

Act I Part 2

Earth. December 19 2018. L3/G242/R1

Slowly the dream faded away and a soft blue light floated across her eyelids. The pain she had felt had been washed away, its memory only a spec in her mind. A droning beeping filled Nicole's ears, her phone's alarm was going off in her hand.

Why was her phone in her hand, had she fallen asleep checking her email? Using her thumb, Nicole padded for the 'dismiss' button somewhere on the screen. Her fingernails clinked against the glass, making a louder sound than normal.

She rolled over with a groan. She really did not want to go to work today. Maybe she would call out sick.

Once again, her alarm rang, finally calling her fully to reality. Blinking away the haze from her eyes, she recognized her room appearing before her. However, the first thing she noticed was the absence of her window. Instead, the entire wall had been replaced with what looked to be a granite wall. Nicole's desk and shelves were chiseled into the stone, in fact the only furniture along that wall not made of stone was her desk chair. From what she could tell, the stone was real, not some fake foam.

Glancing upwards, Nicole saw light dancing across her ceiling. It looked like she was sitting under water. She looked to either side and spotted projectors emitting the waves across the ceiling.

“The Fuck?” Nicole muttered.

Her bed, the only thing that *felt* familiar about the room, was vastly different than how she remembered it. What once was a plain black wood frame, was now made of driftwood and flotsam. The new space gave of a very strong 'sea cave' feel. Nicole could swear that she even smelt the ocean, though that could have been from the bed frame.

She shifted herself under the covers of her bed, but a larger object moved where her foot should be. Nicole tore the blanket off herself and revealed a pair of clawed feet. She was just stunned. They were covered in tiny blue scales with larger, tougher looking plates around the ankles. The claws themselves had been filed down to a smooth shape, almost like they were cut down so they wouldn't tear sheets.

Nicole did not fully make the connection that the feet were attached to her until she shifted her position again. When they followed her movements, she threw the blanket off of her bed in a panic. The blue feet were connected to blue digitigrade like legs, and they were connected to the body that resided beneath the shorts she was wearing. She suddenly became aware of new appendages connected to her, two points on her shoulder blades and a third just above her rear. They felt wrong, like they didn't belong.

“Calm down...” She said to herself, however her mouth opened far more than what it should. With another spout of panic, she attempted to bring herself down to something manageable. “Calm down. This is just a dream... a very...detailed dream. Just like the one you've always wanted to have.”

Taking a deep breath, Nicole pushed her new body over the side of her bed. Starting to walk with a different style of leg, and with the extra weight on her back caused her to get off balance. She landed in a heap on the floor, bruising the new wings and tail she had woken up with,

“Ouch...” Nicole groaned.

“Maybe this isn't a dream...” The feeling of pain jolting a sudden realization into the forefront of her mind. “I... I cannot really be... this creature... I *am Human*. Dragons don't exist.” Nicole closed her eyes and tried to force herself to wake, safe and warm back in her old room. But when she opened her eyes the world had remained the same.

“No no no! What the *fuck* is this?!” She yelled. Nicole dug into her left arm in an attempt to find the human skin beneath the blue scales. The nails on her fingertips tore through her skin and the wound became swollen with red blood. There was nothing but muscle and bone beneath the scales. She could feel the sharp pain and aching flesh with vivid intensity, driving the new reality home. This was her, she was this creature, and this was no dream.

With bloody hands, Nicole grabbed her door and bolted out. Her unfamiliar body caused her to bump into walls and get caught on the hallway door frame. Giving a quick yank, she pulled free. Something on her cracked and more pain surged through one of her new appendages. But she pressed on, determined to get away from wherever she was.

Nicole dashed up the stairs, she dropped onto all fours in an attempt to give herself an inefficient speed boost. At the top of the stairs, sat a door that had not been there in the original home. She managed to grab the doorknob and twist mere moments before she would have collided with the wood.

Back on to two legs, she quickly surveyed the space. While the lower floor was nearly identical in layout to the old one, this floor had a completely different design. The only sunlight streamed down from skylights, she must still be underground. Spinning herself around the dividing wall, she started up the next flight of stairs, searching for the surface.

Someone spoke below, “Nika? Where are you- Are you bleeding?!”

Nicole ignored the voice, she was almost out of the house. The next floor was small, but it actually had windows showing the outside world. This place was like someone had shuffled her old house around and then embedded it into the earth. Glancing around at the furniture, she found the keys to her truck. For a moment, she wondered if she was capable of driving in the state she was in. Nicole would try anyway, swiping them off the table and flying out the front door.

Once again her truck was the victim of looking similar to the old one, yet being different enough to make her pause. Pulling the cab door open caused her to stop momentarily again. It was not that the pedal system was different, but it was that the seat had a tail hole and divots for wings. Nicole climbed in and did her best to get the appendages in their correct places. She was beginning to think more clearly now that the pain was subsiding. However, she still pressed her foot down and sped down the road at a reckless speed. Her thoughts still yelled for her to get away, a bit quieter now. She just needed to think.

The once clear cut hillside she lived on, now appeared to be well forested. Nicole did not see any other houses around either. Already being secluded from the rest of the world helped her calm down even faster.

She laughed to herself. “God, if only my friends could see me now.”

Either the geography of the region had been altered, or she had been driving much faster than she thought, for Nicole arrived in the mountains much sooner than expected. Given what she had seen so far, it might actually be a combination of both. Nicole sighed and looked down at her legs, the blue

scales covered by a familiar layer of cloth.

Unfortunately she had taken her eyes off the road for a few moments too long. When she looked up, it was already too late for her to turn. Her truck smashed into the old guard rail and began to tumble down the hillside. Nicole was thrown around, snapping her wings in multiple places. Blood poured from new wounds, and her head was slammed into the steering wheel. She blacked out and the truck came to rest against a large boulder.

When she returned to consciousness, Nicole found herself hanging upside down. The pain she was feeling was immense. A cry escaped her mouth as Nicole pushed open the dented door and fell to the cold ground. The boulders had caught from crashing into a river only a few meters away. She slowly looked herself over, the injuries looked ugly, but they weren't life threatening as far as she could tell. When she blinked, Nicole found that she could not see anything, nor could she hear.

Nicole shook her head, trying to clear her vision. Nothing helped, even the pain was gone. She reached up to make sure her eyes were actually functioning, but she could see her hands before her. Slowly, the ground faded into existence, but only in a ten meter diameter around her, everything else was blackness.

A voice spoke out from beyond her vision. "Perhaps we should have figured a less damaging way to start this." The voice was familiar, it belonged to the woman in the hood from the meeting hall.

Nicole looked around at the blackness and struggled to remember the woman's name. "Gy... Gymeth?"

"Oh good, she does remember." The second voice belonged to the red dragon, Tetam. "Also no brain damage, good sign."

"Yes.. I'm here." The hooded woman walked through the black wall and into her field of view. "We've cleared your perception of anything non-crucial right now."

Nicole waved her good arm at the area around her. "So that's what this is?"

The red dragon came through the darkness as well and sat on one of the large boulders. "Yes, and I

apologize about allowing you to crash your truck, but there's something about pain that sets off the magic in your system.”

“So you let me crash my truck?! I could have killed myself.” Nicole was a bit flustered now that she found out she was being watched the whole time.

“I did tell Tetam that it was a bit of overkill, but he assured me that it would cause enough for the jump start.” Gymeth said. “And no, you're far more resistant than other creatures, the most you would have done was break a few more bones.”

Nicole looked down at her right arm, which sat limply at her side, then to her wings that had bone protruding from her flesh. She was glad she couldn't actually feel any of the pain at the moment. The look she gave Gymeth did not hide any amount of 'Really?'

Gymeth's head shook like she was rolling her eyes. Tetam stepped in. “Now lets give you a bit of an important first lesson. I want you to concentrate and think about your wing mending itself. All you have to do is think on it and be sure that you wish to do it. It will be slow at first, but with practice, you'll be able to make changes in an instant.”

“Uh... alright...” Nicole closed her eyes and tried to imagine the torn wings coming together and mending themselves. It took a moment, but she could feel the foreign appendages tingling on her back. She had not noticed it before, but there had been no feeling before that moment. Nicole tried to move them, and see if the 'magic' had worked.

It felt like moving another pair of arms, but when they wrapped around her form, Nicole saw that they had indeed healed. “So it is real...”

“That is is,” Gymeth said. “You are not the first to react this way.”

“Yeah... some are worse. There was this one fellow that had been recruited and the lead forgot to change him before he woke. The pain from the transformation woke his powers before he had any idea how to safely use them... That was... quite the show.” Tetam seemed to be remembering a fond memory.

"I'll bring us back in now..." Gymeth waved her hands and the rest of the blackness blew away into the world. "Just take a moment to breath. Just relax."

Nicole took the advice and took some slow breaths, before sitting back on the ground. She managed to cross her legs, it felt strange at first, but after a moment it felt just as natural as her breathing. This life was so strange now.

"So... is this abnormal?" Nicole asked. "Changing into a different creature?"

"No... this is what many of us experience." Tetam said. "If it means anything, I understand what you're going through. I was once Human as well, and as you could guess, my form took some getting use to."

Gymeth took off her hood, revealing a face none too different than Nicole's now, except neon purple hair covered the top of her head, along with trimmed horns. "Fucking Furies" She muttered. "They are probably responsible for, like seventy-two percent of the realms we have to guard... god... some of mine...so cringy."

"Uh" Nicole didn't like the sound of that.

"Don't worry, you seem to have lucked out with some sane realms." Gymeth said, flipping some hair out of her eyes.

Not wanting to dwell on that subject, she looked to Tetam. "Sorry... I didn't know."

"Its fine... I've already been this way for centuries." He said with another one of his smirks.

"Wait, we're immortal?" That would be an interesting development. Though she was concerned,. In most of the books she had read that dabble in the realm or immortal creatures, its very common for them to become lonely and depressed beings, cut off from the rest of reality.

"To an extent... yes." Gymeth elaborated. "We do age, so I would recommend editing your appearance every few decades or so. You will not die of old age, however." She stopped and tapped her chin. "You can still get injured, as you can tell, and sometimes you cannot just use magic to fix your problems. There are creatures in every realm that are resistant to magic, so you need to find other ways to deal

with them if you find yourself caught with one.”

“I see... how do you not get bored, with all this time on your hands?” Nicole asked. It was a serious question.

Gymeth looked over to Tetam. “I think this is a question for you, big guy. You being the oldest of us all.”

He sighed and looked down at himself. “Well, we watch over many realms,. Each realm is its own universe, and each universe is unique. You learn to appreciate the value there is in everything. There will always be something for you to protect. to experience, to live. Be it what we are, or something someone did while we were changed, but we have a drive to just keep going.” Tetam looked off into the darkness. “I would not recommend making any loving emotional attachments to the residents of your realms... Unfortunately that drive is absent in them...”

“That seems like good advice...” Nicole nodded slowly

“*But* you should never look down on the residents of the realms you protect. They are people, or dragons, or whatever they may be. They are *not* playthings or slaves. It is your duty to keep them, and the universe safe.” He said.

“I see how that way of thinking could lead to problems...”

“Indeed...” Gymeth sighed. “As well, us Guardians must be quick thinkers. If you're unable to make a quick change, or if doing so would cause an issue, you need to be able to craft up a story to explain it. If you change reality too much, it might become too hard to maintain stability.”

A faint glow appeared around the two other guardians. Tetam looked down at himself and sighed. “Well I supposed that's it for this training period. We will be back soon for another round of instruction. Though, one more thing. Some Guardians that I've mentored like to create a meter to keep track of their power level. We have a cap placed on us when we start, you'll get a higher tolerance, so to speak, the more experienced you become with them.” He said. “It would be a good idea to keep track of your charge, It would truly be bad if you ran out in the middle of a multistage change.”

Nicole nodded. "That's a good idea." She looked down at her wrist and a small silver band faded into existence. Taking a look at the underside of her arm, Forty-two percent, was displayed on the blue scales.

"Excellent work, similar to what I was thinking," he said. Gymeth and Tetam's bodies began to fade from the scene of ferns and "Farewell."

"So long, Nika." Gymeth waved before Nicole was left alone once again.

Nicole took a deep breath and looked over at her smashed vehicle. "How the fuck am I supposed to get home now..." She clapped her hands and rubbed them together. "Here we go." Nicole closed her eyes, placing her hand towards the vehicle, and concentrated on sending the truck back up to the road above. Her hand tingled and when she opened her eyes; the truck was gone. "Nice."

She climbed up the hillside and stumbled onto the pavement. There sat in the middle of the road was her truck, still crushed beyond recondition. Flipping her wrist over, the power level appeared; Thirty-three percent. Teleporting the vehicle the short distance had dropped her ten percent.

"Well... hope I have enough to make this drive-able. I should make a list of how much things cost." Nicole once again closed her eyes and concentrated on the vehicle returning to its former shape. She heard the crunch and groan of metal shifting.

She was concerned that opening her eyes would interrupt the change, but she took a peek anyway, curiosity winning out. The steel plates stretched out before her hand and bent back into place. Even the dent that had been there when she had bought the car had been mended. Shards of glass flew past her head and reformed into intact windows. In just a few moments, the bent wreck of a vehicle had been reverted into a 'like new' condition.

Nicole stepped back and admired her handiwork. "My god... this is so cool." Her charge was now at five percent. She climbed into the truck and gripped the steering wheel. Her eyes examined the fine blue scales, and she sighed. "Lets go... home..."

The engine started up just fine, and she eased on the gas. Nicole drove back down the mountain, and eventually came to a stop in front of where her house apparently was now. The world she lived in now

was organized completely different. Towns had been shuffled and erased from the map; highways existed where none had before, and the roads she knew had vanished. Thankfully she had brought her phone somehow, without its GPS, she would have never gotten back. It was a wonder Nicole had made it to the mountains in the first place.

Sitting in the driveway, Nicole gave the map a quick look over to try and get a sense of where everything was. All the major cities were still in place, but everything else was wrong. Her house, which had been around thirty kilometers from Seattle was now nearly fifty, and nestled into the Cascade foothills.

Looking up from her phone, she got a good look at the changed house. What use to be a three story building in a residential complex, now appeared to be a single floor garage down a long driveway in the middle of a forest. However, flanking the driveway, behind small wrought iron fences, skylights teased at the rest of the house that now resided below the surface.

Nicole dropped out of her truck, her bare feet, or claws depending on the perspective, pressed against the warm concrete. Her life had changed drastically, and she still did not know how to handle it. If she wanted to keep living, she would have to just deal with it.

She quietly walked up to the front door, and glanced down at her wrist. Ninety-seven percent, appeared on her skin. When she had fixed her truck, it had been below half that number. She could not do much yet. As Tetam had said, it would take time to grow her reserves until she could do something really useful. But to grow, she had to use them, and practice.

Though that was for another time. Now, she had to face her family, well her new family. Nicole still did not know what to think about how they were just, copies, or different versions. Her real family was a layer above her, but they probably thought she was dead now. She wondered how she went out up there, died in her sleep, or maybe a copy would die on the way to work.

Nicole opened the door and walked inside the new version of the house. In the entry way, a table of photographs presented itself. Nicole stopped and picked up one of the family.

She remembered the day it was taken; they were all at a pumpkin patch when she was much younger, one of the few times the extended family was all together. Everyone was in what she assumed was the

same position, but they were are the same species as her. She could see the family lines splitting down the middle. Red and stocky on her fathers side, blue and slim on her mothers, with others mix matched and dotted between.

One of the small children that matched her appearance was being held in the lap of a red and gray dragon, her father if the positions had remained the same. Nicole noted that her wings must have come from him, as no one on her mothers side had them. She had a lot of new family history to learn now.

Nicole set down the photo and started down the stairs she had so hastily ran up that morning. She got a chance to take in her new home. The stairwell was well worn and carpeted, which felt good since she had let without any kind of shoes. The second level was a drastic redesign from what Nicole use to live in. It still had everything from the original, but the layout was twisted and rotated around in a completely unrecognizable way.

In the kitchen on the far side of the level, she could hear the sound of someone cooking. Slowly, she rounded dividing wall and prepared to meet one of her new family members for the 'first' time.

The woman at the stove was a lighter shade of blue than Nicole was, she had fin like spines running from the top of her head to the tip of her tail.

She turned and saw Nicole standing dining room. "Oh, hey Nika. What was that about this morning, you ran out of the house pretty quick."

Nicole frowned slightly. She had just been called Nika for the second time since she had come into this world. That pen name she had used for her writing. "Uh...erm... nothing. I had to run to the store... and do some errands..."

"Oh, um alright, well dinner is almost ready." Her mother said.

"Okay..." Nicole said, she glanced up and over at what, Nicole assumed was her mother, was cooking. It appeared to be some sort of fish, probably salmon from the smell of it. It was something that her mom usually made twice a month, so nothing so exotic yet.

Nicole walked beyond the kitchen and peeked into another room. She found that this was the new

family room, and the dragon she had identified as her father in the photograph was sitting on a couch watching the television.

She was not sure if she was ready for complete interaction with her family yet. Thinking about spending an evening with them left a sick feeling in her stomach. It was the kind that everyone gets when really nervous, the bad kind of fluttering in her stomach.

She spun around and began to walk back towards the stairs. “M-mom... I'm not feeling very good... I'll be in my room.”

“Oh... okay Nika. I'll save you some fish if you're feeling better.” Her mom replied.

Nicole sighed, her family really didn't seem *that* different. Even if they were all a different species now. As she slowly walked down stairs, Nicole pilled out her wallet to check something. Her full name was also apparently Nika, not Nicole, which she just confirmed with her drivers license. Her world was still spinning around. “I should just go to sleep for now...” She sighed. “Hopefully I can figure this out better with a clear head.”

Nika walked back down the stairs to the bottom floor. Thankfully, it was nearly completely unchanged, none of the halls or rooms were in different formations. Other than the exposed granite walls that revealed that this was now in a cave, that is.

She made it to her room and sat back down in bed. “Well... I shouldn't got to bed hungry...” Nika closed her eyes and concentrated. When she looked back down at her thigh, a plate of fish sticks had materialized out of thin air.

With a somber smile, she began to eat. Nika hoped that if this *was* a dream, going to bed would send her back to a much simpler world.

With the food gone and the plate discarded, she lied back down onto the mattress. The position she found herself in was not comfortable, her new body was not made for sleeping on her back. Nika had to settle for her side, instead. She settled into bed and went to sleep, at five-o'clock in the evening.