

Act I Part 1

Earth. December 18, 2018. L2/G0/R01

The rain poured down outside the small window of the restaurant's crew room, typical weather for a Friday in Washington state. Nicole sat hunched over a notebook and scribbled away at the pages. Her old Mp3 player played theatrical music themes into her ears. It had become routine over the year and a half she had worked there. The repetitive tasks had given her plenty of time to think and daydream about what to draw or write about during her next break.

As she worked, she mentally noted the words seeping around her ear-buds but did not pay enough attention to the words themselves. Someone was always shouting something across the store for cheese or more burger patties. She felt a presence standing in the doorway, but chocked it up to another one of her coworkers trying to catch a glimpse of her latest project. No one ever bothered her unless she had accidentally gone over the end of her break by twenty-minutes, though the clock on her phone proved that it was not the current case.

She was not expecting the tap on her shoulder.

Nicole jumped an inch, her rear actually leaving the seat. Taking a moment to re-collect herself. She pulled her ear-bud cord out of her Mp3 player a millimeter to silence the music. Turning to face the offender, it was revealed to be her manager.

"Is my math off..?" She thought to herself. Perhaps she really was late to return to work some how. "What is it?"

Her manager laughed, "Did I actually scare you? I'm sorry." He said with obvious sarcasm. "Do you want to work tomorrow? I've got a shift that needs to be covered."

Nicole shook her head. "I already have plans for tomorrow, I don't get to see my dad much anymore." It was a small lie, but she had a day of typing and video games that she had been looking forward to. There was no way Nicole would be giving that up for more work.

"Oh alright... I'll see if Stephanie can do it." He sighed. Nicole always had some sort of excuse to get herself out of working late or coming in on off days. "You have a good weekend."

“You too” Nicole nodded and started her music back up. Unfortunately, the interruption had sapped her creativity and she was barely able to get two paragraphs onto paper before her lunch break was over. She sighed and began to pack up her notebooks.

Signing back in at the nearest register, Nicole took her place over the grill. The heat radiated off the surface, she had once checked the ambient air temperature of her work station at nearly a hundred degrees. Nicole had to tuck her bangs back into her hat, having hair over her forehead did not bode well for heat management, nor was it considered sanitary in the workplace.

Laboring over a hot grill was not something she wanted to do for the rest of her life. Neither was it something she wanted to do at the exact moment. Nicole felt that she was destined to write or design concept pieces for movies or games. Being able to see the intricate universes she had created in her mind come to life, it was her ultimate dream. With the rise in popularity and technological capability of virtual reality, she could not wait to walk along the shores of the many grand oceans, or among the bustling cities across many worlds. Unfortunately, classes for game development were expensive and with her working minimum wage, coupled with parents who told her they had a college fund saved than spent it on a Hawaiian vacation, made living those dreams virtually impossible.

Though finances were not completely to blame for her unrealized dream. Nicole commonly had a problem with drive. She wanted to take all the classes, but her mind wanders, and she focuses on her own work instead of the assignments. Nicole had managed to get only a seventy-two percent in her creative writing class because she spend all her time writing her old story instead of the class prompts. Though the class did say they really enjoyed her work.

The last hour of work passed quickly, the constant shuffle of meat trays allowed her to get lost in her mind.

There was a running joke among the grill crew that they were paid to get burned. As there was a distinct lack of grease protection for them. And today, she had not been spared. When she was removing a round of beef patties, a blurb of grease splashed up from the grill, landing on her exposed arms and cheek. She winced and wiped herself clean. Her shift would end in just a few minutes, and there was no point in complaining.

When the end of her shift finally arrived, Nicole enthusiastically passed the tools off to her replacement, clocked out and grabbed her stuff. As soon as she stepped foot out of the restaurant, she was assaulted by hundreds of tiny drops of water. She flipped her hood up and started for home. Her only stop was the gas station on the corner to pick up her usual energy drink, Nicole would be powered by three-hundred-and-fifty milligrams of caffeine that night.

The cars flew by as she walked through the heavy rain. At the rate it was pouring, she would not need a shower when she got home. Nicole did not mind the rain, she was from Washington after all. Walking through the rain was relaxing, and she liked it. However, her parents hated it, they had said she would eventually grow out of it but she doubted them. It was just another part of living in the Pacific Northwest.

Nicole walked across the bridge that spanned the local river. The water level was high today, but a small sand bar defied the torrent of water. Her eyes were drawn to its rocky surface by a flash of light. Whatever had caused the flash was nowhere to be seen, just a swirling bit of fog dissipating in the rain. She could have sworn that there were figures standing on the sandbar just moments before. Nicole shook her head and quickened her walking pace, suddenly feeling uneasy about the area.

She had seen plenty of weird unexplained occurrences since her family had moved to the region, sounds in the dark, that feeling of being watched. Figures at the edge of her vision that filled her chest with dread and fear.

Once she had arrived home from work late at night with her truck. The garage door was closed so she had to open it to pull in. It opened just fine but the problem came when she tried to close the door. It had refused to close and upon investigation Nicole had found that the other sensor had been kicked out of alignment on the *other side* of the garage. It should have been impossible to close originally, and to make things worse, it had been kicked inward. However nothing ever came of those feelings or experiences, just a chill in her mind whenever she thought of them.

Once again, she shook her head to rid herself of those thoughts and pressed on home. Upon arriving, Nicole hopped down the stairs and threw her things at the foot of her bed. She tossed her wet jacket over the back of her desk chair and stripped off her uniform to take a long, warm shower. Her laptop had been hidden in the crack between her bed and the wall, but it was now on her bed with her at the keyboard. Nicole went to work typing away at converting what she had written in pen to text on the

screen.

A message from one of her writing friends drew her attention away, and after a few messages back and forth; her work began to slow. Eventually all progress ceased because of her friends. Roleplaying was a common occurrences every night, and it made writing stories impossible. Sure many had spawned stories themselves, but that did not count towards the main work she did. When she began to get sleepy, out came the energy drink to keep her fueled until her friends signed off.

Nicole closed her laptop and slid it back into the crack. Her lights were turned off as she snuggled into her blanket.

Her phone buzzed at ten, again at ten-thirty, but the alarm at eleven is what finally woke her. She slowly sat up and groaned. Nicole's sleep patterns were not the best, but it got her through life.

Her plan for the day started to worked out perfectly, she spent most of her time playing video games, then started typing up her latest chapter work before it was even one in the afternoon. Taking a break from her relaxation she went to work on cleaning up most of the kitchen, her parents' only chore for her that day.

At about two, Nicole looked in her closet and realized that she was all out of chips in her secret stash. With a sigh, she headed out to her small pickup and left for the store.

She had to cross the bridge again, nothing happened when Nicole crossed it the first time, but on the return trip the flash appeared again. Her heart sank. She wished it was just her imagination playing tricks on her, but twice in the same place was hard to ignore.

“Perhaps it's a piece of metal..?” She thought, pulling off into the animal shelter parking lot. Nicole slid out of the truck, it was a quick run down to the river. She would not risk crossing the water, but she could see the sandbar from where she was standing. There were strange prints in the sandy areas along the shore. Some sort of four toed claws alongside a set of boot prints. Nicole had no idea what creature the claws could be from, she did not recognized the animal prints at all.

Taking out her phone, she managed to get an angle that captured the full view of the prints. With a few taps of her phone, the image was posted to her group chat online, *Nika's Bar and Grill*. Hopefully,

someone there would make sense of it.

She gave the area one last look over, but could not find anything else unusual about the place. It did smell a bit like burned plastic, but that could be from the trailer park across the river. Nicole sighed and walked back to her truck, before pulling out of the parking lot and heading home.

Her mother was still out at the mall, so Nicole had plenty of time to finish unloading the dishwasher. Or so she had thought. The security system beeped and announced that the garage door had opened.

“Nicole, have you unloaded the dishwasher yet?” Her mother asked

Nicole looked down at the barely unloaded top rack. “No, not yet. Doing it now though,” Nicole replied while pulling the cups and plates free.

“Well, why isn't it finished yet?” She asked again.

“I finished the rest of the kitchen then went to the store,” Nicole explained.

“Finish it up, I have more work for you to do today.”

Nicole groaned. “What is it?”

Her mother placed her purse on the counter. “I need you to vacuum the stairs, then water the plants.”

Her shoulders sank, so much for her plans. Sure she was twenty years old, but as long as she still lived with her parents, she had to follow their rules. There were plans set in motion to move in with her best friend. Back in October, she had flown out to New York and spent a couple of weeks with him, so they were confident that it would work out.

“Well what's Zach doing?” Nicole asked, watching her brother start for the stairs.

“I'm going to play Xbox.” He replied.

“No you're not. Zach is going to study. He's failing another class, so I took the Xbox away.” Her mother said.

Nicole groaned again, though at least her mother did not take the WiFi router away this time. She went back to work and sped through the rest of her chores. As per the usual, her mother had decided to continually stack more work on top of her list. Nicole did not finish cleaning the house until after the sun had set.

She sat on her bed with a huff. “I can't wait to move out...” Nicole groaned.

The night advanced on much like the last, the only addition was the chips she had picked up from the store. Nothing had changed with her friends through the day. Checking on her chat room, she found that the picture of the prints had completely dumbfounded everyone.

One of her friends had jokingly posted a picture of a dragon he had found on the 'dark side' of the internet. “*Looks to fit from what I can see.*” He had typed. However, the joke seemed to backfire as the others appeared to agree that a dragon was the most likely unrealistic culprit. That, or a dinosaur. On the realistic side of the spectrum, it was agreed to just be some people screwing around.

One by one, people began to sign off for the night. Nicole glanced down at her computer's clock: 2:34 am. “I should probably go to bed...” She mumbled to herself. Closing her writing documents and saving them to an external hard drive, she shut the laptop and rolled into her blanket.

Before she had fully drifted to sleep, a slight rumble stirred her back to consciousness. When Nicole opened her eyes, she was drawn to a bright light emanating from the foot of her bed. It wasn't some single light, the source was rotating. “What the hell..?” Nicole mumbled.

She rubbed her eyelids and slowly rotated herself on the bed to get a better look. Nicole slid across the surface until she could see the ground, or at least what was where the ground use to be. “Holy shit” She was looking down at what she could only describe as a glowing white vortex. The light in the center was too bright to look at directly, but it did not emit any additional light into the room, the light she saw originated from the light-clouds. There was some sort of suction that she could feel, drawing her in.

The vortex sat in a cleared part of the floor, Nicole could have sworn that her floor had been covered in

clothes earlier in the night. She sat and watched as it spun across the ground. The thought to get her parents had crossed her mind, but she was not completely sure this was really happening.

Curiosity finally won over and she slipped off her bed. Nicole grabbed a wooden board she use to use as a makeshift door lock and crept towards the swirling white mist. Carefully, she prodded the hole with the board, but as soon as it made contact, the wood was ripped out of her hands. The board shrunk into the singularity vanishing from sight.

Nicole jumped back, she could not risk touching the thing and ending up like the board. However, the vortex began to dim and slow its spin, perhaps whatever had been driving the anomaly had been satisfied. With a sudden stint of clarity, she realized she did not have and proof that this was happening. Her phone was across the singularity, on her desk.

The only way she could see to get over was the shelf that ran along the wall. It was long and narrow, but sturdy. Hopping back onto her bed, she stepped onto the shelf.

“God... this is probably the stupidest thing I've ever done...” She said to herself, slowly inching across and then stepping onto her desk. Now that she was in what felt like a safe position, Nicole grabbed her phone and snapped a few pictures. She sent them to her online chat group, and cued up a video message. “I don't know what this is... but I woke to it on my floor...”

Without any sort of warning, the once dispersing singularity suddenly brightened and doubled in size. It captured the legs of the desk in it's event horizon. The desk was yanked out form beneath Nicole, rapidly disappearing into the vortex. She fell backwards into the wall and bounced off towards the anomaly, screaming profanities all the way down.

She did not feel anything but an electric tingle as she passed through the cloud of energy.

One moment there was nothing, and the next. Her shoulder was slamming into a cold stone floor. Nicole slid across the polished marble, filling the cavernous space with a loud squeaking noise.

“Fuck!” She barked.

When Nicole came to a stop, she immediately rolled onto her other side and clutched her raw arm.

There was a heavy 'thunk' from behind her, and her bed was launched from the portal and crashed into one of the stone pillars that occupied the space Nicole had been transported to. She glanced around the space, now that she was not hurtling across at ten kilometers an hour.

It was strange, stone pillars supported wooden beams, which in turn held up a modern metal ceiling. The space was lit by old torches and incandescent lights that hung from the ceiling. There was a definite clash of eras and Nicole could tell.

"This *has* to be a dream," she muttered in awe. The room, while strange, was still grand and large.

She jumped as someone spoke out from between the pillars. "See? I told you she would come through." The voice said. "Her curiosity would get the better of her."

Nicole spun on her heel and blinked. How could she have not seen them before. Against the wall was a table, or a desk, behind that were a group of what she could assume were Humans. Three of them, all dressed differently. One was wearing a modern day military uniform, another in some sort of clothing she would expect to see a knight wearing under their chainmail, and the last was a woman in a hooded jacket which concealed their face.

More movement drew her eyes further right. "Oh... yes this is diffidently a dream." Nicole stared at a large red dragon. She had initially thought it was a ruby statue, but now that it moved she had been corrected. It was perched atop a cushion, just behind the desk.

It yawned and its deep voice echoed through the chamber. "She is aware of us now, Major. Let us get this started."

The soldier nodded and looked down at her. "Well Nicole, good evening. Though whether you believe this a dream or not, I can assure you it's really happening. *You* have been chosen to become a guardian!" He paused as if to add dramatic effect. "What are guardians, you ask? We make sure that reality and the many realms remain stable. We protect the worlds our minds create from the nightmares that can be so easily created."

"Erm... this is so strange..." Nicole muttered. "That sounds like a dream I had a few days ago..."

The woman in the hood sat up. “That was one of the many tests we gave to your subconscious,” she laughed. “That one was my doing.” Her voice rose in pitch, she seemed to be pleased with herself.

“Everything we have found points to the fact that you are a perfect candidate,” the Major pointed towards her, just like Uncle Sam in World War two. “And I believe that the others think the same.”

“Why do you favor her so much, Major?” The final voice belonged to the older man in the knight robes, his critical eyes scrutinizing Nicole.

“It is because she wrote military fiction, is it not?” The dragon chuckled, his voice reverberated in her chest. She could have sworn that the candles shook from the rumbling.

“And you like her because she will soon be your cousin, right?” The Major laughed as well. Though that statement made Nicole even more confused, how could she be related to the giant lizard? The soldier continued after he took a breath. “It is true, she writes military stories. But we have seen that she created many sound and stable realms in the layer because of her. And the facts state that she was the best candidate shown. *That* is why she was chosen, Harold. Gymeth and Tetam think the same.” The woman and the dragon nodded in agreement, though the older man just seemed to role his eyes in annoyance.

“Well thank you, it is encouraging to think that my own mind enjoys my stories,” Nicole crossed her arms. This was the most elaborate dream she had ever had, it was so concise, and not disjointed like most others.

“Nicole, I do not know if you understand yet, but everything you have written became real. There are multiple layers to existence, and on each layer exists an infinite number of realms or universes as you know them.” The dragon tried to explain in moderately simple terms. “You are from Layer two, and that layer was created by Layer one. However, their ability to create was passed to their creations, to you. Does that make sense to you?”

“I suppose,” Nicole shrugged. Since this was all a dream, she did not give much of a care for what her mind decided to throw together for exposition.

“You and any other creative mind created and populated Layer three. The Layer we protect. Since

creating stable Realms is very difficult there are many left unguarded, unprotected from ruin.” Tetam, the dragon, continued.

“A being sent to a lower Layer is granted unimaginable powers, the ability to create, change... and destroy the realm's very fibers of existence.” Harold spoke up, brushing a bit of dust off his robes. “Those powers are what we use to protect the realms. Hence why we have to make sure that you're capable of withstanding the stresses.”

“That does not mean that there aren't failures...” Tetam added in as quiet of a voice that he possessed.

“So I'm going to be protecting the worlds I've created? Cool.” Nicole said. *“God, I hope this turns into one of those series dreams I use to have...”* She was looking forward to it.

“No, your realms will be stable once you fully become a guardian.” Gymeth answered.

“Will I at least know the issues I need to fix when I arrive?” Playing along with the dream did not feel like a bad idea to Nicole. It was not like she was in a coma or anything, just asleep on her bed.

“Unfortunately, you will not. It will make itself known to you when the time comes. Each event is different, and even we do not know what you will be facing.” Gymeth said with a hint of worry to her voice. “...These nightmares... they can be unbearable, horrifying... they will resist the attacks you make with your abilities... Gods so many were lost...” She looked down, seemingly remembering whatever had happened to her.

Nicole stepped back, the woman's voice just gave off the wrong tones. Maybe she didn't want to have this dream become a common occurrence. There was a quiet tone that interrupted her thoughts, and the Major looked behind his back at a symbol that appeared on the wall behind them.

“It appears that the higher levels are saying we're out of time.” The Major said. “Gymeth and Tetam will follow you into your realm and help you learn how to use your abilities, so goodbye and good luck.” He looked towards the others at his table. “It was a pleasure seeing other guardians, even you, Harold. I hope we get the chance again.”

The three others began to say their farewells, but Nicole just stood in the open, stunned with how fast it

seemed to end. “What's going on, I have more questions!”

“Unfortunately, when the higher ups say we gotta go, we gotta go. Though I do have a question for you... Do you like Dragons, Nika?”

The Major smiled, and Gymeth and Tetam shared a subtle laugh as they each began to wink away. “Wait what? What does that mean?” Nicole stammered.

“You'll find out very soon.” The Major managed to say a moment before he vanished as well.

Her body suddenly felt hot, every inch of her skin began to burn. Nicole could not move, her muscles were locked in place. All she could do was grit her teeth and take the pain as the world around filled with darkness.