Lhikan, Toa of Fire, stood silent in the gathering darkness. Around him, a small crowd of Matoran had formed, murmuring to each other in shocked tones. He could imagine the shock and horror they were feeling -- after all, he was feeling it too.

“How could this have happened? Ta-Metru has so many safeguards …” he muttered.

“Sometimes, the ways of Mata Nui are a mystery indeed,” said Turaga Dume. “I have already asked Jaller to investigate the accident.”

Lhikan knelt down beside the still, ruined body of the Ta-Matoran. He lay where he had fallen after a vat of molten Protodermis had inexplicably tipped and spilled its searing contents on him. It was an awful way to die.

“Clear the villagers out of here,” Lhikan said to Dume. “The area may not be safe. As soon as Nidhiki gets back --”

“I am back.” The Toa of Air landed lightly next to his comrade. “I examined the vat, the cable, and the connectors, like you asked. It’s amazing how … small everyone looks from up there.”

“What did you find?” snapped Lhikan, impatiently.

“The connectors were tampered with,” Nidhiki answered. “Whoever did it didn’t even try to make it look like an accident. This was murder, Lhikan.”

At the sound of the word, the Vahki Nuurakh moved in close. It was the job of these mechanoids to enforce order in the city, a task they performed coldly and efficiently. Nidhiki glanced at them with undisguised contempt and gave one a shove.

“Back off,” he snarled. “This was a living being once. You wouldn’t understand that.”

Lhikan reached out and gingerly rolled the body over. His eye was immediately drawn to a small stone tablet that had been under the corpse. Two words were written on it the language of the Matoran:

“Toa Tuyet.”

“I don’t have any idea,” said Tuyet, Toa of Water. “I barely even know any Ta-Matoran.”

“Well, that’s understandable,” said Nidhiki. “They’re not the most interesting bunch.”

“Think,” said Lhikan. “Are you sure you never met him? Could he have been carrying a message to you?”

Tuyet shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know. I haven’t even left Ga-Metru in days, let alone gone to the other side of the city. I’ve been helping Nokama on some improvements to the labs.”

“All right,” said Lhikan. “With the other Toa away on missions, there’s just the three of us to protect the city. So take care and keep a careful eye out. Someone killed that Matoran and we can’t let it happen again.”

Later, Nidhiki and Lhikan walked toward the Chute Station. The Toa of Fire obviously didn’t want to talk, but that had never stopped Nidhiki before.

“So, murderous Matoran,” said the Toa of Air. “That should liven things up.”

“There’s nothing amusing about this.”

“Sure, there is, fearless leader,” Nidhiki said. “For example, a brilliant Toa of Fire overlooking the obvious – that’s pretty funny.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Okay, let’s say this is about some message meant for Tuyet. What if the tablet is only a part of the message?”

“Part of it? Then where’s the other part?”

Nidhiki smiled a bitter smile. “He’s lying on a slab in Ta-Metru, Lhikan, and he’s very, very dead.”

***

Kongu was late for work. He should have been at his station a half hour ago to relieve the night Chute flow controller. As a result, he was in such a hurry that he never noticed there was something in the road until he stumbled over it.

He got to his feet, grumbling and brushing himself off. Who would leave something just lying in the street like that, where it could be a hazard?

He had half a mind to complain to the Vahki.

Then he stopped. Behind his mask, his eyes widened. The first rays of dawn had illuminated the object in the road now, and Kongu could see it for what it was: a dead Le-Matoran, mask shattered from a fall. In his hand, he clutched a stone tablet that read

"Toa Tuyet."

***

A cursory investigation by Lhikan and Nidhiki revealed that the cables in which the Le-Matoran had been working had been slashed. If the news of one murder disturbed the population of Metru Nui, word of a second sent Matoran into a panic. Vahki were working non-stop to keep residents working rather than staying hidden inside their homes.

Leaving Nidhiki to search for any remaining clues, Lhikan traveled to Ga-Metru. Tuyet wasn't at the Great Temple or Nokama's school and hadn't been seen all day. The Lightstones in her living quarters had been doused, but a little darkness had never stopped Lhikan. Pushing the door open, he conjured a flame to illuminate the dwelling.

The sudden light startled Tuyet. She had been standing against the back wall, gazing out of the window, lost in thought. When she saw Lhikan, she relaxed, though not very much.

"I should have expected you," she said.

Lhikan nodded. "There's been another death. Tuyet, I know you don't like Nidhiki, so I left him behind. You and I have been friends for thousands of years. We've traveled together, fought together, and once almost died together. If you know something about what's going on, you have to tell me."

Tuyet looked down at the ground. A long moment passed before she spoke. "If I do … I'll put you in danger. The best thing might be for me to just leave Metru Nui. Once I go, this will stop."

Lhikan reached out and took her hand. "A long time ago, I was stationed in a Toa tower that was under attack by Frostelus. Our team leader ordered me to abandon my post so there would be a survivor to warn others of what had happened. I was young, new to being a Toa, so I agreed. I lived; they died. And I swore after that I would never run from anything, ever again. We're Toa, Tuyet – and Toa don't run."

Tuyet looked into the depths of Lhikan's eyes. Her expression behind her Mask of Intangibility was unreadable. When she spoke, it was in the slow, measured pace of a stream running toward the sea.

“Have you ever heard of the Nui Stone? No? I would have imagined you had heard the legend, at least,” she said. “If only it were just a legend …”

“What is it?”

“We all know about Toa Stones – almost any rock can serve as one. A Toa takes it in hand and places a minute portion of his energy inside. Later, it can be used to trigger the transformation of a Matoran into a Toa. But a Toa Stone is passive – just a receptable for Toa Energy. The Nui Stone is something else again.”

Tuyet summoned a fog to shroud her home so that prying eyes could not see through the windows before she continued. “The Nui Stone is active, where a Toa Stone is passive. It doesn’t wait for you to give it your energy – it takes it. Once activated, it will absorb minute amounts of energy from any Toa within a 3000 Kio radius, so slowly and surely that it won’t be noticed until it’s too late. Then that energy can be absorbed by a living being – can you imagine? One being with the power of dozens, maybe hundreds of Toa, or more?”

“And such a thing exists?” asking Lhikan, already seeing the potential danger in such an object.

Tuyet nodded. “Yes, but its makers realized the risks. They made only one and vowed to destroy that one. But before they could do it, it was stolen – no one knows by who. It was passed from hand to hand for millennia, no one ever realizing what it was or could do … just that it was powerful, and so valuable. Finally, at some point in the recent past, it ended up on my home island … or so they say.”

“What does this have to do with two dead Matoran and tablets bearing your name?” asked Lhikan.

“Shortly after I left home to help you and the others fight the Kanohi Dragon here, a team of Dark Hunters invaded my homeland. They were looking for the Nui Stone. When they couldn’t find it, they assumed I had taken it with me for safekeeping.”

“And did you?”

“No!” Tuyet answered. “If I had ever had the cursed thing in my hand, I would have crushed it to powder.”

“But the Dark Hunters think you have it.”

“They sent me a message,” said Tuyet. “They threatened the Turaga and Matoran of my home island. They gave me seven days to turn the stone over to their agents, and promised to help me keep count of the days. These deaths … those sick, evil -- this is their countdown, Lhikan!”

***

Toa Nidhiki dodged a rock-hard blow from the Dark Hunter called Devastator. He wasn’t fast enough to dodge the follow-up, which sent him flying 20 feet through the air to crash into a pile of equipment.

Nidhiki had been happy to hear Lhikan’s news that Dark Hunters had infiltrated Metru Nui. It was comforting in some way to know that some Matoran had not gone mad and started offing his fellows, even if the actual explanation was a little dull. Still, it gave him something to hit. Devastator was a big boy, probably close to a ton of mechanical muscle. Worse, he had this habit of turning to sand and disappearing into cracks in the floor, or telekinetically hurling machinery. It was getting annoying. Lhikan had offered to take on the other two DH’s and it was now looking like the Toa of Fire had the easy job.

What else is new? thought Nidhiki, dragging himself back to his feet.

“I like you,” said the Toa, hurling a mini-cyclone at his foe. “You don’t talk. So many of you Dark Hunter types talk your ear off when they fight. Must be because all the rest of the time, you only get to speak when you’re spoken to, right?”

Devastator grunted and used his mental powers to try and bring a wall down on Nidhiki. The Toa of Air dodged nimbly, grabbed a beam, and hurled it at his opponent. Devastator caught it in mid-air and bent it in two.

“Whatever they’re feeding you, I’ll take a case,” Nidhiki muttered.

The Dark Hunter pressed his attack. Nidhiki dodged and struck back where he could, all the while keeping up a running patter. “That was a cute idea you had, that countdown of dead Matoran. Or did someone else come up with that? Heavy thinking isn’t really your line.”

Nidhiki expected to see anger on Devastator’s features, or maybe even what passed for a smile on a Dark Hunter. He did not expect what he got: an expression of sheer confusion that lasted for at least two seconds before giving way to rage.

Now what’s that about? thought the Toa.

Devastator hurled a few more pieces of scrap metal – nothing Nidhiki couldn't dodge easily, but he pretended to get clipped. When Devastator moved in to finish him off, Nidhiki tossed a cyclone at him. The Dark Hunter evaded by turning to sand and dropping toward a crack in the pavement, but Nidhiki had anticipated him. He'd sent a second cyclone into a nearby Protodermis pool and created a waterspout, which he used to douse Devastator and turn his sand to mud. The Dark Hunter made a game effort to stay in the fight, but Nidhiki had the advantage and wasn't going to let it go. A few well-placed blows and it was over.

Lhikan showed up then. He had tackled a Dark Hunter named Gladiator and another who had some sort of chameleon power. The Toa said his opponent had appeared as a one-eyed yellow Rahi, but Lhikan had no idea who he was trying to resemble.

"That's all of them," said the Toa of Fire. "It's over."

"Are you sure?"

"Gladiator and I had … a talk," Lhikan replied. "I'm sure."

"Heading to tell Tuyet she can come out now?"

Lhikan glanced at Nidhiki. There was something off in Nidhiki's tone of voice, as if the Toa of Air was preoccupied. "Yes," said Lhikan. "I need to stick these Dark Hunters someplace until we decide what to do with them and take care of a few priority jobs for Dume. Then I will head over to Ga-Metru."

"Then maybe I'll see you there," Nidhiki said, departing. "Yes … maybe."

***

It took longer than Lhikan expected to get his tasks done. Night had already fallen by the time he made it to Ga-Metru. Nidhiki was there ahead of him, standing with Toa Tuyet amidst a crowd of Matoran. A Ga-Matoran was lying on the ground, unmoving. From the puddle around the body, Lhikan guessed she had been fished out a canal. In her hand was the now familiar stone tablet bearing Tuyet's name.

"What happened?" he asked, already guessing the answer.

"It was awful," said Tuyet. "I heard a scream and a splash … I ran out … but she was already dead. Drowned, with that … that terrible reminder in her hand."

“Just like the others,” Nidhiki said, his eyes meeting Lhikan’s for a long moment. “Tell him when this happened, Tuyet.”

“Only a few minutes ago,” said the Toa of Water.

“But that’s --” Lhikan began.

Nidhiki cut him off. “Horrible, that’s what it is. But don’t worry, Tuyet, Lhikan and I will catch the ones who did this. You can count on that.”

***

It was an hour later. Full darkness had descended on Metru Nui as well as on the spirits of its residents. And none walked in a deeper shadow than Lhikan this night.

He found Tuyet in her dwelling. She looked at him hopefully. “Did you find them? Did you stop them?”

Lhikan nodded. “Yes. You have … nothing more to worry about. Nidhiki and I captured all three Dark Hunters.”

Tuyet smiled. “That’s wonderful! Then the countdown is over … I can live again. I don’t have to sit in this darkened chamber anymore – we can share adventures again, just like before.”

Lhikan walked past her. Before she could react, he smashed a hole in the back wall and reached in, his hand emerging with a glowing red stone. “Will we share this too? This is the Nui Stone, isn’t it? The one you said you didn’t have?”

“How did you --?”

“The stone is full of energy. Energy gives off heat,” said Lhikan. “Once I knew to look for it, it was easy. Heat is my business.”

Tuyet rose. To her credit, she didn’t seem nervous or taken aback. She was colder than most Ice Toa Lhikan had known, he had to give her that.

“What do you mean, ‘knew to look for it’? I don’t even know how that got here!”

“You didn’t know a lot of things, it turns out,” said Lhikan. “For example, Nidhiki and I

caught those three Dark Hunters that were after you – but we caught them this morning. So they couldn't have killed a Ga-Matoran tonight and left that tablet on her.

"Nidhiki told me Devastator looked confused when he brought up the countdown – so we started wondering if that was because he really had no idea what was going on. He and the others were after you, it's true, but they weren't the ones killing Matoran."

Lhikan summoned a ring of fire to surround the Toa of Water. "You were, Tuyet."

"That's ridiculous!" Tuyet snapped, calling down a thunderstorm to douse the flames. "Have you gone mad, accusing me of something like that?"

"The Dark Hunters were right. The Nui Stone did end up on your home island and you did take it with you when you came here. They wanted it and you knew they wouldn't stop until someone stopped them. So you started this countdown and then set Nidhiki and I on their trail. When you heard nothing from us, you assumed they were still free, so you had to keep the countdown going."

The water blast that struck Lhikan came out of nowhere and sent him hurtling across the room. The impact made him drop the stone, but it landed inside a water bubble that floated gently back to Tuyet.

"I thought Nidhiki would be a problem, but not you," she said harshly. "You are so trusting, so convinced of the purity of Toa. I don't think Nidhiki even trusts himself. Better keep an eye on him, Lhikan, he'll come to no good."

"You mean like you?" said the Toa of Fire.

Tuyet laughed. "Me? With the energies in this stone, I am going to become the most powerful Toa that ever lived. Think of it – no more Rahi monsters attacking, no more Dark Hunters, and maybe I'll even take out the Brotherhood of Makuta just for fun. What the League of Six Kingdoms tried to do while they were active, I will do – impose law and order on everything that lives."

"Your law, and your order," said Lhikan. "Law built on the corpses of dead Matoran, order built on lies – no good can come from that."

"That's your problem, Lhikan," Tuyet sneered. "Always following the rules. Always worrying about others. Did you ever think we could do more good if we stopped worrying so much about who might get hurt in the process?"

“The day we stop worrying about that, we become part of the problem,” said Lhikan.

“No, no more problems,” Tuyet answered, her gaze shifting to the stone in her hand. “I’m about to become the ultimate solution.”

Her hand closed on the stone. It began to crackle, a nimbus of crimson energy surrounding her. Lhikan hurled a fire bolt, but she deflected it without even looking at him. Her power was already growing exponentially with each passing moment. In a matter of seconds, she would be able to snuff him out like a tiny flame in a windstorm.

“Don’t do this!” he shouted. “Remember what it is we stand for! Remember who you are!”
“I don’t care about who I am!” Tuyet yelled. “I care about who I will become!”

The next split second was a blur. There was a sound like a mountain splitting in two and then the door was flying across the room, slamming into Tuyet. Nidhiki stood in the open doorway, a tornado whirling around him.

“Hi, dear, I’m home,” said the Toa of Air.

Lhikan sprang from the floor and closed with Tuyet, trying to pry the stone loose from her grasp. She hurled him aside and then hit Nidhiki with a flood tide that forced him out of the chamber. The next instant, her power exploded, bringing down the entire dwelling.

Before the startled eyes of the Toa of Fire, Tuyet began to rise on a column of water. Higher and higher she climbed, until it seemed like she would be able to touch the stars themselves. And she was laughing, a thunderous, horrible sound that shattered Lhikan’s hopes and beliefs like they were fragile things of crystal.

“I always knew she looked down on us, but this is ridiculous,” said Nidhiki. “Are you up to putting a chill in her plans?”

Lhikan didn’t answer. Instead, he focused his energy on drawing all the heat out of the column of water on which Tuyet stood. The effects were immediate – water became ice. Before the Toa of Water could respond, Nidhiki had picked up a pole made of solid metallic Protodermis and swung it, smashing the pillar of ice to pieces.

Stunned and thrown off-balance, Tuyet dropped the stone. Out of contact with it, her new powers abruptly vanished, and the sudden shock of such a loss stunned her. She fell. The stone fell. Lhikan watched them both, wondering which – if either – he should catch. He chose the Toa. Nidhiki was fine with that choice. He positioned himself under the Nui Stone, ready to snatch it out of the air. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lhikan catch Tuyet. The Nui Stone came closer, closer … and then a blast of fire knocked

it out of the air.

“No!” yelled Nidhiki, trying to grab it. But its surface was molten hot and he couldn’t touch it for more than second. The stone hit the ground and splintered into a billion pieces, whose red glow flared and then faded for good.

“You --!” raged Nidhiki. “You stupid, moronic -- what’s the matter with you?”

Lhikan had encircled Tuyet with fiery chains. Although they did not touch her, she could not move without being burned, and they burned so white-hot that any moisture instantly evaporated on contact. With the destruction of the stone, the red glow had faded around her as well.

“Sorry, Nidhiki. My mistake,” said Lhikan. “I seem to have made a lot of them lately.”

***

Tuyet would be confined in the Coliseum while Dume and Lhikan tried to decide on a fitting punishment. Despite being under guard, she disappeared during the night, never to be seen again. Reports that a large creature had suddenly appeared in her cell and then teleported out with her were dismissed as, at best, a delusion.

Lhikan would never find out what happened to Tuyet, although the mystery haunted him all his life. But the prisoners of The Pit welcomed a new companion that night, a Toa who had committed the unpardonable crime of slaying those she was intended to protect.

Tuyet was among the prisoners who perished when the Great Cataclysm shattered the Pit. There are some escapees who claim she fought beside Hydraxon, trying to stop the inmates from fleeing, while others insist she was looking to break out herself and just got unlucky.

As with so many things in life, the full truth will never be known … and those who still remember her are invited to believe whatever lets them sleep more peacefully at night.