



# Tangled Web

by

GaliGee of BZPower

with gratitude and apologies to the creators of LEGO Bionicle *et al.*

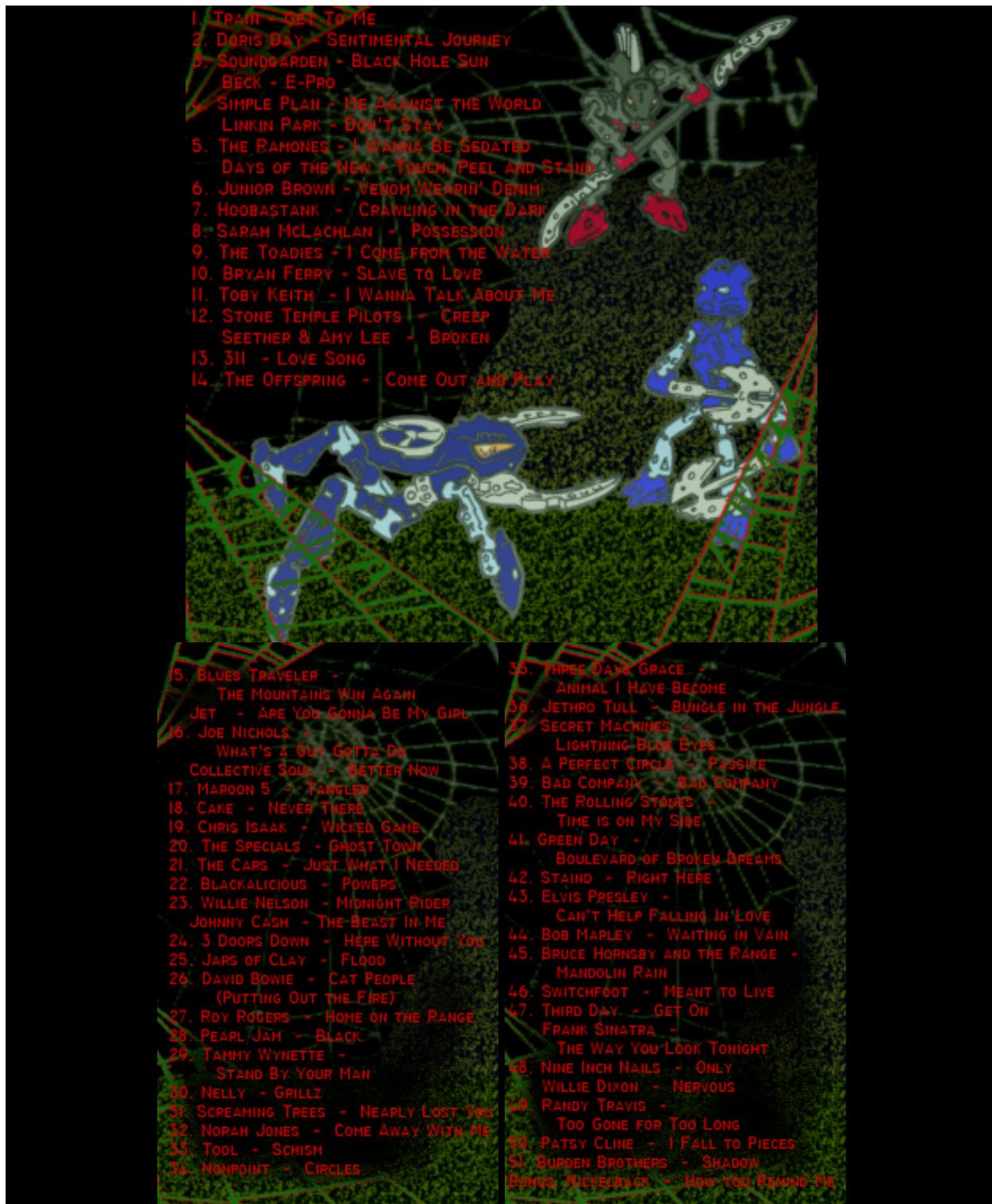
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*Sir Walter Scott had no idea...*

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# 1. Ensnared

## **Train – Get To Me**

*Well an airplane's faster than a Cadillac  
And a whole lot smoother than a camel's back  
But I don't care how you get to me  
Just get to me  
Parasail or first class mail  
Get on the back of a nightingale  
Just get to me I don't care just get to me  
ProKeds, mopeds take a limousine instead  
They ain't cheap but they're easy to find  
Get on the highway point yourself my way  
Take a roller coaster that comes in sideways  
Just get to me - yeah*

*Go on hitch a ride on the back  
of a butterfly  
There's no better way to fly  
To get to me  
I look around at what I got  
And without you, it ain't a lot  
But I got everything, with you, everything*

*Maybe you could pollinate over the Golden Gate  
Take a left hand turn at the corner of Haight  
And then a sharp right at the first street light  
And get yourself on a motor bike  
And if you think you'll get stuck in a traffic jam  
That's fine, send yourself through a telephone line  
It doesn't matter how you get to me  
Just get to me*

*Cause after every day  
The wind blows the night time my way  
And I imagine that you are  
Above me like a star  
And you keep on glowing  
And you keep on showing me the way  
Shine shine shine*

I leaned back in my desk chair, stretched, and re-read the last paragraph of my report on the computer screen. Satisfied, I saved the document and clicked the 'print' button. As the printer warmed up, the room suddenly darkened.

Wondering if the weatherman's prediction of clear skies was in error, I stood and glanced out the window. But then a deep, gravelly voice behind me said, "Good morning, my angel. Your shadow has returned."

I was so startled that I jumped. And since Makuta had recently rebuilt me around a Rahkshi foot, my body now had a minute amount of flight power. My head hit the ceiling and I landed on my feet, chunks of drywall raining around me. Then I spun to face the Master of Shadows, my heart pounding. He was in his oversized-Rahkshi form, which he had constructed of leftover parts after the *Mask of Light*. His rusty Kraahkan and the spikes on his dark gray carapace almost touched the damaged ceiling.

“Oh, GaliGee, darling, I’m so sorry,” he crooned. “I teleported myself inside to spare your front door, and now look what’s happened to your ceiling. Are you all right?”

“Well, teleport yourself back out, before you wreck anything else,” I retorted, straightening my Kaukau Nuva. I brushed a few plaster flakes off my arms.

Makuta laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.” He put his big, tarnished silver hand on my shoulder. “Why, I didn’t dream it, after all. You’re every bit as lovely as I remembered.”

I pushed his hand off me. “Is that supposed to be a compliment for me, or for you?”

“Both,” he grinned.

“Great. Now go away,” I frowned, crossing my arms.

The Spirit of Destruction ignored me and looked around the room, his glowing blue eyes stopping at the computer display. “‘Oak Creek Flood Control Phase II.’ Looks like you’ve been busy with your water engineering work.”

“Yes, and I’d like to get back to it, if you don’t mind.”

“Do you need any help, love? I could excavate a channel for you or build a dam or something. I’m quite handy with earth-moving tasks.”

I rolled my eyes. “My clients didn’t hire me to demolish anything. Now get out of my house!”

“And look, a Hello Kitty calendar! Did your new shapeshifting friend give you that?” he asked with amusement.

“It’s none of your—”

“Now that,” he interrupted gruffly, pointing at the copper Huna on the wall, “I *know* Krahka gave you. That thieving she-Rahi...”

“Look, don’t you have something to do, Makuta? Like a cameo in the new movie, maybe?” I asked nervously.

“Nothing could be more important to me than enjoying the company of my beloved,” he smiled. “But yes, I do have a small role in the movie, and filming is starting soon. So you’re right, we’d best be on our way.” He reached for my hand.

I bolted toward the window, threw it open, and pushed out the screen. Using my new abilities, I sprang out and landed in the grass one story below. Then I sprinted down the street.

The humming sound behind me grew louder, and in seconds I felt an impact against my back. I was lifted off the ground in Makuta’s lap as he flew like a *Rahkshi*. He circled around and hovered over a black Coupe de Ville convertible that was parked in front of my house.

“I don’t know why you insist on doing things the hard way,” he sighed as he dropped me into the red plush passenger seat. He slid behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition.

“Because I wouldn’t want you to think I was coming with you willingly,” I muttered.

“Buckle your seat belt, dear,” he reminded me, putting the car in gear. “Not that I mind, really. Your attempts to flee are quite amusing, and I do enjoy the thrill of the chase. But submission would be a refreshing change, nonetheless.”

I buried my mask in my hands, almost afraid to hear the answer to my next question. “What do you want, Makuta?”

“You,” he replied simply.

“I was expecting a job description.”

“Do you really think I came two thousand miles just to get you to work for me?” he chuckled. “I could coerce any old creature into doing that. What I desire is your undying devotion.” He put a John Coltrane CD in the player, and a smooth saxophone melody was soon gliding out of the speakers.

I glared at him. “Come on, Makuta. We both know you’re going to give me some sort of bizarre task as a condition of my freedom. What is it this time?”

“I can’t believe you still doubt my sincerity. Why else would I continue to pursue you after all the anguish I’ve suffered at your hands?” He glanced at my hands and scowled. “In one case, quite literally.”

I quickly put my hands behind my back, and he turned his eyes to the road. “Since I’m in a bit of a hurry, we’ll use the rockets as soon as we get out of town. I’ve got enough fuel this time to get us all the way back to Connecticut.” He steered the Cadillac onto the freeway on-ramp.

“No, really. What did you kidnap me for this time?” I insisted. Even though I dreaded finding out how he wanted to fit me into his latest evil scheme, not knowing was even worse.

He shook his head. “I don’t know why you keep using such pejorative terms, princess. Can you really fault me for wanting to keep the most precious thing in my life close to me, to cherish and protect?”

Evidently he was planning to keep me in suspense, so I sat back and waited. In a few minutes we were out of the suburbs, and the traffic thinned out. As Makuta closed the windows, he explained, “Since we’ll be traveling quite a distance, and I don’t feel like maintaining a shield the whole time, I’ll just keep the wind out of our faces the old-fashioned way.” He pushed a button on the dashboard, and the convertible top began to deploy. He slumped down in the seat to let the front edge clear his head and stop against the windshield, sealing out the road noise.

Smiling broadly, he flipped open a panel to reveal the controls for the two rockets under his back bumper. “I’ve made a wonderful discovery, darling. The Letterkenny Army Center in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, has all kinds of useful rocketry supplies, and it’s much closer to my lair than that Alabama plant. And their security system is downright laughable. They might as well have tried to keep me out with a piece of duct tape across the front door.”

As Makuta’s bizarre double-thumbed hand closed around the control stick, I braced myself for the acceleration. He had taken me for a short rocket ride once before, and I remembered being pressed back into my seat before we leveled out at a steady speed. Sure enough, after the rumbling and vibrations began, most of the air was squeezed out of my lungs as we lifted off the ground and soared toward the clouds.

Soon we were at cruising altitude, and I took a deep breath and leaned over to admire the spectacular view out the window, a vast patchwork of farmland and forest with the sun glinting off the occasional stock pond. We flew for quite a while with only the sound of the rockets and the wind. Finally I asked, “No Rahkshi stowaways this time?”

Makuta laughed. “No. As soon as they overheard my plans to come get you, Pinky and Chamelerahk sneaked out to the car and disguised themselves. But I’m onto their tricks now.”

I was a little disappointed. In his crass attempts to recruit me, Makuta regularly tried to use the Rahkshi to appeal to my maternal instincts. I found this manipulation despicable, but his strange offspring had succeeded in winning me over anyway. Even though they were reckless and destructive like their father, they were inexplicably loyal to me, and their presence seemed to keep his nastier impulses in check. I glanced over at the Master of Shadows. He was gazing at me fondly. “Aww, you miss the pitter-patter of little feet, don’t you?”

“Makuta, their feet are as big as my entire body,” I groaned.

“Oh, right,” he replied with a wry smile. “Well, I must say, they’ve been positively pining for you. They’ll be so happy to see you again. Especially now that there’s a family resemblance between you and them.”

“They won’t see me for long. I’ll be leaving as soon as I finish whatever weird job it is you want me to do before you’ll give me my freedom. And by the way, what is it?”

“There’s no job this time, cupcake. I simply want you to take your rightful place by my side as I plan my next venture. And I really look forward to curling up with you on the couch to watch *The Conquerors* on the History Channel.”

“Please, Makuta, there has to be something I can offer in exchange,” I said anxiously.

Makuta turned his head and slid his arm across the back of the seat. “Why, I’m delighted you’re so eager to serve me, love. I’m sure I can come up with some useful ways for you to pass the time while I’m otherwise occupied. With your many talents...” I felt his pointed fingers caress my neck.

“I’m not eager to serve you,” I grumbled, leaning forward to get away from his hand. “I just want to go home. If there’s some way I can persuade you to let me go, tell me what it is.”

“Well, whenever you do something wonderful for me—like training my sons to work together—you make it harder for me to give you up. And when you prove yourself capable of betrayal—like running to the Toa to keep me from getting the Vahi—you convince me all the more that someone so delightfully devious belongs with me. So nothing you do can persuade me to release you. You should just resign yourself to staying with me, my lovely, because it’s your destiny,” he finished blithely.

“Whatever happened to ‘I would never keep you against your will’?” I protested. “You’ve always offered me a way out.”

The Spirit of Destruction sighed deeply. “I was afraid you would remember that. You’re worse than Shadrahk. Always taking me at my word. Reminding me of my foolish promises, as if you were my little blue conscience.”

“Well?” I smiled tentatively.

“Actually, that gives me an idea,” he continued, adjusting the trim on the rockets to correct a slight starboard drift. “All right, how’s this? I’ll let you go just as soon as you succeed in convincing the Matoran that I’m good. With your writing skills, I’m sure you won’t have any trouble.”

“But—but—” I stammered, “that’s impossible, Makuta! You keep terrorizing them. No amount of propaganda is going to change their perception of you as a ruthless, selfish bully.”

“Darling, I may seem that way to those uninformed little villagers, but there are good reasons behind everything I’ve done. It’s all been for their benefit, even if they can’t perceive it yet,” he smiled.

“You seem that way to me, too,” I frowned. “And you seem to be assigning me a task that I can never accomplish, just to keep me prisoner.”

“Prisoner?” he chuckled. “There you go again with the harsh language. You know I only want to share my paradise island with you, and make you happy in every way. I miss you so much when you’re away.”

“No deal. Give me a different assignment.” I remembered the last job offer he had presented to me—writing his biography—but I decided not to bring it up, because he could make it last indefinitely with lies and exaggerations.

“Well, there’s always my biography,” he grinned.

I clenched my fists, annoyed that he had read my mind. “You know why I don’t want to take on that one.”

The Master of Shadows sat back in his seat, a nasty smirk on his Kraahkan. “I suppose I’ll just have to keep thinking, then. I’ll let you know when I come up with something else.”

After a few moments of uneasy silence, I said something I never expected to hear myself say. “How about if I watch the *Rahkshi* while you go do the movie?”

“Oh, that worked *so* well last time,” he replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Even with their help, it took me a month to clean up all the rubble after their little *soirée* with the Bahrag. I can’t believe you let my sons release those nasty old biddies and their destructive brood! Do you have any idea how expensive it is to replace a leather couch, a hand-knotted oriental rug, a full set of stainless steel kitchen appliances, a computer and desk, a state-of-the-art plasma television with surround-sound speakers, and a complete rack of stereo equipment?”

“I’m sure it would have cost a fortune, if you ever paid for anything!” I retorted.

He paused and smiled. “I guess you have a point. But still, it takes time and effort to procure things. So, you can spend all the time you want with the *Rahkshi*, but it won’t earn you your ‘freedom.’” He released the control stick to make quotation marks in the air with his fingers.

For a few minutes I wondered gloomily how I would get out of my predicament. Then he patted my knee and asked, “Would you like something to eat, darling? There are some sandwiches in that cooler behind the seat.”

I suddenly realized that I was hungry. As I reached back to retrieve the cooler, I noticed that the scenery under the rocket-powered convertible had gradually changed to lush pine forest. I pulled out a sandwich, bag of chips, and soda for each of us. “How long does this trip take by rocket, anyway?”

“Oh, about five hours. It really beats driving on the ground, although it would be even faster if I still had the *Vahi*.” He paused to glare at me. “You female creatures will be the death of me.”

“But I thought you were immortal,” I objected.

Makuta frowned. "It's an expression, dear."

I thought back to my last encounter with him. He had succeeded in immobilizing thirteen Toa at once with the Great Mask of Time before his control began to slip. First Roodaka appeared out of the time stream, and he managed to freeze her as well. But then hordes of Visorak from the past began to appear all around us and power up their Rhotuka. Krahka had asked me to distract him so she could kick the Vahi off his face. Then the Toa had subdued him and stuck him to the Great Barrier again with a web of protodermis to restore things to the official storyline. "Well, we did keep you from unraveling the fabric of space and time," I said meekly.

"I suppose so," he admitted. "I was rather angry with Krahka for taking you away from me, but now that I have you back, I feel much better. I guess all's well that ends well."

I took a bite of sandwich and recited Krahka's phone number to myself in my head. She had invited me to call her "when that creep comes back to hassle you." Then I quickly suppressed the thought, worried that Makuta would once again read my mind. I glanced at him furtively. To my relief, he was paying no attention to me. He was staring at the sky and rambling to himself. "Yes, rockets are definitely the way to go. The only drawback is that with such a short trip, I won't get to watch her sleep. Ah, gazing at her while she rests her sweet little head against me, as if she trusted me... Maybe someday she will be dreaming of me."

I shivered and turned back to my food. We finished our lunch, and I put the wrappers into the cooler and set it behind the seat. Then Makuta looked over at me. "Say, why don't you take a little nap, my beauty?" he purred.

I really didn't feel like sleeping. Makuta's affectionate behavior made me very uneasy, because he was undoubtedly trying to hoodwink me into helping him with one of his insane schemes. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with drowsiness anyway, and I began to sway. As I lost consciousness, I felt him put his arm around me and pull me toward him.

## 2. Dancing with the Devil

### ***Doris Day – Sentimental Journey***

*Gonna take a Sentimental Journey,  
Gonna set my heart at ease.  
Gonna make a Sentimental Journey,  
To renew old memories.*

*Got my bags, got my reservations,  
Spent each dime I could afford.  
Like a child in wild anticipation,  
I Long to hear that, "All aboard!"*

*Seven...that's the time we leave at seven.  
I'll be waitin' up at heaven,  
Countin' every mile of railroad track,  
That takes me back.*

*Never thought my heart could be so yearny.  
Why did I decide to roam?  
Gotta take that Sentimental Journey,  
Sentimental Journey home.  
Sentimental Journey.*

In my dream, Makuta and I were sitting at a black lacquer table in a nightclub. I was watching bubbles rise in the champagne bottle when the swing band began to play “Sentimental Journey.” Makuta smiled. “Darling, it’s our song! Come, dance with me.” He rose from his chair.

I looked anxiously at the towering hulk of corroded armor standing in front of me and mumbled that I didn’t know how to dance. Ignoring my protests, he dragged me onto the empty floor. “It’s simple, sweetheart. Like this.” He placed one of my hands on his shoulder, put his arm around my waist, and held my other hand. “Now, just follow my lead.”

A little unsteadily, I stepped along with him, watching his feet to see where he was going. To my surprise he kept perfect time with the music, his movements fluid and graceful. Before long I had figured out the pattern, and we were gliding smoothly across the floor. Makuta gazed down at me fondly. “You see, love? It’s easy.”

I nodded, smiling nervously back at him. But then his grip around my waist tightened, and he swung me around unexpectedly fast. I gasped as my feet scrambled to catch up.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he reassured me.

“That’s exactly why I’m worried,” I replied.

He grinned slyly and began to spin me in a tight circle. The wind whistled past my head, drowning out the music. Everything flew past in a blur, and I began to get dizzy. “I can’t keep up!”

“Relax, precious. In a moment you won’t have to keep up, because there will be no more you.” His eyes changed from blue to red. Then everything melted away, and all that was left was two glowing crimson eyes in the middle of a swirling vortex of chaos. And I was being drawn into the middle of it.

I tried to scream, but no sound came out. Then I woke, panting, to find myself in the front seat of Makuta’s Coupe de Ville, lying against his side with his arm around my shoulders. The last notes of “Sentimental Journey” were coming from the speakers. He was looking down at me sympathetically. “Darling, you slept so fitfully. Did you have a bad dream?”

I jerked away from him so hard I slammed the side of my head into the passenger window and cracked the glass. Adjusting my mask, I glanced outside and realized we were still thousands of feet above the ground. I looked back at him warily.

“It’s all right, I don’t bite,” he sighed. “But it breaks my heart the way you keep pulling away from me. All I want is for you to wake in my arms and *smile* at me for once. What’s wrong, beloved? Is it because I’m too tall? I know my height might be intimidating to such a petite creature, and I’m certainly capable of shapeshifting into something closer to your size, but I’m really about as small now as I can stand to be. Any shorter, and I’ll start to lose the respect of the Rahkshi. Even though they’re aware I have all their powers and then some, they really respond to physical size. But, say... if I rebuilt your body in a taller form, would you hold it against me?”

“Definitely! I mean—definitely not. I mean—oh, you know what I mean!” I finished crossly.

“I think you don’t mean to admit to me what you really mean,” grinned the Master of Shadows. Then he glared at me. “But I’m no fool. I’m not going to rebuild you until you demonstrate your loyalty to me. I just can’t shake the image from my mind that Krahka planted there, of you using your long, lovely new legs to kick my Kraahkan across the room.”

While I enjoyed the mental image he was painting, I didn’t really want him to dwell on it. “Makuta, your height doesn’t matter to me.”

His expression softened. “Oh. Well, then, is it because I’m too old? I mean, sure, I’ve got a few millennia on you, but that shouldn’t matter. It’s not like we Bionicle creatures show our age, anyway. In fact, it’s really a good thing, because my years have made me wiser. I’ve wasted enough time chasing the wrong kind of females to be certain by now of what I want. You have the assurance of knowing that my love is not merely a fleeting whim driven by momentary passions. With the perspective of my years, I understand why I thirst for you like a cool drink on a hot night. I desperately crave someone sweet and calm, who can soothe my inner turmoil. Not to mention extraordinarily beautiful, talented, and gentle with my children. It’s obvious you were custom built to be the perfect companion for me.”

He reached over to take my hand, but I pulled it away. “All right, is it because I’m too powerful? Seeing me use my abilities must be rather unsettling for someone who doesn’t have any of her own, but just keep in mind that as long as you are true to me, they are at your disposal as well. I’ll use whatever amount of force and intelligence it takes against anyone who dares to threaten what’s precious to me. The Matoran don’t appreciate the many sacrifices I’ve made to guard them. But you’re much more insightful than they are, so my support should make you feel very well protected. And what better use for my wealth could there be than to indulge you like a princess? Certainly my vast store of riches will be yours as well, as soon as you agree to be mine.”

“Makuta—” I began, but he interrupted. “In fact, my power allows you an extraordinary luxury, my little water lily. I can make you immortal, because even if you are wounded beyond my healing ability, I can replenish your life force with some of mine. If only you would stop thrashing about in futile resistance, you would realize that my sheltering wings offer the refuge you need from the cruel world.”

Finally he stopped ranting long enough for me to speak. “Um, Makuta, you don’t have wings any more.”

“It’s an expression, dear,” he groaned, rubbing his shoulder. “What I mean is, simply surrender your will to mine, and let me be master of your destiny, and you will be safe and loved for all eternity.”

I replied quietly, “But you can’t even protect yourself. You keep getting defeated. And it’s not for lack of power, or intelligence, or determination. You’re doomed to lose, as long as you’re driven by selfish ambition.”

“I haven’t been defeated!” he retorted. “My brother is still asleep, isn’t he?”

“Well, yes, but the Toa Nuva come closer every day to waking him up.”

“Silence, you impertinent wench! I’ll have no more talk of my brother!” he snarled, grabbing my wrist and squeezing it tightly in his claw. Then he suddenly looked down at his hand and let go. “I’m sorry, beloved. I hope I didn’t hurt you. You just drive me to such extremes of emotion.”

He turned his attention back to the instrument panel. But after a few minutes, his eyes narrowed. “It’s that Takanuva, I’m sure of it. *He’s* the one who’s stolen your heart! When we were all on the Great Barrier, I couldn’t help but notice the way you lingered in his presence. And you helped him up after he was weakened from using his stupid shiny mask on me, no less!”

I caught my breath, not sure what to say. As a former Toa prototype and unofficial little sister of the Toa Nuva, naturally I had a lot of affection for the plucky new Toa of Light. My admiration for him had grown even more after he had confronted—and overcome—the fearsome Master of Shadows in the *Mask of Light*. But I didn’t particularly want to discuss it with the loser of that contest, who now held me prisoner.

“I just know that little fire flyer is going to pick another fight with me someday,” muttered the Spirit of Destruction. Then his head abruptly spun around. “And you’ll be rooting for him! You love him, don’t you?”

“Who I love is not your concern,” I said cautiously. “All you need to know is that it’s not you.”

He sighed deeply. “And why not? Really, you must explain why you continue to avoid me. After I’ve invested so much time and energy into courting you, you owe me at least that much.”

“The reason I avoid you is not that you’re too tall, or too old, or too powerful. It’s that you’re too evil.”

“Oh, that again,” he laughed. “Well, that’s no real obstacle. Love can enable us to overlook each other’s minor flaws. It’s the only way to find true happiness with another imperfect being.”

“Evil is not a minor flaw,” I frowned.

“It’s no more than a perceptual difference, love. And that’s all the more reason for you to write my biography. Once you hear about my past, you’ll perceive the nobility of my motives and decisions. And in the process of writing the riveting tale of my many adventures, you’ll spend enough time with me to see that I have only the best intentions for you.”

“I’ll never believe that, no matter how long you keep me,” I muttered. “In fact, I don’t believe much of anything you say. Last time I saw you, you gave me a sad story about how the Toa Metru had interfered with your plan to protect the Matoran from the next enemy. And then I found out the Visorak—and their vicious masters—were working for you all along!”

Makuta sat back with a smug smile. “Of course the Visorak were working for me. I summoned them to capture all the dangerous Rahi the earthquake had freed from the Archives. Just think—if I hadn’t put the Matoran in those spheres, they would have been slaughtered wholesale by those wild beasts! But once the place was safely cleaned up, I was going to let them back out. I’m sorry to have misled you, sweetheart, but I wasn’t at liberty to tell you the whole truth at the time, because it was future storyline.” He glanced over and noticed my scowl. “Why are you so mad at me? The Turaga do that sort of thing all the time.”

“The Turaga don’t do it to cover up diabolical plans to take over the universe, Makuta.”

“All I want to do is offer the world the benefit of my strength and leadership. Does that make me diabolical?” he asked sweetly.

“Actually, yes,” I nodded, “because you’re doing it by deception and violence. And now Greg Farshtey has confirmed it, too. He says you’re sinister, cold, and sadistic, and that if you don’t have any use for someone, you don’t care if they live or die. Evidently that will become obvious in *Bionicle Adventures #10*.”

Makuta snorted. “Oh, for crying out loud. You really think the Great Beings have any idea what’s going on inside my head? Sure, they gave me my start in show business, and I’ll always be grateful for that. But ever since I crawled out of the ooze, I’ve been slashing my own path through the jungle. You can’t just go about meekly following the rules and expect to accomplish anything in this universe. And I don’t intend for their slander to keep me from using my natural talents to control—er, guide the Matoran I was entrusted to protect.”

I sat back in my seat, frustrated in the face of his insane logic. But I still had hope. Perhaps I could get the Rahkshi to help me escape somehow, as they had done once before.

Soon we were flying over New York City, and in typical fashion, Makuta provoked the attention of local law enforcement authorities by circling the torch of the Statue of Liberty and setting it ablaze. I craned my neck to watch the fierce orange flame and the bevy of police helicopters recede into pinpoints in the distance. The Master of Shadows plunged his car into the cloud cover, and everything outside turned to white.

I glared at him. “They’re going to signal every police station in the country! You’ll never get away with that.”

“Oh, don’t be so pessimistic, my pet,” he chuckled. “When those security guards report that a big robot shot a beam of plasma out of its hand as it flew past in a rocket-powered Cadillac, they’ll get an extended medical leave of absence, and maybe a few psychotherapy sessions.”

Makuta pushed the control stick forward to send us into a dive, and as we emerged from the clouds, I saw the gridlines of a small city I guessed must be Enfield, Connecticut. He lowered the car gently onto an empty stretch of highway, and presently we were pulling into the parking lot of the LEGO headquarters and making the familiar trek into the adjacent forest. Seeing no real alternative at this point, I reluctantly followed him into the tunnel that led to his portal to Mangaia.

The Manas deferentially lowered their eye stalks as we passed through the anteroom and headed down the long corridor to the main chamber of the lair. We turned the last bend in the tunnel, and I was startled by a loud shout. “Surprise!” yelled several voices at once against a background din of loud shrieks.

A throng of Rahkshi was assembled under a large banner reading, “WELCOME HOME, MISTRESS!” Balloons and confetti floated down from big nets affixed to the vaulted ceiling. I stopped in my tracks, my mouth open in disbelief, as the lanky armored creatures swarmed around me and clanked their staffs against my axes.

### 3. Homecoming

#### **Soundgarden – Black Hole Sun**

*In my eyes  
Indisposed  
In disguise  
As no one knows  
Hides the face  
Lies the snake  
The sun  
In my disgrace  
Boiling heat  
Summer stench  
'Neath the black  
The sky looks dead  
Call my name  
Through the cream  
And I'll hear you  
Scream again*

*Black hole sun  
Won't you come  
And wash away the rain  
Black hole sun  
Won't you come  
Won't you come*

*Stuttering  
Cold and damp  
Steal the warm wind  
Tired friend  
Times are gone  
For honest men  
And sometimes  
Far too long  
For snakes  
In my shoes  
A walking sleep  
And my youth  
I pray to keep  
Heaven send  
Hell away  
No one sings  
Like you  
Anymore*

*Hang my head  
Drown my fear  
Till you all just  
Disappear*

**Beck – E-Pro**

*See me comin' to town with my soul  
 Straight down out of the world with my fingers  
 Holding onto the devil I know  
 All my troubles'll hang on your trigger  
 Take your eyes and your mind from the road  
 Shoot your mouth if you know where you're aiming  
 Don't forget to pick up what you sow  
 Talking trash to the garbage around you*

*Na na na na na na na*

*See me kickin' the door with my boots  
 Broke down out in a ditch of old rubbish  
 Snakes and bones in the back of your room  
 Handing out a confection of venom  
 Heaven's drunk from the poison you use  
 Charm the wolves with the eyes of a gambler  
 Now I see it's a comfort to you  
 Hammer my bones on the anvil of daylight*

*Na na na na na na na*

*I won't give up that ghost  
 It's sick the way these tongues are twisted  
 The good in us is all we know  
 There's too much left to taste that's bitter*

*Na na na na na na na*

As metallic confetti floated down from the ceiling, the Rahkshi crowded around to greet me. The ones driven by Stage Seven kraata—Shadrahk, Vorahk, Invulnerahk, and Florahk—all jabbered at once while their brothers hissed excitedly. Guurahk elbowed his way through the mob, pointed at my torso, which had once been part of his armor, and tipped his head back to screech triumphantly.

“Now, now, boys,” said Makuta, “quiet down! I know you’re overjoyed at your mistress’s homecoming, but she can’t hear you all at once. Let’s go ahead and get the celebration started, and then you can come by a few at a time to pay your respects. I understand that some of you have prepared a musical gift for her.”

Vorahk nodded vigorously. “Mistress, we’ve started a band! We hope you totally dig it.” He bounded over to a stage in the corner opposite Makuta’s desk. Meanwhile, Pinky the shapeshifting Rahkshi appeared at my elbow with a plate of appetizers for me. I smiled weakly and thanked him, but I didn’t take anything.

Pinky laid his blue head on my shoulder as I watched the band pick up their instruments. Vorahk strapped on an ebony Gibson Flying V electric guitar, Gravirahk silently fingered the strings of a Fender bass, and Accurahk’s hands were poised over a Korg keyboard. Densirahk lifted his

drumsticks over a black Tama drum set. RAHKOUS was spray-painted in green on the bass drum. Sonirahk sat at a sound control board, making minute adjustments to a few knobs.

On Vorahk's signal, Densirahk tapped on the edge of his snare drum, and then the other instruments kicked in, flooding the room with heavily distorted sound. The raspy voice of the Rahkshi of Hunger belted out the lyrics of the Soundgarden grunge anthem "Black Hole Sun."

Makuta beamed as he watched his sons perform. "Aren't they amazing, dear?" he shouted above the din. "They've only been at it for a few weeks, and already it's clear they've got real talent."

I nodded as I nibbled a cracker with seafood dip. I had taken it just to stop Pinky from shoving the plate into my ribs. "Their name fits," I yelled back.

"I think Shadrahk came up with that. You know, they've really started developing their creative gifts lately. I think it's because of you and your good influence on them. Before they met you, all they ever wanted to do was wreck stuff."

While musicians transitioned into Beck's "E-Pro," the Rahkshi came by in small groups as their master had suggested, each one hissing his greeting. The others began to do something that I gathered was the Rahkshi equivalent of dancing—thrashing wildly, shaking their staffs, and discharging small blasts of destructive energy into the ceiling and walls. The resulting sparks and explosions lit up the cave like a disco. Clouds of dust glittered in the flashes of colorful light. Makuta stood behind me like a sentinel, deflecting falling rubble with his staff.

Rahkous finished the last notes of their song, and the huge cavern resonated with a final shudder before it began to ring with the shrill sound of Rahkshi cheering. Makuta excused himself, stalked onto the stage, and took the microphone. At the squeal of electronic feedback, all the Rahkshi fell silent.

"Thank you, my sons, for the wonderful musical entertainment," he said, gesturing toward the band members. "Now, let's shift gears and treat your mistress to a quiet, elegant dinner." The Rahkshi responded by stampeding toward the dining room, but a stone door slammed down over the opening just as the first one reached it, and his brothers crashed into his back. "I said QUIET!" bellowed their master. "Fall in!"

With much jostling and shoving, the armored creatures formed a line, then stood motionless as soldiers. I quickly counted forty-one of them while Makuta led me past. He opened the door again with a wave of his hand. The dining room had obviously been rebuilt since the latest Rahkshi disaster, but its basic configuration was the same, with three long stone tables flanked with benches and two large chairs at each end of the center table.

As I walked through the doorway, I felt something wet fall on my head, and a revolting odor filled the air. I jerked back and hesitantly peered up through the opening. A hideous vine clung to the engraved stone arch, its twisted, scabrous tendrils dripping some sort of viscous fluid. I touched the top of my mask, and it was oily. My head and hand began to feel a burning sensation.

“Oh, darling, I’m sorry,” Makuta apologized, pulling me quickly through the doorway. He flipped my hand over and blasted my palm with a high-pressure jet of water from his fingertips. Then he gripped my chin in his claw and washed off the top of my Kanohi. “That’s one of Florahk’s new botanical experiments. He’s gotten so imaginative in his garden! The foliage on that one may be homely, but it produces the loveliest flowers.”

“I hope they’re stunning,” I muttered.

“I’ll make sure he brings you one when it blooms. And that reminds me, I’ve been meaning to give you water powers again, as usual. You may need them at some point to clean yourself again,” he smiled. He put his hand on my forehead, and I felt the familiar flow of energy come into my body and through my limbs.

My host pulled out a chair for me, and I sat down. His minions took their seats. Plates of baked salmon, vegetables, and bread had been set out, and the Rahkshi hissed hungrily and sniffed at the food with their reptilian faces. Makuta strode to his chair at the far end of the table, raised his wine glass, and proposed a toast. “To my beloved, who has returned to make our family whole again. May all our endeavors together be fruitful.”

The Rahkshi gulped their water while he drained his glass. I pretended to sip from mine, at the same time curious and apprehensive about these ‘endeavors.’ Maybe one of them would be my ticket to freedom. Around me the Rahkshi, untroubled by such concerns, were burying their faces in their fish. I took a cautious bite of mine.

I glanced over at Shadrahk, seated to my right. “How is everything going with you Rahkshi?”

“Quite well, Mistress, thank you for asking,” he replied. “Lately Master has been encouraging us to explore our abilities.”

“Like Florahk’s plant and the rock band?” I asked.

“Yeah, we all have something going on,” Vorahk added. “Good times.”

Invulnerahk nodded vigorously. “Master says maybe one of us will stumble onto an idea that will be useful in his next Plan, and—”

“How’s your fish, darling?” Makuta interrupted. He shot a withering glance at Invulnerahk.

“Um, fine,” I replied. “Say, didn’t you have forty-two Rahkshi last time I was here?”

“Why, I’m touched that you noticed,” smiled the Master of Shadows. “Yes, the missing one is Mentorahk. He’s on Metru Nui at the moment. His assignment is to lurk near the LEGO trailer and warn me before they head up to the Great Barrier. That way I have time to get back into my cage before they show up with the cameras.”

“I see.”

“It’s much too far for me to read their minds myself. And I certainly am not going to stay bound to that accursed rock by that execrable prison of protodermis while they film all those scenes with lesser beings. You know, it’s really tedious, being on call for such a small role. I’m really looking forward to next year.”

“You’re in the 2006 storyline a lot more, then?” I asked.

“Why, yes, I—oh, I guess I just let the Muaka out of the bag,” he chuckled. “You always have that effect on me, poppet. Of course I would love to divulge this year’s storyline, since it’s a flashback, and tell you about my discussions with LEGO about next year. But until I have some assurance of your fealty, I won’t be able to do that.”

By this time the Rahkshi had finished their food and were playing hockey, whacking the salt and pepper shakers back and forth across the table with their forks. Makuta stood up, and they froze. “You may be excused, my sons,” he announced. “Take your plates to the kitchen.”

The Rahkshi swarmed out of the dining hall. Soon we heard the sound of breaking dishes in the cave next door.

Makuta shook his head, an amused expression on his Kraahkan. “They’re a handful.” He scanned the empty hall with his eyes and stopped at a spot on the wall. “Chamelerahk, since you’ve lingered behind, you’re the lucky one who will fetch us some coffee.”

A red and gold Rahkshi materialized in front of the wall. He shuffled out the door.

“Come, sit by me.” My dark, grimy host patted the bench next to him. When I hesitated, I felt a slight electric shock on my feet. I pulled them up and looked under the table. A ripple of chain lightning danced along the table support and turned back toward Makuta. Frowning, I got up and sat on the bench a few bios from the place he had indicated.

“You needn’t be so bashful, beloved. It’s nicer when we don’t have to shout to hear each other, don’t you think? Anyway, I have thought of a way you could help me. It would even be rather easy and fun for you.”

“And then you’ll take me home?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yes, then I would take you ‘home.’” He gestured in the air with his fingers.

I didn’t have much hope I could actually bring myself to do this task, but perhaps it would be something harmlessly unpleasant. “Well, what is it?”

The Chameleon Rahkshi wheeled in a cart with coffee and cream puffs and began to serve us. The Spirit of Destruction stirred some sugar into his steaming cup. “Write a little fan fiction for me. A love story. You like writing about love, don’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Compose a story about a love affair between Kopaka and Gali, and post it on BZPower,” he explained. “Tell all about the furtive glances, the lingering moments of tortured silence and doubt, the brave masks they hide behind while they watch each other risk life itself to protect their charges, glorious heroism suddenly turning to fear and back again. Then the moment of revelation, when the truth bursts out like a trumpet blast and love can no longer be denied. The awe of the Matoran... the warm, knowing smiles of the Turaga... the amazement of the other Toa... Your readers would absolutely love it! Certainly all the Kopaka fans will be rejoicing—quietly, of course.” He grinned broadly.

Puzzled, I cocked my head at him. “Why on earth would you want me to write that?”

“Remember how much they liked that epic you wrote about Kopaka, with its sub-theme of repressed love?” he went on, ignoring my question. “You know they wanted things to go further between the characters.”

“I’m trying really hard to figure out what’s in this for you, because I just know you have some nasty motive here.” I sipped some coffee.

“Oh, come on, you know you want to write it. And I just want to read it. I need a little uplifting entertainment around here—something to do besides watching my boys wrestle with each other. If you insist on denying me love, at least give me a story about it.”

“Are you hoping the Toa will read it?” I guessed. “And Tahu, perhaps, will imagine that it’s based on truth and get really angry? And then the unity of the Toa will be disrupted again, allowing you to make progress on your next evil plan?”

“You see right through me, darling,” he sighed. “You just dissect me with that razor-sharp feminine intuition. It’s really unsettling sometimes.”

“Well, I’m not writing that story,” I declared. “If you want me to concoct some kind of far-fetched adventure tale about you winning a big victory, maybe I could do that. But I won’t plant false ideas about my friends in everyone’s heads with trashy romantic fiction.”

“The most far-fetched adventure tale that could ever be told about me is the real story,” he purred. “Just accept your destiny to be my Chronicler. It’s really the best solution. We’ll both get fame and glory. Plus, by the time it’s over, we’ll have gotten to know each other like old friends.”

“You don’t seem to get along too well with your old friends,” I remarked, finishing my coffee. “As I recall, the energized protodermis entity was pretty ticked off at you last time I was here.”

Makuta stood up. “Don’t get the wrong impression from one or two brief encounters, my sweet. Eppy and I have our difficult moments, certainly. But that’s inevitable when you have so much

power and creative genius in one room. The grand things we've accomplished together—the Rahi Nui, the two-headed Tarakava, the rock-grinding mole, the mutant Lohrak, Bahka, the Proto-Rhino, Voporak—oh, I could go on and on—they're proof of the deep level of mutual respect we have."

"Bahka? The Proto-Rhino? Voporak?"

"Bahka's a big fire-breathing dragon thing. Before being immersed in EP, he was a little creature about the size of a Bohrok Va that worked in my machine shop. Now I have him guarding the gate to Metru Nui. The Proto-Rhino—well, you can probably guess what that looks like. Sometime I'll take you on a tour of my private zoo. Oh, and as for Voporak, he's future storyline, so don't ask." He gestured toward the door. "Let's take our champagne in the living room. Chamelerahk?"

The invisible Rahkshi appeared at his elbow, cleared the dishes, and pushed the cart out. As I stood to follow Makuta, there was a tumult in the direction of the kitchen. "They must have discovered the extra cream puffs," he groaned. Shielding me from the dripping plant with his hand, he led me to a black lacquer table. Then he went to put some music on the CD player.

I gasped as I recognized the table from my nightmare. Then Chamelerahk set the champagne bottle and glasses on the table, and my heart started to pound under my chest armor. The same hand-painted bottle of Perrier-Jouet, the same slender blue flutes—

"You look like you've seen a ghost, precious," Makuta remarked as he sat down. "Are you all right?"

I nodded and collapsed onto my chair, but I sat up straight again at the sound of more crashing in the kitchen. This time it was followed by a muffled explosion. "Pinky must have discovered the extra coffee," Makuta growled. He jumped up from his seat and plunged into the smoke billowing from the doorway. He returned, dragging Pinky by the top edge of his carapace like a misbehaving cat. The Rahkshi was twitching violently.

"Somnorahk!" yelled the Master of Shadows. "Come help your over-caffeinated brother settle down for a little nap."

The maroon Rahkshi trotted out of the weapons room. He aimed his staff at Pinky, who collapsed into a heap on the floor. Then the Sleep Rahkshi ran back to his entertainment.

"I get tired of doing it all myself," explained the Spirit of Destruction, stepping over Pinky. "And they love using their powers on each other, anyway. Well, we'll be eating salads and cold cereal for a couple days, I'm afraid, until I can get a new range and oven." He shrugged apologetically as he sat back down and drank some of the bubbly beverage.

I sat nervously folding my hands and watching him. "Oh, go ahead and drink," he urged. "You obviously need to relax."

Hesitantly, I sipped from my glass. Then “Sentimental Journey” began to play on the stereo. Makuta stood up and smiled. “Darling, it’s our song! Come, dance with me.”

## 4. Unsound Judgment

### **Simple Plan — Me Against the World**

*We're not gonna be  
Just a part of their game  
We're not gonna be  
Just the victims  
They're taking our dreams  
And they tear them apart  
Till everyone's the same  
I've got no place to go  
I've got no where to run  
They love to watch me fall  
They think they know it all*

*I'm a nightmare, a disaster  
That's what they always say  
I'm a lost cause, not a hero  
But I'll make it on my own  
I've gotta prove them wrong  
Me against the world  
It's me against the world*

*We won't let them change  
How we feel in our hearts  
We're not gonna let them control us  
We won't let them shove  
All their thoughts in our heads  
And we'll never be like them*

*I've got no place to go  
I've got no where to run  
They love to watch me fall  
They think they know it all*

*Now I'm sick of this waiting  
So come on and take your shot  
You can spit all your insults  
But nothing you say is gonna change us  
You can sit there and judge me  
Say what you want to  
We'll never let you in*

*They'll never bring us down  
We'll never fall in line  
I'll make it on my own  
Me against the world*

### **Linkin Park — Don't Stay**

*Sometimes I need to remember just to breathe*

*Sometimes I need you to stay away from me  
Sometimes I'm in disbelief I didn't know  
Somehow I need you to go*

*Don't stay  
Forget our memories  
Forget our possibilities  
What you were changing me into  
Just give me myself back and  
Don't stay  
Forget our memories  
Forget our possibilities  
Take all your faithlessness with you  
Just give me myself back and  
Don't stay*

*Sometimes I feel like I trusted you too well  
Sometimes I just feel like screaming at myself  
Sometimes I'm in disbelief I didn't know  
Somehow I need to be alone*

*I don't need you anymore, I don't want to be ignored  
I don't need one more day of you wasting me away  
I don't need you anymore, I don't want to be ignored  
I don't need one more day of you wasting me away*

*With no apologies*

*Don't stay  
Don't stay*

My apprehension grew as I heard myself mutter the same words I had in my dream. “Uh, I don't know how to dance.”

Makuta took my hand and pulled me to my feet. But instead of dragging me to the middle of the floor as he had in my nightmare, he looked me over and shook his head. Then he grabbed my shoulders and turned me around. “Oh, this will never do. You're just too short. Well, I've been meaning to do something about that weak connection in your lower back, anyway. Come with me.” Gripping my hand in his claw again, he strode toward one of the many tunnels leading from the main room. I scrambled behind him.

We entered the spare parts room, which I remembered from being captive in his lair before. A lightstone shed a pale, flickering glow on the piles of parts. Pieces of every color and type filled shelves that reached the ceiling. Others were carelessly strewn about on the tables and floor, some of them fashioned into partially assembled creatures.

After he cast his gaze around the chamber, Makuta removed a few items from an upper shelf and spread them on a low stone table. I backed slowly toward the doorway. In my head I was calculating my chances of escape, but I kept coming up with zero. Then he turned around. “Don't be afraid, dollface, I'm already happy with your basic design. You just need a minor modification. This will hardly hurt at all.”

In one swift move, he picked me up and laid me face down on the table, with his knee on my upper back to hold me still. Then I felt my backbone being wrenched apart. I cried out in pain and fear as I suddenly lost sensation in my legs. But in seconds the Spirit of Destruction had snapped me together again and set me on my feet. I reached behind me and gingerly touched my back. He had reinforced part of my spine with two parallel connections, making me slightly taller in the process. Thankful it was over, I took a deep breath and stretched.

He suddenly embraced me as if we were about to dance and smiled down at me. “Well, that helps a little bit, anyway. You’re still really short, but now at least I don’t have to bend my knees to reach around your waist. All right, let’s get back to the ballroom.”

Lacking a better idea, I followed him back to the living room. To my relief Rahkous had taken up the instruments again and was playing Simple Plan’s “Me Against the World.” At least dancing to a fast rock song wouldn’t involve being close to Makuta. The other Rahkshi were wandering in from the weapons room to listen to the music.

Frowning, the Master of Shadows started to approach the stage, but I tapped on his arm. “Why don’t we let them play?” I suggested. “I thought you wanted to encourage their creativity.”

“Right,” he sighed. “Well, we can enjoy a little more champagne while they finish up. Shadrahk?”

Before he had finished uttering the name, the Rahkshi of Darkness was at his elbow. “Ah, there you are. Fetch us another bottle, please.”

Shadrahk bowed his black head and vanished. Soon he reappeared with a second bottle of champagne. Makuta opened it, shooting the cork at the musicians. Densirahk raised his head and hissed in confusion, then turned back to his drumming.

I noticed a purple Rahkshi stepping up to a microphone near Vorahk. “Isn’t that Xefonirahk?” I asked.

“Why, yes, it is, love. It really warms my heart the way you’ve learned all their names.”

“Uh, yeah. He’s the Power Scream Rahkshi, isn’t he?” I continued nervously.

“Oh, I see where you’re going with this,” he smiled. “It’s all right. He knows better than to use his power indoors. He just likes to hum along with them, since he can’t actually sing. And I let him, because I think it’s good for him to practice controlling the pitch of his voice. By the way, that extra microphone is really for you. Just mention a song you’d like to sing, and they’ll be happy to learn it.”

“Oh, no, thanks,” I mumbled. “So, what projects are the other Rahkshi working on?”

“Lots of things. Let’s see... Entorahk has his little ant farm, Meteorahk has his weather experiments, Plasmarahk and Distrupirahk have their nuclear fission lab—” He was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass. A foamy fluid began to gush out of one of the doorways. Panrahk flew out of the tunnel and swerved toward the weapons room, but Makuta jumped out of his chair and slammed him against the wall with both hands. “You little brat! I told you to stay out of the wine cellar!”

The other Rahkshi swarmed over to the growing puddle, dropped onto all fours, opened their head plates, and lapped up the liquid. “Hey!” Makuta yelled. Then he glanced over and saw me watching him. With a look of resignation on his mask, he released Panrahk. “Oh, well, I suppose it’s about time they had their first taste of champagne. And Merlot, and Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay, too, by the smell of it. I just wish he had had the sense to smash the cheap stuff instead.”

The music stopped as the band members joined the other Rahkshi. In a few minutes they had slurped up all the spilled wine. Makuta waved his hand, and a tiny cyclone swept the pieces of glass into a neat pile against the wall. He walked toward the stereo, but by this time Rahkous was playing again. He yelled over the racket, “All right, Vorahk, go ahead and finish your set. But then it’s my turn to pick the music.” He returned to the table and sat down. I sat back and listened to the song. The alcohol was having its effect on the musicians, whose technique was getting sloppier and sloppier.

“Darling, I’ve come up with another idea for you,” said the Master of Shadows, interrupting my thoughts. “I’ll give you a set of engraved tablets with an account of some my early actions to protect the Matoran. You’ll take them to the Matoran and tell them you’ve found them at the LEGO headquarters, in a corner of the warehouse or something. And then they’ll know the truth about my generous and noble deeds. They’ll show them to the Toa Nuva, who are already suspicious about the patchy, incomplete stories of the Turaga. And then they will all rebel against those old geezers, and history will be set right again.”

I frowned at him. “There’s no way that will work, Makuta. First of all, I’m not a LEGO employee anymore, so why would I be snooping around the warehouse? And secondly, the Turaga will just explain the proper context of whatever half-truths you’re trying to push on them.” I glanced at the stage. Xefonirahk was swaying drunkenly and clutching the microphone stand for support. He took a deep breath. I turned back to Makuta. “Isn’t this a Linkin Park song?”

“I think so,” he replied. “What of it? And of course my plan will work. Just say you went back to visit some old friends at LEGO. And—”

Suddenly I remembered the song. “This is ‘Don’t Stay,’ and it’s got screaming in it!” I dove under the table as the Power Scream Rahkshi emitted a high-pitched wail. It was immediately followed by the thunderous sound of the ceiling breaking loose and crashing to the floor. Boulders rained down all around. One of them struck the table and pinned me underneath until I managed to shove away enough splintered planks and rocks to pull myself out.

I stood and peered through the thick dust. Rakhshi scurried to free their moaning brothers from the rubble. Gravirahk was holding his glowing staff, and a large cluster of rocks was floating above the stage. Densirahk and Accurahk pushed them to one side, and the Rakhshi of Gravity let them drop with a loud thud. Vorahk was shaking Xefonirahk by the neck. “Dude, you almost wrecked our instruments!” He shoved the limp purple Rakhshi backwards off the platform.

To my surprise, Makuta stepped over Xefonirahk to confront the Rakhshi of Hunger. “What in blazes do you think you’re doing, playing a song called ‘Don’t Stay’ for your mistress?” he snarled, raising a silvery gauntlet to strike his minion.

“Uh... sorry, Master. I didn’t mean for her to think that we...” stammered the black Rakhshi.

Invulnerahk popped out of a pile of stones and jumped in front of his brother, with what could best be described as a smile on his reptilian face. “It’s all right, Master. We’re all on board with the Plan.”

The Master of Shadows whacked the Rakhshi of Limited Invulnerability with the back of his hand. But the gray creature just wobbled and laughed. “Whoops! I forgot, Mistress isn’t supposed to know about the Plan. My bad!”

Makuta’s eyes flashed red. He punched his son in the face. Invulnerahk reeled backwards into Vorahk’s arms. I grabbed Makuta’s elbow. “Please stop! He’s not revealing anything I haven’t already figured out on my own.”

The Spirit of Destruction emitted a low growl, then bellowed at all the Rakhshi. “The party’s over! Get out of here, all of you! Go to bed!”

In seconds the Rakhshi had all vanished into the tunnel to the barracks. I watched them go with a mixture of fear, revulsion, and pity. Makuta smiled. “The party may be over for them, but for us, it’s just beginning.” Kicking a few rocks out of his way, he walked toward the home theater system, which had been spared in the cave-in. “It’s a good thing I finally got around to reinforcing the ceiling above my desk. After the Bahrag trashed the place last time, I didn’t want to go through the hassle of reloading everything onto my computer from the remote backups again. But I really should have done the whole room while I was at it. Now, about that dance...” Soon the stereo was playing “Sentimental Journey” again, and he was beckoning to me.

I pivoted and scrambled over the rocks toward the exit. Maybe I could somehow slip through the claws of the Manas. In my panic, it seemed like any chance was worth taking. But I didn’t get far before two hands closed around my waist. My creepy host had stretched his arms across the room to catch me. I tried to break free, but I lost traction and flew backwards like a stone from a slingshot, slamming into Makuta. My foot caught on the cord of the floor lamp, and it fell over and shattered as we tumbled onto the couch.

“I’m really beginning to like this elasticity power,” Makuta grinned as he shifted me around on his knees. “And you certainly have an amusing way of turning off the light.” I shoved desperately against his chest, and his expression turned thoughtful. “Really, darling, you have no

reason to be afraid of me. I'm not going to try to absorb you again, if that's what you're worried about."

Ducking under his arm, I asked, "Did you make me have that nightmare in the car?"

"Well, the beginning of it, yes," he admitted, lowering his arm to block my way out. "The part where we were dancing together. Then your little imagination took over and turned a wonderful dream into a nightmare. But I've learned from that terrible mistake I almost made last time you were here. I can't very well expect to have my cake and eat her, too."

I stopped struggling. "Look, Makuta," I implored him, "I just want to go home. Please let me go!"

"But you've only just arrived," he sighed. He was silent for a few moments while I pushed vainly against his arms. Then he said, "About the only way I would let you go at this point is if you let me make my mark on you."

"Haven't you done enough of that sort of thing already?" I asked. "You've changed my torso, my feet, my arms—even my eye color!"

"Yes, but none of that is unique to me. Here's what I propose, my lovely. I'll use my laser vision to etch my name on your side." His eyes turned to red and then to white, and he leaned over my shoulder to carve a small, neat :m: on the floor.

"No way," I cringed, prying at his fingers. "I'm not going through life with a 'Makuta' tattoo!"

"Not just 'Makuta.' There's an entire Brotherhood of us Makuta, darling. I'll engrave 'Makuta' up one side of you and my individual name—the one you haven't heard yet—down the other. Just think, you'll be the first to find out what it is! You'll have an exclusive journalistic scoop."

I shook my head. "It's not worth it."

His eyes reverted to blue. "My, my, you're particular. You've rejected so many of my ideas! I'm starting to think that maybe you secretly do want to stay with me." He tightened his arms around me. Then the phone rang.

Muttering some words I had never heard before, he pushed me off his lap, jumped up, and rummaged around on the desk until he found his mobile phone. He flipped it open. "This had better be good," he snapped. He listened for a few moments. "All right. Thanks, Mentorahk." He closed the phone and sighed.

"The filming is starting?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid so," he replied dejectedly, flopping himself down on the couch again. "I really don't want to leave, but at least I can console myself with the thought that you'll be here in my lair, faithfully awaiting my return."

Naturally the first thing I intended to do was try to escape, but I tried not to think about this. I forced a smile instead. “Well, have a nice time.”

“Thank you, angel.” He reached over and touched the side of my mask. “Come, let me embrace you one last time before I go.”

I sprang up off the sofa. “You’d better get going. If you’re late, you’ll blow your cover.”

“It’s so sweet the way you’re always looking out for my best interests,” he said through clenched jaws. “All right, you’re in charge of the boys while I’m at work. I may regret this, but if you want to keep them occupied, you can take them topside for a tournament or something. They do so enjoy the games you set up for them. I’ll see you soon, precious.”

I nodded as he stalked toward the tunnel that led to the protodermis chamber, which also held the great Hau-shaped gate to Metru Nui. He turned one last time to wave at me before he disappeared into the blackness.

Being a prisoner in Makuta’s lair was something I had experienced three times before, and each time I had escaped more or less unharmed. The first time, Makuta had given me the choice whether or not to stay. The next, he had assigned me a difficult but feasible job, and after its completion (and a confrontation with the Rahkshi), he had kept his word and taken me home. The last time, Krahka, who had brought me along as bait in a revenge scheme against him, had changed her mind and rescued me. But this time was much more frightening. I was alone, with no agreement by which I might earn my release—and no real experience as a hero, in spite of my original Toa prototype construction. Nevertheless, I would have to save myself.

I waited until the sound of his footsteps had receded and the grinding of the huge stone door had stopped. Then I glanced around. This was my golden opportunity to flee! But it wouldn’t be easy to get past Makuta’s minions. I decided to rummage around in the spare parts room and see if I could come up something to help me.

Aided by the night vision Makuta had given me long ago, I crept quietly down the corridor and peered around the corner into the chamber. I scanned the ghoulish stacks of parts, hoping an idea for a weapon or defensive device would pop into my head. I found a disk launcher, but without any disks, it was useless. Then I noticed a heap of masks in a corner. My heart racing, I picked my way cautiously across the room. Most of the Kanohi were obviously cracked or broken. But on top of the pile was a mint-condition Great Huna!

I slipped the mask over my own, hoping it was still functional. I looked down at my hands and watched them vanish as I willed the mask to work. Overjoyed, I turned and tiptoed out of the room.

I followed the tunnel back to the main room, which was still empty. I made my way through the rubble toward the exit tunnel. But then I collided into something hard. A metallic clang echoed

through the room as I staggered backwards. A veil of darkness receded to reveal Shadrahk. I quickly removed my new mask and put it on my back.

“I’m sorry, Mistress. I didn’t see you there. Can I help you find something?” he asked politely.

“No, thanks,” I murmured, realizing I should have expected Makuta to have made provisions to guard me.

“Master left some bedding in the cabinet for you. I think he may have forgotten to mention it.” The Rakhshi of Darkness walked over to the stereo cabinet and pulled out a pillow and blanket. I arranged them on the couch and sat down.

“Well, good night,” he said with a little bow.

“Good night,” I replied. He walked into the tunnel to the barracks.

I stretched out on the couch, suddenly very tired, and closed my eyes to let the darkness become complete.

## 5. Let the Games Begin

### **The Ramones — I Wanna Be Sedated**

*Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go I wanna be sedated  
 Nothin' to do and no where to go-o-oh I wanna be sedated  
 Just get me to the airport put me on a plane  
 Hurry hurry hurry before I go insane  
 I can't control my fingers I can't control my brain  
 Oh no no no no no  
 Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go....  
 Just put me in a wheelchair and put me on a plane  
 Hurry hurry hurry before I go insane  
 I can't control my fingers I can't control my brain  
 Oh no no no no no  
 Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go I wanna be sedated  
 Nothin' to do and no where to go-o-o I wanna be sedated  
 Just put me in a wheelchair get me to the show  
 Hurry hurry hurry before I go loco  
 I can't control my fingers I can't control my toes  
 Oh no no no no no  
 Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go...  
 Just put me in a wheelchair...  
 Ba-ba-bamp-ba ba-ba-ba-bamp-ba I wanna be sedated  
 Ba-ba-bamp-ba ba-ba-ba-bamp-ba I wanna be sedated*

### **Days of the New — Touch, Peel and Stand**

*Since I know how low to go  
 I won't let it show  
 Won't you touch me, touch me, I won't let it go  
 And now I stand, and I peel for more.  
 Won't you touch me, touch me, I won't let it go*

*Yes I've finally found a reason  
 I don't need an excuse  
 I've got this time on my hands  
 You are the one to abuse  
 One to abuse*

*You're always talking back to me  
 You won't let it be, won't you touch me, touch me  
 It never bothered you before  
 Now I stand and I peel for more, won't you touch me, touch me, I won't let it go*

*Ooohh  
 Yeeahh Yeah  
 Ooohh  
 Yeeahh Yeah*

*Yes I've finally found a reason  
 I don't need an excuse  
 I've got this time on my hands*

*You are the one to abuse  
One to abuse*

I woke in the darkness, rubbed my eyes, and considered my situation. I was a prisoner in the lair of a scheming megalomaniac, and I was responsible for more than two score of his destructive offspring until he returned from an assignment of unknown duration. And one of them—the smartest, stealthiest one—was evidently keeping a glowing orange eye on me.

Then I remembered that after receiving his call, Makuta had left the phone on the desk. I glanced around the chamber, wondering if Shadrahk was watching. But since he wielded the power of darkness, I realized I would probably not be able to tell if he was. So I stepped over to the desk and turned on the computer. This would surely provoke him to reveal himself.

I sat down and leaned over to hide the monitor as the machine started up. A password screen appeared, and of course it rejected my gibberish, but I clicked and typed as if I had succeeded in launching a program. No Rahkshi of Darkness appeared to confront me, so I concluded I was alone.

I flipped open the phone and quickly dialed Krahka's number, my heart pounding. After four rings, I recognized the voice she used with her six-armed Toa-Bane form. "This is me. If you don't know who I am, you've got the wrong number, dig? If you're Valvoline-Breath, whatever harebrained scheme you want my help with, you can't afford me. If you're Magnet-Head Mutant Man with yet another lame pun about how attractive I am, just can it. If you're Darth 'Who's your daddy?' Vader, the answer is 'Not you.' If you're anyone else, feel free to leave a message."

"Krahka?" I whispered. "It's—" The phone was lifted from my hand.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," said Shadrahk calmly. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that." He closed the phone and set it back on the desk. Then he took the mouse and shut down the computer. "Would you like some breakfast?"

Soon the air was filled with the commotion of the Rahkshi scrounging for victuals. They wandered into the living room with their food and sat on the floor and broken boulders. I stumbled into the kitchen and brewed some coffee with the stainless steel commercial coffee maker. Pinky stood looking at me wistfully, so I made him some decaf afterwards, and he eagerly drained the hot fluid from his cup. Vorahk winked at me. "No wonder the Pinkster always raves about you, Mistress."

As I sat back down on the couch, Shadrahk brought me a bowl of Frosted Flakes and a glass of milk. "Master mentioned the possibility that you might lead us in some games on the surface tonight."

I nodded. Organizing an activity for the Rahkshi would not only keep them out of trouble, but it might even give me another chance to escape, if I could distract Shadrahk long enough. "Certainly, Shadrahk. Anything special you'd like to play?"

The Rahkshi swarmed around the couch, hissing loudly. Invulnerahk looked from one to the other and translated, “Hockey! Tug-of-War! Capture the Flag!” But Vorahk asked, “How about something new?” The others nodded and hissed in agreement.

“All right, I have an idea,” I replied, and they fell silent to listen. “We’ll do a scavenger hunt. I’ll come up with a list of items that can be found all over the island. We’ll divide up into teams, and each team will have to collect one of each item. How about teams of... hmm... four Rahkshi?”

With their usual chaotic enthusiasm the Rahkshi divided themselves up while I sat down at the desk and found some paper and a pen. Shadrahk, Therahk, Pinky, and Illusorahk, having formed their team right away, came to help with the list. “Let’s get three items from each Wahi,” I suggested. “For Ga-Wahi, it could be, say, one of those glowing lightfish, but you have to bring it back alive.”

“Cool! And how about a piece of the glass that the Tahnok formed when they melted the sand outside the Po-Koro gates?” suggested Shadrahk. I smiled, remembering that he was quite the history buff. The Rahkshi of Quick Healing hissed, and the Rahkshi of Darkness said, “And a chunk of that striped sandstone from the Po-Wahi quarry.” Illusorahk proposed a container of molten magma and a live Hoto firebug, and Pinky added a Husi feather. I scribbled down our ideas, and soon we had a list of eighteen items.

“Master has a copier in the file room,” said Shadrahk. “I’ll go make a copy for each team.” He took the list and flew into one of the tunnels. He returned in a few minutes and handed out a stack of papers.

“First team to return to me with all the items is the winner. Ready, set, go!” I exclaimed. The Rahkshi hopped up into flight position and were gone with a whoosh, leaving me alone again in a cavern full of rubble and dirty dishes.

I wasted no time. I slapped the Huna over my mask again and crept quietly over the broken rocks toward the exit. The dank tunnel curved to one side and then the other. Finally I got to the chamber with the Manas. The two massive creatures sat motionless against one wall. I took a deep breath and tiptoed out of the passageway.

Suddenly the antennae of one of the enormous crabs began to twitch. Although I was silent and invisible, it had apparently detected my presence by its sense of smell. I sped up, walking as quickly as I could while still being quiet, but the second crab sprang to life and scuttled in front of the doorway. The first one circled around to keep me from going out the way I had entered.

I forced myself not to panic as the Manas moved together to trap me. At the last second before they closed in, and I leaped up and landed on a narrow ledge above them. They sniffed the air, confused. But they must have guessed at my location, because they began to hammer at the wall below me with their immense claws. I looked ahead for potential hand- and footholds, but the long stretch of rock ahead of me was almost featureless. The stone shook under their blows, and one of my feet slipped. I slammed an axe into the rock and held onto it. I gripped my other axe

tightly. I would have to reach out and embed it in the wall, then pull the first one loose and swing myself forward. Even if I made it all the way across the room this way, however, I would still have to come down to open the door and get out.

Just then I heard a humming sound, and I saw Shadrahk zooming toward me out of the darkness. He hooked his arm around me, and I had barely enough time to pull my axe free before he lifted me off the ledge. He sailed just above the snapping pincers of the Manas and carried me back to the living room. He dropped a lightstone, a miner's pickaxe, and a squirming Kofo-Jaga onto the floor as he set me down. "Mistress, if you had any idea how much Master cares for you, you would stop this foolishness," he scolded. "You're lucky I volunteered to collect the Onu-Wahi things first for my team."

"Thanks, Shadrahk," I said meekly, realizing it had not been luck at all.

He nodded modestly. Then the other Rahkshi poured into the cavern, hissing loudly and waving their scavenger hunt items. I sat on the couch and checked off the list for the first team that had come in. The victors were Confusirahk, Turahk, Kurahk, and Adaptarahk. The armored creatures milled around, hissing to one another in animated tones about their hunt. Several of them were playing with the bugs and scorpions until I asked Rahirahk to round them up and take them back to their respective habitats. Other Rahkshi started the Xbox and played a game of "Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil" from a bootleg disc. Still others engaged in light wrestling and gymnastics. Since the living room was already such a mess, I didn't bother to send them to the weapons room as long as they stayed away from the electronics.

Invulnerahk translated some of the conversations for me. Evidently the winning team had prevailed by using their powers on the competition. The Rahkshi of Confusion sent them hunting in futile circles for items that weren't on the list, the Anger Rahkshi pitted them against their own teammates, and the Fear Rahkshi made them too timid to retrieve things from dangerous places. Meanwhile, the versatile Rahkshi of Adaptation braved various hostile environments and used an assortment of powers to procure all the objects by himself. There had been a considerable amount of fighting among the other teams, too, some of whom simply waited for others to find the most difficult objects and then stole them.

Finally the last team—Lentirahk, Statirahk, Somnorahk, and Tacirahk—straggled in, and all the Rahkshi were accounted for. Thermorahk used his heat vision to warm a big pot of canned stew, and we ate it with chunks of bread. The food and the accommodations, as well as the behavior of my dinner companions, reminded me of prison scenes from the movies.

After dinner, Shadrahk invited me to join a game of "NASCAR Thunder" on the Xbox. He helped me design a custom car with the game software, and soon my blue AquaBlaster (plastered with sponsorship stickers from Sparkletts) was racing against his own DarkFire, Therahk's red and white AmbuLance, and Evitarahk's Dodger. While everyone else drove aggressively for the finish line, the Dodge Rahkshi amused himself by driving the wrong way around the track and swerving out of the path of the other drivers at the last possible moment.

After the race Shadrahk insisted that I get to play the next game with new opponents. A couple hours later, I realized what the Rahkshi of Darkness was doing. He had managed to keep me occupied until I became drowsy. Or perhaps his maroon brother had been helping by using a bit of his sleep power on me. Either way, he succeeded in getting some rest for himself, because I fell asleep on the couch with the controller still in my hand.

I woke to the sound of clattering dishes and banging cabinet doors. After a granola bar and a cup of coffee, I addressed the Rahkshi sitting among the boulders in the living room. “Would you guys be interested in having an outdoor concert tonight? Rahkous could perform all their songs, and the rest of you could watch and dance.”

This idea was met with wild cheering. “Let’s rock the Kini-Nui!” yelled Vorahk, and the crowd got even louder. I would have preferred a less sensitive location, but I figured after living on the island this long, they had probably already wrecked their uncle’s temple, anyway. So I let them proceed. With the help of the others, the band members gathered up the instruments and equipment, along with a several cases of snack food and canned sodas, and flew up the shaft to the surface. Shadrahk gave me a ride. As we flew, I noticed spiral steps cut into the sides of the shaft and realized this must have been how Hahli ascended from Makuta’s lair to summon the others during his fight with Takanuva.

Rahkous set up the gear on the Kini-Nui under the clear, starry sky. The main platform of the shrine was still intact, but only one of the great pillars was still standing. The other three were broken off and lay in chunks on the ground. The lawn around the stage was pock-marked with deep craters, and patches of trees had been burned down to scorched earth. The Rahkshi didn’t seem to mind the disorder. They settled in groups on the grass with only a few minor squabbles over the refreshments. I sat between Shadrahk and Pinky, but I edged away from the shapeshifting Rahkshi when I noticed he was hoarding three cans of MDX. Electrorahk plugged a massive power strip into a thick extension cord and waved at Sonirahk behind the sound board, and Vorahk began the concert with a screaming guitar riff. The offspring of darkness screeched their approval.

Vorahk yelled, “Thank you! Thank you!” Then he scanned the crowd for me and gestured for me to join him onstage. “Mistress, come on up here for a sec.”

I sighed and climbed the steps to the platform. Vorahk put his arm around me and spoke into the microphone. “Mistress, we’re totally amped that you’ve come home. This song is dedicated to you. Because just like what you do to Master, music hijacks the heartbeat.” The band started playing the Ramones song, “I Wanna Be Sedated.”

It didn’t take long for the creatures to get on their feet, slam dancing. I circulated amidst the Rahkshi, hoping Shadrahk would lose track of me and I could slip away. I moved closer to the stage on the opposite side from him so I could don the Huna and vault over the side as soon as his attention was diverted. But every time I looked over at him, he was watching me.

Fortunately, the rapid punk beat was too much for even the calmest, most rational Rahkshi to resist. Like his brothers, Shadrahk started thrashing, waving his arms and jerking his head back

and forth. I made my move and leaped over the edge of the hole. As much noise as the band was making, at least I didn't have to worry about being quiet. I scrambled down the treacherous staircase as quickly as I could without losing my footing. The music grew fainter as I descended. In a few minutes I was at the bottom, panting.

I ran through the tunnel to the living room. But before I headed toward the Manas chamber again, I stopped in the kitchen and found two large plastic Zip-Loc bags. Then I used my axe to chop off two pieces of Florahk's nasty vine. I stuffed them in the bags and sealed them. Finally, I washed my tool and my hands using my water powers.

Then I ran into the passageway. The twisting path was becoming familiar. I slowed my steps as I approached the room where I had almost fallen prey to the giant crabs. Carefully I looked around the corner to see where they were.

To my surprise, there were no Manas. Instead, I was met by a wave of heat from a lava river that cut through the chamber. I scratched my head, puzzled as to how I could have gotten lost. From what I remembered, the tunnel from the living room led directly to the Manas chamber, with no branching passageways. Was it possible some kind of seismic activity had released this lava? And if so, where had the Manas gone? I scratched my head and considered what to do. Turning back seemed unacceptable if there was even a slight chance of getting out. So I decided to forge ahead. I took off the Huna to conserve my strength and stored it on my back.

The stream was much too wide for me to jump across. So I sprayed the surface of the magma with water until a chunk hardened, and I used my axe to drag it onto the river bank. I continued to douse the steaming rock until it was cool enough to touch. Then I heaved it into the lava. Taking a running start, I leaped onto it, pushing it farther across the stream. As my raft slowed about two-thirds of the way across and began to turn downstream with the current, I shot water ahead of myself to create a crust of solid rock. In this way I made a series of floating stepping stones. Carefully, I hopped from one to the next before they could sink, and I reached the other side. I flopped down on the shore for a moment, breathless with exertion and fear. Burn marks covered my legs and feet. I knew they would start hurting, but for now the adrenaline masked the pain.

After a few seconds I got up again and looked for an exit. There was only one tunnel leading from the room. This meant that I was obviously not in the Manas chamber, and I was lost after all. But at this point I felt I had no choice but to keep going, so I hurried down the passageway.

Presently I came upon another wide spot in the tunnel and stopped. Ahead of me was a yawning chasm, too wide to leap across and so deep I couldn't see the bottom. I kicked a small rock over the edge and counted the seconds until it struck. I never heard the sound.

I studied my surroundings. Stark, jagged rock formations lined the canyon on both sides. Then I got an idea. I removed the tough, fibrous vines from the bag. They were much too short to span the gap, so I used my axe to split each one into several pieces lengthwise. Then I tied the pieces together and knotted one end around my axe and the other end around my waist. I swung the

makeshift grappling hook around my head and released it. After several tries I succeeded in hooking it around the rocks on the other side. I tugged at it, and it seemed strong enough.

Taking a deep breath, I swung out over the canyon. I tried to use my legs to absorb the impact, but I still slammed so hard into the stone wall that the wind was knocked out of me. I struggled up the vine hand over hand until I made it to the top and lay gasping on the ground. Then I realized the rope was burning into my waist, so I tore it off. My hands were burning from the poisonous sap, too. I put the plants back in the bags, then washed myself and my axe.

A swarm of Kofo-Jaga pinching at my ankles roused me to attention. Fighting the pain and fatigue, I picked up the axe and bags and ran into the only tunnel I saw. A blast of cold water got the heat-loving creatures off my track long enough for me to distance myself from them.

Finally I arrived at the Manas chamber. I put the Huna on again. Then I ripped open the bags and hurled them ahead of me, one to the right and one to the left. I watched the enormous crustaceans pounce on the foul-smelling packages, and then I bolted down the center of the room. I pounded on the wall around the door, desperately hoping I would be able to activate the mechanism before they caught on to my decoys. The door rumbled open, and I sprinted out, hardly daring to believe my good luck. The damp smell of the earth surrounded me as I raced toward the surface, the snapping sound of the Manas' claws not far behind.

Light appeared at the end of the tunnel, and I burst out of the ground and into the forest. Then I slammed into something hard and sprawled backwards onto the ground.

Makuta stood over me, laughing. "Well, thank you for the fantastic show, darling!" he exclaimed. "I'll get hours of enjoyment from the security cam footage of that little adventure. Who would have thought a sweet little thing that spends most of her day behind a computer could come up with such clever girl scout tricks?" He leaned over and extended his hand to help me up.

"I should have known," I muttered. I stumbled to my feet by myself, suddenly aware of the pain from my various injuries, and put the Huna on my back. "You sadistic creep!"

"Oh, now, don't pout, my lovely. How can you blame me for wanting to have a little fun with you? I have to amuse myself somehow while I wait for you to accept your inevitable destiny. My, my, what a mess you are!" He reached toward me. I started to back away, but then I realized he intended to heal me. I stood still while he put his hands on my armor, and I felt the burns and bruises disappear. He knelt to touch my feet, and as he stood again he patted the Huna on my back. It suddenly occurred to me that he might have left it on purpose in such an obvious place—on top of the mask pile—just to make his twisted game more exciting to watch. But at least he was letting me keep it.

"Come on, let's get inside. It's so blasted bright out here." He took my arm and led me back toward the tunnel. "You know what's really ironic? I could hear you running, so I knew you were close, but the way I really pinpointed your location was by your shadow, once you came out into the sunlight. For once, light did me a favor."

I frowned at him. Then I felt a pang of guilt for Shadrahk, who would probably be punished for letting me get loose. But as I trudged reluctantly next to the Master of Shadows, the Rahkshi of Darkness joined us, shielding his eyes from the light with his hand. “Nice work, Master.”

“And congratulations to you as well, my son,” replied Makuta, “for keeping the chain of custody unbroken.”

I stopped in my tracks and glared at him. “Did you even *go* to Metru Nui? Or were you really here the whole time, watching me?”

“Don’t be silly, love. Of course I really went to work,” he grinned, taking my hand. “As delightful as it was to see you pit your wits against my security system, I would never have given up our first moments alone in my lair for it. By the time I got back, you were in the middle of an escape attempt, so I rerouted the tunnels ahead of you just to make it more challenging.”

I groaned and shook my head as he dragged me forward again. Shadrahk asked, “How did the filming go?”

“Oh, it was all right. I had to shapeshift back into my Ultimate Dume form, and that always takes a lot of work. Fortunately, LEGO had assembled some new wings for me, so I didn’t have to actually morph those out of my existing supply of energy. After that, all I had to do was writhe around while the Toa imprisoned me again in that horrid cage of protodermis. And then I watched through squinted eyes while Roodaka chipped off a piece of it with those wonderfully wicked claws of hers.”

“What did she do with it?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

He hesitated, then said, “I might as well tell you, since it’s just the beginning of the movie. She put it in a little compartment in her chest, next to her heart, while she whispered charmingly about setting me free. It was really quite touching.”

I remembered reading spoilers on BZPower about how Roodaka had secret plans to liberate Makuta from his prison. “Is that how she ends up releasing you?”

“Now you’re getting a little ahead of yourself,” he said, shaking his head. “You’ll just have to wait and see. But something else happened—something strange—that you’ll remember. Do you recall how, when we stood on the Great Barrier and I was using the Vahi on the Toa, she appeared out of the time stream with some of her Visorak?”

I nodded, and he continued. “Well, that happened while I was there! Fortunately, it was after all the LEGO people had already cleared out. I watched myself suddenly materialize, wearing the Vahi, along with you and Krahka and all the frozen Toa. And I saw Roodaka talking to me—well, the me from the past, anyway. She shot a Rhotuka at you, remember? And then we all sped up and vanished again before it could hit you. It was fascinating.”

My eyes widened. “You really did stretch the fabric of time, then!”

“Yes, I did. I sure hope I get to do it again sometime,” he said proudly. Then he sighed. “It flashed by so fast I could just barely see it, but I also got to watch you enfold my trembling hand in your cool little blue fingers. Of course, this time I was fully aware that you were doing it just to distract me.”

I didn’t know what to say. Shadrahk filled the awkward silence. “Master, can we take the shortcut?”

“No problem.” Makuta winked at me. “We’ll bypass the abyss and the lava river, sweetheart, if that’s all right with you.” He ducked into the tunnel, and we all headed to the lair.

## 6. Something Wicked This Way Comes

### **Junior Brown — Venom Wearin' Denim**

*She's just venom wearin' denim  
She's a viper dressed in blue  
Tight fittin' jeans are all she needs  
To put the bite on you  
She's pretty but she's poison  
Like a copperheaded queen  
She's just venom wearin' denim  
She's a nightmare not a dream*

*She slithers when she walks  
And there's no tellin' where she's been  
She'll coil up beside you tryin' to shed that denim skin  
Once she strikes her deadly bite, there's no antidote  
She's just venom wearin' denim, boy  
She'll go right for your throat*

*She'll start hissinn' when she's kissin'  
Sayin' you're the only one  
She'll tell you lies with beady eyes  
And a big long forked tongue  
If you give that gal a diamond ring  
You'll get a diamondback  
She just venom wearin' denim, boy  
She's always makin' tracks*

Makuta, Shadrahk, and I arrived at the Kini-Nui just in time to hear a long, energetic drum solo by Densirahk, followed by a cacophonous finale with all the instruments, during which the last temple pillar cracked and fell to the ground with an earth-shaking thud. The Rahkshi mobbed the stage. Pinky, under the influence of his caffeinated energy drink, was doing barrel rolls in the sky. Evidently the concert was over.

The Master of Shadows plunged into the crowd and worked his way to the microphone. “It’s good to be home again, boys. You’re sounding better than ever! Now, collect your gear and come downstairs for some barbecue.”

The Rahkshi complied. A very messy meal ensued in the cavernous dining room. First a flock of winged, snaky Lohrak suddenly showed up, evidently drawn by the smell of meat. They landed on the table and grabbed the food off the plates of a few unwary Rahkshi, provoking a fierce tug-of-war. Rahirahk stood up and waved his staff at them, and they turned abruptly and flew out the door. Then a skirmish erupted between Confusirahk’s and Shadrahk’s friends, with flying rib bones, wadded napkins, and spinning, sauce-dripping paper plates. Their master drew the line at this behavior, and he made them clean both the dining and living rooms. I watched them work from one corner of the room. After so many failed attempts at flight, which had served only to amuse my psychopathic host, I was reluctant to try again. I had resigned myself to waiting for Makuta to come up with another task for me.

As Vacuurahk finished tidying the stone floor of the great room, Makuta got on his computer and ordered a new stove. Then he shut it down, picked up the remote, and flipped on the television. “Oh, we’re in luck! *Monster Garage* is on!” He pulled me onto the sofa. I sat stiffly on the edge of the cushions while he reclined behind me and the Rahkshi arrayed themselves on the floor around us. “I got a lot of good tips for tuning my nitrous system from this show.”

Suddenly a distant ruckus echoed from one of the tunnel openings. Makuta spun his head around. Telerahk vanished from his seat on the floor and soon reappeared next to the couch, hissing urgently.

“Stupid Lohrak! Sniffing around here for scraps when they should have been watching!” snorted Makuta. “Why else do they think I let their miserable little carcasses continue to exist? But don’t worry, Bahka can whip a Nui-Kopen with one claw tied behind his back. Now, let me get back to my show. I haven’t seen this epi—what? Someone is *riding* on it?” He stared intently in the direction of the noise again. “Why—it’s—”

A huge blue spider with four legs skittered rapidly into the room and crouched down. “Presenting Lady Roodaka, Viceroy of the Visorak,” she announced in a singsong feminine voice.

The Rahkshi, Makuta, and I all gasped at once as a tall, shapely black creature sashayed into the room, leading a monstrous insect behind her. Then a large bipedal reptile appeared in the doorway, panting smoke and clutching his side with his claw.

Makuta jumped up off the couch. “It’s all right, Bahka, this one is an honored guest,” he said, waving his hand at the dragon. The creature turned and trotted away, muttering to himself. Then Makuta straightened himself out of his usual slouch and turned to the new arrival, who was about a head taller than he was. “Roodaka. It’s good to see you again. Welcome to Mangaia.”

Roodaka cast a quick glance around the chamber. Her eyes were like iridescent fire, with flames of red light flickering across their blue glowing surface. They briefly met mine and flashed solid red before returning to Makuta. “The pleasure is all mine, I’m sure,” she said demurely. The long, ornate adornment on her head swayed as she spoke.

The Rahkshi hissed quietly among themselves. A few of them gestured toward the Boggarak, who was standing proudly by her mistress’s side. Six more of the blue spiders emerged from the tunnel and took their places next to their sister. I noticed that the first one was slightly larger than they were, and she had a particularly ornate ridge between her eyes.

“Can I offer you something to drink?” asked the Spirit of Destruction politely. Meanwhile, I slid silently off the end of the couch and onto the floor between Guurahk and Sonirahk, hoping to make myself less conspicuous.

“Why, that would be wonderful,” she smiled, tilting her head at him. “I’d like a glass of chilled Daikau juice, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Makuta summoned Florahk, who flew away on his mission. He told Entorahk to find accommodations for the giant wasp, and the Rahkshi of Insect Control ushered it away.

“So,” smiled the Master of Shadows, gesturing toward the couch, “you’ve been traveling. Come, rest yourself.”

“Thank you,” she sighed. She set her Rhotuka catcher on the cushion next to her as she sat down and stretched her graceful legs. “It is a bit of a journey.”

“And to what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

“I was just curious where you were going,” she confessed, watching her own pointed fingers creep along the arm of the sofa. “After all, it’s not every day that a handsome being wearing a Vahi shows up in my life. I simply had to know what you were up to. So I followed you.” She redirected her razor-sharp gaze at him.

“Ah, yes,” he nodded. “Now you’re onto me. You know I can get out of my prison.”

“I suspected as much from the beginning,” she laughed, folding her hands behind her knees. “Roodaka knows no mere cage of protodermis could hold the mighty Makuta for long.”

“It’s awfully boring in there,” he shrugged. “And I can barely see what’s going on. Tell me, how’s it going on the island proper these days?”

“Oh, it’s dreadful, as usual. The spiders keep getting out of line, especially those pesky Keelerak. And I’m getting tired of throwing them off the buildings. It makes such a horrid mess on the sidewalk.”

“I can imagine,” he said sympathetically as he took a glass of greenish fluid from Florahk’s hands. He breathed on it, and frost formed on the surface. Then he handed it to Roodaka. “How’s Sidorak?”

“His Highness the Mighty King Sidorak?” she said sarcastically. “He won’t shut up. That pretentious windbag keeps going on and on about how bad Kamp Karzahni is, and how miserable he is there. But I don’t feel sorry for him. He should have read the fine print in his contract, like the rest of us had the sense to do. If you work for LEGO as a villain, you just have to be smart enough to stay alive, or face the consequences.”

Makuta chuckled. “How bad can it be? As long as you still have your powers, I’m sure you can still find ways to have fun.”

“Actually, it doesn’t sound very pleasant at all,” she remarked, delicately sipping her glass of carnivorous plant sap. “There are lots of disagreeable mandatory sports, like swimming in Leech Lake, paddling a wire canoe across the Electric Eel Pool, running laps while you avoid ambush

on the Ash Bear Attack Track, and sprinting for your life on the Kikanalo Stampede Trail. Even though you can't technically die again, evidently they keep you in a pretty wretched state."

"Oh, please," he scoffed. "I would dominate at any of those games. I would just kill off whatever was supposed to be tormenting me."

"Well, sure, that would work for *you*, because you have so many useful powers," purred the ebony creature, re-crossing her legs and leaning closer. "Of course, you'll never even have to worry about it, being immortal. But anyway, as bad as the activities are, that's not the worst of it. You know what really bugs Sidorak? It's the way Karzahni keeps shuffling over to him and making him see alternate realities. How things could have been if he had won against the Toa. That simply drives him over the edge. And now that he's back in charge of the Visorak for the duration of the filming, the buffoon is convinced he can actually *win* this time."

The Master of Shadows burst out laughing. "Yeah, we all want to change history. But LEGO will never let him get away with that. This is a flashback, for crying out loud! They'll just re-shoot the movie, and everyone will have to do it all over again, probably without any extra pay."

"That's what I keep telling him." Roodaka rolled her eyes. "He just needs to accept his destiny. I mean, he's got it pretty good. He's certainly being paid well—although why, I can't imagine. His acting is ridiculously wooden, considering that he's just reliving what happened before. But mostly he's lucky because he has a chance to leave the Kamp and go back to being king of the Visorak for a little while. He loves to lord it over his subordinates and to watch them conquer things."

"And he's engaged to one of the most attractive female creatures in Bionicle," added Makuta with a grin. "He should enjoy it while he can."

"Oh, stop it, you're embarrassing me!" she protested, flipping her hand. "But let's not talk about him anymore. How have you been? I see you've got quite a cozy domestic arrangement here." She gestured at the Rahkshi, sitting around the couch watching the conversation. The Visorak were still crouching by the doorway.

"Yes, I'm a very lucky spirit, to have such a wonderful family," said Makuta proudly. "Tell your girls to come on over and get to know my sons. And let me introduce you to—wait, where is she?" Guurahk pushed me forward slightly, and Makuta turned his gaze to me. "Oh, there she is." He leaned over and pulled me to my feet. "This is GaliGee. She's my—"

"—Chronicler," I blurted.

"I see," Roodaka said thoughtfully, touching the tips of her claws together. "She's writing your life story? Well, it's certainly time you had one of your underlings preserve it for the generations to come. You have so many tales to tell."

"Yes, I do," he replied, frowning at me. Meanwhile, the blue spiders crept closer to the Rahkshi, still keeping a cautious distance.

The Viceroy of the Visorak scanned me carefully. “Say... she looks familiar. Is she the one that was on the Great Barrier during the time warp? I almost thought I saw her slinking up to you and caressing your hand. But no, that one was a Toa Nuva, and this one is... well, some sort of... mutated Matoran or something.”

“It *is* the same one,” Makuta smiled, still clutching my hand. “She’s not a mutated Matoran. I rebuilt her from a water Toa prototype. Isn’t she lovely?”

I swallowed hard as Roodaka scrutinized me. “Not to disparage your talent as a builder, but you’ve done much better,” she pronounced. “But that’s all right. Now that you have a real female in your lair, you won’t have to bother with play toys like that anymore.” She moved closer and tweaked his chin with her forefinger.

“Well—I—I’m rather... um... proud of her design, actually. Small creatures can be more challenging than you might think, because... uh...” Makuta stammered.

Roodaka narrowed her eyes. “Why, I do believe you have some kind of Pygmalion complex about this little creation of yours! Perhaps we should call her ‘Galitea’? And I suppose your kiss gave her life, and she’s so grateful she’s writing your biography as a labor of love?” She shifted her piercing gaze to me.

He started to answer, but I interrupted. “Uh, no, it’s more of a negotiated deal. I think he just rebuilt me so I wouldn’t remind him of his enemies. Well, it’s nice to meet you. I’m going back to my office now. I’ve got a lot of work to do, so I’d better get started.”

I wrenched my hand loose from Makuta’s grip and searched the crowd of Rahkshi for Shadrahk. He took my arm before I even noticed him moving to my side. “Please allow me to escort you, Mistr—Miss Chronicler.” He led me toward one of the tunnels.

“Your Rahkshi can speak? It’s not that horrid shapeshifter again, is it?”

“No, I haven’t seen her in ages—which is fine with me. Shadrahk has a Stage Seven kraata. What about that Boggarak?”

“Oh, I mutated Daisy so she could speak. She’s the head of my personal guard.”

Their conversation receded into the distance as we walked down the passageway. When we were out of earshot of the living room, I whispered, “Thanks, Shadrahk.”

“No problem, Mistress. Our new guest doesn’t seem to appreciate you as much as Master does. Besides, it *is* about time you got started on his memoirs. Would you like a ride? It’s a long walk.”

I accepted, and he flew me through a winding maze of tunnels to the gloomy room I had been informed would be my office the last time I was in Makuta’s lair. I recognized the motionless

pool of water in the center, the blue leather couch, and the computer desk. There were several new things, too, including an aqua rug with a wave-like pattern and some decorative vases with dried cattails. A single blue lightstone cast a pale glow from a sconce on the wall. Even though this dank chamber had seemed really creepy to me when Makuta had brought me here before, now it felt oddly safe, with several hundred yards of convoluted tunnel between me and Roodaka. Her arrival was definitely a mixed blessing. For reasons unknown to me, this powerful villainess clearly intended to charm Makuta, and this automatically put me on her bad side. On the other hand, with such an alluring creature in his lair, my captor might lose interest in me and let me go.

Shadrahk interrupted my thoughts. “Is there anything I can get for you, Mistress?”

“Oh, no, thanks. Wait—maybe a few more lightstones, if you don't mind,” I smiled.

“No problem,” he winced, flying out of the room. He returned in a few minutes with an armful of the glowing crystals, which he dropped on the floor as if they were burning his armor.

“Thank you so much. I'll arrange them myself.”

He nodded with obvious relief. Then he vanished into the darkness.

I set the stones in niches in the wall. Then I stood next to the pool and dipped my toes in the dark fluid. My water sense told me it was ordinary, clean water, gradually increasing in depth to about six feet in the center. I succumbed to the impulse to wade in. For a few minutes I swam in slow circles to clear my mind of anxiety. This also had the effect of removing the thin film of grime Makuta's hands had left on my armor.

Then I got out and dried myself before sitting down in front of the computer. I figured I should explore every potential tool at my disposal. I switched the machine on, and soon I was looking at a desktop with an underwater scene.

I launched the web browser and loaded a news page to find out what day it was. Then I typed in the URL for BZPower, hoping to find some movie spoilers that might give me some bargaining ideas. I found it interesting that Roodaka had spoken of LEGO's facility for dead villains as if she had never seen it. This meant she would survive the events of the film, but Sidorak would not. Everything functioned normally on the Bionicle fan site until I tried to log in. Then the screen went black, with two red eyes below an “ACCESS DENIED” message. I reached for the ‘back’ button on the keyboard and was startled when one of the eyes winked at me.

I glanced around the room. There was probably a camera somewhere, recording my reactions to this bizarre prison. I considered the way I had hastily agreed to write Makuta's biography in exchange for a few minutes of relative safety from Roodaka, and I wondered if I would come to regret this decision. But hopefully, after visiting with his seductive new guest, he would be in such a fine mood he would agree to let me leave, and it would all be moot.

I didn't have to wonder for long, because a few minutes later I heard the familiar heavy tread of Makuta's feet in the passageway. I sat up, took a deep breath, and quickly prepared a speech in my head.

## 7. Musical Chairs

### **Hoobastank — Crawling in the Dark**

*I will dedicate  
And sacrifice my everything for just a second's worth  
Of how my story's ending  
And I wish I could know if the directions that I take  
And all the choices that I make won't end up all for nothing*

*Show me what it's for  
Make me understand it  
I've been crawling in the dark looking for the answer  
Is there something more than what I've been handed?  
I've been crawling in the dark looking for the answer*

*Help me carry on  
Assure me it's OK to use my heart and not my eyes  
To navigate the darkness  
Will the ending be ever coming suddenly?  
Will I ever get to see the ending to my story?*

*So when and how will I know?  
How much further do I have to go?  
How much longer until I finally know?  
Because I'm looking and I just can't see what's in front of me  
In front of me*

*Show me what it's for  
Make me understand it  
I've been crawling in the dark looking for the answer  
Is there something more than what I've been handed?  
I've been crawling in the dark looking for the answer*

Makuta walked into the office, and I spun around in the desk chair to face him. But his Kraahkan did not have the blissful expression I had been expecting. Instead, he almost looked as if he were feeling guilty.

“Oh, beloved,” he said, kneeling in front of the chair and taking my hands, “I didn’t mean for you to feel slighted. I wanted to show you off to Roodaka, but you hurried out as if you were some lowly minion. And it’s my fault, for not introducing you right away. I’m so sorry to have hurt your feelings. As soon as I could get away without being rude, I came to ask your forgiveness.”

I looked at him as if he had just spoken to me in Kikanalo. “Do you think I have a death wish, Makuta? She obviously doesn’t want me to be in your lair. And that’s just fine with me. Now that she’s here to keep you company, how about letting Shadrahk conduct me discreetly back to the LEGO parking lot?”

“I was afraid this would happen,” he sighed, shaking his head. “You female creatures can be so impetuous. I understand why you’re angry with me, but please don’t be jealous. She’s no more to me than an exceptionally skilled employee.”

“I’m not jealous,” I shrugged, “just realistic. She’s perfect for you, and I want to go home, anyway. Everyone will be happier that way.”

Makuta frowned at me. “Are you actually suggesting that I pursue her? She’s engaged to Sidorak!”

I was taken aback, because I had been thinking only of my own freedom. “Uh, well, she—she doesn’t seem to care for him at all, and he’s going to die soon anyway, right?”

“So you would have me lead astray the fiancée of a condemned man,” Makuta concluded. “The one who’s leading my troops in a life-and-death battle against my enemies right now. Really, darling, I’m disappointed in you. You’re supposed to be the moral one here.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for Sidorak, even though he was evidently a pompous, self-absorbed thug. But his impending death meant there was still hope this situation could work to my benefit. “Well, you could let me go, and then you could wait until Sidorak is dead again before you approach Roodaka,” I said carefully. “I’m sure she would still be there for you, especially if you got rid of me for her sake. The way she talked to you...”

“Let me explain something to you, beloved,” he said, pulling me out of my chair and leading me to the couch, where he sat down next to me. “All the millennia she’s been working for me, Roodaka has been acting like that. It doesn’t mean a thing. At first I thought it was real, too, but after having my hopes dashed against the rocks a few times, I’ve come to accept the way she darts in and out of my life, leaving nothing more than a whiff of her captivatingly toxic scent and a few wistful thoughts on my part. But then I found you. You’re the real thing. You’re everything that’s right and true in my life.” He reached out to caress my mask.

“Uh, maybe so, but I still think she wants me dead,” I replied, ducking his hand. “I would be much safer back at home.”

“You *are* home, my angel,” he smiled. “And tonight at dinner I want you to take your rightful place at the other end of my table, as mistress of my house. We’ll entertain Roodaka like the honored guest that she is, and then she’ll be on her way again for the filming. You’ve probably guessed by now that she’s in the movie quite a bit.”

I inhaled sharply at the thought of Roodaka’s reaction to this. “No way, Makuta. You’d better humor her, and let her sit in my spot. I’ll eat down here.”

“I won’t hear of it,” he grinned. “It’s sweet that you’re trying to be so accommodating, but I want the world to know how I feel about you. Come, let’s go back to the living room together, and I’ll order some dinner.”

“I’d really rather not provoke her,” I pleaded.

Makuta looked at me for thoughtfully for a moment. “My poor little sweetheart. Fear is rising off you like heat waves off the Great Furnace right now.” A gentle smile crossed his Kraahkan. “If it makes you feel better, my beauty, we’ll keep our love secret until Roodaka goes back to Metru Nui. I’m certainly not averse to participating in the occasional conspiracy.”

“Makuta, our ‘love’ is a figment of your twisted imagination,” I scowled, making quotation marks in the air with my fingers.

“You’ll come to love me eventually,” he said blithely. “To know me is to worship me. By the time you get through writing a couple chapters of my biography—oh, that reminds me. All this talk of seating arrangements has gotten me sidetracked, but I meant to tell you how thrilled I am that you’ve agreed to do my story. I can’t wait to get started!”

“I was afraid you would remember that,” I muttered.

“And now I can finally stop racking my brains for ways for you to help me. Well, I’ll go back and send for dinner, and I’ll get one of the boys to come get you when it’s ready. You can sit among them at the table. And I’ll do my best to keep my hands off you when she’s around, even though it won’t be easy for me.” He leaned over and patted my knee.

When Makuta was gone, I breathed a deep sigh of relief. I stretched out on the sofa and thought about the prospect of writing his biography. As much as I dreaded transcribing what would at best be a slanted account of actual events, I might learn a little history in the process. And it would be a good reason to stay secluded in my office, away from Roodaka and Makuta, while I thought of something else I could offer him in exchange for my release, or some other way I could escape. Then I suddenly realized how tired I was. I let my eyes close and drifted off to sleep.

Shadrahk tapped gently on my shoulder. “Mistress, Master has summoned you,” he said softly. I got slowly to my feet and climbed into his lap. Without another word we flew to the living room.

Makuta and Roodaka were walking in from one of the tunnels, followed by her seven Boggarak. “I love what you’ve done with the place,” she purred, gesturing toward the furniture and home theater system. “This lair is not as imposing as the fortress you used to live in, but you’ve furnished it with a very striking blend of modern and classic villainous elements. It’s remarkable that such a powerful being would show such attention to detail and have such elegant taste.” She looked over at me and snorted. “Well, in most things, anyway.”

“Ah there you are, my little Tale-Spinner,” said the Master of Shadows with a surreptitious wink. “I’ve been giving Roodaka a quick tour of the lair. Why don’t you join us?” I nodded uneasily.

“This is the dining hall,” he continued, leading the way. His comely guest stepped through the doorway after him. Then Shadrahk and I ducked through, carefully avoiding the dripping vine. Suddenly Roodaka shrieked with indignation and spun around. “That horrid weed! It burns!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear. That’s a weapon Florahk is working on for me. He’s the Rahkshi of Plant Control. Please forgive me if I seem forward, but if you’ll just hold still a moment...” He washed the top of Roodaka’s head with a jet of water.

“Well, I can certainly imagine some uses for such a creature,” Roodaka remarked with regained composure. “As I recall, you’ve dabbled in botany yourself before, with considerable success.”

“Why, yes, I have.” Makuta glanced at me, and added, “And it makes lovely flowers, too. Say, would you ladies like to visit Florahk’s garden?”

The viceroy of the Visorak expressed her delight, so off we went. After a long walk, the winding passageway opened up into a large, humid chamber filled with strange plants of every type and size, from gnarled trees to delicate green tendrils. Every inch of the ground was covered by a thick carpet of foliage, and woody vines crept up the walls and hung from the ceiling. Clusters of lightstones and heatstones provided the proper conditions for certain species, and the air was heavy with the sickeningly sweet fragrance of thousands of blossoms.

We heard faint singing from across the room. “You put de lime in de coconut...”

“Florahk?” called Makuta.

The voice stopped, and a green and brown Rahkshi appeared from among the branches, brandishing his staff. Then he stopped and bowed. “Oh, greetings, Mas, and sistren.” He clanked his staff against that of the darkness Rahkshi. “Wa’ppun, rude bwoy?”

“Roodaka, this is Florahk,” smiled Makuta.

“De honor is all fi me. You like de fresh juice?” Florahk pointed to a stone countertop covered with plant cuttings, piles of dirt, and bottles of strange-colored fluids. “Me mekkin’ whole heap a juice when me heard da nize. T’ought it was de rats.”

“This is the Rahkshi who created that deadly vine with the burning sap?” asked Roodaka, raising an eyebrow. Makuta nodded proudly.

I glanced at Shadrahk, who shrugged. “I recommend the Uala melon.”

I reluctantly accepted a cup of something pale green and sniffed it. To my surprise, it had a pleasantly fruity smell, like mango and banana blended together. Against my better judgment, I took a sip. It was delicious. I looked up, and the others had already finished theirs.

“What else are you working on?” asked Roodaka, casually adjusting her headpiece with her claws.

“Me honored you ask,” said Florahk politely. “A bush that mek a renk smell.”

“It emits paralyzing vapors. He’s growing it in a special sealed chamber,” Makuta explained, pointing at a small stone dome in the corner of the room.

Roodaka nodded approvingly. “We could offer him a test subject,” she suggested, gesturing at me.

Makuta gave a short laugh. “I think the Rahkshi of Rahi Control provides him plenty of specimens for that.”

Just then, there was a grinding sound. Florahk clenched his staff and bounded over some sticky-looking fronds. He started whacking at the ground next to the dome. “Bodderation! Get away from my hut, wutless critters!”

A sour-smelling cloud of green dust boiled out of the dome. We all gasped uncontrollably and fell to our knees, weakened, until Makuta waved his hand and swirled the fumes away.

He helped Roodaka up. “I think those were some of Rahirahk’s stone rats,” he said apologetically. “He’s trying to develop some that can chew through stronger materials. I’m really proud of his progress. The only problem is that they keep gnawing their way out of their cages.”

“De rats me vex,” grumbled Florahk.

“Well, the gas seems to work,” Roodaka remarked with a delicate cough. She leaned over to examine a shrub with large metallic thorns. “My, this would make nice lacerations on Toa armor.”

Makuta had crept behind me and was breathing down my neck. “Pick out some flowers, beloved, and I’ll have Florahk bring them to your office,” he whispered. I shrank away. Then I noticed Daisy was watching us with her beady eyes. Makuta straightened up and cleared his throat. “All right, let’s get back to the main hall. The food is probably here by now.”

We made our way to the dining room, where Vorahk had apparently ordered the Rahkshi to set the table with military precision. “The grub is ready, Master,” he said with a crisp salute.

“Right,” Makuta winced. He strode to his place at the far end of the center table. “Well, ladies, have a seat.”

Roodaka immediately slid into my usual chair, and her spiders arrayed themselves on the benches near her, extending their long back legs under the table, and resting their forelegs on its stone surface. This made them look almost humanoid, except for their creepy grinding mandibles, which dripped saliva onto their plates. I sat at a different table, facing theirs. The Stage Seven Rahkshi and their friends rushed to take the places closest to me. “What’s the deal, Mistress?” asked Invulnerahk. “Why does she get your—” He stopped when Vorahk elbowed him in the side.

Makuta remained standing until everyone was settled. He raised a goblet and made a toast. “To our esteemed guest, who will soon free me once again from the prison of protodermis. Fair Lady Roodaka, you have my eternal gratitude.”

The ebony creature nodded modestly. “Your humble servant Roodaka is thankful to be able to offer some assistance to her noble lord.”

The Rahkshi hissed approvingly, except for Invulnerahk, who muttered, “But I thought that *was* Roodaka,” prompting another elbow in the ribs from his black friend.

“Well, enjoy,” Makuta smiled. The henchmen pounced on their roast beef, snarling in their hungry abandon. Roodaka sliced her meat with precise, rapid strokes of her knife. Makuta cubed his using heat vision. I ate a forkful of green beans and looked nervously around while I kept my head low over my plate.

“So, Makuta,” Roodaka began, dabbing her napkin daintily at the edge of her mouth, “what projects do you have for the Great Mask of Time, now that it’s in your possession?”

“It’s no longer in my possession,” he replied, glancing at me resentfully. “Due to a series of unfortunate events, I lost it.”

“Oh,” she said with obvious disappointment.

“Well, I would have had to toss it back in the sea soon anyway. It’s got to be there by the time the events of *Time Trap* start happening, or the LEGO suits will hit the roof.”

“I was hoping...” She twirled her fork in the air. “Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

After a few minutes, Invulnerahk piped up. “Oh, man. Awkward silence.” Vorahk grabbed his staff off the floor behind him and whacked his brother on the head. The Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability fell backwards off the bench, then silently arose and took his seat again.

“His armor isn’t the only thing about him that’s thick,” muttered Shadrahk.

Makuta cleared his throat. “Well, it’s getting quite late. After dinner I’ll be happy to make accommodations for you and your spiders to rest a bit before you have to return to Metru Nui.”

“Why, that’s very kind of you,” Roodaka smiled. “But please don’t make a fuss over us. All we really need is a quiet place to lay our heads. Oh, and a warm pool of clean water to bathe in. And some dry towels, and one feather pillow each. And a cup of bula berry tea, not *too* hot, with just a *tiny* pinch of sugar...” She proceeded to list a variety of items she and her Visorak would need to be comfortable for the night.

The Rahkshi began a whispered conversation. “Who’s the hot chick with the spiders, and why is she hitting on Master?” asked Vorahk.

Shadrahk provided a quick explanation of her role in the storyline. “I’m not exactly sure why she’s here, but she should be heading back to Metru-Nui soon to continue the filming.”

“Let’s hope the Kraninator can keep his trap shut that long,” groaned Vorahk.

Invulnerahk leaned toward him. “Just what are you saying, bub?” He frowned and crossed his arms.

Vorahk laughed. “Chill, bro. I’m just trying to keep you out of trouble. I owe you for the way you took the heat when Master was on my case. Besides, you’re the only one I can spar with, no holds barred!”

“Yeah,” Invulnerahk grinned. “Say, Mistress, you want to watch our nightly after-dinner fight?”

I glanced up and noticed Roodaka watching us. “So,” she said to Makuta, “the armored slugs seem to have taken quite a liking to your... Chronicler.”

“Ah, yes, the little nippers are quite fond of her,” he smiled. “She’s set up several tournaments and sports contests for them in the past.”

The intense gaze shifted back to me. “Really. I thought you said you were just beginning to work on the biography. How long have you been here?”

“Well, I, uh,” I stammered, “before I started writing Makuta’s story, I was the Rahkshi’s babysitter.”

“How insolent of you to address your sovereign in such an informal way. You will henceforth call him ‘Lord Makuta’,” she replied coldly. “Take your charges and put them in bed while he sees to the needs of my ladies and me.”

I smiled quickly and stood, relieved to have an excuse to leave. “Come on, guys.”

The Rahkshi milled out of the dining hall, hissing among themselves. Invulnerahk started to grumble about missing dessert, but Tacirahk hit him with a blast of silence from his staff. “Thanks, man,” whispered Vorahk.

I stood in a corner of the weapons room for a while, watching the Rahkshi battle each other using a variety of official and homemade weapons. After I was accidentally bludgeoned with a badly aimed mace, Therahk healed the dent in my hip, and Pinky changed himself into a blue, gold, and gray Exo suit, custom designed to fit me. Then we challenged Lentirahk, the Rahkshi of Slowness, to a wrestling match. But despite our combined size, even the most sluggish of the Rahkshi was able to win two of three contests because we were so clumsy in working together.

After an hour or so I sent the Rahkshi to their barracks. Shadrahk went ahead of me to check if the coast was clear, and he returned to carry me back to my office. As he set me down, I said,

“This Plan Invulnerahk mentioned. Is it that you Rahkshi are supposed to keep me amused, by any chance?”

Shadrahk’s slouchy posture stiffened. “Mistress, you know I can’t divulge...” Then he sighed. “Well, you’ve figured it out, anyway, so what’s the harm? That’s pretty much it. And I must confess, it’s one of the most pleasant missions we’ve ever been assigned.” He melted away into the shadows.

I stretched out on the sofa, relieved to be alone again. But I couldn’t relax. In a very short time, things had gone from really bad to even worse. Shadrahk’s quick answer made me suspect that the Rahkshi had been tasked with something more sinister than simply providing entertainment for me. My hopes that Roodaka’s presence would mean my release had evaporated. I suspected she wanted to crush me, and she appeared powerful and ruthless enough to do it in a heartbeat. Makuta seemed to derive some sort of perverse delight from this situation, dancing on the edge of revealing our so-called conspiracy. And I took on a new, unwanted job title every time I opened my mouth to stammer an explanation to her. The only route to earning my freedom at this point was an interminable writing assignment. Meanwhile, several distant explosions set my heart racing before it was finally quiet again.

But I clung to my faith that my Builder had a better plan for me than to succumb to darkness by death or slavery. As afraid as I was, I still refused to give in to despair.

A weak being like me would need an ally to escape. After tossing and turning on the couch for a while, I thought of the being lurking in the entrance tunnel, who had been loyal to me in the past. Even though his goal was to keep me in the lair for his master, and mine was to escape from it, we shared the common objective of keeping me alive. This would have to be enough.

I sat up and spoke into the darkness. “Shadrahk?”

The dark Rahkshi emerged from the shadows of the doorway. “Yes, Mistress?”

“What do you know about Roodaka?”

“Not a lot,” he replied. “But what I do know makes me really nervous.”

“Me, too,” I agreed.

“But don’t worry, Mistress,” he said quickly. “I’m here to protect you.”

“So you’re my bodyguard as well as my jailer?” I asked wryly.

“I share Master’s confidence that one day you’ll remain of your own free will.” He paused, then added, “But until then, I guess you could say that.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know what she’s doing here? It would make your job easier, you know.”

“Absolutely,” he nodded. “Maybe we can find out. Do you still have that Huna?”

## 8. The Girls Start the War

### **Sarah McLachlan — Possession**

*Listen as the wind blows from across the great divide  
 voices trapped in yearning, memories trapped in time  
 the night is my companion, and solitude my guide  
 would I spend forever here and not be satisfied?  
 and I would be the one  
 to hold you down  
 kiss you so hard  
 I'll take your breath away  
 and after, I'd wipe away the tears  
 just close your eyes dear  
 Through this world I've stumbled  
 so many times betrayed  
 trying to find an honest word to find  
 the truth enslaved  
 oh you speak to me in riddles  
 and you speak to me in rhymes  
 my body aches to breathe your breath  
 your words keep me alive  
 And I would be the one  
 to hold you down  
 kiss you so hard  
 I'll take your breath away  
 and after, I'd wipe away the tears  
 just close your eyes dear  
 Into this night I wander  
 it's morning that I dread  
 another day of knowing of  
 the path I fear to tread  
 oh into the sea of waking dreams  
 I follow without pride  
 nothing stands between us here  
 and I won't be denied  
 and I would be the one  
 to hold you down  
 kiss you so hard  
 I'll take your breath away  
 and after, I'd wipe away the tears  
 just close your eyes...*

I put on my Huna, and Shadrahk cloaked himself in darkness. Holding my wrist, he led me silently out of the office and through the tunnel system. We traveled for quite a while through the maze of passageways. Finally we heard voices and froze against the stone wall.

The voices didn't change in tone or volume, so we slowly crept toward the sound. It was Roodaka and Daisy. Moving along the darkest side of the wall, we peeked around a corner into a cavernous room hung with green spider webs. There was a large stone basin in one corner, from

which steam was rising. Towels and personal grooming items were strewn carelessly on the floor nearby.

“Thank you, Daisy,” smiled Roodaka, stretching out in a hammock made of twisted strands. “Our lodgings are a bit plain, but they’ll do for now.”

The Boggarak, crouching next to the hammock, nodded humbly. “You’re welcome, Milady. The girls certainly seem comfortable. They’ve already fallen asleep.” In the misty distance behind them, I could see six slings of webbing, suspended motionless from more green strands, with blue tarsal segments hanging casually over the sides.

“Tomorrow I’ll get our host to enlarge the bathtub into a proper swimming pool. Maybe I can even talk him into getting us a few carpets and paintings.”

Daisy inclined her head. “But if I might be so bold, Milady... Lord Makuta doesn’t have the Vahi anymore, so why are we staying?”

“Oh, I’ll figure out some other use for him,” shrugged the Viceroy, fluffing her feather pillow. “With all those amazing powers at his fingertips, there’s bound to be some way he can help me. And it’s pretty obvious he wants to.” She extended the claws of one hand and studied them.

“How is this going to fit in with King Sidorak’s Plan?”

“Ha! His delusions barely deserve to be called a Plan,” she snorted. “Although it’s always good to have a backup Plan, just in case there’s a hitch. And there is one potential complication—that Galitea creature. I’m tempted to annihilate her, except that it might backfire. Makuta seems strangely attached to her.”

“She doesn’t seem to like him very much,” Daisy remarked. “She always moves away from him when he tries to touch her.”

Roodaka rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t be fooled by her act. I hate to admit it, but she’s playing the game quite skillfully. With males, you must always leave them wanting more. It only fans the flames of their desire.” Then she glanced at her minion and laughed. “But why am I bothering to explain the art of seduction to a spider? Let’s get some rest now. Tomorrow you can watch me work. If that pathetic little statuette wants to challenge Roodaka to a contest of feminine wiles, just let her try!”

“She’s out of her league, Milady,” said the spider.

“Hordeling, you have a gift for understatement. If he somehow manages to resist my charms, I can always mutate her into something really ugly, just to speed things up. And after she becomes yesterday’s news, you can set up some sort of tragic accident to finish her off.” Roodaka plucked a green strand off the wall and wrapped it tightly around her finger. “In no time at all, the great Master of Shadows will be like this bit of webbing. Well, goodnight, Daisy.”

“Good night, Milady.”

Shadrahk leaned toward me. “Let’s go,” he said in a barely audible whisper. Silently, quickly, we retraced our path back to the office.

I collapsed on the couch. “She can have him. She’ll be doing me a favor. But even after she gets what she wants, she’s still going to kill me! I’ve got to convince her I’m a prisoner.”

“I doubt if that matters to her,” noted Shadrahk, “because she’s figured out how Master feels about you. Unfortunately, he hasn’t been particularly subtle about it. So what we need to do is keep you safe until she goes back to Metru Nui.” He walked over to the desk. “Mind if I use the computer, Mistress?”

I shook my head. He leaned his staff against the wall, sat down, and switched on the machine. Soon he was searching for Roodaka’s name in the BZPower “Official Greg Farshtey Discussion” topic. He read aloud everything he found about her, but I had already seen it. “Sorry to bore you with old news, Mistress. I’ve been so busy playing Risk with Master lately that I’ve gotten a bit behind on the storyline,” he apologized. When he reached the end, he found the “Official Roodaka, Sidorak, and Visorak” topic and scrolled through it as well. “Most of this is just pointless speculation by eager kids, but you never know, there might be a bit of real insight in here.”

Suddenly Shadrahk jumped up and grabbed his staff. He stood next to the doorway. I glanced frantically around the room and dove behind the couch. Then he lowered his arms. “Relax, Mistress. It’s Master.”

This didn’t make me relax, exactly, but at least it wasn’t Roodaka. I stood up as Makuta strode into the office carrying a stack of books. He set them on the end table and sat down on the sofa. “Ah, finally. A nice, quiet place to read. I’ve spent the entire evening building a spa for Roodaka’s spiders, and looking for a housewares retailer that will deliver goose feather pillows and porcelain teacups and organic loofah body scrubbers and Egyptian cotton bath towels and ginger root shower gel on a moment’s notice. Oh, and dealing with thickheaded appliance delivery people. They sent me a gas range instead of an electric one, so I had to send it back.” He shook his head in exasperation. “There’s no way I would ever consider setting up a propane tank down here. I lose enough sleep as it is, worrying about Panrahk stumbling into the nitro tanks.”

“I thought you didn’t sleep,” I remarked.

“It’s an expression, dear,” he groaned. He glanced at the monitor. “So, Shadrahk, I take it you’re doing a bit of research on our guest.”

“Yes, Master. We’ve learned something of Roodaka’s Plan,” said the Rahkshi of Darkness. “I’m afraid she has hostile intentions toward Mistress.”

“You picked up on that,” Makuta chuckled.

“Roodaka plans to lure you away from Mistress and then arrange an accident to get rid of her. So I’m going to organize a twenty-four-hour rotating Rahkshi guard unit. And I’m thinking you should let Mistress use that Ussanui that you built for her last time she was here,” Shadrahk continued. “With Roodaka’s irreversible mutation Rhotuka, dark energy blasts, and tremendous physical strength, Mistress is going to need all the help she can get.”

“Son, I’m impressed that you’ve taken the initiative to investigate all this. But you needn’t worry so much. That’s just the way females talk. They tend to get competitive when they’re around other attractive she-creatures.” Makuta turned his head and winked at me. “Say, maybe Roodaka’s presence will inspire this one to be a bit less reserved.”

It suddenly occurred to me that Makuta might have invited Roodaka into his lair for this very purpose. I frowned and crossed my arms. “Dream on, Makuta.”

He laughed. “Oh, I most certainly will, dollface. And speaking of dreams, Shadrahk, you should go get some sleep. I’ll take over the security detail for a while.” The dark Rahkshi bowed and exited the room.

Makuta patted the couch cushion next to him. “Isn’t it getting to be past your bedtime, my dove?”

“Uh, well, I am getting really tired,” I admitted. “But I don’t think you should stay down here while I sleep. It’s just going to annoy Roodaka even more.”

“Who I love is not her concern,” he grinned. Then he tilted his head. “Shadrahk’s gotten you all nervous, hasn’t he? Well, don’t read anything into it, that’s just his style. He prefers to be prepared. And that’s what makes him such a good right-hand Rahkshi. With him in charge of your safety, you’ll be well protected.”

In spite of my feelings about Makuta, I was now in a situation where I feared being alone. I sighed and looked around the room. Since there was no other comfortable place to lie down, I walked around the sofa and curled up on the other end of it. He pulled a blanket out of the drawer in the end table and tucked it around me. “Sleep well, princess.” He picked up a biography of the Spanish conquistador Fernando Cortez and flipped it open. “You know how this fellow conquered the mighty Aztecs? He posed as their god. Apparently I’m not the only one to think of that.”

“I’m never going to confuse you with my Builder,” I muttered.

“Ah, but if you think about it, I *am* your Builder now,” he pointed out. “I know you inside and out.”

“No, you aren’t, and no, you don’t,” I retorted. “You didn’t give me life. All you did was rearrange my parts, and give me a few new ones.”

“And you have to admit, you’ve never looked more beautiful,” said the Spirit of Destruction merrily.

I gave up on this futile argument and closed my eyes.

I woke from a dreamless sleep what seemed like moments later and kicked Makuta’s hand off my leg. “Ah, you’re awake, beloved,” he smiled, closing his copy of *The Journal of Explosives Engineering*. “Let’s go up for breakfast.”

“Why don’t you go first?” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes.

“All right, I suppose that would be wise. Say, I’ll summon the kraata for you so you can go ahead and use that Ussanui. And that way you won’t get lost, because they know their way around the lair.” He gave a low whistle, and soon five kraata were slithering into the room. “Boys, you remember your Mistress?”

The snaky creatures rubbed themselves on my ankles until I leaned over and gingerly patted their leathery heads. Then they squirmed into the Ussanui, which was standing in a dark alcove of the office. I hadn’t even noticed it until now.

“I’ll use my X-ray vision to keep an eye on you. But don’t tarry.” Makuta hovered and took off with the usual humming sound of Rahkshi flight.

I climbed onto the vehicle and lay down, wrapping my legs around it. The Kohrak-Kal hand shield controls felt familiar under my fingers. Just to be sure I remembered how to operate it, I took a test flight around the chamber. Then I asked the kraata to take me to the living room. In seconds we were hurtling down the dark tunnels. I parked the Ussanui in the corner by Makuta’s desk and walked into the dining room.

Fortunately, Roodaka and her minions weren’t there yet. Nor were the Rahkshi. Makuta was standing at the coffee maker pouring two cups. “It’s odd that the boys aren’t up by now. Pinky’s usually in here making puppy dog eyes at me two nanoseconds after the beans start grinding.”

He handed me a cup, and I sipped the fragrant liquid while I watched him stalk over to the tunnel to the barracks. Then I heard a bellow of dismay and the sound of smashing ceramic. I set down my coffee and ran down the tunnel to the doorway. Makuta was staring at row upon row of tight green cocoons, one hanging above each Rahkshi bunk. His eyes were blazing red.

Then he spun around and fixed his gaze on a dark corner of the room. He lifted his hand, and chain lightning surged from it, illuminating the shiny surfaces of seven blue arachnids as it crackled over and around them. A high-pitched chittering sound came from the creatures as they twitched and jerked.

I ran to the nearest pod and carefully slit the tough, stretchy fabric with my axe. Frigirahk dropped out onto his stone bed and lay still.

“He’s paralyzed,” growled Makuta behind my shoulder, “but that will wear off. He’s otherwise unharmed. Here, help me get the rest of them down.”

We moved among the groups of bunks, opening the cocoons. The Visorak stayed quietly in the corner, where Makuta had fixed them to the floor, probably with gravity. Then we heard a melodious voice behind us. “Dear me! Look what my naughty girls have done. My, my, aren’t they playful!”

“Yeah, this is really funny,” grumbled Makuta.

“Oh, now, don’t be all grumpy,” cooed Roodaka, smiling at him sweetly. “It’s just a silly prank. Here, I’ll get them down.” She shot a focused beam of darkness from her fingertip at a cocoon. The pod split open like a flower, freeing the Rahkshi inside.

Makuta waved his hand and released the Boggarak. They scurried around their mistress for protection. She stooped and caressed Daisy’s dorsal ridge. “You’re all right, I hope?”

“Yes, we’re fine,” replied the spider. “Rather hungry, though.”

“I’ll get some breakfast,” I whispered. Makuta nodded at me, his eyes blue again. He turned back to his sons, who were just starting to stir.

I rummaged through the kitchen cabinets and found some paper bowls, plastic spoons, and boxes of cereal. I set them on the dining room tables with several cartons of cold milk from the refrigerator. Soon everyone was filing in, the Visorak looking bouncy and energetic and the Rahkshi sluggish and creaky. A few of Makuta’s offspring were hissing among themselves and looking resentfully at the spiders. Makuta was halfway listening to Roodaka while his eyes darted around the room. At one point he stretched an arm across the table to restrain Kurahk, who was about to strike a Boggarak with his staff.

Roodaka was chatting gaily as everyone took a seat. “It just needs a larger pool, which can be kept warm, and then a small jacuzzi to one side with hot water. And a vaulted ceiling with a hanging garden would be nice. Oh, and the girls need a jungle gym. It’s important that they get their exercise.”

“I’ll get right on that after breakfast,” replied the Master of Shadows, forcing a smile. “Let’s eat.”

There was a flurry of activity while everyone got a serving of cereal, followed by a few minutes of quiet crunching. Finally Roodaka addressed Makuta. “As much time as you spent with your hireling last night, she must have done a lot of work on your story.” She turned to me, her eyes narrowed. “Why don’t you read us what you’ve got so far?”

I swallowed hard. “Uh, well, I don’t have anything printed out yet.”

“Fine,” she replied. “Get it printed by dinner time, and we’ll hear it then. For now, just tell it to me.”

My pulse rate doubled as I tried to invent something plausible, knowing that I would have to make my written version agree with it. “Well, ah, we started at the beginning, when Makuta—I mean, Lord Makuta—crawled out of the, er, ooze.” I glanced over at him, and he was smiling serenely. “And he... uh...”

“For someone who justifies her existence by crafting stories, you certainly aren’t very eloquent,” she snapped, tapping her claws on the table. “You should keep in mind that Roodaka hates being misinformed.”

“She’s just tired, Roodaka,” Makuta explained. “I made her write a long time before I let her sleep. Don’t be shy, Chronicler. Go ahead and tell her what we worked on.”

I stared at him in dismay. His benevolent demeanor just added to the cruelty of the trap she had set and into which he was leading me. But then I heard his voice echo inside my head. “I was born in the instant I became aware of myself.”

Eyes wide, I repeated his words, substituting third person pronouns. “He became conscious of the difference between his own being and the matter outside him. He perceived the density of the fluid all around, and the energy of its warmth. Then he noticed he could, with an act of will, absorb this energy. So he did, until he was a swirling vortex crackling with raw power. But he still had no form as yet. He felt his energy dissipating almost as fast as he could gather it together.”

Roodaka leaned forward, resting her chin on her interlaced fingers. “Go on. This is fascinating.”

A few of the Rahkshi stopped eating their cereal to listen. Shadrahk, in particular, seemed enraptured as I continued the narrative. “Then Lord Makuta realized that he could focus his mind and convert a portion of his energy into solid matter, encapsulating and protecting his energy. So he experimented with this until he had congealed a primitive form for himself. He moved his new extremities. He rose, dripping, from the mud, raised his new head, and announced triumphantly to the sky, ‘I live!’”

“Brilliant!” clapped Roodaka, her gaze fixed admiringly on Makuta.

Then the phone rang in the living room, and Makuta excused himself. As soon as he had left, Roodaka glared at me. “Don’t entertain the illusion that your little press pass is going to save you,” she hissed.

All the minions looked up with alarm at her tone. With an ingratiating smile, she dipped her spoon in her cereal and wondered aloud, “Hmm, I wonder who he’s talking to?” The underlings returned to their breakfast. To my immense relief, she didn’t ask for any more of his biography while he was gone.

After a few tense minutes, Makuta returned. “Ogel sends his regards.”

“Do I know him?” asked Roodaka thoughtfully.

“You know, the short fellow with the chrome helmet and the red eye,” he reminded her. “He used to have an undersea base. Now he’s got an ice fortress.”

“Oh, yes, now I remember. I spoke with him at a LEGO Christmas party a few years ago.”

“He certainly remembers you,” remarked the Master of Shadows. “He asked if you’re still beautiful, and I told him you’re as lovely as ever.”

“Really, now, Makuta. You must stop flattering me so!” she purred, covering her mouth with one of her claws.

“I just told him the truth,” shrugged Makuta.

Roodaka casually ran her fingers down her headpiece. “That means so much, coming from a being who’s been alive for hundreds of millennia. And I certainly look forward to hearing more of your story this evening. Now, come fix up our accommodations while your servant cleans up the dishes.”

I sighed with relief as she strutted out of the dining room, timing her exit to avoid the drops of burning sap from Florahk’s vine. The spiders scurried after her. Makuta paused as he passed me. He took my chin in his hand. “Well done, my love,” he whispered. Then he turned and followed Roodaka.

A few of the Rahkshi stayed to help me gather the trash, which Thermorahk set on fire with his eyes. “She’s really got it in for you, Mistress,” remarked the Rahkshi of Hunger. “But you know that if she messes with you, we’ll take her down, right?” He tapped his staff against the palm of his hand. The gleam in his eye almost made it look as if he would welcome the opportunity.

“Thanks, Vorahk. But I’m just praying no one will get hurt until she goes back to do the movie again,” I replied.

“I wonder when that will be,” grumbled Shadrahk. “Well, you’ve got some writing to do before dinnertime. I’ll send the first patrol down with you. Then, after I check on a few things, I’ll come down and tell you all the history I know.”

## 9. In the Beginning

### *Toadies — I Come from the Water*

*I come from the water  
I crawled upon the shore  
I left my brothers there  
I got what I came for*

*I sucked that hot air in  
And rolled upon the sand  
Emerged beneath the sun  
To be a man*

*I come from the water  
I come from the water  
That weren't no easy thing  
It's more than nature  
It's like my destiny*

*I stood upon these legs  
And held my head up high  
Emerged beneath the sun  
To start a new life*

*I come from the water*

*Life in the desert  
Just to be together  
The sand forever  
The same forever  
It moves beneath me  
It pulls my body  
My pulse beats hotter  
So far from the water*

*I love to see the sun  
In spite of all it's done  
I pray for shade and rain  
I pray to live again  
I come from the water*

Flanked by Vorahk and Cyclorahk, I rode the Ussanui back to the office. I started the computer while the Rahkshi stationed themselves in the hallway. Another series of explosions echoed in the distance, but now that I knew that Makuta was blasting out a swimming pool for Roodaka and her spiders, they didn't worry me as they had before.

Soon I had transcribed and edited a narrative of the events Makuta had planted directly into my brain at breakfast. Then I printed it. I picked it up and frowned. It was only about half a page long. So I typed all of Makuta's lines that I could remember from the *Mask of Light* and *Legends of Metru Nui*. This increased the length to about a page. I filled in a few of the events from the

two movies as I imagined them from his perspective and arranged it all in chronological order, stretching the story out to four pages long. This would probably not be enough to satisfy Roodaka, but it was all I could do at the time.

I took a break and dove into the pool. I swam a few leisurely laps, then stepped out and lay down on the couch.

At the sound of Makuta's clanking footsteps in the corridor, I sat up. He exchanged a bit of banter with the Rahkshi and then walked in. "Ah, beloved, I'm sorry I've been away so long. This time Roodaka had me build her a swimming pool and a jungle gym."

"Yes, I heard her mention those," I replied.

"And then she decided she wanted some flowers, so we paid another visit to Florahk's garden. But the whole time I was thinking of you, and how I looked forward to seeing you again." He sat down next to me.

"Whatever. So, can you tell me more of your story now?" I asked, jumping up and walking to the desk.

He grinned. "Darling, you have no idea how long I've waited to hear you ask me that!"

"Yeah, well, congratulations. Your evil attempts to manipulate me have been successful," I groaned, handing him the printed copy. "Here's what I've got so far."

He scanned the pages and handed them back to me. "Very nice. You've described some of my thoughts during the movies quite accurately, without me even telling you. I knew you would be good at this." He sat back and clasped his big tarnished silver hands behind his head, a faraway look in his blue eyes. "Oh, I really want to savor this moment, and remember it forever. The one I adore wants to know more about me!"

My hands poised over the keyboard, I growled to myself. After a long pause, I finally said, "Well?"

"Oh, sorry. Now, where were we? Ah, yes, the beginning. So, as I told you before, I rose from the ooze and dragged myself onto land. I felt the firmness of the ground below my body and the air on my outer surface. I drew some of it in and claimed its heat energy. I formed eyes in the front of my head so I could look at the plants and rocks and sand before me. I willed the ends of my limbs to become hands and feet to gain traction. I felt the strength in my arms and legs as I flexed them and stood on all fours, wobbling, for the first time."

"Wait a minute, Makuta," I interrupted. "I know you're a shapeshifter, but... are you telling me you created a body with a head and arms and legs without ever seeing anything like it before?"

"Yes, I did. I'm a self-made spirit, if you will," he said proudly. "Anyway, I saw smaller creatures all around me, and I reached out and picked up a crab. I crushed it in my hand and ate

it. Then I realized it could be combined with the air I had inhaled in a combustion reaction. I took a deep breath and was conscious of the energy sparking inside me. This elated me. I had discovered a new source of energy, and it was much more concentrated than the ambient radiation I had been absorbing directly from my surroundings.”

“You came up with the idea of using a combustion reaction to power yourself, all on your own?” I asked incredulously.

“Sure. It was the rational thing to do. I mean, it’s a lot more obvious than, say, nuclear fusion, don’t you think?”

“Well, yes, but... how did you even know to try it?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “It just came to me. I understand how molecules interact, and I can assemble them as a child might combine building blocks into a toy.”

“Wow,” I remarked in spite of myself. This must be the reason for his incredible array of powers. “So, you don’t have to eat, but you can?”

“It’s a very effective method of gaining energy,” he explained. “I can get it lots of different ways, such as drawing it from an electrical source. And, as you know, I can also merge creatures directly into myself, assimilating their parts and directly absorbing their life force. That allows me to acquire their powers, too, if they have any. But if all I’m after is fuel, it’s easier just to eat them.”

I shivered at the memory of nearly being absorbed. Still, I was driven by curiosity to hear more about how this strange being really functioned. “So... is your interior... some sort of energy reservoir?”

“That’s a pretty good way to look at it,” he smiled. “I formed my body by converting some of my energy into matter—I’m sure you’re familiar with the equation. At the same time, my body is a container that protects my energy. And it’s convenient way for me to interact with the universe and other beings.”

“What happens if your body is badly injured? Does your energy leak out?” I wondered.

“You ask a lot of questions,” he remarked, standing up and walking behind my chair. “But that’s all right, because I know you’ll be able to understand me like no one ever has before. And besides, I have plenty of time.” He spun the chair around and put his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t put this in the biography, but yes, it does. That’s why I’ve made my outer layer so heavily armored.”

I gathered my courage and whispered the next logical question. “And if all of it were to leak out...”

“If all of it were to disperse before I could repair my form, or at least collect a few wisps of it into a new vortex,” his words resonated inside my head, “then I suppose I would die. Because I *am* energy.”

I looked up at him, my eyes wide. He had just revealed to me the key to his own defeat. And perhaps he wasn't immortal after all.

“Of course, now that I've told you this, my precious, I have a real dilemma on my hands,” he sighed. “You know my deep, dark secret. If I let you go, you might betray me to my enemies. Now you're bound to me, forever.”

My heart started pounding. Even if I finished his biography, would this obsessive megalomaniac ever agree to set me free? He stood over me, his intense blue eyes locked onto mine, for a few moments. Then suddenly he smiled. “Or maybe I'm just a really good liar,” he said mischievously as he returned to the sofa.

I watched him warily. He lay back against the armrest, a devious grin on his Kraahkan. “Ready to continue, princess?”

“I guess so,” I grumbled.

“Crouching on the beach, I became aware of the warmth of the sun on my back. I soaked it in eagerly. But then I raised my head and looked directly at its golden orb. Through the window of my eyes, pain shot through my entire being. My instinctive reaction was to rear up at it, as if to fight back with my fists. A blast of darkness surged from my hands. It was a complete surprise to me that I could do it, and it brought instant relief from the accursed blazing sun. I stared at my hands in wonder. It was at that moment that I vowed forever to be the enemy of the light.”

My fingers were flying across the keys. When I had caught up, he went on. “I crawled into the jungle, seeking shade. It didn't take me long to discover that when I walked on two legs instead of four, I could do all sorts of things with my hands. If I applied enough force with them, I could break branches and shatter stones. This was exhilarating! I went on a destructive spree, tearing a swath of chaos through the forest. And as I did so, I noticed that I could wreck things from a distance simply by the force of my will. I had stumbled upon the power of shattering, like Panrahk wields. It was the second of what the Turaga call my 'kraata powers' that I discovered that day.”

“The first one being darkness?”

“Yes. As time went by I experimented and found some powers came naturally to me. Others I developed deliberately, as combinations of ones I had already mastered.”

“I see,” I nodded. It seemed a pity that such amazing intelligence and power were in the hands of such an arrogant, destructive egoist.

“There was one other important event that occurred during those first few millennia of my youth,” he said thoughtfully. “One day in my random wanderings, I annihilated a predatory wolf creature that was about to kill a feline. I was planning to incinerate the little cat as well, but something inside made me hesitate. It bounced up to me and rubbed itself on my leg, purring as if in gratitude. I reached down and picked it up, confused by new emotions. It was strangely satisfying to have rescued this tiny animal. I decided then and there to dedicate my energies to the protection of helpless creatures.”

I frowned at him. “And when did *that* change?”

“It hasn’t!” he snapped, sitting up. “Sometimes I’ve had to use methods that seem harsh to those who don’t know the context, but I’ve always been looking out for lesser creatures. You, of all beings, should be appreciative of that. I’ve saved your life too many times to count.”

“You’ve always been the one that got me into danger in the first place,” I retorted.

He leaned back and laughed. “Really, now, how can you fault me for that? I just can’t resist sometimes. I so enjoy watching you squirm. And I keep holding out the hope that one day after I rescue you, you’ll throw your sweet little arms around my neck and thank me. But anyway, that’s how I was hired as protector of the Matoran. Word apparently got out that I was good at it.”

How he had gotten the job of protecting the Matoran was indeed a mystery I had wondered about. “Who gave you that position, anyway?”

Just then there was a commotion, and Vorahk’s voice echoed in the hallway. “Yo, General!”

“Hey, Sarge,” replied Shadrahk, striding into the room. “Master, I apologize for the interruption, but look what just came in the mail!” He tossed a cellophane-wrapped LEGO Magazine and Bionicle comic onto the end table.

Makuta smiled. “Oh, good. Let’s read it together. Come on over here, pumpkin.” He beckoned for me to join him and the dark Rahkshi on the couch. He ripped the top off the packet and pulled out the comic.

I leaned over and read the cover. It was Comic #24, “Reign of Darkness.” Shadrahk remarked, “Nice title.”

“Yes, indeed.” The Master of Shadows opened it. “Look, it’s Roodaka, sitting on my throne in the Coliseum and talking to Daisy.” He finished the first panels in seconds and waited until Shadrahk and I nodded before turning the page. Soon we had all finished, and Makuta closed it, smirking. “Well, it’s always good to get a little refresher course in the storyline. I missed a lot of the details the first time around, because I was hanging in that cage most of the time. Heh, it looks like the Toa had a pretty miserable time of it!”

The Rahkshi of Darkness spoke solemnly. “It’s absolutely chilling the way Roodaka left her green companion to be devoured by the mountain. And now she’s about to replay her own king’s demise! Master, are you sure we’re safe with this black widow in your lair?”

“Of course we are,” he scoffed. “Her capacity for treachery is exactly why I hired her in the first place. Since then, she’s served me well as my faithful lieutenant, because she knows who gave her that first opportunity for glory. And besides, I’m infinitely more powerful than she is.”

“But it seems that every male who trusted her has ended up dead,” replied his minion.

“Son, there’s one big difference between those others and me,” said Makuta confidently. “I didn’t make the mistake of falling in love with her. I’ve always been too aware of her techniques for her to make a fool of me.”

“Master,” protested Shadrahk quietly, “I overheard her announcing her intention to do exactly that.”

Makuta chuckled. “It’ll certainly be entertaining to watch her try. But she’ll never take the place of your beloved Mistress.” He squeezed me against his side. “Say... just in case she ever tries something, I think I’d better give you another power. And I know just the one that would suit you. Stand up, my pet.”

“I’m not ever going to pick a fight with Roodaka.” I shook my head emphatically. “I’m going to do everything I can to avoid it. In fact, if you let me go home, that’s where I’ll be safest.”

He pulled me to my feet and put his left hand on my back. He planted the other in the middle of my chest. I felt a huge jolt like an electric shock, and my heart stopped momentarily. Then he removed his hand, and I felt the beating in my chest again, a little faster than before. “Now, darling, line up the handles of your axes, pointing the blades outward.” Hands shaking, I did so, and to my amazement, a shaft formed between them, just like a Rahkshi staff.

“Try it,” he urged. I looked up at him suspiciously, wondering what power he had given me. The sensation was very unlike that when he had given me water powers, which seemed to flow tranquilly into me through my forehead. Tentatively, I willed a small amount of energy through my hands. Blue blasts shot out of both ends of my axe-staff, striking the ceiling above the pool and the wall behind the couch. A large chunk was sheared out of the stone and plunged into the water with a huge splash, and a big crack opened in the rock wall.

“Disintegration,” said Shadrahk admiringly. “Nice selection, Master. Useful in battle, and it goes well with her new body.”

“It was a natural choice,” replied Makuta. “A perfect complement to her budding destructive tendencies. Well, since I still don’t have a stove, I’d better go order some dinner. Have fun with your new power, my little Princess of Darkness!” He patted the side of my mask and walked out.

Vorahk stepped into the room. “Good times!” he exclaimed. “Can I train Mistress in her new power?”

“Permission granted,” replied Shadrahk. “Go get Guurahk to help you. Cyclorahk, you’re relieved of duty.”

The Cyclone Rahkshi nodded and hissed. Vorahk frowned at him. “No way, dude. I don’t care if I’m not going to be using it, no one but me touches the ‘Pod. Unless Mistress wants to listen to it while we fly, that is.” He snapped open his carapace and pulled out an iPod.

“No, thanks, Vorahk,” I smiled as I climbed onto the Ussanui.

“It’s got some great tunes on it,” he shrugged, putting it back inside. “Let me know if you change your mind.” He shot down the tunnel. It was just as well I had declined his mp3 player, since I needed all my concentration to hold onto my vehicle as it zoomed after him. His excitement had made his fearless flying style even more daring than usual.

We found Guurahk in the weapons room. He was delighted to hear the news of my disintegration power. He demonstrated a variety of techniques to me, with Vorahk translating. “You can shoot a focused beam, like so.” He leveled the finely honed tip of his staff at the wall and shot, blowing a neat spherical hole in it. “Or, you can take off the surface of something, with a scatter pattern.” He fired a diffuse blast, scanning rapidly across at a circular area of several square feet, converting the first six inches of stone into gravel. Then the blue Rahkshi led us over to a large boulder and hissed in an animated way, waving his hands. Vorahk scratched his head. “He’s showing you the weak points in this rock. He can, like, just feel where they are. Now he’s going to bust it up with a minimum of energy.” Guurahk carefully aimed his staff. A tiny spark surged from the blade. The rock split with a loud crack, and both pieces rolled backwards.

“Awesome, man,” said Vorahk, clanking his staff against Guurahk’s. I couldn’t help but agree. Then the black Rahkshi pointed at the wall. “Now, you try, Mistress.”

I squinted my eyes and released a blast of surprisingly destructive force against the stone. Then I whirled around, protecting my head with my arms from the large angular chunks that flew instantly in all directions. As the shower of rocks pelting us died down, Vorahk shook his head. “You’d better get some practice, Mistress, or no one is going to be safe with you around. Including you.”

Hissing and shrieking erupted behind us. I turned and saw all the other Rahkshi in the weapons room cheering for me. I smiled sheepishly and waved at them.

With Guurahk and Vorahk providing helpful tips, I gradually gained some control over this terrifying new ability. I learned how to vary the quantity of dark energy and focus it, thereby confining the damage to a fairly small target. But I was still gripped by a profound feeling of dread every time I took aim. And each shot drained a huge amount of energy from me.

Before long fatigue and hunger were making me lightheaded. Fortunately, Florahk popped his head into the weapons room and announced, “De supper is fit. Come sidung.” But first I rode back to the office to print the biography. Then I flew back, parked my vehicle, and walked into the dining room in the reassuring company of my two trainers.

Roodaka was all smiles. She lavished compliments on Makuta for the beautiful swimming pool and ingenious jungle gym, which he had built of Bionicle parts. “It’s amazing how big it is, and how lovely the composition. The use of bronze, brown, and tan parts, interspaced among the black plus-rods, gives it an almost organic look. And it’s so strong! I can rest peacefully, knowing my girls will be safe swinging on their webs inside it.” She stretched her arms gracefully over her head and leaned back in her chair.

The Rahkshi quietly nudged each other and exchanged knowing looks.

“Whatever I can do to make you comfortable until your return to Metru Nui, it’s my pleasure to do it,” Makuta replied politely, unfolding his napkin. He sliced into his chicken Kiev. “By the way, I don’t mean to rush you, but when does your part in the filming resume? Personally, I find it easy to forget about the time down here in my little piece of paradise, especially now that it’s being graced by such lovely female creatures.”

Roodaka immediately glared at me. “I presume by using the plural, you mean to include my Boggarak?” she said icily.

“Well, I can’t pretend not to notice my pretty Chronicler as she writes down my story,” he confessed, “but I do try to keep my mind on the work at hand.”

Her eyes narrowed for a second, but then she forced a smile and folded her claws on the table in front of her. “Why don’t we listen to a little excerpt?”

Makuta gestured for me to stand, so I did, on shaking legs. My voice sounded as thin and scared to me as I imagined myself to look. He waved at me to continue every time I paused, until I had read the whole narrative of his genesis. But when I started on his lines from the second movie, Roodaka interrupted me. “Yes, yes, I’ve watched the DVDs. You can skip that part.”

She stood and walked toward Makuta’s seat, her headpiece swaying gently as she stepped. “Every little thing I discover about you just makes me want to learn more,” she purred. “Why don’t you take me on a tour of your magnificent island? We could start in the mountains, explore the canyons and deserts and swamps and rivers together, and finish back down here in your wonderfully cozy abode underneath it all.”

“Well, all right,” he agreed, standing up. He looked up at her uneasily as she moved closer.

“You could change into the form you have for the movie,” she suggested, her hands hovering over his shoulders. “I just love those wings. I’ll be able to keep up with you on my Nui-Kopen, if you’ll slow down a bit for me.”

“Uh, sure,” he agreed. He turned to me. “Chronicler, please look after the Rahkshi, and see that they treat the Visorak with respect. And vice versa.”

I nodded. He led his ebony guest out of the dining room. I breathed a sigh of relief, but Shadrahk seemed more anxious than ever. “Well, Mistress, it’s getting really late. I’ll assign a couple of us to do the cleanup detail. The spiders know the way to their room. Why don’t you suggest to them that they go there now and stay out of our way, so there aren’t any misunderstandings between us?”

“Right.” I walked hesitantly up to Daisy. “I think your room should be comfortable by now. If you need anything, please let me know.”

Daisy studied me for a moment, then replied in an emotionless voice, “I will.” She led her spiders out of the room.

Vorahk picked up his staff. “All right, guys. What are we going to do to them?”

“Nothing,” snapped the Rahkshi of Darkness. “You heard what Master said. We’re going to let it go. And you, Sarge, are going to make sure of that.” He gestured at Pyrorahk and Meteorahk. “You two clean up the mess hall. Therahk, you and I will cover security for Mistress tonight.” He turned to me. “Let’s head back to your office, Mistress. You look exhausted.”

## 10. The Boys Get Even

### **Bryan Ferry — Slave to Love**

*Tell her I'll be waiting  
In the usual place  
With the tired and weary  
There's no escape  
To need a woman  
You've got to know  
How the strong get weak  
And the rich get poor  
You're running with me  
Don't touch the ground  
We're restless hearted  
Not the chained and bound  
The sky is burning  
A sea of flame  
Though your world is changing  
I will be the same  
The storm is breaking  
Or so it seems  
We're too young to reason  
Too grown up to dream  
Now spring is turning  
Your face to mine  
I can hear your laughter  
I can see your smile  
No, I can't escape  
I'm a slave to love*

My jaw dropped in surprise as I flew through the doorway and saw that the entire office was festooned with flowering vines. They hung from the ceiling and dripped from the bookshelves. Water lilies floated in the pool, their bright blooms standing out against the dark water.

I parked the Ussanui in its alcove and took a deep breath. The air was sweetly fragrant. This charming gesture, evidently from Florahk at the request of Makuta, made the dank chamber a lot more cheerful. I settled on the couch with my blanket, but I was still a bundle of nerves. I sat up again and asked Shadrahk, “So, how did the Visorak manage to web all of you?”

He groaned. “It shouldn’t have happened. One of the spiders was pretending to be hurt. When the night watchman, Adaptarahk, went looking for Therahk, another Boggarak hit him in the back. After that we were all easy prey. They paralyzed us in our sleep and wrapped us up. They must have worked really fast and quietly, because none of us heard a thing.”

“That’s low,” I remarked. Therahk nodded in agreement.

“They won’t get away with anything like that again. From now on I’m stationing five Rahkshi every night.”

Therahk seemed to sense my unease. He hissed at Shadrahk, who said, “Mistress, do you mind if he uses his power to reduce your tension level? It might help you sleep.”

I didn’t quite believe it was possible for one of Makuta’s spawn to have a relaxing effect on another creature, but then, the powers of the Rahkshi of Quick Healing had surprised me before. “All right.” I lay down on the couch again.

Therahk stepped forward and slid the end of his staff down my spine. It felt unexpectedly calming.

“Thanks, Therahk,” I smiled. “Say, what sort of project does your master have you working on these days?”

His hiss was interpreted by the Rahkshi of Darkness. “He’s helping Master devise a cure for his brother.”

I sat up. “What? You mean Mata Nui? But isn’t he’s the one who...”

“Master is quite distraught at his declining health,” Shadrahk cut in tersely. “He’s doing everything he can to come up with a treatment, including enlisting Therahk. Now, lie down and get some rest!”

I complied, but I wondered what Therahk was really researching. He waved his staff over my back again. All the aches and pains from my training vanished, and soon I was drifting off to sleep.

I woke to urgent hissing. Telerahk was standing in the doorway. Shadrahk replied, “Thanks for telling me. We’ll be right there.” The blue and green Rahkshi vanished, and Shadrahk hastened over to the couch. “Mistress, there’s trouble brewing between the Rahkshi and the Visorak. We’d better go see what’s happening!”

I straddled the Ussanui, and we were off. After a harrowing ride through the darkness, we arrived in a spacious cavern dominated by a huge brown and black structure built of Bionicle parts. Seven carefree Boggarak were spinning webs, swinging from them, and scuttling up and down the bars. Vorahk and Telerahk stood motionless on the opposite side of the room.

“What’s the problem?” I whispered to Shadrahk. “It looks like Vorahk and Telerahk are just watching them play.” Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash. I felt my body functions slow dramatically. It took several seconds just to turn my head and see Lentirahk standing next to us. He hissed at Confusirahk, who waved to several others standing on a ledge above the jungle gym.

We observed, helpless, as the mutinous Rahkshi got their revenge on the blue spiders. First, Confusirahk shot a concentrated beam at each one. They began to act erratically, swinging in tight circles and tossing webs randomly in the air. Then Gravirahk and Densirahk simultaneously

reversed the gravity and reduced the density of the framework. The massive cage floated slowly off the ground.

Three dozen more Rahkshi flew out of the shadows and grabbed the edges of the jungle gym. Those on one side lifted as the others pushed down, rotating it until the entire structure was inverted. Then they set it gently on the ground and vanished into the darkness. The Visorak clung to the bars, evidently feeling some vertigo.

The Rahkshi of Density stopped using his power, and the upside-down jungle gym became fully opaque again. His blue and silver brother continued to maintain the reversed gravity. The spiders emerged from their fog of confusion and started to clean up the mess, eating the clumpy, tangled webs and spinning more organized ones. They moved normally, except that with no cues on the stark rock walls of the cavern as to which direction was up, they did everything upside down.

The Rahkshi could barely conceal their snickering. Tacirahk swung his staff around the chamber and blanketed everyone with silence. After the Boggarak had played for a few minutes more, Gravirahk shut off his staff, and normal gravity was instantly restored. The spiders screeched with dismay as they plummeted to the ground, which they had mistaken for the ceiling. A few of them caught themselves with webbing and bars as they tumbled, but their unfortunate sisters hit the stone floor with a sickening thud. The Rahkshi ran out of their hiding places and hissed with glee.

Daisy had stopped her fall by snagging a piece of web. She immediately scampered to the outside edge of the jungle gym and looked around the room. She spotted Shadrahk, Therahk, and me, since we were powerless to move or cloak ourselves. “You, Shadrahk!” she hissed angrily. “You’re responsible for this outrage! I’ll shrivel up your kraata like a slug on a hot sidewalk!” I watched in horror as a Rhotuka powered up in the launcher on her back.

But as the spinning wheel of energy was released, the rung beneath her shattered, and she lurched to one side, sending the Rhotuka spinning harmlessly into the shadows. Guurahk shifted his aim and hit another bar with a blast of energy, and she dangled by one foot.

Everyone sprang into action. An unharmed Boggarak scrambled to the ground and pulled her injured sisters up onto a platform inside the besieged edifice. The spiders were easily visible in the open structure, but they took full advantage of the bars and pillars to make themselves difficult targets. The Rahkshi compensated by shooting innumerable blasts from all directions. The jungle gym lurched and caught fire in several places. Pieces of it exploded and flew off, arcs of electricity shot across it, and smoke filled the air. A missed shot by Disruptirahk pulverized one of the stone walls of the cave into dust. Meanwhile, the Boggarak managed to run onto a small balcony and launch some glowing blue spinners into the throng of Rahkshi. Invulnerahk dove in front of me, intercepting a Rhotuka without harm as I stumbled behind a rock. Several other Rahkshi were hit, but to my surprise, they were unaffected. But then white spinners began to fly. Guurahk was struck, dropped to the ground next to Shadrahk, and lay still.

From the shelter of the rock, I considered what to do. Obviously any injuries to the Visorak would incur Roodaka’s wrath against me. I ran to Shadrahk, who was firing blasts of dark energy

at Daisy on the balcony. “Shadrahk, we’ve got to subdue them without harm before Roodaka gets back!”

“Agreed. Rahkshi! Stop aiming directly at them. Vorahk, get the ranged-power Rahkshi to distract them with showers of rubble. Illusion Rahkshi, give them false targets. Statirahk and Somnorahk, get up there and immobilize them.” He beckoned to the Rahkshi of Stasis and Sleep.

Illusorahk aimed his staff at the side of the framework, and three phantom Rahkshi appeared, rapidly climbing the rungs. Two of the Boggarak ran over to that side and began to launch spinners at them, but they kept advancing. Meanwhile, Pinky transformed himself into a section of jungle gym, and Somnorahk climbed inside. He lifted Pinky with him as he flew, undetectable to the Visorak. Chamelerahk used his power to blend into the structure and scale a third side. Then he reappeared and banged loudly on the bars with his staff, drawing fire from another spider. I shot streams of water all around the Visorak to obscure their view, and Panrahk, Guurahk, Laserahk, and Thermorahk fired destructive energy at the beams above them to keep them dodging debris.

Finally there was a triumphant shriek, and Statirahk and Somnorahk emerged from the smoke onto the balcony, dragging seven limp Visorak. The room echoed with Rahkshi cheering as the blasts died down. Therahk touched Guurahk and a few others with his staff, and they got slowly to their feet. I guessed that they been hit with paralysis spinners, after the Boggarak realized their dehydration Rhotuka wouldn’t penetrate the all-mechanical Rahkshi armor to desiccate the kraata inside.

Just then we heard the beating of wings in the hallway, and Makuta and Roodaka flew into the room, he in his Ultimate Dume form and she astride her mutated Nui-Kopen. They landed near the base of the structure. “What’s going on here?” demanded Makuta, his eyes flashing.

“I can see exactly what’s going on here.” Roodaka tossed her head indignantly. “Your badly behaved boys are bullying my poor outnumbered girls. And we had to cut short our lovely evening to set things right, because your governess couldn’t handle them. Or maybe she was in on it.” She turned to glare at me.

Shadrahk stepped in front of me. “Lady Roodaka, it was my responsibility to look after the others while she slept. Please accept my apology.”

Vorahk shoved him out of the way. “No dice, dude. You gave the peacekeeping job to me.” He turned to Roodaka. “It was *my* fault, lady.”

Invulnerahk bounced in front of the black Rahkshi. “Actually, I was the brains behind the whole Plan. Those guys tried to stop us, but we ambushed them. Go ahead and blast me.”

The spiders began to stir. Makuta glanced down at them, at me, and then at the Rahkshi. “I’m sorry their prank interrupted our night out. But it looks like your Boggarak are going to be all right,” he said gruffly.

Roodaka was unappeased. She put her claws on her hips. “Your hideous spawn have traumatized my delicate girls. And I don’t have time to sort out their ridiculous story. Just punish all of them! Except for Galitea. I’ll deal with her personally.” One hand darted out and closed around my throat.

I brought my axes together into a staff and pointed it at her chest. The Rahkshi murmured and brandished their own weapons. The Visorak powered up their spinners. Roodaka reached behind her back with her other hand for her Rhotuka launcher. Makuta gripped his double-bladed staff.

No one moved for about a minute. Then Daisy slowly reached up and tapped Roodaka’s arm with her foreleg. “Milady,” she said in a low voice, “perhaps we should be getting back to Metru Nui anyway. The filming should be starting soon.”

Roodaka glanced at all the tense faces around her. “I suppose you’re right, hordeling,” she sighed, then released my neck. “Gather the girls, and my Nui-Kopen, and our things.”

There was a soft clattering as weapons were lowered. Everyone seemed relieved to stand down. As the spiders scurried off, the Viceroy of the Visorak swung her launcher and sent several Rahkshi and me sprawling out of her way. She approached the Master of Shadows, tipping her face up to his mask. “While I’m gone,” she said sweetly, “you can fix the jungle gym. And when I return, we can pick up where we left off with our tour. Come, walk me to the door.”

Makuta motioned to Shadrahk. “Get this mess cleaned up,” he ordered. “I’ll be right back.” He pivoted his hulking form and led Roodaka out of the room.

Invulnerahk did a sarcastic imitation of a cat’s howl as he stood up again. “Rowrr! What’s her problem? Her stupid spiders started it.”

“It doesn’t matter who started it,” snapped Shadrahk, scrambling to his feet. “We disobeyed a direct order from Master, and almost got Mistress into danger. Let’s be grateful he—or Roodaka, for that matter—didn’t blast us, and straighten this place up.” As the Rahkshi got to work, he leaned toward Vorahk and whispered, “Not that I didn’t enjoy the payback.”

The Rahkshi used various powers to set the pieces of the jungle gym in one pile and the broken rock in another. Meanwhile, Cyclorahk swirled all the dust and smoke out of the room. When order was restored, Shadrahk flew with me back to the office. I fell asleep immediately.

I woke to a heavy hand on my shoulder. Makuta was sitting next to me on the couch, back in his oversized Rahkshi form. “Darling, I’m so sorry the boys got out of line.”

“Whatever. At least Roodaka’s gone,” I mumbled sleepily. I pulled the blanket over my head.

He uncovered my head. “Do I detect a trace of jealousy?” he asked slyly.

“Uh, no, just self-preservation. She wants me dead, remember?”

“Right,” he said with obvious disappointment. “Well, I guess she’ll be gone for a while, because she’s got a lot of work to do. And so do I. She gave me a long list of tasks before she left. And I’ll do them all, because I just can’t seem to say no to her.”

“Well, I’d be happy to get out of your lair, and let you work on that list full time,” I volunteered.

“Don’t even talk like that,” he said quickly. “I need your help. I’m afraid I’m starting to slip in my resolve to resist her charms.”

“All the more reason to let me go,” I shrugged.

“Not at all! I know she just wants to use me. And with your sweet little self here to dote on, I’m a lot less likely to succumb to her wiles.” He reached toward me. “Come here, precious. Wrap your lovely arms around me, and make me forget all about her.”

I groaned and rolled over on the couch.

He tucked the blanket around my legs. “Well, I suppose I should let you rest, anyway. Roodaka is expecting to see considerable progress on the biography when she gets back. Say, it looks like Florahk has been down here decorating for you. He’s done a beautiful job.”

I was a little surprised, because I figured Makuta had told him to do it. But the Rahkshi certainly seemed to be enjoying their task of keeping me entertained, so Florahk might well have thought of it on his own. As soon as Makuta’s claws stopped touching me, I drifted off to sleep again.

## 11. Life in Mangaia

### **Toby Keith — I Wanna Talk About Me**

*We talk about your work how your boss is a jerk  
 We talk about your church and your head when it hurts  
 We talk about the troubles you've been having with your brother  
 About your daddy and your mother and your crazy ex-lover  
 We talk about your friends and the places that you've been  
 We talk about your skin and the dimples on your chin  
 The polish on your toes and the run in your hose  
 And God knows we're gonna talk about your clothes  
 You know talking about you makes me smile  
 But every once in awhile*

*I wanna talk about me  
 Wanna talk about I  
 Wanna talk about number one  
 Oh my me my  
 What I think, what I like, what I know, what I want, what I see  
 I like talking about you you you you, usually, but occasionally  
 I wanna talk about me  
 I wanna talk about me*

*We talk about your dreams and we talk about your schemes  
 Your high school team and your moisturizer creme  
 We talk about your nanna up in Muncie, Indiana  
 We talk about your grandma down in Alabama  
 We talk about your guys of every shape and size  
 The ones that you despise and the ones you idolize  
 We talk about your heart, about your brains and your smarts  
 And your medical charts and when you start  
 You know talking about you makes me grin  
 But every now and then*

*I wanna talk about me*

*You you you you you you you you youyouyouyouyou  
 I wanna talk about me*

When I woke, Makuta was sitting at the computer reading a BZPower page. He gave me a syrupy greeting and left to make some coffee.

I stretched and looked around, glad I didn't need a bodyguard anymore. There were probably cameras watching me from the shadows, so I didn't exactly feel alone, but at least no one in the lair was actively trying to kill me at the moment. I dove into the water for a brief swim. I closed my eyes and breathed in with my Kaukau Nuva, which was now functional. I opened them just in time to avoid hitting my head on the giant rock that now sat in the middle of the pool. So I assembled my axes into a staff and fired a blast of disintegration power at it through the water. The blast was muffled by the fluid, but the subsurface wave pushed me backwards several feet.

The rock crumbled and settled to the bottom, out of my way. I swam for a few more minutes to calm my jangled nerves after using my strange new power.

Then I got out and walked around sniffing the unusual blooms that were draped all over the office. Suddenly I heard a strange scraping sound in the hallway. I grabbed the axes off my back and crouched near the entrance.

“No, woman, no cry,” sang a voice in the passageway. “No, woman, no cry...”

“Come on in, Florahk,” I laughed.

The Rahkshi of Plant Control was dragging a large wooden palette behind him, laden with flowering vegetation. He stopped and looked around, his eyes wide with amazement. “You been dween de gardening, too, Mees?”

“Uh, actually, no,” I replied, gesturing at the vines behind me. “I thought *you* brought me all this.”

“Naa me! You wan whole heap more anyway?”

“Sure,” I smiled. “You can’t have too many flowers. Well, as long as there’s enough air and water and light for them. You’re the expert.”

He took the fronds from the palette and began to arrange them. He also moved some of the foliage that was already hanging around the room. “Mebbe was me bredren,” he shrugged, pointing at a wilted blossom. “Dey dun know how to keep dem fresh. Me mek it all irie.” He waved his staff at a few of the plants, causing them to send roots into the pool or tendrils around stones.

“Florahk, do you ever breed plants with curative properties?”

He paused to look at me. “Mos def, Mees. Me grow de healing herbs. Doc, he help me sometime. We mek med’ cine for de uncle. Mas say he feel bad.”

“Have you ever seen this uncle?” I asked.

“No, me jus’ grow de plants.” Humming his song, he returned to his decorating, leaving me to wonder once again whether this effort to help Mata Nui was sincere.

When he was finished, the office looked lush and beautiful. “Thank you, Florahk. This is incredible.”

“No, no, tenk *you*, Mees,” he replied, tucking a lily into the side of my mask. “You always upful. When you deyre, it mek Mas sweet so.”

I walked over to the Ussanui. “Shall we go get some breakfast?” I suggested.

“Le’s dweet,” he agreed, and we flew together to the dining room.

The Spirit of Destruction met me with a cup of coffee. “How lovely. My little flower is wearing a flower.” He winked at Florahk, then made a point of pulling out the chair at the end of the table for me.

The other Rahkshi were already eating granola bars around the giant stone tables. Some grumbling was going on, evidently about lack of meat. Makuta growled back at them. “Shut up, you ungrateful little rapscallions! It’s time you learned to straighten up and fly right. When my lieutenant and her Visorak return, you’d better treat them with respect. And you always have the option to forage up on deck, if you don’t like the free food.” He shook his head as he handed me a cereal bar. “The stove delivery people showed up again, but this time the stove they brought was the wrong size. An *apartment* stove, for crying out loud. A week in my kitchen, and it would be completely melted down.”

I glanced through the doorway at the twisted wreckage of the old stove. The massive commercial-grade stainless appliance was mangled beyond recognition, probably by blows from Pinky’s staff. There were a few chunks missing from the counter as well. Even the most mild-mannered of Makuta’s offspring was capable of extensive damage.

Entorahk shuffled in, rubbing his eyes. “What’s the matter with him?” I whispered to Shadrahk.

“He’s finally catching up on his sleep. He told me yesterday that Roodaka’s Nui-Kopen made him fetch all kinds of exotic plant material for her nest. Then she sent him all over the island looking for the choicest Nui-Rama to eat. And while he was gone, she decided she’d rather just eat the ants in his ant farm.”

“How big are these ants, anyway?” I wondered. Shadrahk held up his hands about two feet apart, and I flinched.

Then I heard loud grating and scratching sounds. I turned to see a swarm of housecat-sized biomechanical rodents well up into the dining room through a hole in the floor. The pests set their teeth against the table support, gnawing completely through one section before the Rahkshi could grab their cups off the table. The massive stone slab crashed to the floor, spraying chocolate milk everywhere. Xefonirahk jumped onto another table and began to whimper, but Tacirahk silenced him with his staff.

“Rahirahk!” snapped Makuta. “Get these vermin under control!”

Hissing apologetically, the Rahkshi of Rahi Control waved his staff, corralling the rats back into their hole.

“Son, you simply must figure out a better way to contain those little beasts,” scolded his master. But the magenta Rahkshi wasn’t listening. He was threatening Florahk with his staff. The grotesque black vine above the doorway had reached out and entangled three of the rats.

“Nuff wit’ de rats!” said the Plant Control Rahkshi angrily, striking back with his own staff. “Dey a cross an’ sufferation to de whole Rahkshi nation!”

“Come on, boys, you know the rules. Take it outside,” groaned Makuta.

They glanced up at him, then ducked out the doorway. Soon we could hear scuffling in the next room, followed by a crash. Makuta strode out after them. “‘Outside’ does not mean the living room! Now, pick up all those DVDs!” Then he poked his head back into the dining room. “Electrorahk and Fulgorahk, go help your knucklehead brother set up some electric fences for his rats. You can use one of those big submarine batteries Ogel left in the automotive workshop.” The two Rahkshi leaped up and ran out.

“Sorry, darling,” Makuta apologized. “You aren’t afraid of mice, I hope?”

I shrugged. “Not really. Just spiders.”

“Aren’t we all,” groaned Vorahk. “Say, Mistress, want to come jam with us? I’ve got some awesome new songs for the band to work on.”

Lerahk hissed at him, and the Rahkshi of Hunger frowned. “No way, dude. I don’t care if it’s called ‘Toxic.’ I’m not doing a Britney Spears song.” He slipped his iPod earbuds into the indentations in the side of his skull, switched it on, and started to bob his head. “Man, if I could play just one song like Tom Morello, I could die happy.”

“Your mistress is going to do some more work on my biography now,” said Makuta. “After that, you can have her for a little while.”

“Right on, Master,” nodded Vorahk. He danced out of the room, followed by his band mates. The other Rahkshi shuffled after them, hissing conversationally among themselves.

Makuta shot a blast of flame from his hand at each table and burned up the paper cups and wrappers. “Come along, dear.”

I climbed on my vehicle and followed him to the office, thinking about my writing assignment as we flew. He had given me a lot of detail about his first moments of life, but then he had skipped ahead quite a bit. If I could get him to keep doing this, it might actually be possible to get his favorite events written before Roodaka came back. And if he was really falling for her as he had suggested, maybe then he would let me go. I had no idea how long she would be gone, but I decided to encourage him to talk about the highlights first, in the hope he would let me omit the tedious events in between. I turned on the computer while he reclined on the couch and asked, “Now, where did we leave off?”

“You told me after you saved a small cat from a predator, you vowed to defend weaker creatures,” I replied, opening the document. “And then you were assigned to protect the Matoran. Maybe you could start by telling me about the first time you faced a threat to them.”

“Oh, right. Well, actually, I’d like to back up a bit, to the part where I was learning about my powers. I think that would make fascinating reading.”

Sighing to myself, I scrolled up to the first page of the document. “Who, exactly, is going to be reading this, anyway?”

“Anyone who wants to enjoy a triumphant legend of noble self-sacrifice, ingenious strategic planning, and glorious conquest.”

I buried my mask in my hands. “Is any of this stuff true, Makuta?”

“Of course it is! Are you ready, darling?”

I rested my fingertips on the keys. “All right, start talking.”

“Well, after I discovered darkness and fragmentation, I decided to try some more things. I stared at the matter around me and started noticing patterns. The force of gravity, for example, really intrigued me. After observing how objects dropped when released, I figured out a way to neutralize this effect. With a bit of practice, I learned to control it. I made immense boulders weightless, then lifted them up with my hands and let them fall. Then I tried to reverse gravity outright. I was able to make things fall upward. Oh, the confusion on the faces of the creatures I experimented on!” He finished with a devious laugh.

“Yes, I’ve seen Gravirahk do that, too.”

“He’s a chip off the old block,” Makuta remarked. “You know, the most challenging thing is to counteract gravity just enough to make an object barely float. Neutral buoyancy requires a very high measure of control. And at that point, its inertia is so low that you have to apply an infinitesimal amount of force to move it slowly. Otherwise, you either slam it into the ground or send it into orbit.”

He paused while I caught up. “In fact, control in general has been a recurring struggle for me, all my life,” he continued thoughtfully. “I love being in control. At the same time, I adore utter chaos. I’ve always been torn between the two. Watching as my will is accomplished through the actions of other creatures, whether by mind control, infection, or extreme fear, is deeply satisfying to me. Sometimes, it’s really difficult to gain control of another being’s will, as in the case of Nivawk, Nidhiki, and Krekka. Even after they were inside my armor, their very parts forming my limbs and wings, they resisted being subsumed. But when they finally yielded, the fulfillment was immense.”

I wondered whether I should bother to record this tangential rant. I decided to go ahead, because when Roodaka returned, the longer the document I could present, the better. And even though this didn’t really belong in a section about discovering his powers, I could always move it later.

“And then there’s you, beloved,” he continued. “I decided, early on, to bend your will by persuasion rather than force, because I wanted the kind of wholehearted loyalty I wasn’t getting from other beings through coercion. But as time went on, your stubbornness presented such an intriguing challenge that winning you over became an obsession for me. Now I find that even though I’m occasionally tempted to resort to my usual methods, I can’t bring myself to hurt you. Let me assure you, it’s strange for me to feel so powerless at the hands of such a delicate little creature. And it’s even stranger for me to *like* it. But such is the unfathomable mystery of love.”

I had stopped typing. I was certain Roodaka wouldn’t enjoy reading this. I glanced over at him, and he was sitting up on the sofa, staring at me intently. “Uh, and what about the chaos, then?”

“Ah, the chaos,” he murmured. “It’s so much more than simply the lack of order to me. The feeling of being on the verge of losing control—cruising along too fast, or too close to something dangerous—has always given me euphoria. But actually letting go, now... oh, the joy of mayhem, the thrill of turmoil! The release of the bonds that hold everything in a prison of order is the ultimate triumph of entropy. Because the cosmos will end in chaos, my dear. As a Spirit of Destruction, I’m destined to win, because I have the Second Law of Thermodynamics on my side.”

My brow furrowed as I finished transcribing his diatribe. “Just because the world will end someday doesn’t mean you will have won, Makuta.”

“I will have won,” he rejoined, “because it will end my way. It will end at the time of my choosing, after I have tasted all the universe has to offer and become weary of it. Then I’ll unleash a glorious cataclysm of turbulent fire that will make the Big Bang look like a cherry bomb.”

“I certainly hope I’m not around to see *that*,” I muttered.

“Oh, you will be,” he smiled slyly. “Because of my power to share my life force, you’ll be alive until the end. I’ll be holding you in my arms when I pull the trigger. We’ll perish together in the ultimate cosmic detonation.”

“What if you get destroyed before the world ends?” I countered.

“That won’t happen. I can’t be destroyed, for I am nothing, remember?”

A vision of him as a swirling void of hungry darkness, with two blazing eyes at its center, flashed across my mind. “Uh, yeah,” I whispered. Was he now telling me he was immortal after all?

“In fact,” he went on, “we should do an appendix for the story before we go back to the gravity power. ‘Appendix 1: Why Makuta Exists.’ Because my existence is just as necessary for the balance of the universe as my brother’s is. There must be destruction if there is to be creation. There must be darkness if there is to be light.”

I started an appendix. For several hours he proceeded to pontificate about the necessity of his being, citing physical laws, Plato, Confucius, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Oscar Wilde. “So, my love, you see why I must persist in my efforts to impose my will on the universe,” he concluded, folding his tarnished silver hands behind his head. “It’s for the good of everyone.”

Bleary-eyed from staring at the screen so long, I squinted at him. “Are we done with this part, then?”

The Master of Shadows grinned. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve been rambling for quite a while, haven’t I? Your poor little fingers!” He stood up and walked toward to my chair. “Let me rub your tired shoulders.”

I slowly backed the chair away from him on its wheels. “No, thanks, Makuta. But I would like to take a break for a while. And don’t you have to build some stuff for Roodaka, anyway?”

He stopped in his tracks. “You’re right! Thanks for reminding me, sweetheart.” Then he looked up and called out, “Come on in, Invulnerahk.”

A few seconds later the gray Rahkshi ambled in, swinging his staff. “Say, Mistress, nice place you have here! Uh, Master—”

“Oh, dollface,” interrupted Makuta, “don’t let me forget to tell you about how I acquired my keen powers of observation. I’ve got X-ray vision, of course, and a ranging telescopic lens built into one eye. And I’ve got that extra set of eyes in the back of my head. Plus, if you want to count external sources, my Rahkshi, my kraata, my infected Rahi, and my camera network are always gathering information and passing it along. It’s pretty hard to sneak up on me.”

Invulnerahk cleared his throat. “You got that right, Master. So, are we going to eat tonight? Because everyone is getting really hungry.”

“Is it that late already, son? My, how time flies when you’re having fun!” He turned to me and rolled his eyes. “Feeding them is getting to be quite a chore. I used to order take-out food and just wipe the deliverymen’s memories, but the managers at my favorite places were beginning to wonder why so much meat and produce was missing from their refrigerators, and articles were popping up in the newspaper about it. So I had to start paying for the food. Since I can’t afford forty-two Happy Meals every night, I’ve been having a restaurant supply company truck come out once a week and stock my freezer with frozen dinners. That was working great, until I lost my oven.”

“Well, Master, you have the power to torch stuff. Couldn’t you just heat the food yourself?”

“I could,” he replied, “but I’ve really got to get started on that bowling alley for the Boggarak. Say, I have an idea. I’ll get Bahka to do it! He’s got the power of fire.”

“Sweet! I’ll go tell the guys.” Invulnerahk skipped out of the office.

“Well, precious, if you want to go listen to Rahkous while I get Bahka started, they’re probably in the music room. The Ussanui kraata will know where that is.” Makuta leaned over and squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

As I saved my document, I considered the progress we had made. In a whole day of writing, we had covered the acquisition of one of Makuta’s powers. He had thirty-nine more kraata powers, plus six elemental powers and a handful of miscellaneous things such as mind control, amnesia, and X-ray vision. And there were probably others I had never even heard of before. Listening to live music, even if it was a little too boisterous for my taste, sounded like a good way to get my mind off this miserable task. I quickly checked the BZPower headlines and shut down the computer. Then I climbed on my ride and instructed it where to fly.

## 12. Particle Interactions

### Stone Temple Pilots — Creep

Forward yesterday  
 Makes me wanna stay  
 What they said was real  
 Makes me wanna steal  
 Livin' under house  
 Guess I'm livin', I'm a mouse  
 All's I gots is time  
 Got no meaning, just a rhyme

Take time with a wounded hand  
 'Cause it likes to heal  
 Take time with a wounded hand  
 'Cause I like to steal  
 Take time with a wounded hand  
 'Cause it likes to heal, I like to steal

I'm half the man I used to be  
 This I feel as the dawn  
 It fades to gray  
 Well, I'm half the man I used to be  
 This I feel as the dawn  
 It fades to gray  
 Well, I'm half the man I used to be  
 This I feel as the dawn  
 It fades to gray  
 Well, I'm half the man I used to be, half the man I used to be

Feelin' uninspired  
 Think I'll start a fire  
 Everybody run  
 Bobby's got a gun  
 Think you're kinda neat  
 Then she tells me I'm a creep  
 Friends don't mean a thing  
 Guess I'll leave it up to me

### Seether & Amy Lee — Broken

I wanted you to know I love the way you laugh  
 I wanna hold you high and steal your pain away  
 I keep your photograph and I know it serves me well  
 I wanna hold you high and steal your pain

'Cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome  
 And I don't feel right when you're gone away  
 You've gone away, you don't feel me, anymore

The worst is over now and we can breathe again  
 I wanna hold you high, you steal my pain away

*There's so much left to learn, and no one left to fight  
I wanna hold you high and steal your pain*

*'Cause I'm broken when I'm open  
And I don't feel like I am strong enough  
'Cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome  
And I don't feel right when you're gone away  
You've gone away  
You don't feel me here anymore*

On the way to the music room, the Ussanui zoomed past the kitchen. I saw Bahka standing next to a stack of frozen pizza boxes, wisps of smoke rising from his snout. The huge dragon was turning a box over and over in his hands as if he was trying to make sense of it. Several impatient Rahkshi were milling around in the dining room. A few others were playing a game of “MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf” on the Xbox, and I could see some more of them wrestling in the weapons room. I decided the distant blasts I heard were probably Makuta roughing out the bowling alley for Roodaka’s spiders.

The music room was easy to find because the sound could be heard for quite a distance. There was a recording booth at the one end of long cavern. On the stage at the other end, the Rahkshi band was playing “Creep” by the Stone Temple Pilots, with Accurahk on acoustic guitar instead of his usual keyboard. Musical equipment was stacked against one wall, including keyboards, guitars, music stands, and percussion instruments. Invulnerahk was sitting in one of the folding chairs facing the stage. I sat down next to him.

“Hi, Mistress! The band is really rocking tonight,” he shouted over the noise.

When they finished the song, Vorahk said, “Yo, Mistress! I guess Master finally cut you loose, huh?”

I laughed. “Yeah. You’re sounding good.”

“Thanks! It took a lot of work, but we’re finally starting to click as a band.” Vorahk gestured at the others. Accurahk was leaning over his guitar, completely absorbed with minute adjustments to the tuning. Gravirahk was pretending to whack Densirahk over the head with his electric bass in slow motion, and the Density Control Rahkshi was theatrically blocking the blow with his drumsticks. Sonirahk was arranging the sliders on the sound board into a smiley face. “The only problem is, in that last song, the vocals in the chorus overlap, and there’s only one of me.”

“I’ll sing!” volunteered Invulnerahk, jumping out of his seat.

“Sorry, dude, we’ve been down that road before,” replied the black Rahkshi. “And we drove right off into the ditch.”

“Aww, man.” Invulnerahk sat down again.

“Sing,” warbled a hauntingly sweet voice from the shadows.

Vorahk looked up. “Wicked awesome! Ahkwa’s here!”

A shimmering, semi-transparent bipedal creature drifted across the room toward the stage, leaving a trail of wetness behind her. Vorahk retrieved an extra microphone, set its stand next to his own, and plugged it in. The strange figure seemed to flow up onto the platform without moving her legs.

I leaned toward Invulnerahk. “She looks like she’s made of water.”

“She is,” he whispered. “Isn’t she cool? Shadrahk told me Master threw a cup of water into the energized protodermis pool. He was trying to make himself a girlfriend.” Then he quickly cleared his throat. “Of course, that was way before he met you.”

“Let’s do that Seether song, now that she’s here,” Vorahk said to the band. He handed Ahkwa a sheet of paper. It immediately became soaking wet and sagged between her hands. “Here are the lyrics. You come in here, and then we sing this part together,” he explained, pointing.

“Lyrics,” she repeated.

The band started to play “Broken,” and Vorahk sang the first verse and chorus. Then the water elemental opened her mouth, and the most beautiful sound I had ever heard came out. It was clear, resonant, and strong, with a trill at the end of each phrase, like a voice singing underwater. But as she finished the verse, she leaned too close to the microphone, and a bright arc of electricity surged between her lips and the metal. A horrible screech came from the speakers. Sonirahk leaped up and hit a few switches on the sound board to quell the noise.

The musicians glanced at each other, shrugged, and resumed the song. Vorahk started the chorus with Ahkwa harmonizing an octave and a third above him. I listened, astonished, to the amazing blend of the Rahkshi’s gruff baritone and the water creature’s melodic soprano. Soaring into the highest note, she morphed into a fountain and sent a spray of water all over the stage. With a loud pop and buzz, the equipment shorted out, and the electric instruments fell silent, leaving only the sound of the acoustic guitar and drums. One of the amplifiers exploded into flames. Sonirahk immediately yanked a big plug out of the wall.

The smell of melted plastic filled the air. Invulnerahk jumped up and smothered the burning amp with a tarp. Densirahk dropped his drumsticks in exasperation. Accurahk grabbed a towel and wiped off his guitar.

The water being collapsed into a puddle and poured off the stage. Vorahk unstrapped his guitar and followed her. “Well, thanks for singing with us, Ahkwa.”

She reformed herself into a humanoid and put her arms around him. Then she turned and floated away, leaving the wet Rahkshi to stare after her. “Dang! There goes another amp.”

“I’m on it.” Invulnerahk opened a closet door and took an amplifier off the top of a tall stack.

“She’s amazing,” I remarked. I used my water powers to dry off the instruments.

“She’s our ADDiva.” Vorahk rolled his eyes. “She can really belt out the tunes, but she’s awfully hard on the equipment. We’ve never actually made it through a whole song with her.”

“Does she sing with you often?” I asked.

“Nope. I think she usually hangs out in a lake somewhere up on the island. She just drops in once in a while to blow our minds.” He spun around and glared at Invulnerahk. “Hands off, man! I cannot guarantee your safety if you touch the ‘Pod.’”

Invulnerahk quickly put down the portable music player.

I smiled. “Well, at least you have some spare amps. You did sound terrific together on that last song.”

“Yeah, that one was Master’s idea, and he didn’t have to tell me twice. I really dig that song. Say, Mistress, you could sing it with us next time! And then we could perform it for Master. I bet he’d like that.”

“Thanks, Vorahk, but I don’t have a very good voice.”

“Well, vocally, that’s a pretty demanding song. But we could learn to play a different one for you to sing. Just name one.”

I thought for a moment. “Do you know any songs by the Police? Like, perhaps, ‘If You Love Somebody, Set Them Free’?”

Vorahk squeezed his eyes shut. “Oh, Mistress, you’re funny! But seriously, if you think of one, just let us know. What do you say we go check on dinner now? I’m so hungry I could eat a Kikanalo.”

We flew to the dining room. As we approached, I could smell smoke. A giant plume of soot billowed into our faces as we landed in the living room. “I’ll go scope it out,” said the Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability. He disappeared into the cloud. Then he came back out. “Mistress, we could use some water in here.”

I stood in the doorway and randomly sprayed water until the air cleared. A dripping Bahka stood with his hands on his hips next to a pile of soggy, charred pizza boxes.

I spoke cautiously to the massive reptile. “I’m sorry I got you wet, Bahka. But next time you might want to take the pizzas out of the boxes first.”

“And take off the plastic, too, dude,” added Invulnerahk, making a face.

“Oh, great,” said Makuta’s voice from right behind me. “Well, we’ve got some big cans of Chicken à la King in the storeroom. Vorahk and Gravirahk, go get them. Bahka, ever use a can opener before?”

The dragon snorted and shook his head. He kicked the smoking boxes as he followed Makuta to the counter.

Invulnerahk, Densirahk, Sonirahk, and I threw away the boxes and got out the soup bowls. The rest of the Rahkshi wandered in a few at a time, growling and hissing impatiently. About half an hour later, we were all finally lined up to be served. Bahka ladled some whitish, chunky substance onto each dish from a giant steaming pot.

“Gruel. Ask for it by name,” quipped Vorahk as he sat down.

Suddenly Bahka lunged forward, waving the serving spoon menacingly at the black Rahkshi and exhaling dark smoke from his flaring nostrils. Vorahk leaped up onto the bench, brandishing his staff. “Bring it on, big guy!”

Shadrahk grabbed his brother by the elbow and pulled him back down. “It’s never a good idea to tick off the mess cook,” he warned in a low voice.

Therahk hissed quietly, and Vorahk flinched. “Ugh! Do you always have to get all medical on us, Doc?” Then the Rahkshi of Hunger turned and smiled at Bahka. “Sorry, man,” he blinked. “It’s all good.”

Frowning, the enormous creature shook his head. He scooped another spoonful of the dripping slop for the next customer.

Since one of the tables had been wrecked by the stone rats, the Rahkshi had to crowd together. There was a lot of jostling and commotion, but finally everyone was fed and on their way to bed, including me.

Makuta caught my arm as I started to climb onto the Ussanui. “Sweetheart, there’s no reason you have to go all the way down to your office to sleep. You can stay up here.”

I shook my head. “That’s all right. I feel safer down there. I get the feeling company might show up again at any moment.”

“It’s the calm before the swarm,” Shadrahk muttered.

The Spirit of Destruction smiled. “I doubt if Roodaka will be back anytime soon. She’s got a pretty big role. But whatever makes you happy, darling. I’ll go tuck you in down there before I go get started on the ice skating rink.”

“She certainly gave you a lot to do,” I remarked.

“If you want my honest opinion,” he sighed, “I don’t think she really cares about any of it. She just wants to keep me busy, so I won’t have any time to spend with you. But I work faster than she thinks.” He flew after me down the tunnel.

The smell of flowers greeted us. I parked the Ussanui and lay down on the couch. Makuta covered me with the blanket, and then he was gone.

My thoughts wandered to the first set of plants in the office. If neither Florahk nor Makuta had brought them, then who was it? Was it one of the other Rahkshi, as the Rahkshi of Plant Control had suggested? Or was it Roodaka and her spiders? This thought made me sit up with alarm. Perhaps I was surrounded by poisonous specimens, stolen from Florahk’s garden, waiting for a chance to entwine me in their tendrils and strangle me in my sleep! My eyes darted fearfully around the cavern. The blossoms seemed like sinister faces, watching me in the deep gloom.

But wouldn’t Florahk have torn out any malicious plants when he arranged his own? From what I could tell, he wasn’t trying to kill me. However, he could, at the request of his master, be trying to drug me into submission! But this seemed unlikely, given Makuta’s refusal to use his powers to override my will. Still, the Master of Shadows was an accomplished liar. Or maybe it was Shadrahk, in yet another attempt to convince me of the sincerity of his master’s love.

I sat up and asked the darkness, “Shadrahk?”

He stepped forward. “Yes, Mistress?”

“Did you put the first bunch of flowers in here?”

“No,” he replied. “I thought about it, but I figured it was more logical to wait for the Plant Control Rahkshi to do it.”

This seemed honest enough. Shadrahk had never knowingly lied to me, as far as I knew. Maybe it was Pinky. But Pinky usually stuck around to claim a hug after doing something nice. I gave up and went to sleep.

I dreamed Makuta and I were climbing a mountain together. The rocks gnashed angrily at my ankles as I groped for a handhold on the stone made slippery by the constant drizzle of acid rain. Makuta looked down from the crag above. “Look out, precious!” he warned. I glanced down and saw fangs of stone close around my foot. I struggled and hacked at them with my axe, but to no avail.

Makuta extended his arm down the side of the cliff. His hand transformed into a Panrahk staff end and struck the teeth. They shattered instantly. The hand reformed, several times its usual size, and scooped me up, the two thumbs forming a railing to keep me from falling out.

I looked up, and he was smiling kindly at me. But then his fingers started to grow upward, the claws curving around me and meeting at the top to form a jointed cage. His arm folded like a crane until my prison was hanging in front of his grinning Kraahkan.

I sat up on the couch, wide awake. Makuta was sitting at the other end, holding a book of Edgar Allen Poe stories. “You’ve had another nightmare, darling?”

I glared at him.

“Well, you should know that I’ll always be here to protect you. It’s just your over-active imagination that keeps adding the scary endings.”

At breakfast, Magnerahk gave me a necklace made of silvery spheres of protodermis with no fasteners. The beads were held together by magnetic force. I thanked him as he put it around my neck and it stuck to my armor. I made a mental note to inspect it as soon as I left the dining room to see if it contained a transmitter, camera, or microphone.

Between bites of Lucky Charms, Invulnerahk described the golf game he and his friends were planning to play up on the island. “We tee off from the top of Mount Ihu, and then we cruise down through the badland fairways of Onu-Wahi. Crossing Po-Koro is really gritty, with all those sand traps. Then we have a tough slog through the water hazards of Ga-Wahi and the swamps of Le-Wahi. The winner is the first one to sink a putt into the Mangai volcano.”

“That certainly sounds challenging,” I commented.

“It’s always Adaptarahk, Pyrarahk, and Frigirahk and me. Frigirahk hits the best drive every time, because he’s the only one not freezing his kraata tail off. Adaptarahk can fake the cold resistance pretty well, too, though. Then it’s just a matter of who plays the best golf for a while, and who gets lucky avoiding stuff like a Muaka eating the ball. At the end, Pyrarahk always rules at putting, because the rest of us are so dizzy from the heat and magma fumes that we’re just smacking the ball all over the place. Well, except for Adaptarahk. He’s pretty good in the heat, too.”

“Does Adaptarahk always win?”

“Uhh... actually, yeah, he does,” said Invulnerahk thoughtfully. “I guess that’s because he’s got the power of Accuracy, too. But golf rocks, anyway! And there’s always second place to fight for.”

“Well, that’s a good attitude,” I smiled.

“Wait a minute... I should probably stop betting him my dessert every night,” said the Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability thoughtfully. “Thanks for helping me figure that out, Mistress.”

Adaptarahk snickered.

Makuta shook his head. “They can’t all be honor students, I suppose. You’re certainly welcome to go with them sometime, my dove, but right now we’ve got to do a little work on the biography.”

I groaned and took my dishes to the sink. Then Florahk stepped in front of me, holding something behind his back. He presented a long-stemmed blue flower. I leaned over to accept it and realized it was shaped exactly like a Kaukau Nuva. “How sweet! Thank you!” I exclaimed.

Florahk nodded. “De flower naa half so sweet as you, Mees.”

Carrying the flower, I walked to the Ussanui, followed by Makuta. As I passed his desk, I was startled to see a large vase burgeoning with Kaukau flowers. He paused to bury his mask in them. “Aren’t they wonderful?” he remarked. “They have the fresh scent of a mountain stream. Florahk is such a talented young fellow. He’s turning into the Gregor Mendel of Mangaia.”

I shivered and climbed onto my vehicle. Soon I was sitting at the computer, waiting for more dictation from my insane captor. I studied the amazingly accurate ridges of the Kaukau flower, set in a vase on the desk, while he got comfortable on the couch.

He resumed with a lengthy, tedious description of his discovery of density control, comparing it to the gravity power he mastered previously. “They’re both geometrodynamics forces,” he mused. “My elasticity power is actually another manifestation of the density power. And I wield a large variety of electrodynamic powers—electricity, chain lightning, and magnetism fall into that category. The way I create a vacuum or an illusion is really derived from them, too.”

I nodded and kept typing, even though it was becoming obvious to me this task would never really buy me my freedom, with his endless digressing and philosophizing. But I went along with the charade, for lack of a better idea. “The thermodynamic powers are really a subset of those,” he continued. “Adding or removing heat. One of the most energy-intensive things I do is to change the phase of a substance. Making ice from water, or water from steam, or lava from solid rock takes a lot of work. Remember when you said you would swear your loyalty to me when Ta-Wahi freezes over? Well, I doubt you had even an inkling of the huge quantity of heat transfer that would involve. I’ve done a few calculations, you see, and—”

“Makuta,” I interrupted, “can we get back to your story now?”

“Of course, my love. But first, I think we should make a chart documenting all my powers. Call it ‘Appendix II: Makuta’s Powers.’ Start out with the four fundamental particle interactions for headings: Chromodynamics, Electrodynamics, Flavordynamics, and Geometrodynamics, and then we’ll sort all the powers into them.” He stood up and walked behind my chair. “You can set up an Excel spreadsheet if you prefer.”

Panicking, I leaned on the backspace key, but it was too late. Over my shoulder, he saw what I had just typed: “asdfg hjkl; asdfg hjkl; asdfg hjkl; asdfg hjkl;”

His eyes turned red. “How dare you mock me! I pour out my heart and soul to you, and you have the nerve to type gibberish!”

I shrank away from him. “I’m sorry, Makuta. I was... I was getting really discouraged,” I said in a tiny voice. “We don’t seem to be moving forward with your biography.”

He loomed over me, scowling at the monitor, and for a few seconds I wondered which of the four fundamental particle interactions he would be using to snuff out my miserable little life. But then he pointed at the screen. “‘Nietzsche’ has a z in it, darling. Aren’t you using the spell checker? Wait a minute... you’re not even using MSWord! What is this, WordPad?”

“That’s all I could find,” I breathed.

“Well,” he laughed. “I was in such a hurry to go get you that I forgot to load a real word processor onto your computer! I’ll install it from the server right now.”

I got up and let him take the chair. He opened a network connection window and typed a password. “I suppose I have been rather hard on you lately,” he conceded. “I can get a bit long-winded at times. It’s just so wonderful having you listen to my story. No one has ever done that before.”

I resisted making a catty remark about being a captive audience. Instead, I said quietly, “Well, the scientific stuff is actually pretty interesting to me. But it’s not really part of your life story. Besides, in my experience, readers like action. Maybe you could write up the ancillary material yourself, after I’m done with your memoir.”

He nodded. “Certainly, sweetheart. The particle physics treatise can wait until later. I’ve been so insensitive, prattling on about my life while neglecting the most important thing in it! We should take a break and just enjoy each other’s company for a little while.”

“Uh, I’m not feeling neglected, Makuta. I just want to keep moving forward on the biography.”

As I watched the installation progress bar move across the computer screen, I felt pointed fingers creep around my waist. “While the application is downloading onto your hard drive, why don’t you download yourself onto me?” He pulled me onto his knees.

I sprang up, crashing into a bookshelf. It collapsed in splinters onto the floor, smashing a vase and scattering books everywhere.

“Daisy, your sense of direction never fails to amaze me. This is definitely it,” remarked a cool female voice from the passageway. Roodaka emerged, her Visorak bodyguard at her heels, and stared at me. “My, what a clumsy creature.”

Standing with my arms full of books, I froze. Makuta cleared his throat. “Roodaka.”

“Makuta.” The Viceroy of the Visorak strolled over to the pool and plucked a water lily. “I thought I might find you down here in your love nest.”

“Office,” I corrected her. Then I added, “Milady.”

Roodaka crushed the lily in her hand.

“Did the filming go well?” asked Makuta quickly, walking up to her.

“Did it ever! I got to watch the Toa Metru get webbed and mutated.” She tipped her head back, and a peal of wicked laughter rang out. “It was so much fun watching the dismay on their twisted, gruesome new faces. Even though they had been through it once before, they were still horrified to see themselves that way.”

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“It was absolutely delightful, except for the very end, when I got the news that the Rahaga were responsible for their rescue. Then I got to throw a temper tantrum.” She touched the tips of her claws together. Behind her, Daisy shivered at the memory.

“You can raise a ruckus like no one else,” said Makuta with an uneasy smile. “So, would you like to see the facilities you asked me to construct?”

“You actually built all those things? Oh, you shouldn’t have!” Roodaka exclaimed, flipping her headpiece with her hand. “I didn’t mean to make you work so hard. I was just daydreaming about a place I could relax with my girls. But since you’ve gone ahead and done it...”

“I’ve finished everything except for the basketball court. I just didn’t have time to get to that one.”

“What a pity. That’s their favorite sport, besides M&D,” she sighed.

Makuta rolled his eyes. “Well, would you like to see the bowling alley and the ice rink, anyway?”

“Certainly,” she smiled. “Galitea can stay here to clean up her mess.”

“They both adjoin the spa. Since Daisy is such a good navigator, let’s let her lead the way,” suggested the Master of Shadows.

“Yes, my lord,” Daisy nodded. She turned and left the office. Roodaka gave Makuta a teasing glance, then turned to saunter after her spider, her headpiece swinging slowly as she went.

The Master of Shadows waited until she was out of sight. Then he put his arms around me and whispered, “That was such a close call, beloved! I’m still riding the adrenaline rush. Are you?”

“Powers of observation, my eye!” I hissed, dropping the books and pushing against his chest.

“A momentary lapse, my angel. I was busy observing something ever so much more interesting,” he purred.

Shadrahk burst in, pulling a very drowsy Lerahk by the arm. “I’m sorry, Master. The Lorahek that were supposed to be guarding the gate sneaked into the kitchen to hover over the side of beef Bahka was barbecuing. And Lerahk was assigned to guard the office, but I found him snoring in the hallway. I don’t know what put him to sleep.”

“I think I have an idea,” I muttered, remembering Makuta’s wearisome rant about his powers.

“Are you coming, Makuta?” called Roodaka shrilly.

“Don’t worry about it,” Makuta reassured Shadrahk. “No harm done. Let’s go show our guest her new sports complex.”

An explosion suddenly rocked the lair. I ran to the doorway and looked out. “Your Visorak!” exclaimed Makuta. “The Rahkshi must have picked another fight with them. Hurry, let’s go save them!”

Roodaka turned around with a sly grin. “This time they won’t need saving.”

## 13. The Girls Get Reinforcements

### 311 — Love Song

*Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am home again  
Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am whole again*

*Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am young again  
Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am fun again*

*However far away, I will always love you  
However long I stay, I will always love you  
Whatever words I say, I will always love you  
I will always love you*

*Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am free again  
Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am clean again*

*However far away, I will always love you  
However long I stay, I will always love you  
Whatever words I say, I will always love you  
I will always love you*

The scene in the living room was chaotic. Visorak of different colors were launching spinners in all directions as the Rahkshi fired destructive blasts at them. Casualties on both sides were strewn all over the ground. Vacuurahk and Gravirahk were trapped in a cage of electrical energy next to the couch. Behind the home theater cabinet, a pile of spiders lay motionless next to Somnorahk and Statirahk, who were clanking their staffs together. A Keelerak whirled through the air like a living power saw at Magnerahk, until he was repelled by magnetic force and flew spinning into a group of Boggarak, who chattered with dismay. Gnarled vines entangled three of the Oonorak. Plasmarahk aimed his staff at a Roparak on the ceiling just above my head. The brown spider dodged, seeming to vanish into the stone before the shot hit, and magma splattered on the floor in front of me. I jumped back in alarm.

Makuta's shout reverberated above the din. "STOP!"

The hostilities ceased, leaving only the sound of a few falling rocks. Then there was silence.

Makuta frowned at Roodaka. "How many spiders did you bring along this time?"

"Just enough to square off against your oversized velociraptors," she replied curtly. "Seven of each of the six breeds."

“Oh, for crying out loud,” growled the Master of Shadows. “Forty-two more mouths—er, sets of mandibles—to feed.”

“If you can’t control your belligerent offspring,” she shot back, “then you can’t blame me for wanting to provide safety in numbers for my girls.”

He gestured at Therahk, who was restoring health to the wounded Rahkshi with his staff. “Look at him, wasting his energies on this pointless infighting when I’ve got much more important projects for him to be working on.” When the black and brown Rahkshi raised his head, Makuta grumbled, “Go ahead and heal the Visorak as well.”

“Aww, you’re tender-hearted underneath that tough armor, after all,” Roodaka smiled sweetly, tapping his chest with her forefinger. “Let’s resume our tour of Makuta Island while the minions clean up the debris. Change into your big, handsome form again, and take me on a voyage I’ll never forget!” She beckoned to her Nui-Kopen, who soared over the rubble to her mistress.

“I really don’t feel much like traveling with all these quarrelsome creatures loose in my lair,” muttered Makuta. “I don’t trust them not to get into another fight.”

“If they know what’s good for them,” replied Roodaka, activating a mutation spinner, “they’ll behave like little angels while we’re gone.”

The Visorak immediately recoiled in fear. The Rahkshi looked at each other in puzzlement. Then Shadrahk whispered to Vorahk, who whispered to Invulnerahk, who whispered to Adaptarahk, who hissed to Frigirahk, and so on, until the information had rippled through the entire group. Quietly, the Rahkshi backed away from Roodaka.

“Well, all right, then. Let’s go,” Makuta agreed. He turned to the crowd of Visorak and Rahkshi. “When we return, I expect to find everything cleaned up.”

“I’ll make certain of it, Master,” Shadrahk assured him.

“Understood, my lord,” added Daisy.

Makuta winked at me, and I heard his words inside my head. “Shadrahk will keep you safe. Goodbye, beloved.” He squeezed his eyes into narrow red slits and clenched his fists. Darkness blotted out the already dim light of the cavern as he morphed into his giant winged form.

When they were gone, the Rahkshi of Darkness addressed Vorahk sternly. “What exactly happened here, Sergeant?”

“They ambushed us. We didn’t do a thing. We were just minding our own business, and suddenly they were all over us.”

Shadrahk turned to scowl at the new arrivals. “We’d rather not have your kind of help. You can go stay in the facilities Master built for you while we get the living room tidied up. Daisy knows the way.”

The Rahkshi hissed resentfully. Therahk finished curing the last Suukorak, and he scrambled to join his brothers and sisters, gathered together on one side of the living room. Daisy led them toward a passageway.

“Vorahk, take a detachment of troops to make sure they get there without incident,” said Shadrahk in a low voice.

“Yes, General,” said Vorahk. “Hey, hold up a sec. Who jacked my ‘Pod?”

The Rahkshi shook their heads as he scanned the crowd. “It wasn’t me,” protested Invulnerahk. “You’d hurt me.”

Vorahk rolled his eyes. “Like that’s possible.” Then he turned to look at the Visorak filing out the door. One of the Keelerak was dancing back and forth, the white cord of an iPod standing out against his green carapace.

Vorahk’s red-orange eyes narrowed. “This means war,” he hissed. He leaped into the crowd of spiders, pinned the thief to the floor with his staff, and yanked the electronic device off his shell.

Retaliation was almost instantaneous. A Vohtarak sprang onto Vorahk, and they grappled for a few seconds before the spider collapsed, robbed of his strength. But an Oonorak had readied a numbness spinner, and Vorahk got a taste of his own medicine. He slumped on top of his red foe.

Invulnerahk raised his staff and charged into the horde, shouting, “Remember the Alamo!”

As the Rahkshi aimed their staffs and the Visorak readied their spinners, Shadrahk shouted, “Stop this immediately! That’s an order!” Across the room, Daisy tried to dissuade the spiders as well. But their voices were lost in the buzz of Rhotuka and the thunder of detonations. Shadrahk finally groaned and fired a blast of dark energy at a Roparak who was about to pounce on him.

As he compelled thorny vines to spout from the floor and snag a Suukorak’s leg, Florahk called out, “Gray brudder, what do de Alamo have to do wit dees?”

“Aw, man, you’ve forgotten already!” Invulnerahk replied, colliding with a Vohtarak on a berserker charge. Both quasi-invulnerable creatures merely bounced backwards and landed on their backs. “Actually, I don’t remember, either, but they always yell stuff like that in the movies to inspire the troops.”

The battle raged even more fiercely than it had when we had come in. Rocks exploded from the ceiling as Panrahk fired at the arachnids scuttling around overhead. Guurahk sliced a slab of stone off one wall and let it fall onto a group of Boggarak. Rahkshi collapsed all around, paralyzed. A badly aimed Suukorak spinner caused the television to explode in a shower of

sparks. Visorak floated off the ground, twisting helplessly in zero gravity, and fought against each other, goaded by Kurahk's anger power.

No one was shooting at me, fortunately, but I knew Roodaka would count me among the troublemakers. I ducked into the kitchen to avoid the flying debris and think about what to do. I slammed headlong into Bahka, who was standing with his arms crossed, a knife in one hand and a large fork in the other.

"Crazy kids," I smiled weakly.

The four-legged dragon snorted. He turned back to his cooking. The damaged stove had been dragged to a corner of the kitchen and melted into scrap metal. In its place was an entire side of beef on a spit over a bed of glowing coals. The pleasing aroma of roasting meat filled the air. "No wonder the Lorahk got distracted by your cooking," I remarked. "It smells wonderful in here!"

Bahka probed the meat for doneness, then slowly rotated the spit a half turn. He spat some flames onto the scorched surface.

Suddenly I had an idea. I waited until the dragon returned to the doorway to watch the fight, and then I slipped on my Great Mask of Concealment. I used my axe to chop off a large chunk of beef. Then I held my breath and slipped past Bahka, taking care to avoid the knife, fork, and fiery breath.

I sprinted down the corridor to the energized protodermis chamber. Walking rapidly around the pool of shimmering liquid, I approached the large hole in the wall next to the Hau-shaped gate to the silver sea. I peered cautiously through the opening. The Lorahk were flying in circles on the other side. In the dim starlight I could see pontoons of webbing, linked with green strands, floating on the liquid protodermis. The Visorak must have used them to cross over from Metru Nui. They extended as far as I could see toward the faint line on the horizon that I recognized as the City of Legends. I had flown there on the Ussanui on a previous adventure with Makuta and Krahka.

I caught my breath. This was ideal! Where the pontoons were close together, I could leap from one to the next, and where they were farther apart, I could swim, hanging onto one to rest when necessary.

I whistled and flung the meat through the hole. With a loud screech, the winged serpents swooped on it, snarling and tugging it back and forth between them. I dashed across the beach and jumped onto the first pontoon. It swayed slightly, but it was fairly stable. Elated, I sprang onto the next one.

Soon I was several hundred yards out to sea. Then I heard the hum of Rahkshi flight. I turned to see what looked like Shadrahk in pursuit. I dove into the dark liquid, activated my Kaukau Nuva, and slid my axes onto my feet. It took a few seconds to become accustomed to breathing liquid

protodermis instead of water, but soon I was cruising rapidly below the surface, following the line of pontoons.

I continued this way for quite some time. To my surprise, the darkness Rahkshi made no attempt to recapture me. Perhaps he had returned to get someone with powers better suited to catching underwater prey. I shivered as I thought of the Boggarak, with their spinners that would cause a target to swell up and float to the surface. Then, ahead of me in the murky fluid, I saw a wall. I reached out and touched stone. Was it possible I had already crossed the silver sea? I remembered it being much, much wider when I had flown across it before. This time I was traveling under my own power, and yet I was hardly even tired. This had to be an island in the middle of it.

I surfaced to see where I was. Shadrahk was standing on a rocky shore with his hands on his hips, tapping his foot. I turned around and saw Metru Nui in the distance. I was back at Mangaia, and the pontoons were now strung together in a wide circle.

“Don’t you ever give up, Mistress?” said the black and red Rahkshi testily. “I see why Master gets tempted to hurt you sometimes.”

“I’m sorry to put you through so much trouble, Shadrahk,” I mumbled as I crawled out of the liquid protodermis onto the rocks. “It’s not you I’m running away from. You’ve always been more than kind.”

“And Master hasn’t been?” he snapped. “He’s fed you and lodged you and given you meaningful work, not to mention risked his own safety to protect you over and over. He treats you like a princess. What more could you ask? If you’re lacking anything, I’m sure he’ll give it to you.”

I stood up. “Well, actually, there’s only one thing I really want from him, and he’s never been willing to give it to me. That’s my freedom.”

“Freedom. Of what use is that? We all are in servitude to someone. The best we can hope for is that it’s someone who recognizes our worth.” He waved toward the opening in the wall. “Come on, Mistress. I’ve got to get back in there and try to keep the lair from being trashed yet again.”

I stepped through the hole. Shadrahk paused to hurl a rock at one of the Lorahk, who were circling once more.

We ran toward the living room. Before we could get there, we were accosted by three Suukorak in the corridor. I heard a loud buzzing noise and saw a glow form around me. When I reached out to touch it, I was jolted by a strong electric shock. Shadrahk had dodged the spinners and blasted the spiders with darkness, blinding them and knocking them backwards. “Hang on, Mistress, I’ll get Electrorahk,” he called. He ran down the tunnel.

Soon he had returned with the Rahkshi of Electricity, who zapped the reviving spiders to subdue them again. Then he freed me from the cage of current with a touch of his staff. The three of us sprinted into the living room. Shadrahk glanced around. The fighting had spread to the dining

room, whence came the sound of shattering stone. Makuta's computer and the couch were still intact, but the television screen was blackened and cracked. Burn marks covered the walls, piles of dust and rock lay everywhere, and tangled green webs with a few Rahkshi-sized cocoons festooned the ceiling.

Telerahk materialized in the middle of the fray. Shadrahk grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the way of a burning spinner from a Vohtarak. "What's the report?" The Rahkshi of Teleportation hissed frantically.

Shadrahk sprinted to the music stage, grabbed a microphone, and flipped its switch. "Listen up!" he shouted. "Master and Lady Roodaka are on their way back. We've got to stop fighting and straighten this place up, or we'll all be mutated into freaks. We have to move all the rubble to one corner so it can be melted down. Some of you need to get the combustible furniture and so on out of the way, and then the magma can be spread out into a new layer of floor."

The entire group sprang into action. Rahkshi and Visorak toiled together to pile rocks and lift the furniture onto the dining room tables. Gravirahk and Densirahk levitated the home theater system so it wouldn't have to be unplugged. Plasmarahk reduced the debris to magma, and Pyrorahk used his staff like a trowel to smooth it over the floor while everyone else either hovered or climbed the walls. Then Guurahk and Sonirahk blasted small pieces of rock off the cavern surfaces to remove scorch marks and even out gouges. The spiders freed the bound Rahkshi, ripped down all the webbing, and proceeded to devour it. Vacuurahk drew all the grit and dust out of the room. Therahk made his rounds again, helping his patients gently back to their feet or tarsal segments.

Shadrahk surveyed the work. "We're lucky the fighting didn't reach the protodermis pool," he breathed. "If some of us had fallen in, there's no telling what would have crawled back out—if anything did."

A fluttering of wings and laughter in the vertical passage to the surface put everyone on alert. "OK, everyone, look busy—doing something *calm*," hissed the darkness Rahkshi. Several Rahkshi grabbed Xbox controllers and bounced onto the couch. Following Shadrahk's example, others grabbed books out of the bookcase, sat cross-legged on the floor, and pretended to read. A few of the spiders scurried into the kitchen and played at helping Bahka with the evening meal. The remaining arachnids followed Daisy into the weapons room, where Vorahk and his brothers simulated a weapons lesson. Invulnerahk leaned toward Bahka and whispered conspiratorially, "You didn't see anything."

"Oh, just look at this!" cooed Roodaka as they landed. "The very picture of peace and harmony."

Makuta's gaze shifted back and forth suspiciously. "Yeah." He spotted me sitting next to Shadrahk and flashed me a quick smile.

"Now that our boys and girls are getting along so well, we should figure out something to unleash them on—together. Just think how formidable they would be!"

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, my dear,” he replied, scrutinizing a patch of wall. He leaned over Lerahk, took the physics textbook out of his hands, and handed it back to him right side up. Makuta did a double-take at the television screen, which Illusorahk was covering with moving images of racecars. An Oonorahk supplied sound effects while the Rahkshi on the couch pretended to drive.

“Oh, yes, let’s do get ahead of ourselves!” said Roodaka, reaching up to tickle his shoulder with her claws.

He swiveled his head around, and she leaned hers close to his. “What’s for dinner?”

“Uh, dinner,” he stammered. “Dinner, yes. Uh, food. Well, roast beef, if Bahka has succeeded in cooking that side of beef.”

“Wonderful,” she replied. “Why don’t you find an intimate little corner of your lair where we can have a table for two?”

“Sure.” He summoned Panrahk and Guurahk. The brown Rahkshi roughed out a small, private dining room off the main one, and the blue one crafted some stone furniture.

Soon everyone was seated, banging their utensils on the rocky surface of the long tables. An Oonorak came out of the kitchen balancing an empty platter on the tip of his foreleg, over which was draped a towel. He took a bow and announced in a perfect French accent, “Le dîner est servi!”

Bahka followed, holding the side of beef over his head. He slammed it down onto a side table and produced his knife and fork with a flourish. He carved off a choice portion and set it on the platter. The Oonorak carried it into the master dining room. Then Bahka’s flying blade sliced the meat as fast as the creatures could bring their plates. With much gnashing and snapping, the beef disappeared. Bahka tossed the carcass into the middle of the center table and let the underlings strip the bones clean. To my surprise, the meat was delicious.

After dinner, Roodaka ordered me to print up the biography to date while she and Makuta took coffee in their private dining room. As I returned with the thick stack of paper, they approached from the opposite direction with her entourage of Visorak trailing behind them. She was saying, “I’m sure the new spa and sports complex are going to be wonderful. But you know, there’s no reason you have to stay in this lair, really. Don’t you have another in Po-Metru? You could set up a modest little gym for us over there. Think about it! You would be much closer to the action. And to me.”

Makuta cleared his throat. “Yes, but I’d rather stay in this one. It holds everything that’s important to me. Oh, look, it’s my Chronicler. What have we here?”

I handed him the stack and hurried away as Roodaka remarked, “It’s awfully thick. No wonder you didn’t finish the basketball court for my girls.”

“You know me,” he chuckled. “I can be a bit long-winded.”

“Oh, nonsense! Your life story must be fascinating! I can’t wait for you to read me the whole thing.”

I jumped on the Ussanui. Shadrahk led the way to the office, with Lentirahk flying behind us. I settled in for a bit of web surfing.

A few hours later, Shadrahk stood up and dismissed himself as Makuta stepped through the doorway. He was back in his oversized-Rahkshi form. “Oh, beloved, what a sweet refuge this place is to me, all redolent with your fragrance!”

“What do you want, Makuta?” I asked suspiciously.

“The usual,” he replied, stretching out on the couch. “To bask in your presence. I’m going crazy, being dragged around by Roodaka all the time. With her, it’s always ‘Build me this’ or ‘Buy me that’ or ‘Take me there’ or ‘Kill that for me.’ So I just came here to enjoy the peace and quiet of your abode.”

“Make yourself at home,” I groaned. “After all, you do own the place. And it’s not like I could really throw you out, anyway.”

“Now, now, darling, don’t be jealous. Even though Roodaka is enticing, especially when she leans in really close... she’s got some sort of sickly sweet poison in her breath, I think...” His voice trailed off.

“I’m not jealous of Roodaka,” I frowned. “I’m just tired of being stuck here. Why don’t you just go ahead and go after her? Then you won’t need me anymore.”

“Of course I need you,” he smiled. “I’ll always need you. You’re the salve for my scarred armor. When my life spins out of balance, you bring me back to my center and make me feel whole again. Roodaka’s love is dangerous, now and forever. But when *you* finally come around, I know your love will be true. If only I had some kind of assurance that would happen soon...”

I sighed and turned back to the computer screen.

“She’s trying really hard to draw me into her web,” he continued. “She’s using all her most ruthless feminine tricks on me, and it’s getting really hard to resist.”

“So go for it,” I shrugged, clicking a link. “You thrive on danger, don’t you?”

“Yes, but it’s too much of a good thing. I just know she’ll betray me in the worst way imaginable. You have no idea how much trouble she can be.” I noticed that he neglected to mention Sidorak this time.

“So throw her out.”

“But she’s an extremely useful lieutenant, and I don’t want to risk insulting her. You know what they say about females scorned.”

“Right.” I scrolled down a page.

He sat up suddenly. “I should be building that basketball court. Well, thanks for listening, my sweet. You’re a true friend.” He patted the side of my mask on his way out.

Shadrahk came back in. “Mistress,” he said in a low voice, “it’s not my place to tell you what to do, but if you aren’t careful, you’ll push Master right into Roodaka’s arms. And that would be disastrous for everyone, especially him.”

“I’m sure he can take care of himself just fine,” I replied.

“I hope you’re right. But still...” The black and red Rahkshi glanced around, then shot blasts of darkness at two corners of the room. “I found this in Master’s desk,” he whispered, pulling a tattered manuscript out of his carapace. “It’s the script for *Bionicle 3: Web of Shadows*. While you sleep, I’m going to find out just what we’re up against.” He sat in the desk chair and flipped it open.

## 14. If You Can Dodge a Rhotuka, You Can Dodge a Ball

### **The Offspring — Come Out and Play**

*You gotta keep 'em separated*

*Like the latest fashion*

*Like a spreading disease*

*The kids are strappin' on their way to the classroom*

*Getting weapons with the greatest of ease*

*The gangs stake out their own campus locale*

*And if they catch you slippin' then it's all over pal*

*If one guy's colors and the other's don't mix*

*They're gonna bash it up bash it up bash it up bash it up*

*Hey, man you talkin' back to me?*

*Take him out*

*You gotta keep 'em separated*

*Hey, man you disrespecting me?*

*Take him out*

*You gotta keep 'em separated*

*Hey, they don't pay no mind*

*If you're under 18 you won't be doing any time*

*Hey, come out and play*

*By the time you hear the siren*

*It's already too late*

*One goes to the morgue and the other to jail*

*One guy's wasted and the other's a waste*

*It goes down the same as the thousands before*

*No one's getting smarter*

*No one's learning to score*

*Your never ending spree of death and violence and hate*

*Is gonna tie your own rope tie your own rope tie your own*

I woke to Shadrahk's voice. "Master, she acted all sweet to Sidorak, and then she sent him to a certain death at the hands of Keetongu! How do you know she won't do that to you?"

I opened one eye a tiny bit to watch. Makuta was shaking his head. "Son, I appreciate your concern. But I'm not Sidorak. I can't die, for one thing. And I'm not a gullible sap like he is."

"With all due respect, Master, you shouldn't underestimate her trickery. She seduced Vakama into working for her. And they say Toa are really hard to win over."

"Don't I know it," sighed Makuta, glancing over at me. "Even their prototypes are exasperatingly strong-willed."

"Well, that's yet another reason to get Roodaka out of here. She obviously has it in for Mistress. I have to maintain a high-security detail on her while I try to keep skirmishes from breaking out between the Rahkshi and the Visorak. Master, I don't mean to complain, but tensions are running

high, and it's really hard to keep things under control. I've overheard Daisy grumble about it, too."

"Buck up, lad. You're doing fine. Roodaka will be gone as soon as the filming is over, anyway," replied the Master of Shadows. "Until then, it would be less than chivalrous to turn her away. I owe her one for taking that multi-elemental blast that set me free. Now, let's have that script."

Shadrakh removed the papers from his back, and Makuta yanked them out of his hand. "As heartily as I applaud your budding deviousness, my boy, I feel compelled to warn you to stay out of my desk, or I'll have to—" He stopped abruptly when he saw me sit up. "Ah, darling, how did you sleep?"

"All right," I said, blinking in the dim light.

"I suppose you overheard a few spoilers, eh?"

"A few," I nodded. "Roodaka convinces Vakama to betray the other Toa, hands over Sidorak to Keetongu, and frees you, right?"

"That's pretty much it," Makuta smiled. "Well, you were going to find out soon anyway. And it's not like you can tell anyone on the outside."

We headed for breakfast. I noticed a new television monitor in the living room. The Rahkshi were arriving in small groups. Invulnerahk entered the room talking on a cell phone. "Can you hear me now?"

Makuta jumped up and snatched the device out of the Rahkshi's hand. "Who is this?" he snarled into the mouthpiece. "Well, einde dat dit aantal roept!"

Invulnerahk ducked under the table just as Makuta's fist came crashing down, sending shards of stone in all directions. "You are not to play with my phone! Is that clear? And who the devil do you know in the Netherlands, anyway?"

"Oh, that was my buddy Klaas. I met him playing Iron Phoenix on Xbox Live," replied a muffled voice from under the table.

Makuta turned to me and explained. "I hate to be so hard on the little nipper, but this phone is my only connection to Metru Nui. If I lose it, I'll get in big trouble with LEGO. I'm sure you understand." He put the phone in his carapace and rolled his eyes. "I can't *wait* to see the phone bill."

Soon Roodaka and her horde showed up. Makuta changed into his movie form, and everyone settled down to a bowl of lumpy oatmeal.

The Spirit of Destruction received his work assignment from Roodaka—repairing the damaged jungle gym and enlarging the Visorak sleeping quarters sixfold—and flew away. I considered

how to spend the next few hours. Although it was a relief not to have to sit with Makuta and transcribe his diatribe, I felt restless because no progress was being made toward my release. I headed for the music room for lack of anything better to do.

The rock group was just tuning up. I sat next to Invulnerahk, the lone fan. “Hey, it’s great to see you here, Mistress!” he said enthusiastically.

“Hi, Invulnerahk. So, when are you going to learn an instrument and join the band?”

“Oh, I’m not very musical,” he laughed. “I just like to listen.”

He jumped up and thrashed around as Rahkous performed “Come Out and Play” by the Offspring. The kraata that powered the Ussanui crept out of their hatches to wiggle to the infectious punk-metal beat, too.

The musicians finished with a clamorous chord. Vorahk turned to praise his band mates, then called out to me. “Mistress, since you like to play guitar, why don’t you come on up and jam with us? We’ve got a couple of extra axes. Just pick one—electric, acoustic, whatever.” He pointed to the equipment piled against the wall.

“How did you know that?” I asked cautiously.

“Master told me. He knows everything,” shrugged the Rahkshi of Hunger.

“Well, that’s very nice of you, but I’m not very good,” I smiled.

Vorahk grinned. “You should have heard us when we started. The first time Sonirahk cranked up the board, we sounded like a train crashing through the wall! All right, guys, let’s get it perfect this time.” The musicians started the song again.

I sat back in my chair. Vorahk’s remark started me thinking. Perhaps the reason Makuta was encouraging his sons’ musical talent was to harness the destructive power of sound. With Sonirahk at the controls and Xefonirahk humming along, there was a lot of potential for damage. I remembered the sight of the last surviving pillar of the Kini-Nui crashing into the ground.

A few songs later, I got on the Ussanui and flew back toward my office. On the way, Shadrahk joined me. “Mistress, I have a favor to ask you. I think if you were to set up some kind of game or tournament for the Rahkshi and Visorak, it would give us a much more constructive outlet for our competitive impulses.”

“That’s true,” I nodded. “I suppose you want it to be down here in the lair, instead of up on the surface, so you can still keep an eye on things, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Did your master finish building that basketball court?”

“I think so. Why don’t we go check it out?”

I followed him down a long, branching tunnel, which opened up into an enormous gymnasium. “Wow, this is nice,” I remarked. I watched with curiosity as a few Visorak practiced their dribbling skills. A Suukorak was shooting layups, extending his legs in both directions as he leaped and making almost every shot.

“Who would have thought spiders could play basketball?” muttered Shadrahk.

After watching the Visorak for a little while, I stated the obvious. “We could set up a basketball tournament.”

“Basketball looks like a great sport,” Shadrahk replied thoughtfully, “but I don’t think it would be the best choice right now. Only ten creatures can play at a time. Everyone else would be brawling on the sidelines.”

“Good point. It would be better if you could all participate at once.” I thought for a few minutes. “How about dodge ball? There are two teams with as many players as you like, and you throw soft, squishy balls at each other.”

“That sounds perfect,” nodded the dark Rahkshi.

“We’ll need a few dozen inflatable rubber playground balls.”

“Master can get us those. Let’s Google the rules and print out copies for me and Daisy, so we can instruct our teams.”

We approached the office, but then Shadrahk suddenly swerved in front of me and held out his hands. The Ussanui stopped abruptly and hovered in midair. “Someone’s in there,” he whispered. He dropped silently to his feet and formed his staff between his tools, vanishing into darkness. Cloaked by my Huna, I dismounted and followed the faint sound of his steps into the chamber.

There was a scuffling sound, then a loud clank a few yards away. Shadrahk dragged a blue spider out of the shadows.

“Daisy,” I remarked in surprise.

“What are you doing in the Chronicler’s office?” demanded Shadrahk.

“Let me go,” she hissed, wriggling in his grip. He flipped her over his shoulder, and she landed on her back. He put one foot on her abdomen and aimed his staff at her head. Evidently Vorahk’s martial arts training had stayed with him.

I glanced around to see if anything was different. “That guitar,” I said, pointing at an acoustic Ibanez on a stand by my desk. “That wasn’t here before.”

“You brought that in?” asked the Rahkshi of Darkness, jabbing Daisy’s underbelly with the tip of his weapon.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I did. The black Rahkshi told me your master wanted her to have it.”

The Rahkshi of Darkness narrowed his eyes. “Why would he have sent *you* to bring it? That doesn’t add up.”

The spider offered no further explanation. Shadrahk glanced around the room. “Let me guess, Florahk sent you with the first bunch of flowers, too?”

“Why, yes, he did.” Daisy squirmed under Shadrahk’s wide foot. “Will you let me go now?”

“As soon as you can tell me what’s really going on here,” he replied calmly.

“Why do you read so much into this? Don’t you want your mistress to be happy here?” she retorted.

“What about *your* mistress? Why are you acting against her interests?”

“My reasons are my own,” Daisy whispered darkly.

Shadrahk frowned. “Go on, get out of here.” He lifted his foot, and without another word, the Bogarak scuttled out of the room.

“She’s definitely lying,” Shadrahk reasoned, “because Florahk told me he had no idea who brought those flowers. He thought it was probably Pinky. I should have followed up on that situation.” He spent the next several minutes carefully examining the guitar, and then every corner of the room. “No bugs or bombs.” He sat down at the computer, typed in a few passwords, and accessed the video footage from a security camera that was evidently mounted in the wall above the desk. I squinted at the wall and noticed a tiny hole in the stone. Shadrahk suddenly pointed at the screen. “There she is, bringing the guitar. And if I rewind a bit... yes, there she is again, arranging plants.”

“That’s weird,” I remarked. “Why would she want me to be happy here? It seems like she’s undermining Roodaka’s plans.”

“Since she’s been here, Daisy’s always been the voice of reason. Remember the time she got Roodaka to back down, when she was about to mutate you?”

I shivered. “How could I forget?”

“And several times she’s intervened to stop the spiders from escalating an argument. We’ve basically got the same job—keeping our bosses from making rash mistakes, and keeping our siblings from getting into fights.” Shadrahk shook his head thoughtfully.

“Maybe she’s just trying to keep me contented, so things will stay calm,” I shrugged.

“I doubt if it’s that simple. Maybe she wants us to think she’s betraying Roodaka,” said Shadrahk. “Roodaka’s plan may be even more complex than we thought. I think it’s time we did a little more investigating. Tonight, after all have retired to their quarters, let’s see if we can learn more.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I agreed, even though I was terrified of probing this new layer of deception. “Should we get going on this dodge ball idea, now?”

“Right.” Shadrahk closed the security camera window and started the web browser. Soon he had two copies of the rules of dodge ball in his hand.

First we ducked through a cloud of flying rock fragments to find Makuta, hard at work blasting out new bunks for the Visorak. “This precision work is killing me,” he groaned. “Blasting big holes in rock—I can do that all day. But making thirty-five little spider-shaped niches... And I have to do all it in this big, hulking form. Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to run this thing? I have to plug myself directly into the Connecticut Light & Power grid every night for about three hours just to make it through her Honey-Do list the next day.” Looking relieved to have an excuse to take a break, he left to get the playground balls.

Then we flew toward the weapons room. After Shadrahk had announced the tournament to the Rahkshi there, they eagerly flew off to inform their brothers.

Finally we went to the gymnasium, where Daisy was shooting free throws by herself. Roodaka was watching her from the sidelines. “Milady,” said Shadrahk deferentially. We lowered our heads to the tall black creature, who snorted with disdain. I stayed close to Shadrahk as I followed him onto the court.

“Daisy,” said Shadrahk, clearing his throat.

She spun around. “What do you want?”

“Well, we wanted to know if you and your Visorak would like to play a game of dodge ball against the Rahkshi,” he smiled. “If it’s all right with your mistress, of course.”

“Oh.” She glanced at Roodaka, who nodded. “Sure.”

He handed her the rules. “Meet here in, say, an hour?”

She nodded, and we flew away.

Soon the two teams were facing off across the huge, gloomy gym. Makuta sat between Roodaka and me in a box seat at the top of the bleachers. “Chronicler, this was splendid idea. Sport really does promote healthy competition in young creatures.”

“Since when have you concerned yourself with crayfish social development, Makuta?” scoffed the Viceroy of the Visorak. “Just sit back and enjoy the spectacle of lesser beings inflicting pain on each other for our entertainment. Reminds me of the good old days.” She stroked his arm with her index claw.

Makuta chuckled. “The balls are made of rubber, and everyone out there is armored. Sorry, my dear, but I doubt there will be very much pain involved.” He shot a focused blast of dark energy at the ceiling with his staff. A net ruptured, spilling dozens of red rubber balls onto the gym floor. They bounced crazily as the Rahkshi and Visorak dove for them. Then the balls began to fly back and forth with blazing speed as the players strove to hit and eliminate members of the other team. The creatures sprang into the air, turning back flips and somersaults to avoid being struck. Nobody bothered to try catching balls to remove the thrower from the game.

At first play progressed according to the rules, with competitors voluntarily walking to the bench when hit. Accurahk stood at the back of the gymnasium, where Chamelerahk stood invisibly rolling a steady supply of balls to him. He fired them off like a major-league baseball pitcher, pegging the Visorak with unflinching exactitude. Evitarahk danced provocatively in front of the other Rahkshi, drawing futile fire. But the spiders, with their basketball prowess, proved to be incredibly accurate, too. The ranks of players declined rapidly until only a handful remained on each side. Then a frustrated Keelerahk powered up a spinner and fired it at Evitarahk at the moment he dodged the ball the spider had just thrown. The Rahkshi dodged the second projectile as well, but it flew past him and hit Illusorahk, who collapsed, paralyzed, to the floor. Invulnerahk witnessed this injustice and yelled, “Give me liberty or give me death!” before lunging at the green Visorak, wielding his staff like an axe.

The situation degenerated immediately. The previously eliminated players leaped up off the bench to join the fray. Flying Rhotuka felled Rahkshi right and left, and explosions blasted Visorak off their feet all around. The Vohtarak launched a berzerker charge at the front line of Rahkshi. Invulnerahk, Adaptarahk, and Evitarahk withstood this first wave but were stampeded to the floor by a second assault of buzz-sawing Keelerak. Invulnerahk bounced back up. “Nobody panic. I’m OK!” he shouted cheerfully.

Meanwhile, several Rahkshi in the back of the gym were executing a clever plan. Vacuurahk evacuated all the air out of a red playground ball, collapsing it into a fistful of rubber. Then Densirahk compressed this into a hard, elongated pellet. Using his thumb as a mold, Elastorahk pulled a bit of rubber into a shell casing. He laid the bullet inside, and Panrahk gingerly filled the casing with a gray powder. Then Laserahk sealed the cartridge shut with his eye beams. Shadrahk maintained a cloak over the entire operation for protection, thin enough for me to see through with my night vision.

Laserahk handed each finished round to Accurahk, who loaded it into a blue, gold, and dark gray AK-47. I gasped as I realized the assault rifle was actually Pinky. One by one, Accurahk dropped all the Visorak.

Roodaka sniffed the pungent air. “What’s going on? This is some kind of treachery!” She stood up and tossed her headpiece in anger. “Makuta, get yourself and your doctor maggot down there to fix my spiders immediately!”

Makuta’s minions reappeared from the darkness. Accurahk spun the living rifle around the trigger guard, then set the stock on the ground so he could transform back into a slightly dizzy Rahkshi.

Their master could hardly conceal his pride “Don’t worry, Roodaka, we’ll get them restored right away.” He hurdled the bleachers and landed next to Panrahk. “Well done, son! Your very first successful batch of gunpowder! And you kept it under control!” He clanked his staff against Panrahk’s. A bit of dark gray dust on the brown Rahkshi’s staff flared up and drifted away in a trail of chemical smoke.

“Whoa, Panwreck did something smart,” exclaimed Vorahk.

“And the level of teamwork I saw out here today! Laserahk, your precision work is progressing nicely. And Pinky—what can I say? That was marvelous!”

But I didn’t have much time to watch Makuta’s Kodak moment, because Roodaka addressed me next. “You set this whole thing up to humiliate my spiders!” she hissed. “You are going to pay for this!” I backed against the wall as she hovered like a cobra, her arm raised with an activated Rhotuka in the launcher. “Just how ugly should I make you? Two heads, or three? Or perhaps no head at all?”

“Girls, girls!” scolded Makuta, taking her arm and gently lowering it until the spinner was pointed at the floor. “Roodaka, come down here with me and make sure your Visorak are getting the care they need. Chronicler, be a dear and go check on dinner for us.”

Breathing a big sigh of relief, I followed the aroma of roast wild boar back to the kitchen.

## 15. Green with Envy

### **Blues Traveler — The Mountains Win Again**

*I pick up my smile put it in my pocket  
Hold it for a while try not to have to drop it  
Men are not to cry so how am I to stop it  
Keep it all inside don't show how much she rocked ya*

*Ooh can you feel the same  
Ooh you gotta love the pain  
Ooh it looks like rain again  
Ooh I feel it comin' in  
The mountains win again  
The mountains win again*

*Dreams we dreamed at night were never meant to come to life  
I can't understand the ease she pulled away her hand  
This time in my life I was hurt enough to care  
I guess from now on I'll be careful what I share*

*A pocket is no place for a smile anyway  
Someday I will find love again will blow my mind  
Maybe it will be that love that got away from me  
Is there a line to write that could make you cry tonight  
Can you feel the same  
Yeah ya gotta love the pain  
Ooh it looks like rain again  
Ooh feel it comin' in  
The mountains win again  
Ooh the mountains win again*

### **Jet — Are You Gonna Be My Girl**

*Go!!*

*So 1, 2, 3, take my hand and come with me  
because you look so fine  
and I really wanna make you mine.*

*I say you look so fine  
that I really wanna make you mine.*

*Oh, 4,5,6 c'mon and get your kicks  
now you don't need that money  
when you look like that, do ya honey.*

*Big black boots,  
long brown hair,  
she's so sweet  
with her get back stare.*

*Well I could see,*

*you home with me,  
but you were with another man, yeah!  
I know we  
ain't got much to say,  
before I let you get away, yeah!  
I said, are you gonna be my girl?*

Streaked with powder burns, a triumphant Pinky arrived at dinner on the shoulders of his teammates. Therahk stumbled in, leaning heavily on Shadrahk's arm. The Visorak sat sullenly in their places at the three new stone tables Makuta had crafted that day. Their wounds from the rubber bullets were healed, but evidently not their pride.

Bahka carved up the meat with impressive efficiency. The Oonorak with the towel stood in the doorway of the private dining room and announced, "La spécialité du jour: roast wild boar. Je suis Rémy, your serveur for ze evening. Let me know if zere is anyzing else you desire, s'il vous plaît."

Roodaka suppressed a giggle. "Thank you, Remirak." Soon everyone was served.

After dinner, Makuta stood slowly and announced in a weary voice that he was retiring for the night. Shadrahk leaned over and whispered, "He's got to go recharge. That's perfect!" He assigned Vorahk the task of getting the Rahkshi to bed. Then he escorted me back to the office, flanked by Plasmarahk and Somnorahk. Once the others were at their stations, Shadrahk said loudly, "Well, good night, Mistress," while gesturing at my mask and forming his staff between his tools. I put on my Huna, and we slipped past my own guards.

Not really sure what to expect of the expanded Visorak quarters, we proceeded cautiously. We found Roodaka and Daisy reclining in cocoon hammocks with feather pillows in the same chamber as before. The only difference was that there were seven times as many adjoining rooms full of sleeping Visorak.

Roodaka brought a brightly colored drink to her mouth with her shapely black arm. She blew the paper umbrella out of the way and took a sip. "Daisy, I'm telling you, this is the life! I could stay here forever."

"It's certainly lovely here, Milady, but shouldn't we be getting back to Metru Nui? One of your scenes is bound to be coming up soon."

The Viceroy of the Visorak threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, don't fret, hordeling. I'll pop in and finish the filming. It's going to be fun watching Vakama sell his soul again. But what's the hurry? It's not like LEGO can shoot the movie without me."

Daisy squirmed in her hammock. "Milady, they seemed awfully mad at you last time for being so late. I overheard the producer telling the director that he should stop putting up with your costly diva antics and just have the special effects department CGI you."

Roodaka rolled her eyes. “Like they could ever make a computer-animated model walk the way I do.”

“You’re certainly unique,” agreed the Boggarak.

“Anyway, Daisy, I’m counting on you to keep the squabbling between the minions under control, so I can work up a really romantic atmosphere with Makuta. I’m almost ready to pop the big question.”

“The big question?” echoed Daisy uneasily. I could hear Shadrahk inhale sharply in front of me.

“Yes, the reason we’re here,” snorted Roodaka. “You didn’t think my only goal was to get the most powerful being in Bionicle to be my sugar daddy, did you? Although I must admit, that part is very appealing.” She stretched her claws out over her knees and purred, “He can do just about anything, and he will, for me. I’m having a hard time thinking up new tasks fast enough to keep him busy! I asked for a roller coaster today, and he’s almost done with it. All that raw power and specialized talent! And he’s quite the charmer, too. He really knows how to treat a lady. After the movie is over, we’re coming back here.”

The blue Visorak was visibly uncomfortable. “Milady, what about King Sidorak?”

“He’s a hopeless fool,” scoffed her mistress. “All he can offer me is a stupid Plan that will never work. Makuta’s right. If I go along with that lunkhead’s plan and refrain from betraying him this time around, maybe we will succeed together in defeating the Toa, Rahaga, and Keetongu and keeping the horde for ourselves. But what use will that be? LEGO will just make us film it all over again.”

“Right,” muttered Daisy. “Maybe you two need to come up with a different Plan, then.”

“Or maybe I’ll just let the big cretin keep thinking I’m in on his Plan,” said Roodaka slyly, “when all the while I’m really setting up a new Plan. Which brings us back to the favor I’m going to ask of Makuta. Now that I know more about his powers, I’ve come up with a variation on the original Vahi Plan. What do you think of this? When Keetongu comes creeping up the wall of the Coliseum toward the platform, I’ll let him make it to the top. I’ll fight with him a moment and then feign injury and fall down. Makuta will be lurking in the shadows, using mind control to keep Keetongu from really hurting me and to make sure he shreds Sidorak. Then I’ll ‘recover’ and get up to face the Toa and liberate Makuta.”

“What’s the advantage of that Plan, Milady?” frowned the Boggarak.

Roodaka sat up and snapped, “What’s the advantage? Think for a minute, you overgrown louse! If the Visorak don’t see me hand over Sidorak to Keetongu, they’ll realize that Vakama was the traitor, and I’m still their true leader. They’ll return to me after the Toa leave! That way, I’ll rule the horde by myself. And you’ll be my first lieutenant. Now that we’ve discovered this whole outer shell of islands, we’ll have plenty of fresh new hunting grounds. And whenever we get

tired of marauding, we'll come back to our home base here in Mangaia, where the Master of Shadows will play gracious host for us."

"I see," said Daisy meekly.

"So, you have to prevent the Rahkshi and the Visorak from spoiling the mood," concluded the dark seductress, lying back in her hammock. "And you have to keep that annoying Galitea out of my sight, too. She's not much of a threat anymore because Makuta hardly has time for her. But I'm a little worried I'll annihilate her in a fit of pique. I hate the way he keeps changing into that gangly lizard form for her. It's obvious he does it because she likes his repugnant spawn."

"I'll make sure she stays out of your way."

"You do that. Meanwhile, I'll work on Makuta. You know, he's been my most enjoyable conquest yet. I think I would actually be falling in love with him, except for one thing."

The dejected spider perked up. "What's that, Milady?"

"He's so grimy!" laughed Roodaka. "He smells like badly maintained machinery, all greasy and overheated. He's certainly handsome enough, and I love to watch him use those fabulous powers. But whenever he gets close to me, I have no trouble playing coy."

"Well, that's good, I suppose."

"It definitely is. If I were to lose control of my emotions, I would be *his* conquest instead. As long as he wants me more than I want him, I have the upper hand."

"You're the best at this, Milady," nodded Daisy.

"I know. Now, get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be an interesting day."

Shadrahk led the way back toward the office. When we were out of earshot, he said in a low voice, "I can't believe she wants to come back after the movie and make Master's lair her home base! This is really bad."

"Well, my new goal is simple," I replied. "Keep away from Roodaka—and Makuta, too, for that matter—until she leaves again. And then I've got to write as if my life depended on it, because it does."

The Rahkshi of Darkness shook his head. "Your life isn't really in jeopardy, Mistress. Master and all of us Rahkshi are looking out for you. The real danger is that Roodaka will get Master enmeshed in some ill-advised scheme to change the ending of the film."

"What does happen at the ending of the film? Am I correct in assuming Roodaka is defeated but gets away somehow?"

“Yes, you are. The Toa fire elemental blasts at her, and when they hit that bit of Master’s prison that she’s been keeping in her chest armor, that frees him. Then his shadow hand comes and whisks her away to safety.”

“And what happens to the Visorak?”

“Vakama sets them free before that last scene,” he replied. “But it sounds like Roodaka wants to keep them and bring them around here instead. It’s obvious what I have to do.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Maintain a state of continuous warfare between the Rahkshi and the Visorak,” he replied. “And hope that Master has the sense not to make any foolish promises before he tires of the constant strife and kicks her out.”

“Oh, no!” I gasped. “It’s going to be misery.”

“If I don’t act now, it’ll become even—wait, I hear something. I think we have an intruder.”

Sure enough, I could hear sounds of a distant struggle. I followed him through more tunnels until we reached the protodermis room. Using blasts of fire, Bahka had cornered a tall, green bipedal creature. Several Lorahk were circling around them, screeching.

We got closer, and Shadrahk ordered, “Bahka, stop!”

The dragon stepped back. Shadrahk walked up to the trespasser and brandished his staff. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Darakoo,” came the reply. I noticed that he looked like a male version of Roodaka except for his color. And in place of one of his legs there was a long plus-rod.

“You’re the companion Roodaka left to die on the mountain, aren’t you?” surmised the Rahkshi.

“Yes, I am.” Darakoo raised his chin. “I’ve come to speak with her about that. I’ve heard she might be here.”

Shadrahk gave me a meaningful glance. “Come on in,” he smiled, lowering his weapon. “She’s right this way.”

The stranger followed us, limping. He noticed Shadrahk glancing at his peg leg. “I’m sorry I’m so slow,” he apologized. “On my island, if you’re foolish enough to be tricked by someone else, you become an outcast. No one will sell me the parts to rebuild a proper leg. That’s why I have to see Roodaka.”

“So she’ll give you a new leg?” asked Shadrahk, scratching his head.

“No, so she can tell everyone what really happened and clear my name.”

I found myself feeling very sorry for this creature. “How did you survive the carnivorous mountain?”

“I was lucky. Just as the mountain chomped my leg, a group of hopelessly lost tourists started climbing the other side. It got distracted long enough for me to pull free and roll down to the bottom. I was pretty banged up, but at least I was alive.”

We traveled in silence until we reached Roodaka’s suite of caves. “Go on in,” said Shadrahk.

Waiting outside the chamber, we heard a little shriek. “Darakoo! What are you doing here? I thought you were dead.”

“I’ve been following you for millennia,” replied Darakoo’s voice. “I’ve tracked you all the way from our island to the Brotherhood of Makuta fortress to the Dark Hunter stronghold and back. I’ve trailed you and your spider hordes from one island to the next until you got to Metru Nui. And finally I’ve found you here.”

“Why?” Roodaka asked incredulously.

“I just wanted to see you again and get an explanation. You said our love made us different from the others. You said it was our destiny to triumph together where others failed for lack of unity. Why did you leave me behind?”

“I must have sounded pretty convincing,” she mused.

“Roodaka,” he pleaded, “tell me you wanted to come back for me, but it was too late. Tell me you thought I was already dead!”

“I lied to you once,” said Roodaka flippantly, “and you were stupid enough to believe it. Now you want me to lie to you again?”

There was a cry of rage, then an explosion, followed by another. Shadrahk and I crept around the corner to see Darakoo hurling a bolt of lightning from his tool. Roodaka was thrown back. She responded with a blast of shadow energy that sent him reeling. Rock crumbled from the walls behind them both. But Roodaka, with two legs, was much more agile. She managed to dodge his next attack. Soon she had him backed against the wall, a mutation spinner aimed at his chest. Daisy crouched in a doorway with a charged Rhotuka as well. The other spiders watched from behind her.

Shadrahk pointed his staff at Roodaka, but then he suddenly pulled me back into the shadows. Makuta’s massive, winged form flew past us into the room and landed with a loud clank. “Roodaka, is this fellow bothering you?”

Roodaka had backed away from Darakoo at the sound of Makuta's approach and was now cowering in the corner. "Y-yes, he is!" she whimpered.

"Ah," growled the Master of Shadows. "It's your old friend, isn't it? I see he hasn't learned from his mistakes."

Darakoo looked at Roodaka in disbelief. "You left me for *this* guy?"

"Darakoo," said Roodaka, newly emboldened in the presence of her protector, "meet Makuta. Some call him *the* Makuta."

His Kraahkan glowing darkly, Makuta pointed his staff at the green creature's feet and traced a large circle around him with a beam of plasma. A drop of melting stone landed on Darakoo's hand, and he silently jerked it away. Then Makuta etched two vertical lines inside the circle to form an :m:.

"I'll be leaving now," croaked Darakoo, scrambling for the door.

"Next time I'll use smaller handwriting," warned Makuta. "All right, you spiders, move along. There's nothing to see. Shadrahk, show this vagrant the door." The dark Rahkshi quickly ushered away the green being.

"Are you all right, Roodaka?" asked Makuta gently.

"Yes. Thank you for saving me," she sighed. She smiled sweetly, then sank into her hammock and turned away from him.

Makuta stood looking at her for a moment. "Good night, then." He lumbered out the door. I slunk out after him.

After a few yards, Makuta turned around. "Come along, darling. You didn't think you could escape my notice, did you?"

I thought about the extra set of eyes in the back of his head. "Uh, not really." He waited until I caught up, and then we walked together.

"I suppose Shadrahk let him in?" he asked.

I hesitated. I didn't want to incriminate Shadrahk, but I knew Makuta would probably be checking the security camera footage anyway. "Yes. He introduced himself and explained that he wanted to talk to Roodaka. He was very polite."

"I wonder how many more ex-boyfriends of hers are going to come sniffing around here," he groaned. "It's not that I can't easily defend my guests, but—" He stopped at the sound of the Star Wars theme song. Scowling, he opened a compartment on his back and pulled out his mobile

phone. “Darned kids and their ringtones!” He studied the caller ID and grimaced before flipping open the phone. “Hello, Sidorak.”

He listened for a few seconds. Then he replied, “No, she’s not up here on the Great Barrier with me. I don’t know where she is. You’ll just have to get along without her until she gets back.”

The voice on the other end chattered excitedly for a while. Finally Makuta interrupted him. “Look, Sidorak, if I see her, I’ll tell her you’re looking for her. Until then, just try to hold down the fort. Ask one of your spiders for strategy advice. Good day!” He snapped the phone shut.

We walked in silence back to the office, past the startled Rahkshi guards. Makuta spread out the blanket on the couch. He started to put his arms around me, but I dove under the covers.

“Oops,” he muttered. “Wrong form.” The room darkened as he morphed into the oversized Rahkshi shape. He knelt next to the sofa. “Is this better?”

I kept my eyes closed, hoping he would go away. Instead, he ran his creepy claw along the edge of my mask. “Please don’t be jealous of Roodaka,” he said quietly. “I would have run off any intruder who threatened you, too.”

When I didn’t answer, the Spirit of Destruction sighed heavily. “Sweet dreams, beloved.” He shuffled slowly out of the room.

## 16. Splish, Splash

### Joe Nichols — *What's a Guy Gotta Do*

*What's... a... guy gotta do to get a girl in this town  
Don't wanna be alone when the sun goes down  
Just a sweet little somethin' to put my arms around  
What's a guy gotta do to get a girl in this town*

*Well ask anybody, I'm a pretty good guy  
And the looks decent wagon didn't pass me by  
There ain't nothin' in my past that I'm tryin' hard to hide  
And I don't understand why I gotta wonder why*

*Cruise all around the right parking lots  
Little time gets killed a lotta bull gets shot  
One who'll think I'm kinda cute and laugh at every joke I got  
When I get to thinkin' maybe she's a-thinkin' maybe not*

*Had an old man tell me "Boy, if you were smart  
You'd hit the produce isle at the Super Wal-Mart"  
So I bumped into a pretty girl's shopping cart  
But all I did was break her eggs and bruise her artichoke hearts*

*What's a guy gotta do to get a girl in this town  
Don't wanna be alone when the sun goes down  
Just a sweet little somethin to put my arms around  
What's a guy gotta do to get a girl in this town  
What's a guy gotta do to get a girl in this town*

### Collective Soul — *Better Now*

*Oh I'm newly calibrated  
All shiny and clean  
I'm your recent adaptation  
Time to redefine me*

*Let the word out, I've got to get out  
Oh I'm feeling better now  
Break the news out, I've got to get out  
Oh I'm feeling better now*

*Oh I'm happy as Christmas  
All wrapped to be seen  
I'm your recent acquisition  
Time to celebrate me*

*The world's done shaking  
The world's done shaking  
The world's done shaking me down*

I woke alone in the gloomy office. I was hungry, but I didn't really feel like taking breakfast with the powerful, volatile mix of creatures that currently inhabited the lair. So I stretched, took a quick dip in the pool, and turned on the computer. The news sites reported brief power outages along the northeast coast of the country during the previous night. I wondered if Makuta was responsible.

I read a few more headlines before finally steeling myself to go up to the dining room. I whistled for the Ussanui, and it flew out of its corner and hovered next to me. But as I gripped the handshields and started to swing my leg over it, I hesitated. The vehicle looked rather scuffed up, and all the grease seals seemed to be leaking. Worried that Roodaka might have ordered it to be sabotaged, I said to the kraata, "Guys, why don't you set it down and hop out while I take a closer look at this thing?"

The landing gear deployed and the vehicle dropped to the ground. But the kraata hatch lids didn't move. I pulled one of them open. To my surprise, the compartment was empty! I backed away in confusion. Then the lightstones dimmed as the Ussanui transformed itself into Makuta's Rakhshi form. I let out a startled cry.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you," he apologized. "I just couldn't help but be a bit envious of the Ussanui. The way you wrap your pretty little self so snugly around it..."

"You deceitful creep!" I glowered at him. "I'm going to go get some breakfast now, if the real Ussanui is around here somewhere." I whistled again.

"Don't bother, darling. I gave them the day off. I'll give you a ride to the dining room in my lap."

"I'd rather walk," I retorted, heading for the doorway.

"I should have made that tunnel longer," sighed the Master of Shadows as he sank into the couch cushions. "Ogel says I'm the luckiest fellow in all of LEGO, to have two such beautiful female creatures in my lair at the same time. What he doesn't know is that I'm really the loneliest fellow in all of LEGO, because neither one of you will let me get near you."

"Maybe you should start over with someone new," I suggested over my shoulder. "Roodaka is eventually going to find some excuse to kill me, anyway."

"Well, if Roodaka's presence here is really bothering you," he said slyly, "all you have to do is put your lovely blue arms around my neck and promise to be mine forever. I'll launch her out of here faster than one of Matau's test vehicles."

I looked at him sideways. "Let me guess. You made her the same promise?"

"Well, yes, I did," he confessed. "Please don't take it the wrong way, beloved. You have no idea how hard this for me, with your body in arm's reach and your heart light-years away. I may be mighty on the outside, but deep down I'm just as vulnerable as the weakest Matoran. All I want

is someone to hold and cherish and share my destiny. And as many times as you've rejected me, I've grown so hopeless that I'm willing to risk the danger of accepting Roodaka's love, if she'll have me. But I'm really praying you'll be the one to embrace me, because I infinitely prefer the sweet tranquility of your company. Won't you consider my offer?"

My mind was processing his proposition, but not at face value. After being manipulated for so long by all these other creatures, I was finally beginning to formulate a Plan of my own. "Makuta, what if I were to tell you how to win Roodaka's heart? Would you let me go?"

He burst out laughing. Then he looked at me again, standing with my arms crossed. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

He thought for a moment. "How can I be sure your idea will work?"

I laid out the terms of the agreement. "Here's the deal. I'll tell you what to do, and you'll do it, exactly the way I tell you to—no half-hearted efforts allowed. Then, after Roodaka agrees to stay with you, you'll let me go home, and you'll never bother me again."

Makuta grinned. "You know, I really have nothing to lose, my beauty, because there's no way you'll be able to pull this off."

I smiled back. "I have nothing to lose, either, because if I fail, I'll be right back where I started."

"It'll be fun to watch you try, though." He clasped his tarnished gauntlets behind his head. "I'm really curious what you're going to suggest. Considering the way you've wrapped me around your little blue finger, I suspect you know more about the art of enchantment than you care to admit."

"Well, I wouldn't say that, but I probably understand the female mind better than you do."

"All right, you're on!" He leaned forward and shook my hand. Then he pulled me onto the couch next to him. "Tell me, Love Consultant, what should I do?"

I chose my words as diplomatically as possible. "Well, the biggest thing you have going for you is that you have plenty of power, and females are attracted to that."

He extended his arm along the back of the couch. "Yes, I've noticed that."

"But the grease and rust—not so much," I said slowly.

Makuta glanced down at himself. "You mean..."

“I think she really admires your talents and your intellect, but she’s a little reluctant to get close to you, because you’re very... um... industrial-looking. She wants her companion to be a little cleaner, a little more polished.”

“Someone like Sidorak, who spends half his day in front of the mirror buffing his armor and getting his head tubes angled just so?”

“Well, maybe not quite *that* self-absorbed, but you get the idea. Do you have a basin you can fit inside?”

“I can make one easily enough,” he shrugged. “Are you suggesting I take a bath? Say, there’s a constructive use for those water powers I gave you!”

“Basically, yes, but not just with water. For the first step, you’re going to need some degreaser.”

“I’ve got a 55-gallon drum of Lap 1 Super Rev in the automotive shop.”

“Perfect! I’m going to get some breakfast. Come back to the office after you’re done and I’ll tell you what to do next.” I stood up to leave.

He grabbed my wrist. “No, darling, you’re coming to help me. I’ll send for some food.”

“I don’t think that would be wise. Roodaka might find us together, with no computer for me to be writing on.”

“Don’t worry, love. She’ll never find us down there. It’s quite far away, and the tunnels branch a lot.” He tightened his grip on my arm.

My brow furrowed. “Well, all right. Let’s go to this automotive shop, then.”

He hovered in Rahkshi flight position, and I grudgingly climbed into his lap. He flew for quite a while before we arrived in a large cavern lined with shelves and tool boxes. The Cadillac convertible was parked above a repair pit, its windshield missing. “After my experiences with a certain gun-toting she-Rahi, I decided to install bulletproof glass,” he explained, rolling his eyes, “but I keep getting pulled off the job to work on other things.”

He walked into an adjacent empty cave and pointed his staff at the floor. “Stand back, my pet.” I ducked behind a stack of boxes as the detonation shook the room.

Makuta cleared the dust with a whirlwind and rolled a metal drum into the deep hollow. Then he punched a hole in the barrel with his fingertips. When all the solvent had drained out, he tossed the drum aside.

Then he settled into his bath. Slightly dizzy from the fumes, I watched him splash the fluid onto himself. An oily scum formed on the surface of the bath. But his joints were still streaked with a dark, tarry substance.

“Have you got a scrub brush?” He nodded and pointed to a tool bench. I found a stiff-bristled brush and handed it to him. “See if you can get your linkages clean with this.”

He took it and began to scrub his arms. “Look, chérie! It’s working!” He went over his chest, legs, and feet. Then he held out the brush to me. “Can you get my back for me, princess?”

I winced as I looked at the grimy brush. “Can’t you shapeshift into something more limber?”

“Sure, but if you do it for me, you could make sure I get really clean.” He shoved the brush toward me again. “You want this to work, right?”

I sighed and took it. Taking a deep breath, I leaned over the pool of petroleum distillate and began to wash between his spikes. The bristles dug into the grease and loosened it, revealing the metal underneath. “Ahh,” purred Makuta. “That feels really good.”

I frowned, but I kept scrubbing. Then I heard Shadrahk’s voice. “Excuse me, Master, where do you want this?” He was standing in the doorway with a tray of food.

Makuta looked up. “Oh, thank you, son. Just put it on the workbench.”

The Rahkshi of Darkness set down the tray and watched us for a moment. “Mistress sure is taking good care of you,” he remarked.

“She certainly is,” grinned his master. “Will you keep the others occupied for a while? I don’t want us to be disturbed.”

“Of course,” Shadrahk nodded. “Everyone’s pretty busy, anyway. The Visorak are about to try out the new roller coaster. And the Rahkshi are playing in the weapons room.” He turned and flew out.

Makuta turned and looked at me. “Am I clean yet?”

I poured some solvent onto his chest with a bucket. “Almost. You missed a few spots.” I scoured the back of his neck and behind one knee. “All right, now get out and dry yourself off.” He stepped out of the basin and increased his body temperature, rapidly evaporating the liquid. I backed up to get away from the heat.

“I feel terrific!” beamed the Spirit of Destruction, flexing his arms. “How do I look?”

His surfaces were no longer greasy, but they were still mottled with corrosion. “Better, but we’re not done yet. Now we need a chelating agent.”

“Let’s go with a classic, shall we? I’ve got some ethylenediaminetetraacetate in the storage room. Go ahead and eat your breakfast.” I emptied the bowl of Cheerios and plate of sliced Uala

melon while he was gone. He returned carrying a plastic barrel with “EDTA” marked below a skull-and-crossbones symbol. Then he blasted out a new basin.

“I noticed you ordered only one breakfast,” I said as I dumped a bucket of the solution on his shoulders.

“Oh, I don’t need to eat. I’m all recharged.”

“Were you the one who caused all those blackouts along the east coast last night?”

“That was me,” he nodded. “I got impatient with the trickle charge and decided to take a big gulp of power. For the first time in a long time, I’m at my full energy level.” He closed his eyes and splashed his Kraahkan with his hands. Then he handed me the brush again. When I balked, he reminded me, “No half-hearted efforts, right?”

I relented and scrubbed him some more. Makuta stood up, his armor gleaming in the dim light. “I didn’t realize you had so much red and silver on you,” I commented. “I thought you were mostly black.”

“You like the red and silver?” He reached toward me.

I backed away. “What I like doesn’t matter. And we’re still not done yet. Now we need a detergent to get rid of all those chemicals. Ordinary dishwashing liquid will do just fine.”

“There’s some at the sink over there,” he replied. Soon I was using my water powers to fill a new basin. A broad smile on his Mask of Shadow, he sank into the bubbles.

Suddenly a massive explosion rocked the lair. Tools tumbled off the pegboard, and car parts bounced onto the floor. Makuta sat up in his bath and stared intently in the direction of the sound.

“What is it?” I asked nervously.

“I was afraid this would happen,” he groaned. “The Rahkshi rigged the roller coaster to derail and blow up. After I worked so hard on it, too!”

I thought about how the Ta-Koronans must have felt while they watched their village subside into the lava lake after the Rahkshi attack. “I’m sure that must be very depressing.”

Rumbling and booming noises soon followed, no doubt from the Visorak’s attempts to avenge themselves. Shadrakh arrived again, breathless. “Master, I’m sorry to bother you, but all Mangaia is breaking loose! The Suukorak used their electrical powers to free Rahirahk’s stone rats, the Boggarak’s sonic energy has destabilized Plasmarahk’s nuclear lab, the mutated Nui-Kopen is dive-bombing the nitroglycerine tanks, and I can no longer restrain the Rahkshi from fighting back! Xefonirahk has already brought down the ceiling of the Visorak spa, and Distruptirahk—”

“Didn’t I tell you to make sure we weren’t disturbed?” growled Makuta.

“Well, yes, sir, but...”

“Go protect Somnorahk and Statirahk while they put all the Visorak down. And whichever Rahkshi are still fighting, too, for that matter.”

“Understood, Master. But what should I do about Roodaka? She’s screaming and threatening to mutate us all!”

Makuta grinned. “Tell her I’ll be there soon with a wonderful surprise for her.”

Shadrahk looked at me, standing behind Makuta with a big, soapy sponge. His eyes widened. “Mistress, don’t tell me you—oh! This will not end well.” He spun and flew out.

The cacophony gradually died down while I finished rinsing the Master of Shadows. He dried off, looked down at himself, and then smiled at me. “This is fantastic, darling! How can I ever thank you?”

“No need. Just go see if it will work now. Don’t forget to change into your big form first.” I closed the bottle of detergent. Then I wrung out the sponge and set it on the edge of the sink.

Makuta crept up behind me and slipped his arms around my waist. “How about a kiss for luck?”

“No! We did this for Roodaka! Now, go!” I pushed at his hands.

“I’m reminded of St. Augustine’s plea,” he said wryly. “‘Make me pure—but not yet.’”

“You’ll never be pure,” I retorted, elbowing him in the ribs. I wriggled free and fled across the room.

“That’s why I need you in my life. Your purity balances my corruption.” He held out his hand, and I felt a magnetic force dragging me toward him. I grabbed a leg of the workbench and clung tightly. It began to slide with me. He lowered his hand.

“Purity doesn’t balance corruption,” I snapped. “It just gets polluted.”

The stone floor began to ripple up and down. I struggled to keep my equilibrium. Makuta surfed a wave of fluid rock until he reached me. He caught me up in his arms again and brought my mask close to his. I felt faint from the reek of ashes and motor oil. “Wait a minute, Makuta,” I gasped.

“I’ve been waiting for over two years,” he sighed. “I suppose one more minute won’t kill me.”

“I forgot your mouth,” I explained. “Open wide.”

He released me and did as I asked. I shot a high-pressure jet of water into his mouth from my fingertips, cleaning all the surfaces inside. “There you go.”

Makuta sloshed the water around, turned his head, and spit. Then he approached me again. “All right, so now you’ll kiss me?”

“No,” I groaned. “Just go.”

His eyes narrowed. “Fine. I understand. All this niceness was really just an attempt to get me out of your life.”

I nodded slowly. “Pretty much.”

“Well, if this works, I’ll keep my promise to you,” he snarled, his eyes flashing red. “I’ll send you home. Your real home. Your forever home. Artakha Acres!”

I caught my breath. I had always hoped someday to enjoy the legendary afterlife LEGO had prepared for its heroes—but not so soon! I remembered Shadrahk’s dire warnings and wished I had listened. Now I wasn’t sure I wanted my plan to succeed. What kind of influence would Roodaka have over Makuta? Would he become even more cruel and scheming? And if he no longer had any use for me, what was to stop him from vaporizing me with a flick of his wrist? Regrets for my rash actions flooded my mind. I was obviously a fool for trying to deal with evil. I just hoped I would survive to pass along this advice.

“Uh, Roodaka’s expecting you,” I croaked.

“Oh, right,” he sneered. With the usual darkening of the room, he transformed into his movie form. Towering above me, his newly cleaned metal surfaces looked cold and robotic. “One way or another, I’ll see you soon.” He picked up his staff and stalked out of the room.

My knees gave way under me, and I collapsed onto a pile of rags.

## 17. Inviting Disaster

### **Maroon 5 — Tangled**

*I'm full of regret  
For all things that I've done and said  
And I don't know if it'll ever be OK to show  
My face 'round here  
Sometimes I wonder if I disappear*

*Would you ever turn your head and look  
See if I'm gone  
'Cause I fear*

*There is nothing left to say to you  
That you wanna hear  
That you wanna know  
I think I should go  
The things I've done are way too shameful*

*You're just innocent  
A helpless victim of a spider's web  
And I'm an insect  
Goin' after anything that I can get*

*So you better turn your head and run  
And don't look back  
'Cause I fear*

*There is nothing left to say to you  
That you wanna hear  
That you wanna know  
I think I should go  
The things I've done are way too shameful*

*And I've done you so wrong  
Treated you bad  
Strung you along  
Oh shame on myself  
I don't know how I got so tangled*

Once my panic attack had subsided, I jumped up from the pile of towels. My survival obviously depended on my immediate escape. Unfortunately, I had no idea how to get from the automotive workshop back to the main rooms of the lair. I ran along the passageway and soon faced an intersection. I blasted some marks on the wall with my axe-staff so I could retrace my steps if I got lost.

A noise behind me made me jump. To my relief, it was Shadrahk. “There you are, Mistress!” he exclaimed.

“Shadrahk, you’ve got to help me get out of the lair,” I pleaded. “Your master is going to kill me. Or maybe Roodaka will beat him to it.”

He put his hand on my staff, which I was waving agitatedly. “Calm down and tell me what happened.”

“Well, I made a deal with him. I offered to help him win Roodaka’s heart in exchange for letting me go home. So I got him all cleaned up for her. But now he says if it works, he’ll send me to Artakha Acres.”

“No offense, Mistress, but I’m starting to regret bringing you along on my spy missions. It sounds like you’ve gotten yourself in way over your head with this Give-Master-a-Bath Plan. I hate to say ‘I told you so,’ but...”

“What about your Maintain-a-State-of-Continuous-Warfare Plan?” I shot back. “By the sound of things, that got a little out of hand, too!”

“You got me on that one,” he conceded.

“So you have to help me escape,” I urged him.

Shadrahk sighed. “You’re asking me to defy my main directive, Mistress.”

“Well, sure, but if I’m dead, it won’t matter any more!”

“Master is not going to kill you. He’ll come to his senses soon enough. As for Roodaka, she may try, but she won’t succeed.”

I looked into the eyes of the Rahkshi of Darkness. His unflinching gaze was at once frightening and reassuring. Now that he had found me, I knew he would do his best not to let me flee—or die, either. “So, now what do we do?”

“We could spy on Master and Roodaka,” he said, “but if they see us, that could mean serious trouble. And besides, I don’t think I have the intestinal fortitude to watch them. Let’s go back to your office and wait. Everyone is busy with damage control, but I’ll get Telerahk to come with us. He can whisk you away if there’s any danger.”

“Thanks, Shadrahk. I knew you would come up with something,” I smiled weakly.

He got into flight position. “I hope your Plan fails miserably,” he remarked. “Then Master will come in alone, all apologetic. If not... we’ll just have to see how it goes.” I settled into his lap, and he flew me back to the office.

Vorahk met us there. “General, here’s what’s going down. Disruptirahk, Pyrorahk, and Sonirahk have dug the injured Visorak out of the wreckage of the roller coaster, and Therahk has healed them. All the spiders are now together, hanging out in what’s left of the spa, on Roodaka’s

orders. Entorahk has subdued the big, freaky wasp, so the nitro tanks are safe now. The hazmat cleanup of Lerahk's chemistry set is almost done. Magnerahk's in the nuke lab keeping a force field around the breached reactor until Guurahk and Panrahk can finish building a permanent containment facility for it. And about seventy-five percent of the stone rats are accounted for. Rahirahk and Florahk are still searching for the rest of them. All the other Rahkshi are busy clearing rubble."

"Those rats worry me," muttered Shadrahk. "Well, thanks for the report, Sarge. Would you find Telerahk and send him down here?" Vorahk nodded, and the Rahkshi of Darkness dismissed him. "Carry on."

Shadrahk turned on the computer and displayed the video from six security cameras around the lair. I slumped onto the couch. A few tense minutes went by. Telerahk appeared in the middle of the room, and Shadrahk updated him on the situation. "If I signal you, teleport Mistress to the nuclear-hardened bunker until further instruction."

We resumed our waiting. Shadrahk flipped between the various cameras. Finally he hissed, "Master's coming, alone!"

I jumped up. The hum of Makuta's flight resonated in the passageway, so I knew he would be in his oversized-Rahkshi form. He landed in the doorway and stood with his hands on his hips, frowning at me. "You lied to me." He gestured at Shadrahk and Telerahk. "Go." The two Rahkshi headed for the hallway and vanished.

I swallowed hard. His form and his words suggested that my Plan had not worked. But was this a good thing or not?

He turned toward the doorway. "I said to get out!" I heard the sound of Rahkshi footsteps echoing down the hallway. When he was satisfied his minion was gone, Makuta faced me again.

I backed behind the sofa, as if an object of wood and leather could somehow protect me from the Spirit of Destruction. "What, um, what happened with Roodaka?"

"Oh, your idea was quite successful," he replied. "She was all over me."

So the Plan had worked, after all! "Then... what are you doing here?" I asked in a small voice, even though I was certain I already knew the answer. She had taken him up on his offer, and he was here to fulfill his vow to kill me.

"I must confess that I lingered for a little while to enjoy her attentions. But my mind was full of doubt. As she covered my mask with sweetly poisonous kisses, I asked her what she really wanted from me. She whispered that she needed my help with her Plan to change the ending of the movie. She spelled out a few details, and it's a crazy scheme that would probably get me into huge trouble with LEGO. Then she reminded me of my promise to get rid of you, and she put her arms around my neck. But before she could pledge her loyalty, I realized I was making a terrible mistake. I hastily pushed her away and told her I had to go check on the nitroglycerine tanks."

At this moment a huge explosion thundered in the distance, knocking all the books off the shelves. “Oops, there they went,” he groaned. “Darned rats.”

I scratched my head. “So you’re *not* going to kill me, then?”

“That depends,” he sighed. “I really hope I don’t have to. You say you don’t want me, cupcake, but I know you’re lying. You put my needs first, even to the point of tenderly preparing me for the arms of another! What better proof could there be of the sincerity of your love? I was overwhelmed with guilt for doing you wrong. So I decided to give you another chance.”

My heart was pounding. The last thing I wanted to do was enslave myself to this sadistic madman, but otherwise I faced the very real possibility of my imminent death. I glanced nervously at the doorway.

“It’s obvious to me,” he continued, “that your fear is the only thing keeping you from acknowledging your true feelings. But since I can control fear, I should be able to remove it, just as a fire Toa can absorb heat into himself. That, and a little mind control, will help you with the first part.”

His Kraahkan began to glow. My heart slowed down and my hands stopped shaking. Then I felt an irresistible compulsion to walk around the couch to where he was standing and reach up to encircle his neck.

He wrapped his arms around me. “But you have to do the talking yourself,” he said with a gentle smile, “because I want it to be of your own free will.”

I looked at him with perfect calm. Face to face, unafraid of death itself, I spoke my mind. “Makuta, I hate you.”

“You know, your honesty is really damaging our relationship,” he said through clenched jaws. “Just lie to me until you change your mind!”

“I’m never going to change my mind,” I maintained serenely.

His embrace tightened like a vise as he growled, “It’s always been your choice—my love or my wrath. Why must you pirouette on the razor’s edge?”

There was a loud crash in the doorway, and Shadrahk and Telerahk were thrown face first onto the floor. Roodaka burst into the room. “So, Roodaka’s suspicions are confirmed,” she hissed. “She *is* your lover!”

“Lady Roodaka, it’s not what you think!” I blurted, pushing at Makuta’s chest. “He was just threatening to kill me.”

“Well, then,” Roodaka replied coldly, “don’t let me get in the way. Go ahead and crush her, Makuta.”

But Makuta refused to let go. “Actually, Roodaka, it’s exactly what you think,” he said slowly. “I can no longer deny my love for her. Her presence is a refreshing pool of calm in the midst of my raging firestorm.”

She circled us like a hungry tiger. “Even with all your power, Makuta, you would not be wise to tangle with Roodaka,” she warned. “You can’t protect your little junk sculpture forever! At some point, you’ll have to turn your back.” She fired a burst of shadow energy from the tips of her claws.

Still holding me with one hand, he pulled the staff off his back and deflected the blast. “And yet, my ebony beauty, I’m just as hopelessly addicted to the exhilarating adrenaline surge that I feel in your company.”

“Let me guess, she used her water powers to clean you up?” snarled the Viceroy of the Visorak. “My apologies if I get you dusty as I liquidate her.” She shot another bolt at the ceiling. A shower of rock debris rained down on us. While Makuta suspended the stones with gravity power, Roodaka sprang into the air and delivered a flying kick at my abdomen.

He jerked me backwards to avoid the blow. “I feel so torn between you two,” he lamented. “The gentle water nymph offering an oasis of sweet tranquility, or the dazzling femme fatale who will take me on a vertiginous thrill ride.”

“Don’t worry,” she sneered, landing and spinning around. “Soon your choices will be reduced to one.” She picked up some loose rocks and began hurling them at my head.

“Now, a companion with both your qualities would fulfill all my needs,” he said wistfully, vaporizing the rocks in mid-air with a beam of plasma. The lair resonated with another detonation. “Darn, there goes the ammonium nitrate supply. I wish the boys would hurry up and get those rats under control.”

“I hope you didn’t just want her for her looks,” she threatened, “because I’m going to make that homewrecker so ugly you’ll never want to gaze on her again.” She readied a mutation Rhotuka in her launcher.

“If only it were possible somehow to fuse you two together into one perfect female creature ... but wait! *I can!* Yes, that’s it! I’ll build a Kaita out of you both!”

Roodaka suddenly turned her fury on Makuta instead. “I don’t care if you’re immortal!” she screeched. “I’m going to kill you!” She fired the spinner at him.

As it left the launcher, Makuta covered his head, and the energy wheel hit his forearm. Immediately the parts began to twist and bulge grotesquely, spreading upward toward his

shoulder. He let go of me and focused his eyes on his arm. Twin laser beams seared through the metal, and in the next instant his severed arm clattered to the floor.

The Master of Shadows raised his remaining hand and threw a blast of magnetic power at the tall black creature. She was slammed backwards and stuck helplessly to the wall. He shook his head at her. "You know, I've always wondered what one of those things would do to me," he said. "I never thought you'd have enough nerve for me ever to find out." Then the Star Wars ringtone began to play. He sighed, retrieved the phone, and flipped it open. "What is it, Mentorahk?" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Shadrahk pulling himself slowly to his feet. I ran over to him. Telerahk was beginning to stir as well.

Makuta listened for a few moments. "All right, thanks." He closed the phone and stowed it again. "I can't believe it," he muttered. "LEGO wants to meet with me about next year's storyline. Could their timing have been any worse?"

A blast followed that was so powerful it knocked all of us off our feet, except Roodaka, who was still magnetized to the wall. "What was that?" wondered Makuta as he sat up. He said to Shadrahk, "Son, go find out what just blew up." The Rahkshi scurried out, almost tripping over Daisy in the doorway.

The room darkened slightly as Makuta morphed another arm out of his substance. Green light beamed out of the joints until the surface solidified completely. "Good thing I charged up last night. That sure cost me a lot of energy." He glared at Roodaka, who was cursing under her breath as she struggled vainly to free herself. "All right, I've got to get going. If anything bad happens to either one of you, I'm holding the other one responsible."

Makuta walked over to me, and I retreated until I backed into Telerahk. The Spirit of Destruction grabbed my chin in his hand, leaned over, and kissed the side of my Kaukau Nuva. Then he approached Roodaka, but she tried to bite him. So he peeled her arm off the wall and kissed her hand instead. Then he jumped backwards to avoid her slap.

Shadrahk flew back in. "Master, there's a big hole where Sector Alpha Six used to be, which, if I recall correctly, was where you stored your rocket fuel," he panted.

Makuta struck his forehead with his palm, making a loud clang.

"But there's good news, too. The fires started by the other explosions have all been extinguished now," the dark Rahkshi added.

"All right, thanks." Makuta put his hand on his minion's shoulder. "Now, listen, Shadrahk, I've just been called to a meeting with LEGO. Keep the peace while I'm away."

"Yes, sir," nodded Shadrahk nervously.

"Well, ladies, you behave yourselves. I'll be back soon." Roodaka snarled at him, and he smiled graciously. Then he flew out of the office.

Red lightning danced across Roodaka's blue eyes as she took aim at me with her hand. "I'll make you wish you'd never been built." I yanked my axes off my back, formed a staff, and pointed it at her. Shadrahk waved his hand, and I experienced a strange tingling feeling. My vision went black and my body lost all sensation, and then I became aware of the support of a floor under my feet. I staggered and caught my balance as my sight returned.

I was inside a large cavern with shelves covering three of the stone walls, filled with labeled boxes. The fourth wall had bunks carved into it. There was a computer and some radio equipment in heavily armored cases on a corner table. Folding chairs were stacked against it. Several doors, heavy metal hatches with locking wheels, were illuminated by pale blue lightstones.

Telerahk and Shadrahk appeared in the middle of the room. "Sorry for the discomfort, Mistress," apologized the shadow Rahkshi, "but I felt it was necessary for your safety. Not that you mightn't have clobbered her, but it was just too risky."

"I think I know who would win that fight," I shuddered, "and it's not me. Thanks."

Shadrahk checked all the door seals and some gages on a control panel over the table as he spoke. "Telerahk will be coming in regularly and bringing you things to eat. I'm going to see if I can find out when Roodaka is due back in Metru Nui for the filming. Otherwise, she may have to be given a little nudge, if you get my drift. Vorahk is already lobbying hard for that. All right, the airlocks are all fastened securely, and the ventilation system is operating normally. Here's a two-way radio, Mistress. Call me anytime." He offered me a handheld electronic unit. Then he nodded to Telerahk, and they both disappeared.

So, this was where I was to be imprisoned until my fate was determined by more powerful, malevolent beings. I felt angry and helpless. I paced for a few minutes, then sat down at the computer. I turned it on. But I didn't know the password for the only account, "Desperado," so I was unable to use the machine. I turned it off again. I read the box labels, and found there was an enormous supply of food, water, various fuels, spare parts, and a generator. A few books sat on the shelves above the table. They were all about military strategy and nuclear fallout safety. I flipped through one for a while, but my mind was reeling with worry and I couldn't concentrate. I flopped down on one of the lower bunks.

Anxiety finally gave way to fatigue, and I dozed off. I was awakened abruptly by a distant grinding sound.

I sat up in the bed, knocking my mask ajar on the upper bunk. I adjusted it and looked around in the dim glow. The sound was rapidly growing louder. I pressed the call button on the radio. When Shadrahk answered, I explained.

"But, Mistress, you just radioed me that Telerahk was taking you to Florahk's garden for some fresh air! I sent extra guards over there, and told the ones at the bunker to switch out!"

“Uh, that wasn’t me,” I frowned.

Shadrahk gasped. “Oonorak imitating your voice! Wait—how do I know this is really Mistress I’m talking to now?”

“You regret bringing me on spy missions, remember?”

“I’ll be right there.”

I jumped up and formed my staff, pointing it at the location of the sound without any idea what I would be facing. Suddenly a section of the wall crumbled, and three stone rats burst out of the rubble, followed closely by Roodaka, who held them on leashes of electricity that were wrapped around a metal band on her wrist.

“Such a brave pose, little toy water Toa,” she hissed. “But the fun is over for you. You’re *my* plaything now.”

“Lady Roodaka,” I said in a voice as brave as I could muster, “if you’ll help me escape this place, you’ll never see me again.”

“Escape?” she laughed, reining in the rats as they lunged hungrily at me. “If you displease Roodaka, there is no escape. Just ask Nidhiki. Oh, wait, you can’t. He’s Makuta bones.”

A vision flashed through my mind of the Toa double agent she had mutated, so afraid of insects and then turned into one, later to be absorbed into Makuta. I shivered, hoping this wasn’t a preview of my own fate. “Look, I really don’t want to fight you. But if you force me to defend myself...” I raised my weapon a little, hoping fervently that my guardians would show up and back up my plucky words, because I doubted I would last long in a battle.

## 18. Meow Mix

### **Cake — Never There**

*I need your arms around me, I need to feel your touch  
I need your understanding, I need your love so much  
You tell me that you love me so, you tell me that you care  
But when I need you baby, you're never there*

*On the phone long, long distance  
Always through such strong resistance  
First you say you're too busy  
I wonder if you even miss me*

*Never there  
You're never there  
You're never, ever, ever, ever there*

*A golden bird that flies away, a candle's fickle flame  
To think I held you yesterday, your love was just a game  
A golden bird that flies away, a candle's fickle flame  
To think I held you yesterday, your love was just a game*

*You tell me that you love me so, you tell me that you care  
But when I need you baby  
Take the time to get to know me  
If you want me why can't you just show me  
We're always on this roller coaster  
If you want me why can't you get closer?*

*Never there  
You're never there  
You're never ever ever ever there*

As I watched the red sparks flicker across Roodaka's eyes, I suddenly regretted not asking Vorahk for some combat training.

But I hadn't, and there was no use dwelling on my lack of foresight. I was facing the most powerful, ruthless female in Bionicle, and because of me she felt scorned. It made no difference that I had been an involuntary participant in her humiliation. All that mattered now was that I focus on staying alive long enough for the cavalry to appear over the hill.

I shifted my grip on the axes forming a staff between my hands and took a deep breath. I didn't want to provoke her, but I had to be ready to knock her out with disintegration power before she could get near me, because with almost three feet of height advantage, she would thrash me in close combat. The alternative was to slip past her and the three stone rats, scurry down the tunnel they had eaten through the thick wall, and hope there wasn't a horde of spiders waiting to ambush me on the other side. *Don't look into her eyes*, I reminded myself, lowering my gaze

from her mesmerizing visage. *She'll see that as defiance.* Instead, I gathered as much visual information as I could about the layout and contents of the room.

My eyes flew involuntarily to Roodaka's face when she spoke. Her lips wore a malevolent grin. "I really want to savor this moment. The one I despise is dangling in front of me, ready to be crushed like a disobedient Visorak."

I stood across from her for what seemed a lifetime, periodically reminding myself to breathe. The rats were not as patient as their mistress. They chafed restlessly at their electric collars. Finally they began to chew into the floor.

"Well," shrugged Roodaka, "I guess I should take the hint from my new pets and get started. Why not see how you stand up to the classic blast of dark energy?" She raised her arm in a rapid, fluid motion and fired a burst from her claws.

I jumped sideways, but she tracked me with her hand. The beam hit me like an invisible avalanche, knocking me off my feet and expelling all the air from my lungs. I tumbled to a stop against a bunk.

Scrambling painfully to my feet, I glanced up. Roodaka was laughing, her hands on her hips. I crouched, ready to dodge another shot. But if I hadn't been able before, how would I now that I was weakened? Instead, I aimed my staff and concentrated. A bolt of dark blue energy tore through the air and struck her squarely in the chest.

Roodaka staggered backwards into the shelves. She opened a small compartment in her breastplate, and shards of dark crystal spilled out. Her face twisted with fury. "Do you have any idea how much agony I went through to chip off that piece of stone?" she screeched. "I even broke one of my claw tips off! And now I'm going to have to do it all over again, while LEGO isn't looking." She raised her hand again. "Only this time I think I'll spare my manicure and carve it out with your splintered femur."

I started to fire again, but she was faster. As I writhed on the floor clutching my leg, I wondered briefly whether my blast had freed Makuta from his prison. But then I remembered the Toa seal, which I had no power to unlock. My thoughts quickly returned to the situation at hand as Roodaka let the rats approach. Excited at the prospect of something tastier than the floor, they gnashed their rotary teeth.

I forgot my pain and scrambled to my feet. The shapely villainess gave the rats more slack, and they lunged, snapping off a chunk of my foot before I could move. I sprang into the air, tucking my legs, turned a forward flip over Roodaka's head, and landed behind her.

The rodents scurried around her to catch me, wrapping the electric leashes around her legs. She screamed as bright yellow arcs leaped onto her armor. Backing up, I aimed an axe and sprayed a puddle of water around her feet to increase the discharge.

Roodaka released the rats. They burrowed enthusiastically into the boxes of food on the lower shelf. She somersaulted out of the wet spot, avoiding my next disintegration blast, and rolled onto her feet to fire a virulent burst of shadow energy at me. I skidded on my back across the floor and lay in shock, every joint in agony from the impact.

She approached me and hurled the insulated wristband at my head. Too dazed to avoid it, I watched the metal object strike my temple in a flash of blinding light. I heard it bounce and roll away. Then she leaned in close, suffusing me with her venomous breath. “You’re turning out to be entertaining prey,” she smiled, “if a little painful at times.”

I gathered my strength and waited until she got closer. “I’m tempted to keep you around,” she continued, “just to have something to practice on. But Makuta’s been a bad boy, so I’m going to get even with him by breaking his toy.”

I reached up over her head and grabbed her headpiece with both hands. Yanking down on it, I flipped myself over her head. She stood up with me hanging down her back. I wrapped my legs around her waist and jabbed the back of her head with my staff. Then she dove into a forward roll, crushing me under her weight. I let go and jumped back up.

Just as I turned to face her, I saw her flying at me, her foot forward. I ducked and shielded my head, the spikes of her heels grazing my forearm as she sailed over. I pivoted, took aim, and shot her in the back with a focused blast of destructive power.

Her whole body jerked with the impact. Running low on power and health, I gathered my strength for another shot before she could retaliate. She spun around and hissed, “You’re really beginning to tick me off.”

I hesitated. Should I try not to aggravate her any further, conserving my resources for what might be a long fight, or should I give it my all in hopes of taking her out? I decided on the latter, because the *Rahkshi* were surely on the way to help me. As I was deciding, Roodaka sprang like a voracious wildcat, and I opened fire with my staff. This blasted her backwards and away from me, but as I had feared, it also ignited her temper.

She knocked me onto my back with dark energy. “How dare you presume to refuse Roodaka her revenge,” she snarled. My ever-weakening bursts of destructive energy barely slowed her down her approach. Retreating against the shelves, I switched to water, but with my low energy, my fiercest jet was reduced to the splatter of a garden hose. As she reached down for my throat, I sprang forward with a roundhouse kick to her abdomen. She reeled back a few steps, then lunged forward with a punch so powerful it flew right through my pathetic attempt to block it with my arms. She hit me squarely in the chin.

The strange rattling sound inside my head would have frightened me if I had had time to think about it. I swung at her face, but she grabbed my arm and twisted it. As I arched my back in pain, I glanced up. Past her ravening gaze, I saw a box of flour. With my remaining hand I aimed my staff and shot a quick burst of disintegration.

An opaque white cloud filled the air and stuck to her dripping armor. Both of us began to cough. I wrenched my arm free from her grip and groped for the opening in the wall. Finally I felt the edges of the hole in the stone. I ducked inside and dashed for the other end. Ten feet into the hole, I slammed into a stretchy net of thick webbing and bounced backwards. The Visorak had evidently sealed off the opening so the Rahkshi couldn't interfere with Roodaka's fun. Through the fabric, I could hear sounds of a ferocious battle. With little strength for ranged powers anymore, I ripped at the strands with my axe.

At the sound of footsteps behind me, I threw on my Huna. Roodaka swept her hand through the air until she felt my shoulder. She flipped her palm up, jammed her clawed fingers into my chest just above my heart, and lifted me off the ground. "I'm not finished with you." I deactivated the Huna. She hauled me back into the bunker, where I pushed myself off her hand. Then she kicked me into the table.

My eyes were bleary with pain, but as I shoved the Huna onto my back, I thought I saw a Rahkshi emerging from a blur behind her. She heard a noise and whirled her head around. Without letting me go, she shot a bolt of shadow energy at the intruder. Shadrahk crumpled to the ground. Then she dispatched Telerahk in the same way just as he appeared. Shadrahk jumped back up, but she hit him with an even more powerful blast. "This teleportation thing has an obvious disadvantage," he said in a low voice to the other Rahkshi. "Get Disruptirahk. If anyone can power through these walls, he can." Still lying down, the teleportation Rahkshi disappeared.

I bludgeoned the back of Roodaka's head with my staff while she was distracted, but this didn't seem to have much of an effect. She dropped me with her elbow without even turning around. Then she strode over to Shadrahk, yanked open his carapace, and ripped out his kraata. She hurled the hapless Shadow across the room. Then she loomed over me and activated a mutation Rhotuka.

"Playtime is over," she sneered.

"Wait, Milady!" shouted Daisy. I hadn't seen her come in, but suddenly she was there, crouching between me and my assailant.

"Get out of my way, hordeling," growled Roodaka.

Daisy reared up on her hind legs and put her forelegs on Roodaka's arms. "Milady!" she snapped. "Don't disregard Lord Makuta's warning! You yourself said that if you destroyed the blue creature, it would probably backfire."

Scowling, Roodaka backhanded Daisy with her Rhotuka launcher, sending the spider flying backwards with a sickening crack. The creature's limp blue body sprawled against the wall. The shadow kraata, just about to crawl back into his damaged armor, flinched.

Then the Viceroy of the Visorak smiled devilishly. "On second thought, Daisy, I have a better use for her. An engagement gift! King Sidorak needs a plaything while I'm away, don't you think? Send her to Metru Nui, and tell him I've been hunting spies, and I've caught one that's

working for the Toa. He's welcome to imprison and intimidate her, but tell him not to kill her, because she has valuable secrets. Say, maybe if he has something to do, he'll stop calling me all the time, too."

"That sounds sensible, Milady," said Daisy feebly. "But what if she tells King Sidorak where you are?"

"He's not going to believe it," Roodaka scoffed. "Makuta is trapped on the Great Barrier, remember? The whole point of the movie is to show how Makuta was freed to wreak havoc later on. Oh, and to sell LEGO sets, mostly." She struck a pose.

Daisy raised her head slowly off the floor and chittered a command. Visorak streamed from the opening in the wall. They sprang on me and held down my arms and legs. Then they rolled me up in a thick swath of webbing and dragged me toward the exit. Satisfied, Roodaka spun on her spiked heel and strode out in front of them.

Shadrahk coughed. "Mistress... I'll..."

But the leader of the spiders interrupted him. "Don't even *think* about trying to play the hero, Lizard Boy." Her carapace dropped back down onto the stone.

"Get Therahk," Shadrahk gasped to the Rahkshi of Teleportation, who had just appeared.

As my head bumped along the rocky floor, I pondered how I had literally become entangled in the strands of a giant web of intertwined conspiracies. I could hear Roodaka's brisk footfalls ahead of us. It sounded like she was blasting any opposition we encountered. We reached the protodermis room, and I watched the shimmering pool of energized fluid slide past my blurry eyes. Then I was heaved out through the opening in the wall. I could hear the sound of the waves on the silver sea.

One Visorak tossed me to another and then dashed ahead to catch me again. They relayed me across the pontoons. Somewhere out in the middle of the sea I finally lost consciousness.

I came to in a dark room. Someone was prodding me as I lay on a hard surface, still bundled in the webbing. "A gift from Roodaka? Well, isn't that the eel's hips. Oh, sure, there's something I'd like her to give me, but it ain't a webbed Rahi."

"This is a spy, Boss," came a deferential reply. "Lady Roodaka captured her when she was out hunting. She works for the Toa. Lady Roodaka said you were welcome to imprison and intimidate her, but don't kill her, because she has valuable information."

My cocoon was torn open, and I found myself lying on the floor looking into the inquisitive eyes of the King of the Visorak. He poked an injury on my chest with one finger, and I flinched in pain. "So, she doesn't want me to rub out the little doll? Looks like some other cat already tried that."

“Well, Boss, that was actually Lady Roodaka. The spy put up a bit of a fight when she was caught.” The voice belonged to an Oohnorak. Overhead, I recognized the ceiling of the coliseum from the second Bionicle movie.

“You say she works for the Toa? What is she, a mutated Matoran?” asked a slightly larger black Visorak, leaning closer.

“If some spider got off the track, we could get in a jam with the Capo,” frowned Sidorak. “We aren’t supposed to operate that way.”

“She was already like this,” shrugged the messenger spider.

The King adjusted his head tubes as he stood up straight. “Well, I guess it’ll be fun to make her tip her mitt. But I just don’t get it. My sheba doesn’t stick around much lately. Why wouldn’t any broad want to bask in the reflection of this dapper Dan?” He put his fingertips on his wide, shiny red chest and tilted his chin up.

“Why, indeed,” echoed the larger Oohnorak.

“She’s making me goofy, always breezing out when I need her. With LEGO breathing down my neck to get all these Rahi wrapped, and now the waterfowl gumming up the works...”

A third black spider rushed into the room. “Boss, your voice coach is here,” he said with a bow.

“Aw, cripes!” exclaimed Sidorak. “Guess I’ll give the rag-a-muffin the third degree after my lesson. Nick, take her on down to the hoosegow.”

## 19. Queen for a Day

### Chris Isaak — *Wicked Game*

*The world was on fire and no one could save me but you.  
It's strange what desire will make foolish people do.  
I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you.  
And I never dreamed that I knew somebody like you.*

*No, I don't want to fall in love. (This world is only gonna break your heart)  
No, I don't want to fall in love. (This world is only gonna break your heart)  
With you. With you. (This world is only gonna break your heart)*

*What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way.  
What a wicked thing to do, to let me dream of you.  
What a wicked thing to say, you never felt this way.  
What a wicked thing to do, to make me dream of you and,*

*I want to fall in love. (This world is only gonna break your heart)  
No, I want to fall in love. (This world is only gonna break your heart)  
With you.*

*The world was on fire and no one could save me but you.  
It's strange what desire will make foolish people do.  
I never dreamed that I'd love somebody like you.  
And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you, no*

*Nobody loves no one.*

The larger Oohnorak pulled me to my feet. He waved a tarsal segment at the black spider who had summoned the King to his voice coaching lesson. “Come on, Lucky.”

The two Visorak led me to a flight of stairs. With no energy to fight, I stumbled along between them. My entire body was racked with pain, especially where Roodaka had driven her claws into my chest. A small amount of light blue fluid dribbled down my armor.

I peered apprehensively down the narrow staircase that spiraled into the dusty depths of the Coliseum. As my captors jostled me forward, I considered my situation. I had no idea what to expect from Sidorak’s interrogation, but with no real secrets to hide, I wasn’t afraid of betraying the Toa. Still, for my own safety, I resolved to tell him as little as possible, particularly about what was happening in Mangaia. The bright side of all this was that I was now much farther away from Makuta and Roodaka, and closer to the LEGO staff working on the film. If I could manage to convince Sidorak I was useless, perhaps he would release me, and I could go into the city and find the LEGO trailer Makuta had mentioned.

After a long journey through dark passageways and two more flights of stairs, Nick and Lucky shoved me into a room and bolted the door. I stretched out on the floor of the tiny stone cell. With nothing to do but wait, I quickly fell asleep.

I woke feeling stiff and achy. Nick was poking my side with a pincer. “Let’s go, Toa spy.” He and Lucky led me up the stairs again. This time we stopped at a side passage that opened out into a large room. It was empty except for a card table and two folding chairs. A single lightstone hanging over the table cast a feeble light. Nick gestured for me to sit down. Lucky left and returned with Sidorak.

The Visorak retreated outside the doorway. The King sat across from me. “All right, Toots, time to spill. What kind of Plan are the Toa cooking up?”

“I have no idea,” I shrugged.

Sidorak leaned forward. “Come on, now. I know you don’t want to peach on your bosses, but I’ve got an obedience spinner here, see? I’ll get the dope sooner or later.”

“I don’t work for the Toa,” I replied calmly.

“Well, who’s your boss, then? You a stoolie for LEGO?”

I shook my head. “I’m self-employed.”

The King of the Visorak rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure. And I work for MegaBlocs. You expect me to believe that’s the crop?”

“It’s the truth.”

“How did you end up tangling with Roodaka, then? She’s not one to be tooting the wrong wringer.”

“I guess I was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” I smiled. “And I look a little bit like a Toa.”

“Where were you when she pinched you?” he asked, absent-mindedly nudging his head tubes.

“In a tunnel,” I said vaguely.

“I get the feeling you aren’t on the square,” he frowned. “Guess I’ll have to do a number on you.” I shrank back in my seat, but as he readied a Rhotuka in his launcher, he reassured me, “Don’t fret, Toots. This won’t hurt a bit. Now, level with me!”

The wheel struck my chest, and its energy diffused through my body with an unpleasant jolt. I didn’t notice any other effect besides a slight tingling, but when he repeated his question about where I had been captured, this time I felt compelled to say, “In a bunker in Mangaia.”

Sidorak’s eyes widened. “What were you doing in the Head Honcho’s joint? Are you working for him?”

I nodded. “He hired me to write his biography.”

“But you were really peeping for the Toa,” he surmised.

“No, I don’t work for the Toa,” I insisted.

Sidorak leaned over and called toward the doorway. “Nick! Get in here!” The Oohnorak scuttled over next to him. “The girlie doesn’t know from nothing about the Toa’s Plan. She’s the Top Banana’s secretary. But she says Roodaka’s in Mangaia. Probably trying to earn brownie points rooting out double-crossers while he’s up on the Great Barrier in protodermis bracelets.”

“I see, Boss,” Nick nodded.

“You and Lucky go park Toots in the cooler again,” ordered the sovereign. “Then go to Mangaia and get the rumble on what Roodaka’s doing. Don’t let her see you. And get a wiggle on! Capeesh?”

“Right, Boss.”

The King stood up and strode out, brushing an invisible speck of dirt off his gleaming shoulder. Nick and Lucky returned me to my cell and left on their mission. I sat on the floor pondering for a while. Sidorak had gotten surprisingly little information from me, even with his obedience Rhotuka. But I was still a prisoner, and at some point, Roodaka would return for the filming. I looked at the featureless masonry walls. Putting my hands on the surface, I could feel weaknesses in the rock. Enough of my strength had returned that I could probably blast myself out, but that would draw attention to my location, and besides, where would I go? I didn’t know my way around the Coliseum at all. But once I was in the main arena, I could use my Huna to slip out the main gate. I decided to bide my time in the hopes that I would be brought there soon. So far Sidorak hadn’t shown any intent to harm me. And the more I could rest before the next challenge, the better. I went to sleep again.

Then the bolt on the door slid open, and an Oohnorak crept in. “The King requests your presence in the private dining room,” he announced, prodding me toward the doorway with his foreleg.

The creature marched me back up the stairs, into a room lined with dark wood paneling. Sidorak sat at the end of a long table covered by a red and white checkered cloth, staring at the sheaf of papers in his hand. A plate with a sandwich and pickle was in front of him. “You must be confused, Toa,” he said grandly, gesturing with his arm. “You must be confused, Toa. You must be *confused*, Toa.”

“That last time sounded pretty good, Boss,” said the Oohnorahk.

“Shut your yap,” snapped the King. He deepened his voice and repeated the line. “You *must* be *confused*, Toa.” Then he put down the script. “Oh, hello, Toots. Have a seat. Want a sandwich?” He pushed the chair next to him away from the table with his foot.

I sat down. “Yes, please.”

“Joe, get her a sandwich,” he ordered, and the spider scuttled into an adjoining kitchen. Then he looked at me again. “Since the Big Cheese can’t use your secretarial services at the moment, you’re working for me now. Call me ‘sir’ from now on. You ain’t much of a looker, but at least you have only two gams.”

I nodded, wondering what he wanted me to do. Joe brought a plate for me, and I waited for the King to take a bite before I did. We quietly ate our pastrami on rye while he flipped through the script. Finally he wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and looked up. He gestured at a side table with a manual typewriter. “Sit down at the mill over there, kid, and take a letter. Joe, get me a cup of joe.” The spider paused in confusion for a moment, then scurried back into the kitchen.

I moved to the smaller table, rolled a sheet of paper into the antique Olivetti, and put my fingers on the keys.

“Dearest Roodaka,” he began, “my only and forever true love.”

I typed his words. He sat silently for a few minutes, rubbing his chin. “Say, you’re a sister. What do you think I should say?”

“Uh... well, what are you trying to tell her, sir?” I asked cautiously.

“That if she sets me up me again to be bumped off by Keetongu, I’ll return the favor someday,” he replied with a sarcastic smile. “But in a nice way, so as to sound like a gentleman.”

“Hmm... Why don’t you emphasize the positive first? You could slip the threat between some pleasant words,” I suggested.

“Or,” he said slyly, “what about this? Write up a bunch of applesauce about what a doll she is first, and that way she’ll be all sweet on me. Then I’ll speak my piece. After that you can finish up all flowery. Yeah, that’s it. Sugar-coat it. I’m pretty smooth, eh? All right, get cracking.”

I blinked at the paper, at a total loss as to what to type. But I didn’t actually have to come up with anything, because at this moment Nick walked cautiously into the dining room.

“Nick! What’s the lay?”

“Well, Boss,” the large Oohnorak said hesitatingly, “it wasn’t easy getting in there. We ran into some Lorahk at the gate, but fortunately they were more interested in Lucky’s stash of beef jerky. Anyway, we confirmed that Lady Roodaka is indeed in Mangaia.”

“I know that already,” barked the King. “What was she doing? Was she tracking spies?”

“No, she, uh... well, she wasn’t doing much of anything.”

Sidorak raised his Rhotuka launcher. “Come on, punk! Out with it! Give me the rap!”

“She was visiting with Lord Makuta,” Nick explained quickly.

“Define ‘visiting’,” growled Sidorak.

The spider eyed the whirling energy wheel. “They were eating dinner. He was asking her questions. He wanted to know where his Chronicler was. And he was missing a couple of Rahkshi, too. Lady Roodaka told him the Chronicler ran away, probably with the help of the Rahkshi, but he didn’t seem to be buying it.”

Sidorak glanced at me. “That’s you, ain’t it, Toots?” He turned back to Nick. “Wow, I wonder how the Chief did the clean sneak. But, anyway, what else happened?”

“Well... then she started dancing for him.”

“Dancing!”

“Uh, yeah,” said Nick uneasily.

“What kind of dancing?” demanded the King.

“Just sort of... slithering around his chair.”

Sidorak’s fists clenched. “Then what? Wait, I don’t want to know. Actually, yes, I do. Give me the scoop.”

Nick cleared his throat. “She, uh, she slid onto his lap and put her arms around his neck. She started to whisper something, but then she spotted Lucky.”

With an inarticulate snarl, the ruler slammed his fists on the table, flipping the plate onto the floor and sending pages of the script fluttering everywhere. “Where is Lucky, anyway?” he grumbled.

Lucky emerged from a shadowy corner of the room. I suddenly noticed he had eight legs instead of four, and eight eyes as well.

“Lukkirak!” exclaimed the King. “For crying out loud!”

“Lady Roodaka mutated him—”

“I can see that, Nick. Jeepers creepers, a spider with eight legs! And how many eyes you got now?” Sidorak waved Lucky away. “Go on, scram. Hit the street. I don’t want a freak on my payroll. That’s downright unnatural.” He looked up as Joe set down a cup of coffee and quickly retreated.

Lucky's many eyes were downcast. He sidled back toward the exit. "It's been an honor working for you, Boss."

Nick watched his companion sadly. "I'll catch up with you after the movie," he said in a low voice.

"I don't know, Nick. I can't stay around here," Lucky whispered back. "The other spiders will torment me without mercy! I've got to go where my kind will be accepted. There's gotta be an island, somewhere..."

Feeling sorry for the mutated creature, I leaned toward him and said quickly, "Lucky, I know where you can go. Head back to Mangaia, and from the living room, take the main tunnel. Bring something smelly to distract the big crabs that guard the gate."

He nodded gratefully and skittered out.

Sidorak was obsessively stirring his coffee, grinding the spoon into the bottom of the cup. "I can't figure it," he muttered. "My moll, vamping the Top Dog! After all her sweet talk, too. She kept hanging on my neck and going on in that breathy voice about how I was such a handsome swell, and how she would love me forever. And now it turns out she was just feeding me a line. Ain't it just like a dame? You get all dizzy with her, and then she yanks your heart out and does the Jitterbug on it in spike heels."

Nick spoke sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Boss. This must be very painful."

"Lay off the sentimental hooey and help me figure out how to get even!" snapped the King. "So she takes me for a rube, eh? Trying to bunco me, play me like a palooka! But now that I'm wise to her, I'm gonna make her pay, see? I'm gonna tighten the screws on that—"

The spider finally interrupted him. "Success is the best revenge, Boss. You should show her how well you get along without her. Redouble the Rahi-webbing campaign, and surprise LEGO by finishing early."

"That'll never work," scoffed the sovereign. "I'd need her smarts to pull that off. And that reminds me. Without her, I'll never get those lousy penguins wrapped up." He let his face sink dejectedly into his hands, but then he quickly raised his head and straightened his tubes. He caught me glancing at him. "What are you looking at, Toots?"

"Uh, nothing. I didn't mean to stare, sir."

"Do *you* think I'm handsome, at least?"

"Well, uh, sure," I replied nervously.

Sidorak studied at his reflection in his spoon and buffed a spot on his chest with his napkin. Then he laid down the spoon and looked at me. “Say, I’ve got it! I’ll make *you* my Queen! That’ll show that two-timing gold-digger!”

My jaw dropped open in dismay. Nick’s eyes grew wide. “Boss, that’s a little drastic, don’t you think? I mean, the LEGO people are really not going to like it.”

“What they don’t know won’t hurt ‘em. It’s not like Roodaka ever takes the job in the storyline.”

“But what would that mean for your engagement to Lady Roodaka? And what about your Plan to defeat the Toa this time?”

“*She* sure doesn’t seem to give a rat’s tail about our engagement,” snorted Sidorak. “And I’ll come up with a new Plan of my own, so I can beat the rap and rule the Visorak without her.”

“But speaking of the Visorak, Boss, this is really going to confuse them. When Lady Roodaka brings Vakama Hordika to our side, the chain of command is going to get really complicated.”

Sidorak burst out laughing. “Say, Toots is her boss now! Oh, I can’t wait to watch her pitch a hissy fit. This is gonna be a real lollapalooza.” He rubbed his hands together with glee.

Imagining Roodaka’s reaction, I decided to speak up. “King Sidorak, I think it would be presumptuous of me to take Lady Roodaka’s rightful place.”

“Listen, kid, I hate to disappoint you,” he said gently, “but you won’t really be taking her place. You and me, we won’t be getting cozy. This Queen gig is just a formality.”

This was certainly a relief, but I still had no desire to rule a horde of spiders by the side of a vain gangster. “But, sir, I doubt if the Visorak are going to think much of me. I’m not a military leader.”

He rolled his eyes. “They’ll think what I tell ‘em to think. And if the Big Man really wants his girl Friday back, he’ll have to offer me some swag. Nick, go gather the troops for the big announcement.”

“All right, Boss,” sighed his dark minion. “But shouldn’t we clean her up a bit first?”

Sidorak looked me over. “Absotively. She’s a real mess. Take her in the kitchen, Joe, and hose her down.”

Joe led me into the back and stood me over a floor drain. He poured a bucket of water on me, sponged the fluid off my chest with some dish soap, and rinsed me again. I didn’t help him with my water powers because I didn’t want anyone to know I had any.

At first I considered using my disintegration staff and Huna to escape before this strange presentation ceremony. But as Joe dried me with a dish towel, I decided to go along for the time

being. I would probably just get lost in the winding corridors of the Coliseum, and even if I did make it to the great hall, the Visorak would all be assembled there waiting for me, making escape unlikely. But as soon as they were loyal to me, I could find an excuse to travel into the city and seek refuge in the LEGO trailer before Roodaka returned.

Only a few hours after being imprisoned, beaten, and imprisoned again, I stood on a balcony overlooking the main floor of the coliseum. The King adjusted his head tubes, put his arm around me, and announced, “This is a historic day. Remember how you never got a Queen last time around? Well, this time you will. Meet Queen, uh...” He leaned toward me and whispered, “What’s your moniker, Toots?”

Not wishing to give him my real name, I stammered the first word that came to mind. “Blue.”

“Queen Blue,” he finished with a flourish of his hand. “You will serve her faithfully. Unless, of course, I change my mind and want her zotzed.”

The din of a thousand sets of chattering mandibles rang in my ears as I waved queasily to my new subjects.

## 20. Operation Penguin

### *The Specials — Ghost Town*

*This town, is coming like a ghost town  
All the clubs have been closed down  
This place, is coming like a ghost town  
Bands won't play no more  
too much fighting on the dance floor*

*Do you remember the good old days  
Before the ghost town?  
We danced and sang,  
And the music played inna de boomtown*

*This town, is coming like a ghost town  
Why must the youth fight against themselves?  
Government leaving the youth on the shelf  
This place, is coming like a ghost town  
No job to be found in this country  
Can't go on no more  
The people getting angry*

*This town, is coming like a ghost town  
This town, is coming like a ghost town*

As the mass of Visorak in the Coliseum snapped their pincers together in excitement over their new Queen, Joe tapped Sidorak on the arm with his front leg. “Boss, your acting coach is here.”

“Caramba!” spat the King. He turned and dismissed the throng, and they began to swarm out of the hall. “Nick, take Blue down to Roodaka’s pad and get her comfortable. She might as well shack up there, now that the she-Kavinika has dusted out.”

Nick and Joe complied, leading me down a passageway into the back of the building. They swung open a massive set of double stone doors engraved with a giant script ‘R.’ Then they stood aside to let me enter a dark cavern with a high, curved ceiling.

I caught my breath as I walked into the private suite of the Viceroy of the Visorak. A rainbow of different-colored lightstones cast a surreal glow over upholstered lounge chairs and ornate cabinets. A marble-lined bathroom and a large canopy bed were visible behind sheer curtains of webbing suspended in arched doorways. The place smelled faintly of poisonous flowers.

The two Boggarak who had followed us flanked the doors. “Let your guards know if you need anything, my Queen,” said Nick with a slight bow.

Turning to watch the doors close behind them, I couldn’t help but notice the enormous portrait looming above the lintel. The oil-painted Roodaka stood proudly, her head cocked slightly to one side, shoulders thrown back, chest thrust forward, one hand on a tilted hip. A very realistically

rendered Boggarak almost seemed to squirm under her foot. I took my eyes off this mesmerizing image and cautiously began to explore my new quarters.

The living room was ordinary enough, apart from the odd combination of Victorian furniture and psychedelic lighting. The bathroom, however, contained a laboratory. Next to the intricately carved onyx tub and pedestal sink was a long counter with shelves above it. Rows of colored fluids and powders were stored in hand-blown glass containers, carefully labeled in Matoran lettering. Racks of test tubes, beakers, tongs, a mortar and pestle, and a Bunsen burner were neatly lined up against the backsplash. The heady aroma was making me dizzy, so I hurried on to the bedroom. The oversized wooden bed frame was artfully draped in amazingly beautiful spiderwebs with pictures woven into them. Abstract floral designs were twined around action scenes, mostly of spiders attacking Rahi. I noticed tiny images of Roodaka, too, but none of Sidorak. The bed itself looked soft and inviting, with silky white sheets and a fluffy duvet. I started to put my hand on it, but I quickly withdrew it. Something about this bed made me uneasy.

I walked to the doors and knocked, anxious to begin my escape Plan before the usual occupant returned. A Boggarak opened one of them with a loud creak, and I asked her to take me outside for a walk. She nodded and chattered to her comrade. One in front and one behind me, the two spiders guided me to the main hall. There the first one held up her foreleg, evidently wanting us to wait. She walked over to Nick, who was talking to a group of Suukorak. He turned to us and nodded. Then he sent one of the Suukorak away.

Nervously, I asked the second Boggarak, "What are they doing?" She tried to explain, but her high-pitched sounds had no meaning to me. Worried that I would get locked up for attempting to leave, I glanced around to see what I would have to blast through to escape.

Then the Suukorak returned holding a gray object. Nick scuttled over and handed it to me. I recognized a Great Rau like the one Toa Nokama wore. "Take this mask, Queen Blue. It will enable you to understand those of us who aren't Oohnorak."

I thanked him and put on the Kanohi, and we continued out of the building. I felt great relief to be leaving, but I still worried that my Plan was going almost too smoothly. I became aware that the blue spiders flanking me were speaking. "My Queen?" asked one of them in a high-pitched, metallic voice. "Where would you like to go?"

"Oh, uh, let's just look around a bit," I smiled. They introduced themselves as Babs and Sheila and then fell silent again as we stepped out the enormous gates of the Coliseum.

If I had been expecting to get some light and fresh air outside, I would have been disappointed. The devastation spread out before me was overwhelming. Broken buildings were silhouetted in the dim gloom of the two moons, ankle-deep rubble covered the ground, and thick, green webbing shrouded the entire cityscape. The sour, dusty air was almost painful to breathe. I picked my way slowly through the debris. The spiders bounded over it effortlessly.

Where, I wondered, would LEGO set up a trailer in this desolate metropolis? Probably close to the place most of the movie scenes would be shot, but without being visible in the background. I asked my Boggarak guards to take me around the neighborhood of the Coliseum. I figured the trailer might be behind a nearby building, or what was left of one.

The spiders were quite chatty, pointing out places of interest. Babs gestured at a long, low building with a courtyard. "That's where a team of Suukorak and Vohtarak cornered a Kraawa, my Queen," she explained in her tinny voice. "It was a fierce fight, to be sure!"

"And over there, my Queen," added Sheila proudly, waving her tarsal segment at a wrecked bridge over a protodermis canal, "we captured a whole hive of Nui-Rama by spinning an enormous web and driving them into it. It took Visorak of every breed working together."

We made a wide circle around the giant spire of the Coliseum, which, in spite of the intense events of the second Bionicle movie, still appeared intact. The ruins of the Great Furnace loomed in the gritty distance, a thin curl of smoke still rising. Distant Knowledge Towers, sheared off at random angles, formed a jagged horizon. Most of the low structures around us seemed to have been utility buildings to support activities at the Coliseum.

The spiders' conversation seemed limited to Rahi conquests, so I began to ask questions. "Do you two usually work for Roodaka?"

"Fortunately not, my Queen!" exclaimed Babs.

Sheila shook her carapace from side to side.

In a quiet voice, I asked, "I gather she's hard to work for?"

Sheila looked around cautiously, then whispered, "She's a very harsh mistress. About ten minutes after she first gathered her bodyguard team, she selected one of them at random and ordered all the others to kill her, just to show everyone who's in charge."

"We just got hired to protect you because we're girls," said Babs brightly.

"So, what's going on with the filming right now?" I asked.

"I'm not sure exactly, my Queen," Babs shrugged. "I think the Toa Hordika are getting their pep talk from the Rahaga. Vakama will desert them soon, and then we Visorak get to capture him and drag him to Lady Roodaka. I love that part."

"And then we're all extras in the scene where they introduce him to the horde as the new commander."

"It was a lot like when King Sidorak introduced you," remarked Babs.

"I wonder why there wasn't a wedding," mused Sheila. "You were just suddenly Queen."

Babs ground her mandibles. “They say there’s always good cake at weddings.”

“Mmm, cake,” Sheila agreed. When I remained silent, she asked, “My Queen, did LEGO add you to the storyline just to make the movie more interesting?”

“No, I’m not in the storyline. I’m just filling in while Roodaka’s gone, I guess.”

“Well, if it’s the King’s will that you should be Queen, then that’s good enough for us,” she said with a little bow.

I watched carefully for landmarks to keep my bearings. When we had almost completed a circle, I finally saw what I was seeking. Down a dark alley, not far from the main gates of the Coliseum, was a red trailer with yellow and blue trim and a large LEGO sign on the side. It was the only object I had seen that wasn’t draped with green spiderwebs. A single bulb on the porch pierced the gloom with golden light. My heart leaped with hope. “Let’s go down that way,” I suggested as casually as I could manage.

We approached the small building. Hands shaking, I walked up the steps and reached for the knob. But the door was locked. I rapped on the door and peered through a window. A couple of lights had been left on, but apparently no one was there. I lay my mask dejectedly against the glass and closed my eyes.

“Oh, of course, my Queen!” said Sheila suddenly. “It’s Sunday. They always shut down and take a day off. They’ll be back tomorrow.”

Forcing a smile, I rejoined the two Boggarak. “All right. Well, let’s head back to the Coliseum.” As they fell into position on either side of me, I glanced around at the blighted city and added, “And thanks for taking me on this tour. It’s been very... interesting.”

“It’s our pleasure, my Queen,” Babs chirped.

We left the passage and turned onto a narrow street. But as we passed another alley, Sheila stopped. “Babs, did you hear—”

Suddenly I felt an impact to my back, and I was pushed face first to the ground. Snarling sounds came from all around. I rolled over to see a pack of Kavinika surrounding me and my guards. The one that had just knocked me down was standing over me, about to lunge for my throat. “Stop, dog!” I barked.

The sound of its own language coming from its intended victim must have startled it, because it paused long enough for Babs to kick it off me with her rear leg. I jumped up and focused my energy through my staff. A blast of disintegration power sent the canine shooting backwards through the side of a building.

The other Kavinika growled in rage. As one, they pounced on us. As I blocked another assault with my staff, out of the corner of my eye I saw Babs and Sheila subdue their assailants with deadly precision. Their acrobatic kicks and pincer snaps soon reduced the slavering wolves to whimpering dogs, their movements defensive now. Finally the curs had had enough and turned tail to run. But Sheila shot a paralysis spinner at the lead dog. It collapsed instantly, and the others tumbled over it. The Visorak pounced on the weakened animals and swiftly wrapped them up in webbing. When one canine staggered back to its feet, Babs delivered a karate-style blow to send it sprawling, then spun green fiber around it. In a few minutes, seven Kavinika lay in cocoons on the pavement.

I stared at the stack of green bundles. Babs powered up another Rhotuka, and I looked up. The Kavinika that had first attacked me was crawling out of the shattered wall. It started to run down the street, but the energy wheel struck its back. With an eerie hissing sound, the creature shriveled to dust before my eyes. A gust of wind swirled it away.

“My bad,” Babs apologized. “I know we’re supposed to web them for posterity, but that one attacked my Queen.”

“Do all the Visorak fight like you two?” I asked in amazement.

“No, my Queen, we’ve had some special combat training,” replied Sheila. “But what you did was really incredible. Do all, uh, mutated Matoran have staff powers like you?”

“Well, no. I’m... one of a kind,” I smiled back.

Nick was waiting for us when we came in. “My Queen, the King wants to see you in the dining room.”

My guards led me there. Sidorak, sitting at the end of the table, looked up from his coffee and his script. “Well, it’s about time, Toots,” he grumbled. “You haven’t even been Queen for a day, and already you’re skipping out on me. Nick, why is it I always attract dames who like to travel?”

“I really couldn’t say, Boss,” came the dutiful answer.

The King adjusted his head tubes and answered his own question. “Must be my worldly charm. Anyway, kid, before I get back to the battlefield, you get to help me with my lines. Read Roodaka’s part. Here, take a load off your dogs.” He pushed out a chair and slid the script over a little. I sat down and looked where he was pointing.

Sidorak cleared his throat and read theatrically, “On your feet, thing!” Then he paused for the imaginary Keetongu to attempt vainly to rise. “The final blow is yours, Roodaka.”

As I opened my mouth to deliver Roodaka’s line, Joe burst in. “Pardon the interruption, Boss, but there’s been another request for troops from the penguin front.”

“What kind of caper is Sam trying to pull now?” Sidorak groaned.

“Well, he finally figured out where the penguins are hiding when they’re not in the water,” the Oohnorak explained. “His theory is that they’re going inside a hollow glacier.”

Nick frowned. “We just sent him an extra division of Boggarak. As I recall, he was going to have them use their floater spinners on the penguins.”

“Yes, he tried that,” Joe nodded. “Unfortunately, the birds just started diving deeper, except when they’re so far out to sea the Boggarak can’t hit them.”

“So, how exactly will having more Boggarak help?” asked Nick skeptically.

“He’s going to use their sonic hum power to vaporize the glacier,” Joe explained.

“How big is this glacier?”

“Oh, maybe a thousand bios across at the base, a couple hundred bios high.”

Nick sighed. “About the same thickness as Sam’s fool head, it would seem.”

“Well,” declared Sidorak, “hustle some more Boggarak out there, then. Tell Sam to plow through that hunk of ice and get a move on!”

“Boss, I think we should go take a look before we just throw more troops at the problem,” said Nick.

“Hmm, you may be right. They probably do need my wisdom out in the field,” announced the king, rising to his feet. “Let’s ankle, Toots. There’s gonna be some action to write about. You may be Queen now, but you can still gin up a story for me, eh?”

I was apprehensive about watching this hunt, because I knew my sympathies would be with the prey. But with nothing else to do besides wait for the LEGO trailer to open again in the morning, I went along without resistance. We filed out of the dining room, and Joe led us to a garage at the back of the Coliseum.

“Hop into my jalopy, kid.” Sidorak gestured at an open carriage made of Vahki parts and sheet metal suspended between two long Technic rods. I climbed into the strange contraption, and Sidorak sat by me on the red upholstered seat. He checked his head tubes in the shiny metal surface before yelling, “All right, let’s blow this joint!” Four Roparak lifted the rods and carried us on a long trek through Ko-Metru, with Nick and Joe scuttling ahead of us. The dusty piles of shattered crystal that littered the ground looked like drifts of dirty snow. Finally we reached the edge of the Metru. A glacier of frozen liquid protodermis stood on a low bluff overlooking a frigid bay. Visorak of every breed were arrayed in groups around the base of the glacier. They stopped squabbling when they saw the King’s entourage.

Under the supervision of a red spider, a dozen blue Visorak were crouching at the base of the glacier, emitting an intense low-frequency hum. Fizzing noises issued from the monolith as its surface was sublimated into gas.

“Samirak!” yelled Nick.

The Vohtarak waved and replied in a metallic whine which became intelligible when I activated my Rau. “Did you bring me some more Boggarak?”

“No, I brought you some common sense instead,” retorted the black spider. “It’s going to take you weeks to get through all that ice.”

“So what? We’ll break through eventually. Until then, we maintain the siege, so they can’t escape. Hello, Boss.” He bowed to the approaching King.

The ruler stepped up onto a crag of ice and surveyed the area. “Where are the penguins, Sam?”

“They’re inside the glacier, Boss,” answered Sam. “They can’t be anywhere else, because I’ve had the place surrounded for a long time.”

“Long enough that your casualties from friendly fire are adding up,” grumbled Nick. He looked at me carefully and then turned to Sidorak. “Boss, we Visorak can’t swim, but Queen Blue looks like a water creature. Maybe she could go take a look.”

Sidorak scratched his chin. “Toots, go case the underwater situation.”

“Uh, I don’t really think—” I protested.

Sidorak raised his Rhotuka launcher. I quickly dove off the cliff to avoid the energy wheel, but I felt hit my back anyway. Just before I plunged into the chilly water, I heard him shout, “Come right back and give us the rundown.” I activated my Kaukau Nuva and headed obediently for the glacier.

A few minutes of exploring revealed what the penguins were doing. I followed one into an underwater tunnel. At sea level, the passageway became a flight of stairs chiseled into the ice, and I donned my Huna. It finally emerged in a large hollow space. Inside, the birds had stockpiled mounds of fish. Several dozen of the stocky biomechanical water fowl were eating while others arrived with more of the deep-sea catch. I slipped behind a lump of ice, put on my Rau, and listened as their strange chattering became words. Evidently they were prepared to survive this way until the Visorak went away—for centuries, if necessary.

I returned to Sidorak and explained what I had seen and heard. “Well, my idea has paid off handsomely!” he crowed. He picked up a smooth piece of broken crystal to admire his reflection and align his head tubes. “But that figures, eh?”

Nick was nudging his master’s arm and whispering, “See if she has an idea, Boss.”

“Oh, right. Well, Toots, tell us what to do. Should we bust up the glacier?”

I shook my head slowly. “A good tactician once explained to me why a siege is often a disaster for the attacking army. The commander loses patience and starts wasting troops on unwise, futile attacks.”

Nick rolled his eyes at Sam. Sidorak nodded. “Go on.”

“So you need to retreat and let the penguins think you’ve given up. Then they might come out.”

Sam grudgingly agreed to this plan. In a loud voice, he ordered his spiders to withdraw. They regrouped behind some nearby Knowledge Tower ruins. I sat in the chariot next to the King. As the twin moons crept higher in the sky, he pulled a chamois cloth from under the seat and began to shine his armor, starting at his shoulders.

The obedience spinner began to wear off. I glanced furtively at Sidorak, who was completely absorbed in his grooming, and realized this would be my only chance to warn the penguins. I put on my Huna and dropped quietly onto the icy ground. But then I felt pincers close around my waist. “Where are you going, my Queen?” said Nick in a low voice.

I yanked the Mask of Concealment off my face. “Uh, I just wanted to sneak up for a closer look,” I whispered back.

“You’d better stay put. They might hear you,” he warned.

I climbed reluctantly back into the carriage. As I sat down next to the oblivious King, I reminded myself that the LEGO trailer, and the freedom it represented, was only one day away.

Sidorak was polishing one of his knees when a penguin emerged from the water onto the shore at the bottom of the cliff and looked around. The bird plunged back into the water and soon returned with the whole flock. Overjoyed with their new freedom from danger, they frolicked and cavorted in the surf, waddling up steps in the cliff and riding down the glacier like a big water slide.

Sam waved his foreleg. I watched with horror as the spiders sprang out of their hiding places and dropped the unsuspecting penguins with paralysis spinners. The few that managed to get into the water were snared by the Boggarak’s floatation Rhotuka. Then the Visorak rappelled down the cliff on green strands onto the beach. With cold efficiency, the arachnids pounced on their victims and webbed them tightly into cocoons. Soon they were stacked like cordwood against the base of the glacier.

On the way back to the Coliseum, Sidorak prattled on about his army’s success while I sat with my arms crossed, brooding. Furious at the way I had been used to capture innocent creatures, I bitterly regretted coming along at all. The notion that the King might have made me do it anyway brought little consolation. Then my thoughts turned to the evil mastermind who had engineered

this entire conquest, hiring the cruel overseers and unleashing the relentless horde on innumerable peace-loving animals so he could one day dominate all life. It was his fault I was here in the first place, and he had given me the powers I had been coerced into using.

Sidorak's voice finally drifted into my awareness. "Sheesh, Toots, you sure are in a lather about something! Oh, you must be hungry. We'll have dinner as soon as we get back. And then you can chronicle my latest triumph. It's gonna be darb having my own newshawk on staff." He returned to his preening as the buckboard swayed through the ruined streets. I returned to my daydreams of escape. I just had to make it through one more night.

## 21. The Old Timer

### **The Cars — Just What I Needed**

*I don't mind you comin' here  
And wastin' all my time  
'cause when you're standin' oh so near  
I kinda lose my mind  
It's not the perfume that you wear  
It's not the ribbons in your hair  
I don't mind you comin' here  
And wastin' all my time*

*I don't mind you hangin' out  
And talkin' in your sleep  
It doesn't matter where you've been  
As long as it was deep, yeah  
You always knew to wear it well and  
You look so fancy I can tell  
I don't mind you hangin' out  
And talkin' in your sleep*

*I guess you're just what I needed  
(just what I needed)  
I needed someone to feed  
I guess you're just what I needed  
(just what I needed)  
I needed someone to bleed*

*Yeah, yeah, so bleed me  
Yeah, you're just what I needed  
Yeah, yeah yeah*

The King of the Visorak led me into the dining room and settled into his usual chair, where a plate with a sandwich awaited him. He gestured for me to sit at the opposite end of the table. A sumptuous feast of roast duck, wild rice, fresh-baked bread, and spiced apples was spread out before me. “I don’t know if you fancy high-class grub, kid, but the chefs are used to cooking for What’s-Her-Name. Dig in.”

I sat down. If I hadn’t felt so angry at Sidorak about the capture of the penguins, so guilty for my part in it, and so anxious to escape, I would have been delighted by the fare.

Sidorak took a big bite of his sandwich. “Nick,” he said in a muffled voice, “now that the hellcat has run out on me, I can’t count on her to pretend to whack me before Keetongu does. How am I going to keep that big yellow lug from bumping me off for real during the filming?”

“Well, Boss,” replied his assistant, scratching his carapace with the tip of a foreleg, “maybe you could negotiate some kind of arrangement with Keetongu, so that *he* will pretend to kill you.”

“Deal with that goon? No dice. He’ll just pocket the cabbage and bop me anyway.” The King continued to chew thoughtfully. “Hey, how about I sic the Zivon on him? It’ll be swell to watch him crumple like a cheap card table.”

Nick shuddered. “Boss, let’s not go there again. You know no one can really control what that thing does.”

“I can,” retorted Sidorak, gesturing at his Rhotuka launcher. “Just watch me. I’ll have it under my thumb in a New York minute.”

“Uh, maybe so, Boss, but LEGO won’t like it if you kill Keetongu. He’s supposed to show up again in that *Time Trap* book that comes out after the movie.”

“So they delete his cameo. Whoop de do. It’s not like the book is printed yet.”

“Maybe you could still make it look like Lady Roodaka kills you,” suggested Nick. “Even if she’s not in on it, you could act like she pushes you off the balcony or something. We’ll rig a safety net for you.”

“I’m going to have a hard enough time keeping myself from pushing *her* off the balcony,” muttered Sidorak.

I stirred my rice with my fork, wondering at what hour the LEGO trailer would open again. Then it occurred to me I had no way of knowing the current time. There were no windows in the Coliseum, and even if there were, the sunless sky wouldn’t tell me whether it was night or day. I didn’t much feel like waiting for breakfast. I remembered the giant sundial behind the throne room from the second movie. Maybe Babs and Sheila would take me there.

Sidorak was waving at me across the table. “Hey, Toots, you’re going goofy on me. Penny for your thoughts.”

I blinked at him. “Oh, sorry, I was just daydreaming.” I ate a forkful of rice. Then I decided I might as well ask him. “King Sidorak, what time is it, please?”

He pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch and flipped it open. “Eight thirty. Kind of late for dinner, but it was worth it. History will thank me for the story of that last heist. As soon as you pound it out on the mill for me, that is. I’ll help you with the names and whatnot after supper.”

“I’m really tired, sir,” I smiled weakly, dreading another narcissistic dictation session. Besides, I wanted to be left alone to plan my escape. “Mind if we start on the writing tomorrow?”

“Suit yourself,” he shrugged. “I’ve got plenty of time. My scenes don’t start up again until the witch captures Vakama, and she’s not even back yet.” He started to close his watch, but then he looked at it again with surprise. Frowning, he shook it and held it next to his head. “That’s funny. The gizmo has gone all screwy.”

Joe burst into the room, panting. “Boss, a great big guy just came into the Coliseum asking for you. He didn’t give his name. He just said you’ll know him by the trail of dead. And everyone who has approached him has instantly withered to dust!”

“Take a deep breath, Joe, and try to stop twitching,” said Sidorak with mild annoyance. “What did he say? I’ll know him by the trail of dead?”

Joe inhaled and exhaled. “Yes, that’s what he said.”

The King grinned. “That could be just about any of my pals from the old days. What color is he?”

“Mostly red, yellow, and black. And he’s really buff.” Joe suppressed a twitch.

“Oh, that would probably be Voporak, then,” nodded Sidorak. Then his smile faded. “Uh, oh. I’m really in the doghouse now.”

“Why, Boss?” asked Nick. “Who is this guy?”

The King set down his sandwich. “He used to be *my* boss, until Roodaka and I double-crossed him. She was engaged to him at the time.”

Nick stiffened. He shouted at Joe to get more guards.

“Don’t bother,” interrupted Sidorak. “Troops are toast around this fella. He’s got some kind of creepy time power. Just come on down here, all of you, and stand around me.” The two spiders and I gathered around his seat. Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway. The King rose as a bulky bipedal being ducked through the doorway.

The newcomer looked as if a red creature of Sidorak’s species had been fused with a silver and black suit of Exo armor. Bright flecks of yellow studded his body like caution signs. He bristled with heavy weapons, one of which incorporated a Rhotuka launcher. He stopped and stared at Sidorak.

The ruler of the Visorak cleared his throat. “Hello, Voporak.”

“Sid,” came the cold reply.

“Want a sandwich?” asked Sidorak nervously.

“Naah. I’ll just scarf Roodaka’s chow.” Voporak sat down in front of my meal. Suddenly I noticed that the duck had become dry and the apples shriveled. The hulking creature ripped apart the bird and chomped it up, bones and all, as it turned to jerky. Then he shoveled down the desiccated rice and fruit with his fork. He reached for the glass, but the water had already evaporated.

“Joe, get our guest some more water,” said Sidorak.

Joe shivered. Then his expression brightened. He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a large glass pitcher full of water. He pushed a roll of wax paper toward Voporak, unrolling it into a long runner. Then he rubbed the bottom of the pitcher with an oil-soaked napkin, set it on the table next to Sidorak, and slid it toward Voporak at the other end.

Voporak caught it by the handle. It was half empty by now. Drinking directly from the pitcher, he probably managed to swallow about a cup of liquid. He popped the hard, dry bread into his mouth and crunched it up. Then he looked up Sidorak again. “Where is the little woman, anyway?”

“She’s, ah, she’s out hunting.”

“Hunting what? Her next mark? You ain’t long for this world, if I’ve got the storyline straight in my noodle.” Voporak tapped the side of his head with his finger.

Sidorak shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Well, that’s what LEGO thinks. We’ll see what really ends up going down.”

“You’re not counting on any help from the Voluptuous One, I hope?”

“Not for my backup Plan.”

“Well, at least you learned something from the way I futzed up,” said his former employer, wiping his mouth with the napkin. “Never trust a skirt.” He gazed wistfully at the empty pitcher. Joe retrieved another one from the kitchen and slid it to him, and he drank thirstily.

The King ventured to break the silence. “I heard the rumble you got some kind of fabulous time power now.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I have a defensive time field around me that ages everything lickety-split. And I’m specially mutated to seek out the Great Mask of Time. Plus, I’m packing.” He patted his weapons. “The spinner knocks a gee right out of time by a few seconds. He misses his timing on his intended targets, his snappy comebacks, everything.”

“That’s really keen!” exclaimed Sidorak with forced enthusiasm. “At least you got a swell heater out of the deal. I bet no one gives you any lip anymore.”

“Oh, yeah, I should be thanking you for glomming my moll and selling me down the river. It’s a great gig.” Voporak stretched his massive legs. “Except that I can’t eat my bread before it turns to hard tack, I can’t get close to a dame without turning her into an old crone, and I gotta sit on stone furniture.” At this moment the chair under him split, its wood decomposed and weakened by time. He caught his balance and stood up. Then he moved over and sat in the next chair.

Sidorak jumped back a step. “Sorry, pal. If I had known they were gonna do *that* to you—”

“Don’t ‘Sorry, pal’ me. You knew the Brotherhood of Makuta wasn’t going to give me a shave and a haircut and send me home.” Voporak glowered at his treacherous underling. “I should have known by the way you and Roodaka kept making eyes at each other that something was brewing. And that travel package you gave us as an engagement gift was *so* thoughtful. Too bad the ‘casino resort with full-service spa’ turned out to be a Brotherhood fortress.”

Joe patted the top of his carapace with his foreleg and gave Nick a puzzled look. “Haircut?” he whispered.

“Say, after the movie, when I manage to escape, re-gather the Visorak, and take over the world, I’ll give you a cut of the loot. You know, to make it up to you,” the King offered anxiously.

“All the mazuma in the world can’t make me happy now,” sighed the time-bending creature, “because I’ve got no hope of love. All I’ve got to live for now is revenge. Roodaka’s going to do the dirty work for me in your case, so I’m not going to bother with you.”

A relieved smile crossed Sidorak’s face, and he sat down.

“But I’m looking forward to delivering some payback to Makuta,” continued Voporak.

“Throw some extra lead his way for me,” muttered the King.

“If you’ve got a beef with your boss, you should try working for the Shadowed One.”

Sidorak gave him a puzzled look. “Wait a second. You’re on the Dark Hunters’ side now?”

“For the time being.” The hulking visitor explained. “Makuta sent me over there for some training. The crazy thing is, he and the Shadowed One are both trailing the Vahi, so I end up fighting him in *Time Trap*. I can’t wait to blow away all his Rahkshi again. Of course, he does suffocate me with vacuum power, but I survive.”

“You lucky stiff,” remarked the King.

“Me, lucky?” Voporak asked incredulously as his second chair collapsed. He moved one place closer to us. “Sid, look at my life, and look at yours. You got no reason to be bellyaching. You got a whole horde of spiders at your command. And sure, you’ll meet an untimely death because you have the jones for an underhanded broad who’s going to turn on you and set you up to be rubbed out like yesterday’s math lesson on the blackboard. But she’s the most gorgeous thing in Bionicle, and she’s yours for now. *Carpe diem*, my friend!”

Sidorak leaned his head dejectedly on his hand.

“Let me guess,” Voporak smirked. “She’s already breezed out on you?”

“Yeah. If it makes you feel any better, she’s shacked up with Makuta right now,” growled Sidorak.

The visitor raised an eyebrow. “No fooling? He’s a busy fellow, what with all his world domination plans. I didn’t know he had time for dames.”

“Evidently he’s got time for mine,” griped the ruler of the Visorak.

“Don’t tell me you’re surprised. You saw what she did to me, obviously. And before us, there was some green egg from her home island. She did him wrong, too. Left him to die on a carnivorous mountain, I heard.”

“No, she didn’t. He tried to push her off. She was just lucky the mountain got him first,” protested the King.

“Is that the line she fed you?” chuckled Voporak. “Well, don’t feel too blue, old pal. If she’s singing her siren song to Makuta now, he’ll be hurting sooner or later. And it looks like you’ve already found a new Jane to fill the vacancy.” He gestured at me.

“You mean Toots here? Naw, she’s just doing some typing for me.”

“Well, if you don’t want her, give her to me,” suggested Voporak. “You owe me.”

My eyes widened with fear. Sid put his arm around my waist. “Actually, I do want her. Sure, her chassis may be on the scrawny side, but she’s a smart cookie. She inspired me to a pull off a really tricky job today.”

There was a tense pause while Voporak stared at me. Then, to my immense relief, he rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, all right, keep her. I’ll consider it your last wish before your execution. She probably wouldn’t have lasted more than a couple weeks around me, anyway, even if I tried really hard not to age her.”

“Thanks, bub. Because she’s also part of my own personal payback plan for Roodaka. I made her Queen, just so I can watch Roodaka boil over.” Sidorak smiled slyly.

“Hold up, Sid. You’re burning some bridges. What happens when Roodaka asks you to take her back?”

Sidorak snorted with disdain. “I won’t take that minx back. Now way, no how.”

“You know you will.” Voporak shook his head. “No one can resist Roodaka.”

“Well, *I* can.”

“Ooh, the way she used to walk those mesmerizing claws up my chest... her gently swaying headpiece... her ebony curvaciousness... her beguiling venomous scent...”

Sidorak's eyes grew distant. Then he frowned. "Knock it off, Voporak. I'm through with that she-devil, see?"

"Hey, at least she didn't turn you into a freak of nature," shrugged Voporak.

The King smoothed his head tubes. "Yeah, but these good looks are just going to go to waste. She's going to have me bumped off, for the second time!"

"Well, it could be worse," said the time-wielding giant thoughtfully. "Look at what she did to Nidhiki. He's ugly *and* dead."

The two of them burst out laughing. They continued to guffaw until both were out of breath. Sidorak gasped, "Voporak, you slay me!"

"Don't give me any ideas," growled his guest.

"Uh, right," agreed Sidorak, suddenly sober. "So, what are you doing on Metru Nui?"

"Looking for the Vahi. Well, actually, I'm just killing time. At first Tahu had it, so I tracked him all the way to Mata Nui, just to find that there's some kind of big flashback thingamajigger going on. Turns out Vakama totes the mask around for a while, and then he has a scrap with Makuta, and it gets knocked into the sea. I've got the scoop on where the trinket is, but I'm not supposed to pick it up till the red punk fetches it out of the ocean again. Then I swipe it out of his hands and rough him up. After that I get to mix it up with the big boys for a while."

"Nice," commented the King.

"Well, time is wasting," said Voporak, standing up as his third chair splintered under him. "For you, anyway. Guess I'll leave you to stew over your imminent doom. Nice to meet you, Toots."

Sidorak rose to his feet with an ingratiating smile. "Yeah. Thanks for stopping by."

"Any time, old friend." Voporak turned and strode out.

"And good luck settling the score with the Big Kahuna," Sidorak called after him.

No one moved until we heard the front gates of the Coliseum slam shut. Then there was an audible sigh of relief from all of us.

## 22. March of the Penguins

### **Blackalicious — Powers**

*Met her out of town  
 In a small cafe  
 She had the motion of the ocean  
 How her hips did sway  
 She had everybody lookin' back  
 And everybody tookin' back  
 And anything she wanted all the guys  
 Obeyed  
 Now she was a site for sore pupils  
 And she likes to flaunt it cause she knows she got it  
 And she does the most intoxicating things  
 To make a man with worries  
 Feel everything is okay*

*She's got powers  
 And I think I want to get in her spell  
 Powers  
 Every bone inside me of all my cells*

*P-O-W-E-R-S  
 Fizz and bubble when I see her yes  
 Want to see just how deep her abyss gets  
 Lost in the magic of her secret bliss  
 She is a bonafide keeper just  
 Want to travel inside and seek her depths  
 Mystique so fresh  
 From the west coast to the east coast  
 It's a death blow make a Negro get  
 Spun up in her web she don't need no net  
 People low and behold  
 She knows just  
 What I need make an ego  
 What I need make an ego  
 Fly like an eagle  
 Feelin' regal, o b-o-y  
 O she's so fly  
 Lethal injection  
 Frozen in my step like deep in breath  
 Keepin' a brethren like me in a head spin  
 Doc take a rain check  
 She is the medicine*

*And just a whiff of her ferment  
 Will make your knees get weak*

“Hoo, boy, that was a close call,” Sidorak sighed heavily. “That gink wore me out. I feel like I’ve been up for three days straight with no shut-eye.” He leaned on the table to steady himself.

Suddenly the two legs at the far end, where Voporak had been sitting, gave way. The King tumbled onto the floor, landing on his plate and half-eaten sandwich.

“I’m really tired, too, Boss,” said Nick, helping him up. “Being around him must have aged us all a little. But if you ask me, I think he let you off pretty easy.”

“I didn’t ask you, Nick,” growled the King, rubbing mustard off his legs with a napkin.

“It’s a good thing Lady Roodaka is planning to have you killed, Boss,” remarked Joe, “because otherwise you would be dead right now.”

“Put a sock in it, Joe!” snapped Sidorak.

Joe put his tarsal tip to his mandibles. “Sock?” he whispered.

“How you doing, Toots?” the King asked.

I yawned and stretched. “I’m tired, too.” My limbs felt sluggish, and my mind was foggy with fatigue. It was obvious no one would survive long in Voporak’s presence. As much as I resented Sidorak for his arrogant cruelty, I was grateful he hadn’t handed me over to appease his old boss. “Thanks for standing up for me, King Sidorak.”

“No problem, kid. I wasn’t about to lose two dames in one day.” He patted me on the head. “You stick by me, I’ll stick by you. Sure, you’ve got gams like toothpicks, but you’re all right.”

I smiled half-heartedly, trying to focus my mind on my escape and not the sympathy that was starting to well up for him. I reminded myself that this tyrant deserved what was coming to him. “Well, if you’ll excuse me—

A third Oohnorak rushed into the dining room and interrupted, “Boss, the Keelerak are revolting!”

Sidorak snorted. “None of you creepy-crawlies would exactly take the prize at a beauty contest. Well, unless you loaded the judges’ palms with some heavy sugar.”

“Uh, Boss,” Nick explained, “I think he means they’ve organized a revolt.”

“Oh. What’s their beef?”

The messenger nodded. “They’re angry at the way they were sent to web up the lava eels. They say it’s unfair punishment, and they should have help from the other breeds.”

“Well, they should have thought of that before they got out of line,” retorted the King. “They know better than to mess with the Matoran.”

“Of course, Boss. But they say the Matoran probably weren’t even damaged. All they did was—”

“—use the spheres as bowling balls. Yeah, yeah. So what are they doing now, exactly?” demanded the ruler impatiently.

“They refuse to go to work. They’re rallying in the courtyard in front of the Coliseum, chanting ‘Oppression!’ over and over.”

“Oh, that’s just swell. All right, get the Vohtarak and Roparak to break it up.” Sidorak waved at Nick to go with the messenger. After they left, he took my arm. “I’m going to watch the brawl from the observation deck. Care to join me, Toots?”

“No, thanks, I’m going to bed now. I’m really exhausted. Good night.” Anxious to get on with my escape, I pulled my arm away and headed for the exit.

“Want a sandwich before you go?” asked Sidorak. “That big galoot munched all your vittles.”

“That’s all right. I’m too tired to be hungry.”

The King shrugged. “Well, go bunk, then. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Fervently hoping he would be mistaken, I walked toward the door. Joe signaled down the hall, and presently Babs and Sheila fell into step beside me. As soon as I walked into Roodaka’s suite, I was assailed by a wave of heavy fragrance. I asked my guards to leave the doors open so I could have some fresh air. Then I went into the bedroom, out of their line of sight, to ponder my options. I steered clear of the bed and sat on an upholstered chair.

The longer I stayed in the Coliseum, the more likely it was that Roodaka would come back and find I had taken her place. But as soon as I escaped the shelter of the building, I might run into another pack of wild Kavinika, or worse. And when my absence was detected the Visorak would no doubt search for me. Would it be better to wait until dawn?

I wondered about Makuta, too. He might be furious with Roodaka for my disappearance and anxious to bring me back to his lair. Or perhaps he was so taken with her that he had already been persuaded to kill me. A third, more appealing, but less realistic possibility was that he had forgotten about me altogether. I found myself daydreaming LEGO would kill him off in the storyline. How pleasant it would be to know he would never darken my doorway again! But I quickly returned to more useful thoughts.

I finally decided to take my chances and escape immediately, because Roodaka’s wrath was far more frightening than anything I could imagine encountering outside. And the Keelerak revolt might work as a diversion. I powered up my Huna and tiptoed past my guards. Then I made my way silently to the main hall.

The giant arena was full of Vohtarak and Roparak, arranged in formations. I stood behind the last line of the red spiders. When the great doors swung open, I marched out of the building in step with the arachnids. As soon as we arrived on the plaza, a barrage of flying Rhotuka whirled toward us. I ducked behind a nearby statue while the loyalists charged the rebels. I watched for a gap in the battle and raced across the square into the streets.

Picking my way through the jagged debris, I saw the LEGO trailer again, its porch light a beacon of hope. I considered breaking a window and waiting inside, but with imperfectly controlled disintegration power coursing through my body, I was afraid I might bring down an entire wall of the flimsy building. So instead I arranged a nearby pile of broken bricks into a primitive shelter and crawled in it, determined to lay low until the crew arrived in the morning.

Peering through the chinks between the bricks, I exchanged my Huna for my Rau and listened carefully. A myriad of voices became clear to me from the faint buzzing and chirping noises all around. Evidently many small creatures had escaped notice by the Visorak, or were too trivial to bother catching. There were insects hunting for prey among the ruins, rodents scrounging for scraps in wrecked Matoran kitchens, and birds darting from one cranny in the rubble to the next. Sitting in the darkness amid their chatter, I remembered the penguins I had helped to capture.

I crept back out of my shelter with my Huna and headed for the broken Knowledge Towers. The occasional Visorak scuttled by, but I concluded that they were merely night sentinels and were not actively hunting. At one point I heard the growl of a predator that had perhaps detected me by scent. With no visual clues, it paced in large circles around my general location. I walked silently behind a broken wall and formed my staff, sacrificing my invisibility just long enough to deliver a powerful blast toward the sound of the creature. A whimper and the scrambling of paws convinced me it was no longer a danger.

From atop the remains of a tower I finally saw the glacier, standing tall by the side of the bay. I hurried to its base, where the penguin cocoons were still neatly stacked. I leaned over and carefully sliced one open with my axe. The black and white bird rolled out and wiggled his flipper-like orange feet.

Relieved that they were seemed unharmed, I released the rest of the penguins. They got up and stumbled groggily out of the tatters of green webbing, muttering to themselves. I put my Rau back on.

“Blue One, thanks for rescuing the Pengu!” one of the penguins was cackling.

“Oh! Don’t thank me. I’m so sorry for helping your enemies. It’s my fault you got webbed up.”

The Pengu looked at each other quizzically.

“There’s no time to explain,” I clucked. “You have to get out of here. Those spiders will be back. They’ll hunt you until they get you. Swim to another island—one they’ve already been to.”

The water fowl conferred with each other for a few moments about where to go. One of them argued that there was no way they could swim to the closest island without rest. “Maybe we could find a floating iceberg,” chirped another. “We could push it along with us as we swim, and sleep on it at night.”

“Hey, I can help you. Stand back.” I waved the penguins behind me and aimed my staff at the glacier. A bolt of bluish energy sheared off an avalanche of ice chunks. They tumbled into the liquid protodermis and bobbed to the surface. One of them looked large enough to hold all the birds.

“Thanks!” they squawked, waddling to the edge of the cliff and throwing themselves belly-first into the water. They arrayed themselves around the ice chunk and pushed. Soon it was moving steadily out to sea, and some of them let go and swam next to it. The Pengu turned and called back at me, and I waved from the top of the bluff. Then I put my Mask of Concealment on again, just in time to evade the four spiders who came to investigate the noise, and began my journey back to the LEGO trailer.

My trip was uneventful until I reached the long bridge that led from Ko-Metru to the central island with the Coliseum. Then I heard voices that I could understand without the Rau. Fearing they were Oohnorak, I froze and listened for their source.

“Sure, you say that, but you have no idea how tough it is to be a Toa!” said one brightly. “Always having to stick our necks out and save you little guys.”

“Rub it in some more, you lucky dog,” groaned another.

My heart leaped under my chest armor. It sounded like Takanuva and Jaller! I spotted three humanoid silhouettes walking across the bridge from Onu-Metru south of me. One was slightly larger than my size, and the other two were smaller. They were almost to the other side. I quickened my pace to catch up with them. Good guys, at last! My ordeal would soon be over.

“Of course, we wouldn’t have needed to be rescued if someone hadn’t gotten the crazy idea in his glowing brain to open the Muaka cage with a laser beam,” teased a female voice, which I was recognized as Hahli’s.

“Yeah, the Toa of Lightheadedness turned our little trip to the zoo into the full safari excursion package,” said Jaller wryly. “And we were the prey!”

“I just wanted to pet the kitty,” explained Takanuva. He and Jaller burst out laughing.

“Shhh!” hissed Hahli. “You guys are so loud! If you wake the spiders...”

“I’m telling you, it’s safe. Their guards are probably watching us, but they won’t mess with us,” said Jaller confidently. “Even the Visorak know better than to deviate from the storyline.”

The Visorak were indeed following them. With my enhanced night vision, I could see several of them creeping quietly above them, along the strands of webbing draped between the tall poles holding lightstones to illuminate the bridge. The light-emitting crystals were dimmed by the fibrous shrouds.

“Well, we should probably be getting back to the boat, anyway,” suggested Hahli. “If LEGO finds out we sneaked over here—”

“They’re never here on Sunday. Who’s going to tell them, the spiders?” scoffed Takanuva, letting his staff clank rhythmically against the bridge railing as they walked. “Besides, they can’t exactly fire us. Let’s at least see the Coliseum before we go. Wow, to think we used to play sports in that thing. It’s huge!”

“Yes, they can fire us,” whispered Hahli. “Whatever is left of our sets is on the clearance shelves by now. They’re selling plastic Visorak and Hordika to the kids this year. And those big scary-looking guys, whoever they are.”

“I overheard Turaga Vakama saying two of the big sets are rulers of the Visorak,” said Jaller. They stepped off the bridge onto the center island. “I sure wish those geezers would just go ahead and tell us the story, instead of making us wait like the fans.”

“Hey, I’m just glad LEGO didn’t bother to rebuild me into a Matoran,” chuckled Takanuva. “I’d never hear the end of it from you. And if we didn’t have bit parts in the book listening to Turaga Vakama tell his flashback, we’d all be stuck in a sphere like everyone else right now.”

“Yeah. I guess they figured movie audiences wouldn’t miss three spheres out of a thousand,” Jaller pointed out.

They walked directly toward the Coliseum. My bridge was more damaged than theirs, and the repair patches of stretchy webbing were difficult to cross. Desperate to get their attention before they reached the building, I powered down my Huna and yelled, “Takanuva!”

Instantly I felt an impact to my back, and my muscles lost all feeling and strength. I crumpled to the ground. Two Suukorak crouched over me.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a beam of light panning in the direction of my voice. “That sounded like GaliGee,” said Takanuva. “You know, that fanfic writer that never finishes her epic about me. But I don’t see her anywhere. There’s just a couple of spiders on the other bridge.”

“I read that the black ones can imitate voices,” said Hahli. She yelped as a Suukorak lowered himself in front of her from a green strand and gnashed his mandibles. More of them dropped out of the webs overhead. The three travelers began to back slowly onto the bridge. The Toa of Light shot a warning blast at the feet of the spiders with his staff. They jumped back a step, but then they held their ground.

“Let’s get out of here,” urged Jaller. He and his companions spun around and broke into a run, sprinting across the bridge and disappearing into Onu-Metru. The Visorak let them escape.

Meanwhile, the Suukorak had lifted me up and were carrying me over their heads. They brought me to. Nick met us at the door of the Coliseum, and they propped me up to a sitting position. Behind him I could see that the Keelerak revolt had erupted into a full-scale battle. Berzerker Vohtarak were flinging themselves headlong into the living green buzz saws, and Roparak disappeared and reappeared to surround small groups of them. By sheer numbers the loyal Visorak seemed to be overpowering the upstarts.

“My apologies, Queen Blue,” said Nick, “but we had to get you back to safety. It’s a dangerous island out there. I trust the Suukorak treated you gently?”

The feeling and muscle control were beginning to return. “Yes,” I nodded dejectedly.

“Take her back to her room and put her to bed!” commanded Nick. Babs and Sheila stepped forward and helped me stand up. “Don’t worry, you won’t get a demerit,” Nick reassured them. “She has a Mask of Concealment. It took a general alert by Venom Flyer and every set of eyes on guard tonight to catch her turning it off.” The Boggarak seemed relieved, but I didn’t feel any better knowing I was difficult to find.

“I know we can’t touch the Matoran,” asked Joe as I was led away, “but why didn’t you let them web and mutate the shiny gold Toa? He would make a really cool Hordika.”

“He’s not supposed to be a Hordika. He’s in next year’s storyline. LEGO would be really ticked off,” came Nick’s answer. “But we don’t need his kind sniffing around here right now, hence my order to run him off. Let’s go finish off this stupid rebellion now.”

The blue spiders hustled me through the war zone and up to Roodaka’s rooms again. I protested as they dragged me toward the bed, but they followed their orders to the letter and tossed me onto it. Sinking into the soft, perfumed duvet, I began to feel drowsy and confused. I briefly struggled to roll out of the bed before succumbing to it. After all, I was completely exhausted. A little rest would do me good, I thought woozily. Somewhere in my fading consciousness I heard the doors slam shut.

Then I felt a sudden jolt. “Wake up, Toots,” said Sidorak curtly. My eyes snapped open to see him standing over me with an empty Rhotuka launcher.

“Yes, sir,” I blinked, sitting up.

“Sheesh, you’re turning into Roodaka,” he grumbled, lowering the weapon. “Snoozing all day, when there are Rahi to web up! Sorry to barge into the boudoir like this, but the spiders came and got me because they couldn’t rouse you.”

I rubbed my eyes, trying to shake the memory of my bizarre dream. Roodaka had brought me into a lovely garden and was showing me her favorite flowers. Then we started laughing together like schoolgirls over the antics of a playful squirrel. “How long have I been asleep?”

“The day’s halfway over already. Get up and get your motor running. You did so well on the penguins that I’m gonna assign you the Archives next.”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed, compelled by the obedience spinner. “But I don’t understand why you want me to lead your horde. I thought I was just a placeholder.”

“You might as well earn your keep, kid. Say, this bed is really swank.” He patted the comforter next to me.

“It’s sort of... hypnotic,” I muttered, sliding out of it and stretching my arms.

Through the diaphanous curtain I saw a tall figure saunter into the living room. “Daisy, what am I smelling? Bug spray?” She sniffed the air. “Oh, it’s that Axe stuff Sidorak always douses himself with. Why, that scoundrel knows he’s not allowed in my rooms!”

Sidorak’s eyes lit up. “Payback time!” he whispered gleefully. “Just play along, Toots.”

“Milady, perhaps he just...” Daisy began, but she stopped as her mistress quickened her pace toward the bedroom.

I headed for a dressing table to hide behind, but Sidorak grabbed me and threw me on the bed. A whiff of soporific perfume drifted over me again as he pressed me into the covers. “Don’t slap me, kid. This is just for show.” He leaned over and kissed my neck. I shoved him away just as Roodaka walked in.

I braced myself for a torrent of rage. But instead, Roodaka gasped and put her hand to her mouth. “My King! How could you be unfaithful to your loyal fiancée?”

Sidorak straightened up. “Loyal? Says you! I’ve heard a different story. I’ve got two witnesses that say you were necking with the Big Boss. Well, one witness. I ain’t gonna let you string me along any more, Roodaka. I’m through with you, see?”

“Your witness is lying,” pouted Roodaka. She crossed her arms. Resisting the effect of the sedative, I rolled quietly off the other side and crept along the floor until I could see around it. I slipped on my Huna and activated it.

Sidorak frowned at Nick, crouching in the doorway behind Daisy. The spider glanced back and forth between them and stammered, “Uh, like I told you, Boss, it sure looked like she was.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” snapped the Viceroy. “At least, not willingly. Makuta was... he was making me do it! He has the power of Mind Control, you know.” She dropped her face into her claws and started sobbing. Daisy growled angrily at Nick, who retreated a few steps.

“He—he was?” asked Sidorak, incredulous. “Why, that big thug! Just because I’m on his payroll, that don’t mean he’s got the right to put his grubby mitts on my moll! What did he do to you, exactly?”

“Well,” she sniffled, looking up, “he made me sit on his lap, and then he wanted me to put my arms around him, and... oh, I’m so ashamed!” She edged a little closer to him.

“It’s all right, baby,” he said reassuringly, reaching for her. I watched for a chance to scramble past them, but at this point Nick and Daisy were in the doorway to the living room, and several other Visorak were blocking the main exit.

She pushed him away. “No! Don’t try to console me! I know what you’ve been doing while I was trapped in the clutches of that depraved barbarian!”

“Hey, the girlie’s just an office temp. I was bored and missing you, because you’re always blowing out of here.” As she continued to resist him, he pleaded, “Come on, baby. How can I make it up to you?”

“Well,” she said slyly, finally letting him embrace her, “you could have her killed.”

“Aww, cripes!” he groaned. “She’s a nice kid. And she’s the Big Cheese’s secretary. I’m sure to catch some grief if I have her iced.”

“What? You won’t stand up to him, after what he did to me?” she cried, tearing herself loose from his arms.

“Of course I will,” he said quickly, pulling her toward him again. “I’ll have her whacked twice, if it makes you feel better.” He smiled and patted her back as she let her head drop onto his shoulder. “And afterwards, I’ll ring up that hoodlum we work for and give him a piece of my mind, too.”

I lined up my jump, anxiously waiting for an opportunity. Daisy was sniffing the air. Then she looked directly at me. I realized with alarm that Sidorak’s cologne had rubbed off on my neck.

“Oh, my King, would you please?” Roodaka asked sweetly, tracing his head tube with her claw. “You could even tell him you found out she was a spy, and then he wouldn’t be able to retaliate. In fact, he’d owe you a favor.”

“But she’s not a spy,” he shrugged. “I got her to sing, and she’s just a pencil pusher.”

“I know that,” she said, a trace of exasperation creeping into her voice. “But you could *tell* him she is. How could he prove otherwise, after she’s dead?”

“Oh, I get it, baby. Wow, I love a dame with a head on her shoulders,” grinned the King. He gestured to Nick behind Roodaka’s back. “Go take Queen Blue for a swim in a concrete life jacket, savvy?”

“Boss, I think she can breathe underwater,” replied the Oohnorak. “And she could probably shatter the concrete, anyway. Babs and Sheila told me—”

“It’s an expression, you punk! Now, beat it!”

But Roodaka shoved Sidorak against the wall so hard the knicknacks on the shelf above tumbled onto his head. “*Queen Blue?*”

“Uh, yeah, it was just... I mean, she... all right, it was a bad idea, I admit—” He grunted at the impact of her fist in his abdomen.

I crept into the bathroom, but Nick had moved to block its doorway to the living room as well. I glanced around, desperately looking for ideas. Then I noticed the perfect distraction. I took two bottles off the laboratory counter and tossed one of them over the Oohnorak’s head into the main room. Pungent orange fumes immediately boiled out of the shattered glass. All the spiders turned, giving me time to leap over Nick. He winced as my invisible foot grazed his carapace, and Daisy pounced, catching my leg in her pincers. I fell on my face and struggled to free myself.

“Hurry up and—ow!—knock her off, Nick,” I heard Sidorak cough. “I’m not sure how—oof!—long I’m gonna—oh!—last.”

I wrenched my foot loose and sprinted for the doors, tucking the extra bottle into a compartment on my back in case I needed another diversion later on.

## 23. On the Lam

### **Willie Nelson — Midnight Rider**

*I gotta run to keep from hidin';  
I'm bound to keep on ridin'.  
An' I got one more silver dollar,  
An' I ain't gonna let 'em catch me, no:  
I ain't gonna let 'em catch the midnight rider.*

*Well, these ain't my clothes I'm wearin',  
An' this ol' road goes on forever.  
An' I got one more silver dollar,  
An' I ain't gonna let 'em catch me, no:  
I ain't gonna let 'em catch the midnight rider.*

*Well, I've gone by the point of carin';  
Some ol' bed, I'll soon be sharin'.  
An' I got one more silver dollar,  
An' I ain't gonna let 'em catch me, no:  
I ain't gonna let 'em catch the midnight rider.*

### **Johnny Cash — The Beast In Me**

*The beast in me  
Is caged by frail and fragile bars  
Restless by day  
And by night rants and rages at the stars  
God help the beast in me*

*The beast in me  
Has had to learn to live with pain  
And how to shelter from the rain  
And in the twinkling of an eye  
Might have to be restrained  
God help the beast in me*

*Sometimes it tries to kid me  
That it's just a teddy bear  
And even somehow manage to vanish in the air  
And that is when I must beware  
Of the beast in me that everybody knows  
They've seen him out dressed in my clothes  
Patently unclear  
If it's New York or New Year  
God help the beast in me*

*The beast in me*

I scrambled out of Roodaka's suite, dodging the pincers of the two Boggarak who had saved my life the day before. Behind me Nick yelled, "All Visorak to their stations, and block the exits! M and D on Queen Blue! She's invisible, but she's marked with the King's scent!"

There was a loud creaking noise in the distance, and then I heard the enormous front gates slam shut. I raced on my toes, to minimize the sound of my footfalls, down the twisted corridors toward the main hall. Even though I was sure to run into a huge horde of spiders there, it was the only way out that I knew. The rapid tapping of tarsal segments on stone echoed behind me, and spinners began to fly by, hitting the walls all around.

Panting, I emerged on the balcony overlooking the arena. Spiders were stationed all around, but they evidently didn't see me. I leaned over the railing and steadied myself against the wave of vertigo that passed over me. The wide floor was becoming a multicolored patchwork as large numbers of every Visorak breed streamed from the six entrances. Evidently the Keelerak rebellion had been suppressed, and now they were loyally helping the others to hunt me down. Somehow I would have to get to ground level to escape the Coliseum, unless I could find an opening and climb down the outside with my axes. The elevator would be the easiest way down, but a Roparak was crouching in the doorway, and I would be an easy target once the spiders noticed it moving. The strands of webbing which crisscrossed the vast, dusty space inside the conical structure seemed to be my best chance.

The arachnids around me were sniffing the air and looking in my general direction. Since they had already detected my presence, I decided to clean myself before going on. I ducked behind a statue of Sidorak and turned off the Huna. With my fingertips I shot a jet of water at my neck. As expected, the creatures heard the splashing and ran around the sculpture. I activated the Mask of Concealment again and scaled the statue with my axes. Then I sprang from the top of the King's stone head and hooked a thick piece of webbing with my axe as I flew past. I swung around the elastic rope, almost losing control until I was able to grab another strand with my legs. Now I was hanging upside down like a sloth.

Ignoring conventional wisdom, I looked down. I quickly closed my eyes. The dizzying perspective of tangled webs stretching away toward the distant stone floor would have been enough to make me panic in itself, but in addition, swarms of giant spiders were climbing up toward me. Several of them paused to shoot Rhotuka. More Visorak fired from the balcony, and others jumped off into the net to join the chase. Fortunately they all missed their invisible target, but with so many projectiles, eventually one of them might get lucky.

I put my axes on my back and scrambled down the webbing, heading for what looked like a ventilation grill in the wall. A group of Suukorak began to converge on my position. Without relinquishing my camouflage, I shot a weak blast of shattering power at the wall, showering small rocks onto the web. The vibrations distracted the spiders long enough for me to swing between two of them on a loose piece of web. But a dozen Boggarak arrayed themselves in a layer below me to block my descent. I scrambled sideways along a horizontal rope toward the middle of the building. With a sinking heart, I began to realize that I might not be able to make it to the floor. Even without seeing me, the creatures who had spun these webs could use them to locate me quickly and travel very fast. And their numbers were overwhelming.

I worked my way over to the wall just past the Boggarak and below the balcony. Then I lowered myself toward another ventilation grill with a green strand around my left wrist. Through the holes I could see the dim light of the Metru Nui sky! I pried on the edge of the grill with one axe, but it wouldn't budge. I wrapped the web around my waist, braced my feet against the wall, and formed my staff. Dropping the invisibility, I fired a potent burst of disintegration energy at the grill.

The sight of crackling blue energy and the sound of shattering stone got the attention of the Visorak as the unresisted momentum of my blast caused me to swing backwards like a pendulum. I reached the top of my arc, slowed to a stop, and flew back toward the hole I had just made in the wall. I tucked myself into a ball and prayed I would go through the opening. But three Vohtarak scuttled over the gap and hardened themselves in berzerker mode. I hit their tough protodermis shells with a sickening thud. The wind knocked out of me, I swung limply from the rope around my waist for a few seconds while spinners whizzed past.

Through the haze, I saw scores of Visorak scaling the strands around me. I climbed hand over hand and reached the balcony again. From this stable platform, I shot desperately at the approaching spiders and at the wall where the webs were attached. Sections of netting tore loose and plummeted downward, sending the spiders sprawling on top of their approaching comrades. Then I heard scuttling sounds around me and the hum of spinners powering up. I whirled around and saw a group of Oohnorak at the entrance to the balcony, ready to launch. I fired at the ceiling, flattening them under a slab of rock.

Tarsal segments began to appear over the railing as more arachnids scrambled up from below. I shot at them, blowing off hunks of stone off the edge of the balcony in the process. My platform shrinking, and my energy resources almost drained, I backed toward the wall. Overhead, one of the creatures was dropping down on a strand from the ceiling. I fired another blast, but he kept descending. Hoping I had missed rather than run out of power, I glanced up through the dust and aimed again. Beyond the spider, I saw that a large round spot at the apex of the dome was glowing red, and I hesitated. The creature landed in front of me and reared up. I lunged at him with my staff, and he tumbled off the balcony.

I looked up again at the ceiling. To my astonishment, bolts of red energy began to radiate from the glowing spot, coursing down the six large rafters that formed the vaulted dome. A deafening crack ensued, and stones the size of Kikanalo began to tumble from the ceiling.

The crossfire of flying Rhotuka slowed as a deep groaning resonated through the great structure. Larger and larger sections of masonry plunged to the floor and shattered, triggering the segmented floor mechanism. Columns of polished protodermis rose and fell randomly, tossing Visorak into the air. They scrambled toward the massive gates, which fell with a deafening crash. Those that were moving among the webs quickly made their way to the exit as well.

No one seemed to be chasing me anymore, but now I had to worry about getting out of the building alive. I seized a strand of webbing and jumped off the balcony. Adrenaline surged anew during my free fall. Then the elastic fibers became taut, and I reached for another rope and

released the first before it snapped back upward. The second web brought me to the heaving floor, which I struggled to crawl across. Finally I staggered out the door into the street. Not daring to look back, I ran. Behind me, the rumbling grew in intensity. A thunderous crash signaled the final catastrophic collapse of the stately Coliseum. I was thrown flat on my face by a wave of debris.

My ears rang with the sudden silence. I slowly got to my hands and knees and looked around. Everything, including me, was covered in a thick layer of grit. Spiders around me began to rise from the rubble and shake off the dust. “Who let the Zivon out?” muttered one Oohnorak.

I reactivated my Huna, peered through the haze, and located the entrance to the alley of the LEGO trailer. Quietly, I stood up and crept through the ruins.

“Couldn’t you have rescued me just a little more gently?” demanded Roodaka’s shrill voice. I glanced behind me. The King lay sprawled at the base of a broken column, his arms draped protectively around his Viceroy, who sat across his lap. She jumped up and brushed herself off. “Look at this! My armor is all scratched down the side! And don’t think this little distraction is going to make me forget your infidelity. I want that blue creature exterminated, and I want proof!” Sidorak responded with a painful groan, but her attention was already elsewhere. She pointed at a pile of rubble where colored fumes rose from the ground and put her hand sadly to her forehead. “Oh, my lovely laboratory. My beautiful poisons!”

The race was on again, but at least this time I could see the finish line. I sprinted down the alley, tripping over chunks of rock and catching myself. I flew up the steps in one bound and grabbed the doorknob. The porch light had been turned off, suggesting that someone had been there, but to my horror, the door was locked again. Where could the LEGO staff be? Sidorak had told me I had slept half the day!

I felt the impact of a Rhotuka against my back. Instantly immobilized, I slumped against the door and slid down to my knees. Then I toppled over backwards. A Vohtarak rolled me over and cinched strong green fibers into a cocoon. Chittering surrounded me as more Visorak gathered to watch. Soon my vision was obstructed with webbing. Then dozens of barbs pierced my armor and sank into the organic tissue underneath, releasing a burning fluid into my flesh. I clenched my jaws to keep from screaming. Then grogginess set in, like an anesthesia.

“Well done, Jakirak,” came Nick’s voice. “Let’s hoist the cocoon onto your back and march triumphantly back to the... uh... well, we’ll just march in circles around the pile for a few minutes while she mutates. Then we’ll unwrap her in front of the Viceroy and kill her.”

I was lifted up and set down again. “Company, forward!” barked the commander of the Visorak. Then I began to move forward with a slight rocking motion, probably on the back of the Vohtarak. The gnashing mandibles around me grew louder as the procession moved along.

Then Daisy’s voice called, “Halt!”

My cocoon lurched forward and stopped. “Dezirak!” snapped Nick. “Step aside! We have important cargo to deliver to Lady Roodaka.”

“Nikorak, have you no sense of decorum?” hissed the mutated Boggarak. “Parading the King’s indiscretion—and the source of our Lady’s shame—down the street like a prize Rahi?”

“Oh,” replied Nick. “I guess it might not be the most pleasant thing for her to watch.” The chittering stopped, and faint scuttling sounds suggested the other Visorak were backing away from the two leaders.

“You *guess*? I’m absolutely aghast that someone could have achieved your position and still so completely lack any compassion for a mistreated lady!”

“I’m a soldier, not a social worker,” said Nick gruffly. “I’ve got orders to M and D the blue creature. If you want to hush it up, that’s fine, but I’m going to make sure the job gets done.”

“Then you and I will deliver the carcass to Lady Roodaka, quietly and without spectacle,” announced Daisy coldly.

Nick bellowed at the troops. “Company, dismissed! Move along! There’s nothing more to see here. Report to Joe for instructions on cleanup of the Coliseum.”

I was dumped onto the ground amid the scurrying of tarsal segments on the pavement. “We’ll take her to that warehouse on the west side for mutation, and then we’ll take her apart and bring the pieces in to your mistress,” suggested Nick.

“Fine,” said Daisy curtly.

“But I still can’t believe you want to deprive everyone of the customary victory march,” he grumbled. “Killjoy.”

Her reply was to sniff with disdain. “Savage.”

The last of the other spiders left the alley. In the distance, Sidorak’s voice gave orders above the noises of rubble clearing. Sharp pains began to shoot down my arms and legs as the mutagenic venom flowed through my body. I wondered woozily how twisted and hideous my Hordika form would be. But I wouldn’t have much time to be horrified by my looks, because evidently my miserable life was soon to be snuffed out.

I was lifted again and carried for a few minutes, then set down. Spider feet moved around me. Then I heard the impact of one protodermis-armored body against another. The sound of whirring mandibles was interrupted by the dreadful noise of grinding gears. Thumps followed, as if one or both of the Visorak were rolling across the floor. Suddenly alert again, I caught my breath. While they were fighting, maybe I could escape!

I struggled inside my casing, trying to reach my axes. If I pressed one edge against the fibers, perhaps I could saw a hole. I wriggled and twisted, finally working my arm behind my back. The movement of my finger joints felt unfamiliar, and so did the handle of my axe. What kind of strange implement had it been transformed into? It would probably be some sort of water blade. I grasped the hilt and moved it up and down. Soon I felt the snug cocoon loosen slightly. Heart pounding with fear and hope, I kept sawing with my unknown tool. Maybe I wasn't doomed, after all.

## 24. Arachnophilia

### 3 Doors Down — Here Without You

*A hundred days have made me older  
 Since the last time that I saw your pretty face  
 A thousand lies have made me colder  
 And I don't think I can look at this the same  
 But all the miles that separate  
 Disappear now when I'm dreaming of your face*

*I'm here without you baby  
 But you're still on my lonely mind  
 I think about you baby  
 And I dream about you all the time  
 I'm here without you baby  
 But you're still with me in my dreams  
 And tonight it's only you and me*

*The miles just keep rollin'  
 As the people leave their way to say hello  
 I've heard this life is overrated  
 But I hope that it gets better as we go*

*Everything I know, and anywhere I go  
 It gets hard but it won't take away my love  
 And when the last one falls  
 When it's all said and done  
 It gets hard but it won't take away my love*

Desperate to free myself while my captors fought each other, I continued to saw at the fibers by moving my tool up and down behind my back inside the tight cocoon. I could tell that a few of the strands had already yielded, because I had felt the bonds loosen slightly. Then I noticed that the Visorak were no longer making any noise. I froze and listened for clues as to what was happening.

“Oh, Daisy, I’ve missed you so much,” said Nick gently.

“Nicky,” she cooed, “every day we’ve been apart has seemed like an eternity.” Then I heard the horrible sound of clashing mandibles again. I realized with a start that this must be the Visorak equivalent of a kiss. For a moment I was glad I couldn’t see anything.

Nick sighed. “With you here again, everything seems all right.”

“I wish that were the case,” said Daisy sadly. “But we have a really big problem on our hands.”

“We do?”

“Yes, that’s why I stopped your procession,” she explained. “We have to get the blue creature back to Lord Makuta.”

At the prospect of being returned to the Master of Shadows, I quietly resumed my sawing.

“Why? Are secretaries that hard to come by these days?”

“No, silly,” chuckled Daisy. “She’s his girlfriend.”

“Ohhh,” Nick said slowly. “She didn’t say anything about that when the King interrogated her.”

“I think she’s really mad at Lord Makuta for letting Lady Roodaka stay in his lair and flirt with him.”

“So why do we care about the love life of the big boss we never even see? For all we know, King Sidorak could be dying back there!” exclaimed the Oohnorak.

“Because while we were in Mangaia, she was the only thing that kept him from surrendering to Lady Roodaka’s advances. After she disappeared, he was beside himself, and let me tell you, it wasn’t pretty. We need to take her back to him, in original condition, as soon as possible.”

“Well, now I see why Lady Roodaka sent her over here. But I can’t believe you let your boss make out with Lord Makuta! What were you thinking?” he grumbled.

“Oh, she barely got anywhere with him. But what were *you* thinking,” she retorted, “when you let *your* boss marry the blue creature?”

“He didn’t really marry her. He just sort of appointed her Queen.”

“Whatever!” cried Daisy with exasperation. Then her tone softened again. “Oh, our employers are both insane. I’m just so glad I have my beloved Nicky.”

“I’m the lucky one, Daisy, to have you,” he purred. They were quiet for a few moments, and I held my breath, hoping they wouldn’t kiss again. Then Nick said, “So we take Blue back to Mangaia. But there has to be something we can do for King Sidorak. Lady Roodaka is going to lay him to waste if she doesn’t see that carcass soon. How can we stall her?”

“We’ll bring her the remains of some other blue creature,” said Daisy slyly, “and say she looks different because she mutated.”

“Great idea!” he exclaimed. He added grimly, “There’s just one problem with it, though. When the King sees the carcass, he’ll call Lord Makuta to tell him he’s had her killed. I know what *I* would do if I got that kind of news about *my* girlfriend.” I heard pincers snap.

“I don’t know what we can do about that,” she admitted. “We’ll just have to hurry, and just hope for the best. Maybe Lord Makuta will be too busy to retaliate right away.”

“All right, I’ll go hunt something while you guard the cocoon.” He scuttled away. Then there was silence.

My chances of escape had just doubled, but now there were no more distractions. I decided to wait because Daisy was probably staring right at me. Then the Hordika venom caused my body to spasm involuntarily, and one of my elbows jabbed out of the webbing.

“Well, it looks like this isn’t going to hold you for long, Galitea,” Daisy remarked, prodding me. Another arm and a leg sprang free of the unraveling cocoon. “Come on out and let’s see how you turned out.” The remains of my wrapping were torn off me. I rolled over and jumped up, brandishing my weapons. The Boggarak was facing me inside a large, empty building with gaping holes in the roof.

I glanced down at what had once been my axes. They had been transformed into wicked-looking harpoons with narrow, barbed blades. And the hands holding them were now more angular, with two thumbs and two fingers on each one. My gaze traveled up my arms, which hung long and gangly from broad shoulders. My chest was narrow and concave and my body hunched over. I now had the curved legs and wide, flat feet I had seen in the Toa Hordika sets. I felt my mask with my hands, and it had fused to my face. I wondered how it looked, but at the same time, I dreaded finding out.

As the initial shock wore off, anger surged through my entire being. It was bad enough being rebuilt against my will, but this mutation was more than I could stand. I was sick and tired of being a pawn in the games of other beings. I gripped my bizarre new weapons and threw my head back in a scream of primal rage. Then my flashing eyes darted back to Daisy, who was crouching threateningly with her Rhotuka activated and ready to launch.

“I wouldn’t try anything, if I were you,” she said matter-of-factly. “I can fire a spinner a lot faster than you can figure out how to use your mutated powers. You can’t use invisibility anymore, and a Rhotuka flies faster than you can run.”

I felt behind me, and my extra masks were still hanging on my back. But as a Hordika, I knew they would be useless to me. Then Nick came back in carrying something blue. When he saw me, he dropped the object and sprang, tackling me to the floor. I slashed at him with my harpoon. Then he was abruptly yanked off me and thrown to the side. I jumped back up onto my unfamiliar new feet.

“Sorry, Nicky, but brute force isn’t the best way to do this,” said Daisy, placing herself squarely in front of me. “We can reason with this one.”

“Reason with a Hordika? Good luck,” muttered Nick, rubbing the long scratch on his ventral surface. He readied an energy wheel.

I snarled at her and raised my weapons.

Daisy's spinner vanished in her launcher. "Listen, Galitea, you have two choices. We can web you back up for the trip, or you can come with us willingly. Keep in mind that Keetongu is the only way to be cured of Hordika venom. And you will never find him without us."

I considered her words. They did indeed have a good reason to take me to the Rahi healer, so I didn't doubt they would do it. And once I was there, Keetongu, the powerful sworn enemy of Visorak, could not only heal me, but he might also defend me. I could stay with him until the LEGO staff showed up to film his scenes. On the other hand, I could try to escape now, with untested powers and no guarantee of when the LEGO trailer would be open again. My newly awakened animal instincts tugged at me to turn and run and take my chances, but my rational mind knew that would only lead to recapture. I lowered my blades. "All right, I'll go peaceably. I really want to be cured."

Daisy smirked at Nick. "See? You males always want to run roughshod over everything, but there are other techniques that work."

"Where would I be without your feminine intuition?" he grinned, deactivating his Rhotuka.

"Smashed on the sole of an enormous foot somewhere, I'm sure," replied Daisy with a wink.

"Probably," Nick laughed. He picked up the dead blue creature, which looked like some kind of fish. "All right, you wait here with Blue, while I deliver this to the Viceroy." He bundled the carcass in the remnants of my cocoon and headed out the door.

Daisy watched him go. Then she turned to me. "Look, if you say a word to anyone about me and Nikorak..."

"Don't worry, I won't," I reassured her. I paused, then added, "You've saved me from your mistress more than once, and now you're saying you'll take me to the only creature that can heal me. Why would I want to betray your secrets?"

She looked at me suspiciously. I sat down on a crate to show her I had no intention of fleeing, and she relaxed her stance. A few minutes later Nick came back in. "Lady Roodaka seemed to fall for it," he informed us. "She was quite pleased, in fact. And so was the King. He's definitely having a bad head tube day."

"I imagine so," said Daisy. "And it's not over yet. The LEGO people aren't going to be thrilled when they come back from their lunch break and see the Coliseum, or what's left of it."

Nick nodded slowly. "While I was there, I managed to snag this." He produced a cell phone and flipped it open. The screen read "Sidorak, Mighty King of the Visorak, Conqueror of a Thousand Lands."

"Excellent, Nicky! Maybe by the time he finds another phone, LEGO will show up or something, and he'll forget. Let's get going. We'd better hurry, before our absence is noticed."

Nick he peered out the door of the warehouse. He waved for us to follow, and we crept quietly into the gloomy street. “Good thing Keetongu’s not really just a legend,” he whispered. “Now, where does he live again? ‘Where the falling tears meet the sky,’ or some such lyrical mumbo-jumbo, right?”

“He lives on top of the Popsicle. I’ll lead us there.” Daisy scuttled ahead.

“The what?”

“The Popsicle,” she hissed back. “It probably has a Matoran name, but that’s what the LEGO people call it. It’s a big glacier in the far north reaches of Ko-Metru.”

Nick scrambled to catch up with her, and I loped behind them. My legs felt strange and wobbly, but soon I realized they were quite strong and limber. We slunk through the streets, keeping to the shadows. Soon we were crossing the bridge to Ko-Metru.

I glanced over the railing at my reflection in the liquid protodermis flowing languidly in the channel. Shocked, I jumped back. Then I leaned over and looked more closely. My face was an unholy amalgam of a Kaukau Nuva and a Rahkshi head, stretched back over blue eyes that glittered with more than a hint of madness. And my back looked like an armor-plated kraata, arched like a Rahkshi back. A dozen spikes matching the ends of my harpoon protruded from my backbone. And I had a tail now, too. I clenched my hands on the railing and watched the gruesome creature in the canal utter a shriek of frustrated fury.

“Shh!” Daisy jumped over and put a tarsal segment over my mouth. I threw her arm off my face and growled at her.

Nick frowned at Daisy. “Let’s just web her up and keep her paralyzed. This is too risky. Besides, she might run.”

“But Nicky, then we’ll have to carry her, and it’ll slow us down,” she objected. “She’s just having a Hordika moment. Let me talk to her again.”

Nick reluctantly waved at her to proceed, and she addressed me again. “You want to be cured?”

I nodded slowly, trying to silence the instinctive voices in my head urging me to flee or attack.

“You’ve got to be quiet, then!” she warned. “We all want you to be normal again, but if someone tells Lady Roodaka what we’re doing, we could all end up dead. Let’s just work together, all right?”

“Agreed.” I attempted a smile, although I was sure it was some sort of hideous grimace instead. “I’m sorry. You’re right, we’re all on the same side.”

Daisy smiled back. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you whole and home as soon as we can.”

It suddenly occurred to me that they thought I wanted to go back to Mangaia. I decided not to correct this misperception, the better to take them by surprise when I escaped.

“Poor, lonely Lord Makuta,” remarked Nick sadly. “He must dream about you the way I dreamed of Daisy when she was away. I bet he’ll be so happy to see you again.”

The Boggarak laid a sympathetic tarsal segment on my shoulder. “I know you must be feeling really hurt and angry right now, but you should give Lord Makuta another chance. He really does love you. If you want proof, just look at the hole he blasted in the living room wall when he found out you were gone. And the Rahkshi really miss you, too. They were looking really sad.”

“Who would have thought lizard mechs could have feelings?” mused Nick.

I smiled weakly. “Thanks for the encouragement, you two.”

Nick nodded. “You just have to forgive and move on. I know that’s the only way Daisy has been able to put up with me.”

“You’d better believe it,” said Daisy with a wink. “Well, speaking of moving on...”

As I watched Daisy lead the way across the bridge, I marveled at the strange twist of destiny that had me traveling with two renegade Visorak on the road to Keetongu. Ironically, it was their dedication to keeping their cruel, scheming rulers out of trouble that was driving them to risk this compassionate act. I shouldered my harpoons and followed the giant blue spider.

## 25. The Incredible Journey

### **Jars of Clay — Flood**

*Rain, rain on my face  
It hasn't stopped raining for days  
My world is a flood  
Slowly I become one with the mud*

*But if I can't swim after forty days  
and my mind is crushed by the thrashing waves  
Lift me up so high that I cannot fall  
Lift me up  
Lift me up - when I'm falling  
Lift me up - I'm weak and I'm dying  
Lift me up - I need you to hold me  
Lift me up - Keep me from drowning again*

*Downpour on my soul  
Splashing in the ocean, I'm losing control  
Dark sky all around  
I can't feel my feet touching the ground*

*Calm the storms that drench my eyes  
Dry the streams still flowing  
Cast down all the waves of sin  
And guilt that overthrow me*

*Lift me up - when I'm falling  
Lift me up - I'm weak and I'm dying  
Lift me up - I need you to hold me  
Lift me up - Keep me from drowning again*

A chilly breeze blew clouds of dust through the rubble-strewn streets of Ko-Metru as my arachnid captors/guards/guides led me onward toward the one elusive creature that could heal me of my Hordika condition.

My thoughts careened from one unlikely escape plan to another. I could push Nick off one of the spindly bridges spanning the canals, then flee while Daisy skated across the water to save him. Then I could seek Keetongu on my own. I wondered what my powers had become. Or maybe I could make it back to the trailer and ask the LEGO staff to get Keetongu to cure me. Surely they would be back from their lunch break by now.

These pointless musings were interrupted when a large winged reptile emerged from the building next to me as I walked past. I jumped to the side and spun to face it, raising my harpoons. The creature stopped and moved its head from side to side as if deciding on the best place to strike. I heard a spinner being energized beside me. The beast turned toward the sound. To my astonishment, it became intangible long enough for the Rhotuka to fly right through it without harm. I noticed that there was no door or window where it had come out of the building.

“Oh, great, a phase dragon,” grumbled Nick. “You can’t scare those things off or run away from them. We’ll have to take it out.” Daisy’s spinner whirred toward the big lizard, and it vanished and reappeared once more. “Daisy, fire another one and I’ll be ready to jump it when it shows up again.”

The third spinner provided the necessary distraction, and when the creature solidified, Nick pounced, slinging thick ropes of web around its legs. The reptile thrashed and bit through the strands binding its arms, then clamped its jaws onto Nick’s carapace as he struggled to subdue it. I ran over and struck the dragon’s head repeatedly with the side of my blade until it slumped backward. Daisy helped Nick finish webbing it up.

I stood, shaking and looking at my weapons, shocked by the brutality of my own attack. Daisy grabbed my arm. “Run!” she hissed. “It might pass through the cocoon before the sedative takes effect.” We sprinted down the street for a few blocks. Then the two Visorak stopped, and Daisy delicately probed Nick’s injury. “The teeth didn’t go all the way through, Nicky. I think you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, I’m all right,” he nodded. “Thanks, Blue.”

I smiled grimly back at him.

We resumed our course through the maze of crumbled structures. I managed to calm my restless thoughts, because it was obvious the best thing would be to let the spiders lead me along the dangerous road to Keetongu and then seek sanctuary with him. I began to feel hungry, but I had no desire to stop, so I didn’t say anything. We marched on. Finally Daisy scaled a broken Knowledge Tower to survey the landscape.

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” asked Nick testily.

“Just because *you* don’t know where we are doesn’t mean we’re lost,” scoffed the Boggarak. “I took us the long way to get around the Suukorak outpost in the main Tower. But I know exactly where we are. We head down that street to the left, and then we cut over to the seashore, and then we move north until we get to the Popsicle.” She turned to scuttle back down to ground level.

“Oh, good,” replied the black spider, relieved. He turned to me. “She’s amazing with directions.”

The sound of an impact caused us both to look up. Daisy had lost her grip and was tumbling off the tower. Nick shot a clump of webbing at her, and it caught on the jagged structure to stop her fall. Then I felt a blow to my back. I glanced behind me and saw the shards of my Rau lying on the ground. “Get down!” warned the black spider.

He scanned the horizon for our assailant. “Catapult scorpion,” he muttered. Soon he was aiming a spinner at a dog-sized armored invertebrate perched on a nearby pile of rubble. Numbed by the Rhotuka, the creature collapsed.

With my night vision heightened even further by my new Hordika nature, a movement caught my eye. In the shadows, a half dozen more scorpions were moving forward. Glowing balls of magma formed in a cradle at the tip of their tails and hardened. Then they launched them at us. The projectiles fell around us like cannon balls.

Daisy had swung down off the building, and she and Nick were crouching behind it, readying more Rhotuka. “We’ll hit the ones in front, and then we’ll run,” whispered Nick. “They’re not anywhere near as fast as we are.”

But my new animal instincts wouldn’t let me flee from these oversized vermin without a fight. Without even thinking, I held my tools up, and a spinner formed between them. This must be how my water powers worked after my transformation! Ignoring Nick’s protests, I jumped out from behind the tower and willed the energy wheel to fly at the scorpions.

I watched with disappointment as the glowing disk fell short of the target, hitting the debris at the arthropods’ feet. But then I saw its effect. A huge explosion of water and stone surged out of the ground at the point of contact, bowling over all the scorpions.

“Nice,” commented Nick as he fired a spinner at the first crustacean to start stirring. “What is your power, exactly, Blue?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“Talk later,” urged Daisy, tugging at both of us. She led us down a dark alley.

When we had put some distance between ourselves and the scorpions, Nick brought up the subject again. “You had water powers before, and some sort of destructive power, right? The one you used to bring down the Coliseum?”

“Yeah, that was really impressive,” remarked the blue arachnid.

“I actually have no idea how I did that,” I shrugged. “I’ve never had that much energy at my disposal, and I was really weak by then from fighting you spiders.”

“Maybe the building was weakened from Voporak walking through it,” suggested Nick. “Anyway, the Rhotuka you fired at the scorpions packed a serious punch, too.”

“Yes,” I replied slowly. “I think it might have been water and disintegration, fused into one.”

“Wow! It’s too bad we have to get you cured,” remarked the Oohnorak.

I didn’t share Nick’s regret in the least. The water-disintegration spinners were certainly potent, but their use seemed limited to randomly blasting things. And I looked forward to being able to conceal myself again with the Huna. I was glad the Rau had been the one to break, possibly

saving me from serious injury. The Great Mask of Translation had been a mixed blessing to me, indeed.

Nick suddenly looked at his companion with a worried expression. “Daisy, how do we know Keetongu is even going to help us?”

“We don’t know. We just have to try.”

He waved at us all to duck behind a pile of crystal shards as a Venom Flyer whizzed by. When the creature had passed, we resumed our course, and Nick continued. “We’d better not tell Keetongu she’s Lord Makuta’s girlfriend. Those two don’t get along well.”

“Good point. Let’s say that this is a Matoran that was accidentally mutated, and we need his help to change her back before LEGO finds out.”

“You always have the most wonderful ideas, Daisy.” Nick patted her outer shell affectionately. Then a ringing sound came from his back. He pulled out Sidorak’s cell phone and looked at the display. “It’s LEGO.”

“I bet they’re back from lunch,” shivered the blue spider. A few seconds later, a light began to flash on the phone.

“I’ll see if I can retrieve their message,” said Nick, pressing a button and listening. Soon he shook his head sadly. “The King’s in really big trouble. Since the in-house crew has already moved on to building a new Knights Kingdom castle, LEGO is going to have to pay through the nose for an outside contractor to repair the Coliseum. And they’re going to garnish his wages for it.”

“Ouch,” Daisy winced.

I felt a twinge of guilt, since I had been the one to cause the edifice to collapse. But then again, if Sidorak hadn’t decided to provoke Roodaka by making me Queen, none of this would have happened.

“This is going to delay the shooting schedule quite a bit,” Nick went on. “They were already pretty mad that Lady Roodaka was late to work today, too. Evidently they were supposed to do the scene where she sweet-talks Vakama, and everyone sat around waiting for three hours before she showed up. And Hordika are not long on patience. Vakama set two chairs on fire just fidgeting.”

Daisy sighed. “Well, she wouldn’t listen to me when I told her the filming would be starting soon. Finally Lord Makuta threw her out, so we headed back here, but then she had to stop at the Great Barrier and chip out another piece of his protodermis cage.”

“Why?”

She glanced at me. “She got into a fight with Galitea, and it got shattered.”

“Well, during the work stoppage, we have to keep her from going back to Mangaia,” remarked Nick.

“That may not be a too hard. She was planning to go back and use her new potion on Lord Makuta, but now that her lab has been smashed, she might want to stay here and brew some more first.”

“Do those potions really work?” wondered Nick.

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Are you kidding? Have you noticed what happens to the King whenever she gets close to him? He turns into a babbling fool.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And her usual stuff is nothing compared to this ‘Enslave’ formula she just developed. She told me she tested one of the ingredients on the Shadowed One, and he was literally on his knees in about half an hour,” recounted the Boggarak. “She talked him out of a laser weapon, a portable shield generator, and a half dozen battery packs. And then he begged her to let him make her dessert before she left. I’m worried about what might happen if she uses it on Lord Makuta.” They both glanced at me.

“Well, then, we’ll need to sabotage her lab before she can try it,” suggested Nick. “Why is Lady Roodaka after Lord Makuta, anyway? Does she like him?”

Daisy shrugged. “Who knows what she’s really thinking? She was put off by how grungy he was until he showed up one day smelling all lemony fresh, and then she went gaga over him. I think mostly she wants help with her new Plan, though, one that doesn’t involve King Sidorak. She’s trying to get him to use mind control to make Keetongu kill the King without her even being involved. That way, after the movie, she can reclaim authority over the horde by herself. But I don’t think he agreed to it.”

“No way am I working for that psychopathic harpy unless the King is alive, too,” he proclaimed grimly.

“Shh!” warned Daisy. “Not so loud. She has spies everywhere.”

Nick continued in a lower voice. “I suppose we’re stuck with her, since she survives in the storyline. But that’s all right as long as we keep King Sidorak from getting killed. I can put up with her if he’s in charge. When I’m running the horde for him, and I have you by my side, that’s when I’m really happy.”

“Oh, I so want you to be happy, Nicky. But I don’t know,” said Daisy cautiously. “I’m starting to doubt if this is going to work. Maybe we should stop trying to change our destiny and just live as free spiders after the movie, like we’re supposed to.”

Nick stopped in his tracks. “Do you remember what that was like, Daisy? No conquest, no glory, just stalking prey to survive. You’re asking me to give up my dream of leadership to subsist like a mere beast!”

Daisy faced him and put her foreleg on his. “I—I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m getting discouraged. Our Plan depends on Lady Roodaka falling in love with the King, and that just isn’t happening, despite all the romantic gestures you’re coaching him to make.”

Nick wrapped his forelegs around her comfortingly. “We can do this, Daisy. All we have to do is keep Lady Roodaka away from Lord Makuta, and she will eventually realize that the only way she can keep the horde is to cooperate with King Sidorak, even if she doesn’t really like him.”

“All right,” she smiled. “If I can help make your dream come true, I’ll keep trying. And however things turn out, I’ll be content as long as I’m with you.”

“Oh, Daisy, you’re so beautiful. I don’t deserve you.” He nuzzled her pointed face with his own.

I paced restlessly in a circle while I waited for them to have their tender moment. My wild side was impatient to move onward, but my rational mind knew important how it was to keep their trust. I felt bad that I would thwart their Plan to get their employers out of trouble with Makuta, but after all, Sidorak and Roodaka would be the ones to take the punishment, not Nick and Daisy.

Nick sighed as he stroked his companion’s dorsal ridge. “But there’s something that’s been bothering me. You were dreadfully convincing when you were pretending to dislike me back there, when everyone else was watching.”

“Nicky,” she reminded him patiently, “you know what Lady Roodaka would do to me if she knew my loyalties were divided.”

“Of course,” he cringed. “But still... sometimes I can’t help but wonder if you’ve learned her vicious tricks a little too well.”

“I’ve been thoroughly schooled in the art of treachery, it’s true,” she said softly. “But I’ll only use it for the benefit of both of us.”

Nick still seemed uneasy. He stepped back and looked her in the eye. “Daisy, how can I be sure you won’t betray me?” he blurted.

“You can’t be sure. I’ve been around Lady Roodaka long enough to know that promises are cheap. All you can do is watch how I act.” She touched the underside of his chin with a tarsal segment. “Time will show that my love for you is true, Nicky.”

“That’s a gamble I’m willing to take.” He leaned toward her. I quickly turned away as sparks began to fly from their clashing mandibles. It was a good thing I had a reason to look behind me, because towering over us was a mantis as tall as Roodaka.

In my normal state, I would have run, but my Hordika side felt compelled to defend my personal space. “Get back!” I shouted, slashing my harpoons at it. The predatory insect ignored me and lunged over my head toward the Visorak, grabbing Daisy with its powerful forelegs.

Nick sprang into action, landing on the creature’s triangular head and clamping his pincers around it. As the insect thrashed around, it dropped Daisy. Then it seized Nick instead and pulled him off its head. It brought the wriggling spider toward its razor-sharp fangs.

Meanwhile, I stabbed the enormous underbelly of the Rahi with my harpoons. They glanced off its thick armor until one finally sank in to the hilt between its jointed legs and its thorax. Unfortunately, this did little more than annoy it. It kicked me away with one of its four hind legs. I slid into a pile of broken crystal and rolled to my feet again.

With no time to fire a spinner, Daisy had leaped onto the mantis again. Each spider daringly provoked the creature to save the other, and the animal seemed confused by the armful of belligerent prey. I powered up a Rhotuka and aimed it point blank at the insect. But then I realized this might injure the Visorak as well, so I fired at its feet instead. The resulting explosion flung them in all directions, along with a substantial quantity of water, rock and earth.

Daisy pulled herself from the muddy rubble first and managed to ready a Rhotuka. She brought down the mantis before it could jump at her again. Then she helped Nick to his feet, and they webbed the paralyzed Rahi.

“You’re a dangerous ally,” Nick remarked to me as he knocked some gravel off Daisy’s back, “but a good one to have nonetheless.”

“Those Metru Mantises are terrifying. They’re the only creature on this island that was happy to see us show up, because they think Visorak are delicious,” panted Daisy.

Bruised and spattered with muck but undaunted, we continued our quest. The spiders resumed their discussion. “Well, I feel better knowing our Plan doesn’t hinge on what Lady Roodaka thinks of King Sidorak,” Daisy smiled. “Because she keeps talking about what a moron he is.”

“He *is* a moron,” snorted Nick.

“But the Bionicle Encyclopedia says he’s a good strategist,” she pointed out.

“Oh, sure. He has two good strategies. ‘Ask Roodaka’ and ‘Ask Nick.’ I think the only reason he’s even King is that he can fire obedience spinners.”

“Do those things even work?” wondered Daisy. “I’ve never even seen him use one. I bet he just tells us they’re obedience spinners, so we’ll do whatever he says.”

“I’m pretty sure they work,” he replied. “He used one on Blue when he interrogated her. And once more when he got her to help capture the Pengu.”

I winced at the memory. Then I noticed both spiders had turned to look at me. “Yes, they definitely work,” I agreed.

“What does it feel like?” asked the Oohnorak curiously.

“Not much of anything. You just really want to do whatever you’re asked.”

“Makes sense,” nodded Nick. He pulled both of us behind a broken Knowledge Tower as a patrol of Vohtarak scuttled by.

When the coast was clear, we resumed the journey, weaving our way around piles of shattered crystal and stone. Finally we reached the seacoast and began to pick our way north along the ruined jetties and docks. I decided to venture a question of my own. “Daisy, what happened to the two Rahkshi that went missing when I did?”

“Oh, you mean Shadrakh and Telerakh? They’re in the bunker, asleep. Lady Roodaka set up a time-released dose of knockout gas and had us seal off the exit with webbing. They’ll wake up in a few days when it finally dissipates.”

“That stuff that makes you pass out when you’re in her bed?”

“Yes, that’s the same substance. She knew Lord Makuta would be upset if she killed those two, so she just put them out of the way until she could get back there. Don’t worry about your stepsons, they’ll be fine.”

I was relieved to hear no harm had come to the Rahkshi. But I hoped we would make it to Keetongu’s cave before Makuta could send them to find me.

Suddenly the ground heaved beneath us. We were thrown flat onto the boardwalk while one violent shudder after another rocked the foundations of the island. Chunks of stone tumbled from the ruins of the Knowledge Towers as they subsided further into the liquefied soil.

“Speaking of Lord Makuta,” shouted Nick over the rumbling, “I think King Sidorak just managed to find another phone!” He clung to Daisy, and I covered my head. The platform we were on collapsed onto the sand below it, but we were far enough from any buildings to be safe from falling debris.

Finally the shaking stopped, and we slowly got to our feet. The already devastated island didn’t look much different, except for the thick cloud of dust that hung in the air. But my water sense compelled me to turn around and face the sea. The tide had retreated an unnaturally long distance away from the beach. And the biggest wave I had ever seen was heading straight for us at high speed.

I heard Daisy's voice beside me. "I told you he really loves you."

"Quick!" I screamed. "Get inland!" We scrambled toward solid ground. The roaring grew louder behind us as our feet reached the streets. I glanced over my shoulder. A wall of water five bios high was overtaking us, sending splintered pieces of dock flying in all directions before it.

The tsunami swept us up off the ground, and we rode helplessly on its crest for a few moments while it surged over mounds of shattered crystal and rock. Then it pulled us back out to sea and churned us under the surface along with the rest of the debris. I was separated from my arachnid companions. I tried to activate my Kaukau Nuva and got my lungs half full of liquid protodermis before I remembered it didn't work anymore.

I reached frantically for my weapons and tried to form a spinner, but the water was too turbulent. And the strange combined-power Rhotuka probably wouldn't have done me any good anyway, since I hadn't developed any real control yet. In my disorientation, I couldn't tell which way was up, and the water was uniformly dark, so I picked a random direction and struggled to swim. As I choked and spluttered, I considered how ironic it was that I, originally built as the prototype of the most powerful water creature in Bionicle, was about to perish by drowning. And most paradoxical of all was the fact that my demise would result directly from Makuta's reaction to news of my death.

## 26. Small World

### **David Bowie – Cat People (Putting Out The Fire)**

*See these eyes so green  
I can stare for a thousand years  
Colder than the moon  
It's been so long  
Feel my love enraged  
It's just the fear of losing you  
Don't you know my name  
You've been so long*

*And I've been putting out fire  
With gasoline*

*See these eyes so red  
Red like jungle burning bright  
Those who feel me near  
Pull the blinds and change their minds  
It's been so long*

*Still this pulsing night  
A plague I call a heartbeat  
Just be still with me  
You wouldn't believe what I've been through  
You've been so long  
Well it's been so long*

*And I've been putting out the fire with gasoline  
Putting out the fire  
With gasoline*

*See these tears so blue  
An ageless heart that can never mend  
These tears can never dry  
A judgment made can never bend*

As the giant tsunami dragged me out to sea, I struggled to reach the surface. But every way I turned, there was nothing but dark water and the occasional piece of jagged debris swirling past. Dizzy from lack of oxygen, I started to lose consciousness.

An object struck my back, and suddenly I was buoyed up toward a dim light. I bobbed up onto the surface of the choppy water and spluttered until I could breathe again. I looked around groggily. The two moons glowed faintly behind dark clouds, and the island was a distant blur.

A small creature flying like a helicopter swooped down over me. As it approached, I was overjoyed to recognize the blue Rahaga. I waved my hands over my head. She circled and lowered her staff toward me. I grabbed it, and she pulled me out of the water. Hoisting me with a tiny arm, she flew toward the shoreline.

“Thank you Gaaki,” I panted.

The diminutive being nodded her Rahkshi-like head and kept going. She set me down on the remains of a dock. “You’re welcome...” she replied, pausing expectantly.

I had tried to keep my identity hidden from the villains, because I figured the less information they had to use against me, the better. This had sometimes resulted in getting me further entangled in their webs of deceit and revenge. But now that I was face to face with one of the heroes of Bionicle, I could finally speak the truth without fear. “My name is GaliGee. Well, GaliGee Hordika, I suppose,” I grimaced, gesturing at my twisted body.

The Rahaga frowned thoughtfully. “GaliGee. Hmm. I’ve never heard of you before. Are you a 2006 Matoran, here for the future storyline meetings?”

“No, I’m a retired Toa prototype. I’m not even supposed to be on Metru Nui at all. I need to find Keetongu, obviously, and then I’m going to go home.” Then I remembered that Nick and Daisy had been swept away by the wave, too. “Did you see what happened to the Visorak who were with me?”

“Relax. The sea will take care of them for you. Normally Boggarak can skate on the surface, but those two got caught in the undertow.”

“Oh, no!” I exclaimed. “Can you still save them?”

“Save them? But they mutated you! Weren’t you their captive?”

“No. Yes. I mean, sort of. If you could save them, but drop them off somewhere else, where they won’t find me... and then, if you could tell me how to get to Keetongu...”

She gave me a puzzled look, so I provided her with more details. “You see, the spiders were taking me to get healed, even though it was a big risk for them. They had orders to mutate and destroy me. So we were traveling together in secret. But after I’m cured, they want to take me back to captivity.”

Gaaki tilted her head. “Let’s see. Retired Toa prototype, traveling with two Visorak, the minions of the minions of the Toa’s arch-enemy, to see Keetongu, their sworn foe. That’s a pretty wacky story.”

“I know, it sounds really outlandish,” I shrugged. “I should know, because I write stories. But it’s all true. And if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, those two Visorak—”

“You really want me to save the spiders?” she interrupted skeptically.

“Yes, please.” I gave her my nicest twisted smile.

“All right, I’ll be right back. Stay here, and stay out of sight.”

I crept behind a low building and waited impatiently until Gaaki returned. “Come on out,” she gestured. “They sure were surprised to be rescued by me! I dropped them off by the Archives, right into the middle of a big Oohnorak-rock lion fight. They’ll be busy for a while. Well, let’s go find my good-for-nothing brothers, and we’ll take you to Keetongu. It’s not like we’ve got anything else to do until LEGO rebuilds the Coliseum.”

I fell into step beside her, greatly relieved to be in the company of someone I could trust. “Thank you so much, Gaaki,” I breathed.

“Oh, it’s no problem. I’m always up for a road trip, especially to un-mutate something the creepy crawlies have messed up.” She led me down a winding street and into a large, empty building. “Come on in and meet the riffraff.”

In the dim light, five hunchbacked beings were gathered around a stone slab with holes in the corners. The black one leaned over and used a long, smooth pole to tap one ball into another, and it rolled into the pocket.

“Hey, Gaaki, check it out,” called Norik. “Pouks just used his mighty stone powers to fix our quake-damaged table.”

“Yeah, I shoved a rock under one corner,” said the brown creature, dusting off his hands.

“Whatever, guys. Hey, I finally finished the tidal wave rescue,” Gaaki announced.

The other Rahaga looked up from their makeshift billiard table. “Right on, sister,” said Bomonga. Kualus clicked his approval.

“And look what I just dragged out of the sea! GaliGee, meet Norik, Iruini, Bomonga, Pouks, and Kualus.”

I stepped forward into the glow of the lightstone hanging over the table. “Whoa! The Visorak are mutating Matoran now?” asked Pouks. “Wait until LEGO gets wind of this!”

“Ooh, they don’t get any prettier when they’re mutated,” remarked Iruini, adding quickly, “No offense, Miss. Those harpoon thingies are really cool, by the way.”

“Like you’re one to talk!” snapped Gaaki. “Don’t mind them, GaliGee. They can’t help it, they’re just typical males. Go ahead and tell them your story.”

I cleared my throat and repeated the synopsis I had given her earlier. The Rahaga glanced at each other, and then Norik asked, “Let me get this straight. You were traveling with two Visorak to see Keetongu?”

“Yes, a Boggarak and an Oohnorak.”

“She insisted I save them from the wave, too,” Gaaki shrugged.

“Uh, right. And why exactly did the Visorak rulers order them to M and D you?” he continued, looking at me sideways.

“Because Roodaka was jealous after Sidorak made me Queen,” I replied.

“Queen? I don’t remember a Queen in the storyline! When did this happen?” wondered Pouks.

“Yesterday. At first he just shanghaied me into being his secretary, but then he decided to make Roodaka mad. And it worked.”

“But two renegade spiders want to heal you and take you back as a prisoner?” asked Norik.

“Well, actually, they want to take me to Mangaia, because they think I’m Makuta’s girlfriend. You see, Roodaka was trying to persuade him to help with some Plan of hers. She saw me as competition, so that’s why she ordered my death.”

“Oh, man,” chuckled Iruini. “For a minute I thought you said Makuta’s *girlfriend*.”

“I did.”

“That’s... disturbing,” murmured Bomonga. I nodded energetically.

Kualus made some buzzing and whirring noises and spun his finger around next to his head. Pouks stepped over to me and began to examine my cranium. “I agree, she must have gotten a concussion. Gaaki, you didn’t smash her into a rock or anything when you pulled her out of the water, did you? There’s a big dent back here.”

“Of course not,” she retorted. “That sounds like something *you* would do. But it’s possible she hit her head before I got to her. The sea was awfully rough.”

Iruini kept squinting at me. “Hey, don’t you guys get who this really is?” he exclaimed suddenly. “Think about it. The blue coloring... the mutated aquatic mask... Who’s the only Ga-Matoran who’s not safely locked up in a sphere right now? It’s Hahli! She must have fallen into the Visorak’s clutches somehow, and the trauma has given her amnesia.”

“Well, she did say she was a writer,” Gaaki pointed out. “Maybe vestiges of her true memories remain.”

“I’m not Hahli,” I protested, even though no one seemed to be listening. “I’m not even a storyline character. And I’ve never been a Matoran, either.”

Norik raised an eyebrow. “She’s obviously suffered a severe head injury, on top of being mutated. LEGO is going to be furious at the Visorak when they hear about this!”

The thought of Makuta's reaction if LEGO heard my story—or Roodaka's reaction, or even Sidorak's, for that matter—sent a chill up my deformed spine. "I'd really rather not get anyone in trouble," I said anxiously. "I just want to be healed and go home."

"Do you think we should even tell them?" asked Bomonga. "Maybe Keetongu can repair the brain damage, too. He's pretty handy with cures."

Kualus nodded and chirped.

"Yeah, LEGO is mad enough at the Visorak and their masters already about the Coliseum. Let's not waste time ratting them out. We've got to get her to Keetongu right away," insisted Iruini.

"That is, if he turns out to be real and not just a legend," said Pouks with a sly smile.

Iruini muttered, "Very funny, Pouks."

"Well, let's hit the road," urged Gaaki. "Oh, maybe we should bring a snack. Are you hungry, Hahli?"

My instinctive reaction was to bristle at being dismissed as crazy. But I forced myself to stay calm. At least the person I was being mistaken for was noble and good, and the Rahaga were going to take me where I needed to go. And now I would have more help against the Visorak, who would probably be back for me. I decided not to object, since the more I tried, the more they seemed convinced of my insanity. Besides, Keetongu would eventually reveal my true identity anyway. I thanked her and eagerly accepted some Bula berries.

Norik grabbed a handful of the berries, too. "This time we won't have to wander all over the island first, since we already know where the tears meet the sky. But it's still a pretty hard hike. Get your strength up."

"I though you could fly," I commented.

"Sure, but only for short distances. And we'd have to carry you," replied Gaaki, packing more berries into a knapsack.

"Oh. So, how is the filming going for you Rahaga?"

"Not bad," said the petite blue creature. "This part of our lives was pretty exciting, so it's fun to relive it. Saving the Toa Hordika, dispensing words of wisdom, jumping into the big melee at the end... yeah, those were good times."

"Except that Roodaka got away," grumbled Pouks.

"I didn't like that part, either," Bomonga remarked.

Norik's eyes narrowed. "I'd like to sprinkle some Kagarak chow onto her headpiece."

Kualus clucked and whistled shrilly.

"Keep it clean, Kualus," scolded Gaaki. "But yeah, it's really too bad we can't change destiny and blast her shiny black backside into oblivion. At least we do get to teach an important lesson to kids, though."

"What's that?" I asked.

"As Mark Twain once said, it's not the size of the dog in the fight," she grinned, pulling the pack onto her back. "It's the size of the fight in the dog."

I smiled back. The Rahaga led me out of the building and down the street in single file, Norik in the lead.

Traveling with the Rahaga was interesting because they were so familiar with Rahi habits. They moved quietly, their sight and hearing and sense of smell tuned to the beasts that were each one's specialty. At various times one of the dwarfish creatures would whisper for us to hide or separate so as to appear less threatening. My Hordika side understood without explanation, and I got to see many strange animals that were normally too shy to be observed. And we avoided all the dangerous predators.

As we walked, I wondered about the Visorak. My guess was that they would wait until my healing process was complete before attacking. That way they would only have to fight the Rahaga once, rather than risk a counterattack. I explained this idea to Norik.

"Ah, yes, your spider friends." The red Rahaga suppressed a laugh. "Well, if they really *are* trying to play matchmaker for the mind-bogglingly powerful, delusional megalomaniac that's been making all our lives a living torment for millennia, that's pretty much what I would expect them to do, too. But my theory is that they realize they screwed up by mutating you, and they're trying to fix their mistake before LEGO finds out. They'll see what we're doing and leave you alone."

I sighed and kept walking, wishing it were really that simple.

We passed the last trappings of Matoran civilization and entered the frozen reaches of northern Ko-Metru. A phone rang, and Norik retrieved it from a compartment on his tiny back. He listened gravely for a few minutes. "All right, we'll be there. Thank you, sir." As he put the phone away, he related the call to the others. "That was LEGO. We've got an hour to get over to the Great Temple for the filming of the scene where we research Keetongu's whereabouts. They've decided to go ahead with that part even though they haven't rebuilt quite enough of the Coliseum to do Vakama's betrayal scene. They'll splice in that one later."

"The magic of editing," remarked Pouks. "Well, at least the weather is usually nice in Ga-Metru this time of year."

“We’d better not be late,” warned Gaaki. “I bet they’re all in a pretty foul mood over there at LEGO, what with the building collapse and then that freak seismic event.”

“Maybe we can leave Hahli with Keetongu after she’s healed,” remarked Bomonga, “She will be safe there, and that way we can head straight to the Temple.” The others agreed with the Plan, including me.

After a long hike through the snow, we arrived at the base of a massive glacier.

“Behold the icy abode of Keetongu, the Healing Rahi,” announced Norik solemnly.

Pouks grinned. “Assuming, of course, that he really exists.”

“Shut up, Pouks,” grumbled Iruini.

“Well, let’s get on up to the top of the Popsicle,” urged Gaaki. She powered up her blades and lifted me off the ground, fending off chivalrous attempts by the others to help her. “I’ve got her, guys. Keep your scruffy paws to yourselves.” Considering the company I’d been keeping, the male Rahaga seemed quite clean and well mannered to me, despite her sisterly teasing.

We soared up the side of the mountain of ice and over its crest, where we found ourselves face to face with a towering hulk of radiant armor. I caught my breath. He was the largest sentient being I had ever seen, and he wielded a long, deadly-looking blade with one hand and a formidable rotating shield array with the other.

He quickly scanned us with his single eye, then stepped back to let us land on the flat surface.

“Hello, Keetongu,” said Norik, extending his hand.

“Well, if it ain’t Norik and his posse. How d’you do, little feller?” replied the Rahi in a gravelly drawl, leaning over to enfold the small red hand in his giant gold one.

## 27. Cowboy Coffee

### **Roy Rogers – Home on the Range**

*Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam  
Where the deer and the antelope play  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word  
And the skies are not cloudy all day  
Home, home on the range  
Where the deer and the antelope play  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word  
And the skies are not cloudy all day*

*How often at night where the heavens are bright  
With the light of the glittering stars  
Have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed  
If their glory exceeds that of ours*

*Home, home on the range  
Where the deer and the antelope play  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word  
And the skies are not cloudy all day*

*Then give me a land where the bright diamond sand  
Flows leisurely down to the stream  
Where the graceful white swan goes gliding along  
Like a maid in a heavenly dream*

*Oh I would not exchange my old home on the range  
Where the deer and the antelope play  
Where the seldom is heard a discouraging word  
And the skies are not cloudy all day*

The diminutive red Rahaga smiled up at the gold-armored colossus. “We’re doing well, thanks. And you?”

“Fine as cream gravy,” rumbled Keetongu. He gestured toward the center of the distant city. “What’s the news from down yonder?”

“Well, the Visorak managed to bring down the entire Coliseum this afternoon,” said Gaaki. “It was pretty exciting.”

“The whole kit and caboodle?”

Pouks nodded. “There isn’t one stone left standing on another.”

“Well, I’ll be hornswaggled. Will LEGO have to hang fire with the motion picture?” asked Keetongu.

“Yes, they will,” nodded Norik. “At least, for everything that’s filmed in the Coliseum. But we’re due at the Great Temple in an hour for one of our scenes.”

“Well, I ain’t *too* surprised those ornery varmints would kick up a row. If they get to settin’ too long in one spot, they start fightin’ each other like Kilkenny cats! But I reckon y’all didn’t haul yerselves all the way up to my cabin to shoot the bull about the Visorak.” Keetongu fixed me in the gaze of his single eye.

“No, sir, we have a favor to ask,” said Norik. “This Matoran named Hahli has been mutated by their venom. Could you please reverse the Hordika transformation? And if it’s not too much trouble, could she stay here with you until LEGO comes?”

I bristled at my mistaken identity, but Keetongu nodded affably. “It would be my pleasure,” came the slow reply. “As long as she’s upright in the saddle.”

“Oh, Hahli’s a very noble Matoran,” said Gaaki. “She’s done lots of courageous things for the sake of the Three Virtues. She gave the speech that rallied the inhabitants of Mata Nui to Unify behind Takanuva during the great battle between him and Makuta in the first movie. That put them right where they needed to be to pursue their Destiny and head for Metru Nui. And now she’s diligently performing her Duty as the new Chronicler.”

I calmed down a little at the thought that my alter ego had a good track record. But then the Rahaga started to talk about my head injury. “She’s got some pretty serious brain damage, too,” pointed out Bomonga. “Can you fix that?”

Iruini snickered. “Yeah. She’s been babbling about all kinds of nutty things. Being Queen of the Visorak and Makuta’s girlfriend and so on. See that dent in her head?” He whacked the back of his own head with his staff and crossed his eyes, and Kualus supplied some chirping noises. I suppressed the involuntary growl that was rising in my throat.

“Come on over here, little lady. Let’s see if I can’t get you back in apple pie order.” The healing Rahi gently took my hand and led me away from the others. He scanned my head carefully with his eyebeam. “You *have* been knocked galley west, haven’t you?” Then his gaze traveled down my neck. To my surprise, he stopped at my chest. “Whoa, there. What in tarnation is this?”

The Rahagas’ eyes widened. I looked down at my torso. The light from Keetongu’s eye had revealed a darkly glowing handprint. Reddish energy crackled over the mark, which had three clawlike fingers flanked by two thumbs.

“That handprint could only be... Makuta’s,” whispered Norik.

“Whose gang do you *really* ride with, Sister?” Keetongu growled, putting his hands on his hips. “I don’t cotton to bein’ scooped in by minions of evil.”

Everyone looked at me expectantly. I swallowed hard, fearing they would once again scoff at the truth. “I was Makuta’s prisoner,” I replied anxiously.

Keetongu looked me straight in the eyes with his probing orb as if he were staring directly into my soul. Finally something like a smile crossed his strange, mechanical-looking face. “The little gal is right as a trivet,” he announced to the Rahaga. He scanned the rest of me, making comments about various other injuries.

I was immensely thankful that someone finally believed me. But I had one more request. “Could you... could you please heal that mark, too?”

“I ain’t never seen a brand like that ‘un before,” he shrugged. “It’s deep below the surface. I’m not dead certain I can set it right, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

The Rahaga stepped back to let the Rahi do his healing work. He produced his razor-sharp blade and held it close to my head. I tried not to flinch as he passed it along my body. When he had reached my feet, the edge was covered in greenish fluid with a streak of reddish black grime. He wiped it clean in the snow.

Gradually, I felt myself begin to transform again. The jolts and twitches were gentler this time. I looked at my arms and legs, and to my great relief, they changed into Toa limbs again. Even my emerging Rahkshi-foot torso was a welcome sight. “Thank you, Keetongu! Thank you so much!” I marveled at my restored form for a few more seconds before I asked, “Is the handprint gone?”

Keetongu focused his eye, and the mark was no longer there. I smiled gratefully at the massive Rahi.

The Rahaga were staring at me incredulously. “You’re not Hahli,” remarked Pouks.

I shook my head slowly. “No, I’m not.”

“So, who are you, then?” asked Iruini.

“Like I told you, I’m GaliGee. I’m a retired Toa prototype.”

“But if *that* part of your story is true—” began Norik. He was interrupted by a loud crash. We all spun around to see a large rock that had evidently been lobbed over the edge of the glacier. Then I felt an arm grip my waist and pull me backwards just as a giant green net was flung over the Rahaga and Keetongu. I heard Daisy’s voice behind me. “Don’t fight, Galitea, it’s me. We’ve come to take you home!” She anchored a strand of web for us to rappel down the side of the ice mountain.

Meanwhile, Nick furiously spun more fibers to tighten the netting around the others. But Keetongu slashed through the mesh with his blade. His head and shoulders burst out. Nick jumped back and fired a Rhotuka at him. The great gold Rahi caught the energy wheel with his rotating shield array. Then a panel opened on his chest, and he launched his own spinner. The black spider tried vainly to dodge, but it followed his movements. Nick collapsed, the victim of his own paralysis power.

Daisy gasped in horror. I took advantage of the distraction to jab her with my elbow and twist free. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Getting away from you!” I retorted, pulling my axes off my back. I shot a stream of water at her, knocking her off the ledge. She pulled herself back up with the rope.

“You’re making a big mistake, Galitea,” she pleaded. “Lord Makuta really cares for you. It’s the first time he’s ever had someone good in his life, someone he’s willing to sacrifice for—and it scares him into doing reckless things. You have to forgive him and take him back. I’m convinced it’s your destiny to tame the beast inside him. Love really can change the world, and you’re the Avatar of Love.”

“This has got to be the most insanely convoluted trick ever perpetrated by the forces of evil,” I fumed, realizing that a trace of Hordika feistiness remained in my spirit. “No offense, Daisy—I think your love for Nick is sincere. But you’re a pawn in this Plan, too. Makuta just wants to use me, like he wants to use everyone else.”

The Rahaga and Keetongu had surrounded us, but Daisy stood her ground. “I can see I’m not changing your mind. Give me Nick, and I’ll leave you alone.”

“Bold demand, for someone who has no advantage whatsoever,” commented Bomonga quietly.

Norik nodded. “The earthy one is right. But we’ll let you take your Nick and go peacefully, anyway. After all, we’re the good guys. For your part, you have to promise not to interfere with her going back with LEGO.”

“Deal,” the blue spider replied proudly. Kualus and Pouks dragged Nick over to Daisy. She shouldered her beloved and dropped silently over the edge.

The Rahaga were staring at me again. “I’m sure there’s a good story here,” remarked Iruini. “Do tell.”

“It’s really long,” I warned him.

Gaaki cleared her throat. “Write the story, and let us know when it’s done. I’m dying to hear it, but *someone* promised LEGO we’d be at the Great Temple in an hour, about an hour ago.”

Norik stiffened. “Well, I didn’t want to make them mad at me. They’re already in a black mood over the filming schedule.”

“So now they’ll just be mad at us for being late,” snorted the blue Rahaga.

“Hey, I—”

“Wish I had me a Tahtorahk I could loan you,” interrupted Keetongu. “But you’d best be hittin’ the trail. It was real nice seein’ y’all.”

“Yeah, a Tahtorahk. That would be awesome,” said Pouks wistfully as the gold Rahi gently herded the Rahaga toward the edge of the glacier. Their blades sputtered into flight as he nudged them off the cliff.

“Thank you so much, Keetongu. See you in a few days,” called Norik as they buzzed away. The healing Rahi waved his reply.

“Good thing Keetongu *did* turn out to be real,” Pouks remarked. Iruini swerved to side-swipe him.

Keetongu and I watched them fade into the icy gray horizon. Then he turned to me. “It’s not so much that I fancy the cold,” he remarked, “it’s just that I like the quiet. Want I should build us a fire?”

“Sure, thanks.”

He disappeared down an ice staircase I hadn’t noticed before and returned with an armload of firewood, which he carefully ignited using a heatstone in an insulated case.

I watched him work until smoke rose from the pile of logs, then finally spoke. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Don’t fret, little missy,” he shrugged. “You been through the wringer. I’m just happy I could lend a hand.”

We sat quietly for a while, watching flames and the blur of the sunsets. He boiled a pot of cowboy coffee over the fire, and we passed a tin cup of the stout brew back and forth. I enjoyed the peaceful feeling of powerful shelter, and I wanted to respect his preference for silence. But my journalistic curiosity finally overcame me, and I ventured a question. “Keetongu, if you don’t mind my asking, why did you wait so long to confront Sidorak? If you had come out of your cave sooner, all those Rahi wouldn’t have been webbed up.”

The mighty Rahi chuckled. “I woulda dry-gulched him right from the get-go, except that I was gettin’ some shut-eye. My kind has to take a century-long siesta every millennium or so.”

“How odd,” I mused.

“You know, I’m a peaceable critter, mostly, but that Sidorak feller, well, he needed killin’,” he continued.

“I won’t argue with that,” I shrugged. “I’m getting really tired of bad guys.”

“It sounds you’ve been tangling with the worst of ‘em lately. You must have quite a campfire tale.”

“I could tell you an abbreviated version,” I offered, and he nodded. I related the highlights of my escapades since Makuta first kidnapped me.

“My stars,” he mused, crossing his arms behind his head. “Well, at least that four-flushin’ curly wolf is giving you something to write about.”

“I really do enjoy writing the stories,” I admitted. “And usually they prove something about forgiveness, or courage, or compassion. I like being able to pass that along to my readers, mixed in with some adventure. But I don’t want to be in the middle of it, and I think Makuta keeps dragging me into this stuff just to see his name in print.”

“He is a bit of a blowhard,” grinned the gold behemoth. “Reminds me of what happened when I grappled with him in the *Time Trap* book. I look forward to livin’ that again after the movie.”

My eyes widened. “But you survived?”

“Yes, ma’am. He was about to grind off my noggin with my own shield, but then he got to ruminatin’ about exactly how he should off me, and the shack we was in got blown to bits by Vakama. So I escaped.”

He joined me in laughing at the thought of Makuta forfeiting a battle because of his long-windedness. Then he leaned forward. “You know, all you have to do is change the names.”

I cocked my head. “What names?”

“The names in your stories. If Makuta comes to hassle you, just write a story about some other low-life mudsill. That way he antes up an idea for you, but he don’t get nothin’ out of the deal.”

“That’s brilliant,” I smiled.

Suddenly Keetongu sat up straight. “Hobble your lip! I hear somethin’!” We both froze, and then he muttered, “Rahkshi.”

## 28. The Usual Suspects

### **Pearl Jam — Black**

*Sheets of empty canvas, untouched sheets of clay  
Were laid spread out before me as her body once did.  
All five horizons revolved around her soul  
As the earth to the sun  
Now the air I tasted and breathed has taken a turn*

*Ooh, and all I taught her was everything  
Ooh, I know she gave me all that she wore  
And now my bitter hands chafe beneath the clouds  
Of what was everything.  
Oh, the pictures have all been washed in black, tattooed everything...*

*I take a walk outside  
I'm surrounded by some kids at play  
I can feel their laughter, so why do I sear?  
Oh, and twisted thoughts that spin round my head  
I'm spinning, oh, I'm spinning  
How quick the sun can drop away*

*And now my bitter hands cradle broken glass  
Of what was everything?  
All the pictures have all been washed in black, tattooed everything...*

*All the love gone bad turned my world to black  
Tattooed all I see, all that I am, all I'll be... yeah...  
Uh huh... uh huh... ooh...*

*I know someday you'll have a beautiful life,  
I know you'll be a sun in somebody else's sky, but why  
Why, why can't it be, why can't it be mine*

Even though night had already fallen, the sky seemed to darken anyway as the hum of Rahkshi flight became perceptible to me. I looked nervously at Keetongu. My massive host had located the source of the sound and was scanning with his eye beam. “Four of the little scamps, over that-a-way,” he drawled.

“Just tell them you’ve never seen me.” I slipped on my Huna and became invisible.

“I reckon they’ve already sniffed you out. They’re like huntin’ dogs.”

“Then I’d better really leave. They’ll wreck you and your mountain for my sake.” I deactivated the mask and ran toward the edge. Pulling out my axes, I prepared to climb down the cliff.

“Now, come on back here, darlin’, this ain’t my first rodeo,” he said wryly. “Besides, I’m a bit stiff from lollygaggin’ around. Those LEGO folk move like molasses in winter. I could use a bit of exercise.”

Relieved to have his offer of protection, I ran to his side just as the *Rahkshi* swooped in. “They can only use their powers after they land,” I whispered. Keetongu nodded.

Shadrahk made a beeline for me, an arm outstretched to pick me up. “Mistress! The Cavalry is here!” he yelled.

Vorahk zoomed toward Keetongu. The gigantic armored *Rahi* swung his hand and swatted the *Rahkshi* of Hunger out of the sky. I powered up the *Huna* and dropped to the ground. Shadrahk whistled overhead. Having missed me, he scooped up his fallen brother instead, then released him. Vorahk tumbled in the air for a moment, flinging ice chunks in all directions, before leveling into steady flight.

“Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be, Mistress,” scolded Shadrahk. “One way or another, you’re coming home with us.”

I turned off the *Huna*. “No offense, Shadrahk, but I’m not coming. You’ve done everything possible to make your master seem appealing, but I just can’t live with him. It goes against everything I believe.”

Shadrahk and Vorahk circled like hawks. “I’m not here to argue with you,” replied the *Rahkshi* of Darkness. “I have orders to bring you home, dead or alive.”

Keetongu brandished his blade and stepped in front of me. “The lady declines to accompany you sorry little varmints. Buzz off!” he warned.

“Whoa, dude, the mountain of metal can talk,” marveled Vorahk.

Plasmarahk and Guurahk landed on opposite sides of the plateau. I turned on the *Huna* and crept a few feet away. I waited until the two flying *Rahkshi* were aligned and then fired a jet of water at them, slamming them into each other, and they fell from the sky. Then I hid myself and ran to another spot. Meanwhile, Keetongu activated his shield array. As the *Rahkshi* of Plasma and Disintegration fired simultaneously at him, he spun in a circle and caught both their destructive energy beams with his device. Then his chest panel flipped open, and he launched a spinner at Plasmarahk. It struck the *Rahkshi* with a blinding flash of fiery destructive force, and he tumbled backwards off the cliff. I formed my staff and shot a burst of disintegration power at Guurahk’s feet. The blue-armored creature slid away down an avalanche of ice.

“Sorry about your glacier, Keetongu,” I panted.

“I don’t care a continental,” he laughed. “LEGO will fix it. Nice shootin’, Tex!”

“Thanks,” I smiled grimly. “I don’t like seeing them get hurt, because they’ve been kind to me. But one of them has healing powers, so they’ll be all right.” Still, I wondered how much pain it would take to dissuade them. And would the Master of Shadows himself arrive to help out? I cringed at the thought of being the cause of another Makuta-Keetongu fight. Hopefully LEGO

would show up, and they would retreat. Though single-mindedly persistent, Makuta's offspring understood the importance of keeping him out of trouble with his employers.

Vorahk suddenly appeared behind Keetongu. I realized with a start that Shadrahk must have cloaked him so that he could sneak up on us. "Look out!" I cried, jumping away. "Don't let him touch you with his staff!"

Keetongu leaped sideways, but not before Vorahk grazed his ribs with the tip of his weapon. Stolen energy crackled along his dark arms. "Yesss!" he hissed.

The golden Rahi lunged, his blade forward. He hooked Vorahk's staff and flung it over the side of the cliff.

"Bummer," said the Rahkshi of Hunger. "Well, let's just do it the old-fashioned way—you and me, *mano a mano*. How about it, Cyclops?"

Keetongu tilted his head at Shadrahk, who was aiming his weapon, waiting for the right moment to fire. "Horse feathers. I didn't just roll off the last turnip truck, boy."

"General, with permission, I'd like to take him down by myself," called Vorahk over his shoulder. "I've been looking forward to fighting an opponent like this for years."

"Sure, Sarge, give it a try," said Shadrahk, tossing his staff aside. He gestured for Guurahk to do the same as the blue Rahkshi landed next to him. "Our ranged attacks aren't working too well, anyway. But get on with it. We don't have time for a full-on kung fu demonstration. Master is in a black mood like I've never seen before."

"Understood, sir," said Vorahk. "I had a front row seat at the fireworks show, too. All right, what do you say, big guy?"

The gold Rahi shrugged. He set aside his shield and blade. "It's your funeral, whippersnapper."

Shadrahk frowned at me. "You, too, Mistress." I laid my axe-staff down.

Vorahk leaped onto the mighty healer, an extended foot followed by chopping hands. Keetongu reeled as the black Rahkshi slammed into him, then flinched at the onslaught of blows. He swung his fist at Vorahk, who danced deftly out of range.

Then the Rahkshi vaulted over Keetongu's head, striking the Rahi's enormous skull with one foot as he sailed over. Keetongu snorted with annoyance.

The polished behemoth lunged with surprising speed and struck Vorahk with his open hand. The lighter creature flew into the snow with a grunt of pain. As he bounced back up, he rubbed his shoulder and muttered, "Note to self: don't let him hit you again."

He rushed forward and leaped straight up into the air in front of Keetongu. The Rahi reached up to smack him again, but Vorahk grabbed the edge of his opponent's breastplate with both hands and flipped himself over, kicking Keetongu in the back as he landed behind him. The gold giant pivoted and stepped forward. The Rahkshi rolled between his legs and extended both hands in time to trip his foe, sending the massive bulk crashing face first onto the ice.

Guurahk hissed approvingly, and Shadrahk smiled. "Nice."

Vorahk glanced back at his companions and grinned. "All that practice with Invulnerahk is finally paying off. I can't wait to tell him about this!"

But his playtime was cut unexpectedly short. While the Rahkshi of Hunger was boasting to his brother, Keetongu pushed himself to his knees and pulled back one arm. He drove a heavily armored fist into Vorahk's chest, smashing the Rahkshi's carapace deep into the hard-packed snow with a sickening crunch. Two feebly twitching feet were all that was visible of the black creature.

The Rahi calmly wiped some pale green fluid off his knuckles into the snow, stood, and picked up his weapons. A barely audible gasp came from the crater. "Dude... that... hurt..."

"Well, duh! You're a chip off the old block, Vorahk," sighed Shadrahk. He and Guurahk leveled their staffs at Keetongu.

Keetongu had already grabbed his shield so fast I didn't even see his hand move. The rotating array was activated, but the arm holding his blade was relaxed. He cocked his head at Shadrahk. "Scrape up what's left of your pal and shin out before I clean your plow, too," he growled.

"Thanks," nodded the black and red Rahkshi grudgingly. His staff handle vanished, and he put the ends on his back. "Troops, fall back. We'll get reinforcements."

"I'm... down... with that," sputtered Vorahk.

Shadrahk knelt down, reached into the hole in the snow, and hauled out his limp friend. "Guurahk, pick up his staff when you get Plasmarahk," he called, pulling Vorahk into his lap as he hovered. His eyes met mine. "Mistress, you know it's futile to flee your shadow." He and the blue Rahkshi flew away over the edge of the glacier.

"Thanks, again," I smiled at Keetongu.

"My pleasure, little gal," he said politely. "I gotta practice my quick-draw once in a while, or I get a hitch in my giddy-up. Mistress of the Rahkshi, eh?"

"Yeah, that's what they call me," I groaned.

"And Queen of the Visorak, to boot! I've got a pretty high-falutin' guest on the premises," he said wryly.

I rolled my eyes. “It sure sounds that way, doesn’t it?”

The giant Rahi kicked some snow over Vorahk’s splattered fluid. “Well, they’ve pulled in their horns for now. Hopefully I tanned their hides well enough that they’ll stay gone for a spell. But I wager they’ll come creepin’ back around here, from the sound of it, unless the LEGO folk show up first. Want some vittles? Or another cup of the brown gargle?”

“Just a quiet place to rest would be wonderful, thanks,” I replied.

He led me down into his underground igloo. It was sparsely furnished, with a large, colorful cotton hammock and a folding wooden campstool in one corner. Several books, a harmonica, and a canvas rucksack were piled on a table hewn from the ice. A skillet, pot, and tin plate lay beside stacked cans of vegetarian chili and coffee. I stretched out in the hammock, closed my eyes, and lapsed immediately into dreamless sleep.

I was awakened by the sound of arguing. Keetongu rumbled, “I don’t think you’re the real McCoy. You certainly ain’t in this year’s storyline.”

The reply came in a voice even lower and more gravelly than the Rahi’s. “LEGO rebuilt me for a flashback in one of the books.”

I scrambled up the icy steps to see what was going on. The newcomer was a stocky gray and blue Toa. He was leaning on a long-handled gold mace with blunt, square bumps all over the round end. Reddish-orange eyes glowed behind the holes in his gold mask, which was a smooth trapezoidal shape sitting on a wide rectangle with vertical slits, covering his mouth like the chin piece of a medieval helmet.

Keetongu leaned over toward me and muttered, “This here fella claims to be Ravga, Toa of Gravity. Says he was sent by the Rahaga to fetch you and take you back to LEGO. But I smell a Rahkshi.”

“There is a Rahkshi with shapeshifting powers,” I whispered back. “And he has that same color scheme. But last I heard, he wasn’t capable of speech.”

The Toa frowned behind his metal grill. “I’m no shapeshifter, but I can do this.” He raised his mace and pointed it at a boulder, and the massive rock floated like a soap bubble. With a flick of his wrist, he released it, and it crashed down to the ground again.

“What’s your mask power, sir?” I asked politely.

He vanished and reappeared a few feet away. “Teleportation.”

I looked at Keetongu and shrugged. “The shapeshifting Rahkshi can mimic shapes, but not powers.”

“I still think this is some kind of tomfoolery,” grumbled Keetongu. “Considerin’ what kind of company you been keepin’, I won’t let you go gallivantin’ off with just anyone. What if it’s Makuta himself? The scuttlebutt is that he can change into any critter he’s got a hankerin’ to look like.”

“I’m not sure he’d have the patience to stand here and talk with you,” I whispered. At this moment there was a huge explosion in the direction of the Coliseum, followed by several small aftershocks. “I think *that* was probably Makuta.”

Keetongu nodded. “Givin’ Sidorak a good horse-whippin’, no doubt.”

I looked directly into the gray and blue being’s eyes, searching for a hint of recognition. “Pinky? Is that you? Did you go Stage Seven?”

Ravga groaned. “First you say I smell like a Rahkshi, then I’m Makuta incarnate, and now you’re calling me ridiculous names. Look, if you don’t trust me, I’ll be on my way. I was just trying to do a favor for some old friends.” He shouldered his tool and trudged away across the glacier.

“Wait a minute, Ravga,” I called. “I’m sorry to sound ungrateful. It’s just that there are a lot of dangerous creatures out there. Please tell us more about yourself. How do you know the Rahaga?”

The Toa stopped turned around. “We fought the Brotherhood of Makuta together. They used to be the Toa Hagah, you know. They were the best of the best. After they found out what Makuta was really up to, they managed to steal the Avokhii from his fortress before that vicious sorceress Roodaka mutated them into ugly little freaks.”

I glanced at Keetongu. “He knows his storyline,” muttered the Rahi. He turned to Ravga. “Why haven’t I heard tell of you before?”

“You really want to know? Because some kid snapped together some Toa Metru and Nuva parts, sent the picture to a building contest, and won. I think he did an especially good job on the weapon, myself. I don’t know where he got the gold Nuhvok-Kal hand shields, maybe from some Technic racing set or something. Anyway, as part of his prize package, LEGO built me for real and wrote me into a backstory. But it’s just a cameo. I get shot to pieces by Exo rockets at close range about six hours after I get to the island. If you ask me, I’m just being used to show how ruthless Makuta can be.”

“Ooh,” I flinched.

“He might just be tellin’ it straight,” said Keetongu thoughtfully. “Trouble is, if he’s chiseling us—”

Just then, Ravga was struck in the back by a blast of dark energy and toppled over with a moan. His assailant, Shadrahk, was standing on the edge of the cliff. Guurahk, Plasmarahk, and Vorahk

were arrayed nearby. But as I glanced around, I saw more Rahkshi had joined them. Somnorahk, Thermorahk, and Vacuurahk were aiming their weapons behind me.

Keetongu's shield array was already activated. He crouched, ready to spin and intercept whatever powers were thrown at him. Nervously, I scanned the crowd and decided Vacuurahk's was probably the only power he couldn't counter, since it wasn't a directed force, but rather the absence of air. I unleashed a bolt of disintegration energy at him and dropped to the ground as Shadrahk yelled, "Fire!" and the other Rahkshi shot at my protector.

As before, the immense creature was able to spin fast enough to catch most of dark energy coming at him. But some of the Rahkshi had held off for a few seconds, and as he opened his spinner cover, he continued to be assaulted with destructive power. He staggered under the combined blast. A potent spinner shot out, and he willed it to fly into the middle of the first four Rahkshi. The ice exploded under them, and they were thrown into the air. Guurahk and Vorahk fell over the edge. Vacuurahk tumbled backwards from my shot as well.

Ravga struggled to his feet and gripped his mace, and the two other newcomers were lifted into the air. Writhing, they fought to steady their aim while he threw ice chunks with one hand to knock them away from the glacier. Then he reversed the gravity, sending them plunging down. The sound of their impact seemed to ring across the canyon almost instantaneously.

Keetongu had stumbled over to Shadrahk, who was crawling out of a pile of ice chunks. He raised his mighty hand. Shadrahk clutched his staff and hid himself in a column of shadow. The Rahi struck anyway, and the Rahkshi of Darkness yelled in pain. He flew out of the vanishing shadow and landed a few bios away.

The Toa of Gravity had teleported himself out of the way of Plasmarahk's shot. Vaporizing ice hissed where he had been standing. Then he raised the Rahkshi of Plasma into the air and kicked him out over the crevasse. Repeating his trick, he sent his foe crashing to the ice and boulders below.

Shadrahk crawled to the edge of the glacier and flew off to find his injured comrades before Keetongu could get to him again. His voice faded into the distance. "We'll meet again, Mistress!"

Ravga walked up to the gold giant, who was wincing and rubbing his head. "You all right, Keetongu?"

"Sure. We would have been buzzard food if you hadn't unshucked your gun. Thanks." Then Keetongu turned to me. "I don't mean to bellyache, sweet thang, but your suitor's ankle-biters are gettin' to be a real pain," he grumbled. He gestured at the pock-marked surface of his glacier. "And I'm gonna have some explainin' to do when LEGO shows up."

"I'm sorry," I smiled sheepishly. "Well, since Ravga has certainly proved himself, I'll go with him, and hopefully you won't have any more trouble."

The Rahi looked at the Toa and sighed. “How are you gonna hold off seven Rahkshi until you get all the way to the LEGO trailer?”

“I’ll teleport us,” shrugged the bulky hero. “I can’t get us there in one shot, but I can move us from one high point to the next faster than they can fly after us.”

“Then head ‘em up and move ‘em out,” said Keetongu. He clanked his blade against Ravga’s mace. “Well, thanks again, Ravga. You’re someone to ride the river with. As for you, little lady, I’ve had a powerful nice time swappin’ campfire stories with you. Happy trails!”

“Thank you so much for all your help, Keetongu,” I smiled. I hesitated for a moment, then threw my arms around his waist. He was so large that my hands didn’t even meet behind his back.

The creature chuckled as he enfolded me in his massive arms. “Bye, now.”

Ravga put his weapon on his back and gestured for me to come over. He put a heavy arm around my shoulder and saluted Keetongu with the other. Then the tingling sensation of being teleported surged through my body, and the world went dark.

## 29. Artificial Gravity

### **Tammy Wynette — Stand By Your Man**

*Sometimes it's hard to be a woman  
 Giving all your love to just one man  
 You'll have bad times  
 And he'll have good times  
 Doing things that you don't understand  
 But if you love him you'll forgive him  
 Even though he's hard to understand  
 And if you love him  
 Oh be proud of him  
 'Cause after all he's just a man  
 Stand by your man  
 Give him two arms to cling to  
 And something warm to come to  
 When nights are cold and lonely  
 Stand by your man  
 And tell the world you love him  
 Keep giving all the love you can  
 Stand by your man  
 Stand by your man  
 And show the world you love him  
 Keep giving all the love you can  
 Stand by your man*

I felt solid ground under my feet, and my vision returned. Then I realized it wasn't ground, exactly, but rather a fairly stable pile of broken crystal. Ravga and I had materialized on top of a ruined Knowledge Tower. I craned my neck and saw Keetongu's glacier behind us. A ray of sunlight pierced the clouds that covered most of the sky, and for a moment the Rahi's armor glinted like a gold beacon.

I looked over at the Toa of Gravity, who was still clenching my shoulder, and waited. He scanned the horizon carefully and focused on another tower, this one partially intact. We vanished into nothingness again, then reappeared on top of the truncated skyscraper. I caught my breath as I realized we were standing about ten stories in the air on a small windswept platform. I grabbed Ravga with both hands to steady myself.

"I'm a little bit afraid of heights," I said apologetically.

Ravga nodded. He glanced back at Keetongu's peak, which was merely a distant jag on the horizon now. Then he put his other arm around me and hugged me tightly. At first it was reassuring to be in his firm grip. I assumed that he must be resting before his next expenditure of energy. But after a long pause, I finally asked, "When are we going to move again, Ravga?"

To my astonishment, he hissed at me. Then he began to morph, and I found myself in the embrace of a blue and gold Rahkshi. "Pinky!" I groaned. "It *was* you! But how did you—"

Shadrahk had landed on a narrow ledge below us. “Pay no attention to the Rahkshi behind the curtain,” he grinned.

A nearby Knowledge Tower faded away, revealing Illusorahk, Telerahk, Gravirahk, and Nick. “Or the Visorak,” added the spider in a gravelly baritone.

“Oh, no,” I moaned. “I can’t believe—well, yes, I can.” I dropped my mask into my hands.

“It’s so good to have you back again, Mistress. Let’s get down to the ground. And please don’t try anything crazy.” Shadrahk hovered next to us and held out his arms.

The shapeshifting Rahkshi nuzzled my neck affectionately with his reptilian head. Then he lifted me and tossed me into Shadrahk’s lap, and we flew down to the street. Shadrahk set me down and clanged his staff against Pinky’s. The members of the “Ravga” team crowded around us, along with all the Rahkshi that had been involved in the fight with Keetongu, plus Daisy and Therahk. All of them were hissing, clanking their weapons together, and bouncing up and down, except for the Rahkshi of Quick Healing, who was leaning wearily on his tool. My heart sank as I realized I had virtually no hope of escaping this jubilant crowd.

“Excellent work, Shadrahk,” Nick remarked. “After I saw you lose that first battle so badly, I was starting to doubt your military skills. But then when you came to me and explained your Plan, I realized why it was pure genius to throw the fight. By deceiving Keetongu instead of defeating him, you made sure no one would follow you.”

Vorahk crossed his arms. “What do you mean, ‘throw the fight’?”

“Keetongu was expecting us to attack sooner or later. But mostly I wanted to probe his strengths.” The Rahkshi of Darkness put his arm around Vorahk. “And besides, Sarge here was itching for a good brawl. He fought like a champion, too. I was afraid he would win for a while there. Fortunately, he got distracted.”

“So you knew I would get my butt kicked, but you had a second, more awesome Plan in mind the whole time?” asked the black Rahkshi incredulously. “You’re a chip off the old block, Shadrahk.”

“Thank you, Vorahk,” said Shadrahk, lifting his chin a little. He turned back to Nick. “Still, the Plan wouldn’t have worked without your exceptional proficiency at ventriloquism, Nikorak. Not to mention your quick thinking and your vast knowledge of the Bionicle storyline.”

Nick chuckled modestly. “No problem. I was glad to help. I was feeling pretty hopeless after my own fiasco.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why did you and Daisy attack when you did?” wondered Shadrahk. “Was it because once they realized Mistress’s story was true, they would be ready for you?”

“Exactly,” replied the spider. “It was our last chance to use the element of surprise. So we went ahead, even though we were ridiculously outnumbered. Due to the secrecy of our mission, we couldn’t enlist any help, you see.”

“Well, it was a brave fight and a smart idea. It probably would have succeeded if you had gotten to wait until the Rahaga had left. Or if Mistress had been a bit more cooperative.” Shadrahk turned to glare at me, and I swallowed hard. But then he cracked a smile. “No matter. You’re safely in our custody now, and for good this time.”

I looked around at the Visorak and Rahkshi and shook my head in amazement. “You guys sure are willing to make a lot of sacrifices to make a Plan work. The intensity of that fight really made ‘Ravga’ believable.”

Pinky hissed resentfully at Shadrahk. “Sorry, Pinky. I know that blast hit you pretty hard. I had to make it look realistic,” explained the Rahkshi of Darkness.

Pinky shrugged his forgiveness. But Gravirahk wasn’t faring so well with Somnorahk, Thermorahk, and Plasmarahk, who were beating him over the head with their staffs. Shadrahk stepped in and broke up the fight. “Stop that! If anyone has a reason to complain, it’s Therahk.” The black and brown Rahkshi hissed in agreement.

I sighed. “Well, Shadrahk, your Plan was brilliant. I suppose it’s not your fault you have to send me back to a dark hellhole to be the companion of an evil psychopath.”

“We Rahkshi will do our very best to make you feel at home,” he pledged.

Daisy patted my arm with her front leg. “I’m not going to give you the speech again, but I’m confident true love will prevail.”

I shifted my weight between my feet and looked around. I was tempted to throw on the Huna, activate it, and slip out of the crowd, but with so many eyes on me, this was not the moment to flee.

“And if you really have faith in love,” she continued, “you’ll realize how much power you have to change him. You stand at the crossroads of Destiny. Go ahead, don’t be afraid to use your feminine wiles! The fate of the universe might very well hang in the balance. Just imagine how his strength and determination, walking hand in hand with your kindness and beauty, will make the world a better place.”

“Um, Daisy, you’re giving her the speech,” muttered Nick.

She waved at Nick to be quiet. “But without you, it’s obvious he’s dangerously unstable. Lord Makuta needs you, Galitea,” she concluded. “It’s time to stand by your man.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not my man.”

“Well, your spirit-being-manifesting-himself-in-the-form-of-a-biomechanical-creature, then,” she shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Hey, wait a minute, Daisy. Didn’t you tell the Rahaga you wouldn’t interfere with me getting back to LEGO?”

“Sure,” she said offhandedly. “But promises are cheap. Consider who trained me in the ways of treachery.”

The Rahkshi began to murmur among themselves, and a few of them snickered. When Daisy’s eyes narrowed, Vorahk reassured her, “They’re talking about your boss, not you. We call her the Queen Über—”

“That’s enough,” Shadrahk snapped. “There’s no need to be disrespectful.”

After a moment of awkward silence, Nick said, “You know, Shadrahk, you should be really grateful Vorahk wasn’t killed by that big brute. I lost my Number Two recently, and it was a big blow for me. I mean, I like the new guy, but I still miss Lucky.”

“You mean the Oohnorak that Roodaka mutated into an eight-legged monster?” asked Shadrahk. “I saved him from being turned into charcoal by the dragon that does our cooking. He said he was stealing meat to distract the Manas so he could sneak out Master’s portal. So I told them to let him pass on through.”

“You did? Thanks, Shadrahk!” exclaimed the black spider.

The dark Rahkshi smiled. “No problem. Well, it’s been a privilege to work with you, Nick. And with you, too, Daisy. Your style, eloquence, and discretion are a credit to your species.”

“Yeah, I’m really lucky to have her,” beamed Nick. She nudged his leg, and he added quickly, “Uh, working with me.”

“Well, we’ve got to get Mistress back to Master before he blows another gasket.” Shadrahk jumped up and hovered.

“Of course. Since it happens to be *my* master he’s pulverizing at the moment, I won’t keep you any longer.” Nick saluted the Rahkshi commander with his front tarsal segment.

The Rahkshi mobilized for flight, and Shadrahk pulled me into his lap. I watched Nick and Daisy over his shoulder as we flew away. They waved at me. Then Nick said, “Too bad it’s not *your* boss that’s getting clobbered.”

Daisy took a swipe at him, but he caught her foreleg and pulled her close instead. I turned away just as their mandibles met in a kiss.

“Who would have thought,” mused Shadrahk as we skimmed over the rubble of Ko-Metru, “that a couple of arachnids would be so smart?”

“You minions of darkness are full of surprises,” I remarked. I settled back to watch the scenery. Evidently I would be returning to my familiar life of trying to find ways to break out of Mangaia.

“We’ll be meeting Master in the Po-Metru lair,” said the shadow Rahkshi. “I’ve sent Telerahk to find him. He’s going to be so thrilled to see you.”

I flinched at the prospect of a sentimental reunion with Makuta. Hopefully he would have work to do, and he would leave me alone soon so I could find an escape route from the new lair.

We flew over a sculpture field, where we were joined by Invulnerahk, Pyrorahk, and Laserahk, who had evidently been searching for me there. The Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability flew next to Vorahk and eagerly listened to all the details of the fight with Keetongu. “Sweet! You rock, Vorahk!” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, it was good times,” his black friend reminisced. “Even though I didn’t have you there to yell a random inspirational movie line.”

The jolly camaraderie came to an abrupt halt when a wall of earth surged up in front of us like a giant hand. Fingers of soil grabbed at those Rahkshi who hadn’t already collided with the huge palm. Guurahk and Plasmarahk fired devastating blasts at the bizarre hand, but another one rose behind us and smashed them. Meanwhile, Shadrahk dropped me and rolled on the ground, clutching his head in pain. Pyrorahk and Laserahk were flash-frozen in a block of ice, and bolts of high-pressure water knocked Telerahk, Vorahk and Invulnerahk from the sky. Pinky and Illusorahk struggled to stand up, but the ground under them had turned to quicksand, and they slid quickly under the surface. Vacuurahk and Therahk succumbed to a barrage of flaming projectiles while Thermorahk vainly shot his eye beams against what seemed like a force field imprisoning him. Although I would have been an easy target, none of the attacks were directed at me.

I caught my breath. This must be the Toa Nuva, come to free me at last from my bizarre ordeal! Who, besides Makuta, wielded this kind of mastery over the elements? They must have become bored, sitting around waiting for the flashback to be over, and come to the island to see the sights. They probably relished an opportunity to get revenge on a few stray Rahkshi, anyway. I stood alone in the midst of the dust and my fallen captors, waiting for my rescuers to show themselves.

Then a strange whooshing sound filled my head as a green blur swirled around me. Was this Lewa Nuva, using his Kakama? As the blur became more tangible, I could see thousands of tiny emerald-colored bits floating in front of me. They began to assemble themselves into a tall bipedal being. My heart started pounding as I realized this was definitely not the playful Toa of Air I had hoped to see. Spikes protruded everywhere from his burly limbs and back. His red eyes glowed with sinister glee as the last particles of his intimidating gold triple-bladed weapon fell into place. Without a doubt he was the most fearsome living thing I had ever seen.

Although this creature had just saved me from the sons of Makuta, something told me he did not have good intentions for me. I fought my paralyzing fear and backed slowly away from him. Then he grinned, exposing a wide row of gleaming white, razor-sharp teeth. I pivoted on my heels and bolted as fast as I could.

I heard the whooshing sound again, and the green granules flowed past me again. The monstrous creature reconstituted himself right in front of me. I slammed into him and fell backwards onto the ground.

He leaned over me and frowned with his crooked mouth. In a very strange voice that sounded like a chorus of separate beings speaking at once, he growled, “Whatch you lookin’ at?”

## 30. All Smiles

### Nelly — Grillz

*Got 30 down at the bottom, 30 mo at the top  
All invisible set in little ice cube blocks  
If I could call it a drink, call it a smile on da rocks  
If I could call out a price, let's say I call out a lot  
I got like platinum and white gold, traditional gold  
I'm changin' grillz errday, like Jay change clothes,  
Cuz when I...*

*Open up ya mouth, ya grill gleamin' (say what)  
Eyes stay low from da cheifin'*

*I got a grill I call penny candy you know what that means,  
It look like Now n Laters, gum drops, jelly beans  
I wouldn't leave it for nothin' only a crazy man would  
So if you catch me in ya city, somewhere out in ya hood just say*

*Smile fo me daddy  
(What you lookin' at)  
Let me see ya grill  
(Let you see my what)  
Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
(Rob da jewelry store and tell 'em make me a grill)  
Smile fo me daddy  
(What you lookin' at)  
I want to see your grill  
(You wanna see my what)  
Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
(Had a whole top diamonds and da bottom Row's gold)*

*I got my mouth lookin' somethin' like a disco ball  
I got da diamonds and da ice all hand set  
I might cause a cold front if I take a deep breath  
My teeth gleaming like I'm chewin' on aluminum foil*

*My mouth piece simply certified a total package  
Open up my mouth and you see mo carrots than a salad  
My teeth are mind blowin' givin everybody chillz  
Call me George Foreman cuz I'm sellin' everybody grillz*

I stared in utter panic at the spiky green hulk leaning over me, whose component particles rippled constantly all over his body. Then it occurred to me that he might actually be expecting a response to his question. “Y—y—y—” I stammered, but I couldn’t seem to get any words out.

In his bizarre multi-layered voice, he answered for me. “Oh, I know. You want to see my pretty smile again.” His mouth spread open in a frightful grin. “Come on, pipsqueak.” He leaned over, grabbed my wrist, and slung me over his shoulder like a backpack. Kicking a couple of Rahkshi out of the way, he started to stride across the rubble-strewn desert. I struggled vainly against his

grip for a moment before I resigned myself to clinging to his back. At least that way I wasn't being bounced as roughly by his lurching gait. But there was no way to offset the wave motion of the granules that composed his body, which was making me queasy.

Reaching behind me, I retrieved an axe, even though I suspected it might pass right through him. But when five similar creatures of different colors appeared out of the dust and fell into step beside us, I recognized the futility of fighting and quietly replaced it. "Whatcha got there, Snake?" asked the brown one.

"Treasure," replied the one carrying me.

"Maybe to a junk dealer," scoffed the red being. He poked a scaly finger at me, but the green one struck it away with a lightning reflex, flinging some of his particles off in the process. They flew around and rejoined his arm. The red creature recoiled, grumbled, and fell back into the loose formation. I concluded that the green one was the leader of the group.

Presently the creatures climbed inside a ring of boulders, and I was tossed to the ground. I finally got a good look at the others as they stood in a circle around me. They were all similar in build to the first, in the colors of the six Toa elements, each with a different complicated, intimidating weapon. None of them showed the strange undulating effect of the green one, who shimmered even when he was standing still. "You got a name?" he asked.

"G—G—" I hesitated, unsure what to tell him. Lies had gotten me deeper in trouble before, but I was still reluctant to give away any information.

"Well, nice to meet you, Guh," snickered the red one. "I'm Hakann. Wanna see my grill? It glows in the dark." He smiled broadly, and a shiver went up my spine.

The black being elbowed Hakann aside. "They call me Reidak. I brush these babies with a Brillo pad." He exposed his gleaming teeth, too.

"Vezok. I bite boulders in half for fun," chuckled the blue creature, chomping with glee.

The brown one shoved his way past the others and smirked at me. "Avak here. I floss with concertina wire."

"I'm Thok. I gargle with battery acid." The white one leaned closer. His teeth were as dazzling white as the rest of his body. "You can see yourself in my ivories."

"We're the Piraka. Look for us in the next Dentyne ad," quipped Hakann. They burst into raucous laughter, except for the green one.

"I'm Zaktan," he announced over their noise. He was the only one with a polyphonic voice, probably because he was the only one with the strange particulate nature. "I'm in charge here, because I have the loveliest smile of all. And if they won't settle down, theirs are gonna be wired shut."

The laughter died immediately. “Hey, Snake, what are we going to do with her?” inquired Hakann.

“I know!” shouted Avak. “We’ll take her to that chop shop on the home island and sell her for parts.”

“We could use her for target practice.” Thok leveled his ice-encrusted gun at me.

“Drop her off a cliff and see if she’s blue on the inside, too,” suggested Reidak.

Hakann shook his head. “No, we should keep her as a slave. She could cook for us, clean our weapons, and buff our teeth.”

“Let’s cook *her* instead. I bet she’d be good with bacon and onions.” Vezok leered at me hungrily.

Zaktan jabbed his finger into the chest of each of his comrades in turn. “Moron! Fool! Imbecile! Bonehead! Retard!” He gestured at me. “How often do you see a Rahkshi flying around with a stuttering Matoran cradled in its lap?”

“Never,” muttered Vezok.

“Exactly.” The leader turned to stare at me. “There’s something special about Guh. Maybe she’s got some information the Makuta wants.”

“I hope he’s got a lot of time,” Hakann guffawed. He was silenced by a look from Zaktan.

“So, we do not scrap her, nor do we eat her, nor do we drop her off a cliff. We *ransom* her,” continued the green Piraka.

“What could we possibly score from a bunch of Rahkshi?” sneered Thok.

“Well, they’re stupid and nasty, but they’re first-rate hunters,” Avak pointed out.

“Finally, one of you knuckleheads is catching on,” groaned the green Piraka. “So, we offer them the hostage if they’ll bring us the *most valuable thing* on this lousy rock of an island. Which is...” He paused expectantly.

“The movie director’s wallet?” asked Avak brightly.

“No!” growled Zaktan. “Rise above petty theft for a moment, and think big.”

“The camera equipment?” ventured Vezok.

“No! Bigger.”

Reidak scratched his head. “The LEGO trailer?”

“Yeah, that’s it. We’ll tell the Rahkshi to fetch us a building. I’m sure no one will notice it’s missing,” snorted Zaktan. “Get real. We are not going to steal anything from LEGO. At least, not this time.” Reidak sank back into sullen silence along with the others.

“That suva thingy in the big stone temple place!” shouted Hakann suddenly.

“No!”

“The Great Mask of Time,” said Thok quietly.

Zaktan sighed. “Yes, the Vahi. Word is, it’s at the bottom of the sea somewhere near the Great Barrier.”

When the other Piraka stared at Thok in surprise, he shrugged. “It was in last year’s Bionicle movie.”

They murmured their approval. “Oh, I see.” “Yeah, that’s brilliant.” “I get it now.” “Really smart.”

“Shut up, you groveling toadies!” snapped Zaktan. “Now, we have to wait until the Rahkshi come creeping around again, and we’ll make them an offer.”

“What do we do in the meantime?” wondered Reidak.

“I don’t know! Play a game of Parcheesi. Practice your pirouettes. Write the great American novel. Just don’t break anything.”

“I’ll do guard duty,” volunteered Avak. He leaped onto a high, craggy rock.

“You do that.” Zaktan sat heavily on a rock next to me and set his chin on his hand, but his particles refused to rest. They retained the same overall shape, but they kept vibrating and flowing in shallow waves over his surface. Woozy from the mesmerizing sight, I turned away, clasped my knees to my chest, and waited gloomily. I wondered what the Rahkshi would do. Maybe they would negotiate, although I seriously doubted they would fetch the Vahi for anyone but their master. Or perhaps they would mount a sneak attack. Either way, I was so anxious to get away from these mercenary ruffians that I was looking forward to seeing Makuta’s minions again.

The others sat on boulders, too. But after a few minutes, they became restless. Hakann melted circles in the sand around me with his heat vision, and Reidak stirred the dirt with his drill until the stone on which he was sitting started sinking into a puddle of quicksand. Vezok shot a few water daggers into his own mouth with his weapon, then started watching Thok. The white Piraka was sitting and staring at the ground in front of him, where two tiny creatures of sand rose

and fought each other. Vezok lobbed a large rock at the sand beings conjured up by his white comrade, crushing them.

Thok stood up. “You want a piece of me?” he demanded.

“Yeah, I’ll take that ball joint that’s holding up your ugly head,” snarled Vezok, grabbing at the white Piraka’s neck. Soon they were wrestling in the middle of the clearing. Vezok pounded on Thok’s skull with his fist until Thok twisted Vezok’s arm behind his back. Then the blue Piraka sank his teeth into Thok’s shoulder and clamped down.

“Stop that!” roared Zaktan. Two beams shot from his fiercely glowing eyes, and the contenders howled in pain as they backed away from each other.

Avak was tinkering with his weapon up on the lookout rock. He yelped as he accidentally switched on his jackhammer, hitting his own foot. He sat down and tenderly rubbed the clawlike appendage. He glanced up to see Invulnerahk land right in front of him.

Invulnerahk raised his glowing staff with both hands and yelled, “For Frodo!” He slammed into Avak with a powerful side kick. The brown Piraka rolled backwards off the boulder.

Thirteen more Rahkshi landed on the ring of rocks, surrounding us. Vorahk muttered, “OK, dude, that was *really* random.”

Avak jumped up and announced, “The Rahkshi are back!”

Zaktan leaped to his feet and sent his arm granules out to grab me around the neck. They pulled me closer to him and re-formed his arm. The other Piraka backed up to us, brandishing their weapons in a deadly circle. “Avak, remind me to kill you when this is over,” growled the green Piraka. In a louder voice, he said, “Listen up, you armored mealworms! If you bring us the Great Mask of Time, we’ll give you Frodo without a fight. Otherwise, there won’t be anything left of you but oily spots in the sand. Take my advice—you don’t want to cross the Piraka.”

Shadrahk cleared his throat. “Piraka! I don’t know who you are what you’re doing on Metru Nui. But even if we Rahkshi *did* stoop to negotiate with criminal scum, we wouldn’t bring you the Vahi. The flashback would be messed up, and LEGO would castigate all of us.”

The Piraka glanced uneasily at their leader, who snorted with disdain. “LEGO will never know. They’ll think some water Rahi swam off with it and just make another one.”

“Here’s our counteroffer,” proposed Shadrahk. “You give us Frodo, and we’ll let you live.”

Zaktan burst out laughing. Then the mirth turned to a snarl. “Fire at will!”

A blazing firefight ensued. Zaktan shot laser beams at Shadrahk, but the Rahkshi absorbed them with his cloak of darkness. Plasmarahk blasted the sand under Zaktan, turning it into a glowing

liquid and forcing him to turn into a living cyclone and lift off the ground with me entrained in the flow. We landed a few feet away, where he became solid again.

Guurahk and Thermorahk targeted Reidak, but the black Piraka jabbed his weapon into the sand until several of the big boulders began to subside into the destabilized earth. Deprived of their footing, the Rahkshi flew off the sinking stones. Guurahk landed a few yards away and managed to blast Reidak. The hulking creature fell into his own quicksand. But he dragged himself out and crawled toward Guurahk. The second time the disintegration attack was completely ineffective. Alarmed, Guurahk raised his staff for hand-to-hand combat. He barely managed to deflect the swinging buzz saw with his own weapon. Then Thermorahk hit Reidak in the back with his heat vision, and he fell forward onto his smaller blue foe.

On the other side of the clearing, Thok shot blast after blast of ice at a dozen Rahkshi who were streaming between a gap in the rocks. The creatures were frozen to the boulders. Satisfied, he turned to find another opponent. But then the iced Rahkshi disappeared, and Illusorahk popped out from behind another stone. He swung his staff at one of the frozen rocks. It shattered, and chunks of ice and stone cascaded over the white Piraka.

Vezok's water daggers flew off into space, deflected by Vacuurahk's power, until he finally hit the vacuum Rahkshi with his eyebeams. The smaller creature was slammed into the rocks behind him. But Gravirahk hit the blue Piraka in the back, and he crashed to the ground.

Avak had conjured a prison of stone to hold Somnorahk, and he was approaching with his jackhammer to finish him off. But then he spotted a larger jackhammer lying on the ground. "Hey, check this out!" he shouted to no one in particular. "The Rahkshi riffraff have a hammer that's even nicer than mine! Brotherhood technology is usually pretty cool." He picked up the weapon, examined it, and hefted it in his hands. But when he pulled the trigger, the hammer transformed itself into a blue and gold Rahkshi that vaulted over his head, pulling his staff against the Piraka's neck. The prison disappeared, and the sleep Rahkshi hit the brown creature with a burst of soporific power. The giant spiky beast tumbled forward into the sand, and Pinky was thrown clear.

Hakann sprayed a barrage of lava balls at Pyrorahk, Laserahk, and Telerahk. The first two shrugged them off, and the third teleported himself away before they hit. Enraged, the red Piraka concentrated his eyebeams on Pyrorahk, who was flying toward him swinging his staff like a club. The fire-resistant Rahkshi fell, writhing in mental agony, until Laserahk blasted Hakann in the forehead with a focused beam of light, forcing him to break off the attack.

Meanwhile, trapped in Zaktan's grip, I was whacking him over the head with an axe. Vorahk yelled savagely as he leaped at him. But the strange emerald being simply parted himself and let the black Rahkshi sail through him. I was thrown to the ground and scuttled across the sand to hide behind one of the rocks. Vorahk had managed to touch only a few of the particles with his staff. But when he had reconstituted himself, Zaktan found himself face to face with Invulnerahk, who delivered a powerful kick to his chest. The green Piraka staggered back in disbelief. Then he brought down his triple blade on Invulnerahk's head. The Rahkshi only flinched. A blast of laser vision was met with the same indifference.

Shadrahk aimed a blast of dark energy at Zaktan. He scattered his particles again, and the beam passed right through him. Thousands of tiny voices hissed all around us like an eerie wind. “Give up, you metal-plated maggots! Can’t you see you’ll never prevail against me?”

Shadrahk waved at Vacuurahk and waited for his green enemy to regroup. Then he fired another beam of darkness. As Zaktan degenerated into fragments again, Vacuurahk’s staff began to glow. The green granules were sucked across the clearing and dashed against the rocks at the Rahkshi’s feet. As they tried to reconstitute into a body, Vacuurahk aimed again, and they flew straight up in the air and erupted like a firework, spewing a hundred feet into the sky.

To my amazement, the other Piraka had recovered from the various attacks. They were staring in awe at the fountain of green particles. “Whoa! That was cool!” exclaimed Reidak.

“Heh, serves him right, the ugly thug,” grunted Vezok.

“All right, I’m in charge now,” barked Hakann. “Thok, take down those two—”

“I’m not taking orders from the likes of you,” retorted the white Piraka. He shot his ice gun at Hakann, freezing him solid.

“Good riddance,” chuckled Avak. “I’m the new leader now. Vezok, you and Reidak—”

Disinclined to obey, Vezok turned and cut him down with a swing of his saw.

In the ensuing confusion, the Rahkshi were easily able to subdue the remaining Piraka. Vorahk landed behind Reidak and put his staff in front of his neck. The dark hulk collapsed in seconds. Thok fell to a savage blast of Guurahk’s and Plasmarahk’s energy combined, and Vezok was crushed into the ground by Gravirahk.

Vorahk quickly ran to each of the five fallen Piraka and sapped his energy. “That should give us a few minutes.”

Shadrahk strolled over to me. “This time I bet you’re happy to see the cavalry,” he said grimly.

“Yes, I am,” I said sheepishly. “Thanks.”

“You know what’s funny, Mistress?” asked Invulnerahk as he and Vorahk dropped to the ground. “I didn’t even know your real name was Frodo.”

“General, may I have permission to smack him?” groaned Vorahk.

Shadrahk rolled his eyes. “Go for it, Sarge.”

“Hey, don’t hurt me! I saw you drain all those Piraka!” Invulnerahk backed quickly away from his friend.

While we were distracted, Zaktan had re-formed himself and was looking at Shadrahk. As I saw his eyes light up, I yelled, “Look out!” and shoved Shadrahk to one side. The other Rahkshi dove for the ground. Gravirahk hit Zaktan from behind with a blast from his staff. As the Piraka staggered and dropped heavily to the earth, his eye beams swung wildly around.

I was suddenly aware of a searing sensation in my side and fell down, blinded with pain. I tried to get up, but I couldn’t feel my legs.

As I faded from consciousness, I saw Gravirahk’s second burst of power flatten Zaktan’s particles into a uniform layer over the sand while Somnorahk put them to sleep. Then I felt myself being picked up and moved. Therahk’s gentle face leaned over me, and then I blacked out.

I heard wind whistling around me and groggily realized I was being flown somewhere. With all the surreal events that had happened to me, I felt like Dorothy in Wonderland. Or was it Alice of Oz? I wished I could just click my ruby slippers together, so the giant rabbit with the pocket watch would take me back to Kansas. Then I lost consciousness again.

I awoke in almost complete darkness to the sound of Shadrahk’s voice, speaking quietly just above my head. “Master? Here she is.”

Some distance away, two dimly glowing red slits opened. They rose and slowly approached us. I felt the familiar touch of pointed fingers on my mask. The eyes changed to blue. Then I was lifted from Shadrahk’s arms and clasped against a large, armored body.

In a deep, weary voice, Makuta murmured, “My angel...”

## 31. Reunion

### **Screaming Trees — Nearly Lost You**

*Did you hear the distant cry  
Calling me back to my sin  
Like the one you knew before  
Calling me back once again*

*I nearly, I nearly lost you there  
And it's taken us somewhere  
I nearly lost you there  
Let's try to sleep now*

*Drag me far enough to know  
I'm blind every mile that you burn  
There's a rider that's fallen and  
Its clear there's no time to return*

*Did you hear the distant lie  
Calling me back to my sin  
Like the one you knew before  
Calling me back once again*

*I nearly, I nearly lost you there  
And it's taken us somewhere  
I nearly lost you there  
Well let's try to sleep now  
I nearly lost you there  
I nearly lost you  
I nearly lost you there  
I nearly lost you there  
I nearly lost you there  
Oh yeah, nearly lost you there*

As Makuta held me tenderly against his chest, with his head resting on mine, the pall that had enveloped the room like black velvet gradually lifted. By the dim glow of a pair of lightstones, I could see that we were in a large chamber of stone.

Shadrahk finally interrupted the silence. “Excuse me, Master. You might want to heal her some more. Therahk stemmed the fluid loss and pulled her back from multiple organ failure, but he was already very tired from medic duty. She’s been fading in and out of consciousness.”

The Master of Shadows held me at arm’s length. I dangled limply from his hands, pain shooting through my ribs, while he scanned me with his eyes, which widened immediately. “What happened to her? Telerahk told me she was all right.” He laid me gently on a dark gray leather couch and knelt down.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies for her condition, Master. She was cut almost in half by stray laser fire. We were ambushed by a band of Piraka just before we got here.”

“Watch your language, young man!” snapped Makuta, covering my ears.

“Sorry, Master, but that’s what they called themselves. I don’t know any other name for them. But in my opinion, that one suits them just fine.”

“My poor little darling,” Makuta breathed softly as he moved his hand slowly over my torso from my shoulders to my pelvis. I felt the pain and dizziness recede. I sat up and looked around, newly invigorated, but he seemed weakened from the effort. He dropped onto the sofa and sprawled against the armrest. “Shadrahk, get me some energy. A battery, a power pack, anything.”

The Rahkshi of Darkness disappeared. I started to rise, but Makuta caught my wrist, so I sat again. He turned to me and smiled feebly. “Beloved, you have no idea what kind of ordeal I’ve gone through. Please just rest here a moment with me.” He closed his eyes.

Soon Shadrahk returned, dragging a portable generator and a five-gallon container of gasoline. He poured some fuel into the tank and started the machine. Noise and smoke filled the room. Still clasping my arm, Makuta raised his other hand, and it morphed into a heavy-duty electrical plug, which he inserted into one of the receptacles on the generator. I got a slight jolt of static through the manacle of his grip. “Ahhh,” he sighed. He gazed off into space and extended his heavy legs across my lap. I noticed that he had become corroded and oil-streaked again, although not nearly so much as before the bath I had given him. This time there wasn’t a thick buildup of grease and dust around his joints.

After a few minutes, he pulled his fingers out of the socket and stood up. “Let’s just bypass the middleman.” He unscrewed the cap on the gas can, lifted it, and drank like someone who had just walked across fifty miles of burning desert. “Thanks, Shadrahk.” He wiped his mouth and tossed the empty container onto the floor.

His minion shut off the motor. “Glad you feel better, Master.”

The Spirit of Destruction flopped down on the couch next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. The gasoline fumes made me a bit lightheaded. “Have a seat, son, and tell me how you accomplished the excellent feat of retrieving my one and only.”

Shadrahk sat across from us in a matching leather armchair. “I led a team to Ko-Metru on the theory that if Mistress were still alive and conscious, she might be mutated by Visorak venom and searching for a cure. We located her by color and scent, for indeed she looked like a Hordika.”

“Oh, I wish I had gotten to see that!” exclaimed Makuta. “I bet she was adorable as a half-savage creature. Picture her Hordika form for me.” Shadrahk looked thoughtful for a moment while Makuta looked into his eyes. Then Makuta grinned broadly. “Priceless! I just love her face.”

Those sweet little hands, with two thumbs and three fingers, just like mine! And that crazed look in her eyes... oh, man. How did you like it, cupcake?"

"It was horrible," I said through clenched jaws. "I was always grumpy. And my powers combined so that all I could do was blast big muddy craters in the ground."

"How delightful! Well, don't worry, darling. If I had wanted you to look that way, I would have built you like that. But I still think you were cute. Sorry, Shadrahk, do go on."

"She was in the company of the six Rahaga. A bit of lurking revealed that they were escorting her to Keetongu. So, knowing that your relationship with him is somewhat strained, I decided to wait until they negotiated her healing before we recaptured her. Guurahk and Vorahk stayed with me while Plasmarahk flew back for Telerahk and Therahk, who were searching Onu-Metru."

Makuta approved. "Good thinking, my boy."

"As soon as she was normal again, two Visorak, who had also been trailing Mistress, attacked Keetongu and the Rahaga and attempted to capture her. They tried to use the element of surprise, but the odds were very much against them. They retreated in defeat."

"Two Visorak?"

"Yes, Daisy and a slightly oversized Oohnorak named Nikorak. He's evidently Sidorak's right hand spider. I gambled that they would help us, so I instructed Therahk to heal the black one, who was injured in the fight. He turned out to be indispensable later on."

"Really," Makuta mused.

"After the Rahaga left I waited for sunset, then launched an exploratory salvo against Keetongu with Vorahk, Guurahk, Plasmarahk, and myself. Vorahk gave us a very nice martial arts demonstration."

Shadrahk turned his head in the direction of the doorway, where Vorahk's voice could be heard in the other room. "Let's just go get the skinny from Master." The sound of Rahkshi footsteps approached, and the Rahkshi of Hunger and Limited Invulnerability strolled in. "Hey, Master," asked Vorahk. "When Mistress got here, was she dead?"

Makuta turned to his minion and smiled. "Fortunately, no. I was already so depleted that I probably wouldn't have been able to revive her without a long recharge first."

"Yesss!" exclaimed Invulnerahk. "You owe me dessert for a week!"

"Aw, dang," groaned Vorahk. Then he noticed Makuta glowering at him. "But this is a bet I don't mind losing," he added quickly.

Under their master's glare, the two crossed the room to continue their chat. The Spirit of Destruction motioned for Shadrahk to resume his story.

"Vorahk got crushed, but I learned what I needed to know about Keetongu. A few hours later, we came back and executed the real Plan."

"I have to admit, this one was really brilliant," I sighed. Makuta looked at me fondly, and I frowned at him.

"Pinky morphed into a Toa, and Nick—the Oohnorak—provided the ventriloquism to make him talk. Gravirahk and Telerahk provided his elemental and mask powers. They all hid behind a screen by Illusorahk. We passed him off as a minor character in a flashback and offered to accompany Mistress back to the LEGO trailer."

"And it worked?"

"Quite well, Master. Keetongu was really suspicious until I led a fake attack with the rest of the Rahkshi who had joined us by then. Ravga, Toa of Gravity, fought valiantly and defeated many foes, and the Rahi with the scanning eye of truth was fooled. He was perfectly happy to let Telerahk transport Mistress off his glacier, with Pinky's arm around her."

Makuta laughed heartily, and the deep sound boomed off the walls. "And that way no one even thought to pursue you. Not bad, my son. Not bad at all!" He picked up his staff, which had been leaning against the couch, and clanked it against Shadrahk's.

Shadrahk nodded. "Exactly. Thank you, Master."

"No, no, thank *you*. Now the most precious thing in my life is back in my arms. It's true what they say: you never know what you've got till it's gone." Makuta turned and put his other arm around me. Fixing his eyes on mine, he said, "Shadrahk, why don't you go get us something to eat? Set it up in the dining room."

"Yes, Master." The Rahkshi of Darkness slipped out of the room.

Face to face with the malevolent being that was responsible for all the anguish and pain I had suffered over the past few days, I spoke sharply as I shoved his arms off me. "Get away from me, you evil creep! All of this was your fault!"

"My dove," he said gently, "I understand why you're angry with me. I'm quite angry with myself, actually. I can't believe I strayed so far from what is good and true. And because of my own selfish transgression, I nearly lost you!"

In the shadowed corner of the room, Vorahk was taunting, "Come on, Invulnerahk. Don't be a wimp."

"Hey, go easy on me! You're strong as a Tahtorahk right now!" There was a loud thud.

“Darling? Are you paying attention?” asked Makuta, leaning close again. “I know it’s hard for you to trust me after the way I’ve broken your heart. To have let myself be lured away by another, even after you lavished me with such loving care! But let me assure you, it will never happen again.”

“Just let me go,” I growled, sliding further away from him on the couch.

Makuta reached over and took both my hands in his. “Please, poppet. Don’t give up on our love because of one foolish indiscretion on my part. Roodaka means nothing to me. But you... I’m mad about you. I can’t survive without you,” he implored me. He looked deep into my eyes. “My only true love, I solemnly swear this oath to you: from now until the end of time itself, I’ll never let anyone come between us again.”

At this moment a large gray object flew across the room toward us. I pulled my hands away just as Invulnerahk landed heavily in the middle of the sofa. The frame collapsed with a loud crack. “Help!” he cried. “Vorahk is trying to kill me!”

Makuta jumped up and seized him by the neck. The Rahkshi croaked, “If this isn’t a good time, Master—”

“Please don’t hurt him, Makuta,” I pleaded. He looked at me, then at the mortified Rahkshi, and lowered his armored fist. Invulnerahk wrenched himself free and scurried away.

Makuta sighed. “You see? That’s why I need you with me. To keep me from doing crazy, impulsive things, like damaging my own sons. And after what’s happened to you, I’m never going to let you out of my sight.” He grabbed my chin and kissed the side of my mask. He reeked of car exhaust.

“But you made me a deal I could go free if I wrote your biography. You can’t go back on your word,” I grumbled, wiping a smudge of grime off my Kanohi with the back of my hand.

“Yes, yes, my lovely. We’ll work on that some more, if you want. There’s no computer here in Po-Metru, but as soon as I regain some strength, we’ll return to Mangaia, and we’ll continue my story.” He lunged for my hand. “Let’s go eat. You must be famished. I know I am. I haven’t had a bite of food since we’ve been apart.”

He started to lead me out of the room, but then he stopped and turned around. Vorahk and Invulnerahk were scuffling again in the corner. “Come here, you two scalawags.”

The Rahkshi obediently crossed the room. Makuta put his hand on the black one’s shoulder. “Vorahk, since you’ve got energy to burn, and I don’t have enough...” Soon the Rahkshi collapsed on the floor. “Invulnerahk, your turn. No more broken furniture for you today.” The gray one gave up his strength to his master, too, and tumbled on top of his brother.

“Well, that solves two problems at once,” Makuta beamed. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of that before. Let’s go, pumpkin.” He walked out with a bounce in his step.

I glanced over my shoulder at the pile of fallen Rahkshi, and they smiled at me. I rolled my eyes at the thought of their strange life with Makuta. Unfortunately, it was to be my life, too, until I could figure out a new way to escape.

We walked down dank, twisting passageways for several minutes. I was hoping to find a clue as to how to get out, since I had been unconscious when I was brought in. To me, this lair looked just like Mangaia. We passed rooms full of weapons, supplies, extra parts, and tools. In the sleeping quarters, rows of niches in the stone walls were empty except for one, where Therahk lay deep in sleep. Then Makuta turned into a room with cabinets along one wall and a card table with a few folding chairs in the center. “I apologize for how primitive things are in this lair, sweetheart. As soon as we get back to Mangaia, we’ll celebrate our reunion properly with a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon. And I’ll send out for chocolate-covered strawberries, too.” He produced a loaf of bread, a large jar, and a knife from an upper cabinet. He sat down and started spreading peanut butter. I took a seat and accepted the first slice.

“So, princess, did you think of me while we were apart?” he asked pleasantly before shoving a piece of bread into his mouth.

“That depends on whether you count daydreaming about your death,” I replied, looking at him sideways.

He stood up and rummaged through the cabinet for two cans of Coke, which he cooled with a wave of his hand. “Well, I was hoping for more, but at least it’s something.” He handed me a frosty beverage. “I never stopped thinking about you.”

I flicked a few ice crystals off the lid and opened it, steeling myself for another barrage of sentimental hyperbole.

“In fact, thoughts of you seared my mind like a wildfire burning across a field of yellow hay,” he continued, leaning forward. “When I returned from my meeting with LEGO and discovered you were missing, the Rahkshi and I literally took apart the lair hunting for you. Shadrahk and Telerahk were gone, too. Roodaka told me the two of them had helped you escape, but I didn’t believe her. I was certain she knew more than she was letting on.”

“She always does,” I muttered through peanut butter.

“Anyway, she came slithering around and tried to seduce me again. I must confess that I came dangerously close to yielding to the temptation.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. Then he paused to devour another slice of bread and take a swallow of soda. “But as luck would have it, along came a spider. She recognized this Oohnorak as one of Sidorak’s lieutenants, evidently, and she jumped off my lap and fired a spinner at him. I’m now convinced she’s been using some sort of psychoactive chemical on me, because as soon as she moved a few feet away, her effect on me weakened considerably. As I watched the creature mutate into an eight-legged

monstrosity, it hit me all at once—her cruelty to you, what she did to my arm, her harsh treatment of the Rahkshi. The memories came crashing over me like a giant wave.”

I traced the outline of my Coke can lid with my finger. “Interesting analogy.”

“I realized the only way to be safe from her enticements was simply to remove her from my presence altogether. So I told her to collect her Visorak and clear out of my lair. She protested, but I stood firm—some distance away, of course. Her tantalizing appearance is another potent weapon in her arsenal, so I tried to keep my eyes off her, too. Daisy reasoned with her for a few minutes, and finally she flashed me a defiant look and walked out.”

I would have been skeptical, except that Nick, Lucky, and Daisy had told this same story, so I nodded while he ate some more.

“Shortly afterward, Plasmarahk burned some webbing off the wall of my nuclear-hardened bunker and discovered it was concealing a hole. Frigirahk, who was searching with him, saw him collapse from the fumes that came out. He held his breath and dragged his brother to safety. Then they reported to me. I vacuumed out the gas and found my missing Rahkshi inside. Someone had set up a timed-release canister of sleeping potion.”

“I wish she had been that merciful to me,” I sighed.

Makuta reached across the table and put his tarnished hand on my arm. “Shadrahk told me what she did to you. It grieved me so to imagine you battered and bleeding.”

I jerked my hands involuntarily to my chest where Roodaka’s claws had pierced my armor. The memory of the pain was very vivid. He stared at me for a moment and then sat up straight. “What happened to my mark?” he demanded.

I scowled at him. “You mean that brand you left on my chest when you gave me disintegration powers? Keetongu removed it.”

“Why, that impertinent beast! Next time I see him, I’ll—”

“He did it at my request,” I interrupted. “The sight of your hand print almost dissuaded him from healing me.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms. After a long pause, he bent over and spread some more peanut butter. “Well, I suppose you had to pretend you had no connection to me to get his help. So I won’t take it personally.” He consumed two more slices of bread. He offered me another, but I declined and drank the last of my soda instead.

“Anyway, I found out from Shadrahk that Roodaka had sent you to Sidorak in Metru Nui as an engagement gift. Naturally all sorts of ominous possibilities crept into my mind. I hoped fervently that he would take the time to find out who you really were and not just kill you right away. You do still look somewhat like a Toa.”

I smiled at this last comment, evidently to his annoyance. He resumed his account. “Then, just as I strode through the gate to the Silver Sea and launched myself into flight, my phone rang, and his name was on the caller ID. As I was reaching cruising altitude, I listened to that audacious fool boast that he had had you mutated and destroyed. He started telling me that he had interrogated you, and that you were a spy for the Toa. At that point I completely lost control. The shock wave of my grief, horror, and rage caused a tremor that buckled the rock of the sea floor.”

“You caused a tsunami, too,” I said grimly.

“Really?” he asked absent-mindedly. He finished scraping the peanut butter jar and ate the last bite of the creamy food. He had gulped down four pounds of it, spread over a whole loaf of bread. “Well, I suppose I must have. I dissipated quite a bit of energy. Right under me the sea went completely dry for a minute. Anyway, at this point Shadrahk appeared at my side with a hand-picked team of Rahkshi commandos and offered to accompany me. He had been training them for weeks just in case an emergency ever arose, bless his little heart. So off we all flew. We reached the Coliseum and found it completely destroyed. Sidorak was standing in the rubble, supervising the spiders as they did the rebuilding.”

I cringed. I didn’t really want to hear this part, even though I had no love for the vain king who had ordered my death at the insistence of his psychotic fiancée. I had seen enough destruction and pain already, much of it my own. But there was no stopping Makuta on a rant.

“After I changed into my large, winged form, I cinched his head tubes nice and tight around his neck and demanded to see your body. I wanted to bring you back to life before I expended any power on him. I was burning hot with wrath, but I had already shot a lot of kilowatt-hours into the ocean, and it takes a tremendous amount of juice to bring someone back from the dead. He waved his herding blade at an Oohnorak, who brought in a pile of blue wreckage. It looked suspiciously like a Makuta fish that had gone through a hydropower sluice. You know about fish, don’t you, darling? It’s that handsome species that looks as if it’s wearing a blue Kraahkan. Anyway, as I started to rebuild it, the spider assured me there was no need to rearrange the parts, because you had been mutated into this creature. This thought infuriated me further, but I suppressed my anger for the time and concentrated on pouring my life force into it.”

I remembered the armful of blue flotsam Nick had carried back to the Coliseum. “So you revived a big dead fish?”

“Yes, I did. I read its mind, just in case you were somehow trapped in its scaly body, but of course it was just a fish. So I whacked Sidorak over the head with it. I knelt on his chest and used my heat vision to weld his head tubes into a pretzel. Then I ordered Shadrahk to find you, dead or alive, and bring you back to me, here. I flew here, changed back to my Rahkshi form to conserve my strength, and waited.” He glanced at the doorway, where the black and red Rahkshi was holding a tray of sandwiches, drinks, and chips. “Come on in, son. Did you get those from the LEGO catering truck?”

Shadrahk nodded. “Pinky did. He posed as Nokama Hordika, and they handed them right to him without even noticing his colors were a little off. They put it on her tab.” Shadrahk set the tray on the table and served the meal on paper plates. “If you don’t mind, Master, I’m really curious. What you did to Sidorak after we left?”

“Well, I couldn’t kill him, because he’s in the storyline, and I certainly didn’t want to waste any resources reviving him. So it was an exercise in self-control,” he replied grimly. “I decided it would be amusing to test all my powers on him, one at a time, in alphabetical order, starting with Accuracy and ending with Weather Control. I had to stop once in a while to heal him so he could suffer some more. It’s no fun to torture someone who’s gone into in shock, you know. I made it all the way to Plasma before Telerahk returned with the news that your mistress had been recovered, alive and well. It’s a good thing he showed up when he did, too, because I was just about spent, even though I was riding on so much adrenaline that I couldn’t really feel it. In my joy I shot off most of my remaining energy in a blast of plasma into the sky. Certainly it was a frivolous gesture, but I enjoyed it. Then I released Sidorak’s head tubes with a slash of laser vision. He finally passed out.”

“Where was Roodaka all this time?” asked Shadrahk.

“Standing in the ruins of a doorway, laughing the most sinister laugh I’ve ever heard,” he replied with a shiver. “But just after I did Electricity on him, which she seemed particularly to savor, I looked at her and said, ‘Why are you laughing? You’re next.’ I mean, it’s pretty obvious she was behind the whole thing, and she’s smart enough to know that I know. She mumbled something about having a tray of cookies in the oven and fled. I never saw her again.”

His minion snorted. “Master, I hope someday you’ll let us get revenge on that vicious Jezebel for Mistress’s sake.” Then he nodded politely to me and left.

“Let’s forget all about her, shall we?” he smiled at me. He bit into a sandwich. “That will be our best revenge. To live together, blissfully in love, in spite of her hateful Plan to separate us.”

Slightly nauseous, I pushed my plate toward him. “You can have my sandwich.”

“Thank you, my kitten. Did I mention that I’m ravenously hungry?”

I nodded. “Yes, you did.” As I watched him wolf down my food, I wondered about the ardor of his efforts to retrieve me, from his own account and as confirmed by several witnesses. I found it inconceivable that his feelings for me—or for anyone besides himself, for that matter—were really that intense. I figured I must be an important cog in one of his evil schemes, although I couldn’t begin to imagine how. Or perhaps it was just the principle of the thing: he couldn’t stand for someone else to take something he coveted.

The Master of Shadows interrupted my thoughts. “You know, when I learned Sidorak’s spiders hadn’t killed you after all, and you were out there somewhere alone in that big, dangerous city, I was assailed by agonizing thoughts. I pictured you suffering and dying, far from my healing hands, your torn and broken little body lying in a dark alley surrounded by voracious

scavengers.” He put down his napkin and stared at me with narrowed eyes. “But even more than that, I anguished over the possibility that you might run into some LEGO employees, and they would misconstrue my intentions toward you. The idea that I might not ever see you again drove me onward like a flaming whip at my back.”

I swallowed hard. Of course that’s exactly what I had been hoping would happen.

Then he smiled gently. “But all that misery is over, my beauty, now that we’re together again at last. You know, I’d like to do something for you to make up for all the distress you’ve been through. Why don’t you let me take you on that romantic tour of Metru Nui that I promised you a while back? I can use my shadows to keep us safely out of sight. There are so many things I’ve been wanting to show you.”

“Do I have a choice?” I sighed, leaning my head on my hand.

He shrugged. “Not really.”

## 32. Atomic Fireball

### **Norah Jones — Come Away With Me**

*Come away with me in the night  
Come away with me  
And I will write you a song*

*Come away with me on a bus  
Come away with me where they can't tempt us  
With their lies*

*I want to walk with you  
On a cloudy day  
In fields where the yellow grass grows  
Knee high  
So won't you try to come*

*Come away with me and we'll kiss  
On a mountain top  
Come away with me  
And I'll never stop loving you*

*And I want to wake up with the rain  
Falling on a tin roof  
While I'm safe there in your arms  
So all I ask is for you  
To come away with me in the night  
Come away with me*

Before we left on our tour of Metru Nui, Makuta summoned Shadrahk for one last debriefing. Makuta apologized for the delay, but it didn't bother me at all. I was none too eager to embark on a sightseeing excursion with the Master of Shadows, because the last one had been absolutely nerve-wracking. In each of the six regions of Mata Nui he had staged a dangerous situation so he could rescue me. My mind reeled with memories of tumbling off Mount Ihu, struggling underwater without a mask against a Tarakava, and looking up at a landslide inside a mine shaft with nowhere to run.

“So, Shadrahk, tell me more about these Pir—uh, these ruffians you came across,” Makuta was saying, draping his arm casually around my shoulders. When I started to squirm away, he flexed it into a loose headlock.

“Well, they were a little taller than us, quite a bit bulkier, and incredibly powerful,” replied his minion. “There were six of them, controlling most of the usual elements, although in very strange ways. And they have some vision and mental powers as well. I didn't have time to observe all of them personally, but from the accounts of my troops, I've compiled a list.” He pulled a piece of paper from his carapace and read off the abilities of the Piraka. “The green one was the leader. He was unique in that he could dissociate himself into tiny flying particles at will.”

Makuta raised an eyebrow. “Do they have any weaknesses?”

“Only one that I could see, but it’s major. They don’t work together well at all. As soon as we subdued the boss, the others bickered over who would be in charge. This, plus the fact that we outnumbered them more than two to one, was how we won. And I don’t think they expected us to be so organized.”

“Well, I have you and your mistress to thank for that,” smirked the Master of Shadows. “My first-generation Rahkshi were mere automata of destruction. And those of my brothers still are, for that matter. Why do you suppose they attacked you?”

“A simple case of seeking ransom, as far as I could tell. They perceived that Mistress was of value to us, so they ambushed us and took her. I’m embarrassed to say we were completely overwhelmed by their massive show of force. We regrouped and found them waiting for us. They demanded for us to bring them the Vahi in exchange for Mistress.”

“The Vahi?” Makuta scratched his chin. “They can’t even use masks. They must have been planning to sell it.”

“You’re familiar with these creatures, Master?” asked Shadrahk.

“Judging by what you’ve said, they’re the new villains for the ’06 storyline,” came the reply. “I heard some sketchy information about them in my last meeting with LEGO. Now I’m wondering if I should retaliate. I hate to alienate potential allies, but... was it the green one’s laser vision that almost cut your mistress in half?”

“He was actually aiming at me, I think. It was after we had defeated them. He reconstituted himself when no one was looking. Mistress’s quick reflexes may have preserved my life, because she pushed me out of the way. When Gravirahk took him down, his laser beams shot all over the place, and they hit her. I’m pretty sure it was by accident.”

Makuta looked down at me. “How sweet! You saved my finest son!”

“I owed him one,” I sighed.

“Well, I guess I’ll let it ride, then, if it wasn’t deliberate. Thank you, Shadrahk.”

The shadow Rahkshi nodded politely and walked away down the hall, and Makuta slid his hand onto my shoulder again. “Let’s get going, my water lily. The sights of the city await! Oh, if you don’t mind, I’d like to stop by the nuclear lab for a minute to charge up some more. Come right this way.”

“The nuclear lab?” I asked skeptically.

“Yes, I have a small liquid metal fast breeder reactor in this lair, too. It produces only a fraction of the power of the one in Mangaia, but I think there’s enough plutonium down there to give me a nice little jolt.”

I shook off his arm and backed away. “I think I’d be safer waiting up here.”

“Nonsense! It’s perfectly safe, buttercup. There are plenty of precautions in place. It’s an old-fashioned design that uses mercury for a coolant, so it doesn’t run as hot as the liquid sodium one in Mangaia. And all the radioactive materials are contained inside the biological shield. I’m sure you’ll forgive me if I’m feeling the need to keep you close to me these days.”

He grabbed my hand and led me down the passageway, into a larger hall, and through a descending maze of smaller tunnels. We finally reached a room with a large, heavily reinforced metal door at one end. He punched a code into a keypad on the wall and morphed his index finger into an elaborate key, which he inserted in a tiny gap below the keypad. After some grinding sounds from machinery on the other side of the wall, he gripped the handle and pulled the door open. We stepped into an airlock, and he closed and dogged the door behind us. He waited for the faint hissing of air to stop. Then he unlatched the inner door and pushed it. It swung into a vast chamber lit with pale blue light. “Come on in, darling. Don’t be afraid.”

Nervously, I stepped into the room, and Makuta secured the second door. A path delineated with yellow and black caution tape snaked along the stone floor between several large, imposing tanks and pressure vessels. They were surrounded by a jungle of piping and electrical cables. One wall was covered with dials, switches, and gauges, with trefoil radiation warning signs scattered all around. He strode over to a console and pushed a few buttons. Warning lights flickered on all over the room, pumps and fans whirred to life, and a low, ominous hum began to emanate from a huge cylindrical structure on the other side of the lab. The air became very warm. After a few minutes of tinkering with the control panel, he walked back over to me. “Come behind this lead shield, my dove.” He steered me behind a dull gray metal partition. “I’ll be right back.”

I crouched with my back to the shield and waited. The humming noise and heat grew in intensity until it plateaued for a few minutes. I heard the reactor power down, and moments later Makuta was tapping on my shoulder. “It’s safe to come out now, my sweet. Let’s go.”

I turned my head and looked up at him. Faint green light shone from every joint and crevice in his armor, shifting as he moved, and there was a darkly radiant emerald halo all around him. His eyes had turned a brilliant yellowish green. I jumped up and backed into the lead shield. “You—you’re glowing,” I stammered.

“Harmless residual radiation, love. It’ll wear off in a few minutes,” he assured me. “Underway on nuclear power!” He skipped toward the door with me in tow. Then he stopped, a troubled look on his Kraahkan. He coughed a couple times, put his fingers down his throat, and pulled out the crumpled remains of a metal canister, which he tossed aside.

Grinning again, he spun the dogging wheel with a flourish and pulled me into the airlock. As the door thudded shut, a Geiger counter began to sputter like a bag of microwave popcorn. “I must

remember to recalibrate that thing sometime. It always overreacts,” he chuckled, tapping a gauge on the wall. The needle was pegged at the upper end of the red zone.

The Spirit of Destruction operated the outer door, and I welcomed the cool, damp earthy air on my mask. Soon we were making our way back up through the tunnels. I stayed as far behind him as our two arms together would reach and stumbled along, trying to keep up with his rapid pace. Clutched in his hot claws, my fingers felt as if they would melt. Finally I tripped on a rock and fell. I was dragged along the ground for a few feet before he noticed me and stopped.

“Oh, I’m sorry, darling. I’m going a bit fast, aren’t I? I’ll just carry you.” He flung me across one shoulder and launched himself into flight. Then he shifted me into his lap while he swerved down the dark corridors. The waves of heat coming off his surface streamed behind us in a blurry wake. “I get a bit vivacious when I’ve had a good dose of the atomic juice.”

“I can see that,” I muttered, rubbing my abraded knees. My back was getting uncomfortably warm against his chest, so I slid forward a few inches. From time to time I propped myself up on my knuckles to give my legs a chance to cool.

“Where shall we start? With your element, in Ga-Metru?”

“Sure, a swim would be nice right now.” My head was beginning to ache, and I was feeling slightly ill.

“Your wish is my command, princess.” He veered up a vertical shaft, giving my already queasy stomach a rather unpleasant lurch, and soon we were shooting out of the ground into a gloomy gray sky. Below us sculptures lay scattered across the otherwise featureless desert. He leveled out and rocketed toward a bluish horizon that rapidly became a shoreline. The wrecked buildings, canals, and gardens of Ga-Metru emerged from the haze, smothered under a heavy layer of green webbing. As we flew above the city and out over the beach, I could see that this had once been a beautiful and orderly place, carefully tended by feminine hands.

One large and particularly stately structure stood on a jetty that extended far into the silver sea. It alone was undamaged by all the recent catastrophes. “Ooh, that gorgeous dome must be the Temple of the Great Spirit!” I exclaimed.

I could feel Makuta’s legs stiffen beneath me. “Yes, it is,” he growled. Silently, I reminded myself not to express any more enthusiasm for his brother’s house of worship.

We zoomed out over the open sea, and Makuta leaned back and stretched his feet forward. “Lie back, and we’ll go into the liquid protodermis feet first.” He pulled me into the same streamlined position. “Prepare for impact, darling!”

Laughing maniacally, he moved his hands like ailerons to send us spiraling downward toward the water. I clutched my mask and took a deep breath. We accelerated until we were flying so fast I could see tongues of flame flashing behind us. At the last second, Makuta morphed into a missile nose cone and enfolded me inside himself.

Then we plunged deep into the cool, heavy liquid. The heat from his body instantly vaporized the fluid around us into a frothing mass of bubbles. I wrested myself free, surfaced a few yards away, and watched a boiling cloud of steam rise above the sea. Soon his head popped up, back in its normal form. “You were right, doll. This is so refreshing!”

Stunned by the concussive impact but otherwise unscathed, I dove back under the water, activated my Kaukau Nuva, and slipped my axes onto my feet. Convective currents swirled around me, soothing after the intense heat. Quickly, I scanned the underwater landscape. Makuta could swim much faster than I, so I would have to find a very compelling distraction if I wanted to attempt an escape. But the serene blue depths held little promise. Fish darted about in schools or alone, their shimmering sides flashing in the patchy, filtered sunlight. I could barely see the sea floor, which was strewn with coral formations and, closer to the shore, debris that had once been Ga-Matoran boats or structures. My getaway would have to wait.

When I came up again, Makuta was beckoning me. His eyes were blue again. “Look, sweetheart! We’re just in time! They’re filming the scene where Vakama wrecks the Temple!” He bobbed up and down in the water with delight. “Oh, I just love this part.”

Thick smoke was billowing from the top of the metallic dome. I tried to hide my dismay as I watched a chunk of roof blow off with a loud boom. “Why would he do that?”

“Because Roodaka sweet-talked him into participating in her evil Plan. He’ll take the Rahaga captive, except for Norik, who will be left behind to tell the other Toa Hordika. Obviously, the Toa and Norik will head straight for the Coliseum and attempt to rescue their little buddies. Assuming, of course, LEGO has it rebuilt by then. I must admit that I derailed the reconstruction a bit when I stopped by to give Sidorak his just desserts.”

I noticed several colored bipedal creatures lying on the causeway. A green one sat astride an arch over the pavement. Beyond them were several people with large, black movie cameras on tripods, booms, and dollies. One man was barking instructions through a megaphone. I looked at Makuta. “Are those—”

“Yes, love, those are the Hordika, asleep on the job. Matau is supposed to be keeping watch, but he’s busy building a nest instead. And gazing at Nokama. Heh, sometimes they make villains’ work so easy.”

I ached to swim over to the Toa and the LEGO crew, but with Makuta’s attention fixed on them, the idea was doomed to backfire. “What will happen when they get to the Coliseum?”

“You’re so curious, darling! Well, I suppose that’s natural for a journalist. Roodaka is recruiting them, supposedly to help run the horde as a gift to Sidorak. But of course she’s really scheming to get rid of him. She plans to use the Toa’s—well, you’ll see. I don’t want to *completely* spoil the surprise,” he finished, reaching across the waves to tweak my chin.

A powerful blast rocked the bay, and flames shot out of the Temple dome. Part of its structure collapsed in a cloud of dark smoke and dust. There was silence for a few minutes. Then the Toa sprang into action, racing into the still-smoldering hulk as the cameras followed them down the jetty. As I watched Nokama yank open one of the doors, I hoped someday soon I could repay her a sandwich.

Makuta took a deep breath of sooty air. “Ah, the sweet stench of destruction!” he crowed. “Well, I suppose you’re eager to see the sights, so I guess we should get going. But do you mind if I feed one of my pets first, while we’re here?”

“Uh, no. Go ahead.”

Makuta extended his hands over the water, and soon a school of large fish bobbed to the surface, probably drawn by magnetism, density control, or gravity. His eyes turned from blue to red and then to white. “I hope this doesn’t bring back bad memories for you, sweetheart,” he apologized as he chopped up the fish with his laser vision. Then he used magnetism to stick all the chunks together into a ball. He grabbed the clump of chum with one hand and my arm with the other. “Come on.”

We swam down into the murky depths, toward the foundation of the Great Temple. The building was sitting on a large outcrop of rock. He led me around to a dark cave in the stone. Then he called his pet with some strange underwater whistles and clicks.

We struggled against the strong current welling up from under the ledge. Soon a massive creature surged out of the cavern and opened its giant jaws. Row after row of blade-like teeth lined its maw. I recoiled in fear as Makuta tossed the ball of fish into the gaping mouth. The beast gulped it down in one bite and groaned with contentment. It rubbed its face against Makuta’s mask. Then it subsided back into the cave with a flurry of bubbles.

“Well, then,” said Makuta, his gravelly voice distorted by the water, “let’s swim up one of these canals, and then we’ll get out and walk around the Metru a bit.”

I followed the Master of Shadows into a waterway, which led to a network of connecting canals. Some of them fed into holding ponds and processing facilities, which I decided must be for purification of the liquid protodermis. One large main led away towards Ta-Metru, presumably to supply the forges. We surfaced in the middle of a plaza with graceful fountains and waterfalls. Paved pathways wove between the water features, lined with statues, ferns, and benches. One- and two-story buildings had large windows overlooking the mall all around. Before all the calamities that had befallen their island, this must have been a place of peaceful contemplation for the Ga-Matoran. Now the stonework lay broken and the ubiquitous webbing choked the plant life.

I put my axes on my back and stood studying the beautiful ruins for a few moments. “Go ahead. Explore a bit, darling,” said Makuta, gesturing at the dwellings.

I crept into a Matoran house and looked around. The owner's possessions lay in orderly fashion under a thick layer of dust. No struggle had occurred to capture this Matoran. She had marched with her sisters toward the Coliseum on Makuta's orders, to be packed into spheres like the rest of the city residents. I paused to admire her sparse, well-crafted tools, ornaments, and furniture, which were vaguely oriental in their elegant simplicity.

Had this been the Ga-Metru of old, I would have liked to linger among the fountains and pools, letting a stream of cool liquid protodermis cascade over my fingertips, diving into a deep, still basin, or floating with the water lilies, mask to the sky. But all the beautiful artistry of the gentle water dwellers had been fractured and covered with vile green webbing. I didn't have the heart to travel around it in this melancholy condition. Besides, the longer I loitered, the longer it would be until I got another chance to escape from the Spirit of Destruction. I sighed and ducked through the low doorway. "It looked as if this used to be really beautiful, before all the disasters struck."

Makuta smiled. "It's more beautiful than ever, darling. But perhaps that's just because of what's in the foreground."

I winced.

As I walked back onto the plaza, I heard a faint hiss behind me and spun to see a terrifying sight. A snake was rearing its six Rahkshi-like heads as if to strike at me. "Hold your breath!" warned Makuta, stepping in front of me. He extended his staff, drawing the air into the tip as the creature exhaled a green mist. Then he kicked the serpent at the junction of its necks, sending it skidding back into the canal. He discharged a jet of green vapor out of his staff. It dispersed in the breeze across the plaza.

"What was that thing?" I gasped.

"A doom viper. Its toxic breath can kill any living creature. Unless, of course, that creature wields the power of vacuum. Or has a good friend that does." He winked at me.

"Let me guess. You summoned that viper somehow, so you could save me?"

"Don't worry," he said, shaking his head, "there's ample danger on Metru Nui without me stirring up any more on purpose. But that's fine with me, because I like having you close. Have you noticed that bad things happen to you only when you aren't near me?"

"Being near you is a bad thing in itself," I grumbled.

"Well, none of the violence that befell you in the last few days would have happened if you had been with me," he pointed out. "I'm just going to have to bring you to work from now on. I can't trust your safety to others, no matter how competent and loyal. Besides, I enjoy protecting you. Protection is my specialty."

I looked at him sideways. "No, protection is your *racket*."

Makuta laughed. “One of the things I really missed while we were apart, my lovely, was your charming wit.” He jumped up and hovered in flight position. “Well, that’s about it for Ga-Metru, unless you like to do schoolwork or run water treatment plants for fun. Let’s go see the Metru of Fire!”

I climbed into his lap, greatly relieved that he was cool to the touch again, and off we flew toward the smoking shell of the Great Furnace.

### 33. Vacation Hot Spot

#### Tool — Schism

*I know the pieces fit cuz I watched them fall away  
mildewed and smoldering, fundamental differing,  
pure intention juxtaposed will set two lovers' souls in motion  
disintegrating as it goes testing our communication  
the light that fueled our fire then has burned a hole between us so  
we cannot see to reach an end crippling our communication.*

*I know the pieces fit cuz I watched them tumble down  
no fault, none to blame it doesn't mean I don't desire to  
point the finger, blame the other, watch the temple topple over.  
To bring the pieces back together, rediscover communication.*

*The poetry that comes from the squaring off between,  
And the circling is worth it.  
Finding beauty in the dissonance.*

*There was a time that the pieces fit, but I watched them fall away.  
Mildewed and smoldering, strangled by our coveting  
I've done the math enough to know the dangers of a second guessing  
Doomed to crumble unless we grow, and strengthen our communication*

*cold silence has a tendency to atrophy any sense of compassion*

*between supposed lovers  
between supposed brothers.*

*And I know the pieces fit.*

I leaned over Makuta's knee and watched the ground zoom below us. We were approaching the border between Ga-Metru and Ta-Metru, where the scenery abruptly changed from blue slate roofs to reddish metal ones. To one side I could trace the protodermis main, which ignored the angular maze of streets above it and ran straight toward what remained of the Great Furnace. Its dark conical silhouette dominated the hazy landscape.

The air temperature increased noticeably as we traversed into the Metru of Fire. Visorak webbing lay draped in charred tatters over the devastated industrial cityscape. Since I was evidently going to be stuck with Makuta for a while, I decided I might as well ask some questions. It would pass the time, and besides, most of what he was telling me lately seemed to be true. "Makuta, these forges and foundries have stood idle, in ruins, for centuries. Why is it still so warm here?"

"Well, darling, they're supplied with geothermal energy from the fire pits. Those never cool off, even if no one is making anything. Why do you ask, princess? Is the heat making you uncomfortable?"

“Not any more, after that dip in the sea.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that, sweetheart. I admit, I let you get a bit too warm. But wasn’t it thrilling to watch the flames streaming off us, spinning together as if we were dancing in the air, our music the escalating scream of the wind?”

I frowned. “How is it that I lived through that fall, anyway?” I wondered. “Shouldn’t it have killed me? I mean, even with a layer of metal to break the impact...”

“Ah, but I was no mere layer of metal, love. After a few last-minute mental calculations indicated you might not survive, I remembered a form I designed a long time ago for just such an occasion. You never know when you might need to protect delicate cargo during a splashdown.” He patted my leg. “It’s a double-hulled design, with the inner shell suspended by energy-absorbing dampers and lined with viscoelastic foam. I can add an energy recovery system, with a flywheel and generator, but right now I’ve got power to burn, so I skipped it this time. You just did the aerospace equivalent of bouncing on a Tempur-Pedic bed. Did you enjoy it?”

“Sure, except for the part about being seized with mind-numbing terror,” I replied.

“Really, now, my dove. You must learn to trust me, and you’ll have a lot more fun. You won’t die on *my* watch,” he purred.

We flew silently for a few minutes, and the charred hulk of the Great Furnace gradually came into focus. Now I could see the extent of the earthquake damage. Ruptured metal beams protruded from a smoking hole in the side.

“So, are any of the movie scenes going to be filmed in Ta-Metru?” I asked, hoping for another chance to flee to the LEGO film crew and the good guys.

The Spirit of Destruction began a slow, banked turn around the Furnace. “No, it was featured quite a bit in the last movie, but I don’t think it’s in this one at all, except maybe for a few seconds during the quest for Keetongu. The Toa and Norik go wandering all over the island and end up in Ko-Metru. The joke’s on them, because they don’t recognize that the riddle is nothing more than a poetic rephrasing of the hydrologic cycle. Reminds me of a certain clueless future Toa of Light, who carried his own mask for miles, and even passed it off to his buddy for a while, before it occurred to him to try it on.” I felt the vibration of his laughter through my back. “After that, the rest of the scenes will be shot in the Coliseum. Naturally, there’s a big climactic battle there.”

“Are you in that?”

“Goodness, no!” he exclaimed. “I just have a cameo at the end, when Roodaka frees me from my prison.”

“Oh, yeah,” I murmured, disappointed. His extended absence would have given me more time to get away.

“When I do that last take,” he continued, “I suppose I’ll have to leave you in the care of Shadrahk. Although you might just be safer in Mangaia, now that I think about it. Roodaka will be stuck on Metru Nui, because she has a big part in that scene. And there are a lot fewer dangerous Rahi and mercenaries and whatnot running around on Makuta Island than there are here. Hmm... Yes, that’s what I’ll do. After our vacation, I’ll take you and the boys home and just stay with you there until I get the call from LEGO.”

I sighed. I would have to escape on Metru Nui, or else I would face the same predicament as before: getting past forty-one Rahkshi, two Manas, and the Master of Shadows to the LEGO headquarters. Or I could finish Makuta’s interminable life story, an equally grim prospect.

“Makuta, have you thought of anything besides your biography that I could offer you in exchange for my freedom?” I asked brightly. “You said you would try to come up with something else.”

“Oh, yes, I did, didn’t I? Well, I’m really sorry, honey. I’ve been so busy trying to get you back that I haven’t had time to consider how to lose you again,” he replied, sarcasm creeping into his voice.

“Well, I didn’t ask you to come after me. Just think how much energy you would have saved by just forgetting about me altogether after I disappeared,” I retorted.

“And leave you in the hands of the Piraka? Darling, I don’t think you’ve thought this through very carefully.”

“The Piraka would never have noticed me, except that they thought it was really odd for a bunch of Rahkshi to be toting me around,” I snapped back.

Makuta snorted. “Yeah, you would have been much better off with the Rahaga. I’m sure your midget friends would have had no trouble defeating a band of ruthless professional assassins bristling with lethal weapons. You know, dear, you’re starting to sound rather ungrateful, for someone who’s just been hauled back from the brink of death.”

“The Rahaga had already left for the filming! I was with Keetongu when the Rahkshi took me!”

“Same difference!” he shouted. “Why won’t you just admit that you need me?”

I crossed my arms. “Because I don’t. *None* of this would have happened to me if you had just left me alone.”

“Or if *you* had just let me introduce you to Roodaka as my sweetheart in the first place, like I was about to do,” he snarled.

“Oh, yeah? Well, it was only *after* she found you holding me that she tried to kill me!”

“She sensed weakness in our secrecy,” growled Makuta. “She would have been shamelessly kissing up to you if she had known your true identity as future Empress of the Universe. Instead, your reticence propelled us into a waking nightmare, with you imprisoned and interrogated, mutated and mangled, and pawed by a gang of armed hoodlums, and me twisting in mental torment, anguishing over whether my only true love, the soulmate I’d found at last after half a million years of emptiness, was alive or dead, and whether she had been torn from my arms forever!” His body temperature and airspeed were rising rapidly. We passed in and out of the cloud of scorching, gritty fumes wafting from the Great Furnace as he flew in tight circles above it.

I caught my breath. Making him angry wasn’t helping anything. I decided I’d better calm him down again. “I’m sorry, Makuta. Thank you for getting your *Rahkshi* to rescue me, and for patching me back together. You obviously went to a lot of trouble for me.” I craned my neck to look at his mask. The eyes behind the *Kraahkan* were red and the brow furrowed. I swallowed hard and continued. “It’s just that I’m really, really tired, and I want more than anything to go home. If you would please take me back there, I would be very grateful.”

He dropped out of the plume of soot and swung into a wide orbit around the huge rust-colored cone. After a few minutes, his eyes shifted to blue, and he spoke quietly. “Please forgive me for losing my temper, cupcake. I get so irate only because I adore you so much. When I’m threatened with the prospect of being bereft of you, I’m mightily tempted to unleash the full intensity of my frustration—which of course would only annihilate that which I cherish most. Ever since you came into my life, it’s really been a problem for me.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I know you’ve been through a lot of physical and mental trials, and you’re exhausted. Your desire to leave me is a knife blade sinking into my heart, but I guess I can’t blame you for feeling nostalgic for your sleepy, unexciting little life on earth. Perhaps I can come up with an idea that would make it bearable for me to part with you for a short while.”

His last four words made me particularly nervous, but I didn’t say anything for fear of triggering another tirade. I waited to see what he would suggest.

He gazed thoughtfully at the massive exhaust stack as he flew. Finally he leaned over me and grabbed my left hand. “A ring. Yes, that’s it, I’ll forge you a ring. An unending circle of precious metal, to symbolize our pure, eternal love. All you have to do is give me your word that you’ll never take it off your sweet little blue finger.”

“I suppose it will contain some sort of tracking device?” I asked suspiciously, pulling my hand away. “Like the jewel you gave me with the camera hidden in it?”

“So you noticed that. I was wondering why you never wore it. I thought it was rather pretty. A sparkling sapphire to match your lovely eyes.” He closed his arms around me and breathed down my neck. “You have to understand something, my angel. Now that I have you again, I’m not going to let you go unless I know I can keep an eye on you. Just wear my ring. All right?”

A shiver ran up my spine in spite of the heat. “No deal, Makuta.”

“Well, I’ll just keep you, then,” he replied cheerfully. “Let’s go sightseeing!” He veered straight up and plunged suddenly downward into the jagged hole in the side of the Great Furnace. I stopped pushing his arms away and grabbed onto them for dear life.

Inside the sweltering cone, we dove toward a great, glowing vat of reddish liquid. A tangle of piping led to smaller vessels arranged around it. Eruptions released foul-smelling gases that hung in a brown pall over the tanks. The heat waves and the ceaseless bubbling of the fluid added to the hellish atmosphere.

He flattened out his trajectory and landed on a narrow catwalk suspended over the largest vat. Anxious to be away from my creepy captor, I jumped down and grabbed the single cable that served as a railing. It seared my hands. The metal of the walkway was so hot I hopped up and down. In desperation I scrambled up Makuta’s back, grabbing his spikes as handholds.

He laughed and reached up with one arm to steady me as the thin strip of metal swayed under our combined weight. It had doubtless been designed to support one Matoran. “We won’t stay long, sweetheart,” he shouted over the gurgling and hissing. “I just wanted you so see the view.”

“It’s nasty,” I remarked. “I thought the protodermis had been purified in Ga-Metru by the time it got here.”

“Yes, it is. But the earthquake fractured the bedrock and allowed underground streams of impure molten protodermis to come to the surface. The contaminants are what make it stink in here. Normally all you can smell is the boiling metal.”

That didn’t sound particularly enjoyable to me, either, but for a fire villager, perhaps those would have been pleasant working conditions. On the inside of the great cone, I noticed strange, charred shapes that resembled a plant sketched in charcoal. “Is that what’s left of the Morbuzakh?”

“Sadly, yes,” replied the Master of Shadows. “It was a fine creature. But I suppose it’s just as well the Toa destroyed it. It had already gone insane with power, and eventually it would have challenged me just like its predecessor.”

It was amazing to me that a plant could have survived in this oppressive environment. The only light was the glow given off by the magma. “How did it live in here, with so little light?”

“It absorbed energy in the one-to-six-micron wavelength range, rather than from the visible portion of the spectrum. Florahk has had quite a bit of success with that sort of botany, actually. Many of his creations thrive on heat instead of light. And I’m quite happy about that. I, like my son, prefer infrared lamps to the usual kind.”

“I see. Can we go now?” I panted. I, unlike his son’s creations, did not thrive on heat.

He hovered long enough for me to slide down onto his legs, and then he flew out a side door. When we were some distance from the Furnace, he set me down in the middle of the street. Here

the temperature was unpleasant but tolerable, with warm gusts from behind us occasionally stirring up the heat waves rising from the stone pavement. I peered into a doorway of a Ta-Matoran dwelling. Metalworking tools lay on a simple, sturdy table, and ornamented armor and disks hung from the wall under a shelf of trophies. I realized these must be for playing Akilini. Evidently a talented athlete had lived here.

“Say, darling, would you mind if we stop by the Kanohi storeroom for a moment while we’re here? Right about the time LEGO finally cleared their operation out of Ta-Metru, I got my hands on an Xbox 360 prototype, and that darned thing got me completely hooked. I forgot all about looking for masks.”

“Sure,” I shrugged.

He led me through narrow, winding streets to a large, featureless building, which he scanned carefully. “All clear,” he nodded, unlatching the door and pulling me through after him.

I caught my breath as I felt the stare of thousands of empty eyeholes. All around a large room, masks lay piled in great gray heaps, punctuated here and there by metallic glitter.

“Most of these are Matoran masks,” Makuta remarked, stirring the pile with his foot. “Useless, except for target practice. But somewhere in here there will be some Turaga masks, and maybe if I’m lucky a Great Kanohi or two.”

I leaned over and picked up a gray Miru. Earlier that year, all the Mata Nui Matoran except the Turaga learned that the masks they had been wearing all their lives had been made long ago by Matoran artisans. Because I was a prototype, my mask was probably created by a LEGO set designer with a stereo lithography machine, but I still shared their surprise. I marveled at the intricate craftsmanship, and even more at the way protodermis could be so carefully refined as to permit a Kanohi to have powers. “How can you tell the difference?”

“A useful one will resonate with the energy in my fingertips,” he replied, holding up two masks. “See? This one is dead metal. But this one is valuable.” He touched his claw to each in turn. The first remained dull, but the second glowed slightly.

Since I had no way of testing the masks myself, I watched him crouch down and drag his strange hands through the pile. When he felt something, he would rummage around until he found the mask that had responded. After he had made it through about a quarter of the mounds and gathered a few Kanohi, he stood up. “Well, these are all powers I already have, but it’s never a bad thing to have two ways of doing something.”

He put a Hau over his usual mask, and it changed to black. It startled me to see the Kanohi often used to represent Mata Nui on Makuta’s face. “Throw something at me, darling,” he invited me.

“No problem,” I smiled mischievously. I picked up a Huna and flung it at his head. The mask bounced off the shimmering shield he summoned just in time.

“You throw like a girl. Harder!” he chided.

I removed an axe from my back and pitched it with all my strength. To my own amazement, it ricocheted off the shield and embedded itself into a stone wall.

“Nice! Remind me to keep this mask handy when you’re in a bad mood,” he said with a wink. “But seriously, sweetheart. Are you really that mad at me?”

I nodded.

He sighed and donned a Mahiki. “All right, now throw one at her.” He pointed across the room.

I turned my head and saw Roodaka standing in a mask pile with her arms crossed, her face tilted upward in a scornful sneer. Even though I knew it was an illusion, the sight made my heart pound. I pulled my other weapon off my back and took aim. Then I glanced back at Makuta. He was grinning. I hurled the axe at him instead. He blocked it with his arms, and it bounced into the masks with a loud clatter.

The Spirit of Destruction frowned at the dent in his forearm. “Not nice,” he growled.

“Uh, sorry. I was just, um, testing your reflexes,” I said quickly.

“Don’t even bother trying to lie to me,” he warned. “I’m an expert at lying, I know you really well, and besides, I can read your mind. All you’re testing is my patience. Now, let’s see if this one works.” He slipped a Komau over his Kraahkan.

I shuddered, feeling very helpless without my weapons, even though they would have been of no use anyway. Then I was suddenly overcome with the urge to dance like a ballerina. I bounded across the stage of the warehouse floor, sweeping my arms gracefully above me as I spun and swooped down, finishing with a perfect pirouette and low bow.

Makuta clapped enthusiastically. “Brava! Brava!”

I stood up and glared at him. “Very funny, Makuta.” I walked across the room and retrieved my axes.

He returned to his hunting, and I slouched resentfully against the wall. Finally he turned his back to me, and I slid quietly toward the door. I slipped around the corner, and I was outside.

I glanced around and quickly spotted the partially reconstructed Coliseum. I sprinted down the street on the tips of my feet. Then I saw a red cloud heading toward me. Was this some sort of toxic industrial gas? I ducked into a side alley to let it drift past. But it came after me. As it grew near, I could hear buzzing and see tiny red insects.

I tried to run away, but the pests sped up and surrounded me. Then they began to sting me, like hundreds of burning needles. I shot a spray of water all around myself, but they came back faster than I could knock them away.

Then I felt a different tingling, and I was being teleported. I regained my senses, and I was back in the warehouse. Makuta was wearing a mask I didn't recognize. "Teleportation, darling. This is outstanding! Usually it's next to impossible for me to combine my powers—kind of like trying to pat yourself on the head and rub your tummy at the same time. But now, with this external device, I can use X-ray vision and teleportation at once, and bring something over from the other side of a wall! Want to try it, poppet?"

I would have been eager, but my entire surface felt like it was on fire from the stinging insects. "Maybe later," I whimpered. I held my hands over my head and doused myself with water, but it gave little respite from the pain.

He smiled gently. "Oh, you poor thing. You're covered with fireflyer welts. Here, allow me." He took off the teleportation Kanohi and set it down at his feet, along with another mask. Then he began to run his hands over my head and neck.

Relief flowed through my armored outer covering at his touch. "Thanks, Makuta," I sighed.

"My pleasure, darling." He worked his way down my arms.

"What does that other mask do?" I asked, nudging the second Kanohi with my foot.

"Insect control," he replied.

I sprang away from him. "You vicious creep!"

He straightened his lanky frame and turned up his palms. "What?" he asked innocently.

"Let me guess, you did that just so you could put your grimy claws all over me," I fumed, backing away.

"Did what?"

"Plagued me with stinging insects! Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Of course not, precious. You just jump to too many conclusions. Come on back over here. You must still be smarting terribly."

My torso and legs were burning, but I didn't move. "Not enough to humor you!"

"Look, just let me heal you. I hate to see you in such pain," he entreated me.

“You can fly to the next metru if you like, but I’m going to walk.” I turned and headed out the door.

Makuta gathered up his masks. He caught up and matched my brisk pace. We turned onto a wide avenue. “Suit yourself. But you should really stop fighting me so much. Our vacation would be much more pleasant.”

“And do what? Just go along with whatever evil Plan you have for me?”

He laughed. “I don’t have an evil Plan for you.”

“That’ll be the day,” I muttered.

“I have only the best intentions for you, you know. To share the best of life with me. Are you sure you don’t want a ride? Or some more pain relief?”

I strode forward in silence. The overpowering heat, irritating fireflyer venom, and strenuous physical exertion were making me tired, but I was determined not to let him near me.

“Look, if you would just stop pulling away from me all the time, then you might just find you *enjoy* my touch,” he shrugged. “And then we could skip the part with the stinging insects.”

I spun around, my eyes blazing, and swung my fist at him. He leaned back to dodge the blow. “You’re cute when you’re mad.”

Since my rage was only amusing him, I turned around and kept walking. It seemed like the red roofs would stretch on forever. By the time we finally arrived in Le-Metru, I was exhausted, but at least the air was cooler. I stopped in the middle of the street and stared overhead at the tangle of wrecked chutes and webbing and loose cables. The roofs of the houses here were crafted of green slate. All the other buildings seemed to be hangars, warehouses, and loading docks, with verdigris metal coverings.

I looked at Makuta. “So, what nasty trick are you scheming to pull on me here?” I groaned wearily.

“Why, I wasn’t going to pull anything. See that test vehicle track?” He pointed a large, round building. “I was thinking it would be fun for us to race each other.”

“No, thanks. I’m really tired.” I didn’t feel like wasting any strength on amusement park entertainment with the Master of Shadows.

He cocked his head at me. “What if I told you it could be a chance to get away from me for a little while?”

“Oh?” I perked up a little.

“Here’s my offer. If you can defeat me in a race,” he smiled slyly, “I’ll take you back to that pathetic little hovel you call your home.”

My eyes widened.

## 34. Go, Speed Racer, Go!

### **Nonpoint — Circles**

*Going around in circles again*

*Pedal to floor, back in the seat, purpose and will versus modern machine  
 Passing the slow, defeating the weak, all with the tar on the street  
 And the weight of my feet the sweat on my face  
 Wanting first place for then you can understand*

*Going around in circles again*

*Photo finish race  
 Rear view stare chase  
 Satisfaction only when I finish at the end  
 If I follow all the rules, promise that I'll win?  
 Driven so confused that I'm going around in circles again*

*Going around in circles again*

*Holding on by a thread  
 Cut me loose so I can contend  
 Hoping for something more than second place, first place or more  
 Where will I be when I get to the end?  
 Doesn't matter what place I begin, three hundred sixty-one degrees and then*

*Going around in circles again*

“Now, wait a minute,” I said warily. “How can I be sure you won’t cheat?”

Makuta shrugged as he brushed some grit off the side of a black Vahki transport about the size and shape of a school bus. “How can I be sure *you* won’t cheat?”

“Cheating is not my style,” I replied, crossing my arms.

“So you say,” he grinned. He walked over to a rack piled with Kanoka disks, flipped them over to check the code engraved on the back, and selected a few. “Come get some disks of speed, sweetheart. They go in the rear compartment, like this.” He opened a hatch in the back of the transport and slid the disks into a row of slots.

I didn’t move. “What happens after I lose?”

“Now, now, dear. What kind of attitude is that? You’ll never hear Jeff Gordon talking that way,” he teased. He picked up some more disks and loaded them into the back of a blue vehicle.

“Well?”

“I’m not asking you to wager anything. I’m the only one taking a risk here.”

“So why are you doing it?”

The Spirit of Destruction chuckled. “Because apparently it’s the only way I can get you to race me.”

I walked up to the second vehicle, stood on tiptoe in front of its jointed legs, and peered inside the open cockpit. The controls were simple, consisting only of two levers and a power switch. Rows of hooks hung from the enclosed rear compartment, probably so the Vahki could hang on like subway riders. “I suppose you’ve put all the best disks in your car?”

“If you’re worried about that,” he smiled, “why don’t you pick the one you want? You can look at the disk codes to see the power levels.”

I squinted at the two seemingly identical vehicles. The disks were probably not the only way he could give himself an advantage. I tried to decide whether he would be so obvious as to rig his own equipment to be better, or whether he would use reverse psychology and favor mine. I finally gave up trying to second-guess him and put my hand on the blue transport.

“Good choice, darling. You’re going to look fabulous in that one.” He lifted me onto the seat and switched on the power, and I heard a low hum. “If you’ve ever driven a bulldozer or a tank, it’s the same principle. Each stick is a throttle controlling one set of legs, forward and reverse. To go forward, push them both forward; to turn around, push one and pull the other back, and so on. Take a practice lap.”

I closed my hands around the knobs and looked up at the test track, an oval course about a mile long. A slight push of the levers made the vehicle lurch forward. I turned in a slow, tight circle and then straightened out and eased onto the track. With the throttles at full forward position, the craft accelerated into a gallop. The insectoid legs clattered faster and faster against the pavement, and the transport began to rock violently. Alarmed, I eased back on the controls to keep the vibrations from tearing apart the chassis.

I came around the last corner. Makuta was waiting for me on the track. “Take the inside lane, princess. This line will serve as the start and finish. Two laps.”

I nodded and pulled up next to him.

“If you win,” he continued, “will you let me show you the rest of Metru Nui before I drive you home?”

I looked at him sideways. His question was obviously intended to promote the illusion of a fair contest. Since I was almost certain I would be taking that tour anyway, I agreed. “Sure, whatever.”

The theme music of Star Wars began to play. Makuta shut off his engine and retrieved his phone. “Blasted kids! I still haven’t had time to change that ringtone. Excuse me, darling, I have to take this call. Hello?”

I fingered the control sticks nervously while I waited, wondering what I was getting myself into. I hardly dare to believe two laps could be the key to my freedom after all my best-laid Plans had failed disastrously, but I figured it would be crazy not to try. Maybe I would be the beneficiary of some blind luck.

“Yes, indeed,” he was saying into the mouthpiece. “That was quite a tremor. Even up here inside this restrictive cage, I was able to feel it. I can definitely see why you’ve had a difficult time sticking to the schedule.” He listened some more and then assured the caller, “Well, I’ll certainly be on the lookout for troublemakers, if any come this way. Just let me know when I’m needed.” Then he flipped the phone shut.

“LEGO?” I asked.

He nodded. “They’re absolutely livid. It’s been one fiasco after another. First they came back from their lunch break to find the Coliseum completely razed to the ground. Roodaka, who’s been acting like a spoiled diva this whole time anyway, was in a fit of pique because her lab got destroyed. She was hurling rubble at everyone in sight. Half the Visorak had panicked and run off. By the time they got her calmed down, found all the spiders again, and started clearing the wreckage, an earthquake caved in the roof of the LEGO trailer. The resulting tsunami flooded the Great Temple and left debris strewn all over the beach. They pumped all the water out and got the trash cleaned up, but the film crew still ended up waiting half a day for the Rahaga to show up for their scene. When they finally got the cameras rolling, a flaming meteorite streaked across the sky at just the wrong time. They can’t do the take over again without rebuilding the Temple, so they’re going to have shell out major overtime pay to the CGI team to edit it out of the picture. Then Keetongu called them to report that half his glacier had collapsed. And now they’ve noticed that Sidorak’s armor is all scorched and dented, and he won’t stop twitching long enough for them to buff out the scratches. They’re probably going to have to do some CGI on him, too.”

“You realize you’re responsible for every single one of those catastrophes,” I remarked.

He growled at me. “Let’s not get into that again.”

“Sorry,” I murmured.

He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Although, in a way, they did all result from my desire to keep you safe, as well as from your pathetic timidity. So I suppose we’re both guilty. Except for the Coliseum demolition. That was the Visorak.”

“Actually, that happened when they were chasing me, after Roodaka insisted that Sidorak have me killed.”

“I see. So, indirectly, we caused that, too.” A smirk crossed his Kraahkan. “It took two hours for them to get Sidorak’s head tubes to look right again. Naturally, their expert metalworker was off building a set for the next Exo-Force comic. Since protodermis is notoriously tricky to weld, they had to bring in an experienced pipe fitter from the New London naval station *and* a metallurgist from the University of Connecticut. As I’m sure you can imagine, those guys charge top dollar. And they’re taking it out of Sidorak’s paycheck.”

I winced. “So, are you in trouble with LEGO, too?”

Makuta’s grin grew even wider. “I’m imprisoned in solid protodermis on a big, lonely crag of rock in the middle of the sea. How could *I* possibly be at fault?” He pressed the power button on his dashboard. “Let’s race! Give us a start signal, love.”

I announced, “On your mark, get set, go,” and we were off. The two vehicles scuttled down the straightaway, mine accelerating slightly faster. When the vibrations became excessive, I backed off the throttles slightly. My competitor began to catch up with me.

I adjusted the levers and headed into the turn, carefully hugging the stone blocks that formed a guardrail along the inside. Makuta swung out in a wider arc and kept even with me. Coming out of the curve, I sped up, but not enough to prevent Makuta from swerving and cutting me off. The back of his vehicle scraped against my right front fender, forcing me into the rocks. Sparks flew off both sides of my car. I cursed him under my breath and slowed down to avoid getting crushed. He pulled ahead of me.

Right behind him, I ignored the ominous rattling of my frame and sped up enough to nudge his bumper. Through his back windows I saw him turn his head and smile. Then he abruptly slowed down, and I rammed the back of his vehicle. My hands shot out reflexively to keep me from flying out of the car. I could hear his laughter over the engines and jangling of insect legs.

I yanked on the levers and maneuvered into the outside lane. I approached at full speed on the back side of the track and overtook him just before the curve. I cut in front of him, and he followed just behind and to my right through the curve. Then I gunned my motor and pulled ahead some more as we passed the starting line. One lap to go, and I was slightly ahead.

I quickly assessed the situation. My vehicle accelerated faster, possibly because my weight was a small fraction of his. But Makuta was more willing to tolerate armor-rattling vibrations and risk accidents, and he was by nature a fearless and aggressive competitor. I would have to use my superior acceleration and agility to gain position in the turns, hopefully while staying far enough ahead of him that he couldn’t hit me again.

Then I noticed that the pounding of my transport’s legs was getting quieter, and I was slowing down despite my full-ahead throttle position. I leaned over the side to see if I had hit a slick spot on the track, and I felt myself float slightly out of my seat. Evidently he was using gravity to make me lose traction.

Annoyed that Makuta had resorted to trickery, I watched him sail past me. I pulled an axe off my back and aimed, spraying water on the pavement in front of him. I smiled with satisfaction as the legs of his vehicle slipped and he spun helplessly out of control. With my transport back to normal, I resumed the lead. I dried the surface ahead with a wave of my hand and steered carefully into the turn.

But on the straightaway, once again my car decelerated unexpectedly. I frowned, wondering what he was using this time. Slowness, perhaps? Then I noticed several loose bolts sticking to the base of the seat. I nudged one with my foot, but it didn't fall off. This time it must be magnetism.

As soon as my grinning opponent surged past, boosted by the kinetic energy he had drawn from my car, I formed my axe staff and aimed. A bluish bolt shot from the tip, blasting a deep hole in the track at the start of the curve. With plenty room to maneuver, I piloted my craft around the crater while his plunged into it, shearing off the right set of legs.

The rickety blue transport tilted precariously as I careened out of the turn. I glanced over my shoulder. Makuta was crouched next to his car, using his heat vision to weld the leg assembly back on. He looked up at me and grabbed his staff. Suddenly there was a loud hissing noise all around me. The metal of my vehicle glowed ominously, then burst into tiny fragments. I covered my head as I hit the pavement and tumbled head over heels. I opened my eyes to find I was lying face-down on a pile of fine powder, about fifty yards from the finish line. Molecular disruption, I groaned groggily to myself.

Painfully, I got to my knees. Makuta's hastily repaired car rattled past me and crossed the finish line. He had won the race, but I wasn't going to wait for him to come back and gloat about it. I ran to the disk rack, grabbed an armful of Kanoka, and shoved them into the back of a red transport. Then I vaulted into the seat and started the motor. With a blast of disintegration power I created an exit in the side of the building and plowed through shards of twisted metal into the street.

It was twilight. A quick scan of the horizon oriented me, and I drove straight toward the base of the coliseum, which had been rebuilt up to about a third of its previous height. I reached a wide boulevard and turned. The jointed legs clattered on the hard surface as I trundled past store fronts, transit stations, and cargo docks. I looked behind me and saw Makuta fly around the corner.

Ahead of me the pavement froze into a solid sheet of ice. The legs of my vehicle slipped, and I spun out of control until skidding to a stop in an alleyway against a trash can. Makuta landed in front of me, his hands on his hips and a wide grin on his Kraahkan.

“Well, that was just delightful, buttercup! I was hoping you would finally loosen up a little and throw the rule book out the window. But we should play it cool now. We're getting rather close to the area where LEGO is working.”

Salvation was near! My eyes shifted like a cornered animal as he extended his arms to take me out of the driver's seat. I rammed the control levers forward. The transport surged forward and hit him knocking him backward onto the pavement with a clang. There was a thumping sound under the vehicle as I drove over him and took off again down the street.

The element of surprise would give me only a slight head start before his ranged powers and X-ray vision would make the outcome of race for my freedom a foregone conclusion. And now I had almost certainly made him mad. I decided I'd better assume he was already watching me.

As I approached the large suspension bridge that stretched over the protodermis canal toward the Coliseum, I put on my Huna and vanished. I held both levers forward with my feet while I rummaged behind the seat. I wedged a number three plus rod and a wrench into the controls, aiming the transport straight for the railing. Then I jumped out and rolled onto the pavement. Still invisible, I sprinted across the bridge. I heard the crash of the vehicle hitting the guardrail, then a loud splash as it struck the liquid protodermis.

I turned and watched Makuta zoom down over the water after my car, which had already floated several dozen yards down the waterway. I spun back around and ran with all my strength.

The avenue opened onto the main plaza in front of the coliseum. To my horror, the place was packed with Visorak, moving stacks of stone blocks like a colony of ants. They swarmed around the construction site, scuttling up and down the truncated cone with the blocks slung on their back with webbing. Various foreman barked orders in the strange chittering tongue of their kind.

I zigzagged around the busy creatures, slowly weaving my way to the alley with the LEGO trailer. I glanced over my shoulder and didn't see Makuta. But with his power of shadow, he could be anywhere. I vaulted over a Roparak into the alleyway. The porch light was on at the end of the street, but all the windows were dark. I covered the short distance to the front steps and stopped. My head hung in disappointment.

Then an idea occurred to me. What if the portal to the LEGO office on earth was *inside* the trailer? I had never thought about it before, but that was the logical place for it to be. Even though no one was in the building, I might still be able to get to safety! I smashed a large window with my axe and jumped through it.

The front room, as I had seen from the porch, was a small waiting area, with primary-colored couches and coffee tables in smart minimalist Danish style. There were books and large containers of toy LEGO bricks all around, some partially assembled on the tables, and framed Bionicle movie posters on the walls. Shelves loaded with posed figures ringed the ceiling. But I wasn't here to admire the decorating. I ran down the hall. There were small offices for the director, producers, and story team, and a room full of spare parts and tools. Near the end of the hall was a large, reinforced door with a sign that read "Authorized Personnel Only." It was rigged with an exit alarm.

I reached out to push the bar latch, and my hands struck something invisible and hard. Makuta appeared in front of the door. "I'm sorry, beloved. I'm afraid I can't let you do that," he said quietly as he trapped me in his vise-like arms.

With a muffled screech of frustration, I pounded on his chest. Then I sighed and took off the Huna. He shifted me to one side and started down the hall, pausing on the way to filch a Piraka set from the story team office as we passed. Then he carried me through the shattered window and down the steps. By now the twilight had deepened into blue-violet darkness.

The Master of Shadows backed into an obscure corner and set me down, out of the way of a patrol of Suukorak who had come to investigate the noise. They quickly discovered the broken window and scuttled inside. Soon they were spilling out again, waving their loot triumphantly, particularly those who had found toy Visorak. They broke a couple more windows in their exuberance.

Makuta laughed. "Look at that, love. The test track building, the bridge railing, and now the LEGO trailer. We're *still* leaving a trail of destruction across the island!"

"How did you find me?" I moaned.

"I felt the empty driver's seat, and there was neither a trail of bubbles, nor a reflection of the sonic pulse I sent down the canal. So I waited between you and the only place on Metru Nui from which I couldn't retrieve you. I knew I was right when I heard you smash the window."

I shook my head in despair.

"You know, I like that fighting spirit in you," he went on as he pulled me into his lap and took flight. "It's quite endearing. But you're really pushing me, getting so close to LEGO. I'm more convinced than ever that I need to get you back to Makuta Island where you belong."

"Does that mean we'll skip the rest of the tour?" I muttered. I had mixed feelings about this prospect. I disliked traveling with someone so cavalier about danger, but I was disheartened that my escape opportunities were dwindling.

"Of course not," he chuckled, rising above the rooftops. "I'll just have to be more vigilant. You're quite the challenging little mouse."

I clenched my fists. This whole thing was an episode of Tom and Jerry to him. Except that in this case, the cat kept winning.

"So, my lovely, would you like to see the zoo now?" he asked, zooming toward Onu-Metru. "And in case you're wondering, no, you don't have a choice."

## 35. If I Ran the Zoo

### **Three Days Grace – Animal I Have Become**

*I can't escape this hell  
So many times I've tried  
But I'm still caged inside  
Somebody get me through this nightmare  
I can't control myself*

*So what if you can see the darkest side of me?  
No one will ever change this animal I have become  
Help me believe it's not the real me  
Somebody help me tame this animal  
(This animal, this animal)*

*I can't escape myself  
(I can't escape myself)  
So many times I've lied  
(So many times I've lied)  
But there's still rage inside  
Somebody get me through this nightmare  
I can't control myself*

*Somebody help me through this nightmare  
I can't control myself  
Somebody wake me from this nightmare  
I can't escape this [deleted]*

*(This animal, this animal, this animal, this animal, this animal, this animal, this animal)*

Makuta sank his claws into the side of a vent pipe and ripped it open. He peered down into the shaft, which was about two yards in diameter. I stared gloomily out over the low, dark gray roofs of Onu-Metru, disheartened that my Plan to escape to the LEGO trailer would no longer work. Now I would actually have to get the attention of the movie crew and make a commotion in front of too many witnesses for Makuta to silence. But the cold reality was that he would probably not allow me to get anywhere near the filming again.

“There’s no point in going all the way to the main entrance of the Archives. No one’s manning the ticket booth anyway these days,” he grinned, beckoning for me to follow. “Just slide down after me.” He stepped into the pipe and grabbed my arm, pulling me in. We shot down the narrow tube in the dark. I heard him blast an obstacle in front of us and felt shards of hot metal whistle past my head. Then the pipe opened up into a room. We splashed into a giant puddle of mud.

Makuta helped me up and brushed some mud off my shoulder. “Sorry, darling. I know it wasn’t the most elegant way to land, but it’s the best I could do in the time I had. We were going so fast I could barely scan ahead of us. At least there’s plenty of earth down here to work with.”

I stepped back and sprayed myself off. “Typical Makuta transportation. A white-knuckle ride in the dark, a sudden impact into something creepy, an excuse to invade my personal space, and a lame apology. Let me guess. Now you’ll figure out some way to ‘accidentally’ release a bunch of huge, rampaging monsters down here so you can scoop me up and whisk me to safety?”

“Stop fussing at me, dear,” he replied. “We landed in one piece, didn’t we?”

My night vision probed the darkness to see what devastated, depressing environment I would be touring next with the Spirit of Destruction. Stone-lined corridors led off in several directions. Down each hallway, prison doors alternated with metal-reinforced glass windows. The facility had been heavily damaged, with large holes in many of the walls. Green spiderwebs dotted with cocoons bedecked the piles of rubble and glass. The whole scene matched my bleak mood. “You’re right. Why am I complaining? I’d be better off if you *did* kill me,” I groaned. “I bet there are some really hungry carnivorous Rahi down here.”

“I’d just revive you, darling. Suicide threats are useless against me,” he chuckled. He chose a hallway and began to stride along. “These are the temporary holding pens for harmless new arrivals on this upper level here. They’re all empty. If I know the Visorak, they’ve already come down here, tracked down everything that was loose, and busted out everything that wasn’t. We have to go down a couple of floors to get to the interesting stuff they wouldn’t dare mess with.”

“Well, if you won’t let me go or let me die, then you really have a responsibility to keep me from being terrorized. That is, if you want to keep pretending to be a gentleman,” I insisted, shuffling resentfully behind him.

“My love, I would never knowingly do anything to—” he began.

“Yes, you would! Stop lying to me. Well, I suppose you can’t, it’s just in your nature. But at least stop trying to scare me into your arms. I’d rather face the big, bad world alone than put up with you.”

“I’m starting to miss those half million years of solitude myself,” he muttered under his breath.

My eyes widened with a sudden inspiration. Maybe I could nag and irritate him until he was desperate to get rid of me. I would have to deprive him of any pleasant conversation and avoid letting him touch me, too, so he would get no benefit from my presence.

We came to a set of elevator doors and looked inside. The car had long ago crashed down to the bottom of the shaft. Makuta grasped a thick strand of Visorak webbing the spiders must have used to move between the levels of the Archives. “Hold onto me, sweetheart, and I’ll rappel us down.”

I backed up and frowned at him, shaking my head. “And touch your grubby carcass? No way. I’ll take the stairs.”

Makuta sighed. “Suit yourself.” He led me to the stairwell, and we descended several flights. We came out into a wide foyer. “On this level they used to keep the less aggressive Rahi. Since they don’t pose a danger to visitors, exhibits have been set up for them. But it looks like all the inner stasis tubes have been broken, so there’s nothing here anymore.”

We walked down a hallway. Lightstones still lined the walls most of the way. All the displays were damaged, their doors ajar and the glass containers inside cracked and empty. Many of them still had plaques carved with names, information, and illustrations of the creatures and their natural habitats. I saw cages for the Fusa kangaroo, the Brakas monkey, and the Hikapi dragon lizard, among other things. I would have liked to ask questions about them, but I stuck to my Plan and remained sullenly silent.

“Let’s head down to where they keep the more interesting beasts,” suggested Makuta.

“The ghastly freaks you designed?” I said snidely.

“Well, many of them are my creations, it’s true,” he smiled.

“Then no wonder they’re locked away where no one has to see them.”

He looked at me sideways. “You’re really starting to get on my—hey, wait a minute! You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

I caught my breath. “Doing what?”

He studied my mask. “I see what you’re up to. You’re trying to annoy me so I’ll get sick of you and take you home.”

His mind-reading abilities had just made this the shortest-lived Plan yet. “Well, yes, I am, because I don’t want to be here,” I said in a small voice.

“It’s not going to work,” he snorted. “Now that I’m onto you, I refuse to let myself be provoked by anything you say. Sticks and stones, love! You’re too sweet to keep up the act for long, anyway. All I have to do is wait. As for not letting me touch you...” I backed rapidly away, but he stretched out his arms and encircled my waist several times. “This time we’re taking the elevator.”

His elastic limbs pulled me back, and I slammed against him. He unwound one arm and wiped some grime off my Kanohi. “Say, sweetheart, if you want me to take you back to your house for a little while, why don’t you give me another bath? That would supply me with enough fond memories to tide me over until we could be together again.”

I winced at the memory of scrubbing the Master of Shadows as he soaked in the pungent brew of solvents in the automotive shop. Still, it had taken only a couple of hours to get him clean, and he was not as filthy now as he had been then. This time the Plan didn’t depend on something risky like Roodaka falling for him, either. In fact, she would be far away, busy with her film work.

“Just like before?”

“Just like before.”

I reviewed the process in my mind: degreaser, chelating agent, and detergent, followed by a thorough rinsing, including his mouth. Then I remembered how he had acted when I was finished. “All right,” I agreed slowly, “as long as Shadrahk is there, too.”

“Shadrahk? Why, darling? Don’t you trust me to treat you like a lady?” he asked softly.

I shook my head. “No, not at all.”

Makuta sighed. “Well, fine. If it makes you more comfortable, Shadrahk will be there.” Then he smiled broadly. “Mmm, I still get shivers reminiscing about the last bath. To think I would ever actually *enjoy* getting clean! Maybe I’ll pull you into the bubbles with me this time.”

“Shadrahk has to be awake,” I added quickly. “And conscious.”

He groaned and released me. “Your incessant demands are taking all the fun out of this. Let’s just forget about it.” He waved at an obscure corner of the room. “And speaking of Shadrahk, you might as well come out and show yourself, son.”

“Cold busted,” muttered The Rahkshi of Darkness to himself as he emerged from the shadows. “Good evening, Master and Mistress.”

I nodded my greeting, and Makuta put an arm around him. “How long have you been trailing us?”

“From the beginning,” replied his minion.

“Really? I didn’t notice you until Ta-Metru. Nice job, my boy.”

Shadrahk smiled proudly. “Thank you, Master. I particularly enjoyed watching that race on the vehicle test track. Would you mind if I accompany you through the Archives? I’ve been reading up on Metru-Nui Rahi in the new Bionicle encyclopedia, but I’m sure you could tell me much more about them.”

“Oh, fine. You can tag along.” Makuta looked at me with resignation. “I suppose any father should welcome the opportunity to take his son to the zoo.”

Shadrahk waited for Makuta to pull me into the elevator shaft and lower us with the webbing down the cold, dark tube until we landed on top of the crushed car. Then he flew down beside us. I looked up, and faint spots of light shone in at each floor. The level we were on was completely devoid of illumination except for the dim glow emitted by our eyes.

The Master of Shadows steered me down the hallway by the shoulders. “Down here on the restricted levels were all the large, powerful Rahi who resisted stasis and were deemed completely unsafe for the public. Such small-minded people, those Matoran. If I ran the zoo, I’d sell tickets to ride a shielded roller coaster through here, and, I guarantee you, I would make a mint.” His eyes darted back and forth. “At this depth, some of the cages might still be intact. Let’s see... Yes, down that way... it’s the two-headed Tarakava! Come see my handiwork, beloved.”

He strode purposefully down another corridor until he reached a door with a sign describing the mutant aquatic reptile. He punched the lock through the door and kicked it open. A large tank of liquid protodermis was in the center of the room. Four eyes were visible at the surface.

I stayed in the doorway as Makuta ambled over to the eyes. A tall, angular lizard-like creature leaped suddenly onto a partially submerged rock and brandished its powerful fists at him. Then, just as suddenly, it dropped them.

The Spirit of Destruction laughed as he watched me cringe behind Shadrahk. “Don’t worry, pumpkin, I’ve got the power of Rahi control,” he said reassuringly “Here, take this Rau and see what it has to say.” He removed a Great Mask of Translation from his carapace and tossed it to me.

I took the mask and put it on, hoping no one would make me use its power to commit any more offenses against the animal world. “Hello,” I said. It came out as a strange buzzing noise.

The two heads looked at each other, then flickered their two tongues at me before one of them answered. “You travel with our master,” it hissed. “We are very hungry, but we will not eat you.”

This was good news, just in case Makuta released his mental grip on the creature. “I think he’s going to set you free. Stay away from the big spiders. Get to the sea as soon as you can.”

The Tarakava head that had spoken before grunted its thanks. The other snarled instead. “Spiders taste good.”

“She warned us not to mess with them,” pointed out the first head. The two heads started snapping at each other.

I put my hands on my hips. “Hey, if you keep fighting with each other, the spiders are sure to capture you. Trust me, I know about this. They’ll web you up and transform you into something really nasty. If you think having two heads is bad, think about having six or eight of them!”

The heads paused. “Oh,” they said in unison.

Makuta laughed. “I don’t know exactly what you said to it, sweetheart—something about the Visorak, I think?—but it’s just amazing to me the way you can make creatures get along with

each other. You're like a walking Avokhii, without all that unpleasant shininess." He turned to Shadrahk. "Isn't she wonderful?"

"You don't have to tell me," smiled the Rahkshi. He watched his master release the Tarakava, who waved a fist and zoomed past us to freedom. "Say, Master, what happened to all the Rahkshi that used to be down here?"

"They were all freed in the cataclysm, I believe."

"That's what I figured," nodded Shadrahk. "But if they were so numerous, why haven't I seen any wild ones around the city? Did they leave?"

"No, son, they died a noble death protecting me from a lethal foe in *Bionicle Adventures #10*."

"Oh." The shadow Rahkshi lowered his head. "What kind of death, if you don't mind me asking?"

"They died of old age," said his master.

Shadrahk looked at me in confusion, but I just shrugged. We followed Makuta around a corner to another undamaged door. The sign read, "DANGER. KRAAWA. KEEP OUT." "This is going to be really good," grinned the Master of Shadows.

"Looks promising," I mumbled, trying to remember what a Kraawa was.

Inside a spacious room, a bulky creature lay slumped in one corner. At the sound of the door hitting the wall, the slumbering beast snapped its eyes open. It reared up to its full height, about the size of the Tarakava. Its hatchet-shaped face swung from side to side as it scanned us. Powerful arms with paws like serrated shovels hung from its bulky shoulders.

"Isn't this the Rahi that grows in size as it absorbs the energy of an attack?" asked Shadrahk.

"The very one," replied his master. "Watch this." He fired a bolt of reddish-orange energy at the Kraawa with his staff. It roared in pain, then began to glow. I watched in astonishment as its size increased by about half.

"Wow," said Shadrahk. "Would a blast of darkness do that, too?" Makuta nodded, and his minion shot a blast of dark power at the creature. It ballooned to twice its original size, its head almost grazing the stone ceiling. I backed behind Makuta.

"But if you use your energy merely to darken the space around it, it won't grow. Try it," he suggested.

Shadrahk waved his staff in a spiral, and an obscure cloud surrounded the Rahi. It snorted and made scraping sounds against the stone floor. When the darkness receded, the Rahi was the same size as before, but its attitude had clearly changed for the worse. It was pawing the ground and

crouching as if to lunge at us. I activated my Rau and spoke to it. “Kraawa, we mean you no harm. The big one is planning to free you. He was just showing his minion what you can do.”

The Kraawa hesitated. It looked back and forth between us. “Tell them to get out of my way and let me go,” it growled.

I tugged at Makuta’s elbow. “The Kraawa just wants out. I don’t think it will give us any trouble if we just let it leave.”

“Hold on, poppet. This is a teaching moment. So, son, how would you propose to defeat something like that?” asked Makuta.

The Rahkshi of Darkness tilted his head. “Well, you would have to trap it, or deprive it of air, or something like that. Or use mental powers on it.”

“Exactly. Vacuum works, or sleep, or slowness, or stasis. As long as there’s no applied force.”

“I suppose if it runs into something, it grows as well?”

Makuta nodded. “Newton’s third law. Shove it into a wall, and you get a growth spurt.”

As they conversed, the animal drew back its massive foreleg as if to punch a hole in the stone wall. I didn’t doubt it had the strength to do it, possibly with disastrous consequences to the structure of the cave. “Wait, Kraawa,” I urged. “Let me ask them again.”

The Kraawa hissed, and I stepped between Makuta and Shadrahk. “Look, it’s really impatient, and it’s really big. All it wants is freedom. Why don’t we let it get out before it brings the ceiling down on our heads?”

“Say, you’re really good with that mask,” remarked Makuta. “You’ve used one before, haven’t you, doll?”

“Actually, yes. Sidorak gave me one.”

“Sidorak?” he frowned. “Why would he give a valuable Kanohi to a prisoner?”

“So I could talk to the spiders.” I glanced up at the Kraawa. It was pacing and snarling. “Now, about this Rahi...”

Shadrahk moved quietly to one side, but Makuta stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, staring at me. “Why would you need to talk to the Visorak? I think there’s more to this story than you’ve let on. You’d better tell me everything, because I’ll find out anyway.”

“He made me work for him,” I explained hastily. “He used his obedience spinner to make me spy on some penguins with the Rau. Uh, I think the Kraawa wants to get out.” The creature snarled menacingly. I addressed it again, trying to calm it down. “Please be patient, Kraawa.”

“That scoundrel!” Makuta growled. “Did he mistreat you in any way? Because if he even laid a hand—”

“No, not really,” I interrupted, tugging at his arm to get him to move. “He was quite polite, actually, up until the point where he ordered my death. He even made me Queen. Now, why don’t we get out of this thing’s way before we all get—”

“Queen? He made you *Queen*?” Makuta’s eyes blazed red, and dark energy began to crackle around his hands. “All right, that’s it. I don’t care if he’s in the storyline. This time I will kill him. Shadrahk, take care of her until I get back.” He pivoted for the door.

“Makuta, wait! It was just a formality! He did it to make Roodaka mad!” I pleaded, horrified at my mistake. “Please, just leave him alone and let it go.”

He spun around again. “Are you *defending* him?” he fumed. “You would have wanted to stay with him, is that it? But Roodaka found you out. And now, so have I. If you think her wrath was terrible, wait until you see mine!”

I backed slowly away. “I don’t like Sidorak at all, actually. But I don’t want you to beat him up any more. I think too much pain and destruction have already resulted from your insane fantasy that I’m your girlfriend.”

“Not the best time to pontificate, Mistress,” whispered Shadrahk, pulling me to the floor and covering me as a powerful shock wave rocked the Archives. I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath as the floor shuddered and rubble rained down all around.

“Good thing we’re on a heavily reinforced level,” he continued, shoving away a few boulders and pulling me out, “or we might have ended up down in the maintenance tunnels. I hear those are really nasty.”

Makuta reached past him and seized me by the throat. His eyes shone crimson through the dust. Shadrahk’s head popped up between us. “Master, don’t do this. You know you’ll hate yourself in the morning.”

The Spirit of Destruction grunted. His fingers dug more tightly into my neck. “What’s a little more self-loathing to a bad guy like me? I think I’ll blow up the Archives and cave in the entire island while I’m at it. What do I have to lose, if she won’t love me?”

“A lot,” replied the shadow Rahkshi calmly. “You’ll get yourself fired, for one thing. And if that happens, all the ingenious Plans you’ve been crafting so carefully will cave in just as fast. I might as well go brew a cup of espresso and hand it to your brother.”

Makuta sighed. “Well, when you put it that way...”

He relaxed his grip, and I sprang backwards into something hard. I looked up. It was the Kraawa. I ran behind Shadrahk and watched it grow so huge it crashed through what was left of the ceiling, bringing down part of an adjacent wall. The stunned creature wobbled unsteadily.

“Master, Nick was there, and he told me Mistress didn’t want to be Queen. He helped her try to dissuade his master. But the King hauled her in front of the horde anyway and announced that she was the new Queen. Unlike you, Sidorak isn’t smart enough to listen to his primary minion’s advice.”

Makuta raised an eyebrow.

“Nick said she wouldn’t help Sidorak until he used an obedience spinner on her. And she tried to escape several times while she was there,” Shadrahk added.

“Well, I guess she didn’t treat him any better than she treats me, then,” Makuta frowned. “Maybe I should go back to the Coliseum and finish running through my catalog of powers on that red son of a Kavinika.” He raised his hand to shield his head from falling debris as the Kraawa smashed the rest of the ceiling with its powerful paws. It leered down at us.

“I don’t think that would be such a good idea, Master. LEGO is in a bad mood, and they’ll really be stepping up security as soon as they see what the Visorak did to the trailer. Consider yourself lucky you were able to torture him as long as you did.”

I looked up at the Kraawa, now two stories tall. Swallowing my fear, I said, “If you crawl up through that hole, you can get free.” Then I suddenly thought to add, “And will you please take me with you?”

The beast leaned over. “Kill them first.”

“Don’t fight. They have powers that will weaken you without making you grow. Run instead.”

The Kraawa hesitated. Then it scooped me off the ground in its paw, which was the size of a hydraulic excavator bucket. Like an ape, it swung itself up to a higher level with its other arm. The weakened floor buckled behind us, but it scrambled forward, knocking pillars and walls out of its way as it lumbered on three legs into the darkness. I wrapped my arms around one of its thick metal claws and held on for dear life.

## 36. Hello, Kitty

### **Jethro Tull – Bungle In The Jungle**

*Walking through forests of palm tree apartments –  
scoff at the monkeys who live in their dark tents  
down by the waterhole – drunk every Friday –  
eating their nuts – saving their raisins for Sunday.  
Lions and tigers who wait in the shadows –  
they're fast but they're lazy, and sleep in green meadows.*

*Let's bungle in the jungle – well, that's all right by me.  
I'm a tiger when I want love,  
but I'm a snake if we disagree.*

*Just say a word and the boys will be right there:  
with claws at your back to send a chill through the night air.  
Is it so frightening to have me at your shoulder?  
Thunder and lightning couldn't be bolder.  
I'll write on your tombstone, "I thank you for dinner."  
This game that we animals play is a winner.*

*Let's bungle in the jungle – well, that's all right by me.  
I'm a tiger when I want love,  
but I'm a snake if we disagree.*

*The rivers are full of crocodile nasties  
and He who made kittens put snakes in the grass.  
He's a lover of life but a player of pawns –  
yes, the King on His sunset lies waiting for dawn  
to light up His Jungle as play is resumed.  
The monkeys seem willing to strike up the tune.*

As the Kraawa clutched me loosely in its paw, I pictured myself in Ann Darrow's torn white evening gown and blonde curls. Makuta and Shadrahk were in pith helmets, shooting at the Kraawa with elephant rifles as it scaled the Coliseum. Suddenly I regretted dragging an innocent creature into this ill-conceived, dangerous pursuit, which seemed doomed to end badly. Fortunately, the Kraawa had a significant advantage over the mighty King Kong. Its strange power of growing when struck would force its pursuers to use non-violent means of bringing it down.

The sensation of vertigo brought me back to reality. As it tried to crawl upward out of the ruined Archives, the Kraawa was increasing in size every time it smashed a barrier to its progress. It had to destroy more and more walls just to accommodate its enormous bulk. "Kraawa, let me break the ceilings above you, so you won't get any bigger," I suggested, forming my axe-staff.

The beast paused and looked at my weapon. "Can you shoot Vahki, too?" it asked. "I hate Vahki."

“I don’t think there are any left, but if we see some, I will,” I promised as I aimed diagonally above us. “Watch out for the spiders, though.” The shattered section of stone fell to the floor. Then I blasted the next ceiling as well to give the creature two stories of space to move around in. It hoisted itself up, hunching over to avoid hitting the intact slab above. I shot more energy upward, clearing the way for it to climb two more levels.

At this point I heard Makuta’s voice below us. “All right, son, here’s your chance to practice your tactics. Suppose you had all the Rahkshi at your command. What would you do?”

“First, I’d get Illusorahk to set up a cage of fire to trap the Kraawa,” came the reply.

“Done.” A wall of flames rose from the fragmented floor all around us.

The Kraawa uttered a roar of dismay and reared up on its hind legs, smashing its head into the ceiling. I braced myself as rubble cascaded past my head and the Rahi grew again. I tugged at its claw. “The fire isn’t real! You can walk right through it!” I urged, hoping it could avoid Makuta’s next blast.

Staring at me in disbelief, the Kraawa snorted. “It will burn us.”

“No, it won’t! Watch.” I jumped down out of its hand and dashed through the flames. “Come on!”

“Now what?” asked the Spirit of Destruction.

“I’d tell Somnorahk to hit it with sleep power.”

“He’s going to shoot at you! Move!” The Rau twisted my words into a strange wail. At the last second the Kraawa lunged after me through the raging red curtain. It stumbled to a stop and glanced behind it in amazement. Then it picked me up again.

“Run forward for a few seconds! They won’t expect that,” I yelled. The Kraawa galloped ahead while I cleared out the walls with my disintegration power. It was immediately obvious how hopeless this strategy was. Even if Makuta hadn’t had penetrating vision, with every second or third step the Kraawa’s weight fractured the floor and betrayed our position. I demolished another couple of ceilings. “Go up!”

“Somnorahk wouldn’t be able to hit it from here. There’s too much stone in the way for a clear shot,” Makuta remarked.

“Oh, right. Then Guurahk goes first, but he has to be careful not to destabilize the slab under them.”

Chunks of stone dropped away from the floor behind us while I shot away another pair of ceilings. Then, just as the giant beast swung itself up two more levels, it suddenly stopped and yawned. I shoved its claws apart and sprang clear while it teetered on the edge of the pit from

which it had just climbed. The mighty Rahi toppled over, plunging through floor after floor, gaining in bulk as it disappeared down a widening shaft. Finally the echoes died down.

Horrified, I leaned over the edge of the hole and probed the obscurity with my night vision. “Kraawa, are you all right?” I called a dozen stories down into the darkness.

“I think so,” came the Kraawa’s faint moan. “Sorry about that. I just fell asleep. I don’t know why.”

“No, no, it’s my fault!” I shouted after it, relieved that it was alive. “Thanks for trying to help me.” I switched to my Huna and glanced around for an escape route I could use without blasting anything. Howls and scurrying noises came from deep in the Archives, and I realized with a start that the Kraawa must have freed some other creatures as it went down.

“Good work, son. Judging from her Doctor Doolittle impression, your mistress had the sense to jump to safety. Now, how do you propose to retrieve her?”

“Well, she’ll probably switch back to the Huna, since the Kraawa is of no use to her anymore. I’ll get Sonirahk to pinpoint her location by sound. Then we’ll just fly after her and pick her up.”

Knowing that they would be listening for me, I dropped to all fours to sound more like a Rahi. I scanned the dusty darkness for some stairs or an elevator shaft and saw a dim lightstone at the end of a corridor. I crawled toward it as fast as I could.

A pack of rodents scrambled past me, pausing to gnaw voraciously at a stone support. Part of the ceiling behind me caved in. I took advantage of the noise to run on two legs for a few seconds and reached the elevator. Hawk-like birds flapped by my head and veered up the shaft. As their natural tools scraped against the stone sides, the shaft echoed with the thunder of a rockslide. I realized with a start that the creatures that had the potential to cause catastrophic structural failure had probably been stored in the lowest, most secure levels of the Archives, and they had just been unleashed.

To my relief, there was still a strand of webbing in the shaft, and when the rumbling stopped, I grabbed it and began to climb hand over hand. I ascended three stories and came face to face with a mouthful of pointed teeth as long as my forearms. They belonged to a creature that looked like an oversized Muaka.

I froze as the giant cat extended its neck and sniffed in my direction. Then it raised its massive paw. I quickly shimmied up the rope, but it followed the movement of the strand with its glowing eyes and swatted me. I hung on for dear life as I bounced off the side of the shaft. Upward progress suddenly seemed less important than survival. Holding my breath, I let myself slide slowly downward. The beast lunged and caught my leg in its jaws. It dragged me out of the shaft onto the floor.

I grabbed an axe off my back and shot a powerful jet of water into the creature’s eyes. It dropped my leg and roared, but as I scuttled backwards, it pounced, planting its paw in the middle of my

chest. Struggling for air, I managed to retrieve the Huna and swap it for the Rau. “Nice... kitty...” I said nervously.

The Rahi’s lips curled up at the edges. “Nice dinner,” it snarled back.

Shadrahk stepped forward out of nowhere and swung his staff at the great cat’s head. The startled animal pivoted to snap at him. But he vanished into darkness, calling, “Master, Rahirahk goes next.”

As I scrambled against the wall, mesmerized by the approaching teeth, the monster suddenly changed its demeanor. It dropped onto its belly and rubbed its huge head against my feet. A loud rattling sound came from its throat, and I realized it was purring. Tentatively I spoke to it again. “Nice kitty.”

Makuta strolled in, leaned over, and rubbed the animal’s head. “Go on, you feisty old tom.” As the cat rose and shuffled away, he helped me up. “There are some things even your gentleness can’t tame, darling, and the Muaka Nui is one of them.”

I replaced my extra masks and weapons on my back. “And you are obviously another,” I grumbled.

“Perhaps. Time will tell,” he grinned. “Once again, Shadrahk, excellent work. Remind me to give you some extra Xbox time when we get home.” His minion’s eyes lit up with delight.

A sudden crash made us all jump. “Well, now that we’ve had our fun, we’d better be moving on,” suggested the Master of Shadows. “It sounds like the rock raptors, tunnelers, and Kinloka are about to bring this place down on our heads.” He pulled me onto his lap and launched himself into flight, swerving up the elevator shaft.

Chunks of stone tumbled down the shaft toward us as the sounds of the cataclysm intensified all around. Makuta projected a force shield like an umbrella over our heads, reaching around it with his staff to shoot blasts of energy and break up larger obstacles. The air was so full of grit I couldn’t see and could barely breathe. I held onto his leg with one arm and covered my head with the other, waiting for it to be over. Then I felt cool air rushing against my mask and I opened my eyes. We had shot out of the ground and were leveling out over Onu-Metru with Shadrahk following close behind. I looked back and watched the ground subside several feet as a final shuddering crash shook the Archives. Dust drifted from jagged fissures in the surface.

“I hope you youngsters enjoyed your trip to the zoo,” called Makuta cheerfully, pausing to let his minion catch up.

Shadrahk nodded, but I crossed my arms. “It was exactly like I said. You unleashed a bunch of dangerous creatures so you could save me. You’re getting so predictable, Makuta.”

“I unleashed them? I believe it was you and your ever-growing friend that set them all loose, actually. At first I was afraid it was an attempt to draw LEGO’s attention by making a lot of

noise. But that's obviously not what you intended, because you know as well as I do they're never around in the middle of the night. They won't be back until daybreak."

I slumped against his chest, silently cursing my timing.

"But then I considered the possibility that you did it all to entertain me, and that lifted my spirits considerably," he continued.

"I was just trying to get away from you," I retorted glumly.

"Must you always crush my hopes?" he growled. "Whenever I lay my heart at your feet, you never miss an opportunity to tread on it."

"Oh, I get the impression you like it when I do that," I frowned. "Why else would you keep coming after me, when it's clear what I think of you?"

"Darling, I think you're mistaking my patience for masochism. I'm willing to take it slowly, and suffer a few slings and arrows in the meantime, because I know I will eventually win your heart. It's just a matter of time."

"I don't believe that. You thrive on misery and anguish in other creatures. Maybe you crave it for yourself as well."

"Hmm. I see your point. Not everyone can appreciate the bittersweet flavor of despair," he mused. "Most people are happy only when they're happy. It takes a sophisticated being to savor pain."

"Or a pathological one."

He ignored my last remark and closed his pointed fingers around my hand. "That's just one more reason I know you're the one for me. You understand me better than anyone I've ever met. You're not only the object of my adoration and desire—you're my truest friend."

I shook off his hand. "I'm not your friend, Makuta. I'm your captive."

"Well, I suppose that will just have to do for now," he sighed. "Anyway, beloved, it was quite a thrilling chase. I must say, I'm really impressed with your destructive talents. To think that you, with your puny little collection of borrowed powers, managed to bring down several dozen floors of a reinforced stone structure! If I had set out to demolish the Archives myself, I couldn't have done a better job."

The rest of the Rahkshi that were on Metru Nui soon fell into formation beside us and began hissing eagerly. Makuta glanced around and smiled. "All right, you boys can come with us to Ko-Metru, if you stay out of trouble."

The armored creatures jostled each other excitedly as we zoomed toward the fractured crystal towers of the Metru of Ice.

## 37. Glass Houses

### **Secret Machines — Lightning Blue Eyes**

*Under the weight of persuasion  
When you change your mind  
I left the ground you just gave in  
It was the only time*

*I felt awake I was way out  
Under the closing night  
Just as the morning became us  
and we were only skies*

*What changed?  
It's in my love*

*In your dreams you've seen it all  
Through a window so far off  
Remember watching while your  
Lightning blue eyes reflected sunrise*

*Through the dawn I'd seen it, too  
I caught a glimpse I thought was you  
And I was overwhelmed  
Lightning blue eyes against the daylight*

*I felt awake I was way out  
It was the only time  
To do away with persuasion  
Oh when you change your mind*

Nestled in the lap of the Spirit of Destruction and flanked by over a dozen of his multicolored minions, I watched the dark gray rooftops of Onu-Metru give way to the white peaks of Ko-Matoran dwellings. The pale, web-draped pyramids looked like miniatures of the crystal Knowledge Towers that rose among them, except most of the smaller buildings were intact. The majority of the Towers, on the other hand, had been sheared off at ground level, leaving large polygons of rubble that glittered in the dim moonlight. A few still stood at what must have been half their height or less. A chilly breeze stirred white dust among the jagged ruins.

We flew toward the coast, and the beautiful glaciers along the seashore loomed into view. I recognized the ice crag in which the Pengu had been hiding and leaned over Makuta's knee for a better view. I didn't see any of the flightless water fowl, or any cocoons their size. "Makuta, are there any penguins inside that glacier?" I asked.

"Penguins?" He peered at the mass of ice. "No, I don't see any. Why do you ask, love?"

"Oh, just wondering," I replied, relieved that the birds had evidently taken my advice to flee.

“That’s not good enough. You know I’ll find out sooner or later.”

I sighed. “It’s because I watched the Visorak web them up, but later I set them free and told them to leave the island.”

“How touching,” he replied. “You have the sweetest way of undermining my Plans. Fortunately, I’m no longer relying on that particular one to succeed.”

We continued along the shoreline. Presently Keetongu’s glacier became visible on the horizon. The Rahkshi, who had been zigzagging playfully around us, tightened into a combat formation as we approached. “Relax, boys,” their master reassured them. “I’m not going to pick a fight with Keetongu right now. We’re just seeing the sights.”

“I understand that you and he got into it after the events of the movie,” I remarked, turning to look up at him.

He nodded. “That arrogant upstart ambushed me while I was preoccupied with a couple of other foes. Pretty brazen of him, really. He seemed to think all it would take to defeat me was size and strength. It was only by a fortuitous coincidence he survived.”

“I heard it was your long-windedness that saved him,” I grinned.

Makuta’s body tensed under me. “Did he tell you that?”

“Uh, yes.”

Off to one side, trudging along the debris-strewn beach, were five medium-height individuals that looked like Toa Hordika and a tiny hunched one that I recognized as a Rahaga. Presumably their half-Rahi nature made it easier to see in the dark. I wondered if LEGO had urged them to hurry to help make up for the schedule delays.

“You two spent some time together, I take it,” he growled. “What else did he tell you?”

“Not a whole lot. He’s pretty quiet,” I said quickly. I was beginning to regret bringing up the subject.

“Well, he’s going to be quiet for good when I’m done with him. We have to re-enact that scene for Book Ten, but I’m thinking this time I won’t waste any time before I waste him.”

“You can’t do that!” I protested, my anxiety level rising. “LEGO will be angry with you.”

“No, they won’t. He’s not even in the storyline afterwards.”

“But it’s just not right!”

“Oh, like I care about that,” he snapped. “I’m the bad guy.”

Shadrahk called over to Makuta. “Master, I’m going to cloak us. We’re getting close enough that they’ll soon be able to see us.” He landed astride Vorahk’s shoulders and aimed his staff. We were enveloped in a shroud of even deeper darkness.

Makuta glowered at me. “But why do *you* care so much? Is it because he’s all gold and shiny?”

I cringed, sensing another jealous tirade. “No, it’s because he’s a decent living being.”

“I see how it is,” he grumbled. “First it was Mata Nui. Then it was Takanuva. And now it’s Keetongu. All your favorite beings are gold and shiny! You’re shunning me because of my shadowy coloring.”

“That’s not true,” I retorted. “I’ve never even seen Mata Nui’s colors. And what about Onua? He’s as dark as you are.”

He groaned. “Oh, yeah. Onua. Just when I had managed to forget about him. Well, he’s the exception that proves the rule.”

Suddenly Invulnerahk exclaimed, “Look, it’s our little red brother! He’s being held hostage by those gangly Toa dudes!”

I looked back at the shoreline. The figures were much clearer now. Whenua was leading the way with a determined stride. Nuju and Onewa were following in morose silence. Matau shuffled after them, dragging his tools in the sand. At the end of the line Norik and Nokama conversed quietly while they walked.

“That’s not our brother,” said Shadrahk. “That’s Norik. He’s a Rahaga. They’re former elite Toa bodyguards. Long ago they turned against Master and stole the Mask of Light, and for their crime they were mutated into—hey! Get back here!” He jumped off Vorahk’s shoulders to pursue the Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability, who was making a beeline for the beach. The artificial darkness abruptly receded.

“All for one, and one for all!” shouted the gray Rahkshi as he rocketed away, waving his staff in the air.

“Well, this time his slogan makes sense, even if his mission doesn’t,” shrugged Vorahk, swerving out of formation to join the chase. But Accurahk was faster. He landed on a tower and picked up a shard of crystal. With a stylish wind-up worthy of a major league baseball pitcher, he hurled it at his rogue brother. In the distance, Invulnerahk dropped from the sky like a stone. Shadrahk swooped down to catch him.

“I’ll pretend to be distracted,” muttered Makuta, “and I’ll accidentally apply just a little too much force. ‘What? He’s dead? Oops! I just don’t know my own strength.’ Then there will be one less gold, shiny being out there for you to fall in love with.”

I forced myself not to panic. “Makuta, please stop overreacting. Keetongu could be tie-dyed, for all I care. What matters is that he healed me. He saved me from a miserable existence as a half-bestial lunatic. You yourself said that you prefer me in this form!”

“Sure, but I could have rebuilt you again. I’ve got another Guurahk foot in the storeroom. And I think I have one more set of those pretty blue legs.”

“But I still would have been insane,” I pointed out. “He did me a huge favor, and the least I can do is stand up for him. If you want to show me that your heart isn’t as black as your armor, then please spare him.”

“Would it really change your mind about me? Or are you just trying to manipulate me with your feminine wiles? You she-creatures are all alike!” he said with disgust.

“Actually, yes, I am trying to manipulate you,” I said softly. “As long as I’m stuck with you, I’m always going to try to make you treat the creatures around you more kindly.”

Makuta clenched his fists. “It’s one extreme or the other. Roodaka tried to entice me into flouting the script, and now you don’t want me to deviate from it one iota. Why can’t you be just a *little* bit evil?”

Shadrahk returned with his brother’s limp form in his lap. Vorahk was following them, carrying a long, wriggling purple object. He gestured at the Rahkshi of Accuracy. “Nice shot, Sharpie. You knocked out his kraata.”

“Maybe we should leave it out,” remarked the Rahkshi of Darkness. “He’ll get into less trouble that way.”

“Hey! No fair! You have to put me back in!” protested the kraata.

Laughing, Vorahk yelled, “Lateral!” He tossed Invulnerahk to Accurahk, who fired a perfect spiral pass to Shadrahk. The purple kraata emitted a shriek that warbled as he rotated.

The dark Rahkshi caught Invulnerahk over his shoulder and slammed him down onto the imaginary turf. “Touchdown!”

Makuta swiveled his head to see Accurahk spinning the purple kraata on the tip of his finger as he flew. He rolled the squeaking creature into a ball and dunked him through a hoop formed by Vorahk’s arms. Then the Rahkshi of Hunger noticed Makuta watching them. He shoved the kraata inside the gray armor, which was still draped across Shadrahk’s legs. The three resumed their positions in the formation as if nothing had happened.

The corner of Makuta’s mouth twitched, and finally he smiled. “It’s hard to stay in a murderous mood in the presence of my gentle beloved and the joyful little rascals she’s helping me raise.” He patted my knee. “All right. If it makes you happy, darling, I’ll spare Keetongu. I’ll play the ranting megalomaniac, just like last time, and let him get away. But you owe me a favor.”

“Thank you, Makuta.” My foolish mouth might well have cost Keetongu his life if the Rahkshi hadn’t been so amusing.

“I suppose I should be happy you care enough to try to improve me. Well, let’s get away from those do-gooders before someone spots us. I’d like to show you the inside of a Knowledge Tower, anyway.” He circled away from the sea, finally settling on a truncated tower some distance inland. “You Rahkshi can do whatever you like, as long as you stay out of sight and don’t break anything. I’ve found that everything in this metru is rather brittle. And Shadrahk, see that the perimeter of the building is secured at ground level. I don’t want anyone coming in. Or going out, for that matter.”

Shadrahk glanced at me and then back at his master. “Understood.”

As the armored creatures started a game of flying tag, Makuta kicked some crystalline rubble out of the way to expose a staircase. “Come on, pumpkin.” He started down the steep glass stairs. Since they had been designed for Matoran, the treads were too narrow for his feet, so he took them three at a time and crushed a wide, flat spot with every step. I descended cautiously after him. We passed through several floors, most of them a heavily damaged jumble of metal, glass, and paper, before he stopped at one that was intact.

The only walls inside the large room were the ones forming a central elevator shaft. They were covered with huge star charts. Clear crystal girders and beams supported the gray cementious ceiling. In all directions, glass panes gave an unobstructed view of the dark, jagged landscape. Numerous work stations were arranged in hexagonal patterns like a tile floor. Each lightweight metal desk had a stool, two metal baskets of neatly stacked paper, a device that resembled an abacus, and a few writing implements. In one corner there was a water cooler and an ice box.

“These little guys were consummate bureaucrats,” remarked Makuta, flipping through a few of the papers. “They spent all day, every day, poring over the positions of the stars. Calculating the significance of each miniscule movement and flicker. Statistically correlating the data to phenomena on the ground, like Rahi migratory patterns or foundry output. Checking and rechecking old prophecies against the new numbers. They never got tired of it.”

I sat down on a stool. He picked up a sheaf of papers and scanned them as fast as he could turn the pages. “Anything interesting in there?” I asked.

“What? Did you say something, dear?”

I repeated my question, and he replied, “Oh, not much. I’m just trying to see whether they discovered anything I haven’t already figured out. So far, it’s pretty routine stuff. But I know Nuju worked on this floor somewhere.” He continued to the contents of another basket.

After watching him for a few minutes, I realized I was very sleepy. I wondered how long he would spend in here, reading Ko-Matoran star analyses. I gazed out the window and watched the

Rahkshi. They had found a flock of ice bats and changed their game of tag to include the flying Rahi.

“Here’s his desk,” announced Makuta. He browsed through the two baskets. “Nothing of significance here, but I was expecting that. The crafty midget did his most interesting work on his computer. Remember that rig he was bragging about to Kopaka when we saw them on the Great Barrier?”

“Oh, yeah. But why would LEGO let one Matoran use a computer while everyone else did hand calculations?” I wondered.

The Spirit of Destruction chuckled as he crouched and peered under the desk. “LEGO didn’t know about it. He smuggled it in after he saw one in the company office. I must say, I don’t blame the little geek for getting tired of crunching row after row of numbers with an abacus.” He finished inspecting the desk and stood up. “Of course, as soon as he set up his internet connection, I hacked into his hard drive. But I was too busy to look at it for a while, and then I wrecked the power plant. Now, where could he have hidden that thing?”

I shrugged. “You’re the one with X-ray vision.”

Makuta had already started scanning the room. “The janitor’s closet, next to the elevator. Naturally.” He strode over to a small door and yanked it open. He leaned inside, pushed aside some brooms, and ripped a panel off the back wall, revealing a computer sitting on a small desk. “Pay dirt!”

Dragging the desk out of the closet, he pulled up a stool. He pulled the cord out of the wall and jabbed it into his leg. The machine whirred to life, and soon the familiar Windows startup sound resonated through the room.

I watched over his shoulder for a few minutes while he opened some Excel spreadsheets and scrolled through endless columns of numbers. I blinked drowsily a few times, and the figures drifted in and out of focus. My captor appeared to be completely absorbed in the computer, but an escape attempt from a twenty-story glass high-rise surrounded by Rahkshi seemed like a bad gamble. I decided I might as well get some rest. I shoved two desks together and stretched out on top.

In moments sleep overtook me. I dreamed I was wearing a Rau and having a conversation with the phase dragon. It was explaining how it used its power to become intangible and fade away. “It’s as if you turned every bit of yourself sideways all at once, and there’s nothing to see but the space in between.” Then its eyes darted to one side. “Danger!” it hissed, and it disappeared.

I followed its gaze and saw Makuta walking out of the dusty rubble. My efforts to run were thwarted by the magnetic force holding my feet to the ground. I winced with resignation as he wrapped his arms around me. Then I thought of the phase dragon’s trick. I envisioned each of my atoms pivoting into a new dimension, like a playing card turning in three-dimensional space

to present only its edge. Makuta gasped in surprise as I vanished inside his embrace. “Sweetheart?”

I woke to see him standing over me and slowly recalled where I was. “Oh, uh, did you find anything on Nuju’s computer?”

“Yes, I did learn a few interesting details I had overlooked,” he replied. “I sent the computer back to the lair with the Rahkshi. I told them they could keep it. It was top-of-the-line equipment last year, so it still should have some useful life left.”

I sat up rubbed my eyes. Past him, through the panoramic windows, I could see a dim red glow on the horizon. One Rahkshi straggler was silhouetted against the sky, leaning over to open the ice box.

“Did you have a nice dream, darling?” continued Makuta.

“Oh, yes,” I smiled. The Rahkshi pulled out three cans and popped one of them open. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed the cans were red with a wavy white stripe, and the Rahkshi was blue and gold.

“Was I in it?”

“Actually, you were,” I replied, jumping off other side of my makeshift bed. “Uh, Makuta, I think we should probably get out of here now.”

“Oh, there’s no hurry,” he grinned. He followed me around the desks. “We’re all alone, and the suns are about to rise. Why don’t we just enjoy the view?”

Pinky downed the second Coke as I said urgently, “Because I’m pretty sure the building is about to collapse.”

“Don’t worry, my beauty. I know it seems risky to be in a glass skyscraper that’s been damaged by two major earthquakes. One more aftershock could certainly bring it down. But then again, it might stand another thousand years. And I’m here to protect you.”

I pointed at Pinky. “It’s not the aftershocks I’m worried about. It’s—”

“Shhh.” He put a finger across my mouth. “Let’s just watch the sky.”

I pushed his hand off my mask. “Makuta, the sunrise is going to be behind you,” I said anxiously, hoping he would finally turn around. The shapeshifting Rahkshi drained the last soda and crushed the can in his hand.

“I’m not too fond of direct light. I’d rather watch it mirrored in your eyes,” purred the Master of Shadows, slipping his arms around me and fixing me in his intense blue gaze. “Relax, precious. There’s no safer place for you than right here in my embrace.”

Ironically, he was right, at least in terms of my immediate physical well-being. Given Pinky's usual reaction to caffeine, all I had to do to evade Makuta's romantic advances was stall him for a few minutes. "Well, since there's no hurry, why don't you tell me about *your* dreams? I know you don't sleep, but you often speak of dreaming."

He laughed gently and loosened his grip a little. "Why, you've never been interested in my dreams before. And you've stopped radiating fear! But I won't speak any more about that, lest I jinx myself."

Behind him, the hyperactive Rahkshi shot straight up in the air and crashed into the ceiling. He landed hard on the floor and rebounded up again.

Makuta cleared his throat. "Well, beloved, my dreams have always been quite simple. Win the confidence of the Matoran, root out any of their leaders who resist the prospect of my benevolent rule, and restore order to the world. And now that you've come into my life, my water lily, I want you by my side the whole time."

The edge of the first sun rose just above the horizon and sent reddish gold rays into the sky. I gave Makuta a strained smile. "Order? That doesn't sound like you."

"Every system needs order," he explained. "I don't mean the everything-in-its-place, nobody-steps-out-of-line kind of order that the Turaga cherish. They insist on structuring the Matoran's lives, but they refuse to impose any order on the outside world. The little guys work like dogs and get no real protection in return for their labors. I, on the other hand, will use a hierarchy of reliable subordinates to annihilate the enemies of the Matoran, so that they can live in safety. I had actually made some headway on this Plan until the Toa Hagah sabotaged my operation, so I'm really just starting over. But this time I won't make the mistake of trusting any Toa."

Pinky's oscillations increased in frequency, and a wide crack began to spread across the slab above him. I wondered when Makuta would notice the catastrophe unfolding a few yards away from us. "I suppose they would be your slaves?"

The Spirit of Destruction rolled his eyes. "*Employees*, darling. They'll be well recompensed for their work. As long as they worship me, and I get a certain minimum level of productivity out of them in my munitions factories, they will be allowed to build, play, and travel under the benign protection of my organization. They will have more freedom than ever, actually, since they will no longer be preyed upon by the likes of the Dark Hunters. You will help me manage them, because you're such a good peacemaker. Shadrahk will be in charge of the military, of course, and will assist me with strategy. Vorahk will serve under him, keeping the troops in crack condition and preparing tactical operations. Any Dark Hunters who defect to my side and prove themselves worthy will be welcome to join the armed forces. It's a bit like the current system on Makuta Island, except that we will spread it to the rest of the known universe."

"But the Matoran already have Toa to defend them," I argued. The second sun had risen by now, and the room was flooded with light.

“The Toa are weak, because they’re too self-righteous to dirty their hands with violence,” he snorted. “And they’re always too wrapped up in their own private squabbles to work well together. When the Dark Hunters tried to establish a base on Metru Nui, it took hundreds of Toa to defeat them, and the fighting ravaged the island for several decades. I could have cast out that rag-tag band of hooligans with two regiments of Rahkshi in about a month. You’ve seen what they can accomplish.”

At this point a huge chunk of the ceiling broke loose and tumbled down onto the floor. Pinky bounced through it, shattering it with his head as it fell. The extra weight made the weakened floor beams give way with a mighty crack. The surface below our feet tilted abruptly. I looked at Makuta. “All right, I know you’re in the middle of a rant, but you had to feel that.”

“The earth moving? Yes, my angel. You have that effect on me, too.” He reached over to caress my mask.

As the floor beneath us crashed down onto the next level, rubble cascaded onto our heads. Makuta glanced around, enfolded me tightly in his arms, and launched us off the subsiding slab with his powerful legs. We burst out the window, sending shards of glass in all directions. I looked over his shoulder and watched each floor of the building flatten under the combined weight of the failed structure above. Pinky shot out of the other side of the doomed edifice, spiraled toward the ground, and leveled out just before he reached the pavement. He careened off toward the horizon as Makuta attained stable flight and shifted me sideways on his lap. I breathed deeply to calm my jangled nerves.

“Did you enjoy the sunrise, my sweet?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah, it was very nice.”

“It was the prettiest one I’ve ever seen,” he agreed, “because of the lovely eyes reflecting it. You know, poppet, I’m amazed that you were able to sense the aftershock coming. You’ve really become attuned to your destructive powers.”

“I didn’t sense an aftershock,” I shrugged. “I watched Pinky reach into the Ko-Matoran’s icebox and guzzle three Cokes in a row.”

Makuta laughed heartily. “That’s hilarious! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was trying to,” I sighed.

“Oh. Well, no matter. Shall we head for Po-Metru now? The sculpture fields always look very dramatic when the shadows are long.”

“Whatever makes you happy, Makuta,” I muttered, brushing a few shards of glass off my leg.

His eyes widened. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course not,” I groaned. I watched the final collapse of the building, which sent a massive cloud of white dust and debris along the ground in all directions. We were briefly buffeted by the shock wave.

“Oh, well. I can dream.”

I turned around to face forward. “Evidently so. You dream about some really outlandish things.”

“Someday I’ll make them come true, and you’ll share in my triumph,” he replied confidently. We soared toward the Metru of Stone.

## 38. Heart of Stone

### **A Perfect Circle — Passive**

*“Dead as dead can be,” my doctor tells me  
But I just can’t believe him, ever the optimistic one  
I’m sure of your ability to become my perfect enemy  
Wake up and face me, don’t play dead ‘cause maybe  
Someday I will walk away and say, “You disappoint me,”  
Maybe you’re better off this way*

*Leaning over you here, cold and catatonic  
I catch a brief reflection of what you could and might have been  
It’s your right and your ability  
To become...my perfect enemy...*

*Wake up (we’ll catch you) and face me (come one now),  
Don’t play dead (don’t play dead)  
‘Cause maybe (because maybe)  
Someday I’ll (someday I’ll) walk away and say, “You disappoint me,”  
Maybe you’re better off this way*

*Maybe you’re better off this way  
You’re better of this, you’re better off this,  
Maybe you’re better off!*

*Go ahead and play dead  
I know that you can hear this  
Go ahead and play dead  
Why can’t you turn and face me?  
Why can’t you turn and face me?  
You [deleted] disappoint me!*

*Passive aggressive [deleted]*

We left behind the geometrically arranged crystal dwellings of the Ko-Matoran and approached the low, flat-roofed dwellings of the Metru of Stone. Stacked up like natural sedimentary rock outcrops, their colors were the same shades of brown as their inhabitants’ armor. Larger warehouses and workshops loomed in their midst. Between groups of buildings lay barren reaches of sand studded with massive sculptures. As we soared over the desert, the air became warmer. I wondered what Makuta would want to show me here.

He veered into a canyon and alighted on a large boulder. “Come see a piece of history, love. The Dark Hunters’ prison is down here.”

Shoving aside some rubble with his foot, he crept into a crevice. Meager sunlight filtered through the dusty air to light our way. We reached a gloomy underground bunker with fractured walls and ventilation grills ajar. I looked around for a few minutes, remembering scenes from the second movie where three newly transformed Toa Metru discovered their mask powers with the help of Turaga Lhikan. I realized the hole in the wall through which we had entered must have

been the one Nuju had made. Makuta seemed to be waiting for me to comment, so finally I said, “It must have been really depressing to be locked in here. I bet they were relieved to get out.”

“That’s the whole point of a dungeon, darling,” he grinned. “I’ve designed quite a few of them in my time. This one is actually a bit too airy, in my opinion. But then, the Dark Hunters have never have lived up to their name.”

I shrugged. “You’re the expert on darkness.”

“You know it, honey,” he said, tweaking my chin. “All right, let’s go back up and see some of the more interesting statues.”

We crept back up over the broken rocks to the surface, where he picked me up again and flew toward the sculpture fields. Most of the stone artworks were broken, but a few still stood tall and majestic. As Makuta had suggested, the long shadows cast by the morning sun made them look even more magnificent. “Shadows are long in the morning and evening,” he remarked enigmatically. “When the light fades, pretenses fall away, and true intentions are revealed.”

I studied the statues as we got closer. They were of various subjects, including enormous masks, Toa, and Rahi, all in formal poses. Some of them were abstract compositions, possibly for use as building components. “Do those big columns over there look familiar?” asked my captor. “They were supposed to be supports for a new chute system. I appropriated a few of them to shore up the roof of the protodermis chamber in Mangaia.”

“Oh, yeah,” I muttered. “They look a lot less creepy in the sunlight. But wouldn’t it be easier to make new ones than to move such big things?”

“Not when you’ve got more force than finesse,” he explained. “Just look at those intricately carved capitals and plinths, and the subtle entasis that makes them look even statelier. I can’t wait for the Matoran to start worshipping me instead of my undeserving brother. Then I can have architectural components like that custom fabbed on site.”

I spotted a statue similar to one in the second movie. “Isn’t that Toa Lhikan?” I asked brightly. Then I clapped my hand over my mouth. The last thing I needed to be doing was bringing up more gold-toned heroes.

“Yes, it is,” growled the Spirit of Destruction. Then he cracked a smile. “With bit of recent embellishment, it would seem.”

I looked again and noticed a large handlebar moustache chiseled into the stone Hau. “The Rahkshi?”

Faint sounds in the distance soon grew loud enough to confirm my guess. The armored creatures were yelling and shouting in a nearby canyon. As we landed on a small ledge halfway up a tall cliff, I saw that they had captured two Kikanalo. Straddled by Vorahk and Shadrahk, the beasts

were facing each other across a wide, open area. The other Rahkshi struggled to keep them still as they swung their mighty heads and stomped their feet.

Off to one side, Illusorahk waved his staff. A Muaka appeared behind each of the herd animals, and the other Rahkshi let go. With a mighty roar, the beasts charged away from the predators and toward each other. Wielding their staffs like lances, the two riders tried to knock each other off their mounts.

“Kikanalo jousting! That’s brilliant,” beamed Makuta. “I’m so proud of the way my sons have responded to your athletic training. They come up with the most creative games now.”

Vorahk ducked a deft blow of his competitor’s staff and jabbed him in the midsection. Shadrahk grunted and swayed on his Kikanalo. Each Rahkshi grabbed the massive horn in the middle of his animal’s head to steer him in a tight circle. They faced each other again. The two Muaka reappeared, and the Kikanalo raced toward each other again.

This time Shadrahk’s thrust struck Vorahk’s head, but not before the Rahkshi of Hunger managed to wedge his staff under his brother’s leg and flip him off his mount. The darkness Rahkshi sprawled onto the sand. Slightly dazed, Vorahk raised his weapon over his head in victory. The Kikanalo started looking around in confusion and snorting to one another. I quickly put my Rau over my Kaukau Nuva and realized they were talking about the imaginary Muaka. “They’ve been fooling us,” said one. “Those cats aren’t real!”

The angered beasts began to paw the ground with their forelegs. The one Vorahk was riding leaped and bucked. The black Rahkshi gripped its sides with his knees. He wrapped one arm around its neck and swung the other for balance. “Yee haw!” yelled Invulnerahk. “We’ve got ourselves a rodeo!”

The riderless Kikanalo charged the cheering throng of Rahkshi. Invulnerahk jumped in front of his brothers. “Bring it on, you ornery critter!” Then he cartwheeled to one side. The massive animal lunged at him, catching him and lifting him up on its long, pointed horn. “Yikes!” he cried as it tossed him in the air. Somnorahk zapped the Rahi with sleep power, and it stumbled to its knees and collapsed. Invulnerahk crashed head first into the ground. He sprang to his feet and spit out a mouthful of sand, a big grin on his lizard-like face.

Vorahk was finally thrown from his steed and landed next to Shadrahk in the dirt. The red and black Rahkshi pulled him up. “Nice going, Sarge! Accurahk says you lasted exactly eight point seven seconds.”

“How’d I do as a rodeo clown?” asked Invulnerahk.

“You’re a natural,” chuckled Shadrahk, slapping him on the back.

Next to me on the cliff, Makuta was doubled over with laughter. “That was great,” he gasped. He looked over at me.

“It was pretty funny,” I agreed. “The Kikanalo didn’t seem to enjoy it much, but at least they didn’t get hurt.”

“Oh, don’t worry about them. You’ve taught the boys not to be unnecessarily cruel, and I appreciate that.”

I crossed my arms. “It wasn’t easy, considering their paternity. When I met them, you were training them to torment innocent Matoran.”

Meanwhile, with the Great Mask of Translation I could hear Vorahk’s Kikanalo bellowing for help. As the Rahkshi congratulated each other below us, a rumble became audible, and a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon.

Makuta pulled off my Rau, handed it to me, and looked me straight in the eyes. “Now, what’s gotten into you, sweetheart? You’ve become so moody all of a sudden. And just when you were beginning to warm up to me, too.”

“Warm up to you?” I asked incredulously, replacing the mask on my back. “What are you talking about?”

“I understand why you’re hesitant to admit your newfound feelings,” he smiled gently, reaching for my hand. “Love makes us vulnerable, and that’s profoundly unsettling. I myself resisted for some time before giving in to my emotions for you. I tried to pretend I wanted you as a mere minion, when I knew deep in my heart I really adored you.”

“My feelings about you haven’t changed,” I retorted, taking a step away from him on the narrow ledge. “I’ve always despised you, and I still do.”

A thundering herd of Kikanalo was stampeding toward the Rahkshi. I backed up against the cliff as the stone around us began to shake with the vibrations. “Lift off!” shouted Shadrahk. The armored creatures jumped into flight position just before the pounding feet reached the spot they had been standing.

“What about the nice dream you had of me? What about the way you let me hold you tenderly in my arms while you asked me about mine? You can’t deny what happened between us back there in the crystal tower.” Makuta frowned. “Don’t play coy with me, after the way you’ve raised my hopes. Now *you’re* being the cruel one.”

I watched the Rahi skid to a stop in the sand before their fallen comrade. “I was trying to stay close to you so when Pinky brought down the building, I wouldn’t be smashed into scrap metal.”

A Kikanalo with a golden horn tipped back its head and bellowed. The others joined the dirge. The gritty air resonated with powerful waves of sound. Awakened by the noise, the recumbent beast shook its head and slowly rose to its feet. Its herdmates gathered around it and rubbed their noses affectionately against its sides.

“And here I thought you were finally succumbing to the Stockholm syndrome,” grumbled the Master of Shadows. “Well, at least you’ve acknowledged that you need me.”

“No, I don’t,” I shot back, my ears still ringing from the sound. But that wasn’t the only damage from the creatures’ sonic outburst. Beneath us, I could feel giant fissures opening up in the stone. Loud cracking noises followed as huge slabs of stone split and slid against one another. The Kikanalo herd moved away from the base of the bluff and ran away down the canyon.

“Tell me you need me,” shouted Makuta above the noise, “and I’ll save you.”

I glanced down at the cascading boulders below, and then up at those about to tumble onto our heads. Then I felt the rock beneath me give way. I began to panic. Perhaps I should admit that I needed him, I thought to myself. In that moment, it was certainly true. As long as I qualified it with a time limit—

The world suddenly went black.

When I returned to consciousness, I was lying on my back, my spine and limbs racked with pain. I blinked and gasped for air. As my eyes slowly focused, I saw Makuta kneeling over me, clutching his head in his hands. “No! It can’t be! How could she do this to me?”

I moaned, and he looked down at me. “You’re breathing! Oh, my poor little darling.” He gathered me up in his arms and held me for a few moments before he noticed Therahk standing beside us, panting and leaning heavily on his staff. “Wait a minute. Therahk, did you just revive her?”

The black and brown Rahkshi nodded.

“But—but you can’t bring creatures back to life!” stammered Makuta. “So, she wasn’t dead after all?” Therahk shook his head.

The footsteps of the other Rahkshi approached. “Mistress is one tough chick!” Vorahk exclaimed.

“I thought she was a goner for sure, after that crunching sound she made when she hit the ground,” remarked Invulnerahk.

Shdrahk bowed his head. “Mistress, it’s good to see you’re still among the living.”

Makuta closed his eyes and sighed. I noticed that his dirt-caked armor was glistening with fresh grease at all his joints. His dusty Kraahkan was streaked with fluid below his eyeholes and the corners of his mouth. Looking down again, he saw me staring at him. “I don’t have a heart of stone, darling,” he explained sadly. “Knowing that I could revive you didn’t lessen the pain of watching you die as much as I thought it would. And it caused me unspeakable agony to know that you’d rather perish than admit you need me.”

“Actssually, Massster,” said the quick healing Rahkshi softly, “Missstresss wasssn’t capable of ssspeaking. Ssshe wasss ssstruck by a sssizsssable ssstone sssoon after the ssstart of her dessscent. Obssserve this contusssion on her sssupraorbital foramen.” He pointed at my eyebrow.

Makuta smiled with relief. He gently touched the bump on my head. “Then maybe you *were* going to say it?”

I briefly glared at him and then craned my neck to look at Therahk. Behind his eyeholes, the edge of his kraata was definitely purple.

“Dude! You’re a Seven!” exclaimed Vorahk, clanking his weapon against the caduceus-tipped staff of his newly promoted brother.

Invulnerahk elbowed Therahk. “What’s up, Doc?”

“The oppossite of the vectorial sssum of the graviatsssional forcsssesss acting at a given locatsssion, of coursse,” smiled the Quick Healing Rahkshi.

Invulnerahk scratched his head. “Geez. He can talk now, but it still ain’t English.”

“Congratulations, brother,” said Shadrahk warmly. “The *s* sounds will get easier.”

“Well done, Therahk. How did you know she was still alive?” asked Makuta, stroking the side of my mask. “She sure looked like she was flatlining to me.”

“I thought ssshe was decsssseasssed, alssso,” came the reply. “But I sssstimulated her ssscerebral functionsss jussst in cassse, and to my sssurprissse, my attempt wasss sssuccsssesssful.”

Makuta squeezed me tightly, which sent spasms of pain down my back. “Thank goodness. I was really dreading the prospect of having to get Takanuva to combine with me again. Believe me, it was not a pleasant experience, being filled with all that annoying light. Of course, this time there wouldn’t be a giant door hanging over us, but still...”

I sat up straight in spite of the pain. “Wait a minute. You’ve been acting like you could bring things back to life on your own.”

“I never actually said that I could do it *alone*,” he shrugged.

“What about that fish that the Visorak tried to pass off as me?”

“It wasn’t completely dead, either, beloved. Primitive life forms can survive an amazing amount of trauma. And Makuta fish are especially durable. It barely flinched when I whacked Sidorak over the head with it, even though the blow sent him flying backwards so hard he cracked the stone wall behind him.”

I shuddered. “So all the times you’ve been so cavalier about risking my life, you wouldn’t even have been able to restore it?”

“Look, I’ve always been here to protect you. You haven’t died yet, have you? This particular brush with death was your own fault, dear, because you wouldn’t admit the obvious. And I’m sure your golden buddy would be glad to come help me revive you any time.” His Kraahkan twisted into a snarl. “He’d probably relish the excuse to play the hero. The Kaita has his hands, too, so that shiny scoundrel would be putting them all over you, just to make me—”

“Masster, could you pleasse finissh her healing? I’m quite exhaussted,” interrupted Therahk.

“Fine,” grumbled the Spirit of Destruction. A sly smile spread across his grimy Kanohi as his claws hovered over my shoulders. “*Now* will you say that you need me?”

I winced at a pang in my arm. “Once in a while,” I replied sullenly. “To get me out of the insanely dangerous situations you keep getting me into.”

“Well, it’s not the exactly heartfelt gratitude I was hoping for, but I’ll take what I can get.” He ran his tarnished hands over my injuries. As soon as I felt better, I pushed them off me with a resentful look. Then I slowly stood up and stretched. I looked behind me at the puddle of pale blue fluid where I had hit the ground, and I felt slightly nauseous.

“Master,” said Shadrahk, “you may have noticed that Accurahk joined us a little while ago. He has just given me a very detailed report from Mangaia.”

“Oh, right, I was wondering about that. What’s the G2?”

“Well, everything is pretty much rebuilt. The nuclear reactor is back online, the hazmat cleanup around the explosives tanks is complete, and all the rats are contained again. And you know that big hole you blasted out of the living room? Florahk has decorated it like a cabana nightclub.”

Makuta laughed. “Let me guess. Now we’ve got palm trees, wicker furniture, and wooden masks around a bamboo dance floor?”

Accurahk nodded and hissed.

“Well, as long as he doesn’t burn the place down with his tiki torches. All right, boys, we’re done with our sightseeing. You Rahkshi go on back to Mangaia. Your mistress and I will follow shortly.”

“Yes, Master,” said Shadrahk. “Troops! Let’s mobilize!”

The Rahkshi were soon airborne again. As they flew toward the top of the canyon, I heard Invulnerahk say, “We should celebrate Doc’s purpleness with a big Rahkous party in the new cabana. Maybe start off with a concert tour, with a stop in each region. We could call it ‘Rahk the Island’!”

“Sweet idea, dude!” exclaimed the band’s frontman. “I could write some special new songs. What do you say, Doc?”

“Sssplendid,” answered the new Shadow Rahkshi. Shading their eyes with their hands, they disappeared over a bluff into the sunrise.

After they were out of sight, Makuta turned to me. “Let’s swing by the Coliseum to get a couple breakfast tacos, shall we?”

“Sure,” I muttered. Now that my body was functioning normally again, I was feeling quite hungry.

The Spirit of Destruction picked me up, and we zoomed toward the giant dome. The repairs seemed to be almost finished. Spiders scurried in and out of the gates carrying building materials and construction debris. Shrouded in shadow, we flew silently past the great building and down the alley toward the trailer. I watched anxiously for signs of LEGO personnel, but with Makuta’s arm locked around my waist, I had little hope of getting free.

He landed behind a low building. Clenching my wrist, he peered around the corner at the trailer. He slipped his new mask of Teleportation over his Kraahkan. Soon a platter of foil-wrapped tacos materialized at his feet. He picked it up and handed it to me. “Let’s go up to the Great Barrier and have a picnic. It’s on the way home anyway, and the view is quite amazing.”

“I know,” I nodded, taking the food. “I’ve been there.” I thought about Kraahka, whom he had recruited to help him recover the Vahi, and the group of Toa Nuva and Metru that had helped us thwart his Plan. Then I remembered how Roodaka and her Visorak guard had emerged from the time stream, and I shivered with dread.

“Don’t worry, my love,” he smiled. “This time we won’t have any unwanted company. It’ll just be you and me and the roar of the sea.”

Glancing over his shoulder as he took off, I felt a little melancholy. My last chance to escape on Metru Nui had just passed me by. I hoped he would be wrong, and someone would show up on the Great Barrier to rescue me.

## 39. Stone Temple Pirates

### **Bad Company – Bad Company**

*Company always on the run  
 Destiny is the rising sun  
 Oh I was born, six-gun in my hand  
 Behind a gun I'll make my final stand  
 That's why they call me  
 Bad company  
 And I can't deny  
 Bad company  
 Till the day I die  
 Till the day I die  
 Till the day I die*

*Rebel souls  
 Deserters we are called  
 Chose a gun and threw away the sun  
 Now these towns  
 They all know our name  
 Six-gun sound is our claim to fame  
 I can hear them say  
 Bad company  
 And I won't deny  
 Bad, bad company  
 Till the day I die  
 Till the day I die  
 Till the day I die*

*Tell me that you are not a thief  
 Oh but I am  
 Bad company  
 It's the way I play  
 Dirty for dirty  
 Oh somebody double-crossed me  
 Double-cross  
 Double-cross  
 Yeah  
 We're bad company  
 Kill in cold blood*

Makuta set me down on the Great Barrier right in front of his protodermis prison, which was just as I had remembered it—a silvery web with a Toa seal in the center. On one side there was a space between the strands and the rock.

“Do you repair that thing from the inside every time you get back in?” I asked.

He nodded. “The first time I got out, I had to breach the seal, which took a huge amount of energy. Now I just slip inside and summon enough stone power to fill the gap. Then I shatter the

patch to get out again. Or, if I'm in a hurry, I just project the illusion that the cage is stuck to the rock."

"Couldn't you have broken the rock behind the prison to get out?"

"Well, that would have worked fine, except that the Toa managed to make it wrap all the way around me," he groaned. "I could have summoned a Rakhshi to free me in a matter of minutes if they hadn't done that."

"You said you were able to get out right away the second time. What was different?" I wondered.

"The first time, I was too low on energy after fighting Vakama, and I had no way to replenish it," he sighed. "Moving the sea floor all around, using the shadow hand over and over again—all those things were a big power drain. I had suffered some pretty bad injuries from that stupid rock slamming into me, too. But the second time, I knew all that was coming, so I tanked up on nuclear energy before I showed up for the filming. And the Mangaia plant produces even more power than the one in the Po-Metru lair."

"No one noticed you were glowing?" I asked skeptically.

"I control darkness, honey," he chuckled. "If I don't want to glow, I don't glow."

"I see. Are these the rocks you busted up trying to grab Vakama?"

"Yes, yes. Well, sweetheart, if you're finished playing Twenty Questions with me, let's eat," he suggested. He took the plate out of my hands, set it on one of the rocks I had just asked about, and sat on another. "Have a taco. They're still nice and warm."

I sat down across from him and looked out over the sea while I unwrapped my food. The water was choppy and restless. In the distance the island was shrouded by a dingy haze, underneath which was the trailer where all my hopes had lain.

"Don't be dejected, darling," said the Master of Shadows. "We'll return to Metru Nui someday soon. By then we may even rule it."

"We'?" I rolled my eyes. "Makuta, I can't dissuade you from trying to take over the world. I suppose it's your job. But please don't project your insane ambitions onto me." I took a bite of my taco.

"Precious, I understand your dubious reaction," he smiled. "Going from simple writer to Empress of the Universe is a big leap. But I've been studying you for a long time. Your dainty exterior belies an inner strength that I've rarely seen in other creatures. At times I've cursed it, my angel, because it makes you so difficult to conquer—er, convince. But I know it will be invaluable to our success together."

I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing he would just be quiet and eat, so I could concentrate on figuring out some way to escape from this barren crag. Then I heard a faint scraping sound and the clank of metal against stone, coming from behind the giant rock with the protodermis prison. I opened my eyes again.

Makuta was looking at me intently. “Our destinies are inextricably intertwined, my beauty. Mine is to dominate the universe, and yours is to make me good. Wouldn’t you like to fulfill yours first? Rather than just complain about my methods, use your feminine wiles to persuade me to change them! Just think of the suffering you could avert.” He finished his taco.

“If you really cared about averting suffering, you would give up on your Plan entirely,” I said flatly, leaning over to see behind him. I saw black spikes sticking out from behind a boulder, and a shiver ran down my spine. “Makuta—”

“That would be doing the world a grave disservice, love. Because after a short time of travail, they will come to be grateful for our benevolent rule. When my power, intelligence, and determination are tempered by your gentleness, I will become the perfect philosopher-king. And you will be my beloved companion, praised and adored by all for your comeliness, compassion, and wisdom.” He leaned across the makeshift table and touched my neck with his claws.

Reidak’s head appeared around the rock. “You were right. It *is* Frodo!”

“Would I lie to you?” asked Avak’s voice.

“Yes,” chorused the other Piraka. They strolled out into the clearing, their eerie teeth gleaming in the diffuse light.

Makuta turned his head and looked at them. Then he raised an eyebrow at me. “Frodo?”

I touched the long scar across my Rahkshi-foot chest armor. My throat tightened at the sight of the creatures who had cut me almost in half. “It’s—it’s—”

Makuta waved his hand to silence me. “Relax, darling. I know who they are,” he said reassuringly.

“And she’s got a really ugly boyfriend,” sneered Thok.

Hakann elbowed the blue Piraka. “Hey, Beast, you should have gone ahead and asked her out! You might have had a chance, after all.”

“Shut up,” growled Vezok.

Hakann leaned forward and said in a stage whisper, “He thinks you’re cute, Frodo. And don’t worry, he doesn’t care that you can’t talk. He’s not much of a conversationalist, either.”

Vezok swung his harpoon at Hakann, but the red Piraka dodged the blow. Then Makuta slowly stood up.

“A *tall*, ugly boyfriend,” remarked Thok.

Zaktan’s protodites rippled agitatedly as he studied Makuta with narrowed eyes.

“Say,” suggested Reidak, “let’s kick some sand onto the lovebirds’ picnic table!”

Hakann shook his spiky head. “I say we wait for that Rahkshi commando squad to come up here and take the junk heap apart. That’ll be fun to watch.”

“I bet Trigger could build a weapon out of his pieces,” Vezok smirked.

Avak stroked his angular chin. “I’m thinking a flame-thrower.” The others burst out laughing, except for Zaktan.

The sky darkened as Makuta morphed into his hulking movie form, his powerful wings moving slowly above his blocky shoulders.

“A tall, ugly, *shapeshifting* boyfriend,” said Thok nervously.

Cringing at the thought of a fight between the Spirit of Destruction and these powerful thugs, I took shelter behind a rock outcrop. Then I realized a pitched battle might give me time to swim back to the island, or at least get far enough out to sea as to be impossible to find. I waited for the conflict to flare up so I could use my axes to descend the cliff face without being heard.

“You half-witted cretins! That’s the Makuta!” hissed Zaktan. “And he might have some work for us. Shut your traps and let me do the talking.”

The other Piraka seemed willing. They took a couple of steps behind him. “I’ve always said Snake was the brains of this outfit,” remarked Avak.

“Kiss-up,” grunted Reidak. “Hey, wait, why would an evil genius want a mute girlfriend? He’d never get any flattery.”

“That’s obvious,” replied Hakann in a low voice. “More time to monologue.”

Zaktan’s arm flew off his body, veered behind him, and backhanded Hakann before reattaching itself. Then he straightened his posture. “Master of Shadows,” he announced in his odd polyphonic voice.

“Zaktan,” Makuta rumbled.

“Yes,” said the green Piraka proudly. “The leader of the—”

“—Piraka,” finished the armored titan. “An appropriate name, if I’ve heard correctly.”

“Thank you. I understand you might be looking for qualified paramilitary personnel. I am a self-employed soldier of fortune, with the best training and the most experience of anyone in the business. And if you need cannon fodder, these five are available as well.”

“Hey,” grumbled the other Piraka.

Makuta scrutinized them carefully for a few seconds. “I can always find a place for talented individuals in my organization.”

It looked like there might not be a fight, after all. Still, I watched for an opportune moment to escape.

“We’ve successfully recovered countless valuable artifacts,” continued the Piraka leader, pointing to a canvas bag that Vezok was holding, “including several from that big stone temple back there, which was surrounded by Toa and LEGO employees at the time. And of course we are quite skilled in combat. We have many powers, natural and acquired, as well as a formidable array of armaments. I, for instance, can shoot laser beams—”

“—from your eyes, and dissociate into protodites. And you wield that triple-bladed sword with considerable lethality. Hakann has heat vision, shoots fireballs from his lava gun, and projects mental blasts.” Makuta proceeded to list all the powers of each Piraka. When Zaktan’s eyes widened, he explained, “I have my sources in your employer’s association.”

“You’re right about our powers. But we no longer have an employer.”

“No one leaves the Dark Hunters except in a body bag,” Makuta snorted. “As much as I dislike the Shadowed One, I have to admire his termination policy. Tell me, why would I want to risk hiring mutinous riffraff that’s already being hunted by my enemy?”

The mercenary cleared his throat. “We didn’t mutiny. We had... creative differences with the management.”

“So you’re deserters,” concluded the Master of Shadows, crossing his arms. “He’ll still be chasing you, you rebel scum.”

Zaktan’s shoulders drooped with disappointment.

Makuta gazed thoughtfully into the sky. “But I might have some work for you anyway. A dirty, dangerous job. It’ll take cunning, endurance, and plenty of brute force to survive the mission, much less to succeed at it. I don’t want to expend anyone trustworthy on it. And if I hire you, no one will suspect my involvement.”

“Perfect,” grinned Zaktan. “And the pay?”

“I can assure you that it will be generous. But I’d like to see for myself what each of you can do before we finalize the agreement.”

“Gladly.” The green Piraka turned and aimed his eyebeams at a boulder. A fine line across the stone began to glow, and then it split in half.

“Nice. And the protodites?”

Zaktan exploded into tiny pieces, which swirled into a vortex. They streamed between Reidak’s legs and then regrouped into a hammer-shaped green object that struck him on the head. The black Piraka winced, and the others hooted with laughter. Makuta’s mouth widened into a crooked smile.

With everyone’s attention focused on the demonstration, I put on my Huna and crept to the edge of the bluff. I looked down to the narrow, rocky shore far below and took a deep breath. Then I pulled my tools off my back and quietly dropped over the side. I deactivated the Mask of Concealment so I could concentrate on my descent. I planted each axe in the sheer cliff face and tested it before hanging my weight off it and moving the other. Sometimes the stone crumbled away and I had to slam my tool into the wall again. At one point I made the mistake of looking down. I closed my eyes to stem the vertigo and moved on, vowing to look only where my blades had to go. Above me on the cliff, I heard explosions and cracking noises. At least Makuta and the Piraka were still busy.

Finally I reached solid ground. I leaned against the cliff wall to catch my breath. Then I put the Huna on my back and turned around to dive into the sea. But an unexpected sight made me hesitate.

A few dozen bios off the shore was a dark ship with tattered black sails. A long, flat raft of wide timbers was tethered behind it. The raft was evidently falling apart, because a trail of wooden debris bobbed in the wake behind the pair of vessels. I looked back at the ship. An anchor flew over the side, followed by a dinghy and a rope ladder. I heard a voice growl, “Use yer deadlights, Voporak, and find the loot fast so we can cast off of this miserable rock!”

The name of the time-bending creature made my heart beat even faster than the exertion had. I reached for my Huna. But I had already been spotted by one of his companions. “Captain,” called a slightly mechanical-sounding voice, “there’s a small blue creature on the shore.”

“Arrr! Hand me the spyglass, ye robotic swab!” As I activated the mask, the captain exclaimed, “Well, sink me! Thar it were, clear as day, and then it vanished.”

“That was Sidorak’s little Jane,” said Voporak standing up at the back of the barge. “She must have used that trick to breeze out of his digs without getting bumped off when Roodaka came home. Let’s go find her.”

“Hop to and get to work, unless ye be wantin’ to meet rope’s end!” snapped the captain, climbing down into the rowboat. He was a bulky silver and yellow bipedal creature with a thick

tail that swayed when he moved. He waved his staff at a squat yellow being that was wrapping the anchor rope around a cleat. “Sentrakh, I’ll be goin’ ashore to torment me old enemy. Stay and guard the ship.”

Voporak jumped off the raft into the shallow water, which was up to his waist. Several pieces of wood detached and drifted away on the sea. I realized that his time-accelerating defensive field must be making the wood decay and fall away. This would explain why he wasn’t riding in the ship, and why the raft was so long. “What’s the rush, chief? The Vahi’s not going to swim off. I’m going to go find that doll. Sidorak doesn’t need her anymore.”

I looked around. There was nowhere to run. The shore was just a narrow strip of barren rock surrounded by water. I slipped slowly into the sea so as not to make a splash. I would have to become visible to use my Kaukau, but hopefully I could get past him fast enough that he couldn’t catch me. Once I was completely underwater, I stowed the Huna and pushed off horizontally with my feet.

Ahead of me in a wide circle, fish began to desiccate into skeletons, coral reefs crumbled to the sea floor, and seaweed shrank away like kindling in a fire. He was coming toward me! Panicked, I turned around and jumped out of the water onto the ledge. The thought of seeking protection from Makuta was distasteful, but merely being close to Voporak meant rapid decay and death. I gouged my axes into the rock and scrambled up the cliff face. Underneath me, I heard strange humming sounds. A solid, crystalline protodermis staircase was being formed from the bottom of the cliff. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the captain shooting beams from his staff to create the steps. Turning my face back to the rock, I accelerated my pace, slipping once and dangling for a moment from a loose axe before I managed to plant the other one. At last I reached the top. I vaulted over the edge and sprinted toward Makuta.

The Master of Shadows had a look of intense concentration on his mask, but he was still managing a smile. In front of him, five Piraka were in a line, their spiny arms linked, dancing the Can-Can. Hakann was supplying the music. “Naa na na na na na, naa na na na na na...” Zaktan was doubled over with laughter, his protodites jiggling uncontrollably in random directions.

Makuta saw me out of the corner of his eye and extended his hand. The Piraka stopped high-kicking and stood glaring at their leader.

“That was great,” the green being gasped, standing up straight again. “Mind Control is a really awesome power.”

“Just remember that if you give me the same kind of trouble you gave your old boss, I can make you dance, too,” Makuta warned him, pulling me against his side. “I can make anyone dance.”

“Of course,” nodded Zaktan respectfully.

The Shadowed One’s voice came from below the edge of the cliff. “Arrr! Keep yer distance behind me, ye scurvy dog! I’ve already lost enough of me youth to ye and the blaggard on top of this rock!”

I opened my mouth to tell Makuta what I had seen, but he laid a finger across my lips. “I know.”

The Piraka hurried behind the prison rock. Their weapons clanked as they crouched down and peered around the edge. I held my breath as two sets of footsteps approached up the protodermis staircase.

## 40. Time Crunch

### **The Rolling Stones — Time is on My Side**

*Time is on my side, yes it is  
Time is on my side, yes it is*

*Now you always say  
That you want to be free  
But you'll come running back (said you would baby)  
You'll come running back (I said so many times before)  
You'll come running back to me*

*Oh, time is on my side, yes it is  
Time is on my side, yes it is*

*You're searching for good times  
But just wait and see  
You'll come running back (I won't have to worry no more)  
You'll come running back (spend the rest of my life with you, baby)  
You'll come running back to me*

*Go ahead, go ahead and light up the town  
And baby, do everything your heart desires  
Remember, I'll always be around  
And I know, I know  
Like I told you so many times before  
You're gonna come back, baby  
'Cause I know  
You're gonna come back knocking  
Yeah, knocking right on my door  
Yes, yes!*

*Well, time is on my side, yes it is  
Time is on my side, yes it is*

*'Cause I got the real love  
The kind that you need  
You'll come running back (said you would, baby)  
You'll come running back (I always said you would)  
You'll come running back, to me  
Yes time, time, time is on my side, yes it is  
I said, time, time, time is on my side, yes it is  
Oh, time, time, time is on my side  
Yeah, time, time, time is on my side*

Towering above me in his massive winged form, the Master of Shadows looked down and smiled. “Well, encountering my enemy has brought about one unexpected benefit, anyway.”

I suddenly realized my arms were around his waist. I let go and recoiled in revulsion. He pulled me back again.

“You’d better not try to take advantage of this,” I warned him in a low voice.

“Me, take advantage? Really, darling. When have I ever been less than a gentleman?”

“Every time you put your creepy claws—”

“Rhetorical, dear,” he interrupted as the head of the Shadowed One appeared over the edge of the cliff.

“Shiver me timbers! Ye’re supposed to be shackled to yonder rock!” The leader of the Dark Hunters jerked his thumb toward the prison.

“Ah, the so-called Shadowed One, Scourge of the Silver Seas. You’re looking sprightly for your advanced age,” remarked Makuta.

The captain’s eyes flashed white. “Arrr! I be lookin’ forward to burnin’ some more holes in yer boiler,” he growled. Leaning on his staff, he stepped up onto flat ground. He was almost as tall as Makuta.

“Before I send you home again, whimpering, with your tail between your legs?” Makuta grinned.

The Shadowed One opened his mouth to retort, but at this moment Voporak came into view behind him. He quickly scuttled to the side to give the time being plenty of room.

The red and silver creature scowled at Makuta, then smiled at me. “Hello, Toots. Long time no see.”

Makuta gave me a surprised look. “Toots?”

“I made her acquaintance at Sidorak’s place,” explained Voporak. “Seems you wind up with all his shebas.”

“This one’s been mine all along, and Sidorak has paid handsomely for his crimes against her. As for Roodaka, I kicked her out,” Makuta said offhandedly.

Voporak blinked incredulously. “Why?”

“She was interfering with my domestic tranquility. You should have seen the catfight.”

The Shadowed One waved his staff at me. “Belay that talk! Ye had Roodaka and that scrap of a wench in yer lair, and *Roodaka* be the one ye spurned?”

My captor squeezed my shoulders. “Good things come in small packages. Besides, I can change her size and shape—and mine, too, of course—any time I want to. You can’t begin to imagine the playtime possibilities.”

“I don’t care if you’re immortal,” I muttered through clenched jaws. “I’m going to kill you.”

“In me many eons of fightin’ and pillagin’, me deadlights have seen some horrid sights,” proclaimed the Shadowed One, covering his eyes dramatically with an armored claw, “but naught as ghastly as the one hauntin’ me mind right now.”

“Wish I had that kind of mojo,” Voporak grumbled.

“Mojo?” snorted the captain. “I wager it be Mind Control.”

An ingratiating smile crossed Makuta’s Kraahkan. “Perhaps you would stoop to that level, if you had the capability. But I don’t have to.”

“It can’t be your swell attire.” Voporak put his hand on his hip. “You look like a locomotive that took a nose dive off a bridge.”

The Master of Shadows sighed. “Well, since you two seem so fascinated with my love life, I’ll let you in on my secret.” He stroked the side of my Kaukau, and I forced myself not to flinch. “I offer chivalrous sophistication, vast power and riches, and eternal youth. What do you have? Let’s see. Voporak’s got premature aging and death. And I hear the Shadowed One can whip up a mean batch of cupcakes.”

The leader of the Dark Hunters bristled. “How in the world—why, that tale-tellin’ she-demon!”

“Roodaka wasn’t the one who told me. I have many sources in your organization.”

“Arrr! I reckon I’ll be keelhaulin’ a few of me crew when I return to me isle.”

“It won’t do any good. They don’t even know they’re working for me. I read their minds, erase their memories of the debriefing, and send them back to you for more.”

As his boss folded his arms in angry silence, Voporak spoke up. “It’s your fault I’m a freak,” the time creature growled, his eyes glowing fiercely. “It’s because of you and that black sorceress that I can’t take a dame out for a night on the town without aging her into an old bag. I can’t even eat a meal without it turning to dust in my mouth!”

Makuta shrugged. “Switch to fossil fuels.”

With unnatural speed, Voporak powered up his spinner and launched it at Makuta’s head. He ducked, but the energy wheel swung around and hit him in the back. I caught my breath and looked up at him. He radiated an orange glow.

The Shadowed One smirked, “Now we’ll be havin’ some fun with this bilge rat!” I wriggled free and ducked behind Makuta as his enemy stepped up and struck the side of the Kraahkan with his

staff. A moment later, Makuta moved his arm as if to block the blow. The captain tipped back his head and laughed spitefully.

“Get the girly out of the way, Boss,” suggested Voporak, “and I’ll have him leaning on a cane, too.”

I was already retreating across the clearing. I ducked behind the prison on the opposite side from the hidden Piraka. The Shadowed One started hobbling after me, then waved his staff in annoyance. “She be far enough now. Let him have it!” He scrambled behind a boulder.

Makuta grabbed for me as Voporak approached him, but his hand closed around air. Then he raised his staff. Power surged from both beings until the Master of Shadows’ shoulders sagged and the time creature collapsed gasping on the ground.

“Vacuum wins again,” muttered Makuta wearily. “You’d think he’d have had enough time to figure that out by now.”

“Blimey!” spat the Shadowed One, emerging from the shelter of the boulder. His tail swished impatiently. “Go fetch the mask, Voporak! I’ll take care of this rapsallion meself.” Voporak took a deep breath and rolled to his feet again. He glanced resentfully at Makuta before stepping over the side of the cliff to descend the stairs.

I decided my best option was to find a different way down while everyone was occupied. I slipped my Huna over my mask and started to creep out of my hiding place. But I was immediately surrounded by a flurry of green particles. “Where are you going, Frodo?” they hissed in unison.

Anywhere I stepped, I would run into the protodites and reveal my location. I took off the Mask of Concealment. Zaktan reconstituted himself, grabbed my wrist, and led me behind the prison rock to the group of crouching Piraka.

“I’ll keep her quiet,” Vezok volunteered.

Avak rolled his eyes. “Like that’s going to be hard. She’s mute.”

“Shh!” warned the green Piraka. He gripped me in a loose headlock, but he let me lean around the rock with him to watch what was happening.

The two titans were facing each other across the clearing. “So, I take it you came here to get the Vahi while I was still imprisoned?” Makuta asked.

“It be no business of yers,” grumbled the captain.

“You know LEGO frowns on deviations from the storyline during a flashback.”

“Ha!” snorted the Shadowed One. “The storyline is more what you’d call ‘guidelines’ than actual rules.”

“But what’s the point? Vakama has to end up with the Vahi anyway, or LEGO will make everyone do the Book Ten plot all over again. Probably without any extra pay for you, since it would be your fault.”

The Shadowed One sighed. “For an evil genius, ye be thick as a main mast. Aye, Vakama will get his mask in the end. But I’ll deal directly with the lad this time, and leave ye out of it entirely.” He pointed his staff at Makuta’s chest.

“Ah, you’re hoping to salvage what’s left of your fading youth,” Makuta concluded.

His remark was met with a dark scowl.

“You know, your Plan is really futile,” continued the Master of Shadows, peering over the ledge after Voporak. “If you just go along with the flashback, you’re not going to end up any older than you are now, because LEGO will reset your age before we re-enact the book. But if you try to take the Vahi now, you’ll have to fight me *twice*. There’s no telling what kind of damage you’ll sustain by the time I’m through with you. Just ask Sidorak.”

“I wasn’t countin’ on ye bein’ out of jail,” conceded the leader of the Dark Hunters, “but that will only slow me down a minute. Get yer rusted arse back into the brig, afore I forge new bars of protodermis where ye stand!” He waved his staff menacingly.

Makuta shook his head with disdain. The time-delay Rhotuka had worn off, but he looked more weatherbeaten than usual from the accelerated aging field. “You know, when you call yourself the Shadowed One, it’s an insult to the shadows. Perhaps it’s time to reveal your real name to the world.”

“Aye, there be a great idea. And then I’ll reveal yers.”

“I’ll proclaim mine with pride one day, to distinguish me from my brothers when I take over the universe. You, on the other hand, seem somehow ashamed of your name.”

“Move!” snarled the Shadowed One.

“Although I can’t imagine why. It’s perhaps a little less intimidating than you might like,” Makuta smiled, “but really, there’s nothing wrong with ‘Percy’.”

Silvery protodermis shot out of the tip of the Shadowed One’s staff. Makuta grabbed his weapon off his back, and energy surged from it. The beams met in the middle. Makuta’s, which was presumably magnetism, deflected the metallic stream, the splatters forming a strange twisted sculpture in the air between them.

“Six Great Masks says the Makuta’s gonna take him,” Hakann said quietly.

Reidak snickered. “Give me three-to-one odds, and—”

Their mouths were promptly jammed full of green particles. They spat on the ground in disgust, and the granules returned to Zaktan’s shoulder.

As Makuta and the Shadowed One continued to fire, the silver blob grew to the size of a Muaka. Then Voporak appeared at the top of the stairs holding up the Vahi, and both beams stopped as the combatants turned their heads to look at him. The gleaming metal lump crashed to the ground.

“Chief, the Vahi was under the water just where I figured, but it’s busted almost in half!” Voporak exclaimed. “I can feel the time waves leaking out. And it’s turned orange.”

“It looks like a piece of cheese,” whispered Thok. He got an irritated look from Zaktan.

“Get that blasted thing away from me!” snapped the Shadowed One, shuffling several steps away from the stairs. He squinted at Makuta. “I reckon ye had somethin’ to do with this?”

“Oh, yeah. That was probably from when Krahka kicked it,” he replied slowly, rubbing the side of his head. “She’s got quite a roundhouse. For some reason, I always attract the feisty ones. But that’s all right. The little mask-maker will repair it. As for the orange color, well, it’s obviously been corroded by the seawater.”

“Voporak, go put the loot in the hold. No, wait, keep it off me ship! Put it on the barge. And lash it down fast.” The time being nodded and descended the protodermis staircase again as his boss faced Makuta again with narrowed eyes. “So ye was expectin’ *me* to follow the storyline, eh?”

“It was worth a try. You have to admit that one way or another LEGO controls your destiny.”

“Ye and LEGO be scuppered! I’ll forge me own destiny!” declared the Shadowed One. “I’ll—” He stopped talking at the sound of Avak’s jackhammer.

“Oops,” muttered the brown Piraka. “My bad.”

“I knew ye was lurking on this rock somewhere, treacherous band of brigands,” frowned the Shadowed One. “Curse the dark day I ever thought to recruit anyone from Zakaz! Come out and show yer ugly mugs, unless ye be too spineless.”

The Piraka strode out from behind the rock. Zaktan tossed me to Makuta and smacked the back of Avak’s head. “You trigger-happy numskull!” he hissed. Then he stared at his former employer with seething hatred in his eyes as his companions arrayed themselves behind him and brandished their weapons. Makuta trapped me in his arms.

“In case ye’re wonderin’ how I knew,” remarked the Shadowed One, “I noticed me missin’ garbage scow tied off down there. A fittin’ vessel, considerin’ the cargo.”

Vezok frowned at Hakann. “You swiped the trash boat? No wonder it smelled so bad.”

“I thought that was Reidak’s feet,” muttered Thok.

“Hey, at least it got us here,” protested the red Piraka.

Zaktan’s protodites vibrated restlessly as he faced the Shadowed One. “I’d cut you up the way you did me, except you might be lucky enough to die. That would be too good for the likes of you. And besides, I want the LEGO cameras to be rolling when I exact my revenge.”

The leader of the Dark Hunters surveyed the Piraka with ill-concealed contempt. Then he leaned over the side of the cliff and shouted, “Sentrakh!”

“Aye, Captain?” came the mechanical voice from below.

“Which of the twain do I despise more, Makuta or Zaktan?”

“Well,” replied Sentrakh, “that’s a difficult question. Let’s consider the facts. By rebelling against your authority and inciting five other members of your organization to defect, Zaktan threatened your leadership and damaged your pride. Makuta digested two of your operatives, and by shoving you into Voporak, he stole centuries off your life.” The semi-living being paused before giving his answer. “I’d have to say Makuta.”

“Figures he’d give me a bloody dissertation on the subject,” the Shadowed One grunted. He turned to the Piraka. “I’ll be sparin’ yer worthless lives today. But I’ve known of yer Plan for some time now, and ye’ve been marked for death everywhere you go. Zaktan, I’ll leave ye to speculate which of yer ragtag crew tipped me off.”

Zaktan spun around to glare at the others. They shrank away in fear.

“Now get out of me sight! I’ve got bigger fish to fry,” snapped the leader of the Dark Hunters, pivoting on his heel toward Makuta. As a parting gesture, he raised his launcher and shot a Rhotuka over his shoulder. It struck Avak’s arm.

The brown Piraka stood still for a moment, stunned. Then he began to spin in circles. “Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies...”

At the sound of the Star Wars theme music, Makuta flipped open his phone. “What’s happening, son?” After a moment he covered the mouthpiece and announced, “The LEGO film crew is on their way over here to set up the final scene.”

A collective gasp went up from everyone, except for Avak, who sang, “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!” and collapsed.

The Shadowed One yelled, “Sentrakh, hoist the mainsail! We cast off as soon as I get on board!” Then he put his staff on his back and lumbered over to Makuta, who was putting his phone away. “If ye be so concerned about followin’ the storyline, ye won’t mind me helpin’ ye to get back into yer cage. I can even seal it up for ye with crystalline protodermis.” He grasped his enemy’s shoulders and shoved him backwards toward the prison.

Makuta released me and grappled with the Shadowed One, pushing him sideways. The two beings were roughly the same size, with Makuta’s bulkier upper body balanced by the Shadowed One’s stouter legs and tail. The Dark Hunter leader’s eyes flared. Two laser beams ran down Makuta’s chest and burned glowing lines into the dark armor.

Makuta growled in pain as he slowly wrestled his foe toward the rock. “I have a better idea. Why don’t you get in there yourself and do a little stunt work for me? I can project the illusion that you’re me, and LEGO will never know the difference.”

The Piraka crowded closer to watch. I slipped behind them to the edge of the cliff. If I could just get to the water, maybe I could hide there long enough for LEGO to arrive. But as I swung my leg over the side, I bumped into Voporak, climbing back up the stairs. “Hiya, Toots,” he smiled.

I screamed, scuttled back up to the top, and sprinted past the Piraka. Voporak vaulted over the edge. He glanced at Makuta and the Shadowed One and then ran after me at surprising speed.

“I told you she could make noise,” said Vezok, moving away to let him through.

“Stop him!” shouted Zaktan.

With my rock-climbing tools and lighter weight, I decided my best hope was to go up. I began to scale the side of the prison rock. Glancing down, I saw my pursuer smashing handholds into the stone. His feet slid occasionally as the time-accelerating effect crumbled the rock, but he kept coming. From the ground, Vezok fired water daggers from his gun, but they evaporated before they could hit. Hakann’s fireballs fizzled out, and Zaktan’s eyebeams faded to darkness. Thok’s ice coating sublimated before it could cover the time creature with a thick enough layer to slow him down. I reached the top of the prison rock, and there was nowhere to run.

I looked down to choose a side to descend. Makuta was filling the gap between the prison and the rock with a wedge of stone. Meanwhile, the Shadowed One was trying to burn his way out with his eyes. Light shone through a narrow gap in the top of the prison, and wisps of smoke drifted out.

Voporak hoisted himself up onto the flat surface of the rock. “Don’t fret, baby doll,” he whispered. “Now that we’re alone, I’ve turned my defensive field down as low as it will go.”

I dropped over the edge behind me, but he lunged and grabbed my wrist. He hauled me back up and set me in front of him. “I can tell you don’t really dig him,” he said, tilting his head toward Makuta. “Come with me instead. I’ll show you a good time.”

In response I swung an axe at his head. He caught my arm and leaned toward me. I could hear the Piraka climbing up the side of the outcrop. A cloud of green particles flew up and hovered at a distance away from us. "Let her go!" they hissed.

Then the time creature became transparent and vanished. I staggered to catch my balance. I looked down again and saw him reappear by the side of the prison. Twin laser beams seared through the stone and struck Voporak's chest. He howled in pain as the Shadowed One smashed his way out of the weakened rock. "Gaah!" he yelled as he saw Voporak standing two feet away.

Zaktan's protodites swirled around me, lifted me up, and carried me down to Makuta, who was standing by the other side of the prison, laughing. He clamped his arm around me and said, "Thanks, Zaktan."

"Teleporting one enemy into another's way, eh? I think I'm going to like working for you," remarked the green Piraka as he reassembled himself.

"Hey, listen!" said Reidak suddenly. In the distance, a faint humming noise became audible. Everyone turned to look in the direction of Metru Nui. Soon we could all hear a helicopter approaching.

"Gangway!" The Shadowed One seized his staff and hobbled toward the cliff, looking more fatigued than ever. "Let's take our Vahi and be gone." Voporak stepped aside and then stumbled after him, clutching his smoking armor.

Zaktan and I looked up at Makuta to see if he would try to stop them, but he slowly shook his head in response to our unspoken question.

"Not so close! Arrr, the staircase is halfway gone from ye climbing it," grumbled the captain. He stepped carefully over the edge. Then he stopped. "What the devil happened to the barge?" he asked in disbelief.

Everyone approached to look down. The raft was completely gone, its frayed rope floating on the water. A few rotted timbers floated in the place where it had been.

"The wood just wasted away before my eyes," called Sentrakh. "And then the mask sank into the water."

"It was damaged and leaking, remember?" said Voporak.

The Shadowed One scratched his head. "Arrr! Now how will I be transportin' ye back to me isle?"

"Forge a chain to tow him, sir," Sentrakh suggested. "Add new links at the stern end as the ones he's holding corrode away."

“Aye, I suppose that will work. Come on, ye trouble-makin’ shark bait.” He gestured for Voporak to follow him down. When they reached the bottom, the Shadowed One got in the dinghy and rowed to the larger vessel. Sentrakh helped him over the gunwales, and he sat down and crafted a rough chain of solid protodermis with his staff. He glanced anxiously at the sky. The helicopter had grown louder, but it wasn’t visible yet.

“I’ll go get the Vahi while you make that, boss,” offered Voporak.

“Nay, leave it! I don’t want that accursed bauble near me ship,” barked the captain. When the chain was long enough, Sentrakh secured one end to the aft mast and threw the other toward the shore. Voporak looped it around his waist and waded out into the water.

“Anchors aweigh!” shouted the Shadowed One. He waved to Makuta. “May the suns ever shine in yer eye.”

“Give my regards to Lariska,” Makuta grinned.

“Arrr!” The captain spun the ship’s wheel. Sentrakh tugged a rope, bringing around a boom. A gust of wind filled the ragged black sails.

“Don’t worry, darling, I don’t even know her,” explained Makuta, tightening his arm around me. “I just wanted to watch him grind his gears.”

The ship moved out to sea, towing Voporak behind it. Hakann turned to Zaktan. “*Now* do we get the Vahi?”

“Yeah. Since you mentioned it, you can be the one to retrieve it,” said the green Piraka.

“Actually, I was thinking Vezok should go get it,” said Hakann quickly. “He’s a much better swimmer.”

Vezok frowned. “Hey! I—”

Makuta cut him off. “Don’t bother. I know of a much more important mask you could seek.”

Thok scratched his head. “What could be more important than the Mask of Time?”

“Maybe the Mask of Space,” suggested Reidak.

“Like the stuff between your ears,” Vezok scoffed.

Reidak swung his drill at Vezok, who ducked behind Thok. The weapon struck the white Piraka’s shoulder.

Hakann jumped between Reidak and Thok. “Hey, not in front of the new boss!” Reidak clubbed the red Piraka, too.

Zaktan started to step forward, but Makuta grabbed his elbow. “Zaktan, will you, please?” asked the Spirit of Destruction, pushing me gently toward the Piraka, who wrapped a spiky, vibrating green arm around my shoulders. “I need to tidy up a bit, so LEGO doesn’t suspect anything.”

He walked up to the giant lump of crystalline protodermis formed in the fight and shoved it off the cliff with his foot. “Come by my lair in Mangaia after we re-enact *Bionicle Adventures #10*, and we’ll continue our discussion.”

Zaktan watched the hunk of metal crash onto the shore and bounce into the water with a big splash. “Wait a minute,” he said slowly. “After the flashback is over, everything will be restored to how it was after the *Mask of Light* movie. That means you’re going to be smashed under a big door, right?”

Makuta waved us away from the edge, knelt, and put his hands on the ground. The rock split with a tremendous crack, and the front face of the cliff with the protodermis staircase fell away, leaving a pile of dusty rubble below. Then he took my hand and leaned over me toward Zaktan. “Just come on by anyway,” he said in a low voice. “Tell the others you want to loot my corpse.”

“Agreed,” nodded the Piraka leader, releasing me. He walked back to his comrades, who were still scuffling. “All right, break it up! Avak, clean up your mess.” He pointed at the eight-foot daisy the brown Piraka had carved into the rock with his jackhammer. Avak looked at him sheepishly and chiseled off the surface of the stone. Now the helicopter was a tiny dot just above the horizon.

“Get back to the boat, everyone,” ordered Zaktan. “Makuta, it’s been an honor to watch you work.”

“Perhaps there is honor among thieves, after all,” shrugged the Master of Shadows.

“Do you want us to guard Frodo during the filming?” asked Vezok. “We’ll keep her really quiet.”

“No, thank you,” groaned Makuta. “You’d better be on your way.”

The Piraka had soon scaled the cliff, and I could hear them shouting curses at one another as they shoved their boat off the shore, wrestled with the rigging, and sailed away.

Without releasing my hand, Makuta sat down with his feet hanging over the cliff. He pulled me down next to him. “Whew. I’m exhausted. Are you all right, sweetheart?”

“I guess so,” I replied, peering at the horizon and the distant helicopter.

“Please forgive me if I don’t change back to my smaller form for you, cupcake. I need to be in this one when LEGO arrives, and I want to conserve what’s left of my energy.”

“I’m really worn out, too,” I sighed. In fact, I had never felt so drained in my life.

“It’s that time field of Voporak’s. I’m so sorry he got close to you. But you still look young and sweet and beautiful to me.” He put his arms around me.

I resisted the temptation to rest my head on his shoulder. I wondered what he was going to do to keep me away from the LEGO film crew.

“It really bothered me, the creepy way he was acting. He’s definitely got stalker potential,” he continued.

“You should know,” I muttered.

“But I loved the way you tried to hack off his head. Turning down such a handsome fellow, for my sake! I’m so flattered.”

“I still want you dead, Makuta,” I said wearily. “I’m just too tired to do anything about it at the moment.”

He laughed. Then he flinched in pain and moved one hand over the burn marks on his chest. “Don’t tell anyone this, beloved,” he said softly, “but that rascalion injured me pretty badly. There’s a weak spot in my armor where these plates join together, and he knows it. I need to reinforce it before we re-enact the book, because he’ll no doubt try to burn all the way through it and release my vital energy.”

The helicopter was larger now, its metallic chassis glinting in the hazy light. I tried to keep him talking in the hope of distracting him until it showed up. “You’ve been feuding with him for quite some time, I take it,” I remarked.

“For centuries, buttercup. Ever since Nidhiki and Krekka failed pathetically in the mission for which I hired them—and paid in advance, I might add. I felt I was owed some sort of compensation. So I absorbed them. He was absolutely livid when he found out.”

“You act so confident you can defeat him with your new Plan. How do you expect it to work when all your efforts up to now have been unsuccessful?”

“Now I have you to inspire me,” he explained. “And the Rahkshi you’ve helped me train will deliver a swift, well-coordinated, and deadly blow to the heart of his organization. The very thing that makes Dark Hunters powerful is also their weakness: they’re ruthless, backstabbing renegades. When things go badly, they’ll turn on their leader, or just plain abscond.” A sly grin crossed his Kraahkan. “This time, Percy will never even know what hit him.”

My heart was pounding as I watched the surface of the sea being stirred up by the chopper blades. I could see the red LEGO logo now. Would he make me mute and invisible to LEGO? Would he teleport me to a cave somewhere inside the rock? Would he bring me inside the prison

with him? I let out enough breath to ask another question. “Is your war with him part of next year’s storyline?”

“Nice try, love, but that is something I’m not going to tell you until you promise to be mine.” He patted my knee.

Since I had reached a conversational dead end, I searched desperately for more topics. “Uh, you were going to think of something else I could do for you, so you could let me go,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes. Well, what if you were to change your name to one that included mine? That would be a wonderful way for us to declare our love. We’ll have a Naming Day ceremony for you, with all the Rahkshi in attendance. You know how they love a good party!”

I smiled weakly. “Yes, they do.” Then I saw a tiny dot behind to the helicopter. It grew rapidly in size. As it passed the aircraft, the outline of a flying Rahkshi became clear. My heart sank as I realized how Makuta had arranged to thwart my last prospect of salvation.

“We could invite some of my V.I.L.E. friends as well,” he said, gazing off into space. “Obviously Ogel, Lord Sinister, and Vladek would want to come. Doc Ock and Sauron are good company, too. And Slade would probably feel slighted if we didn’t include him and a few of his minions. Not Cinderblock, of course, because he and Ogel don’t get along. Oh, and Captain Sparrow and his crew always liven up a social gathering. Not all pirates are disagreeable people, you know.”

I fought back tears as a light purple Rahkshi landed in front of us, panting. Makuta patted his spiky back. “Mentorahk, you’re just in time.”

I wrested my hand from Makuta’s and made a desperate, doomed attempt to flee across the rock. Elastic arms caught me and hauled me back. Despair and fatigue finally overwhelmed me, and I started to cry.

“Why, sweetheart! Please don’t weep. We’ll be together again soon,” the Master of Shadows reassured me. “The Rahkshi will keep you safe until my return.” He lifted me toward his hovering minion.

I kicked and writhed against him. The mind-reading Rahkshi’s eyes widened, presumably at the intensity of my thoughts. Makuta glanced over his shoulder toward the LEGO aircraft. “Darling, please. I knew our parting would be sweet sorrow, but I really wasn’t expecting *this!*” He restrained my arms and legs and tried to set me in Mentorahk’s lap again. I kept struggling. “I apologize for doing this, beloved, but you’ve left me no choice. Until we meet again, my angel.”

I was suddenly overwhelmed with drowsiness. As my body became limp and my eyelids heavy, Mentorahk arranged me on his legs. I felt Makuta’s kiss on my forehead and the lurch of the Rahkshi taking off. Behind us his master muttered, “Female creatures can be so difficult. Ouch! Stupid cage...” Seconds later I heard the helicopter land. I drifted off to sleep.



## 41. Dark Blue

### **Green Day — Boulevard of Broken Dreams**

*I walk a lonely road  
The only one that I have ever known  
Don't know where it goes  
But it's home to me and I walk alone*

*I walk this empty street  
On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams  
Where the city sleeps  
and I'm the only one and I walk alone*

*I walk alone, I walk alone  
I walk alone, I walk a...*

*My shadow's the only one that walks beside me  
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating  
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me  
'Til then I walk alone*

*Ah-ah, Ah-ah, Ah-ah, Aaah-ah,  
Ah-ah, Ah-ah, Ah-ah*

*I'm walking down the line  
That divides me somewhere in my mind  
On the border line  
Of the edge and where I walk alone*

*Read between the lines  
What's [deleted] up and everything's alright  
Check my vital signs  
To know I'm still alive and I walk alone*

*I walk alone, I walk alone  
I walk alone, I walk a...*

*My shadow's the only one that walks beside me  
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating  
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me  
'Til then I walk alone*

I heard the wind whistling past my head, and I opened my eyes. I was in the lap of a lavender Rahkshi, flying over the silver sea. He glanced at me with red-orange eyes.

I looked furtively down at the sparkling liquid protodermis. The pontoons of webbing Roodaka's spiders had used were still there. With my Kaukau Nuva, I could swim at depth indefinitely and follow the pontoons back to Metru Nui—and Rahkshi, as far as I knew, were only moderately good swimmers. Makuta was back in his prison, and with the filming in full swing again, the

island city would be crawling with LEGO personnel. I took a deep breath and pushed myself off Mentorahk's legs with my hands.

He clamped his arms around me and rolled in mid-air, resuming his flight position. I groaned to myself. What was I thinking, trying to surprise a creature that could read minds? He hissed at me.

"Say," I suggested, "why don't you let me put on my Mask of Translation? I won't try to escape again."

As he relaxed his grip, I retrieved the Kanohi from my back. "I thought you couldn't use your power when you were flying," I remarked.

"Not at full strength," he replied calmly. "But I didn't need to. I can tell you're frightened and upset. What you were about to do was pretty obvious."

I gazed far below us at the water. I remembered from a previous trip that it was seething with dangerous creatures. He would have been in serious trouble if one of them had eaten me, yet his reptilian face was sympathetic. I smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Mentorahk."

"Why don't you rest some more? You're really tired."

Unable to disagree, I removed the Rau, settled back into his lap, and closed my eyes. Soon I was asleep again.

I awoke in the protodermis chamber to the excited hissing of dozens of Rahkshi crowding around Mentorahk and me. Shadrahk waved them back as soon as he saw my eyes open. "Give her some air." They stepped back. I yawned and looked around dejectedly.

"Welcome home, Mistress. Are you hungry? Would you like to go to the living room? Or perhaps you would like to go back to your office and relax?" asked the Rahkshi of Darkness.

"The office, I guess."

He nodded to Mentorahk, who flew me through the living room. It was almost twice as large as before. The cabana Florahk had set up was colorful and inviting, and just as Makuta had guessed, it had a bamboo dance floor and garlands of tropical flowers draped around the tables. A sound stage at the back of the room was surrounded with musical instruments and recording equipment. Two torches illuminated the otherwise dark cave.

The mind-reading Rahkshi continued down the maze of tunnels until we reached the office. I shivered as I entered the gloomy room that had served as both my prison and refuge. The Rahkshi appeared to have straightened everything up after all the fighting. The desk had been dusted, the rubble swept away, and the books replaced on the shelves. About half of them were upside down. Florahk's plants were more abundant than ever, with large, full blooms hanging from the ceiling and floating on the surface of the pool. Their sweet fragrance was strangely

calming. I stretched out on the couch and thanked Mentorahk. He smiled and receded into the shadows.

Shdrahk appeared some time later with a tray of roast beef slices, crackers, and fruit and set it on the end table. I realized I was hungry and sat up. "How long was I asleep?" I asked.

"An hour or so," he replied.

As I started to eat, I glanced at the computer. "I suppose I should get going again on your master's biography," I sighed. "Can you help me while he's gone?"

"Sure, Mistress. I'll take you to the Vault. There's plenty of material there."

He summoned the Ussanui kraata. I finished my snack, and we flew down some convoluted tunnels to a large doorway. He peered into a retinal scanner and typed a code onto a keypad. The heavy stone door slid to one side.

I dismounted and followed the Rahkshi of Darkness into a cavernous room. When my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I saw it was lined with stacks of stone tablets. "This is where Master archives his notes," he said, gesturing with his hand.

My eyes widened. I picked up a tablet and examined it. It was covered with small Matoran lettering. "Thank you, Shdrahk. This will keep me busy for a while," I smiled weakly.

"Of course, he didn't use the stone-age technology for long," remarked Shdrahk. He led me into an adjoining room, which was piled high with scrolls. At the far end, row after row of leather-bound journals sat neatly in niches in the walls.

"This is going to take forever," I moaned.

"Master has been alive for quite some time. And he's had plenty to say about the events unfolding around him," agreed the Rahkshi. "Of course, once he obtained a computer..."

Blinking in disbelief, I stumbled after him into a third room. This one was burgeoning with bundles of punch cards, reels of digital tape, and heaps of CD cases. My legs wobbled under me.

"If you'd like," Shdrahk suggested, catching my elbow, "I can get the Rahkshi to fetch the records a few at a time and bring them to your office."

"All right," I said feebly. I climbed back onto the Ussanui. We traveled back to the office, where I crumpled onto the couch. Shdrahk switched on the computer and left.

In a few minutes, he returned with Accurahk and Vorahk, their laps laden with stone tablets. Shdrahk stacked the documents carefully next to the desk. "Sarge, from now on, you'll coordinate the courier service. When she finishes with these, I'll call you. You bring two other

Rahkshi down here—anyone but Panrahk—and load them up with the old records. I'll meet them at the Vault and give them the next set to carry back to you.”

“Got it, General.” The Rahkshi of Hunger saluted.

Shadrahk turned to me. “Mistress, I'll check on you regularly. You can use the walkie-talkie to call me anytime, too.” He set one on the desk and stored an identical unit inside his carapace.

“Thanks, guys,” I muttered. They left with the tray.

I sank into the desk chair and dropped my mask into my hands for a few minutes. But wallowing in self-pity would not get me free, so I opened the word processing program. I scrolled through it to remember where I was. Memories flooded my mind of typing feverishly to forestall Roodaka's wrath, but I shut them out and got to work.

First, I read each tablet and transcribed its contents. Then I edited the text to make a continuous account, using my best judgment to put it in chronological order using the occasional relative time references. Most of the material consisted of stories of ancient battles between characters I had never heard of, with the notable exception of Mata Nui. To my surprise, the text described him as noble and powerful. He never actually engaged in combat, but he provided technology and wisdom to the soldiers that were working for the Matoran—including the narrator, presumably Makuta. I skipped the portions of the tablets that were pointless philosophical rambling. Evidently Makuta had been indulging in this habit since early youth. I took the liberty of making brief summaries of several tables detailing the organizational structure of his troops and his equipment inventory. Even so, it seemed like several hours later that I finally set the last of the stone slabs onto the finished pile.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked at the screen. The computer file was growing so large that I decided to split it up. I saved the first installment as “megalomaniac\_rant\_1.doc” and made a backup copy. The last thing I wanted was to lose any time to a corrupted file or bad disk sector.

Shadrahk walked in just as I finished. “Mistress, dinner is served.”

“Oh, yeah, food,” I said groggily. “Sure, I could use a bite to eat.” I stood up and pointed at the stack. “I'm finished with those.”

He looked at me in amazement. “Really? All right. I'll tell Vorahk at dinner, and we'll get you another set.”

A quick Ussanui ride brought me to the dining room. I ducked past the revolting vine in the doorway. The Rahkshi were lined up at the kitchen. Pinky waved for me to cut in line and join him. The other Rahkshi hissed their approval, so I walked up to the front. Bahka dished up filets of steaming, spicy blackened red snapper, buttered green beans, and herbed rice. He shoved a chunk of bread onto each plate. We took our seats at one of the long stone tables, where we were soon joined by all the stage seven Rahkshi and several others. Florahk plucked a flower from the

vine and handed it to me. I marveled at its fluted shape and delicate peach and magenta stripes. Fortunately, it smelled sweet and fragrant.

“So, Mistress, did anything interesting go down after we left?” asked Vorahk.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, it was interesting, all right. Your master was planning for us to have a quiet little picnic up on the Great Barrier, but as it turned out, we had lots of extra company.” I ate a bite of the tender, flavorful fish. “Bahka has gotten to be quite the gourmet chef.”

“He selected this evening’s alimention in consideration of your safe recrudescence,” smiled Therahk.

Invulnerahk looked up, his muzzle covered with rice. “Yeah, what he said.”

A sly smile crossed Florahk’s face. “Me aks Bahka fi mek de barbecue rat, but he radda cook de fish fa you, Mees.” He dodged a fork thrown by Rahirahk.

“So, who crashed the party?” asked Invulnerahk.

“The first ones to show up were the, uh, well, the Piraka, if you’ll pardon my French.”

“Those are the gnarly dudes that tangled with us and fragged Mistress,” Vorahk explained to the others. “Did Master fry their spiky butts?” Pinky transformed himself into a flame-thrower on the bench next to me.

“No, he made some kind of deal with them,” I shrugged, biting off a chunk of bread. “And then he used Mind Control to make them do the Can-Can. It was a very strange sight.”

Pinky turned himself into a metal can with jointed legs and demonstrated the dance. The Rahkshi snickered, except for Florahk. “Blood fire! Why Mas na torch dem, if dey bring harm to Mees?”

“Mistress’s injury was an accident,” said Shadrahk. “And besides, they’re in the storyline next year. They might even be working for him, by the sound of things.”

“Then the Shadowed One, Voporak, and Sentrakh showed up in a pirate ship,” I continued. “Evidently they have some history with your master, and it’s not all friendly.”

Pinky reverted to his usual form and hissed quizzically at the Rahkshi of Darkness, who tilted his head. “If I’m not mistaken, the Piraka defected from the Shadowed One’s Dark Hunter organization, and the penalty for desertion is death. As for Voporak, I read about him in the Encyclopedia. He’s a being from Sidorak’s island that Master and Roodaka mutated to have time powers. He’s training temporarily with the Dark Hunters.”

“The Shadowed One is really angry at your master, because evidently he defeated him after the events of the movie—and will again in the re-enactment for Book Ten,” I added. “And Voporak

is seething mad, too. He's really lonely, because he can't get near anyone without aging them. There was quite a heated discussion."

Shadrahk sat up with a sudden realization. "Those Rahkshi on Metru Nui..." I nodded grimly.

"I wish I could have seen Master talking smack with those guys," grinned Vorahk. "Was there a big three-way brawl?"

"Well, the Piraka stayed out of it. At first they were trying to hide, but eventually the Shadowed One heard them, and they exchanged some bitter words. And Sentrahk stayed behind on the boat. But your master fought the other two."

"Sweet!" crowed Invulnerahk.

"Me spec Mas mop de floor wit dem," smiled Florahk.

"Pretty much," I nodded. "He used magnetism against the Shadowed One's beam of crystalline protodermis. And he choked Voporak with vacuum. It's just about the only power that doesn't age in the time accelerating defensive field, since it's the lack of something. The Shadowed One tried to push him back into his prison, but your master ended up locking him up instead. And then he teleported Voporak into the Shadowed One's laser vision beams just as he burned his way out, so that they would damage each other."

"Good times!" exclaimed Vorahk.

"Why didn't the teleportation beam lose its potency in the time field?" wondered the darkness Rahkshi.

I scratched my head. "It would have, I think, except that Voporak had turned it down so he could grab me. He can't turn it completely off, but he can reduce its intensity."

"He grabbed you? What a sicko," Vorahk muttered. "I hope Master cleaned his clock."

"He got burned pretty badly by the laser beams. Then the LEGO helicopter showed up on the horizon, and everyone scattered. Your master got Mentorahk to carry me back here at the last minute while he got back into the cage for the filming of the final movie scenes." The mind-reading Rahkshi nodded proudly. As I ate a bite of green beans, I noticed that the Rahkshi had already licked their plates, and their faces, clean.

"That's wicked cool. Master rocks!" Invulnerahk cheered, raising his fist.

I looked at him sideways. "Well, if you've got to work for an evil psychopath, at least he's the one that usually wins."

The Rahkshi all laughed at this. Then Vorahk stood up. “Speaking of rocking, Mistress, after you finish your grub, would you mind dropping by the studio? It’s just over there next to the living room. I could really use some help writing material for the upcoming tour.”

“Yeah, we moved what was left of our gear into the cabana after the stone rats trashed the old music room,” said Invulnerahk. Rahirahk turned his head and whistled innocently.

“I’ve got the tunes hammered out already,” continued the black Rahkshi, “but I’m just not a word dude, and you are. I mean, a word chick. Uh, I mean...”

I smiled. “I’d be happy to, Vorahk, but I’ve really got to get some more work done on this biography first. You should see the huge stack of stuff I have to transcribe.”

“Sarge, we need to get her another set of tablets from the Vault,” said Shadrahk.

“Whoa! Already?” asked the Rahkshi of Hunger.

The Rahkshi looked at each other as I strode back to the Ussanui. On the way I waved at the cook. “Thanks, Bahka. That was delicious.” The massive green dragon lowered his head and snorted some smoke.

Soon I was resupplied with tablets and typing away. This group of records described more wars on behalf of the Matoran, and how they became aware of Mata Nui and his benevolent help. As I transcribed a tablet from the middle of the stack, I saw the first mention of Makuta’s resentment. “I can’t bear my brother’s self-righteousness,” confessed the narrator in jagged characters. He had just suffered debilitating damage in a gritty battle to protect the Matoran from a band of fire elementals, who had traveled through a vein of magma and emerged from the fire pits in Ta-Metru. The assault had destroyed the entire metru and killed half its inhabitants. After unsuccessfully leading a group of fire and ice Toa in a desperate attack against the intruders, Makuta had dismissed what was left of his troops and absorbed the attackers’ fire into his own body, badly burning himself but snuffing them out completely.

According to the tablet, Makuta wasn’t content to retire to the infirmary after his victory. Racked with pain, leaking energy, and stoked on rage, he swam through the magma conduit back to the elementals’ homeland, using his fire resistance to protect himself from the searing liquid. He released the stored energy in a devastating blast of shattering power, decimating the entire island. Holding what was left of his overheated form together with magnetism, he hurled himself into the sea. Upon his return to Metru Nui, Mata Nui was there to welcome and heal him, but he criticized his reckless brother for the heavy collateral damage. “We must protect our people with all our intelligence and strength,” he said benignly, “but we must rein in our desire for vengeance. It only perpetuates the cycle of violence.”

The words in Makuta’s journal were bitter. “I allowed my flesh to be scorched and my armor melted by their enemies, and yet the Matoran believe his pacifist drivel. They look upon me as a slaughterer. I am no more to them than a dangerous tool given to them by their adored protector.

They praise him for granting them the safety which I bought with great agony to my own body, and they attribute to him all wisdom and virtue. And he is perfectly happy to soak it all up.”

I sat back and scrolled through the text I had just typed. Without a doubt, this was the beginning of the conflict that would culminate in the betrayal of one brother by another, casting the entire Bionicle universe into darkness and uncertainty. Makuta’s tactics did seem awfully drastic, but who could blame him for wanting to prevent more casualties? Could Mata Nui really have been at fault somehow, for neglecting to give his shadowy brother enough credit? Or was Makuta simply insatiable in his desire for admiration? I wondered how much of the account was true.

As I continued to read, the narrator reverted to lists of troops and armaments, followed by detailed descriptions of raids on lesser enemies. There was no further reference to the emotions that had racked him as he lay injured that day.

I set the last tablet on the stack of completed work. Then I called Shadrahk on the radio.

“Hello, Mistress,” he smiled as he walked in. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, pretty well, I guess. How many more of these stacks of tablets are there?”

“Maybe a couple dozen.”

I dropped my head on my hand and muttered, “And then there are the paper records, and the computer files...”

“Well, at least you won’t have to retype the computer files. You’ll just have to edit for continuity. And Master can set you up with an OCR scanner for the paper stuff. As fast as you’re going, I’m sure you’ll be done in a few months.”

“What if your master wants to add some more accounts that he hasn’t written down?”

“He probably will. And he’ll want to go over what you’ve transcribed with you, I’m sure. I suppose you’re ready for bed now?” He arranged the blanket and pillow on the couch.

“I’d like you to get me another stack, if you don’t mind.”

Shadrahk walked back over to the desk. “I don’t see why you’re in such a hurry, Mistress. You should relax and pace yourself.”

“How can I relax when your master insists on keeping me in this dungeon?” I moaned.

“Mistress, if there’s anything you need to be comfortable, all you have to do is ask,” he frowned. “And I still don’t understand your reluctance to stay with Master. He’s got the ambition, the intelligence, and the power to achieve his dream. All he wants you to do is to enjoy it with him. And believe me, as susceptible as Master is to your charms, you’ll be the most powerful female—no, the most powerful *creature*—in the entire Bionicle universe.”

I sighed. “Could you please just get me some more tablets, Shadrahk?”

“Of course.”

Soon Florahk and Invulnerahk appeared with a new set of tablets. As he set down his stack, the Rahkshi of Plant Control raised an eyebrow. “All work an’ no play mek Mees go coconuts.”

“Yeah, your brain will get all defunkitated,” agreed Invulnerahk, crossing his eyes.

“You should take a break and come jam with Rahkous,” suggested Vorahk.

“Maybe later. Thanks, guys.” I returned to my transcription work.

Some time later, I opened my eyes to find I had fallen asleep on my keyboard. I sat up with a start. The screen was covered with gibberish. I quickly scrolled up to see if I had accidentally erased anything. Fortunately, the last coherent writing agreed with the tablet on the desk. However, I didn’t remember typing any of it.

I rubbed my eyes and stumbled over to the couch for some proper rest.

When I awoke, I finished the stack. I started to call Shadrahk on the radio, but then I realized I was famished anyway. I crawled onto the Ussanui and flew into the living room. The Rahkshi were doing their usual activities. Four of them were sitting on the rug in front of the Xbox playing Kung Fu Chaos, and several others sparred in the weapons room. Pinky saw me parking the Ussanui and dropped his numchucks. He got me a bowl of Lucky Charms and a glass of milk from the kitchen. I accepted the cereal and sat down on the couch to eat.

Soon several other Rahkshi had gathered around us. Shadrahk walked in ripping the plastic off the next Bionicle comic, issue number 25. We crowded around him to read about how the Toa Hagah discovered Makuta’s treachery, stole the Avokhii, and were mutated into midgets by Roodaka’s spinners.

“So that’s how they were transformed from ugly Toa into such cute little dudes,” remarked Invulnerahk.

Shadrahk rolled his eyes. “Yeah. But that’s just a side story. Check this out.” He pulled a rough draft of Comic 26 from his carapace. “It’s not officially out yet. I printed this copy off Master’s hard drive. He must have hacked into the LEGO network to get it.”

We eagerly read the continuing story of the Toa Hordika’s struggles. When everyone was finished, the Rahkshi of Darkness flipped back to the center insert illustrating the 2005 Titan sets. “This is the most interesting thing in the whole issue.” He pointed to Roodaka’s entry. It read, “Trivia: Secretly worked for both sides during the Dark Hunter-Brotherhood of Makuta war.”

“Contemptible perfidy!” exclaimed Therahk.

Florahk shook his head. “Me tol’ Mas bout dat ooman. She a poison flower.”

“The Dark Side of the Force grows stronger,” said Invulnerahk ominously.

“Dude, we *are* the Dark Side,” groaned Vorahk. “But now I’ve got another excuse to take her down when she shows up again. Besides the way she roughed up Mistress, which was already reason enough in my book.”

“You’ll have plenty of backup,” Shadrahk noted grimly.

“Hopefully I’ll be done with this biography before that happens,” I said anxiously, standing up. “Can you guys get me another set of tablets, please?”

“I doubt she’ll be back very soon, Mistress,” Shadrahk remarked. “The war in question is started by the events in Book Ten, and LEGO hasn’t even scheduled the re-enactment yet.”

“That’s cool. We’ll have time to get ready for her,” smirked Vorahk. “In the meantime, Mistress, why don’t you come listen to some music? You look like you could use a break.”

“Oh, all right,” I agreed resignedly. “I’m getting really sick of typing.” I followed him across the room and into the cabana. He picked up his Gibson, switched on an amp with his foot, and played a chord. This brought the other band members to the stage in a matter of seconds.

Soon Rahkous was warming up with “Epic” by Faith No More. I sat in a wicker chair next to Invulnerahk and watched them play. Other Rahkshi filed in and filled the cabana. As the last chords died down, Vorahk walked over to us. “Any requests, Mistress?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A song to cheer up someone who’s weary of the world.”

“When I’m down, I usually play something that fits my mood. It sounds weird, but it actually lifts me up,” remarked the black Rahkshi.

“I know what you mean,” I smiled. “Then it feels like you’re not the only one.”

“How about that Alice in Chains song that Master likes?” suggested Invulnerahk. “I think it’s called ‘Down in a Hole.’”

Vorahk frowned. “That might be a little *too* depressing, bro.”

“‘Into the Ocean’ by Blue October?” asked the gray Rahkshi brightly. “It’s even about water, and Mistress is a water creature.”

“Yeah, it’s about a dude who’s drowning, without hope of rescue,” replied his friend skeptically. “Let’s play something *you* know.” He unstrapped his guitar and handed it to me.

“Wow, this is really nice.” I hefted the instrument in my hands. Unlike my own acoustic guitar, it was heavy and solid. I strummed a few chords. “Barre chords are really easy on an electric guitar.”

“Yeah. Even when you have all-metal hands, it’s easier to hold down the thinner strings,” Vorahk agreed. “What’s that you’re playing? It sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Uh, I doubt if you know it,” I chuckled. “It’s a Charlie Peacock song called ‘In the Light.’”

The Rahkshi all winced.

“What about this one?” I played another series of chords.

“Totally!” crowed Vorahk. “That’s ‘Boulevard of Broken Dreams,’ right?”

I nodded. The other musicians started in. Nervously scanning the multitude of Rahkshi, I was gripped with stage fright. Invulnerahk urged me to go ahead. “We’re an easy crowd, Mistress. We’ll love you, even if you mess up!”

I took a deep breath, put on the strap, and stepped onto the stage. Vorahk had already picked up an electric-acoustic Epiphone and was strumming along. Then he leaned toward the microphone and began to sing Green Day’s ballad of solitude.

As we finished the first verse and chorus, he inclined his head toward me. “You’re doing awesome.” He launched into the next verse. Then he looked at me expectantly when it was time for the solo.

“I don’t know the solo,” I said. He set down his guitar and took back the Flying V while the others continued to play. I watched him replicate the guitar solo exactly as it sounded on the CD. Then he played it again twice as fast, filling in extra notes so rapidly his fingers were a black blur. Grinning, he handed the guitar back to me, and I resumed the rhythm part. The strings were hot to the touch.

After we sang the last chorus, he asked, “You know the outro?” This time I nodded. We finished the song, ending with a thunderous chord. The Rahkshi jumped up and screeched their approval, waving their staffs and shooting small blasts of energy into the ceiling.

Flushed with adrenaline, I smiled at Vorahk. He grabbed my hand and raised it in victory. “Rock on, Mistress!” he exclaimed.

The crowd parted, and Makuta walked through. As he stepped onto the stage, I backed into Vorahk. “Welcome back, Master,” said the black Rahkshi. “How’d you like our song?”

“It was superb, son.” The Spirit of Destruction kept his gaze fixed on me. “Your mistress has more talents than she’s let on, it would seem.”

“Uh, I’m not very musical, actually. It was all them,” I stammered, handing Vorahk his guitar.

Makuta reached for my hand. “I’ve missed you, darling.”

“So, is the filming over?” I asked as he gripped my fingers in his claw.

“Actually, no,” he replied with a wry smile on his Kraahkan. “We got to the scene where Keetongu finishes off Sidorak, and the crazy fool ordered a Kahgarak to shoot a Dark Dimension spinner and release the Zivon.”

Shadrahk, in the front row, cringed. “That can’t be good.”

“My boy, if you’ve never seen that thing in action, you have no idea. Sidorak tried vainly to control it with an obedience Rhotuka, but it took down an entire wall of the Coliseum before the LEGO crew could step in and subdue it. I’ll have to go back in a couple of days when they resume the filming.”

I considered how this would affect my captivity. “Well, I’ve been working on your biography while you were away.”

“Really? How charming! But wait... does this mean you’re turning down my offer of a Naming Day celebration?”

“Uh, yeah.”

His face fell. “And I was so looking forward to that. I had the menu all planned out. And I even got myself cleaned up for it. Well, no matter, sweetheart. At least the biography will take longer. And it’s always a pleasure to watch you write about me.”

I noticed he was less grimy than before. Still, I flinched as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Come on, love, let’s get some coffee, and I’ll tell you why it took so long for me to get back home to you. You see, after the fiasco with the Zivon, LEGO invited me to a very nice dinner to discuss next year’s storyline...” He led me off the stage toward the kitchen.

## 42. Vice-Grip

### **Staind — Right Here**

*I know I've been mistaken  
But just give me a break and see the changes that I've made  
I've got some imperfections  
But how can you collect them all and throw them in my face*

*But you always find a way to keep me right here waiting  
You always find the words to say to keep me right here waiting  
And if you chose to walk away I'd still be right here waiting  
Searching for the things to say to keep you right here waiting*

*I hope you're not intending  
To be so condescending, it's as much as I can take  
And you're so independent  
You just refuse to bend so I keep bending till I break*

*I've made a commitment  
I'm willing to bleed for you  
I needed fulfillment  
I found what I need in you*

*Why can't you just forgive me  
I don't want to relive all the mistakes I've made along the way  
But I always find a way to keep you right here waiting  
I always find the words to say to keep you right here waiting*

*But you always find a way  
To keep me right here waiting  
You always find the words to say to keep me right here waiting  
And if I chose to walk away would you be right here waiting  
Searching for the things to say to keep me right here waiting*

Makuta instructed the band to play more quietly, and they turned down the volume on their amps. Then he found Mentorahk and ordered him to fly back to Metru Nui and lurk in the shadows near the LEGO trailer again. The mind-reading Rahkshi waved to me as he flew out. I waved back.

As the Spirit of Destruction led me into the kitchen, he pulled out his cell phone. “Excuse me, darling. I need to make just one quick call before I forget.” He entered a number with one of his thumbs while he removed the coffee beans, grinder, spoon, and measuring cup from the cabinet with his other hand. I got out two mugs, the sugar, and the cream, and then I sat on the stainless steel counter, since there were no chairs.

“Hello, Jean-Pierre? It’s—” He was met with an enthusiastic greeting as he measured the beans into the grinder. “Yes, yes. Listen, I’m really sorry for the short notice, but I’ve got to cancel that big cake. We’ve called off the ceremony.”

A barrage of sympathetic chatter came out of the tiny speaker. “Why, thank you, Jean-Pierre. I—” Makuta stopped when it was obvious the baker had more to say. He filled the measuring cup with water by a wave of his hand. “Yes, I’m quite disappointed—” The voice continued, and Makuta leaned against the counter. “Ah. She must have been very special.”

The Master of Shadows shifted the cell phone between his mask and his shoulder armor while he picked up the coffee grinder with both hands, but the phone slipped. He caught it and handed it to me.

I put it tentatively to my ear. When the noise of the grinder stopped, a heavily accented voice was saying, “her shimmering hair, it was like ze finest silk satin... her breath, it was sweet as ze spring breeze, with ze arôme délicat of ze freshest fleurs... her angèlique eyes, zey were deep pools of cristalle zat sparkled in ze candle light... I proposed to her on a moonlit night zat summer, and to my delight, she said ‘oui.’ I was ze ’appiest man in all of Paris. But zen a few days before we were to wed, she left me and ran off with ze butcher. To zis very day, je suis végétarien.”

Makuta dumped the last of the coffee into the filter and set down the grinder, so I handed the phone back to him. “She left him for the butcher,” I whispered.

He held the phone against his head as he poured the water. “I’m sorry to hear that, Jean-Pierre. I consider myself fortunate that my true love has stayed with me. I think she just got a little skittish about the formalities.”

A whole new eruption of prattle came from the phone. Makuta rolled his eyes as he put some sugar and cream into the cups. He poured the coffee and slid one of the mugs toward me. “Well, I appreciate your advice, Jean-Pierre. As soon as she comes to her senses, I’ll give you another call. Goodbye, now.” After the baker’s response, he hung up.

“‘As soon as she comes to her senses?’” I crossed my arms.

Makuta grinned. “He certainly is a talkative fellow, but he’s worth it. He’s the best baker in New England. As much as the boys love his millefeuille, he’s gotten a lot of my money.” He chuckled as he put away the supplies. “He offered me all sorts of suggestions about what kind of flowers I should give you, what brand of chocolate, and what I should write on the card. But I already have a special gift for you. Let’s go drink our coffee in the living room.”

I followed him sullenly to the couch and sat at one end, clutching my mug and wondering what new trickery he would be foisting on me as a gift.

The Spirit of Destruction put his cup on the coffee table and sat next to me on the dark leather cushions, sliding his arm across the back of the sofa. “You see, my beloved, I feel so terrible about the way I’ve done you wrong. I long for your forgiveness.”

I narrowed my eyes. “How can I forgive you if you’re still committing the offense?”

“I know I still have some imperfections, but I’m a changed spirit,” he protested. “I’ll never let Roodaka, or anyone else, lead me astray again. As alluring as she can be, I don’t love her. But my feelings for you—”

“I wasn’t talking about Roodaka. You can do what you want with her, as long as you leave me out of it. I was talking about the way you keep stalking me.”

“Oh, that,” he smiled, tweaking my chin. “I’m confident your cynical way of seeing things will soon yield to the irrefutable truth of my devotion. But anyway, I wanted to give you a little something, to help make up for all the hardship you’ve endured for the sake of our love. Something that might really help you one day.”

“What is it? A restraining order against you?” I growled. He laughed heartily.

Shadrahk flew into the room. “Master, please excuse the interruption, but the new stove is outside.”

“Thank you, son. Precious, I’m sorry, but I need to take care of this before someone looks out the window of the LEGO headquarters and notices an appliance truck in the parking lot. Pinky?”

He stood and flew out after Shadrahk. A blue, gold, and gray end table morphed into a Rahkshi and zoomed into the tunnel behind them. I jumped onto the Ussanui and followed in the hope of donning my Huna and slipping past them while they were busy with the delivery men. Unfortunately, several more Rahkshi fell into formation around me as I raced down the corridor.

“It’s cool we’re getting the new stove,” remarked Invulnerahk, “but I’m really going to miss Bahka’s grub.”

“Me, too,” Vorahk agreed. “He’s awesome. But life’s like that, man. You just have to roll with it.”

Accurahk began hissing, and the Rahkshi of Limited Invulnerability explained. “He says it’s like the time he busted the solar power generator on the antenna dish thingamajig that goes up, and he had to signalize the data through the controlification link interface gizmo, and it was really slow.”

I blinked a few times. “I see.”

Therahk smiled graciously. “The power supply to the image data transmitter failed on his satellite. He was able to rig a temporary bypass through the comm signal transmitter, but naturally the baud rate was several orders of magnitude lower.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I was saying,” nodded Invulnerahk.

“You have a satellite?” I asked Accurahk.

He hissed his response. I started to reach for my Rau, but Therahk seemed to enjoy translating, so I let him continue. “It used to belong to NOAA, the weather agency. But Master hacked into the comm signal and got it to mimic a total power failure. After a few attempts to contact it and run diagnostics, NOAA wrote it off as a loss and launched a replacement unit. Then Master let Accurahk take control of it.”

“Wow,” I marveled, wondering what the Rahkshi of Accuracy was doing with a weather satellite. Presumably Makuta had some dark purpose in mind for it. “Did Accurahk ever fix the transmitter power supply?”

“No, but he managed to reroute power from the Search and Rescue Satellite Aided Tracking equipment, since the satellite was no longer part of the SARSAT network anyway. It’s not like he was actually going to help rescue anyone.” Accurahk grinned as his brother finished the interpretation.

“Well, I’m certainly impressed,” I remarked. By this time we had reached the Manas chamber. The two giant crustaceans challenged us at the doorway.

Vorahk landed and brandished his staff. “Let us through, you oversized vermin!”

Therahk shook his head. “Vorahk, it wouldn’t be prudent to provoke them. Shadrahk is the only Rahkshi they’ll permit to pass. Let’s tarry here until their return.”

The Rahkshi sat down with their backs against the wall. I deployed the Ussanui’s landing gear and sat up on it. The Manas watched us suspiciously for a few minutes before they scuttled back to their usual spots.

Soon Makuta strolled through the room pushing a furniture dolly loaded with a large box. Shadrahk walked in front, kicking loose rocks out of the way of the wheels. “Well, hello there,” greeted the Master of Shadows, patting my head as he passed me. “Come on, boys. You can help me set this thing up.”

I joined the procession back to the kitchen, where Makuta removed the cooking pots and pans from the embers that were still smoldering below Bahka’s roasting spit. I realized that the dragon must have cooked the vegetables, rice, and bread in these the night before. Then Makuta vaporized the spit with a beam of plasma and used cyclone power to swirl the ashes up the vent pipe above it. He opened the box, pulled out the large stainless steel stove, and, with the help of Shadrahk and Accurahk, slowly eased it into place. The empty box tumbled to one side as the dolly changed into Pinky’s usual form. He gingerly rubbed his back. “Thank you, son,” Makuta told him.

Therahk stepped forward and ran his staff along the blue and gold Rahkshi’s spine. Pinky sighed with relief. Then he pointed to his shoulders and looked wistfully at Therahk. “Oh, very well,” smiled the healing Rahkshi. He put away the staff and gave his brother a shoulder massage.

Suddenly Bahka burst into the room. When he saw the shiny new stove in the place of his own equipment, he tipped back his head and uttered a savage roar. Then he spat a blast of flame at the offending unit.

Vorahk tackled the giant lizard, but the mighty creature hurled him against a wall before he could activate his staff. Invulnerahk jumped in front of the enraged Bahka, who seized the gray Rahkshi by the neck. Makuta stepped in front of me. I slapped on my Rau and shouted, “Bahka, stop!”

Bahka spun around in surprise. He snorted some flames from his nostrils. Makuta aimed his staff, but I grabbed his elbow. “Wait! Don’t hurt him. Please, let me talk to him.”

“I was only going to put him to sleep,” he shrugged. “All right, as long as you stay behind me.”

I leaned around him. “Bahka, please let the Rahkshi go.” Behind the dragon I saw more Rahkshi filling the doorway, eager to watch the drama.

“You speak my tongue now?” growled the Rahi. He ignored Invulnerahk, who was jabbing at the scaly green arm with his staff.

“Yes, I can speak anyone’s language with this mask.” I pointed at the great Kanohi. “What do you want me to tell them?”

“Tell them to put my roasting spit back.”

I looked up at Makuta. “He wants his spit back.”

“Why should I reward his rebellion?” he frowned.

“Because he’s been a loyal servant, and he wants to cook for you. And he’s good at it.”

Invulnerahk stopped thrashing and croaked, “Yeah, Master, we love his chow.”

Makuta’s eyes darted back and forth between Bahka, the Rahkshi, and me. Finally, he sighed. “All right. I’ll make a smokehouse for him.”

Bahka dropped Invulnerahk, who scurried over to the rest of his brothers rubbing his neck, and looked at me. “A smokehouse?”

“Yes,” I smiled. “A room devoted to smoking, barbecueing, and grilling big pieces of meat. Now, if I were you, I’d move away from the stove before he changes his mind.”

The immense reptile stepped back and bowed his head, and Makuta lowered his staff. I walked up to Bahka and patted his arm. “If you like, I can show you how to use the new equipment, too. It’s a lot easier to bake bread in an oven than over an open fire.” He grunted his assent.

“Mees know all de sweet wuds fi tame de mean critters,” remarked Florahk. “She bedder dan Rahirahk.” To my surprise, Rahirahk nodded his agreement.

Makuta plugged the stove into the wall outlet and welded the range hood to the vent pipe with his heat vision. Then he spotted Panrahk and Guurahk in the crowd and called them over. “Panrahk, blast out a hole about ten by ten bios for me right over there. Guurahk, chip out a narrow tunnel going up from the middle of the ceiling, and connect it with the vent over the range. Thermorahk, get some plus rods out of the spare parts room and weld up another spit. And go ahead and make him a barbecue pit out of whatever you find in there, while you’re at it. Vacuurahk, clean up the mess when they’re done.”

The Rahkshi got to work. Makuta turned to Bahka. “Find something in the walk-in to roast on your new rig.” The fiery beast nodded and stalked off toward the refrigerator.

Then the Spirit of Destruction pulled Shadrahk aside. “Put a bottle of champagne on ice. The good stuff. And find me some chocolate-covered strawberries.” His dark minion nodded.

Makuta put his arm around me. “Now, my love, about this gift. I can’t wait to see you wearing it.” He led me toward the exit. I wondered what sort of evil artifact he had crafted this time. I was pretty sure I had made it clear I wouldn’t wear his ring.

In the doorway, Shadrahk shouted, “Hey! Pyrorahk! Get Burns off the furniture!”

“Not cool,” muttered Vorahk, looking past him and shaking his head.

“I’ll save the controller,” volunteered Invulnerahk as he rushed into the living room. When we reached the doorway, we saw the gray Rahkshi wrestling on the couch with a bipedal being made of fire. At the other end of the sofa, the Rahkshi of Fire Resistance sat absorbed in an Xbox game, rapidly pushing buttons and hissing with excitement. Flames were rising all around his aquamarine armor, and the pungent smells of burning leather and foam mingled in the air.

Invulnerahk managed to wrench the controller out of the fire elemental’s hands. He held it up triumphantly as he elbowed his foe, flipping him over the back of the couch. “Say, I wonder if it still works.” He sat down on the blazing cushions and pushed a few buttons, evidently unaware that the cord was completely burned through.

Makuta put his gauntlets on his hips. “Pyrorahk, take your friend and go play in the autoclave,” he ordered sternly. The two of them got up, grumbling, and walked out. The Master of Shadows waved his hand, and a wall of water crashed over the sofa, extinguishing the conflagration.

Invulnerahk looked up, water dripping off his face. “Hey, Master, you got the controller all wet,” he protested. “Oh, well. I think it was toast, anyway.” He tossed the melted device over his shoulder and got up.

Makuta surveyed the damage. “Great. Now I have to order another couch. Well, let’s go down to your office, darling, and use your computer. Down there, at least, we won’t be disturbed.” With considerable misgivings, I followed him down the tunnels on my kraata-powered flying machine.

As I dismounted and stowed the Ussanui in its alcove, I remarked, “I’m surprised you let any fire elementals into your lair at all.”

“Oh, Burns is a nuisance sometimes, but he stays away from the fuel tanks,” he said casually. He sat down at the desk and started the computer. “He does the occasional odd job for me, like incinerating the trash. He’s a typical elemental, with a personality exactly like his element, so he can be pretty feisty. But he knows not to cross me.”

I walked over and stood behind him as he opened a furniture website. “Ahkwa seems to be a lot like her element, too.”

“You’ve met her?”

“She came to sing with Rahkous one day. She’s got an amazing voice.”

“She certainly does.” The Master of Shadows selected a gunmetal gray Italian leather sofa with classic styling and clicked the “Add to Cart” button. “I wanted the companionship of a gentle water being, but it turns out she was too much of a good thing. Unless you contain her, she just flows away. And her mind is as fluid as her form.”

“Yeah, that’s what she did after she shorted out Vorahk’s amp,” I smiled.

“What I needed all along was a *biomechanical* water creature, with the tranquil sweetness of water but enough of a spine to stand up for herself.” He patted his knee. “Come sit down, darling.”

I rested my elbow on the stack of stone tablets instead. “I’m guessing Eppy gets his arrogance from the fact that his element transforms or destroys anything it touches?”

“Exactly, my pet. He thinks he’s the right hand of Destiny itself,” he chuckled. “It was pure joy watching Krahka dismantle his ego last time you two were here. I never tire of watching the security camera footage.”

I remembered being paralyzed with fear as the energized protodermis entity had woven himself into a cage around me. Krahka immediately transformed into a silver siren to distract him. Sensing profound loneliness under his haughty exterior, she flattered him until he agreed to kiss her, and then vanished from his embrace with Makuta’s help. His hopes dashed, Eppy had fled a fit of bitter despair.

Makuta typed in a credit card number and clicked another button. It suddenly occurred to me that he might be an elemental being himself. I looked at him sideways. “Are you... would you call yourself an elemental of dark energy?”

A smile crossed his Kraahkan. “Well, yes, I did start out that way. I like to think I’ve become much more. How insightful you are, darling.”

“And the properties of dark energy are that it’s... dynamic. Restless. Chaotic. Destructively unstable.”

“That’s me,” he grinned. “You have such a way with words. Oh, that reminds me. Let’s take a peek at your recent work on my biography, shall we?”

“Sure.” If it would bring me closer to freedom, even by an infinitesimal amount, it was worth enduring his review. I hopped up onto the pile of stone plaques and sat with my legs dangling over the side.

He opened the My Documents folder. “Where is it? Ah.” He turned to frown at me. “Very funny, dear.”

“The ‘rant\_1’ file is the stuff you’ve already seen, with some new material at the end,” I explained meekly. “And ‘rant\_2’ is all new.”

He opened the documents and began to read. He paused from time to time to comment. “Ha! The Rakkara. So much pretension, so little preparation. With only a little guidance from me, the Toa and Matoran subdued them in a matter of hours.” And, “Can you believe those Malovai? Trying to freeze the entire island. What a preposterous idea that was. I encapsulated their cadavers in an iceberg and launched it back to their homeland, as a lesson to the overconfident fools who sent them on their insane errand.” And finally, “Ah, yes. The fire elementals. I suppose that’s why you asked why I would let one into my lair?”

I nodded. “Knowing you, I thought you might still hold a grudge.”

“Well, your knowledge of me is substantial, but it’s not perfect,” he smiled. “If a being turns out to be useful, I’m able to get past that sort of thing. You saw what happened with the Piraka. If I had let my mind be clouded by the fact that they had severed my beloved almost in two, I would have lost the opportunity to recruit some potentially useful operatives.”

“I see.”

“Of course, if I had believed for a moment that they had done it on purpose...” A dark scowl crossed his Kanohi.

“Right. Well, what do you think of the biography so far, then?” I asked hopefully.

“It’s wonderful. Absolutely delightful.” He continued to read, and his brow furrowed. “Hmm. Yes, my convalescence. How could I forget my brother’s nauseatingly conciliatory speech? With all his intelligence, he just didn’t understand what sort of enemy we were facing. You can’t

appease something like that, or it will turn around and bite you in the back. I crushed it at the root at great personal cost, and that ingrate had the arrogance to denounce me.”

“I take it that was the beginning of the trouble between you,” I commented, my curiosity getting the better of my caution.

Makuta leaned back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “From the very beginning, I adored and revered my brother. I was happy to live in the shadow of his wisdom and power, because we shared the same objective—protecting those adorable little villagers. But it soon became clear that we just didn’t see eye to eye about how best to accomplish it. As time went on, I was forced to admit to myself that the form of defense promoted by my cherished hero was doomed to fail. Our enemies were becoming increasingly cruel in their attempts to destroy or enslave the Matoran, and he didn’t have the guts to be ruthless. It was left to me to do the dirty work, or it wouldn’t have gotten done. For example, if he had been the one to face the Barraki, he would have negotiated some sort of treaty with them, and their pathetic little coup would have progressed even farther before I managed to quell it. And it would ultimately have cost even more lives.”

“Barraki?”

“Oh, I guess you haven’t gotten that far yet,” he shrugged, scrolling ahead a few pages to the end of the document. “A particularly arrogant lot. They were petty warlords that used their handsome appearances and deceptive charisma to subvert a large contingent of Matoran against Mata Nui himself. But with overwhelming military force, I quickly halted their revolt and brought the ringleaders to justice.” He smacked his palm with an armored fist. “All things considered, there were very few Matoran casualties.”

“And then you executed the Barraki?” It would be ironic if he had killed someone for trying to do the same thing he himself did later.

“Actually, no. I was about to, but other... powers decided they should be condemned to the Pit instead. But I suppose it’s just as well. They’ll suffer in there forever.”

“The Pit,” I muttered to myself. I decided I didn’t really want to know. Relieved that my ill-advised question about Mata Nui had reached a conversational dead end, I asked, “So, do you want me to change anything?”

He shook his head. “Nope. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

I slid forward on the tablets, grateful he wasn’t going to make me do a lot of time-consuming editing. There was more than enough work simply transcribing what he had written over the eons.

He closed the files. “Now are you beginning to see why I need to rule the universe instead of my spineless sap of a brother?”

I winced. “Well, no, but I see why you *want* to rule the universe instead of your brother.”

He looked at me sideways. “The very existence of the Matoran is at stake here, darling. I don’t think you realize what sort of danger they were in, with him in charge.”

Against my better judgment, I expressed my opinion. “But the Great Beings had a purpose for creating both of you, and other beings like you, with your relative strengths. There’s supposed to be a balance between creation and chaos. Putting Mata Nui to sleep has destroyed the equilibrium.”

“Sure, that’s the company line,” he said through clenched jaws. “But I can be creative, too. Just look at all the magnificent Rahi I’ve built! Observe all the ingenious inventions I’ve devised! Consider the brilliant stratagems I’ve developed! And where have they gotten me? All the sacrifices I’ve made to protect my people have been overlooked, ignored, even condemned. He gets all the glory, while I work a thousand times harder and receive only fear and loathing!” He stood up and shook his fists, his eyes flashing red.

I shrank back, wishing I had kept my mouth shut.

“Look at you! You’re afraid of me, even after I’ve proven over and over that I’m willing to bleed for you. But if *he* walked into the room at this moment, you would run to his arms for shelter!”

This was certainly true, but it was unlikely to happen, so I had to say something to defuse his fury. I fought back my panic and said in a trembling voice, “I know you can be creative, Makuta. My own form is proof of that.”

He blinked in surprise. “You... you like the way I rebuilt you?”

“Yes, I do,” I smiled shakily. “At first I was really angry you changed me without my permission. But I decided it was pointless to be bitter, so I got used to it. Eventually I came to be pleased with it. It’s unique, and I can do acrobatic things I couldn’t do before.”

Taken aback, he relaxed his fists, and his eyes reverted to blue. “I... why, I’m so glad.”

I was reassured to see him calm down, but I wished I had chosen a different example of his work to praise, because he stepped between my knees and clamped his claws around my head like a vise. “I must confess, precious, that I was a little apprehensive about tearing you apart and putting you back together. I’ve always made big, hulking, powerful things, because they’ve been useful to me. You’re the first thing I’ve ever built that was small and delicate.”

“Congratulations,” I whispered uneasily, trying not to inhale the charcoal fumes of his breath.

Makuta stared into my eyes for a few moments as if scanning my thoughts for sincerity, and I was thankful I hadn’t lied to him. Finally he said, “My angel, I need to tell you something. Something important. Since our destinies are forever bound together, I think you should know.” He hesitated before continuing. “What you said about Mata Nui is all too true.”

I looked at him quizzically. He had just flown into a rage arguing against it.

He let go of my face and put his hands on the tablets on either side of me. “In the old days, I was content—eager, even—to risk the fate of the universe for the chance to rule it. If I had the choice between resigning myself to letting my brother run things or unleashing total devastation on the cosmos, I would rather rip the fabric of space and time from one end to the other and watch the whole thing explode in a pyrotechnic cataclysm of fiery destruction.” His eyes glowed maniacally at the thought.

I swallowed nervously. “But now?”

“But now you’ve come along and rocked my world. Sure, someday I’ll revel in the glory of watching the complete detonation of all that has ever been, but not until I’ve had a little time to enjoy being in the driver’s seat, with you riding shotgun. So I have to be much more careful in the way I take over the universe, so I don’t wreck it in the process.”

“Oh,” I breathed.

“That is why, when I learned that my attack on Mata Nui had left him not just sleeping, but dying, I got really worried.”

“Mata Nui is dying?” I gasped, my eyes wide.

He glared at me briefly before he answered. “Yes. And I don’t want him to die. I have a bad feeling the universe would begin to decay irreparably, and soon there wouldn’t be anything left for us to rule.”

“You’ve got to wake him up and heal him!” I exclaimed. “You have healing powers!”

“Now, don’t get hasty, sweetheart. He doesn’t have to be *awake*. He just has to be *alive*. So I’ve been trying to develop a cure that will work on him without interrupting his nap.”

Suddenly I understood what Therahk and Florahk were working on. “But LEGO wouldn’t let him die, would they? Surely they’ve noticed something this important!”

He put his hands on my waist and lifted me down off the tablets. “It didn’t take long for them to figure it out, love. Remember when Mentorahk called me right after I brought you back to my lair, and I had to leave in such a hurry? He told me they were going up to the Great Barrier to call me on the carpet for what I had done. I was so flustered I even forgot my cell phone. I was only supposed to put him to sleep, you see.”

“Oh, right.” I certainly remembered the part about the cell phone, because I had tried in vain to use it to escape. “Did you already know he was dying?”

“Yes. I had been hoping to cure him before they caught on. Obviously they had hired me as the main bad guy for my consummate villainy, but I was afraid that if they had to come up with some desperate, implausible storyline device to bring him back from the brink of death, they would fire me for being overzealous.” He took my hand and led me toward the couch.

“So, what did they say?”

“After they made me squirm for a little while, they explained that they had a plan already figured out. It’s going to be the crux of next year’s storyline.”

My eyes widened as we sat down.

“You see, cupcake, there’s a Mask of Life that could save him, if all else fails.”

“I see,” I nodded. “Is this the one you were telling the Piraka about, that’s going to be so dangerous to retrieve?”

“Exactly. Not only are there incredibly horrible creatures guarding the thing, but it’s also going to be a race against the Toa. Turaga Dume was only a couple dozen calculations away from reading the signs of Mata Nui’s declining health in the stars before he had to set aside his work and get out of the way of the film crew. He’ll be back on in it as soon as they wrap. And he knows about this mask already.”

“Why not just let the Toa heal Mata Nui?”

“Because if they use the Mask of Life on him, he might wake up. So I have to make sure it stays out of their hands. And besides, now it’s in my contract that I have to try to get it.”

“I’m surprised you would trust six ruffians you barely know with a mission this critical,” I remarked skeptically.

“I’ll be there, princess, hiding in the shadows in case they fail or try to steal it for themselves. I’ll have a new, impressive form, too—very intimidating. At that last meeting I just attended, I worked with the set designers to put the finishing touches on it. You’re going to love it.” He grinned broadly.

“I guess LEGO still likes you, then, if you’re getting a new set,” I shrugged.

“Oh, yeah. That’s why I took so long to get home, dollface. They let me out of my cage, took me back to Headquarters, and wined and dined me with fancy catered fare before locking me back up. Even though I’ve been troublesome for them at times, they have a grudging respect for me. I’ve proven to be a challenging and imaginative foe for their heroes. I let up and pretend to lose once a year, so the kids will think the good guys always win, but of course it all fits in with my larger Plan. Then I rise undaunted with new minions to battle them again, and a new generation of Toa emerges to confront me. And LEGO keeps selling sets, books, t-shirts, lunchboxes, and movies. It works for everyone.”

“Well,” I smiled hopefully, “if LEGO is involved now, I’m sure Mata Nui is going to be all right.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m not too sure of that, actually. He’s pretty bad off, and there are a lot of things that could go wrong. This mask is rather, well, temperamental. It has a nasty habit of killing creatures that try to use it against its will. And what if it gets damaged in the fight? I’m still working on a cure, just in case. I’d rather heal that lousy slacker myself and just stash the mask where no one will find it. But enough about him.” He stood up and walked over to the computer. “I’ve really been looking forward to presenting you with my gift.”

I felt overwhelmed by all this new and frightening information. “Hopefully I’ll finish the biography before all this gets started, and I’ll just follow along in the comics from the comfort of my own living room,” I muttered.

“I’m impressed by the way you’ve been working so hard on it, poppet.” He shut down the machine and sat next to me. “But I don’t think that’s very realistic. The re-enactment of Book Ten will only take a week or so, and then this new storyline will start up. I’ve got to clear out my lair and batten down everything in preparation for a long absence. Soon I’ll have to start putting the Rahkshi into stasis tubes, deep in the earth below the Bohrok chambers.”

“Well, that won’t stop me from working on the biography. Set it up so I have access to the vault, and I’ll just get the tablets myself,” I reasoned, sliding away from him on the couch.

He shook his head. “That’s not the problem. Basically, there’s no way you’ll finish before I leave. And there won’t be anyone here to protect you while I’m gone.”

“You mean to keep me from escaping,” I corrected him.

“That, too.” He gave me a sideways glance. “I thought about taking you along on this new mission with me. But Voya Nui is a savage place, with unforgiving climactic conditions and dangerous foes everywhere. You could die a hundred different ways. I don’t entirely trust the Piraka not to kidnap you again and sell you to the highest bidder, which would, of course, be me. And given what I’ve just told you about the Mask of Life and its guardians, I’m sure you’ll understand. I don’t want to take the chance that you’ll suffer even worse misfortunes than you did on Metru Nui.”

“Then the solution is obvious. Let me go back home.”

He sighed. “My lovely, you’ve refused every one of the suggestions I’ve given that would have made that tolerable for me. I’m afraid the only answer is to put you in stasis, too.”

“No! You can’t do that!” I protested, jumping up off the sofa and backing slowly away from him. If he were to put me in stasis, when, if ever, would I stir again? And who—or what—would be there when I awoke?

“Don’t be afraid. It won’t hurt at all,” he smiled. “It’s the best way to keep you safe. It grieves me that we’ll be apart again, but at least I won’t have to worry this time. I’ll know that when I return, you’ll be right here waiting.”

“It’s completely painless, Mistress,” confirmed Shadrahk’s voice from behind me. “And when you are revived, the time that’s passed seems like the blink of an eye. Master, dinner is served.”

## 43. Chemical Attraction

### **Elvis Presley—Can't Help Falling In Love**

*Wise men say  
Only fools rush in  
But I can't help falling in love with you  
Shall I stay  
Would it be a sin  
If I can't help falling in love with you*

*Like a river flows surely to the sea  
Darling so it goes  
Some things are meant to be  
Take my hand, take my whole life, too  
For I can't help falling in love with you*

*Like a river flows surely to the sea  
Darling so it goes  
Some things are meant to be  
Take my hand, take my whole life, too  
For I can't help falling in love with you  
For I can't help falling in love with you*

I hurtled through the dark tunnels, too dejected to make the effort to steer the Ussanui. Fortunately, the kraata that powered it knew the route. Flying between Shadrahk and Makuta, I arrived in the living room and stumbled off the machine.

Shadrahk pulled his master aside and pointed to a page in the comic rough draft. They read together for a moment, and then Makuta chuckled with amusement. “I knew she was doing that all along, son. But thanks for trying to help. Wait a minute... where did you get this?”

As the other Rahkshi jostled cheerfully past me to partake of Bahka’s rotisserie chicken and baked beans, I shuffled forward with the disconsolate gait of a condemned prisoner. My time was running out. Even my last-resort backup Plan, writing a lengthy, distorted biography for the Master of Shadows, was no longer a viable option. I would soon be put in stasis for at least a year if I didn’t come up with some other way to barter my freedom. In my mind I ran through the list of his propositions, but I still couldn’t bring myself to accept any of them.

Florahk appeared at my elbow carrying a lily with blue and purple stripes. “Mees look all downpressed. Mebbe me flower mek her iree?” He slipped the stem under the edge of my mask.

“Thanks, Florahk,” I smiled weakly. I took my plate from Bahka and sat in my usual place, even though I didn’t have much of an appetite.

Vorahk set his plate down next to mine with a clatter. “Mistress, we were really jamming this afternoon. We’re expanding our garage-band sound in a big way for the island tour. We’ve got a world-music vibe going on the new songs.”

“Yeah, Florahk joined the group,” Invulnerahk nodded enthusiastically. “He made some really cool drums out of tree trunks and stuff.”

“Bongo drums,” explained the Rahkshi of Plant Control. “Me mek dem play a reggae song for Le-Wahi.”

I smiled in spite of my predicament. “Well, that sounds cool.”

“Vacuurahk has agreed to play some wind instruments, too. He’s a natural,” added the black Rahkshi. “He plays them backwards.”

“I happened to be perambulating in the vicinity,” remarked Therahk, “and I must say, Adaptarahk adds an impressive degree of versatility with that modeling guitar.”

“What’s a modeling guitar?” I asked.

Vorahk twisted the knobs on an imaginary instrument. “A Variax Line6, to be specific. It can imitate just about anything with strings. Banjo, mandolin, steel guitar, you name it.”

Somehow the irrepressible sons of Makuta were managing to cheer me up. “That sounds appropriate for Adaptarahk.” I replied through a mouthful of chicken. “So, did you find anything for Invulnerahk to play?”

Vorahk laughed. “Hammerhead, play an instrument? Naw. It’s great he’s such a big fan, but musically speaking, I wouldn’t trust him with a cowbell.”

Invulnerahk’s face fell, and I felt bad for him. “Well, every band on tour needs a road crew,” I suggested.

“Hey, that’s perfect, Mistress!” exclaimed Vorahk. “Hammer, you can be our roadie.”

“What does a roadie do?” asked the gray Rahkshi.

“He sets up the instruments, packs up after the show, and stuff like that. You’ve already been doing that kind of thing for us in the studio, anyway. Now you’ll just help us take the act on the road. It’ll be awesome, because we’ll be able to keep our minds on the music.”

“Sweet,” grinned Invulnerahk. “I’m all over it.”

I smiled at him. Accurahk and Gravirahk hissed their approval, and Densirahk did a rim shot on the edge of the table with his fork.

I looked back at Accurahk and remembered the conversation about the satellite. “Say, Accurahk, what exactly are you doing with a weather satellite?”

He hissed, and Shadrahk glanced down the table at Makuta. The Master of Shadows shrugged. “Go ahead and tell her.”

“He’s monitoring changes in global climate. Master has done some, well, experimentation in that area.”

I raised an eyebrow at Makuta. “Don’t tell me you’re responsible for global warming.”

“Not entirely,” he grinned. “But I have been having a bit of fun with it. I’ve accelerated it somewhat by melting some polar ice. I’m still waiting to see how extensive the effects will be.”

“I thought you said phase changes were incredibly energy intensive. Why would you waste your precious power on something like that?”

“Darling, you *have* been listening to me! How wonderful. That’s certainly true. But in this case, I tricked the sun into doing the work. I used my density power to form a lens in the atmosphere and concentrate the rays of light onto a small area. That didn’t increase the overall influx of solar radiation, of course, but since I started the process, things have been snowballing, so to speak. The ice turns to water, which reflects less heat away from the earth than the ice did, melting more ice, and so on, causing a positive feedback loop.”

“What’s the point?” I asked skeptically.

“Well, it’s been a real bonding experience with my son. He’s amazing, that kid. He solves systems of simultaneous orbital mechanics equations in his head,” finished the Spirit of Destruction proudly.

“It’s a good thing Sharpie rocks so hard, or he’d be a total nerd,” added Vorahk. “He’d have a pocket protector, if we had pockets.” A flying chicken bone struck him squarely in the middle of the forehead.

“But mostly, it’s just because I can,” Makuta added with a wry smile. “It’s delightful, slow-motion chaos.”

I was beginning to get irritated at Makuta’s lack of concern. “And what about all the people who will suffer because of it?”

“They’ll adapt eventually. It’s been really hilarious watching them,” he gloated. “They’ve finally noticed what’s going on, and naturally, they assume it’s all their doing. Pathetic, self-important little humans. They think they’ll stop it with their international treaties and carbon dioxide credits and hybrid cars!” He gave a deep, maniacal laugh, and the Rahkshi snickered with him.

I sighed and turned back to my food.

“And that brings me to an important subject.” Makuta stood and cleared his throat. “Boys, I have an announcement to make. As you know, I have one more filming session to attend on Metru

Nui, and then a book to re-enact, and then a big role in next year's storyline. I'm going to be staying busy for a while. So tomorrow you're going to clear all of your things out the lair. All the equipment has to go into the deep storerooms—you know, down below the Bohrok. The garden, the chemistry lab, the satellite control console, the rat cages—everything. Leave the nuclear reactor for now, and of course the living room, spare parts room, and my office furniture, because I'll be using them for a few more weeks. But all your projects have to go into storage."

The news was met with much muttering and grumbling.

"After you're done with the cleanup, you'll be going back into stasis," continued their master. "I've got some important business on a faraway island, and I can't let you run around on your own for a whole year."

The groans grew louder, and finally Makuta slammed the butt of his staff onto the ground to quiet them. "If you pack everything away, you'll be able to set it all up again after I wake you up. Otherwise, I'll have to take everything you've been working on and blast it into atoms."

"Well, at least we'll get our projects back," said Shadrahk, trying to reassure his brothers.

"Yeah, I guess that will be okay," Invulnerahk agreed.

Vorahk raised his hand. "Master, what about our Rahkous tour? Can we do that before we start cleaning up?"

Makuta scratched his chin. "Maybe. But it's got to happen right away. And it's got to be quick."

The Rahkshi of Hunger sat back and did a few mental calculations. "We'll do three songs in each Wahi," he proposed. "Two that we know already and one original tune. Counting travel and setup time, we should be able to do the whole thing in one day." He glanced at Invulnerahk, who nodded. "And we'll need one day of really intense practice beforehand to pull the whole thing together."

"All right," Makuta consented. "The band can rehearse tomorrow while the others pack. Then the next day, the concert tour will be our last celebration together before we store the instruments and you all go into stasis."

"Good times!" Vorahk grinned.

"Give tanks," whispered Florahk. "De music got us out of dween de hard labor."

"Now, boys, take your plates to the kitchen and get to bed. You've got a big day ahead of you tomorrow." The creatures complied with a great deal of shoving and hissing.

Watching the flurry of Rahkshi movement, I realized their usual pandemonium might give me a chance to escape during the packing, or failing that, the concert. I considered whether it would

make more sense to escape to Metru Nui or through the Mangaia portal. The Lorahk were easier to distract than the Manas, but the journey was much longer and more perilous.

Then I felt Makuta's claw on my shoulder. Startled, I spun around. He had a bowl of chocolate-covered strawberries in the other hand and a bottle of champagne under his arm. "Sweetheart, let's go back to your office."

Resigned to going along for the time being, I followed Makuta back through the tunnels. I dismounted and stowed the Ussanui while he pulled two champagne flutes from a cabinet under the bookshelf. He motioned for me to sit on the couch and uncorked the bottle. He filled the glasses with the bubbly beverage. "To us," he smiled, handing one to me and clinking his against it.

"To escape," I muttered to myself, taking a sip.

He set down his drink and offered me a strawberry. As I ate it, he procured a small black velvet box from his carapace. "And now, my angel, I present my gift to you. This," he said solemnly, opening it with a flourish, "is an ounce of my very essence. My life blood, if you will. Sealed in a crystal flask for you to wear over your heartlight." He lifted a glass vial on a tarnished chain and held it in front of my mask.

This was definitely the sort of gift I would have closed back up in its box and shoved to the back of the bookcase, if I had had the choice. But as I slid away from him, he looped the chain around my neck and welded the links together with his eyes. I tugged at the necklace, but it was strong, and it only dug into my neck. The chain was too short to pass over my head.

Frowning, I studied the tiny container. It held a darkly glowing, greenish-black substance. I tilted it and watched a bubble move from one end to the other. It was about the opacity and viscosity of used motor oil.

"You may be wondering why I said it might be of use to you someday," he continued. "It's more than a sentimental symbol of my readiness to bleed for you. It's also a source of great power, should you ever be in a situation that threatens your life. Just crush the vial and breathe in the vapors, beloved. You will be infused with destructive power beyond your imagining."

I fingered the chain. I could probably use the destructive power he had already given me to shatter a link, but with my erratic control, I might break the flask instead, and I really didn't want to expose myself to this ominously murky substance.

He leaned toward me expectantly. "Well?"

"Is it radioactive?" I asked suspiciously.

He chuckled. "No, of course not. It might burn a little when you inhale it simply because of its intensity, but it won't harm you."

I looked at him sideways. “Are you going to be able to track me with it?”

“To some extent. I’ve never used this method for locating a minion before because none have been worthy of the high personal cost, but it should give me your approximate direction and range. And it will sense whether or not you are in danger and convey that to me as well. Actually, I regret not giving it to you long ago, because I might have been able to spare you the perils of Metru Nui.”

“Except for the ones you exposed me to yourself.”

He ignored my retort. “So, my lovely, what do you think?”

“Very nice,” I said flatly, making a mental note to look for a hacksaw in the automotive shop in the morning. I leaned across him and grabbed the blanket. “Now, how about going away and letting me get some—”

“What’s this?” he interrupted. “Why, you brought me a gift as well. How sweet!”

I looked at him in confusion. “No, I didn’t.”

He reached around to the compartment on my back and pulled out the vial I had grabbed off the counter of Roodaka’s laboratory. I inhaled sharply as he read the label. “‘Enslave.’ Hmm. This looks like one of Roodaka’s potions.”

I jumped up off the couch, but he reached out and caught me by the wrist. “I’m amazed it survived all your misadventures. But then, this vial appears to be quite shatter-resistant. The one I just gave you, on the other hand, is frangible by design, like the glass in a fire alarm. How did you get it, princess?”

Twisting in his iron grip, I said anxiously, “Let me go!”

“I’m guessing Roodaka didn’t give it to you,” he smirked. “Well, let’s see what it can do.” He uncorked the small bottle with his teeth and poured a few drops onto my forearm. The room was instantly filled with a sickly sweet aroma. “Mmm, you smell wonderful,” he breathed, releasing me.

I stepped back and glared at him sullenly, wondering what humiliating thing he would force me to do. He stood and held out his arms. “Darling, come dance with me.”

“No,” I said, surprised at how easy it was to refuse.

“I command you to dance with me!” he repeated, more firmly this time. I shook my head.

Makuta frowned and read the label again. “How can this be?” he wondered. “Oh, I see. Since Roodaka designed it, it must work only on male creatures. Any male close enough to smell it would be enslaved to the female who’s wearing it.”

My eyes widened as I considered the possibilities. I decided I'd better test it before I revealed any potential Plans. "Uh, Makuta, swim across the pool."

Without hesitating, the Master of Shadows dove into the water and crossed it. He got out on the other side, dripping wet. "What next, adored one?"

I gestured at the rainbow-colored film floating on the surface. "Clean up the grease."

He shot a blast of heat at the pool, and the oil caught fire. Soon the black smoke had drifted away and the water was sparkling again. He evaporated the water off himself as well.

I decided to try a more definitive test. "Now, give me the vial."

He frowned at me. "Do you really think my resolve is that weak, cupcake? Roodaka's compounds are strong, but so is my will."

I remembered what he had said about the potency of her effect increasing with closeness, and I walked around the pool and stood next to him. "Give me the vial, Makuta."

Suddenly docile, he handed me the flask. My heart leaped with hope. "Promise you'll never put me in stasis," I said, my voice as steady as I could manage.

"But sweetheart, it's for your own good," he protested.

I dabbed some more elixir on my wrist. "Promise?"

He sighed. "Curse that sorceress! Fine. I promise I'll never put you in stasis."

I breathed deeply, trying to calm myself and conceal how excited I was about this new power. Now it was time for the most important request of all. "Actually, that won't really matter, because the next thing you are going to do is fly me to the LEGO parking lot."

A pained look crossed his Kanohi. "Darling, please don't ask me to do that," he pleaded.

I remembered how Roodaka had gotten her way and determined to do whatever it took, no matter how distasteful, to make the intoxicating fragrance work. "Come on, Makuta," I said sweetly, touching the side of his mask.

"I won't—" he began.

I put both arms around his neck and gazed into his eyes. "Please?"

"My angel, you're being unspeakably cruel," he said quietly. He launched himself into flight, lifting me onto his lap.

Cradling me gently, never taking his eyes off me, he flew slowly toward the living room. As we passed by the scorched sofa and the home theater system and veered into the tunnel leading to the Manas chamber, I tried to think of more favors to ask. I couldn't very well demand that he end his war against the Toa and his spell on Mata Nui, because that was the job LEGO had hired him to do. But one more idea did occur to me. "Makuta, promise me you won't tamper with the earth's climate any more."

"Well, I think the damage is done, but if it makes you happy, beloved, I won't do anything more to destabilize it," he smiled.

"Thank you," I replied. Worried the effect might wear off, I applied some more fluid to my wrists. I glanced at Makuta's submissive smile, and for a moment I reveled in the vertiginous rush of having this powerful despot under my thumb. Then it occurred to me that Roodaka must have felt exactly this way, too, and I was dismayed at myself for relating to such a wicked creature. Still, it was deliciously ironic that Roodaka's poison would be the key to my freedom.

With a wave of his hand, Makuta stilled the Manas, and we flew over their heads. Finally we emerged from the ground in the forest surrounding the LEGO parking lot, and he landed. Golden sunlight filtered through the trees, and the air smelled fresh and clean after being in a dank lair for so long. The Spirit of Destruction set me down, but he kept his arms around me. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. "Please don't go."

"Goodbye, Makuta," I smiled grimly, wriggling out of his grasp. I spun and sprinted toward the building. Then my legs tripped on something, and I tumbled onto the pavement. As I struggled against the glowing strands that entangled my limbs, Makuta ambled up to me. I tried to order him to free me, but no sound came out of my mouth. He shot a high-pressure jet of water at me from his hand. The aroma quickly faded away.

"Ever since I absorbed Nidhiki I've been wondering if I could spit an energy net," he mused. "Looks like I can."

I twisted and thrashed in my bonds, wishing I could scream. Evidently he had used silence power on me. I hoped fervently someone would happen to walk out of the building to take a lunch break and would see us.

"You know, I rather like you mute. No backtalk." He released the net with a touch of his staff, wrenched the vial out of my hand, and scooped me up off the ground. Slings me over his shoulder, he started for the tunnel. "You had me on the verge of cardiac arrest for a moment there, my lovely. But fortunately you made a critical mistake—you failed to exact a promise not to recapture you. You just don't think like a villain, even with the best tools of the trade at your fingertips."

He was squeezing my torso, so I couldn't retrieve an axe. Frustrated, I pounded on his back with my fists. All it did was make a clanging noise as he continued. "But you've done me a big favor, darling. This has been good practice. Now I know exactly how to counter Roodaka and her

potions. Before she can even get close, I'll hit her with silence, and then I'll give her a nice, cold shower."

I slumped forward over his shoulder, crestfallen that victory had slipped through my hands. By the time he had flown us back to my office, I was dry again. He laid me on the couch, tucked the blanket around me, and sat down by my feet. "Good night, precious. Sweet dreams. I know what I'll be dreaming about. Your slender blue arms, draped around my neck... your heartlight, beating so fast as you pulled yourself close to me... your soft breath on my mask... maybe I should be *thanking* Roodaka."

I wanted to retort that he had been spending too much time talking with his baker, but I was still voiceless. I rolled over in annoyance, nudging my new pendant aside so it wouldn't poke me, and pulled the blanket tighter.

"Don't be disappointed, darling. I don't need any chemicals to be besotted with you," Makuta remarked. "You're dangerous enough in your natural state." He flipped open a biography of Ivan the Terrible and began to read. I finally drifted off to sleep.

## 44. Words and Music

### **Bob Marley -- Waiting in Vain**

*I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 From the very first time I rest my eyes on you, girl,  
 My heart says follow t'rough  
 But I know, now, that I'm way down on your line,  
 But the waitin' feel is fine  
 So don't treat me like a puppet on a string,  
 'Cause I know I have to do my thing.  
 Don't talk to me as if you think I'm dumb  
 I wanna know when you're gonna come — soon.  
 I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 'Cause if summer is here,  
 I'm still waiting there  
 Winter is here,  
 And I'm still waiting there.*

*Like I said  
 It's been three years since I'm knockin' on your door,  
 And I still can knock some more  
 Ooh girl, ooh girl, is it feasible?  
 I wanna know now, for I to knock some more.  
 Ya see, in life I know there's lots of grief,  
 But your love is my relief  
 Tears in my eyes burn — tears in my eyes burn  
 While I'm waiting — while I'm waiting for my turn,  
 See!*

*I don't wanna wait in vain for your love  
 I don't wanna wait in vain for your love, oh!  
 I don't wanna — I don't wanna — I don't wanna — I don't wanna  
 I don't wanna wait in vain.  
 It's your love that I'm waiting on (I don't wanna — I don't wanna —  
 I don't wanna — I don't wanna — I don't wanna wait in vain)  
 It's me love that you're running from.*

I dreamed I was standing on the platform of the Kini-Nui at night, holding a microphone. Rahkous was arrayed behind me, and dark, multicolored floodlights illuminated the stone stage. Densirahk tapped on the edge of his snare drum, and the band began to play a bluesy acoustic number. Somehow I knew the lyrics, even though they were in a language I had never heard before. I opened my mouth and sang the first note, clear and strong, and the Rahkshi hissed with excitement. Then they started swaying with their hands in the air. We finished the song, and they clapped and shrieked. Makuta pushed his way through the crowd and stepped onto the stage. I looked up at his smiling Kraahkan as he strode toward me. Past his shoulder I saw rock raptors soaring on the air currents over the dark Le-Wahi jungle. They swerved and dove into the trees. I gasped as I heard screams of terror in the distance, but Makuta put his hands on the sides of my

head and turned my face toward his, and then there was only silence and the sound of my own heart beating.

I woke and blinked in the dim light. Makuta closed his book on Mao Tse Tung and set it onto a stack of volumes on the coffee table. He patted my foot. "Did you sleep well, princess?" he smiled.

"I guess," I muttered. "Except for my weird dream."

"You and your dreams," he chuckled. "You know, you really shouldn't let yourself get so emotional about other creatures. You'll wear yourself out. Besides, predators are a natural part of the universe."

I looked at him sideways, wondering if he had influenced my nocturnal thoughts or simply read them. "Sure, but I'm not going to let myself become prey."

"What exactly are you implying?" he frowned. When I frowned back at him, he stood up and stretched. "Well, darling, let's go see what's for breakfast." He hovered, waiting for me, so I climbed halfheartedly onto the Ussanui and followed.

Upon my entry into the dining room, the Rahkshi crowded around me to admire my new necklace. "I'm so happy for both of you," Shadrahk smiled, giving his master a knowing glance.

I sighed and made my way to the kitchen, where Bahka was ladling out portions of oatmeal from a large pot over the fire, and I remembered my offer to give him a lesson on the use of the new stove. I put on the Rau and asked him if he was still interested. His glowing eyes brightened. "Of course! As soon as I clean up the breakfast dishes." I nodded and went to sit with the Rahkshi.

Makuta and his sons were discussing the details of the cleanup. He organized them into teams for some of the more delicate operations, like moving Electrorahk and Fulgorahk's synchrotron radiation particle accelerator. As soon as the Rahkshi finished their food, they scurried off to get started, motivated by the incentive that the first team to finish would get to play on the Xbox.

Several of the Rahkshi were begging Vorahk to let them join the rock group, presumably to get out of doing the heavier work, but he kept shaking his head. "Sorry, dude, we don't need a kazoo in the band." "Nope, we're not gonna have a slide whistle, either." Finally he announced in a loud voice, "The Rahkous lineup is final. All right, guys, let's go practice. Master, can Mistress come with us?"

"If she wants to," he replied, looking down the table at me.

"I promised Bahka a cooking lesson. After that, I guess I'll hang out with the band." It seemed like a pleasant enough way to pass the time while I tried to think up a new Plan. I was relieved to have persuaded Makuta not to put me in stasis. Still, I wondered what he would decide to do with me instead while he went to work on the dangerous island in the next year's storyline.

Makuta approached the door, pausing to touch my hand. “Tell Shadrahk if you need me, love. I’m going to go prepare a little surprise for the Piraka. Have you ever seen a Mana-Ko? The Manas are small fry compared to these things.” A mischievous smirk on his Kraahkan, he stalked out.

After he left, I noticed that the fluid in the vial had lost its eerie shimmer. I took comfort in the thought it might be losing its potency with time. I picked up my bowl and spoon and headed for the kitchen. For the next half hour, I showed Bahka the basics of cooking with modern equipment. Shadrahk used his master’s computer to print a few recipes for us. While I watched Bahka mix and slice ingredients, I tried to think of an escape plan, but I couldn’t come up with anything I hadn’t already tried. Soon the massive dragon was happily stirring a pot of gumbo on the range while his first batch of cookies was baking in the oven.

The Rahkshi of Darkness and I walked over to the cabana and sat down next to Invulnerahk. Rahkous was on the sound stage, playing at full volume with its new members. As soon as Vorahk saw me, he stopped the music and set down his electric guitar. “Oh, good, there you are. We don’t have long to crank out these new songs, and I’m totally vapor-locked on the lyrics. Mistress, can you help me?”

“Uh, sure,” I shrugged. Maybe a Plan would come to me if I stimulated my imagination in a different way. “What kind of music will they go with?”

“Cool stuff,” he grinned. “Where do you want to start? The water village? That’s where you wanted us to take you when we showed you the island, remember?”

I rolled my eyes. “How could I forget?” It seemed like a thousand years before that the six Rahkshi with sets had taken me on a tour of each village, leaving mayhem in their wake. I had been terrified of these tall, lanky creatures with their fearsome powers and their inscrutable, sinister hissing—and even more so of their master. Since then I had learned his progeny were even more dangerously destructive than I had imagined, yet I feared only him.

Florahk started a gentle rhythm on the bongos, Densirahk joined in with a couple maracas, Accurahk plucked arpeggios on a harp, and Gravirahk flicked a switch on his amp so it sounded like a double bass. Vacuurahk drew air through pan pipes, producing a hauntingly sweet melody. Adaptarahk strummed an ordinary-looking electric guitar, and to my amazement, it sounded exactly like a ukulele.

“Wow, that sounds really different. It’s so... refreshing,” I remarked. “How about some sort of thing where a person is staggering out of the desert, and he comes over a crest and sees a pool of water?”

“Perfect,” he smiled, shoving a pad of paper and pencil at me. As I hummed along to the music, I scribbled some thoughts. After a lot of scratching out and inserting words, the thoughts evolved into the story of a weary traveler splashing his face, then slaking his thirst with the cool fluid, and finally diving in. I said, “How’s this?” I read my short poem aloud.

“That’s awesome,” crowed Vorahk. “OK, now how about the fire village?” He adjusted his amp, picked up his Flying V, and launched into a wailing riff that was immediately echoed by the heavy pounding of Gravirahk’s bass and punctuated by Densirahk’s aggressive drum work. “I’m thinking the dude is struggling to keep his temper,” the black Rahkshi shouted over the clamor, “and then he lets go at the end of the song. Then it *really* ramps up.”

“Got it,” I yelled back, wondering how the music could get any louder. As the band continued to crank out the punk metal, I jotted down some more lyrics. First I wrote of the furious, passionate energy of fire. The narrator described the power coursing through his body and his fight to control it before it consumed him. It was easy to end with an angry outburst, because all I had to do was think about Makuta. When I finished, I started to read the song to Vorahk, but he waved his pick at the microphone. “I can’t hear you. Use the mic.”

I stepped up onto the stage and barked the lyrics into the microphone. My enraged words echoed back at me, and it was almost frightening to hear them so strongly amplified. But the Rahkshi hissed with approval. Invulnerahk and Shadrahk got out of their chairs to thrash around to the beat. The guitarist finished the song with a bone-shaking run of chords that knocked some of the wooden masks off the walls. As the sound finally died down, he grinned, “Wow! Our gentle Mistress turns out to be a rap metal diva!”

“Uh, yeah,” I blinked. “That did sound pretty fiery, I guess.” My ears were ringing, and I felt slightly dizzy, so I went back to my chair and sat down.

Shadrahk flopped himself back into his seat. “That was quite a compelling piece of writing.”

“Yeah, that even made *me* feel the heat,” agreed the gray Rahkshi, landing on the other side of me.

“Thanks.” I thought about what Makuta had once said about playing the guitar when Pinky had posed as one, and I wondered if that was where the band had learned to make such a powerful sound. “Say, have you ever heard your master play music?”

Shadrahk nodded. “Yes, once. He has a specially modified guitar. It sounds like a cacophony of thunder, only more so, because so many notes resonate at once.”

“Everyone else was blown backwards, but I was standing right next to him, rocking out,” Invulnerahk said proudly. “Vorahk says that’s probably how I got dain bramage.”

“Talk about your grunge power-chord mega-meltdown! It totally rules. He pours all his rage and power into it.” Vorahk set his guitar on a stand. “Master makes Disturbed sound like Raffi.”

I imagined the heavy metal frontman with his shaved head and multiple facial piercings singing cheerful acoustic songs to a group of children. “I see.”

“Maybe someday I’ll be able to rock like Master,” added the black Rahkshi. He picked up a Les Paul, plugged it in, and strummed it to check the tuning. “OK, if you’re ready to slow down the

tempo, Mistress, the Le-Wahi song is a complete contrast to that one. It's mellow and uplifting, with a reggae beat."

Florahk smiled wryly as he pulled his bongo drums onto his lap. "Bout time for nudder cool jam, mon. Dat last song sound like de train jump de tracks." Densirahk poked him in the ribs with a drumstick. He laughed and started tapping his drums. Accurahk joined in with his electronic keyboard on a Hammond organ setting, Vacuurahk played a trombone, and Adaptarahk shook a maraca with one hand and played a hand-carved xylophone with the other.

I picked up the paper again and began to write, inspired by the easy rhythm of the band. I wrote of the sensation of breathing a breath, of feeling the breeze on my face. I finished with the vertiginous sensation of the wind under my imaginary wings. I stood up to read my poem. "C'mere, Mees," Florahk invited me. "Me dween de singin' on dees one."

I stepped over to his stool and handed him the paper, and he sang the first verse. "Ah sey one, you caught de spirit of de island breeze," he grinned. "Why you naa sing de harmony wit me?"

I began to sing the chorus, a third higher than his smooth voice. The song seemed to roll along on its own momentum. After a long, rambling ending, Florahk finished with a patter of bongo beats. "Respect! Dat be de bes' one yet."

Vorahk chuckled. "You're just saying that because half the instruments grew in your garden, Budrahk."

Makuta's gravelly voice came from a shadowy corner. "Sweetheart, you never told me you could sing." He stepped past Shadrahk into the light.

"Uh, you never asked," I muttered. I glanced up at the lofty ceiling, halfway expecting to see carnivorous birds circling there.

"Actually, I *have* asked you to sing for me," he replied. "Back when I had the synthesizer-disguised-as-a-concert-grand-piano. Remember?"

As he stepped onto the stage and approached, I backed slowly into the bass drum. Densirahk extended his hands in time to stop me from falling backwards into the cymbals. "Oh, right. But I'm not very good." I glanced down at the vial. The fluid was glowing again.

"I can tell you have a wonderfully sweet voice, love. Someday you and I will do a duet," he smiled, taking my chin in his hand. I swallowed anxiously.

"That's going to be cool!" exclaimed Invulnerahk. "I can't wait to see it."

"Uh, dude, I don't think we'll be invited," said Vorahk in a low voice.

“But not today, because I don’t want to risk demolishing my lair just yet,” said Makuta offhandedly, releasing my chin. “It’ll have to wait until I bring you out of stasis again. In the meantime, I guess I’ll have to settle for listening to you sing with my sons.”

“Stasis?” I sputtered. “But—but you promised me you wouldn’t.”

He looked into my frightened eyes. “I’m a villain, darling. I don’t have to keep promises unless I want to.”

My jaw dropped in dismay. All the unpleasant things I had done to make the Enslave potion work on him had been completely worthless.

“It’s really not going to be so bad for you, my water lily. It will only be difficult for me. I’m going to miss you so much.” He stroked my neck.

“You kept all your promises to Roodaka,” I protested. “You built her a spa, and a basketball court, and a bowling alley, and a roller coaster...”

“Yes, I did,” Makuta groaned. “Oh, fine. I won’t put you in stasis. Well, it looks like I’m back to cursing her.” He crossed his arms. “But now you’ve put me in a bind. I can’t take you with me, and I can’t leave you here, unless you’re safely packed away.”

“You can let me go home,” I suggested hopefully. “I’ll be safe there.”

“You know, I’m actually not so averse to that idea anymore, now that I know how involved I’ll be in next year’s storyline,” he said thoughtfully. “I just need something to remember you by until we can be together again. And you keep rejecting my ideas.”

I squinted at him. “You seem to have this whole lair under constant surveillance. What about all the security camera films? Aren’t there enough of those to satisfy your obsession?”

“Oh, I can watch video of you for hours. But it’s not like you’re performing for me. I want a gift from your heart, intended especially for me. Something to prove that all these years of waiting for your love haven’t been in vain.” He sighed deeply. “Maybe I’m just a hopeless romantic.” Then his downcast eyes brightened. “Say, I could store you in one of those Matoran spheres.”

“That’s just like being in stasis,” I said nervously.

“It’s not the same thing,” explained the Master of Shadows. “In both cases you’re in suspended animation, but the sphere allows your bodily functions to continue at a very slow rate. In stasis, they stop altogether.”

My shoulders slumped in despair at the prospect. Then Shadrahk spoke in a quiet voice. “Technically, Master, you’re correct as usual. But putting her in a Matoran sphere would violate the spirit of your promise. And besides, what if she loses her memory? Or shrinks? You spent so long getting her design just the way you wanted it.”

“I can control those things,” his master retorted sharply. “And I don’t recall asking for your opinion, Shadrahk.”

“My apologies, Master.” The Rahkshi of Darkness lowered his head.

Makuta looked me up and down. “At least, I’m pretty sure I can control those things.” There was an uneasy silence. The Rahkshi glanced at each other.

“Hey, Master,” said Vorahk suddenly. “Speaking of performing, why don’t you record the new songs Mistress is writing for the tour? You could listen to them when she’s gone and think of her.”

The Spirit of Destruction raised an eyebrow. “Now, that’s an intriguing idea. What has she been writing?”

“She’s doing lyrics for each of the six elements—you know, water, fire, ice, and so on. The tunes are original Rahkous material, each in a different musical genre. The one we just played was the Air song.”

“Ah, the Toa elements,” grumbled his master. “But she’s writing those lyrics for you, not me.”

As everyone fell quiet again, my mind raced. The idea of recording original music was much more palatable than anything Makuta had proposed, and it was just an extension of something I had been doing already. I didn’t want to lead him on, but perhaps I could make it slightly more interesting for him. “I told the Rahkshi I would write six songs. I wasn’t planning to *sing* them,” I said slowly. “But I could sing them for you. That could be my gift.”

He turned to me, beaming. “Why, that that’s a splendid idea, sweetheart!”

My hope soared, but after the last near-escape, I hastily clarified the terms. “So, if I write and sing the six songs for you, you’ll record them, and then you’ll let me go home—er, back to my house?”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “Yes, my lovely, I’ll drive you back to your house. But I want you to do *seven* songs.”

“Why would you want a song about light?” I asked, puzzled.

“Darkness,” he growled.

“Oh, right,” I murmured apologetically. “Then it’s a deal?”

“It’s a deal,” he agreed. “Let’s seal it with a kiss.”

“How about a handshake?” I stuck out my hand to keep him from getting any closer.

He grasped my fingers and kissed my hand. “Well, I’ll let you get back to practicing. I’ll bring the recording equipment to the concert tomorrow. I can’t wait to hear it. Oh, how it will warm my heart when you’re far away, just to hear your sweet voice!” Smiling, he pivoted and walked off the stage.

Shadrahk and Vorahk quietly clanked their staffs together. “Good job, Sarge,” whispered the Rahkshi of Darkness.

“Glad you said something, General,” replied Vorahk. “Mistress could have ended up a mind-wiped midget.”

As Makuta reached the doorway, he turned around. “Wait a minute. Invulnerahk, you don’t play an instrument. You should be helping your brothers move.”

“I’m the official roadie,” explained the gray Rahkshi proudly. “I’m in charge of moving all the gear from one Wahi to the next.”

“I see. Well, you’ve certainly got a big job.” His master gestured at the vast array of musical equipment.

Florahk set down his bongos. “Hey, dat remine me. Gwine go see if de bredren be treatin’ de garden aright. Ah be right back.” He hurried past Makuta and Invulnerahk.

“Well, let’s go ahead with Ko-Koro,” suggested Vorahk. “We don’t need the jungle beat for this one, because it’s totally electronic. It’s Sharpie’s fave.”

The hands of the Rahkshi of Accuracy danced over his keyboard, producing an assortment of bizarre electronic noises. Vorahk strapped on the Flying V again and started playing with him, and the others joined in. I picked up my pencil and began to daydream about walking through the frozen wastes of Ko-Wahi. Soon I had penned a story about a traveler who stares in fascination at the crystalline beauty before realizing he’s been overtaken by the cold. He continues to admire the icy perfection around him as his body slowly shuts down.

“Creepy! I like it,” remarked Vorahk after I had read it aloud. “Even Frigirahk is going to shiver.”

Across the room, Plasmarahk and Tacirahk flew in from a tunnel carrying a new couch. They set it down, and the Rahkshi of Plasma vaporized the old one. Then they flew back out.

Florahk zoomed in, waving his hand in front of his face. “Wha’ppun? Sum’ady bun de furniture?” He waved his staff, and some vines sprouted from the floor. They quickly bloomed and filled the air with their scent instead.

“That was Plasmarahk, finishing the job Burns started. You got back just in time, dude,” chuckled Vorahk. “All right, let’s do the Earth song.”

Densirahk began to pound out a slow, steady beat on three drums at once, sounding a bit like a chain gang. Vorahk echoed the blows with palm-muted chops of his strings. “Sound like the inside of a mine to you?” he asked.

“Yeah, that gives me an idea,” I replied, scribbling. “A mine at work, then after everyone leaves, when it’s quiet and cool and humid.”

“OK. We’ll slide into something dreamy,” nodded the Rahkshi of Hunger. “Like the Mata Nui Online Game had when you went to Onu-Koro.”

“You guys played that?” I asked.

“Sure. Master made us. We had to know our way around for the *Mask of Light*.”

I smiled wryly and kept working on the lyrics. Soon I was reading the poem to the band. They transitioned from rhythmic tool strikes into slowly shifting ethereal harmonies, just as I had imagined, and finished the song with a fade effect by Sonirahk on the sound board.

“Right on,” cheered Vorahk at the end of the song. “So, here’s what I’m thinking for Po-Wahi. Picture yourself in the middle of a bunch of really imposing cliffs.” He struck a series of majestic chords. “Now Panwreck comes along, and you can guess the rest.” He scrubbed his pick up and down the strings as his fingers flew all over the fret board. His band mates played chaotically behind him.

I squinted at him. “Sure, but that’s more about destruction than about stone.”

“Hmm, maybe so. What have you got?”

“How about we do a thing on the geologic cycle? If you sped up time, you could see the stone moving. Rock is pushed up by plate tectonics, and earthquakes bring it tumbling back down. It’s built up in layers on the ocean floor, then exposed to the weather and eroded by rain and wind, and so on. But if you consider how the stone looks on any given day, it seems permanent.”

“That’s really cosmic, Mistress. For sure, we can do that.” He began again with the same intro. Then, during Vorahk’s regular chord progression, Gravirahk’s bass shifted keys, creating musical tension. Vorahk resolved it with a flurry of notes, ending in the same key. Densirahk provided cymbals and bass drum beats for a cataclysm, and then everyone quieted down again. Throughout the song Accurahk’s atmospheric keyboard sounds provided continuity. I wrote furiously to keep up.

“That fits my lyrics really well,” I smiled. The Rahkshi all gathered to clank staffs with me before we took our places to do the final song about darkness.

I felt a sudden lurch in the pit of my stomach as I sat down with my pad and pencil. Even though the writing had been easy and pleasant in the company of such talented musicians, I couldn't help but think of my dream. Was Makuta planning to use my songs to victimize someone?

Bahka walked in with a pot of gumbo and a stack of bowls, and the band took a break to taste his latest creation. As we ate, I wondered about my rushed decision to make another deal with Makuta. I wondered if I would I come to regret this Faustian bargain as much as I had the bath agreement that had resulted in such a long, painful ordeal. But at least there were no hostile creatures involved in the music Plan, and it was still possible to back out. If I saw a sign of foul play on Makuta's part, I could simply stop singing. I decided to keep working with the Rahkshi until I had some indication it would backfire.

All agreed the gumbo was delicious. The dragon chef tried his cookies on us, and the response was even more eager. Bahka nodded his thanks and took the dishes back to the kitchen. Once again I stared at an empty sheet of paper.

Vorahk strapped on the Flying V again. "We haven't done anything for darkness yet, so we'll just mess around while you write and see if we can figure something out. I'm thinking a metal ballad would be good."

"I guess so." What would I write about the force that powered my captor? My mind was gripped by uncertainty and fear, amplified by the dirge-like music the band was playing. Makuta had agreed too easily to the singing deal. I became more and more convinced that he was going to sabotage my efforts somehow. Would he hit me with silence power again just as I took the stage, and then blame my dumbness on stage fright? Would he create some cataclysm-and-"rescue" situation that would cut the tour short? Or, worse yet, maybe he had some sort of Plan to use my music against me. But how could lending my voice to his sons' music be of any practical benefit to him? Would he play it for the Toa as propaganda, perhaps, telling them I had defected to his side? As a peripheral Bionicle being, I didn't see how this would affect them, other than to irritate them further. They certainly couldn't like him any less. Besides, with his technical acumen, he could splice together enough audio clips of my voice to accomplish that without my help.

I must have been staring at the paper for some time, because Shadrahk was repeating, "Mistress? Mistress? Are you all right?"

"Uh, yeah." I looked at his concerned eyes. "I guess I'm just having writer's block."

The Rahkshi of Darkness smiled. "Maybe I can help. I know a thing or two about the subject."

"Oh, right," I replied. "Well, do you have any ideas?"

"What emotions does darkness elicit in you?" he asked. "Reach into your inner darkness."

I hesitated because it sounded dangerous, but if it helped me fulfill my part of the bargain, it would be worth the risk. As long as I kept it generic, maybe Makuta wouldn't be able to twist my words. "Well, fear... confusion... disorientation... stuff like that."

"Write those down. What are you afraid of?"

I jotted the words before answering. "Not knowing. Losing purpose. Being used for evil. Falling into an abyss of nothingness, and dying a meaningless death."

"Write those down."

I complied, my throat tightening as I let the feelings engulf me. "And I'm afraid of yielding ground to my own despair, and sinking into madness. Losing my grip, becoming suicidal."

Shadrahk's eyes widened. "This is perfect, Mistress. Keep writing."

I folded my arms across my chest and clutched my own shoulders. "And finally giving up. Letting go of everything I trust, and falling into the arms of darkness." Shaking, I laid my head down on my knees.

"It's all right, Mistress." I felt a hand tentatively touch my back. "You're safe with us. You don't have anything to fear."

I sat up and forced myself to breathe regularly. "Thanks."

"When you feel ready, write down the rest of that. Master is going to be absolutely delighted," the Rahkshi of Darkness said gently.

I looked at him in alarm. Was he in on this Plan, whatever it was?

"It'll make him so happy to listen to the one he loves sing of his favorite emotions. And it'll be your ticket to freedom," he smiled. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't be in favor of that, but the alternatives seem unpalatable at this point. And since I'll be in stasis, I'll be unable to protect you."

My eyes narrowed as I studied his reptilian face. Perhaps he just wanted my attempt to succeed.

Vorahk announced, "We've got a tune worked up. How's this?" He launched the song with a mournful progression of heavy minor chords, and Accurahk supplied an eerie melody reflected by a wandering counter-melody on Gravirahk's bass. The musicians ground out the perfect grunge rock for my nihilistic ballad, but I couldn't bring myself to repeat the lyrics. Submerged in the emotion again, I stared at the floor. The feelings were too close to the quick for me to risk speaking the words.

"That one's going to be the bomb," said Vorahk solemnly after finishing the music with a blast of discordant minor sound. "Let's take a Coke break while we figure out which other songs we'll

do. Then we'll practice everything." He led the procession of Rahkshi to the refrigerator. They returned to find me still in my chair, chin in my hands.

Gravirahk handed me a soda, and the Rahkshi sat down around me with their drinks. Soon they had generated a list of songs, two for each Wahi. "T'ree songs hardly seem wut de trip 'tween de villages," remarked Florahk.

"Yeah, it isn't much, but Master says we have to keep it short. We'll repeat the choruses an extra time. And we can draw the songs out with long outros," replied Vorahk. "Just ask Densirahk. I'm the king of long outros." The drummer flailed his arms as if they were exhausted, and the others snickered.

Recharged, the band took the stage again. Vorahk offered to teach me the rhythm guitar parts to all the songs, and I agreed, mostly to keep my mind off my predicament. After the trauma of plunging into my inner fears to write the Darkness song, I decided to stop second-guessing my decision. The music Plan was the most sensible and straightforward one yet, and besides, I hadn't come up with anything else even remotely plausible. I would remain alert to danger without letting myself become pointlessly agitated. I told the Rahkshi I would save my first performance of the Darkness song for the concert to keep the feeling fresh and raw, and they seemed to agree with this logic.

After a long afternoon of practicing, dinner was ready. Bahka proudly shuttled a seemingly endless supply of home-baked pizza out of the kitchen. The Rahkshi devoured the pies enthusiastically. They were hungry from their work, and besides, the pizza was excellent. The thin, yeasty crust was perfectly golden, the sauce spicy, the cheese thick and stretchy, and the sausage savory. Makuta made a brief speech congratulating the Rahkshi on their successful move, which had been accomplished with only a few small explosions and toxic spills. Everyone ate his fill with minimal conversation and then staggered off to bed. Makuta intercepted me at the doorway as the last of his offspring cleared out. He had just started some romantic music on the stereo.

"It's our last night together for a whole year, my lovely," he said softly. "Let's make it memorable. Will you dance with me?"

"Uh, no, I'd rather not," I replied, hoping he wouldn't insist. "I'm really tired from all the rehearsing, and I've got a big day tomorrow."

"Just one little dance?" He took my arm and led me into the living room.

"No, thanks," I repeated.

He sighed. "I had really hoped... Well, I suppose you do need your rest, darling." He followed the Ussanui as I flew to the office.

Makuta sat at the end of the couch, watching me as I spread out the blanket. "Won't you come sleep in my sheltering arms?"

I looked at him sideways. “No.” I lay down and rolled myself up in the blanket.

He was quiet for a moment before he spoke. “I won’t do you any harm. I just want to be close to you for a little while. A year is such a long time.”

I glanced up at him, his pockmarked mask silhouetted by a pale blue lightstone, and for a moment, I felt a pang of pity for him. Perhaps he *was* just a forlorn weirdo, engrossed in a futile search for a companion to share the same twisted dreams that condemned him to solitude. Because he didn’t know how to give real love, he would never in his long life experience receiving it.

Then I remembered what he had put me through, and I turned my eyes away. It wasn’t *my* fault he was lonely. Tomorrow, if all went according to Plan, I would no longer be entangled in his nightmare.

## 45. Band of Brothers

### **Bruce Hornsby and the Range – Mandolin Rain**

*The song came and went  
Like the times that we spent  
Hiding out from the rain under the carnival tent  
I laughed and she'd smile  
It would last for awhile  
You don't know what you got till you lose it all again*

*Listen to the mandolin rain  
Listen to the music on the lake  
Listen to my heart break  
Every time she runs away  
Listen to the banjo wind  
A sad song drifting low  
Listen to the tears roll  
Down my face as she turns to go*

*A cool evening dance  
Listening to the bluegrass band takes the chill  
From the air till they play the last song  
I'll do my time  
Keeping you off my mind but there's moments  
That I find, I'm not feeling so strong*

*Running down by the lakeshore  
She did love the sound of a summer storm  
It played on the lake like a mandolin  
Now it's washing her away again*

*The boats steaming in  
I watch the sidewheel spin and I  
Think about her when I hear that whistle blow  
I can't change my mind  
I knew all the time that she'd go  
But that's a choice I made long ago*

*Listen to the mandolin rain  
Listen to the music on the lake  
Listen to my heart break  
Every time she runs away  
Listen to the banjo wind  
A sad song drifting low  
Listen to the tears roll  
Down my face as she turns to go*

I woke in the semi-darkness and looked around. To my relief, Makuta was gone. I pulled the blanket around me and lay down again for a few more minutes of rest. Today was the day I was to sing for my freedom. I wondered if it was a good thing or not.

Then I noticed that the vial hanging around my neck was glowing. That meant my kidnapper was probably still in the room somewhere. Besides, I detected a faint odor of axle grease in the air. “Makuta?” I called.

To my horror, the blanket enfolding me transformed into the Master of Shadows. I thrashed to extricate myself and rolled onto the floor. Jumping to my feet, I glared at him. “You duplicitous creep!”

“You have to admit, beloved, that you were contentedly cozy all night,” he grinned as he sat up. “You slept like a baby.”

I dropped my mask into my hands. Whether or not he was just a lonely nutjob, I had to do whatever it took to get away from this freak. I whistled for the Ussanui.

“I’ve already put them in stasis, precious. They and all the other loose kraata are safely stored down below,” Makuta explained. “But I’ll be happy to give you a ride.”

Taking comfort in the hope that this would be my last day of my bizarre captivity, I stepped over the real blanket and a book he had been reading, *Tyrants: History’s 100 Most Evil Despots and Dictators*, and climbed onto his lap. Soon we were in the dining room with the Rahkshi, who were lined up to receive a plate of French toast from the burly green and orange chef. The offspring of darkness were visibly excited about the prospect of a rock concert.

“Hey, Mistress!” Vorahk greeted me, taking off his iPod earbuds. “How’s the voice box this morning?”

“Mi mi mi mi mi,” I sang. “OK, I guess.”

He gave me a thumbs-up sign and strode past us into the kitchen. A moment later he crowed, “Awesome! There *is* some left,” and returned with a big tray. “Cold pizza. The breakfast of champions!” His band mates crowded around for a piece.

Shadrahk appeared at Makuta’s elbow. “Morning, Master and Mistress. I’ll take over from here while you set up the recording equipment. We’re starting the tour in Ga-Wahi, on the beach by what’s left of the village.”

Makuta nodded. “Thanks, son. Well, darling, I’ll see you onstage. Break a leg!” He leaned over to kiss the top of my head and stalked out.

Vorahk was waving a slice of pizza at me, but I declined and ate some French toast instead. Presently the Rahkshi started carrying their dishes to the kitchen. A few of them hissed at Shadrahk for guidance. He stood on a table and announced, “All right, everyone head on out to Ga-Koro, unless Invulnerahk has tapped you to help carry the gear.” The Rahkshi stampeded for the tunnel to the surface.

“Where is Hammerhead, anyway?” wondered Vorahk. “I haven’t seen him since yesterday morning.” He looked around the nearly empty dining room. “Wait a minute. There’s no one left but the band! How are we going to carry all this stuff?”

Shadrahk tilted his head at Densirahk. “Go see if he’s still in the barracks.”

Gravirahk shuffled over to the pile of equipment. He waved his staff, and it floated off the ground.

“Yeah, that’s all fine and good, but it’s still really bulky,” grumbled the Rahkshi of Hunger. “Man, I knew he was going to flake on us!” He snatched the case of his Flying V out of the air, slung it over his shoulder, and reached for an amp.

Just then Invulnerahk stumbled in, rubbing his eyes. Densirahk was walking behind him, prodding his brother’s backside with his staff. “Sorry, dudes,” the gray Rahkshi apologized. “I was up really late working on—hey, pizza!” He rolled up a slice, opened his head plates, and stuffed it down the craw of his kraata.

“Hammer, we don’t have time to watch you eat breakfast! We’ve got to get going!” said an exasperated Vorahk. “And just what is your plan for all this stuff? I didn’t hire you so I could carry my own gear!”

“Mmmph,” replied Invulnerahk. He gestured toward the ceiling. “Thmmmz mmmamm bmmmmzmm up mmmere. Mmmm really mmmmgry, because I missed dinner.” He jammed another piece of pizza into his mouth.

Shadrahk shrugged. “Well, he’s obviously useless. Everyone just grab something, and let’s get going.” He shouldered a coil of cables and picked up a guitar case. The other band members groaned and followed suit. I settled into Shadrahk’s lap with a keyboard across my knees, and we all flew into the tunnel and up the wide shaft toward the Kini-Nui.

We zoomed out of the ruined temple into the night sky. To my surprise, there was a school bus parked in the grass. It was neon green, with ‘RAHKOUS’ in large, dripping black letters over airbrushed blue flames. Underneath, it read “RAHK ‘N’ ROLL!” The front of the bus was painted to look like the muzzle of a ferocious animal with sharp teeth. The hubcaps sported chrome spinners, a police light bar was perched on top, and a kraata-shaped hood ornament glinted in the moonlight.

The band members landed and set down their loads, glancing at each other in astonishment. Florahk exclaimed, “Bredren, dem be some wicked wheels!”

Vorahk blinked a few times. “Dude,” he said slowly.

Accurahk hissed, and Shadrahk chuckled. “Oh, what’s a couple of backwards *Ks* between friends?”

Sonirahk peered inside the open door and then gestured for everyone to follow. The seats were clad in green and black zebra-striped fake fur, and an immense video screen covered the back window. Next to it was a stack of electronic components and a bar with a small refrigerator.

Invulnerahk bounded up the steps behind us. “Do you like it?”

As the others hissed energetically in agreement, Vorahk solemnly draped the cords of his iPod over Invulnerahk’s shoulders. He pressed the tiny white device into his brother’s armored palm.

“Sweet!” exclaimed the gray Rahkshi. He switched on the player, put in the earbuds, and immediately started a vigorous air-guitar solo. “This guy is almost as good as you,” he grinned.

Vorahk rolled his eyes. “Good old Hammer. He came through after all.”

“This is great,” Shadrahk agreed. “So, does anyone know how to drive?”

Adaptarahk raised his hand. He slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine while everyone else stacked the equipment on the sturdy-looking rack of plus rods welded to the top of the vehicle. Invulnerahk flew around strapping everything down with thick bungee cords.

In a few minutes we were bumping over the scarred turf of the Kini-Nui, swerving around chunks of fractured columns, toward a Matoran footpath that led in the direction of Ga-Wahi. Popping open a Dr. Pepper, Vorahk pulled one of the earbuds off Invulnerahk’s head. “Dude, where did you get a bus, anyway?”

“Master gave it to me. He took me down to the automotive shop yesterday and let me customize it while he was working on his car.” He paused to take a sip of Mountain Dew. “He was putting in a windshield and tinting all his windows. Oh, and replacing the cracked passenger window. He said Mistress would know about that.”

“Uh, yeah, I did that with my head,” I said sheepishly.

“Cool! Maybe we should call *you* Hammerhead,” he remarked.

I laughed. “So that’s why you missed dinner and didn’t get much sleep?” I asked.

“Yep.” Invulnerahk settled into his seat and sighed as I rubbed his shoulders. “But it was totally worth it.”

“Well, I gotta say, I feel like a real rock star.” The black Rahkshi stretched out his legs. “You da man, Hammer.”

A half hour of a Jackie Chan movie made the time pass quickly while we careened down the dirt road through lush Ga-Wahi forests and fields. Adaptarahk brought the bus right up to the beach, stopping the motor when the tires got stuck in the sand. The huge Kaukau statue with water

cascading from it, although fractured almost beyond recognition, confirmed that this had once been the site of the Matoran water village. Shards of wood lay scattered on the shore.

Makuta had crafted a stone platform for the occasion, and Invulnerahk scurried to set up the musical equipment opposite the recording apparatus. The Master of Shadows greeted us warmly. The other Rahkshi were milling around, wrestling and kicking sand at each other. Some of them were playing with their powers: Cyclorahk stirred up a sandstorm, while Laserahk burned a Rahkshi logo into the sand with his eyes. Invulnerahk unloaded a big cooler of drinks, and they swarmed around him to grab refreshments. As the band took the stage, they ran over and sat around it.

After a quick mic check, Vorahk got everyone's attention with a trio of power chords. "Are you ready to Rahk the Island?" he yelled. The Rahkshi jumped up and screeched in approval. "OK, we're going to start out kind of mellow, in the land of Mistress's element."

Densirahk tapped out a slow rhythm, and the band began to play "Take Me to the River" by the Talking Heads. Accurahk's keyboard, set to an organ-like vibrato, punctuated palm-muted acoustic guitar strumming. I had an uneasy flashback to the bath I had given Makuta as Vorahk sang in a staccato voice, "I wanna know that you'll tell me, 'I love to stay'... Take me to the river, drop me in the water, push me in the river, dip me in the water, washing me down, washing me..."

Then our capable keyboardist used water-like atmospheric sounds to transition into "Aqueous Transmission" by Incubus, with Adaptarahk's Variax set to mimic a sitar, Vacuurahk's sweet flute counterpoint, and lots of mellow drumming by Florahk. The fluid sounds blended with the gentle song of the waves while Vorahk crooned, "Lying face up on the floor of my vessel, I marvel at the stars, and feel my heart overflow, further down the river..." With every line of the lyrics, I flipped over the bamboo-and-rice-grain rainstick Florahk had crafted. I closed my eyes and swayed with the rhythm, wishing I was floating on a river. At the end of the song, the instruments faded, leaving only the sounds of croaking Ghekula.

The Rahkshi hissed their approval, and soon Vorahk was starting Rahkous's original composition for the water village. I stepped up to the microphone. I probably would have been nervous, except that the music we had just played had put me in a relaxed mood. I sang the first verse to subdued applause and soft whistles from the audience.

Then the Rahkshi began to point and murmur among themselves. I turned around to see a glistening, transparent bipedal being walking out of the surf. Ahkwa stepped onto the stage, smiling. "Far out!" exclaimed Vorahk, repeating a few measures of the instrumental interlude to give her time to look at my lyrics sheet. We sang the rest of the song together, her warbling voice soaring a fifth above mine, before I spotted the turbulence brewing inside her. Alarmed that our equipment would be damaged, I pulled my axes off my back and used my water powers to contain and shape her into a sphere. Then I stepped off the stage, drawing her along behind me. The band continued the long outro that Vorahk had promised, to wholehearted cheering by the other Rahkshi.

When we were a safe distance away from the electronics, I released Ahkwa from my hold. She exploded into a joyous shower of droplets, regrouped into a biped, and put her arms around me. “Play?” She pointed a diaphanous finger toward the sea.

I glanced at the band. They had finished the song and joined the others, cavorting in the sand while Invulnerahk packed up the instruments. Accurahk, who was very particular about how his harp was handled, was helping. I decided I had a few minutes to spare, so I nodded.

The water elemental and I ran to the ocean and dove into a wave that was just breaking onto the shore. It was difficult to see my companion, but I could sense where she was. We swam in circles around each other, raced along the sea floor, and draped seaweed fronds around each other’s necks. When I estimated that enough time had passed for the bus to be loaded, I told her goodbye. She plucked an iridescent shell from the sand as a gift for me, then waved and swam away. I waded back to the shore, feeling cool and refreshed.

Makuta walked up to me, holding out his arms. “That was marvelous, darling! And the harmony with your kindred water creature was positively heavenly.”

I backed away a little. “Did you get your recording?”

“Yes, I did,” he replied, gesturing at his recording equipment, which was already stacked in a neat pile. “You look like you’re enjoying yourself, playing music with my sons and the elemental I created.”

“I am, actually.” I gave him a quick smile. “Well, I guess I’d better get back on the bus.” I turned and hastened toward the others.

Invulnerahk was tying down the gear, and the Rahkshi were gathering around Vorahk for directions to the next gig. “We’re going to Ta-Koro. But, hey, there’s room in the bus for you guys. Why don’t you just pile in with the band?” he suggested. They did, with a lot of jostling and bouncing.

When Pinky started to jump onto the steps, Shadrahk held up his hand. “Wait a minute. You’ve had a few too many, pal.”

Pinky looked at the can of Red Bull he was holding. Vorahk put his hand on the shapeshifting Rahkshi’s shoulder. “Yeah, no offense, Pinkster, but you’re pretty hopped up. Why don’t you fly alongside us?” The blue and gold Rahkshi sprang up, turning a cartwheel as he emptied his energy drink and flung away the can. Then he buzzed in circles around the bus.

Adaptarahk started the engine and rocked the vehicle back and forth in the sand, but it was hopelessly stuck. Gravirahk hissed for the others to get out and then waved his staff at it, and several Rahkshi pushed the floating bus until it was over solid ground. It dropped and lurched forward as Adaptarahk gunned the motor. He hit the brakes and waited for everyone to jump in, and then we were underway. After a sudden thump, Shadrahk stuck his head out the window. “It’s just Pinky. He’s surfing on top of the bus.”

The mood inside the big vehicle was lively. Bags of Cheetos and Chex Mix were passed around, and happy chatter drowned out the CD and DVD players, which were operating simultaneously. Soon we had left the lush jungles and were zigzagging through the charred forest up to the very edge of the lava lake. As we stepped off the bus, we were met with a blast of hot, sulfurous air. The island supporting the fire village was half-submerged in the magma and the bridge was long gone, so Makuta had set up his console a few yards back from the shore. It was on a raised stone platform, allowing air to flow under it.

While Invulnerahk did his work, Pyrorahk swam the backstroke across the lake of fire, playfully splashing lava at his brothers on the rock above him. Plasmarahk aimed his staff at the magma beneath his brother so that it would bubble up even more fiercely around him. The Fire Resistance Rahkshi laughed as if it tickled. Therahk patiently healed the burns of the bystanders.

“Alright, guys,” said Vorahk into the microphone. “We’re in the fire village. It’s time to ramp it up a little. Burn stuff!” The Rahkshi screeched and scurried around the stage in anticipation. The black Rahkshi treated them to Nirvana’s “Lake of Fire”, with its odd take on the afterlife: “Where do bad folks go when they die? They don’t go to heaven where the angels fly. They go down to the lake of fire and fry, won’t see them again till the Fourth of July.” The slow, bluesy grunge was met with vigorous applause from the audience.

“And now we’ll ramp it up a lot,” grinned Vorahk, churning out grinding power chords to start “The Red” by Chevelle. I glanced uneasily at Makuta while his son sang, “So lay down, the threat is real, when his sight goes red again, seeing red again, seeing red again...” But the Rahkshi didn’t seem worried. They shrieked and danced, knocking chunks of hardened lava off the sheer cliff into the lake, until long after the last note finished ringing.

The oppressive, sultry atmosphere was starting to make me feel weak, but now it was my turn to perform a part more challenging than the rhythm guitar I had been playing. I stepped up to the mic stand and looked anxiously around while Vorahk re-tuned his instrument. Shadrahk nodded to Cyclorahk, and he stirred up a tiny whirlwind to cool me off a little. I smiled nervously and waved my thanks.

The heavy distorted punk rock kicked in, and soon I was screaming my angry lyrics into the microphone in a voice harsh and raspy from breathing the caustic air. The stomping of the Rahkshi’s frenzied, thrashing feet echoed off the surrounding stone. After the last chorus, Vorahk’s guitar solo went faster and faster, and the Flying V caught fire. Invulnerahk pulled a dry-chemical fire extinguisher out of the bus to douse it. The Rahkshi of Hunger kept playing, oblivious to the flames, heat, and white dust cloud that enveloped his face.

Finally the racket was over. Vorahk scratched his head and poked at the melted pick guard. “Man, my axe got really out of tune all of a sudden at the end of that last song. Hammer, you bring any extra strings?”

“Yeah, plenty,” called the roadie, hoisting a trunk onto the roof rack. “I’ll restring it as soon as we hit the road again.”

Parked on the hot stone so close to the magma flow, the tires of the bus had softened and gone flat. We waited for Invulnerahk to fly back to the lair for another set. Makuta sat next to me on a ledge overlooking the lake. “You sounded fabulous, love. And it’s all I can do to refrain from making a bad pun about how hot you looked.”

I crossed my arms. “Thank you for your restraint.”

“I must say, you seemed pretty mad. Remind me not to get on your bad side,” he grinned.

“Too late,” I muttered.

“Have you ever played in a band before, sweetheart? You seem to be having a good time.”

“No, I’ve never played with anyone, really,” I shrugged. “And yes, I’m having a good time. I never thought I’d say this, but the Rahkshi are good company.”

“Making music with someone else is an incredibly magic feeling,” he remarked. I nodded, hoping Invulnerahk would return soon.

“You don’t have to leave all this behind, you know,” he went on. “If you stay with me, you’ll be able to sing with the Rahkshi every day. And all the while, you’ll be gradually drawing out the good side of me with your sweetness. How could your ridiculous little morality tale about Takanuva possibly compare to the significance of that? You’re wasting time on the Toa while your true destiny awaits you. I assure you, stasis is no worse than closing your eyes for five minutes. When you wake, we’ll pick up right where we left off. I’ll even bring you a gift from Voya Nui.”

“Have *you* ever been put in stasis?” I asked.

“Well, no, but—”

I shook my head. “I’m sure you’ll understand why I don’t want to be, either.”

“Your situation is different, darling. I’ve never been loved by a powerful being I can trust,” Makuta replied, leaning back on his hands. “Keep thinking about it, beloved, and let me know if you change your mind. I certainly am enjoying the music in the meantime.”

We sat in silence, watching the mesmerizing flow of glowing liquid stone, until Invulnerahk emerged from between the charred tree trunks. He was flying slowly, with four tires hanging from a chain over his shoulder and two more around his waist. “I’m the Michelin Man!” he called as he zoomed toward the bus. Makuta helped him, jacking up the bus with pillars of stone he raised from the floor and wrestling the new tires onto the rims. Then he morphed his index finger into an air compressor hose and filled them.

“All right, kids, get out of here before those melt, too,” smiled the Master of Shadows as his hand returned to normal and the stone jacks subsided. He picked up his recording gear and flew away.

The Rahkshi swarmed into the bus, and we were on our way. As soon as we got into the jungle, I opened several windows to let in the fresh breeze. The moonlight filtered through the trees, and the cries of nocturnal creatures filled the warm air. Insects thumped against the windows, attracted by the dim light of the television monitor inside the bus. Several large moths flew in through the open windows and fluttered around our heads until Entorahk sent them away.

We reached the giant tree that supported the village of Le-Koro. Makuta called down from the treetop, where he had built a wooden platform in a fork next to the ruined village. The Rahkshi helped Invulnerahk fly the equipment up to it. As I stood gazing from below, Shadrahk offered me a ride. I started to accept, but then I caught my breath when I felt myself being levitated. Makuta leaned over and captured me in his arms as I reached the level of the platform. He tied a vine securely around my waist. “Safety first, my pet. I don’t think I could take the trauma of watching your lovely little body crash to the ground again.” Even though I suspected it was yet another excuse to touch me, I consented, because I didn’t want to take that kind of trauma again, either.

The Rahkshi soon had all the instruments set up. Rahkous started the show with a rousing version of “Aerials” by System of a Down, with Vorahk’s throaty voice belting out the philosophical lyrics: “Aerials, in the sky, when you lose small mind, you free your life. Aerials, so up high, when you free your eyes, eternal prize.” Whether or not the other Rahkshi understood, they responded to the hard-driving electric guitar riffs and the heavy bass with hyperactive dancing, so that the entire platform shook ominously.

Then the pace slowed with the performance of “Aeroplane” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. As Vorahk sang to the laid-back tune, I noticed the lyrics fit Vorahk’s description of the way music influenced his mood. “I like pleasure spiked with pain, music is my aeroplane, it’s my aeroplane. Songbird sweet and sour Jane, it’s my aeroplane...”

The end of the song was met with enthusiastic applause. “Now for our original tune about the element of Air,” announced Vorahk. “We’re going to branch out—sorry about the lame pun—and do a reggae number.” Florahk started the song with a run of drumbeats on his bongos, and soon the xylophone and maracas started up. I stepped up to the microphone and sang in a breathy voice with a hint of Florahk’s accent. He added his voice in harmony. The audience appeared to love the new sound, swaying slowly to the beat. Even the crickets seemed to adopt the rhythm as their own.

Then my water sense alerted me to the presence of thunderclouds. It was difficult to see them against the dark sky, but a huge bank of them was forming to the east. A restless wind began to blow, sprinkling us with mist. I gripped my axes in alarm. Not only would rain ruin the instruments, but a lot of metal at the top of a tree might attract deadly lightning. The first of many bolts of glowing yellowish-blue energy tore across the sky, followed by a loud thunderclap that made the instruments rattle.

The band played on, unaware of the potential danger. I aimed at the cloud and channeled my energy at it, hoping I could disperse it before it reached us. Across the platform Shadrahk tapped Meteorahk on the shoulder, and he added his power to mine. In a few minutes the dark mass receded and the wind died down again. As I replaced my axes on my back, tired but relieved, Vorahk whispered, “You OK to sing the last verse?”

I nodded and continued the song. We did a long, drawn-out ending with a lively interchange between our two percussionists that sounded almost like a conversation. Then the woods were silent again, except for the cheering of the Rahkshi and the twittering of a few night birds.

Invulnerahk broke down the set and handed various instruments to anyone who could help. Makuta approached me, but I untied the vine and dove onto Shadrahk’s lap. He flew me to the ground without a word.

I glared at the Spirit of Destruction as I followed my band mates onto the bus and sat down. He was trying to sabotage our deal, and he was being really obvious about it. My only hope was that the Rahkshi could keep parrying his thrusts. The others flopped into their seats, and Invulnerahk appeared in the doorway to report that the gear was secured. Adaptarahk revved the engine. The wheels spun uselessly, slinging muck everywhere.

“Here we go again,” groaned Shadrahk. “All right, everyone off the bus.” The Rahkshi piled out.

Wading ankle-deep into the mire, Gravirahk raised his staff, but Florahk stepped in front of him. “Ease up, brudder. Ah dweet dees time.” He waved his leaf-ended tool, and several large, heavy vines hanging in the trees overhead extended their tendrils downward. Slowly, they dug into the mud and entwined themselves around the vehicle.

I was so absorbed in watching that I jumped at the sound of Makuta’s voice behind me. “It’s amazing what they’ve learned to do, don’t you think, doll? You have to admit, you’re going to miss them.”

“Good thing one of them has learned how to undo your catastrophic weather,” I retorted, looking up at him.

He sighed. “I’m sorry, love. I suppose the sky was resonating with my grief. Things like that always happen whenever my emotions get this intense.”

“You expect me to believe that storm wasn’t on purpose?”

“Darling, if it had been my goal to stop the show, we would be standing under a deluge right now,” he replied.

I couldn’t argue with that. I had seen plenty of evidence that he was many times stronger than any of his progeny. The ropy vines gradually tightened around the tour bus. “Dude, don’t let your freaky plants crunch our ride!” exclaimed Vorahk.

“Rest, mon! Ah’m de Rahkshi of Plant *Control*,” laughed his brown and green brother. The creepers stopped constricting. They began to strain against the weight of the bus and the adhesion of the mud. The frame of the vehicle creaked and flexed, and he summoned more vines to wrap themselves around both ends.

Makuta laid a heavy gauntlet on my shoulder. “This tour has been bittersweet for me, precious, knowing that every breathtaking performance brings us closer to the moment when you’ll tear yourself out of my embrace again.”

“We made a deal,” I reminded him nervously. “Please don’t undermine me.”

“I did notice you neglected to stipulate that I refrain from interfering.”

My heart sank as I recalled what he had done during the village reconstruction the previous year. I tried to appeal to his sense of decency on the remote chance he had one. “But that would violate the spirit of our agreement.”

“You know, you could easily get me to promise not to hinder you.” A wide grin spread across his Kraahkan. “Remember the way you talked me into taking you to the LEGO parking lot? I’m pretty sure that would work again, even without the Enslave potion.”

I scowled at him. “Look, you said you wouldn’t mind letting me go, as long as you had a souvenir of my stay. You can’t just change your mind now that I’m almost halfway through with my part of the contract. You’ve already gotten something out of me.” I pointed at the stack of recording equipment.

“Not enough,” Makuta smiled wryly. “But I suppose you’re right, love. You’d never trust me again if I disrupted your concert tour. And besides, watching you sing is a real delight for me.” His voice heavy with resignation, he explained his dilemma. “It’s just that I’m in the peculiar position of seeing a Plan work too well. When I told the Rahkshi to encourage you to join the band, it was to make you happy, so you’d want to stay. And now you’re turning my own scheme against me.”

I thought of the first time I listened to Rahkous perform, when Makuta had told me that the extra microphone was for me. Shadrahk had admitted that the mission of the Rahkshi was to keep me entertained. And Vorahk had certainly done his part to get me involved with the rock group.

With a loud sucking sound, the bus finally came loose from the mud. The vines swung it over a patch of dry land, set it down, and retracted into the trees. The Rahkshi, who had been busy slinging slime at each other, stopped and ran toward the door, but Shadrahk blocked the entrance. “Wait until Mistress can hose us down. We’re all pretty muddy.”

I twisted out from under Makuta’s hand. “Well, at least you’re getting some songs out of this that you can listen to whenever you want,” I said brightly, hoping his attitude would last. I walked over to the bus and used my axes to spray off and dry each Rahkshi before he got in.

The Master of Shadows watched me clean off his sons for a few minutes. “Yes, I am. I guess I’ll just have to be content with that for now.” He hovered and loaded his recording gear into his lap. “I’ll see you in Ko-Koro, sweetheart.” He flew off into the jungle.

The last of the Rahkshi boarded the bus, and Adaptarahk started down a narrow dirt road under a canopy of trees. After stopping once to replace a drum that was scraped off the luggage rack by a branch, we emerged into the rocky foothills of Ko-Wahi. The patches of snow became thicker as we wound our way up into the mountains, until we were driving through a glittering crystal-white landscape.

## 46. Sibling Rivalry

### **Switchfoot — Meant To Live**

*Fumbling his confidence  
And wondering why the world has passed him by  
Hoping that he's bent for more than arguments  
And failed attempts to fly, fly*

*We were meant to live for so much more  
Have we lost ourselves?  
Somewhere we live inside  
Somewhere we live inside  
We were meant to live for so much more  
Have we lost ourselves?  
Somewhere we live inside*

*Dreaming about Providence  
And whether mice or men have second tries  
Maybe we've been livin with our eyes half open  
Maybe we're bent and broken, broken*

*We want more than this world's got to offer  
We want more than this world's got to offer  
We want more than the wars of our fathers  
And everything inside screams for second life, yeah*

*We were meant to live for so much more  
Have we lost ourselves?  
We were meant to live  
We were meant to live*

As the Rahkous tour bus snaked up the narrow switchbacks in the mountains of Ko-Wahi, the road became completely coated with ice. Adaptarahk wrestled valiantly with the big steering wheel, but we finally skated off the trail and plowed into a massive snowdrift. The windows of the front third of the bus were entirely obscured by snow.

The Rahkshi of Adaptation hissed in frustration and jammed the gearbox into reverse. He popped the clutch, and the bus lurched backwards into another drift. He groaned and banged his head on the wheel.

“Don’t worry, bro. Master gave us some tire chains,” Invulnerahk reassured him. “Can I get some of you gravity-type dudes to help me out here?” Gravirahk and Densirahk raised the bus while Invulnerahk installed the chains and everyone else threw snowballs at each other. Soon we were creeping up the road again. But then we arrived at a narrow ice bridge spanning an immense chasm. Adaptarahk braked carefully to a stop and turned to look at Shadrahk.

“You smart guys think we should we go for it?” Invulnerahk asked.

“Mebbe we bedder kiarry de gear up dere,” suggested Florahk.

Vorahk frowned. “Dude, we’re a long way from the village. I don’t want to carry all that stuff. That’s why we have a bus.”

“We could hold the concert right here,” I proposed anxiously. “We don’t really *have* to go all the way to Ko-Koro, do we? It’s cold enough at this altitude to sing about ice.” Losing our instruments would bring the whole tour to an abrupt halt, and I didn’t want us to take any unnecessary risks.

“Perhaps our structurally astute companions should evaluate the solidity of the edifice,” commented Therahk.

Shadrahk gestured at Guurahk, Sonirahk, and me, and we followed him out of the bus. “Do you three sense any dangerous fissures?”

I peered at the structure and laid my hands on the ice for a few seconds. “I don’t see or feel any. But the surface is slick and icy, and the bus is probably too heavy for that bridge even without any cracks.”

Guurahk took a few steps onto the bridge and knelt down. He touched his fingertips to the ice. He returned, nodding his agreement.

Sonirahk hissed, and Shadrahk shrugged. “Go ahead and test it, as long as you can do it without wrecking it.” Sonirahk used his staff to send a barely audible pulse of sound through the bridge and then listened for the echo. He held up his thumb in approval.

The Rahkshi of Darkness stepped back into the bus and explained. “The bridge seems sound, but it’s really slender and treacherous to drive on. The rest of the way should be an easy drive except for one long staircase at the very end. So here’s the plan. Gravirahk and Densirahk will lighten the bus just a little, so the tires will still get traction. The rest of us will fly alongside and push it back on if it starts to slide off. If worst comes to worst, we can catch it, if we all work together. Magnerahk, get on the other side and use your power to help pull it across.”

The Rahkshi sprang into action. Adaptarahk carefully steered the vehicle across the bridge, flanked by three dozen Rahkshi. At one point the bus slipped to the left, and the front wheel dangled over the abyss. The Rahkshi on the left shoved it a little too hard to put it back on track. “Easy, easy!” urged Shadrahk. The ones on the right nudged it back to the center. Magnerahk delivered a final burst of energy to drag the bus safely onto the other side. Watching from Shadrahk’s lap, I breathed a big sigh of relief. He landed and set me down in the snow.

The Rahkshi screeched with delight and danced around the bus. Panrahk did a back flip and landed next to the bridge. There was a loud popping noise as a crack rippled across the span. Dismayed, I watched the entire structure collapse slowly into the ravine. The thunderous sound of the falling ice chunks triggered a small avalanche on a nearby slope. Shadrahk picked me up

again, and when it was over, the bus was half buried in snow. The other Rahkshi had also taken to the air and were circling above the vehicle.

“Panwreck! You moron!” yelled Vorahk. “Now we’re going to have to carry the gear *and* the bus back across.” The brown Rahkshi lowered his head.

“Don’t single him out, Sarge,” Shadrahk sighed. “We were all making too much noise. This is a fragile landscape.”

“We’re exceedingly fortunate our transport and its musical consignment didn’t get propelled into the crevasse,” remarked Therahk.

The Rahkshi dug out the bus with the ends of their staffs, aided by a whirlwind courtesy of Cyclorahk, and presently we were on our way again. We rode without incident until we reached a narrow ice staircase that wound its way up the summit of Mount Ihu. “Now we get out and carry the gear,” Shadrahk announced. Invulnerahk stood on top of the bus, loosed the bungee cords, and distributed the instruments and amplifiers onto the laps of the hovering Rahkshi.

We followed Vorahk up the side of the peak until we reached a flat spot carved into the glacier. Makuta was sitting at his console in front of the remains of the Ko-Koro Sanctum. “It’s about time you boys got here,” he remarked wryly.

Shadrahk grimaced. “We had a bit of trouble with the icy roads, Master.”

“Yes, I saw that. Well, get the show started!”

Invulnerahk had the equipment arranged after a few minutes, and Vorahk growled the first few words of “Cold” by Crossfade to begin the concert, and then the barrage of electric guitar, bass, and drums kicked in. “Looking back at me, I see I never really got it right, I never stopped to think of you,” sang the black Rahkshi, almost as if he were apologizing for his master’s behavior towards me. “I’m always wrapped up in things I cannot win...”

As loud as the music was, I didn’t notice the avalanche until Sonirahk abruptly switched off all the amplification. The sky continued to rumble ominously, and I looked over my shoulder to see an enormous cascade of ice and snow grinding its way down the side of Mount Ihu toward us.

Everyone scrambled to grab a piece of gear and fly into the air. Adaptarahk, who was standing right behind me, scooped me up, along with the Fender Stratocaster I was playing, and laid his Variax across my knees. Makuta glanced at me and then rescued his recording equipment. Gravirahk stayed on the ground and levitated the bus. Shadrahk summoned a score of audience members to catch the vehicle just as the Rahkshi of Gravity stopped using his power and launched himself into flight. Looking down, we watched the white tide cover the stage and sweep away a few stray guitar stands and instrument cases. When the mountain was still again, Plasmarahk melted a flat spot where the Rahkshi could set everything down. “Sarge, I think you’d better make this an acoustic set,” suggested the Rahkshi of Darkness.

“Acoustic?” snorted Vorahk, landing nearby. “No way! This is the hardest-rocking set of all. Well, except for Po-Koro, obviously.” He unwrapped a cable that had gotten tangled around his leg. “Hammer, get all this stuff hooked back up. I mean, how much more ice can fall on us, anyway?”

I looked at Makuta sideways, wondering if he had triggered this avalanche. His expression didn't betray any guilt, but then, he was an expert liar. He raised an eyebrow at Vorahk. “I can set up a wall around you, son, but if another avalanche starts up, all it will really do is buy a little time to get your equipment out of the way.”

“Go for it, Master,” replied his minion. Makuta raised a levee of ice around the band while Invulnerahk restored all the connections. The musicians nodded their readiness to one another. Once more, the powerful rock sound echoed in the thin air until a mass of snow flowed over the barricade and buried the stage. Hovering again with the instruments, the amplifiers, and the bus, the other Rahkshi hissed at Vorahk in irritation.

“OK, fine, we'll do an acoustic set,” he said crossly.

With obvious relief, Invulnerahk switched out the electric guitars for acoustic ones and set out a different collection of amplifiers. He strapped the original instruments to the top of the bus. After a quick sound check, the music started up again, much more quietly. Vorahk's gravelly voice rang out over the guitars, “What I really meant to say, is I'm sorry for the way I am, I never meant to be so cold, I never meant to be so cold... Cold to you, I'm sorry about all the lies...”

I looked over at Makuta. He was sitting in front of the recording console with his headphones on and his tarnished claws on the controls, staring at the monitor with a melancholy expression on his weather-beaten Kraahkan. For a fleeting moment, I almost felt sorry for him. He had invested so much time and effort into pursuing me—with little benefit to him—that I was beginning to doubt he wanted only to use me for his evil Plans. Maybe under his hard exterior, he did have some feelings for me, and some regrets for the misery he had caused me. Still, I was determined he should apply the painful lessons he had learned to a relationship with someone else.

We made it to the last chord without knocking loose any more ice. The band members smiled at each other. The Rahkshi responded with polite applause, except for Pinky, who jumped up and down and whistled. Illusorahk quickly grabbed his brother by the spikes and shoved him face first into the snow.

“All right, I guess we'll go acoustic on the next one, too,” sighed Vorahk. Accurahk's moody keyboard effects started the second song, “So Cold” by Breaking Benjamin, and then the guitars began to strum soft minor chords. The Rahkshi of Hunger's raw voice painted a bleak, apocalyptic picture with the lyrics. “Hollow heroes separate as they run, you're so cold, keep your hand in mine, wise men wonder while starved men die... Show me how it ends, it's all right, show me how defenseless you really are...” I thought of Makuta's intent to hold me close as the world ended, and I shivered.

Then it was time for our original composition. Accurahk's reptilian face beamed with delight as his hands sailed over the keys, creating an atmosphere at once ethereal and high-tech with his electronic sounds. The other musicians added a muted accompaniment. I sang my words in a clear, thin voice, and for a few minutes I was the lonely traveler transfixed by the crystalline beauty around him. As the last notes faded, I realized my teeth were chattering and my extremities were numb. I stamped my feet and rubbed my hands together to speed the circulation of my fluid.

"A sterling performance, beloved," purred Makuta, who had crept up behind me. "Here, I'll warm you up." He put his arms around me and increased his body temperature. In seconds I felt uncomfortably hot.

"Uh, thanks, Makuta. I'm plenty warm now," I grimaced, wriggling free. I walked toward the bus, sinking into the snow as it melted under my feet.

"The acoustic stuff sounded really good, dude," said Invulnerahk as Vorahk trudged sullenly off the makeshift stage.

"What do you know about music, Hammer?" the black Rahkshi grumbled. "You're a roadie."

Shadrahk frowned at Vorahk. "He's just making the best of things. Well, we'd better pick everything up and fly it down below the bridge." He rounded up a crew to lift the bus.

"If I ever agree to do a gig in this sorry town again," groaned the Rahkshi of Hunger, returning to shoulder his Flying V case, "just shoot me."

Gravirahk pointed at Vorahk's back with his staff, but Densirahk pushed down his brother's weapon and aimed his own instead. They both snickered. When Vorahk spun around to look at them, they pretended to be busy packing their gear.

The procession of equipment-laden Rahkshi flew slowly above the winding staircase and followed the trail back to the shattered bridge. They set the bus on the narrow road and loaded the top rack again. Everyone climbed on board, including Pinky, whose caffeine buzz had finally worn off. He promptly fell asleep with his head on my shoulder.

Adaptarahk cranked the starter, but the diesel engine wouldn't fire. He popped open the hood, and he, Invulnerahk, and Shadrahk stared at the motor for a few minutes. "It's probably just too cold," concluded the Rahkshi of Darkness. He beckoned to Thermorahk, who gently warmed the engine for a few minutes with his eyes. Adaptarahk returned to the driver's seat and turned the key again. This time the machine roared to life, and we were on our way back down the mountain.

The forested foothills of Ko-Wahi soon thinned out, and we drove into the barren badlands of Onu-Wahi. The trip was much longer than the distance on the map because Adaptarahk had to zigzag around deep ravines. From time to time Shadrahk would fly overhead to scout out a path and return to confer with the driver. By the time the credits of *The Matrix* were rolling across the

television screen, we reached the unobtrusive stone entrance to Onu-Koro that Takua had used in the Mata Nui Online Game. The Rahkshi of Adaptation got out to check the overhead clearance and then drove the bus into the tunnel.

The Rahkshi opened the windows and hissed and screeched to hear the echoes. Soon, however, they began to get dizzy from the exhaust fumes. The tunnel was designed for Ussal crab traffic, and the ventilation was inadequate for an internal combustion engine. Vacuurahk jumped out of the bus and evacuated the smoke, drawing in cool air from inside the cave network, and we resumed our journey. When we reached the Onu-Koro main cavern, Adaptarahk parked the vehicle just outside the tunnel. Pinky awoke with a start when I tapped on his arm. He grabbed a Monster energy drink from the refrigerator before getting off the bus.

Makuta's glowing blue eyes were waiting behind the recording equipment in a shadowy corner. They silently watched us set up the instruments on the hard-packed dirt. The Rahkshi sat down around us, chattering.

In a few minutes Vorahk announced the first song. "OK, guys, my hayseed bass player talked me into doing a country song." The Rahkshi in the audience glanced at each other dubiously. "Yeah, that's what I said, too. 'You gotta be kidding, dude. We're a rock band.' But forget his lame taste in music for a sec and listen to the words. You'll get a kick out of this one. Obviously, we'll rock it up a little."

Gravirahk rolled his eyes as his animated bass line joined the lively guitar intro of "Two Feet of Topsoil" by Brad Paisley. Adaptarahk had his Variax set to mimic a banjo, and I added rhythm acoustic guitar. Soon Vorahk was singing the jilted lover's wry lament: "There's two feet of topsoil, a little bit of bedrock, limestone in between, fossilized dinosaur, a little patch of crude oil, a thousand feet of granite underneath... Then there's me."

As predicted, the Rahkshi hissed with glee at the humorous lyrics. Vorahk finished his rapid fret work with a final chord from the entire band, and the fans, glad to be able to cut loose again, cheered wildly.

"How about that," marveled Vorahk. "Hillbilly music *can* be cool." Gravirahk hissed in annoyance, and the black Rahkshi set down his Flying V. "What do you mean, Brad Paisley could kick my butt in a guitar contest? You wanna start something, bub?" Densirahk stood up behind the drum kit and brandished a drumstick like a fencer's epee.

"Hey, guys," I interrupted, anxious to keep the concert going. "How about we start the next song?"

Vorahk slung the strap over his shoulder again and leaned toward the microphone. "Let's move along to one of *my* favorites, shall we?" He hit a series of power chords to kick off "Hole in the Earth" by the Deftones. Over the din of three electric guitarists, a bass player, and two drummers, he belted out the bitter lyrics: "There's a hole in the earth... Mistake... I'm out... This is the end... somewhere... This is the end..."

As the last notes and the Rahkshi's clamorous praise reverberated off the cave walls, I heard Makuta's voice inside my head. "This doesn't have to be the end, love. We won't have to be apart, after all. I've figured out a way I can keep you with me on Voya Nui."

"This *is* the end," I retorted aloud, looking at his eyes. "Or, at least, it'll be the end after three more songs." The other band members glanced at me and then shrugged. They retrieved their instruments for the last song of the Earth set.

"I see why you're apprehensive, after everything I've told you about the place," continued the Master of Shadows. "But I'll build a sturdy little fortress to protect you on a remote corner of the island, with Shadrahk and Bahka for your bodyguards. It'll be disguised as a rocky cliff, but inside, you'll have all the modern comforts. I'll come visit you whenever I get a break. And when I'm away, you'll get to witness the storyline unfolding first-hand, from your own private tower."

"No, thanks," I groaned. I had no desire to be Makuta's prisoner on a dangerous island, even if it would put me near the action. I set the Fender on its stand and stepped up to a microphone.

"Well, we can talk about it later, my water lily. I'll let you get back to your concert. Actually, what would be ideal would be for you to agree to stay right after you record the last song." He winked at me across the room, and I frowned back.

Densirahk began our Earth song by striking the edge of his snare with the drumsticks, and Florahk joined in with heavy beats on the bongos. Vorahk's guitar and Accurahk's keyboard provided some industrial sounds, and the musical chain gang was underway with a momentum of its own. My words describing the miners' work started in a choppy staccato voice, and then I began to draw them out as the music transitioned into a dreamy monotone of bass and keyboard tones accented with Vacuurahk's slow flute melody. The sounds faded, leaving only the quiet dripping of underground springs.

The Rahkshi gave us a standing ovation. I noticed that although they seemed to enjoy all the songs, the way they expressed their approval depended heavily on the mood of the music they had just heard. They milled around hissing quietly until we loaded the bus, and then they climbed aboard for the voyage to Po-Koro.

The road became drier and dustier as Adaptarahk steered the tour bus toward the village of stone. Eroded arroyos in the earth gave way to majestic rock cliffs rising from graceful dunes sculpted by eons of wind. The moonlight gave everything a bluish cast, even though I remembered the stone and sand to be golden.

When I saw the shattered village, I remembered how the Rahkshi loyal to me had raced to put the giant carved stone Kolhii ball on top of the entrance gate before Makuta's team could blast it to bits. Now all that remained of the stately walls was a pile of rubble, thanks to Xefonirahk and his master, who had supplied him with extra energy.

The town was little more than a ring of rocks now, but historically speaking, this was Po-Koro, so this was the site of the concert. Makuta was leaning on his recording equipment when Adaptarahk pulled the dust-covered bus into the clearing. Everyone piled out and began to play in the rocks while Invulnerahk arranged the stage.

As Vorahk had promised, this was a hard-rocking set. We started with “Cumbersome” by Seven Mary Three. Against a backdrop of typical heavy-metal instrumentation, Vorahk bellowed a story of love on the rocks: “I guess the stones are coming too fast for her now... all the stones that are thrown are building up a wall... I have become cumbersome to this world, I have become cumbersome to my girl.”

When the song was over, Vorahk paused and waved to the screaming crowd. “Thank you!” he yelled. “Thank you very much!”

The roles were reversed in the second song, “Burden in My Hand”. Adaptarahk played the intro with his Variax imitating a mandolin, and the electric guitars joined in. The twisted Soundgarden lyrics started out innocently enough: “Follow me into the desert, as thirsty as you are...” But soon Vorahk was singing the disturbing chorus: “I shot my love today, won’t you cry for me... I lost my head again, would you lie for me... I left her in the sand, just a burden in my hand.”

My eyes darted toward Makuta, wondering if he would ever consider me such an impediment to progress that he would kill me. He had come perilously close to doing it a few times, but I always wondered whether he was just being overdramatic. He always acted very remorseful afterwards. Still, as obsessively jealous as he was, I feared that someday he might prefer that outcome to watching me share a life with someone else. He noticed me looking at him and smiled. I turned my eyes back to my guitar and kept playing. We strummed the last chord and let the notes echo off the surrounding cliffs.

The Rahkshi were hissing deliriously with excitement. They grabbed Vorahk off the stage and passed him over their heads on their hands. He grinned widely as he surfed all the way across the crowd and back to the stage. They set him down again in eager anticipation of the next song.

Gravirahk and Densirahk exchanged annoyed glances. The Rahkous song about Stone started slowly with lush grand-piano chords by Accurahk and atmospheric sounds from Vorahk dragging his pick up the strings of the Flying V. Behind me, I could hear the bassist and the drummer whispering to each other. As I sang of the stately grandeur of the stone formations around me, Vorahk began to rise slowly off the ground. I glanced behind me to see Gravirahk aiming the neck of his bass at the frontman.

“Cut it out, man!” snapped the black Rahkshi. He started playing deliberate, dignified arpeggios, but with no footing, his feet flailed comically in the air. The audience snickered and hissed.

The pranksters shrugged innocently as they began to play their parts of the song. Vorahk continued to drift upwards until the cord of his guitar was taut. He stuck his pick in the strings and pulled himself back down with the cable. Then he clubbed Gravirahk over the head with his guitar. The resulting disharmonious clamor brought a loud cheer from the Rahkshi. There was a

series of crashes followed by a loud boom as the Gravity Rahkshi reeled through several music stands before finally falling onto his bass.

Densirahk picked up a spare set of drumsticks and hurled them at Vorahk like daggers. One of them hit the Rahkshi of Hunger in the eye, and he folded over in pain. The audience shrieked with amusement.

“Hey!” shouted Shadrahk, running to the edge of the stage. But the fight only escalated as Accurahk lobbed a monitor at Densirahk. The black and green Rahkshi collapsed on top of his drum kit with an amplified thud. Then Sonirahk aimed his staff at Accurahk. The resulting tidal wave of sound triggered a screeching feedback loop. The amps wailed and thundered, and two of them burst into flames. Accurahk crumpled under the sonic assault. Vacuurahk sucked the air away from the Sonics Rahkshi, bringing him gasping to his knees.

Shadrahk hit Vacuurahk with a blast of dark energy, knocking him to the ground. Then he ran behind the sound board and shut off the power to stop the feedback. He switched it back on and nodded to Florahk, Adaptarahk, and me, who were the only ones left standing. “Keep playing! We have to finish the song!”

Adaptarahk looked over at me. I was already playing a guitar, so he dropped his, shoved Gravirahk out of the way, and picked up the bass. Florahk moved over from his percussion stand to the drum kit, rolled the drummer off it, and began to play that instead. The music was a bit crude and ragged, but we managed to make a lot of noise to accompany my lyrics about cataclysmic geologic events. We slowed down and ended the music with long, atmospheric notes reminiscent of the intro. I breathed a sigh of relief when it was over.

The Rahkshi jumped up and down with delight. Evidently this was their favorite song of all, because it contained a big brawl, which they mistook for part of the show. Shadrahk let them cavort for a few minutes before dismissing them to the Kini-Nui. “While you’re waiting for the band to follow in the bus, start a game of Kolhii on the grass.”

I helped an exasperated Invulnerahk untangle the mess of cables. Makuta startled me with a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Well, darling, you salvaged that one against all odds,” he grinned.

I spun around. Remembering his power to cause anger in others, I demanded, “Did you incite that fight?”

The Spirit of Destruction scratched his chin. “Well, in a way, I suppose you could say that. They do get their irascible natures from me.”

I groaned. “I guess I’m never going to get a straight answer from you, am I?”

“That depends on what you ask.” He handed me the case for my Fender. “If it’s whether I want you to stay with me, the answer is a resounding ‘yes.’”

I put the guitar inside and snapped it shut. “And my answer is still a resounding ‘no.’”

“I think you should seriously consider my offer to bring you to Voya Nui, beloved,” he insisted. “No one will know you’re on the island, because I’ll camouflage your fortress. You’ll eat well, with Bahka there. Shadrahk will keep you company, and you’ll have books, guitars, a computer, a garden, a swimming pool—whatever you like for entertainment. And when I get time off, I’ll come spend it with you, reveling in your sweet presence. As rugged as the working conditions are going to be there, your stronghold in the mountains will be a refuge for me.”

I sighed. “Just don’t mess up my concert, Makuta.”

While we were talking, Vorahk straightened up and pounced on Gravirahk, who had just hauled himself to his feet. Shadrahk roughly yanked the two of them apart. “Band meeting in the bus! Now!” he barked. When the beleaguered roadie looked up, he added, “You, too, Invulnerahk.”

“I’ve got to go.” I walked past Makuta and got on the bus.

Shadrahk’s face was grim as he addressed the musicians. “I’m absolutely disgusted with those of you who got into the fight. Mistress had to finish the song with two others who weren’t even in the original lineup!”

Vorahk glared at Gravirahk. “Dude, he started it.”

Gravirahk hissed angrily, and I retrieved my Rau in time to hear most of what he was saying. “You won’t stop showboating. It’s as if *you’re* the band. Well, maybe you’re the big star, but you wouldn’t be where you are if it weren’t for the rest of us!”

The assembly erupted in more accusations until Shadrahk held up his staff. “Silence! The point is not who did what. The point is that a band is a team.”

“Heah come de quote,” Florahk whispered.

“And as the great coach Vince Lombardi once said, ‘Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.’”

Florahk winked at me.

Shadrahk looked around the bus at the sullen, grumbling Rahkshi. “We have to keep in mind what’s at stake here. Now, obviously none of us want Mistress to leave. But we have to respect the deal she made with Master and give her a fair chance to accomplish her part of the agreement. And it’s not a bad thing, really. She’ll be safe from the likes of Roodaka and Voporak as soon as she passes through that portal, and Master can always go back and get her later. She’ll certainly be better off in her house than she would be in a Matoran sphere. Imagine watching her crawl back out, shriveled and confused, not even knowing who we are!”

The Rahkshi murmured in agreement as Shadrahk finished his speech. “I know Master hasn’t always been the best example of brotherly cooperation. But we can rise above that. When we put

our personal pride behind us, we can accomplish something together, and then we really have something to be proud of. We've done it before, and we can do it again." He gestured at the ruined village outside the window.

Invulnerahk smiled broadly. "Yeah! There's no 'me' in 'team.'" He traced a few letters in the air with his fingertip. "No, wait. Actually, there is. But it's all mixed up with the other letters."

"That's brilliant, Hammer," Vorahk laughed, slapping him on the back. Then he turned to the others. "General, guys, I'm sorry I acted so full of myself. What do you say we make this last set the best one ever?"

His suggestion was met with a loud cheer. The musicians scrambled out of the bus to help Invulnerahk pack up the gear. Then the dusty transport roared off toward the Kini-Nui. Makuta had already left with his equipment.

As we bounced down the sandy road, I leaned toward Shadrahk. "Thanks for all your help."

He smiled. "No problem, Mistress. Personally, I'm hoping you change your mind and decide to go to Voya Nui with Master. But that should be up to you, not a bunch of egomaniac rock stars."

I sat back in my seat, grateful for my level-headed ally. Now I just had to perform one more song to buy my freedom. Unfortunately, this was the song with lyrics I hadn't yet dared to sing aloud—the song of Darkness.

## 47. Evil Music

### **Third Day — Get On**

*So you think you had me  
Had me in your sights  
I've got news for you  
I'm working over time  
To get away from slander  
To stay away from lies  
I won't listen to you criticize*

*Get on, get on, get on away from me  
If you're trying to bring me down  
If you're trying to bring me down  
Get on, get on, get on away from me  
If you're trying to bring me down  
If you're trying to bring me down*

*I've been doing some thinking  
And I think you're wrong  
For trying to put down  
What I've been working on  
So if you want to break me  
You better stay away  
I won't listen, no  
I won't listen to you today*

*Excuse me if I still question  
Carefully all of your intentions  
I've decided that I won't listen  
Because your words only bring division*

### **Frank Sinatra — The Way You Look Tonight**

*Some day, when I'm awfully low,  
When the world is cold,  
I will feel a glow just thinking of you...  
And the way you look tonight.*

*Yes you're lovely, with your smile so warm  
And your cheeks so soft,  
There is nothing for me but to love you,  
And the way you look tonight.*

*With each word your tenderness grows,  
Tearing my fear apart...  
And that laugh that wrinkles your nose,  
It touches my foolish heart.*

*Lovely ... never, ever change.  
Keep that breathless charm.  
Won't you please arrange it ?*

*'Cause I love you ... just the way you look tonight.*

*Mm, mm, mm, mm,  
Just the way you look tonight.*

Vorahk surveyed the crowd of his brothers. They were sitting cross-legged around the cracked stone platform of the Kini-Nui, murmuring restlessly in the darkness as they waited for the final set of the Rahk the Island '05 concert tour. But before he played a note, the Rahkshi of Hunger gave each member of the band a long, affectionate introduction. He started with me, crediting me with the lyrics of the original elemental songs, and continued through the lineup, citing the strengths of each musician. He finished with Gravirahk. "Give it up for Grav on the bass. He's like a rock we can totally rely on. He never misses a note. But most importantly, however full of hot air I get, this dude keeps my feet planted firmly on the ground." The Rahkshi all laughed and clapped excitedly. Then Vorahk gestured for Invulnerahk to come onto the stage. He put his arm around the gray Rahkshi. "And let's not forget my buddy Hammerhead. He built us that awesome bus, and he's kept it on the road in spite of sand, snow, and swamp. He's the hardest-working roadie in the business!" Everyone jumped up to give Invulnerahk a standing ovation. He grinned broadly and waved back.

Then the black Rahkshi started the throbbing minor-key power chords of the Burden Brothers' "Beautiful Night" on his Flying V. He confidently belted out the lyrics: "It's a beautiful night for feeling lonely, a beautiful night for being afraid..." The others joined in until the song crescendoed to its climax. "All your fears are coming true, and this is the time, this is the time of your life, that defines you, so raise your hands, raise your hands..." I was acutely aware of the critical time that was approaching for me, the moment when I would sing the Darkness song and seal the deal for my liberty.

We segued into the next number, "Shadow on the Sun" by Audioslave. "I can tell you why people die alone, I can tell you I'm a shadow on the sun," screamed Vorahk over the din of the distorted guitars. "Staring at the loss, looking for a cause, and never really sure. Nothing but a hole, to live without a soul, and nothing to be learned..."

When the music and cheering were over, the sudden silence hung ominously like a pall. I stepped up to the microphone and cleared my throat. Vorahk looked at me expectantly. "You ready, Mistress?"

"I'm ready," I said in a quiet voice.

The band began the doleful metal ballad they had composed to go along with my words. Hesitatingly, I whispered into the mic. Sonirahk turned up the level to make my voice audible over the music. As I sang of fear, dread, and emptiness, the emotions overtook me once again. Or perhaps it was the music that brought them forth. "Starting to slip, losing my grip, the peaceful freedom of death is calling..." Whatever the cause, by the time I reached the end of the song, I was gasping for air. The stone platform seemed to spin underneath me. "Letting go of all that I know, into the arms of Darkness falling." With the last syllable I lost my balance. I reeled and tripped over a cable. My vision went black, and I fell against something hard.

I blinked open my eyes to find I was lying on the ground. Shadrahk was leaning over me. “Are you all right, Mistress?”

“I guess so. Thanks for catching me.” I sat up. “Where’s your master? I want to go home now.”

“He’s downstairs,” came the reply. “He’s preparing for the trip. He said he would signal me when he’s ready.”

“What has he got to prepare?” I wondered aloud. “All he has to do is tell the Manas to let me walk out.” I looked around at the Rahkshi, who were celebrating by destroying everything in sight. The forest was exploding into flames, plumes of earth erupted from the ground, and arcs of electricity crisscrossed in the sky. The air sizzled with dark energy.

“He insists on accompanying you all the way to your house, for your safety,” explained Shadrahk. “I imagine he’s loading some rocket fuel into his car and testing all the flight systems.”

I frowned. “I’d really rather just take a plane.” I stood up and walked toward the spiral staircase in the center of the platform that led down to Mangaia. “I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Look out!” Shadrahk warned me. He pointed at Xefonirahk, who was opening his mouth to let out a piercing shriek. We dove for the grass. The temple platform collapsed into the shaft in a great cloud of rubble.

As the dust cleared, I crept on all fours toward the gaping hole where the stairway had been. “Well, Shadrahk, could you fly me down there, then?”

“All right, Mistress,” he agreed slowly. “I suppose Master won’t mind. At this point it’s not like he’ll have to worry about you running away.”

I shouted goodbye to the Rahkshi. They stopped their clamor long enough to come over and clank their staffs against my axe-staff.

“Rock on, Mistress!” called Vorahk. “See you next year.”

Florahk handed me a daisy. “Cool runnings, Mees.”

“Farewell,” nodded Therahk. “May your environs be ever salubrious.”

“Live long and prosper,” smiled Invulnerahk, holding his fingers up in a V.

Pinky gave me a silent hug. Then I climbed onto Shadrahk’s lap, and we plunged down into the gritty darkness. “He may already be teleporting the car up to the surface,” remarked the Rahkshi. We landed and picked our way through the boulders that had rolled into the living room.

I glanced down at the glowing vial hanging from my neck. “He’s close by.”

“Ah, yes, you have an intimate connection with him,” said Shadrahk. “Oh, I see him, over there by the recording equipment. Well, I’ll leave you two alone. Mistress, as always it’s been a pleasure to serve you. I wish you a safe journey and a pleasant year.” He hesitated before adding, “Master won’t be the only one who will miss you.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks, Shadrahk. You’re a real gentleman.” I put my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder.

He returned my embrace. “Well, I’d better get back up there before my brothers turn the island into a Bahrag’s dream world.” He flew up the shaft toward the night sky.

I walked over to the improvised recording booth that Makuta had set up in a corner of the cabana. He was sitting in front of the console, wearing headphones, evidently too absorbed in adjusting the settings to notice my approach. He leaned toward a microphone. “There is peace in surrender,” he said in his low, gravelly voice.

I stopped in my tracks. What could he be doing? I put on my Huna and tiptoed behind him. The desk was strewn with books and papers.

“Renounce the burning light. Come join me in the cool darkness,” he crooned. Then he sat back and listened as if he were replaying his voice and nodded with satisfaction. “Hmm.”

I got close enough to read a few book titles: *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vince Packard, *Subliminal Seduction* by Wilson Bryan Key, and *Secret Messages on Records* by William Poundstone. My heart began to pound under my chest armor. Was he adding subliminal messages to the music he had just recorded?

He pivoted on his stool and removed the headphones. “Hello, doll. Well, isn’t this delightful! You can’t sneak up on me anymore, now that you’re wearing my essence. I can feel its presence.”

I groaned and pulled off the Huna. “What are you doing? I want to go home now. I’ve fulfilled my part of the bargain.”

“I was just listening to your wonderful music. I’ve burned it onto a CD so we can listen to it in the car.”

So he planned to use my own music to brainwash me! I put my hands on my hips. “You said you had foresworn using mind control to recruit me.”

He ejected the compact disc and shut off the machine. “Don’t be ridiculous, darling. I was just adding some backup vocals.” He hastily gathered up the books and papers and stuffed them into a nylon bag.

“I heard what you were adding to it,” I fumed. “I’m not going in the car with you. Just let me walk out of here.”

He stood up and took my arm. “Oh, you’re coming with me, all right. After you sang the songs, the arrangement was for me to take you home.”

A few pages were sticking out of the bag. I quickly stooped and picked them up. My eyes widened as I read the titles, “Heart Rate,” “Brain Wave Response,” and “Compliance with Commands.” Each graph had three lines plotted on it, and the legend showed that they were for Toa, Matoran, and Rahi. Scrawled across the top of one chart were the words, “Music hijacks the heartbeat.”

“You’re going to use my music against the Matoran!” I gasped.

“Well, I have done some research in that area,” he confessed, snatching the graphs from my hand and crumpling them. “But I’m convinced the potential is limited. Packard himself admitted that most of his data were fabricated.” He picked up a jewel case off the desk, opened it, and laid the silver disc inside.

I staggered backwards as the horrible implications began to sink in. In my attempt to negotiate my freedom, I had given him a weapon to use against my friends! I couldn’t allow myself to become an accessory to his despotism. I grabbed my axes off my back, formed my staff, and blasted the disc and the case to smithereens.

“Now, really, beloved,” he scolded me, shaking a few shards of plastic off his hand. “That was a bit childish. If you didn’t want to listen to music in the car, all you had to do was say so.”

I looked behind him at the equipment. The original recordings were probably stored inside on a hard disk somewhere, so he could still make another copy. I aimed my weapon at the console. “No!” he yelled. He stepped in front of it and waved his hand as I summoned enough strength to fire a devastating blast. My staff was knocked downward as if by magnetism, but the edge of my wide beam of fragmentation energy still hit both him and the machine. The case ruptured, the electronics inside made crackling noises, and flames burst out of one side. Makuta glanced down at a dent in his ribs, turned toward the smoking equipment, and frowned. “I don’t mind when you play rough with me, precious, but I think you’ve just destroyed the master files.”

“Just let me go, and I won’t break anything else,” I said grimly, clutching my staff.

The Master of Shadows cocked his head. “That’s quite out of the question, my lovely. The good thing about this is now I get to keep you. You have to admit that with your little tantrum, you’ve violated the spirit of our agreement.”

I inhaled sharply. All the effort and anguish of recording the songs had been for nothing. I was back to the beginning again. I had run out of time and ideas, and soon the Rahkshi would be in stasis and unable to defend me. I would soon be imprisoned in a gloomy dungeon on a perilous island between visits from my psychotic captor. Or perhaps he would lock me up in a Matoran

sphere, where my body and my mind would wither away until he felt like letting me out. I began to panic.

“It’s all right, love. I’d much rather have you than your songs. Besides, maybe someday you’ll sing for me again.” Smiling, Makuta reached for my hand. “So, darling, since you’ve finally said ‘yes’ to me, why don’t we celebrate? I’ve got a special bottle of Perrier-Jouet in the fridge that I’ve been keeping for this day.”

“Get away from me,” I growled, jumping backwards and brandishing my staff.

“Still playing hard to get, sweetheart?” he chuckled. “You female creatures can be so capricious. But you know me. I do enjoy a good chase.” He stepped forward.

I glanced over his shoulder at the tunnel that led to the Manas chamber. Escape was a long shot, to be sure, but perhaps invisibility and surprise would enable me to succeed. Hopefully the vial would give him only an approximate idea of my location, and he would refrain from reading my mind. I lowered my staff, separated it into axes, and put them on my back, keeping one hand on my Huna. Then I smiled back at him as sweetly as I could manage. “You’re going to be a gentleman and give me a head start, right?”

“Well, how could I refuse?” he grinned. He put his hands behind his back. “I’ll close my eyes and count to ten. One...”

I slapped on the Huna and bolted for the passageway. My breathing and footfalls echoed off the walls as I sprinted down the dark stone corridor. I decided I would hit the opposite side of the Manas chamber with a blast of destructive power to distract them, but I never made it that far. By my estimate, I was halfway down the tunnel when a torrent of boulders slid down in front of me, blocking the opening. Panting, I skidded to a stop. I deactivated the mask, formed my staff, and blasted through the debris, covering my head to shield myself from the flying rocks. Then I ran through the hole I had just created. To my dismay, another landslide sealed off the tunnel a few dozen yards past the first one. I heard Makuta’s laughter echo off the stone walls behind me.

I spun around. I could see the Spirit of Destruction sauntering down the corridor toward me. I concealed myself again and slunk against the wall. When he got close, I ducked between his legs. I reached the living room again and dashed into the tunnel to the protodermis chamber. I had no hope of boring through stone faster than he could pile it up, but maybe I could somehow escape by sea.

Unfortunately, the opening in the wall filled with solid rock just as I was about to vault through it. I slammed into it and slumped to the ground. The Huna spun away across the floor.

“Oops! Sorry, cupcake,” he said from the opposite doorway. “I didn’t expect you to get across the room so fast. You’re pretty fast for such a petite creature.”

I crawled to my knees and blasted at the stone, but nothing happened. I stood up and glanced back at him. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “You shouldn’t be so sure of what you see, pumpkin. You know I have the power of illusion.”

I spun around and jabbed my weapon through the imaginary stone. Then I crouched for my jump. But as I tried to spring, my feet stuck to the floor. “Magnetism,” I muttered angrily to myself.

Makuta ambled across the cavern and stood next to me as I tugged at my legs with my hands. He released the magnetic force with a flick of his wrist, and I tumbled backwards. He extended his hand toward me. “You’re quite an engaging playmate, precious. But aren’t you getting a little tired?”

I glared at him. Then I rolled away, firing a shot of destructive power at the same time. It knocked him off his feet and hit the ceiling as well. Chunks of rock rained down into the protodermis pool.

“I suppose not, then, my little tigress,” he remarked wryly. He got up and strode after me. I ran around the pool. Then I watched in astonishment as something bubbled to the surface. A humanoid creature made entirely of stone dragged itself out of the silvery fluid and stumbled onto solid ground. It was followed by several smaller beings on four legs.

“Why, look, darling! You’ve created some stone elementals!” exclaimed Makuta.

My heart leaped with hope. Perhaps, out of gratitude for their new lives, they would help me. “Attack him!” I yelled, pointing at Makuta.

The dark, crystalline creatures lumbered toward Makuta. “Well, it wouldn’t be very nice of me to kill your new creations,” he laughed, “so I’ll just keep them out of trouble for now.” They collapsed heavily to the ground, apparently overwhelmed by artificial gravity. He continued toward me. “Come, my sweet. It’s time we stopped playing. Let’s go back to the living room and celebrate your decision to accept your destiny.”

My eyes darted around desperately for a solution. They stopped on the vial hanging around my neck. Makuta had said it would give me incredible destructive powers. I feared it would have other consequences, but at this point, I had nothing left to lose. I grabbed the glass container and crushed it in my hand.

The acrid smell of burning oil suffused my lungs. I resisted the urge to cough and breathed deeply instead. I felt a jolt of power course through my body and limbs as arcs of electricity rippled over my armor. I gripped my staff and shot a focused blast directly at Makuta’s chest. His armor split with a loud crack, and dark green energy seeped from the opening.

“Aaaah!” he roared, clutching his chest and doubling over. As I sprinted for the hole in the wall, I heard him staggering after me. The opening was suddenly covered with rock again. Reassuring myself it was just an illusion, I jumped anyway. My shoulder bounced off it, and I fell onto my

back. I had hit the stone so hard it had split in half, but it still blocked the opening. I got painfully to my knees and lined up a shot, but my weapon was yanked out of my hands and fell apart. Still leaking energy, Makuta shoved me to the floor with one hand while he lifted one of my axes with the other. He put his knee on my chest.

I stared in wide-eyed terror at the Master of Shadows as he loomed over me, his eyes glowing red. Now I had really done it. I had pushed him over the edge by breaching his armor, and he was going to slay me with my own weapon. After all I had been through, this was the most meaningless death I could imagine. In despair I closed my eyes and waited for the final stroke.

But the expected blow didn't fall. The smell of overheated metal filled the air. Hesitantly, I opened one eye. Makuta was holding my axe like a mirror, using it to reflect the beam of his heat vision to repair the wound in his chest.

He finished the weld and looked down at me, his eyes blue again. "Why, darling, you look so frightened. You didn't think—oh, sweetheart, of course I wasn't going to kill you!" He lifted his knee off me and laid my axe on the ground. Then he put his hands on either side of my head. "Did you think I would love you any less for trying to destroy me? I'm the Spirit of Destruction, and you'll always be my angel. You're more beautiful to me than ever, lying there with your adorable face framed by a halo of debris."

I thrashed and tried to hit him with my fist, but he pressed my arms to the ground and pinned my legs with his knee. "Destiny is such a fickle thing," he continued softly. "I've made so many plans for our future together, but at any moment, you could be snatched from my hands forever. During the dark days when we were apart, there was one regret in particular that haunted me. I berated myself that I hadn't gone ahead and kissed you when I had the chance. I'm not going to make that mistake again."

He brought his corroded Kraahkan closer to my mask, and I turned my face to one side, halfway wishing he would just kill me instead.

Then a metallic voice came from behind us. "I feel strongly compelled to advise against that, old friend. Don't you remember what happened last time?"

Makuta spun his head around. Above the pool, a shimmering silver bipedal creature hovered with his hands on his hips.

The Master of Shadows sighed deeply. "Hello, Eppy."

## 48. Undermining Protodermis

### **Nine Inch Nails — Only**

*I'm becoming less defined as days go by  
Fading away  
And well you might say  
I'm losing focus  
Kinda drifting into the abstract in terms of how I see myself*

*Sometimes I think I can see right through myself  
Sometimes I can see right through myself*

*Less concerned about fitting into the world  
Your world, that is  
'Cause it doesn't really matter anymore  
No, it doesn't really matter anymore  
None of this really matters anymore*

*Yes, I am alone but then again, I always was  
As far back as I can tell  
I think maybe it's because  
Because you were never really real to begin with  
I just made you up to hurt myself  
I just made you up to hurt myself, yeah  
And I just made you up to hurt myself  
And it worked.  
Yes, it did!*

*There is no you  
There is only me  
There is no you  
There is only me  
Only*

*Well, the tiniest little dot caught my eye, and it turned out to be a scab  
And I had this funny feeling like I just knew it's something bad  
I just couldn't leave it alone, I kept picking at the scab  
It was a doorway trying to seal itself shut  
But I climbed through*

*Now I am somewhere I am not supposed to be, and I can see things I know I really shouldn't see  
And now I know why, now, now, now I know why  
Things aren't as pretty  
On the inside*

### **Willie Dixon — Nervous**

*When my b-b-baby calls me d-d-daddy  
And she c-c-call me real slow-sh  
I a-ask her what she want  
And she says "I-I don't kn-know"  
I get nervous*

*M-m-man, I get nervous  
I'm a n-n-nervous man  
And I t-t-tremble all in my b-b-bones*

*A-when she take me in her arms  
And she squeeze, squeeze me tight  
Start to sh-shakin' in her voice  
And she say, "Ev'ry-th-thing's alright"  
I get n-nervous, man  
Man, I-I-I get nervous  
I'm a n-n-nervous man  
And I t-t-tremble all in my b-b-bones*

*Now, a-when my b-b-baby  
K-k-kiss me, f-f-f-feel like-a  
L-l-l-lightnin' hit my b-b-brains  
My heart b-b-beat like thunder  
And she call me baby names  
I get-a n-n-n-nervous  
M-man, I-I get nervous  
I'm a n-n-nervous m-m-man  
And I t-t-tremble all in my bones.*

As the energized protodermis entity watched with supercilious amusement, Makuta got to his feet and pulled me up off the floor. He handed me my axes and wrapped his arms around me before I could sidestep away. His voice full of irritation, he turned to Eppy and asked, "What are you doing in my lair?"

"Your lair?" The metallic creature chuckled, and his silver surfaces undulated in resonance with the sound. "Every place where energized protodermis is found is part of my domain, be it a vast lake or a mere puddle. You consider this chamber in which we are standing to be part of your warren, but technically, on the Venn diagram of your territory and mine, it falls into the area of intersection."

Makuta groaned. "Your mathematical digression failed to answer my question, old friend."

"What am I doing? Keeping you from repeating a potentially disastrous mistake. I'm sure you haven't forgotten the outcome of the last pass you made at a water creature. And from what I saw a few minutes ago, this one is at least as feisty as that other one. Indeed, after what she just did, I'm surprised she's not a smoking pile of slag at this point. You must be really fond of her."

"Well, obviously," Makuta sighed. "She's actually the same one. I rebuilt her."

The silver being sized me up for a moment. "I'd be careful, if I were you. She may be slender, but if you vex her sufficiently, I'd wager she could still send your Kraahkan flying across the room. I'll always remember the sight of you scrambling after it, energy streaming from the gaps in your face, trying to scoop it up before it slid into the protodermis!" He burst out laughing.

I looked up at Makuta in astonishment. "I did that?"

He hesitated. Finally he answered in a low voice. "It was right after you pulled Shadrahk's armor out of the pool."

I glowered at him, wondering what he had done to provoke me that day. I recalled feeling uneasy about the way he was looking at me, and then fleeing from the room. Several days later, he had confessed to erasing my memory of one incident.

"I take it you've wiped her mind. Well, I don't blame you," Eppy shrugged. "If a female creature had humiliated me that badly, I would have been mortified, too."

Makuta stepped in front of me. "Eppy, get out of my lair," he growled.

"Oh, I'd gladly leave you to your awkward attempt at romance, if it weren't for one small business matter we have yet to resolve." The metallic being gestured behind us.

I pivoted to see the stone elementals lunging at Makuta. I dove out of the way. He grabbed his staff and hit them with a bolt of blue energy. They tumbled to the floor and began to snore loudly. "I'm not paying for those things!" Makuta snapped. "My beloved made them by accident when she knocked some rocks into the pool."

"For a courtship, there certainly is a large amount of flying debris," Eppy remarked. "All right, then, I'll charge your lady friend for them. And if she's short on cash, I'm sure we can work out some sort of arrangement." He extended a few tendrils of liquid silver in my direction, and I backed quickly against the wall.

Makuta teleported me a few feet away and strode over to the protodermis entity. "I would advise you not to make me angry," he hissed, gripping his weapon.

The protodermis elemental retracted the tentacles and puffed out his shiny chest. "Or what, you'll shove me around? I'm not like the other creatures you are in the habit of bullying. If you touch me, you risk instant death."

"Or transformation into something more powerful than either of us could possibly imagine." Makuta grinned darkly at the thought.

Eppy raised a gleaming eyebrow. "I seriously doubt that is your destiny. Already the universe is barely large enough to accommodate the size of your ego."

Makuta rolled his eyes. "Listen to the pot, calling the kettle black. Who says I have to touch you to make you suffer? I've got plenty of ranged powers that would work on you, old friend. Magnetism, for instance." He raised his hand and pointed an armored finger, and a giant lump bulged out of the creature's silver forehead.

“Oh, very funny,” Eppy snapped, pushing down the bump with his hands. “I would advise *you* not to make *me* angry. You need me. There’s no one else in existence that can bring your hideous creations to life.”

“Nonsense,” retorted the Master of Shadows. “You’re completely superfluous. Non-living EP is just as effective.”

Eppy smiled sardonically. “Sure. But wherever you try to access it, I’ll be there to thwart you.”

“Unless,” Makuta said slyly, “I absorb you. Then you would be dead, and I would have your power.”

Memories of watching Makuta turn into a churning vortex of doom sent chills up my spine. I inched along the wall toward the exit to the Silver Sea, hoping their attention would remain fixed on each other.

“Ha! You’d have to touch me to do that. Same problem as before,” scoffed the protodermis entity.

“No, I wouldn’t. I’d be pure dark energy. Energized protodermis wouldn’t affect me.” Makuta pensively scratched his chin. “This idea is sounding better and better, actually. It would be the solution to all my Rahi-building needs. No more payments, no more attitude.”

“It would never work. You couldn’t integrate my substance into yours. You would probably explode into atoms.” Eppy crossed his arms in defiance. “And you don’t have the fortitude, anyway.”

Makuta glanced behind him and whispered, “Sweetheart, stand clear. This will only take a few minutes.” The chamber darkened and filled with the sound of rushing wind as his body began to disintegrate into separate parts and swirl around the glowing red eyes in the center. “I don’t, you say?” boomed his voice from the spiral.

Cowering against the wall, I gasped in horror. I had no idea what would happen if Makuta absorbed the energized protodermis entity, but I was sure it wouldn’t be good. If he died, would I be annihilated in the resulting calamity? Conversely, if he survived, what monstrous thing would he become, and what effect would his touch have on me then? I slid quickly toward the opening in the wall.

Eppy stood unmoving above the pool, bright against the dark vortex of chaos. “Fine. Go ahead, old friend. If it’s your destiny to perish in a foolish attempt to seize more power, who am I to stand in your way?” The parts gained in speed until they were a blur, and lightning crackled throughout the living energy whirlpool.

If I had had the time to consider what was happening, I would have been intrigued by the way Makuta was reducing himself completely to energy, rather than simply disassembling himself as he had done when he had threatened to absorb me. I would have watched, mesmerized, as the

silvery surface of the protodermis pool formed patterns of waves that rippled toward the vortex. But I was too worried about my own survival to stand in awe of these fascinating processes. I took aim at the cracked slab of stone which blocked the opening in the wall. With a focused blast, it shattered and fell away. I put my axes on my back and crouched, ready to spring.

To my surprise, a rock saw appeared through the hole, followed by another. Toa Onua peered through the opening and looked around. “Little Sister!” he exclaimed, climbing into the chamber. “You can shatter rock now?”

I threw my arms around him in relief, and he squeezed me tightly. “Yeah. We’ve got to get out of here. Makuta is about to absorb the energized protodermis entity!” I breathed.

“Well, we can’t let *that* happen,” he rumbled reassuringly over the noise of the wind. “Stand behind me.”

I stepped behind his broad, hunched back, wondering what one Toa could do to stop the escalating conflict between these titanic megalomaniacs. I prayed he wouldn’t get hurt trying to intervene.

From the dark, swirling void, the familiar reddish-black shadow hand emerged and reached slowly toward the energized protodermis entity, who boldly held his chin high. Then a huge mound of earth rose suddenly between them. The hand closed around a large clump of soil and retracted. “Arrrh!” yelled Makuta. Onua and I ducked as the vortex rejected the inert substance. Chunks of dirt were flung out at high speed in all directions, hitting the walls and splashing into the pool.

“Energized Protodermis Entity!” called Onua. “Get out of here, before it’s too late!”

Eppy shrugged off the dark hero’s warning and addressed the vortex instead. “When you’re finished making mud pies, old friend, pull yourself together and we’ll discuss a payment plan for all these earth elementals,” he chortled, tilting his head at the swarm of new creatures creeping out of the pool.

Onua rolled his eyes. “He’s too arrogant to realize what almost happened to him. There’s just one way to deal with his kind.” I gasped as the Toa of Earth morphed into a silvery bipedal creature with a curvaceous feminine shape. She turned toward Eppy and waved, swiveling her hips seductively. “Hello, handsome. Remember me?”

Eppy looked up. His mouth dropped open in alarm. “It’s—you’re—”

“Yes, it’s me,” cooed the silver siren. “I’m here to save you from your tragic solitude. Touch me, and fulfill my destiny to transform into your deepest desire! You know you want me.”

“S—s—stay away from me!” The energized protodermis entity collapsed into an amorphous blob and wobbled down the passageway to the living room.

I stared at her in amazement. “Krahka?”

She dusted off her metallic hands. “Works every time. What’s up, Squirt?”

“I think you just saved the universe again. Thanks!” I panted.

“It’s a dirty job,” she sighed, “but someone has to do it.”

“Now we just have to worry about *that*.” I pointed uneasily at the vortex.

The roar of the wind had grown stronger. “Old friend, you can’t hide from me forever!” bellowed Makuta. A few wisps of protodermis were drawn off the surface of the pool and began to whirl around at his outer radius.

Krahka changed into her six-armed Toa Metru Nui form and jumped in front of the glowing red eyes. She cupped two of her hands around her mouth and shouted, “Hey, you swirling heap of junk! Get a grip on yourself. You’ve got company.”

The storm slowly subsided, and the dark whirlpool consolidated back into Makuta’s oversized Rahkshi form. The suspended protodermis fell back into the pool. “Krahka!” blinked the Master of Shadows.

“Mack,” she replied dryly.

“Well, this is certainly a surprise. Are you the one who drove Eppy off?”

“The male ego is like ice,” she smirked, raising her foot and pointing its crystal spike toward the floor to form a small, frosty pyramid. Then she stomped on it. “It’s brittle, and fun to crush.”

He winced. “You’re devastatingly good at that.”

“At first I posed as Onua and tried to talk some sense into him, but when he wouldn’t get a clue, I resorted to my silver Barbie form.”

“I see. So I have you to thank for all that dirt, too. Excuse me.” He leaned over, coughed, and spat out some mud. Then he straightened up again and wiped his mouth. “Couldn’t you have announced yourself in a more conventional way? I miss the good old days of calling cards.”

“Oh, sure. But with the Onua form, I figured I could tunnel into this place pretty easily. And I knew Squirt would give me a Hallmark moment.”

I embraced her again. “I would have done the same even if I had known it was you.”

“Aww. That’s so sweet,” She wrapped her six arms around me. “Sorry I took so long to show up. I’ve been stuck in the Dark Dimension ever since the re-enactment of Book Eight. Happily for me, some bonehead unleashed the Zivon—evidently during the middle of the filming, too—and I

was finally able to escape and check my phone messages. Cell service is really crummy in the Double D. I'm lucky if I get one bar."

"Two females in my lair, and they're hugging each other," grumbled Makuta. "Wait a minute. She *called* you?"

Krahka patted me on the back and released me. "So, do you still want me to save you from this big, evil, greasy, chaos freak? Or has he talked you into staying with him in his cozy love nest and raising his adorable children?"

I looked at her sideways. "Uh, no, he hasn't."

"She doesn't need saving, Krahka." An ingratiating smile crossed Makuta's mask. "In fact, she just rejected my sincere offer to take her back to her house. I can only assume—" At this moment the bipedal stone elemental tackled Makuta while all the four-legged ones latched onto his legs. He swayed precariously under the larger creature's weight, his legs too encumbered to step forward. "Dearest," he said testily, "would you please call off Rocky and his little friends before I yield to the temptation to pulverize them?"

With Krahka here, I felt confident I no longer needed their help, and I didn't want them to get hurt trying. "All right. Stone elementals, thank you. You can leave him alone now."

As the beings jumped off him and clomped away into the darkness. Krahka doubled over laughing. "Oh, that was priceless! I'm sure there's some kind of story there."

Makuta crossed his arms. "Look, Krahka, you've probably got to get back to your busy life. Can I pack you a lunch for the road?"

"You know me. I never turn down free food," she grinned. We followed him down the hallway to the living room, and I began to breathe more easily. Even though my future was still in doubt, my anxiety had been replaced with a patient faith that Krahka would find some way to secure my freedom.

As we walked, Krahka transformed into a replica of Toa Hordika Nokama. "I like this form," she commented. "It's comfortable, and it's got that whole wild-thing 'tude. Only problem is, it's got a highly developed sense of smell." She looked at Makuta and wrinkled her snout, and he scowled back. She slouched along for a few steps before asking, "So, what did I miss?"

"A lot," I smiled grimly.

"Has Dirtbag been giving you the full-court press?"

"You could say that," I nodded. "It's all going to be in a story on BZPower soon."

"So much for 'No more Makuta stories,'" she teased.

“Well, I wasn’t going to do this one, but Gaaki asked me to, and I promised her I would. It was the least I could do after she saved me from the tsunami.”

“Tsunami?”

“He caused it,” I replied, jerking my thumb towards Makuta.

“You can’t fault me for being upset after Sidorak told me he’d had you M&Ded, sweetheart,” he protested. “I was beside myself with grief and rage.”

“Sure, but he never would have sent his Visorak after me if you hadn’t been putting your claws all over me when Roodaka walked into my office,” I retorted.

“I couldn’t help it! You were driving me mad. You treated me so lovingly when you gave me that bath, and then you turned around and rejected me again. There’s only so much a fellow can take.”

His attempt to shift the blame was starting to annoy me. “If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have been kidnapped by armed thugs and cut almost in half. Or almost buried in the Archives collapse, or almost lacerated in a falling Knowledge Tower. And I *did* actually fall off a cliff because of you.”

“I saved you from all those things,” he frowned. “About the cliff, I offered my help, but you didn’t want it.”

Krahka stopped in her tracks. “You gave Mack a *bath*?”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “It was an ill-fated Plan to get Roodaka to fall for him.”

The shapeshifter exploded into laughter. Makuta tapped his foot impatiently until she quieted down, and then he started walking again.

“Okay, so I did miss a lot,” she snickered as we entered the living room. “Hey, you totally redid this dump! I hate to say it, but it looks cool now. It’s not your usual cave-troll décor.”

“The cabana was Florahk’s doing,” explained the Master of Shadows.

“No wonder,” chuckled Krahka. “Where are the rugrats, anyway?”

Makuta pointed to the ceiling. “They’re up on the surface, throwing their last party before I put them in stasis for next year’s storyline. They just did a rock concert in each region of the island.”

“Really? And I was stuck in the Double D without even an MP3 player. Dang!”

As we passed into the dining room, Makuta and I ducked under the poisonous plant out of habit, but Krahka screamed in pain as a drop of venom fell on her head. “Sorry, dear. I forgot to warn

you about Florahk's—" Before Makuta could explain, Krahka had spun around, formed a fire sword in one hand, and blasted the vine with flames. "Oh, well. I suppose he won't miss it while he's in stasis, anyway," he finished with resignation.

She peered through a doorway. "Hey, look out, dude! There's a big dragon loose in your kitchen!" She brandished her fin barbs.

"That's Bahka. He's my cook. Come on in, and I'll get him to fix you a to-go box."

At Makuta's request, Bahka disappeared into the walk-in and retrieved a large chunk of roast beef. He laid paper-thin slices onto a slab of whole wheat bread spread with brown mustard, added cheddar and lettuce, and closed the sandwich with a flourish. Then he rolled it up in butcher paper and handed it to her. She nodded her thanks, and the giant green reptile he bowed modestly.

Makuta glanced at me, staring hungrily at the food. "Oh, and make one for your mistress while you're at it. You don't need to wrap it."

"Thanks," I told Bahka in advance. I suddenly realized all I had eaten since breakfast was a bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos I had split with Pyrorahk and Plasmarahk. As soon as he handed it to me, I took a big bite.

Makuta put his arms around both our blue shoulders. "Krahka, we'll walk you out to the Silver Sea. I assume you'll be flying back to Metru Nui so you can leave through the portal in the LEGO trailer." He steered us through the living room.

I glanced over at Krahka as I chewed my sandwich, wondering if she had a Plan to get me free. She winked back. "Yeah, that'll work. Oh, and since you owe me big time for saving you from certain doom, I'll accept Squirt as payment."

Makuta laughed. "My dear, I didn't ask for your help. All you did was delay the gratification I'll get when I subsume him someday."

"Get real, you big lug! If I hadn't stopped you, you would have ended up looking like an episode of MythBusters gone wrong," she snorted. "And you complained that Nidhiki and Krekka gave you heartburn."

"Maybe," he shrugged. "I guess we'll never know. Don't get me wrong, Krahka, I'm glad you put Eppy in his place. Even though he's a good friend, that guy really aggravates me sometimes. But I'm not giving up my precious for that."

Krahka frowned. Then, as we approached a curve in the tunnel, she suddenly stopped walking and sniffed the air. "Do you smell something?" She ducked out from under Makuta's arm. "Dang, I should have closed the door behind me!" She pulled me toward her, morphed into a cloud of smoke, and drifted around me.

Makuta spun around and snapped, “Will you cut it out? Your attempt to buy time is patently transparent.”

Dark, slender fingers crept over his shoulders, and I caught a whiff of familiar sickly-sweet perfume. Makuta turned his head as Roodaka’s voluptuous figure emerged from the shadows. “Who are you talking to, Lord Makuta?” she purred, sliding her arms around his neck.

## 49. The Return of the Queen

### **Randy Travis—Too Gone Too Long**

*You've been too gone for too long  
 It's too late to come back now  
 It's been so long since you walked out my door  
 Now you're just an old song nobody sings any more  
 I've got a new love and she's a true love  
 But darlin' how could you have known  
 You've been too gone too long  
 Now it's too late to come back home  
 You came a long way goin' the wrong way  
 Don't even set your suitcase down  
 You wanted to roam, now you're paying the bill  
 You're an old rolling stone who rolled over the hill  
 Well I had a good cry when you said goodbye  
 I didn't want to let you go  
 But you've been too gone too long  
 Now it's too late to come back home  
 I had a good cry when you said goodbye  
 I didn't want to let you go  
 But you've been too gone too long  
 So why don't you just stay gone*

“Nobody,” Makuta said quickly, looking up at Roodaka as she slithered closer to him. “I was just talking to myself, as usual.”

Behind Krahka’s screen of smoke, I swallowed my bite of sandwich and donned the Huna. The last two times I had encountered this vicious sorceress, she had left puncture wounds in my chest and ordered my execution. I waited to see if Makuta would apply the strategy of silence and water he had used on me. Since she had sneaked up on us, I wondered if he had already inhaled some of her Enslave fragrance.

“How sad. The future ruler of the universe is lonely,” the dark seductress cooed sympathetically. “Well, Roodaka has come to change that.” Her arms snaked around his neck.

He wrenched himself from her grip and backed away. “Roodaka, please... I think we should just be friends. Stay over there.” Unsteadily, he raised his hand and pointed it toward her.

Springing forward, she grabbed his wrist and pushed it down. “Don’t resist me,” she hissed. Her fingers traveled up the side of his mask, and her voice resumed its sweetness. “I’ve missed you so much, my lord. Since you sent me away, I’ve been thinking about you day and night. I’m convinced our love is strong enough to survive that little quarrel we had. I would have come sooner, except that someone stole my Nui-Kopen, and I had to send for another ride.”

Makuta swayed slightly. “Stole it? How do you know?”

“It was that imbecile Darakoo. One of my Boggarak saw him, but he was too fast for her.”

“The lame green fellow that came by here looking for you?” he asked in surprise.

“He managed to get himself a new leg somehow, but he’s still lame in my book,” she snorted. “But enough about him. You’re the only one who’s ever treated me right. Change into your tall, handsome winged form for me. It’s so dreamy.”

The Spirit of Destruction complied, darkening the room as he expanded into the larger, more intimidating shape. He was unmistakably under her influence. I spoke to my wispy companion in hushed tones. “Let’s get out of here.”

“That’s so much better. Why were you even in that ratty old form?” Roodaka chided the Spirit of Destruction, adjusting her headpiece. “No one likes it anymore, now that your so-called Chronicler has been eliminated. It’s the only thoughtful thing that clown of a king has ever done for me. To think that you would be tempted by that scrawny little slattern, when you could have me!”

“Wait, she’s talking about you, Squirt,” snickered the smoke cloud. “This is hilarious!”

“When I saw her in your arms,” pouted the dark, shapely creature, “I felt like a dagger was sinking into my heart. But I’m sure by now you’ve expunged every trace of her from your lair. Haven’t you?”

Makuta’s eyes shifted back and forth. “She...”

“Krahka,” I urged in a barely audible whisper, “Her perfume is enslaving him. We’ve got to escape before he tells her I’m still alive, or I won’t be for long!”

“Are you kidding?” came the amused reply. “This is better than *Desperate Housewives!*”

I considered fleeing alone, but Roodaka was blocking one exit, and I needed Krahka’s help to get past the Manas at the other. Fortunately, Roodaka hadn’t heard us, because she was busy haranguing Makuta. “Why are you hesitating to answer me? Are you still in love with her? Tell me the truth!”

“I... well... yes, I am,” Makuta stammered.

“Check this out,” said Krahka slyly. She morphed into a perfect replica of me and stepped out of the gloom. “I’m baaaaack!” she crowed.

Roodaka’s jaw dropped. “But—but you’re dead! I saw your mangled parts! How did—” She glared at Makuta. “Explain this to me! Is this a trick to make me jealous?”

He gave a nervous laugh. “Begone, illusion.” He waved his hand at Krahka, and she disappeared into darkness.

The changeling stepped back out of the shadow, a grin on her Kaukau Nuva. “Peek-a-boo!”

“Well, there’s one way to find out if she’s real,” scowled the Viceroy of the Visorak. She extended her hand and fired a beam of dark energy at my doppelganger. Makuta lunged sideways and caught the blast in the middle of his chest. He reeled backwards a few steps.

“You dirty, cheating son of a Kavinika!” she spat. She grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “You revived her somehow!”

“Actually, she never died,” he smiled sheepishly. “That corpse was just a fish. Minions can’t always be trusted. You know how it is.”

“This time Roodaka will personally make sure the job is finished,” she snarled, her eyes narrowing into red slits. “Don’t you dare protect that tramp any more. And if I ever cross paths with that traitor Nikorak again, he’ll meet the same fate.” The Master of Shadows stood in a miserable daze, his hands hanging limply at his sides.

Krahka cartwheeled across the corridor as the dark Viceroy aimed again. She missed by inches, exploding the stone wall into fragments. Krahka pointed her aqua axes at Roodaka, but the sleek black creature pounced on her and deflected her water jet, grappling her to the floor and sending her tools skidding across the floor. In my form, Krahka was much weaker than her attacker. She struggled vainly to throw her off, but Roodaka’s hands closed around her throat. I suddenly realized that the shapeshifter wouldn’t be able to change into a stronger form because she couldn’t breathe. I aimed my staff at Roodaka, but I hesitated, afraid I would hit Krahka instead. Hoping Makuta would act in time if freed from the spell, I pulled my staff apart into axes and drenched the combatants with a wave of water. Then I reactivated the Huna before Roodaka could see me.

Makuta shook off his stupor, jumped into the fray, and pulled Roodaka off her victim. Krahka danced to the other side of the hallway. “You can’t catch me!” she taunted in a sing-song voice.

As he struggled to restrain Krahka’s assailant, he frowned. “Cupcake, I’m glad you’re finally asserting yourself, but you’ve picked a deucedly inconvenient time to do it.”

“Let me at her!” barked Roodaka. When Makuta tightened his grip instead, she gave him a vicious elbow jab to the face and twisted free. Makuta turned to retrieve his Kraahkan, which bounced off the far wall with a loud clank. Meanwhile, Roodaka aimed her Rhotuka launcher at Krahka, who was reaching for one of her axes. I gasped in horror as my friend, disguised as me, faced the prospect of permanent mutation. Yanking off the Huna, I yelled, “Roodaka!” and leveled my staff at her.

“Curse your dishonesty, Lord Makuta!” She pivoted her torso toward me. “Wait. You must be the illusion, because the real one lost her axes.” She swung her weapon back to Krahka. “Or is that what he wants me to think? Besides, that one is armed.” She aimed at me again. Krahka and I remained motionless, trying not to provoke her. We both knew that if she launched a spinner,

she could direct it with her will as long as she was conscious. Any shot I fired would have to be decisive. I prayed Makuta would hurry up. Some distance down the hall, his joints creaked as he bent over for his mask.

Krahka broke the tension. “Actually, we’re both real. He couldn’t get enough of me, so he built another just like me,” she giggled. “Now we can snuggle up to both sides of him at once. Did you know he’s ticklish?”

Roodaka fixed her burning gaze on Krahka and screamed in rage. I took advantage of the distraction and fired, knocking the launcher out of her hands before she could release the disk. She hurled her Rhotuka catcher at me, and I dove for the ground. The heavy metal weapon hit my shoulder, and I sprawled onto the floor.

Krahka grabbed her axes and formed her staff as Roodaka sprang towards her. She shot the black creature squarely in the breastplate, sending her staggering backwards. Krahka laughed. “You okay, sister? Let’s blast this witch into smithereens.” I nodded as I jumped up and aimed at her again.

“Now, now, darlings. Don’t be too rough on her. She’s in the storyline,” scolded Makuta, catching Roodaka from behind. This time he trapped her arms at her sides. “We need to get her back to Metru Nui where she belongs.”

“I’m not leaving here until she’s—they’re dead,” hissed Roodaka.

“Actually,” Krahka smirked, “there’s only one Chronicler. Remember me?” She morphed into her Toa Metru Nui form.

“The shapeshifting Rahi!” shrieked the Viceroy. “I should have known. Lord Makuta, you’re even more of a low-down, sleazy scoundrel than I thought.”

“Think what you like, my dear. And dream what you like. It’s time for you to take a little nap so we can get you back to the filming.” He raised his hand over her, but at that moment, the tinny tones of the Star Wars theme filled the tunnel. “Oh, great.” He rummaged in his leg compartment for his phone. “Mentorahk, make it quick. I’ve got my hands full.”

Roodaka squirmed out from underneath his arm. She vanished in a cloak of darkness, and I heard faint footsteps heading toward the living room. I glanced anxiously at Krahka. “Let’s get out of here!”

The changeling hesitated. “But it’s so fun to stir up the Queen Bee! Oh, well, I suppose this is as good a time as any.” She grabbed my arm, and we hastened toward the protodermis chamber.

Behind us, Makuta was saying, “Are you serious? All right, I’m on my way.” He materialized in front of us, back in his oversized Rahkshi form. “Where do you ladies think you’re going?”

“Well, duh! We’re getting out of this freaky hellhole before your psycho girlfriend tries to kill us again,” replied Krahka. She turned to me. “Three chicks in his lair, and he’s managed to get all of us ticked off at him. When it comes to love, he’s all thumbs.”

“Very funny, Krahka,” he groaned, glancing at his hands. “That harpy is definitely not my girlfriend. Look, I need your help. I’m in hot water with LEGO, and I need to get back to the Great Barrier right away, but Roodaka is refusing to leave until she gets revenge.”

“Yeah, I heard that last part. And this is my problem because...” Krahka gestured for him to continue.

“Because I’m going to compensate you handsomely if you’ll solve it,” he sighed.

“I’m all ears,” she grinned, sprouting several on the sides of her head.

I grumbled to myself. It looked like Krahka’s penchant for well-paid adventure was going to expose me to more danger. But since she had already kept me from getting killed and mutated since she had arrived, I forced myself to be patient.

“Here’s what I need you to do. Subdue Roodaka somehow, and get her back to Metru Nui. The filming is about to start, and they’ve noticed she’s missing again. I’d do it myself, but the film crew will be heading up to the Barrier soon, and I’ve got to be there in my cage. If she’s gone for very long, they’ll come looking for her, and if they find her here, I’ll be in even deeper trouble. They’re already angry with me about some other things.”

“Really? LEGO is finally onto you?” A sly smile spread across Krahka’s face. “Like Spider-Man once said, ‘Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.’”

“That was Sir Walter Scott,” muttered Makuta.

“Whatever. So, what is LEGO mad about? Do tell.”

“Well, here’s the gist of it. When the CGI team was airbrushing a meteorite out of the Ga-Metru footage, they noticed it resembled me. Then they started looking for my involvement in other recent disasters. Their forensic experts discovered pyrotechnical devices in the rubble of the Coliseum, and naturally they suspect I set them. They’ve got a seismologist looking into the earthquake and the tsunami, and some other specialists investigating the Archives and Knowledge Tower collapse, the landslide in Po-Metru, and the looting of the LEGO trailer. And now they’re wondering about Sidorak’s mysterious injuries. My beloved can explain it to you in more detail. Some of it was even her doing.”

“Wow, you two really know how to party,” remarked the shapeshifter.

“Anyway, that’s why it’s really important for me to hurry back into my prison,” he finished. “Maybe some of the allegations won’t stick if I can convince them I’ve been there the whole time.”

“Pyros?” My eyes widened. “Is that why the whole thing caved in when I hit that button on the ceiling?”

“Exactly,” he nodded, tweaking my chin. “You’ve become a force of nature, precious, but you’re not that good yet.”

“This all feels pretty unnatural to me,” I shrugged, looking down at my axe-staff. “Why did you rig the Coliseum to blow up?”

He sighed. “Every villain worth his salt has a self-destruct mechanism in his lair. I used to live there when I was impersonating Turaga Dume, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Listen, sweetheart, I’ve got to go. So, Krahka, you’ll handle Roodaka for me?”

“Leave it to me,” Krahka assured him, morphing into a hideous, heavily-armed creature that I assumed was a Dark Hunter. “I’m your trigger man. Now, about my fee...”

“Trust me, dear, I’ll make it worth your while when I get back. *Well* worth your while. Now, promise me you’ll keep my beloved safe. She’s my most valued treasure. And be sure not to leave any marks on Roodaka. The reason I haven’t called on the Rahkshi to do it is that I don’t trust them not to mangle her. Use something gentle, like sleep or stasis.”

Krahka spun her vicious-looking weapon around its trigger guard. “Sure, Mack. Kid gloves.”

He straightened his posture and took a deep breath. “Well, my only true love, and my favorite old flame, it’s time for us to part. I’ll see you both soon, so I won’t say *adieu*, but rather, *au revoir*.” The Master of Shadows leaned over and kissed my hand. He nodded at the changeling.

“Well, *déjà vu* and *soupe du jour* to you, too, Mack!” said Krahka.

“Oh, beloved, thanks for the mental image of you and Krahka fawning over me,” he called over his shoulder. “That was delightful.”

“It wasn’t me who said that.” I pointed at Krahka. “It was my evil twin.”

“Drat! Well, still, that thought will help sweeten the long hours I’m detained in that confounded prison.” He smiled blissfully.

Krahka transformed into a facsimile of me again and blew him a kiss. His gaze lingered on us a moment before he launched himself into flight and zoomed away down the corridor.

I groaned. “Ugh! You shouldn’t encourage him, Krahka.”

“Like he hasn’t been fantasizing about that from the moment I showed up,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Besides, it’s good for him to be obsessing over something pointless. That way it won’t occur to him that I’ll be long gone before he gets back, with you and whatever else I can haul off.”

“I like the sound of that! But why don’t we just leave right now and skip the battle?” I asked. “Roodaka can get him in trouble with LEGO, for all I care. I just want to go home.”

“Come on,” she smiled mischievously. “You know you want to see that nasty she-devil get what’s coming to her.”

“Well, maybe just a little,” I admitted. “But what if she kills us instead? Last time you fought her, in Book Eight, you lost.”

“Why do you think I want to fight her so bad? Chill out, Squirt. We can take her, no problem. This time I can use powers LEGO doesn’t know I have. Besides, I made a deal with Mr. Brightside. You know, I’d kick her snobby backside any day for free, but of course I’ll never tell *him* that.”

I sighed. As anxious as I was to get away from Mangaia, I was grateful to Krahka for answering my call for help, and I realized I shouldn’t argue with her about how she planned to deliver me. She had proven herself trustworthy in the past. “Hey, thanks for coming to save me. I really appreciate it.”

“No sweat,” she smiled.

“So, what’s the Plan? Get her to follow us to Metru Nui?”

“First, we eat our sandwiches. I’m starving.” She pulled hers out of her back compartment. “Where’s yours?” I pointed to the remains of my lunch, which had been trampled in the fight. “Come on, let’s get that fiery dude to make you another one.” She transformed into Kopaka so she could use an Akaku Nuva to scan for Roodaka. As she led us into the living room, she peered carefully at the desk. “He’s got plenty of cash in his drawer. We’ll be flying home first class.”

At the sight of a Toa of Ice, Bahka lunged forward spitting flames, but I quickly put on my Rau and explained. He assembled another sandwich for me and an extra one for Krahka. Then he disappeared into the smokehouse again.

“How did you get past the Lorahk?” I asked Krahka.

“I used an ice orb I won off Ogel in a game of Texas Hold ‘Em,” she replied through a mouthful of food. “That keeps them frozen longer than a regular blast of ice, like this guy can make.” She pointed to her ice blades. “That’s the other reason it took me so long to get here. After I got out of the Double D, I went to fetch some equipment.”

“You’re hanging out with Ogel now?”

“Not really. He invited me over for snowmobile races. He was probably planning to hit on me, but I ended up cleaning him out instead. His harpoon looks really good over my fireplace,” she said slyly.

“I bet he was pretty annoyed about that,” I grinned. “Well, if the Lorahk are still frozen, why don’t I take off now and wait for you on Metru Nui?”

“Because I might need some bait, obviously,” she replied impatiently. “Stop trying to weasel out of this. You think I’m going to sell you to her or something?”

“I’m sorry, Krahka. It’s not that I don’t trust you,” I explained. “It’s just that every time I’ve gone fishing, it hasn’t gone so well for the bait.”

“Things’ll be different, Squirt, now that you’ve hooked up with me. All right, let’s review. Turning into big, fierce things doesn’t work on her, because she’s ridiculously strong. I’m thinking ranged Rahkshi powers, mostly. Plus, we’ll work the jealousy angle and get her flustered. You take a shot at her with water or disintegration if I get in a bind. With two of us and one of her, we can make her dance for a little while before we finish her off.” The shapeshifter crammed the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth and stood up. “Let’s get this party started.”

“How are we going to find her? Should I—”

Krahka faced the shadowy living room and adjusted the lens of her Akaku. “No need. She’s already here.”

## 50. Rrrrowr! Hsss!

### **Patsy Cline — I Fall to Pieces**

*I fall to pieces  
Each time I see you again.  
I fall to pieces  
How can I be just your friend?*

*You want me to act like we've never kissed  
You want me to forget, pretend we've never met  
And I've tried and I've tried, but I haven't yet  
You walk by and I fall to pieces*

*I fall to pieces  
Each time someone speaks your name  
I fall to pieces  
Time only adds to the flame*

*You tell me to find someone else to love  
Someone who'll love me too, the way you used to do  
But each time I go out with some one new  
You walk by and I fall to pieces*

*You walk by and I fall to pieces*

I sprang from my seat and reached behind me for my Huna. Krahka pulled me into the shadows and turned into an illusion Rahkshi. An image of me appeared at the table, sitting across from an image of her Toa Metru Nui form. They nibbled on imaginary sandwiches.

A blast of dark energy ripped through the room. It passed through the illusion of me and struck the back wall, sending stone chips flying. A second bolt was fired unsuccessfully at the Krahka mirage. Krahka shifted quickly into a brown Rahkshi and blasted a huge hole around the doorway. There was a shriek and a scuffle amidst the falling rocks, and then silence.

“Come on,” hissed Krahka. She turned into the smoke cloud form, and I followed on tiptoe into the living room. Roodaka’s glowing eyes darted behind the home theater system.

The cloud whispered, “Get behind her and get ready to shoot.” I crept around the couch and aimed my staff. Krahka morphed into a copy of me and called out, “Roodaka? You know, even though you keep trying to kill me, I don’t have any hard feelings. We should just share him! There’s enough of him to go around, don’t you think?”

This suggestion was met with a savage blast of darkness. Laughing, Krahka vaulted over the couch, which exploded into fragments. I hit Roodaka in the back with a burst of disintegration power, and she rolled forward and sprang onto her feet again. She spun around and raised her hand, but Krahka bludgeoned the back of her head with her axe-staff. The dark Viceroy reeled away and retreated behind the computer desk.

“Oh, did I mess up your hair? My bad,” shrugged Krahka. She ambled toward the computer. “How sentimental he is! Look at all these pictures of me on his desk. Is that one of you? Oh, no, it’s a close-up of his new stone rat design. My bad.”

Roodaka shot a blast from under the desk, knocking Krahka’s blue legs out from under her. I ran around to shoot again, but our enemy was ready, hitting me squarely in the chest with a powerful beam. I skidded backwards across the floor, the wind knocked out of me.

When I looked up, Roodaka was grappling with a replica of herself. Ignoring the pain in my ribs, I scrambled to my feet and waited to see which one was real. Claws slashed and blows landed, and they rolled on the floor in a black blur before one of them tore herself away and landed in a combat stance, her hands forward. The other got up warily, and they circled each other.

One Roodaka’s flying kick sailed through the other’s two-armed block, sending her staggering backwards. But she ducked the next roundhouse and grabbed her opponent’s leg, flinging her sideways. Then she pounced. They wrestled on the floor for a few minutes, locked in ferocious combat. “Your copycat power notwithstanding, Rahi,” snarled one of the shiny black combatants, “you’re no match for the real Roodaka!”

I tried to figure out which one had spoken, but they were an indistinguishable tangle of arms and legs. Finally one of them prevailed, slamming her enemy to the floor with a sickening crunch. I waited anxiously for a sign. It came in the form of the loser morphing into a Muaka as she leaped back up. She snapped her teeth at the real Roodaka, who responded by bashing the gleaming white daggers with her Rhotuka catcher. Krahka emitted a whimper and retracted her head. I shot a jet of water at Roodaka, blinding her long enough for Krahka to swat her with a mighty paw. Roodaka flew across the room and landed against the sofa. Krahka changed into Roodaka again and strutted toward her, swinging her hips exaggeratedly and sticking out her chest. “Look at me. I’m Roodaka. Everyone wants me, except Makuta. He dumped me for his secretary.”

“That’s it. You’re going to die slowly. And hideous, too.” Roodaka raised her spinner launcher. I shot it with disintegration power, knocking it out of her hands.

“Ooh, Squirt, I think you broke her nail,” Krahka scolded. “Now you’re really in for it.” She dodged a beam of dark energy with a swivel of her pelvis.

I understood the mixture of tactical and personal reasons that drove my ally to taunt Roodaka, but she was making me nervous. “I’m running low on energy,” I warned her in a low voice. “And we’d better defeat her after all your trash talk, or she’s going to make our deaths really painful.”

“Yeah, I guess we should wrap this up,” nodded the false Roodaka. She transformed into a catapult scorpion and began to lob hardened magma balls at the dark Viceroy with her tail. Each was exploded in mid-air by a focused beam of dark energy. I fired at Roodaka again, but she surprised me with a sudden back flip, and I pulverized what was left of the couch instead. Meanwhile, Krahka changed into a blue and silver Rahkshi. Roodaka fired a concentrated blast

in my direction before I could recharge for another shot, and I was blown backwards into the television monitor. Through tumbling DVD cases and shards of glass I watched Roodaka crash to the floor. She flopped on the ground, trying vainly to rise, as Krahka shot her over and over. Finally she was overcome by the artificial gravity and lay still.

Krahka's shoulders drooped with fatigue. "Dang! That much gravity would have dropped three or four Toa. I say we jack with her nicely polished armor now." She morphed into a large lava eel and slithered along the stone, leaving a smoking trail behind her.

Roodaka's eyes widened with terror. "Stay away, you freak! Don't touch me!" she shrieked.

"Krahka, we're not supposed to leave any marks," I protested. In truth, I was more worried my friend's preoccupation with revenge would somehow allow Roodaka to get the upper hand. "I think you should turn into a sleep Rahkshi or something."

The eel hesitated. It changed into a blue and black Rahkshi. "Squirt, you can really be a killjoy sometimes. Stasis okay with you?"

"Sure," I nodded. Suddenly there was a roar behind us. We spun around to see a winged reptile about twenty feet high and sixty feet long crash through a wall. It was wreathed in smoke and swung a whiplike tail. The room filled with flames as the creature exhaled.

"Rosy! How sweet. You've come to help," cooed Roodaka. Through the heat waves I could see the beast fix her eyes on her mistress and snort contentedly, sending another gust of searing heat through the room. The Viceroy of the Visorak mustered the strength to raise an arm and point. "Kill those two."

Krahka and I scrambled into the dining room. "What is that thing?" I cried.

"A Kanohi dragon," Krahka smiled grimly. "I guess that's the ride she was talking about." She glanced at her staff. "It's so big it'll take a dozen blasts, and by then we'll be cooked."

Bahka ran past us into the living room and spat flames at the new arrival. She swung her mighty head and returned fire. The reptilian chef stood bravely in the midst of the scorching blast. Then he leaped onto the Kanohi dragon's neck and slashed at her thick mask-like scales with his claws.

"He needs a bigger ally," muttered Krahka. "Like, say, a Tahtorahk." She morphed into an immense dragon-like animal, with fearsome claws and gleaming blades protruding from her massive head. She crashed through the already enlarged doorway to charge the intruder. As a Tahtorahk, Krahka loomed almost twice as tall as the Kanohi dragon, but their overall bulk was about the same.

Rosy clawed at Bahka, tearing him off her neck. He tumbled to one side. Krahka lunged and clamped her jaws around her foe's foreleg. Rosy howled, breathing scorching flames onto Krahka's head and shaking her afflicted limb. Dodging the vicious swishing tail, Bahka carefully

timed a leap onto the Kanohi dragon's back and sunk his claws into a gap between scales. She thrashed under him, but he hung on like a determined bronco rider.

The heat was beginning to overwhelm me. I blinked away the double vision and started to step back, but behind me were the blazing fires of Bahka's smokehouse. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and Roodaka's cold voice penetrated the clamor of the fight. "Come with me, Chronicler. I've got a writing assignment for you."

I jabbed backwards with my elbow and sprang forward, but she struck me over the head with something heavy. I felt the impact of several blows before I blacked out.

When I returned to consciousness, the first thing I noticed was my throbbing skull. I smelled the same intoxicating perfume that had infused Roodaka's bedding. I opened my eyes to see her leaning over me. She was propping me up in a desk chair. Then I realized it was the one in my office, and a blank MS Word document was displayed on the computer screen in front of me. "Suicide Note.doc" was on the title bar.

"Now," announced my captor matter-of-factly, "you're going to write a little message to Lord Makuta. You'll say how sorry you are to have disrupted the enduring love between him and the ravishing Lady Roodaka. You'll say that your burning regret has driven you to end your own miserable little life."

I looked at her in dismay and opened my mouth to reply, but the pain and poison slowed my response. Before I could speak, her claws crept around my throat. "Get on with it!"

My mind reeling, I willed my sluggish fingers to type. I wondered what was happening with Krahka, Bahka, and the Kanohi dragon. I could hear distant thumps and rumbling sounds. Keeping one hand on my neck, Roodaka flipped open a black Razr cell phone and entered a number. "Hello, Lord Makuta. How are you?"

After a brief pause, she replied, "No, I'm still in your lair. Something's come up I thought you might want to know about. I found your Chronicler in her office typing a suicide note."

There was an outburst of protest, after which she assured him, "It's true. Evidently she's so horrified at her attempt to sabotage our love—fine, go ahead. I'll put you on speaker." She punched a button, set the phone on the desk, and smirked at me.

Makuta's anxious voice came out of the tiny speaker. "Darling! Are you feeling all right?"

Rubbing my aching head, I mumbled, "Uh, no."

"Are you really writing a suicide note?"

"Yes," I replied groggily, "because she—aack—" Roodaka's hands tightened around my throat.

“She’s quite choked up about this,” explained the dark Viceroy. “But she did say she wants to hear you promise you’ll help me, as proof that her licentious behavior hasn’t undermined the only true love you’ve ever known. That’s the only thing that would change her mind.”

“Wait a minute. What does she want me to promise?”

“That you’ll help me keep my horde, obviously,” she snapped. “Don’t you remember our Plan? You’ll use mind control on Keetongu, so that he’ll—”

“Are you *threatening* me?” he snarled.

“No, you big cretin,” she sighed in exasperation. “I’m threatening *her*.”

“I won’t be extorted by my own employees,” growled the Master of Shadows. “If any harm comes to her—oh, no. Here come the LEGO brass. I’ve got to go.”

Roodaka’s sinister laugh sent a chill up my spine. “Then I’m afraid there’s nothing more I can do to dissuade the despondent little waif from killing herself. I mustn’t be late for the filming. I’m the star.”

During the agonizing silence that followed, I clawed futilely at her hands. Finally, he asked in a quiet voice, “Please don’t do anything rash, Roodaka. Can I call you back?”

“You have ten minutes,” said Roodaka curtly. She released my neck and flipped her phone shut. “Well, Galitea, I suppose we’re about to learn how much he really cares for you. My guess is he won’t call back in time.” She walked over to the sofa, reclined on it, and stretched her legs. Then she pushed a few buttons on her Razr keypad and closed it again. “You might as well go ahead and finish your silly note. The only way a creature as trivial as you will ever have a chance to be remembered is to be a peculiar little footnote in the biography of someone important.”

Rubbing my neck and taking a deep breath, I looked at the clock on the computer screen. Surely the LEGO people would not be finished talking to Makuta in ten minutes, and when it came down to the choice between losing his job or losing me, it was obvious I would be the one sacrificed. The prospect of spending the last moments of my life composing lies while Roodaka watched in amusement was intolerable. As hopeless as my odds were, I still had to try to escape. A muffled crash made the walls shudder. At least Krahka was still alive.

I began to type gibberish while I thought of a Plan. Adrenaline was helping to chase away the lethargy from the potion. A furtive side glance revealed my subjugator was examining the tips of her claws. I looked down at the shard of glass still hanging from its corroded chain around my neck and regretted wasting Makuta’s powerful essence on him. As if a tiny bottle of his fluid could enable me to defeat his entire being!

Fleeing was clearly a better prospect than fighting. Fortunately Roodaka hadn’t placed any obstacles in the way of the tunnel opening. I typed with one hand while I reached quickly for my Mask of Concealment and put it in my lap. She looked up. Evidently my movement had caught

her attention, but after a few moments she returned her gaze to her manicure. I decided to wait a while before moving again, just in case. Time ticked slowly by while I pretended to edit my note. I fingered the broken vial and brought it up to my mask. It still smelled of burning oil. I inhaled deeply to get every last bit of destructive power. My heart leaped as I felt a slight tingle run through my body.

Emboldened, I slipped on the Huna and dashed toward the tunnel. Roodaka yawned and calmly fired a burst of dark energy at the arch above the door. Rubble crashed to the floor, blocking the exit. "You really shouldn't even bother trying," she said flatly.

I deactivated the mask and fired directly at her. The couch buckled, and she flipped backwards over the back of it. I spun around and blasted away some of the rocks. I ran for the opening, but I was immediately buried in an avalanche of new debris. Groaning with pain, I shoved aside a few boulders. I could hear the clip-clip of her heels as she approached, and the click of her phone flipping open.

"You still have two minutes," she remarked, tapping her foot. "I suppose I shouldn't kill you just yet. After all, it's *possible* Lord Makuta has feelings for you." She laughed wickedly.

I fumbled for my axes in the wreckage of the doorway, but I could only find one of them. I twisted around over and pointed it at the pool of water in the center of the room. The fluid did my bidding, silently rising up out of its basin and crashing over Roodaka, knocking her to her knees. "Cute," she sputtered angrily. She jumped up and shook herself off. "Just for that, I think I'll mutate you first. As soon as the alarm on my phone goes off, you're going to be a three-headed Takea."

I heard the hum of a spinner powering up, but I had already located my second axe and was running for the doorway. A sudden impact to my legs sent me sprawling on the wet floor, and I saw the Rhotuka catcher tumble past me. Then a beeping noise began. "Time's up," she sneered. I rolled over to see the mutation disk zooming towards me.

Then I felt the prickling sensation of being teleported, and I blacked out. I came to on the scarred turf next to the Kini Nui. The flaming woods stood out brightly against the purple dawn sky, and dust hung heavy in the air. Shadrahk and the other Rahkshi crowded around, and Telerahk appeared beside me. "Good work, Telerahk," said the dark Rahkshi grimly. "Mistress, are you all right?"

"I'm infinitely better than I was a second ago," I panted. "Thanks!"

"Who did we just save you from?" When Telerahk hissed an answer, Shadrahk groaned. "Imagine my joy. So, did you use your necklace to fight her?"

"I broke it in a different fight." I smiled awkwardly. "The wrong fight, as it turned out."

“Well, troops, let’s go down there and rescue our cook from the two monsters tearing up the living room first. But keep an eye out for Roodaka, because she may come after Mistress again. Sarge, take—”

“Wait, one of them isn’t a monster!” I exclaimed. “The Tahtorahk is actually Krahka. She’s on our side.”

Mentorahk hissed, and Shadrahk interpreted. “He didn’t see a Tahtorahk down there with Bahka, just a Manas and a Kanohi dragon.”

“Oh, then she must be the Manas. The dragon is Roodaka’s ride.”

The Rahkshi of Darkness winced. “All right, then let’s build some Kaita to subdue the dragon, and that’ll probably bring Roodaka right to us. Vorahk, take Guurahk, Panrahk, and... hmm...”

“Not Disruptirahk again.” The black Rahkshi rolled his eyes. “The Kaita Omai just wasted the room when he fought the Bahrag. How about Pyrorahk?”

“Perfect,” the commander grinned. The selected Rahkshi began to dismantle themselves. “Somnorahk, Statirahk, and Lentirahk, you guys go ahead and form the Kaita Zzz again and get ready to back him up. The rest of you will come down there with me and stand by.”

The Rahkshi jumped into flight position, and I got into Shadrahk’s lap. I looked over at Mentorahk. “I thought you were in Metru Nui. Didn’t you just call your master about the LEGO people?”

“He was,” Shadrahk nodded, “until just now. Master sent him back here to tell us to rescue you. He infused him with extra power, too, so he could fly really fast.” Mentorahk soared into the sky and did a loop-the-loop to show he was still full of energy as the Rahkshi of Darkness continued. “But Master told him only your location. He didn’t explain what was going on. I take it he got called back for the filming right after Roodaka showed up?”

“Yes. Krahka was there, and he hired her to capture Roodaka and send her back to Metru Nui in his absence. She had brought her down with gravity, but then the Kanohi dragon showed up. Evidently that was her ride, because the green fellow from her homeland took her big wasp.”

Shadrahk sighed. “That would be my fault.”

“It would?”

He glanced around and then leaned in closer. “Don’t tell Master, but I rebuilt Darakoo’s leg in exchange for his promise to go back to Metru Nui and steal the Nui-Kopen. I was hoping it would keep Roodaka away for a while. But it looks like my Plan backfired.”

“Oh, it might not matter,” I replied brightly. “It did delay her a while. And I bet the Rahkshi Kaita can handle Rosy, especially with Krahka’s help.”

“And Kraahka’s here because I failed to prevent you from calling her on Master’s phone?”

“Uh, yeah. But if she hadn’t showed up, your Master would have tried to absorb the Energized Protodermis Entity, and we’d *all* be doomed. She scared off Eppy at the last second.”

Shadrahk gave a low whistle. “Okay, we definitely owe her. Let’s get going.”

The two Rahkshi Kaita—tall, wiry, multi-legged creatures bristling with staffs and spikes—had already jumped down the huge shaft. Evidently they retained some kind of flight power with the rebuilding, and they landed softly at the bottom. Shadrahk beckoned the others, and we plunged back into the darkness of the lair with Vorahk in the lead.

A billow of flame met us at the doorway to the dining room. Through the fiery glow, I could see silhouettes of the dragon with its teeth around a Manas’s shell. The giant crab was gripping the dragon’s head with its claws. They seemed locked together, unable to move. The Kaita Zzz waited to one side while the new Kaita lunged inside to change the balance of the fight. Several others started to follow, but Shadrahk held up his hand. “Stop! Only Kaita can go in. A free-for-all would only result in needless casualties.” He turned to Vorahk. “It took ten Toa a month to subdue this thing when it got loose on Metru Nui.”

Vorahk nodded. “Yeah, I can believe that. Individual Rahkshi will be toast, except for Pyrorahk, and he’s already in there. Say, Hammer, what do you think we should call the new guy?”

The Invulnerability Rahkshi watched the Kaita fire a blast at the combatants, knocking them apart with a mighty crash. “I’m feeling a comic-book-action vibe right now,” he replied. “How about ‘Kraak’?”

“Totally fitting,” agreed the black Rahkshi.

A third Kaita rushed past, formed from Meteorahk, Cyclorahk, and Vacuurahk. He stirred up a mighty tornado inside the cavern and directed the base of its funnel toward the dragon. Kraak ducked as his adversary was thrown across the room, wrapped in a vortex of fire.

“Voom,” announced Invulnerahk, to everyone’s approval. He christened the combination of Magnerahk, Gravirahk, and Densirahk while he was at it: “‘Kraamm.’” This fourth Kaita jumped into the fray with a loud thud. He pounced on the dragon, and they wrestled violently. Rosy spat fire at her attackers, and they all backed up except for Kraak and Bahka, who had joined the fight again.

Meanwhile, Kraahka had morphed into a Kraawa. She grabbed at the Kanohi dragon’s tail. The reptile whipped Kraahka with the long, spiked appendage, causing the shapeshifter to grow larger.

Kurahk gathered Turahk and Confusirahk, and they quickly rebuilt themselves. They hit the dragon with a beam of hysterical rage, and she began to thrash crazily.

“What the heck?” asked Vorahk. “That’s not helping.”

“Watch and learn, Sarge,” advised Shadrahk.

The black Rahkshi suddenly nodded as he saw the tail swing again and the Kraawa surge in size. “Oh, I get it. Nice. He needs a name, Hammer.”

Invulnerahk shrugged. “Uh... ‘Yeeargh’?”

The combat grew so fierce that it was difficult to tell what was going on, even if we could have withstood the intense heat and gotten close enough to see through the smoke. Finally the noise stopped and the haze cleared. The Kraawa, now so large it grazed the ceiling of the chamber, was sitting on the Kanohi dragon, and the Rahkshi Kaita were arrayed around them, ready to fire if their adversary moved again.

“Zzz, do your thing,” ordered Shadrahk. The dragon’s defiant eyes drooped shut and her body relaxed. “Good job, troops. You can disassemble now.”

Krahka morphed into her six-armed Toa Metru form and climbed off the dragon. Breathing heavily, she surveyed her fallen foe with satisfaction. She looked at the Rahkshi, who were clanking their staffs together. “Thanks, guys. You’re all right for a bunch of oversized, armor-plated crayfish-lizards of destruction.”

“You’re quite welcome,” said Shadrahk graciously.

Bahka got slowly to his feet across the room. He bowed deeply to Shadrahk and grunted his thanks. Krahka held out one of her many fists, and the green dragon clanked his against it. She said, “Nice going, fiery dude. You fight like a champ. And you make a mean roast beef sandwich, too.” He grinned and returned to the kitchen to tend his smokehouse.

Vorahk prodded the Kanohi dragon with his foot. “Hey, General, what are we going to do with this thing? When it wakes up, it’s going to be pretty cheesed off.”

“I could monitor cerebral and muscular activity levels, and the Kaita Zzz could administer his somnolescent power if required,” suggested Therahk. “Once Roodaka departs for Metru Nui, the creature will indubitably accompany her.”

“She might take issue with anyone transporting her mistress as a prisoner,” objected the Rahkshi of Darkness. “But it would be a shame to kill such a fine living thing, just because her boss is a witch. Besides, she might show up in the storyline at some point.”

“Too bad we can’t make her forget she belongs to Roodaka,” I remarked.

“Actually, we can,” said Shadrahk brightly. “Thanks for the idea, Mistress. Telerahk, go find Neezy. He’ll be in one of the stasis tubes down there in deep storage. You can’t miss him. He’s bright orange and transparent.” He turned to Vorahk. “It’ll take him a while because he’s only a

kraata, but I'm guessing Rosy's brain is pretty small. We'll get Therahk and Zzz to make sure she stays asleep until Neezy's done."

I remembered the kraata of Amnesia from a previous captivity in Mangaia. It was refreshing to see Makuta's mind-wiping power being put to constructive use.

Shadrahk addressed the changeling again. "Now, Miss Kraha, about her mistress—"

"Yeah, yeah. Your old man hired me to send her home, and I'll get it done. I just got a little sidetracked. You can go back to your destruction derby on the surface now."

"Actually, to show our appreciation for the way you saved Master from catastrophe with the Energized Protodermis Entity," said Shadrahk, straightening his posture a little, "we'd like to offer our services. If it's all right with you, we'll capture Roodaka for you."

She looked at him sideways. Then she shrugged. "Sure, why not? I'm a little winded. Just turn her over to me after you've taken her down. Oh, and like Squirt keeps reminding me, don't leave any marks on her."

"Understood." The dark Rahkshi turned to his second and barked an order. "Sarge, execute Operation Queen Über—well, you know."

"You guys have been looking forward to this, haven't you?" laughed Kraha.

"More den you ken know," Florahk smiled slyly.

Invulnerahk raised his staff. "Failure is not an option," he declared.

"I like the way you think, dude," nodded Vorahk. "All right, troops, to your stations. Go!"

The armored creatures scattered to various pre-arranged points in the lair. Shadrahk put his hand on my arm. "Vorahk and Invulnerahk are going to watch you while I go hunt for her, since I can detect traces of dark energy. Just stay with them." He and Sonirahk headed for my office, her last known location.

Invulnerahk propped up a piece of the couch on a heap of rubble. "Come on over, Mistress, it's pretty comfy." I joined him on the narrow seat, and we watched Vorahk practice a few combat moves. "Hey, Blackie, when they find her, are you gonna take her on, one-on-one?"

"You know it," smiled the dark Rahkshi slyly. "Check out this special kick I've developed just for her." He feinted with one foot, then danced onto the other before delivering a vicious blow to what was left of the television.

"Sweet. Here, I'll pretend I'm her." The gray Rahkshi jumped up off the couch fragment and stood in front of Vorahk. "Hit me, big boy," he said in a falsetto voice.

Vorahk stepped back and repeated his move, sending his friend skidding across the floor into a boulder. He popped up, his head dusty with rock chips. “Awesome! That’s gonna hurt.”

Telerahk appeared next to Vorahk and hissed frantically. Vorahk gripped his staff and glanced around the room. Invulnerahk sprang in front of me and grunted as he was struck by a beam of bluish energy from the far side of the room. He was knocked backwards into me, and the makeshift furniture flipped over. We sprawled onto the floor. “Sorry, Mistress,” he apologized.

“Are you kidding? Thanks,” I whispered, crouching behind him in case another shot was fired.

A barrage of energy bolts fanned out across the cavern from behind us. I saw a glimmer of polished black armor as Roodaka dodged the blasts. One of them hit the wall behind her, silhouetting her against a blue glow. “There she is!” yelled Invulnerahk.

Vorahk was already cartwheeling toward his well-formed enemy. With a savage yell, he lunged. She ducked, and he flew over, catching her headpiece and throwing her to the floor with him.

“Now you’ve got the tiger by the tail,” remarked Shadrahk, lowering his weapon slightly.

The two ebony combatants thrashed on the ground for a moment before they leaped up and circled each other. Roodaka faked a kick and socked Vorahk in the abdomen when he fell for it. He doubled over, but as she approached, he snapped himself upright, hitting her chin with the top of his head. She reeled backwards. Vorahk tackled her, slamming her into the stone wall behind them. With a sharp upward blow of her knee, she flipped Vorahk over her shoulder into the wall. He dropped on her head and latched onto her shoulders. She spun in a circle until he was flung off.

Invulnerahk ran over, holding his friend’s weapon. “Here’s your staff, dude.” Vorahk staggered dizzily to his feet.

Shadrahk was hitting the wall on either side of Roodaka with focused bursts of dark energy to keep her from running. “Had enough, Sarge? There are about a dozen of us ready to take over when you get tired.”

“No way, man,” panted Vorahk. “I haven’t tried my new kick yet! I just need a quick distraction. Hammer?”

“You bet.” Invulnerahk jumped in front of Roodaka and pointed at a far corner of the chamber. “Look, a distraction!”

Without taking her eyes off him, Roodaka groaned, “What a dimwit.” She raised her fist and punched him, hard, right in the middle. He crashed into a pile of rocks and rolled backwards onto his feet, grinning at her. “Is that all you’ve got?”

Meanwhile, Vorahk launched himself into his kick. He connected with her silver breastplate, knocking her into the wall again. She slumped to the ground, dazed.

“Lentirahk, go ahead,” said Shadrahk. The Rahkshi of Slowness fired a blast of his power at the gleaming black creature.

Vorahk was rolling on the floor, clutching his leg. “I think I broke my foot,” he moaned. He stretched toward Roodaka and touched her with his staff. “That’s better. Say, she’s really strong!” He stood and limped over to Invulnerahk, lifting him over his head and pumping him up and down a few times like a barbell.

The other Rahkshi stood around the paralyzed figure of the enemy, waiting to see if she would move again. They parted to let the shapeshifting Rahi through. She had changed to her Nokama Hordika form. Shadrahk looked at her and announced, “Miss Krahka, the spitfire has been extinguished.”

“Just call me the Fireman,” quipped Vorahk. Pinky immediately sprang toward him, turning himself into a fire extinguisher as he landed in the black Rahkshi’s arms.

Krahka grinned. “Way to go, guys.” She cracked her blue knuckles as she leaned over the gleaming black Viceroy.

“You’re going to pay for this,” hissed Roodaka, her voice slurred. “When my dragon wakes up, she’s going to burn you all to a crisp.”

Therahk, Somnorahk, Statirahk, and Lentirahk ambled in, followed by Rahirahk. He was leading the Kanohi dragon by a long chain, and the transparent orange kraata was perched on his shoulder. “Rosy!” called Roodaka, but the reptile didn’t respond.

“Just take her out the gate, get her flying toward Metru Nui, and then set her free,” said Shadrahk. “She has no reason to come back and attack us now.” Everyone backed up to let the Rahi Control Rahkshi through. He continued down the tunnel to the protodermis chamber.

Roodaka’s tongue suddenly overcame the slowness effect. She unleashed a torrent of cursing at me, Krahka, the Rahkshi, and even Makuta. Shadrahk gestured to Somnorahk. “Go ahead and hit her with sleep, too.” As he did so, and Roodaka’s eyes fluttered shut, the Rahkshi of Darkness asked, “Miss Krahka, would you like the Sleep Rahkshi to fly along with you to Metru Nui in case Roodaka wakes up?”

“No need,” she assured him. “You got a big box?”

Pinky, who had morphed back into his usual form, hissed, and Shadrahk nodded. “Right. Go get it.” The blue and gold Rahkshi returned in a moment dragging the heavy-duty corrugated cardboard box that had contained the vent hood for the new stove.

“That’ll work great. How about some tape?” Shadrahk dispatched Pinky to the weapons room for a roll of duct tape, which Krahka slipped over her wrist. She bent over Roodaka, who twitched suddenly in her sleep. Somnorahk stepped forward brandishing his staff, but she waved him

back. Reaching her hands around Roodaka's shoulder, she unfastened a couple of connectors, wrenched off the arm, and tossed it into the box.

Shadrahk smiled broadly. "No marks."

"Isn't it handy that we're all made of LEGO s?" Krahka removed the other arm and put it in the carton. After disconnecting several smaller parts, she put her foot on Roodaka's chest and pulled the torso apart at the waist.

Roodaka's eyes flew open. "Gaaah!" she screamed. "Put me back together right this instant! I'm an important character in the storyline!" She proceeded to spout a stream of nasty epithets at Krahka.

"I'm going to let the LEGO people do that," Krahka smirked. She knelt and extended her hands toward Roodaka's neck, but as she got close, the ebony creature snapped at her fingers. The shapeshifter pulled her hands back in surprise. She tore a big piece of duct tape off the roll, and, after a few tries, managed to stick it over Roodaka's gnashing mouth, stemming the flow of expletives. "Much better." She proceeded to tug off the Viceroy's head and lob it into the carton with a graceful basketball-style shot. Then she dismantled the legs. After all the parts were in the box, she taped it shut with a flourish.

Muffled cries came from the cardboard prison, but Krahka cheerfully ignored them. "I think I've got things under control now," she assured Shadrahk. "Thanks for all your help."

"Our pleasure, Miss Krahka. You have no idea how glad we are to see her go," commented the Rahkshi of Darkness. "Well, brothers, let's go enjoy our last few hours of freedom before stasis. Mistress, why don't you come to the surface with us until Master gets back?"

"Krahka's taking me home," I explained. "Your master's expecting to be busy for a long time with the filming. Thanks so much for all your help."

Shadrahk looked back and forth between us. "All right," he agreed. "Have a safe trip."

We had already said our sentimental goodbyes, so I simply waved at the Rahkshi. "You guys take care." Hissing joyfully, they cartwheeled and jostled toward the shaft to the Kini Nui. Soon they had all flown away, leaving us standing next to the box of Roodaka's parts.

Krahka strode over to Makuta's scorched desk, which had lost one of its legs and was tipped at an oblique angle. "Payday," she grinned, morphing her hand into a staff of disintegration. She shattered the lock on the drawer and opened it.

Just then I heard scurrying sounds, and the room was suddenly full of Boggarak. Krahka quickly shoved the drawer back into the desk. "Oh, great. We're way outnumbered." She glanced around. "Too bad we're not in a Harry Potter movie. It would be really handy for a magic car to show up right about now and get us out of here."

I recognized Daisy in the lead as the horde approached. “I know that one. She’s Desirak, Roodaka’s right hand spider.”

“Boy, is she going to be miffed when she figures out what’s in the box! Well, spiders are totally gross, but once I morph, I’ll like ‘em. I was kind of hungry, anyway.” Krahka changed into a Metru Mantis and gnashed her mandibles.

“Wait, Krahka. I think I can talk to her. She helped me on Metru Nui.”

The mantis looked at me quizzically as I stepped forward and addressed the Visorak. “Hello, Daisy.”

“Greetings, Galitea. I mean, Lady Galitea.” She glanced nervously at Krahka and gestured for the others to stop. “Have you seen Lady Roodaka? We’ve got to get her back to Metru Nui for the filming. She’s about to get herself fired!”

“Actually, my shapeshifting friend and I were about to take her back there ourselves,” I smiled, gesturing at the box. “I apologize for her condition, but she wouldn’t cooperate.”

The mantis struck herself on the head with her foreleg at my stupidity, but fortunately, Daisy didn’t take offense. She whispered, “That’s fine with me. She would probably have slapped me around for telling her what to do. Was she trying to get Lord Makuta to help her again?”

“Yes, but he refused.” The spider looked relieved until I leaned forward and added, “Now that she knows I’m alive, she wants Nick dead. Maybe you should ask Makuta for protection after the movie. After what you did to save me, I’m sure he’ll want to help you.”

“He knows about that?” she asked. We moved away from the box so we could speak freely.

“Shadrahk told him you were invaluable.”

“How nice of him!” Then Daisy shuddered. “I’ve got to go back to Metru Nui and warn Nick!” She turned to her spiders. “Let’s go.”

A group of Oohnorak appeared, blocking the exit. Nick skittered up to Daisy. “Daisy! There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” They threw their forelegs around each other.

Krahka had morphed into Nokama Hordika again. “All right, this is getting really weird,” she muttered. When the spiders’ mouth parts clashed together in a kiss, she covered her eyes. “Ugh! I didn’t need to see that.” I put my hand on her arm to reassure her.

Daisy said urgently, “Nicky, you’re in grave danger. Lady Roodaka knows Lady Galitea is still alive, and she wants to kill you. But Lady Galitea says Lord Makuta may give you asylum. Shadrahk put in a good word for us.”

“Shadrahk is an upright guy. Where is he, anyway?” asked the Oohnorak.

“He’s up on the surface with the other Rahkshi until their master gets back.” I pointed toward the ceiling.

“Well, I’d certainly be happy to accept Lord Makuta’s protection. Perhaps I should go find Shadrahk and wait there until the movie is over. At that point, Lady Roodaka will go back to her home island to recover, and Daisy can come find me.”

“I’m not going back to serve someone who wants my true love killed! I’m coming with you,” she smiled.

“Wait a minute. You worked so hard to get where you are today. You’d throw that away for me?”

“Of course I would, Nicky,” she purred. “I just wish I could have made Lady Roodaka fall for King Sidorak. I so wanted our Plan to succeed, so you could lead the horde after the movie.”

“Me, too, Daisy. I should have coached the King better in the ways of courtship. But even if I don’t have the horde, I have you. That’s the most important thing.”

At this point more Visorak of every breed swarmed into the room. Krahka glanced at me warily as Joe scuttled up to Nick and Daisy. “Nick! There you are. We saw you sneaking off, and we just have to talk to you before the movie starts up again.”

“What is it, Joe?” asked Nick, his brow furrowed.

“Me and the guys have been thinking. You know how we’ll all be freed again after the filming? Well, last time it was a big letdown. We all missed the thrill and glory of hunting in a pack. After the movie we won’t have a mission of conquest anymore, but we still want to keep the horde together. And we want you to be the one to lead us.”

Nick stared at his sweetheart in amazement. “Daisy, it’s my dream come true!”

“Oh, Nicky, I’m so happy!” she cried, hugging him tightly.

“Joe, I’ll gladly accept,” Nick said over her shoulder. “But Daisy and I are going to have to wait for you up on the surface of this island. Lady Roodaka wants to kill me for saving Blue.”

“*Lady Blue*,” whispered Daisy. “We need to start using her rightful title.”

“Lady Blue,” Nick corrected himself.

Joe bounced up and down with eagerness. “No problem. I’ll fill in for you until then. And I’ll get one of the Boggarak to pose as Daisy. How about you, Sheila?”

I put on my Rau to hear the response of the spider who had briefly been my guard on Metru Nui. “Sure, Joe. It’ll be an honor. And then we’ll all have a big celebration when the movie’s over.”

Her companion, Babs, nodded enthusiastically. “Finally, it looks like we’re going to get some wedding cake.”

“You should ask Makuta to call his French baker,” I suggested. The Visorak chittered excitedly. I took off my Great Mask of Translation and explained to Krahka, “They’re looking forward to the party.”

“Whatever,” she said in a low voice. “As long as there isn’t any more kissing. When are they going to get out of here?”

“Goodbye, Lady Galitea,” called Daisy. “I hope you and Lord Makuta have a long and happy life together. And thanks!”

“Same to you and Nick,” I replied.

The spiders were already shuffling toward the doorway, chatting among themselves. Joe was telling Nick he had just gotten a phone call from Lucky. “He’s doing great. He escaped into a world where all the spiders have eight legs, but they’re really small. He made it all the way to some jungle, and this tribe of humans is worshipping him as their spider god. They bring him bugs all day long on a golden platter.” Their voices receded as they filed out of the living room.

When all the Visorak were gone, Krahka slowly shook her head. “You have some really creepy friends, but they always seem to come through for you when it counts.”

“I consider myself very lucky in that regard,” I grinned.

She resumed rummaging through the contents of the desk drawer. “So they think you and Greaseball are really an item. How cute.”

“I let them believe it so they would be more motivated to help me,” I replied. “They secretly took me to Keetongu to get me un-mutated after Roodaka talked Sidorak into ordering me M&Ded. Sidorak had made me Queen in her absence.”

“You and Mr. Perfect Head Tubes? You poor thing,” she grimaced. “I don’t even want to think about what that was like.”

“He didn’t do anything to me. He just did it to make her mad. And it worked quite well.”

She removed a stack of hundred dollar bills and a credit card from the drawer. “What did Mack have to say about that? Did he go ballistic?”

I nodded. “It was pretty scary.”

Krahka stood up straight and looked at me. “Are you sure you really want to leave him? He’s obviously so in love with you. And you’ve been through so much together! His kids and his minions adore you. He just took a big hit for you, or what he thought was you. Did you notice when Roodaka forced him to tell the truth, he said—”

“He’s evil,” I interrupted. “I don’t think he really loves anyone but himself. He keeps trying to use me for his sinister Plans.”

“He just wants to include you in his life! The whole ‘evil’ thing is all relative. Besides, he’s got cool powers. And he’s rich, too.” I caught a slight twinkle in her eye.

“Cut it out, Krahka,” I groaned. “I get enough of that from him.”

She laughed as she pulled out a second packet of bills. “All right. I guess this is enough.” Then she lifted a small glass vial. “Look, it’s his aftershave. I’m guessing ‘Eau de Pennzoil.’ No wait, it’s called ‘Enslave.’ Well, that figures.”

“That’s Roodaka’s potion!” I exclaimed. “It makes any male obey the female who wears it. I picked it up in her lab. He tried to use it on me, but it turned out to work only on him.”

“It’s yours, then.” She handed the bottle and one stack of bills to me, and she slipped the rest of the cash and the credit card into a compartment on her leg. “What did you make him do? Sign over his bank account? Dance the Macarena?”

I put the vial and the money in the pack on my back. “Uh, no. I tried to get him to let me go. We got all the way to the LEGO headquarters parking lot. But as soon as I got a little ways away from him, the effect dissipated. He hit me with silence power and water and hauled me back inside.”

“Bummer. But then, if you had escaped on your own, we wouldn’t have had all this fun.” She gestured at the rubble around us. “Hey, you just gave me an idea. Instead of going back through the portal in Metru Nui and coming out in Denmark, let’s go out the back way, to the LEGO building in Enfield. Shorter flight, less bad airplane food.”

“I suppose the LEGO people will make sure Roodaka gets back to Metru Nui,” I said thoughtfully. “But I don’t think we should let them see us.”

“That’s no problem,” she replied. “Wait here while I get the snow globe. I’ll use it on the Manas.”

I paced nervously around Roodaka’s crate, which was still grumbling in a subdued voice, while the shapeshifter went to retrieve the ice orb. Could this really be happening? I was about to leave Mangaia, and I wouldn’t have to see Makuta again at all. Someone I liked and trusted was going to take me home.

Krahka returned holding a large glass ball with a stand under her arm and handed it to me. I accepted it hesitantly, expecting it to be ice cold, but it was merely cool to the touch. “I take it you can turn this thing on and off?”

“It has a remote,” she nodded, transforming into Onua and shouldering the box. “Come on, Little Sister.”

I didn’t need any urging. I strode quickly to keep up with her brisk pace. We reached the Manas chamber, and she told me to set the orb inside the doorway. As the huge crabs scuttled toward it, we backed away and she pushed a button on the remote. There was a whirring sound while blue shapes moved inside the clear sphere. In moments the ice-coated creatures stopped moving.

“Now we turn it off and run like heck.” We dashed through the cavern before the crabs could thaw, and I pressed the secret switch to raise the stone door. Stepping outside, she tossed the remote inside as I closed the door. “I’ll leave it for him as a souvenir.”

We made our way up the tunnel to the surface. The sunshine and fresh air were a welcome change. There were a few cars in the parking lot, but no one was in sight. Krahka walked up to the building and heaved the box at the full-height window. It shattered the plate glass with a loud crash. “That should get their attention,” she grinned, morphing into a Rahi hawk. I climbed onto her back, and we flew away. When I glanced back down, people were emerging from the building, milling around, and observing the damage. To my relief, no one thought to look up.

## 51. The Last Word

### **Burden Brothers — Shadow**

*I don't want to tie you down  
I don't want to break your stride  
So if you got to go then go  
And I will be the shadow at your side  
You know I got to find out  
Just what you're made of  
So this is your song now  
This is your song now*

*And I am the shadow at your side  
I am the shadow*

*So won't you put a light on  
And put it in your window  
To let me know you're at home  
To let me know you're alone  
Know that I am waiting  
Always waiting  
Know that I am watching  
Always watching  
Let me follow  
Let me follow*

*And I am the shadow at your side  
I am the shadow*

*Let me follow you  
I will  
Let me follow you  
Let me*

*And I am the shadow at your side  
I am the shadow*

The great winged creature that was Krahka landed on the grass of a public park in a Hartford suburb, and I climbed off her back. She morphed into her Kitty Konichiwa form, an attractive, dark-haired young woman in a black leather jumpsuit. “I don’t want to fly too close to the airport,” she said with a slight Japanese accent. “Someone will think I’m a homeland security threat. We’ll take a taxi from here. I hope they have decent food at the airport, because I’m starving.”

She flipped open a pink phone and dialed the information number, and soon a yellow checkered cab was pulling up to the curb. She handed the portly, middle-aged driver a hundred-dollar bill and instructed him to take us to the airport. “Right away, Miss!” he exclaimed with a gap-toothed grin.

Presently Krahka and I were eating lunch in an airport restaurant. She had used Makuta's credit card to buy me a plane ticket home, and the flight was to leave in about an hour. "Krahka, I really appreciate your help getting away from Makuta," I smiled across the table.

"Hey, that's just how I roll. You know, when we girls work together, we can defeat him every time. If LEGO ever wants to kill him off in the storyline, all they have to do is send a team of females after him. You, me, Roodaka, and Lariska—he'd be toast," she grinned. "So, how long is it going to take you to write your story?"

"I think this one is going to be pretty long," I remarked. "I'll start it right away, but it'll take at least a year to finish. He kept me prisoner for a long time, and a lot of stuff happened." I sipped my Coke.

"It sounds that way. What was the nastiest thing he did to you?" she asked, taking a bite of her first cheeseburger.

"Well, he got me to record a bunch of songs in exchange for my freedom, and it turned out he was planning to load them with subliminal messages to brainwash the Matoran. That was really low. And when I was first there, he let me find the Huna and think I was escaping, and then he raised a bunch of obstacles in my path, like a lava river and a deep ravine, just so he could watch me overcome them. Oh, and then there was the time he turned himself into the Ussanui so I would climb onto him." I frowned at the memory.

Krahka burst out laughing. "That's so like him! What was the story with the bath?"

"That was really disturbing. I was trying to get him to wash himself so Roodaka would fall for him and he would let me go, but he talked me into helping. Pretty soon I found myself scrubbing the grime off his back with a brush and some engine cleaner. And when I was done, he made a pass at me." I shook my head in disgust. "He kept trying to leave a mark on me, and change my name, and so on. But probably the creepiest thing he did was morph into my blanket. I was fast asleep all night, with him wrapped around me, and I didn't realize it until morning."

My companion was laughing so hard she was gasping for air. She took a drink of water.

"Well, it's funny *now*," I conceded, finally cracking a smile.

"You have to have a sense of humor about these things, or you'll go crazy." She finished her second burger.

I nodded and bit into my fish sandwich. "Yeah. Having the Rahkshi around helped. They lighten things up a lot. Plus, I got to meet the Rahaga and Keetongu. I really liked them."

"Those little guys are awesome. And Keetongu, well, he's good as gold. You gonna eat your tots?"

“Go ahead.” I gestured at my plate. “But I also met some really scary low-lives, like Voporak and The Shadowed One. Voporak acted so creepy that even Makuta said he had stalker potential. Hey, did you know that you cracked the Vahi when you kicked it off Makuta’s face?”

“Really? Sweet,” she said proudly, her mouth full of potato nuggets. “Speaking of cracked, what’s with the necklace? Did Rust Bucket give you that?”

“Yep. The vial contained some of his essence, to give me extra destructive power in case of an emergency.” I tugged at the chain.

“And you obviously had one,” she pointed out.

“Definitely. He was threatening to take me to some dangerous island, to be locked up in a big fortress while he worked on next year’s storyline. With the power boost, I managed to crack his armor, but it didn’t slow him down very long.”

“You go, girl!” she cheered. “Want me to take it off you?” She pulled a pair of needle-nose pliers out of her jumpsuit, clipped the chain, and let it drop to the floor with a clank.

“How did you get through airport security with those?” I wondered.

“I can get anything through those scanners. I have the power of magnetism. So, what’s the moral of your story going to be? You always have a moral, right?”

“Oh, that’s easy. ‘Never deal with evil.’ Every time I tried to negotiate with Makuta, my Plan backfired completely.”

“He’s tricky like that,” she nodded. She sank her teeth into burger number three.

“From the sound of your voicemail message, you’ve had some unwanted attention from bad guys, too,” I mused.

“Oh, man. After the V.I.L.E. convention where me and Mystique spiked the wine, I started getting calls from the slimiest guys. And even the classy ones turned out to be losers. I mean, Darth Maul told me he would come over and give me a saber-fighting lesson. That would have been pretty cool, right? But he kept flaking out. Ever since he lost that big fight with Obi-Wan Kenobi, he just can’t seem to pull himself together. And I thought Sauron was pretty hot until we went on a date. He took me to dinner at this really nice place, but he wouldn’t shut up about his stupid ring and how he thinks Peter Jackson actually had Frodo throw a *copy* of it into the lava, but then Jackson wouldn’t give the real one back to him after the movie. What a bore. I just about fell asleep in my fettuccini.”

I smiled knowingly. “Villains never get tired of talking about themselves. You should hear Sidorak go on about how great he is.”

“No thanks,” she groaned. “And why can’t they take a hint when you don’t like them? When Johnny Rancid started calling me once an hour, I finally had my number changed so I could get some sleep.”

“I wish I could get rid of Makuta that easily. He’s making my life a living torment. Even when he’s not around, I live in the shadow of fear he’ll come back.”

“He’s pretty dang stubborn,” she agreed. “Have you tried moving?”

“Yes, and he located the new place right away. But he doesn’t always come to my house. Once he tracked me down at the grocery store, and another time he found me in line at the DMV getting my license renewed.” Suddenly overwhelmed with discouragement, I leaned forward and confessed, “Krahka, I don’t know what to do. I’m about to go insane. I feel really trapped. When I tell him I’ll never love him, he says we just need to spend more time together so I can get to know him. If I say I love someone else, he goes into a jealous rage and I worry about their safety. And fighting him only makes things worse, because he’s so into destruction. When I blasted a hole in his chest, he thought it was *romantic*.”

“That’s really messed up. Well, you could always move to another dimension,” she suggested casually.

“What?” I raised an eyebrow. “How could I do that?”

Krahka leaned back in her seat with a smirk. “I happen to have figured out how to get in and out of the Dark Dimension. It takes a lot of energy, but I can turn into a Kahgarak and fire a spinner to open a portal. I was hanging out in there with my buddy the Tahtorahk when you called. He can’t pop in and out like I do—I mean, it’s hard to be inconspicuous when you’re forty feet tall. So I visit him a lot. But when Sid summoned the Zivon, I went ahead and sneaked out, because, hey, the door was open.”

I looked at her in confusion. “You think I should go live in the Dark Dimension? It sounds rather... dark.”

“Well, no. But here’s the deal. I’ve met a couple of strange characters in there that were not from LEGO. From what they’ve told me, there’s a secret way you can go directly from the Zone of Darkness to other, non-Bionicle storylines. Otherwise, you’d have to pass through the heavily guarded portals the authors have set up, like the one between the LEGO trailer on Metru Nui and the office in Denmark, and you could never get in.”

My jaw dropped.

“Yeah. It’d be weird to leave the dimension you’re used to, and there’s no guarantee you could get back, because there might not be anybody there that could open a portal from the other side. If you want to start completely over, you could even go through a filtering portal. I heard about this one dude who did that because he was being hunted down by a squad of quasi-invincible

death robots. You keep your personality, but you lose your conscious memories, and your form changes to match the new universe. Tall, Dark, and Gruesome could *never* track you down.”

“Wow,” I said simply, taken aback by this radical idea. My dream about the phase dragon suddenly came back to me. Could it have been prophetic? Still, I had a lot of doubts. “How would I know what I was getting into? I mean, what if I stepped into a universe where there was no air or something?”

“Well, not all of them sound friendly, but they’re habitable by humanoids, because they’ve been created by the human mind. We could keep opening portals until we find one you like.”

I watched in silence while Krahka ate her fourth cheeseburger. Then I asked, “What about my story? I promised Gaaki I’d write it.”

“Go ahead and post your story first. Mack will be busy with the ’06 storyline, right? When you’re done, I can take you to the Double D. You can even come out once in a while to answer your readers’ posts. Then, when you’re ready, we’ll find you a new universe. Kind of like the Witness Protection Program.”

I thought about her idea. “I’d miss my friends. But I guess I’d meet new ones. And the old ones would know I’m safe. They’ve been worrying about me a lot. Every time I disappear, they’re afraid I’m dead, or worse.”

“You’d still have one old friend. Since I can open portals and I’m a shapeshifter, I could drop by, disguised as whatever lives there,” Krahka smiled. Then she folded her hands on the table. “No pressure, sister. This is totally up to you. But I’m just saying, if Loverboy is really making you that miserable, this is how you can get him off your trail forever.”

“That’s worth a lot to me,” I said grimly. “Krahka, I want to do this. Can I call you right after I write my last chapter? I’d like to put in an explanation for my readers, so they’ll know I’m safe. But he might read it, so I want to go as soon as I post it.”

“Sure. You’ve got my number. If you want, I’ll post the last one for you after we get you into the Zone.”

“That sounds great,” I smiled. “But wait—Makuta might come after you. I’d better not say how I got to the Dark Dimension.”

Krahka laughed. “I’m not afraid of Junkbot. Go ahead and tell them.”

“Really? Well, all right. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she smiled back.

“Actually, here.” I took the vial of Enslave out of my pack and handed it to her across the table. “Take this, as a gift from me. Because of you, I won’t need it, anyway.”

“Hey, awesome!” she exclaimed. “I can definitely use this. Thanks.”

A voice on the public address system announced that my flight was boarding. “So, what are you going to do now?” I asked her as we stood up.

“Oh, I think I’ll go see my peeps in California, and then I’ll head back for the Double D again. I saw a rumor on BZPower that a character next year would wear the Kanohi Olmak, the Mask of Dimensional Gates. That would obviously be a good way to work me and Taht back into the story. If that happens, I’d better be there! But I’ll come out and check my phone messages every once in a while.”

“Cool.” We arrived at the gate, and I gave her a big hug.

“Later, Squirt.” She winked a glowing orange eye at me and disappeared into the crowd.

Filled with a calm I hadn’t felt in many years, I settled into my seat next to the window while the other passengers streamed onto the plane. A woman and a boy about ten years old stowed their carry-on luggage and sat down across the aisle from me. Then the youngster noticed me, and he whispered excitedly to his mother. She nodded. He slipped between the other passengers lugging their bags down the aisle and cautiously approached. “Um, you’re in Bionicle, aren’t you?”

“I used to be a prototype for a water Toa,” I nodded.

“Can I have your autograph?” he asked eagerly, handing me a comic book and a pen.

“Sure.” I signed my name in Matoran lettering.

The boy adjusted his baseball cap. “So, um, what’s it like to be a Bionicle character?”

“It’s a non-stop adventure,” I smiled.

“Cool,” he replied. Beaming, he returned to his seat. As the plane taxied down the runway, took off, and attained altitude, he continued to glance over at me.

After what seemed like days with no rest, I realized I was incredibly tired. I leaned my seat back and promptly fell asleep.

I awoke to the anxious murmuring of the other passengers. “It’s coming right at us!” “Is that a private plane?” I peered out the window, but I didn’t see anything.

“It’s a terrorist!” proclaimed a man sitting a few rows behind me. Several others began to scream. A stewardess got on the P.A. system and assured us that the pilot was trying to establish communications with the other aircraft, and that there was no cause for alarm.

I looked around at the other passengers, wondering what they had seen. The boy across the aisle said suddenly, "Mommy! I know who that is! Remember the LEGO set you got me for my birthday, the one you said was really ugly even for a Bionicle?"

I followed his pointing finger with my gaze. The cause of the commotion was just outside my window. Flying alongside the jet was a black convertible with two white smoke trails streaming behind it. The familiar dark figure driving it looked across at me. I slid down in my seat. "This can't be happening," I muttered to myself. Then my body began to tingle throughout, and I found myself sitting next to Makuta in his rocket-powered Cadillac.

"Hello, my beauty," he crooned. He pushed on the control stick to swerve away from the airliner.

"Makuta!" I snapped. "What are you doing? Didn't Krahka do enough for you to buy my freedom?"

The Spirit of Destruction smiled. "Oh, she did me an enormous favor. As for what I'm doing, I'm taking you home."

"Whose home?" I asked guardedly.

"Yours," was his quiet response.

I looked at him sideways. "Well, that's good. But why did you teleport me out of a moving plane and frighten all those innocent people?"

"Darling, you say that like it's a *bad* thing," he grinned. "Here, pass me that laptop next to you so I can delete you from the passenger list and take those charges off my credit card." He switched on the autopilot and opened the computer. After a few minutes of clicking and typing, he closed it and handed it back to me.

"You didn't answer my question," I reminded him.

"Well, the car was already full of rocket fuel. That stuff is pretty unstable. The best way to unload it is just to use it."

I shook my head. "That's a pretty lame excuse, Makuta."

"How about this one, then? I forgot to take back your powers."

"Oh, yeah." I sighed as he put his hand on my forehead and draw the water powers out of my body. Although I felt I shouldn't have them unless they were bestowed by LEGO, I knew I would miss them. But when he spread his claw across my chest, I was actually relieved to feel the jolt as the disintegration power left me. Even after quite a bit of experience using it, it was still somewhat frightening to me. I looked down suspiciously at my Rakkshi-foot chest plate. "You didn't leave a mark this time, did you?"

“No, sweetheart, I didn’t,” he replied. “But I should have, so you wouldn’t forget me.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried, and it’s not possible,” I growled.

He sat back in his seat and extended a claw toward me. “I’ll have those masks, too.”

I handed him the Huna and the Rau. “You said you ‘forgot’ to take back my powers. Did you know we would leave?”

“Well, sure.” He flipped off the autopilot and gripped the stick again. “I figured Krahka would clean out my supply of cash, too. But I didn’t realize she would steal my vial of Enslave. That was quite a blow.”

“Why would you want it? It won’t work for you,” I pointed out. I suddenly wished I had kept it, just in case he changed his mind about taking me home. Then it occurred to me that he probably would have taken it from me by now if I had.

“So I can reverse-engineer it and come up with an antidote. Now I guess I’ll just have to be careful Roodaka never sneaks up on me again. With those chemicals at her fingertips, she’s really dangerous, even to me.”

“I’ll say,” I agreed. “I’m glad to be getting far, far away from her.”

“I watched the security cam video of you and Krahka fighting her. She was certainly vicious. But you’re quite the little wildcat yourself.” He caressed my chin as if I were his pet. “It’s a shame I didn’t get to see it in person. LEGO always seems to call me right before the good catfights.”

I leaned away from his tarnished hand. “I’m glad *someone* enjoyed it,” I said sarcastically.

“Oh, I’m not the only one. Ogel is excited about it, too,” he chuckled. “He had offered me a snow crawler for a movie of you and Roodaka fighting. But for two movies, plus Krahka in the second one, I’m going to ask him to throw in some ice orbs, too. I got the idea from the one she left in my foyer.”

“Wait a minute. Did you provoke that life-threatening fight between Roodaka and me just to shake down your friend for some gear?” I demanded.

“Of course not! But I figured if it was going to happen anyway, why not share the—ow!” He stopped and rubbed his arm. “So, I’m going to use the orbs to freeze Ta-Wahi. Surely you haven’t forgotten your promise to stay with me if I did.”

“It’s an expression, Makuta,” I frowned, trying to ignore the pain in my fist.

“Oh.” He was silent for a few minutes.

“Well, now that you’ve removed my powers, why not teleport me back into the airplane?” I asked.

“Ah, beloved,” he smiled, “that’s not the only reason I flew after you. With my employment crisis, and Krahka hovering nearby, we never had a chance for a proper goodbye.”

“Yes, we did,” I said hastily, remembering the way he had kissed my hand. “It was just the right sort of goodbye. Very proper.”

He laughed. “I worded that poorly, didn’t I? It was a bit *too* proper. And besides, my water lily, there are some things I want to tell you before our long separation.”

To allay my own anxiety, I reminded myself that this was the last time I would ever have to fend off his advances. “You just wanted to have the last word, is that it?”

“You know me well, darling,” he replied with a wink. “I thought you might want to hear about what happened on the movie set, for one thing. I’m not alone in incurring the wrath of LEGO these days. They shipped the box of Roodaka’s parts straight to the Coliseum as is, probably so they wouldn’t have to deal with her any sooner than necessary, and wheeled it into the pre-shoot meeting. When they opened it and pulled the duct tape off her mouth, she whimpered that I had kidnapped her and implied that my behavior had been less than gentlemanly. Fortunately, the head of the story team assured the producer that we had both been on the Great Barrier all afternoon. Then, as they rebuilt her, she became furious. She started screaming that Krahka had ambushed her and taken her apart. Her claim was met with considerable skepticism, since everyone thinks Krahka is still confined to the Dark Dimension. Finally the director told her to shut up or he’d fire her on the spot, so she did. She tried to spit on me as they led her to her dressing room, but I used Quick Dodge power to jump out of the way.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“She’s a feisty one, all right. At the end of the movie, when I used my shadow hand to spirit her away to safety, she bit my finger.” He shook his head. “I know I’ll have to encounter her in the future, and she’ll use her wicked ways to take advantage of me again. But at least she’s paid for the pain she put you through.”

“Is LEGO still mad at you?”

“That’s the second thing I wanted to discuss with you. They most definitely are. Not only have they found evidence to support all the charges I already told you about, but now they’re suspecting me of having cracked the Vahi—which was Krahka’s fault, not mine. *I* was being careful with it.”

I looked at him incredulously. “Careful? You were stretching the fabric of time almost to the breaking point! We’re all lucky you didn’t obliterate the universe.”

“Sure, but that’s not what cracked it,” he protested. “And they’re linking me to a school bus that disappeared from the LEGO parking lot a couple of days ago. That actually *was* me. I have absolutely no idea how they figured it out, though.”

“You stole a school bus?” I looked at him disapprovingly. “The one Invulnerahk fixed up for the Rahkous tour?”

“Well, yes. Is that so wrong? I just wanted my sons to be happy.”

“What about all the children who were stranded?”

Makuta shrugged. “They got a longer field trip out of the deal. No harm done.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Anyway, LEGO is being quite unforgiving about it all,” he continued dejectedly. “They’re so disgusted with everyone in this year’s movie, they’re not even going to make one next year. And they’re especially fed up with me. I’m still going to be in the 2006 storyline, because my contract has already been signed. But they’ve changed my form to something quite different. They’ve postponed my handsome new set indefinitely.”

“What’s your new form like?”

“Very primitive,” he sighed. “About the lowest life form there is, actually.”

“A worm? A lava eel? Tell me,” I said mischievously.

“Lower than that,” he grumbled.

“A protodite?”

He shook his head. “You’ll see soon enough, darling. If I’m lucky, I’ll get to be a little canister of goo in a Happy Meal. And to keep me from making any more trouble between storyline events, when they crunch me under the door again for the Piraka to find, they’re going to drain most of my energy, so I won’t be able to shapeshift into anything else. Suffice it to say that for quite some time I will be unable to express my affection for you in a physical way. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

I suppressed a grin. “That’s all right, Makuta. I’ll manage without it.”

“I appreciate your understanding, doll. This is going to be absolute torture for me. From what I can tell, I won’t get a form I can travel in for almost two years. But keep looking out your window from time to time, and one day you’ll see a familiar shadow.” The Spirit of Destruction reached over, put his arm around my shoulders, and pulled me against his side. “Come here, my lovely, and let me hold you while I can.”

“Well, at least you’ve still got a job,” I remarked. This was perfect—he wouldn’t be able to recapture me before I finished my story and Krahka whisked me away to safety! My fear of him was decreasing by the minute. Still, I decided to change the subject in case he decided to read my mind. “So, I was wondering. Did you even want those recordings I made with the Rakhshi, or did you set up that whole thing so that I would destroy them and invalidate our deal?”

“It was a win-win situation for me,” he smirked. “Of course I wanted them, so your beautiful voice would keep my loneliness at bay in your absence. Even so, I didn’t mind losing them when I thought I would get to keep you. After all, it’s not of the best quality, but I have security camera footage of you and the Rakhshi rehearsing together.”

I recoiled from him in horror. He could still record his hidden messages over my songs! My mind filled with images of raptors swooping down on the innocent prey paralyzed by my own voice. Then his voice broke into my apocalyptic daydream. “That is, I have video of all but the last song, the one about Darkness. It’s the only one suitable for enhancement. But that’s the breaks. At least I can listen to the others for my own pleasure.”

Relieved, I let him draw me close again. “I guess you have something to remember me by, after all. But I don’t understand. As much talent as your sons have, why did you need me to sing for you?”

“I required a voice that was naturally sweet to go behind the subliminal text,” he explained. “I’ve got intimidation down pat, but I find subjects respond best to a combination of fear and enticement. I can’t fake that reassuring tone that only a female with a sincere, loving heart can produce. The Rakhshi obviously can’t do it because they’re male. The Oohnorak can imitate a female voice, but they lack sincerity. Roodaka is—well, you know how she is. In theory Ahkwa could do it, but her attention span is all of thirty seconds long. And she balks at singing dark lyrics. I tried splicing several of her vocal clips together, but it just sounded too choppy.”

“Did you use some kind of power on me to make me feel depressed while I was singing?” I wondered.

“That was Vorahk’s doing. He was drawing your strength through his guitar, and amplifying the emotional effect with the choice of chords. That’s why the Darkness song was ideal for the suggestion technique, because the music was so moody and your vocals so desperate. We’d been experimenting with that concept together for some time.”

Vorahk had been the one to suggest my songs could buy my freedom! And Shadrahk had helped me compose the words to the Darkness song. My heart sank as I realized the affable creatures had been accomplices to his evil Plan. “So the Rakhshi were in on this whole thing?”

“Oh, no. I encouraged them to get you to sing, because being in the band would make you feel like you belonged so you’d be more likely to stay. Vorahk was trying out his new skill, but none of them were aware of the grander Plan. In my experience, the best way to get someone to help with a Plan is to let him think it’s his own idea.”

I breathed a little easier after hearing this. “I see. Well, I’m glad it didn’t work. It’s really despicable that you tried to use my singing to brainwash my friends.”

“I suppose it isn’t the noblest way to win people over,” he confessed. “But that’s exactly why I need you in my life. To keep me from making these morally questionable decisions.”

“There’s no question most of your decisions are immoral. But I can’t be your conscience. You have to develop one of your own, if you really want one,” I retorted.

A blue Rahkshi head popped up behind the front seat and hissed.

“Pinky,” Makuta groaned, “she didn’t mean you. What did you disguise yourself as this time?”

The shapeshifting Rahkshi morphed into a blue, gold, and gray cooler.

“Oh, great. I guess this means the real one is back in the LEGO parking lot, and we don’t have anything cold to drink,” grumbled the Master of Shadows.

Pinky changed back into his Rahkshi form. He opened his carapace and proffered two cans of Coke.

Glad for the excuse to slide away from Makuta, I smiled at Pinky and popped the top on my drink. “Thanks, Pinky. It’s still cold.” Pinky nodded modestly and opened a Sprite for himself.

“Good choice, son. No caffeine. Now, look at the scenery or something. Your mistress and I have important matters to discuss.” Makuta took a long drink.

With Pinky among us, and knowing that the subliminal music Plan was defunct and the Rahkshi innocent of any involvement, I found my heart rate had slowed. All I had to do now was wait, and I would be free of Makuta forever. I sank back into the upholstery and smiled to myself. But then I worried he would read my thoughts. I tried to think about something else. I wished the trip would end soon. “How long till we get there, Makuta?”

“Oh, maybe an hour. So, about your story, pumpkin. I’m really looking forward to reading it, because it will remind me of all the wonderful times we had together. In my new form it won’t be easy for me to get onto a computer, but I’ll manage somehow. I should have enough energy to telekinetically operate a mouse and keyboard.”

The mental image of Makuta as a container of goo, barely able to run a computer, almost made me laugh. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“Before I took off, I burned you a CD of songs to go with your experiences. One for every major event that happened to you. You can post the songs along with the chapters of your story.” He slid a disk into the player in the dashboard. “I think you’ll like it.”

Fearing he had altered these songs as well, I reached over and touched the 'eject' button. "Well, thanks. But I'd rather listen to it later."

"What, don't you trust me? After all this time?"

"Not at all."

"I haven't tampered with these recordings in any way, buttercup," he protested. He returned the disk to its case and handed it to me. "I wouldn't have had time, even if I had wanted to. I've got a huge list of things to do before Book Ten starts up. Put the boys in stasis, make remote backups of all my important files, draw one last dose of power from the nuclear reactor, and hide everything high-tech before the LEGO people come along with the Piraka. Especially the reactor. Even after that thing is decommissioned, I'm going to have to encapsulate it with stone ten feet thick so they won't detect a radiation or heat signature."

"I think there are some Visorak on your island that want to throw a party, too." I put the CD in my pack.

"Nick and Daisy? Yes, they were up on the surface with the Rahkshi when I got back. I ordered a big cake for them before I left. It should show up about the time I get back."

Pinky crumpled his drink can in his hand, hissed, and started bouncing eagerly on the back seat. Makuta turned around. "Yes, Pinky, there's going to be cake. But right now it's naptime." He waved his hand, and the Rahkshi flopped down and closed his eyes. "The little guy can't handle sugar too well, either," his master explained.

I looked back at the lanky creature and smiled. He and his brothers had certainly made my imprisonment more tolerable. Makuta glanced over at me. "Aren't they cute when they're sleeping?"

I noticed I was incredibly tired myself. If I slept, the trip would seem faster, but I worried that my dreams would betray my Plan. Hoping the caffeine in my Coke would keep me awake, I took another sip.

"Why don't you get some rest, too, beloved?" asked Makuta sweetly. He raised his hand over me, and in spite of my intent to stay alert, I was suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue. I closed my eyes and began to dream.

I was riding on the back of a giant swordfish through the calm waters of a sunlit bay. The muscular creature swam just below the sparkling azure surface. Then it leaped into the air, spraying scintillating drops all around us. I gripped the rope of twisted flax knotted around its middle and held tight as it fell back into the water.

When the fish jumped again, I looked down at the smooth, pale blue legs straddling it. My feet were webbed, with little fins running along the back of my calves. I was clad in a white linen tunic. I touched my head and felt long strands of hair streaming behind me in the wind. The

swordfish abruptly plunged under the surface, and I inhaled some water. Then I realized I wasn't choking. I could breathe water.

The fish surfaced and swam to a wooden dock. I dismounted and waved at it, and it wiggled its tail before submerging again. I climbed a staircase cut into the rocky cliff and arrived at a complex of low stone and thatch buildings surrounded by water gardens and a masonry wall. A gate was open, and I walked inside the largest building and sat down at a desk. All around me were stacks of books and scrolls on shelves labeled with what appeared to be dates. "I must be a historian," I said to myself.

I heard a rapping sound on the door, and I stood to see who it was. Then I heard Makuta's voice. "Good morning, my lovely."

My eyes blinked open. I was lying across Makuta's lap, and he had his arms around me. Despite the grimy feeling of having slept in a junkyard, I smiled at the secret knowledge that this was the last time he would ever be able to pull this creepy trick.

"You woke in my arms and smiled at me," he purred. "Finally!"

"Sorry," I muttered, sitting up. "I didn't mean to."

He patted my hand. "We're almost to your house, cupcake."

I looked down at the ground. A grid of familiar streets lay below a few wisps of cloud. My heart leaped at the reassuring sight.

"What was that beautiful form you had in your dream?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know," I replied, buckling my seatbelt in anticipation of Makuta's typical rough landing. "Just something my imagination came up with, I guess." I tried to hide my excitement as the car descended and banked around my neighborhood. We made a complete loop. "Why are we circling?"

"I'm looking for a place to land. But first, I want something from you."

I groaned to myself, wondering what it would be this time. Hopefully it wouldn't be too unpleasant. "What is it, Makuta?"

"There isn't enough room for us to have that dance I've been longing for, and my attempts to kiss you have been met with considerable resistance," he said, a hint of resentment in his voice. He turned on the autopilot.

I was glad it wasn't either of those two things, but I was still a little nervous.

“You cut me so deeply when you told me you hated me. But since then I’ve seen some signs that your feelings have changed, precious. I want so much to believe it, but in the past my poor heart has been so badly battered by your vacillation. I just need to hear the truth from you.”

I squinted at him. “You want me to tell you how I feel about you?”

“Tell me that you love me,” the Spirit of Destruction said bluntly.

I sighed. Should I lie to him? I didn’t want to lead him on, but on the other hand, I really wanted out of his car.

“Just three little words, my dove. Please forgive me for my insecurity, but they will give me so much strength in the difficult days and months ahead.”

I glanced over at the rangy amalgamation of scrap metal next to me. He was looking at me expectantly. Then something caught my eye. In the midst of a vast grid of switches, dials, and digital readouts that studded the dashboard, there were two square red buttons protected by hinged safety guards. A sign above them read “EMERGENCY EJECT,” and below were the labels “DRIVER” and “PASSENGER.”

I reached for the passenger eject switch and flipped up the safety guard. The convertible top opened automatically. Makuta leaned across me and grabbed my hand. “Oh, no, you don’t,” he scolded. “If you won’t say it, you’re not getting out. I have to know you’ll be waiting for me before I’m willing to leave you here.”

I caught my breath. Maybe I should just go ahead and lie to him, I thought. I had certainly resorted to cheap, manipulative tricks before. But what would be the consequences of an outright declaration of love? Since he was asking for it, I was sure he had some sort of Plan to use it against me or my friends somehow. I remembered my own words to Krahka: *Never deal with evil.*

“I’ve promised not to put you in stasis, and I can’t take you to Voya Nui in the form I’ll have,” he was saying. “Maybe I can arrange for my brothers to keep you in the Brotherhood fortress on Destral until the story arc is finished. I don’t really trust them, sweetheart, but they fear me enough that they’ll take good care of you.”

My eyes widened with terror. This would completely ruin my Plan! I doubted Krahka could retrieve me from a Brotherhood of Makuta fortress, even if she still wanted to save me after I’d thrown away the chance she’d already given me. It was obvious I would have to lie to him. I tried to force the words out. “Makuta, I...”

Still gripping my right hand, Makuta studied me. His eyes burned intently under his heavy eyebrows. “I can see there’s something you’re not telling me, darling. What’s the big secret? It’s futile, trying to conceal your thoughts from someone who can read your mind.”

Now I was really panicking. I tried to fill my head with vapid musings about the scenery. As his rusted Kraahkan and piercing blue eyes loomed closer, though, I realized it was only a matter of time before he would penetrate my mental defenses and discover my Plan.

Without any powers, my meager strength would be useless against him. I needed a distraction. It only had to last a few seconds, but it had to be absolutely compelling. I glanced at the back seat. Unfortunately, Pinky was fast asleep. Then I remembered the one weapon at my disposal against which the Master of Shadows was completely defenseless. Steeling myself with the idea that a few seconds of hydrocarbon fumes might avert a lifetime of slavery to darkness, I reached my left hand behind his neck, pulled him toward me, and kissed him gently on the mouth.

He blinked a few times in stunned disbelief. Then he released my wrist and took my chin in his hand, sliding his other arm around my shoulders. “My beauty, I’ve waited so long for this,” he whispered. While he kissed me, I groped at the dashboard behind him. My fingertips located the switch with the raised safety guard. I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed the button.

There was a deafening explosion underneath my seat. Makuta reeled backwards as it shot out of the convertible. My heart pounded and my stomach lurched as I accelerated into the sky. Then a second pyrotechnic device fired, and a folded parachute shot out. The seat jerked violently when the chute deployed. Then I started to float slowly downward.

I heard Makuta’s voice in my head as I looked up at the vast expanse of billowing black silk above me. “You’re so full of surprises,” he said with amusement. “I understand that you’re not ready to speak those words yet. But thank you for giving me a proper goodbye! *Au revoir*, my angel.”

I waved at the receding Coupe de Ville. “*Adieu*, Makuta.”

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After half a bottle of Listerine and a long soak in a tub of water lily bubble bath, I felt refreshed. Wrapped in a towel, I climbed onto my bed and switched on the television to see what had happened while I was away on my bizarre and dangerous adventure. The CNN evening news anchor spoke of the usual wars, political maneuvering, and celebrity scandals. I yawned and walked into the bathroom to hang up my towel. But as I crawled under the covers and picked up the remote to turn off the news, one story caught my attention. “In what may be the strangest case of mass hallucination ever reported, dozens of passengers on a commercial jetliner claim to have seen a blue female robotic being on their flight, only to watch her disappear into a flying car that appeared alongside the plane. Our correspondent in Houston has more on the story.”

I sat up and watched with interest. The pilot told the reporter, “At first we thought the other aircraft was a terrorist. I attempted to make radio contact, but the pilot didn’t respond. I’m just glad he didn’t hit our plane.” A stewardess testified, “I remember seeing the blue girl board the flight. She had no luggage, not even a purse. And I know it sounds crazy, but that flying thing

looked just like a Cadillac convertible with jet engines under it. This big, dark, mechanical-looking guy was driving it.” Several passengers were also interviewed, including the woman who had been sitting across from me. “The robot girl was very nice to my son. And then, after the car showed up, I looked over at her seat, and she was just gone.” The boy was tugging at her skirt. I could barely hear his voice in the background. “She wasn’t a robot, she was a Toa! She autographed my comic book! And that dude in the car was Makuta. He’s the bad guy!” The anchorman reappeared onscreen. “Continental Airlines has no record of this passenger in its computer system, and the FAA has no radar data on the alleged flying car. The armed services report no military flights in the area at the time. Samples of the in-flight meal have been expedited to the Centers for Disease Control and are currently undergoing testing for psychoactive toxins. We’ll bring you the results as soon as they are available.”

As the weatherman started his routine, I switched off the television and sank into the softness of the bed. For the first time in years, I could rest assured that Makuta would stay confined to my nightmares. Stretching out in the bed, I breathed deeply the smell of sheets that had dried in the sunshine. I was relieved I would never again have to set foot in his gloomy lair, or endure the touch of his rusted claws, or cower in fear while he provoked a senseless fight against an old enemy. I had to admit feeling a little bit sorry for him, because I had come to believe he was genuinely lonesome and craved my company. But I was equally convinced nothing would stop him in his insane quest to dominate all Bionicle life, at the cost of whoever stood in his way, and I was glad his loneliness was no longer my problem. I drifted off into blissful sleep.



Hey, kids, this is Krahka, your friendly neighborhood shapeshifter. I just gave your favorite Toa-prototype-turned-author a lift to the Dark Dimension, and I’m posting her last chapter from the computer in the LEGO trailer on Voya Nui. I have to hurry, because the electrical power supply is kind of iffy. The weather really wreaks havoc on the technology around here. And when the Mask of Life zoomed by last year on its way to Mahri Nui, it totally fried the generators, and we all had to eat peanut butter and drink warm soda for a week.

So, can you believe what she did to get away from Mack? Hello! I thought she was a good girl! Naturally I gave her a hard time about it, especially when she told me it took her, like, five seconds to find that button. She said there were a kajillion switches on his dashboard, and she didn’t want to push the wrong one and accidentally fire the machine guns or something. Yeah, right. Stockholm syndrome, much? But, seriously, I would have done the same thing in her situation. Except I would have ejected *his* seat.

Anyway, just thought you might like to know she’s safe and sound. Mr. Wrong can’t get at her, because even if he followed me and tried to sneak in after me, he’s just a puff of air pollution right now, and I’d blow him away with Matau’s power. In case you hadn’t heard, Taht and I got out of the Double D when Brutaka opened a dimensional gate, but I’ll keep stopping by to make sure Squirt is all right and bring her recharged batteries for her laptop. She says it’s not so bad hanging out in the dark because she has night vision, and at least there aren’t any evil creeps

trying to hit on her in there. We've been shopping for a storyline, and when she's wrapped up her work on BZPower, she'll make her final choice. There are some really cool universes out there and she can't wait to jump into one. She sends hugs to all of you.

Stay cool,  
Krahka

## The Very Last Word

### **Nickelback — How You Remind Me**

*Never made it as a wise man  
I couldn't cut it as a poor man stealing  
Tired of living like a blind man  
I'm sick of sight without a sense of feeling  
And this is how you remind me  
This is how you remind me  
Of what I really am  
This is how you remind me  
Of what I really am*

*It's not like you to say sorry  
I was waiting on a different story  
This time I'm mistaken  
For handing you a heart worth breaking  
And I've been wrong, I've been down,  
Been to the bottom of every bottle  
These five words in my head  
Scream "Are we having fun yet?"*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, no  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, no*

*It's not like you didn't know that  
I said I love you and I swear I still do  
And it must have been so bad  
'Cause living with me must have [deleted] near killed you*

*This is how you remind me  
Of what I really am*

Alas, my love.

It's difficult for me to express my feelings about what you've done. That's partly because I'm a wisp of swirling energy at the moment, and I have to strain to telekinetically press each key. Plus, the power supply to this wretched trailer has flickered out once already, causing me to sear with frustration at the prospect of typing half my post over again. But all that is trivial compared to the struggle I'm going through to describe so much pain with mere words. Add this song to your CD, sweetheart, and it will help speak for me.

I thought your reservations had finally started to melt away. Even though you didn't flip that safety latch closed and ask me to turn the car around, I was charmed by the clever way you gave me a taste of heaven before you rocketed out of my embrace and left me thirsting for more. Sentimental fool that I am, I dismissed your worrisome comments to your readers as a publicity stunt and allowed myself to believe you were waiting demurely for my return, when you would surrender completely to my will. Ah, the affectionate reunion I was anticipating!

Instead, you were raising my hopes and stoking my desire for the sole purpose of cloaking a perfidious Plan to abandon me, my heart ripped open and bleeding. (Metaphorically speaking, that is, because I have no actual heart or blood at this point.)

After I read your chapter, my nebulous form was writhing with anguish and fury. With neither physical form nor powers nor energy to spare, I drifted into the depths of Mangaia and roamed tunnels still faintly redolent with your fresh fragrance, even though you no longer deign to grace them with your engaging presence. In my tormented mind, I could hear the echoes of your light footfalls and see the glow of your haunting blue eyes around every corner. When the pain reached an intolerable crescendo, I vented my wrath by triggering the self-destruct mechanism. I watched everything I had built diligently over the past hundred millennia detonate into tiny shards. And I laughed like a madman.

Why? Because all along I've had a contingency Plan.

Don't get me wrong, cupcake, I wanted more than anything for you to join me in my mission to bestow upon the universe the peace and order of my dark utopia. I wanted you beside me, to cool my fevered brow (well, assuming I had a forehead) whenever my emotions got the best of me, to balance my strength and determination with your kindness and calm. It's a cruel twist indeed to see how treacherous you can be, because it's even more obvious to me how quickly we could have conquered the world together.

But, in a move worthy of Roodaka herself in its cold-blooded cunning, you've slipped through my hands (if I had any) at the exact moment I am least capable of pursuing you. If I were at my normal energy level, I would welcome this chance to play hide and seek with you. After all, I do know a thing or two about dimensional travel. But right now I have no power to spare. I don't even have enough to deactivate my own security system and release a minion from stasis to help me. And it would take too long for me to travel to a source and charge up. LEGO would certainly notice and come after me, the way they've been breathing down my neck lately (if I had one).

Thus your refusal to participate forces me to resort to my backup Plan. I'll follow the classic blueprint of evil: the villain starts out with good intentions, but through some caprice of fate he loses the one he holds most dear. He subverts his sorrow and rage into an insatiable drive for revenge. Among the many anti-heroes forged by tragedy in movies and literature, consider Count Dracula, Mad Max, Darth Vader, and my good friend Doctor Octavius. It's a time-honored formula.

In a way you've brought me back to my senses, and I should thank you for your vicious betrayal. It's time I got up off my knees (if I had them) and became the most ruthless villain possible. With no hope of love, I might as well immerse myself thoroughly in malevolence and live up to the reputation Great Being Farshtey has established for me. What reason do I have not to pull out all the stops? Gone forever are the days I showed restraint for the sake of LEGO and their moralistic storyline!

I was so firmly convinced it was your destiny to change me. In retrospect, I see that I was correct, but it happened in a way diametrically opposed to what I had envisioned. Instead of awakening my compassion, you were meant to educe my inner darkness. And based on the malicious deed you've done to me, I think I've influenced you in the same way. Perhaps I have managed to leave my mark on you, after all.

You may be wondering if I plan to execute Krahka for her role in this travesty. After some thought, I've decided against it. My retaliation will be to let her live, so she can watch the destruction I wreak on that worthless sleeping spirit she worships, racked with guilt that she's partly to blame.

Still, my fantasies of vengeance will never fill the void you've left inside me. A few seconds of security camera video is enough to elicit a flood of bittersweet reminiscences. I imagine your shapely blue figure wandering the halls of my lair, your melodious voice singing with my sons, the weight of your slender body asleep in my arms, and the delectable flavor of your mouth when at last you consented to my kiss. Why can't you admit you enjoyed exploring the world of Bionicle in my company? You can take yourself away from me, my lovely, but you can't take my memories. Even as I list these things, my eyes burn anew with anguish. (All right, they're really just optically sensitive patterns in my energy field, but you get the idea. What a curse to be verbose when you have no fingers!)

To keep from exploding with grief, I console myself with the thought that every moment of poignant regret will translate into increased ferocity on the field of battle. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." If I had succeeded in persuading you to become my empress, you would have been my greatest vulnerability, needing protection from collateral damage as well as from my enemies. But without you, I have nothing to lose. I'm free to unleash as much violence and chaos as I see fit. For the sake of my career as a bad guy, I'm much better off without you.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

A peculiar thought crossed my mind, darling, as I re-read your escape Plan. I can't help but wonder whether one day you'll come across my brother. If you had continued your work on my biography just a little longer, you would have documented my discovery of other beings of the Makuta species. One of them was so much like me it was immediately clear the Bionicle universe wasn't big enough for both of us. Being slightly more ambitious than he, I managed to banish him to the Dark Dimension, from which, according to my sources, he disappeared soon afterwards. I suspect he may have done exactly what Krahka suggested and passed through a filtering portal. If you do meet him someday, I hope you'll break his heart the way you've broken mine (you should know what I mean by now).

So, beloved, here is my last word to you: go. If it makes you happy, flee from the mighty being who will adore you forever, leaving him with nothing but sentimental memories and a footlocker of security camera footage, and start an uncertain new life among strangers on the distant shores of an unknown dimension. But cast a glance behind you once in a while, and you'll see the consequences of your feminine deception. Watch the one you carelessly spurned rise to

supremacy, knowing you could have shared in the glory. Witness the way I brutally crush my adversaries—some of them your friends, whom I might have spared for your sake if you had been by my side to whisper in my ear. I'll make their deaths—gaah! The air conditioner just came on. I'm about to be sucked into the return-air intake grille. I have to get out of here.

*Adieu, my angel.*

**M**



GaliGee's wonderful helpers:

pohatu jr  
bahka, a.k.a. All Those Penguins, a.k.a. Toa Kyan, Spirit of Electricity, a.k.a. PenguinStar of IceClan  
GregF  
Covenant Grunt  
Isaga  
KKN\_GN  
chip-e  
chonicler12  
Elpizo  
Crisis  
Kratoo the Assassin  
efll  
Screenguy  
Xirahk  
Nukora  
The Terminator  
Takuta-Nui  
Naeo  
toa of life (Kara Nui)  
Flameberge ~BK~  
GSMN  
Janus  
Tohron  
~Toa of Space~  
Lyger  
Vorzhak Master  
Blackchimaera  
Taniko  
The Power that Is