



Toa Lhikan crept silently through the dark streets of Ta-Metru. The night was utterly silent, as if his adopted home had become a city of the dead. Even the shadows seemed touched by the fear that gripped Metru Nui.

He started to summon a small flame, then stopped. Turaga Dume had warned him about betraying his position through the use of his powers. The enemy would track back to the source of the flame, and if he were to be caught too far from the Coliseum ... well, he had seen what was left of other Toa who had gotten careless.

You can afford a mistake or two against a Rahi beast, he reminded himself. But not against these opponents. All they need is the slightest opening, and –

A sound came up from above – metal scraping against stone, no doubt from one of the rooftops. An ambush? The Dark Hunters were more than capable of that – and worse. Lhikan activated his Mask of Shielding, throwing a force field around himself, and readied his fire great swords. Whoever – or whatever – was after him was in for a surprise.

A familiar mask appeared over the edge of the foundry roof. “Relax, brother. It’s me!”

Toa Nidhiki leaped down and landed beside his comrade. His emerald armor was scarred and pitted from countless battles. “Midnight walks, now?” he whispered. “What’s the matter, the war not giving you enough exercise?”

“You were supposed to stay at the Coliseum, with the others,” Lhikan replied.

“I got bored. Besides, six Toa to guard one Turaga should be enough.”

“Not if I’m right,” said Lhikan, his expression grim. “Not if he’s been targeted by who I think. Half the legion could be in that building, and he still would not be safe.”

Beneath his Kanohi Mask of Stealth, Nidhiki flashed a smile. “You worry too much, brother. You always have. Remember the time the tops of all those Ko-Metru Knowledge Towers were being shattered? You were sure the Kanohi Dragon was back. Turned out to be Ice Bats with attitude.”

“Then humor me,” said Lhikan. “I’m going west and circling around. You go north. Use your mask, stay out of sight, and for Mata Nui’s sake, if you see Dark Hunters, go for help this time.”

“You take all the fun out of constant violence, Lhikan,” Nidhiki chuckled, already fading into the shadows.

Toa Nidhiki wandered through the broad avenues of Ga-Metru, past temples and schools and canals. Of all the Metru in the city, this was his least favorite. It just seemed so clean and orderly. He got the feeling that if a little water sloshed onto the street, they would call out half a dozen Vahki patrols and declare a metru-wide emergency.

He had long ago shut down his Mask of Stealth, which allowed him to travel in a ghostlike form, barely visible and completely silent. As effective as the mask was, he found it disconcerting not to be able to hear his own footsteps. Lhikan would have called his action "taking an unnecessary risk." But Nidhiki seriously doubted that any Dark Hunter would be caught dead in the picture-perfect, sky-blue, oh-so-proper pit of a metru.

Something scuttled through the shadows to his right. He jumped a little at the sight of a Chute Spider heading off on its night hunt. It was something he would never admit to his brother Toa, but Nidhiki had always had a morbid disgust of chute spiders, Nui Jaga, Nui Rama ... really anything insectoid. Were it up to him, Metru Nui would have been purged of multilegged crawling things a long time ago.

Nidhiki waited until the spider was well out of sight before moving on, a little more cautiously than before. It was only that extra bit of wariness that allowed him to spot the figure that flitted from shadow to shadow. It was the first time he had ever seen anyone who seemed as at home in the shadows as he did. Intrigued, he followed.

Two things rapidly became apparent. The first was that his quarry wasn't a Toa – she wore no Kanohi mask and she was much too good at slipping unseen and unheard through the night. Toa, as a general rule, were not very good at sneaking. It went against their image of being proud and very public heroes. Nidhiki was an exception to that rule. Where he came from, Toa struck from the shadows or they did not live very long.

The second was her destination. She was on a direct course southwest toward the Coliseum. Normally, it wouldn't have worried Nidhiki, not with the kind of security around that place. But what if this Dark Hunter was good enough to make it inside, and then do who knows what to Turaga Dume?

Nidhiki stopped, unlimbered his scythe, and aimed for where she would be, not where she was. Then he unleashed a narrow, focused, hurricane-strength blast of wind at his target. She never turned. She never cried out. She simply leaped aside as if he had soft-tossed a Kodan Ball at her, landed silently, and spun in his direction. Her smile was a challenge.

"I appreciate the little breeze," she said softly. "Hunting is hot work."

"Then maybe you need a little more chilling," he replied. This time he sent elemental air power from both sides of his tool, bracketing her. To his amazement, she did a somersault from a standing start, neatly evading both blasts. Before she had even

reached her feet, she had hurled two daggers at him. One whistled past his mask while the other sliced his right shoulder armor as it flew by.

“I guess they don’t teach dodging in Toa training,” the female Dark Hunter said. “No wonder your city is falling.”

Nidhiki glanced from the new gash in his emerald armor to his foe. She had missed on purpose, he was certain. With her aim, if she had wanted to kill him, he would be dead.

“Not my city,” he replied. “But a place I am protecting just the same.”

“Oh. A matter of honor?”

Nidhiki paused before answering. “Let’s say no better offers.”

He took his eyes off her for a fraction of a second to ready his scythe. When he looked back up, she was gone, vanished like a wisp of smoke in the night wind. Nidhiki stood completely still, not even breathing, his legs tense and ready to spring. A veteran of a thousand fights, he knew better than to panic. Not knowing where she was, any move he made could be the wrong one. He mentally triggered his mask and disappeared into the shadow.

“Oh, you’re good.”

Her voice was coming from above. She was perched among the chutes, watching. It was a perfect hiding place – a wind strong enough to dislodge her would bring the chute braced down on his head, while climbing up after her would be nothing short of suicide.

“I could kill you now, Toa” she continued. “But I’ve filled my quota today. So I am just going to leave you here and go finish off your precious Turaga. If you’re scared of the dark ... well, you probably should be.”

Nidhiki kept silent, until another dagger buried itself in the wall behind him.

“Don’t stay quiet on my account,” the Dark Hunter said. “I already know where you are. I can smell your fear.”

The Toa forced himself to relax. He had been in tough spots before and talked his way out of them. This was just one more. “You’ll never make it. It’s too well guarded.”

“Watch me. Unless ... you have a better plan?”

“We’re on opposite sides, remember?”

“We don’t have to be.” Her voice was above and behind him now. He whirled around, but still could not see her. “How many Toa did you start out with? A hundred? Two hundred? And what do you have left, maybe a few dozen? The Dark Hunters have half the city, and we’ll soon have the other half. When it’s over, you’ll be just one more mask

in the pile.”

The words struck hard. In the months since Turaga Dume had refused the Dark Hunters a base on Metru Nui, countless Toa had fallen. Most were struck down from the shadows, never knowing their enemy was there. Oh, there had been some victories – Nidhiki had routed more than his share of the enemy, and Lhikan was worth six Toa in battle – but they all knew the numbers were against them. It was only a matter of time.

“If you want to die, I will be more than happy to oblige,” she added. “But if you want to live ... something might be arranged.”

A long moment went by. Then Nidhiki lowered his scythe. A second later, the Dark Hunter known as Lariska dropped to the ground in front of him. She still had her daggers at the ready. “The Shadowed One – my employer - is always looking for new talent,” she said. “Help us capture the Coliseum and you can name your price.”

The full impact of what he was to do struck Nidhiki then. If he betrayed the Toa, his name would go down in infamy ... or would it?

Who’s going to tell? he asked himself. The Toa will all be dead. Matoran? They’ll believe whatever they are told to believe. And the Dark Hunters? Right, like anyone’s going to listen to them.

“Metru Nui,” he said firmly. “I give you Dume, Lhikan, and the rest, and I get the city to rule. That’s my price, take it or leave it.”

Lariska grinned. “Actually, I think my choices are take it or kill you where you stand. But I’ll let that pass. Meet me here tomorrow night – I’ll give you our answer.”

The next day lasted for an eternity. Nidhiki spent his time wandering the hall of the Coliseum, imagining himself in control of it all. Now and then, he felt a little twinge of guilt over what he was about to do. But then he reminded himself that it was Dume’s fault, and the other Toa’s fault, for ever thinking they had a chance against the Dark Hunters.

As the twin suns set, Lhikan approached. “Nidhiki, there you are. There’s a boat coming from the south, carrying supplies. I need you to meet it.”

“Sure,” Nidhiki replied, grateful for an excuse to slip away. “ Can’t have a siege to the bitter end without supplies, right?”

He left before Lhikan could answer.

“It’s a deal,” said Lariska. “Tomorrow you lead Lhikan and the Coliseum guard into the Canyon of Unending Whispers in Po-Metru. We’ll be scattered in the caves and foothills. Once it’s over, I’m to take care of Dume personally ... and the city will be yours, Nidhiki. What do you plan to do with it?”

Nidhiki sat down on a bench and stretched his legs. "Maybe you should stick around, Lariska, and find out."

Nidhiki's news struck the Coliseum like a lightning bolt. The Dark Hunters had established a base camp in a Po-Metru canyon. All their operations were being coordinated from there. One swift strike and the war would be over. "But we'll need every Toa we can muster," he told Lhikan. "We can't afford to lose this opportunity because we left some behind to guard the Coliseum."

Lhikan looked at Dume. The Turaga nodded. "Nidhiki speaks the truth. We may never have such a chance again."

"All right," said Lhikan. "I'll assemble the guard. We move out at once."

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were on the march, over one hundred Toa with Lhikan and Nidhiki in the lead. Clouds of dust kicked up under their armored feet as they traveled well-worn paths through Po-Metru. Each of them had lost a brother or a sister Toa in this war, and all wanted it to end. But not before they had made the Dark Hunters pay in full for their crimes.

Side by side, they marched into the Canyon of Unending Whispers. The clang of their footsteps echoed again and again. The sun baked the barren rock for as far as the eye could see. A few Rahi flyers swooped and dove in the bright sky. Of a Dark Hunter base camp, there was no sign.

"Where is it?" demanded Lhikan, turning to Nidhiki. "You said the war could end today."

"And so it will," replied the Toa of Air. All around, Dark Hunters rose from their hiding places, weapons leveled at the assembled heroes. "Sorry it had to be this way, brother."

Lhikan shook his head. "Not as half as sad as I am ... and don't call me 'brother' again."

The Toa of Fire's arm shot up. Suddenly, Toa rose up from the tops of the canyon walls, a dozen, a hundred, then two hundred, and still more. They said nothing, merely aimed their tools at the now-surrounded Dark Hunters. The hunters were now the hunted, and they looked to Lariska for guidance. She assessed the odds, then shrugged, dropped her daggers and rose.

"Very neat," she said to Nidhiki. "You had me fooled."

Lhikan shoved Nidhiki toward the Dark Hunter lines. "He didn't deceive you. Though I wish he had."

"How did you know?" the Toa of Air asked his former friend.

"The other night. The boat carrying supplies," Lhikan replied. "You left without asking where it was docking. I went after you to give you the information, and stumbled on your meeting with your deadly new friend."

“And all these new Toa?”

“The ‘supplies’ we were promised from the south. With Dark Hunter eyes and ears everywhere, Dume and I thought it best not to talk of reinforcements out loud. Once I knew what you were planning, I ordered them here to spring a trap of our own.”

“And now what?” asked Lariska. “Do you march us all into the sea?”

The Toa of Fire met her gaze, his eyes cold. “A messenger was sent to the Shadowed One before you even reached the canyon. You will be allowed to walk out of here the same way you walked in, provided the Dark Hunters leave Metru Nui and never come back.” He turned and pointed to Nidhiki. “Starting with him.”

Nidhiki’s expression was one of disbelief. “Go with them? But I’m a Toa, Lhikan. I’m your brother in arms!”

Lhikan turned his back on the traitorous Toa of Air. “No. No, you’re not. You lost the right to call me ‘brother’ when you betrayed us all. Get out, Nidhiki – of my sight and of this city. Get out before I kill you.”

Nidhiki sat on a bench, watching a team of Dark Hunters train. Their mission was to penetrate a heavily defended island and steal a stone known as the Makoki. He didn’t know all the details, but apparently the Shadowed One intended to split the rock up into six pieces and thus make six times the profit in ransoming it back.

The Dark Hunter squad was, for the most part, professional and efficient. They made it over and around every obstacle Nidhiki had set up, and effectively eliminated any target dummies that popped up. All of them, that is, except for one big blue brute who lacked any semblance of grace, style, or stealth. After watching him demolish a barrier he was supposed to slip quietly under, Nidhiki had seen enough.

“Krekka!” he snapped. “You just woke up every Toa for kiosk around. A Toa of Fire has spotted your team and you’re about to be the guest of honor at a Dark Hunter bake. What are you going to do?”

The blue Dark Hunter pondered for a very long time. Then he smiled and said brightly, “Smash him?”

“He’s up there,” Nidhiki said, pointing up to a nonexistent fortress. “You’re down here.”

Krekka looked up to where his instructor was indicating, but saw nothing. “He’s not up there. Did he run away?”

“No, but why don’t you?”

“Because I like it here.”

Without another word, Nidhiki stalked off. It was time he and the Shadowed One had a talk.

“They’re ready.” Nidhiki reported. “All of them but the blue fool. Keep him here, send me, and we’ll get your rock for you. I promise.”

The Shadowed One smiled, but did not look up. “And we all know what your pledges are worth, don’t we, ‘Toa’ Nidhiki?”

Nidhiki restrained himself from saying what came to mind. He had seen how the Shadowed One dealt with insubordination. Instead, he tried a different approach. “I know how Toa think. I know how they will try to defend the stone. I should be going on this mission.”

“Your knowledge of your former allies makes you too valuable as a trainer for me to risk losing,” said the Shadowed One, not even trying to sound convincing. “Krekka goes. You stay.”

Nidhiki felt fury rising in him. In the six months since he had come to the Shadowed One’s island, he had done nothing but help prepare other Dark Hunters for missions, wander among the rocks, and stare at the ocean. If there were such a thing as a Toa of Boredom, he would be it. And now to be passed over for that hulking, clumsy mass of muscle – it was too much.

“He’s a moron,” he said through clenched teeth.

That got the Shadowed One’s attention. He locked eyes on Nidhiki and rose to his full height. His voice sounded like ice braking. “And you’re a traitor. You turned your back on your ideals, your friends, your city, all to save your own worthless hide. Why would you ever think I would trust you, Nidhiki?”

The Toa of Air had nothing to say. After all, the Shadowed One was correct. He had turned against everyone who relied on him. The Toa didn’t want him, and the Dark Hunters were just using him for his knowledge. He belonged nowhere.

“But ... I am not without appreciation of your talents,” the Shadowed One continued. “So perhaps you are right – perhaps you would serve us best in the world beyond this island. I assume you would want only the most dangerous missions?”

Nidhiki smiled, hardly able to believe the Shadowed One had come around to his way of thinking. “Those are the ones with the greatest reward.”

“Indeed. Too dangerous for any Dark Hunter to do alone, however. You will need a partner. Fortunately, the very one for the job is waiting outside my chamber.”

Nidhiki turned to the door, confident he knew who was about to walk through. He and Lariska had been close companions since the disaster on Metru Nui. There would be no one better to team up with him.

The door opened. Nidhiki started to say her name ... and then the sound dies in his throat. Standing in the doorway ... in fact, so broad he had cracked the doorway ... was Krekka.

“Tell me the plan again.”

Krekka started to reply, then stopped, as if the thought in his head had just flown away like a hungry Gukko bird. He looked lost for a moment. Then he suddenly brightened as he remembered what it was Nidhiki asked to hear.

“We get there. I keep quiet and try to look scary. When we find the spot, I smash open the gate. You go inside. I stay outside.”

“Why?” asked Nidhiki.

“Because you said so.”

“Then what?” This was the fourth time Nidhiki had run Krekka through the plan, start to finish, and he would do it four more times if he had too.

“You smash up the place and then come out. We leave and come back here. You turn the weapons over to the Shadowed One and I keep my mouth shut, and ... and ...”

Nidhiki frowned. “And no one gets hurt.”

“Oh, right!” said Krekka. “I always forget that part.”

It was a fairly straightforward job. Some Matoran on a nearby island had developed a new kind of launcher. Nobody knew just what it was meant to fire, but the Shadowed One wanted it anyway. Supposedly, there were only a few models in existence. Once they were stolen, and the equipment used to create them smashed to bits, it would be a while before any more could be built.

There were problems, of course. There was a Toa on the island, but Lariska had agreed to go ahead and set up a diversion. The Matoran posted guards around their village but did not cover one access point, which involved a climb up a sheer cliff. They assumed no one could get up that way.

They had never met Krekka.

The big blue Dark Hunter slammed his fist into the side of the cliff, creating an instant handhold. He began to climb, punching holes in the rock as he did so. Nidhiki came up after him. They were halfway up when Nidhiki realized something was very wrong.

“Wait a minute, Krekka,” he said. “I thought Lariska said you could fly?”

Krekka responded with his usual look of puzzlement. The he nodded vigorously. “Oh,

that's right. Forgot."

If I pushed him right off this cliff, no one would ever know, Nidhiki grumbled to himself. And I would too, except the Shadowed One said I'm responsible for his well-being.

Krekka walked quickly to the door of the armory and smashed it down with one swing. Then he obediently stopped, turned around, and allowed Nidhiki to get in alone.

The launchers were easy to find. There were three of them, but Nidhiki grabbed only one for transport back the Shadowed One's island. Then he dug a hole in the rocky floor of the building and placed the other two inside. No one would ever think to look for stolen goods in the very place from which they were stolen – and now that Nidhiki knew where they were, he could come back and grab them anytime. After all, he might have a use for them someday that the Shadowed One would not approve of.

He was just beginning to fill the hole when the shadow of Krekka fell on him. "What are you doing?" asked the big Dark Hunter.

"I told you to stay outside!"

"I just remembered, Shadowed One said I have to stay with you all the time on a job." Krekka answered. "What are you doing, Nidhiki?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? Listen, Krekka, we'll bring one back to the Shadowed One, and then we'll keep the other two for us. Wouldn't you like a new toy to play with?" Krekka shook his head. "Shadowed One says everything goes back to him. Nothing gets left."

"Krekka – "

"Shadowed One says no!" Krekka said, slamming his fist into the wall. The whole building shook as it might come down on top of them. Worse, the volume of his voice was attracting Matoran attention. Nidhiki could hear guards coming this way. He had been told to make sure the Dark Hunters' involvement in this theft was kept secret, and that was now in jeopardy.

"All right," said Nidhiki, gathering up the three launchers and wishing he could use them on Krekka. "But just because you asked so nicely."

Nidhiki first spotted the stranger walking through the stone courtyard of the Shadowed One's fortress. Tall, powerful, with jet-black armor, she moved like a serpent, her eyes darting from left to right. She was new, and anything new on the island was always of interest to him.

"I wouldn't," said Lariska. She had appeared beside him without him ever being aware she was near. "She's trouble."

“What kind?”

“She wants Dark Hunter training, and she’s willing to pay. But she’s not joining. Says she has plans of her own. So the Shadowed One is giving her a few hours to change her mind, then she’s being sent back where she came from.”

“And she needs our skill – so her plans involve theft, murder, and betrayal,” Nidhiki muttered. “Sounds like my kind of evening.”

Before Lariska could stop him, he was on his way to greet the new arrival.

“Get out of my way.”

Nidhiki didn’t move. He had found out the newcomer’s name was Roodaka, but precious little else about her. Still, he could make a few educated guesses and the best way to confirm them was face-to-face. *If you can call what she’s got a “face”,* he noted.

“Just trying to make you feel welcome,” he said lightly. “This is a very friendly island we have here – heavily defended, home to several hundred killers, and unfailingly lethal to trespassers ... but friendly.”

Roodaka started to push past him. “I have no need of friends.”

Nidhiki blocked her again. “Then how about a business partner? Listen – I’ve been stuck on this rock for over a year now. The only time I get off is when they send me on some errand, with a drooling fool. I want out of here.”

“And this concerns me how?”

“You’re looking to get hired on by someone, or you’re already working for them,” Nidhiki replied. “Someone who needs beings with my kind of talent. Introduce me. If I get in, I’ll see you’re rewarded.”

Roodaka nodded. When she spoke again, it was in a conspirational tone. “And what of the Shadowed One and the other Dark Hunters?”

Nidhiki shrugged. “They will keep doing what they do. I was meant for bigger things. I was – I am – a Toa. I should be running puny islands like this, not working on them.” The tall ebony figure smiled. “I think we can do business together. Meet me at the dock in full darkness. We will conclude our arrangement then.”

Midnight found Nidhiki standing by the water’s edge. The island was silent, much like Metru Nui had been a year before, the night he met Lariska. He hadn’t told her about his meeting with Roodaka or his plans to leave the island. She wouldn’t have understood. She was a Dark Hunter, by profession and by nature. The notion that in some part of his heart he still saw himself as a Toa would have been laughable to her.

She was too short-sighted, he decided. *Her horizon stopped on the borders of the island.*

He still had the lean, powerful look of a Toa. He still had a Toa's powers. All he would have to do would be to find some island where they never heard of Lhikan or Dume or Metru Nui, and the population would line up to welcome him. Anything he wanted would be his, and maybe ... maybe he might even be a hero again.

After all, I look the part, he reminded himself. Of course, that won't matter if Roodaka doesn't show up soon.

He stared out at the ocean, wondering about his past and his future. He remembered the first time he saw Metru Nui. It was the day he and a handful of other Toa arrived in answer to a summons to help fight the Kanohi dragon. They were strangers to each other, but brothers just the same – they all shared the responsibilities and the risks of being Toa. It was a special bond, nothing like what the Dark Hunters shared. And, to Nidhiki's surprise and dismay, he found he missed it. Sure, maybe they weren't really his friends ... maybe they were too quick to turn on him, instead of trying to understand why he did what he did ... maybe they couldn't see past their jealousy and resentment of the only Toa smart enough to look out for himself.

If it weren't for me, the war would still be going on, he reminded himself. The Shadowed One would be sitting in the Coliseum right now. But do I get gratitude? No, I get exiled. Well, I'll find a place where they need a Toa, and aren't too particular about that kind. And if Lhikan or one of those Metru Nui heroes tries to take it away from me, I'll make them regret the day they put on a Kanohi. All I need is for Roodaka to help me get what I deserve ...

Rhotuka spinners, being pure energy, make very little noise when they fly. Even if the one Roodaka launched had, Nidhiki would never have heard it over the noise of his own thoughts. All he knew was the black pain when it struck, the world spinning in front of his eyes, the bizarre sensation of his muscles shifting, altering, becoming something alien.

It lasted for six seconds. To Nidhiki, it lasted for an eternity. When it was over at last, he walked ... no, he wasn't walking, at least not like before ... to the water's edge. All he could see were the dark waves.

"Let us help." The voice belonged to the Shadowed One. A moment later, the entire beach was bathed in torch light. And now Nidhiki could see his reflection in the water. He screamed for a very long time.

Roodaka watched with amusement as Nidhiki tried to master his new body. He was stumbling about on the sand, trying to move like a Toa but a prisoner of the monstrous form her mutation spinner had given him. She turned to the Shadowed One.

"Can I assume I have purchased my training?" She asked.

"Most definitely," the Shadowed One replied. He thought again how amazing her powers seemed to be. Nidhiki's head and arms had changed their shape. Most

grotesque of all, his lower body now resembled that of a huge, four-legged insect. The sight was too much even for some of the assembled Dark Hunters. Lariska had already fled back to the fortress.

“You really should have known,” the Shadowed One said to Nidhiki. “Roodaka wanted something from me. She attempted to use the report of your conversation to buy it, but I insisted on more. If you were still deluding yourself that you could go back to being a Toa, that you could wash the stain of treachery off your spirit that easily, I was going to strip that dream from you once and for all.” The Shadowed One laughed, a harsh and grating sound. “You are a monster, Nidhiki. Matoran seeing you would run screaming. You will never be cheered, never be admired, never be hailed as a savior by the crowds. What are you now? A Toa of Nightmares? A hero, Nidhiki, or a horror? No, I think you will find your place is now, and forevermore, with the Dark Hunters. For who else would have you?”

Nidhiki’s eyes blazed with hatred. The Shadowed One paid no heed. Instead, he simply smiled and put a hand on the ex-Toa’s shoulder.

“It’s ironic, in a way,” said the leader of the Dark Hunters. “Your friend Lhikan could have ended your misery back on Metru Nui, but he chose not to. No doubt he thought he was doing you a favor when he allowed you to leave, unharmed, with us.” The Shadowed One turned and walked away, saying, “Someday, you really should thank him properly.”

One by one, Roodaka and the others departed. No one spoke of a word of mourning for the Toa who had just died ... and no one spoke a word of welcome for the Dark Hunter that had just been born.