

No One Gets Left Behind

By Shadow-Nui

Screams. The pained cries of Matoran around him suffering. Norik looked in every direction, but the darkness was impenetrable. Any attempts to conjure a fire to illuminate his destination were quickly extinguished. The shadows swirled around him, slowly increasing the pressure, crushing the wind from his lungs. The darkness came alive, a living entity, seeking only the death of this Toa. Suddenly the demonic presence disappeared, along with the trees, the rocks, the screams, and most importantly, the ground. Norik dropped into the abyss, a perpetual and eternal freefall, forever falling, falling, falling....

Norik sat straight up, panting, and quickly lit a fire, revealing his surroundings. The trees and rocks were still there, and though the only sounds were the chirping of the night birds and the wind rustling through the leaves, the screams still lingered at the back of his mind. He took a deep breath.

"VARIAN!" he yelled. An azure mask popped up next to him.

"You called?" she asked innocently. Norik simply looked at her.

"How many times have I told you NOT to do that?" he asked. It was less of a question, and more of a warning.

She grinned. "If I didn't have perfect auditory retention, I'd be insulted at the question. 288, not counting the time it was that Xian experiment."

Norik didn't say anything, merely continued looking at her.

"What, you expected me to go back further than a year? I can't count that high."

They had been camped out on the shore of the northern continent for several days now, waiting for their contact. A few weeks prior, they had been approached by a group of Matoran, acting as emissaries of their Turaga. Three local Toa had disappeared in the night, though a fourth was left alone. The Turaga suspected foul play and sent some Matoran out to acquire reinforcements. Norik and Varian were hard-pressed to refuse the plea, and returned with the group to their island. They had been instructed to wait a few hours outside of the village, in case whoever, or whatever, had taken the Toa was still watching. Neither of them argued; they had seen too many comrades fall to ambushes. An informant was supposed to return to them within a day or two and apprise them of the situation; it had been three, and although he didn't show it, Norik was starting to get worried.

It was Norik's turn to keep watch. He spared a glance at his sleeping companion, who was dead to the world. The sight made him grin. She was so full of energy during the day, it was amazing she could sleep as well as she did. Unlike her, Norik had no desire to interrupt her sleep. Not that he begrudged her for it; that's simply the way she was. They had been partners for centuries now, and he had grown used to her teasing.

The two had been strangers to each other; different homelands, different teams, different lives. Their groups had come together to deal with a Protocairns invasion, and their knack for teamwork in dealing with the strange beasts (and the resulting Parakrekks infestation) eventually led the teams to stay together. Over the years, their numbers had dwindled, but they remained together, and sent members out on various missions. Norik and Varian, good friends by this time often paired up, and set off to help where they could.

"Calm one, isn't she?" a grey-colored Toa said. Norik abruptly stood up, and summoned a fireball to his hand.

"Woah, easy friend!" the Toa said. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you like that. Force of habit, my apologies; my element is Sonics."

Norik lowered his hand, but kept the fireball. "You're our contact?"

The Toa nodded. "I'm the last Toa. My Turaga wanted to come himself, but I insisted on going in his stead. You know what happened?"

"Just the basics," Norik replied. "Your three teammates were abducted in the night, but you were left alone. Any idea why?"

"Plenty," the Toa said bitterly. "Each more insane than the last, but all of our usual leads came up empty."

Norik sighed. "If you can't tell me anything more than that, there's not much we can do."

The Toa of Sonics nodded. "I figured as much, though I still had to try. I'll lead you guys to the village."

"Thank you," Norik said. "By the way, we were never introduced; my name is--" The Toa held up his hand for Norik to stop.

"No names. It'll be easier that way. Just call me 'Grey.'"

"I guess that makes me 'Red,' then," Norik said.

Varian, who had woken up, laughed. "Then I get to be 'Gold.'" Norik gave her a sideways glance. She shook her head.

"No, Norik, I won't back down on this one. You owe me this. I'm not going to be 'Blue.'"

'Grey' chuckled. "'Gold' is fine with me. We should get moving – the less time we waste, the better."

They stood up, and started toward the village.

"I was wondering, though," 'Grey' said. "Why is it that you guys don't carry weapons? Are you that good?"

A look of surprise briefly flashed across Norik's face, replaced by one of understanding. He looked at Varian, and nodded slightly. Varian exhaled deeply; wicked looking blades suddenly sprouted from her elbows, and a massive spear appeared on Norik's back. Both carried shields that seemed to radiate light, despite the oppressive darkness.

"Now THAT," 'Grey' said, "is a nice trick."

The three Toa entered the village the next morning.

"It's awfully quiet," Varian said, oblivious to her own loud voice. "Where are the villagers?"

"It's pretty early," Grey said, although he looked somewhat unsettled. "They're probably indoors. I'll take you guys to our quarters ... that was the last place they were seen."

The group entered the dwelling, and Varian suddenly charged ahead, stopping in the dead center of the room. Closing her eyes and raising her arms, she drew deep, steady breaths.

"What is she doing?" Grey whispered, afraid to interrupt. Norik, who had seen her do this time and again, spared no such effort.

"Mentally scanning the room and surrounding area," he said. "You'd be surprised at how helpful a simple probe can be. It can reveal illusions, sense hidden beings nearby ... sometimes the smallest detail matters."

Varian's eyes snapped open.

"Look out!" she screamed.

The building exploded.

The crimson-armored Dark Hunter known as Lurker laughed maliciously. Hefting a massive plasma cannon, he turned to his companion, the colossus Gatherer.

"You see, Gatherer? The Xians are not without their uses."

Gatherer gestured to the blaster Lurker held. "I thought you abstained from fancy weaponry."

"Ordinarily, yes," Lurker said, tossing the tool to Gatherer. "I much prefer to feel my kills. Long range weaponry is so impersonal. The devastation this causes, though ... nothing short of magnificent."

"The female is still inside," noted Gatherer, ignoring Lurker's philosophical discourse on assassination.

"What a shame," Lurker sighed. "There goes the hunt."

Norik's eyes fluttered open. He sat up, but promptly fell back, his muscles screaming in protest. Sitting up again, slower this time, he looked around. There was a large fire directly in front of him, blazing intensely despite the cool air. It was a comforting sight – fire was his element, after all. That is, until he remembered what caused it.

"Varian!" he yelled, racing towards the house. He threw the flames aside with his power, bursting in to the abode. The inside was in shambles, but, thankfully, fire free. Sifting aside debris and wreckage, he came across the prone figure of his teammate and heaved her up onto his shoulder, carrying her out of the room. Once they were outside, he lowered her gently onto the ground. She was still breathing, but her eyes were shut and she could not be roused.

Norik stood by her side for hours, refusing to leave; it was clear something had happened to the villagers, and he could not chance heading to their boat with the potential for an ambush on the way. He was contemplating breaking in to one of the homes in the hope of finding something that could help them when she woke up.

"Easy," Norik said gently, "Easy."

"Norik," she spluttered. She was taking short, shallow breaths, and trembling all over.

"Calm down," Norik said, "You're safe now. What happened?"

"I ... he ..." she mumbled, faltering at every syllable. She couldn't string more than two words together. Norik was at a loss, and could only watch as she struggled to speak. Finding her voice at last, she began to tell her tale:

Her mental probe had picked up two nearby beings. cursory examination revealed them to be Dark Hunters, armed with a weapon capable of blowing them all to oblivion. By the time she had shouted her warning, it was already too late. Augmenting her reflexes with her Kanohi Calix, she had grabbed Norik and hefted him bodily from the room. She was too late to reach their Toa guide, however, and the building was struck by their attack. Despite the blast, she had remained conscious, and was attempting to look for the Toa of Sonics when the Dark Hunters arrived. The taller one, the red-armored one, approached her, but before he could get to her, a voice rang out from behind them, commanding them to stop. The voice belonged to the battered, but alive, Toa of Sonics. He launched himself at the Hunters, flailing with his weapon. Lurker launched a vicious counterattack, slashing and hacking with his blade. Varian herself began preparing an elemental attack, summoning mental energy slowly, ready to unleash a devastating assault. It seemed just in time; 'Grey ' was clearly outclassed by the vicious Lurker, who eventually pinned him with his claws. Lurker raised his blade, poised to deliver a killing blow, and Varian attempted to act. In the fraction of a second before she unleashed her Psionic assault, the other Dark Hunter prepared and fired a Rhotuka, straight at Varian.

There, her tale ended. Once struck, she described things that only one touched by madness could comprehend; violent explosions of color, and a kaleidoscopic fade into nothing. Norik recognized the Hunter from her description; a former Matoran named Gatherer, captured and turned into a Dark Hunter. From intelligence gathered, Norik knew that he possessed a Rhotuka with the ability to scramble minds, something not only a potent weapon, but sheer agony for one whose mind was her greatest weapon.

"Please Norik," Varian said. "We have to save him. He could still be alive! We can't leave him to die."

Against all odds, against his own intuition, Norik knew she was right. If there was even a chance 'Grey ' was alive, they could not afford to abandon him to the enemy. They were down a few hours, but they had come in a good boat; if they got out to sea, they might be able to catch up to them.

"All right," Norik said. "Let's go."

Varian nodded eagerly, leaping up, only to collapse. Norik rushed to help her, but she quickly waved him off.

"I'm okay, Norik. I'm just ... tired."

Despite her assurances, Norik was still worried.

"I'm going to search through the homes to see if I can find something for us to use. Will you be okay on your own?"

Varian nodded. She looked better, though still a little unfocused; the experience had rattled her. Norik headed slowly towards a hut, never taking his eyes off her.

As soon as he was gone, she sat down, cradling her head in her hands. What she had told Norik was the truth – mostly. It definitely wasn't a physical pain, it was just an overwhelming fatigue. In a way, it was worse than any wound of the body, and she had experienced her fair share of those. She sighed. It was difficult being a Toa. She wasn't one to disparage her duty, let alone her destiny, but the constant battles were taking a toll. She had initially been involved with stealth and reconnaissance, as her abilities were perfectly suited for sensory work. What wasn't suited for the task was her personality. She enjoyed freedom, and more than that, she enjoyed action. Not content with being the support, she had requested to be assigned the more combat-oriented missions. Their leader, a grizzled Toa of Gravity, had initially refused the request, but after much negotiation, allowed her to try. Rumor has it that she had used her powers to make him "see" her point of view, but neither of them could afford to admit it. She adored the action, but in retrospect, she had bitten off more than she could chew; strong as she was, she wasn't nearly as battle able as Norik, and every mission made her more tired than ever. For years, she had made a pact with herself to disclose these feelings to Norik, but the years came and went, and still she ended up on the front lines.

Her musings were interrupted by Norik, who was carrying a gleaming object underneath his arms.

"It's not exactly a remedy for your pain," Norik said, "But I think it'll come in handy down the line."

"You always did know how to make me feel better, Norik." Varian grinned. "What about the Matoran?"

Norik shook his head. "Gone. I don't know what happened to them ... but I think we're better off not knowing. Come on. We have a Toa to rescue."

As it turned out, they didn't need to hurry. The Dark Hunters were just preparing to set sail when the two Toa arrived at the shore. Norik didn't bother with tactics. The time was long past for subtlety. He announced their presence with a wave of fire, following it up with a barrage of fireballs. Gatherer leapt forth and took the brunt of the assault, shielded by his thick armor. Lurker made no such move, merely watching the spectacle with an amused look. Even if he had been paying attention, he would not have noticed Varian, shielded by her elemental powers, sneak aboard the ship.

Looking around, she opted against a manual search. Norik couldn't hold off two Dark Hunters forever. This left dropping her shield and scanning the area with her mind, in the hopes of locating the Toa of Sonics. No sooner had she done so then she felt the cold metal of Lurker's blade against her neck.

"I thought a reckless charge was a little too good to be true," the Dark Hunter said. "But I didn't know where you were until you were stupid enough to reveal yourself."

Varian didn't rise to the bait, instead focusing her energies into telekinetically moving the blade away from her neck. Once she had put enough distance between the two, she ducked and lunged backwards, thrusting with her elbow blades. Lurker shifted to the side, but was caught in the torso, tearing at his armor. Enraged, he grabbed her with his claws and threw her against a wall, and stabbed with his blade.

Their fight spilled out onto the deck. Gatherer and Norik were still duking it out on the beach. Gatherer had the power advantage, but he was having trouble maneuvering when hit by Norik's slowness Rhotuka. Lurker landed two well-placed blows on Varian and hefted her overboard, into the sea. Norik's attention momentarily

diverted, Gatherer took advantage and shot Norik squarely in the chest with his blaster. By the time he recovered, the boat was several kiosk out, and Varian was trudging out of the water, looking thoroughly displeased.

"I wanted a swim, but this wasn't exactly what I had in mind," she spluttered. "What now?"

"Now," Norik said, "Is when the action starts. Get the boat."

They caught up to the Dark Hunters quicker than expected. Their boat was big, and heavily armed, but it was slow. Norik's boat, by comparison, was small, and speedy. They trailed their enemies for a short while, but a Kanoka blast told them that they couldn't keep that up much longer.

Norik glanced at Varian. What she was about to do was bold, risky, and potentially suicidal – worse, it was entirely dependent on her. They didn't have many other options, and this was the one with the biggest chance of success. It was do or die; time to make their move.

Reaching out with her hand and her mind, Varian enveloped the Dark Hunter vessel in telekinetic energy. Massive as it was, the very inertia of the boat kept it going, overcoming her powers without breaking stride. They had anticipated this. Varian's powers were already diminished, and this was a challenging task for anyone. Thankfully, they had a countermeasure. Norik withdrew the object he found back in the village: an ornate mask, with an hourglass figure around the mouthpiece and ridged cheeks.

The Kanohi of Elemental Energy.

He tossed it to Varian. Immediately after donning it she felt a rush of pure energy flowing through her body, revitalizing her powers. It wasn't enough to eliminate her exhaustion, but acted as a stimulant, giving her a much needed boost. Reaching out again, with both hands, she thrust her elemental energy at the boat. The boat tilted and rocked, but ultimately slowed down, and eventually stopped.

In the distance, Varian spotted the figures of Lurker and Gatherer emerging onto the deck, to find out why their boat had stopped. She grinned. Perfect. With a running start, she leapt off the prow of Norik's boat, using her Calix to time the jump right and gain the necessary distance. Lurker stepped forward to meet the challenge. A mistake, as he was about to find out.

Midair, Varian pulled out her shield, and focused her power into it. A spinning wheel of energy formed at its center, imbued with a Sleep power. Varian let the Rhotuka fly; the wheel flew at a deadly velocity, striking Lurker dead on. He was unconscious before he hit the deck.

Varian landed perfectly and rolled forward, minimizing the impact damage. Standing up, she was immediately confronted by Gatherer, who brought down his blade. Varian caught the blade on her shield, but Gatherer had a powerful arm behind him, and forced her to one knee. With all her might, she deflected the blade to one side and darted forward, throwing out her elbow to catch Gatherer's side. His armor proved too thick, however, and the blade bounced off. Further strikes proved useless as well. Warily, Varian circled Gatherer, reluctant to use her mental powers while he still held on to his Rhotuka launcher.

Down below, Norik anxiously maneuvered his skiff around the Dark Hunter vessel. Sinking the boat was out of the question (tempting though it was), and it was too risky to try and get up there himself. Abandon the skiff, however, and he abandons any hope they have of escaping. It was a no-win situation, and was completely reliant on Varian to succeed, which is how she liked it. There was no arguing with her once she had put her foot

down (which she often did, in the most literal fashion). All he could do was wait and hope, two of his poorest skills.

Back on deck, Varian was preparing another Rhotuka. Norik had told her that Gatherer was an insomniac, never sleeping, but that didn't mean he couldn't.

She never got the chance to test her theory, as she was brutally struck on the side of the head. As she fell, she caught Lurker, recovered from his "nap," out of the side of her eye. In her last moment of consciousness she sent a telepathic plea, a final, desperate gambit, and hit the deck. Lurker picked up the sleeping Toa, and headed inside to get the ship moving again.

Gatherer followed suit, but a sudden increase in the temperature caused him to look back. There was Norik, flames swirling about him, spear and shield at the ready. Norik jabbed his spear forward and shot a concentrated burst of magma. With surprising speed, Gatherer darted underneath the shot, and propelled himself upward. Unleashing his vast array of weaponry, Gatherer fired an arsenal at Norik, blasting him with his Rhotuka, energy cannon, and several Kanoka disks. Norik was overwhelmed by the assault, and he was caught by Gatherer, who dragged him inside.

Varian opened her eyes; at least, she thought she did. It was hard to tell in pitch darkness. She groped around, trying to gain a feel for her surroundings. All she felt was the cold, hard stone of what was obviously a prison cell. A stone panel slid open, blinding her with a sudden beam of light. Standing in the new doorway was a massive, golden armored Dark Hunter she knew to be called "Ancient".

"Ah," the veteran Dark Hunter said. "You're awake. Saves me the trouble. Your presence is requested in the Shadowed One's chamber."

"Requested?" Varian queried. "What if I refuse?"

Ancient shrugged noncommittally. "Then you die."

"I'll come."

"Wise choice."

Ancient led Varian to a large chamber. A throne sat at the focal point of the room. Seated in the throne was the Shadowed One, exuding an air of confidence and power that a lesser being could never possess. Behind him lurked Darkness, and to his right sat his Recorder, poised to fulfill his one and only goal in life. Ancient departed the room, only to return, carrying the limp bodies of a Toa of Fire and a Toa of Sonics.

"Now, Toa," the Shadowed One said, snapping Varian's attention back to him. "I find myself in a dilemma. You see, I ordered two Toa, and yet here I am ... with three. A problem by most standards, but I have crafted a clever solution. I shall allow you to choose for me."

For a minute, Varian could not comprehend his words. Slowly, the truth of the simple, evil action dawned on her.

"No." she said decisively. "I won't do it."

The Shadowed One laughed. "Bravado in the face of danger is admirable. However, three is still a surplus." He brought his blade down just above Norik's neck. "Either you choose one to live... or I choose one to die."

She broke. Norik was her best friend, and she could not be responsible for his death.

"Him," she said. "Norik. I choose him."

"Predictable," the Shadowed One said disdainfully. "Very well. He will be returned to the Northern Continent, alive."

As Ancient carried the Toa of Fire out of the room, Varian extended her powers to him, blessing Norik with pleasant thoughts and dreams; it was all she could do for a lifetime of friendship.

When he was gone, Varian turned to the Shadowed One.

"And what of us? What plans do you have for us?"

"You," the Shadowed One emphasized, "Will spend an eternity here, in stasis. You will not be able to see, hear, or feel anything."

"Wh-why?!" Varian exclaimed. "What purpose does that serve?"

"Purpose?" the Shadowed One said mockingly. "Do not flatter yourself Toa. You have no higher calling. You will be put on display here, like these Kanohi. I do admit, it was difficult choosing an element, but I settled on Psionics. Your kind has a certain... charm about you."

Mind reeling, Varian grasped onto the last piece of information she still didn't understand.

"What about the Sonics Toa? I... I never even found out his name. What do you have planned for him?"

"His name is Triglax," the Shadowed One said, "And he will continue to serve under my employ as he has for centuries."

Confused, Varian turned to the Toa, only to find him up and reclining against the wall. Before her horrified eyes, he began to shift and morph, eventually settling on a completely different form.

The Shadowed One leaned over to her.

"Thankfully for you, in stasis... you also won't be able to think."

Varian's screams were the last sound she ever made.