

The Kingdom

By Greg Farshtey

Part I

Takanuva, Toa of Light, fell through inter-dimensional space, trying hard not to scream. A moment before, he had stepped through a dimensional portal created by Brutaka. His mission: travel to Karda Nui and warn the six Toa Nuva there of a disaster about to occur.

Somehow, though, this trip was not going as planned. Takanuva was being buffeted about, catching glimpses now and then of weird other worlds filled with beings both familiar and unfamiliar. He could guess that if he somehow wound up in one of those places, he might never find his way back to his own universe.

Suddenly, there was a jolt worse than any before. He was spinning wildly, out of control. There was an instant of complete darkness, followed by a very bright light, and then Takanuva slammed onto a rocky shore. He lay there, stunned, for a long time. When he finally lifted his head, it was to view a sight he could never have imagined.

The city before him was vast. It made Metru Nui look like a collection of stone-cutter shacks. Multiple design styles had combined to create a megalopolis that stretched for as far as the eye could see. Some of the buildings looked like ones in Metru Nui – he recognized the Coliseum, for example – others were totally strange and some almost primitive.

Takanuva glanced up at the sky. No, it didn't look like the one over Metru Nui. It looked – *oh, no, that couldn't be*, he thought. It was the same shade of blue as the one over the island of Mata Nui.

That's impossible, he said to himself. *Everyone left Mata Nui to move back to Metru Nui months ago. And Mata Nui was never this size, or filled with so many beings and buildings!*

He stood up and looked around. Everywhere, he could see Matoran of all kinds hard at work. That certainly wasn't unusual. Of course, the fact that they were working side by side with Bohrok, Skakdi, and Visorak was downright shocking.

"Hey," said a voice from behind him. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Takanuva turned. A Ga-Matoran, Macku, was there. She gave no sign of recognizing him.

"I'm Toa Takanuva," he answered. "Can you tell me where I am?"

“You’re not Takanuva,” said Macku, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Try again ... or would you rather we call the Hunters?”

“But I am Takanuva. I know I look different, but -- ”

“That’s for sure,” laughed Macku. “You’re a lot taller. Or have you never seen Turaga Takanuva, stranger?”

“Turaga --?” sputtered Takanuva. He recovered quickly. “Um, maybe I was a little confused. Tell me, do you know where I could find Jaller?”

“At the Great Furnace, naturally,” said Macku, suspicion in her voice. “What do you want him for?”

“I have, um, a message for him from an old friend,” Takanuva replied.

It took some doing, but he finally convinced Macku to escort him into the city, which she called “the kingdom of the Great Spirit.” The first person she brought him to was a tall, strong warrior carrying a massive axe. He looked Takanuva over for a minute, then nodded. “He’s not a shapeshifter. And he really does think he’s Takanuva.”

“Thanks, Axonn,” said Macku. “So he’s crazy then?”

“Not sure,” said Axonn. He reached out and snatched away Takanuva’s Staff of Light. “Might be better not to let him walk around the city with this. You know how the Turaga feels about citizens carrying weapons.”

They walked through the streets of the city, as shock followed shock for Takanuva. Over there were Matoran buying wares from street stands run by Vortixx; further on, a Skakdi was hawking a show, boasting of the amazing Visorak pyramid that could be seen inside for just five widgets. And on every street corner, there was the presence of law enforcers – not Toa, not even Vahki, but Dark Hunters!

Macku left Takanuva with Toa Jaller. The Toa of Fire looked the same as he always had, but he viewed Takanuva without the wariness the Ga-Matoran had. “Well, you’re obviously not Takanuva,” he said. “But as long as you’re not a Makuta in disguise, you’re welcome in the kingdom. What can I do for you?”

“Just talk to me,” Takanuva said. “Tell me about this place. Are we ... is this really the island of Mata Nui?”

Jaller laughed. “Wow. I haven’t heard it called that in close to 10,000 years. Anyway, yes, this was the island of Mata Nui, but it’s a lot more than that now.”

“I see that. What ... I mean, how ...?”

Jaller pointed to a massive stone wall. “That’s what you want. There’s a Wall of History in every district – Kopeke made sure of that. You’ll find answers there.” Jaller paused, and then added, “You know, it’s funny . I know I never met you, but somehow you seem familiar. Why did you ask to see me, anyway?”

Takanuva thought about telling Jaller the truth. He could share all sorts of things only the real Takanuva would know. But then he decided that, at best, he would scare his old friend ... and at worst, he would wind up arrested by the Hunters.

“Right. Well, I met Turaga Takanuva once, and he ... um ... told me what a great friend you were. He said if I was ever in trouble, to come see you.”

“Well, that’s a pleasant surprise,” said Jaller. “None of the Toa Mahri are very popular around here, even after all this time ... even after how things turned out. I don’t think anyone’s even seen Matoro in five or six thousand years.”

The name startled Takanuva. Matoro was dead, killed when he sacrificed his life to save the Great Spirit Mata Nui and the universe. A theory was starting to form in the mind of the Toa of Light, and the Wall of History was where it could be proven or disproven. He thanked Jaller and hurried on.

Yes, it was all there all right. The first thing he noticed was the date – it was 10,000 years after he had left Metru Nui! But that wasn’t half as surprising as the story the carvings told.

The Toa Mahri had journeyed to the underwater city of Mahri Nui in search of the Mask of Life, just as he recalled. But after that, the story had changed. Toa Matoro – referred to in the carvings as the “Disgraced One” – had hesitated a few moments too long in his pursuit of the mask. The core of the universe had been sealed off, making it impossible for him to revive the Great Spirit Mata Nui with the mask. And Mata Nui, ruler and protector of the entire Matoran universe, had died.

But the tale didn’t end there. The Turaga of Metru Nui had been planning for just such an eventuality. Mobilizing the Toa, the Vortixx, the Skakdi, and many of the universe’s other species, they led a mass migration to the surface over the course of a few days. The Order of Mata Nui revealed its existence and helped as well. Even as more and more beings poured from Metru Nui up to the Mata Nui, those who were already there worked to construct floating platforms to hold them all. Naturally, not everyone made it – it just wasn’t physically possible to

evacuate a universe in that short an amount of time – but many did. It was obvious that only by working together could they survive on the surface, and so the concept of the Kingdom was born.

Only two species from the original universe were not represented here. The Zyglak had refused to evacuate, choosing death over accepting assistance from Matoran. The Makuta attempted to migrate, only to find their way barred by Toa Takanuva and the Order. Together, they drove the Makuta back underground, and no sign had been seen of them since. His destiny achieved, Takanuva had sacrificed his power to bring a new generation of Toa into being. These included Toa Kapura, Toa Balta, Toa Dalu, Toa Velika, Toa Defilak, and a new Toa of Light, Tanma. Takanuva had then become a Turaga and was named leader of the Kingdom in recognition of his heroism.

Things got stranger from there. Turaga Takanuva had formed a new ruling council, consisting of Turaga Dume, a prime Skakdi warlord, Roodaka, the Shadowed One, Helryx, and a Nynrah Matoran. Dark Hunters had become the primary law enforcers, while Toa were put to work using their powers to help the city in other ways. First, they prevented the collapse of the original island in the wake of Mata Nui's death. Then they created new and more stable land masses to support the city's expansion. After 10 millennia, the Kingdom was now a mega-city and home to all the survivors of the original universe.

Turaga Takanuva and his Council ruled from the Coliseum. Toa Takanuva not only couldn't resist paying a visit to his other self, but he needed to find some way out of here. The Wall had shown him he had not simply traveled into his future somehow. This was not his universe at all.

As he walked, he had to admit that part of his wished he didn't have to leave. Who would have imagined that Matoro's failure would have resulted in a paradise like this? Everywhere he looked, he saw beings of different species working side by side. Only Toa and Hunters carried weapons, but they looked like they hadn't been used in ages.

He expected to find the Coliseum heavily guarded, but the opposite was the case. The seat of government was open to all in the Kingdom. Instead of asking to see Turaga Takanuva, though, he sent a message to Helryx. It was short, reminding her of what her original plan had been to warn the Toa Nuva about conditions in Karda Nui and asking if she could get him in to see the Turaga.

That produced results. Takanuva was escorted by Trinuma into the Turaga's chamber at the top of the Coliseum. Turaga Takanuva was in conference with Toa Tanma and Roodaka. Resting in the center of a large table was a Rahkshi head.

“You say this Rahkshi appeared in the center of the city, near the Piraka fountain?” the Turaga said.

Roodaka nodded. “A bunch of Fe-Matoran were there feeding Avak and Thok, making plans to add iron supports to the western land mass. They spotted a Panrahk and called the Hunters, who took care of it. This is all that was left.”

“It shouldn’t have been able to get through,” said Tanma, grimly.

“Maybe it was an accident,” Turaga Takanuva offered, sounding as if he didn’t believe it himself. “Maybe one slipped through before the light barriers went up and has been hiding here all this time.”

“I wish,” said Toa Tanma.

“The light barriers are going down,” said Toa Takanuva. All three turned to look at him, startled. “I ... know a little about light.”

Turaga Takanuva started to say something, then stopped. He turned to Roodaka and Tanma and asked them to leave the chamber. Once they were gone, he said, “How is this possible?”

“You know, then?” said the Toa.

“How could I not?” said the Turaga. “And Helryx has told me what she planned to do, if things had gone differently. You’re from ... someplace else, I take it?”

The Toa nodded. “Someplace else, it’s true, but not someplace as peaceful. You have done an amazing job.” He smiled. “I’m proud of me.”

The Turaga shook his head. “It can’t last. Onua and the others have done all they can, but the original island cannot survive much longer. We will have to move on again, perhaps to the stars if Nuju and Nuparu’s project works. But until then, the Makuta – if they still live -- must not be allowed into the Kingdom!”

Turaga Takanuva looked at his Toa counterpart from another universe, not his own. “I know this isn’t your world, and I know the message you carry is vital. But Tanma ... and the entire Kingdom ... could use your aid. When you’re done, we can find a way to send you back. Will you help?”

Toa Takanuva nodded. “Of course. But ... I could use my Staff of Light back.”

Turaga Takanuva smiled. “Oh, that weapon went out of style 10,000 years ago. I think we can find you something better than that, old friend.”

The Kingdom

Part II

Turaga Takanuva led Toa Takanuva out of the Coliseum and into the eastern portion of the vast city. Toa Tanma trailed along behind, not saying much. He wasn't sure whether to be grateful another Toa of Light had arrived to help him, or upset that the Turaga didn't think he could handle the job on his own.

They arrived at a small, narrow building in an alleyway, not far from the shore. There was no knob or handle on the outside of the front door, nor any carving to indicate who lived there. Turaga Takanuva wrapped twice with his staff.

A small panel opened about halfway up the door. No eyes were visible through it, but a Matoran voice said, "What's the password?"

Turaga Takanuva looked at the two Toa. "They've lived among us for ages, and still like to play at secrecy." Turning back to the door, he said, "This is Turaga Takanuva. Open up."

"Wrong password. Not even close."

"Try this one," said the annoyed Turaga. "I have a troop of Bohrok with nothing to do. If you'd like, I can have them tear down this building and turn it into a park."

There was a pause. Then the voice said, "Close enough," and the door swung open.

The three visitors entered a dark hallway, which twisted and turned far more than one would expect, given the size of the building. A door at the end led to a small workshop, cluttered with all sorts of armor, weapons, and other gadgets. A lone Fe-Matoran was tinkering with a nasty looking projectile launcher when they walked in. He looked up at Turaga Takanuva, surprised and annoyed.

"You know the routine," he said. "Leave your request in the slot outside, and we'll get to it."

"Yes, I know that's how you Nynrah crafters prefer to work," Turaga Takanuva replied, making an effort to keep his temper. "But this is a crisis. I have a Toa who needs weaponry."

The Matoran looked Toa Takanuva up and down. "Looks like his color scheme could use some work too. But ... I might just have something here that could be of use."

After a few minutes of rummaging through claw catchers, Rhotuka launchers, and parts of a Visorak battle wagon, the Matoran emerged with a twin-bladed lance. He handed it to Toa Takanuva and said, "Now, aim at that far wall. Just use a little bit of power, not even enough to singe the stone."

The Toa took the lance, aimed it, and focused on releasing just the tiniest sample of his elemental light. The next instant, a blast of energy blew a hole the size of a Kanoka disk in the wall. "How ...?" said Takanuva, looking down at the lance.

"Most Toa tools just channel power," the Matoran said, smiling. "This one amplifies it. And if that's not enough --"

The Matoran searched some more, this time emerging with a launcher. "We don't have a name for this one yet, too new. Draws light from the environment and fires it as a sphere. It hasn't been tested yet, though."

"Fine," said Turaga Takanuva. He turned to the two Toa. "I suggest you start right away. There's no telling how much time we have."

Once they were back on the street, Tanma wanted to head right for the nearest light barrier, but Toa Takanuva held him up. "There's something I want to do first," said Takanuva. "I want to see Matoro."

"That coward?" spat Tanma. "If not for him, we would still have our homes, our universe. You can go see him if you like – I want nothing to do with him."

Takanuva expected that Matoro would be living in the region inhabited by the Ko-Matoran and Frostelus. But he evidently hadn't been welcome there. Tanma directed his new comrade to an area of what was once Po-Wahi, now home mostly to Skakdi. There, in a small hut made of stone, sat Toa Matoro.

"What do you want?" the Toa of Ice said, not even looking up at his visitor. "Go away."

"Matoro, I ..." Takanuva began. "You're needed. You have to come with me."

Toa Matoro laughed. It was a bitter sound. "I was needed 10,000 years ago. My destiny was before me, and I hesitated ... and a universe died. So don't try to tell me I'm needed now. Just leave me alone."

"I heard what happened," Takanuva said. "But I also know that, in your heart, you're a hero. I know how hard you fought on Voya Nui, on Mahri Nui. And I know if you could have saved the universe, you would have ... you would have done anything to do that."

Takanuva, overcome with emotion, had to stop talking. Here was Matoro, who was dead in his universe, having sacrificed himself to save Mata Nui and every other living thing. Here he was, alive, but dead inside, knowing he had failed his people when it mattered most.

Matoro looked up at him. "Who are you? No one in the Kingdom talks about me that way."

"I'm from ... another kingdom," Takanuva answered. "One where people think of you as a hero."

"I see," said Matoro. "Escaped from an asylum, did you?"

“Okay,” said the Toa of Light. “You want to sit here and feel sorry for yourself. You blew your chance to be a hero – well, here’s another one. Here’s a chance to show everyone you aren’t a failure or a coward. Here’s an opportunity to bring some honor to your name ... do you have the courage to take it?”

“Why do you care?” asked Matoro. “I don’t even know you.”

“Maybe I know you,” said Takanuva. “Or someone very close to you. Now, come on – we have a kingdom to save.”

Tanma was not at all happy to see Matoro along, but there wasn’t time for a prolonged argument. Fortunately, the most likely problem spot was in the same area as Matoro’s hut. The area around Kini-Nui was too well traveled for Rakhshi to have emerged from there unnoticed, but the old Bohrok tunnels in Po-Wahi were out of the way and largely ignored. If the light barrier in the main tunnel had come down, it would be easy for Makuta to send legions up through those passageways.

“Why not just block the tunnels? Bring them down?” asked Takanuva.

“Pohatu and Hewkii tried that during the evacuation,” said Tanma. “The Rakhshi smashed their way through and killed them both before Tahu, Jaller and Kopaka drove them back. No, light was the only effective means of stopping them – intense light, more than their kraata could stand.”

“And they couldn’t just, I don’t know, dig their way around the barrier? Or use density control and float up through the rock?”

“They could,” Tanma agreed. “But Onua made sure the ground is warded. Any attempt to dig through it or pass through it, and we’d know.”

Matoro had said nothing. Takanuva turned and said, “What do you think?”

“I think ... never mind,” said the Toa of Ice.

“What he thinks doesn’t matter,” snarled Tanma.

“It does to me,” Takanuva replied. “Tell us, Matoro.”

“Well ... what if the barrier didn’t go down? What if they’ve found some way to shield themselves against the light?”

“Then we have a problem” said Takanuva.

Cautiously, they started down the tunnel. Even this close to the surface, Takanuva could feel the chill in the air. The only light came from Tanma, who kept up a low-level illumination using his Toa power. “We can’t do down too far,” he said. “There’s no heat down there and what air there might still be is foul. Most of the universe is flooded and a lot of the water has mutagen in it. So whatever did survive the end probably isn’t still recognizable ...”

Takanuva glanced at Matoro. Every word the Toa Tanma said was like a dagger in his heart.

They had walked perhaps a kio when the tunnel brightened. Tanma pointed ahead to a wall of light in their path. "That's the barrier. It's still intact. So the problem isn't here. Mangaia, maybe? Or some other access point we don't know about?"

"Perhaps," said Takanuva. "But what if Matoro's right? What if the barrier simply isn't stopping them anymore?"

"I don't have time for Matoran myth," said Tanma. "We have to check other possibilities. Are you coming or not?"

Takanuva glanced at the barrier, at Matoro, and then back at Tanma. "All right."

The two Toa of Light started back up the tunnel. Neither noticed Matoro wasn't following until they heard the sound of ice blasts coming from behind them. Takanuva turned and ran back down, followed closely by Tanma.

There was Matoro, battling four Rahkshi on his own. Behind them, more were breaching the barrier, each clad in armor made of deep shadow. The armor couldn't survive the passage through the barrier, dissolving not long after making contact with the light. But it lasted just long enough to get the Rahkshi through to the other side.

Takanuva and Tanma both dropped to one knee and opened fire with their light powers. Takanuva's power lance took out two Rahkshi, while Tanma drove a third back into the barrier, where its kraata burned to ashes. Matoro froze the fourth in a block of ice up to its head, just long enough to reach in and yank out its kraata. He threw the squirming creature on the ground and stepped on it.

"Excellent," said a soft, sinister voice, which seemed to come from every shadow. Takanuva knew it well – it belonged to the Makuta of Metru Nui, leader of the Brotherhood. "I see that at least one of you has an imagination. Matoro, my old friend ... it seems like yesterday we were teamed against the Barraki and their hordes."

"You," said Matoro, his voice shaking. "Why aren't you dead? So many others died ... why not you?"

"What is there left when the light dies, Toa? Darkness. Only darkness," Makuta replied. "And I thrive in the dark. Oh, my brothers perished, one by one ... Icarax was the first, driven from his body by my attack so I could possess it, his essence left to die in the cold of the void ... but my hatred will not let me die. Hatred of Mata Nui; hatred of all who escaped the end of this universe; most of all, Matoro, hatred of you ... you turned away from your destiny. Mata Nui was meant to cheat death ... instead, I was cheated of my revenge."

Now the Toa heard a clanking of armor, as if a colossus were coming toward them. The next moment, a 20-foot giant clad in shadow armor erupted from the barrier. As the shroud of shadow fell away, they could see their foe. He was a bizarre amalgam of the Makuta who had attacked Karda Nui and others who were unfamiliar. He was a monstrosity, now truly as ugly on the outside as his spirit was within.

“As my brothers were about to die, I absorbed them into my body,” said Teridax. “I used their mass to grow. I used their knowledge to create armor to pierce this barrier. And now your Kingdom will surrender, or it will suffocate in a sea of shadow.”

Tanma, Matoro, and Takanuva attacked. Bolts of ice and spears of light rained on Teridax’s armor, but the damage was negligible. “I have had 10,000 years to prepare for this battle,” the Makuta hissed. “You cannot win.”

“Excuse us if we try,” said Takanuva, blasting with his power lance directly at the Mask of Shadow. The blow knocked the mask off. Makuta bent to retrieve it, but Tanma was too fast, hitting it with full power and melting it to slag.

“Tanma, get back!” Takanuva shouted. It was too late. Makuta had scooped up the Toa of Light like a toy and triggered the shattering power of a Panrahk. Takanuva had to look away – it was simply too horrible to watch.

“Now do you see?” said Makuta. “You must --”

Makuta stopped dead. Then he smiled at Takanuva. “Oh, I see ... oh, how intriguing. You are from ... somewhere else ... somewhere ... where Matoro died, and Mata Nui lived. The Plan proceeds there to its inevitable conclusion. Did you flee, then, Takanuva? Did you have the wisdom to escape before my reign begins?”

“I ... died?” said Matoro quietly.

“Yes,” Takanuva replied. “You did. You gave your life so billions could live. In my universe, you are considered the greatest hero ever to bear the title of Toa.”

“And here you are just one more insect to be crushed,” said Makuta, advancing. “Or perhaps ... there is some other use for you. The Mask of Life still exists, and you were connected to it ... you have knowledge I can use, Toa of Ice.”

A hand made of shadow emerged from Makuta’s chest, heading right for Matoro. Takanuva made a move to get between them, but the Toa of Ice hit him with a barrage of ice shards, driving him back.

“Matoro, what are you doing?” Takanuva cried out. “He’s going to kill you!”

“I should have died 10,000 years ago,” Matoro said. He stood erect, hands at his sides, waiting for the hand to seize him. “I should have saved everyone, but I didn’t. If you think about it, Takanuva, neither of us is meant to be here.”

The shadow hand took Matoro in its grasp and drew him, unprotesting, into the substance of Makuta. Takanuva got to his feet, blasting light from his power lance and shadow from his other hand, screaming, “Murderer!”

Strangely enough, Makuta did not counterattack. In fact, the colossus actually looked a bit unsteady on his feet. He took a step back, reached out an armored hand to support himself, then dropped to his knees. Both hands went to the side of his head, as he shouted, "No! My will must prevail! I am the stronger! I am --"

Then another voice came from Makuta's mouth. It was Matoro's! "No, Makuta. You once told the Toa Mata that you could not be destroyed, because you were nothing. You were wrong – it is because you are nothing that I can destroy you. You have no heart, you have no spirit, you have no reason to exist – even your hate is a pale reflection of what once burned in you. You survive out of habit, monster, and habits ... and minds ... can be broken."

The scream that came from Makuta then was a long, loud, and strangely hollow. An instant later, the giant collapsed to the ground and lay unmoving. Takanuva edged closer, and confirmed what he already knew: Makuta was dead. Just to be sure, he used his power to send searing light to every corner of the tunnel, but there was no sign of the master of shadows' antidermis. He had not escaped this final confrontation.

Takanuva pondered for a long time as he walked back up to the surface. Turaga Vakama had once told him that when a Makuta absorbs a body, he must crush the will of his victim immediately. Otherwise, he risks other minds intruding upon his own. Matoro had heard the same tales. He had known if Makuta absorbed him, he could fight back from within.

At one time, such an effort would have been impossible – Makuta's will would have been too strong. But Matoro had been right. Makuta truly had nothing to live for. He survived and plotted his vengeance, but it was a hollow pursuit. He had lusted for a control of a universe, only to see that universe destroyed ... and there was no place for him in the Kingdom.

Takanuva would tell the ruling council what had happened down below, and warn them to beware of any other Rahkshi who might still lurk below, clad in shadow armor. He would stay long enough to see a statue erected of Matoro, the Toa who had been granted that rarest of commodities: a second chance to make things right.

Turaga Takanuva would ask his Toa counterpart to stay, even knowing what the answer would be. In the end, the Brutaka of this universe would use his Kanohi Olmak to send Takanuva back into the space between dimensions, on his journey to Karda Nui. There was much to be done, and still a very long way to go.