

Clothes were flying out of her closet as Nika searched for something her mother had made an offhand comment about. It seemed that the scuba certification that she had received in her old world had carried over. While that was not unusual since everything else from there had also carried over, her Mom had mentioned that she had some actual equipment here.

Nika stopped when she saw the floor. She had not found any diving equipment, except for a wet suit. It was not a full suit either. Instead, it was a partial body, like a suit she would wear into warm waters. The neck sock, which had to have been a thing since Dragons had much longer necks than humans, was open on both sides. That would let water contact her neck which did not make any sense to her.

“Well... um, alright.” She muttered. “Where the hell is the rest of the gear?”

With just wet suit in hand, Nika climbed the stairs up to the main floor. Once again, the smell of cooking food entered her nostrils. She seriously wondered what her mother did other than cook and clean all day. That was all she had seen her doing since Nika had arrived in this reality. Nika glanced over towards the kitchen, and of course, her mother was cooking away. Well, it sort of looked like her mother.

The magic practice Nika had used her for two days ago was not totally gone. She had left Emma, her mother, a decade and a half younger than she had been just to see how the reality smoothing effect Tetam had talked about would handle it. It turned out that nothing had really changed. Her mother barely acted different and nothing in the world changed. Emma still thought she was in her forties, when she was really only a few years older than her daughter. Nika had also messed around with her height and other scale colors, but had returned those to about normal afterwards.

It suddenly occurred to Nika that she had yet to see her father or siblings. Maybe she would show up for dinner later tonight for once.

“Oh, hey Nika,” her mom said. “You're going diving today?”

Nika looked down at the wet suit in her hands. “Uh... maybe?” She was not completely sure.

Emma walked over to a drawer and pulled out a key ring. “Well you will need these. Your father changed out the boat locks after your brother lost the spare.”

That was new. “We... have a boat...?” Nika questioned. Owning a boat had always been out of reach financially for her family.

“Um, duh,” Emma said. “Are you feeling alright? You seem to be forgetting a lot of things lately.”

“Yeah... yeah. I'm fine. Just a lot of stress... from that accident, and everything else.” Nika shook her head.

“Okay... if you say so. Be sure to be home in time for dinner, this is the last one before I have to go back to work. I have a seven o'clock flight to Frankfurt tomorrow morning, and I've got a fresh co-pilot to put through the wringer.” Her mom shrugged. “I won't be back for any real time until the end of the month.”

“Alright, I'll be there.” Nika reassured her. “...Where is the boat again?”

“Vinson's Marina, on the waterfront. Come on, Nika.” Emma sighed. “If you keep this up, I won't allow you to go.”

“I am fine, mom. It's just been a while...” she replied. “I use to have it in my GPS, but I had to factory reset my phone.” Nika lied.

That seemed to please her mother. “Well, alright then. Have fun.”

Nika nodded. “I will, and I'll be back in time for dinner.” She started up the stairs; she could not just teleport in front of her mother. Well, actually she could, but Nicole might as well get her truck back. Her power reserves were decent for teleportation, but if she had to do anything else it might become an issue.

What she did do, however, was teleport back down to the parking lot by her work. The truck was still parked in the usual spot behind the dumpster corral. A small warning sticker was stuck to her window, saying that the truck was to be towed tomorrow morning. Nika peeled it off with a claw and tossed it into the dumpster behind the wall. She flipped over her wrist and read off her power level, plenty.

She hopped in and entered the name of the marina. The route quickly appeared on the screen, the 'waterfront' her mother had mentioned was really a small beach town on the northern end of the peninsula, like a three hour drive, or an hour ferry ride. Not like in Seattle like she had thought.

“Well... never mind driving there...” Nika gripped the wheel and envisioned herself and her truck in a parking lot near the marina. In a blink, she was back to viewing the ocean; this time through a windshield. “This is easy...”

Nika glanced around at the marina, it many boats say in their bays on shore. A massive forklift hauled boats that were about to be taken out for the day down to the water. She kicked open the door and hopped out to the gravel. The small kiosk to call down a boat was situated on the

hillside just before the water. She pushed open the small door and the shack was empty, save for the attendant.

It was a small dragon with a baseball cap behind the counter. He glanced up from a magazine at the female that just walked in. "Oh, hello. What can I help you with?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'd like to take my boat out today." Nika took out her ID and passed it over to the attendant.

"Okay misses... Gentry. Just to confirm, what's the berth number?" He asked.

"Uhm..." Nika glanced down at her phone and made a quick text to her mother through her phone. The response came through quickly. "Berth forty-seven, sorry it's just been a while since I've gone out."

"Nah, it's alright. I'll have the loader drop it off on the boat launch, so you'd better wait there for it," the attendant said.

Nika nodded and headed out and down to the boat launch. Like what the attendant said, the forklift carried a thirty foot boat out of the racks. It was a cabin cruiser, and it had to have been her families; the berth tag was in the front window. The Forklift lowered the boat into the water, and a few other dock hands pulled it around the dock, away from the boat launch.

She hopped aboard and waved to the dock workers as she started the boat up. Nika wanted to be a bit far from view when she did what she was planning. Her experience with boats only went as the one her great grandfather owned, and that was about this size. She took the boat out into the sound and let it drift for a bit while she searched the cabin for the rest of the dive equipment.

There was a closet that the key her mother had given her unlocked, and inside were scuba tanks and respirators. There were two sets marked for her brother and father, but Nika could not find any for her on the entire boat.

"Well that's just odd..." She said to herself. "I guess I'll just use one of theirs...."

Nika walked over to the table and took out a paper map of the area. There were a few spots marked as diving locations, some shipwrecks or diving parks. She tapped her chin and pondered which she wanted to go to. Probably something simple, Nika was not entirely sure how swimming with wings and a tail would go.

She picked a small tanker wreck in shallow water, just north of her current location. It was marked as a beginner dive, so Nika was happy. It was another teleport jump away, since she wanted to make it home in time for dinner. Nika walked back into the cabin to get suited up. She pulled the wet suit and tank harness on over her shoulders. The air tank was a bit difficult

because of her wings; she had to rest it in that crevice between them, and get the harness to go around the membrane.

With the gear on, Nika shuffled over to the back of the boat and kicked down the diving platform. She turned around and began to climb down the shallow stairs when she blinked. When she stepped down, the water looked different. It was lighter, brighter and more tropical than the waters of the Pacific Northwest.

Nika glanced around, tall rocky islands with white sandy beaches. *Not* where she had teleported herself. "What the hell... Where am I?"

A dull thump from the front of the boat moved to answer that question. Nika looked up and over to see Tetam walking across the roof. He was back in his normal feral form this time. "Ah, just somewhere I think you'll find that is much more interesting." He answered.

"Okay..." Of course he was like this. "But where are we?"

"A small island chain twenty five hundred kilometers east of the Hawaiian islands," he answered.

"I don't know of any islands out there..?" Nicole said, confused.

Tetam smiled. "Ah, that is because they did not exist in the reality you know. You've noticed this world is slightly different. There is a lot to find still," He revealed.

Nika shifted on the dive platform as Tetam dropped down from the boat's roof, causing the craft to rock. "Well alright. But is this a simple dive? I'm not as experienced in this body, and I should have probably brought someone along with me."

Tetam rolled his eyes at her. "Nika, Nika, Nika, you wield a world altering power. You will be fine." He chided. "Plus, this world might have a few surprises in store for you." The weights around her waist became heavier and he walked up to her.

"Tetam, what are you doing...?" Nika hefted the counterweight belt; it was a significant increase in what she had applied for herself.

He walked closer, approaching her on the dive board. "Helping you dive. Welcome to another bit of training." Tetam gently gave her a nudge with his head, but it was enough to knock her off balance. Nika fell back, over the side of the boat.

She hit the water and began to sink.

As she struggled with the extra heavy weight belt, Nika sunk further into the depths. With a click, the belt came apart and she released it to sink alone. Nika sat there in the limbo of the

ocean until she realized something was off. Her respirator was not in her mouth yet she was still 'breathing'. Salt water filled her mouth; yet it didn't cause her to gag or cough. She inhaled and felt it pass through something on her neck.

"What the fuck?!" Nika thought. Wait... did she have gills?

Nika reached up and felt along her neck, right where the neck-sock of the wet suit had its opening. Her fingers felt slits open on her neck. Another inhale of water and they opened slightly further. It was very surreal to her. She was under the sea, breathing water.

She tried to swim around, and she found that the wings just felt like they were too clunky for her to use right now. There was no real muscle memory for them, so she just drifted with the current. Her mind went through possible ways of swimming, other than the usual kick and pull. If she did that, her wings would cause plenty of drag in their current position. Then the thought came to her as she saw her tail. The tail went from round to flat about midway through its length; it reminded her of a smaller sea iguana tail. She had seen it before, but this was a new light.

The tail swished sideways and Nika shifted her hips in tune with the flow. Then she was off, swimming through the water with ease. All it took was a little movement before some sort of muscle memory was unlocked. Nicole dove deeper into the tropical waters, the further she got the colder it became. However the amazement she felt from breathing through the water... it was exhilarating.

She could see a massive coral reef extending out below her, with fish of all kinds just going about their lives. Nika swam down and the fish darted out of her way. There was no sense of worry about how much air she had left, or whether an air tank would fit through a hole. Her wings were organic and they could move to grant access through spaces she normally would not have been able to get through as a human.

The reef suddenly ended. Dead, broken coral hung off the edge of a massive dark cavern. Icy cold water flowed up from the depths, completely opposite what should have happened. Nika could see the reef resume on the other side of this dead zone, once again full of vibrant life.

If it was not for her newfound abilities, she would not have even considered it.

Nika entered the cold cave. She felt a shiver crawl through her skin, or scales, or whatever she had over most of her body. It was *very* cold. With a small bit of magic, she summoned a sort of light. The same kind of thing she would use if she was playing a fantasy videogame. The light in her palm did little to illuminate the space beyond; it was just that big. She could feel the pressure the further she went. It did spur a thought about how far down she could feasibly go before deep was too deep. Nika would push that limit now, and she pressed on.

A rocky outcropping suddenly appeared beneath her. It looked to be made of a bunch of smaller rocks all cemented together; almost like paving stones. But what were paving stones doing this far beneath the surface?

It was not a flat surface, it was curved and grooved. It dropped off again, but the paving stones continued downwards at a near vertical angle. However, after a few mysterious spikes, Nika started to realize what she was actually looking at. It came a moment too late, as the massive eye of the creature beat her mind to the punch.

There was a muffled groan as the *wall* moved towards her. Nika panicked, turned tail and swam back for the surface as fast as she could. There was not much she could do, especially fleeing from something that could overtake her in one stride. The surface was coming closer, and she could see the bottom of her boat bobbing in the waves.

Nika threw herself out of the water and landed on the back board of the boat. "Shit!" Her wings got caught on the doorway as she scrambled for the controls. The boat lurched forward as whatever was below broke the surface. She dropped into the seat and punched the throttle forward. The motor roared and she took off towards open water. Nicole glanced back and just saw a massive dragon like head the size of the boat emerging from the waves. Fins and horns covered the creature as it appeared to stand in the water.

"Fuck this. I'm outta here." She mumbled.

Tetam appeared on the front of the boat, just in front of the windscreen. "Nika, those islands are populated, hmm? Are you really going to leave them undefended?"

"Can't we just call in the navy or something?" Nika questioned.

He rolled his eyes. "This is your duty Nika, you need to stop the creature you awaked."

"Oh fuck you." Nika turned the wheel and the boat banked around. "I wouldn't have if you had just let me dive where I wanted. You probably put it there."

"Ah, again, that would be telling wouldn't it." Tetam smirked and vanished from sight.

She angled the boat towards the nearest island; its beach appeared to be uninhabited. "Okay... how am I going to do this...?"

Nika tried just making the creature disappear, but nothing happened; instead the creature seemed to change its focus to her. "Oh shit..." She gripped the wheel and purposefully ran ashore; she could fix the boat later.

Hopping down to the sand below, Nika checked her charge; it was back to around eighty percent. That should have been enough, but nothing had happened. The monstrous creature marched towards her position, not wavering at all. If she could not just magic it away, what

could she do? Tetam or Gymeth had said that she would need to solve problems without directly using her magic, but how.

Then it hit her; she had to call in the navy. Unfortunately she could not just do that, she had to use some other means. Nika snapped her fingers and suddenly a one-hundred-and-forty-six ton turret from a battleship appeared in the sand. Her hands glowed bright with blue energy as she moved them to affect the turret; it turned and the canons elevated to meet the monster. Inside the turret, packets of gunpowder and shells were automatically loaded into the four guns.

The monster lumbered through the shallow water, it roared and a jet of fire was cast from its maw.

Nika pulled back her right arm, and the guns fired. The shockwave ripped through her chest and the roar itself caused Nika to cover her ear fins. The fire from the barrels leapt forwards across the beach, the force of the blast ripped the unsecured turret from the sand, casting it backwards well into the tree line. Nika herself was knocked across the beach by the wave of sand that was launched through the air.

When the dust cleared, the monster was staggered. Blood dripped into the waves from four gaping wounds in its chest. It coughed and roared again in pain, but continued to stumble towards her. Nika was not sure what she should do, the turret was gone, uprooted and sitting on its side in a nest of shattered palm trees. Yet the Dragon resumed its march with anger. She glanced at her power reserves, still plenty. So she did what worked before; two turrets were spawned on the beach, only smaller and anchored in a concrete bunker fortification.

A shelter appeared around Nika as the fortifications rose from around her. It was based off a series of bunkers that she had visited once as a kid. The designs were from the early 1900s but they should work for this. The guns fired, offset from one another; stopped and then reloaded, and fired again. Nika watched her charge tick down rapidly with all this activity, but it was working. The Dragon stumbled and fell in the face of the gunfire, the water around it rapidly turning red with blood.

She climbed up the ladder and onto the roof of the bunker. It looked like it was dead, that she was done. Nika plopped down on the edge and looked out at the water. It suddenly occurred to her that there was a second part to the bit about not directly using magic; she didn't have to completely defeat it that way, all she had to do was weaken it until she could get control. The creature was still alive, yes, but bleeding out as she sat around. With a wave of her hand, teleported the Dragon to her hand, while simultaneously shrinking it to the size of a small lizard. In its near death state, it could not put up any sort of fight.

While it sat in her palm, it glowed with her magic and she healed the wounds she had caused. Immediately it perked up, but began to panic as it became aware of its surroundings. Nika dropped down to the sand and walked back over to her boat. Opening an old cooler, she filled it

with water and dropped the tiny monster inside. She would make it a proper habitat when she got home.

Tetam appeared inside the cabin, this time in his anthropomorphic form. "Well that was quite a dramatic show." He placed a folder on the table. "Would you like to see some of my shots? I do enjoy a bit of armature photograph when I'm not home."

He removed a few sheets of paper from inside and set them down; they were photographs of her during the last ten minutes. One was a dramatic landscape of her with both arms radiating blue energy with the blast of the guns behind her, and another was of her boat plowing through the waves as the massive dragon lumbered behind it.

"Well these are nice and all but why would you ruin my relaxing diving trip with this?" She threw her hands in the air at him.

"Ah well this is sort of my last test for you," Tetam said. "Since you managed to pass this, well done; thus I will not be around anymore. Gymeth still has some things for you but I am not sure when she'll be back."

Nika took a step back. "Oh... you're leaving? I see..." While she will enjoy not having another one of those monsters dropped on her, having someone who checked in every once in a while that knew sort of what she was going through had been a bit of a comfort lately. She hardly knew Gymeth, there had been very few lessons with her. "Well good luck with the... what... realm? Is that what you call them?"

"Yes, but realm-s." Tetam drew out the S to her. "I actually mediate over five, and you on the other hand... have gotten lucky with seven." He smiled and collected the pictures from the table.

"Is that... really lucky?" Nicole asked. "That seems like a lot."

"Oh it is a lot, but I've done some browsing through them and I'm confident to say that you've lucked out in the condition of them." Tetam waved his hand to her and then bowed. "Good luck, Nika. Perhaps we'll see one another someday during another selection process."

He took a step back and vanished before her in a rather anti-climactic fashion. That was it, Tetam was gone. Nicole inched around the spot where he had been moments before, and dropped down into the pilot's seat. "Alone at last... but the mood to dive is gone, ugh."

With a sigh she glanced out the window at the ruined gun turret in the trees and the bunker complex she had created. It wasn't *really* out of place; perhaps this island chain had some strategic value in world war two. She thought about if she should clean it up but ultimately decided against it. In the future Nicole planned to come back.

“I should really get to that dinner...” Nika snapped her fingers and suddenly she was standing on the front step of her parents’ house with the cooler under her arm. She was feeling more confident with her powers now that she had vanquished the monster. The wetsuit shifted across her body, forming into a pair of jeans and a simple t-shirt. “Off to dinner I go...”