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Story

Prologue

Waves of flame, red and white, flashed above the dark-armored Elemental's head as he raced down the ledge of the tall mountain. The flames' heavy shroud of darkness obscured almost everything around him. Even with the full moon shining above his head, he couldn't make out anything but the path before him and the deathly red of the horrid flames as they danced across the summit of Obsidian Peak like a destructive, raging demon.

Must... escape now. His thoughts sounded weaker than usual, as though the roar of the hungry flames pervaded his mind as well as the world around him. *If the Spirit Toa is lost, all of our work has been for nothing.*

He knew that at least one of his Order was dead already, speared through the eye by the traitor. Many others had been badly wounded in the escape, but he knew at least two members of their Order were still alive.

It's too late for the Shadow Orb. Thought the Elemental grimly as, pausing at the foot of the peak, he watched the flames engulf the entire mountain in a horrible conflagration of red and

yellow. He knew that their prize, the greatest treasure ever obtained by their Order, had been lost forever in the brief and deadly skirmish. The Elemental cursed the name of the traitor quietly, imagining his claws slashing open the treacherous Elemental's throat...

For a few moments, the Elemental stared at the blaze, his red eyes gleaming with unspoken vengeance as he watched the destruction of his Order. Then he tore his gaze away from the mountain, remembering there was still one chance for their survival.

The Shadow Orb was only the beginning. With the Spirit Toa at our command, nothing will stand in our way ever again.

The dark being's lips twisted into a dark smile as he again imagined gouging his claws into the traitor's throat, watching his lifeblood drain away. With the raw power that this Toa carried within him, nothing would ever defeat their order.

Turning away forever from the scene of their defeat, the Elemental strode through the forests, toward the small group of [Copies of Corpse](#) he'd left guarding the Spirit Toa while he'd been at Obsidian Peak. Leaving such beings as weak as the Copies guarding such a strategic pawn in their game had been risky, but with all of his elite soldiers and mercenaries guarding the perimeter of the Mountain, there had been no choice.

The thought that the traitor might reach the Copies before he did enraged the Elemental, spurring him on. He knew that while it was unlikely any of the soldiers he'd hired to guard the mountain had survived -- the traitor was far too skilled to allow any of them to escape -- but it was likely that several of the order were also still alive.

Their lives are irrelevant. The Spirit Toa is the only thing that matters now. he thought as one of the Copy guards came into view. The cavern system where he'd hidden the Spirit Toa and stationed the sentries was one of the most secure fortresses in the known universe. He'd used the Shadow Orb's power to render the cave system unnavigable by anyone except himself or the bearer of the Orb.

Striding up to one of the Copies, the Elemental rasped, "We were betrayed. We're leaving now with the Spirit Toa."

The Copy did not argue, but simply stepped aside into the cave. The Elemental followed, his eyes shining with fury against a sinister black backdrop. Before he vanished into the darkness, he took one last, lingering look at the burning mountain in the distance, then with a contemptuous flick of his curved, scythe-like tail, vanished into the cavern.

The caves were dimly lit by several flickering torches, as well as glowing patches of silvery

moss that hung from the walls and ceiling. Pausing before a massive gate made of black, twisted metal, the Elemental raised a single claw and the gate swung open.

"What's happening?" asked a new voice. The Elemental turned his gaze on the Toa standing before him. His armor, golden and black, gleamed in the shadows. The Toa's pale green eyes stared at him, wide-eyed with fear as he stared at the Elemental in awe. "Where are we?"

The Elemental was about to reply, when another being, taller and armored in red and black, seemed to materialize out of the darkness behind the Toa.

"I suggest you give me the Spirit Toa," he ordered calmly, "or things will become unpleasant."

"[Arcturas](#)!" screeched the Elemental in rage. He pointed a single curved talon at the other Elemental. "Surrender! This Toa is mine!"

An insane rage burning in the red Elemental's eyes, Arcturas snarled back, "I'll never let you resurrect your Order, [Skorpix](#)."

"Then die," hissed the Elemental in a low voice as he lunged at Arcturas. The red Elemental drew a long, black weapon of half-molten Obsidian, and as Skorpix raised his twin weapons, summoned his powers over fire and caused the weapon to explode into flames.

Dark energy crackled from the Elemental's hands as his power exploded from his claws toward Arcturas. The fire Elemental raised the flaming sword and blocked both of Skorpix's attacks. Seeing that his attacks were ineffective, Skorpix, dark fire spiraling wildly from his talons, slammed into Arcturas.

Arcturas was faster than he'd expected, and stepped to one side. The Elemental's claws scored thin air, and as he slashed wildly toward Arcturas, the other Elemental brought his weapon down, attempting to slash Skorpix's head from his shoulders.

Quick as lightning, Skorpix slipped away from the weapon and parried Arcturas' next few blows. As Arcturas began to force him onto the defensive once more, Skorpix suddenly brought both his wingblades down on Arcturas' shoulder, drawing blood. As Arcturas, realizing the attack had left Skorpix open to a fatal blow, stabbed outward beneath Skorpix's guard. Skorpix slipped away from the weapon and brought both of his weapons arcing down, toward Arcturas' chest.

Arcturas began to take a step back, then hesitated as he realized Skorpix was backing him up against the wall. While he was debating his next action, Skorpix struck again, ripping open Arcturas' shoulders savagely and clawing at his mask. The ancient Kanohi that the red Elemental was wearing spurred Skorpix on, allowing him to wrestle Arcturas to the ground.

Skorpix could hear the Spirit Toa yelling at them to stop and trying to break free from the grasp of his Copy guardians, but he was unable to comprehend anything but Arcturas as the two Elementals rolled over and over in a horrible, bloody melee. Skorpix scored two solid blows on Arcturas' chestplate and legs, and felt the spray of blood spatter against his mask. Arcturas

managed to dodge Skorpix's next two blows, and as Skorpix was about to tear open his leg with a swipe of his claws, brought his fiery weapon down on Skorpix's back.

Skorpix snarled in pain and rage as blood welled from the wound, a startling crimson against his ebony armor. As he staggered away from Arcturas, the enemy Elemental raised the weapon again, thrusting downward at Skorpix's neck. The Elemental dodged the blow at the last second, and as his weapon met empty air. Skorpix, now standing upright once more, retaliated with a barrage of chain lightning. Three of the bolts connected, voids of jagged shadow devouring the crimson armor and flinging Arcturas against the wall. The fire Elemental seemed to hang suspended for a moment, and then he collapsed on the ground.

Skorpix knew Arcturas still lived. His presence, while weak, was still detectable in the aura field. As Arcturas raised his head weakly to stare at Skorpix, the Elemental fired several bolts of shadow from his outstretched hand.

The bolts struck Arcturas head-on, and as Skorpix began to relax, expecting to hear the satisfying crunch as Arcturas' spine disintegrated. But Arcturas was faster than he'd thought, and the bolts struck his shoulder, obliterating the armor and tearing into the muscle. Arcturas screamed in pain and rose to his feet, flinging several weak bolts of energy at Skorpix. Skorpix deflected them easily, but Arcturas, taking advantage of the distraction, charged him, sword drawn.

Skorpix fired several bolts of darkness at the charging Elemental, but Arcturas easily deflected them both with his sword. As Arcturas bore down on him, eyes wild, Skorpix raised his wingblades and tore the blade from Arcturas' hand.

Arcturas didn't immediately realize what had happened, and as his eyes alighted on his fallen weapon, Skorpix raised both of his weapons and stabbed out at Arcturas' chest. Arcturas whirled around and, staggering backward and throwing his hand into the air, gathered a massive sphere of flame in one hand.

As Skorpix brought the blades down, scoring wounds across Arcturas' already damaged chestplate, Arcturas released the fireball. A roaring torrent of flame washed over Skorpix like a raging tsunami of fire, and the Elemental screamed in rage. Arcturas watched as Skorpix's elemental energies slowly overcame the flames. As Skorpix, disoriented, staggered towards him, Arcturas brought down his fist on one of Skorpix's wingblades, sending it flying across the cavern.

Skorpix was dimly aware of the Spirit Toa being subdued by his Copy guards, but the pain of his burns made rational thought almost impossible. He could feel Arcturas probing his defenses, inviting him to begin battle using their Psionic powers. Skorpix knew that eventually the battle would come down to a test of wills, but for now he needed to weaken Arcturas further.

As Arcturas closed in, raising his weapon for the final blow, Skorpix stared at the ground beneath him. Arcturas was quickly halted as the ground turned into mud, and as he struggled to free himself, Skorpix created a column of earth beneath Arcturas, slamming him into the ceiling. Stunned, Arcturas fell to the ground.

Skorpix gestured to one of his Copy guards, who was standing over the struggling body of the Spirit Toa.

"Finish it." he ordered casually.

As the Copy drew near to Arcturas' broken body, Skorpix saw Arcturas begin to rally. As he was about to warn the Copy, a massive bolt of pure fire struck him dead-on. Shattered pieces of Obsidian were scattered across the stone floor.

"Your arrogance will be your undoing, Skorpix. It always has been," snarled Arcturas as he rose to his feet, eyes burning as brightly as his weapon. Skorpix replied by blasting him with shadowy fire.

Arcturas deflected the blows easily, and then replied with a fire attack of his own. The lance of flame struck his enemy directly, but Skorpix let it sizzle through him with no apparent ill affects. Arcturas blasted him again, this time with a cone of fire, but Skorpix dodged and it struck a second Copy, scouring it from the earth.

Skorpix waved a hand lazily at Arcturas, and several jagged forks of blue lightning tore through the Elemental's body, corroding his armor further. Skorpix could see his eyes were dimming, his concentration slowly breaking.

"It is becoming apparent that this will not be decided by martial skill," continued Arcturas as Skorpix readied his weapon to retaliate. Skorpix could feel his mental probe drive deeper into his skull, and this time accepted his invitation to battle on the mental planes. As Arcturas staggered upright once more, Skorpix's ray of immense mental power invaded Arcturas' consciousness.

Arcturas retaliated quickly; using his probe to drive a burning ray of energy at Skorpix's attacking shadows, driving them back. Skorpix regrouped his mental rays quickly, creating a shadowy circle on the physical world to hold Arcturas back.

Back and forth the battle of wills raged. Skorpix's powers managed to overwhelm several portions of Arcturas' consciousness, and he attempted to snap the Elemental's spine. Arcturas broke the Elemental circle on the physical plane with a bolt of sizzling fire, forcing Skorpix to withdraw.

Sensing weakness, Arcturas poured more energy into the thought matrix between them, forcing his way into Skorpix's mind even as Skorpix regained control over the physical battle. Both Elementals poured more power onto the physical world and strove against the mental barriers until both thought neither of them could continue.

Then Skorpix felt a disturbance on the physical plane as Arcturas abandoned his assault. Skorpix broke down the last of Arcturas' mental barriers, and was about to immobilize the Elemental when Arcturas released the last of his energies onto the physical world.

Skorpix screamed in rage and pain as flames washed over him, breaking his concentration. Arcturas' mental rays invaded his mind, seizing control over Skorpix Elemental powers of Earth and bringing the cavern ceiling down on top of him.

The ground shook as a torrent of darkness enveloped Skorpix, crushing him against the floor. The two remaining Copy guards charged Arcturas, but Arcturas dispatched them both, stabbing one through the chest and slicing the other in half.

Arcturas turned toward the Spirit Toa, who was lying unconscious where the Copies had stood only moments before.

Skorpix and the order erased all of his memories. Thought Arcturas. No one knows anything about this Toa... but the Last Prophecy predicted his arrival.

He traced one badly injured hand over the Spirit Toa's mask, erasing the memories of the damage done today. Once he'd believed that the arrival of this Toa predicted the destruction of everything he'd believed in. Now... he was not sure.

Arcturas' thoughts were suddenly interrupted as an explosion of shadow rocked the cavern. He could feel Skorpix, trying to break free from his earthen prison. He knew it would not hold him much longer.

For a moment, a single moment, Arcturas hesitated over the unconscious form of the Spirit Toa, the Toa that could one day change the fate of the universe.

Then he roused the Toa, and together they slipped into the shadows.

Chapter 1

The sun had set by the time Shardak returned to the stark city of Intax. The moon cast its dispassionate gaze down on the city below, and the tall towers rose like avaricious avengers against the cold north wind. Drawing his dark cloak around him to conserve heat in the cold conditions, he stared at the urban landscape before him. The warring Kodax tribes had already decayed the once-beautiful city beyond all hope of repair. It was, reflected Shardak, like everything else on Xaterex, a remnant of everything the universe had lost.

Beside him, his friend Blast contemplated the grim towers before them and spoke the words they were both thinking.

"It's so...desolate. As though nothing at all lives here."

It was not abandoned, of course. The Kodax soldiers that ruled the city of Intax would never let anyone leave the city alive. But everyone knew that the price anyone paid for wandering the city at night, the unspoken promise in the eyes of the Kodax guardians who currently controlled the city. And it *wasn't* death.

"You know the reason." answered Shardak. "Everyone is distracted now. The Kodax tribal wars never spread to Intax before, and since the most recent battles, everyone's distracted."

Ever since the massive interplanetary war that had devastated Xaterex, every city save Intax had been wiped off the map, and the few remnants of civilization had resurrected a few cities across the warped planet. Since then, the Kodax Fells had escaped annihilation in the civil wars that followed, and Intax became a bastion for all those in the Fells who feared tribal violence.

However, recently, things had begun to go wrong. Tribes of Vorox and Kodax had attacked and harassed patrols outside Intax, and showed no sign of stopping. There were rumors that soon a great army of Kodax would annihilate Intax, as they had many other cities during the last civil war.

"There haven't been any attacks on Intax." Blast protested. Then he added, darkly, "Yet."

"I know." replied Shardak. "But everything seems so...quiet...as though a storm is about to break. And *when* the attacks strike Intax and Xaterex, we must be ready."

Blast nodded grimly. "We could escape all this, you know." he said, almost as an afterthought.

"How?" asked Shardak incredulously. "There's no way out of Intax, except the way we leave at twilight for mask making, carving, and hunting. And even if we could escape, we'd never get Nightshade and Arcturas out without official permission."

"I know." said Blast. "But...there has to be a way to solve the puzzle...a way to escape the city forever. The Kodax, obviously, have a way out."

Shardak briefly wondered why they bothered to discuss all of this. It wouldn't help them earn more widgets to support their friends, Arcturas and Nightshade, and it certainly wouldn't allow them to escape Intax. It was almost as though it had become a cold comfort to their predicament, trying to support many other Glatorian as well as themselves from day to day in the city of Intax.

"We'd better return now." said Shardak, breaking the long silence. It's long past twilight."

The two Glatorian strode across the bridge which spanned the Shadewater River, which flowed through the center of Intax. Grimy and overflowing with decay and scrapped metal, Shardak couldn't see the bottom of the River, despite it being quite shallow.

"Shardak." said Blast. There was a tone in his voice that Shardak had heard only once before, when they had almost been apprehended by Kodax guards at night. "Shardak, something's on fire."

Shardak turned to look at the sky, and startled, noticed that the ebon Glatorian was correct. Smoke was rising from a nearby area, and sparks rose into the night like dying stars.

And it was coming from an area which Shardak knew only too well.

"No!" he screamed, racing down the streets, turning down an alley that was blanketed in smoke and flames.

Arcturas.

Nightshade.

The sparks and smoke were rising higher now. For a moment, Shardak wondered what had happened, if Arcturas and Nightshade had escaped and had been taken to safety. As he ran, gasping for breath as he tore down the streets, he saw that the entire roof of a house nearby their own had collapsed, and that the flames, steadily rising above the buildings, blotting out all sight of any beings. Only Blast's armored hand, wrapped tightly around his, kept him from running out into the blaze.

"Shardak, there are Kodax there. They'll help them out." Shardak tore his hand out of his friend's grasp and raced into the smoke. Gagging and choking, he staggered around and fell to his knees in shock. At the center of the smoke stood a Glatorian he knew very well.

Arcturas. Three strange, obsidian armored beings, each one carrying spears in their seemingly carved hands, surrounded him. If he even moved an inch, he'd be transfixed by all of their spears. No, he realized, they'd throw one at Nightshade as well.

No... he thought. This can't be happening. Not now, not like this...

Arcturas was standing, defiant and unbowed, despite the carnage and flames surrounding him.

"I knew you'd find me one day." he said. "It was only a matter of time."

From the flames came a harsh, cackling laugh. "We anticipated your every move." One of the strange beings stepped forward, his red eyes reminding Shardak of the ring of fire that surrounded them all. "It is a...shame that these poor Glatorian must die with you." He raised his spear.

Arcturas moved so quickly that Shardak couldn't even see his fist until it slammed into the being's face. The being, dropping its spear, staggered backward and collapsed on the ground, unconscious. Two more of them lept out of the flames, felling Arcturas. One's spear caught him in the leg, the other in the side. Shardak noticed blood, stark black against the dark sky and the darkened flames. As Arcturas slipped out of the beings' grasp and staggered to his feet, the other being threw his spear.

"No!" Shardak screamed, flinging out a hand as though he could stop the spear's path midflight. There was nothing he could do as it drew closer and closer to Arcturas.

An explosion of fire startled Shardak, and he stared at Arcturas, staggering toward the edge of the fiery circle, and the molten remains of the obsidian being's spear. Shardak was forced to take a step back as the fire began to separate him from Arcturas and Nightshade.

As the fire rose higher, Shardak thought he heard a scream of rage in the distance, followed by a sharp pain in his side. As though struck by some great force, he was flung back. The flames spun in a whirling, deadly kaleidoscope of red, orange, and yellow, and the stars spun around and around his head as though something had set the planet spinning at light speed. It took him a moment to realize he was lying on the ground, a shattered spear lying next to him. Realizing he hadn't been wounded, he attempted to stand and collapsed again.

Impervious to everything except the flames, he lay there, mesmerized and lost in a world beyond caring for a few moments, before a scream jerked him back into reality. For a moment, his mind was completely blank, then he remembered.

"Arcturas..." he gasped.

"It's me." said Blast.

"Blast..." he asked, his throat dry from the smoke and fire. "Where's Arcturas? And Nightshade."

"I don't know." he said. "We have to get out of here before this entire place collapses."

"I'm not going to leave them!" snarled Shardak. As his vision cleared, he could see the beings in the distance, and he could hear Arcturas' voice, defiant but weakening. The flames, rising hungrily over the carnage of battle obscured everything else.

"Shardak-" began Blast, but the yellow-armored Glatorian had already torn himself free from Blast's grasp and flung himself into the flames. For a moment, he was lost completely in the clash of weapons and flames, then his vision cleared. He could see Arcturas, racing toward him, horror in his eyes three of the obsidian beings lay motionless on the ground behind him, and two more were still fighting.

"Shardak!" He screamed. He was carrying his flaming weapon, the [Blade of Arcturas](#) in one hand, a spear from the obsidian beings in the other. "Run! You shouldn't be here! Get Blast and-

One of the beings stabbed out at him, but Arcturas blocked the blow with a sweep of his flaming blade and speared the being under the chin. Scarlet blood fountained.

"I'm not leaving you!" Shardak screamed, trying to make himself heard over the clash of weapons and the roar of flames. It seemed as though the ground was giving way beneath him. The world was spinning rapidly, causing the Glatorian biting nausea and horrible pain from where the spear hilt had struck him.

Arcturas decapitated the last obsidian being with a sweep of his flaming sword, then raced toward Shardak. "You have to get out of here." he said urgently. "Run! They're coming."

Shardak was about to reply when he noticed that one of the obsidian beings had staggered to his feet. "Arcturas! watch out!" he screamed. Arcturas, racing toward Shardak, stopped and turned

around-just as the spear that the being had thrown entered his body. The momentum carried him backward, and he collapsed limply on the scorched earth.

"Arcturas!" yelled Shardak as he raced toward his father. He was lying, either dead or dying, on the ground. Shardak wondered for a brief moment if he was dead. Shaking him, he searched frantically for a pulse, for any sign he was still alive.

Arcturas' eyes fluttered open. "Shardak..." he gasped. "I am dying."

"No!" said Shardak. "We can get you to Intax...invent some story."

"The wound is fatal, Shardak." Arcturas said gently. "I cannot move, or I will hasten my passing."

"Take this," he said, placing the blade in the hands of Shardak. The Blade of Arcturas. Normally Shardak would've argued, saying he wasn't worthy of the powerful weapon, but now he reached out and touched it. A bolt of energy shot up his arm, and his vision went out of focus. "And remember, while the secret is hidden, sometimes the answer...the answer is in plain sight."

"We can still escape." Shardak said desperately, and for a moment he was oblivious to the soldiers firing at them, to the noises of the night, to everything but Arcturas.

"No. Run!" Arcturas gasped. "You have to live. Then we may still have some hope." His voice softened. "You can survive. Just- don't hate me in the end. When you know the truth."

"What truth? What-" Shardak was cut off by the sound of more of the beings racing toward them. They hadn't spotted Arcturas yet, but if they did, Shardak knew they would both be killed.

"Flee..." Arcturas gasped, his speech horribly slurred. "They'll not follow you, they only want me. Run!" The effort of speaking made the blood flow faster from his horrible wounds. Shardak knew then there was no way to save Arcturas. If he fled with the Toa, the beings would follow them, and kill them both. And Arcturas had said he must live. For what reason, Shardak did not know, but he guessed it went beyond the bond they shared.

"Shardak." said Arcturas, his voice quieter now. "Please leave. Some part of me will always watch over you." his breathing began to grow weaker now. "Go..." he whispered. "Take care of Nightshade for me. Follow...your heart."

Nightshade. his sister's name jerked him out of stupor. Staggering to his feet, blinded by tears and by the all-consuming smoke, he raced away from the dark soldiers.

And as he turned, he saw, for a sliver of an instant, a tall, cloaked being standing over Arcturas' remains. His red eyes stared balefully at Shardak, then the curtain of flame rose once more and the being was hidden from view once more.

Shardak was dimly aware of the Blade of Arcturas' weight in his hands. His head throbbing with pain and his side aching from where the spear's hilt had struck him, Shardak collapsed on the ground, his eyes staring at the flames which blotted out even the night sky itself.

Stars. thought Shardak numbly. The stars are burning.

Then he was gone, lost in a realm beyond life, death, or reality.

Chapter 2

Illiera

Three Years Earlier

The sun set to the west of the sea in a brilliant flare of orange and red, bathing the ocean in an ethereal twilight glow. For a brief moment, the sun flashed down at the faces of the two figures standing near the edge of the shore, the waves lapping at their booted feet.

Momentarily blinded, [Valkyria](#) closed her eyes against the glare, and at that moment, her opponent sprang. His weapon, a curved sickle made of shadowy steel, slipped through the shadows, aiming under her guard. Valkyria whipped to one side as the dagger flashed past her, quickly recovering from the attack.

Her adversary, fellow Ix apprentice and [Illieran](#) Xhallin Naar, tensed as she resumed the offensive, the longer scythe he carried in his other hand blocking her next blows easily. As she blocked his next blow with her dagger, he swung the scythe around, aiming at her neck.

Valkyria winced. While the training weapons had been designed not to permanently injure an apprentice, they could still hurt. As the blade was about to strike, she easily evaded the blow and, as their daggers met midair, reversed her grip on the weapon and twisted it out of his hand.

Watching them, her mentor, [Scrall Vhokyn](#), gave a nod of approval from his position among the group of Ix. Valkyria, knowing such praise did not often come from an Ix warrior, felt his pride for her achievements run through the currents of the aura field itself. Acknowledging the praise with a small touch with her aura abilities, she quickly returned her focus to the duel.

Xhallin, while unable to grab his weapon, was still holding his own with the scythe. His weapon was simply too long for her to easily block without being wounded in retaliation. Once again she was forced back onto the defensive by his sheer strength. However, despite his strength, she was easily holding her own. Speed and grace were her allies, and she used them freely and easily.

Then Xhallin changed tactics. Instead of continuing to force her back so he could retrieve his weapon, he reached out, into the aura field, trying to draw the weapon to him. Valkyria easily blocked his attempts; his aura skills were crude compared to hers. As he tried to draw the weapon to him again, Valkyria attacked.

As her dagger slashed down, aiming for his heart, Xhallin jumped *toward* her, slamming the hilt of his scythe into her leg. As she staggered away from his sweeping scythe, Xhallin grabbed his fallen sickle and slashed at her again. This time, Valkyria only narrowly dodged the attack. As Xhallin brought the scythe down again, she knew she couldn't evade him forever. She needed to regain the offensive.

As Xhallin Naar, an expression of triumph on his features, readied to finish her off, Valkyria leapt into the air. As Xhallin's scythe slashed through empty air, Valkyria, her jumping distance augmented by both auric and elemental strength, landed lightly behind him. It took Xhallin a few moments to realize what she'd done, and as he turned around, an expression of realization on his face, Valkyria smiled at him, dagger at his throat.

Xhallin held her gaze for a few moments, gazing into her emerald green eyes. His expression, unreadable in all but the aura field, revealed nothing but good humor at his defeat. He and Valkyria had been friends since before their apprenticeship, and she knew he felt no shame at being beaten by her.

"You're getting good, Xhallin." she said, breathing only slightly. While their long duel had tired her, she showed no signs of it, as befitted an Ix apprentice.

"The same to you, Val." he answered. "That final move...I'm going to remember that, the next time we spar."

"It's always fooled you." she said playfully. "I-"

She broke off when she sensed her mentor, Scall Vhokyn, approaching them. He was wearing black armor, a stark contrast to Valkyria's green-brown scouting garb. While his face betrayed nothing, he let Valkyria know how proud he was for her victory.

"You did well. Both of you." said Scall. "However, Apprentice Naar, you need to work on being less of an easy target. You're slower than Apprentice Rhai, but that's no reason for her to defeat you with her speed every time."

Scall Vhokyn turned to Valkyria. "Apprentice Rhai. You did well defeating Apprentice Naar. You recovered well from his attack, and your skills in the aura field are nearly unmatched, even among the senior apprentices. As such, you will be joining our next mission."

Valkyria was able to keep her surprise under control, but beside her a jolt of shock ran through the aura field from Xhallin. Scall gave her a slight touch in the aura field that confirmed he approved of her emotional control.

"What mission?" asked Xhallin, his voice calculated and measured. Carefully controlled.

Scall gestured one hand toward Valkyria. "Apprentice Rhai. Tell us the story of Illiera." He turned to the other Ix, and one gave a nod of approval.

This time, Valkyria could not keep her shock from flashing through the aura field. The story of Illiera? The cornerstone of their existence here? While puzzled, she began the tale that had been passed down through many generations of Illierans.

"It began during the height of the Xaterex Civil War, more then one hundred years ago." Valkyria felt her throat go dry, but continued. "During the siege of the rebel Toa's fortress known as the Circle. Cut off, the defenders could do nothing as our plague slew the defenders from within and our armies from outside."

Valkyria felt the eyes of every single Ix present on her as she continued. "But the height of our triumph was also the beginning of the Exile. For several elementals were still in rebellion, and worked one of their deadly powers-- they sealed off Illiera, the most beautiful fortress of the Ix, from the rest of the core universe.

"Eventually, our original Ix bloodlines began to wane, but we adapted, becoming corporeal beings that could exist on the physical plane as well, like our slaves, the [Kodax](#). And we have waited, for the past seventy years, for our vengeance, when we can return and rejoin our Ix brethren as masters of the universe."

There. She'd finished. The Ix did not say a word, even Scrall Vhokyn did not display a sliver of emotion at all.

Then, finally, the one of the Ix spoke. His voice, cold and raspy, was common of all the purest Ix bloodlines. Valkyria's and Scrall's were lighter, more musical, as was common of half-Illierans.

"That is story as every apprentice knows it." he finished. "But we warriors know more. Slowly, the bonds between Illiera and that of the Core Universe began to dissolve, eventually disappearing completely in several places. Recently, we have learned this from you, Apprentice Rhai."

"Me?" Valkyria asked, confused.

"Your first mission, as an apprentice, was to try to use the aura field. When you did, we sensed your aura reaching through Illiera's barriers-- and into the Core Universe. We quickly discovered that this was no extraordinary event, the boundaries between the worlds are unraveling."

Scrall Vhokyn walked toward Valkyria, and placed his hand on her shoulder. "For the past six months we have been perfecting our raiding tactics. When we have amassed enough power, influence, and fear, we will rejoin, for the first time in centuries, the Ix Empire."

Chapter 3

"Shardak."

The voice seemed to echo all around him, yet somehow sound distant at the same time.

"Shardak." The voice had spoken again, and this time, Shardak thought he recognized it.

Then, as he opened his eyes to pitch darkness, he remembered. The weight of Arcturas' horrible death at the hands of the strange soldiers had struck him to his core, and he had staggered away from the flames, looking for-

"Blast?" he asked. His voice sounded cracked.

"I've found the obsidian beings' tracks." came the reply. Shardak could see a light shining in the distance, and as it came closer, he saw his friend's helmeted face appear in the shadows, his green eyes shining in the darkness.

"Where am I?" he asked. His voice still sounded unfamiliar to him, as though the smoke had burned more than his armored body.

"I was standing near the edge of the inferno when you staggered out of the fire. You weren't burned badly, however, and I managed to guide you back to the city's center. You're in one of [Kor's](#) hideouts."

Kor, an enigmatic Glatorian who had befriended Blast and Shardak, lived in fierce competition with the brutal Intax gangs and always had a hideout on the outskirts of the city. He always allowed Shardak and Blast to use them, if necessary.

"Did you see what happened to Nightshade and Arcturas?" asked Shardak.

"I saw Arcturas fall after he was struck by a spear." replied the ebon Glatorian. "But I never saw Nightshade fall, or escape. However, I've found the obsidian being's tracks, as well as other, more slender footprints. Would those be Nightshade's?"

Shardak stood up slowly, on unsteady feet. He still felt slightly dizzy, and the entire situation had taken on a sort of unreality, as though all that had happened was only a nightmare. Still, he knew how brutal, how deadly, and how true Arcturas' death had been on some level of consciousness.

"Yes!" he said in surprise as he examined the tracks. "They're Nightshade's. She's obviously been taken by the obsidian warriors." he said as he examined the tracks of two other beings, wider and larger.

"They're heading west, toward the Market District." said Blast. "It's highly likely they dwell beyond that though, on the outskirts."

Shardak wondered exactly who the assassins had been working for. Were they working for one of the gangs? The Kodax? The *Empire*? And why had Arcturas behaved as though he had *met them before*? The questions were endless.

"If they have Nightshade, I'm going after them." said Shardak. He looked around, startled to see that both his own tools and the Blade of Arcturas were missing. "What-" he began, but Blast cut

him off, drawing the Blade of Arcturas. Without the fiery blade ignited, it appeared to be a normal weapon made of golden metal.

"I have your own weapons." he answered. "And you were carrying the Blade of Arcturas when you staggered out of the flames. I've gathered enough provisions for a short journey-"

"I can't ask you to come with me." interjected Shardak. "You've done enough as is, rescuing me from the fire and finding the being's tracks. This is my friend I have to save, and you saw what those beings did to Arcturas. I don't want to be responsible for your death."

Blast smiled. "Shardak, I'm your friend, and Nightshade's, too. If there's even a chance she and Arcturas survived and have been captured by these beings, whoever they serve, I'll come with you."

"But-"

"Disunity is what brought the Skrall down." Blast reminded him. "And only through unity were the Toa able to defeat the [Makuta of Metru Nui](#) in the [City of Legends](#)."

The tales of Metru Nui, a series of ancient legends that had been passed down orally by the Matoran for many years. The legends were also told by Glatorian and Agori villagers in Intax. They were set in an ancient universe where the Matoran supposedly originated in, as well as a world known as Bara Magna. While there was no planet called Bara Magna in the Solis Magna System, and the Matoran's universe had never been proven to exist, many Matoran and Agori believed the ancient stories were true.

However, the Kodax, as well as the Empire outside, were brutal in punishing those who believed or even told such stories, and many of the village elders had been publicly executed for "spreading lies". The executions had done nothing to stop the Matoran's beliefs, but since the Eternal Game, when the entire city was waiting for the Empire's reaction to Fairon's victory, everyone had stayed silent, fearing retribution.

"And besides." said Blast, startling Shardak out of his dark thoughts. "Arcturas fought alone. We'll fight together."

His words, far from reassuring Shardak, made him remember his helplessness as he tried desperately to save Arcturas from the attackers. Still, he conceded, Blast had a point. If they fought together, they might stand a chance against the beings.

"I have no idea how powerful these beings might be, or whom they serve." said Shardak.

"They can't leave Intax." said Blast. "Unless they're working for the Kodax. And even if they are, they couldn't have gone far. It's only been twelve hours since..." his voice trailed off into silence.

Shardak nodded. "You can come, then. United, we may stand a chance against these murderers."

They're probably working for some gang in the outskirts. Shardak thought. Their tracks confirm they're heading in that direction.

Then he had an uneasy thought. *But why haven't they hidden their tracks?* Surely they didn't want to be discovered by Intax's authorities.

"We have to go now, then." said Blast. "They may eventually discover that several beings witnessed the attack, and cover their trail."

Shardak grabbed his cloak from a nearby table, and drew the Blade of Arcturas. Blast raised his scythe, an ancient weapon he'd found discarded outside Intax while the two Toa were foraging and hunting. Even outside Intax, nothing was safe from the Empire's influence, as the entire wilderness was surrounded by outposts heavily guarded by Kodax warriors.

They couldn't have gone far. The city's too heavily guarded. Exiting the rundown building and drawing their dark cloaks around them to conceal their weapons, the two Glatorian strode onto the desolate Intax streets.

Shardak noticed very few beings had emerged from the buildings yet, and only saw two Kodax, wearing the blue cloaks unique to Intax's police guard. One gave Shardak a long stare, and Shardak began to worry that the Kodax would speak to him. The guard only spoke to citizens when about to arrest them. Then, just as quickly, his features relaxed and he vanished around a block.

"Even more abandoned than last night." observed Blast, and Shardak remembered Blast's comment as they'd returned from the unsuccessful hunting expedition that had led to the death of Arcturas. Even thinking about what had happened before the attack was painful.

Arcturas can't be saved now. Try to save Nightshade, who's probably expecting us to follow her. He reminded himself.

Turning down another street, Shardak noticed that it, too, seemed abandoned. Surprised, he looked around, expecting to see some signs of life, any indication that the outskirts were not abandoned. It seemed that the entire section of the city had been suddenly deserted.

Then he realized why.

"Oh, Mata Nui." Blast gasped.

Lying before them were the bodies of eight slain beings. Two bore one of the gang's insignias, the rest seemed to be civilians or upper-class merchants. Their bodies were tangled and drenched in torn armor and blood. Several of them were missing limbs, and one's head had been hacked off completely.

"What could have done that...to a living creature?" asked Shardak.

Blast merely shook his head as though he had no answers. For another moment, Shardak contemplated the scene of destruction with horror in his eyes.

"Who did this?" Blast wondered aloud, this time more forcefully. "Was it the obsidian creatures?"

Shardak nodded. "These are spear wounds. They were carrying stabbing spears." he said, pointing to the corpse of a slain Glatorian. "But some were injured by another type of weapon, perhaps a longsword." Years of watching the Kodax execute suspected rebels had given him a greater understanding of weapons. Arcturas had always told Nightshade and him that they should carry weapons as well, in case they were attacked, and taught them several basic combat moves.

"It makes you wonder what they did to them."

"Probably only got in their way." said Shardak. "Like Arcturas."

"The tracks." said Blast, trying to steer the subject away from the scene of battle before them. "They're here as well, heading off into the distance. Nightshade's still with them."

Shardak looked at the being's footprints, and noticed they continued on, past the bodies of the slain beings.

"So they were here. No wonder everyone's avoiding the Market District and the outskirts." he said.

Turning away from the gruesome scene before them, the two Glatorian drew their weapons, alert for danger now.

"I wonder if they stopped to rest during their journey." mused Blast.

"Probably not." answered Shardak. "We don't know if they're even alive. They seemed almost fully mechanical."

"The tracks stop here." said Blast. There seemed to be a note of surprise in his voice. "At this rundown building."

They were standing before what had once been a large building, its architecture dating back to the city-state era, before Intax came under the control of the Empire. Once again, it struck Shardak how little he truly knew about the Empire, and if it even existed beyond Intax. He'd never been beyond the city, and as far as he knew, no one but the Kodax had either.

"They've gone inside, then." said Shardak, wondering why. There had been far too many beings to conceal in a single building, no matter how large. They'd run themselves into a cul-de-sac.

"Let's go." said Shardak.

"Shardak!" yelled Blast. "You don't know anything about these beings. This could be a-"

But Shardak had already pushed open the door and vanished inside. The building was empty, the floor and walls covered in dust. There were no lights, and Shardak wondered briefly if he could use the Blade of Arcturas to provide illumination, as Arcturas had done during the battle. However, as he drew the weapon, he realized there was no way to turn the blade's power on or off.

How did Arcturas ignite the weapon? Shardak wondered, just as Blast stepped into the building cautiously, scythe drawn. Glatorian didn't control any elemental powers. Touching his own helmet, ancient and cracked, he wondered where Arcturas had gotten it. It didn't resemble any of the helmets he'd ever seen, not even Blast's.

"They've been here. I can tell even though most of their foot" said Blast, pointing to several tracks on the floor. "And Nightshade."

So we haven't lost their trail. said Shardak, relieved. He'd begun to worry that their tracks had become confused or lost, as Intax was a busy city and the thousands of footprints that were scattered almost erratically across the city made it nearly impossible to follow any being's trail.

Following the tracks down a flight of stairs, Shardak could see that here the beings had tried to hide their tracks and almost succeeded. However, one of Nightshade's tracks confirmed this was the correct path. The two Glatorian paused as they realized the tracks had disappeared.

"Where did they go?" wondered Blast aloud. "Beings don't simply vanish into thin air."

Looking down, Shardak noticed several cracks in the floor, as well as three dark metal shapes.

No, not just metal shapes, he realized. *Hinges.* Reaching down, searching for the lever he knew must be there, he grabbed onto something metal and pulled. Slowly, the trapdoor swung open without any noise.

"What!" exclaimed Blast, then lowering his voice, said, "Where are these beings going? Haven't the Kodax realized there's a dangerous building with a route to an underground tunnel in a rundown fortress?"

"I don't know." said Shardak. "But they've definitely been here, I can see their trail. Most of it's vanished now, but this is, indeed, the tunnel they've disappeared into."

"You're absolutely sure that we didn't confuse their tracks and that this isn't a secret Kodax outpost?" asked Blast.

"I'm sure." answered the yellow Glatorian. "You've confirmed it as well, and your skills are better than mine."

"That's what I was afraid of." muttered Blast.

"We have to find them. They still have Nightshade with them, and we're on their trail. I think we'll be able to make it!" said Shardak, excitement palpable now in his voice. "We may actually catch them!"

The two Toa descended down the stairs, watching as the light began to vanish as the trapdoor slammed shut.

"Blast." said Shardak, suddenly frightened as the darkness closed in around them. "Did we bring any torches?"

"You can't see?" said Blast, surprised. "It's not dark at all."

"Not dark? It's darker then midnight!" said Shardak incredulously.

"Really?" said Blast, sounding puzzled. "It's definitely not dark at all. It's far brighter then nighttime, it seems almost-"

He broke off as Shardak stared at his helmet. It was glowing softly, illuminating the pathway before him. As he watched, the helmet began to brighten, and gleam with ethereal blue light. Shardak looked at him strangely.

"I didn't know your helmet could do that." he said. "The tunnel's clear." he added as an afterthought, his armored hand pointing down toward the tunnel snaking off in the distance.

"I didn't, either. It seems to have been activated on it's own." he shook his head. "Odd."

"We have to continue, then." said Shardak, pushing aside thoughts of Blast's strange new powers away for a moment. All of his thoughts were focused on the rescue of Nightshade. And while there was little hope, he still retained a small hope that perhaps somehow the obsidian beings had saved Arcturas and taken him captive as well. Then there would still be a chance to rescue him.

In his heart, he knew Arcturas was dead, however. No being could have survived a spear wound that fatal for long. If the beings had kept up such a brisk pace and they had come down here, they had obviously not slowed down. Nightshade could probably keep up with them, Shardak reasoned. She was in excellent physical condition.

Guided by Blast's strange new power, the two Glatorian descended down a flight of seemingly naturally occurring stairs. Continuing down the passageway, Shardak noticed that the passageway was beginning to slope downward, slowly getting steeper. Despite the faint illumination, Shardak found this place dark and oppressive. Slowly the two Glatorian continued down a steep precipice, landing on their feet before a massive chimneylike column of earth. A large hole, as well as many smaller holes, were punched into the apparently hollow structure.

"It's a naturally occurring phenomenon." said Blast. "Nothing like this could have been made by anyone from the surface."

"We're not on the surface anymore." said Shardak. "We still don't know what these beings are capable of." For the first time since they'd set out, Shardak felt a twinge of unease. Who knew how far this strange hollow structure descended. For a moment, he thought about returning to the surface.

It'd take at least four hours. More, since we're going up hill. We're far lower than any basement in Intax, maybe 400 bio. We've come too far down. Either we find the beings, or lose their trail.

"How are we supposed to enter that?" asked Blast. "Even if we can enter through the large holes punched through this thing, we'll certainly be forced to descend at least ten feet."

Where are we? wondered Shardak, not for the first time tonight. "I'm going to take a look inside this thing." he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "There may be a way we can get down this."

Approaching the earth column cautiously, afraid, irrationally that something might attack him if he turned his back on the tunnel, Shardak stepped into the torn entrance and gasped as he looked down.

He was standing at the very edge of a massive cliff. The pit below seemed to spiral away into inky blackness. Faint, flickering illumination glowed from several clumps of moss that hung like silvery thread from the overhangs.

Light suddenly flooded his vision as Blast stepped next to him, his helmet illuminating the yawning chasm below. While steep, it was not smooth, and Shardak believed that they could climb down the cliff with some difficulty.

"I think we can climb down this for a few feet." said Blast. "But beyond that, I'm not sure."

As he spoke, the light from his helmet fell upon a white, dirty rope tied to a stalagmite. Shardak bent down on his knees, and grabbing the rope, saw it cascaded far into blackness.

"There's our entrance!" Shardak exulted, realizing that against the odds he was getting closer and closer to his goal. He turned to Blast, expecting to see his own enthusiasm reflected on his friend's face, but to his surprise Blast was frowning.

"I'm not sure if this is a good idea, Shardak." said Blast, his face grim now. "We don't know how deep this crevice is, and if it does end about ten feet down, the beings could still be thousands of miles away. We don't know how fast they travel, or what kind of beings live in this underworld."

"We're not too far from Intax." said Shardak.

"Not too far? We've been walking virtually nonstop for five hours!" said Blast. "This could be fatal."

"What are you suggesting?" said Shardak, a touch of despair coming into his voice. "If I leave Nightshade in the captivity of these horrific beings forever, never knowing what's happened to her or where she is, I'll never be able to think of either Arcturas or Nightshade again without feeling guilty. I made a promise, Blast. I promised Arcturas I'd take care of Nightshade. And if I don't honor that promise, I'll-" he broke off, unable to continue.

"It just seems too convenient somehow." said Blast, but the tension had gone out of his voice. "It's unlikely that anyone could have followed them this far, but every good assassin would leave no trace like a rope hanging down a chasm. Anyone could follow that."

"It could be someone else left it." argued Shardak.

"Impossible." said Blast. "It's obvious they've passed through here recently, and this rope is fresh, though dirty. It's still strong."

Shardak knew that Blast was right. It had obviously been left by the obsidian beings, and this was their trail. Still, it also seemed unlikely that the assassins, who had been able to ambush both Arcturas and Nightshade, would have left such an obvious trail. He pushed the thought out of his mind. So close to their goal, it didn't matter now why the beings had left the rope. They'd regret it.

"We are in agreement, then." said Shardak finally. "We must continue. I know you want to return to Intax. But you live alone. These Glatorian were my friends as well, and I owe it to Arcturas to find Nightshade."

Blast nodded in agreement, but Shardak could see he was not entirely satisfied.

"I'll go first." said Shardak. "You follow." Blast nodded again, and Shardak began the slow descent.

At first, he was scared the rope would snap immediately. But as he lowered himself down the jagged cliffs covered in the shining silver moss and a cold iron metal, he began to relax. Slowly, minutes dragged by, but the chasm showed no signs of leveling out. It simply continued, deeper and deeper into the earth.

After around thirty minutes of climbing, Blast spoke, his voice echoing eerily around the abyss from somewhere above Shardak.

"I need to rest, Shardak. Let's take a short break here. We have plenty of rations."

Shardak wanted to argue, say they must continue onward, but every drop of vitality had been sucked from his body. He wanted to lie down and rest. His mind rebelled, but eventually he said, "We'll stop here."

The two Glatorian landed lightly on the edge of an overhang, leaving the rope hanging in the chasm. Shardak could tell the void went on for many more miles, and the rope ended very soon below them. A second rope hung snared on another outcropping below.

As Shardak began to relax for the first time since the death of Arcturas, he heard Blast scream.

"Shardak! Watch out!"

Shardak saw Blast's scythe flash once, and saw a large white creature slam into his friend, hauling him toward the edge of the chasm.

Then, looking up, he saw massive, milky white eyes stare at him for a few moments before the talons descended.

Chapter 4

The massive canyon lay between two mountains, hundreds of torches from the two mountains above shed light down into the gorge, where the Ix commander known as the Fury stood, following his subordinates toward the cliffs above. The baleful light illuminated his ebon armor, and his gleaming red eyes. He stepped forward, toward the cliffs, ready to make his report to his superior.

Suddenly, another being materialized beside the Fury, his armor also black. He was far taller than the Ix commander, and his eyes were cold and orange, all at once brighter and colder than the fires themselves. Despite the darkness, the Fury recognized him immediately: Skorpix, one of the most powerful Elementals in the Empire's hierarchy.

"You will follow me," he ordered, his voice deep and commanding. "There has been a change in plans. The Hooded One has heard of your report, and wishes to speak with you immediately."

The Fury nodded, but inwardly he was reeling in shock. The ruler of the Empire wished to speak with him? Then, he realized, he shouldn't be surprised, his mission had been one of utmost importance.

Following Skorpix, his face impassive but his mind in turmoil, the Fury ascended the natural stairs built into the cliff, passing by the large legions of Ix warriors. While there were many other places that the Empire ruled that were far more splendid and regal than the twin Obsidian Cliffs, these were the base of the Empire's power, where the massive armies of the Ix hatched their most secret plans.

The Fury's thoughts were cut short as he approached the top of the cliff, where an elite vanguard of the most powerful members of the Ix Order stood, weapons at the ready. Two other beings stood guard as well, two green armored beings, [one](#) heavily armored, [the other](#) tall and crooked, as though her body had been shattered and then remade.

But the Fury only had eyes for the being standing before the seat atop the raised dais. The seat was almost like a throne, from which two large scythelike blades, bent outward, stood on either side. The being was tall and thin, and wore a hooded cloak and carried a long, curved scythe. Lying on the throne was an ornate trident that gleamed with a cold red light all at once darker and brighter than the flames.

"Approach me." the Hooded One's voice was a horrible, scratchy rasp, that sounded like nails scraping across a stone. Head lowered, the Fury walked silently toward the throne, bowing as he reached the dais. "What news do you bring to us?"

"We have eliminated Arcturas, and recovered our spy." reported the Fury. "The fires began to spread, but were soon put out. No one else will realize he has been killed."

"This I know." said the Hooded One. "What of the yellow-armored Toa with him? Did you kill him as well?"

"No, he lives. His friend managed to escape while I killed the traitor Arcturas."

"Did you think he was insignificant? Why did you not bring him before me?"

"We tried...but in the chaos, he managed to escape. I wished to dispatch a group of warriors to recover him, but the majority of my Copies were eliminated."

"Then the time for subtlety has passed." rasped the Hooded One. "Windeus, bring your command to scour the countryside of Intax...and bring this Toa to me...alive. He is key to our plans, and must not be killed."

"It shall be done." Windeus said, bowing once.

"Continue your mission to eliminate the rebellion outside of the Circle." said the Hooded One. "Though soon, it will no longer matter. With the Spirit Toa in the hands of our Empire, the rebels shall fall...and soon, we will rise above the lower races of the world and take our place as the rightful masters of the multiverse."

Instantly flooded with a surge of energy, Shardak lept away from the being's talons just as they were about to drag him over the cliff. For a moment, the massive being looked confused, then it turned its milky eyes on the Glatorian and readied to strike again.

Shardak stared at the creature in shock. The being's entire body was covered in overlapping, armorlike scales which glowed with a faint blue light, and its claws ended in massive, curved talons. Its eyes seemed to be blind, white with no irises or pupils, and its mouth opened to reveal jagged rows of teeth.

It was a being from a nightmare.

The second being was wrestling with Blast near the edge of the cliff. Shardak could see blood, black in the shadowy illumination of Blast's Ruru and the beings' scales, but he couldn't tell whether it was the creature's blood or Blast's.

As he was watching his friend, he realized in a sudden instant that he'd turned his back on the first being. The flying creature slammed into him, trying to grab hold on his helmet but failing. As it reached out again, Shardak raised the Blade of Arcturas, cutting into the being's armor. Before he could deal any significant damage, however, the being slipped away and over the edge of the cliff, screeching once and then dive bombing him again.

This time Shardak was ready. As the being bore down on him, he thrust outward with his weapon. The being, to his surprise, twisted itself around midair and slammed into the blade's side, knocking it out of its grasp and sending it spiraling to the floor. The being's talons grabbed at his head again, trying to rake it off. Shardak fell to his knees, reaching out to grab the Blade.

The being, confused by Shardak's narrow escape, reoriented itself and struck Shardak again just as he grabbed and lifted the Blade of Arcturas. Shardak felt the weapon cut through the being's leg, then through bone. With a screech, the being tore itself away from Shardak, but the wounded talon impeded its escape. As it flew backward, Shardak lunged forward and stabbed it in the side. Startled, he noticed the being's blood was a dark blue-green color. He noticed the being spiral away from him, and struck it two more times with the weapon before it retreated beyond the edge of the overhang.

Turning toward Blast, he saw the ebony Glatorian was still alive, but bleeding and fighting a losing battle as the being wrestled him to the ground once again.

Screaming his friend's name, Shardak charged toward them, only to be flung backwards. Completely disoriented, he saw a flash of talons and was flung to the ground while all the while stabbing blindly at his assailant. The creature's blood splattered against his chestplate and he watched as the being, wounded badly, collapsed over the edge of the cliff and into darkness.

Shardak raced toward Blast, and saw the Glatorian struggling desperately against the second being's onslaughts. Shardak saw Blast's scythe slash over and over again into the being's body, but his attacks were beginning to weaken. As Shardak was about to charge the being in a final attempt to save his friend, the being's talons descended for the final blow.

Shardak saw Blast's scythe stab upward twice, snapping one wing. The being collapsed on the ground, writhing in pain, as Blast struck the being a blow to the chest, then to the other wing. As the creature tried to reorient itself, Blast lunged forward and slashed open the being's throat. Wings snapped, the dying creature collapsed over the edge of the cliff.

Shardak could hear the surviving being's screech from below, and he rushed over to Blast, who was covered in both the being's blood and his own.

"Quick! Climb down the rope!" said Shardak urgently. Blast, his eyes unfocused, watched as Shardak began his descent, then followed.

"One of them is still alive!" yelled Shardak, and Blast's head turned just as the creature was about to strike. Instantly galvanized into action, the Glatorian began his descent. The glowing creature turned disinterestedly from Blast and, seeing Shardak, flew at the Glatorian.

Shardak knew that if the being struck him, the rope would snap and Blast would be killed. He had only a moment to think, *Mata Nui, this is insane*, before leaping off the rope and into the darkness. As he'd gambled, the second overhang was directly below him,. As the being rushed to grab him in his talons, Shardak slashed out wildly above him, and felt the Blade tear through armor, then bone. He saw one of the being's claws disappear into the void just as the second claw wrapped around his leg.

Half falling now, Shardak twisted around midair, grabbing the being's armored neck with one hand. The being was too strong for him, however, and its wings were too weak to support them both. Shardak could see his death rushing up to meet him and felt mounting dread as the being nearly wrestled out of his grasp.

Then time seemed to slow. Shardak could suddenly *feel* the being, its predatory instinct, its bloodthirsty nature. He could see a glowing field of energy surrounding the being, and felt its basic, Rahi-like emotions. He suddenly knew where the being would strike next.

As the creature attempted to tear itself free from Shardak's grasp, Shardak, having known somehow exactly what the being would attempt, wrestled the being to the ground. As they slammed into the ground, Shardak now on top of the being, he could feel the creature's wings snap.

With a screech of sheer rage and pain seemed to be torn from the depths of the abyss itself, the massive creature writhed out of Shardak's grasp, trying to raise its shattered body into the air. It began to rise for a moment, then collapsed over the edge of the cliff with a final screech.

What- Shardak thought, wondering what had happened.

"Is it dead?" Blast asked shakily.

"No." said Shardak. "But it won't be back here in a hurry."

Looking down, Shardak noticed that the cliff was beginning to level out, beginning a downward slope that snaked deeper into the darkness. "It may level out soon." Shardak pointed out. He could see the fight with the winged creatures had weakened Blast, he was injured in the shoulder and the leg, where the being's talons had struck him.

Blast winced as he saw Shardak's concern. "I'll be fine." he said. "Hopefully they're hidden around here somewhere."

Shardak hadn't had time to remember their goal during the deadly struggle, but now he realized just how much danger they were in. Both of them were wounded, and they were many, many below Intax. He was about to reply when he heard a screech from somewhere within the void.

"Shardak!" yelled Blast. "The-" He was abruptly cut off as a *third* winged creature grabbed Blast by the arm and dragged him down the slope. Shardak slashed downward at the creature, and felt the Blade of Arcturas tear through the creature's wing. Momentarily distracted, the creature released his grip on Blast, and Shardak lept over the ledge and raced down the gradually descending slope, worried Blast would fall over the edge and continue falling through the void.

Shardak heard Blast fall against the slope, and raced over to his friend. Before he could speak, Blast rose to his feet slowly.

"I'm alright," he said, looking around. Shardak saw they were standing on a massive overhang that nearly spanned the entire chasm. Behind them, a tunnel snaked off into the darkness. All around them, patches of the silvery moss grew from several columns identical to the one they'd traveled down.

"I can't find any of their tracks," Shardak reported. "But I think the obsidian beings came this way."

"They've-" Blast said, then broke off. Shardak saw the winged beast he'd injured was, amazingly, trying to drag itself upright. As it began to rise into the air awkwardly, its blood still seeping from its injured wing, Shardak tensed, prepared to fight.

With a screech, the being flung itself at the two Glatorian. Shardak readied the Blade of Arcturas, Blast drew his scythe.

Then, suddenly, there was a flash of dark metal, and the being fell backward, collapsing limply on the ground. Shardak and Blast raced over, wondering what had happened. He knelt down next to the being, and saw a thin, curved dagger had imbedded itself in his neck. The being's milky eyes glazed over, blood still trickling from its torn throat.

It took Shardak one moment to make the obvious conclusion. "Who--"

A cold voice silenced him abruptly. Shardak turned, and gasped.

Standing in the mouth of the tunnel were two of the obsidian beings. They both carried spears, pointed at Shardak and Blast. The being who had thrown the spear was a four-legged, two-armed being with armor of shadowy sapphire. His eyes were a horrible, hungry orange that stared out from a slitted black mask. He was carrying two more daggers, aimed directly at the two Glatorian.

The sapphire-armored being gave a thin, cold laugh. "You are now prisoners of the [Void Circle](#). Surrender immediately, or we will kill both of you."

Chapter 5

Shardak felt cold and impassive as he strode down the tunnel followed by Blast and their captors.

At first his mind had been awash with turmoil and doubt. He'd watched as the sapphire being, whom the obsidian beings referred to as [Banrax](#), escorted Blast and him into the darkened tunnel. He could see there were four more of the obsidian beings, and two were carrying lanterns that gleamed with acid green light, illuminating the tunnel ahead.

Slowly, they'd begun to walk, he and two of the obsidian beings leading, with Banrax guarding Blast. Both of the beings were carrying lanterns in one hand, spears in the other. Two of the obsidian beings had been sent ahead, and there were four still with them. Escape was impossible.

His mind had been filled with hundreds of questions. *Where is Nightshade? Who or what is the Void Circle? And what do they want?*

Worry and fear made any thought beyond that impossible. He'd wanted to tell Blast how sorry he was, how he didn't know what they were getting into when they set off in pursuit of the obsidian beings. But as they walked down what seemed to be an endless slope descending deeper into the earth, Shardak began to feel less and less worried, and his thoughts began to diminish, then cease altogether.

Weariness set in slowly, and he began to slow, only the threat of the obsidian beings' spears keeping him half awake. Only the constant, throbbing pain in his side, where the being's spear had struck him the day before, and in his shoulder, where the winged creatures had torn through his armor.

"We are here." announced Banrax.

"What?" asked Blast and Shardak at the same time. All of the beings had halted, but Blast saw nothing remarkable about the stretch of tunnel they currently occupied.

Then Banrax raised his hand, pointing it at the wall. There was a single flash of white light, then he felt something pulling him toward the wall. Winds whipped around him, cold and forbidding. Even though they nearly drowned out sound completely, he was dimly aware of Blast screaming in surprise and shock. He tried to resist, but the inexorable pull on his body and mind dragged him back.

"Do not fight the power." advised Banrax, his voice nearly drowned out by the winds, which were growing stronger. "It will make the transfer less painful."

"Transfer?" Shardak tried to call back, but the winds tore the breath from his mouth before he could speak. Then he saw that the obsidian being's bodies were growing lighter, a strangely glowing field of energy surrounding them. Then, with a flash of light, the heavy winds seemed to tear them apart, the light that surrounded their bodies disintegrating quickly.

Shardak only had time to open his mouth to tell Blast how sorry he was that it would end like this, and barely had time to wonder if they were dying before they vanished in a flash of light. Shardak was conscious only of endless spinning into an abyss far deeper than the one they'd navigated earlier.

With no corporeal body, Shardak was unable to see or sense anything, beyond distinct areas of darkness and light. At first, the void was full of only shadow, but slowly it became filled with several glowing lights in the endless abyss.

First, he sensed an obsidian being. He reached out with his consciousness, and realized that he could almost "see" a faint nimbus of crackling dark energy in the void of shadows. Other colors and pinpoints of light emanated from the void as well.

He soon sensed several more like the first -- the other obsidian beings he realized with a start-- and he began to reach out further into them. He quickly realized that they were alive, but their consciousness was weak, and their senses dull. He felt no response to his probing and withdrew.

Reaching out further into the Void, he sensed Blast. The ebony Glatorian was harder to read than the obsidian beings. While he hadn't felt any emotions or ideas coming from the obsidian beings, he realized the energy he sensed coming from Blast was not just moral light and shadow. They were *ideas* and *emotions*. He could feel some type of power within Blast, but it was small and, like everything else he'd sensed within the Glatorian, unreadable. He didn't feel Blast react at all to his presence within the aura that held him intact within the void, and continued to probe, trying to puzzle out Blast's emotions.

He quickly discovered the overwhelming emotion within Blast was fear. Fear of death, fear of annihilation, fear that they would never return to Intax. Once he'd broken through the miasma of terror, he sensed other, fainter emotions. It was impossible to describe how he knew they were there. They were visible in a way something bright, vibrant, or overwhelmingly dark was, as though each consciousness in the void radiated pure energy.

Out of curiosity, he attempted to probe the Blade of Arcturas with his strange sense. He felt fire within it, but it was weak, not activated. Disappointed, he began to probe Blast again and gasped.

This time he realized he could sense the scythe Blast had found, and recoiled in shock. The raw, throbbing power within the scythe was impossible to fathom, so great it tore his own sense into writhing tendrils of matter. He was forced to withdraw slightly or risk his own presence in the Void's destruction. He didn't know whether that would kill him or not, and he hoped to never find out.

Then, suddenly, he felt another presence touch his, the aura mingling with his own, confirming the owner. *Banrax!* he thought in shock, and began to read their captor's emotions. Surprisingly, he realized the overwhelming emotion was...*recognition*. Quickly, Banrax withdrew slightly, seeming to realize what he was probing.

The shock emanating from Banrax was so great and unprepared that Shardak thought for a minute the bolt of searing energy would tear his own presence apart. Just when he thought the pain would be too much to bear, Banrax withdrew, and Shardak realized that the vibrant colors that surrounded him were vanishing.

Slowly, vision returned. His eyes were blurry, and his body felt sluggish, as though it was just awakening. Every drop of vitality had been stolen from him in the transfer, and the shock that suddenly the corporeal world had returned was so sudden he almost fell over. When his vision was completely restored he noticed Blast lying on the ground. As he was about to race to his friend's side, Banrax suddenly seemed to sense what he was thinking and moved to intercept him.

"He is alive. Spontaneous matter transfer is very dangerous and debilitating for those who cannot sense the aura field. He will recover in a few hours." the being said. The tone of his voice made Shardak slightly worried. It was as though the being was examining Shardak in a slightly detached yet curious tone, like a being examining a corpse.

"Matter transfer? We were *transported* here? What happened?" asked Shardak. "What was that...energy?"

Banrax smiled. "You'll learn soon enough."

"Where are we? Are we still underground?" Shardak asked. With a sinking feeling, he realized the possibility of returning to Intax was growing slimmer every minute.

Banrax merely smiled, his expression cold. "Look around you."

Shardak turned and gasped in shock and awe.

Directly ahead of them, perhaps several bio away, a titanic stone column rose above toward the ceiling of the massive cave in which they stood. The wide stone base of the column was built up with streets, half-fallen walls, and several larger, more elaborate structures. A few glimmered with faint silvery illumination, and here and there a lantern shed green illumination in small pools of green light separated by gulfs of shadow.

Along the pathway leading toward the gates of the massive city, Shardak saw several lanterns lit with the same green light as those carried by the obsidian beings and Banrax, and by that illumination he saw a river of winding gray water surrounded the base of the column in front of the walls. As they walked slowly toward the city gates, Shardak noticed the river flowed into a massive sea that stretched on and on in the distance. In the eerie, cold green illumination, the sea appeared a deep, unfathomable emerald.

The cavern was massive, reaching more than one hundred bio into the air and stretching an undefinable length into the distance. Shardak couldn't tell whether this was made by beings in the distant past by unknown powers, perhaps elemental like those of the Toa, or if it was a naturally occurring phenomenon. Looking around, he saw the cavern was far wider than the tunnel they'd been standing in moments ago, and he could not make out the cavern's walls at all.

"Approach." ordered Banrax, and wordlessly Shardak did so. Dark stones, carelessly thrown together, formed an open gatehouse. The arch revealed a rubble-strewn roadway, a rather rundown wall that had collapsed altogether in some places, and an ominous cityscape beyond.

Although no one seemed to be guarding the gateway, Banrax seemed completely at ease. Raising a clawed hand to point at the archway, he whispered something unintelligible. Almost immediately, several beings seemed to appear in front of them. Shardak almost gapsed in shock when he saw a being seem to materialize in front of him.

The beings were stocky and tall, with pale, almost white eyes. At first they reminded Shardak unnervingly of the creatures they'd fought in the void above, but then he saw a spark of intelligence in their pale eyes and relaxed slightly. They were mostly organic, with light green armor, and one wore a helmet that obscured his face completely except his eyes. They all carried spears that matched those

"Lord Banrax." said one of the beings, bowing slightly. Banrax did not acknowledge the being at all, but gestured imperiously toward the gateway. As he saw several more of the obsidian creatures emerge from the darkness, he began to speak again, this time not in the common language, but in several short words. They reminded Shardak of the common language, and wondered if they were code words.

One of the obsidian beings whispered something in common, and the pale-eyed beings stepped aside fearfully as they watched Banrax's gaze travel over them. Finally he turned and, gesturing for Shardak, Blast, and the rest of his patrol to follow.

Slowly, heart heavy, Shardak stepped past the gate and into the city. Very few beings were standing on the streets, a stark contrast to Intax's usually crowded alleyways. He could see well, thanks to the ghoulish green light that shone down over the city.

As he looked for the source, he saw that it was shining from several tall lampposts that had three-taloned claws grasping luminous spheres of green light. In the eerie glow, Shardak made out several more of the obsidian beings, as well as the pale-eyed creatures that had been guarding the gatehouse. Slowly, as they moved toward the massive spire of earth that stood at the center of the city, the small crowd dwindled.

Then he saw another being. It was neither one of the obsidian constructs or the pale-eyed beings, but a tall, thin individual standing beside one of the lampposts. Bathed in the green half-light, Shardak saw he was wearing a black cloak that shrouded his face in darkness. His entire body was tense and sinewy, and bent slightly forward. One corpse-like hand grasped a small, curved dagger.

Even in the faint illumination, the being's robe appeared darker than the blackest night, as though taunting the light itself. As he saw them pass, he raised his veiled head to stare at them, and Shardak glimpsed cold, red eyes under the hood. Its entire being radiated darkness.

Then it hit him like a lightning bolt. This being was the same hooded being that had killed Arcturas. Shock, cold and burning at the same time, tore through him for an instant before being replaced by the dull ache of despair.

"We're in real danger now, Blast." he whispered shakily as they passed through a much higher gate, with ghostly silhouettes of guards patrolling the ramparts. Blast did not reply.

Banrax halted before the massive spire. Now, up close, Shardak could see the spire was made entirely out of pure black rock, darker than even obsidian. Whereas obsidian gleamed in the darkness, this rock almost seemed to absorb the light like the veiled being's cloak. He could see ornate windows carved into the spire's walls, and with a start he realized the interior was hollow. Two more of the obsidian beings stood rigidly at attention at the nondescript door. Had Shardak not been standing directly in front of the spire, he would not have noticed it.

"Enter." hissed Banrax as the two Glatorian halted, feeling very small and weak in the shadow of this colossal formation.

Shardak couldn't tell in the cold green light, but he thought Banrax was half-smiling at him. But it was not a smile of friendship. It was the smile that a hunter wears after a successful hunt, a detached smirk that spoke of a mission well completed. Uneasily, Shardak and Blast steeled themselves, then stepped through the doorway.

The interior of the spire was lit with several torches, even darker than the lanterns hanging in the city outside. The crackling flames were not orange, but a cold blue or green. Shardak shivered as he passed one of the lanterns, and realized, fascinated but also horrified, that the lanterns gave off not heat, but cold.

"[Burning Ice](#)." said Banrax, as though he'd read Shardak's thoughts. "One of the unique substances that occurs naturally in the Void."

Shardak could barely hear him, however. The spire was open and not narrow, but somehow he felt mounting claustrophobia and dread, as though the shadows themselves were closing in on them.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity but in reality could have only been about five minutes, Banrax halted before a large steel door. In the cold blue light, Shardak made out runic letters written in a strange language inscribed on the door. Banrax opened the door slightly, then slipped into the room, closing the door silently behind him.

Blast and Shardak stood for a few moments outside the chamber, and heard Banrax's voice through the door, as well as another voice, speaking in a strange language that sounded horribly like nails scraping over a rock. Another voice, slightly deeper than the first but still nasal and rasping, joined the first in the same language.

A few minutes later he heard Banrax whisper several words hastily and opened the door. While he was smiling, his eyes were cold and slightly scared.

"Come." he ordered, motioning for the obsidian beings to remain outside.

Slowly, Shardak and Blast stepped into the chamber. Not knowing at all what to expect, the two Glatorian entered the chamber.

Unlike the rest of the spire, this chamber only had a single blue torch hanging on the wall, the rest of the room was shrouded in darkness. The cold light illuminated two tall, cloaked beings standing in the shadows, their hands corpse-like and emaciated, like the being Shardak had been on the street within the city. Their eyes, cold dark red, burned with a horrible intensity.

Unlike the being in the city, Shardak could see they were wearing masks that hid their faces except for their slitted red eyes. They stared at Shardak impassively, their expressions completely unreadable.

"These beings are the Ix." said Banrax, though Shardak could see his expression was one of fear. He was trying desperately to conceal it, but it was obvious to both Glatorian. "They will ask you several questions."

"You may go." said one of the Ix, his voice cold and nasal. Banrax nodded and hastily walked out the door, his head bowed. Shardak wanted to run out the door as well, but the Ix's cold red eyes kept him anchored to the spot. Both of the Ix did not speak for a few moments, then raised their hands as one.

"Do not fight the darkness." rasped the Ix on the left. "Or it will rend your soul apart."

"The darkness?" asked Blast, and though he tried to keep his voice calm, he was unable to disguise the fear in his voice. "What do you mean?"

The Ix gave not the slightest hint of emotion, but one said, "You will find out soon enough."

"We--" began Shardak, but one Ix held up a hand for silence. Both beings stared at the two Glatorian, and Shardak felt the same sensation he'd felt during the transfer, that another being was touching him. Looking at Blast, he saw his friend was surrounded by a field of energy, similar to the one he'd seen during the transfer. The scythe he carried was a blinding ray of immense energy, and Shardak could not stare at it for long without becoming dazzled.

Then he felt the touch again, and saw a black tendril of energy had touched the white light surrounding him. Slowly, the darkness spread across the entire field, tightening slowly. Shardak felt horrible cold engulf his limbs, holding him almost completely still. He opened his mouth to speak, but felt cold hands on his throat, choking off the words.

Do not fight the darkness. he heard the Ix's nasal rasp in his mind. *Let the pain flow through you.*

Shardak felt the darkness spread, containing the energy field around him completely, and while he was completely distracted he felt a blinding flash of pain within his skull. He tried to speak, but the flash came again, and this time he felt pain, a harsh jolt against the cold numbness before, spread through his body. While he could not see anything beyond the haze of light and darkness, he was conscious of screams coming from the world outside.

The Ix began questioning him, each syllable a painful jolt that wracked his body until he cried out for it to stop. It vanished for a moment, then returned, greater then before.

What is your name?

Where do you come from?

What is your purpose?

Do you know a being called Arcturas?

What do you know of the Empire?

Each word was uttered within his mind, and each word was more painful then the last. He was dimly consious of his mouth moving in reply, and he could see the hazy forms of the Ix channeling bolt after bolt of dark energy into the light field around him, all the while questioning him.

Do you know how to utilize the Aura field?

What do you know of the Empire?

What is your name?

Do you know a being called Arcturas?

"Stop!" he was screaming, over and over. The pain was becoming even more intense now, as though it was scouring his very soul for the truth. The Ix were still questioning him, and he knew that on some level he was replying, but the pain was too great for him to do anything else.

I don't care anymore, let me die, I want to die, stop, stop...the pain-- His thoughts were swept away by the indifferent hand of the Ix as he continued the questioning.

Do you know how to utilize the Aura field?

Where did you come from?

Slowly, their words were again lost in the abyss of pure terror and pain. He felt as though he was drowning in a sea of liquid torment, as though answering the Ix's questions only kept him barely afloat. He was not consious of time, nor did he ever learn how much he'd told the Ix, but slowly he felt the pain begin to drain out of him, and felt the dark energy surrounding his energy field dissipate.

His first thought was, *Mata Nui, this hurts.* then he fell to the ground, half-consious. He could see Blast leaning against the wall, his eyes half closed and his armor plates somewhat damaged. The torture had left him feeling strangely empty on the inside, as though it had eaten away at his

very soul. He could also see Banrax standing in the doorway, his face a carefully composed mask.

"That will be enough." said one Ix, his horrible voice devoid of all emotion as before. Shardak tried to summon up hatred for these pitiless torturers, but could feel nothing but the terrible emptiness within him. "Banrax, take them to the Holding Cells. We will continue the session tomorrow."

Chapter 6

Ko-Matoran Outpost

Three Years Earlier

The shadows were beginning to lengthen as Valkyria returned to the Ix raid squadron. The sun was a burning ember of dark flames in the west, and no stars shone in the sky yet. The Matoran outpost she'd been watching was small, but contained many items of value.

Ever since they'd discovered the portal to the Core Universe, a long-lost exit to their long imprisonment, the Ix had been using hit-and-run tactics in order to gain items of value from Matoran strongholds near the edge of the portal. She'd been scouting ahead, observing their defenses and weaponry.

They didn't have very many weapons, but had something even more precious to the Ix. *Information.* While they had gained large amounts of the Core Universe's weaponry, they knew very little about the Universe itself, nor had they learned anything about the rulers of the various species that inhabited this universe as well. These Matoran were prestigious recorders, and kept records of many transactions that went on within the Core Universe.

Fortunately for the Ix, they were also reclusive, and did not employ large amounts of mercenaries, as some of the outposts other Ix had raided had. It was perfect for her first battle. As an Ix apprentice, she would have to prove herself against many other apprentices, who all wished to be the strongest, fastest, and smartest of the new generation.

Recently, Valkyria's mentor, Scrall Vhokyn, had sent her on a scouting mission in the Core Universe. When she'd returned, bearing information about the easily attacked outpost, the Ix had mobilized immediately. Both Valkyria and her mentor had been chosen for the attack force.

There were two other apprentices with the strike force as well, and they all wanted what Valkyria herself desired--a chance to kill one or more of the Matoran. Killing the guards of an outpost would garner great fame for both apprentice and master, something all apprentices craved.

Moving stealthily through the undergrowth, her green and brown camouflage blending well with the forests, she saw the Ix camp in the distance. Two guards were standing on the embankment above the small valley, waiting for her return. Silently, she crept toward them.

"Val?" She heard the easily recognizable voice through the forest. "Are you back?"

She dematerialized from the undergrowth, slightly annoyed that her friend had spotted her so quickly.

"I don't know how you do that, [Xhallin](#)," she said with mock frustration. While they'd been close when they were younger, now the divisions that separated all apprentices applied to them both. She'd been attempting to hide from him, to confuse him and the other guard.

Xhallin Naar, a tall, broad shouldered Illieran with lime green eyes and dark gray armor, smiled. "I don't know. Luck, I suppose." Then his voice became quieter, full of anticipation. "Can we attack?" he asked.

"They're completely unguarded," answered the Ix apprentice. For whatever reason, Xhall seemed to believe their friendship could continue during their apprenticeships, something that was completely impossible if you had any ambition at all. "We'll win easily." Though she tried to keep her voice neutral, her eyes glittered with anticipation.

"I'll kill more Matoran than you." Xhallin teased, then vanished into the valley to spread word of the coming invasion.

Valkyria sighed, then drew a curved dagger and followed him into the valley. She noticed the other Ix guard had been studying them thoughtfully. As he noticed Valkyria watching him, he nodded once in approval of her cold, neutral attitude towards Xhallin.

Descending into the valley, Valkyria saw that the commander of this attack force, Ix warrior [Khazin Thaer](#), was standing with his senior commanders discussing tactical plans. Valkyria spotted her own mentor, Scrall, with them. Quickly, the meeting dissolved, and Khazin walked over to her.

"Apprentice Rheai," he said in his clipped, hard voice. "Do the enemy have any defenses to speak of?"

"No, commander," answered Valkyria. "They are defenseless, though they all carry poorly made weapons. Several larger beings are with them, but their weapons, while powerful, are too few to resist the might of a full Ix raid squadron."

"And you are sure none of them spotted you?"

"Yes, commander."

"I will gather the warriors, then." Said Khazin, turning away to address the gathering warriors and apprentices.

Khazin's eyes were a cold red, and he was wearing standard light Ix warrior armor, as well as an ornate breastplate carved from obsidian he'd taken during an earlier raid. He had a reputation for

being one of the most coldly efficient of all commanders. All of the other Ix were wearing full plate now, Valkyria's green-gray cloak stood out in the mass of shadowy armor.

"We will strike the enemy on both sides, with ten Ix warriors and two apprentices. The rest will strike the enemy head on. Their weaponry is too weak to resist our might." The Ix said nothing more, not even needing to acknowledge their commander's order. They began to group into their attack forces, Scrall and Valkyria joining a group of four other warriors.

"They've probably retreated into their fortress by now." said Scrall. "If so, we'll overwhelm the guards, then attack the outpost's interior with our combined might. If their main force is still outside the fortress, we'll strike them from behind while Commander Thaer's attack force and the other strike team devastates them with assaults.

All of the Ix warriors nodded grimly. Valkyria drew her curved dagger, and vanished with the rest of the Ix into the darkness.

By now, the sun had mostly set, and clouds hid the moon and stars. Valkyria knew this was the perfect time to attack, when the Ix possessed superior weaponry, the cover of darkness, and their night vision which they'd learned the Matoran lacked.

Valkyria knew that her cloak blended almost perfectly with the shadows, but still wished she'd been able to wear full Ix warrior armor. While the camouflage clothing gave her the advantage of speed, if she was stabbed by one of the weapons, no matter how weak, she could easily be killed. For a moment, a slithering tendril of fear invaded her thoughts, but she quickly quashed it. Fear was the first thing an Ix apprentice was taught to avoid.

Still the thought she could be killed by these inferior creatures was startling.

Valkyria's keen vision easily picked out the shadowy forms of two guards. They were not Matoran, but the taller beings she'd seen while she'd been scouting. They were carrying longswords, but their reach did not exceed that of the long scythes that the Ix carried.

"Attack." whispered Scrall quietly, and the Ix silently struck. Valkyria heard scythe clash with sword as one of the Ix warriors cut the tall being to the ground. The second being, further away, heard the clash of arms and whirled around, stabbing his weapon deep into the Ix attacker's body. The attacker was flung backward, and he quietly died, as befitted an Ix warrior.

The being was looking around wildly for more assailants. His eyes alighted on Valkyria, and as he was about to charge her, Scrall struck from behind like a Shallows Cat, plunging two daggers into the being's back. As the guard opened his mouth to call a warning, Scrall pointed a hand at the being. A single ray of dark energy channeled from his aura struck the being, snapping his neck.

As the being collapsed, Valkyria and the four surviving Ix were approaching the fortress. Despite the death of one of their warriors, the attack had been carried out quickly, easily, and efficiently. No one had heard anything inside the fortress.

As the Ix approached the fortress, Valkyria heard the clash of weapons and an abruptly cut off scream. She could see torches flickering within the fortress, and realized quickly that the time for subtlety had passed. She heard another scream as the second guard fell, and saw Scrall smash down the heavily bolted door with a bolt of dark lightning. The rest of the Ix attackers materialized out of the shadows and charged through the door. Valkyria raced forward, along with the rest of the strike force, and saw several white-armored Matoran standing before her. One was talking to Khazin, pleading for their lives.

Khazin smiled grimly. "This is over, fool." he raised his hand and snapped the Matoran's neck before he could open his mouth to reply.

"Murderer!" screamed one of the Matoran, his voice shrill. Valkyria drew back her arm to throw one of her daggers, aiming at the Matoran's heart, but at the same time Scrall flung him against the wall telekinetically. Even with the sound of weapons clashing all around her, Valkyria still heard his spine snap.

Several more Matoran charged Scrall, but he easily overwhelmed them. Khazin was fighting another of the tall beings, forcing him up the stairway. The rest of the Matoran either tried to surrender or fled deeper into the fortress. But the Matoran and their defenders had lost the element of surprise, and Valkyria watched as black blood spattered against the fortress walls.

The battle was over within ten minutes. While brave, the Matoran lacked the sheer power of the Ix, and they were quickly overwhelmed. Valkyria saw that four Ix warriors had been killed in the battle, two cut down by the three remaining tall beings before they were killed, the others felled by the Matoran's sheer numbers.

"Val?" Xhallin's voice broke into her thoughts. "Did you find any Matoran?"

"No." she called back, a note of disappointment in her voice. "This room's empty." Neither she nor Xhallin had been able to kill a Matoran during the battle. One of her daggers had speared through a Matoran's leg, another into a shoulder. But she hadn't slain any of the enemy, nor participated in gathering the Matoran's records. Khazin had overseen the collection personally with Scrall and several others, leaving the three apprentices to search for survivors.

Regrouping with Xhallin and [Kresh](#), the other apprentice, Valkyria listened while they reported the same news-- there were no hidden Matoran in any of the areas they'd searched. Xhallin seemed unhappy, but Kresh was smirking. He'd killed a Matoran in the battle with a scythe, slashing his head off. His victory would bring honor to him and his mentor, damaging the other apprentices' chance to become warriors.

"They're obviously all dead." said Kresh. "Still, we'll complete the search. Continue." he said, acting as though he was their superior already. Valkyria kept her emotions, both in and out of the aura field, unreadable, and continued her search.

For a few moments, all was quiet as Xhallin and Kresh continued their search. Then she heard another voice, a whisper. Reaching out in the aura field, she realized that even with her limited senses, she could almost visualize two beings, both Matoran, hiding from the Ix.

Quietly, Valkyria approached the chamber door and listened there. She heard nothing more, other than the scrape of metal-shod feet against the ground. Slowly, she opened the door.

Two Matoran were standing in the chamber. One was a tall, grizzled gray armored being, carrying a single poorly made weapon. The other was far younger, and he stared at the Ix girl with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Who are you?" asked the tall Matoran. He didn't seem afraid at all. "What do you want?"

"I am Valkyria Rhai, Ix apprentice and aura warrior." said the Ix apprentice.

"And they've sent you to finish off any survivors?" asked the Matoran, before she could continue. He seemed slightly amused.

"I'll have to kill you both." she answered, trying to keep both the shock and slight excitement out of her voice. "But it will be painless if you surrender your weapon."

"But why?" asked the younger Matoran, his eyes even wider. "We've never done anything to you. What--"

"She doesn't mean it." said the older Matoran calmly, challenging Valkyria to deny it. "She's not that much older than you. She'll not kill us, because there's nothing to gain from it."

"You didn't see what I did outside. There were others with her, and they killed as well. She's just as ruthless. She means what she says. Don't--"

"Stop." said the older Matoran. He turned to address Valkyria. "I think it's obvious that you're not about to kill either of us. You don't have it in you to do something like that."

"I am an Ix apprentice. Surrender your weapon and I will kill you both painlessly."

Now the young Matoran was even more scared. "They've probably killed all of the order except us by now. She's not bluffing, Aatron. She will--"

"Be silent." said Aatron. "Valkyria Rhai. If you are going to kill us, then do it now. If not, then let's ta--"

He broke off when he saw Valkyria was holding a dagger in her hand, ready to throw. With a scream, the young Matoran turned around and fled, and just as he did, Valkyria released the dagger.

The younger Matoran turned with a screech just as the dagger entered his body. Valkyria saw blood pour from the open wound, and felt his presence in the aura field diminish, then vanish completely. In stark contrast to feeling elated, she was unnerved at how his life had simply slipped away, falling into endless darkness.

Aatron's shocked eyes stared at her as she moved to retrieve her dagger. The slain Matoran's blood covered the hilt, and she winced as she felt the blood drip onto her hand.

Valkyria turned back to Aatron, and saw his face was a mask of fury. "There was no reason to do that, *Ix apprentice*," he practically spat the title. "He was no threat to you. Why would you--" he broke off, unable to continue. His eyes were filled with unshed tears, and for a moment, Valkyria felt something like uneasiness within her. Something was telling her what she'd just done was horribly wrong, but she couldn't quite understand anything beyond that.

Aatron had raised his weapon now, and Valkyria readied another dagger to fight. As his crazed eyes blazed into hers, he snarled, "This is for--"

He broke off suddenly, and fell to the ground, his blood mingling with that of the fallen Matoran's. His eyes glazed over and he whispered something unintelligible. Then Valkyria felt him slip quietly out of existence as well.

Turning to the doorway, she saw Scrall Vhokyn standing there, a second dagger in his hand ready to throw. His armor was slightly bloodied, but he appeared unwounded.

Scrall pointed at the body of the younger Matoran. "You killed that one?" he asked. Valkyria nodded, still not entirely comfortable with what had transpired.

"You have done well, Apprentice Rhai," he said. Valkyria felt the cold abyss within her give way to warmth, and began to relax. She'd done the right thing, killing the Matoran for her order.

"I wish to present you with this weapon as well," continued Scrall, drawing a long dagger from his sheath. Valkyria almost gasped in shock, but then remembered and cloaked her emotions in the aura field.

The dagger was long and curved, and seemed to be made of molten silver. As she grasped the cold obsidian hilt, she saw a shiver run down the blade, as though it had found its rightful owner. Valkyria marveled at how perfect the weapon was for her, how completely attuned she felt to it, as though it had been made for her.

"Its name is Laetari-Xyrr, or *Silverblade*," said Scrall. "It is one of the original weapons that our Ix ancestors crafted before the Exile. Use it well in the service of the Ix order."

Valkyria nodded, and they returned to the gathering Ix warriors and apprentices. Xhallin's eyes widened when he saw the weapon she was carrying, and Kresh stared daggers at her when he saw the blood on her hands, but neither of them spoke.

Scrall strode toward Khazin, and reported what he and Valkyria had done, then the Ix regrouped and left the bodies of the Matoran and the fallen Ix lying within the fortress now devoid of life. But Valkyria felt uneasy, and her thoughts kept returning to the Matoran she'd killed.

In action, it had been simple. A dagger thrown, a life ended. In the aftermath, it had changed her forever, turned her from an innocent to a killer. The uneasiness grew deeper, and Valkyria, recognized it as *guilt*. She still felt that what she'd done to the Matoran was horribly wrong, even though everything else, including the Ix blood that flowed in her veins, told her it was right.

Valkyria realized with cold shock that she'd never even learned the Matoran's name.

Chapter 7

Banrax grinned coldly as he walked the two Glatorian prisoners down a darkened corridor. The air within this corridor seemed to be laden with dread, as though the memories of all who had wasted away in this spire still lingered here.

"This is your cell." Banrax's voice jolted Shardak back to the present. They were standing in front of a large cell carved into the rock itself. Shardak felt despair sink into him. There was no way they could ever escape that.

"We will continue interrogation tomorrow." said Banrax, his cold eyes staring at Shardak intently as they entered the cell. The interior was lit with the same cold blue flame torches that had hung within the rest of the spire.

"More of that horrible torture?" gasped Shardak, enraged. "What have we ever done to you? We were just looking for--"

"Silence!" snarled Banrax. "I do not know why you trespassed on the Circle's territory. Nor do I care. Your interrogation will continue tomorrow." he looked down at Blast's unconscious form. "As will your friend's."

The way he was looking at Blast made Shardak shudder, as though he was slowly destroying his friend's mind and enjoying every moment of this. The yellow Glatorian wondered if Blast would ever awaken, and if he did, forgive him for getting into this mess.

He heard the door slam shut as Banrax departed, and felt within that sound grim, cold finality.

It was over.

Their short, ill-fated expedition had come to this horrible end, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Over the course of three days, more interrogation sessions with the Ix followed. Shardak and Blast rarely spoke, but it was because the interrogation sessions left them completely drained, tearing all of the vitality from their bodies in a single decisive swipe.

In the spire, time lost all meaning. After one sleepless night, his time in the Holding Cells seemed to ebb and flow all around him, and hours seemed to last for years. During moments of icy clarity, Shardak wondered if this was a feature of the Ix's terrible torture-- to lose one's grasp of time itself.

During one such moment of clarity, Banrax entered the cell, informing them that Blast would now be separated from Shardak for "security reasons." Part of Shardak's mind rebelled, but he was unable to protest as Blast was led away before his eyes.

What seemed like the next moment, he was suddenly, startlingly awake for the first time since the two Ix had tortured them. From outside he could hear the lock rattle, then watched as the door swung open.

Shardak's breath caught in his throat. Was it Blast? Or was it Banrax, his horrible, hungry-looking mask about to tell them it was time to continue interrogation?

Then he saw it was neither. The being that stood before him was tall, heavily armored in dark crimson mail. He carried a massive curved scimitar in one hand, a spear in the other. His eyes were blue, warm and generous. They spoke of great suffering, but also great wisdom.

However, his face was a mask of urgency. "There's no time to explain," he whispered to Shardak. "You have to come with me. Just let me tell you that I am no friend of the Ix and do not intend to harm you. Come!"

He reached out an armored hand, but Shardak declined. Was this an elaborate trap? A complex series of mad designs orchestrated by the Ix themselves? What did this being want?

The crimson being sighed. "If you don't come with me, all is lost! The Ix are close to figuring out who you really are. Once they find out--" he broke off suddenly. "Trust me!"

For one brief moment, Shardak hesitated. He had no idea whether Blast was still alive, or what the Ix wanted of him. For a moment he wondered if it had something to do with the "aura field" the Ix torturers kept mentioning. Then, confused, desperate, scared, yet still hopeful he could find Nightshade and bring this nightmare to an end, Shardak grabbed the being's hand.

The crimson being's eyes brightened. "I know the way out," he said, "And I've already disabled several Copy guards that tried to stop me."

"What about the Ix?" asked Shardak, his voice scared. "They've been--"

"I know what they do to prisoners," said the crimson being darkly. "I've been in their claws before." Something about his voice made Shardak lose all thoughts that this being was lying. As

they raced down the darkened corridor, Shardak felt his old curiosity begin to return. Perhaps this being could answer all of his questions about the Ix, Banrax, and the obsidian beings. Perhaps there was some way out of this after all.

Then he remembered the cold, sardonic eyes of the Ix watching him being escorted to the spire, and the horrible interrogation sessions, and his hope began to crumble once more.

"We are here." said the being. Shardak looked up and saw the being was about to open the door to the spire. Quickly undoing the lock, they left the spire.

Words failed to describe how much pain seemed to be lifted from both Shardak's body and mind as a rush of cold air washed over him. In contrast to the dark, claustrophobic atmosphere of the spire, the city seemed open and bright. While it had done nothing to ease his fear that Banrax, the obsidian beings, or the Ix would notice them, nor had it eased the strange dread he felt within this city, it had cleared his mind of the Ix's dark designs.

Then reality rushed back. Shardak noticed armed guards, both obsidian constructs and pale-eyed beings, patrolling the inner wall that surrounded the spire. There was no way out. To Shardak's surprise, none of the beings seemed to notice they had just emerged from the spire. They looked warily at the doorway, but did not seem to notice they'd opened it.

"Why haven't they noticed us?" he whispered.

"A simple trick. I cloaked the door's opening using an illusion, and are cloaking our presence in the physical world with the aura field. Thank Mata Nui there were no Ix guarding this area, they'd see right through it. I'll explain everything after we're out of danger."

Shardak looked around and saw that, indeed, they seemed to be slipping through the shadows themselves. They were almost completely invisible, and if anyone even spotted them, it would only be for the briefest of moments. They'd dismiss it as a trick of the eye.

Quietly, the crimson being and Shardak approached the gate. In the cold green light, Shardak saw that the gate was bolted. The being, however, acted like nothing was wrong. Slowly, both he and Shardak began to grow even less visible, and vanished altogether. Shardak saw a field of energy, like the one surrounding Blast and the Ix, enveloped their invisible bodies as they passed through the wall itself.

"What happened?" he asked, when he'd recovered from the shock. They were standing in the long, winding road at the center of the city. For a moment around frantically for some sign of obsidian beings or Ix, then relaxed when he saw there were none.

Slowly, they began to grow corporeal again. Shardak saw them both briefly materialize in the physical world, then slip into the realm of indistinct shadows once more.

"My mask power is-- or, was, intangibility. I can still access the power. I'll tell you everything soon." said the being in reply. Shardak opened his mouth to respond, then paused when he saw

the tall, mechanical form of an obsidian being walking past them. Shardak thought then they were lost, but the being passed them as though they were not there and Shardak breathed again.

"We're here." said the obsidian being after a few moments. Shardak looked up and saw they were standing before a nondescript, rather run-down building on the edge of a narrow street. A single of the menacing lampposts shed light on the house, revealing two dented windows and a stone door.

Slowly, the being pushed open the door, then breathed in deeply when they were both inside. Suddenly dizzy, Shardak leaned against the wall, and when he recovered he saw that the being looked extremely tired.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"An aftermath of the Aura Cloak I used. I'll recover."

Shardak felt as though his head was going to explode with questions. Who were the obsidian beings? Were was Blast? What did the Ix want with them? What did this being want with them?

The being must have somehow sensed his confusion, because he raised a single hand. "Please, sit. I will tell you everything, starting at the beginning.

"First of all, my name is [Silencer](#). I am--or was, a [Toa](#) of [Fire](#)"

"A *Toa*?" asked Shardak incredulously. "They disappeared ages ago, long before the Kodax. And besides, I know what Toa look like. They resemble Glatorian, and you really have no resemblance to one."

"I said I was a Toa. I am no longer. But for me to explain, I need to know where you come from, and a little about you and your friend. How much do you know of the Ix?"

"Very little." admitted Shardak. His mind was awlirl; could he really trust this total stranger? Then again, he'd freed him from the grasp of Banrax and the Ix, so it was possible he was a potential ally.

Oh, Karzahni. he thought, finally, and began, describing their life in Intax under the petty and brutal Kodax. He then told Silencer about Arcturas and Nightshade, but not revealing their names, and how they'd returned home to find the street burning. He described the obsidian beings, their threats, and Arcturas' death at the hands of the cloaked Ix. He then recounted how he and Blast had discovered Nightshade had been captured, and how they'd pursued the obsidian beings through the strange void. The told of their battle with the strange white draconic beings and their capture by Banrax, the journey through the void and the strange energy fields.

Finally, in a ragged whisper, he told of the horrible torture he'd suffered at the hands of the Ix for what had seemed like years. He told Silencer that Banrax had separated him and Blast, and how the Ix kept asking if he knew how to utilize the "aura field."

Finally, Silencer asked, "Your father. What was his name?"

"Arcturas." replied Shardak.

Silencer was good at concealing his emotions beneath his helmet, but he was unable to stop the jolt of recognition from flashing across his face. He stared at Shardak in complete shock for a few moments, then let out a ragged whisper,

"Did you tell them his name? Did you tell the Ix Arcturas' name?"

Shardak suddenly felt horribly ashamed that he'd elicited this reaction from Silencer. And while his time in the Hold was a blur, he remembered telling the Ix that his name was Arcturas.

"Yes." he whispered. "They forced me to tell them."

Silencer's face was grim. "Then it is even worse than I thought. No wonder there were no Ix present on the streets today."

Shardak was growing impatient now. Silencer seemed to be deliberately not explaining anything about this "Circle." to him, and he finally asked.

"I've told you everything I know." he said. "Now, you have to explain. What is the Circle? Who are the Ix? What is this aura field they keep mentioning? What are the obsidian creatures? Do the Ix control them? What?"

"I will, indeed, answer your questions, though there is much I do not know." said Silencer. "So you come from the Kodax's small empire in the Eastern Fells. I'd expected this, if you lived within any of the other mountain kingdoms or in the Ix's cities, you'd have been discovered by now."

"Hold on." Shardak said. "You mean the Kodax only rule a small part of the world? They don't control anything beyond the Fells? They said--"

"I am aware of the propaganda." Silencer cut him off. "But you're still only asking questions and not letting me answer any of them. Please, be silent. I am aware of what the Ix did to you, but if you wish to survive, you have to listen."

Silencer paused, and Shardak nodded mutely. After a few minutes the former Toa began,

"For over one hundred years, there was a great order that ruled over much of this world, Xaterex. They kept the Kodax that dwelled in the mountains at peace, and forced them to free many of their slaves.

"I was born during the dying days of this order. I was taken among potential candidates for Toa Stones, as it was done during those days, and became a Toa. By the time I came into existence, however, the order was already close to extinction, having been scattered by war.

"Six years after I was born, a total solar eclipse fell over Xaterex, that lasted an entire year. This had been prophecised centuries ago, and it was said there that the year would bring an end to our ancient order.

"While there had been peace since the ancient Storm Wars over a century ago, powerful Makuta with ambitions began striking out that year. Their aim was to rule all of the known universe, and they came close to defeating the entire order. During that year, in the insane turmoil that followed the defeat of the Makuta rebels, a new order was founded, one that was supposed to keep peace among the various factions that existed."

Silencer sighed, as though the memories were horribly painful. "The Ix corrupted this order from within. They turned the leaders against the common people, made them so arrogant that they began to believe their destiny was not to serve, but to rule. The war that followed was the bloodiest and most chaotic since the Storm Wars themselves, and when it finally ended, the Ix controlled nearly the entire planet."

Shardak was struck silent. In a single blow, Silencer had annihilated all of his old beliefs about the universe. Some of this he'd known, of course. Many ancient Matoran who were born in the years following the Storm Wars still told of the bloody battles in Laverna Realm that created a massive war. He'd never heard, however, of this mysterious order, or of the Ix.

"I fought during that final war." said Silencer. "I watched as the Ix destroyed the final remnant of everything we'd worked for for hundreds of years. This is how I came by my mutation. During a battle my body was mutated by energized protodermis, ruining my Toa powers and many of my powers in the aura field."

Shardak suddenly felt very sheltered. The horrible fear that a rival Kodax tribe would destroy their leaders seemed small and far-off now.

"And since then, for more than one hundred years the Ix have fought us." finished Silencer. "For reasons known only to themselves, they left much of the Kodax's mountain territories alone. Ironically, the once bloody Fells are one of the safest places to live on Xaterex."

Shardak, far from understanding, felt more confused than ever. "What does this have to do with me?" he asked. Some part of his being, however, felt as though this had *everything* to do with him. As if this was some inevitable part of his destiny, and that his life had come full circle?

"The truth is, Shardak, I don't know. But this brings me to the final part of my tale, and hopefully then you will understand.

"I sensed your presence in the Aura field the moment you entered the Circle. You had no idea how much power was within you, and I was afraid the Ix would figure out that you could sense the field. When you passed through the Void between dimensions, your aura somehow reached out and...*melded* with mine. Then I began to wonder if you were more than just a powerful aura wielder."

Silencer sighed, as though wondering if he should say something more, then finally said, "The prophecy during the war also predicted the coming of a Last Toa, one who had a destiny..." He trailed off for a moment, then continued. "Many, many beings were searching for this Toa, but he was never found."

Silencer paused, and Shardak suddenly knew, with horrible certainty, what he was about to say.

"When I touched you in the Aura Field, I knew immediately you were a Toa. And when you told me your father's name was Arcturas, I realized I was correct. You, Shardak, are the Last Toa prophesied during that year."

"Me?" gasped Shardak. "How is that possible? I've lived all my life in the Fells. I've never heard of the Ix, or--"

"If you've never heard of the Ix, then consider it a blessing." said Silencer coldly. "You saw what they were capable of during your interrogation. But I think you know more than even you know, Shardak. Search your memories, and I think one day you will find what you are looking for."

Shardak tried to think back, but like all being's earliest memories, they remained teasingly out of reach. "I...can't." he whispered.

Then he asked, "What is the Aura field? The Ix were asking me about this during interrogation constantly, and when I told them I didn't know...they..." he trailed off as he thought of the horrible, pressing darkness, as though he was falling into an endless abyss of shadows.

"I know. I've suffered their torture before during the war." said Silencer. "Anyway, the power of aura is simple. Each being, each object, has a field of energy around them. Tapping into this aura field allows one to be able to sense emotions and ideas. The field has been around as long as the multiverse has existed, and some believe it is a being with a will and purpose of its own."

"So that's why when I fought the white beings in the void I was able to sense their animalistic instincts." guessed Shardak. Silencer nodded. "Advanced controllers of this field can use it as a weapon as well. There can be nothing more powerful than using someone's own aura against him. It is...unusual for Toa to have Aura as an element. Toa of Aura were very rare, even before the war."

"You're a Toa of Aura as well, aren't you?" said Shardak, remembering how Silencer had told him he'd used the aura field to cloak them both from the eyes of the pale-eyed and obsidian beings. "When the obsidian being passed by us, it didn't even notice us at all."

"No, I was a Toa of Fire. Since my original powers were lost, I can only sense and use several limited Aura field powers. Perhaps it was a side effect of the energized protodermis that changed me. And the obsidian beings that killed your friend are Copies of Corpse. The Ix's shock troopers."

"The being that killed Arcturas. Was he an Ix?"

Silencer nodded grimly. "[The Fury](#). He said at last. "He's a powerful Ix, but I don't know how much sway he holds in their order. The Ix's empire spans many planes of reality, yet they are highly mysterious. While there's talk of a sort of inner circle within the Ix's heirarchy, no one knows for sure."

Silencer's face became unreadable, but his eyes were full of sorrow. "He's been on a personal vendetta to bring me down. He-- he killed one of the only two people I loved, and mutated the other."

Shardak's mind was still full of questions about Silencer's past, but Silencer looked so pained and full of hatred that he decided to ask the most obvious of questions that came to mind.

"What do you need me for?"

"The Ix suspect that you are the Toa in the prophecy as well." said Silencer. "That's why they've seperated you from your friend. I don't know what they intend, but we've fought them all our lives, and we can't let our last hope of victory slip away now."

"We? There are others with you who fight the Ix?" asked Shardak.

"Not quite." came a new voice. Both Shardak and Silencer almost jumped in shock as two more beings emerged from the shadows.

One was tall, covered in yellow and orange full plate armor. He had three eyes, one set above the others, and his face glistened, as though coated by cold slime, like that of a squid. The other being was smaller, rake-thin and bent over. He carried two long daggers and had a blue-armored head with insectlike mandibles and cold eyes that regarded them both intently.

"[Ion](#), Melnox. Welcome." said Silencer. "Have you been listening to our entire conversation?"

"No, we only arrived recently." said Melnox. Shardak recoiled in shock. Melnox's voice was resonant and deep, with a hint of Silencer's own accent. It didn't fit at all with his cold eyes or insectlike appearance. "We would've arrived through the front door, but the entire Circle is swarming with Ix."

"Are we safe here?" said Shardak, suddenly worried that the Ix would find them again.

"Probably." answered Ion. His voice was simular to Melnox's and Silencer's. "This place has been abandoned for years. Still, this might be a good time to get moving to another safe house."

"I haven't asked for his cooperation yet." said Silencer. His voice seemed heavy, as though what he was about to ask weighed heavily on his mind.

"Shardak, we can't fight the Ix. Even with your help, we still can't fight them. But we cannot let you be captured by them. It could mean the final ruin of Xaterex and the worlds beyond."

Shardak's mind was still spinning. He'd been taken from torture at the hands of the Ix by this group of rebels who had no way to battle the Ix at all, but needed to prevent him at all costs from falling into their hands. He'd heard Silencer say he believed he was the subject of an ancient prophecy. He felt as though he should have been amazed or in shock at what they believed, but he was simply confused. Even his hatred of the Copies of Corpse, which extended to the Ix now as well, had been dulled to a low ache deep within him.

"What do you intend?" he asked finally.

"We need time. Time to train you in the ways of the aura field, to control your elemental power. I am one of the leaders of an organization who actively opposes the Ix, and I must train you for the battles ahead. Many prisoners are taken from the worlds above the Circle, and we can disguise you as a worker near the Edgelands while we train you to control your powers."

He said now, in a softer tone, "I know how incredibly confusing this must be for you."

"And then..." asked Shardak.

Silencer sighed. "I was hoping you would not ask, but there is more. For years, the Ix have been searching for this, something I have guarded for years. It is known as the Shadow Orb. What they want it for is unknown, but they would kill to possess it."

Silencer raised an object to the light. It was shaped like a crescent, a thin metal object that was formed of pure darkness. Like the Ix's cloaks, the object seemed to absorb light, rather than reflect it.

"If the Ix gain this, it will mean the final ruin for all hope against them. Their masters will regain control of the multiverse once more."

"The Ix's masters?" asked Shardak. "Who are they?"

"No one knows. They are spoken of in many Matoran tales, worshipped as Great Spirits and deities. Many of them are now wandering the Grand Abyss or other myriad planes of existence. They are all scattered, but many wish to rule the cosmos once more. The Ix are part of the same race, but were created after the Fall."

"Planes?" asked Shardak. "Banrax mentioned something about the transfer between planes, before we entered the Circle."

"The moment you entered the Circle you left a plane and entered another. They are all interconnected; all coexisting on different levels of space and time. You have moved beyond your world into another plane, Shardak. In this case, it is coexistent in time and space with your world. You saw how the torches burned with blue flame?" he asked. Shardak nodded.

"Some planes have strange differences. This is one difference that the Circle plane has from your plane; fire is blue and chills, ice is orange and burns. The world you come from is connected to nearly twenty other planes of existence.

"Shardak." Silencer continued, his voice lower now. "The Ix do not yet know I am here. But they will soon. I plan to train you--"

"Train him?" Ion broke in, voice unreaable. "Silencer, isn't that dangerous?"

"It is a risk we have to take." said Silencer grimly. "I cannot allow the Ix to triumph."

Join with Silencer? Leave Blast to fend for himself in the clutches of the Ix? Shardak's head was spinning. All of these revelations were throwing his mind into turmoil.

REVENGE! The thought tore through Shardak's mind like a bolt of lightning. While at first he'd thought this was a stranger's war, he knew now that he'd been fighting the war ever since Arcturas' death. The Ix had killed his father. There was no way around that. If Silencer and the others could train him to control his powers over the Aura field, then he could rescue Nightshade and Blast.

"I will join you. There's nothing left for me in Intax now." as he said these words, he realized how true he was. Everyone he cared about was either dead or in the claws of the Ix.

And the Ix would pay for killing Arcturas.

"Good." said Ion as Silencer and Melnox prepared to leave the safe house. "We will need your power very soon."

Chapter 8

The dark wasteland snaked into the distance, a black void, cold against the green lantern Shardak carried. The Glatorian--no, *Toa*, he had to remind himself-- found it unnerving that the shadows did not flee from the light as darkness did in the world above. It reminded him of the spire. And Blast.

And the Ix.

"Melnox?" The voice, light and innocent, jerked Shardak back to reality. He turned to regard the Matoran standing next to him as he replied to his assumed name.

"Yes, [Barit](#)?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound casual. "Are we almost to Circle's Edge?"

The Onu-Matoran's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Almost." he said. There was no trace of discomfort in his voice. Shardak had quickly learned that all the Matoran here had spent so long underground they were almost blinded by bright light, and could see perfectly in the dark.

He'd also learned so much more during his time in the Circle. After the fateful meeting with Silencer and Melnox when he'd discovered that he was a Toa and learned of his powers in the aura field, Silencer and his allies had taken them to a second safe house and explained their plan to him.

"Untrained." Silencer had said, "You are a danger to everyone, but mostly to yourself. We can train you in both physical combat and in the ways of the aura field, but we need time. And time is not on our side. The Ix will never give up searching for you, and unless we can train you quickly then somehow get you out of the Circle you'll stand no chance if you flee."

"Can't you just escape with me and train me in Intax? Then--" he had stopped when Silencer cut him off.

"I'm a citizen here, and so is Ion. The Ix do not know Melnox exists, or if they do, they have not chosen to arrest me for it. As such we are not allowed beyond the Skull Gates or any gatehouse." said Silencer. "I've breached their security before, but that was only for--" he broke off suddenly, then continued. "Anyway, I'd never be able to escape this place without hundreds of Ix on my tail."

"And besides." said Ion, his voice raw with emotion. "What do you think would happen to our friends?"

"They'd slaughter them. The Ix would kill them all." answered Silencer, his voice oddly flat as he said those words.

Shardak was about to reply no sane ruler would ever do such a thing. Then he'd remembered the horrible torture he'd suffered at the hands of the two Ix interrogators and the words dissolved in his mouth.

"Can I go back to Intax after this is all over?" Shardak had asked.

"If you can learn to control your aura powers, you can. You're a massive presence in the field, Shardak. I'm surprised the Ix didn't sense you earlier." Silencer had answered, looking thoughtful.

"Anyway, I've talked with Ion and Melnox, and we've agreed on a plan.

"We're going to disguise you as a Glatorian slave miner on the Circle's Edge. Recently captured, you'll say you know very little about the Circle and need to be taught everything a slave needs to know. Mostly about how we owe the Ix everything and how to work properly." said Silencer.

Shardak nodded, but then felt a pang of anxiety. "Do the Ix monitor all slave transactions as well?"

Silencer smiled grimly. "Yes, but there are many, many technically illegal deals that are made for Glatorian, Agori, and Matoran slaves. The--"

"Matoran here buy other Matoran?" asked Shardak, shocked.

"Not those from the Circle. Those from the worlds above." said Silencer. "Or lower class Matoran, such as Ga-Matoran or Le-Matoran. Even Karnr are sometimes enslaved."

"Matoran enslave other Matoran here?" Shardak had gasped.

"It depends on how useful you are. Po-Matoran and Onu-Matoran rank higher than all the others, and the rest are either slaves or lower-class citizens." Silencer answered. "During the Order's age, they'd eradicated slavery from the Circle, but, unfortunately, it thrives here now."

"What are Karnr?" Shardak asked.

"They're the pale-eyed, green and white beings that you said were at the gatehouse."

Shardak paused for a moment, then asked, "Are you sure I'll be alright? There's so much I still don't know."

"That's okay, most slaves don't, either." Silencer had answered. "But you'll learn. You won't be treated badly there, willing, able miners at Circle's Edge are in high demand among the upper-class citizens, since most Matoran are too afraid to go there."

The way Silencer said the last word made Shardak slightly worried, but he held his tongue. He'd already asked so many questions and gained many answers, and if Silencer was correct, he'd learn more about the Circle soon enough.

Instead he'd asked, "But how will this help my training? Mining won't give me mastery of the aura field."

"I have a safe house near the Slave Compound. When you're supposed to rest, you can easily return to the safe house and train. Returning in the morning should be easy, the Compound houses so many slaves from all professions that it's wildly chaotic during shift changes."

Shardak had quickly learned that "day" and "night" meant virtually nothing in the Circle. The cold blue and green lights were always shining down on the Circle, and no one seemed to all rest at the same time. "But I can't use my name." he said. "I told you the Ix forced me to tell them everything."

"Melnor is not a citizen here." said Silencer without further explanation. "You can go under his name. It'll rule out accidental slips of the tongue, and since the name isn't a common Matoran name it won't seem suspicious."

"Okay." answered Shardak.

Silencer smiled sympathetically. "Excellent. As soon as you're ready, we'll disguise you and tell you what to do when you arrive at the Circle's Edge."

When Silencer brought him to the Slave Compound, he'd fabricated a story about how he and Ion had aquired Shardak as a slave from the latest beings captured from the Kodax Fells above. The guards had nodded, as this was nothing unusual, and Silencer demanded one-fifth of the wages Shardak made from his work, the rest for the Ix and the slavemasters.

After bargaining, Silencer and the slavemaster, one of the short, stocky pale-eyed beings, walked over to Shardak, and, after chaining him with the other slaves, led them to the compound.

The slave compound was a rundown, ramshackle building that had been carelessly constructed by heaping several stones atop one another. It had a stone roof, one that Shardak half expected to collapse. The walls were no better, and the stones were covered in lichen, as well as the silver moss he and Blast had seen on their journey through the void.

He'd quickly become accustomed to the routine. His shift was four hours long, during which he'd practice mining with a pick and shovel, trying to find the hidden "emeralds" within. The slave overseers said as soon as they were confident in his abilities, they'd send him on his first assignment.

Shardak had also realized equally quickly that they'd only bothered to train him because of the job's many dangers. They'd said it would be unprofitable for them to lose a physically fit slave to an accident, and he'd been grouped with the other fit slaves for training.

"We're here." said Barit, and the present flooded back into focus. "Circle's Edge."

Shardak looked around and almost gasped in shock.

They were standing on the edge of a massive precipice. It was as though suddenly the ground had vanished beneath them. Like the void they'd encountered Banrax in, he was unable to see the depths below. Unlike the void above, the blackness seemed to draw him in, as though some primal part of him desired to merge with the rippling waves of darkness.

The void was eerily silent. Even though Shardak could see workers hanging from ropes or standing on overhangs, and watched their picks striking the rock again and again, he couldn't make out any noise at all.

"It's a strange, unique phenomenon." said Barit, as though reading his thoughts. "At an unidentified point in history, a large amount of sonic energy was released into this void, causing all sounds to fade. You can make it out, if you listen carefully. Once you're inside Circle's edge, it stops."

Shardak listened, not daring to bend down in case he fell into the void. Sure enough, he could hear sounds rising from below, but it was almost unintelligible. He'd have never recognized the sound had he been able to see the Matoran's and pale-eyed being's shovel striking the obsidian earth over and over again.

"You there!" One of the Karnr, a short but somewhat gaunt being, strode over to them. Shardak could tell immediately from the silver whip he held in his hand he was one of the slavemasters. "Join team seven. They're down on the highest mining platform." the Karnr led them, whip held in hand, toward several crudely carved handholds for them to lower themselves onto the mining platform.

Shardak eyed them doubtfully for a few moments, but Barit quickly began climbing as though he'd done it all his life.

"Go." ordered the Karnr.

Shardak turned toward the slavemaster and saw his eyes held the baleful promise of punishment. He quickly began his descent.

Once there, he and Barit were approached by a Po-Matoran. Shardak was shocked to see he bore scars on his shoulders and back, and one arm had been nearly severed completely.

"You will begin by mining the obsidian and emerald from this cliff. You will cover sector eight, over there." Shardak's gaze followed his finger to an empty platform jutting deeper into the void. It was directly below the platform they were currently standing on.

Shardak nodded, then as soon as they were out of earshot, muttered, "What happened to him?"

Barit grimaced. "His arm was probably injured in an accident, and he began preforming poorly. The worse you preform, the more you'll be whipped."

"Don't they need as many unwounded miners as they can get?" asked Shardak, confused. "Why would they damage one further, and not allow his arm to heal."

Barit smiled coldly. "If you can't work, you die. Slowly. Why do they need fit slaves when they can grab hundreds more from the Fells? Or from another Ix outpost?"

"There are more outposts?" asked Shardak, surprised.

"Many more, scattered throughout the [Upperdark](#)." said Barit. Their domain ends on the edge of the Grand Abyss."

Shardak almost asked about the Grand Abyss, but decided to ask another question, one that had been weighing on his mind since he'd arrived in the Circle four days ago.

"What are the Ix, anyway? Are they Karnr? Glatorian?"

Barit's eyes suddenly became panicked. "Do you *want* to get us killed?" he whispered, voice furious.

"I just asked--"

Barit cut him off. "Don't ever asked that question out loud, if you value your life." he whispered. "Even I don't know the answer. It's strictly forbidden to talk about the Ix, or portray them in any way."

Shardak was about to reply when a scream rang out next to him. He whirled around, and saw to his shock and horror that one of the massive scaled beings that had attacked him and Blast within the void above had slammed into the overhang, shattering the wooden platform. With a shriek, one of the being's talons wrapped around a hapless Matoran and hauled him over the edge.

A chorus of gasps and shouts rang out from above. Shouts of "Lumidrax!" rang through the air.

Shardak looked down, and saw the other Matoran working with him had fallen into the void. He watched, horrified, as the green light from their lanterns spiraled down, down, down, finally ceasing completely.

With a roar, the scaled being turned and saw Shardak and Barit. Dropping the wounded Matoran onto another mining platform, he lunged at the Toa.

Shardak's first instinct was to raise his tool, then he remembered the Blade of Arcturas had been taken from him during the interrogation. As the Lumidrax descended upon him, he swung his pick wildly, slashing and hacking at the being's scaled body, aiming for the throat. The being snarled defiance and slammed into him again.

Shardak swung the pick around and smashed it against the side of the Lumidrax's head. The creature's mandibles snarled horribly as blueish blood oozed from the wound. Shardak slammed the pick against the being's skull again, and heard the awful snap of bones.

Jaw broken, the Lumidrax flew backward, trying to escape the slashing pick. Shardak could see Barit slashing at the creature's tail out of the corner of his eye. As the monstrous creature closed in again, Shardak slashed at the being's chest.

However, he was too late. With blinding speed the Lumidrax whipped around and flung his talons out at Barit. The Onu-Matoran reacted quickly, crushing the being's taloned claw and hacking it off, but was too late. Shardak brought the pick up with all of his strength and slammed it into the Lumidrax's shattered jaw.

The being screamed and pulled away from Barit, and Shardak felt the cobalt blood spatter against his helmet and arms as a gleaming weapon descended.

With a last scream, the Lumidrax's head spiraled away into the abyss, its decapitated body collapsing against the platform. Blood, both Shardak's and the Lumidrax's, pooled around the slain creature.

Shardak gasped. Where the being had been moments before was the wounded Matoran. He smiled weakly at Shardak, raising a knife, then fell to his knees.

The Karnr slavemaster walked over, his expression unreadable. He did not acknowledge either Shardak or Barit, but looked down at the fallen Matoran slave. Shardak saw that while he was wounded, he would heal within a few weeks.

"Get up!" he snarled, kicking the Matoran savagely.

"What--" Shardak began, but Barit elbowed him in the ribs, silencing him.

"Can't..." the Matoran gasped, "Help..."

"I'll help you!" snarled the Karnr brutally, grabbing the fallen Matoran's head and twisting it savagely so he was forced to lock eyes with the slavemaster.

"Don't..." coughed the Matoran, but the slavemaster was grinning wickedly now. Without another word, he drew a long, curved knife, and before Shardak's shocked eyes, ran it through the Matoran's head.

He almost screamed, but Barit, as though anticipating his reaction, silenced him with a look. As if nothing had happened, the slavemaster returned to his post and the slaves continued to work.

Shardak felt disgust. Didn't the Karnr realize he was a slave, too? A slave to the Ix, like they all were? Had the little bit of power his masters endowed him with turned him bitter, or had he always been that way?

Shardak sighed, then picked up his fallen, bloody pick and began to work again.

"Dodge! Thrust! Block!"

Shardak blinked as Ion called out a command as Melnox slammed into him. Shardak leaped backwards and slashed Melnox to the ground, then turned on him and caught the mutated toa on the arm.

Melnox responded with a series of simple thrusts, which Shardak countered his curved makeshift sword. It was not as powerful as the Blade of Arcturas, and the swords were blunted, but they were good for sword practice.

"Dodge!" Ion called out as the Melnox swiped a sword over his head, narrowly missing Shardak's helmet. Shardak cleaved upward with his sword, blocking Melnox's next blow. Melnox easily dodged, then raised his sword, ready to thrust it at Shardak.

Shardak whipped around and blocked Melnox's attack, dodging his next thrust but allowing Melnox to stab at him, denting his armor lightly. The Toa narrowly blocked Melnox's next blow, then caught the mutated Toa of fire with a blow to the shoulder. His next thrust weakened Melnox's defenses. Melnox stabbed at him twice, but he blocked it both times easily.

Toa Toa of Fire was able to thrust at Shardak, denting his armor again. Shardak blocked, then watched as Melnox's stance shifted from the simple [Lihtne Combat form](#) defense he had been using to the more complicated [Sila](#) form, which utilized both physical strength and Elemental Powers together.

For the past three days, Shardak had worked on learning how to use the Lihtne, [Guokte](#), and Sila combat forms, first learning how to defend against all three styles, then practicing himself.

He'd then learned how to fight defensively with Lihtne, combining it with simple thrusts. While he found this difficult, Melnox had told him that it took a fighter years to master fighting offensively with Lihtne, and that it was easy to combine with another combat form to give the fighter an advantage.

He found it relatively easy to combine Guokte with Lihtne, which focused on fighting with dual blades, mainly to confuse opponents. Melnox and Ion were pleased that he had mastered it so quickly, but told him that most Ix and Karnr were also able to use Guokte with their scythes and that Sila would be more effective against them.

Shardak switched to Guokte, drawing a second sword and blocking Melnox's next strike with a two sword defense. Melnox blocked his sword thrust with another blow, and managed to hit Shardak again. Shardak raised his second sword, but Melnox disarmed him quickly.

Before the other Toa could strike him again, Shardak blocked his sword with a complicated Lihtne defense and attacked recklessly, aiming to land a blow on Melnox's chest. Melnox managed to narrowly dodge, and struck his sword with such momentum that he nearly disarmed Shardak.

Shardak stabbed out at the other Toa, and Melnox dodged his blow again. Melnox struck Shardak again, and Shardak stabbed out, dodging two of Melnox's blows but taking a hard strike on his shoulder. Melnox lowered his blade, intending to strike Shardak in the chest, but Shardak managed to dodge before he could land the blow. Blast had fallen silent now, watching Shardak's progress intently. Shardak managed to dodge two more of Melnox's thrusts, then stabbed out wildly and struck Melnox a hard blow to the chest.

"Good!" said Melnox, then raised his sword above his head, ready to bring it down on Shardak. Shardak noticed that Melnox had left his side open, and had almost landed the blow when Melnox's blade changed direction and disarmed Shardak easily.

"Stop!" Melnox ordered as Shardak reached to retrieve his fallen blade. Shardak halted quickly, breathing heavily. The fight had tired him.

"You understand the basic concepts." said Melnox. "But you need to be able to be less focused on learning the moves. In real combat, your opponent may use almost any style of fighting, combine any combat form, and, even if he is completely inexperienced in even Lihtne combat, may use brute force to overpower you. It is virtually impossible to learn every combat form that exists, but a good warrior-

"-Must be able to defend against them all." Shardak finished. He began to breathe again, and slowly relaxed from the tense fighting moments before. He wished his elemental power was more offensive. Silencer had told him on the first day of training that fighting with the aura field could be dangerous, and while he'd tried it with Silencer, the Toa had warned him not to use it in battle with Melnox.

"How many combat forms are there in all?" Shardak asked. He knew that Melnox had mastered two combat forms, Lihtne and Sila, and had some experience in three others, [Tera](#), Guokte, and [Vauhti](#), but the others were unknown to him.

"There are seven main combat forms, that every warrior should be able to defend against, Lihtne, Guokte, [Kracht](#), [Napad](#), Sila, Tera, and Vauhti. However, there are many other, lesser known forms, such as Texiten and Basto, which involve use of shields and maces.

"Never assume that because these combat forms exist that a warrior will combine two forms together for greater power or maneuverability." continued Melnox. "And even if a fighter uses only Lihtne or Guokte, never underestimate him. Even though he follows the combat form completely, he will always improvise, at least somewhat. Many of the moves I used against you were not Sila. The final attack was Vauhti, which involves using speed and cunning to penetrate defenses."

Shardak nodded. Days had bled into weeks since the battle with the Lumidrax, and he'd learned so much about the Circle in such a short time, from both Silencer's friends and the slaves and slavemasters.

The Ix were at the top of the pecking order, and their word was law. To question them meant death or torture, or worse, banishment to the Eternal Game. He'd never learned what this game involved, but from the dark looks he'd been given, he'd quickly inferred it was a forbidden topic, like the Ix themselves.

Under the Ix were a select group of Onu-Matoran and Kranr, which he'd learned his old captor Banrax was priveleged to belong. After questioning Barit, he'd realized not many people knew exactly what this group did, and that Barit did not either.

Below the upper-class citizens were the middle-class such as Silencer, and the rest of the inhabitants were either gangsters who dwelt in the undercity or slaves. Whenever his shift ended, he'd return to Silencer's safe house, rather than the Compound, and trained.

"Is Silencer here?" asked Shardak finally. He felt a cold pit of fear grasp his heart when he remembered what he was planning to ask the Toa of Fire tonight.

As though on cue, the door burst open, and Silencer entered, his face grim. "Hello, Shardak." he said. His voice was kind, but his eyes were sad. Shardak felt a sliver of unease seep through him. Had something happened to Blast?

"Are you ready to begin Aura training?" asked Silencer.

"There's something I want to ask you first." Shardak said, heart in his mouth. "I need to get Blast out of the Hold."

In the stunned silence that followed, Shardak winced. Had he been too direct? Perhaps Blast was already dead, and there was no reason to try and rescue him.

Silencer's expression, shocked at first, began to calm. In a serious voice, he answered, "I know you'd ask us someday."

"Is he alive?" asked Shardak. "If they--"

"He's alive." said Silencer. "And can still be rescued. The Ix haven't decided to execute him yet."

"Yet?" asked Shardak, shocked. "He hasn't done anything to them!"

"He entered the Circle." said Silencer. "Had you not been rescued, you'd be either dead or worse, imprisoned. You wouldn't last five minutes in the Eternal Game."

"What is the Game?" asked Shardak. "I've heard Barit mention it several times, but never learned anything else about it."

Silencer sighed. "When the Ix took over the Order, they implemented the Eternal Game. Technically, it's been going on since the Year of Darkness. It's how the Ix executed their war criminals. Twelve years later, after the war completely ended, it became a mechanism to hold the populace in fear. Essentially, it's a contest, where the players must kill each other until only one remains."

Silencer's voice turned angry. "Last year, the Ix released nearly twenty Toa into the arena. We thought for a moment our last hope had not been extinguished, but we soon realized these Toa were either corrupt or had had their minds completely broken by the Ix. Those who still had sanity were killed off one by one."

"Who won?" asked Shardak.

"Won what?" asked Silencer, as if Shardak had interrupted his thoughts.

"The Eternal Game. Who won last year?" asked Shardak.

Silencer did not answer. He instead asked, "Anyway, about Blast. Do you have any idea how much risk there is in this? If we help you, we could be signing our death warrant, as well as the death warrants for all of our friends."

"I know how risky it is." said Shardak, surprised at how much passion Silencer's voice held. Then he remembered how close he'd come to losing Melnox during the Ix's takeover. "But I can't let Blast die. He--he risked everything to help me find Nightshade, and now I'm sure she's dead,

and this was all for nothing. Silencer, you, Melnox, and Ion have helped me so much, revealed the real killers of Arcturas. I can't let my best friend die because of me."

For a moment, a far away look came into Silencer's eyes, as though he was remembering something from long ago.

"I'll help you." he said. "How can I not? It is part of a Toa's nature to defend the weak. If I were to deny that, I would be no better than the Ix."

"You know a way?"

"Yes." said Silencer. His face was regretful, however. "I wish we'd had more time. Two weeks of training won't matter if you have to fight a Kranr, or worse, and Ix, in open combat. Your skills in the aura field are still dangerously uncontrolled. However, while I can't come with you, I do have several things that will help you survive."

He pressed several objects into Shardak's hand. They were gray, and were about the size and shape of a Midak bullet.

"These aren't weapons, but when thrown, they explode into flames. The fire quickly dies, but it can be dangerous if thrown at a being. They're mostly for distraction. There are only five of them, so use them wisely."

Silencer lowered his voice. "And I have one more thing for you as well, Shardak." he said, raising a dark fragment of stone to the torchlight.

"The Shadow Orb." whispered Shardak. "Surely you need this? When I return to Intax, it will just give the Ix another reason to follow me."

"Shardak." said Silencer. "I'm coming with you, back to Intax. If all goes well, I'll meet you near the air channel near Intax."

"But don't you need to stay in the Circle?" asked Shardak.

"The Ix don't know I'm here." said Silencer. "And now that I have found another surviving Toa... the time for secrecy has passed. If we do not act now, and I cannot train you, the Ix will claim the rest of the planes of existence, as they have the Circle."

Shardak nodded. "So how will I enter the Spire? Surely the place will be swarming with Ix."

Silencer shook his head. "An Elemental Prince, [Flareus](#) by name, is currently in charge of the Spire. He's as brutal as Banrax is, some say more so. They're also bitter rivals for the Ix's attention."

"You make it sound as though you know them." said Shardak.

"I do." replied Silencer, darkly. "Anyway, You'll be cloaked, using the power of invisibility. That should allow you to enter the Inner Circle and escape the Kranr guards. However, even the strongest invisibility spell won't hold up to an Ix. You'll have to bypass them in another way."

"What if I am able to break Blast out, and we do escape?" asked Shardak. "What then? Surely we can't stay within the Circle."

Silencer shook his head. "Once you escape, I'll send you through the Labyrinth."

Melnox, usually concealing his emotions well behind his cold red eyes, gasped in shock. "Silencer, are you sure. That's--"

"Yes, I'm sure. It's the only way. Their only chance to evade the Ix."

"What about the Labyrinth?" asked Shardak.

Resignation flashed across Silencer's face. Voice heavy, he said. "It's time I explained everything about the Circle." he said.

"Back before even the Elementals and Ix existed, after the Fall of the Ancient Forerunners who preceeded them, an ancient species from beyond the recorded cosmos invaded this universe. Their powers were far, far greater then anything the prehistoric races of Xaterex had seen before, for they possessed advanced mental powers that they used to telepathically command thousands of beings to surrender.

"These beings, the Mindeaters, so-called because they controlled hundreds of telepathic slaves. Called Drones, it was said at the time the Mindeaters devoured the creature's willpower from within, giving them the name. They were brutal and cruel, and forced hundreds of beings to mine for a mysterious substance they called Essence, which was the only thing they ever fed on.

"The Mindeaters soon discovered that Essence, while not plentiful on most planets, was plentiful here. And they also soon discovered massive deposits of Essence below the earth. It was they who created the first tunnels, the Earth Node that you and Blast entered the Circle though, and they who created the mines at Circle's Edge.

"They also discovered that below the Earth Nodes and mines, there was another world below-- the Grand Abyss. It is said to be a realm of blank nothingness, a void between worlds. Not a plane, but a dimensional prison between all of the other realms. Cruel entities from the distant past, beings who have powers that bend space and time, are said to exist there, forever locked between worlds for past crimes.

"Now, here's were the legends mix with the facts." said Silencer. "It is said that the Mindeaters created their capital *below* the Great Abyss, in an inner world below. This cities' name, lost to time, became known in later eras as the Nameless City. However, it is unknown if such a world ever existed, as soon after, the Mindeater Empire was destroyed in a massive, bloody coup by an army of escaped Elementals and slaves.

The Mindeaters survived, however, and remnants of their dark power still linger even here. The Elemental Lords soon realized the truth-- that the dark power of the Mindeaters was about to tear their newly founded city apart. They soon realized that the Abyss itself was closing in on their city, and in a dangerous risk of life, combined their power to create the Circle, a barrier against the Abyss.

"However, this was only a somewhat succesful cure." said Silencer, voice heavy.

"When they were concieving their plan to destroy the Toa Order, the Ix created a bioweapon they called *Elimination*. They used it during the war, releasing large quantities into the atmosphere around beseiged cities. They used this plague against the Circle, and it killed many of its defenders. This left the city open to the Ix's armies, and the Circle fell quickly and easily to their legions."

Silencer waited for a few moments, then finished, "The Labyrinth was once part of the Circle's city as well-- the district for upper class and Elemental nobility. During the plague, it was abandoned, and the series of tunnels collapsed in on itself, rendering them unstable. As such, it has become known as the Labyrinth, for it is a nearly innavigable maze."

Silencer lowered his voice. "The Labyrinth can lead you to Intax, Shardak. It is, apart from the Earth Node you followed the Copies of Corpse through, and the secret tunnels in the Ix's citadel, the only entrance to the upperworld."

Shardak nodded. Silencer's tale had answered all of his questions about the Circle, but there was one more thing he needed to know, something Barit wouldn't answer.

"Silencer, what are the Ix?" he asked. "I asked Barit during mining the day the Lumidrax attacked, but he wouldn't answer.

"No one knows, exactly." said Silencer. "They are part of the generation following the Fall, that is certain. Their Empire spans across many other worlds far darker then the Circle, as well as much of your own world. I've fought them for many years, and I know they need the Shadow Orb for some obscure plan only they know of, but little else is truly understood about them. The Ix are so far removed from the common people of the Circle that they've become a seperate race, the oppresors and the oppressed, and so on."

Shardak was about to acknowledge Silencer when another, more urgent question, entered his thoughts. "You said the Labyrinth was innavigable by anyone who didn't know it by heart. And earlier, your plan stated I needed to cloak myself with an invisibility power. My Aura skills are so undeveloped that I doubt I could even hide myself in the field, much less become completely invisible. Are Ion and Melnox Aura-users, as well? Can one of them accompany me?"

"No, I thought I was the only aura field user in existance other then the Ix before you showed up. If all goes well, we will meet you near the air channel that leads to Intax. However, there are other ways to gain invisibility, and your guide knows the Labyrinth like the back of her hand."

"Guide?" asked Shardak. "Who--"

"That would be me." said a new voice.

Shardak and Silencer both turned to regard the figure standing in the doorway. She was tall, armored in dark sapphire armor with blue eyes. In one hand, she carried a trident, in the other, a spear. She turned to regard Shardak, and spoke again,

"I am [Kyhrex](#). I will guide you through the Labyrinth and back to Intax."

Chapter 9

Illiera

One Year Earlier

Camouflaged in her scouting cloak, Valkyria watched her final opponent stride across the sands. The sun was setting over Illiera, and Valkyria was reminded slightly of her sparring match with Xhallin the day before her first raid. She smiled inwardly as she thought back to how naive she'd been then. So much had changed since that day when she'd been chosen for Khazin Thae's raiding mission.

Their Ix order had completed its final preparations to rejoin the Ix Empire. Their raids had become far more bold, now spanning the entire region called the Kodax Fells.

And other changes as well. Valkyria had grown tall and coldly beautiful, as befitted an Ix warrior. She'd mastered more combat forms than any other apprentice, and become a skilled killer who had slain dozens in almost every way imaginable.

Now she stood on the threshold of becoming an Ix warrior. Her greatest dream had been realized.

Stepping out of the shadows, she smiled at the Kodax. Seeing her, he charged.

Suddenly the sun flashed in her eyes, momentarily blinding her. For a moment, the words of her trainers before they'd entered the Eternal Game training grounds had told her: *Distraction can mean your death in the arena*. As an Ix warrior apprentice, Valkyria had fought many deadly beings to the death, but she'd never faced such deadly ferocity.

With reflexes borne from years of rigorous training, Valkyria's dagger seemed to materialize in her hand. The Kodax trainer's scythe flashed past her line of vision, and she blocked the blow easily. She had no time to see her opponent's second scythe slash at her, just below her guard. Valkyria blocked the blow, but the Kodax's sheer strength tore the weapon from her hand. He reached out for the final blow with both scythes, blades flashing in the sunset.

Valkyria drew a second dagger from the sheath on her thigh and narrowly managed to block one of the blows, twisting to one side to avoid the second. As the Kodax, momentarily disoriented by the distraction, swung at her wildly with the knife, Valkyria tore the weapon from his hand.

"Very good." the Kodax said. An obvious distraction. His remaining scythe struck her shoulder, drawing blood. Valkyria tensed against the pain that shredsteel always caused, the horrible sensation of burning and freezing cold all at once.

At first, when she had been chosen as an Ix apprentice, she had been shocked that they would actually land real blows. Her mentors had told her, "Would a real enemy?"

No. And eventually you can become immune to pain, as well as all of the emotions. It gives the Veiled Ones strength. Strength to survive anything that has been forced upon us.

The Kodax was on the defensive now. Valkyria, now armed with two shredsteel daggers, had injured him badly with blows to the chest and arms. With his final weapon, a long, razor sharp scythe, in his bloodless hands, he could defend easily against her strikes with her far shorter daggers.

I must end this, soon. she thought grimly as she easily parried the blow. Valkyria knew she could not outlast a Kodax warrior in combat forever. She was far more slender and built more lightly than any Kodax, and could not compete with the Kodax's sheer strength.

Suddenly the Kodax switched to the offensive, his scythe swinging wildly. Valkyria blocked the first several blows, and, though disoriented by his sudden attack, managed to take a step back, avoiding injury. But they both knew that this was more than a simple training exercise. If Valkyria was able to win against a Kodax master, she would be accepted as an Ix warrior. If she failed...

I will not fail. thought Valkyria, pushing the distracting thoughts aside. As the Kodax's blade arced downward, the metal blade striking her dagger and nearly tearing the weapon from her hand, an idea sprang into her mind. It was risky. It would utilize her powers of [Aura](#), which, according to the rules of the Eternal Game training exercise, would allow him to respond with his own powers as well.

As the Kodax's scythe descended, Valkyria lunged forward, allowing the scythe to reach an inch from certain defeat before flinging out a hand. Her green eyes stared at the hilt of the weapon, and her aura reached out, for a moment holding the blade in midair. Then, using a technique she'd been taught by an Ix Aura warrior, crushed the weapon's own aura around it, shattering the blade.

It took the Kodax a moment to realize what she had done, and another moment to realize he was now allowed to use all of his powers. As Valkyria brought the blade down, aiming for a finishing blow over the heart, he retaliated with a barrage of chain lightning. Years of training took over as Valkyria leapt high into the air, using both her control over the Aura field and her inherent speed caused by the Ix blood flowing in her veins.

The Kodax, realizing almost instantly what had happened, fired a blast of dark energy at the Ix, sure that it would strike her. Valkyria easily twisted out of the way, landing on her feet while aiming both daggers at the Kodax's heartlight. There was no doubt in either of the being's minds that had the Kodax been a real attacker, he would be dead now.

Valkyria felt a rush of pride and ambition rise up from within her, which she quickly suppressed. While many Ix warriors could not utilize either Aura or any of the elemental powers, they were still highly sensitive to the emotions of other beings.

And as an Ix warrior, she would never be allowed to show emotion of any sort while around other beings. It was only when she was alone that she could revel in her success, the culmination of the ultimate challenge. She had won a great victory, one that had been achieved only by the greatest of all warriors.

"Very good." a new voice rang out over the field. Nasal and harsh, it spoke in the Ix's native language, not the common tongue spoken by the Kodax, Matoran, and Agori who had been lost when Illiera was forever cut off from the rest of the universe.

Three beings seemed to appear out of the dark forest surrounding the training area. One was a massively built Kodax carrying at least ten daggers and two longer maces. The other two, veiled in robes of the blackest night, carried no weapons, but at the same time seemed even more dangerous than the Kodax.

Valkyria bowed her head respectfully to the two powerful Ix lords. One stepped forward and walked over to her.

"Valkyria Rheai, Ix apprentice and Aura warrior." intoned the Ix in his nasal voice, this time in the common tongue. "You have done much in your apprenticeship to serve the Ix Empire. You have battled beings from the Core Dimension, slain many deadly opponents in single combat, and proven yourself worthy of the title warrior."

Valkyria felt a shiver of anticipation as she waited for the Ix's final words. "Rise, Valkyria. Tomorrow you will be given your first mission as a full warrior, but, for now, you may rest and recover from the arena training session."

The Ix lord paused, then, almost as an afterthought, added, "I suppose you'll also need this."

He held out his hand, and Valkyria saw what he was carrying. It was a long, slender dagger with a hilt formed of pure obsidian, shot through with silver streaks of Shredsteel. The blade was curved slightly, and gleamed with a silver sheen. The blade itself appeared to be completely formed of molten silver, as though ripples of the metal were sliding up and down it.

[Silverblade](#), thought Valkyria. She'd wondered when her weapon would be returned to her. It had been given to her as an apprentice, after she'd been sent on a raid with her mentors. She'd killed one of the enemy warriors during the battle, and in return was granted the Ix weapon by [Scral](#) [Vhokyn](#), her commander.

"Your mentors tell me you also have a talent with the bow as well as the dagger. Take these as well." The Ix lord paused, and two Ix warriors stepped into the clearing.

One carried a bow, made completely out of the same materiel Silverblade had been fashioned from, the Xxyr, "[Shademetal](#)" in Matoran. A set of arrows, as well as a quiver, were held in his other, and he handed them both to Valkyria, who was unable to control her surprise or delight in the Aura field. She had to make a consious effort not to betray her surprise any further.

The second Ix was carrying six Shredsteel daggers, which were carried by both warriors and apprentices in case of attack. As she slung the quiver of her shoulder and picked up the bow and Silverblade.

Something must have shown on her face as she faced the Ix lord, for his eyes seemed to grow softer. Valkyria felt a brief touch, that of another aura coming in contact with her own, and tensed, waiting for the Ix's reaction.

"Do not suppress your emotions now, Valkyria." he said, surprising her by using her first name. "This is your last day as an apprentice. You will have the rest of your life to live without emotion."

Valkyria began to calm now, remembering what Vhokyn had told her during the torture resistance sessions she'd had to endure as an apprentice, in the event she was ever captured by an enemy.

The Ix are the masters of the universe. Any master must be able to put his own emotions aside for the good of the universe we rule. Without emotion, there is no love, no anger, no life, no pain, no death- only the single devotion to our ultimate goal.

Valkyria smiled inwardly, thinking of their raid on the Glatorian outpost built near the edge of [the Veil](#). It had been there that she'd first taken a life, there where she'd been given Silverblade, and there where she and her squadron had won knowledge of the Core Universe's weaponry, the way they fought, and the way they lived. It had been a grand victory, one that she had savored in its fullest.

Now, as an Ix warrior, she would win many more great victories, but she would not allow even the lighter emotions to cloud her judgement. Allowing, for one last time, her ambition, anticipation, and thrill of success to shine on her face, Valkyria waited for the Ix to finish speaking, then bowed her head one last time and, as the gathered Ix and Kodax began to scatter, vanished into the trees, her bow in one hand, Silverblade in the other.

Chapter 10

All was silent in the Circle. The cold, baleful green lamplight shone down on empty alleyways covered in a thin layer of dust. Moving silently, his torch of Cold Fire held tightly in his clawed

hand, the Kranr guard grimaced, his scarred, pitted mask reflecting off the wall of cold, mirrorlike steel.

He'd been on watch for far too long now. While the Kranr's Inner Watch still patrolled the edge of the Spire, he was the only member of the Outer Watch still on duty. His commander had told him his replacement would arrive in two hours. He'd been on watch for five.

The Kranr suddenly heard the sharp sound of steel on steel. He tensed, drawing his sword, and moved slowly and deliberately toward the source of the noise. It was unusual for the gangs that battled in the lower parts of the city that the plague had devastated, but rare for their battles to spread so far into the Circle's heart.

If it's really the gangs, the Ix'll deal with them. thought the Kranr, shivering slightly. While he tried to tell himself it was because of the chill air of the Upperdark or the torch he carried, he knew the truth. Just the thought of the cold-blooded, veiled beings made his blood run cold, as though Cold Fire was flowing through his veins.

No, they'll have my head if I don't deal with this. he decided, then moved toward the source of the noise. Creeping through the darkness, the Kranr steeled his nerves and strode down the alleyways.

Nothing. he thought, confused more than angry now. He'd have sworn he'd heard footsteps only minutes ago.

You've been on watch too long, that'll all. he told himself as he walked back to his post. *There's no need to get the Ix in on this. It's nothing.*

"Excellent job." whispered Kyhrex as she and Shardak slipped by the Kranr guard. "You covered the mistake well."

They'd been creeping past the Kranr guard when his armored hand had slammed against a lamppost. He'd immediately walked toward the Kranr, rather than away from him, so when the guard had searched for the noise, he'd found nothing.

They'd managed relatively easily to bypass the Outer Watch. Very few guards were still on duty, and the lampposts were dimmed. However, as they drew closer to the center of the Circle, Shardak had realized the invisibility power was failing. If someone looked closely, they could perceive the faint outline of the two beings.

Fortunately, the cold green light gave everything an ethereal quality, so shadows flickering in and out of existence were not uncommon. No one had been able to spot them, though the Kranr guard had come dangerously close. Shardak sighed in relief once they were past the guard.

"We're almost to the Spire." said Kyhrex. "Then--"

"Melnor?" a new voice interrupted her. "Is that you?"

For a moment, the voice distracted Kyhrex. The invisibility shield wavered, then failed altogether.

"Barit?" gasped Shardak. "What are you--"

"I saw you come out of that dark house. Then you vanished-- it was as though something swallowed you. I followed you past the Outer Watch's gatehouse, and I realized you were going to the Spire. How'd you break out of the Slave Compound?"

"I--" Shardak began, at loss for words. Kyhrex motioned for him to stay silent. "Matoran--" she began.

"Barit." corrected the Onu-Matoran.

"Barit." said Kyhrex. "Why did you track us here?"

"Because you're going to free your friend. The Glatorian prisoner."

"How did you know about Blast?" gasped Shardak, unable to believe what his senses were telling him. The chances of running into Barit here were astronomically small, and the Toa was at loss for words.

"It's not exactly science." said Barit. "You knew nothing about the Circle, and you're obviously not a Glatorian. Why the Ix didn't figure it out is beyond me. I'm almost surprised you managed to evade them this far."

Barit paused, his eyes full of pain and regret. "I'll now have to call the Inner Watch. Nothing personal." He opened his mouth.

A bolt of jagged fire shot from Kyhrex's fingertips, striking the Matoran with such force it lifted him off the ground and slammed him against the wall. Barit's eyes rolled back in his skull, and he collapsed against the wall.

Kyhrex quickly resumed the invisibility shroud, but now it was in worse condition than ever. They were now almost completely solid, like specters or wraiths. Realizing this, Kyhrex grabbed Shardak's arm and dragged him beneath one of the lampposts.

Shardak saw three Kranr appear on the ramparts above, crossbows at the ready. They whispered something unintelligible, then vanished behind the parapet.

"Run! The Inner Watch are coming to investigate." whispered Kyhrex. "They'll be here any minute."

"Why did you knock out Barit?" asked Shardak angrily. "He was innocent. Will he live?"

"He was about to kill us both." said Kyhrex. "And yes, he'll live, if the Inner Watch is in a good mood. Now get moving before we're caught."

Shardak raced after Kyhrex, his mind in turmoil. Had they sacrificed Barit's life to buy time to save Blast? Would the Ix torture Barit now, because of their actions?

Toa are the heroes in every legend. thought Shardak. *A true Toa wouldn't sacrifice an innocent to save his own life.*

Then he remembered Blast, languishing in the Spire with no escape. For a moment, Shardak wondered what the Ix had done with the Blade of Arcturas and Blast's scythe. Were they still in the possession of Banrax? Or had the Ix also sensed the power within those weapons and taken them to further their own ends?

"We're here." said Kyhrex quietly. "The spire."

Shardak stared up at the massive spire rock, feeling very small. The spire, carved from the twisted obsidian column at the heart of the city, it towered over them like an avenging shadow. Flickering lights danced like ethereal specters across the smooth surface of the sheer cliff. Even the massive walls, patrolled by armed guards, suddenly seemed very small in the face of this massive formation. In one hand, the Shadow Orb throbbed with power, flooding his aura with darkness. The last time he'd been here, he'd been Banrax's captive, a prisoner of the Ix. Now, to save his friend, he would have to once more enter the realm of his nightmares.

Stepping up against the barred iron door, Shardak realized he'd reached the moment of desision. Drawing back a hand, he felt a hard, cold sphere of auric energy meterialize in his hand. For one moment he hesitated, then released the energy and the door shattered.

Shards of cold metal exploded from all directions, and Shardak heard the shouts of the guards as he and Kyhrex entered the Spire. A crossbow bolt slammed against the Spire, inches from his shoulder. Shardak raced into the Spire, Kyhrex close behind.

Then the world exploded into chaos. Instantly alerted by the shattered door, a patrol of Copies burst from the darkness of the Spire. Their spears, cold and sharp against the stark blue light, stabbed out at Shardak.

Raising the sword Silencer had given him, Shardak brought it down on one of the Copies' pikes, severing the tip from the hilt. As a second Copy charged him, he blocked three blows from the spear with his sword, and brought the weapon down on the Copies leg. Shardak felt the sword sink through armor, then bone. With a screech, the Copy tore himself away, limping into the shadows.

Kyhrex, however, had been surrounded by Copies with spears, and as he raced toward her, stunning several Copies with long sweeping arcs with his sword, the wounded Copy attacked. Shardak fell against the wall of the Spire, and watched as the Copies' spear readied to impale him.

Then Kyhrex struck. Her long protosteel claw slashed the Copy from head to foot. Peices of the construct scattered across the floor. Two more Copies charged Kyhrex, but she sidestepped nimbly and, using the same bolts of fire she'd used to stun Barit, destroyed the Copies. The flames danced across the floor of the Spire before flickering out.

Any living foe would have stopped then, or called for reinforcements. But the constructs, oblivious to the losses they'd suffered, continued their relentless attack.

Then Shardak realized more Copies were appearing, and masked Kranr from the Inner Watch were pouring through the Spire door. Any minute now they'd be pinned between the Copies and the Inner Watch, with no hope of escape.

"Kyhrex! Run!" Shardak yelled, as a crossbow bolt struck her in the shoulder. Kyhrex grimaced in pain, and drew a new weapon-- a laser crossbow. Shardak saw the Inner Watch step back slightly, then Kyhrex shot one in the neck and he fell to the ground. A second bolt of fire eliminated the Copies, and Kyhrex raced over to Shardak.

Behind them, the Inner Watch was taking in casualties, preparing for the next assault. Shardak saw Kyhrex's attack had destroyed the three remaining Copies, and at least three of the Watch were killed or wounded.

"They'll be back, with more reinforcements on the way." whispered Kyhrex urgently. "We have to get Blast, then escape into the Labyrinth."

"How will we get out?" asked Shardak frantically. "The Inner Watch'll have the door barricaded again. We'd never get through."

"The Spire is a fortress." Kyhrex answered. "But without at least several exits, it's also a death trap. I know another way out." She looked weak and tired, and Shardak realized the invisibility shroud and the fire bolts she'd used against Barit and the Inner Watch had weakened her badly.

"How many of the Inner Watch are on duty?" he asked, once they were out of sight.

"Many, perhaps forty, but they're all so scattered it'll take a long time to rouse them all. They won't pose a problem, as they've probably never even been within the Spire. It, along with the Ix Citadel, is the most secret of all buildings."

Shardak nodded, trying desperately to remember the directions to the holding cells. The idea that more Copies or worse, Ix would soon appear only served to confuse him further.

"This way." he said finally, grabbing a Cold Fire torch from the wall. He felt both exhilarated and terrified after the skirmish. Shardak and Kyhrex turned down the tunnel, and Shardak's guess was confirmed when he saw the cells in the distance, as well as the Glatorian sitting trapped within them.

"Blast!" he said, his voice ecstatic. "You're alive!"

"Shardak?" slurred Blast, his eyes tired. It was as if the appearance of his friend was not at all a surprise. "Can we go now? Who's this?" he said when he saw Kyhrex.

"She's on our side." Shardak assured him. "We're here to get you out."

Blast nodded, as though tired. "Are you okay?" asked Shardak, alarmed.

Blast's eyes suddenly regained some of their old intensity. "Shardak." he said, grabbing the Toa's leg. "There's something--"

Then a new voice cut in, and Shardak had to brace himself against the cell in order to keep from falling over in complete shock.

It was a voice he knew very well.

Too well.

Chapter 11

"Hello, Shardak." She said as she entered the room. Her armor gleamed silver in the half-light, only dimmed by the dark cloak she'd draped over her slender shoulders. Her eyes, once so full of warmth, sparkled with dark hatred. Three cloaked Ix, scythes drawn, flanked her. Shardak could see two more approaching them.

"I told them that if we waited long enough, you'd come for your poor friend." said Nightshade coldly.

Shardak felt as though he'd been slapped in the chest. How had she been captured? Were they going to threaten to kill her, so he'd turn himself in? What...

No.

She was one of *them*.

The enemy. The Ix. He'd been betrayed. Tricked. Played by the Empire. Shardak felt his world unravel before him.

"Nightshade...you're not..."

Nightshade turned her imperious gaze on Kyhrex. She'd raised her bow, ready to fire an arrow through Nightshade's heart.

"One shot, and you're dead." Nightshade snarled. "You've seen how fast the Ix can move. You, too, Burnarm." she added Blast readied his scythe.

She must have told the Fury...where Arcturas and I were hiding. That's the only explanation for the Copies' attack in the forests that night. Shardak thought, his memories in turmoil. He'd never seen Nightshade fall to the Copies. While Shardak watched Arcturas die, Nightshade was probably laughing over his death with the Imperial soldiers.

She murdered him. He thought. Fury gave him strength, and he drew the sword Silencer had given him. Then he lowered the blade as sickening realization flooded him. The Ix would kill him before he even lifted the sword.

"We...pitied you." Shardak gasped. "We pitied you, and you betrayed us! How could you! You're..."

"An Ix." finished Nightshade. Despite the drawn weapons all around her, she seemed completely at ease, more so than Shardak had ever seen her. She was completely in control.

She was an Ix.

"I was an assassin, sent to kill Arcturas." said Nightshade, but Shardak could barely hear her over the pain he felt. It was as if someone had stabbed a knife into him and was slowly twisting it around.

"But I had a better plan." she continued. "I watched and waited while you and that old idiot wandered around from place to place, trying to escape the Empire. But no one can evade us forever. Finally, the moment was right. I trapped you both in the fire. Thought for sure you'd die at the hands of the Copies.

"But somehow you escaped, and found your way here with the help of that anarchist Silencer. Except Kor, of course, who, by now is captured and awaiting execution. You should never leave anyone you care about behind, Shardak." She laughed her beautiful, pure laugh, but it was tainted by hatred.

"Nightshade." Shardak said, desperately, wondering how she knew about Silencer. "How could you spend ten years laughing and talking and journeying with us and then-" his voice broke. "Just-" He couldn't continue any further. His vision blurred with tears.

"You didn't matter to me." she said. "Neither of you. We are the chosen race, the rulers of an Empire that spans universes. You are an insignificant group of rebels who will be erased from memory forever today."

Shardak winced as he felt the Shadow Orb grow heavy in his hand. Although he knew there was no way Nightshade could possibly know he was holding the heart of the Ix's power in his hand, he felt as though her cold emerald gaze was burning through him, as though she knew all of his innermost secrets and fears, including the fact he was holding the Orb.

She turned to the massed Ix. "Kill them." she ordered. "Kill them all."

This is the end. Thought Shardak. His mind was still confused. How could he believe that the sister he'd loved so much had suddenly become an evil Ix, bent on his destruction? Even as one of the Ix raised a scythe to deal a death blow, Shardak still felt as though everything was happening extremely slowly, despite the ghoulish soldier's extreme speed.

Shardak's eyes fixed on Nightshade as the Veiled One bore down on him. She stood before him like a conquering general, her gaze cold and pitiless. There was no sign of the compassionate, friendly Glatorian that he had journeyed with for eleven long years. Her eyes only held one promise: death.

Shardak moved in, shielding Blast from the attack. Kyhrex had her laser crossbow at the ready, aiming it at Nightshade. However, it was completely obvious that the Ix, who could move almost supernaturally fast, would grab him before they did.

Then everything happened at once. The Ix lunged toward him, there was a flash of daggers in the half-light, an explosion of blood that struck Shardak, spattering across his armor and legs, and the force of the impact flung him against the wall of the Spire and knocked the Cold Fire torch from his hand.

Then he saw his rescuer.

"*Barit?*" he gasped in shock. "How did you--"

Nightshade moved faster than Shardak would have thought possible. Shardak opened his mouth to scream as the dagger entered Barit's neck.

Like a puppet with all his strings cut, Barit staggered backward and collapsed limply on the ground. Shardak opened his mouth, but everything happened too quickly to follow. Moments after the dagger speared through Barit's throat, Shardak saw Blast, holding the scythe in one hand and the Blade of Arcturas in the other, struck a charging Ix.

Shardak saw a second Ix leap at him, but Kyhrex had charged into the fray now, protosteel claw swinging wildly. Shardak grabbed Barit in the confusion, hauling the Matoran to his feet. A quick examination confirmed all of his worst fears. The dagger had struck the center of his throat, and his life was slowly fading. Blast had been slammed against the wall, and Kyhrex was shouting for him to run.

"Why?" Shardak asked, his face stained with tears. "Why did you--"

"You...were...right." Barit gasped. "The Ix are not...our guardians. Prevail Shardak...for Mata Nui's sake, flee..."

His head rolled to one side as his eyes glazed over. His body went limp and he fell against the wall.

"Run! Shardak! Run!" Blast was yelling. The element of surprise was nearly over, and the Ix had recovered from the attack surprisingly quickly.

He realized he'd have to leave Barit. Leave him for the Ix.

"Run, Shardak! Don't throw your life away! Run!"

Blast's shout galvanized Shardak into action. He took one last look at Barit's body before racing after Blast. The Ix had regrouped, but Shardak knew they'd be too late. Barit's suicidal attack on Nightshade had given them the one chance to escape.

Racing down the twisted tunnels, Shardak knew they'd already escaped the Ix, but he didn't care. Kyhrex was shouting at them, urging them to follow, telling them the entrance to the Labyrinth was near, but Shardak was hardly listening.

Barit was dead. And *Nightshade* had killed him. In retrospect, Shardak wanted to laugh aloud at how he and Blast had played right into her hands, following her into the Circle.

Shardak knew that if they hadn't followed her into the Circle, they'd have been captured by the Ix no matter what, they'd never let any witnesses survive the fire once they learned of his survival, but the pain he felt, both from his wounds and from Nightshade's betrayal made rational thought impossible. In the wildly chaotic race through the twisting tunnels below the Spire, he was only conscious of the weight of the Shadow Orb in his hand.

Kyhrex led them down winding passageways lit by Cold Flame torches and the green spheres from the Circle, but Shardak was barely conscious of it. Later, he would wonder exactly how long they'd wandered within and below the Spire, but he knew he'd truly never learn.

Finally Kyhrex stopped before a massive archway. Shardak gasped in shock. The cavern was like a yawning void, a gateway into darkness. He could see strange green dancing lights somewhere in the bottomless blackness as well, but the pale color seemed even blacker than the cavern mouth itself. Cold Fire torches, one on either side, did nothing to brighten the shadowy cavern.

Shardak gasped again, his voice filled with awe. Though Silencer had told them both what to expect, words could not convey the sheer mass of the cavern's entrance.

"The Gateway." said Kyhrex. Her voice was grim and cold. "The entrance to the Labyrinth."

Chapter 12

Illuminated by the ethereal green light of Kyhrex's lantern and the cold torch Shardak carried, the Labyrinth appeared foreboding, mysterious, and enigmatically dangerous. Grim, half-topped spires stood like grim witnesses to time's unceasing destruction, and half-formed and collapsed buildings and rock formations made the small, winding tunnels even smaller.

Despite himself, Shardak shivered. The Circle, while tyrannical and cruel, had been wide and open. However, the Labyrinth was a massive crisscross of intersecting tunnels and passageways that led far deeper into the earth than the Circle.

Once again, Shardak had wondered how deep underground they were. Silencer had told him the Circle was not far from the Kodax Fells and was not much deeper than the passageway Banrax had captured them in.

A sudden thought made him turn to Blast. They'd been running through the Labyrinth for the past twenty or so minutes, too scared that the Ix would catch them to talk. Now they'd slowed slightly, Kyhrex easily leading them through the maze like she'd lived here her entire life.

"Where'd you find the Blade of Arcturas and the scythe?" Shardak asked.

Blast looked puzzled. "It was strange. One moment I was thinking that I needed a weapon, the next I was holding both of them in my hands. I don't understand how or why--"

Kyhrex looked puzzled. "You're obviously not a Toa. However, I don't think you can use the aura field, and you certainly don't have elemental powers."

Shardak was about to ask Kyhrex how she could be so certain, but Blast spoke first.

"I know. But I didn't get tired or weaken or anything after summoning the weapons, it was as though--" Blast broke off, a confused expression on his face, as though his subconscious had realized a missing piece to a puzzle but his consciousness had yet to process it.

Kyhrex halted finally near a small, rundown building.

"We've lost them now. If they can still sense where we are, they haven't shown it yet."

"How do you know?" asked Blast. Shardak wanted to grab his hand, beg for his forgiveness for the mess he'd gotten them all into, but he didn't dare. However, Blast seemed eager to let bygones be bygones, and looked delighted to have been rescued.

"The way Shardak can sense the aura field...I can sense elemental energy. Unlike auric power, I can tell where it's coming from. If any of the Kranr pursued us, they're far behind now."

"And the Ix?" asked Shardak.

"The Ix could very well be following us now. However, hopefully Barit wounded the Ix girl badly enough to keep them off our trail for a few hours."

At the mention of Nightshade, Shardak tensed. She was an Ix! How blindingly obvious her betrayal had been, yet Shardak, thinking with his heart and not his mind, had rushed off to save her, never considering she'd been the real murderer all along.

Her and the Fury. thought Shardak. At the thought of the ghoulish Ix commander, his heart froze with dread. Even Silencer spoke the Fury's name with no little awe or fear.

"Hopefully." he answered. Then he asked, who is the Fury? I've heard Silencer mention him in the past, always with hatred. What did he do to him?"

Kyhrex's expression grew somber. "Silencer has lost much in the fight with the Ix. For years he has fought the Ix, and lost everything he loved because of it. Well, not everything." she amended. "He still has Melnox."

As she spoke, Shardak felt a thought, or was it a *memory*, flash across his mind.

He was standing on a massive island. Winged Rahi flew through the skies, legions of black-robed Ix strode from the darkness...

Silencer, and another Toa, a Toa of Water, fighting against the massive horde of enemies. More beings, Glatorian, Agori, and Matoran, running in all directions...

The Fury, scythes drawn, facing Silencer and the same Toa of Water...

"Shardak." Kyhrex's voice brought the world back into focus. "Shardak, are you okay?"

"Yes." he lied, deeply unsettled by what he'd seen. He wondered for a moment where the vision had come from? Was it his imagination? Or the Shadow Orb? It had seemed so real...

"Hopefully she'll not be able to follow us." said Shardak. As he said this, his voice broke with pain and exhaustion. He'd truly severed the last tie that bound him to Intax.

"I can't believe her." said Blast, angry. Then his voice became sad. "They'd beat me, in the hold. The Kranr would laugh, and the Ix would just...stand there and let them do it. Nightshade would often come and watch."

"Blast, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to get you involved in--"

"Shardak." said Blast calmly. "I can't blame you. It was the Ix. They're the ones to blame, for drawing us into this. And besides, sooner or later the Fury and Nightshade would've figured out what had happened and come after us. And we'd have both been dead weeks ago."

In the next few minutes, Shardak and Kyhrex told Blast about Silencer rescuing him from the Spire, his days as a slave miner and apprentice to Melnox and the others, and Silencer's revelations about his past and about the prophecies.

"I believe you." said Blast immediately, surprising him. "Some of the questions the Ix asked me...had no other explanation. Eventually they gave up questioning me about you when they realized I knew nothing."

Shardak nodded, then turned to Kyhrex. "Why were all these buildings built within these tunnels? Some of them were once so large it's as if the earth itself has shifted and destroyed them."

"That is not so far from the truth." Kyhrex answered. "Many years ago, the Labyrinth was part of the Circle, the noble's district. During the years of the plague, the Labyrinth sank beneath the earth and eventually the raw elemental energy within the earth twisted them into the maze of tunnels they are today."

"Where did the plague originate from?" asked Shardak. "From the Nameless City?"

Kyhrex seemed surprised, but answered, "Silencer told you of the Mindeaters?"

"Yes. He said the city was their capitol, their main base." Shardak answered.

"No one knows if the city exists." answered Kyhrex. "However, if it does exist, it has almost certainly been devastated by now. One of the ancient legends calls it *A place of horrors and half-formed shades, from which terrors stem and darkness rises*. If it does exist, it would be somewhere in the void."

"What is the void, exactly? Silencer called it the Grand Abyss."

"The Void, the Abyss, the Pit-- it has had many names over the years. Some say it leads to complete annihilation, a complete destruction of mind and body. Others say it's an ultimate prison, where forgotten deities and demons from ages past are locked away, a sort of void between realities."

"Will the Ix ever invade the Fells?" Blast asked after a few moments of silence.

"No." Kyhrex answered at length. "They won't attack. Many, many Kodax serve the Empire in the realms above the Circle, as the Kranr do here. The Kodax tribes are so nomadic that the Ix already control the entire area without even posting guards there."

"However, you can't hide there. The Ix are patient. Sublimely patient. No one has ever left the Circle and survived, save one."

"Who?" asked Shardak curiously. He felt a strange sort of anticipation flow through him, as though he already knew the answer, as though it was just beyond his reach.

"He was an Elemental, like Banrax. His name was Arcturas."

Arcturas! the name tore through Shardak like lightning. Was it possible that the Glatorian who'd raised him and the only being to have escaped the Circle were one and the same? It seemed completely inconceivable...but he'd been thrown overnight into a world where nothing, not even life and death, was certain.

Before Shardak could inquire further, Kyhrex got to her feet.

"Ix." she whispered the name quietly, as though it were curse.

Shardak felt raw terror flood his senses again. Could the Ix have caught them so soon? It seemed impossible. But, if Silencer was correct, the veiled torturers and the Copies were the least of the Ix's servants.

"Here? So soon?"

"They're coming...and there are Kranr with them."

"Kranr?" asked Shardak. "Don't they want to have our escape be as secret as possible."

Kyhrex nodded. "Usually, yes. It surprised me, too. I think it may be that the veiled ones will send the Kranr first, then have the soldiers follow on mop-up duty. It's one of their tactics. And then we've got the division ahead of us--"

"The division?" asked Shardak.

"White Lightning." said Kyhrex. "They're the Ix's border guard. They maintain the lowest, darkest reaches of the labyrinth, as well as a gateway to the Void."

"More Ix? Great. We're completely cut off, then?" asked Shardak, fearing the worst.

"No." answered Kyhrex. "There are many escape routes in the Labyrinth, and the Ix can't possibly patrol them all. There are other dangers, such as hunting Lumidrax, but nothing you can't handle, even with your limited auric skills."

Shardak was about to reply, when Kyhrex grabbed his arm. "We'll have to rest later. I know an air shaft that leads upward, toward the Circle. It leads to many other tunnels, so we can double back and return here if we have to."

Shardak raised his torch, illuminating the shadowed passageways ahead. All was ominously silent, and Shardak wondered for a brief moment if his auric senses were also confirming what Kyhrex had told him or if he was simply scared of impending danger.

"No..." whispered Kyhrex. Shardak looked at their guide and was startled to realize her features were scared. "He's coming. I should have known he wouldn't take the passageways, he'd just blast his way in."

"Who?" asked Shardak and Blast at the same time, their voices equally full of fear.

"Flareus, Elemental Lord of Fire. And it seems he's not going to wait for the Ix to arrive. He's coming now to take us prisoner."

"He's disobeying the Ix?" asked Shardak.

"No. The Kranr's presence I sensed was either a diversion, or the Kranr and possibly the Ix are following Banrax to make sure all the loose ends are tied up. Either way, he's trying to blast through the walls of the Labyrinth."

Her final words were accompanied by a burst of fire and an explosion like a thunderclap. Shardak winced as more flames exploded from the wall, and as fire and ash spiraled through the cold darkness, a being, moving through the flames as though they were nothing but air.

"Shardak! Blast! Run!" yelled Kyhrex. The being had destroyed the wall completely now, he was staring at Kyhrex with murderous intent in his eyes.

"I'm not leaving you!" Shardak yelled back, his voice hoarse. Flareus, in a dark cloak and crimson armor, looked absolutely terrifying in the miasma of flames. His Kanohi had the same hungry twisted expression that Banrax's had, but unlike Banrax his eyes were darker, smouldering with flames. Worse still, Shardak could sense his aura, a burning sphere of pure flame that surrounded his entire being.

Flareus wasted no time with words. Drawing back a hand, Shardak saw a sphere of flame begin to form within his hand. Before Shardak could move, Flareus launched the sphere at Kyhrex.

Shardak watched as Kyhrex threw up a shield of elemental water, then to his horror, saw that the fire was burning *through* the shield, evaporating the water. Shardak watched helplessly as the elemental's sheer power flung her against the wall. Kyhrex slammed against the wall with a jarring thud, then fell limply to the ground.

Kyhrex raised her head, trying to clear her vision. "Run..." she whispered. "It's our only chance..."

"You never had a chance, rebels." hissed Flareus disdainfully, his voice sounding like the crackle of burning embers. "This conflict is over. Now give me the Shadow Orb."

The Elemental raised his hand, a second sphere coalescing in his palm. His eyes flicked back and forth between Shardak and Blast, as though deciding which being to kill first. Then finally he settled on Blast, his eyes fixed on his target.

Shardak felt a cold surge of pure anger flow through him, one he never completely understood. Maybe it was because of the anger he felt at Barit's death and Nightshade's betrayal. Maybe it was because the Ix had interfered with his life when they'd had no right to, and now Barit was dead and Kyhrex could be dying. But in any event, he raised the Blade of Arcturas and charged the Elemental.

Flareus was about to release the elemental sphere when Shardak struck. Surprised, Flareus whirled around, his eyes smouldering with rage. His expression turned to recognition when he saw the Blade of Arcturas slam down on his foreleg, sinking into the muscle and bone beneath.

The Elemental snarled and swiped his claws, aiming for the Toa's head. Shardak dodged narrowly, and the blow struck him below the shoulder blades, damaging his armor.

Pain shot through him, a cold lance against the dying embers of his rage. Before he could react, he felt Flareus' burning claws grab him, and felt the heat flow through his body. Before he could react he heard Blast scream his name, and felt a rush of cold air tear him from the Elemental's arms. Shardak landed lightly on his feet, and saw Kyhrex channeling the energy into him out of the corner of his eye.

Flareus screamed in rage, and released the fireball at Blast. Shardak watched its progression with horror, thinking for sure Blast would be incinerated or flung against the wall.

However, just as the sphere was about to strike him, something inexplicable happened. Just as the fireball was about to make contact with Blast and Shardak was about to charge Flareus again in retaliation, Blast suddenly vanished, then appeared at the other side of the cavern. Flareus snarled in confusion as his sphere of flame splashed uselessly against the wall, then turned around in horror to see Blast standing directly in front of him.

"What--" Flareus began, but Blast had already gathered blue energy in his hand and flung it at Flareus. The Elemental retaliated with a burst of sonic energy that sent both Blast and Shardak reeling. While they were distracted, Flareus flung a crackling bolt of dark energy at them, striking Blast in the arm and Shardak in the leg.

Shardak winced in pain as his leg was knocked out from under him and he fell to the ground. The force of the impact sent the Labyrinth spinning wildly around him, and it took him a moment to realize he'd fallen. As he looked up, he saw that Flareus had callously swatted Blast to the ground and left him injured while moving in to finish off Kyhrex.

"No!" screamed Shardak, and leapt at the Elemental. Flareus whirled around, then, in one hard strike, tore the Blade of Arcturas from his hands. He then used the force created by Shardak's jump to reverse his momentum, flinging him to the ground once more. Again, Shardak felt his fall slowed by Kyhrex's air Elemental powers.

Flareus hissed in rage, when he saw Shardak had not been killed, then struck Kyhrex again with a bolt of fire. The bolt narrowly missed Kyhrex's head, and struck her arm. Shardak winced as the flames literally burned through it.

"No!" he screamed as Flareus readied to deal the final blow.

At the last minute, Kyhrex dodged to one side. The trick did not fool Flareus at all, and the Elemental matched her blow with one of his own. At the same time, Kyhrex drew her laser crossbow, and the Elemental was forced to take a step back to avoid being stuck by the weapon.

Kyhrex slashed the blade wildly, and Flareus quickly disarmed her. The Elemental snarled in confusion as he watched the remains of her laser crossbow shatter against the Labyrinth's walls.

And at that moment, Kyhrex struck. Raising her hands toward the cavern ceiling, she fired a cyclonic blast of energy upward. The beam impacted at the same moment Flareus' bolt of fire did, and the combined weight of those attacks brought down a massive rockfall of debris.

Shardak watched in horrified fascination as hundreds of tons of rubble came crashing down on Flareus. The Elemental uttered a final screech of rage and hatred that was abruptly cut off as the cavern collapsed on top of him.

"Quick, follow me!" yelled Kyhrex over the roar of the crumbling tunnel. "This entire section of the Labyrinth will cave in at any moment!"

Shardak needed no further urging. Grabbing Blast's arm, he hauled the Glatorian to his feet and together they raced down the tunnel.

"Is he dead?" asked Shardak. His voice sounded different to him, smaller and more afraid. Earlier in the Spire, Nightshade had been about to kill him with her sickle. He'd never felt closer to the edge of death than he had then, until Flareus grabbed him and held him in his claws, ready to snap his spine.

"No." said Kyhrex. Shardak looked at her with gratitude and admiration. She'd been injured badly by Flareus and had used the last of her elemental powers to bury the Elemental beneath a stretch of tunnel, but was still standing despite her exhaustion and injuries. "How long do you think it'll take him to blast out of there with fire? He tore down a cavern wall made of cold iron with three blasts."

"So he'll be on our trail soon? Before we run into White Lightning?" asked Shardak.

"No, he'd already exhausted much of his elemental powers blasting through the cavern wall and in the battle. He'll recover, but he'll almost certainly return to the Ix and report failure."

"You're sure?"

"White Lightning guards the Labyrinth. Every exit tunnel is monitored by the Ix. His failure to kill us was only a temporary setback. And now they all know we have the Orb."

Shardak nodded once, then turned to Blast. "How did you do that?" he asked. "You slowed down time around Flareus."

"I...don't know." said Blast. He sounded very confused. "It was similar to when your sword and the scythe appeared in my hands. It was as though...I'd suddenly developed skills far beyond my years of training."

Kyhrex was looking at Blast with curiosity and slight suspicion, but she was obviously tired and they both abandoned questioning. It was obvious both of them were wounded badly and needed rest.

"We should rest here." said Shardak. "There's no way we'll get any further, and if Flareus isn't following us, we aren't in any immediate danger."

Kyhrex nodded as though relieved. "I'll take first watch. We still need to take precautions. It's not unusual for the Ix's division to patrol this area of the Labyrinth."

Shardak silently acknowledged Kyhrex, but his own comment continued to haunt him. *We aren't in any immediate danger.* Shardak shivered as he thought of hundreds of grim, cold Ix soldiers barring all hope of escape from these claustrophobic tunnels, and wondered as he surveyed the area with his Cold Fire torch what dangers lay ahead.

Chapter 13

Deep within the Labyrinth, Shardak followed Blast and Kyhrex through a seemingly endless network of twists and turns. Despite the fact that Shardak had become more than confused after a few hours of travel, Kyhrex seemed to know the way like the back of her hand.

How long had they been travelling? Shardak couldn't say. Hours? Days? His mind was numb from what he'd seen back in the Spire and in the Labyrinth during the battle with Flareus.

"We'll—" Kyhrex began, but a new voice cut her off. Shardak had enough time to draw the Blade of Arcturas before a tall thin being in orange armor staggered around a corner and into a tunnel. Seeing travelers, the being gave a smile. However, his dark eyes and staggering gait made him seem less than sane to Shardak. And his aura...it was almost unreadable, a disjointed, scattered mess of conflicting thoughts and emotions that he didn't dare to read.

"Travelers!" hissed the orange-armored being. "Ix-beings!" his insane eyes fixed on Kyhrex, and, raising one fist, grabbed her arm before she could even draw her crossbow. "No! You shall not kill me!"

"We're not Ix!" said Blast. "Let us go. We're trying to escape from them!"

At the sound of Blast's voice, the ancient orange-armored being whirled around. "That voice..." he said, eyes widening. "I know you from before."

"Before?" Blast asked, confused. "I—"

"Before!" said the orange being, with more force. He seemed agitated, and did not relax his hold on Kyhrex. Shardak saw he had a long knife in one hand and was raising it slowly as he saw Blast raise his scythe. "When the world ended."

He's insane. Thought Shardak, with a touch of sadness. He could see the being's armor was rusted, pitted and scarred. Trying to maintain his calm, he stepped forward, raising the Blade of Arcturas. "Let us go," he said again, hoping his voice sounded steady.

The being's eyes fixed on the sword, and recognition flashed again in his eyes. "Fire sword! I knew you too, before the end. We were friends. Before the fire scarred me, I was an ally." On the last sentence the being's voice became more certain.

"We've never met before," said Shardak, more than confused now. The being obviously thought he was someone else. "But you have to let us go. We've done you now harm."

"You Ix-beings," said the ancient being, in a flash looking all suspicious again. "The wanderer knows when you lie. He knows you're not real."

"We're not Ix," said Shardak. "I...wanderer, we need to pass. We mean you no harm."

"Yes! You must go!" said the Wanderer. "Anything for you, my friends." he released Kyhrex, then in a flash he became suspicious again.

"You're dead," he said, pointing at Shardak with ominous certainty. "I know you died. This is—"

"Run. Now." hissed Kyhrex under her breath, as the Wanderer drew his knife and a longer sword. "We could probably attack him, but it's better if we leave him in peace. He's no threat."

Shardak knew Kyhrex was right. The being was so broken and insane that he definitely was no servant of the Ix. As he drew near Kyhrex, he halted, confused. "I know the Toa," he said, uncertainly. "I know. You need to go, before the Ix catch you."

"Yes," said Kyhrex, trying to keep her voice steady. "Yes. Thank you."

The Wanderer muttered something unintelligible. Then he turned and the darkness of the Labyrinth swallowed him.

"I've never encountered him before," said Kyhrex, after the Wanderer was out of earshot. "Did you ever meet him?" she asked Blast and Shardak.

"No," said Shardak. "He must have mistaken us for someone else."

But inwardly he was not so certain. There had been a cold, almost ominous tone to the Wanderer's voice as he'd said, *You're dead. I know you died.*

But it was impossible. What had the being meant? How could he have recognized Blast and Shardak? It was impossible.

He must have been completely insane. concluded Shardak. *There's no way he could have recognized me or Blast. Besides, we have bigger problems than an ancient wanderer in the Labyrinth.*

Shardak awoke, eyes wild. He'd slept for a few hours after his watch ended, but his dreams were full of violence, fire, and death. He could still see Nightshade, raising her scythelike dagger to kill him, and Flareus, eyes smouldering with burning fire, holding him in his clawed hands, about to snap his spine with impunity.

"Shardak." said Blast. Shardak turned, surprised to see Blast standing upright. Despite the injuries he'd suffered, he looked alert, albeit scared. He reminded Shardak of a cornered animal, one ferocious because it has realized there was no hope for survival.

Which, just maybe, we are. he thought. They were trapped between the Circle and the Ix's Division, and the odds that they'd survive another attack were very small.

"The Ix. They're coming." said Blast. "We have to make our escape now, into one of the Air Shafts to the surface."

No. thought Shardak, as the mention of the Ix made his blood run cold again. "Is Flareus with them?"

"No." said Kyhrex. She was holding her Laser Crossbow and had a bolt readied. She'd repaired it easily after the encounter with Flareus. "He's either retreated or is regrouping with the Kranr pursuers. I've been scouting ahead, and the passageways are swarming with Eliminators, the Ix's soldiers."

"Where will we go, then?" asked Shardak. Dread was mounting within him. He imagined Nightshade standing over his body, laughing as he died.

Nightshade! the thought of his former sister made his cold hatred well up within him once more. She had changed everything. Now he couldn't even look back to the life he'd led before the Ix had slain Arcturas, for she'd been there, tainting his memories with her spying.

"We'll head for the lowest tunnels in the Labyrinth, where the old cities are still mostly intact. Hopefully the Stalkers haven't picked up on our trail by now."

"Stalkers?" asked Shardak.

"The Hunters of Darkness." whispered Kyhrex bitterly. "They're completely undetectable by any of the senses except touch, so you don't know where they are until they've ran a dagger through you. Their keen sense of smell and vision allows them to track targets over long distances. They're the Ix's assassins. I can't even sense their locations with my elemental sense."

Shardak felt his heart sink even further then before. More enemies seemed to be appearing every moment, with no hope of escape. The Stalkers strengths seemed insurmountable.

The thought that one of their enemies could be standing right next to him served only to galvanize Shardak into action. Grabbing his Cold Fire torch and the Blade of Arcturas, he leapt to his feet.

"Let's go. They could be watching us now."

Kyhrex, crossbow readied, led them down many winding intersections of tunnel. Shardak's mind was so focused on the Stalkers and the Ix that he barely took in the vivid scenery around him. Cold Fire torches, long burned out, either hung from lampposts of corroded metal or lay scattered and in fragments on the ground.

Sometimes the tunnels intersected with other tunnels, other times they did not. Eventually Kyhrex halted, her voice a low whisper.

"Ix."

Shardak felt his heart freeze. "Where?" he whispered, careful to keep his voice low.

Kyhrex pointed down the tunnel. It was slowly widening, opening into a larger cavern similar in size to that of the Circle. Shardak could see Cold Fire burning in the distance as well, but was unable to pinpoint its source.

Then he saw the Ix, and locked eyes with a soldier. He was tall and thin, like all Ix, with a pale face from which horrible, intense eyes scorched him almost physically. He carried weapons decorated with the Imperial Insignia, and his presence in the aura field was a black abyss, a miniature void in the aura field of unreadable emotion.

Then everything happened at once. The soldier hissed something in the Ix's nasal language, Kyhrex fired a crossbow bolt burning with energy that struck a second soldier in the face, and *something* struck Shardak from behind.

Stalker! the word exploded in his mind as he was flung off his feet and slammed against the wall. Swinging wildly with the Blade of Arcturas, he managed to make contact with the Stalker's weapon, but the Hunter of Darkness would not be stopped.

As Shardak rose to his feet, the Stalker struck again. A line of corrosive acid seemed to materialize from thin air. Shardak twisted narrowly, avoiding most of the blow, but the acid struck his shoulder and knocked him off-balance.

Shardak felt cold numbness spread through his arm, then screamed as excruciating pain tore through his body. He could feel the acid eating away at his armor, burning through the muscle beneath. Shardak screamed again, louder, and heard a rush of air as the Stalker struck at him again.

Swinging wildly through the haze of pain, Shardak brought down the Blade of Arcturas on something solid. With an inhuman screech, the Stalker suddenly appeared on the physical world for the briefest of instants, then vanished again. As Shardak struck at the Stalker over and over again with his blade, sometimes hitting, sometimes missing.

The Stalker snarled again, and Shardak felt it strike him in his burning shoulder. For the briefest of moments, he saw the Stalker's teeth, long and jagged, tearing through his already horribly damaged shoulder. He felt the Stalker tear through burned armor and muscle.

Shardak screamed in pain as the Stalker forced him against the walls of the cavern, acid flowing from its clawed limbs as it tore at his armor, trying to rip out his heart.

No! Shardak screamed silently as acid burned through his body. *No! Stop! No...*

How long he struggled against the Stalker, he did not know. Pain made time seem to slow, and he was conscious of every minute of his excruciating pain. He was dimly aware of Blast being forced back by one of the White Lightning soldiers, and saw Kyhrex grappling with two more Eliminators.

Then, suddenly, he felt the Stalker's claws lessen, felt the spatter of the creature's blood against him. The Stalker, now a blurry outline, staggered backward and collapsed against the wall.

Shardak gasped in shock. The creature's body was a hideous amalgam of teeth, claws, and overlapping scales that covered the monster's entire body. The creature's face had slitted orange eyes, but the true horror was the creature's mouth. It was a black void of emptiness that covered the creature's entire lower face, framed by fangs as black as the Ix's cloak.

There were five crossbow bolts embedded in its back. Shardak turned toward Kyhrex, and saw that one of the Ix, badly wounded, was staggering away from her, black energy crackling from its hands, but the other had dealt her blows to the shoulder and leg, impeding her maneuverability. Her laser crossbow, useless in close-quarter combat had been thrown aside, and she was fighting with her protosteel talon.

But the Ix were overmatching her. Kyhrex was agile, but the Eliminators were much more so. She was slowly being backed up against the wall, and would be slain soon if they continued fighting her.

"Shardak! Run! Blast needs help. He's being pursued by a group of White Lightning soldiers!" she had no time to say anything more, for the wounded soldier struck her with a bolt of dark lightning, forcing her back. It was as though they were toying with her, trying to make sure she couldn't go to Blast's aid.

The thought of Blast's life in danger brought Shardak back to reality. Ignoring the excruciating pain from his injuries, he raced down the tunnel. Neither of the Eliminators made any move to pursue him, but continued their relentless attack on Kyhrex.

Racing down the tunnel, the Labyrinth became a bloody chaotic place of destruction. He could see Blast in the distance, grappling with a wounded Eliminator, but could see more of them converging from all sides. Several charged Shardak, but the Toa was an unstoppable whirlwind of cold fury. His torch slammed against the face of one of his attackers, and the Eliminator

vanished from view. Two more came at him, but they were struck down by the Blade of Arcturas, wounded badly. The Ix, unprepared for such a suicidal lunge, froze for a moment.

That was all the time Shardak needed. Racing down the tunnel, he grabbed Blast, pulling him away from the wounded Eliminator. He gasped as he saw Blast was bleeding from several scythe wounds. Shardak winced as he remembered the cold pain brought on by the Ix's scythes as he raced down the tunnel.

He saw the gaping maw of darkness just ahead, the darkened tunnel that led into the deeper tunnels of the Labyrinth. He narrowly leapt to one side to avoid being tackled by an Eliminator, and fell against the stones that surrounded the maw. The Eliminator swiped, and missed Shardak's mask by a fraction of an inch. In the darkness, only the Ix's eyes could be seen, red and feral. The soldier swiped again, glancing off Shardak's armor plates. The Limiter's massive strength flung him against the mouth of the cave.

For a moment, as he watched the scythe snake out at him again, he saw Nightshade's face flash before his eyes. Her expression was laughing, as though she enjoyed every moment of watching him die.

No! he thought. Get up, Shardak! You can't let her win! Shardak grabbed Blast, flinging the scythe at the Eliminator to block the dagger from killing him instantly, and then half-dragged Blast into the cave. Kyhrex's lantern gleamed in the darkness, illuminating the dark passageways before him. As he ran deeper into the caves, he could hear the harsh voices of the Eliminators in the distance. Feeling his way along the wall, Shardak saw that he was in a wide, open cavern. Looking around, he could see no tunnels leading deeper into the caverns.

No. Shardak thought. No.

But his sight confirmed the horrible truth-there was no way out of the cavern. He had run into a cul-de-sac, and was about to pay with both his and Blast's lives.

There was a flash of light as a lantern sliced through the darkness of the cavern. Shardak saw an Eliminator standing like a demonic horror before him, clutching a lantern and a long scythe. More Ix surged toward them, and Shardak tensed. He was not going to surrender without a fight.

The Eliminators will not kill me. I will die on my own terms, like Barit and Kyhrex. thought Shardak grimly, as the Eliminators struck them.

The tall Eliminator dropped his lantern and slashed the Scythe into Shardak's uninjured shoulder. Shardak felt deadly pain as the scythe struck again. The cold iron chilled his muscle, bones, and every fiber of his body burned with icy fire. The Eliminator's green and black mask glowed in the pale lantern light.

The Eliminator struck out again, and Shardak parried. The long scythe that the Ix carried struck Shardak a glancing blow to the neck, and an explosion of pain rocked his world. Shardak braced

against the walls of the cavern as the Ix soldier raised his scythe. Shardak saw Blast kicking out at the oncoming, but the Eliminators caught him and raised a sickle to his throat.

"No!" Shardak screamed, and as the Eliminator prepared to deal Blast a death blow, grabbed the strange objects Silencer had given him and flung it at the Ix.

The object impacted against the Eliminator's face, and as it struck the creature's mask, exploded. The Eliminator screamed in pain and rage as his entire face exploded into flames, and Shardak heard the jarring crack as his neck snapped. The dying Eliminator staggered back, and another Ix charged him. Shardak dove to one side, and grabbing the Blade of Arcturas, lunged at the Eliminator and ran the Blade of Arcturas through his chest.

Before Shardak's sickened eyes, the Eliminator collapsed, his blood pooling around him. The other Eliminator collapsed against the wall, his eyes fading in death.

Shardak saw Blast grab the lantern and fling it at the Eliminator as the Ix soldier slammed Shardak against the wall. The scythe struck him in the shoulder, reopening the wound the Stalker had dealt him. His vision blurred, and he fell to the ground in pain. Shardak, out of options, flung his three remaining spheres, two at the attacking Eliminator, one at the Ix attacking Blast.

Fire seemed to strike the Limiter's weapon as it came nearer, and Shardak was dimly aware of Blast shouting to him, but he had eyes only for the scythe about to end his life. Closer the scythe came, flame burning into the handle-

The Eliminator stiffened as the flame struck him, consuming his scythe in a flash of white-hot flame. For a brief instant the soldier stood there, his armor torn and ragged. Then a second bolt consumed him utterly. Blast screamed a warning, then he, too, vanished into the flames.

Meanwhile, behind him the Ix dodged his remaining sphere, well aware of the danger. The Sphere struck the cavern ceiling, and an explosion shook the cavern as an avalanche of earth plummeted down on them, burying the two Eliminators completely. Others were struck by the sphere and burst into flames.

Shardak dodged away from a surviving Eliminator, but a second, his armor charred and his mask in pieces, swung a scythe that caught him on the leg. He fell, half-rising as the Eliminator raised his Scythe to deal a second blow.

The Limiter exploded into flames and Shardak ran for the exit. With a burst of fire, the entire stretch of tunnel was dragged into a vortex of fire and earth, burying everything beneath a shroud of flame. Shardak could see Blast in the distance, shrouded slightly by the dancing flames.

"Shardak, run!" yelled Blast. Shardak rose to his feet unsteadily and dodged the Eliminator's weapon narrowly, racing toward Blast.

"A magnificent yet terrible sight." whispered Blast, his voice hoarse and breathless. "What happened?"

"I threw a sphere of fire at the cavern ceiling. I don't know how many of them survived, though. I know two are dead, but the rest are probably only wounded." It sickened Shardak to say those words. Barit had died a hero, yet he'd never killed anyone in battle.

He remembered Kyhrex, killing the Eliminator in the battle in the wider cavern. She'd probably died saving them. And yet...he was a Toa. It was his duty not to kill. It was a complete violation of the Toa Code.

I was only acting in self-defense. thought Shardak. *But that doesn't make it right, does it? These battles are turning me into something I don't want to be. I--*

Before he could say another word, he saw the flash of red eyes in the darkness.

"No!" he screamed as the figure drew several daggers and strode toward him. Wounded, both physically and mentally, Shardak raised the Blade of Arcturas and readied for battle once more.

Chapter 14

Shardak took one look at the figure and gasped in relief.

"Silencer, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me" The figure said tensely. "We've been watching out for you since the escape went wrong. It's a miracle you made it out of the Circle alive. Another war squadron is coming to cut you off any minute now." Like shadows, Ion and Melnox materialized behind Silencer.

"We need to leave. Now." Melnox spoke. "The Ix and White Lightning are coming." Silencer nodded.

"Where's Kyhrex?" asked Shardak. "We have to find her first, If she's alive."

"I'm here." came a new voice. Kyhrex stepped out of the darkness and stood beside Silencer. "I was about to be overwhelmed by the Ix before Silencer, Melnox, and Ion arrived. If they hadn't showed up, I'd be dead now. How did you evade the Eliminators?"

"I'd like to know the entire story while we're travelling." said Silencer. "The Eliminators are out on battalion strength, as are the Stalkers. They won't rest until we're dead, and we will be, if we don't hurry. It's just a matter of time."

As the group of Toa and Glatorian slipped into the shadows of the Labyrinth, Shardak recounted their tale. He told of their capture by Nightshade, Barit's sacrifice, their narrow escape from Flareus, and their battles with the Stalkers and Eliminators. Finally, he told Silencer of how he'd killed the two Ix in battle and wounded many more.

"You were only acting in self defense. You couldn't have done anything more." Silencer said. "If you hadn't killed them, they'd have done worse to you."

"Are we near the exit to Intax?" asked Shardak.

"No." said Silencer grimly. "The plan's changed."

Melnox inspected their injuries, his face grim. When he saw Shardak's shoulder and leg wounds, he winced. "Stalker got you?" he asked. Shardak nodded mutely.

"We're here." said Silencer grimly. Shardak blinked in surprise. Before now, he'd just assumed Silencer was leading them away from the Ix patrols. "Void's Edge."

Shardak paused, then looked down at his surroundings and gasped.

Behind him, about a bio away, Shardak saw a massive opening into a horrible black abyss of pure darkness. Like the Ix's cloaks, it absorbed light from the lantern he carried, but the abyss seemed to pull him *toward* it, as though asking him to jump into the bottomless depths of cold darkness. While he could tell where the ground gave way to the void, he could not see where it ended.

"The Grand Abyss." said Silencer, seeing his reaction. "The Void of Dimensions. Some also say it's literally a gateway to other worlds, as well as the ultimate prison."

"Do you think we've evaded the Ix?" Shardak asked Blast at length. His mind was full of questions about the Abyss, but he held his tongue. The most important thing was to know they were out of danger.

"I hope th-" Blast broke off.

Suddenly Shardak saw what Blast had seen. He drew the Blade of Arcturas. Silencer and the others redied their blades.

The Fury stood before them, hooded and masked. His dark cloak obscured most of his body, leaving only his corpse hands visible in the shadows. Behind his mask, his eyes burned with feverish intensity.

Flanking him stood a virtual army of Ix soldiers. All were armored in green and black, and carried standard Ix Division weapons. Shardak saw Flareus standing directly behind the Fury, Banrax at his side. Both the Elementals looked cold and impassive, though Shardak saw a gleam of excitement in Flareus' eyes as he looked at them, eyes smouldering with their usual hatred.

"Fury." Silencer spoke the word coldly as he faced his archenemy.

"Silencer." said the Ix. His voice was raspy and nasal, and his being emanated pure evil and barely controlled rage.

For a few moments, the two beings, Toa and Ix faced each other, as though recalling their ancient struggle. Then, as if by some unspoken signal, they tensed. The Fury raised his hands, and to his horror Shardak saw he was carrying small scythes, similar to the one Nightshade had wielded in the Spire.

No, thought Shardak. It was his worst nightmare. They were trapped between an Ix army and the most secure prison in the entire universe or a void of complete annihilation, depending on who you asked.

"Silencer, no." said Melnox, his voice pleading. "Don't fight him."

Silencer looked his brother in the eye, and nodded quietly. "It's time I righted a few wrongs." His eyes remained fixed on the Ix commander as he raised his weapons, a long, curved sword of cold iron and an icy club.

"Die." whispered the Fury. "Let this be the end of all your dreams to use the Spirit Toa against us."

Silencer said nothing in reply, simply drew his sword and struck. In an instant, the Fury crossed the distance between them. Their blades locked in a deadly dance of scythes, sword, and club as they fought their duel to the death. Shardak, Ion, Kyhrex, Melnox, and Blast watched helplessly as the two beings continued their deadly dance.

Silencer's two weapons were unweildy, yet they dealt the same amount of damage as the scythes did as they were more powerful. Silencer was fast, but the Fury was almost supernaturally agile, dodging and weaving around Silencer's weapons to score hit after hit.

Silencer winced in pain and struck the Fury a glancing blow to the shoulders. The Fury tore the club from Silencer's hands. Silencer retaliated with a bolt of elemental fire, but the Fury dodged it with speed and grace that rivaled that of a Muaka Cat and brought both scythes down on Silencer's legs, tearing open an old wound. Blood welled from the cut.

"That's not good." whispered Melnox quietly as the Fury brought his scythes under Silencer and the Toa was forced backward, toward the watching Toa and Glatorian.

Silencer slashed one knife at the Fury, who leapt away quickly, tearing the club from Silencer's hands. The Fury then attacked again, tearing a ragged wound in the Silencer's side. Silencer staggered backward, and the Fury tore another gash with his deadly scythes. Blood, cold black in the pale green illumination, flowed down his chestplate.

"No!" Melnox screamed as the Fury readied to deal a death blow.

At the last moment Silencer staggered backward, and the dagger scythe struck Silencer in the shoulder, driving deep into muscle and bone. Shardak winced as he watched the Fury tear the scythe free as Silencer winced in pain from his wounds.

The Fury leapt up with his dagger and struck, ripping a terrible gouge in Silencer's side. Shardak winced as the deadly, icy pain of Shredsteel took its toll. Silencer staggered backward, weakened horribly, and the Fury lunged forward at the weakened and disoriented Toa.

And at that moment, Shardak knew what Silencer was about to do.

His old lesson on combat forms weeks came back to him. *Many of the moves I used against you were not Sila. The final attack was Vauhti, which involves using speed and cunning to penetrate defenses.*

The Fury had been using Vauhti against Silencer. But now, Shardak saw Silencer bring his weapons together as flame grew between them.

The Fury struck Silencer like a viper, both scythes extended. At that moment, Silencer pounced. Leaping upward, he brought his club down, tearing one of the Ix's scythes from his grasp. As the weapon clattered to the ground, Shardak watched as the Fury snarled, stabbing outward at the Toa

As the Fury's scythe neared Silencer's heart, Silencer leapt to one side. The Fury, unprepared for such a sudden and forceful attack, staggered back as Silencer struck him in the chest with the club. The Ix snarled and knocked the club from Silencer's hands with his scythe.

Then Silencer struck, switching his grip on the scythe and, with the full force of his momentum behind him, slashed upward, blindingly fast, and tore open the Fury's neck.

Blood sprayed between the two combatants as the Fury's scream was abruptly cut off by a ghastly choking sound. The Fury, mortally wounded, staggered away from Silencer, mouthing curses as the blood poured from his throat.

Silencer grabbed the Ix's fallen scythe and sank both blades into the Fury's chest. Like two figures in a tragic Po-Matoran statue, Toa and Ix stared at each other in silent recognition.

The Fury's body convulsed, then went still. Silencer tore both his knives from his dying enemy, and the Fury slumped to the ground, blood pooling all around him. His eyes, the spark of life fading from them slowly, glazed over.

The Fury was dead. Excited murmuring passed down the ranks of Ix as they stared at the body of their fallen leader. For a moment, they hesitated.

Silencer wasted no time. As he staggered back to Shardak's group, Shardak was shocked to see the injuries the Toa had suffered. The Fury's scythe had impaled him through the chest and side twice, and blood was still pouring from his open wounds.

Then Banrax snarled an order. The Ix drew their scythes, and readied to charge.

"Go!" Silencer yelled at them from atop the ridge.

"We can't leave you!" Ion yelled back.

"You must." Silencer's breath was slowing. "My destiny has been fulfilled...but theirs has yet to come. Remember the plan, Melnox. Guide them in the ways I never was able."

"I...cannot" Ion spoke sadly. "We need you, Silencer!"

As Silencer shook his head, Shardak felt another vision engulf his mind, heard the clash of spear and sword.

The Fury, stabbing both daggers into the Toa of Water's back...

Silencer, screaming in rage and pain, forcing the Ix hordes away from his fallen friend...

Silencer, holding the Toa's hand as the cold of death took her...

Melnox, eyes grim, standing like a dark shadow behind his brother and the dying Toa.

"You must." Silencer spoke as though, in his darkest dreams, he'd known the moment would one day come. "I'll die anyway. I may as well buy you some time." Shardak looked at Silencer helplessly, but knew he was right. The Fury had injured his body beyond repair.

"This is...not the end." Silencer slurred. "It is a new beginning. Go!" his voice regained some of its old strength in that last syllable.

Melnox and Ion grabbed Shardak's and Blast's hands, and as the Ix charged, led them down the tunnel, not away from the Void, but around it.

Shardak's last view of Silencer before he vanished forever was the Toa, a warcry on his lips, his weapons held high. A lone red Toa in the midst of darkness. A solitary figure in a field of drawn scythes.

Then he was gone, his screams and the clash of weapons growing fainter with each turn down the tunnel.

Chapter 15

Melnox paused on the edge of the Void. His heart was heavy from all that had transpired, but his heart was heavier for what he was about to tell them.

"Are your wounds healing?" the Toa of Fire asked. His voice was tense. This was important. They needed to survive.

"Yes." answered Shardak. He could hardly believe what had happened. Silencer had killed the Fury...then died at the hands of the Ix himself. His eyes sparkled with unshed tears of both pain and sadness.

Why? How could anyone let this happen?

Silencer had rescued him from the Spire. He'd pulled Shardak from the brink of death, and helped the Toa escape the Circle and the Labyrinth. He'd mentored Shardak, accepted him in a way no one had done since Arcturas' death. The Fury had torn all that away from him, just like he'd killed Arcturas.

And even Arcturas could have been lying. If he'd escaped the Circle, why did he never mention this to me?

Shardak had no answer.

"Listen." said Melnox finally. His voice was carefully composed. "Silencer thinks--" he broke off with a grimace. "*Thought* that the Ix girl who was with you and Arcturas--"

"Nightshade?" asked Shardak. "What about her?"

--"That she's one of the highest ranking Ix, the Fury's direct subordinate."

"Really?" asked Shardak. He honestly didn't want to think about Nightshade now. Everything she'd done had torn a hole through his heart that felt like it would last forever.

"Yes. Which means she'll take over the position of commander now that the Fury's dead." Melnox stared at Shardak and Blast with such intensity that it made them shiver. "Which means the Ix won't stop until you're dead. No matter how much danger you were in before, you're in the greatest danger. You are *marked* now. Forever as an enemy of the Ix and the Empire."

"So if I go to Intax, to Kor--"

"He's dead." Melnox said simply. "That's the way it is."

Shardak's eyes grew shocked as he realized the implications of what Melnox was saying. "But I didn't ask for this. I don't *want* this." he pleaded, aware of how pathetic the words sounded.

"It was always your destiny to fight the Ix, Toa." said Melnox quietly. "Arcturas was their mortal enemy."

"What!" asked Shardak. His voice was shocked. "I've heard he was the only being to ever escape the Circle and live, but--"

"There is much we still do not know about Arcturas' motives. But he fought them all his life. Just like Silencer." Melnox had tears in his eyes now as well, and his voice was cracking.

"Kyhrex told me he lost everything he loved fighting them." said Shardak. "The Toa of Water that the Fury killed?" he guessed.

Melnox sighed. "He was not perfect. He blamed himself for her death, as well as the deaths of all those others during the battles that raged after the Year of Darkness. But he could not escape them. Nor can we. Which means we'll all need to lose ourselves now."

"The Abyss?" guessed Shardak. "Silencer was *always* planning on taking us here, wasn't he?"

To his surprise Melnox shook his head. "No. His plan was to let us all escape to the surface world, to continue your training. But this is better. The void is a dangerous place, but it won't kill you outright. Ion will explain everything."

"You're not coming, then?" asked Shardak. "Where will you, Ion, and Kyhrex go?"

"Kyhrex and I are coming with you." said Ion. "As Melnox said, I will explain the rest of Silencer's plan once we've entered the Void."

"Where will you go, then, Melnox?" asked Shardak.

"Once the Ix are finished with Silencer, they'll come after us. I'll lead them away, and if I escape, I won't go back to the Circle. Too risky." Melnox sighed with regret. "I guess we're all homeless now."

Enter the Void? Never return to Intax? Shardak's head was spinning, but he realized it was truly their only alternative. Melnox tried to make it sound like he'd survive and escape, but in reality Shardak knew he was sacrificing himself to buy them time. It was either risk death in the Void, or die at the hands of the Ix.

Despite his grief, Shardak's mind was beginning to spin with questions again. "What--" he began.

Then he heard footsteps, and the Ix's nasal language shouted in the distance.

"They're coming." whispered Melnox. "Follow me."

He led them toward a massive, crumbling stone arch. Once magnificent, one of the pillars had collapsed in on itself, leaving the entire structure leaning to one side.

"The gateway to the Void." said Melnox. "The only neutral point in the Upperdark, where no being can be pulled in against his will. Once you walk through the gate, you will enter the Void. Remember that the Ix rule there as well. They will follow you, and will attempt to cut you off, to trap you within. Shardak, this is your only hope of survival."

It's our only chance. thought Shardak. Looking back at the Labyrinth tunnel, he made a silent vow.

I will return. I will return one day. For my friends, for Kor, for Melnox, for Arcturas and Silencer. I will return.

Then the sound of footsteps was heard again, and Melnox urged them to go. Shardak hesitated for only one moment, then stepped through the stone arch-- and into the Void beyond.

Epilogue

"No! I will not tell you where he is, Ix!" the Toa of Fire spat with venom.

Valkyria smiled coldly. "If you do not tell me where the Spirit Toa is, I will have to kill you."

"Kill me then, Ix, but you'll never learn where he's hiding, no matter what you do."

Valkyria thought back for a moment to her first kill, that young Ko-Matoran in the outpost. She'd come so far since then. She was an Ix warrior now, perhaps the most respected of her generation. She'd become more skilled with ranged weapons and daggers than any of the warriors save Khazin Thaer and Scrall.

"This is your final chance." she said, completely calm and emotionless.

The Toa simply stared at her with hatred and disgust.

Valkyria did not hesitate. The dagger left her hand in an instant, and the next second, the Toa crumpled to the ground, dead. Blood poured from his wounds for a few moments, then his eyes glazed over.

Valkyria retrieved her dagger from the fallen Toa, then strode back to the group of Ix warriors. Her old mentor, Scrall Vhokyn, was standing there, waiting for her return. Beside him stood Khazin Thaer and a group of senior Ix warriors and apprentices.

"He would tell us nothing." she said calmly.

"That is unfortunate. Then he is dead?" asked Thaer.

"Yes." said the Ix warrior.

"You have done well, Warrior Rhai." said Vhokyn. His emotions were completely cloaked, but Valkyria sensed a shiver of excitement run through him as he spoke his next words.

"We were, however, able to locate some information from poor Toa Melnox's mind earlier." said Vhokyn. "You did well capturing this Toa, but your next mission will be the first major step toward our unity with the Ix of the Core Universe. You will be assigned to this mission under my command."

Scrall paused, and let Thaer speak, believing, as Scrall and Valkyria did, his words had sealed the death of a single being.

"Your mission is to track down and kill the Spirit Toa, Shardak."

At the edge of the Grand Abyss, in a destroyed arena, another Toa stood. While he could not know that, hundreds of miles away, another Toa was thinking the same thoughts, he whispered a single sentence that mirrored Shardak's as his companions and he lept into the Void.

"I will return."