next Agori in line. “Now, squeeze the control. Understand?”

Not far away, Gresh was hard at work with his own team of Agori. They had been doing hard labor all day, hauling up rocks from the floor of the canyon to the slopes. Each rock was placed inside a net made of fireroot vine, which was stretched between two peaks. In addition to being flameproof, fireroot was incredibly strong, so the net could hold tons of stone.

The trap itself was simple. When the Bone Hunters rode through this part of the canyon, an Agori would cut the vines so that the rocks would fall on the invaders far below. There were two things that made the execution of the plan tricky. The first was timing – cut the vine too early or too late, and the rocks would miss. The second was that fireroot could be extremely difficult to cut. The villager on watch would have only a few seconds to slice through it.

“It’s all in the wrist,” said Gresh, demonstrating on a spare piece of vine. He flicked his dagger and cut through the thick tendril easily. “Now you try.”

Metus gave Gresh an uncertain glance and then took the knife from him. The Agori did his best to duplicate the Glatorian’s move, but the blade got stuck halfway through the vine. Metus tried to wrestle it free, but couldn’t. Standing off to the side waiting for his turn, Raanu couldn’t help laughing. Metus shot him a glare.

“If you want more fighters for your arena, you’ll knock it off,” Metus growled.
“Oh, relax,” smiled Raanu. “You ice tribe sorts are used to breaking icicles, not anything that requires real muscle.”

The leader of Vulcanus took the knife from Metus’s hand and severed the fireroot in one clean stroke. “See? Easy.”

“Yeah. Right,” Metus answered. “Think I’ll go find somebody a little more my style to work with, like Gelu or Strakk.” The Agori paused, looking around. “Hey… where is Strakk, anyway?”

For the sixth time in the last hour, Ackar surveyed the canyon. The Glatorian and Agori had done their work well. Rock falls were set up in numerous places, some controlled from up above, some connected to trip wires. And if the Hunters made it to the village, well, there would be a few surprises waiting for them there as well.

Ackar had planned as best he could, but he couldn’t escape the feeling that he had missed something. This kind of doubt was nothing new for him. As he grew older, he found winning in the arena was getting more difficult. He tired a little more easily and it took longer to recover from injuries. Younger, stronger fighters were pushing him to his limit in matches.

It was only natural, he supposed. He had been fighting in the arena for many years. Time, they said, was the only enemy a Glatorian couldn’t beat. Eventually, even the best fighter would lose a little bit of his speed and his reflexes, maybe lose a little power behind his blows. One day, he would be beating anyone who challenged him. The next, he could be losing to backstabbing little creeps like Strakk. And the day after that, his village wouldn’t need him anymore. If he were lucky, they would run him out for unimportant fights. If he wasn’t, he’d become a wanderer, hiring his sword out for a hot meal or a place to sleep.

Ackar was determined that would not happen to him. He’d rather die in battle with the Bone Hunters than end up pitied by another Glatorian. He refused to wind up like Malum – I’m old, but not crazy, he reminded himself.

Weapon in hand, he headed back to the central shelter in the village. It was time to hone his blade to a razor-sharp edge. Perhaps that would make up for the edge he was no longer certain he had.

That night, the four Glatorian – Gelu, Gresh, Kiina, and Ackar – and Raanu sat around a table in the shelter. They had finished their evening meal and talk had quieted down. They had gone over the plan so often that Kiina was sure she would be reciting it in her sleep.

Strakk’s absence worried Gresh more than he wanted to admit. He had been responsible for bringing the Iconox fighter to Vulcanus. He didn’t know Strakk all that well, having only traveled the desert with him a time or two, but he knew some of the stories about him weren’t pleasant. Strakk was good in a fight, that was true, but he was also all about profit. If the Bone Hunters offered him a better price than he thought he might get for Vulcanus’ “treasure,” would he sell out the village? It bothered Gresh that he didn’t know the answer to that question.

Outside, sharp-eyed villagers kept watch on the canyon. Fires had been doused in the village so the light would not outline the figures of the Agori and give their positions away. No one spoke or made a noise of any kind. Every sentry clutched his weapon and waited for the sound of rock steeds galloping across the sand.

“Tomorrow, you think, then?” Raanu asked, for the third time.

“If not tonight,” replied Ackar. His tone was surprisingly gentle. He understood why Raanu was so anxious. They were all tense. Snapping at the village leader would achieve nothing.

“They should have been here by now,” Gelu said. “Unless that fight with the Vorox really rattled them. If it were anyone other than Bone Hunters, I would think they had turned back and gone home.”

Kiina chuckled. “If they went back empty-handed, it would be the last trip they ever made.”

“They’re coming,” Ackar said firmly. “Bone Hunters finish what they start.”
Raanu swallowed hard. Now that the fight was almost here, he was having doubts. What if the plan failed? What if the Glatorian fled, leaving the villagers to the mercy of the Bone Hunters? Maybe fighting wasn’t the best idea, after all.

“Listen,” Raanu said, his eyes fixed on the floor. “The Bone Hunters just want to steal from us, like they have done before. They will ride in, take our food and anything else of value, and leave. If we stay out of their way, no one gets hurt. But if we try to fight… they could kill us all.”

“They could,” agreed Ackar.

“And burn the village to the ground,” said Raanu.

“Most likely,” answered Ackar.

There was a long silence. Raanu never lifted his eyes to meet Ackar’s gaze.

“Do you want us to leave?” Ackar asked finally. “We can grab our weapons and ride out tonight. You can leave the traps alone and just let the Bone Hunters ride in… if that’s what you really want.”

Raanu shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “It’s not… but I have to think of my people. If all the Hunters want are food and supplies…”

“That’s not all they want.” The voice belonged to Strakk, who was standing in the doorway, smiling. He advanced a step into the room and kicked the door shut behind him. “Not by a long shot.”

The assembled Glatorian looked at him; some surprised, some angry. Strakk glanced at each of them, his grin growing broader. Then he returned his attention to Raanu. “Listen, little Agori. The Bone Hunters don’t want your scraps of food, your cobbled-together tools, or your patchwork weapons. They want your lives.”

Ackar shot up, furious. “If you know something, Strakk, say it. Otherwise, get out.”

Strakk sat down, propping his feet up on the table. Kiina knocked them off with a swipe of her armored hand. “I’ve had a long day,” she said. “Don’t make it longer.”

“Well, it’s like this,” said Strakk, sounding very satisfied with himself. “This afternoon, I decided to go out scouting for the Bone Hunters… you know, get an idea of how close they were, how many, that sort of thing.”

Gelu looked at Strakk in disbelief. Then he shook his head and said to the others, “He was running away.”

Strakk ignored the jibe. “So there I was, riding along, and I spot the Bone Hunters just up ahead. I figured, great opportunity, so I snuck closer to try and hear what they were saying. Naturally, they didn’t see me – no one does, unless I want to be seen.”

Gelu snorted. “He was hiding. He’s good at that.”

This time, Strakk shot him a nasty look, as if challenging Gelu to say something else. Then he went on with his story. “As I was saying… I overheard them talking. They didn’t say anything about looting Vulcanus. They talked about wiping it off the map.”

Raanu stiffened, but whether with fear or new resolve, no one present could tell.

“Naturally, when I heard that, I rode back here to warn you all,” Strakk finished.

“The Bone Hunters were between him and Iconox,” said Gelu. “So he had to turn around and come back.”

Strakk leapt up, weapon in hand, and kicked his chair across the room. Gelu got up, too, ready to fight. Kiina got between them before a blow could be landed. “Only if you want to dance with me first,” she said, “Strakk’s hot temper, and he backed off a step.

Kiina glanced over her shoulder at Gelu. “Sit down. We don’t have time for this.”

Gelu shrugged and walked away. Kiina gave Strakk a little shove toward the opposite side of the room. “It sounds like we have enough people that want to kill us,” she said, “without us doing it to each other.”

“That’s it, then,” said Gresh. “Now we know what we’re up against.”

“Raanu! It’s your village,” said Ackar. “Your call. Fight or run?”
“They want to kill us,” Raanu said softly. “We, who have never harmed them… all we’ve tried to do is live our lives and make it through each day. And if they win here, this will just be the start.”

He rose and looked Ackar right in the eye.

“No. We fight. With you or without you, we fight.”

Ackar nodded. Then he turned to his fellow Glatorian. “All right, then. Any of you who wants to leave, now’s the time. No one will think any less of you.”

Kiina gave Strakk a hard look, saying, “Don’t even think about it.”

“I’m in,” said Gresh. “If the Agori want my help, I won’t walk away.”

All eyes turned to Gelu then. Defending the village had been his suggestion in the first place, but now he felt his mouth go dry and his gut grow cold. What Strakk had revealed meant almost certain death for anyone who stayed in Vulcanus.

But Gelu also knew Ackar was wrong about one thing: the other Glatorian would think less of anyone who left. Even if none of them lived long, they would go to their graves thinking that he was a coward if he fled. Gelu was afraid, but he was no coward.

“Sure, why not?” he said, trying to sound casual about the whole thing. “I don’t have anything planned for this week anyhow.”

Ackar turned to the Glatorian from Tajun. “Kiina?”

“This is completely crazy, you know that,” Kiina said.

“Completely,” Ackar agreed.

“It’s not like the Agori are suddenly going to look at us like we’re heroes,” she continued. “We’ll still be just the hired help to them.”

“Most likely,” Ackar said, nodding.

“Best we’re going to do is slow the Bone Hunters down a little… maybe give them something to think about the next time.”

“That’s probably the best we’ll do,” said Ackar. “Are you in or out?”

Kiina gave him a long look. “We’ve fought in the arena how many times, Ackar? Sometimes I win, sometimes you win. I want to make sure I get another chance to knock you down in the arena. I’m in.”

That left Strakk. He looked around the room, being careful to avoid Kiina’s gaze. “I’ve done a lot,” he said. “Without me, you would think they were just coming here to raid you. Anyway, I was thinking I might be of more use riding out to find reinforcements. Of course, I’d like to stay with you—”

“Good,” Ackar cut him off. “Then you will.”

He turned to the others. “Get some rest. I want everyone in position before dawn. Let’s give those Bone Hunters a fight they’ll remember.”
Fero led his Bone Hunters into Iron Canyon. “Be watchful,” he ordered. “This place is more treacherous than a sun serpent.”

The unspoken question among the other Hunters was why they were there at all. The question was valid – but after what happened to the last of their number who talked out of turn no one would ask it again. Fero knew that they could have just ridden in from the west, across open desert, and overwhelmed any Agori defenses they encountered. But that wasn’t the point.

The Agori were already on edge after what happened to Atero. Once Vulcanus fell, they would panic. Trade would drop to nothing. New walls would go up everywhere. Arena matches would stop as each village armed its Glatorian and used them for defense. Raids would get more difficult and more costly. That meant Bone Hunters had to get used to doing things the hard way, with a little more strategy and a little less charging across the sand right at the enemy.

As they rode single file along the narrow trails, Fero scanned the peaks on both sides, looking for traps. He saw no sign of any new defenses. The first rays of morning sun did not reflect off the armor or weapons of warriors hidden among the rocks. It was just as he expected. The Agori would never dream of anyone attacking from this maze of rock.

Let the hunt begin, thought Fero.

Despite his keen eyes, Fero had indeed missed something. Hidden high among the peaks was a single Agori from Vulcanus. The villager’s own eyes widened as he saw the column of Bone Hunters entering the canyon. He hadn’t really believed until this moment that they were truly planning to invade his village. Now that they were here, he knew what to do.

He cupped his mouth with his hands and made the cry of a sand bat. The cry would be picked up and carried along the line of Agori watchpoints until the message was received in Vulcanus itself. The meaning of it was simple: the Bone Hunters are coming.

The mock creature cry set off a flurry of activity in the village. Agori grabbed their tools and took up their stations around and inside their shelters. Ackar, Strakk, and Kiina readied themselves for the fight that was to come.

“It’s all up to Gresh and Gelu now,” said Ackar.
“Why doesn’t that fill me with confidence?” Strakk muttered.
“You just better hope the Bone Hunters don’t fill you with Thornax,” Kiina said, smiling.
“And ruin my good looks?” Strakk replied. “They wouldn’t dare.”

Fero heard the repeated sand bat cries, each one farther away than the one before. He slowed Skirmix to a walk, and listened. There were no other sounds. He frowned, troubled.
One sand bat in a place like Iron Canyon was no great surprise, but four or five? Impossible. With its voracious appetite, a lone sand bat could decimate the wildlife in a region. For that reason, two or more sand bats never lived anywhere close to each other.

Something was wrong.

“Eyes on the rocks,” he barked. “If anything moves, kill it.”

The three dozen Bone Hunters that traveled with Fero immediately began sweeping their eyes up the slopes on both sides of the trail. Too late, one spotted the glint of a dagger high among the rocks, to the left and just behind the column. Before the Bone Hunter could fire his Thornax launcher, the Agori villager took his knife and sliced through a fireroot vine. The next moment, a half ton of rock rolled down the slope, sealing the canyon exit.

The rock steeds hissed and reared up in surprise. Clouds of stone dust billowed forth, blinding and choking the Bone Hunters. Fero cursed and ordered his men to get their mounts under control and get moving.

Up above, his job done, the Agori scrambled across the peaks and headed for his next post. By the time the dust cleared enough for the Bone Hunters to take a shot at him, he was already out of range.

Fero wheeled Skirmix to look at the damage. Their way back out of the canyon was now fully blocked. There was no choice but to go forward, into the village of Vulcanus. He had no illusions what that meant. The Agori would not be trying to drive his squad forward unless there were more traps waiting further along.

Very well then, he thought. We will march through their petty snares and right into their village. And when we leave it, there won’t be two stones left standing together.

Up ahead, Gelu made ready for the Bone Hunters’ arrival. His trap was modeled after something the Iconox villagers had used for years to stop marauding mountain worms. Granted, there it was carved from ice and made over the course of weeks, and here it was wood, rock, and fire-root slapped together. But he had faith the effect would be the same.

It was a simple device. Four long shafts of wood were laid out on the ground, then two more laid across them to form a latticework. Fireroot was used to lash them together. Pieces of volcanic rock sharpened to a point were then fitted into each of the joints. Finally, the whole construct was hauled up the side of a peak and tied to the rock with vine. When the vine was cut… things would get interesting.

Of course, if it didn’t work, it was doubtful Gelu would live long enough to worry about it. It was funny – even in his time as a paid guard for caravans, he had never really thought about the possibility of dying. There had been some tough fights out in the desert, but somehow he knew he would always survive. This time, he wasn’t so sure.

That doubt sharpened his mind a great deal. Everything felt much more intense to him. The vivid, dark orange of the rock all around him; the icy feel of the weapon in his hand; the soft sounds of insects skittering among the stones: the scent of fireroot and ash… every color was bright, every sound magnified, every aroma almost overpowering.

It made him wonder. Malum’s life was at risk every moment – you couldn’t exist out in the wastelands without a constant awareness that death was riding beside you. Was this how he felt, then? And if so, was it any surprise he was a little… crazy? Gelu couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have every sight, sound, and sensation be magnified all the time.

Right now, though, his enhanced senses were a blessing. He could hear the distinctive sound of rock steeds moving along the trail. A moment later, he could see Fero at the head of the column. Now came the hard part. He had to be patient.

Gelu waited as, down below, Fero rode by. Then another Bone Hunter, and another, until about half a dozen had made it past Gelu’s hiding place. This was the moment. Gelu slashed the fireroot, and the latticework fell. It crashed atop the middle of the column, knocking Bone Hunters from their steeds. Even from his perch high above, Gelu could tell at least a few Bone Hunters wouldn’t be getting back up again.
A Thornax struck the rock near him and exploded, showering him with shards of stone. He looked down to see it had been fired by Fero. The lead Bone Hunter was pointing up at his hiding place and shouting. Temporarily deafened by the Thornax blast, Gelu couldn’t hear what his old enemy was saying, but he could guess. It was time to get out of here, he thought.

Down below, Bone Hunters were working to help their felled comrades by hacking the latticework to pieces. More had joined Fero in firing up at the rocks. Gelu, staying low, scrambled across the peaks, heading back to Vulcanus. Thornax blew the rocks apart behind him as he ran. One stumble and it would be him getting blasted to pieces.

Gelu was almost to safety now, but he couldn’t resist stopping to look back. He had survived, after all, and he couldn’t keep the grin off his face. Looking down at Fero, he waved.

“Welcome to Vulcanus, Bone Hunter!” he shouted. Then Gelu was gone among the peaks.

So far, so good, thought Ackar. But we have a long way to go.
The early reports from the Agori and Gelu told the tale: the Bone Hunters had been caught by surprise, and the various traps and obstacles were slowing them down and bleeding their forces. They would still have numbers on their side when they hit Vulcanus, but they had decreased their advantage.

“What do you think?” asked Kiina.

“I think,” Ackar replied, “that I wouldn’t want to be Fero right now.”

As it happened, Fero didn’t want to be Fero now either. He had lost three Hunters to Gelu’s trap and two more to spears thrown from up above by Agori. His men had managed to wound more than a few of the villagers, but the rest had gotten away. Fero sent up another four Hunters into the rocks to scout for traps up ahead. He saw them surprise a group of Agori waiting in ambush – none of the Agori escaped alive. The Hunters moved on, but then never came back. Fero thought he caught a glimpse of Gresh up among the peaks, which might well explain his missing men.

The anger in the ranks was about to boil over, and Vulcanus was still a long way off. If they kept on, his ranks would be bled dry by the time they reached the village. He had no doubt that he could take the place even with a reduced force, but it would be more difficult, especially since he had no idea how many Glatorian were waiting inside.

A crude shaft flew from somewhere high up and to the left, striking one of the Bone Hunters’ rock steeds. The beast reared, hissed, and then hit the ground, pinning its rider underneath it. Others helped free him, but his leg was badly injured.

Fero made a decision. “Ready your launchers,” he said. “We are turning back. We’ll blow apart the obstacle at the canyon mouth and make for the desert.”

“Giving up?” growled one Bone Hunter. “Bowing to Agori? Never!”

Fero raised his launcher and gestured toward the spiked orb loaded into it. “You are new to the ways of the warrior,” he said, his voice flat but with anger in his eyes. “So you do not know what this can do to a body when used by a master. Do you care to find out?”

The resistant Bone Hunter promptly shut his mouth.

“We ride,” said Fero. “Go!”

From his vantage point high above the trail, Gresh could not believe his eyes. The column of Bone Hunters had reversed direction and was heading out of the canyon. Had they abandoned the attack?

He turned to the two Agori with him. They were manning a net filled with rocks, waiting for the chance to unleash its contents on the invaders. “Stay here,” he said. “Keep your eyes open. This could be a trick.”

Staying low, Gresh scrambled over the rocks, trying to keep the column in sight. When they reached the rockfall that blocked the exit from the canyon, they blasted it apart with explosive Thornax. When the smoke and dust cleared, the Bone Hunters were gone.

But to where? That was the question.
There was only one thing to do: head back to Vulcanus, get his sand stalker, and try to find them.

When Gresh returned with the news of what he had seen, no one believed it. “When Bone Hunters do you a favor, that’s the time to draw your sword,” Kiina said. “They’re up to something.”

Ackar agreed with her, but added, “I know something about what Iron Canyon can do to you. Maybe they decided Vulcanus wasn’t worth the price they would pay. But… we need to make sure.”

Gresh, already mounted, said, “I’ll be back.” Then he rode out of the village.

Raanu looked at the Glatorian with hopeful eyes. “Do you think… they really gave up?”

“Sure,” Strakk answered. “I also think rock steeds can fly.”

“I’d call it unlikely,” said Ackar.

“I’d call it something more colorful,” said Kiina. “If you think they turned tail and ran, I have a few miles of wasteland I’d like to sell you. The Bone Hunters are up to something.”

Gresh was gone for hours. During that time, Strakk picked a fight with Vulcanus’s chief cook and wound up trashing the inn. Kiina stepped in to stop him, and the two wound up in a fight which did even more damage. It took Ackar and a dozen Agori to pull them apart. Raanu was not happy.

The villagers were starting to grumble as well. Glatorian were known for their healthy appetites. No one complained too much about feeding ones employed by their village, but taking food and water to give to fighters from Tesara, Tajun, and Iconox did not go over well. Even the fact that those Glatorian were there to defend the village didn’t help, especially once word spread that the Bone Hunters had already fled.

Gresh rode back in after dark. He looked puzzled. “I followed them for miles. They’re headed on a straight line north for the Skrall River. They were riding hard and no one broke off from the column.” He shrugged. “I don’t get it.”

“I do,” said Raanu, smiling. “They ran into more trouble than they expected here. They didn’t think we would fight back. Now they’ll look for someplace easier to raid.”

The leader of Vulcanus walked up to Gresh and shook his hand. Then he did the same to Kiina and, after some hesitation, Strakk as well. “You did it. You have the gratitude of every Agori in this village. We wish you a safe journey home.”

“That’s nice,” said Strakk. “When do we get paid?”

“Raanu, we should talk about this,” said Ackar. “If the Bone Hunters should come back—”

“They aren’t coming back,” Raanu said, in a tone that said he had no interest in an argument. “It’s over. We’re very grateful for the help, but Vulcanus will be all right now.”

Kiina picked up her weapon and headed for the inn’s exit. “If that’s how you feel, so be it.”

“Kiina!” Ackar called after her.

“Save it,” the female Glatorian replied. “We’re only good enough to risk our lives when Agori are in trouble, remember? After that, they’d rather not have us around.”

“I have better things to do anyway,” Gelu said, glaring at Raanu, “than stand around helping people who don’t want my help. I’ll collect what I’m owed before I leave, Raanu. Oh, and next time your village is in trouble – try and find me.” Then he, too, was gone.

Gresh had his eyes fixed on the ground. When he spoke, his voice was tight and strained as he tried to contain his anger. “With due respect, Raanu, you’re making a mistake. There has to be more to this than what we’re seeing. There has to be.”

“You followed them yourself,” Raanu said. “You saw them go. Now it’s time for you and your friends to do the same.”

Without saying a word, Gresh gathered his things and left. Strakk watched him go, but made no move to leave himself. He waited until he heard the sound of Kiina, Gresh, and Gelu riding out before turning to Raanu.

“Okay, now that those three losers are gone,” Strakk said, “when do we get paid?”
The next day dawned bright and clear over the village of Vulcanus. Agori were back at work, some repairing the damage Strakk had caused in the inn, others gathering food or repairing equipment. Requests to take the stones from the western walls for use elsewhere had been turned down by Raanu. The immediate threat might be over, he reasoned, but the Skrall were still out there.

“Hopefully, word will get back to the Skrall about how we treated the Bone Hunters,” he said. “Then maybe they will leave us alone, too.”

Raanu had little time to spend on such things, however. Metus was getting ready to ride out and the Vulcanus leader had to talk to him before he did. Metus had been expecting the discussion.

“We need more Glatorian,” Raanu said. “With Malum gone, all we have is Ackar… and how much longer can he fight every battle on his own before he starts to lose?”

“You had Glatorian here – Gelu, Kiina, Strakk, Gresh – why not hire one of them?” asked Metus.

“Gelu no longer fights in the arena,” Raanu replied. “The others have been fighting for their villages for years. They’re mostly top-rank Glatorian. You know how hard it is to get someone like that to fight full-time for another village. No, we need a new fighter, one who battles and wins for Vulcanus alone.”

“I found you new Glatorian,” Metus replied, never slowing as he packed his vehicle with supplies. “You decided to use them as messengers to Tajun and got them killed. That’s not my fault. If you are going to waste prime material that way, you can’t blame me if no one wants to fight for you.”

“We’ll pay double,” said Raanu.

Metus looked around. “You don’t have double,” he snorted.

“We need at least one more,” Raanu said, a note of pleading entering his voice. “We’ll slip you a little extra finder’s fee.”

Metus nodded. “All right. And I get to promote an Ackar-Strakk match? After what happened in the inn, I think a lot of Vulcanus Agori wouldn’t mind seeing Strakk lose.”

“Agreed.”

“Then I’ll do what I can.” Metus climbed into his vehicle. “One thing, though – if I do find you someone, try not to get him killed so quickly and in such a stupid way, all right?”

Before Raanu could reply, Metus was on his way out of the village.

Not far away, Ackar watched the trainer depart. Metus had a job to do, just like any Agori, but Ackar had seen a few too many rookie fighters pushed into the ring over the years, only to get chopped down by a stronger, more experienced opponent. Some of that – maybe a lot of it – was the result of pressure from village leaders like Raanu. But Metus should have been looking out for his fighters, too.

Maybe Kiina’s right, he thought. Maybe no one looks out for the Glatorian but us.

He looked out toward the desert. The idea that the Bone Hunters left just like that gnawed at him. Sure, the village’s defenses were effective, but the Hunters had not even encountered the nastiest of them yet. It wasn’t like Fero to lose his nerve.
Still, there was no sign of them. He even posted Agori to keep watch on the canyon, but nothing. Despite that, he was still angry with Raanu over his hasty decision to send the others away. He knew that was a mistake, even if all the evidence showed there was no more danger.

The day passed. When night fell, the Agori lit their torches to keep Vorox away from the village. Ackar sent a few extra villagers to keep watch for any suspicious activity in the desert. He gave up on the idea of getting any sleep himself. If something happened, he wanted to be armed and ready for it.

It was a quiet night. Agori talked among themselves in hushed tones. There was something about the dark that made everyone feel they had to keep quiet. It was almost instinctive, as if making too much noise might attract monsters that waited in the darkness.

If you asked the Vulcanus Agori Kyry, he would have told you he didn’t believe in fear. He also didn’t think dousing three torches in a row would mean a Vorox attack, or that stepping on a beetle mound would mean a year of bad luck. That sort of superstition was fine for some villagers, but not for him. Those fears did nothing but hold Agori back, making them too afraid to venture out of their villages and explore. For every trader or traveler, there were six other villagers who would never venture beyond the bounds of their own villages. That was not the life for him. He had done a little exploring of this world, and planned to do more.

Right now, though, his job was to keep watch on the Sea of Liquid Sand to the south-west. That was like watching metal rust. While there were a few safe paths through the area, most of it was quicksand that could swallow rock steeds in a matter of moments. Even the Vorox avoided that area.

A sound came from out in the night, so soft that he first thought he was just imagining it. It was the clink of metal on metal. Kyry froze, listening hard. Maybe it had just been the echo of a noise from inside the village.

He didn’t hear anything now, only the wind swirling through the sand. Or was that the wind? It sounded like a hiss. Could it be some desert snake venturing close to the village, drawn by the heat of the torches? No, it was too low for that.

Kyry glanced up at the torch that burned beside him. Its light illuminated the area ten feet in front of him, but also made him blind to anything that might be out in the desert beyond that point. If he doused it, his eyes might adjust to the darkness, allowing him to see anything moving out in the night. On the other hand, if it was a Vorox out there, it would charge the second the flame was gone.

Now there was another sound, louder than the first two. This one made Kyry stand up and immediately douse the torch.

It was the sound of a Thornax launcher being loaded. Bone Hunters! The words exploded in his mind. He turned to shout a warning to the village.

A strong hand clamped itself over his mouth. Kyry was yanked off his feet and hauled up onto the back of a rock steed. A single blow knocked him unconscious.

The Bone Hunters spread out into a line along the border between Vulcanus and the Sea of Liquid Sand. They were hungry and tired, but it didn’t matter. All that was important was this village and the destruction they were about to wreak upon it.

Fero savored the moment. He had waited until he was certain they were not being followed to order a change in course, away from the high desert and south toward the Sea of Liquid Sand. The order caught even his own Hunters by surprise. They traveled through the wasteland between Tajun and Vulcanus, staying far from known trade routes. When they reached the treacherous Sea, they kept on for miles before looping back north. They would hit Vulcanus from a direction no one would expect.

“Attack!” Fero shouted.

The Bone Hunters struck Vulcanus like a sandstorm. Agori poured out of their shelters only to be struck down or trampled by the riders. Ackar charged into the center of the village and spotted Fero, torch in hand, lighting up one of the Agori huts. With a bellow of rage, the Glatorian rushed forward, knocking the Bone Hunter off his rock steed with one mighty blow.
Fero hit the sand hard. Ackar moved in to finish him off, but the Bone Hunter rolled away and sprang to his feet. "Look around, Glatorian," he said, gesturing to the chaos in the village. "In a matter of minutes, this village will be in ashes. You thought you could drive us off by throwing rocks? Next time, you'll know better..."

Nearby, three Agori managed to unseat a Bone Hunter from his steed, but it was too late. Bone Hunters were rampaging through the village, taking whatever they could carry and smashing any resistance. It was a scene out of a nightmare, or worse, out of a memory.

"You've seen this before," said Fero. "Been part of it, too, during the battles of long past. How many villages did you see destroyed? But I can afford to show mercy. I want all of Bara Magna to know what happened here. Ride out, Ackar, and tell the tale wherever you go."

Ackar looked around. Tell the tale? A tale of failure, of death, of a village lost, and all for the greater glory of a murdering band of Bone Hunters?

"Never," Ackar answered. "The only story coming out of this night will be the one about your death."

Fero raised his sword. "Your allies are gone. Your Agori are fleeing or dead. It's over, Ackar. You're all alone."

The Bone Hunter raised his blade to make its fatal strike. The next instant, the sword exploded into a thousand shards of metal. Fero cried out and dropped the now useless weapon.

"Don't you know by now? Glatorian have to stand together."

Fero and Ackar both turned at the sound. It was Kiina, Thornax launcher in hand, flanked by Gresh, Gelu, Strakk, Vastus, and Tarix.

"After all, if we don't, who else will?" Kiina glanced at the fighters on either side of her. Then she turned back to Fero, a fierce smile on her lips. "Let's take them."

The six Glatorian rode in hard, catching the other Bone Hunters by surprise. Fero grabbed onto his rock steed and mounted, shouting orders to his bandits to regroup. Tarix rode up to Ackar, with the Vulcanus Glatorian's sand stalker right behind him. Ackar wasted no time in mounting his beast.

"I couldn't let Kiina have all the fun," said Tarix. "Vastus took some convincing, but the chance to bash Bone Hunters is too good to miss."

"And now we are seven," Ackar replied. "Time to hunt the Hunters."

Kyry woke up in the sand. He raised his head at the sound of shouts and Thornax exploding all around. The sight he saw was one he would never forget.

Seven Glatorian were locked in battle with three times as many Bone Hunters. Swords flashed, axes flew, and launchers fired as the two sides fought to the death. Near the border of the village, Kiina caught two Hunter swords on her trident, shoved them back, then swept both of her foes off their steeds with one swing. Both rock steeds hissed and went at her with their jaws snapping. It was the last move either would ever make.

Not far away, Gresh had his back to the wall, with four Hunters closing in. He was using his shield to parry their blows, but Kyry knew one blow would get through eventually. One Bone Hunter saw an opening and moved to attack, only to freeze in mid-strike and fall over. As he hit the ground, Kyry saw Vastus standing behind him, with a paralyzing venom spear in hand.

"Four to one? Didn't I teach you better than that?" Vastus said to Gresh. "It's not a fair fight unless it's at least six to one."

"I'll try to remember that," Gresh said, smiling, as he waded into the remaining Bone Hunters.

Gelu and Strakk fought back to back, fighting off waves of Bone Hunters. Gelu glanced over his shoulder to spot Strakk looting one of the fallen enemies. "Would you save that until the battle is over?"

"By then, all the good loot will be gone," Strakk answered, fending off a Bone Hunter's blade with his axe. "Agori are quick, and they have sticky fingers."

"You're hopeless," said Gelu.

In the center of the village, Ackar faced Fero. The two had been fighting an even match, but now Fero could see that Ackar was starting to grow tired.

“You should have retired long ago,” the Bone Hunter said mockingly. “Put down your sword and go live in the wastes with Malum. He has the right idea: to hide in the desert and hope the storm passes him.”

“You Bone Hunters aren’t a storm, Fero. You’re not even a stiff breeze.”

Ackar swung his sword. Fero blocked with his launcher. “You and your Glatorian may win this battle, but it’s your last fight, Ackar. You and I both know you’re past it. Why don’t you just surrender?”

“Glatorian rules,” Ackar smiled. “We don’t get paid for losing to mindless creatures or Bone Hunters.”

Fero snarled and fired his launcher. Ackar tried to dodge, but the Thornax caught his sword arm, tearing open his armor. Fero took aim for a second shot.

A ragged scream distracted the Bone Hunter leader. He glanced to his left to see the last of his raiders fall before Kiina’s trident. Now it was his turn to be all alone.

Fero had not survived in the wastes all this time by being stupid. He backed away from Ackar and grabbed the reins of his rock steed. Mounting it in one swift motion, he said, “Bone Hunters are like grains of sand in the desert – the wind may blow a few away, but there are always more to take their place. We’ll meet again, Ackar.”

The Glatorian tried to stop him, but his own fatigue and the pain in his wounded arm slowed him down. Fero rode out of the village and vanished into the darkness.

“Are you all right?” Kiina said, jumping down from her sand stalker.

“I’m okay,” Ackar replied. “But Fero got away.”

“He won’t be gone long,” said Gelu. “One of us will run into him and finish the job you started.”

Raanu rushed over. He had been wounded, but it didn’t look too serious. He shouted orders to a few other Agori to look after villagers who were more injured. Then he turned to look up at Kiina.

“Why did you come back?” he asked.

“We figured the Bone Hunters would,” she answered. “And if you wouldn’t let us wait for them in the village, well, we decided to wait for them out there.”

Raanu nodded, solemnly. “You saved us. You’ve done a great thing for Vulcanus.”

Kiina shook her head. “You don’t understand. We first came here to help you protect your village.” She gestured to Ackar, “But we came back to protect him.”

Kyry stumbled into the village at just that moment. He looked at the assembled Glatorian with wonder and pride. His village was damaged, his people hurt… but damage could be repaired, and wounds could be healed. Eventually, the pain would be forgotten.

But this victory never would be, he vowed. He would leave this village and he would spread this tale. As long as there were Agori on Bara Magna, he would make sure they knew what happened in Vulcanus. And then, maybe, they would see Glatorian as more than just swords hired for pay. They would see them as heroes.
Through the dark void of space, a golden mask flew…

Seen from far away, it might have looked like a shooting star. Had someone been close enough to see what it really was, they might have wondered how such an object could have ended up among the stars. The answer would take years to tell, if one were to explore every mystery of it. But this is all the observer would truly need to know:

Once, there was a great ruler named Mata Nui. He was incredibly powerful – his body was made of metal and stood 40 million feet high. He traveled through space, exploring new worlds. His creators, known as the Great Beings, intended for him to fulfill a vital mission. But first, they wished him to learn as much as he could about the universe around him.

Unfortunately, while he focused on that universe, he ignored another one – one that existed inside his metal shell. Millions of beings lived inside of Mata Nui, and their labors gave him power. In return, he was to protect them from harm. But he grew so fascinated with the wonders of other worlds that he paid little attention to those who depended upon him.

As so often happens, neglect allows evil to breed. A conspiracy grew in Mata Nui’s inner universe. Those who hungered for power struck at him, casting him into a deep sleep that lasted for a millennium. When at last he woke again, it was to find that his greatest enemy had stolen his body. Mata Nui’s mind and spirit were trapped in the golden Mask of Life and hurled into space.

Now he flew through the void, out of control, knowing that his people were under the rule of a dark and unforgiving master. He had failed them. By not being vigilant, by not being wise, he had allowed himself to be forced from his body and exiled. In this new form, he had no hope of defeating his enemy.

Any other being would have surrendered to his fate. But Mata Nui knew he had a destiny to fulfill. Somehow, he vowed, he would find a way to return and free his people. It might take a thousand years, but only death would stop him from trying.

The mask’s direction shifted now, as the gravitational pull of a planet took hold. It sped up, diving toward the surface, its outer skin heating up as it entered the atmosphere. The next few moments would tell the tale. Would the mask survive the heat and the impact of a crash-landing, or would it shatter, taking Mata Nui’s spirit with it to destruction? Would his quest begin on the world so far below, or would it end there?

Within the golden mask, Mata Nui could do nothing now but hope…
Metus steered his wagon across the desert sands, still marveling at what he had just heard. He had been certain that Vulcanus would be destroyed by the Bone Hunters, and that everyone in it would be killed. How so few Glatorian managed to stop a marauding band of raiders and save the village, he did not know. But the Vulcanus Agori he had run into—a youth named Kyry—assured him it was so.

Some things had changed since the events at Vulcanus, some had not. The Bone Hunters had been badly mauled, and their raids had become less frequent. No one doubted they were out in the desert somewhere, plotting their revenge. Gelu figured that if they hit another village, it would be in much greater numbers to prevent a repeat of Vulcanus. The Glatorian hoped it would take the Bone Hunters a good, long while to assemble that big a force.

Of course, that still left the Skrall to worry about. Since the fall of Atero, they had not mounted any major attacks, but everyone knew it was just a matter of time. There had been plenty of raids by small Skrall squads, mainly to steal resources and capture Glatorian. What they were doing with the fighters they grabbed, no one seemed to know.

The loss of so many fighters was bad for the villages, but good for Metus. There was a bigger need to recruit more fighters, and it meant that the ones he managed could get higher pay for their work. You couldn’t find a Glatorian under every rock, of course, but now and then, you stumbled across someone with real potential—if you knew where to look.

A flash of light in the sky caught Metus’s attention. At first, he thought it was a shooting star. But no, it was too bright for that. Some kind of meteor, maybe? The mysterious object was headed for the desert sands not far from Vulcanus.

For a moment, he dismissed the whole thing. It had nothing to do with him, after all. But then some instinct kicked in—the same instinct that had led him to amazing success so often in the past—and it told him to check this out. Maybe it wasn’t just a hunk of rock from space… maybe it was something really valuable.

*What are the odds?* he said to himself, even as he drove in the direction of its likely impact. He shook his head, chuckling at himself. What was he thinking? With all of Bara Magna’s troubles, did he really imagine the answer was going to fall down from the sky?

A swarm of scarabax beetles scurried across a sand dune, in search of their evening meal. On most evenings, this hunt was uneventful. The beetles would feed and then return to their underground tunnels. But this night was destined to be different.

One beetle lifted its eyes from the sand and saw something strange. It began clicking its pincers to alert its comrades. Other scarabax joined in, watching as a point of light streaked through the night sky and became a large fireball.
The scarabax scattered. The falling object smashed into the ground and skidded across the sands, carving out a trench as it traveled. The intense heat fused the sand to glass. Finally, it came to a halt on the edge of a dune. Smoke drifted from its metallic surface.

Had anyone been present, they would have guessed that it was some kind of mask. It was golden in color and quite beautiful, despite having been through a long journey and an abrupt crash landing.

A native of Bara Magna would most likely have seen it as a potentially valuable item that could be traded for water or some other needed resource. Even if it was just ornamental, someone would want it to hang on the wall of their shelter. Maybe it could even be melted down and the metal used to make a tool or a weapon.

But the only living things around was a small army of desert beetles. Their only interest was to find out if the object was something they could eat. If it wasn’t, they would most likely turn away and leave it where it lay. Over time, the sands would cover it, and its appearance would be quickly forgotten.

And if that happened, no one on all of Bara Magna would know that the salvation of their world had indeed fallen from the sky…
Slowly, the scarabax emerged from hiding. They could feel the heat coming from the object. The swarm moved closer. They didn’t realize that it was a metal mask. Still, there was something about it which compelled them to draw near…

Without warning, the mask rose into the air. The beetles jumped back in surprise as the sand beneath it swirled like a miniature cyclone. Now the mask hovered more than seven feet in the air, surrounded by a contained sandstorm. After a few moments, the sands began to take on a recognizable shape. Two arms, two legs, and a torso formed from the whirling grains, then turned solid.

The storm ended. There now stood a being wearing a mask. His armor was white and gold, and his body lean and strong. He brought his hands to his mask, gently, as if not certain it was real. Then he looked down at his new body.

The newcomer took a step, and his knees buckled. Catching himself, he took a deep breath before trying again. As he lifted and extended his leg, he heard a clicking sound.

Looking down, the strange being saw a scarabax beetle right where his foot was about to land. He pulled back, saying, “Sorry, little one.”

The beetle moved back, cowering in fear.

“Easy,” said the being. “I will not hurt you.”

Responding to the stranger’s gentle tone, the beetle lowered its pincers and looked up, cocking its head to one side.

“My name is Mata Nui,” said the stranger. “You may have noticed I am not steady on my feet yet.”

Mata Nui knelt down, extending his hand to the scarabax. The beetle sprang into his palm and scampered up his arm, clicking furiously.

“I have the feeling you’re trying to tell me something,” said Mata Nui. The beetle was on his shoulder now, close to his mask.

“Ah, it’s the mask you’re interested in.”

The beetle brushed its pincer against Mata Nui’s mask, making it glow brightly. For a moment, it seemed like the mask and scarabax were one. Then the glow faded, and Mata Nui could see that the insect had been transformed. Where once there had been a small beetle, there was now a full-sized shield with the symbol of a single eye in its center.

“Magnificent…” whispered Mata Nui in wonder.

Then the eye on the shield blinked.

Mata Nui jumped back, startled.

There was no time to ask questions. Mata Nui whirled at the sound of an angry hiss from above. A large, clawed creature was leaping toward him. Mata Nui tried to dodge, but he wasn’t fast enough. The attacker clipped his shoulder, slamming him into the ground.
Mata Nui got a better look at his attacker. It was roughly seven feet in height, tan, with claws like spikes and a stinger tail like a scorpion. For a moment, Mata Nui wondered if this was some Toa gone mad. Then he reminded himself: _There are no Toa here! This is not your home._

The creature attacked Mata Nui again. The shield moved to block its blows, making it angrier. Mata Nui rolled aside to avoid a strike. The beast’s claws slashed deep marks in the stone where Mata Nui’s head had been a moment before.

_Okay, not good_, thought Mata Nui. _If I stay on defense, I’ll wind up in pieces._

Mata Nui scrambled to his feet as the beast attacked again. The creature whipped its tail around, preparing to strike with its stinger. Mata Nui took a step back — and stumbled over a boulder, landing on his back in the sand. The creature hit the boulder with its stinger. The force of the impact was so strong that it shattered the rock and broke off the attacker’s stinger tail. Screeching in pain, the beast ran off into the night.

Mata Nui lay on the sand and rested on his shield, trying to catch his breath.

There was a bright flash of light. “What —?” said Mata Nui, in surprise. When the light faded, his shield was gone, returned to the form of the little scarabax beetle.

Mata Nui smiled at the insect. “Before this day, I never needed help from anyone or anything. Thank you.”

He gently lowered his arm toward the ground, to allow the insect to run free. “Well, little one, I spared your life and you saved mine,” he said. “Shall we call it even and go our separate ways?”

The scarabax responded with the rapid clicking of its pincers. Mata Nui chuckled, saying, “Okay, easy, it was just a —”

Mata Nui heard a sound. He turned and saw a small, white-armored figure approaching in a land vehicle. The vehicle looked like it had been patched and repaired a dozen times using pieces from wrecks. Was this another attack? Mata Nui grabbed the broken tail of the beast and stood up. The scarabax scampered up to his shoulder and hid on the back of his neck.

The driver looked at Mata Nui, then at the impact crater left by the mask, and back at Mata Nui again. He raised a crystalline sword and said, “State your business.”

Mata Nui did not relax his guard. “Just a traveler looking for the nearest city,” he replied.

To Mata Nui’s surprise, the driver lowered his weapon and broke into a grin. “Well, then you may as well start digging,” he said. “Here on Bara Magna, you’re bound to find the ruins of one or another.”

When Mata Nui didn’t react, the driver added, “That’s a joke… Right. Well, to answer your question, the nearest village is Vulcanus. I’ve got some business there if you want a ride. That is, unless you’d rather wind up captured by a pack of Bone Hunters, or worse, Skrall.”

Mata Nui didn’t know this being, but he seemed friendly enough. The alternative was walking through this vast desert, with no idea which direction to go.

“What are Bone Hunters and Skrall?” asked Mata Nui.

“No one you ever want to meet.”

Suddenly the driver struck at Mata Nui, who blocked the blow with the stinger tail.

“Relax!” said the driver. “You’ve got a filthy scarabax on your back. I was just trying to knock the disgusting thing off.”

“Thanks, but I like him right where he is,” answered Mata Nui, with a trace of warning in his tone.

The driver shrugged. “To each his own. I’m Metus, by the way. Now hold on!”

Metus gunned the vehicle into motion and it shot across the desert sands. They traveled for a long time through the wastelands. There was little to see — just long stretches of empty sand occasionally broken up by bizarre structures that jutted up from the ground at weird angles.

“What happened here?” Mata Nui asked finally.

“Who knows?” answered Metus. “It’s been like this as long as anyone can remember. But if I had to make a guess, I’d say it was probably —”

“Evil,” said Mata Nui, softly.
Metus glanced at his passenger, then shrugged. “I was going to say ‘earthquake,’ maybe ‘volcanic eruption,’ but ‘evil’ works. Not from around here, are you?”
“No.”
“I figured,” said Metus. He pointed at the stinger tail Mata Nui carried. “It’s clear you can fight if you can defeat a Vorox, and there aren’t many Agori or even Glatorian who can do that.”
“Agori?”
“Me. I’m an Agori,” Metus said, smiling. “Although most aren’t as good looking as I am. That’s another joke. Truth is, we’re just peaceful villagers trying to survive. Not like the Bone Hunters. They’re cutthroats who steal what little we’ve got left.”

Metus suddenly stopped the vehicle and pointed up ahead. Mata Nui could see movement in the sand. It looked like ocean waves, but there was no water anywhere around. “Uh-oh,” said Metus.
“What is it?” asked Mata Nui.
“It’s real name is very long,” Metus answered. “By the time you finish saying it, you’ve already been eaten. So we just call them sand bats.”

Metus turned the vehicle and they sped off over the dunes. Mata Nui looked back and saw that the moving sand was following them. It came closer and closer. Then the sand exploded upward.
“Look out!” yelled Metus. “It’s attacking!”

Mata Nui hung on as Metus steered the transport into a sharp turn. He could see the sand bat now. It looked like a huge snake with bat wings and was at least 15 feet long. The creature had shot straight up into the air and now dove down toward the two travelers. It smashed into the transport. Mata Nui and Metus fell out, landing in the sand.

Mata Nui gripped his sword and prepared for a fight. He was sure the creature would attack them now that they were on the ground. Instead the creature dove back into the sand and disappeared.

Metus was on his feet, trying to roll the transport back onto its blades before the sand bat came back. Mata Nui helped him, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the spot where the monster had vanished.
“Where is it?” he wondered.
“Not here. That’s what matters,” said Metus, climbing back into the driver’s seat. “Get in!”
“Too late!” said Mata Nui, pointing at the ground. It was moving again, and the waves were headed right for them. Mata Nui grabbed Metus, pulling him out just before the sand bat soared up again and crashed into the vehicle.

“Run!” shouted Metus.

Mata Nui thought that seemed like a good idea. He started running. A screech from behind him made him turn. The sand bat was flying right at him!

Just before the creature grabbed him, Mata Nui dove to the ground. The sand bat flew past and plowed into the dunes, vanishing below ground again.

Metus had turned back and helped Mata Nui get up. “There are caves over there,” said Metus. “Maybe we can hide in them… if there isn’t something worse already inside.”

Mata Nui looked ahead. The caves were at least a mile away. They would never make it. “We’re going to have to fight it,” he said. “Keep your eyes on the ground. Maybe we can spot the creature before it attacks again. When it comes up, try and knock its mask off.”

“Where I come from, beasts wore masks that made them do evil things,” explained Mata Nui. “But if you knocked the mask off, the animal went back to being peaceful.”

Metus started running toward the caves. He scanned the sand for signs of the creature as he went. “Around here the monsters don’t wear masks… or hats, or pants, or anything else. And they eat you because they’re hungry and you’re nearby. Got it?”

Mata Nui frowned. Metus was right. He had to remember that this wasn’t home and things didn’t work the same way here. Forgetting that might get him hurt, or worse.

The sand bat exploded out of the sand to their left. Metus ran toward the caves. Mata Nui stood, sword in hand, waiting for the creature to attack.
He didn't have to wait long. The sand bat screeched and dove at him. At the last second, Mata Nui dove aside and swung his sword. The blade hit the sand bat's wing, but did no damage. The creature disappeared under the sand again.

Mata Nui looked down at the sand, then at his sword. “Metus, this makes no sense!” he said. “Of course not,” Metus yelled back. “Getting eaten by a big, winged snake usually doesn’t.” “No, I mean… it’s bigger and stronger than we are,” said Mata Nui. “It’s tough enough that my sword doesn’t hurt it. So why does it keep diving into the ground and hiding? What’s it afraid of?” “Missing dinner?” said Metus. “How should I know?” “Think!” answered Mata Nui. “What’s around here? Sand… rocks… air…” The sand bat shot up out of the ground right near Mata Nui, knocking him backward. As it dove at him, Mata Nui raised his sword to protect himself. The sunlight struck the blade. The creature suddenly turned away. Then it dove back beneath the sand.

“Sunlight!” Mata Nui shouted, jumping up. “It doesn’t like the sunlight!” “Boy, did it pick the wrong place to live,” said Metus. “This is what we’re going to do,” said Mata Nui. He told Metus his plan. The villager kept shaking his head as if Mata Nui were crazy.

The sand started to move again. This time, instead of running away, Metus and Mata Nui ran toward the spot where the sand bat would appear. The creature came up out of the ground. It flew into the sky, then dove at Metus.

As the sand bat headed for the ground, Mata Nui ran at it. He jumped and tackled the creature, knocking it off balance. The sand bat threw Mata Nui off easily.

Metus gave a yell and ran right in front of the sand bat. When it ignored him, he threw a handful of sand at it. The creature flew after him. Metus ran as fast as he could, but the sand bat was faster.

“Mata Nui!” Metus yelled. “Is this part of the plan? Because if it is, I don’t like it!”

The sand bat suddenly turned back. Smoke was starting to come from its wings. It flew one way, but saw Mata Nui blocking its path. It flew the other, but Metus was there. Now its whole body was smoking.

The creature tried once more to get underground. This time, Mata Nui moved out of the way and let it go. It disappeared into the dunes in an instant.

“Wait a second!” said Metus. “You let it go!” Mata Nui started walking toward the transport. “It didn’t need to be hurt,” Mata Nui said quietly. “It just needed to learn that the world it was visiting, the world above the ground, was dangerous. That’s something I have to learn too.”

Metus still wasn’t sure who this strange visitor was or why he was here. But something told him he better stay close to this “Mata Nui.”

_Maybe I might learn something valuable, too, _thought Metus. _Something very valuable indeed._

The outline of a village appeared up ahead. Mata Nui could hear the faint sound of a crowd cheering.

“Ah, good… sounds like we’re just in time,” said Metus. “For what?”

Metus’s answer was a broad smile. He drove their vehicle into the outskirts of the village, which, to Mata Nui’s surprise, seemed to be empty. From where, then, was all the cheering coming?

The answer came a moment later. The settlement was crude, built near an obviously active volcano. Light came from torches planted in the ground and red-hot magma oozed from cracks in the surface. In the center of the village was a poorly constructed arena. The citizens were clustered together, watching as two warriors – one in red armor, one in white – fought ferociously.

Metus halted the vehicle and got out. Mata Nui followed. “Back in the day, villages settled disputes the old-fashioned way – by trying to destroy one another,” explained Metus. “Very messy. Lots of clean-up. So we came up with a solution. Representatives from each village fight one-on-one…”
Mata Nui could hardly believe what he was seeing. In his universe, Toa fought for justice, to save lives and protect the innocent. But this was something different. “You Agori use your best warriors for… sport?” he asked, unable to keep the distaste out of his voice.

“Not sport – problem solving. Much more honorable than slaughtering each other. And considerably more profitable.” Seeing Mata Nui’s cold expression, Metus added hastily, “Errr… not that I care about that sort of thing.”

“C’mon, Ackar! Take him down!” yelled someone in the crowd.

“Get him, Strakk!” responded another.

Metus pointed to the fighters. “The red warrior, Ackar, used to be the greatest warrior in all of Bara Magna. The white one is Strakk, from the ice village of Iconox.”

An Agori, also in red armor, rose to greet Metus. “Ah, Metus. Glad you’re here. Look at Ackar. I’m telling you, his days are numbered. I practically had to beg him to fight.”

“Mata Nui, meet Raanu. He’s the leader of this village. Mata Nui’s new in town.”

Raanu nodded at Mata Nui, then returned his attention to the fight. After a few minutes, he turned to Mata Nui and said, “What do you think?”

Mata Nui gestured toward Ackar. “He fights without fear. That is a rare quality.”

“True enough. But he’s lost his taste for battle,” said Raanu. “And once a Glatorian loses heart, it’s not long before he meets defeat after defeat and must be banished. No doubt that is why Metus brought you here tonight.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Ha, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Raanu,” Metus said, cutting off Mata Nui. “There’s plenty of time to find a new First Glatorian to take Ackar’s place.”

In the arena, Ackar was pressing his attack. He dodged a wild swing of Strakk’s ice axe and responded with a blow from his own fire sword. The impact rocked Strakk and sent his shield flying out of his hand.

“This red warrior fights with the courage of a true Toa…” said Mata Nui.

Strakk swung his axe again, but once more Ackar dodged. Seeing an opening, the red-armored warrior slammed his shield into his opponent’s midssection, sending Strakk flying into the arena wall. His weapon dropped from his hand as he crumpled to his knees.

The crowd exploded. “He’s done it! Ackar! Ackar!”

Ackar stood over his now unarmed opponent. “Concede and this goes no further.”

Strakk looked at Ackar with undisguised hatred. Then he slowly lowered his eyes, muttering, “All right. You win.”

Satisfied, Ackar turned away and went to retrieve Strakk’s fallen shield. “You leave with your honor intact, and I with your shield, in victory.”

Behind him, Strakk grabbed his ice axe and hurled it at Ackar’s back. A shout of warning from the crowd came too late. Ackar spun and managed to catch the brunt of the blow on his shield, but the impact knocked him backward. He hit the ground, stunned.

Strakk, grinning, stalked toward Ackar and picked up his axe.

“You call this honor?” Mata Nui said to Raanu, angrily. “He was clearly defeated!”

“We’re just Agori. We’re not going to take on a Glatorian,” Raanu replied. “The leader of his village will decide what needs to be done.”

That’s not good enough, thought Mata Nui. He leapt over the railing into the arena, a bright flash heralding the transformation of the scarabax into a shield once more. The sight startled the crowd. No one had ever seen a shield appear from thin air before.

“Interesting,” Metus said to himself. “No wonder he’s so fond of that bug…”

Strakk hadn’t noticed the new arrival. He was standing over the fallen Ackar, axe in hand, ready to deliver the final blow. “You’re finished, old—”

Mata Nui dove, tackling Strakk. Both hit the ground, but the experienced Strakk made it to his feet first, axe at the ready.
“I’ll cut you down for that, outsider!” the Glatorian growled.

Strakk struck. Mata Nui brought his shield up, but the blow knocked him right off his feet. Strakk pressed his attack, as Mata Nui desperately tried to block his strikes.

Metus shook his head. “Too bad. I’d hoped he’d bring a decent price…”

Mata Nui was on the ground now. Strakk stood ready to finish him off. Ackar had revived enough to see what was happening. “Your fight is with me!” Ackar shouted.

“You’re next, Ackar,” Strakk answered. “He asked for it, and now he’s going to get it.”

Mata Nui brought out the stinger tail, hoping to somehow parry the coming blow. The crude weapon touched his mask, and again, there was a bright flash of light. In the next moment, Mata Nui no longer wielded a broken stinger, but a bright, gleaming sword.

The crowd gasped and Metus’s eyes widened in shock. Strakk staggered back. “How in—!”

Mata Nui seized the moment. He lashed out with a sweeping kick that brought Strakk down and caused him to lose his grip on the ice axe. Mata Nui leapt to his feet, holding the blade of his new weapon at Strakk’s throat.

“Concede,” said Mata Nui coldly.

“Fine…” Strakk growled.

“For all to hear!” snapped Mata Nui.

Strakk glared at Mata Nui for a moment before shouting, “I concede!”

The crowd went wild, their cheers shaking the arena. Ackar walked unsteadily to Mata Nui’s side. Spotting Strakk’s hand inching toward his axe, Ackar stepped on the weapon, saying, “Don’t.” The ice Glatorian rose and limped out of the arena.

“What will happen to him?” asked Mata Nui.

“For attacking after he conceded? Banishment. Iconox can’t afford to send Glatorian without honor into the arena. Strakk will be reduced to living in the wastelands before the week is out.” Ackar offered Mata Nui the ice warrior’s shield.

Mata Nui shook his head. “You won honorably. The prize of victory is yours.”

“In that case…” Ackar tossed the shield aside as if it were garbage. “I’ve got plenty of shields.”

Ackar turned to look at the crowd. Most of the Agori were already filing out of the arena, not even looking in his direction. “How quickly they forget,” he said softly. “I am already an outcast.”

“It’s never too late to win them back,” answered Mata Nui.

Ackar shrugged. “Perhaps… I am in your debt, stranger.”

Mata Nui said nothing. But he wondered if he had just found the most valuable treasure that might exist on this world: an ally.

* * *

From the pages of Mata Nui’s Diary…

Entry 1:

Once, I ruled a universe.

You might not believe me, for I look much like any other warrior on this world. You would have been even less likely to believe me a few short days ago, when I first arrived on this strange planet of Bara Magna. But it is the truth… as cold and painful as ever there was in any world.

I could tell you a great deal about the universe that once was mine, about its people, its heroes, and the threats to its peace. But none of that matters very much now. It is enough to say that my rule was stolen from me, because I was not wise enough to keep it safe. The thief was a being of darkness and fear, whose terrible plans for my people I can only imagine. He trapped me inside an object, a Mask of Life, and hurled me from my universe into the blackness of space. He believed I was gone forever, no longer a threat to him in any way. He believed he was safe from me at last.

I intend to prove him wrong.
I would be lying if I said I had any idea how I would do that as my prison soared through space. I felt shock, rage, and yes, fear, more for my people than myself. As the pull of Bara Magna’s gravity latched onto the mask in which my spirit was trapped, I wondered if this was how my 100,000-year existence would end – burned up in the atmosphere of an alien world.

But that was not to be my fate. Rocketing down like a blazing star, the Mask of Life struck the sands of Bara Magna, scorching a deep trench in the floor of the desert. It came to rest, smoke still rising from its surface. And then the power buried deep in the mask exerted itself, and began to create a living body from the sand and the earth.

And when it was done, I, Mata Nui, stood on the surface of a new world.

Entry 2:

I did not have very long to grow accustomed to my new body or my new “home.” My first encounter was with a curious beetle, who dared come close enough to touch my mask with its pincers. The power of the mask transformed him in an instant into a shield. No sooner had I recovered from that shock than I was attacked by an armored creature.

The beast was savage, wild, and determined to kill me. I had never fought before, or ever needed to, and I wasn’t used to this new body yet. But, somehow, I drove the creature off. This first fight taught me a great deal. This was not the peaceful universe I had once watched over. It was a dangerous place full of unknown menaces, and if I wasn’t very careful, I would die here.

I thought about the Great Beings, the wise men and women who had created me and my universe so many thousands of years ago. Could they ever have imagined all that had happened since? What would they think if they knew that their creation no longer towered above worlds, no longer had the power to split planets or travel between worlds at will. Now I was simply a being carrying a shield and crude sword, with no real idea how to use either, surrounded by miles of desert and far, far from home.

Someone else might have wept or screamed in frustration or even given up right there and perished. But I didn’t have the right to do any of those things, not while my people were in danger. Like it or not, I would have to explore this harsh world on my own, and hope I could somehow find a way to achieve my destiny.

Entry 3:

Shortly after my battle with the Vorox in the desert, I encountered a villager who introduced himself as Metus. He talked very quickly and offered me a ride to the nearest village, Vulcanus. Although I was hesitant, the thought of walking across a hostile desert was not very appealing, so I agreed. The trip was not without incident, as we wound up in combat with a creature he called a sand bat along the way.

My first reaction to Vulcanus was one of utter shock. Right in the center of the village, a crowd was watching two warriors fight in an arena. Was this the sort of barbaric society I had stumbled into, where battle was a sport? Even after Metus explained to me this was how arguments were settled here, in order to avoid wars, I was still troubled by it – where I came from, warriors fought for justice, not to decide who owned a strip of land or a wagon load of metal.

Still, in any society, there is right and there is wrong. I watched as the red-armored warrior, Ackar, defeated the white-armored one, called Strakk. I heard Strakk concede defeat, and then saw him reach for his weapon as soon as Ackar’s back was turned. No one else was willing to do anything… but I could not stand by and see someone attacked from behind. I ran into the arena and tackled Strakk, making his shot go wild.

Of course, now I was the one in trouble. He was a trained fighter, and I had only been in this body for an hour or so. He drove me across the arena and then down into the sand, ready to kill me… when a strange thing happened. The piece of Vorox stinger I carried as a crude weapon touched the mask I wore – and transformed instantly into a sword! The sight startled Strakk so much I was able to knock him off his feet. This time, when he surrendered, I made sure he meant it. I didn’t realize it then, but that short fight would change my entire future here on Bara Magna.
From the pages of Takanuva’s journal…

We seem to be safe for now. Kopaka and Lewa found Gali, she’s all right. The Turaga have brought as many Matoran as they could find to this chamber deep inside the Archives. While it is not much of a hiding place – can there be any hiding place? – it is defensible against Rahkshi attack. It is almost impossible to believe… Makuta Teridax in possession of the body of the Great Spirit, and so in control of this universe. Can any word be said he will not hear? Any plan carried out he will not know of in advance? Tahu says we will fight back… but how do you fight back against the sun and the stars and the world beneath your feet?

Onua is right, of course – we can’t stay here. We can’t hide in the darkness while the entire universe is at the mercy of that vile lunatic. Kapura reports that the surface of Metru Nui is teeming with Rahkshi, enforcing Makuta’s evil laws. So we must find another way out. Fortunately, the Turaga were able to find Krahka, a shapeshifting Rahi they once fought down here. She allied with them once against the Visorak, and is willing to do it again. She knows long unused tunnels that lead to the shoreline. If we can steal a boat, perhaps we can link up with other Toa in other lands.

Tahu has a plan. True, Makuta has almost infinite power now, but his mind was not designed to control it. If we can split up, stir up trouble, force him to focus his attention in dozens of different places at once, perhaps he will lose his grip on the universe… anyway, it’s worth trying. We encountered an Order of Mata Nui agent named Trinuma on Stelt. He says Daxia is destroyed, but there are still some Order members who survive. I have to believe that as long as anyone who loves freedom is alive, there is still hope.

I wonder what has happened to the Great Spirit Mata Nui? Makuta said he forced his mind and spirit into the Mask of Life, and then ejected the mask from this universe. But that doesn’t mean Mata Nui is dead – after all, the mask has already survived much. Could he still be out there somewhere, in the void beyond this universe? And if so… will he ever return to his people, who badly need him?

Pohatu and I have journeyed to Destral. There is precious little left here. How much of the damage we see was caused by the Order’s attack, and how much by Makuta Teridax himself, is impossible to say. I know one thing – nothing is left alive here. And from the shattered pieces of Makuta armor I see everywhere, it is hard not to believe that the new ruler of this universe has decided to eliminate all possible competition for his throne.

Pohatu is occupied searching for weapons, but I am combing the ruins of this fortress looking for something else. If I can find whatever the Makuta used to teleport Destral from place to place, perhaps I can use it to return to some of the other dimensions I visited in past days. Maybe I can find help in one of those places, or some clue
to how we can overthrow Teridax. If I could find Brutaka, he could help me, but I do not know if he is alive or dead.

I received a message from Tahu via our new Rahi courier system – Teridax, it seems, pays little attention to the wildlife of his universe. The Toa Nuva of Fire reports that Rahkshi have overrun the island of Odina, but the Dark Hunters had already relocated to Xia. Teridax could, of course, destroy them at any time, but it seems like he wants the challenge of sending his armies against them. That may buy us a little more time.

I have found it! It is badly damaged and I do not understand its workings, but it is here. I have sent out a message requesting aid from Nuparu. I pray that he arrives in time. This may be our best hope.

Gali elected to stay behind in Metru Nui. The latest word from her is that a troop of Ta-Matoran evaded capture by the Rahkshi, and fled through the Bohrok tunnels toward the island of Mata Nui. They were supposed to send word back if they made it beyond the domes… but no word has been heard.

Things have never looked worse… but I swear by all I believe in, this battle is not over. And we will win, even if we must tear our own universe apart to do it!

*      *      *

Vezon walked between worlds.

At least, that’s how he saw it. Lately, it seemed like every step he took left him somewhere completely different. One moment, he was out in the sunshine, seeing Matoran and Dark Hunters working together in perfect harmony (granted, they were building a giant cannon, but they were still getting along well). The next moment, everything had shifted and he was in a quite different place. Here, a group named the Great Beings had built a 40 million foot tall mechanical being they named Makuta. Unfortunately, his brother, Mata Nui, was plotting a rebellion against him.

How had this all begun? He tried to remember, never the easiest thing for Vezon to do. He had donned a Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates, which he had found on Destrall. A portal opened up in front of him then. Eager to escape the island, he stepped through it – only to find himself facing an oncoming tidal wave. It washed over him, but he did not drown. Instead, he fell through another portal, winding up in the middle of a swamp. And then another, and then another…

It took him quite some time to figure out what had happened to him – that his body, his essence, had fused to that of the Olmak. He was now, for all intents and purposes, a walking dimensional gateway.

There was still a lot to learn, of course. Was the effect permanent? Could he ever learn to control the power, so he could pick and choose where he went to? If he was holding something or someone, would they travel with him?

Wouldn’t that be interesting? he thought. First thing I’d do is find Makuta Teridax and give him a great… big… hug.

Tahu used his elemental powers to light a small campfire. It was foolish, he knew. There were Exo-Toa in the area and they would zero in on the heat. Then again, being a Toa of Fire, they probably couldn’t miss him anyway.

He glanced around the camp at his “team.” It was not a sight to inspire confidence. In the days since Teridax took over the universe, the Toa Nuva had scattered (they were too easy of a target if they stayed together). Hooking up with other fugitives as they went, they made for places of relative safety in order to regroup and plan.

This explained why Tahu was sitting in the blasted ruins of Karzahni with a Ko-Matoran, Kopeke; Johmak, a female Order of Mata Nui member with the ability to shatter and reassemble her body; Krahka, female shapeshifting Rahi; and two Dark Hunters, Guardian and Lariska.

Not exactly Gali, Lewa and Kopaka, thought Tahu. But they will have to do.
“We’ll stay here a few more hours, then move out,” he said. “Onua said there were a few Order of Mata Nui agents somewhere south of here, looking for a cache of weapons and supplies. We’ll hook up with them.”

“And then what?” grumbled Guardian. “Throw rocks at the sky? Challenge the wind with Cordak blasters? All we’re doing is delaying the inevitable – and we all know it.”

“And the alternative?” asked Johmak. “Bow and scrape before Makuta, begging him for one more moment of life in which to serve him? Let me die, then, as long as I do it as a free being.”

“Tahu… what are we going to do?” Kopeke asked, in hardly more than a whisper. “Guardian is right. We’re trying to fight the universe itself.”

“No, we’re not,” said Tahu. “We’re fighting a mad being who controls the power of a universe. And it’s not like learning a new machine at a Ta-Metru forge – it takes time and practice to master so complex a system. And we’re not going to give him that time… we’re going to do a Pohatu on him.”

“A Pohatu?” asked Kopeke.

Tahu smiled. “That’s right. ‘When in doubt, smash everything and hope you’re somewhere else when it all goes boom.’”

Guardian got up and walked away from the fire. He had nothing against Tahu, but there had to be a better way. Maybe instead of running from place to place, they should be trying to find a way out of this universe. Could be this place was lost, and it was time to accept it and move on. It wasn’t an easy choice, but those weren’t the kind he was used to making anyway.

Beneath his feet, the ground opened. Bonds made of solid stone wrapped around him, yanking him down into the hole even as he screamed. Then the barren earth slammed shut again, and he was gone.

The team was on its feet. “It’s Makuta,” said Tahu. “He knows where we are. He’s toying with us!”

“Tell us something we don’t know,” snapped Lariska. “Like what do we do about it?”

Before Tahu could answer, a dozen Exo-Toa appeared on the rise. Their missiles were loaded and aimed at the fugitives. The lead machine spoke in the voice of Makuta Teridax.

“Citizens of the Makutaverse, you are in an unauthorized area. You will accompany these Exo-Toa to Metru Nui, where you will be… retrained for new work that will benefit all my people. You will live out your lives there, in peace and prosperity, wanting for nothing… or you die, now.”

“You know what?” said Lariska. “This may turn out to be the shortest revolution on record.”
Mata Nui followed Ackar to his shelter in the village. The Glatorian began packing items into a satchel, explaining that he was due to fight another match in the village of Tesara.

The walls of the shelter were lined with Glatorian shields, trophies of Ackar’s past victories. “You won all these?” asked Mata Nui.

“Yes. And look what good they do me,” Ackar answered, making no attempt to hide his bitterness. “Should have packed it in long ago.”

“But you stayed. Why?”

Ackar paused a moment before answering. When he spoke again, he sounded less bitter than sad. “Duty. Pride. But a Glatorian past his prime’s no good to anyone.”

“To be defeated without a fight would be dishonor. You carry this truth inside you, as do I. You are a true Toa,” said Mata Nui.

“Toa?”

“Where I come from...” Mata Nui began. Then he stopped, as if not sure how to explain himself. Finally, he said, “It is a name given to a select few warriors, worthy of –”

Metus burst into the shelter, practically leaping in the air with excitement. “Mata Nui! You were brilliant! Raanu will pay anything we ask. And if you don’t like this village – no problem! I’ll get the other leaders to bid for you.”

“That is very kind,” said Mata Nui. “But... no.”

Metus looked at Mata Nui as if he had just said he wanted to be a target dummy for the Skrall. “Are you crazy? Do you realize what you’re passing up? The life of a First Glatorian!”

“Yes, just look how great it worked out for me,” Ackar muttered. “The answer is still no.”

“Okay, okay, I hear you. But when you change your mind—”

Mata Nui held firm. “I will not.”

“Playing hard to get, eh? I can respect that. Soon enough, you’ll come around, begging me to take you back.”

Mata Nui took a step toward Metus, obviously not amused by the suggestion. Metus took a step back.

“Okay, that’s a joke. You’d never beg. Heh, heh... I’m going now.” Metus turned and rushed out of the shelter. Ackar laughed at the sight, and after a moment, Mata Nui joined him.

“So, stranger, what are your plans?” asked Ackar.

“I must begin searching for a way back to my homeland.”

“Which is...?”

“You will think it sounds crazy...”

“No crazier than jumping into an arena armed with only a stinger tail and that thing,” Ackar said, gesturing toward the scarabax perched on Mata Nui’s shoulder.
“True. My home is far from this place… on another world entirely,” said Mata Nui. “I was once its protector, until I lost everything to a powerful evil that has enslaved my people. That is why I must find a way back.”

A blue-armored Glatorian suddenly sprang from the shadows near the door, startling them both. “I knew it! Woo-hoo! Proof! Proof of what I’ve been saying for years!” shouted the newcomer. “Kiina–!? What are you–!?“ Ackar snapped. “This is not the place!”

Their visitor was female. She was tall and wiry, and looked as if she would be a formidable foe in a fight. Right now, though, she was either extremely happy or completely insane; Mata Nui wasn’t sure which. And he wasn’t in the mood to take chances. Mata Nui went for his weapon.

“Just who is this?”

Ackar reached out to restrain Mata Nui. “Wait, she’s—”

The female Glatorian came right up close to Mata Nui. “Name’s Kiina. A Glatorian. One of the best. And you just won me a lot of bets.” She turned to Ackar. “Kiina’s delusional. There’s no such thing as other worlds. ‘Yeah, well, he proves there are!’”

Ackar gently guided Mata Nui’s arm down, so that his sword was pointed at the floor. “It’s okay. Although I don’t always agree with her methods – such as lurking in the shadows – as Glatorian go, Kiina ranks. I’d trust her with my life… and have, more than once.”

Mata Nui looked from Ackar to Kiina. He still thought she was unbalanced, but if she was a friend of Ackar’s… well, he had to take his allies where he could find them now. “Good to meet you, Kiina,” he said.

The scarabax on his shoulder clicked its approval. Kiina looked at the insect with undisguised revulsion. “So what they’re saying is true?” she asked Ackar.

Ackar nodded.

She turned back to Mata Nui. “Let me guess. You call him ‘Click’,“ she said, more than a little sarcasm in her voice.

The scarabax, as if sensing her contempt, lashed out with a pincer and clicked angrily. She took a step back. “Hey, I was just kidding.”

Mata Nui smiled. “Actually, I like it. Click it is.”

Kiina walked in a wide circle around Mata Nui, checking him out from every angle. She had always dreamed of meeting someone from another planet. Somehow, though, she had thought they would look less like the other Glatorian she knew. It was an exciting moment just the same.

“Wow – a real other-worlder,” she said. “Finally, someone to convince the Agori there’s a better place than this miserable wasteland.”

Ackar frowned. He considered Kiina a good friend, but he also knew she could be selfish. He didn’t want to see Mata Nui used. “He needs our help, Kiina. I owe him,” he said.

Kiina looked right at Mata Nui. “Help, huh? I might be able to do something for you. But I’m going to want something in return.” She moved closer, her helmet practically touching Mata Nui’s mask. “I want out of this dump. You have to take me with you.”

“Kiina…” said Ackar, shaking his head.

“It’s all right,” said Mata Nui. He studied Kiina for a moment, then said, “If it’s within my power, I will take you. But the time to help my people is running out.”

“No problem,” Kiina said, smiling. “I work fast.”

“What do you have in mind, Kiina?” asked Ackar. He didn’t know of any way to get off Bara Magna. “Well, I discovered an enormous cavern under my village. It’s filled with weird, ancient equipment and tools. It might have something you can use. Word of warning, though…” She pointed an armored finger at Mata Nui. “Don’t even think of pulling a fast one – ’cause you’re my ticket out of here.”

Whose bright idea was this again? Kiina asked herself. She, Ackar, and Mata Nui were in a borrowed dune chariot, on their way to the water village of Tajun. It was dawn.
Traveling in daylight was not Kiina’s idea of a good time. It didn’t take long for the temperature to soar in the desert of Bara Magna. If the vehicle kept running, they would make it to the village before high sun. But dune chariots were notoriously unreliable – and this one looked to be patched and repaired a dozen times over. She would have been happier riding her sand stalker, but the animal was ill.

Heat wasn’t the only worry. There was no cover out in the middle of the trackless wastes. Granted, the savage Vorox would be more likely to hunt at night, but in full sunshine, Bone Hunters could see potential victims coming a mile away.

Of course, there is some good news, thought Kiina. You can see them, too.

Mata Nui pointed toward a canyon up ahead. “Is the cavern in that canyon?”

Kiina shook her head. “No. It’s near Tajun, my village, just beyond that canyon.”

Ackar wasn’t listening. His eyes were scanning the horizon, looking for threats. It had not been that long ago that Bone Hunters had attacked Vulcanus, and Skrall had sacked the free city of Atero. No place on Bara Magna was safe, least of all the wastelands between villages.

Had he been able to see what was going on behind him, Ackar would have been even more worried. Shortly after their departure from Vulcanus, an Agori slipped out of the village. Making his way up into the rocks, he ran into two Bone Hunters on their rock steeds.

Bone Hunters were an unusual breed. Distantly related to the rock tribe of Roxtus, they were nomadic bandits. They lived in the desert, surviving on stew made from the Thornax plant – and whatever they could steal. They were excellent trackers and unafraid to go after prey even in the worst heat of the day. Normally, they robbed and killed their victims. Lately, they had begun kidnapping Glatorian, for reasons unknown.

Under ordinary circumstances, an Agori who encountered a Bone Hunter would scream and run. But these weren’t ordinary circumstances, and this Agori was right where he had planned to be.

“The Glatorian are heading for Tajun,” he told the two riders. “You know what to do.”

The two Bone Hunters glanced at each other. They weren’t used to taking orders from villagers. Agori were for robbing, after all. But it had been made clear to them that this Agori’s word was to be obeyed. So they grunted something close to a “yes” and rode off.

The Agori watched them go. He didn’t trust the Bone Hunters – what sane being would? – but he needed them. Left on their own, they were a dangerous element, unpredictable and wild. But bribed with weapons and water, they could be “tamed” and used. And once they were no longer useful…

He smiled, then, a little smile with no cheer in it. Then he turned back to Vulcanus. He couldn’t let his absence be noticed by anyone, not when he was so close to achieving his goals. So it was time to go back to playing the role of trusted Agori: a little eccentric, maybe, but all in all, a good being to have around. And all the while, he would be laughing inside at the thought of what waited for the fools of the fire village.

*     *     *

From the pages of Mata Nui’s diary…

Entry 4:

It soon became obvious that this world had its own share of problems. In addition to a lack of resources and a harsh climate, they were menaced by roving bands of Bone Hunters, savage Vorox like the one I fought, and a violent invasion by a race called the Skrall. It sounded all too familiar.

As I listened to the Glatorian tell me of these things, I struggled with myself. I had not come to Bara Magna of my own free will – I had been exiled here. The problems of these people were not mine. My own universe was in danger, because of my failings, and it was my responsibility to save it. Could I afford to get myself embroiled in the crises of another world?
The simple answer was no. What if the struggle here on Bara Magna took years? What if I was wounded or killed, who would there be to save my own universe? These Glatorian seem smart and capable, surely they could handle things here. And what help could I be? Stripped of my great powers, was I even the equal of Ackar or Strakk or any of the others? They had years of experience here… I had been here less than a day.

And yet… I turned away once before. I paid so much attention to the worlds I was visiting and the mission I had to carry out for the Great Beings that I ignored what was going on inside my own universe. Too late, I realized that there were hostile forces arrayed against me. It was because I was so oblivious that evil was able to take root in the place I was supposed to protect. Could I walk away again? Could I really turn my back on these people who had welcomed me into their midst? By doing nothing, would I not be allowing evil to triumph here as well?

This was something I would need to think long and hard about. The decision I made might change the course of two worlds. And I could not help but think – if the only way I could save my home was to leave this place to its doom, would I be able to do it?
“I don’t like this,” said Ackar. “It’s the perfect place for an ambush.”

The dune chariot had reached the mouth of the canyon. Places like this made the red-armored Glatorian wary. It hadn’t been that long ago that he had helped set up an intricate series of traps in Iron Canyon for a Bone Hunter raiding party. All the skill of the bandits had not helped them at all in a place where they were stuck on a narrow path, being picked off by Glatorian hidden among the rocks above.

“Please,” said Kiina. “Even Bone Hunters aren’t stupid enough to take on three Glatorian.”

This, of course, was a lie, and she knew it. With the element of surprise on their side, Bone Hunters would try almost anything. But she didn’t want Mata Nui to get nervous and decide he wanted off this ride.

Ackar knew exactly what she was doing, and he wasn’t planning to let her get away with it. He owed Mata Nui. If they were going to expose him to danger, he had a right to know what kind and how nasty things were likely to get.

“They’re getting bolder,” he said to Kiina. There was an edge in his voice that said watch it, I’m on to you. “Skrall, too. In the past few months, they’ve seemed to know our every move before we make it.”


The scarabax beetle sitting on Mata Nui’s shoulder clicked its pincers in enthusiastic agreement.

“I was talking about his blade, bug face,” Kiina snapped at the beetle, and shook her head. “I can’t believe I’m talking to an insect.”

Mata Nui did not crack a smile. “In my experience, when an enemy knows too much, it can only mean one thing: You have a traitor on your hands.”

Ackar nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. But who?”

A low rumbling sound filled the air. The ground beneath the chariot began to shake violently. Then the rumbling became a roar as, up ahead, the earth buckled and heaved.

“I think we have a bigger problem!” Kiina yelled.

The ground exploded. A massive crimson creature rose up on four great legs and let out an earsplitting roar. Mata Nui had never seen anything like it. It was at least forty feet tall, part animal and part machine. Its legs sported massive treads and ended in vicious claws. Sharp pincers extended from both sides of its jagged mouth. When it took a step, the earth shook—and the chariot was headed straight for it.

“Skopio!” shouted Ackar. He had seen this creature once before, from a distance. Getting this close to one was something he could have lived without.

“We should turn back,” said Mata Nui.

“Can’t,” Ackar said, pointing behind the chariot. “They’re even deadlier.”
Mata Nui turned. A group of black-armored riders mounted on reptilian creatures were riding across the sands in pursuit of the chariot. Each held a sword aloft in the air and shouted war cries as they rode.

“What are they?” asked Mata Nui.

“Bone Hunters,” Ackar answered, “and a lot of them.”

“My village – there’s another Glatorian there,” said Kiina, leaning forward in the driver’s seat. “We just have to make it there!”

Kiina turned the wheel and aimed the chariot at the narrow gap between the Skopio’s left foreleg and the canyon wall. The creature’s eyes narrowed and it whipped its leg to the side, blocking the vehicle. Kiina yanked on the wheel, sending the chariot into a skid right in front of the beast.

“Hang on tight!” yelled Kiina.

The Skopio slammed its right foreleg into the sand, missing the chariot by centimeters. Kiina drove it up the side of the canyon wall. The beast swung again – and missed. Kiina vaulted the chariot off the wall and over a dune. But she wasn’t quite fast enough. The Skopio landed a glancing blow, sending the chariot tumbling end over end and hurling the three occupants onto the sand.

Ackar and Mata Nui rolled to their feet, weapons drawn, facing the oncoming Bone Hunters.

“Help Kiina,” Mata Nui said to Ackar. “I’ll draw the beast away from you.”

“Good luck,” said Ackar, dropping into a crouch to await the first attacker.

Mata Nui glanced down at Click. “Are you ready?”

The beetle snapped its pincers together in response. Then there was a bright flash as it transformed once more into a mighty shield. Mata Nui charged toward the Skopio.

Behind him, Ackar and Kiina were both locked in battle. Kiina parried a Bone Hunter’s sword with her staff, looking for an opening. When she saw the Hunter drop his guard, she struck, landing a solid blow with her weapon and hurling him from his rock steed. Two more Bone Hunters closed in. Kiina moved like quicksilver, keeping her enemies off-balance with sweeping kicks.

Nearby, Ackar was surrounded, fierce but outnumbered. Fighting mounted warriors on foot is a losing game, he thought. So it’s time to even the odds a little.

A Bone Hunter rode down on him, sword flashing in the sunlight. Ackar blocked the Hunter’s blade with his own. As the Bone Hunter drew back to strike again, Ackar launched himself into the air and landed a solid kick, knocking the Bone Hunter out of the saddle. The Glatorian landed atop the rock steed and urged it forward.

Up ahead, Kiina was hard-pressed in a fight against a bigger, stronger Bone Hunter. Ackar rode toward her, battling the Hunters on either side of him. As soon as he drew close to the canyon wall, he hurled himself from the saddle, somersaulting in the air – once, twice, three times. He came out of the move feetfirst, slamming into Kiina’s opponent and knocking him senseless. Now Kiina and Ackar stood back to back as the Bone Hunters closed in.

Mata Nui was having problems of his own with the Skopio. Its attention was now fully focused on him, which was what he wanted. Its blows were coming dangerously close to landing, though, and Mata Nui had learned at least this about his new body: It grew tired. And if he slowed down even a step, the Skopio would finish him.

The great beast, meanwhile, was growing impatient. It was time to crush this golden-armored pest. The Skopio concentrated, triggering the mechanical Thornax launcher built into it ages ago. With a hiss of hydraulics and a metallic hum, the launcher rose from the creature’s back and locked into place. Taking aim at Mata Nui, the Skopio fired.

Mata Nui stopped dead. For just a moment, he watched the beast’s transformation in disbelief. That delay almost cost him his life, as he barely got his shield up in time to take the brunt of the blast. Even with its protection, he was still knocked off his feet. The Skopio advanced, lifting a clawed leg into the air, ready to crush him. Mata Nui rolled to dodge the blow, landing neatly in a crouch. This time, he’d be ready for the Skopio’s next attack.
Behind him, he heard the sound of Kiina’s voice. “Ackar!” she said. “We’re finished unless we can make it to my village.”

“Try and get to the chariot,” Mata Nui yelled to the two Glatorian. “I have an idea.”

When the Skopio swung a leg at him again, Mata Nui didn’t try to move aside. Instead, he launched into the air and grabbed onto the leg. As the Skopio drew its limb back, Mata Nui was pulled high into the air. When he was at the same level as the monster’s head, Mata Nui jumped off the leg and landed on the Skopio’s back.

It took Mata Nui only a moment to figure out the controls for the mounted Thornax launcher. Aiming at the Bone Hunters menacing Ackar and Kiina, he fired. The blast scattered the Hunters like grains of sand before a fierce wind. Ackar and Kiina took advantage of the opening to run for the chariot. Bone Hunters who pursued them were met by another devastating Thornax blast, courtesy of Mata Nui.

Angered by its unwanted rider, the Skopio whipped its stinger tail forward, knocking Mata Nui off his perch. He twisted in midair and managed to land on his feet on a high ledge. Down below, Ackar and Kiina had reached the vehicle and were speeding toward the Skopio, hoping to slip underneath the creature. Mounted Bone Hunters galloped close behind.

Mata Nui drew his sword and plunged it into the rock beneath his feet. The power of the blade split the stone, sending half of it tumbling down the mountainside. It struck other boulders, knocking them loose. Soon, the whole mountainside seemed to be moving, stones careening down in a huge rockslide.

Kiina heard the sound of the avalanche and saw the first rocks strike the sand up ahead. “This is going to be close!” she yelled to Ackar, pushing the chariot to full speed. The metal frame of the vehicle shook violently, bolts snapping off and flying in every direction.

Spotting a gap barely large enough for the chariot, Kiina aimed right for it. The vehicle shot through it and onto open sand just as the rain of rock brought the Skopio down with a tremendous crash. The Bone Hunters weren’t so lucky – they were under the creature as it fell, buried beneath its body and a ton of rock.

As they neared the mouth of the canyon, Kiina allowed herself a relieved sigh. Then she suddenly realized someone was missing. “Hey, where—?”

Ackar pointed off to the east. “There!”

Kiina saw him now, too. Mata Nui was surfing down the side of the mountain on his shield, vaulting over outcroppings as if he had been doing it all his life. One particularly large rock sent him high into the air. He somersaulted, grabbing his shield and spinning into an upright position just in time to land on the hood of the chariot.

Ackar laughed. “Gutsiest move I’ve ever seen.”

“Woo-hoo! Those Bone Hunters are going to be eating Skopio belly for weeks,” Kiina said, smiling broadly. “Not bad, other-worlder.”

Ackar’s grin abruptly vanished from his face. He laid a hand on Kiina’s arm, as if to steady her against a shock. She glanced at him, then up ahead – and that’s when she saw it.

A plume of black smoke rose from the nearby oasis. Flames shot through the cloud of ash and soot. As they drew nearer, Kiina could hear the sound of shelters collapsing, sand stalkers screeching in fear and pain, and something even more chilling: the war cries of Skrall.

Tajun was burning.
Weeks ago…

Branar cracked his whip and muttered a Skrall curse under his breath. As a named warrior, he was no stranger to dangerous situations or assignments that require he get his armored hands dirty. But his task today was both disgusting and deadly, and the sooner it was finished, the happier he would be.

Tuma insisted on these “Vorox runs” once every month. The object was to drive some captured Vorox north, over the path the Skrall had used to travel to Roxtus the year before. The thinking was that if the shapeshifters who had driven the Skrall out of their original territory were moving south, the Vorox would encounter them along the way. The Vorox would no doubt die in the battle, but Branar might escape to make it back to Roxtus with the news. And if he didn’t escape, well, Tuma would learn just as much from his failure to return.

All of which explained why Branar and a Skrall warrior were driving a half dozen savage Vorox along a mountain trail. The twin challenges were keeping the beasts moving and waiting to see if one or more of them would die a horrible death at the hands of the Skrall’s old foes. It was hot, it was dusty, and the job was more than likely a waste of time – combined, it made Branar about as happy as a hungry spikit.

Branar did understand Tuma’s worry, of course. He had been one of the first warriors to encounter the shapeshifters, who the Skrall dubbed “Baterra” (an ancient word meaning “silent death”). He had been leading a small patrol out scavenging for supplies in a wooded area. When the two warriors on the flanks failed to respond to hails, he ordered weapons drawn. The baterra appeared out of the darkness, struck, killed three of his troops, then vanished. Branar ordered a return to the fortress and he and one other warrior managed to fight their way back. For bringing word of this strange new enemy back, he was rewarded by Tuma with a name. For a Skrall warrior, there was no greater honor.

It was not the last time Branar would face the baterra, but none of the battles ended in a victory. Skrall were skilled, ruthless, and efficient warriors, but they could not fight a foe that seemed to appear and disappear at will. Despite their best efforts, the Skrall were never able to accomplish the first condition of victory: choosing the time and place of the battle. The baterra attacked when they chose to, sometimes multiple times in a day. Then they might vanish for weeks at a time, letting even under-manned patrols pass right by. It seemed to be impossible to bait them into a trap.

“Watch them!” Branar barked to the Skrall warrior. “One of the Vorox just wandered off the path.”

It was a constant problem. Vorox were creatures of the open desert. They hated captivity or being forced to travel one way or the other. Any chance to escape was seized upon. It wasn’t unusual to return from one of these missions with fewer Vorox than one had at the start.

The Skrall warrior glanced to his left. The Vorox was just vanishing into the rocks, so still close enough to recapture. A nod from Branar said that the squad leader would keep an eye on the rest of the herd while the escapee was brought back.
Grumbling, the warrior spurred his mount. The three Skrall were riding rock steeds received in trade from a nearby Bone Hunter troop. Sand stalkers were not the fighters that rock steeds were, and fighters were what might be needed on this trip.

He had just left the path when he heard the Vorox scream. Thornax launcher at the ready, he rode up a steep bank of shale. From that vantage point, he could see the remains of the Vorox scattered among the rocks below. There wasn’t much left of the beast. The Skrall swiftly scanned the area. There was no sign of sand bats or other desert predators. Whatever had killed the Vorox was gone.

Or was it? Remembering just what they were out here to find, the Skrall backed his rock steed down to the path, then wheeled and galloped toward Branar. “Contact,” he said quietly.

Branar gestured to the Vorox, saying, “Let them go.”

The warrior gave a yell and started driving the Vorox off the path. Branar did the same. Dozens of Vorox scrambled up the rocks toward where the suspected baterra was hiding. Branar and the Skrall followed behind, halting at the top of the ridge. They watched the Vorox climb down the slope, scattering in every direction to elude pursuit. But no one was following them, and more importantly, nothing was attacking them. In a matter of moments, free once more, they had all disappeared into the mountains.

Branar’s expression darkened. It was either another false alarm or the baterra were playing games again, more likely the former. He turned his head to look at his remaining warrior. In the micro-second it took him to make that movement, the other Skrall was dead. The warrior fell from his saddle with a vicious gash on his back. Of his attacker, there was no sign.

“Baterra,” Branar said. “Show yourself.”

It was a pointless thing to say and wouldn’t make very good last words, he realized. But there was nothing to attack and little point in running. With luck, the other warrior would make it back to warn the city and…

Branar hesitated. Why was he still alive, he wondered? It had been at least two minutes since the Skrall was killed. Baterra attacked quickly once their presence was known.

Unless…

Branar spurred his rock steed back down the shale. Nothing tried to stop him. Once back on the path, he started toward Roxtus. His senses were alert for any sign of an attack. But none came. And suddenly he knew why.

_They want us to know they’re coming_, he thought. _The baterra are so certain we can’t stop them that they are giving us a warning. They killed my warrior, but not me… to show they have the power to grant life or death to the Skrall._

Now the Skrall would face the same choice. Would they fight the baterra, and risk annihilation, or flee again? Only Tuma could make that decision. For the sake of their race, Branar hoped he would make the right one.
By the time the trio reached the village, it was too late. The once-proud village of Tajun was a pile of ashes, or soon would be. Kiina stood in the middle of the chaos, looking around desperately, stricken with grief.

“Looks like the Agori got away,” said Ackar. “A daylight raid… one of their sentries must have spotted the attackers in time.”

“The village… our homes… this is my fault! I should have been here to help. Where’s Tarix? And Gresh? We had a training session scheduled for today. He’s just a rookie. He wouldn’t be prepared for—”

Gresh was a young Glatorian from the jungle village of Tesara. Although new to the sport, he was highly skilled and had been fast gaining a reputation as a potential champion. But not even a veteran Glatorian could win against a Skrall war party.

“There!” yelled Ackar, pointing to the western side of the village.

Gresh staggered out of the smoke, clutching his shoulder. His armor was battered and one arm hung limply at his side.

“He’s hurt!” said Kiina. She, Ackar, and Mata Nui rushed to his side.

“Easy, son,” said Ackar, reaching out to support him.

Gresh pushed them away. “I’m fine. I’ll be fine,” he said, his voice weak. Then his face contorted and he grabbed at his injured shoulder. His knees buckled and only fast action by Ackar and Mata Nui kept him from collapsing.

“Just shut up and let us help you,” growled Ackar.

“We need to get him out of sight,” said Mata Nui. “Kiina, your cavern—”

“Right,” said Kiina. “The entrance is this way.”

The party made its way through the thick smoke, moving as quickly as they could with the injured Gresh in tow. The young Glatorian, gasping for breath, was still trying to talk.

“Stay quiet,” said Mata Nui. “You will be safe soon.”

“No,” Gresh answered. “You don’t understand… Skrall and Bone Hunters… they’re working together.”

“Impossible,” replied Ackar. “They’re rival tribes. Neither allies with anyone, least of all each other.”

Gresh grabbed Ackar’s arm. “No! I watched them destroy our village… I…” His eyes went wide for an instant, then suddenly closed. He sagged in Ackar’s arms.

“Gresh!” said Kiina. “He isn’t…?”

“Still alive,” Ackar reassured her.

“But not for long, if that savage sees us,” Mata Nui said.

The others turned at his words. Moving through the smoke was a giant of a being, a warrior clad in black-and-green armor and carrying a huge sword. Kiina had seen him only once before, but it was impossible to forget the sight.

Now more figures appeared behind him, a combination of Skrall warriors on foot and mounted Bone Hunters. Kiina felt sick. This was every Agori’s worst nightmare, coming true before her eyes.

“The boy was telling the truth,” said Ackar quietly. “The Bone Hunters have joined forces with the Skrall.”

**Hours ago…**

Indistinct figures lurk in the sands north of the water village of Tajun. Skrall warriors hunch behind dunes, while nearby dozens of Bone Hunters dart among the dunes, heedless of who sees them. Growls between the two groups drift on the wind, but do not reach the unsuspecting village. A shrouded figure exchanges hushed words with leaders of both factions and gestures toward Tajun. Nodding, Tuma and his Bone Hunter counterpart stalk back to their warriors. Dust plumes rise from their feet as both groups start to run toward the village.

In the Tajun arena, Gresh stands waiting for Tarix to show up for a practice bout, when he sees above the canyon walls a dust cloud heading directly for him. Although still a rookie, Gresh takes only a moment to understand, and shouts for everyone to get out. Startled Agori drop what they are doing and immediately dart for the nearby hills of Knee Island, but a few stay to help defend their homes. Grabbing his weathered weapons, Gresh hurries to the oncoming dust cloud. He has no hope of defeating them all, but he will make their victory as expensive as he can.

Bone Hunters fall under Gresh’s blade as the first wave of attackers stream past him. Grimly, Gresh prepares for the next wave of Bone Hunters, and is shocked when Skrall warriors thunder past him, raiding and looting the Agori homes before destroying them. One Skrall knocks Gresh down, and he fights for his life against the dark warrior, managing to evade powerful sword strokes until he can stumble into a narrow crevice and lose the Skrall. Panting, badly wounded, Gresh watches in misery as the combined force tears the village apart. Even worse, he looks on as they head straight for hidden doorways and places where Gresh knows valuables are stored.

Slowly, the raiders finish their work and filter out through the deep crevices that form Tajun village. Gresh, barely able to walk, is forced to wait until help arrives.

* * *

From the pages of Mata Nui’s diary…

**Entry 5:**

My first view of the “work” of the Skrall was when Ackar, Kiina and I arrived in Tajun. I have seen entire worlds devastated by war before, but this was something different. The Agori did not choose this fight. It was forced upon them by the greed and ambition of the Skrall and Bone Hunters. And… perhaps it makes a difference to see a battle from the midst of it, rather than from the great distances I have known before. I saw the young Glatorian, Gresh, badly wounded; saw the shelters burning; and realized that the water tribes had just had their lives shattered as surely as their planet once had been.

I have experienced many new emotions since coming to Bara Magna. Oh, the Great Beings gave me the capacity to feel when they created me, but I was always so far removed from everything around me that I have had no reason to experience emotion. Now I have known fear, facing the Vorox… friendship, with Ackar and Kiina… and now, anger at the senseless violence I see all about me.

The Skrall do not realize it, but in a strange way, they have done me a favor. I have wrestled with the choice before me – whether to leave Bara Magna as quickly as possible to go and save my universe, or to stay and help these people. Now I know what I must do. What the Skrall did today must be avenged.

Kiina pointed out Tuma, leader of the Skrall, to me as he walked amid the carnage. He is tall, strong, and obviously filled with enormous confidence. He shows no sign of regret for what his soldiers have done here, only
pride and satisfaction. He reminds me of someone else I have known, an enemy I still must bring down. I think I will enjoy bringing this Tuma to face Agori justice one day.

In the meantime, there is work to be done. Kiina says there is a place we can go to where Gresh will be safe. It is the same cavern she spoke of, filled with ancient technology and strange inscriptions. I have a hunch that I am about to discover I am not so very far from home as I thought.

* * *

Kiina pushed on a jutting piece of stone and a portion of the rock wall slid open. The group rushed inside and the door slid in place behind them. “They won’t find us in here.”

She led her friends down a gently sloping tunnel. The stone walls were marked with strange glyphs and symbols, carved with care. Mata Nui found he could not take his eyes off them, despite the danger that surrounded him.

“Wait,” he said. “These glyphs… I…”

“Later,” snapped Kiina. “First we have to take care of Gresh. The cavern is just ahead.”

The tunnel opened onto a massive cave. This was no natural formation. Huge, opaque, marble obelisks dominated the center of the space, illuminating a central area. Six entrances opened onto what looked like miniature ecosystems.

*It looks like a… place of creation,* thought Mata Nui. *A lab, perhaps? But why create six environments in this place? For what purpose? If it was a test… what were they testing?*

As they moved farther in, Mata Nui saw more evidence for his theory. Tables made of stone were scattered about, covered with tools and machine parts. Someone had been working here and perhaps not so long ago – he noted disturbances in the ancient dust.

Kiina gestured to one of the tables. “Lay him down over here.”

Gresh’s breathing was steady, but one arm was badly injured. Mata Nui felt helpless. He knew nothing about how to care for another being. He wasn’t even certain how serious the damage to Gresh might be – would he die from this wound? Or was this the kind of injury Glatorian received in the arena all the time? He guessed not, given how worried Kiina appeared to be.

The keen ears of Ackar picked up a sound from the shadows. He drew his sword in a flash, saying, “Show yourself. Now!”

There was a long moment of stillness and silence. Then a villager clad in blue armor stepped into the light. He was short and his body seemed to be in constant nervous motion. He held his hands out defensively, looking from Ackar to Kiina and back again.

“Okay, okay, relax,” the Agori villager said. “Everything’s okay. It’s just me – Berix.”

Now Kiina had her trident in hand, pointing it toward Berix. Her features were tight with anger.

“You filthy little thief! I told you if I ever caught you down here again, I…”

Berix ducked behind Mata Nui’s legs. “This place doesn’t belong to you. And I’m no thief – I’m a collector.” He glanced up at Mata Nui then, noticing his “protector” for the first time. “Ooh… like your mask. Can I have it?”

The villager reached up to touch the Mask of Life. But before his fingers could make contact, Berix spotted Kiina rushing toward him. He withdrew his hand quickly, as if the mask might bite him.

“Come here, you!” snapped Kiina.

Berix sidestepped, keeping Mata Nui between him and the enraged Glatorian. “I have a right to collect anything I want. It’s just junk anyway.”

“Then why do you want it?” asked Kiina.

“Cause I like fixing things,” said Berix. He gestured at the lights on the ceiling. “Who do you think got those lights working?”

“I was wondering about that…” Kiina grumbled.

Berix looked up at Mata Nui again. Spotting the scarabax perched on the warrior’s shoulder, he took a step back. “Hey, you’ve got a–”
“He knows!” Kiina and Ackar said in unison. There was too much anger in this chamber, Mata Nui decided. It wasn’t helping Gresh or anyone else. “Berix, have you ever fixed an injured Glatorian?”

“Oh, no,” Kiina said immediately. “No way. He’s not touching Gresh.”

“Like every time you’ve been pounded on for stealing.”

Berix moved to the table to look at Gresh, but couldn’t resist snapping back, “Collecting. Maybe you should let me work on your ears next, Kiina.”

“Enough,” Mata Nui said. “Can you fix him?”

Berix shrugged. “Yeah. Okay, yeah… I think I can.”

The Agori tapped his arm. A small panel opened in his armor. Inside was a compartment stuffed with various tools, wires, and odds and ends. He reached inside and took out a crude knife.

“Gresh better pull through,” Kiina said. “You got that?”

“Great,” Berix muttered. “No pressure or anything.” He took the knife and sliced off a portion of a strange vine that grew on the nearby wall.

Ackar took Kiina’s arm gently and led her a few steps away from the table. She never took her eyes off of Berix, watching him with the look of a mother sand stalker ready to spring to the defense of its young. “What if he’s the traitor?” she whispered.

“Then he’ll pay,” Ackar replied.

The two Glatorian moved to join Mata Nui, who was examining the cavern with undisguised curiosity. He moved hesitantly, as if he were trying to capture a memory that was just out of reach.

“Something wrong?” asked Kiina.

“I don’t know,” Mata Nui answered. “There’s a familiarity about this place.”

“Must have been created by the old rulers of Bara Magna,” said Ackar, looking around.


Mata Nui’s head snapped around at the sound of the name. “The Great Beings were here?”

It was too incredible to believe. The Great Beings were at the core of Mata Nui’s earliest recollections. They had constructed the massive robot body that had once belonged to him. They had created his consciousness and placed it inside that body, and then sent him forth to do… what? He still did not recall. That had been more than 100,000 years ago and he had given up hoping he would ever find them again. It might have been chance that brought him to this world, where the Great Beings had once walked, but he preferred to think it was destiny.

It was obvious that Kiina did not share Mata Nui’s reverence for the Great Beings, though. “Great Destroyers is more like it,” she said.

“Why do you speak against them?” demanded Mata Nui.

“Why? They wrecked our world, that’s why,” Kiina shot back. Gesturing toward the six chambers containing mini-environments, she continued, “This was Bara Magna before the Great Beings left us here to rot.”

“You have no proof of that, Kiina,” said Ackar. “They could have just as easily ended up buried in the ruins. A lot of others did, you know.”

“No,” Mata Nui said, shaking his head. “The Great Beings did not fall here. That much I am sure of.”

He walked deeper into the cave, examining every inch of the walls, until he came to a great door. Inscribed on it was a symbol – three dots flanked by two curved lines. Mata Nui had seen the symbol before, for it had been inscribed in places on his old robotic body as well. But he did not know what it stood for.

“What lies beyond here?” he asked.
“No idea,” Kiina replied. “Never been able to get it open.”
Berix had been eavesdropping on the conversation as he worked. Now he called over his shoulder,
“Me, neither! But I bet there’s something good back there.”
“Keep dreaming,” Kiina said sharply. “And pay attention to what you’re doing, thief.”
Mata Nui stepped close to the door. As he did so, his mask began to glow, casting golden light on
the inscribed image. “I recognize this symbol,” he said softly.
He reached out and touched one of the three dots. As soon as he did so, it began to glow, and
there was a loud click, as if a lock was coming undone. The symbol rotated beneath Mata Nui’s hand, and
the two halves of the door began to slide apart.
“It’s opening,” said Kiina. “You did it!”
Behind the door there was a stone staircase leading down. Mata Nui and the two Glatorian
followed it into an antechamber farther beneath the earth. A variety of symbols covered the walls, most
of them circles with lines or other circles inside of them. Kiina and Ackar examined these as Mata Nui
moved farther into the chamber. Then they heard him cry out, “It cannot be!”
Ackar and Kiina were at his side instantly. He was standing in front of the far wall. Carved into
the wall were what looked like building plans for a giant being made of metal. It was clear from the dust
all around that the carving had been made long, long ago.
“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” said Kiina.
“I have,” replied Mata Nui, his eyes riveted by the carving.
“You know that thing?”
“Yes. A gigantic mechanical being,” Mata Nui said, his tone filled with frustration and anger. “Just
like the one now enslaving my people.”
“Wait,” said Kiina. “You think the Great Beings had something to do with that? Did they harm
your people too?”
“No. The responsibility lies on my shoulders alone,” said Mata Nui. “But this place… these
symbols… we are on the right track.”
Axonn had been running for many days and nights. After being teleported from Metru Nui by the power of Makuta, he had found himself in a vast, barren landscape. At first, there was no sign of any life at all, Matoran or Rahi, or any habitation. That changed when he began to hear the screams. They were cries of agony and they were coming from Brutaka, though his old friend was nowhere to be seen.

The warrior had raced off in the direction of the screams. That had been – how long ago? A week ago? A month? He had crossed the wasteland that never seemed to end, but had been unable to find Brutaka. Strangely, he had felt neither hunger nor thirst on the journey, just an overpowering need to keep searching.

A few things had begun nagging at him, though, like the buzz of a fireflyer in his ear. The landscape never changed. He could swear he had seen the same rock formations time and time again, as if he were running in a circle. And Brutaka – not even he could endure what he seemed to be for weeks at a time. His screams should have died out long ago.

Then the crack appeared in the sky. It was only a small one, but bright light flowed through it from somewhere outside. That, too, made no sense. No sooner had Axonn said that to himself than the crack got bigger. Then more cracks started to appear, in the sky, in the ground, all around him.

This can’t be happening, Axonn thought. This can’t be real. This… isn’t real!

The next instant, Axonn was sitting on a beach. Water lapped against the shore in front of him, and behind, a gentle breeze stirred jungle trees. Flying Rahi circled in the sky overhead, now and then diving down to steal a fish from the sea. There was no sign of the endless waste he had been in before.

Of course not, he thought. I was never there. With his powers increased by being in Mata Nui’s body, Makuta can pierce even an Order member’s mental shields. My days and nights of running, Brutaka’s screams… all an illusion.

Axonn rose. He still had his armor, his mask, and his axe. He wondered if perhaps his mask, which could see through any deception, had been the difference between his escaping Makuta’s trap and being lost in the fantasy forever.

He didn’t know for certain where he was, nor did he care at the moment. All that mattered to him was where Makuta was, and he knew that answer. Somehow, some way, he was going to make it back to Metru Nui – and Makuta was going to pay for what he had done, even if it cost Axonn his life.

Far away from Axonn’s island, Tahu and his ragtag team were facing the potential end of their own lives. The group was confronted by a squad of heavily armed Exo-Toa, prepared to imprison or execute them. Tahu doubted the machines much cared which option they pursued.

He calculated the odds. Lariska, Krahka, Johmak and he could take out four Exo-Toa, maybe even eight if they caught a break. That would still leave four of the machines free to cut them down. In the past, he would have just accepted the situation and vowed to go down fighting. Now he was trying to use his
brain as much as his brawn, because the fight against Makuta could not afford to lose warriors to needless sacrifice.

He had settled on a plan – a mock surrender, followed by an escape attempt before they reached Metru Nui – when the ground began to shake. At first, he thought it was another attack by Makuta. Then the tremors became more violent and some of the Exo-Toa lost their footing. They didn’t have to bother getting up again. A chasm opened up directly under the machines and swallowed them up. Tahu ran to the edge of it, and saw nothing but darkness. At least, at first…

“Brother! Can you give me a hand?”

Tahu smiled. Onua Nuva was clinging to the rocky wall of the crevice. The Exo-Toa had not been so lucky, having tumbled down into what looked like a bottomless pit.

The Toa of Fire helped the Toa of Earth back to solid ground. He nodded toward the chasm, saying, “You still do good work.”

“I have been keeping in practice,” said Onua.

“We were just about to head south to find those Order agents you mentioned, the ones looking for weapons,” said Tahu.

Onua shook his head. “Don’t bother. Rahkshi got them, and the supplies.”

“Then we pick another direction,” said Tahu, “and we keep moving.”

Lariska walked over, sheathing her dagger. “So. Any bright ideas? There are more Exo-Toa where those came from.”

“And more Rahkshi,” agreed Tahu.

“Onu-Matoran,” said Onua, smiling.

“What are you talking about?” asked Lariska.

“Onu-Matoran live underground most of their lives,” explained the Toa of Earth. “The first time they come to the surface, the bright light overwhelms them. Most are blinded for a short time, until they get used to the environment. That’s how Teridax is now. He’s not used to all this new power yet, or trying to see in every direction at once. He needs other eyes and ears within the universe – the Rahkshi and the Exo-Toa.”

“What do you have in mind, and does it include explosions?” asked Tahu, hoping it did.

“Oh, it does,” Onua assured him. “A Toa of Earth learns to - excuse the pun - keep his ear to the ground. Makuta may be all-powerful, but he still needs to make Rahkshi the same old way – by making worm-like kraata who then turn into his warriors. And I think I may know just where those kraata are coming into being.”

“We strike there,” said Tahu. “Maybe we can cut off his supply of Rahkshi, temporarily. It’s a start.”

“How far?” asked Lariska.

“We’ll get there,” said Onua. “Makuta picked the one source of energized protodermis the Order of Mata Nui wouldn’t think to try and shut down – the one on their own island of Daxia. He leveled their fortress and seized control of the island. That’s where we have to go.”

“Guarded?” asked the Dark Hunter.

“Like it’s the treasure of the Great Beings,” said Onua. “Bring an extra dagger.”

* * *

Lewa’s mission was simple and straightforward. With the help of information from a surviving Order agent, he was headed for the island of Artakha. Somehow, the powerful ruler of that land had to be convinced to do more than sit back and make armor and weapons. They needed him in the fight.

As he came within sight of the island, he could tell he was already too late. Shattered Rahkshi littered the coastline, but more were advancing on the fortress. Artakha’s Matoran workers were fighting a desperate holding action, but it was a lost cause. The only hope was to somehow pull off a rescue of Artakha himself before Makuta’s forces overcame him.
Lewa was about to launch himself into a power dive when a voice echoed in his head. Do not, it said. It is too late. But there is another who can aid you, if I have fallen. Go to him. Persuade him to join your fight.

“Who are you talking about? And where do I find him?” said Lewa.

There is still time, said the voice of Artakha. I will send you to him. The rest is up to you.

The world spun, and then Lewa was no longer in the air above Artakha. Instead, he was standing in a dark cave, facing a blank wall of stone. He could feel something behind him, the way one could feel a bog leech crawling up the back of the neck. Lewa wanted to turn around and see what was there — and at the same time, he knew he really didn't want to see.

Turn. This voice was also in Lewa’s mind only, but it had none of the comfort and assurance that could be found in Artakha’s. If it was possible for a voice to have a scent, this one reeked of death and decay.

"Who are you? Where am I?" said Lewa, staying right where he was.

You are at the end of your journey ... the end of all journeys, Toa. And my name is Tren Krom.
Weeks ago...

Tuma sat in his chamber, brooding. The news brought back by Branar had been dire indeed. The baterra were closer than he had imagined they would be, and so his plans for Bara Magna had to be advanced. Already, he had moved up the date for the attack on Atero, and laid out ambitious plans to seize control of the other villages. If all went well, his troops would control all of Bara Magna before the baterra emerged from the Black Spike Mountains. But any organized resistance by the Glatorian and Agori would put his plans in jeopardy.

A rap came on the chamber door. One of his guards entered and said softly, “The one you called is here.”

Tuma nodded. The guard withdrew. A moment later, another figure entered the room, one who was not a Skrall. Tuma had been approached by this being some time ago, with an offer to provide useful information on the villages and their defenses as well as to act as a go-between for the Skrall and the Bone Hunters. This arrangement had so far proved profitable to both sides.

“You took a big chance sending me a summons,” the traitor said. “What if someone had stumbled on your message? Where would I be then?”

“That is not my concern,” growled Tuma. “Your safety is your responsibility. The welfare of my people is mine.”

The traitor looked around the chamber, then gestured toward the doorway that led to the fortified city. “Seems to me your people are doing just fine.”

Tuma rose to his full, imposing height. “We attack Atero tomorrow. Be prepared.”

“Tomorrow?” the traitor said, startled. “I thought you were going to wait for the end of the tournament.”

“Our plans have changed,” Tuma answered. The look in his eyes said he had no intention of explaining further.

“On their own, or did someone change them?” asked the traitor. “Let me guess… your neighbors to the north are coming to pay a visit.”

Now it was Tuma’s turn to be surprised. He stalked across the room, grabbed the traitor around the throat, and slammed that being into the wall. “What do you know of the baterra? Speak! Have you betrayed the Skrall to them, as you have betrayed your own people to us?”

“Urrrrrk,” croaked the traitor, as the Skrall’s hand cut off all air. Tuma abruptly let go. The traitor crumpled to the ground, hand massaging a painful throat.

“I know… a great deal… about a great many things,” the traitor said hoarsely. “But if you want the benefit of that knowledge… we are going to have to come to a new arrangement.”

Tuma’s mouth curled into a sneer. “Your naked greed ill becomes you.”

“I don’t work for free,” spat the traitor. “Not this kind of work, anyway. Now let’s see if we understand each other – you fled south like a pack of frightened rodents because the baterra were
decimating your people. Now they’re closing in on you again, so you’re in a big, fat hurry to seize the desert so you can buy some time and space. How am I doing so far?”

Tuma nodded, but said nothing.

“It’s an excellent plan… for old women,” the traitor said, with a harsh chuckle. “Run, until you can’t run anymore, and hope your enemy exhausts himself running after you. Tell me, Tuma – have you ever killed a baterra?”

“Of course,” said the Skrall leader. “How else do you think we learned they are machines, not living things?”

The traitor wandered to the back of the chamber, running a finger along the arm of Tuma’s throne. “I see. So you downed one by accident and saw it fizzle and spark… and then the baterra killed how many of yours? 100? 200?”

“Your point, sand worm,” hissed Tuma.

“My point, my point... oh, yes,” said the traitor, abruptly sitting down in Tuma’s grand chair. “My point is that I know how to kill the baterra, and you don’t. And I think that puts a new slant on things around here, doesn’t it?”

“You will tell me how to kill those… things,” Tuma said, his voice deathly quiet. “Or I will give you to the Spikit, as a snack. But you will not die, oh, no. We will keep you alive, patch you up, and when you are healed – we will give you to the Spikit again. And again. And again.”

“See, there’s only one problem, Tuma,” the traitor said, leaning forward in the chair and smiling broadly. “You don’t scare me. Sure, you can torture me, kill me… but what’s in my head stays there. Then it’s only a matter of time before the baterra come and finish you off.”

Tuma wanted to bellow in rage. He wanted to tear the traitor’s head off and mount it on a pole, for all to see. He wanted to storm the villages of Bara Magna, burn them to the ground, and slay the Agori the way the baterra had slain his people, little more than a year before. Had he been but a Skrall warrior, he would surely have done that. But he was more than that – he was the lone surviving Skrall leader left alive, and he had a responsibility to the empire.

“What is your price?” the Skrall said, slowly. “And be aware… you tread on dangerous ground. Push too far, and you may find I forget what is in the best interests of my people in favor of what would be most… satisfying… to myself.”

The traitor reclined on the throne. “No need to worry, Tuma. We both want what’s best for the Skrall and the rock tribe. Of course we do. And as of today, I no longer work for you. From now on… we’re partners.”

“Partners? In what?” asked Tuma.

“In the conquest of this pile of sand,” the traitor replied. “With my wits married to your warriors, we are going to carve Bara Magna up between us. Now you had better find a chair for yourself… we have a great deal of planning to do, don’t we?”

Now...

Tuma, leader of the Skrall, was feeling quite satisfied.

He had returned to the city of Roxtus following the sack of Tajun, confident that his plans were proceeding. With that village and its oasis in his hands, the Agori of Bara Magna had lost their primary water source. No doubt they would turn on each other now in a fight over what water remained in the wastelands, making them easy pickings for his Skrall warriors. In one swift stroke, he would control the desert.

To an outsider, it might have seemed a strange prize to covet. After all, what was there to Bara Magna? Nothing but scattered metallic shelters that towered hundreds of feet high, with Agori huddled inside them for protection against the wind and sand; deposits of exsidian metal and other semi-valuable minerals here and there; precious little food or water… on the face of it, nothing a conqueror like Tuma would want.
But the desert of Bara Magna offered one thing the Skrall desperately needed: space. No one other than the Skrall knew why they had first moved down from the north into the Black Spike Mountains. Their cities had been raided and destroyed by a race of warriors they had never encountered before, shapeshifters who struck from the shadows and then disappeared. All of the Skrall’s weapons and skill had proven of no use against this enemy. Finally, the Skrall were forced south, taking up residence in the long-abandoned city that became Roxtus.

Here, they were easily the most powerful tribe. But Tuma could not help looking behind. Would their enemies from the north follow them here? If so, how would the Skrall stop them? Fighting the shapeshifters in confined quarters would lead to a second disaster. The Skrall needed room to maneuver, vast tracts of open land they could force the foe to cross. Only then would they have a fighting chance to survive.

Tuma could have simply warned the Agori of Bara Magna of what the Skrall had encountered and made some mutual defense agreement with the other villages. But that was not the Skrall way of doing things. No, instead he plotted, manipulated, and steadily weakened the villages until he was sure they could not stand against his army. Then the Skrall struck at the village of Atero, destroying it, and now Tajun had fallen as well. Complete surrender by the Agori would follow any day now.

Then Tuma would rule not just a city, but an empire… and it would be an empire he would keep, no matter who might dare to attack it.

A pair of Bone Hunters stood guard amid the ruins of Tajun. They were not happy. Their role in life was to ride, hunt, rob, and kill. It was the nature of their people to take from those who were weaker. Bone Hunters saw themselves as akin to the cruel wind that blew out of the Black Spike Mountains, raising sandstorms that blinded and killed those foolish enough to be caught out in the desert. Through their hunts, they eliminated those Glatorian and Agori who were not fit to survive.

That had changed since the alliance with the Skrall. Now they had to take orders from Tuma and his lieutenants, even if doing so meant standing around and watching over a pile of ashes.

As it turned out, the Bone Hunters were right: They were not made for guard duty. If they had been, they might have heard Ackar before he sprang up behind them and knocked their heads together. Instead, both slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Kiina appeared behind Ackar. “You have all the fun,” she chided him. “I get the next two.”

Ackar didn’t smile. “Let’s move. We need to warn the villages about the Skrall and Bone Hunters uniting.”

Kiina nodded. “And that we have a traitor on the inside.”

Mata Nui and Berix emerged from the cave, supporting Gresh between them. The young Glatorian had his arm in a makeshift sling of vine.

“How are you holding up?” Mata Nui asked Gresh.

“I’m fine,” said the wounded Glatorian. “You don’t need to baby me. But I could use a new weapon. The Skrall shredded my shield.”

Ackar and Kiina both looked at their own weapons, each heavily damaged by the recent battle with the Bone Hunters. “Get in line,” said Kiina.

Berix reached for Kiina’s trident. “I might be able to—”

Kiina yanked it away. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Wait,” said Ackar. He turned to Mata Nui. “What you did with the Vorox stinger, and Click. Could it work with my sword and her trident?”

Mata Nui reached up and touched the metal surface of his mask. “I don’t know. This mask… gave me new life. But I still don’t completely understand its power. I am certain it only works on things that are, or were, alive… like the stinger.”

“No problem,” said Berix. “Most Glatorian weapons have bone or claw cores.”

“No, collected a few, have you?” said Kiina.

Mata Nui took Ackar’s sword in hand. “It’s worth a try, anyway.”
The others watched as he raised the sword to his brow. “Together… as one mind,” Mata Nui said, so softly they could barely hear him. Then the sword began to glow, its substance shifting into a larger, more formidable version of its old shape.

When the process was done, Mata Nui handed the sword back to the amazed Ackar. The Glatorian hefted it, testing the balance of the weapon, and admiring the quality of the blade. Suddenly, the sword glowed red-hot in his hand. Flames leapt to life along the blade and shot from the tip, scorching a sand dune nearby.

“What in –” Ackar said.

Mata Nui was not surprised. “Of course,” he said. “Fire is your elemental power… it is the heart of your tribe. The Mask of Life has simply ignited it. You have become a true Toa.”

Ackar had no idea what the term meant, but from the way Mata Nui said, it was obviously meant as a compliment. He put his hand on Mata Nui’s shoulder and said simply, “Thank you, friend.”

Mata Nui looked down at the sand, and then back up at Ackar. “Strange. I have worn many titles, been called many things… but never ‘friend.’”

Kiina stepped forward, holding her trident out to Mata Nui. “Me next.”

Mata Nui took the weapon from her. “I will do what I can for you, but then I must continue my journey. I must find a way to free my people.”

“You’re not going to help us?” asked Gresh.

“No,” said Mata Nui. “I have my own battles to fight.”

“Mata Nui, trust me,” said Ackar. “I’ve seen you fight. You’re quick, you have some style, but… you’re not ready. Stay with us a while and I’ll teach you everything I know.”

Mata Nui considered the proposal. He did not know where his destiny would lead him, and still suspected it was a path he was meant to walk on his own. But this was a world of unknown dangers, and here he had already found a rare treasure: friends who would fight beside him. Having done that, could he really go back to being alone again?

He looked at Ackar, his answer written in his eyes. The veteran Glatorian smiled and clasped Mata Nui’s hand.

“Welcome to the team, other-worlder,” Kiina said. “Now let’s go to work.”

Ackar kept his word. As they traveled toward the village of Tesara, he began schooling Mata Nui in the art of combat.

Mata Nui stood in the desert with his new friend, Ackar. They were on a dangerous journey to the village of Tesara. A traveler had to be prepared.

Ackar was an experienced fighter for the village of Vulcanus. He had won many battles in his life. But Mata Nui did not seem to know how to protect himself. Ackar decided to teach Mata Nui how to fight.

Today was the first day of class. Ackar wanted to take Mata Nui by surprise to show him that a good fighter always had to be ready. Ackar whirled his sword over his head. Then he brought it down toward Mata Nui.

Mata Nui was shocked. He tried to block the blow with his blade but it was too late. Ackar knocked Mata Nui off his feet.

“Lesson one,” said Ackar. “You have to know what your opponent is going to do before he does it.”

Ackar helped Mata Nui get up. “How do I do that?” asked Mata Nui.

“You use your eyes and your brain,” Ackar answered, smiling. “Now let’s practice. Attack me with your sword.”

“But what if I hurt you?” asked Mata Nui.

Ackar laughed. “You will have to hit me first.”

Mata Nui swung his sword. Ackar blocked it easily. Mata Nui tried again… and again… and again. Ackar dodged or blocked his blow every time. Mata Nui started to wonder if Ackar was reading his mind!
When he was too tired to keep going, Mata Nui dropped his sword and sat down on the sand. “I need to rest,” he said. “How do you do it?”

Ackar pointed at a huge bird with a long, sharp beak that was flying over head. “What that bird for a minute.”

Mata Nui did as he was told. The bird didn’t do anything exciting. It just flew back and forth from its nest in the rocks.

“That bird is about to fly in a different direction,” said Ackar. “Is it going to fly to the right or to the left?”

“How should I know?” asked Mata Nui. He was starting to get frustrated. What did bird-watching have to do with fighting?

“It’s going to turn left,” Ackar said. He sounded absolutely sure of it.

Mata Nui was amazed to see that Ackar was correct. The bird suddenly turned to the left and flew toward the sun. “That’s incredible!” said Mata Nui. “You must know some fantastic trick!”

“We both watched the bird, but I watched closely,” Ackar said. “Just before it turned, one of its wings flutters a little. Its right wing flutters before it turns to the right. Its left wing flutters before it turns to the left. By watching its wings, I can guess which way it is going to turn next.”

Mata Nui smiled. “Okay. I am all set for a battle with birds, then.”

Ackar laughed. “Keep watching. You will figure it out.”

For the next hour, Mata Nui tried to predict how a creature would move. He paid attention to where it was looking before it jumped or flew or ran. He even listened to the noises it made. But nothing helped. Each time he made a guess, he was wrong.

“I will never be able to do this,” Mata Nui said. He was tired of this game.

“Come with me,” said Ackar.

He led Mata Nui across the sands and up into the rocks. When they were close to the top, Ackar suddenly stopped. He pointed to a strange creature up ahead.

“That’s a rock steed,” Ackar said. “It’s one of the most dangerous creatures in all of Bara Magna.”

It is certainly one of the strangest looking, Mata Nui thought. It stood on two legs and had two small arms. It had fierce jaws and a stinger tail like a scorpion. “It looks like a giant lizard,” said Mata Nui.

“Giant lizards are nicer,” said Ackar. “Get too close to a rock steed, and it will bite or sting you. But if you can tame one, you can ride it.”

“How do you tame a creature like that?” asked Mata Nui.

“You need to wind a fight against the animal,” Ackar answered. “That’s what I am going to do.”

Ackar walked toward the rock steed. When the rock steed saw him, it hissed and snapped its jaws. Ackar moved to his right. The rock steed watched him. Suddenly, the creature ran at Ackar. It tried to bite him, but missed. Ackar grabbed the rock steed around the neck.

Mata Nui ran to help. Before you could reach Ackar, the rock steed attacked with its stinger. Ackar was hit! He fell on the ground. The rock steed looked down at him, ready to strike again.

“Hey! Over here!” Mata Nui yelled at the rock steed.

The creature turned from Ackar. It looked at Mata Nui and gave an angry hiss.

“That’s right, big guy,” said Mata Nui. The rock steed came toward him. That was what Mata Nui wanted – for it to move away from Ackar.

The rock steed struck at Mata Nui with its stinger. Caught by surprise, Mata Nui barely dodged the attack. Then the creature came at him with snapping jaws. Mata Nui jumped back to avoid being bitten.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” said Mata Nui, “your sharp teeth or your bad breath.”

The creature tried to sting Mata Nui again. Mata Nui almost fell off the mountain trying to avoid its tail.

“Okay, this isn’t going well,” he said. Mata Nui looked at Ackar, but the fighter was still not moving. Mata Nui knew his friend might be badly hurt. He had to end this fight quickly so he could help Ackar.
The creature came to attack Mata Nui once more. This time, Mata Nui watched very carefully. He saw the rock steed’s right shoulder move a little bit. The next moment, the creature tried to his Mata Nui’s right side with its stinger.

“Now that’s interesting,” said Mata Nui.

He backed away from the creature. This time, the rock steed’s left shoulder moved. Then the stinger lashed out at Mata Nui’s left side. He was ready for it and batted it away with his sword.

“Okay, so if its right shoulder moves, it attacks to my right,” said Mata Nui. “And if its left shoulder moves, it attacks to my left. Got it.”

The rock steed came at him again. But this time, its stinger slapped against the ground. Then it lunged forward and tried to bite its enemy. Mata Nui was so taken by surprise that the rock steed almost got him.

“Stinger against the ground means a bit,” Mata Nui said to himself. “Now let’s see if I can use what I know.”

Mata Nui got ready to fight. The rock steed charged. But each time it attacked, Mata Nui blocked it. It tried to sting and bit him, but it could never get Mata Nui.

The rock steed was really angry now. Mata Nui felt more confident with every passing moment. He knew he was ready for anything the rock steed might do.

The creature came at him again. This time, Mata Nui smacked it with the flat of his sword. When the rock steed tried to sting him, Mata Nui struck it again. One step at a time, he drove the creature back. There was nothing it could do to stop him.

Finally, the rock steed gave up. With a loud hiss, it turned and ran away. Mata Nui watched it scramble down the slope and then run off into the desert. He had won.

Then Mata Nui heard an unexpected sound. Someone was clapping for him! Ackar was back on his feet and had not been hurt.

“I knew if you thought I was hurt, you would know what to do,” said Ackar. “So I pretended the rock steed had beaten me. You thought my life depended on you winning.”

“That was smart,” said Mata Nui. “And I’m happy to see you are not hurt. But if you ever do something like that again… I’ll push you right off this mountain!”

Ackar laughed. So did Mata Nui. Together, they made their way down the slope and back to the sands of Bara Magna.

* * *

From the pages of Mata Nui’s diary…

Entry 6:

Ackar is a most unusual being. Despite his own troubles – his fears that his fighting skills are eroding, his concern that he may be forced into retirement – he has offered to aid me in my quest to return home. He says he owes me for saving his life in the arena in Vulcanus, but I sense there is something more to it. Perhaps he wants… or needs… to feel he is part of something greater than himself.

He reminds me of someone I knew of in my own universe – a hero named Onua. He was tremendously strong, but his power was always tempered with wisdom. Like Ackar, he was a strategist… and also like the Glatorian who rides with me now, he was respected by all who knew him. I can tell from the way Kiina speaks with Ackar that both his word and his approval are things she values.

Ackar has pointed out, correctly, that I have a lot to learn about fighting. He has offered to teach me. Of course, his way of doing it is a bit strange. Rather than teach me maneuvers, he has me watching birds in flight. I am to follow their movements and try to predict if they will turn right or left. It is frustrating work and I do not seem to be very good at it.

Later, Ackar takes me up into the rocks and shows me a creature he calls a rock steed. It is a vicious, reptilian beast, and Ackar says it must be fought before it can be tamed. When he tries to do just that, the rock
steed strikes him down. I challenge it... and find that I can do what Ackar taught, predict its movements from the smallest signs. I fight and I drive it off, only to learn that Ackar was not so badly hurt – he simply believed that I would learn best if I believed his life depended on it. And he was right – seeing him in danger crystallized his lessons in my mind. I had no time to think about what I was to do, only time to do it.

A wise being, indeed.

* * *

As night fell on the second day of their journey, Berix was in the driver’s seat of Kiina’s chariot, with Gresh riding along beside. Kiina, Ackar, and Mata Nui walked.

“Unfair,” said Gresh. “I score this clawed-out new weapon, and Mata Nui tells me I’ve got awesome ‘Toa’ powers – whatever those are – but none of you will let me test them out.”

Kiina smiled. She had been after Gresh for a while to “lighten up.” For a young Glatorian, he had always been much too grim and serious. It seemed that he had taken her words to heart.

“You mean like this?” she said, laughing as she thrust her trident forward. Three jets of water shot from the tines of the weapon, striking a pile of boulders and blasting the rocks to bits.

Gresh raised his new shield with his good arm. “Come on... just a little test!”

“Patience is the first lesson in becoming a great Glatorian,” said Ackar.

“Oh, I think this is pretty great,” said Kiina, firing another blast of water from her trident.

Ackar stepped right in front of her water jet, fire sword raised. As the water struck his blade, it turned to steam.

“Guess it’s a standoff,” said Kiina.

A sudden blast of sand struck the cloud of steam, blowing it away. Kiina and Ackar turned to see Gresh hurling a mini-cyclone from his shield at the ground. The concentrated air was hurling the sand aloft with amazing force.

“Looks like I can blow you both away,” Gresh said, smiling.

Kiina’s expression brightened. “Better yet – why not combine our powers?”

“Enough,” said Ackar. “There’s more to winning a fight than fancy weapons. And let me tell you, Mata Nui isn’t the only one that could use a few tips. You’ve got raw talent, Gresh, and a lot of courage, but that will only take you so far. Kiina, I saw your last match with Vastus in Tesara. You let your guard down and he almost took your head off.”

Berix burst out laughing. “Ha, Kiina, he got you there!”

Kiina whipped around and smacked Berix out of the driver’s seat with her trident. Gresh leaned forward to grab the wheel and keep the vehicle from veering off course. Ackar stepped forward and grabbed the shaft of Kiina’s weapon.

“Stop it, both of you. Pay attention and you might actually learn something – like this!” Ackar said, as he turned on Mata Nui and slashed downward with his fire blade. Mata Nui barely blocked the blow with his own sword, but the impact knocked him backward into Kiina. Click flew from his shoulder and landed on Kiina’s arm.

“See?” said Ackar. “You have to learn to read your opponent’s next move, before it happens.”

Kiina wasn’t paying attention. She was eyeing the beetle on her arm warily. “Watch it,” she said to Click. “I’m warning you. I’ll bite back.”

Click opened his pincers as if to snap at her, but before it could do so, Ackar had grabbed it by the shell. The Glatorian lifted the beetle into the air.

“Study your opponent’s fighting style,” Ackar continued. “Find their weakness, then use it against them... if you can.”

Click snapped his pincers together angrily. Ackar tossed the insect back to Mata Nui. The beetle settled contentedly on his shoulder once more.
Dawn brought a return of stifling heat to the desert. The group had been spending the days under whatever shelter they could find, but this morning there was no need to hunt for a cave or a rock outcropping. As they came over a rise, they could see two villages in a large patch of jungle. Great trees dominated the landscape, with vines trailing everywhere. A Glatorian arena sat in the center, separating the villages, but it did not look at all like the one Mata Nui had seen in Vulcanus. This arena was constructed of wood and vines, which formed a latticework roof over the fighting area.

“Where are we?” asked Mata Nui.

“The twin villages of Tesara,” said Ackar. “Gresh’s home.”

The sound of cheering drifted up from the villages. “Sounds like a match is about to start,” said Gresh. “Vastus must be fighting today.”

“Not if I can help it,” said Ackar.

The others looked at him, surprised both by his words and the fierce tone in which he said them. The Vulcanus Glatorian ignored them and started marching toward Tesara. After a moment, the rest of the group followed along behind.

In the arena, Metus sat with Raanu and other Agori in the stands, watching as the Glatorian were announced. The main match for the day pitted the very experienced Vastus of Tesara against the reigning champion of all Glatorian, Tarix of Tajun. Had the great tournament in Atero taken place this year, it was possible Tarix would have been robbed of his title by someone else, most likely a Skrall Glatorian. But the Skrall attack on the arena had brought the tournament to a violent halt, so Tarix remained the official champion.

Following the main match, there would be training matches between some of the newer Glatorian Metus was managing. That had brought Raanu here, in hopes of finding a new fighter for Vulcanus.

Ackar and his team had reached the outskirts of the village by now. Berix lagged behind, glancing uneasily from side to side.

“Why so jumpy, thief?” asked Kiina. “Rip someone off around here? Or just looking for a Skrall to tell our plans to?”

“I’m not a traitor or a thief,” Berix answered. Then he added nervously, “But I have done a little… collecting… around here, so best to lie low.” His eyes chanced upon an axe hanging from a nearby doorway and he reached for it, saying, “Oh, I like that…”

Kiina slapped his hand away. “This is not the time, Berix. Got that?”

Metus spotted Ackar, Gresh, and Mata Nui approaching. He rose from his seat, smiling broadly. “What a surprise! Welcome, friends. Isn’t this great? A sold-out crowd. I knew pitting Vastus against Tarix would pack them in. Mata Nui, I hope your appearance means you’re ready to—”

Ackar cut him off. “It’s over.”

“Over?” said Raanu, confused. He turned to Metus. “What is he talking about?”

Metus shrugged. “Who knows, with him? He might still be upset about that match with Strakk… or maybe he’s been out in the sun too long. I’ll talk to him.”

The fight promoter walked over to Ackar. “Uh, listen, Ackar. With all due respect, you don’t have any authority here – this is a match between Tesara and Tajun. And you’re too late anyway.”

Metus gestured toward the arena. The match had indeed already started. Tarix had fired his Thornax launcher, but Vastus dove aside before the explosive sphere could strike him. It slammed into the ground and went off, sending a spray of shattered rock into the air. He hit the ground and rolled, ending up on his feet and firing his own launcher at Tarix.

The Tajun Glatorian saw the Thornax coming at him, but too late to move aside. He brought his weapon up to block it, but the explosive impact still sent him reeling.

Ackar had seen more than enough. He stepped up to the railing, even as Metus tried to block his way. “Wait, what are you doing?” asked Metus, his tone a little frantic. Ackar might have already seen his best days, but Metus knew he was still a Glatorian that others listened to. If he spoke out against the Glatorian system, who knew what might happen?
Gresh, Kiina, and Mata Nui moved to Ackar’s side, pushing Metus out of the way. Ackar leaned over the rail, his eyes scanning the crowd of Agori and the two Glatorian fighters.

“Listen to me,” Ackar said. “All fighting between Glatorian must stop. Our real enemy is out there, in the desert.”

The response of the villagers was shouts of “Sit down, you fool!” and “Mind your own business!” As serious as Glatorian matches were, they were also one of the few sources of entertainment for Agori. Beings who spent each day just trying to scrape together enough resources to survive needed whatever distraction they could get and weren’t in any hurry to give it up.

It was the voice of Tarix that silenced the shouting. “Quiet,” said the Glatorian. “Let him talk.” Vastus moved to stand beside Tarix. “I agree. Speak, Ackar.”

“Thank you, Vastus. And you, Tarix,” Ackar said. “Now listen to me, everyone. The Bone Hunters and the Skrall have formed an alliance.”

This provoked a chorus of disbelief from the crowd. Some threw their hands up into the air and turned away. One Agori could be heard saying, “Why are they making us listen to some old loser’s fantasies? Get on with the match!”

“It’s true,” said Kiina. “Tarix… our village has been destroyed. I saw it with my own eyes. We arrived too late to help. The Agori who were there escaped, probably out into the sands, but… it’s gone… all of it.”

“Impossible…” Tarix whispered. “I should have been there. I told Metus this match was a bad idea, especially when you would be in Vulcanus, but Tajun needs the food that was at stake here. And now you say there is no more Tajun.”

“Kiina speaks the truth,” said Gresh. “Tajun is gone, and it’s just the beginning.”

“We must unite,” said Ackar. “Time is running out.”

As soon as he said it, Ackar knew he had made a mistake. The Agori – before simply angry and sceptical – had now become a fearful mob. Who could blame them? Many of them had seen firsthand the aftermath of Bone Hunter raids and the Skrall destruction of Atero. They had witnessed Glatorian running before the might of the Skrall army. Why should they believe Glatorian could save them now that their two worst enemies had joined together?

Raanu chose that moment to step forward. He held his hands out to the crowd, gesturing for them to sit down and be silent. “Calm yourselves,” he said. “Your village leaders will know what is best for you. We will do as we always have.”

Mata Nui could no longer stay quiet. He knew all too well the dangers of underestimating an enemy or expecting that the old methods of dealing with a problem would always work. It was thinking like that which had cost him a universe.

“You old ways will not work,” Mata Nui told the crowd. “You are facing a unified army now. I have seen this before. They will not stop until your people are destroyed.”

“This is crazy,” said Metus. “It can’t be as bad as all that. Maybe… maybe the Skrall and the Bone Hunters just happened to hit Tajun at the same time. There might not be any alliance at all. We could be getting all upset over nothing.”

“Nothing?” said Tarix, outraged. “You call the destruction of my village nothing? Be glad you are not a Glatorian, Metus, or I would have your head for that.”

Raanu turned to Ackar, his voice a harsh whisper: “We have no weapons, Ackar, not any that can stop the Skrall. You know that. How can we fight back?”

“Enough!” yelled Ackar, as he thrust his weapon up into the air. Fire erupted from the blade, licking high into the morning sky. As one, the crowd gasped and started to back away.

“Yeah, we kinda thought that would get your attention,” said Kiina.

“Toa Mata Nui has offered to help us build up our defenses,” said Ackar. “With him at our side, I know we can prevail.”

Raanu snorted in disbelief. “‘Toa’ Mata Nui? Why should we trust this stranger?”
The crowd echoed Raanu’s sentiments. Mata Nui understood how they felt. After all, he was not one of them. From what he had seen, the Agori lived a hard life. Most likely, trust would not come easily to them, even in the best of circumstances. And this was far from the best of circumstances.

“Tarix, give Mata Nui your weapon,” Ackar said.

The Tajun Glatorian stepped forward reluctantly and handed Mata Nui his crude sword. “What is he going to do with it?”

“Show you the power you already possess,” said Ackar.

Mata Nui brought Tarix’s weapon to his brow. As soon as the weapon touched the Mask of Life, it transformed, becoming a far more ornate and powerful looking sword. Tarix and the Agori looked on, stunned.

“I don’t believe it,” Tarix said, as Mata Nui handed him his new weapon. “It’s… incredible.”

Ackar turned back to the crowd of villagers. “What more proof do you need? The time to unite the villages has come. If we stand together, we will win.”

The Agori burst into cheers, all but Raanu. He still looked unconvinced. Gesturing once more for silence and receiving it, he looked up at Ackar. “If we agree, do you Glatorian and this Mata Nui swear to stay and protect us?”

Kiina, Gresh, Ackar, Tarix, and Vastus nodded their assent. Then all eyes turned to Mata Nui. “You do not have to ask for the allegiance of the Glatorian. You know where our loyalties lie,” Ackar replied to Raanu. Then he turned to Mata Nui. “But we cannot speak for you. I will not pretend I have anything left to teach you. But I’ll ask: as friend… will you help us?”

Mata Nui reached out and locked arms with Ackar. “Then, as a friend… I will stay.”

The five Glatorian formed a circle around their new ally. Raising their weapons in the air, filled with the hope of victory, they cried out, “We fight together!”

Their shout echoed across the desert, ringing from the mountains and riding the wind across the dunes. Somewhere, a Bone Hunter’s rock steed cocked its head, wondering at the noise. The beast pawed the ground, every sense alert, eager to charge. For though it could not understand the words the Glatorian had spoken, it knew well the meaning of the tone.

It was a battle cry.
100,000 years ago…

Two beings hurried through the darkened corridor. They walked softly, assuredly, their moves belying their extreme power.

“We should have predicted this,” one said, indicating the roar of carnage and combat that seemed to be coming from all around them.

“Our job is to protect and provide, not to predict,” the other one replied. “The Element Lords did exactly what they were supposed to: govern the land. Their arrogance and territorial nature were entirely unforeseeable.”

“Their burden was ours to bear, and you know it,” his companion retorted. “We cowered from our responsibility, our destiny, and this is the result.”

Silence filled the tunnel, oppressively stifling all; the war itself could have stopped.

“Our duty is to protect this planet, and that is what we’re doing… however we can.”

The next question was quiet, almost hesitant. “Then you think Heremus is right?”

The second let out a short bark of laughter, a sound that seemed like it would perforate every inch of the tunnel, but reached only the ears of his companion. “No. Let Heremus tinker with his machines. I believe Angonce; the great spirit of this planet will live on.”

The two Great Beings rushed through the corridor to their destination, their minds on the task ahead, the war outside nearly forgotten.

* * *

Tarix parried blow after blow from a Jungle Tribe soldier. It had been a simple plan, he reflected. The Ice Tribe’s finest battalion, led by the famed commander Certavus, had recently defeated several Sand Tribe units that had been preparing to attack them and steal the mysterious silver liquid that everyone coveted. The campaign had taken them across the plains of the desertic Bara Magna region, which meant a long trek home. Expecting to be hailed like heroes, the Ice Tribe band was ambushed by a small Skrall platoon, and demolished. Excellent leader as he was, Certavus managed to save the majority of his warriors from death, but was forced to hide in the dunes to avoid any major confrontations. Despite their best efforts, the news was leaked almost immediately, and the Ice Tribe was forced to triple their security. Tarix, regarded as one of the most elite warriors of the Water Tribe, was assigned to the unit in charge of taking advantage of the Ice Tribe’s absence of power. Not that Tarix was happy about that.

_It just didn’t make sense_, he thought, driving his blades into the joints of two soldiers, crippling them. _Everybody else will be doing the exact same thing. Why not wait until the other tribes have had a shot? They fail, we take advantage of the weakened defenses, they win, we ambush them. It’s the most pragmatic solution, and one that will result in the fewest lives lost._
He could have been preaching to the ocean itself. Which, in a sense, he was. The Element Lord of Water, leader of Tarix’s tribe, believed in absolute domination.

“Muster up all your strength, and overwhelm in a single force,” Tarix was told, in lilting tones. “If you fail, simply retreat, regroup, and attack again. That is the flow of combat.”


A small nick in between his armor told him it was time to turn around. Standing there was Vastus, field commander of the Jungle Tribe. Sitting there in his hands was a very nasty looking scythe. Tarix felt his left arm numb almost immediately.

“Venom,” Tarix spat. Soon the entire side of his body was senseless, and he sank to the ground.

“Is this really how it ends, Tarix?” Vastus said wearily. “A shuddering, crumpled heap on the ground? I know you. You’re better than this.”

Tarix grinned, a lopsided sneer made almost sinister by the unresponsive side of his face. “Better than you, certainly. What happened to the Vastus I know? You didn’t even use all of your venom. The war getting hard on you?”

A small shadow passed over Vastus’ face. Tarix didn’t catch the microexpression, as he was too busy being smacked in the face by the flat of the scythe. “You’re in no position to argue, Tarix. I hold your life in my hands now. What’s to stop me from taking it?”

Tarix attempted to muster up a laugh, but it only emerged as a gurgle. “You would have killed me long ago if I didn’t have something you need.” His expression softened a little. “Enemies as we are, please. I have something that you need, and the last thing you want to do is kill me. We can help each other.” He raised his one functioning arm in the air, as a show of peace. Vastus lowered his scythe almost eagerly. He offered a hand to Tarix to help him up.

“So…” Tarix mumbled, propped up by the Jungle commander. “How about an antidote?”

Vastus laughed. “What use would the venom be if I had an antidote?”

“A secret tunnel?” Vastus asked.

“Yes,” Tarix replied. “Rumor has it that the Element Lord of Ice initiated the construction of several of these tunnels. Apparently, the idea was to expand the entire territory, and the underground tunnels were the first step. They ended up abandoning construction after one of the tunnels collapsed.”

Vastus walked to the mouth of the cave, and peered out. A larger cavern greeted his eyes, lit with hastily constructed fires. After they had agreed to a truce, the two commanders had established a single base inside the large cavern. The Water Tribe had originally attempted to camp in there, before they discovered that the Jungle Tribe was lying in wait. The fighting had spilled out into the surrounding area, and both sides were fairly well matched. Vastus saw several soldiers from each tribe mingling in the others camp. Despite all the atrocities, all the suffering, their warriors were willing to put that aside and interact. A small smile graced the face of the Jungle Tribe leader, if only for a moment.

“What makes you think there is still a tunnel remaining?” he said, returning to their campfire.

Tarix continued. “A few weeks back, we took in a small unit of Ice Agori. They said they had been survivors of the tunnel cave-in, and we nursed them back to health. The Ice Tribe negotiated their release, but they were grateful; they told us about the tunnels.”

Vastus nodded, impressed. “Where is the tunnel?”

“Several days march from here,” Tarix said, pulling out a map. “The path we will take follows the edge of the Great Forest, and through several glaciers. The tunnel entry was hidden, but there is a marker there; we’ll know it when we see it. We have to hurry though. We delayed the release of the Agori in order to get a chance to… act on the information, and mobilize the troops.”

A laugh emerged from Vastus. “You sound bitter. What’s the matter? It’s a sound enough plan.”

Frowning, Tarix muttered. “That’s what bothers me.”

Still chuckling, Vastus continued. “And when is the optimal time to strike? Assuming that they inform their leader right away, there’s a very small window. When should we head out?”

It was Tarix’s turn to laugh.
“Yesterday.”

A small bird, native to the ice region, alighted upon a rock. A moment later, the bird spread its wings and took off, feet still smoldering where the rock had burned them. The bird was understandably confused; this was the land of ice. Ice meant cold. So how could a rock like that burn with such intensity? The bird spotted prey, and was soon engaged in the hunt. The rock was the furthest thing from its mind. In Tarix’s mind, however, the rock was very present.

“It’s an invention of the Fire Tribe,” he explained. “Similar to the darkfire torch, it was designed to give off heat without alerting enemies to its presence. The heat is very self-contained, and rarely affects the surroundings. You have to touch it to know what it is. The Ice Tribe managed to acquire several of them, and were trying to reverse engineer the process.”

Vastus gave a non-committal nod of the head, only half listening. Tarix was worried about him. They had been traveling through the Great Forest the previous day when a Fire Tribe squadron had passed by them, led by Malum. The two tribes had managed to hide themselves before being spotted, but one of Vastus’ warriors was rather clumsy, and made a small noise when perching in a tree. Malum could not discover the source of the noise, but it didn’t matter to him. He ordered his troops to burn the forest down, and watched the trees blaze. Vastus lost three soldiers in the inferno, and the destruction of the plant life was almost too much for him to bear. He had been subdued ever since.

Before Tarix could say anything more, he noticed the glacial formations.

“Halt!” he cried. The two armies stopped, and began looking around.

“Is this the place, Tarix?” Vastus asked.

“Yes,” Tarix replied. “The heat rock is around here somewhere. The entrance to the tunnel is located directly beneath it.”

Vastus nodded. “Fan out!” he shouted to his troops. The Jungle army sprang to life, and began searching the area, hopping over snow banks and swiftly climbing the cliff walls.

“Wait,” Tarix said. “Do they know what –” he stopped. Voices were coming from the woods behind them. Loud voices. Tarix motioned for his troops to take cover, and scrambled up a hill with Vastus. The two found a cropping of rocks, and took shelter behind it.

From the woods emerged the Fire Tribe squadron they had eluded earlier, Malum in the lead. One of the soldiers approached his captain. “Are we sure they went this way, sir?”

“Oh, they went this way,” Malum assured his warrior. “I heard them. I can smell them.”

Behind their shelter, Tarix turned to Vastus. “What do we –” Vastus silenced him. He then held up one of Tarix’s blades. Surprised, Tarix reached behind him, and only found his other blade. Vastus backed up, to a small space in the rock. He raised the blade. Suddenly, Tarix knew everything that was about to happen.

“Don’t do it,” Tarix said. “Please.”

A sad smile appeared on Vastus’ face. “Sorry,” he said. Then he brought the blade down. A powerful stream of water whipped out, striking Malum and a soldier. Vastus sliced the base of the rock, sending it tumbling down the hill. He tossed the blade back to Tarix, and then he was gone.

Malum sprung back to his feet, sword at the ready. He saw Tarix standing there, blade in his hands. His fingers tightened around the hilt of his weapon. “Water…” he growled.

No other choice remained to Tarix. He understood what Vastus had done. Malum was by no means an experienced leader, but he had assembled warriors with enough brute force to crush anything in their way. Even with their combined forces, they would have been hard pressed to claim a total victory. Any way the battle went, they would have been in no shape to continue an assault on the Ice Tribe. Vastus had acted out of self-preservation, and Tarix was left to clean up the mess.

“CHARGE!” Tarix roared. Azure warriors of all shapes and sizes emerged from their hiding spots. Taken unawares, many Fire Tribe warriors were struck down, and hastily retreated a distance. Tarix leapt from his perch and threw himself at Malum, grappling with the Fire warrior. The fighters brutally hacked at each other, neither landing a damaging blow. Tarix spared a look around. Thanks to the surprise assault,
they were gaining the upper hand. The Fire Tribe were attempting to gain ground, but his soldiers were not letting up. Well timed elemental blasts and Thornax shots were keeping them from breaking the ranks. If they could continue to hold the formation, they could press the Fire squad into a retreat; retreat would mean they could continue their mission. Could it work? Tarix parried a blow by Malum’s blade, and triggered his own weapon, shooting an overripe Thornax into the ground in front of them. The explosion knocked them back several paces.

“Give up, Malum?” Tarix called into the haze and smoke.

“I would rather die on my own sword than forfeit to yours. Surrender is not an option,” Malum responded. He meant the words; chances were he would live long enough to see them come true. His army was strong, but undisciplined. Tarix’s army was tightly knit. They had the upper hand.

“Bravado is impressive Malum, but it doesn’t provide an edge in combat. Maybe –” he stopped short. Arrows embedded in the shoulder tend to have that effect.

Tarix couldn’t really grasp the situation at first. He reached up, and touched the arrow. It looked real. It felt real. The pain hadn’t come yet, but it would. Probably. Should he pull it out? No, no, that would be even worse. What about the source? Yes, the source would be a good place to look. Avoiding future pain is vital in self-preservation. He looked up.

Certavus looked down. He met the eyes of the Water Tribe commander, and smiled. He handed the bow back to a dumbfounded soldier, who took it without a word. Rumors of Certavus’ natural skills in battle were plentiful, but seeing it in action was a different thing entirely. Several soldiers behind the first one snickered. This one was new to the squadron, and had yet to see the commander display all his skills, and weapons proficiency. A simple shot from a bow had left him speechless.

“A-amazing shot, sir. Why didn’t you go for a more damaging blow?”

“The idea is not to kill, but to avoid being killed,” Certavus replied. “If we can force them to retreat, it conserves the energy. We can’t afford a full battle. Not yet. It took us a long time to reach here; we need to keep moving.”

Down below, Malum had also tracked the arrow to its source. Certavus. The legendary warrior, master of every known weapon. Malum raised his hand. His warriors stopped their combat instantly. Not out of discipline; out of shock. It was an order of retreat, something the fighters had never seen. Malum backed away from Tarix, never taking his eyes off of the commander.

“Good luck,” he whispered. He turned and fled into the trees, his army following suit. Tarix gingerly tested his arm. The pain had come, but it was bearable; leaving the arrow in was the annoying part, but removing it would do more harm than good. The looming threat of the Ice Tribe unit was also a problem.

One of his soldiers ran up. “Commander Tarix, what do we do? The Fire Tribe unit is gone, but so are the Jungle Tribe members. Should we keep going?” Tarix looked up again. Certavus and his unit were gone. Would they stay gone?

“No…” Tarix said. “No, we don’t have enough power. Without Vastus and his squad, we couldn’t succeed. We need to retreat. Pass the order; we’re leaving. Go.”

The soldier ran off to spread the word. The Water Tribe began filtering out, and eventually vacated the area.

As he later found out, Vastus had already planned to escape. He had reasoned that the tunnels were too risky of a plan to work, and outlined their retreat ahead of time, and at the right moment, they abandoned their Water allies. Tarix was officially rebuked for his failure to succeed in the mission, but it did no lasting damage to his career. He couldn’t even be sure the tunnels really existed. No other intelligence report gathered had indicated the presence of them. The Agori they released could have simply lied. Not that it really mattered. Their world shattered several weeks later, and such matters seemed trivial. Had the tunnels actually existed, they would have collapsed during the disaster. Tarix and Certavus, along with several others, willingly put aside their differences and created a new social construct, to avoid any more fighting. The avarice of the Element Lords had literally ripped their planet apart, but they could rebuild. They had to. They would.
Weeks ago…

Tuma and Stronius rode north over mountain trails long unused. It had been along this very route one year before that the Skrall had fled from their last fortress. The vicious attacks of the baterra had driven them south through the Black Spikes to the borders of Bara Magna’s great desert. Now two of their number were going back.

“This is madness,” Stronius said. “You realize that.”

No one else in the Skrall legions would have dared speak to Tuma like that. But Stronius was an elite warrior known for saying whatever was on his mind. His services to the Skrall led Tuma to be a bit more tolerant of his outbursts than he would have been otherwise.

“Then turn back,” Tuma said calmly. “I did not order you to accompany me.”

“I wasn’t going to let you ride up here on your own,” Stronius replied. He turned from Tuma to look at the path ahead. “I have a duty to protect the life of my leader. And your life is doubly at risk here.”

“Baterra and…?”

Stronius shot Tuma an annoyed look. “Baterra pale beside those you would visit, and you know it.”

“We share a common enemy,” Tuma said. “They will be… reasonable.”

“We abandoned them to that enemy,” Stronius snapped. “They will be merciless.”

The two rode for most of two nights and a day. They ran into no baterra, so far as they knew. If the rocks or the trees were their enemies in another shape, well, those enemies chose not to attack. Now and then, they paused at the sight of Skrall armor littering the path where one of their warriors had perished during the long retreat.

Dawn was still a few hours away when they veered sharply eastward. All of the Skrall fortresses in this region had been destroyed by the baterra long ago. Logically, no one here should have survived the last year. But logic had nothing to do with who Tuma was seeking.

Stronius was the first to feel it – an electricity in the air, an oppressive feeling that seemed to slow all movement. His mind felt dull, his body sluggish. He turned to shout a warning to Tuma and it felt like it took an hour to perform that simple action.

Tuma felt less of an effect than Stronius, being a little further away. He spotted a robed figure atop some nearby rocks, wielding a wooden staff. “You!” he shouted. “Tell her I want an audience!”

The robed figure’s head tilted, as if puzzled by the request, then the mysterious being disappeared among the rocks. A few minutes later, Stronius felt his head clear. He glanced at Tuma, who nodded once.

Side by side, the two rode on.

The sky darkened. From every side of the pass, more robed figures peered down at the two Skrall. Their faces were hidden, but Tuma could feel their hatred just the same.

Up ahead, a half dozen more figures blocked the way. Beyond them, a seventh sat on a crude throne carved from part of the mountain itself. “Dismount,” she ordered, in a voice that was surprisingly
soft. Tuma tensed. He had not realized this one had ascended to leadership. His hope of surviving this journey dwindled considerably.

He and Stronius both got off their rock steeds. The seated figure then said, “The weapons of warriors are not allowed here.”

“No,” Stronius replied immediately. “An elite warrior never surrenders his weapon.”

The robed figure shrugged. “Then he can surrender his life instead.”

Pain exploded in Stronius’ head. It was worse than anything he had ever felt, worse than anything a blade or a Thornax could do. Yet no weapon had ever touched his body. The pain tore a scream from him as he dropped to his knees.

“Stop!” Tuma shouted. “We came here in peace!”

A chorus of whispers came from every side. The sound chilled Tuma as he realized what he was hearing was laughter.

“You came here out of fear,” the seated figure said. “Just as you abandoned us out of fear… just as your kind banished us millennia ago, out of fear. You stink of it, Tuma, despite your mighty legions, despite your conquests. You are a warrior made of straw.”

Tuma took three steps forward, ready to ram his sword into his tormentor. That was as far as he got before the pain hit him too. But he did not leave his feet, not even as the agony increased beyond all imaginable limits. He had made a vow long ago that he intended to keep – he would never kneel before the Sisters of the Skrall.

As quickly as it had appeared, the pain vanished. Tuma saw Stronius slowly standing back up again. He noted the elite warrior’s club still lay on the ground.

The figure on the throne rose and removed her hood. She wore no helmet or armor. Her face was a dark gray in color, wizened and weathered. Tuma knew appearances were deceiving. Though her body might seem feeble in comparison to a Skrall warrior, the energies at her command were more devastating than any sword or axe could ever be.

“You did not fall,” she said to Tuma, matter of factly.

“I prefer to remain standing,” the Skrall leader replied. “That is why I am here.”

“You risked your sanity and your life coming here.” She gestured at the other robed females.

“They would see you dead, and worse than dead… I see no reason to deny them.”

Tuma gave the slightest of shrugs, an acknowledgment that the female who faced him could do what she claimed – not an easy admission for him to make, but an honest one. “I thought you were a seeker of knowledge,” he said. “If you kill me, you’ll never learn what I came here to offer you.”

“You have nothing we want,” the female answered dismissively. “And we have nothing left to give you in return.”

She resumed her seat, her gaze never leaving Tuma. She stared straight into his eyes as she addressed her assembled people.

“Kill them,” she said. “Kill them both.”

* * *

Now…

Acknowledged there was no time to waste. He and the other Glatorian immediately began organizing the defenses of Tesara. With the aid of Mata Nui and the Agori, they erected crude stone walls, mounted Thornax launchers, and dug pit traps in the sand. Kiina worked with the Agori, teaching them how best to use their weapons against mounted foes.

“What makes you so certain the Skrall will strike here next?” Mata Nui asked Ackar as they worked.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Ackar replied. “As soon as we saw the Bone Hunters are working with them, a lot of things began to make sense.”

“Like what?”
“Not long ago, the Bone Hunters started targeting Kiina’s village, Tajun,” Ackar explained. “Raiding trade caravans, killing Agori, doing everything they could to cut the village off from the rest of Bara Magna. Since Tajun sits on an oasis, you hurt them, you hurt everyone, because they run the water trade.”

“That does make sense,” Mata Nui agreed.

“After Tajun, what village has the most valuable resource? Iconox, to the north – they have a huge deposit of exsidian, a metal that resists wear even in the worst sandstorms. It’s much prized for use in weapons. If the Skrall want to eliminate our ability to fight back, that’s the most logical place to strike.”

“And Tesara?”

“Lies right between the two villages,” said Ackar. “The combined Skrall-Bone Hunter legion hit Tajun, and they’ll want Iconox. But they can’t afford to leave Tesara sitting behind their lines. They’ll be out to destroy it before they move on Iconox.”

Mata Nui heard a cheer coming from the other Glatorian. He turned to see that the walls were complete and the pits concealed.

“Well done,” said Tarix. “We did it.”

“The Skrall will never know what hit them,” said Gresh.

*I truly hope not,* thought Mata Nui. *But are the Skrall somewhere even now, saying the same thing about us?*

That night was quiet. Kiina stood guard with a group of handpicked Agori, watching for any movement in the desert. The other Glatorian and villagers tried to rest, though sleep proved elusive for most. Bone Hunters were known for making night attacks, often traveling without torches or any other means of illumination. It was frequently the case that by the time a village knew they were coming, it was too late to do anything about it.

Kiina was standing watch on the eastern edge of the village when she heard a sound. It was the barely audible noise of armored feet treading through sand, but it was not coming from beyond Tesara. No, it was from off to her right. Someone was slipping out of the village and into the desert.

*The traitor,* she said to herself. *Now I’ve got you.*

She readied her trident and moved off in the direction of the sound. In the pale glow of the village torches, she caught sight of an Agori walking swiftly away from Tesara. Doing her best to stay silent, she followed.

Kiina caught up to the Agori just as he reached the Tesara hot springs. Seizing him from behind, she spun him around. In the moonlight, she could see clearly who it was, and she was not a bit surprised.

“I have to admit, I was hoping I was wrong,” Kiina said. “Don’t move, traitor.”

Berix looked up at her, panic in his eyes. “What? No! You’ve got it all wrong, I was following—”

A soft voice came from behind the Glatorian. “He was following me.”

Berix and Kiina both turned at the sound. “You!!” said Kiina in surprise.

The shadows around them began to move. The next instant, a dozen Skrall and Bone Hunters closed in on them, weapons primed and ready.

“…And this is how you block a Certavus double-strike,” Ackar said, showing off a defensive move it had taken him years to master. Tarix, Vastus, Gresh, and Mata Nui looked on, suitably impressed. Of the lot, only Tarix was agile enough to duplicate the maneuver, and even he doubted he could do it without lots of practice.

The demonstration was interrupted by Metus. “Ackar! Mata Nui!” he shouted. “The Skrall have kidnapped Berix and Kiina!”


Now Raanu rushed up to the group. “I saw them, too,” he said. “They were being dragged away through the hot springs.”

“We must go after them,” said Mata Nui, “before they get too far. We cannot leave them to the mercies of the Skrall.”
“Agreed,” said Ackar.
“I’m going with you,” said Gresh. “My wound has healed. I’m ready.”

By now, the whole village was roused. The Agori crowded around the Glatorian. Some wondered aloud what was going on, while those who knew looked at the Glatorian with worry on their faces.

“No,” said Raanu. “You can’t leave us. Don’t you see, this is just what the Bone Hunters and the Skrall want. They’ll lead you away, then wipe us out – just like Tajun.”

“He’s right,” an Agori villager shouted.
“You have to stay!” said another. The cry was picked up by the rest of the crowd, born of panic and unreasoning fear.

“I understand your feelings,” Mata Nui said to the assembled Agori. “But we cannot turn our backs on our friends.”

“Kiina is just one Glatorian,” Raanu answered. “And Berix is a worthless thief, everyone knows that.”

“No one is worth sacrificing, no matter how small,” said Mata Nui. “We stand together, as a team.”

“So you’d leave us defenseless?” demanded Raanu. “A fine thing! We trusted you with our lives, and you repay us with betrayal.”

Mata Nui looked at Ackar and Gresh, then back at Raanu. “I was once forced to abandon my own people. I will not do so again. The Glatorian will remain here. I will go after Berix and Kiina… alone.”

“No!” said Gresh. “You can’t!”

“One being alone, even you, Mata Nui, against a horde of Skrall and Bone Hunters?” said Ackar. “It would be suicide, my friend, and it would help Berix and Kiina not at all.”

Mata Nui held up his hand to silence them. “We will see each other again. I promise you.” Then he turned and walked out of the village.

“Let me go with him,” Gresh said to Ackar. “He doesn’t stand a chance alone.”

Ackar watched his friend disappear into the darkness. The last glint of moonlight reflected off the shell of Click, perched on its master’s shoulder. “He’s not alone,” the Glatorian said.

Dawn found Ackar climbing a rise toward a great petrified tree stump. Mata Nui sat atop the stump, deep in meditation.

“I thought I might find you up here,” said Ackar gently.

Mata Nui smiled. “Thank you, Ackar… for everything.”

Ackar shook his head. “I should be thanking you. I’d lost faith in others… and myself.” The Glatorian held a rolled-up piece of parchment out to Mata Nui. “Here. This might help.”

Mata Nui spread the parchment out. It was a map of the world of Bara Magna. Ackar pointed to a spot in the northeast, labeled “Roxtus” on the map.

“My guess is they’ll be there,” said Ackar. “Berix may not be a valuable prisoner, but Kiina is. Of all of us, she’s the only one who ever came close to beating a Skrall in the arena. They’ll make her the star of one of their matches… before they kill her.”

Mata Nui could hear what Ackar was leaving unsaid. Kiina meant a lot to the Glatorian. It was tough on him, leaving her safety in the hands of someone else. But the alternative would be rebellion by the Agori – or worse, their surrender to the Skrall.

“I wish I could go with you,” said Ackar. “I know, I know… you’re ready.” Pointing down to Tesara, he added, “The question is, are they?”

Mata Nui followed his gaze. Down below, the Agori were laboring to pull their two massive shelters together. Two structures separated by an arena were more vulnerable to a “divide and conquer” Skrall attack. One could be more easily defended.

“Uniting the two halves of Tesara is a start,” said Mata Nui. “Let’s hope the rest of the villages survive long enough to join us,” Ackar answered.
Ackar suddenly feinted a jab at Mata Nui’s face. Mata Nui moved like lightning, bringing his hand up to block Ackar’s fist. Ackar burst out laughing.

“You’ve learned well, my friend,” he said, slapping Mata Nui on the back.

“I had a great teacher,” Mata Nui replied, smiling.

A great boom suddenly rocked the desert. Mata Nui and Ackar looked down below to see that the Agori had succeeded in uniting the two shelters into one. While both large metal structures had looked impressive before, connected together they were a formidable sight that might make even a Skrall hesitate before invading.

But their new appearance had an even more profound effect on Mata Nui. His eyes widened slightly and he gasped. Now he knew why the huge shelters had looked so familiar to him. It had been right in front of him all along, but with all that had been going on, he hadn’t seen it.

“Incredible…” he whispered.

“What is it?” asked Ackar.

Mata Nui wanted to shout the answer to the skies. It was amazing, wonderful… it could be the key to his regaining his lost universe. But now was not the time to reveal what he had learned to Ackar, not when the Glatorian faced such a serious threat. When the Skrall were defeated, there would be time to share his revelation.

“I will explain… later,” he said, beginning his descent back down the mountain.

Ackar watched him go, wondering what had gotten into his friend. Sure, seeing the shelters coming together was a good start, inspiring, even… but hardly “incredible.” Well, sometimes there was no figuring out Mata Nui, he thought, and that was to be expected. He was from a completely different world, after all.

Will he ever make it back home? Ackar asked himself. I know that’s what he wants. But I am not so sure Bara Magna can stand to lose him.

Roxtus was the largest village in all of Bara Magna, big enough to be called a city. Home to the Skrall warriors and the rock tribe Agori, it was a place few had visited even before the war had begun. The Skrall were not friendly or particularly good hosts. Most of the Glatorian or Agori who wound up there did so against their will, having been captured by Bone Hunters and sold into slavery in Roxtus.

Since the attack on Atero, of course, no one had dared come within miles of Roxtus if they could avoid it. The city was an armed camp, with Skrall troops drilling for a planned campaign and Agori guards talking about how they wished they could be there to watch the other villages fall. Outside the walls, Bone Hunters scoured the desert, watching for Agori spies and Glatorian raiders.

Kiina and Berix were getting a look at life inside Roxtus. Hanging in a cage suspended high in the air, Berix was starting to think they might have been better off buried in the rubble of Tajun. It didn’t help that Kiina had decided their captivity was all his fault, not to mention that she was still angry about his activities in the Tajun cave.

“It was my cavern,” she insisted for the third time. “You should have stayed out of it!”

“Oh, really? Your cavern?” snapped Berix. “You stole it! You’re a thief, just like me.”

“That – no!” said Kiina. “And I thought you said you were a collector, you little weasel!”

“Ah-hah, now she remembers. How things change when the metal claw is on the other foot.”

“Doesn’t even make sense,” Kiina sputtered. “Look, that cavern was my secret place… my private sanctuary from all the ugliness outside… Can you understand that?”

Berix looked at the expression in Kiina’s eyes and suddenly felt all the anger drain out of him. Bara Magna wasn’t the easiest place to live. Probably everyone needed some kind of an escape. For him, it was “collecting” for Kiina, the cave and her dreams of someday getting off this planet. Most other Glatorian just threw themselves into training nonstop as a way of ignoring the harsh realities of life in the desert.

“Yeah, I can,” Berix said, after a long moment. “I’ve got feelings, too, you know. And by the way, I didn’t steal them.”
Kiina actually smiled warmly at Berix. He couldn’t believe it. “No,” she said. “You just collected them.”

Berix smiled back. “Didn’t you ever think that maybe you weren’t the only one who needed to believe that there was something more?”

Kiina didn’t reply, just looked away. The silence that followed was uncomfortable. Berix had never seen Kiina so… vulnerable before. He had to admit that he was guilty of the same thing as she: He had never bothered to think about her feelings. Maybe if they had stopped shouting at each other for a minute, they might have settled the cave issue between them long ago.

“I’ve got an idea,” he offered. “Maybe we could share the cavern? It could be our secret place. I mean, once the Glatorian rescue us… Um, they are going to rescue us, aren’t they?”

Kiina gestured at the fortress in which they were held prisoner, bristling as it was with armed Skrall and Agori. “Look where we are, Berix. I wouldn’t count on it.”

Berix’s smile disappeared. Then suddenly it was back, twice as bright as before. “Yeah, well, then what’s that?” he said, pointing toward the gate.

Kiina looked down. Mata Nui, shield in hand, was walking into the city of Roxtus. Mounted Bone Hunters rode behind him, prodding him towards the central arena. But this was no prisoner they were escorting, that was obvious. His head was held high.

Hearing the commotion, Tuma, leader of the Skrall, stepped out of his shelter and walked to the center of the arena. He stood still, sizing Mata Nui up as the hero approached. Tuma had heard stories about this one from the Bone Hunters who survived the Skopio fight. He had been prepared to credit this new Glatorian with skill and daring, but obviously the warrior was lacking in sense if he walked into Roxtus alone.

*This stranger will learn a lesson, thought Tuma, and a painful one. He walked into my city – he will not be walking out again.*
Kapura moved swiftly (for him) through the shadows of Metru Nui. His destination was the outskirts of Ga-Metru, specifically a portion of the Archives underneath that spot. The sign carved into the wall outside his shelter had told him where to go, and even who was to meet him there, but not the most important answer: why.

Cautiously, he peered around the corner of a building. The way seemed clear. Rahkshi stood guard over most entrances to the Archives, but not this one. It led to a section of the vast museum that had been deemed unsafe decades ago and abandoned. Even when Matoran and Toa retreated below in the days right after Makuta’s takeover of the universe, they had avoided this region.

He slipped across the street and, with great effort, raised the hatch. It let out a shrill creak he was sure every Rahkshi in the city could hear. Kapura froze. Was that the whistling sound of Rahkshi flying through the air toward him? No, it was just steam escaping in Ta-Metru. He waited a moment more, and when no hostile force appeared, he ducked into the tunnel and closed the hatch behind him.

It was dark and dank inside. The faint stench of Muaka lingered in the air. Kapura found himself remembering another recent visit to the Archives, when he had gotten lost in the maze of passageways. That time, he had almost wound up a meal for an escaped exhibit and it was only the timely arrival of Toa Takanuva that saved him. He wished that his friend had picked a different place for their meeting... but then remembered that only this sort of a spot would do.

“You’re late.”

Macku stepped out from a recess in the wall. Her blue armor was stained with mud and she moved with a slight limp, a souvenir of an escape from some Exo-Toa a few days before.

“Sorry,” said Kapura. “I had to make sure I wasn’t followed.”

“We’ll wait a few more minutes for Hafu,” Macku said. She sounded tired... no, beyond tired, Kapura thought. More like she was barely holding herself together.

“Is he working today?”

Macku nodded.

Kapura frowned. All of the Po-Matoran carvers had been put to work carving statues of Makuta for placement all around the city. The order hadn’t come from their new “Great Spirit,” but rather from the new “Turaga” of Metru Nui – Ahkmou. No, he wasn’t a true Turaga – he had never been a Toa, after all, which was the prerequisite – but his past association with Makuta had put him in a position of power in the city.

“We should have killed that lousy traitor long ago,” Macku muttered.

Every Matoran remembered Ahkmou’s crimes on the island of Mata Nui, involving the sale of koli balls tainted with Makuta’s darkness. Many had heard the tales of his sins on Metru Nui as well, in the weeks before the Great Cataclysm. Although he had largely kept to himself for the past year, no one really trusted him. But Turaga Vakama insisted he not be exiled. “Better to keep a doom viper beside your bed than to let it wander free. At least then, you will know from which direction its strike will come.”
The hatch opened again with a screech. A shaft of dirty light pierced the gloom of the Archives. Macku and Kapura instinctively hid until the light was gone. Then they heard the reassuring sound of Hafu’s voice, saying, “Anyone remember why we wanted to come back to this city?”

Macku laughed, though there really was nothing to laugh at. But it felt good to be around these two Matoran again. So many of the others up above had given up. Rahkshi and Exo-Toa were everywhere, and the only Toa visible were the Toa Hagah, who seemed oblivious to everything going on around them. When questioned, they insisted that Makuta Teridax had been defeated and all was well on Metru Nui. Worse, one could tell they really believed this delusion.

“What’s the situation?” asked Hafu. “You know that symbol is only supposed to be used in an emergency.”

“This is an emergency,” Macku assured him. She had taken a great risk drawing the “help” symbol – a crude sketch of a Rahkshi – near the homes of her friends. Ahkmou had forbidden the creation of any unauthorized art.

The Ga-Matoran turned and headed deeper into the Archives. Hafu and Kapura followed. She led them all the way down into the sub-levels, moving as if she knew the place as well as Ga-Metru. Kapura was completely lost and he suspected Hafu was, too.

“In here,” Macku said quietly. She beckoned them to follow her into a large chamber that had once housed a particularly nasty specimen of Rahi primate. There was someone else in there now – a Toa of Water, wounded, stretched out on the stone floor. But it wasn’t Gali or Gaaki or any other Toa Kapura recognized.

“Who is she? Where did she come from?” asked Hafu. Suspicion colored his voice. He had seen too many Makuta tricks to believe anything at first glance anymore.

“She says her name is Tuyet,” said Macku. “And that she’s here to help.”

Hafu had heard the name once… something to do with Toa Lhikan, if he recalled correctly, but he didn’t know the tale. “She doesn’t look like she can help herself, let alone us.”

“You might… be… surprised,” the female Toa said, lifting her head to look at Hafu. “So might a lot of people. Tell me, where is Toa Lhikan?”

“Dead,” said Kapura. “Killed by Makuta.”

Hafu shot him a look. It wasn’t smart to share information with strangers like that. “And Toa Nidhiki?”

Kapura glanced at Hafu and shrugged. Then he turned back to Tuyet. “Dead, too. Makuta… ate him, I guess.”

“Look, we’re happy to see you and all,” said Hafu. “But one Toa more or less isn’t going to make a difference here. Not unless you have a super-weapon hidden away that can cleanse Metru Nui of Makuta’s forces.”

Tuyet sat up. She reached into her pouch and pulled out a piece of crystal about the size of her fist. “As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I do have.”

“And do you think Makuta will give you the chance to use it?” asked Macku. Half hopeful, half skeptical.

“Makuta is the Great Spirit, correct?” asked Tuyet. “And the Great Spirit knows all about everyone who lives in his universe… where they are, what they’re doing… all he has to do is think about them?”

Kapura nodded.

Tuyet smiled. “Then I am the perfect ally, little ones. I am dead… and have been for some 2000 years.”
Weeks ago…

Stronius stood at the edge of a glassy lake. It was a calm, clear day, warm for the mountains, with a soft breeze. Rock Agori were working nearby, building weapons of war. Not far away, a horde of Vorox, each chained to the other, was being marched off to labor in the mines.

Life was good.

Well, almost. As he looked down at his reflection in the water, Stronius noticed a small crack in the chestplate of his armor. When had that happened? Skrall armor was some of the toughest around and he couldn’t recall an opponent landing any blows lately that might have damaged it. This was puzzling.

Even more confusing – and disturbing – was that the crack was growing bigger as he watched. It was already more than two inches long, and spreading into a spider-web of tiny fractures. He staggered back a step. The crack was big enough now that he could see something through it. It looked like another layer of armor, this one silver.

The crack accelerated its pace. Before Stronius’ startled eyes, his chest armor split open, followed by his arm and leg plate. With a loud crack, his helmet shattered. He stared at his reflection in horror – something was emerging from inside the ruin of his armor – a baterra!

And Stronius could do nothing but scream.

Not far away, Tuma heard Stronius’ ragged cry. The female Skrall weren’t satisfied to just execute their prisoners. No, they wanted to torture them first, using their mental powers to create illusions. He had no idea what Stronius was seeing now, but it was a good guess that his elite warrior’s sanity would go before his life did.

Tuma’s weapon was on the ground, just out of his reach. The women had left it there to mock him. His mind told his arm to reach for it, but his arm wouldn’t move. His body was paralyzed by the mental force of his captors. Only his mouth still worked. When the time came, they wanted to hear his screams, too.

But a good warrior always had more than one strategy in mind. He’d hoped to use the threat of the baterra to talk the females into allying with him. If that wouldn’t work, he knew something that would… something that the females wouldn’t be able to resist.

He tried to rise. A stabbing pain tore through his mind. It was time, then. He opened his mouth and yelled one word: “Angonce.”

For a moment, the pain increased and he thought he would surely go mad or die. Then it eased, just enough for him to take a breath. The leader of the female Skrall approached. She grabbed Tuma’s jaw roughly and forced his head up to look at her.

“What do you know of Angonce?”

Tuma flicked his eyes toward Stronius. “Stop… whatever… you’re doing to him… and we’ll talk.”
The female Skrall nodded to one of the others. The next instant, Stronius stopped screaming and collapsed in a heap.

“I know where he might be,” said Tuma. “At least, where he once was.”

“Is that all?” the female Skrall spat. “We all know that. The great tower… the burning place… in the Valley of the Maze. That is where they all were.”

“And they all fled,” answered Tuma. “No one knows where. But Angonce always had more of a… curiosity… about the Agori than the others. He would stay close enough to keep an eye on them.”

The leader of the Sisters of the Skrall considered his words. The females of her species had been gifted from birth with psionic powers, strong enough to enable them to withstand the hatred and violence of the males and to resist the baterra. But the legends said that one female Skrall had once encountered the Great Being named Angonce, and Angonce had taught her how to ascend to a whole new level of power. Some said entire civilizations rose and fell on her whims now. She had evolved far past her own species and had no contact with them ever again. Still, every Skrall female hoped to one day find Angonce and learn his secrets.

“Why would you share this with us?” asked the female. “You know what we could do with that kind of power.”

“I could lie to you,” said Tuma, “and say I think greater power would make you virtuous and good. But the truth is, I think the whole story is a pile of rock steed droppings. It’s a load of nonsense you and your sisters tell each other to stay warm on cold nights in the mountains. Even if you find a Great Being, he will laugh in your face – that’s what they do best.”

“And if you’re wrong?” the female said, a wicked smile curving the edges of her mouth upward. Tuma returned her smile. “Then I won’t live long enough to regret it, will I?”

“And what do you want in exchange?”

“Our freedom,” answered Tuma. “And your pledge to destroy any baterra you encounter on your journey.”

“The baterra pose no threat to us,” she countered. “We carry no weapons that they would recognize as such. Why should we start a war with them?”

“Because the alternative is two dead Skrall you have to bury, and no more idea of where Angonce is than you had before,” said Tuma. “You know, the problem with revenge is it is over so quickly. And when you are done, what is there left to do? Even miserable creatures like the Sisters of the Skrall need something to aspire to, to strive for… isn’t that true?”

Of course, thought the female. In this case, we aspire to the destruction of you and yours. So we will seek out baterra for you… and make sure they know just where you are.

She nodded. “We have a bargain, Tuma. You and Stronius can leave… but once we find our Great Being, we will see you two again. Be sure of that.”

That is what you think, witch, thought Tuma. As soon as we have seized the Bara Magna desert and destroyed any baterra that are left, we will find a way to eliminate you too.

“A bargain it is,” said Tuma. “And when – if – you return from your quest, be sure we will give you a… memorable welcome home.”

Now...

“I don’t believe it,” said Kiina. Her thoughts were a jumble. There was excitement, relief, and surprise that someone had actually come to their rescue. There was puzzlement – where were Ackar, Gresh, Tarix, and the others? Why had Mata Nui come alone? And there was fear, too. She knew what Mata Nui had let himself in to do, and she worried about what might happen to him in this nest of sand snakes.

“Neither does Tuma,” Berix replied.
That might have been true, but if it was, Tuma was careful not to show it. The Skrall chief radiated power and confidence as Mata Nui approached. “I’d hoped all the Glatorian would come,” he said. “But it seems they are even bigger cowards than I thought.”

Mata Nui ignored the jibe. He marched up the ramp that led into the arena, paying no attention to the chained Vorox on either side of it who tried to claw at him, or the laughter of nearby Skrall warriors. Tuma reminded him of someone else he had known, in his past, so full of belief in his own might. Beings like Tuma, he knew, drew their power from the fear they provoked in those around them. Confronted by someone who felt no such fear, they often crumbled.

In the cage, Berix gave a little wave to Mata Nui as he passed underneath. “Is he—?” he began.
“Alone,” Kiina finished for him. “I’m not sure I want to look.”

Tuma turned to look at the crowd of Skrall and Agori. Gesturing toward Mata Nui, he said, “Either he’s a madman or he wants to join the winning side.” He turned to look at Mata Nui, an evil grin plastered on his features. “Which is it?”

Mata Nui walked right up to Tuma. The Skrall leader towered over him, but Mata Nui was not intimidated. He looked Tuma in the eyes and said, “I am here to fight for my friends’ freedom, one-on-one. Unless the leader of the Skrall is the true coward?”

Anger flashed in Tuma’s eyes, but his tone of voice stayed amused, even a little bored. “I’m going to enjoy tearing that fancy mask from your face.”

Before Mata Nui could reply, Tuma lashed out, landing a solid blow and sending his opponent sprawling in the sand. The Skrall and Bone Hunters cheered wildly. This was going to be a good fight, if a short one.

“You! No fair!” yelled Berix.

“Dirty, cheating Skrall,” Kiina said.

Tuma wasn’t letting up. He brought his huge sword down hard on Mata Nui’s shield. Mata Nui rolled away and got to his feet, but Tuma was on him in an instant. The Skrall leader struck again and again, battering Mata Nui around the arena at will. Tuma was enjoying this, but some part of him wondered—could it be this easy? Why wasn’t this Glatorian fighting back?

Above, Berix covered his eyes with his hands. “Oh, I can’t watch. Mata Nui’s getting shredded.”

“No, no, don’t you see?” said Kiina. “Watch. He’s doing what Ackar taught us—study your opponent, find his weakness.”

“Well, he’d better find it fast!” Berix replied.

In the arena, Tuma was feeling more confident than ever of victory. He wasn’t even bothering to keep his shield up anymore. This Glatorian was broken, too much of a coward to even raise his sword in defense. He was certainly far from being a worthy opponent for the leader of the warrior Skrall, but perhaps he could be a chew toy for the Vorox after Tuma was done with him.

“Did this pathetic weakling really believe he could bring down the mighty Tuma?” the Skrall leader bellowed to the crowd.

“Be careful,” said Mata Nui. “Arrogance can topple giants. Trust me… I know.”

Tuma had grown tired of this sport. It was time to end it. He swung his sword in what would surely be the killing blow.

But the strike did not connect. Mata Nui moved so fast he was almost a blur, ducking under the sword and slipping past his attacker. As Tuma’s momentum carried the Skrall leader forward, Mata Nui helped his opponent along with a sharp elbow to the back. Tuma grunted and staggered a few steps.

The Skrall leader turned on Mata Nui, enraged. He swung his sword wildly, but where his blows had never missed before, now hitting Mata Nui was like trying to strike a desert wind. Mata Nui ducked and dodged each blow, then took advantage of his opponent’s being off-balance to land solid shots of his own. Each one rocked Tuma a little more, causing the Skrall chief to slow down just a bit. Faster and more agile, Mata Nui took full advantage of his foe’s fatigue, striking and then backing away before Tuma’s sword could hit.
In the cage, Kiina was so excited she was shaking Berix. “That’s it! Tuma’s huge, but he’s slow. Mata Nui’s using the Skrall’s own strength as leverage against him.”

“I get it! I get it!” Berix said, feeling like she was going to rattle his brains loose in a second.

The tide of battle had turned, and even Tuma knew it. With each blow Mata Nui evaded, his fury and his carelessness grew. “I’ll crush you like an insect!” he raged.

Remembering the origins of his shield, Mata Nui smiled. “Don’t be so fast to knock insects, Tuma. Sure, they’re small—but their sting can fell a giant, wouldn’t you agree?”

Tuma swung at Mata Nui’s head and missed once more; Mata Nui ducked inside his guard to strike two more hard blows. Tuma was exhausted and reeling. Mata Nui knew it was time to finish this fight.

Summoning all his remaining strength, Mata Nui brought his blade down in a final sweeping blow, shattering Tuma’s weapon to bits. Without pausing, Mata Nui spun, lashing out with a kick that sent Tuma crashing to his knees. Tuma looked up at Mata Nui, his body teetering for a moment. Then the Skrall leader collapsed into the sand.

All around, the Skrall, Bone Hunters, and Agori gasped in shock. Mata Nui ignored them, instead reaching down to pick up the fallen Tuma’s shield. Raising it high over his head, he proclaimed, “I claim Tuma’s shield in victory! Release my friends.”

In the cage above, Berix and Kiina embraced in wild celebration. “He did it!” shouted Berix. “He really did it! Woo-hoo!” cried Kiina.

Silence reigned in the Skrall arena now. Tuma was conscious, but too weak to rise. The Skrall, amazingly, had not charged Mata Nui, perhaps too in shock that their leader had fallen. Mata Nui still held the shield aloft, waiting for his foes to honor the deal he had made with their leader.

Then there came the strange sound of one pair of hands clapping and all too familiar laughter. Mata Nui turned to see Metus standing at the entrance to the arena, Kiina’s trident in his hand. All around, the Skrall drew their weapons.

“I could always pick a winner. Now throw down your shield and your sword,” said Metus. When Mata Nui did not respond, Metus’ smile abruptly disappeared. “That’s not a joke.”

Mata Nui tossed his blade onto the sand and then gently laid down his shield. There was a flash of light as the shield transformed back into Click. “Save yourself,” Mata Nui whispered to the insect. The beetle gave a quick click of its mandibles and then vanished underground.

Metus hurled Kiina’s trident at the spot where the scarabax had vanished, but too late. The head of the trident stabbed into the sand, leaving the weapon sticking out of the ground.

“So you were the traitor all along,” said Mata Nui coldly.

“Coward!” Kiina screamed from above. “Keeping tabs on the Glatorian so you could sell us out to the Bone Hunters.”

“Not a coward,” Metus said, smiling. “Just a good businessman.”

“You were the one who convinced the Skrall and the Bone Hunters to unite,” said Mata Nui.

Metus gestured to the assembled army of Skrall warriors and nomadic bandits. “Of course I did. You think they’d come up with that idea on their own? As rival tribes, they did little damage, always having to be watchful of each other, but together… under one ruler…”

Kiina couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You’d lead them against your own people?”

Metus spat on the ground. “What have the Agori ever done for me?”

“Uh, let’s see,” said Berix. “We trusted you?”

“The Glatorian will tear you apart for this,” Kiina said through gritted teeth. Metus glanced at Kiina, then back to Mata Nui. “She still doesn’t understand.”

“We are the only ones that know your role in this,” agreed Mata Nui. “The other Glatorian still see you as an ally.”

“Exactly,” said Metus. “And by the time the Glatorian realize it, the battle will already be over. I win.”

Metus turned to his army. “Finish them! I’ve wasted enough time here; I have to get back to—”
His orders were interrupted by the sound of Bone Hunters grunting in alarm. The nomads were pointing toward the desert, their bodies actually shaking with fear. Metus turned and immediately saw why – there was a Glatorian heading for the city. But not just any Glatorian; no, this one shimmered in the sunlight and was easily 100 feet high.

That sight was more than enough for the Bone Hunters, who broke ranks and raced away in terror. Some didn’t even pause to mount their rock steeds, just took off into the desert on foot.

“Where are you going?” screamed Metus. “Don’t run, you idiots, fight!”

The traitorous Agori pointed at the Vorox, still chained near the entrance to the arena. “Unleash these wretched beasts. Make them fight. If that giant crushes them, so be it!”

Roused from their shock, the Skrall moved to carry out his orders. Loading their Thornax launchers, they prepared for battle with the giant attacker.

Mata Nui took advantage of his captors’ distraction. Grabbing both his sword and Kiina’s trident, he moved swiftly to the chain that held the cage in the air. With one swift stroke, he shattered the chain, sending the cage crashing down into the sand. The impact shattered the prison, freeing Berix and Kiina.

Mata Nui rushed to join them. “Are you all right?” he asked Kiina, handing her the trident. “I am now that I’ve got this back,” Kiina answered. “Thanks.”

Berix didn’t share her relief at escaping. His attention was focused on the giant Glatorian who was still marching toward Roxtus. “What is that?”

Mata Nui glanced at the giant. In the distance, he could hear a familiar sound – the clicking of a scarabax beetle, multiplied millions of times. He smiled. “I believe, Berix, we are witnessing the true power of unity.”

The clicking could be heard by everyone now, so loud it drowned out every other sound. Before the startled eyes of the Skrall, the Glatorian dissolved into a swarm of scarabax beetles. With the giant construct gone, it was now possible to see what had been behind it all along.

“And loyalty…” said Mata Nui.

They emerged from the center of a sandstorm like avenging desert spirits. Tarix, Vastus, Ackar, Gresh, and so many more. Glatorian and Agori of every tribe united into one great army. Some were on foot, others in dune chariots and other vehicles. Their weapons ranged from Thornax launchers to rocks and clubs. It was a ragtag force, undisciplined, wild, maybe even suicidal, to dare challenge the Skrall – and it was the most beautiful sight Mata Nui had ever seen.

The Glatorian-led army swept into the city, clashing with the defending Skrall in fierce combat. Atop a wall, Mata Nui, Kiina, and Berix saw the battle begin. Mata Nui handed Tuma’s shield to Berix. “Here. You may need this.”

“Really?” Berix answered, grinning. “Wow, nobody ever actually gave me something before. Can I… keep it?”

“Only if you survive,” said Kiina. Seeing the worried expression on the Agori’s face, she smiled. “Don’t worry. Just stay close to me. But hold up – aren’t we missing part of the team?”

As if in answer, Click leapt from the sand, landing on the tip of Kiina’s trident. Mata Nui reached out as the beetle vanished in a flash of light, transforming back into his shield. Mata Nui’s eyes met the single eye in the center of the shield.

“Now we’re ready,” said Mata Nui.

Mata Nui and Kiina jumped from the wall, Berix following right after. “Wait for me!” the Agori shouted.

Two Skrall mounted on Bone Hunter rock steeds spotted Kiina and Mata Nui leaping down toward them. Before they could fire their Thornax launchers, they had been unseated by a combined attack. Berix, sailing through the air behind them, landed backward on the back of one of the steeds. It immediately took off in a gallop, with Berix hanging on for dear life.

The Agori glanced over his shoulder and saw he was headed right for a Skrall. “Oh, what the heck,” Berix said, closing his eyes tightly and swinging his shield downward. “No trial—”

The shield bashed the Skrall on the head, staggering him.
“–no treasure!” Berix smiled, already looking for another target.
Nearby, Mata Nui was in trouble. A mounted Skrall had him pinned down with Thornax launcher blasts. He had managed to dodge them so far, but he was running out of room to maneuver. His shield would protect him for a while, but enough direct hits would shatter it. He needed help.

It came from an unexpected source — Gresh, tearing across the sand, riding his shield down the dunes. As Mata Nui watched, Gresh launched himself into the air, flipped, and slammed shield-first into the Skrall. The impact knocked the Thornax launcher out of the Skrall’s hand. Mata Nui charged, stabbed his sword into the ground, and used it to vault himself into the air and snap the launcher.

As he fell toward the ground, Mata Nui saw the image of an attacking Skrall reflected in the metal surface of the launcher. He landed on his feet, whirled, and smashed his shield into the Skrall. As the warrior went down, Mata Nui saw Kiina with a mounted Skrall riding after her. He tossed her the Thornax launcher. She caught it and fired in one smooth motion, blasting the ground in front of the rock steed. Animal and rider flew into the air and landed with a heavy thud.

Still, the element of surprise could only work against the Skrall for so long. These were trained and disciplined warriors. Regrouping, they surrounded the Glatorian and pressed in. Mata Nui, Ackar, Gresh, and Kiina found themselves fighting back to back, with their comrades in the same situation not far away.

“They have us outnumbered ten to one,” said Ackar, fending off multiple attacks at once.
More like twenty!” said Kiina.
“Yeah,” Gresh added, “but who’s counting?”
“Let it be a hundred,” said Mata Nui. “We have the true power. We fight with honor and purpose.”

Mata Nui brought his sword down against a Skrall shield with such force that the shield exploded into fragments. “For unity!” Mata Nui cried.

“For unity!” the Glatorian echoed, surging forward.

Mata Nui battered two Skrall aside, opening the first gap in the enemy lines. Through it, he saw Metus trying to run.

“So the coward flees…” Mata Nui muttered to himself. He charged toward Metus, who was climbing into his dune chariot accompanied by two Skrall warriors.

Spotting Mata Nui, Metus shouted to his guards, “Well, what are you waiting for? Destroy him!”
But there was no stopping Mata Nui this day. Mata Nui slammed into the two Skrall, knocking them off their feet. With each blow, he thought of his lost universe and people. He remembered the evil that held them captive… the same kind of thoughtless cruelty and arrogance that lived in Metus. In his own way, the traitorous Agori was just as bad as the darkness that had overtaken Mata Nui’s universe. The Agori wanted power, and he didn’t care who had to suffer for it.

Right now, though, all Metus wanted was to put some distance between himself and this battle. He fired up the dune chariot and was about to ride out of the city when he saw two Vorox blocking the way. “Out of my way, you filthy—”

The Vorox grabbed the dune chariot and tipped it over, dumping Metus out onto the sand. Before he could get up again, Mata Nui was upon him, yanking him into the air.

“Wait,” pleaded Metus. “We can make a deal. I’ll give you whatever you want!”
Mata Nui lifted Metus higher, so the two were at eye level. “I have what I want. You.”

The Mask of Life Mata Nui wore began to glow. He brought Metus closer, until the Agori’s helmet touched the mask.

“Stop! What are you doing??” screamed Metus.

There was a blinding flash of light. When it dissipated, the Agori was gone, replaced by a hissing serpent with the face of Metus. The mask had done its work well, Mata Nui decided — justice had been done.

“Now everyone will see you for what you truly are,” Mata Nui said to the Metus serpent.
Behind him, the Skrall were closing in on Ackar, Kiina, and Gresh. “There’s too many!” shouted Kiina over the din of battle.

“We can’t fight them all!” said Gresh.

“Our weapons!” said Ackar. “Quick! Combine their power!”

The three Glatorian stood side by side, their sword, trident, and shield touching. A blast erupted from the combined weapons, air, fire, and water together in one devastating force. It blew the Skrall back, but they charged again.

“They’re still coming!” said Gresh.

Mata Nui vaulted over the Skrall to land beside his allies. He touched his sword to their weapons. “Now – as one!” he said.

Once more, they fired, this time with the power of Life itself added to their energies. The explosive blast flattened the Skrall attackers. Those few who still remained on their feet fled at the sight of so much raw power unleashed. On vehicles, on foot, and on rock steeds, they deserted Roxtus, leaving the Glatorian and Agori the victors.

“We did it!” yelled Gresh.

Mata Nui looked into the eye on his shield. “Thank you,” he said.

There was a bright flash of light, and then the shield was gone and Click was sitting on Mata Nui’s shoulder once more. Ackar looked at the insect and smiled.

“And I used to think scarabax were just annoying little pests,” Ackar said.

The beetle responded with rapid clicks of its mandibles. Ackar laughed at the sight, saying, “Click, I will never doubt you again.”

“I can’t believe it’s over,” said Vastus.

“And that all of us are still in one piece,” added Tarix.


“I haven’t seen the little guy,” said Gresh.

Kiina was frantic now. “I told him to stick close to me.”

“Kiina–” Ackar said, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“No!” said Kiina. “He was my responsibility. Berix!”

A muffled voice cried out in response. “Down here!”

The Glatorian glanced to the right. Berix’s hand was sticking up out of a pile of rubble. “Little… help… here… please!” the Agori said.

Kiina rushed over, grabbed his hand, and yanked Berix free. “You jerk! I thought–” Then she paused and hugged the Agori tight to her chest. “Don’t ever do that again.”

Berix gasped for air in her too-tight embrace. “You know, I think I liked it better when you hated me.”
Weeks later…

Mata Nui stood alone on a rocky peak, staring off into the desert. From far below came the sound of Agori hard at work, but there was another noise mixed in, the sound of celebration. While the Bone Hunters were still active in the wastelands, the Skrall had vanished completely. Perhaps they had gone back north, no one could be sure. What mattered was that their threat had ended. Metus, too, had not been seen since the battle. The unspoken assumption was that he had fallen prey to a sand bat or some other desert predator. No one was shedding any tears over him.

Ackar climbed up to join Mata Nui. He had been busy these last few days overseeing a massive project: the linking together of all the villages of Bara Magna into one mega-city.

“Don’t like parties?” he asked, smiling. “Agori from all over Bara Magna are pulling together… literally… uniting all the villages. And we have you to thank for that.”

“No, I was only one piece,” Mata Nui replied. “It took each of us to complete the whole. This celebration belongs to the Agori and you – the first leader of the new united villages.”

Mata Nui looked down. Using chains, Spikit, and dune chariots, the Agori of Iconox, Vulcanus, and Tajun had dragged their massive shelters across the desert to link up with Tesara. Others had gone north and brought down the huge structure that dominated Roxtus. It had been a mammoth undertaking, and now it was almost finished.

Kiina, Gresh, and Berix came up to join the two friends. “So what now, Mata Nui?” asked the Agori.

“Continue searching for answers,” Mata Nui replied, “wherever they may take me.”

“Look!” Kiina said. “They’ve done it!”

With a final, thunderous boom, the last shelter was fitted into place. When the sand and dust finally cleared, the group of heroes got their first look at the newly assembled structure. It was a sight that shocked them all.

“What?” said Berix. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Whatever they had expected, it had not been this. Only Mata Nui had even an inkling of what was to come, and he hadn’t dared to hope. But there it was, for all to see – when the shelters were put together, they were revealed to be not just random giant pieces of metal, but pieces of a mechanical being. Once assembled, the head, arms, torso, and legs could each be clearly seen. And the group around Mata Nui could all recall where they had seen such a thing before.

“The giant,” said Ackar. “From Kiina’s cavern in Tajun…”

“How is this possible?” said Gresh. “All this time, we have been living inside pieces of a giant mechanical… something?”

“Wait!” said Berix, digging into his pouch. “I’ve got something. Hold on, where is it… here!” He handed Mata Nui an old coin. Inscribed on one side was the figure of a mechanical being, the same figure that was on the wall of the Tajun cavern.
“I collected it from the cave a long time ago,” said Berix. “Forgot all about it until I saw that thing down there.”

“The two images match,” said Ackar.

“Uh-huh,” said Berix. “And wait till you see the other side.”

Berix flipped the coin over. On the other side was another design, this one matching the mazelike pattern of the Skrall shield Berix still carried.

“Same symbol,” said Kiina.

“No, not a symbol,” Mata Nui answered. “A map!”

“To where?” asked Gresh.

“That is what I must find out,” said Mata Nui, taking the coin from Berix. “That is where my destiny is waiting… I know it.”

“Don’t you mean we must find out?” asked Kiina. “Remember your promise to me.”

Mata Nui gave a gentle smile. “You are welcome to join me. But I have no idea how long this journey might take, or the dangers that await.”

“Do you think that you and that… giant… are connected somehow?” asked Ackar.

Mata Nui knew the answer, of course. But telling Ackar he had once inhabited the body of a 40-million-foot tall robotic being, a larger version of the one down below, would start a conversation he did not feel like having right now. So all he said was, “Perhaps. But you are looking at an empty shell, the remains of what might have been a great ruler, the guardian of his people.”

He paused. It was difficult to get the words out, with so many new emotions swirling inside of him. When Mata Nui finally continued, he said, “Thanks to all of you, I am closer to becoming the warrior I must be if I am to reclaim my empire and free my people.”

“This time, though, you won’t need to face the fight alone,” said Ackar.

Mata Nui smiled. “Then, my friends, our quest begins.”

*      *      *

From the pages of Mata Nui’s diary…

Entry 7:

In the universe I came from, there was only one true source of evil. If he could be defeated, life, light, and hope would return to my people. As I traveled to the city of Roxtus to rescue the kidnapped Kiina and Berix, I believed the same would be true here. If I could defeat Tuma, leader of the Skrall, then the danger that threatened Bara Magna would vanish.

Defeat him, I did, although it took every lesson I had learned from Ackar to do it. But the menace to Bara Magna did not end with him. Upon his fall, Metus appeared, revealing himself to be a traitor to the Agori. He had somehow gained influence over the Skrall, perhaps by offering knowledge to Tuma in exchange for power. Whatever the reason, the Skrall attacked at his command. Badly outnumbered, it seemed my first major battle would prove to be my last.

Salvation, as it often does, came from an unexpected source. Despite my insisting they remain in Tesara, the other Glatorian – my friends, a word I still marvel at – charged Roxtus. They fought with heart, spirit, and pride, and those were three weapons the Skrall could not hope to stand against. The rock tribe and its warriors broke. I spotted Metus attempting to get away, but the power of the Mask of Life has a surprise for that traitorous murderer of his own people. In his heart, he was a serpent; the Mask of Life saw to it that his body would match. I watched him slither away into the desert and felt no regrets.

This experience had taught the Agori a lesson about unity. Now willing to work together, they brought all their scattered shelters together to form one great mega-city. It was only when the work was done that I realized what they had unwittingly constructed: a new robot body, much like my old one. With it, I knew I could challenge my ancient enemy and save my universe.

But before I could do that, there were new dangers to be faced.
This would be but the first of the adventures Mata Nui would have on Bara Magna. Accompanied by Kiina, Gresh, Ackar, and Berix, he would journey north, past Roxtus, to the lands from which the Skrall had come. Berix would add “chronicler” to his list of hobbies, keeping a record of where they went and what they encountered.

The revelation that a second robot body existed – no doubt a prototype of Mata Nui’s own former shell, from some past era – opened a whole new array of mysteries. Had the Great Beings, Mata Nui’s creators, actually lived on Bara Magna? And if so, were they here still? Was there a way to find the energy that would power that body, and could Mata Nui’s mind inhabit it? And if that was possible, could he take the Agori’s shelters away from them in that way, so soon after convincing them to create one great city from the pieces?

There were many questions, and few answers, as the heroes began their journey north. Gresh could guide them a part of the way, as he knew the Black Spikes from an earlier journey, but beyond that it was unexplored territory. The landscapes were wondrous and frightening, the enemies – including the shapeshifters that had plagued the Skrall – fierce and devastatingly destructive. And, as always seemed to be the case, the solution of each mystery seemed to create a dozen more puzzles.

Despite all this, Mata Nui found he was at peace. Once, he had been the ruler of an entire universe, powerful beyond all measure – and yet, he had been alone. Now, though not as strong and the ruler of only his own heart, he had friends beside him. Long ago, he had tried to teach his people about the virtues of unity and duty, but had never truly understood them himself. His time on Bara Magna had taught him much, far more than he had ever taught the Matoran and Toa.

His destiny still lay before him, even though there might be no chronicler to tell its tale. One day, he would return to do battle for his universe and his people. When that struggle came, he might well be fighting alone again. But he would carry into that challenge the memories of Ackar’s bravery, Kiina’s resourcefulness, Gresh’s daring, and the courage of every Agori. He would fight not only to make up for past failures, but to honor those who chose to stand beside him in his time of trial.

It had been a long journey, and someday others might think it had all been just a legend… but for those who had lived the tale, the heroes, the villains, the tragedies, and the triumphs would never be forgotten.
Weeks ago…

The Sisters of the Skrall sat in council. It had only been a short time since they had done the unthinkable – allow a Skrall leader and elite warrior to walk out of their camp, alive. But a bargain had been struck: the freedom of the two arrogant males in return for information on the location of a Great Being named Angonce.

“I do not believe their tale,” one of the female Skrall whispered. “Why would Angonce have remained when the other Skrall fled? Why would he be there?”

“As a guard?” the leader of the sisterhood asked. “They say there is great power there… power that could make someone an emperor… or an empress.”

“And we will seek out that power?”

The leader considered. Theirs had not been an easy existence. Banished from the sight of the male Skrall, abandoned to the wilds, struggling to survive while the males pursued their plans of conquest… and now Tuma, their hated enemy, had been forced to buy his freedom from them. His payment had been dear indeed, if it truly led to the secrets of the Great Beings. And if Angonce was still on Bara Magna, could he be far from that which was most treasured by his kind?

“We go,” she said. “Gather the sisters together. We will travel to the Valley of the Maze and pierce its heart. And when we find what is hidden there… we will do the same to our Skrall brothers.”

Tuma and Stronius had traveled in silence since they left the camp. Stronius was furious, that much was obvious. No doubt he would have preferred to die at the hands of the sisterhood than bargain with them. But a leader could not afford to allow personal pride to threaten the welfare of his people. Dying here would not have helped the Skrall legions at all. Sending the sisterhood off on a wild sand bat chase, and possibly having some baterra killed in the process, might prove to be a great boon.

*Stronius is a fine warrior, thought Tuma. But he does not understand that sometimes a leader has to make deals with those he finds… repulsive.*

Not for the first time, he thought of Metus. The ice Agori had proven somewhat useful up to now, helping to strike deals with the Bone Hunters and providing information on the defenses of the various villages and the skills of their Glatorian. Lately, he had promised to share the secret of how to defeat the shapeshifting baterra, but he had yet to deliver on that pledge. Privately, Tuma doubted Metus truly knew anything of use on the subject. But he preferred to keep the Agori close by for now, at least until the second phase of the war against the villages had begun. Better to let him keep thinking his best interests lay with an alliance with the Skrall than risk him betraying battle plans to the Glatorian. A traitor, after all, can never be trusted.

Once the war was over and the Agori had been subjugated, of course, things would be different. Metus’ usefulness would be at an end, along with his freedom… and quite possibly his life. He was a viper, and Tuma had no wish to suffer his company any longer than was necessary.
The Skrall leader abruptly stopped. The pass up ahead was narrow and dotted with trees. He and Stronius had traveled through it on the way to meet with the Sisterhood earlier that day and met with no incident. But things had been different then – for one thing, there had been fewer trees.

“You see it?” Tuma said, as softly as he could.

“Of course,” Stronius answered. “An ambush, no doubt… well, we will make them regret this day before we’re through.”

“Will we?” said Tuma. “There are six of those ‘trees,’ each a baterra in disguise, and two of us. I doubt we will make it through the pass alive.”

“So what do we do – call on the sisters for help?” Stronius sneered.

Tuma whirled and struck the elite warrior, sending Stronius sprawling on the ground. Before the warrior could leap up, weapon drawn, Tuma had his own weapon at the fallen fighter’s neck.

“Speak to me like that again,” Tuma snarled, “and you may find you have something caught in your throat.”

Stronius’ eyes flicked down to the point of the blade now pressing against his neck. He knew exactly what Tuma meant. He forced his anger down and bowed his head in the traditional Skrall sign of submission to a greater authority. Placated, Tuma withdrew his blade.

As Stronius got to his feet, he noticed something odd about the baterra who lay in wait for them. At first, he wasn’t sure just what did not seem right about the scene before him. Then it hit him, and his hand went to his weapon immediately.

“The roots,” he said. “Look at the roots.”

Tuma did as he asked. Baterra disguises were traditionally thorough. If one changed its shape to look like a rock, it could be mistaken for a rock that had been in place for years. If another became a plant or a tree, there was nothing to give away that it had not been growing in that spot for ages. Even the roots of the trees looked to be buried deep in the ground, an incredible illusion.

Only the roots of these new trees in the pass were not growing down into the dirt. Instead, they were resting on the surface, and some were torn and ragged. Either the baterra were getting sloppy or…

“Those trees have been uprooted and placed there,” said Tuma. “They wanted us to see them and mistake them for our enemy. And that means—”

Pain exploded in the center of Tuma’s back. He hit the ground, even as two baterra emerged from the rocks behind them – or rather, the baterra had been the rocks behind them. They had run a double-bluff, focusing the attention of their prey on a fake ambush in front of them, while the true trap was behind them.

_They are growing more clever_, thought Stronius. _Here is hoping we live long enough to share that cheerful bit of news with Roxtus…_

Silently, the baterra advanced. Stronius readied himself for battle. He and Tuma would die with honor, at least. There would be no “deals” struck with this enemy.

He raised his war club and, with a guttural yell of rage, Stronius charged.

Tuma opened his eyes. With a start, he realized he must have blacked out from his wound, leaving Stronius to face two deadly baterra alone.

The worst had happened. Stronius was unconscious on the ground, not far away. His war club and Thornax launcher were nowhere to be seen. Tuma knew that he had little chance of stopping the baterra on his own, but he would have to try. He reached for his sword… but it was gone. So was his launcher.

He was defenseless.

Tuma struggled painfully to his feet. His back throbbed with pain. The baterra’s attack had pierced his armor and damaged some of the organic tissue within. He could still fight, and if he had a weapon, he was sure he could take at least one baterra with him. As it was, all he could do was face his death like a true Skrall.

“Come on, then,” he shouted at the baterra. “Finish this!”
The baterra made no move to advance. They seemed puzzled, if such a word could be applied to machines.

“Sorry, Tuma. You’re going to be disappointed.”

The Skrall leader whirled at the sound. It was Metus, unarmed, leaning against a rock as if he didn’t have a care in the world. As the Skrall watched in surprise, Metus walked up to the two baterra and regarded them like they were just annoyances.

“Move along. Nothing to see here,” he said to the two mechanical warriors.

To Tuma’s amazement, the baterra did just that. They turned and walked away! His first thought was a dark one: that Metus was truly in charge of the baterra and responsible for all the Skrall deaths they had caused, not to mention all the other warriors they had slain back in the Core War.

Metus was smart enough to guess where Tuma’s thoughts would be going. He turned to the Skrall with his arms out. “Now, Tuma, if I controlled them… If I had decimated your legions and your fortresses… why would I leave you alive to maybe put a dagger in my back? Use your brain. Remember what I told you.”

Tuma charged forward, ignoring his pain, and backhanded Metus, knocking the Agori to the ground. “I have grown tired of your insolence. I need no weapon to end your life.”

“I just saved your life, yours and Stronius,’” Metus spat. “A simple ‘thank you’ would have sufficed.”

More than ever, Tuma wanted to shut Metus’ mouth for good. But he couldn’t escape the truth the Agori had spoken. The baterra were in a perfect position to kill him and his elite warrior, but hadn’t. Why?

“You said you had a secret… a way to stop the baterra,” Tuma said. “Is that what I saw here today?”

Metus got to his feet. “Just about. You’re not dead, are you? Yes, I know a secret, and it’s not one any Skrall would ever figure out on his own.”

The Agori smiled. For a change, he was actually telling the truth. Long ago, in the closing days of the Core War, Metus had hitched a ride on a supply caravan heading to an Ice army outpost. Normally, he would have preferred to make his way on his own, but his ice axe had broken and was in for repair. He hadn’t time to dig up a new weapon and didn’t much like the thought of traveling through a war zone unarmed.

The wagons were ambushed by a dozen baterra. The Ice warriors and other Agori put up a fight, but none of them survived the battle. Through it all, though, the baterra just ignored Metus. Even when he grabbed the reins of a wagon and made his escape, they didn’t pursue. The question of why dogged him all the way to the outpost. When he arrived, he told the warriors there that he had been knocked unconscious early in the battle and must have rolled under a wagon where the attackers couldn’t see him. They seemed to accept the explanation.

Metus knew better, of course. There had been something different about him, something that led the baterra to spare his life. Once he realized that, the answer was blindingly obvious.

I wasn’t armed, he thought. These creatures are killing warriors on every side. Their definition of “warrior” is anyone who has a weapon.

Now, here he was, years later, apparently the only being that had made this connection. The Skrall would never figure it out on their own, and even if they did, they would never want to do it — they would cut off their arms before they would lay their weapons down. When he saw Tuma and Stronius both unconscious, he had ditched his ice axe and rushed down, kicking their weapons well away from them. That brought the baterra up short, since their programming did not include attacking unarmed beings.

“You owe me,” said Metus. “I think it’s time we discussed payment.”

“Our deal stands,” Tuma growled. “Do not go too far, Agori.”

“Really? All right, then I can always bring the baterra back here. You can try negotiating with them. Or you can talk to me, like a… civilized warlord.”

Stronius was waking up. Metus decided he better wrap this conversation up fast. Stronius would snap him in half whether it was in the Skrall’s best interest or not.
“Listen, you’re a great and powerful leader,” the Agori said. “You’re going to be the ruler of Bara Magna pretty soon, and with my help, you’re going to wipe out the baterra. But just in case something should go wrong… if you were killed in battle, say… someone should be ready to step into your boots, don’t you think?”

“If a leader falls, an elite warrior takes over,” Tuma replied, already not liking where this was going.

Metus laughed. “Stronius? Please. The guy couldn’t lead a Spikit to dinner. And I won’t work with him, meaning the baterra carve your last legion to bits. No, I was thinking more of… me.”

Now it was Tuma’s turn to howl with laughter. “You?! You are no Skrall, just a miserable traitor to his own kind. Perhaps I should hand you over to the Agori and leave you to their justice, Metus.”

Metus crossed his arms over his chest. When he spoke, his voice had none of its usual bluster. It was cold and flat. “Those are my terms. If you get killed or become unfit to lead, the legion answers to me. Otherwise, just kill me now, Tuma. My death will only come a little earlier than yours and that of the rest of your warriors.”

“They will never accept it,” said Tuma. “They will never take orders from an Agori.”

Metus chuckled. “If you go down, things will be so desperate they would even take orders from a lummox like Stronius. Anyway, you let me worry about that. Do we have a deal?”

“For now,” Tuma said. “But once the baterra are defeated…”

“I’m on my own,” Metus finished for him. “I got it. Well, don’t be concerned – all of this will be over soon, and nothing’s going to happen to you, right? You’re just humoring an Agori.”

“Yes,” Tuma agreed. “Yes, it will all be over. Everything… and everyone… ends in time.”

Metus smiled. He quickly retrieved his ice axe, and then happily “discovered” where the Skrall weapons had fallen. It had been a good day. Perhaps Tuma really would conquer the villages and the baterra in time, but the Skrall leader was in a dangerous profession. There was always the potential for accidents. Of course, it might be wise to include Stronius in the “accident” as well, if at all possible. The thought was a very entertaining one, and it kept him amused all the way back to Roxtus.

As for Tuma, his thoughts were his own. He would have to make a formal announcement to his legion, one they would have a hard time believing. But he would also give a whispered order to Stronius: if anything were to happen to him in battle, even a noble death at the hands of a Glatorian, the elite warrior was to immediately slay Metus.

Yes, everything ends, Tuma said to himself. But some endings are more painful than others, my Agori friend. Pray you never learn just how painful.

Tuma smiled and resolved to put the whole matter out of his mind for now. He had, after all, a world to win.
Now...

Makuta Teridax, in the huge robotic body that once belonged to Mata Nui, surveyed the world he stood upon. There was nothing but water for as far as the eye could see — and when one is 40 million feet tall, reflected Makuta, one can see quite far.

It was, he decided, quite a dull world. Oh, it was true that beneath the surface of the vast ocean, escaped prisoners of the Pit still struggled to survive. But they were so unimportant as to be beneath the notice of so great and powerful a being as himself. While it was true he could not affect their fates in the same way that he could one of the living things that dwelled inside his body — the Toa, Matoran, etc. — his new body had enough power to vaporize this ocean, if need be. Perhaps he would do it before he left this world, just for amusement.

And make no mistake — he would be leaving this planet of endless sea. There were other worlds out there, teeming with life, waiting to be conquered. Why should he be satisfied with ruling a “universe” inside this body, when he could master a true universe of planets and suns and stars? This robot body had the power to lay waste to cities, to shatter mountains, and yet Mata Nui had never used any of it. Well, Makuta would not be so foolish.

Naturally, there would be preparations to be made. He would need to extinguish any last bits of rebellion within the universe of the Matoran first. It would be stupid to risk some critical breakdown in his systems in the middle of a war, just because some tribe of Matoran decided to value the concept of freedom over the hard, cold facts of death. When this was done, Makuta would beckon to the red star above and begin his journey.

The thought sparked another, an even more wonderful idea. He had expelled the Mask of Life from inside him, with the mind of Mata Nui trapped in the mask. The powerful Kanohi had gone flying into space, perhaps to burn up, or shatter against an asteroid… or, somehow, to find refuge on some other world. Though far away, it was still a part of this body, and Makuta knew he could find it again. He could track it down, no matter where, and extinguish any flickers of hope that Mata Nui might be feeling. The mask and all its powers were a dust mote in Makuta’s eyes now, and he would prove it by crushing it to powder with his armored heel.

It was a pleasant fantasy, but there were realities that had to be dealt with first. He had sensed the presence of another Makuta among the Matoran, which should have been impossible. All the other Makuta had been slain, either by him or by Order of Mata Nui agents. Well, that was not strictly true, he supposed… Miserix was still alive, though that former leader of the Makuta did not know it. As far as Teridax’s old enemy knew, he had been changed into a two-dimensional drawing on a wall, and that was how everyone else saw him too. In the old days, it would have taken a considerable amount of energy to maintain such a successful illusion, especially for another Makuta. But with his powers amplified by his new form, it was practically effortless.
But the Makuta he sensed was not Miserix. No, it was one who was totally unfamiliar… and yet disturbingly familiar at the same time. And since he could not be an existing one, nor one who was just created, there was only one answer.

*He has come from another dimension. My enemies have recruited a Makuta to use against me. How… enterprising of them. I must give their new recruit a proper welcome.*

Mazeka and his newfound Makuta ally found themselves in an uninhabited portion of the southern continent. The valley they stood in was actually quite lush and beautiful, but Mazeka remembered well the tales of this place. The tall grasses that swayed in the light breeze were guardians of this place. They could sense movement and responded by wrapping themselves around the offending foreign object and strangling it. The remains would then be pulled underground and the valley would go back to looking beautiful and unspoiled.

“Stay still,” he advised the white-armored Makuta beside him. This was an alternate universe version of Makuta Teridax, from a world where the Makuta had never gone bad. In return for agreeing to leave his old enemy Vultraz there, he had been given the opportunity to bring one inhabitant of that dimension back with him. He had chosen that world’s Teridax, hoping the double would be able to predict the actions of the original.

“We have such things in our world too,” said the alternate Teridax. “We know how to deal with them.”

As Mazeka watched, darkness began to creep over the valley. Wherever it passed, the grasses withered and died. “Wait a minute,” said Mazeka, suddenly suspicious. “You told me that Makuta in your world had banished all trace of shadow from inside them. How can you control the darkness then?”

The alternate Teridax gave a whisper of a smile. “I cannot. But I can absorb the light… and what is darkness, but the absence of light? And now, I believe we have someplace else we need to be.”

Walking down the now darkened path, the two allies made their way out of the valley as their quest truly began…

Toa Tuyet could hardly believe her good fortune. Thousands of beings she might have encountered in this universe, and she had found two who did not remember her or her deeds. That would make things so much easier.

Her momentary weakness, the result of a difficult journey to get here, had passed. Now she walked through the Archives behind the two Matoran, Kapura and Macku, listening to them talk. It had not taken her long to grasp the situation here. Her old fears had been proven right. The Makuta had rebelled against Mata Nui and now controlled this universe. *If Lhikan and Nidhiki had listened to me, none of this would have happened… because there would have been no Makuta left alive,* she thought.

How well she recalled how it had all come about. She had been a Toa in Metru Nui, millennia ago. Using a powerful artifact called a Nui Stone, she had tried to make herself mighty enough to destroy those she perceived as threats to peace – the Dark Hunters and the Makuta. She knew other Toa, like Lhikan, would object to her plans, so she had to keep it all a secret.

Unfortunately, it could not stay hidden for long. Dark Hunters arrived in Metru Nui, seeking the Nui Stone they believed she had. To neutralize them, she framed them for murders of Matoran that she herself had committed. Toa Lhikan and Toa Nidhiki captured the Dark Hunters, but later tumbled to the fact that she was the murderer and had the Stone. In the ensuing battle, the stone was shattered and she was captured.

The Toa locked her up in the Coliseum until they could decide what to do with her. One night, a golden figure appeared in her cell, identifying himself as Botar of the Order of Mata Nui. He told her what she had already figured out for herself: pieces of the Nui Stone were embedded in her body now, making her a living battery of Toa power. No conventional prison would be able to hold her for long, not as long as there were Toa anywhere around from whom she could drain power. But the Order wanted more
than a more efficient way to lock her up – they wanted the secret of the Nui Stone so they could make more.

This was an effort so secret that only the highest ranks in the Order knew about it. So a complicated plot ensued. Botar teleported Tuyet to another dimension, one where no Toa existed for her Nui Stone to drain. To keep this concealed from lower-ranking Order members, a second Tuyet – from yet another dimension – was taken to the Pit in her place. This double was even altered so that she had crystals embedded in her, although not from a Nui Stone. She would remain in the Pit, while the original Tuyet would be locked up and interrogated about the nature of the Stone.

For 1500 years, the Order tried to pry the secret of the Stone out of her, with no success. All the while, she plotted her escape. Working on one of her guards, she managed to convince him of the justice of her cause (after all, the Order disliked Dark Hunters and Makuta as much as she did). Finally, the guard was sufficiently on her side to help her fake her own death in an explosion. Believing her body was vaporized, the Order didn’t bother to search for her. Meanwhile, she used technology from that dimension to escape.

With no map, it took her two thousand years to make it back to her own universe… two thousand years filled with visiting worlds teeming with Toa from whom she could draw strength. Finally, she found a way back home, ending up in the Metru Nui Archives.

As for what had happened to her double in the Pit, she had no idea. She supposed the Order would know, and one day, if she was bored, she would squeeze the information out of them. But for now, she had bigger tasks ahead of her.

Tuyet had no doubt she could organize and lead a successful rebellion against Teridax and bring him down. But she had no intention of allowing Mata Nui to regain control. Thousands of years to think about it had convinced her that Mata Nui was weak, or he would have wiped out the Makuta himself long ago. No, what this universe needed was a ruler who was strong, decisive, unafraid to do what had to be done.

*      *      *

Someone like me, she said to herself. Yes, someone very much like me.

*      *      *

The all-too familiar blurring of reality and wave of nausea struck Vezon. He really did have to find a way to control this new power, if for no other reason than it was starting to make him feel really sick. He wasn’t sure how beings like Brutaka managed to move between dimensions all the time without losing their sanity… then again, like Vezon, maybe Brutaka didn’t have that much sanity to lose?

Anyway, here he was. He was here. Which, of course, begged the question – where was “here,” this time? The Kanohi Olmak that had become fused to his substance opened dimensional gates the way Matoran open gift boxes on Naming Day, and it was impossible to predict where one might end up.

He looked down. There was sand under his feet. In fact, there was sand in every direction. At first, he thought he was on a beach, but there was no water nearby. He could see trees and buildings in the distance, though, so he started walking in that direction.

The desert, as it turned out, was not very big. It gave way to a lush jungle, filled with a number of beings doing one of those things Vezon did his best to avoid: hard work. Some were obviously Le-Matoran… the others, Vezon did not recognize, though they had the look of villagers. He hated villagers. They were so… industrious.

One of the villagers loped over to him, using his arms as forelegs. He looked up at Vezon and said, smiling, “Are you a friend of Mata Nui?”

Vezon performed a complicated and challenging feat – he didn’t laugh. “Why, yes, little… whatever you are. I am.”

“Are you a Toa, then?”

“Nothing but,” Vezon said, giving his best “noble and heroic” smile.

“Come on, then,” the villager said, dashing off. “You’re late.”

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Intrigued, Vezon followed along behind. This place had a Mata Nui and Toa, so it had to be something like home. But who were these other little runts? And just where was he?

“Um, excuse me, villager,” Vezon began.

“Tarduk!” the villager shouted back at him. Vezon ducked, like he was told, but saw no sign of any tar flying through the air. It took him a moment that it wasn’t “Tar, duck!” he had heard.

“Right. Whatever. Where am I?” said Vezon.

Tarduk paused and looked over his shoulder. “Oh, you must be from up north. This is Tesara. Now, hurry up, please – Gresh and Toa Kongu need more help.”

Gresh? Vezon said to himself. What’s a Gresh? But Kongu… him, I know.

They pushed their way through some undergrowth, and Vezon stopped short. There were Toa – a lot of them – and some other warriors he didn’t recognize. They were repairing a huge, metallic shelter. Jaller was using his fire power to weld shut a seam, while a female in blue armor urged him to hurry up. She wasn’t a Toa of Water, at least Vezon didn’t think so – Toa of Water usually weren’t that pushy.

Vezon knew he shouldn’t go into the clearing – after all, he wasn’t extremely popular with Toa. Then again, if they saw him and attacked, it might make things interesting. It had been all of two days since someone had tried to kill him, and he was getting antsy.

Head held high, he marched up to where the Toa were working. A few nodded in his direction. One smiled. One Toa of Stone even waved! Vezon decided that he really hated this place.

“So who are you, exactly?” asked Tarduk.

“My name is… ah… Toa Vezon,” he said, loud enough for all the Toa to hear. “I’m the Toa of… of… Anarchy.”

Tarduk frowned. “Okay. I see. We were really hoping for Ice… gets pretty hot doing this work.”

Vezon looked around. No one had reacted at all to his name… not even Jaller. Was it possible – ? No, it was too horrible to think about. Such a tragedy, such a loss, was beyond comprehension. But he had to face the fact:

This universe didn’t have a Vezon. It had never had one. Otherwise, surely someone would be shooting at him by now.

“We don’t get a lot of, um, news up north,” he said to Tarduk. “What exactly goes on here?”

“You don’t know?” said Tarduk. “Well, I suppose I should send you over to see Takua, but I think he is up in Roxtus today. It’s pretty simple really – the Great Beings, through Mata Nui, made things right around here. Then Mata Nui went up north, and a few months later, the Toa and Matoran and all the rest showed up.”

“And what happened to Mata Nui?”

Tarduk shrugged. “Tahu Nuva said something about the Valley of the Maze and power going back where it belonged. I didn’t catch too much of it. I’ve never been one for history, you know?”

Vezon turned at the sound of marching feet. A tall figure, unmistakably a Makuta, was leading a column of black-armored warriors in a drill.

“They’re early,” said Tarduk. “Ever since Tuma got deposed and the Makuta took over the Skrall, they’ve been nothing if not efficient. I’m glad they’re on our side!”

A few more questions spelled things out for Vezon, or at least came close to it. In this universe, the Makuta had never rebelled against Mata Nui. The Great Spirit had been allowed to proceed with his mission – whatever that was – without incident. After it was finished, he let at least some of the Toa and Matoran leave and live with the natives. That included the Makuta, who had smashed the ambitions of some local warlord but held onto the army.

Vezon was wondering what they even needed an army for in such a happy, peaceful, idyllic, mind-numbingly boring place as this when his question was answered, in very dramatic fashion. Coming over the dunes in the distance was an army, marching right for Tesara. Some of them he recognized – other Skakdi, like the Piraka, Roodaka and her Vortixx, and Makuta Miserix in dragon form. The black-armored riders on the two-legged reptiles were new to Vezon, but he doubted they had come to deliver fruit baskets.
“It’s an attack!” yelled Tarduk. “Quick, Toa Vezon – go help the Makuta. Use your power. I’ll get the others.”

*Use my power. Right, thought Vezon. My power is to get the heck out of here. I just have to figure out how to turn it on.*

The invaders smashed through the ranks of the Skrall warriors and headed for the village. The Skakdi in the lead hurled torches, setting the jungle ablaze.

*Now would be a really good time for a dimensional gate to… anywhere! Vezon said to himself. Come on. Come on! I don’t want to die in a universe where I never lived… who will remember me, then?*

But the power of the Olmak was strangely absent. And all Vezon could do was stand and watch as an onrushing horde surged toward him…
Over 100,000 years ago...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Great Spirit.
Now...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, he wondered, a map of what?

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

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

“By the Great Beings, I have had enough of this,” Mata Nui growled. His voice echoed off the peaks all around.
Amazingly, there came an answer. The words came from the fortress, though there was no sign of anyone to speak them. They floated through the air on a whisper so soft he almost missed it over the sound of the breeze.

“What do you seek?”

Mata Nui took two quick strides forward and stared up at the fortress. “Entrance,” he said. There was a long silence. Then the voice repeated, “What do you seek?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right,” said Kiina. “So I owe him... and I pay my debts. With or without you, I’m going after him.”

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

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

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll get supplies. You find Gresh. He’s going to want to come too.”

Ackar started to turn away, but Kiina reached out to stop him. When he turned back to her, he saw real fear in her eyes.
“Do you think he’s okay?” she asked. “I mean, he couldn’t be… you know… could he?”
“If anyone can come back out of those mountains in one piece, it’s Mata Nui,” Ackar answered.
“So let’s make sure we’re there to greet him.”

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

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

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

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

Mata Nui rose. “I seek… unity!” he shouted.

“What is your burden?” the mysterious voice asked.

“Duty,” answered Mata Nui.

“What brings you life, and death?”

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Vezon had had better days. His newfound ability to travel to other dimensions had landed him on an alternate world called Spherus Magna, where Makuta, Toa, and some other race called Agori were happily living together. Well, mostly – a pretty good sized army of Skakdi, Vortixx, and Spherus Magna natives was headed right for the village in which Vezon stood.

It seemed a good time to leave. But Vezon had not yet achieved any mastery over the powers of the Kanohi Olmak that had been merged with him. It didn’t work just because he wanted it to, and right now, he was starting to wish he had never seen the miserable thing to start with.
For the sixth time in the last minute, he willed the Olmak’s power to take him away from this reality before the onrushing horde trampled him underfoot. This time, he felt the now familiar sensation of dizziness that preceded a dimension jump, and saw the world waver around him. But then something happened that had never happened before: everyone around him froze in place. When he tried to reach out and touch a Toa, his hand passed right through. Worst of all, he wasn’t “traveling” – he seemed to be stuck in a realm of statues.

“This is better than being killed,” he said to himself. “Not much better, but better.”

His addled mind ran through all the possible scenarios. This wasn’t much help, as he knew next to nothing about Masks of Power or how to repair them. If something had gone wrong with the Olmak, he might well be stuck forever.

“Would that be so bad? The voice was in his head – this wasn’t an unusual experience for Vezon, although normally the voices he heard were his own.

“If it doesn’t get any more entertaining than this, yes,” Vezon replied. “Who am I speaking to?”

My given name wouldn’t mean anything to you. The people of Spherus Magna would call me a “Great Being.”

“And what makes you so great?”

I do not speak to the beings of this world. They never see me, or hear me, and so it is left to their imaginations to conjure what I am like, how I think, and what I believe. The imagination has an infinite capacity to fill in the blanks with what it wants to be there.

“That’s nice,” said Vezon, impatiently. “Can you help me get out of this situation?”

Why would I? I got you into it. My people created the first Masks of Power. We certainly know how to shut one off. You don’t belong here… in fact, I strongly suspect you don’t belong anywhere. And so, now you are nowhere.

“Is this what Great Beings do all day? Stick their phantom noses into things that don’t concern them and get in the way of a perfectly good lunatic rampage through realities?” asked Vezon.

I am, perhaps, not a typical Great Being, the voice replied. Eons ago, I made the error of touching the Mask of Life. As a result, everything around me – furniture, equipment, rays of light – came to life. For their own safety, my fellow rulers imprisoned me. Now all I need fear are my living chains… living blocks of stone… and the screams of light as the darkness extinguishes it.

Vezon didn’t know anything about what pains a living light might feel, but he did know a light at the end of the tunnel when he saw one.

“So you’re in prison, and so am I. Would you set me free… if I could set you free?”

The voice in Vezon’s head was silent for a long time.

Lewa stood stock still. Artakha had teleported him into a cavern, but he was not alone there. No, evidently he was sharing it with some being named Tren Krom… and something told Lewa he really didn’t want to get a look at his host.

“Turn,” Tren Krom said again. His telepathic “voice” reminded Lewa of a nest of slithering borer worms.

“I am ever-fine right here, thanks,” said Lewa. “Artakha said —”

I can guess why you have come, Toa, Tren Krom replied. I too heard the voice of Makuta Teridax coming from every corner of the universe. But what would you have me do? I have knowledge that could be used as a weapon against him, but knowledge without the experience to use it is less than useless. And I am bound to this island by the Great Beings, unable to venture forth.

“And if the Great Beings did it, I doubt I have the power to quick-free you,” said Lewa. “So this journey was another waste of time.”

Perhaps… and perhaps, said Tren Krom. There may be a way. But it would involve great risk… and success, for you, might be worse than failure.
“Everyone I care about is at risk,” Lewa answered. “Everything that matters to me has been poisoned by Makuta’s corruption. I’ll do whatever it takes to stop him.”

**You may live to regret your choice,** said Tren Krom. **But the choice has been made just the same.**

Lewa felt a tentacle wrap around his neck. His arms went up to tear it away, then stopped halfway there. The next instant, the world began to spin and he felt as if his insides were being yanked out a piece at a time. There was light and pain and impenetrable darkness. And when the shadows cleared away, Lewa was staring at… himself.

He looked down, for only a micro-second, long enough to see a huge tentacled mass grafted to stone. Instinctively, he knew that was Tren Krom’s body – and his mind was inside it.

“Freedom.” The word came from Lewa’s mouth, in Lewa’s voice, but it was spoken by Tren Krom. “After so long, I have a body again… a strong, powerful body that can take me from this wretched place… thanks to you.”

Lewa tried to speak and couldn’t. At first, he panicked. Then he recalled that Tren Krom had spoken to him telepathically. He concentrated and his words echoed in “Lewa’s” brain.

**What have you done? I didn’t quick-agree to this!**

“You said ‘whatever it takes,’” Tren Krom replied. “This is what it took. But do not fear – I will honor our bargain. I will use what I know to stop Teridax. All I ask in return is freedom. Is a life spent in exile here so high a price to pay for the safety of all you know and love?”

Before Lewa could form an answer, Tren Krom – in the body of the Toa Nuva of Air – had left the cave. Lewa tried to pursue, but the great bulk of this body was a part of the island itself. He could not move.

**And if I don’t find a way to get my body back,** he said to himself, **I’m going to be ever-trapped here for good.**
“Help… me…” the Agori croaked.

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

“I can’t… I can’t believe you did that,” gasped Tarduk. “I thought I was cooked.”

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

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

“You go,” said Mata Nui. “I came here for answers and I’m going to get them.”

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

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

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

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

“Incredible,” said Tarduk.

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

“Incredible isn’t the word,” muttered Mata Nui. “It’s impossible.”

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

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

“How do you know?”

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

“Into that!” Tarduk said, shocked. “You’ll be killed!”
“I don’t think so,” Mata Nui said, already walking toward the eruption. “I think I was meant to go in there… or someone was.”

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

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

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

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

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

Next to the plans was a blank screen. Mata Nui reached out and brushed his fingertips against it and it flared to life. A series of images flashed by at mind-numbing speed: schematics, calculations, notes, details of design and construction. It all went so quickly it was impossible to consciously focus on any one thing, yet Mata Nui could feel the knowledge flowing into his mind just the same. It was overwhelming and painful, but he endured. This is what he had come here for — this was his origin story.

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

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

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

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

Now it all became clear to him. He had been on his way back from his exploration of the universe, heading for Bara Magna, when he was attacked from within by the evil Makuta. Rendered unconscious, he crashed into the ocean of Aqua Magna. The impact had temporarily damaged the memory core of the robot, causing him to forget his mission. Even when he was reawakened by a band of heroes called Toa, he had been without purpose. Before he could initiate self-repair and retrieve the knowledge he needed, Makuta had seized control of the robot and exiled Mata Nui’s consciousness into space. By chance or design, he had ended up on Bara Magna, his original destination.
He was armed with the knowledge he needed at last, but staggered by its implications as well. To achieve his mission, he needed his original body, or something close to it. More, the task of reconstructing the planet required the power of not one, but two robots.

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

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

“What’s the matter?”

He turned at the sound. It was Tarduk, who had followed him in despite Mata Nui’s orders. Being smaller and more agile, the Agori had had no trouble navigating through the jungle of iron and wires. Seeing no reason to keep it secret, Mata Nui laid out what he had learned. Tarduk listened intently. When the tale was done, the Agori walked over and pointed up to the plans.

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

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

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

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

The “volcano” was a power plant.

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

“Then there might be a second power source,” finished Tarduk. “It’s worth searching for, right?”

* * *

Tren Krom stood on the shore of what had been “his” island for so many thousands of years – his home, his prison, his place of torment. For almost as long as he could remember, he had been trapped here by the power of the Great Beings. By all rights, he should hate them and their creation, Mata Nui, and want revenge.

Strangely, he did not. Yes, he had raged against his imprisonment and vowed vengeance more than once. But as time passed, he grew wiser, recalling the old saying that “no one fights in a burning house.” Pulling down the Great Beings’ creation would not profit him at all. In fact, it would mean his death as well. And, despite having been pushed aside for Mata Nui more than 100,000 years ago, Tren Krom still felt a sense of responsibility for the universe he once looked after.

That was why he had tricked Toa Nuva Lewa into swapping bodies with him, so he could escape the island at last. What he hadn’t counted on was that he would not get Lewa’s power over air in the bargain. Without this, and with no boat or air vehicle, he had no way to leave the shore. Still, that was no worry. He knew who had sent Lewa to him, and so he knew the answer to his problem.

Artakha, hear me.

It was a telepathic message projected over an unimaginable distance. Yet the answer came within seconds.

I am here, Tren Krom. I see you are still… resourceful.

The body will be of use, Tren Krom conceded, but only if I can travel in it to Metru Nui. You can make that happen.

And should I unleash you on the universe, then? wondered Artakha. The Great Beings bound you for a reason, so that Mata Nui could rule with no rivals.

Tren Krom cursed. Stop wringing your hands, you ancient fool. If you did not need me free, why did you send the Toa? You knew what I would do.
Artakha sent no message back. Instead, the world around Tren Krom began to shimmer and fade. When his vision was clear again, he was standing in a subterranean tunnel filled with a collection of broken equipment and dust-covered artifacts. He had never physically been to this place before, but he knew what it was: the Metru Nui Archives.

My thanks, he thought.
Artakha’s reply was stern. See that you carry out your end of the bargain, Tren Krom. And do not even think of keeping a body that is not yours. I will find a way to destroy it before I will let you steal it for all eternity.
Tren Krom ignored him. He was more concerned with finding his way to where he needed to go before Makuta Teridax acted to stop him. The Archives were a labyrinth of tunnels and none of the minds he had read recently knew the layout. He reached out, looking for a sapient being nearby who might know how to navigate the maze.
He found something else entirely. His mind brushed against another, one of incredibly strong will and ambition. Before he could probe deeper, he heard figures approaching. Readyng Toa Lewa’s weapon, Tren Krom braced for an attack.
“Lewa! Look, it’s Toa Lewa!”
The happy cry came from a Matoran villager. A quick scan of his mind revealed his name was Kapura, and his companion was Hafu. But it was the blue-armored female that traveled with them that most intrigued Tren Krom.
“Isn’t it great, Hafu? Now we have two Toa with us – Lewa and Tuyet.”
Tuyet? Tren Krom took the time to read her mind, being none too subtle about it. He saw her past efforts to take over the universe, and her plans to try again in future. This one was powerful and dangerous… but she might be useful, as well.
For her part, Tuyet just smiled. She knew this was no Toa of Air who stood before her. She had never met Lewa Nuva, but no Air warrior wearing a Mask of Levitation had the kind of mental powers she sensed. So who was this, really, and why was he disguising himself as a Toa Nuva?
“If you are opposed to Makuta, then your help would be very… ever-liked,” Tren Krom said, hastily adding in some treespeak for the benefit of the Matoran.
“I’m sure,” said Toa Tuyet. “You have a plan, I take it?”
“If I did not, I am sure you would,” Tren Krom replied, looking her right in the eyes. “Perhaps we can… quick-help… each other?”
“What a break,” Kapura said, smiling. “Don’t you think so, Hafu?”
The Po-Matoran looked from Toa Tuyet, who he didn’t trust, to Lewa Nuva, who didn’t seem like himself. “Yeah. Wonderful,” he muttered.

The small group waited until nightfall. Then they slipped out of the Archives, heading for the Coliseum. Along the way, they passed Toa Pouks and Toa Bomonga casually strolling through the city as if nothing was wrong.
“Who are they?” asked Tuyet. “Traitors to the Toa cause?”
“They’re the Toa Hagah,” Kapura explained. “Something happened to them… no one knows what. But they walk right past Rahkshi like the monsters aren’t even there.” He shrugged.
Intrigued, Tren Krom touched the minds of the two Toa Hagah. Ah, he thought, a simple trick. Teridax made these Toa see a false reality where all is peace and serenity. For them, it’s an iron-clad illusion they could never break free of on their own. But for me…
A fraction of Tren Krom’s mental power tore Makuta’s artificial reality to bits. Pouks and Bomonga shook their heads, as if waking from a dream. Even as he restored them to the real world, Tren Krom sent his power cascading to the minds of the other Toa Hagah, freeing them as well.
“Perhaps fortune will smile on Metru Nui, and these Toa will return to their senses soon,” Tren Krom said. “Time will tell.”
“It usually does,” said Tuyet. “What will time tell about us, I wonder?”
Tren Krom looked at her. “Hopefully, nothing either of us would regard with shame.”
“Oh, no, of course not,” she replied, with a chuckle.
“Where are we going?” asked Hafu. “And do I really want to know?”
Tren Krom pointed to the Coliseum. “There. I have a message for Mata Nui. It may mean the difference between life and death for everyone.”
“Mata Nui?” asked Hafu, incredulous. “But Mata Nui isn’t there. Makuta Teridax exiled him from the universe, maybe killed him. How are you going to get a message to him? And what could he do to help us now, anyway?”
Tren Krom looked at the Po-Matoran. A strange smile came to Lewa Nuva’s mouth, the corners of it bent at an odd angle. “The answer to both those questions is the same… you would be surprised, Hafu. Very surprised.”
Raanu, elder of the city, looked at Mata Nui as if his guest had just transformed into a sand bat. “Ridiculous. Insane. Impossible!” he said, his voice rising. “How could you even ask such a thing??”

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

Ackar, Kiina and Gresh shifted uncomfortably behind their friend. Mata Nui had explained what he needed and why, but even to them it sounded bizarre, if not mad. But their faith in their friend outweighed their doubts. If Mata Nui said he had to do this, then they would help in any way they could. Raanu looked at the three Glatorian in disbelief. “You stand with him. Don’t tell me you support this… this… this lunacy?”

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

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

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

“Very well,” the elder said. “We’ll go now. But I make no promises.”

“I don’t ask for any,” Mata Nui assured him.

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

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

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

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

“You’re right. They did create it,” Mata Nui replied. Even having seen it before, the image of the robot body stretched out across the sand still shook him. “But something went wrong. It exploded, raining parts all over the desert. And they stayed scattered until the Agori brought them together again.”
“You haven’t answered my question,” Raanu said. “So it’s a failed experiment. It’s also our home and our only protection against our enemies. What does it have to do with you?”

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

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

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

“Are you sure you have to do this?” asked Gresh. “There’s no other way?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gresh’s eyes widened. He looked at Mata Nui as if he had never seen him before.

“You mean you…?”

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

“And did you?” asked Ackar.

“No,” replied Mata Nui. “That wasn’t why I was created.”

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

Ackar turned to Gresh. “How about you, kid?”

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

“Gresh!” Ackar snapped.

“It’s all right,” said Mata Nui. “Let him have his say.”

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

“That’s enough,” said Ackar.

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

Gresh hesitated.

“Take it,” Mata Nui repeated.

Again, Gresh made no move to do so. Mata Nui finally put the sword back in its sheath. “Then help me,” he said to Gresh. “Or else get out of my way.”
Not far away, Raanu sat in his chamber, deep in thought. He had half-expected this day to come ever since the villages had been united. After all, he knew far more about the Great Beings’ creations than anyone else suspected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who?” asked Raanu, annoyed. “Don’t think you can trick me–”

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

Raanu had never felt the burden of leadership rest quite as heavy on his shoulders as it did right now. It would be easy to dismiss Mata Nui as lying or insane and forget the whole thing. The problem was he knew it would be an injustice. Mata Nui wasn’t crazy, or being deceitful, he realized. The warrior was genuinely afraid for himself and Bara Magna. And if a being who faced down an entire Skrall legion on his own felt fear, there had to be a good reason for it.

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

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

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

*      *      *

Toa Helryx had made a decision.

Alone in her prison, with only the thoughts of Makuta Teridax and a portrait of Makuta Miserix for company, she’d had time to think. Teridax had made a point of telling her what he planned to do – harness the power of the Great Spirit’s body and use it to conquer worlds. She had no doubt he could do it, too, unless he was stopped.

But how?

The obvious answer lay with the Matoran. There was an obvious connection between their labors and the health of the mechanical in which they lived. Simply put, if they stopped working, the robot would die, and Makuta Teridax with it. The problem was that Teridax would not tolerate a strike. No doubt he would slaughter some Matoran, in particularly agonizing ways, until the rest gave in. Brave as they were, the Matoran couldn’t be counted on to stand firm in the face of their friends’ suffering.

There was, of course, another problem too. The robot’s death would inevitably mean the death of everyone that lived inside it – Matoran, Toa, Vortixx, Skakdi, everyone. The planet outside had no known land masses, and so no place to flee to. The inhabitants of the Matoran Universe would suffocate or freeze in the darkness.

As leader of the Order of Mata Nui, Helryx had often had to make decisions that sent agents to their deaths. It came with the job. But could she make a decision that would send an entire universe to its grave?

Yes, as it turned out. She could.

Teridax had to be stopped before he killed or enslaved billions of innocents in the universe beyond. She wasn’t certain she could bring him down, but she had to try. Her prison was near a sensitive area, whose destruction might be enough to slay the Makuta. A nova blast using her water power might do enough damage. Even if all she could do was cripple him, perhaps others could finish him off.

She closed her eyes and drew upon all her power. If she had any doubt or regrets, she pushed them aside. Helryx would do what she had always done: whatever was necessary.

An impossibly loud pounding broke her concentration. Had Teridax already discovered what she was about to do?

The next moment, a wall caved in. Stepping through the rubble were two Matoran, Toa Nuva Lewa, and a figure Helryx never thought she would see again: Toa Tuyet.

“You!” the Order leader snapped. “What are you doing here?”

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“You’re welcome,” Tuyet replied. “I had no idea you were locked up here, Helryx. Poetic justice, considering how your kind imprisoned me for centuries, isn’t it?”

Helryx looked to Lewa. Tuyet, free, was potentially a terrible menace. Perhaps if she and the Toa Nuva of Air acted quickly, they could take the rogue Toa down. But Lewa was paying no attention to Helryx. Instead, he seemed to be fixated on the picture of Miserix. Makuta Teridax had transformed his old enemy into a painting on the wall in a unique and nasty act of murder.

“Lewa? What are you doing?” she asked.

The Toa of Air ignored her. Instead, he muttered, “Interesting. Not dead, but so convinced that he is that he might as well be.”

“Don’t mind him,” said Tuyet. “He’s not this Lewa. I’m not sure who he is, only that he knew how to get us here. And now that we are here, I am sure I can find some way to use our arrival to my advantage.”

Helryx glanced back at Lewa. The Toa of Air had his eyes closed and was reaching out with his right hand. But no cyclone erupted from his outstretched palm. In fact, nothing was happening at all.

And then, suddenly, something did.

The portrait of Miserix warped, as if it was folding in on itself. An instant later, Makuta Miserix himself stood in the chamber, in full reptilian glory. The Makuta looked dazed at first, then his eyes filled with rage.

“Where is Teridax?” he bellowed, so loud the walls shook.

“Well,” said Tuyet. “That was a surprise.”

“Shut up,” Helryx barked, “all of you.” She turned to the two Matoran. “Hafu, Kapura… this is no place for you. Go back to Metru Nui and get word to the resistance. Tell them to be prepared to act, and tell them… to make their peace with the Great Spirit and each other.”

Hafu took a step forward, ready to argue for staying. But Kapura laid a hand on his arm and shook his head. There was no fight coming that they could be a part of… somehow, he knew that this Toa of Water was talking about the end of everything.

Now it was Lewa Nuva’s turn to speak. “A message must be sent. Mata Nui must be prepared.”

“Who are you?” demanded Helryx.

“You knew of me as Tren Krom,” said the Toa. “Like Tuyet, I am recently escaped from my prison. Now I have a task to perform.”

He advanced past Helryx, walked to a wall panel, and tore it off. A small bank of machinery had been hidden behind it. As he started to manipulate the controls, Helryx, Tuyet and Miserix all moved to stop him.

“Hold!”

Everyone in the room whirled to see who had spoken. Standing in the opened wall were Brutaka and Axonn. Brutaka was levitating and a greenish aura surrounded him. Axonn’s left arm hung useless at his side. Both looked like they had been through a war.

“Tren Krom must do what he set out to do,” Brutaka said. “The three must be one. This universe must live so that a world can be whole once more.”

“This universe must die, and Teridax with it!” Helryx replied. “Axonn, Brutaka, I order you to subdue these three.”

Brutaka smiled. “We no longer take orders from you, Toa Helryx. We take our orders from destiny.”

“Just so you know,” Axonn added, “Brutaka’s his own ‘we’ these days. Long story.”

Tuyet had stopped paying attention. She was eavesdropping on Tren Krom. Whatever message he was sending was for the most part not an audible one, but now and then he would mutter something she could catch. So far, she had heard the words “Ignika” and “golden armor.” Both were intriguing, to say the least.

“Enough talk,” growled Miserix. “Teridax is inhabiting this metal shell, and that means it gets destroyed, along with anyone who gets in the way.”
“Don’t start something you can’t finish,” warned Tuyet. “I may have use for this universe.”
“Brutaka, maybe Helryx is right,” said Axonn. “Maybe this is the only sure way of stopping Teridax.
Maybe it’s what Mata Nui would want us to do.”

Before the startled eyes of Kapura and Hafu, battle lines were drawn. On one side stood Helryx, Miserix and Axonn – on the other, Tuyet, Lewa Nuva, and Brutaka.

“If it must be, it must,” said Brutaka. “To save this universe, then… Axonn, Helryx and Miserix must die.”
Months had passed since Makuta seized power in Mata Nui’s universe, and yet he had still not grown used to the energies that were now his to command. As he soared through the void of space, heading for Bara Magna, he thought about how it all began.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took 1000 years of patience, manipulation, and even a few feigned defeats for his plans to come to fruition. Badly damaged by the crash, Mata Nui finally died. A Toa named Matoro, wielding the Mask of Life, brought the robot back to life at the sacrifice of his own existence. But before Mata Nui’s spirit could return to his body, Makuta’s consciousness took control of the robot. Since no form could have two guiding spirits, Mata Nui now found himself barred from his own body.

Teridax’s revenge wasn’t done. He destroyed the rest of the Brotherhood of Makuta to make sure they could never recreate the virus that had downed Mata Nui. Then he forced Mata Nui’s spirit into the Mask of Life and ejected the mask into outer space.
At the time, Teridax had been confident he had seen the last of Mata Nui. He thought surely the mask would float endlessly through space, or be burned up by a sun, or shattered by an asteroid. He was wrong.

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

Mata Nui had to be destroyed.

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

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

How could anyone stand against him?

Tahu, Toa of fire, was frustrated and furious.

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

Since then, he had led a rebellion against his now far more powerful enemy. But despite some minor victories, he and his allies had been unable to truly harm Makuta. It ate at him. Here he was, a Toa – a hero – created to protect the Matoran villagers from harm. Yet he and his teammates had been unable to provide safety or security to any inhabitant of the universe. Now they were scattered, fighting skirmishes against Makuta’s armored warriors, the Rahkshi, and accomplishing nothing.

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

“What happened?” snapped Tahu. “Did they spot the trap?”

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

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

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

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

There was only one way to find out.

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

“Tahu, what if this is a trap? What if Makuta wants us to leave everyplace else defenseless?” asked Onua.
“If Makuta wanted to destroy all of us, plus every Matoran, he could do it in an instant,” said Tahu. “He doesn’t need tricks, not anymore. But if we can pen up his Rahkshi and wipe them out, maybe we can slow down whatever he has planned.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mazeka stood on a ridge. Down below, he could see the remains of a dead village. He recognized it as having once been home to a small group of Ba-Matoran, those whose element was gravity. It looked like it had been overrun some time ago, but there were no signs of any Matoran corpses. Perhaps the villagers escaped into the hills, he thought, or maybe they were just captured.

“Your universe is very… turbulent,” said Makuta Teridax. The white-armored warrior stood beside Mazeka. He came from an alternate universe in which the Makuta had never rebelled, but had instead stayed loyal to the Great Beings and helped save a world. He had come to this universe with Mazeka to try and free it from the control of his evil counterpart.

“That’s one word for it,” replied Mazeka. “It’s hard to remember a time in my life when I wasn’t fighting. I’ve been lucky. I’m still alive. Not sure that can be said about the Matoran who lived down there.”

“If they died, maybe it was a mercy,” said Teridax. “Maybe they are better off not seeing what their universe has come to.”

“Now you sound like our Teridax,” said Mazeka. “I guess you two aren’t as far apart as I’d like to think.”

Teridax shook his head. “A turn to the left instead of the right, a wound received or avoided, rising from slumber an hour too early or too late… these are the little things lifetimes hinge on, Mazeka. Your Teridax took a step on a path that circumstances allowed me to avoid. If circumstances had been different, who knows?”

“Meaning that if you took control of this universe instead of him…?”

“I might be just as wicked,” Teridax answered. “It is always a possibility.”

Around them, the winds rose. In a moment, they had gone from gentle breeze to a screaming maelstrom, so powerful it knocked Mazeka off his feet and sent him tumbling toward the edge of the ridge. Teridax fought to stay focused, ignoring the storm as he used his power to keep Mazeka from falling. But
the ground erupted beneath his feet, shattering his concentration. Mazeka fell down the slope, followed swiftly by Teridax.

They landed among the ruins. Mazeka’s impact shattered the long dead corpse of a Visorak into fine black powder. Teridax hit hard, but rolled with the fall and was back on his feet in an instant. Now that he looked around, he could see other bodies of Visorak spiders scattered here and there. The villagers who had lived here had gone down fighting.

Then a voice came from the dead mouths of the Visorak all around. Teridax recognized it as his own voice, but touched with madness and evil. “I see you have brought company, Mazeka… and such company.”

“It’s Makuta,” Mazeka said. “He’s found us.”

“Yes, I never noticed your entry, I must admit,” Makuta said through the dead spiders. “But did you really think a pale and weak version of myself could stop me now?”

“Weak?” said the white-armored Teridax. “Stronger, I say, for I resisted the temptations you could not.”

“Indeed. Then let us see just what you are capable of resisting.”

The air crackled with ozone, and then before Mazeka and Teridax’s eyes, three figures appeared. Each resembled Takanuva, the legendary Toa of Light, but their armor was jet black and shadow energy swirled about their hands.

“I have been a poor host, brother,” said the voice of Makuta. “Allow my new friends to welcome you properly to my universe.”

Helryx avoided Tuyet’s slashing attack and landed a side kick in her mid-section. The corrupt Toa of Water staggered backwards, only narrowly avoiding being accidentally struck by Brutaka. The battle had begun only moments before, but already the chamber in which they fought was a shambles.

The issue over which they fought was deadly serious. Helryx, Makuta Misrix, and Axonn had decided that Teridax’s control of the universe had to be ended, even if that meant destroying the universe itself. Tuyet, Brutaka and a possessed Lewa Nuva believed there was still hope of driving Makuta out without killing millions of Matoran in the process.

Misrix thought he would have the easiest opponent. He could sense that Lewa Nuva was not himself, but was under the control of another. Whoever that was, they had no access to the Toa’s air power. That would make him ripe for defeat.

Unfortunately, Lewa’s body was now home to Tren Krom, an ancient entity with enormous mental powers. Misrix’s first solid blow knocked Lewa to the ground. The fallen “Toa” responded with a mental shock blast that came close to turning Misrix’s brain to ash. Still, Misrix had been through a lot in the past millennia – imprisonment, torture, humiliation – and no mind power was going to be enough to stop him. He gathered Lewa up in his claw and slammed his foe against the wall, once, twice, three times.

Axonn’s heart wasn’t in this fight. He had only recently rediscovered Brutaka and regained their old friendship. He couldn’t believe they were already at each other’s throats again. And he wasn’t certain that Brutaka was wrong – maybe Helryx’s plans were too extreme. Maybe duty lay in protecting the Matoran until the very last moment.

For this moment, though, he had to concentrate on protecting himself. One good hit from Brutaka would take his head off.

Helryx had not wavered in her determination, but she also knew that this battle was sure to draw Makuta Teridax’s attention. Her chance to act could disappear at any moment. She had to do the nova blast now, before anyone could stop her.

Tuyet could guess what was about to happen. She slammed an elbow into Axonn even as Brutaka struck at him. Taking advantage of the moment, she wrested the warrior’s axe from him. With a yell, she vaulted into the air and smashed Misrix with the axe. With a roar of pain, the reptilian Makuta fell backwards, right towards Helryx.
The mad Toa hit the ground and turned to watch the end of her handiwork. But to her surprise, just as Miserix was about to crush Helryx, the ancient female warrior vanished. The Makuta landed in a heap, but was barely slowed by his wound and already seeking out his attacker.

Tuyet never got a chance to defend herself. Helryx was suddenly behind her, catching Tuyet in a headlock. “Time to say goodbye,” said Helryx. “We’ll all go down together, and the universe will be better for it.”

The world began to blur in front of Tuyet’s eyes. At first, she thought that Helryx must be choking the life from her. But then she realized that everyone was looking toward the chamber’s entrance, where space itself seemed to be warping. The next instant, a massive figure stepped out of the distortion and stood before them.

“You… imbeciles,” the figure said, in a voice both old and young at the same time. “You ignorant stone apes… is this how you try to save existence?”

No one in the room had ever seen the newcomer before. But there were some who knew his voice, and all felt a chill of fear at the sound of it. Only Helryx had the presence of mind to give their visitor a name, and even she spoke it in a whisper.

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

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

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

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

“No,” Mata Nui answered. “But it’s what I have to do.”

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s never going to be the same, is it?” she said quietly.

“What isn’t?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mata Nui forced himself to turn back toward the head of the robot. It was like trying to turn a huge ship into the wind. He could feel the environment resisting him, but he would not give in and lose control. Without a body to inhabit, he knew he would soon go mad.
There was what felt like a violent lurch. Suddenly, he was looking up at the sky. Had he overshot his target? Was he outside of the robot again? Would he even be able to find his way back? Maybe, he wondered, I should try to get back into the mask. Maybe there is some other way to stop Makuta than with this ancient machine.

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

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

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

“Can’t help him now,” he told her. “This is something he has to do on his own.”

“What in the name of–?” whispered Ackar. “Look! It’s moving!”

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

No, thought Kiina, not ‘it’ – not a robot. That’s… Mata Nui.

“He made it,” said Ackar. “I can’t believe it.”

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

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

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

“Well done, Ackar,” he said. Even spoken “softly,” his words were like sonic booms down below.

Tahu could not have done better.”

Kiina glanced at Gresh. “Who’s Tahu?”

Gresh shrugged. “Maybe some Glatorian we don’t know.”

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

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

“Yes,” Kiina replied. “But how about you?”

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

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

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

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

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

“There are caves nearby,” said Ackar. “We’ll get everyone into them.”

*   *   *

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From the pages of Mata Nui’s diary…

Entry 8:

The robot body was intact. I could only guess that it was a prototype for my own lost form, perhaps something that failed its initial test here in the desert of Bara Magna. I could will my mind into it, but that would not help any, for the body had no power source. Without energy, it was just a metal shell.

It was then that events took an unexpected turn. Berix produced a coin he had found in the cavern of the Great Beings which had a maze pattern on it. Then we found that the pattern on the Skrall shields matched that of the coin. Finally, Vastus told me of one of his tribe’s Agori, Tarduk, who was telling wild tales about a “Valley of the Maze” to the north.

I wanted to seek out this Tarduk and question him. But it turned out that he had left Tesara on an expedition of his own to find the maze and solve its secrets. Accompanied by Kiina and Gresh, I followed. Had I not, well, I doubt Tarduk would have lived to return and tell us what he had found.

The maze was a last riddle left behind by the Great Beings. Designed to keep intruders out, it concealed a source of great power. Once unleashed, that power fused the parts of the huge robot body together and powered it. Then I had only to send my spirit from the Mask of Life into the body to once more have the strength to challenge my foe.

Entry 9:

Long ago, wise but fallible Great Beings constructed a giant robot. But the power source was unstable, and an explosion scattered parts of the metal giant across the face of the planet.

Learning from their mistakes, the Great Beings desperately constructed a new, larger robot. This machine was infused with an intelligence and mission to learn about the universe, and thus I awoke as the intellect of a giant robot. Smaller beings were placed inside me to maintain the inner workings. My earliest memories are of being activated on Spherus Magna.

Safety measures in the form of six Toa warriors were put into place, just in case of unforeseen disaster. Little did anyone realize how vital these six beings would be in saving countless lives.

My construction was completed just in time. As I left my home planet, energized protodermis leaked from the world’s core and triggered a massive explosion that flung two huge chunks into orbit. These became the jungle moon of Bota Magna and the ocean world of Aqua Magna. The desert world that remained was renamed Bara Magna by the survivors.

I spent most of my existence exploring other worlds, watching cultures evolve, measuring and analyzing the dance of stars and planets. After a time, I took the beings inside my metal body for granted, ignoring them and their constant squabbles to focus on the outside universe. This neglect would cost me – and my small workers – endless misery and pain.

Inside my body, workers maintained machinery and repaired the damage and fatigue caused over tens of thousands of years. Most, like the Toa and Matoran, were content with their roles. But the Makuta dreamed of glory and power. My inattention gave them numerous opportunities to scheme and plot.

Finally, my journey drew to its close. As I traveled back to the planet of my construction to fulfill my final destiny, one ambitious Makuta attacked. Teridax crashed my systems and sent my robotic body plummeting into the ocean moon of Aqua Magna. There, I slept for a thousand years.

Automatic systems camouflaged my face, one of the only parts of my body above the waterline. A fake volcano was created, along with lush jungles, icy mountains, deep lakes, deserts and caverns. Toa brought Matoran workers to this island paradise and then transformed into Turaga leaders to guide the Matoran. Memories of being inside a robotic universe were erased from all but the Turaga.

Makuta Teridax had yet more plans. Not content with putting me to sleep, he schemed to eliminate his fellow Makuta and take over my massive robotic body. The sacrifice of brave Toa Matoro brought my body to life,
but Teridax stole my robot form before my consciousness awoke. I was flung out of my own body, imprisoned in the Mask of Life.

The final battle approaches even now. I have no doubt my enemy knows what has happened and will seek me out. I may destroy him, or he may destroy me, but I fear that our fight will inevitably rain destruction down on those below. I have warned Ackar and the others to get themselves and the Agori to a place of safety. They have helped me, saved me, and shown me a world I did not know existed — but this was not their fight. It was mine… and it was one I should have fought many centuries before.

* * *

At the sight of Artakha, the chamber went silent.
He stood at least 10 feet tall. His armor was gray-green and covered in runes carved at the beginning of time. His mask was the most ornate anyone had ever seen — more than just a Kanohi, it was a true work of art. The metallic protodermis from which it was forged was arranged in intricate patterns and designs, each reflecting one of the many cultures that flourished in the universe. The eye slits were angular and pointed, giving him an air of both wisdom and a vague sense of menace.
Artakha stood in the shattered doorway, facing some of the most powerful beings in existence. His stance made it clear he was their equal, if not their superior.
His cold eyes fell first on Lewa Nuva. “Your task is done,” he said. “Return whence you came.”
Lewa Nuva stared at Artakha for a moment, then turned without a word and started to exit, only to be blocked by the newcomer.
“Without the body,” said Artakha.
Lewa Nuva shrugged. “Payment for services rendered?”
“The mind of Lewa Nuva is trapped within your old body, Tren Krom, as you well know,” Artakha replied. “He deserves better than to suffer a fate meant for you.”
The mouth of Lewa Nuva smiled, though it was the mind of Tren Krom that made it so. “The words come easily to you, Artakha. You chose to live as an exile. I did not.”
“None of us choose our destiny,” Artakha replied. “And none of us can defy it. Go, Tren Krom. Have faith Mata Nui will reward you when all is said and done.”
Lewa Nuva nodded. “Faith, yes… a drop of water in place of an ocean.”
Artakha reached out and placed the palm of his right hand on Lewa Nuva’s forehead. “It’s more than time.”
The Toa’s body spasmed, then dropped to the floor. After a moment, Lewa’s eyes opened and he looked around, dazed. “Where…? I was… in a cave… in an ever-ugly body… and…”
Artakha ignored him. Helryx had advanced up to him, staring up at his masked face and making no effort to contain her fury. “This is no affair of yours, Artakha. Actions must be taken to contain the threat of Makuta, here and now.”
“Creation is my essence,” Artakha replied. “And you would destroy all that exists. I can’t allow that.”
“You can’t stop it either —”
“But I can.”
The voice reverberated throughout the chamber. It belonged to Makuta Teridax.
“Oh, who invited him?” muttered Lewa.
“Invited me?” asked Teridax. “As I recall, you are all guests in my home. And you have been most rude and destructive ones. I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to leave.”
“And if we refuse?” bellowed Axonn. “What will you do then, you formless freak?”
Teridax gave a low, mocking laugh. Then he said softly, “Why, then… I will have to insist.”
One instant, Axonn, Brutaka, Helryx, Artakha, Miserix, Tuyet and two Matoran were inside a half-ruined chamber deep beneath Metru Nui. The next, they were floating in the airless, icy void of outer space, watching as the robot Makuta commanded soared away from them toward a distant world.

* * *

“I told you this was a bad idea,” said Toa Kongu.
“Quiet,” hissed Toa Hahli.
“Is the Order sure of its information?” asked Nuparu.
“As sure as they can be, with things as they are,” replied Hewkii.
“Then we better get to work,” said Jaller.

The five surviving Toa Mahri were crouched on the western shore of the island of Zakaz, home to the murderous Skakdi race. Ordinarily, it wasn’t the sort of place any sane person wanted to visit, wracked as it was by a millennia-old civil war. Back when they were Toa Inika, Jaller and his team had battled six Skakdi, the Piraka, and barely escaped with their lives.

Their mission here was as simple as it was perilous. The Order had learned that Nektann, a powerful Skakdi warlord, had allied with Makuta Teridax and led his army on a journey south. Now it was vital to find out if any of the other warlords were going to follow his lead.

On top of that, there was a mystery to be solved. Following the widespread destruction on Daxia, the sea snakes that were once the evil Piraka had vanished. It had been believed they were just buried in the rubble, but rumors were flying they had been rescued and spirited away to Zakaz. For what purpose, no one could say.

To accomplish either of these, they had to get past the Skakdi guards on the shore. That was Kongu’s job. Using his control of air, he robbed the guards of anything to breathe until they passed out. Once they were down, the Toa Mahri advanced.

Their next obstacle was a small encampment of warriors, surrounded by a wall of thick stone. “Want me to bring the wall down?” asked Toa Hewkii.
“Just like we planned,” nodded Jaller.

Hewkii concentrated and extended his power over stone to the wall. The next moment, the rocks began to explode. The alarmed Skakdi, thinking they were under attack by another tribe, rushed to their defenses… but couldn’t spot the enemy.

After a few minutes of “bombardment,” they scaled the rubble and fled into the night.

Jaller turned to the Toa of Water. “Hahli?”
“It’s this way,” she answered, taking the lead. The Toa moved swiftly across the uneven terrain until they reached the mouth of the cave. By now, they could all hear the rushing of water. Hahli led them inside, where they saw an underground river.

“Perfect,” said Nuparu.
“The Order says that will take us right into one of the larger ruins,” said Hahli. “All we have to do is swim.”

“That again?” asked Hewkii, in mock protest.

The Mask of Life had transformed the Toa Inika into water-breathing Toa Mahri not long ago. Then it had changed them again, making them true amphibians. One by one, they dove into the river and began to swim through the cold, dark water.

After an hour or so, during which time Nuparu discovered that there were some very nasty fish under Zakaz, they emerged in another cavern. Just beyond the mouth of the cave was a large area of ruins, in which about 500 Skakdi were gathered. One, obviously a warlord, was addressing the gathering.

“The Brotherhood of Makuta is no more,” he bellowed. “The Dark Hunters are a battered ruin. The Toa are scattered and hiding like stone rats. Who is there left for anyone to fear?”

“The Skakdi!” yelled the crowd in response.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” said Hewkii.
“I think you’re about to like it less,” said Nuparu. He was crouched down, with one hand on the soil. “Something is moving underground, maybe 20 bio from where we are. Something big.”

“For too long, we have been penned up on this island, by the will of the Brotherhood,” the warlord continued. “And now one of their number controls our universe, and believes he controls us, as well. But we will show him he is wrong!”

“Okay, well, it doesn’t sound like he and Teridax will be playing kolhii together anytime soon,” said Jaller.

“And I think he’s just getting warmed up,” said Hahli.

“Let our salvation now rise,” shouted the warlord.

“Here it comes,” said Nuparu.

Now they could all feel the rumbling underground, and soon, they saw what was causing it. A huge tank was rising up in the center of the ruins. One glance and the Mahri knew all too well what was inside of it.

“That’s energized protodermis,” whispered Jaller. “How did they –?”

“Questions later,” said Kongu. “Look at who just joined the party.”

The Skakdi were hauling prisoners toward the tank. One was a Zyglak, the savage race of outcasts known for being virtually invulnerable to the elemental powers of Toa; next came a Vortixx, the crafty race that had spawned the evil Roodaka; and after that, one of the brutish race that served as laborers on Stelt.

“This makes no sense,” said Hahli. “Even if they throw them into the liquid, the three of them might just be destroyed by it… probably will be. So what’s the point?”

“None,” said Nuparu. “Unless… unless, somehow they know those three are destined to transform.”

“But the only one who could know that would be –”

“Teridax,” finished Jaller. “They probably don’t even know he put this idea into their heads. It’s another one of his sick games.”

“Just got sicker,” said Hewkii. “Or are those not the Piraka I see?”

The Toa of Stone was correct. Five Skakdi were carrying five sea snakes, each of the serpents gasping to breathe. At the warlord’s signal, the three prisoners and the five snakes were thrown into the energized protodermis tank. So engrossed were the Skakdi that they failed to notice a strange, greenish cloud that emerged from the nearby lake, hovered in the air a moment, and then plunged into the energized protodermis tank.

The liquid began to froth and bubble. The Toa Mahri could see a shape forming in the silver fluid, something monstrous and horrible.

“Tell you what,” said Kongu, “call me when it’s over. I don’t think I want to look.”

“I don’t think the Order’s going to like this,” said Nuparu.

“I don’t think anyone is,” said Jaller.

And then, before their eyes, a new and terrible form of life began to climb from the tank…
How long is a fraction of an instant?

Long enough for Lewa Nuva to see the others in the chamber – Artakha, Helryx, Miserix, Tuyet, Axonn, Brutaka, Hafu and Kapura – starting to shimmer and fade… and long enough to realize he was not teleporting as they were. Teridax was leaving the Toa of Air behind, no doubt for some sinister reason.

Lewa wasn’t having it. Before that fraction of an instant was through, he had grabbed onto Brutaka. It was a risk – a big one – to try to latch onto a teleport in progress. But Lewa was determined that wherever the others went, he would go.

In the next split second, he found himself floating in the void of space alongside the others. Of them all, only Miserix wasn’t succumbing to suffocation, since antidermis didn’t need to breathe. But the cold of outer space would claim him eventually. Makuta Teridax had thrown some of the most powerful beings in his universe out like the trash, and it looked like they wouldn’t survive the experience.

Lewa summoned his elemental power, an effort in this environment, and created a thin bubble of air linked around the heads of all the castaways except Miserix. “Join hands!” yelled the Toa of Air, seeing the group members already beginning to drift away from each other.

Helryx turned to see the Mata Nui robot sailing away from them toward a planet in the distance. The world of the endless ocean was far beneath them. “Artakha, can you teleport us back inside?” she asked.

Artakha closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, shaking his head. “Teridax is blocking our return. I can try to get us to his evident destination, but I cannot guarantee any of us will survive the journey.”

“More likely we will all find ourselves materialized inside trees and rocks,” muttered Tuyet. “We’ll be just as dead.”

“This is no way for a warrior to die,” growled Axonn.

“Teridax must be stopped,” said Brutaka. “We must do whatever we can, regardless of the danger.”

Artakha nodded. But before he could use his great power, a hole appeared in space before him. An armored hand reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him, and the others along with him, into the portal.

The nine found themselves sprawled on a damp stone floor. Kapura was the first to realize that the stone was moving, not to mention breathing. He cried out and got to his feet, backing against a wall. The bricks in the wall reached out to embrace him, holding him fast.

An armored figure, his face set in a hideous grin, stepped into the light cast by the one window in the room. “Kind of rattles you until you get used to it, doesn’t it?”

Miserix’s eyes narrowed. “I know you. You were among my rescuers from Artidax. You were the one who never shut up. Where have you brought us?”
Helryx stood as best as she could on the moving floor, weapon at the ready. “Vezon,” she said. “Explain yourself.”

“Not even a thank you?” said the mad Skakdi. “See if I save you from the darkness of outer space again, even if I only did it because he told me to.”

“He?” said Axonn. “Who?”

“Oh, didn’t I introduce you? How rude of me,” said Vezon. “Over there, in the shadows.”

The occupants of the chamber turned as one to look in the direction Vezon was pointing. They could barely make out a figure seated on the floor, chains affixed to arms and legs. The chains were writhing like serpents.

“Be careful,” Vezon added, in a loud whisper. “He’s quite insane, you know.”

“Matoran,” said a voice from inside the darkness, “amazing… and the rest of you… how proud I am. If I could, I would embrace you all.”

Helryx took two steps forward, saying, “Is this another of your tricks, Vezon? Who is this?”

Vezon put out a hand to stop her. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“You’re not me,” Helryx snapped, pushing him aside.

She had advanced as far as the edge of the shadow when her armor suddenly began to strangle her. The Toa of Water fell back, gasping for air.

“Would have been better if I were you,” said Vezon. “Less painful.”

Axonn slammed Vezon against a wall, pressing his arm against the lunatic’s throat. “Answers, Vezon. Now.”

“If you want answers,” choked Vezon, “you need to ask him. He’s the Great Being, after all, not me.”

A dry chuckle came from the darkness. “A Great Being, yes… that is what they called me… and my brothers and sisters. Angonce once said that name was the worst thing that ever happened to us, because we started to believe it was accurate. Perhaps he was right… perhaps that is why I am imprisoned here. But now you are here to free me.”

Lewa Nuva glanced out the window of the cell. He was stunned to see a forest that stretched as far as the eye could see, far larger than the jungle he had called home on the island of Mata Nui. “Where is here?” he asked.

“That’s right. You wouldn’t know,” said the Great Being. “Welcome, my friends, to Bota Magna.”

Pridak picked himself up off the ground, seething with rage.

His deal with the Shadowed One had been struck. He, Kalmah and Mantax had rebuilt their legions, while Ehlek had returned to the sea to gather his own troops. Of Carapar, there had been no sign for some time. They were poised to strike as soon as the Shadowed One unleashed the viruses on Makuta Teridax. The universe would be theirs to rule once more.

Then… nothing. The appointed time had come and gone, with only a violent earth tremor to mark it. At first, Pridak thought that quake was a sign that the Shadowed One had succeeded. But it rapidly became obvious that nothing had changed. Teridax was still in control.

Now Pridak had a choice. March on Metru Nui, and risk destruction at the hands of the Makuta, or stay put and risk rebellion by his legions. He had been a fool to rely on anyone else, he decided. The Shadowed One was, to use an old saying of his people, “either dead or fled.”

Pridak looked around. His legion was armed and ready. He was a warrior, a conqueror. There was no other choice.

“We march!” he yelled, to the cheers of his troops.

In a chamber on the island of Xia, the stone floor was littered with the shattered remains of precious vials. Of their contents – and of the Shadowed One – there was no trace. No one would look very hard for him. They were too busy trying to determine why every Vortixx in a kio radius had met a
horrible death... and just what on their island could possibly have pulverized living beings into fragments, without leaving any sign of its presence.

The Toa Mahri watched in shock as the new lifeform emerged from the tank of energized protodermis. A mixture of a Zylak, a Vortixx, a Steltian laborer, and the five surviving Piraka, it had been created by the barbaric Skakdi in an elaborate ritual. And now it was free.

It was terrible.

It was beautiful.

Towering 12 feet high, with gleaming golden skin, powerful muscles, and piercing green eyes, it regarded the assembled Skakdi with the benevolent gaze of a creator. Only the vaguely reptilian cast of its face took away from its stunning appearance.

“We live,” it said. “And we hunger.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Jaller.

“I haven’t liked the sound of anything in at least a year,” replied Kongu.

“Do you think... they’re going to be a meal?” asked Hahli.

“I wish it was that simple,” said Hewkii. “But somehow, I think it’s going to be worse.”

“You will feed me,” said the new creation. “And in return, you will be granted a wondrous gift.”

The Skakdi moved a little closer. They were not a cautious people as a rule, and the concept of someone wanting to give them something – as opposed to them just taking it – was a new and appealing one. As they drew near, their creation closed its eyes, an expression of rapture on its face.

“Is it... feeding?” asked Nuparu. “On what?”

“I don’t know, but let’s make sure we’re not the next course,” said Jaller. “The Skakdi are distracted, and so is that... whatever it is. Get ready.”

“Yes,” said the golden-skinned being. “So much to savor. And so much to give in return.”

“This is it,” said Jaller. “Whatever it’s going to do, it’s going to do now. So let’s... let’s...”

Jaller paused, confused. There was something the Toa Mahri needed to do, urgently. What was it? He knew it was important.

Suddenly, it became crystal clear. Why hadn’t he seen it before? It was so obvious, after all. “The Skakdi are the superior race,” he said to his teammates. “Stronger, smarter... we shouldn’t be opposing them. We should be following them.”

“Do you... do you think they would allow us to serve them?” asked Hahli.

“Even if they don’t... even if they kill us,” said Hewkii, “what better way to die?”

Throwing down their weapons, the five Toa Mahri rose and walked forward, ready and eager to obey the commands of their new masters.

* * *

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

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

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

He waited a few moments to see what effect his warning might have had. Frightened by the voice that came at them from every direction, most Vorox had retreated underground. The Bone Hunters and Skrall had stirred, but that was about it. That was about all that could be expected. Those two groups
were sure to think the whole thing was some trick, even with the sight of Mata Nui looming over them to back up his words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With those words, there could no longer be even the slightest doubt. Makuta had arrived.
The impact of Makuta’s landing shook the cavern, bringing down a rain of rock and dust. While Raanu and Ackar worked to keep the assembled Agori calm, Kiina and Gresh peered out the mouth of the cave. What they saw astonished them.

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

“Two of them?” said Gresh. “There’s two of them?”
“The big one must be Makuta,” said Kiina. “Mata Nui told Raanu he was coming. This is bad.”
“How bad?”
“Well, take a look at him,” snapped Kiina. “If he flicks a toe, he could bring the whole mountain down on top of us. We have to find a way to help Mata Nui.”
Gresh hefted his shield and started out of the cave. “Then what are we waiting for?”
Kiina put an arm up to block his exit. “A plan, and the right moment, kid… right now, we would just be something else for Mata Nui to worry about. Let’s wait and watch for a while.”
Gresh looked at her, a trace of disbelief in his expression. “When did you start talking like Ackar?”
Kiina smiled. “When I got smart – so listen, and maybe you’ll live long enough to do that too.”

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

“I don’t need to do any of those things,” Mata Nui answered. Although he was speaking quietly, the sound of his words still echoed all over the planet. “I don’t need to prove my power in useless combat with you, either. We don’t need to fight.”
Makuta chuckled, a harsh, metallic sound. “No, of course we don’t. You could just lie down and die right now. You would save me at least a few minutes’ effort, and yourself a lot of pain.” He raised his right arm. “Or do you need persuading?”
A burst of power shot from Makuta’s armored gauntlet. It sizzled past Mata Nui’s head and struck one of the peaks of the distant Black Spike Mountains. The terrific heat melted the mountain in an instant. Mata Nui’s sensitive sensors picked up the screams of faraway Skrall warriors in the split second before they were covered in magma.

“I could do that all day,” said Makuta, “and into the next. You would fight back, naturally, and between the two of us we would lay waste to this planet… which suggests an idea.”
Makuta lifted his arm again and Mata Nui prepared for another attack. But this time Makuta opened his hand and turned it palm up. "Join me," he said. "In these bodies, we have the power to decimate entire universes. Together, we could rule all of reality."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tahu had been standing beside Takanuva, Toa of Light, when the quake hit. Both were knocked off their feet from the quake. Tahu glanced up to see a mass of metal falling right toward them. He unleashed his power of flame, vaporizing the solid iron.
“What… what was that?” asked Takanuva. “An attack by Makuta?”
“I don’t think so,” Tahu said, struggling back to his feet. “I think our old enemy just ran into someone who knows how to throw a punch.”
The Toa of fire pointed up ahead. The Rahkshi had been scattered like leaves in the wind by the tremors. They were only now regaining their feet and continuing their journey south.
“Are they ever going to get where they’re going?” asked Takanuva. “We’ve been traveling for days.”
“And picking up Toa as we go,” Tahu reminded him. “Let them keep going. By the time they stop, we’ll be ready for them.”

Mata Nui knew he had to act with blinding speed. The surprise attack had hit Makuta hard, but it had also caused him to drop the mountain he held suspended. With no time to spare, Mata Nui fired a second blast, turning the falling mass of rock to dust just before it would have crushed the Agori and Glatorian.
“Go!” he shouted. “Get far away from here!”
Down below, Ackar turned to Raanu. “Do what he says. Take the Agori and head east, as fast as you can. Take nothing except what you need.”
“What about you?” asked Raanu. “Aren’t you coming with us?”
Ackar’s blade glowed red-hot. “I think Mata Nui could use some help against that monster. If nothing else, I can be a distraction, maybe buy him a few seconds.”
“We can do more than that,” said Kiina. “Gresh has a plan.”
“I don’t know whether to be intrigued or scared,” Ackar said, smiling.
Kiina looked at Gresh, then back to Ackar. “All things considered, old friend, I’d go with scared.”

Makuta was smiling.
“So predictable,” he said, as he rose to his feet to face Mata Nui once more. “And you don’t even see it, do you?”
Mata Nui didn’t respond.
“No, of course you don’t,” Makuta continued, “even though my strategy would be clear to a blind tunnel crawler. All I need to do is threaten the inhabitants of your little ant farm here to make you expend power to save them. Needless to say, I have more power in this form than you do in yours. I can threaten them long past the point where you can rescue them.”
Makuta glanced down at the damage done to his robot body by Mata Nui’s attack. “Who knew you had such a temper, brother? You seem to have forgotten, in your righteous rage, that your precious Toa and Matoran live inside of me. Damage me… and you kill them.”
Mata Nui knew Makuta was right. There was no way to bring his enemy down without risking injury or death to the population that lived inside of him. But what was the alternative? Surrender, and let Makuta conquer this world and then many more? No. The Toa and Matoran had risked their lives more than once to stop the schemes of Makuta. They would accept whatever had to happen now. At least, that was what Mata Nui had to tell himself.
Something began to flash in front of Mata Nui’s eyes. It was a “heads-up display” built into the robot. The green light showed the speed and trajectory of the two other pieces of Spherus Magna that he had tried to pull toward Bara Magna. Both were drifting off course and would require more power to return them to the right trajectory. As he had feared, he didn’t have the energy to achieve his mission on his own.
The green light was replaced by a flashing red one. It warned that the structural integrity of his robot body was in serious danger. The power that was keeping the robot moving was slowly destroying it, and the damage done by Makuta had only made things worse. In less than an hour, the complex mechanism was going to collapse in a heap and Makuta would have won.
It was a bad situation.
It was about to get worse.
Gresh’s plan was simple. While Ackar, Kiina and the rest distracted Makuta as best they could, he would try to slip by the robot unnoticed and find a way inside it. It was true that the Glatorian were too small to pose any real threat to the invader, but Gresh hoped that by focusing their Thornax launchers on joints and other potentially weak spots, they might at least annoy the enemy. Once inside, Gresh would secure the entry point and the other Glatorian would join him, smashing whatever they found inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That time was now.

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

He was just taking aim for his first shot when a hissing sound came from the hatch. The next instant, it began to slowly open. Instinctively, he took cover behind a nearby rock. What he saw next was staggering.
A horde of armored figures charged out of the hatch. In the lead were vaguely reptilian looking creatures of all different colors, although yellow seemed to be the most common hue. Each carried a staff. Right behind them came some of the strangest beings he ever saw, warriors with huge jaws and weird, serpent-like external spines lined with spikes. These were armed with swords, axes and other hand weapons.

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

“Pull back!” Ackar yelled. “Regroup!”

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

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

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

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

“What is that?!?!” cried Kiina.

Ackar aimed his sword and hurled a blast of fire, incinerating the slug. “Whatever it is… was… it’s not anymore.”

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

Ackar nodded as he slammed a Rahkshi to the ground.

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

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

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

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

“Who is he?” one voice said. “He doesn’t look like one of Makuta’s creations.”

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

“Wait!” shouted Gresh. “I’m no friend of Makuta’s! I thought you were!”

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

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

“Yes,” Gresh answered. “But what are Rahkshi?”

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

He turned back to the warriors, large and small, who stood behind him. “Let’s go. These people need our help.” Tahu looked over his shoulder at Gresh. “You coming?”
“I’m going inside,” the Glatorian replied. “I have to stop this Makuta.”

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

“Then I’m with you,” answered Gresh, already racing toward the battle. “Let’s do this.”

“Eager sort, isn’t he?” asked Takanuva, following behind.

“Yes,” chuckled Tahu. “Reminds me of you.”

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

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

“Hey, Tahu!” said Takanuva. “What’s the matter? Come on, speak to me!”

But Tahu couldn’t hear him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

_You are seeing what you need to see_, said the mask. _A message has been sent; a message has been received. Now I must pass the knowledge on to you._

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

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

_The hordes of the Makuta are unstoppable_, said the mask. _The Glatorian and Agori will fall._

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

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

“What? What are you--?” Tahu began.

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

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

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

“I wore a golden mask once,” Tahu said, still bitter over the mask's actions. “It was powerful, but it couldn't do what you claim.”
It was a candle beside a bonfire, said the mask. *I can create the armor, but be warned... it can be used but once, and there is no telling what its use will do to you, Tahu.*

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

“Tahu! Wake up!” yelled the Toa of Light.

Tahu gently pushed him away. “I’m... I’m all right.”

“No,” said Takanuva. “No, you’re not. Tahu, you’re not a Toa Nuva anymore. You’ve... changed.”

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

“That cursed mask,” Tahu said, in a tone of barely controlled fury. “It’s ruined me.”

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

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

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

“Tahu? Was that armor really important?” asked Takanuva.

“Yes,” said Tahu.

“Then I think we have a problem.”

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

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

*What is this? Where did it come from?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You thought you could slaughter the inhabitants of this planet,” Mata Nui spat. “But they won’t surrender to you, any more than the Matoran or Toa did.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You can’t do that! The consequences—”

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

Energy erupted in waves from Makuta’s gauntlet, a planet-killing force that could not be stopped…
The minutes before the blast...

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

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

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

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

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

Three Skrall had battled their way through the windstorm and were coming for him. Gresh smiled. This was going to be fun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concentrating, Takanuva used his power over light to create a hologram between the two Rahkshi. He didn't have the skill yet to make it perfect or very imaginative – all he could manage was a duplicate of himself. If the Rahkshi looked closely, they would see it was transparent in too many places. But in the midst of battle, they weren't going to take time to examine the sudden appearance of a new enemy.
The creatures whirled as one and shot out beams of heat vision at the light image of Takanuva. They passed right through the light image to strike the Rahkshi. Before they could recover from the shock, Takanuva used his lasers to slice through the creatures’ armor. Both crumbled to the ground, dropping their staffs.

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

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

“I’ll crush you!” bellowed Nektann.

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

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

Tahu gave a grim smile as he bored in on the Skakdi. Enemies had done this to him before—try to strike at his pride, make him sloppy, try to get him to make mistakes. But it hadn’t been so long ago that Tahu had fought others of Nektann’s kind and suffered a bitter defeat. If it hadn’t been for a brave group of Matoran villagers, he would have died. The experience made him take a hard look at himself. Nektann was about to regret that.

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

“You can’t, and you know it,” growled Nektann. “That’s why you have to cheat.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Be grateful you were wrong,” Tahu said, as Nektann fell to the ground in a mass of liquid metal. “Be grateful I never learned from my enemies how to kill. You’ll live, Skakdi, but you won’t forget.”
Tahu picked up the Skakdi’s satchel and removed the piece of golden armor. “And, Mata Nui help me, neither will I.”
Mata Nui saw the gravity wave being unleashed by Makuta. As swiftly as he could move, he threw himself at his foe, grabbing Makuta’s arm. He jerked it up in the air, sending the gravitic power surging into the sky.

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

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

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

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

It couldn’t last. Both he and Makuta knew that. Just as he pushed Makuta to the furthest northern reaches, the power in Mata Nui’s robot body ran down. He didn’t have the strength to finish off his foe. Makuta smashed a metallic fist into Mata Nui’s chest, sending the robot toppling to the ground with a tremendous crash. Makuta stood over him, triumphant.

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

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

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

“The armor!” said Tahu. “We need it!”

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

“We don’t know,” said Takanuva. “That’s what we’re going to find out.”

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

“Are you sure about this?” asked Takanuva.

“I haven’t been sure of anything in 100,000 years,” said Tahu, smiling. “So why start now?”
The Toa of Fire concentrated, focusing his thoughts just as he would do to activate a mask power or control flame. But this time, he was willing the golden armor to do whatever it could to end this battle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Moments ago…

Teridax studied the three shadow Takanuva who blocked his path. They had been sent by the Makuta Teridax of this universe – the one who controlled the giant robot inside of which millions lived – to kill him and his companion, Mazeka. It was a good plan. After all, one Takanuva would be a challenge – three corrupted ones were deadly.

Teridax had multiple powers of his own to choose from. In his time and in his universe, he had been a great warrior. No doubt Makuta expected him to pit his energies against those of the Takanuva in an apocalyptic final battle and, outnumbered, die horribly after a few minutes. Mazeka would most likely not even last that long, though the Matoran would make sure his killers remembered the fight.

Ah, Makuta, thought Teridax. We are the same being in different universes, but I am not you. You’re a plotter… a schemer… not wanting to get your claws dirty, if you can avoid it. You would think of all sorts of ways to fight the Takanuva from a distance… all of which would fail.

Teridax unlimbered his war hammer. You would never think of doing this.

He charged. Before the startled shadow Toa could react, Teridax had swung his hammer, striking one Toa in the face and shattering his mask to pieces. Whirling, he landed another hammer blow to the chest armor of a second Toa, cracking it down the center. Mazeka moved in then, catching the third
Takanuva with a scissor kick and sending him to the ground. Teridax made sure he would never be getting up.

The now maskless Toa staggered forward, firing shadow energy from his hands at random. One blast caught Teridax in the shoulder, badly damaging his armor. The warrior from another dimension did not have the luxury to feel pain just then, or worry about the antidermis escaping through the gap. He landed a side kick in the Toa’s middle, while swinging his hammer again to stop the charge of the other Takanuva. The latter, still in the fight despite badly damaged armor, created a swirling fog of darkness to conceal his movements.

“Let me,” whispered Mazeka.

The Matoran stood completely still, reaching out with all his senses. He knew that at any moment, the shadow Takanuva could strike and kill them both. But he could not dwell on that fear, not if he hoped to survive this battle.

There! The slightest scrape of boot on rock, about three feet behind him and to the left. Mazeka leapt, whirled in midair, and lashed out with a kick. His foot connected with the Toa’s mask, knocking it askew but not dislodging it. Even as his momentum carried him forward, Mazeka landed a second blow to the shadow Toa’s neck. Enraged, the Toa hurled tendrils of darkness that began to strangle the Matoran.

“Your friend is doomed,” the evil Takanuva said, smiling. “You’ll just beat him by a few—”

There was a sickening crunch. The shadow Toa’s face went blank. He staggered forward one step and then collapsed, revealing in the process just how much damage a war hammer in the hands of an expert could do. The tendrils dispersed and Mazeka scrambled to his feet.

“Where’s the third one?” asked the Matoran, as the darkness dispersed around them.

“There,” said Teridax, pointing to the north. “And there,” he added, gesturing toward the west.

“Oh, and there’s some over there,” he finished, casually glancing to the east. “His mask was shattered. I thought he might like to join it.”

Mazeka chuckled. “You know, Toa wouldn’t approve of this… they don’t kill.”

Teridax shrugged. “Very noble… but considering the state of this universe, maybe they should have bent the rules a little more.”

“Try telling them —” Mazeka began.

Teridax held up a hand to stop him. “Wait. Something’s… something’s wrong. Quick, grab my hand!”

Mazeka did as he was told, even as Teridax began to teleport. The world blurred and vanished around them. When it reappeared, they were standing back on the ridge above the abandoned village. A violent tremor was shaking the ground and Mazeka could barely keep his feet.

“As I hoped,” said Teridax, wearily. “We escaped the worst of it.”


“Your Makuta… has fallen,” said Teridax. “We need to keep moving, but first… first, we had better find some way to patch my wound. I prefer to walk out of this universe, not float.”

Taipu was used to the darkness. He was, after all, an Onu-Matoran, who had spent most of his life in the Metru Nui Archives or deep in mines. Of course, it was one thing to choose to live in the dark, and another to have all light suddenly extinguished around you.

He took stock of the situation. He was lying face down on the floor of an upper level of the Archives. The air was filled with dust. The lightstones were all shattered. Something extremely heavy was on top of him, making it impossible to get up and quite difficult to breathe. All of this was the result of a massive quake that had just struck Metru Nui, followed shortly after by a not quite as devastating aftershock.

Taipu tried to yell for help, but could only manage a hoarse whisper. This wasn’t a very good way to die, he decided. But it seemed to be one he had gotten stuck with.

Then he heard something. Someone was digging nearby. Maybe they would find him? He tried to yell again, but wound up choking on dust.
There were more sounds. He could hear voices now, familiar ones. Someone was yelling for others to keep digging. The terrible weight on his back was suddenly gone. Taipu felt two strong hands grabbing his wrists and pulling him out from under the rubble.

He looked up to see Tamaru and Macku were his rescuers. Not far away, Kopeke was helping other Onu-Matoran who had been caught in the quake. Macku propped Taipu up against a wall and dusted off his armor. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Taipu nodded. “What happened?”

Macku pointed up. Taipu looked and saw a massive hole, and beyond that, blue sky like he remembered from the island of Mata Nui. It had only been recently that Taipu and the other Matoran had learned their “universe” was the inside of a giant robot. Now someone had evidently punched a big hole in the robot’s head.

“I think Makuta ran into someone tougher than he was,” Macku explained. “Pretty sure the robot’s dead, and my guess is so is he. We’re going to need to get everyone out of here and hope there’s someplace outside we can live. But in the meantime… well, there are a lot more people trapped like you were.”

Taipu got to his feet. “Then I’ll help.”

“You need to rest,” said Macku sternly.

“I didn’t rest at Kini-Nui when those Rahi attacked,” Taipu replied. He looked around at Tamaru and Kopeke hard at work. “I don’t know where Hafu and Kapura are… but it looks to me like the Chronicler’s Company lives again.”

Macku smiled. “All right, then, old friend. Let’s get to work.”
The battle was over.

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

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

“Do you think Makuta’s really gone?” asked Takanuva.

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

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

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

“You know what, Takanuva? I think we’re going to be just fine.”

“I’m just happy you’re alive,” said Takanuva. “When you fell over like that, I thought for sure you were dead. Are you sure you’re okay?”

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

Unity.
Duty.
Destiny.

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

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

Makuta was the past. It was time to worry about today and tomorrow for this world.
When he had gone to Raanu and asked to take the Agori’s city away from them, Mata Nui had made a vow to himself. If he succeeded in rebuilding the planet, he would not stop there. He would give the Agori a new life, a new chance to thrive here. Now it was time to begin that work.

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

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

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

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

A moment later, Mata Nui felt the power of the mask merge with what little remained of his own. Then he willed that power to flow from his body and sweep across the planet. Everywhere it touched, mountains rose, forest flourished, life appeared where none had been before. In the desert of Bara Magna, time seemed to flow backwards as barren sand gave way to a jungle teeming with trees and plants and long-dead rivers returned to life.

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

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

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

“He did it,” whispered Kiina. “I can’t believe it.”

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

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

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

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

“Come on!” yelled Kiina. “He needs our help!”

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

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

“We’re too late,” Kiina said softly. “He’s gone.”

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

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

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

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

“Watch out!” yelled one of the Toa. “That’s dangerous!”

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

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

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

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

“Then the mask can do amazing things,” said Toa Tahu. “You could use it to make a body for yourself, couldn’t you? We could all use your wisdom and your guidance.”

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

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

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

“So this is... goodbye?” asked Kiina.

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

“Anything,” said Ackar. “Name it.”

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

“If that’s what you want, it’s done,” said Ackar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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