

Desi Desi Panic

For GenderTension

By TheSpiralledEye

Alex rolled over in bed and groaned. His head was on fire; he really needed to take it easy on the beers next time. Luckily, it was Saturday and he didn't need to force himself out of bed to get to class. He felt his brow furrow as slowly a sleep filled realisation hit him; he hadn't gone drinking last yesterday. He'd been up all night studying; so why did he feel so hungover? His chest was hurting and sleepily, he rubbed at it, he must have slept weird for the muscles there to be so sore. It was only after a few seconds, rubbing at the soft skin that he realised something was off. The muscle there was springy, giving way to his fingers far more than it should and what's more, it was...higher up? He opened his eyes not sure what to expect but what met his eyes hadn't even been on the list.

Two round breasts, complete with cleavage visible just before the neckline of his shirt were sitting there. Both aching slightly from where he'd been laying on them moments before. For a moment he regarded them, blinking a few times and finding they didn't disappear with his fading sense of sleep. He shot up in bed, feeling them move, bouncing slightly as he suddenly became upright.

"W-what?"

He choked on the word; the voice that flowed from his throat was rich and breathy with shock. And very much *not* his own. A hand flew to his throat, long, soft fingertips stroking over the curve there, devoid of any tell-tale bump or stubble. His spare arm wrapped around his middle, his waist was so thin, yet his hips so wide. Nothing about his body felt right, everywhere he looked and touched felt off. The bottom half of his body was hidden beneath his sheets and Alex found himself hesitant to lift them.

This had to be some sort of dream, he glanced around the room rapidly, trying to find something obvious to prove his point; flying cars out the window, a clown juggling in the corner, *anything*. He only found a regular dorm room, but concerningly, it wasn't his. Gone were his basketball and AFL posters, replaced with a landscape painting of a sunset beach. The desk was still half covered in university work but the other half, where his current sci fi book was perched was instead coated in romance novels. Even his plain white sheets had been turned yellow. Strangest of all was the door; it was on the wrong side of the room, in fact, the entire structure seemed to have been flipped and mirrored giving the whole space an uncanny vibe that made the hair on his arms stand on end.

That strange feeling of familiarity settled over him as he finally pushed back the sheet, revealing a long pair of legs with dark honey coloured skin. Clothed only in the sleep shirt and white panties he stood, gazing out the window to see the dorms across the street. It was a sight he'd seen many times but from the opposite point of view. As if to confirm his suspicions the doors several storeys below opened and several men walked out. He was in the girl's dorm, in a girl's body!

Once more he looked down at those brown skinned legs, several shades darker and smoother than he was used to and seconds later he was out the door. Running for the shared dorm bathrooms and rushing for the row of mirrors above the sinks. The woman looking back at him was out of breath, her cheeks dusted red and her light brown eyes wide with shock. Her long dark hair would normally be straight but was currently marred with knots and loose strands from sleep, further exasperated by his own hands and they clawed into them. He swallowed, biting down on his lips as he looked at this woman, this eerily familiar woman.

“I know you.” He whispered, reaching out for the mirror, and pressing his finger tips to the glass, strange memories beginning to trickle into his mind like drops of water through a crack.

He’d seen this woman before, not in his life but in the mirror. He could see her, *himself*, looking back as he applied a layer of lipstick ready for a date, a younger version admiring her newly pierced ears, a younger version still pouting at the ugly haircut she’d given herself trying to cut her own fringe. Slowly the face in the mirror became more and more familiar and almost as fast Alex found the body feeling more at home. Almost in a trance he stumbled along the hall back to his room, the door was still ajar and across the front was a plastic name plate, a piece of cardboard covered in curly handwriting slotted inside.

“Niketa Patel...” he whispered, running his fingers across the slightly faded ink.

The name was so familiar; it felt right, it felt like his, even more so than Alex. That trickle of recollections was steadily increasing, the drips turning to an all out flood as new memories made themselves at home in his brain. Growing up in a house by a park filled with maple trees, his first kiss behind a tree at that very park just down the road as a teenager, sulking during a rare trip back to India and being forced to wear a sari. Feeling overwhelmed he sat down heavily on the bed, once again feeling that strange jiggle from his new breasts. Except they weren’t new, he’d had them for years now, but also hadn’t. There was a buzz from his bedside table and out of habit he reached for it and hit answer.

“Niketa, you didn’t pick up. Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

That voice.

“I’m fine, mum.” He said, as memory after memory of this new mother filled him. She was chattering away in Hindi, a language he only barely spoke and she knew that, yet insisted on using each time she called, even if it made the conversation three times slower.

“Really, mum I was just in the bathroom.” He sighed after several minutes, “And no, I wasn’t with a boy.”

“I never said you were, why would you say that unless-“

“Mum, please.” He rubbed his forehead as a headache slowly began to build, “You were implying it. You always imply it. Have some faith.”

“I do darling, it’s just, a woman alone at university, a lot can happen. I do wish you’d stayed in Melbourne with us.”

Niketa had insisted on going to the University of Sydney, she’d even applied and gotten a full scholarship so her parents couldn’t argue against it. She loved them, *he* loved them but they could be smothering and so traditional.

“Mum, I am honestly really busy. Lots of studying to do. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up before she could argue; a voice that sounded suspiciously like his new voice told him he’d pay for that later but that was Future Alex’s problem. Or Future Niketa’s...fuck this was confusing. He rubbed at his forehead, trying to remember anything that would clue him in as to what was happening and how he’d turned into this woman.

Slowly, the room began to feel right to him; he’d borrowed those romance novels from the library, the yellow bedsheets had been a parting gift from an old friend when he moved. He got to his feet once more, determined to take control of this situation. First things first, if he was in this body, with these memories does that mean somewhere across the street somebody else was waking up his body, with a perfect double of his own memories as Alex? He jumped to the desk, opening up the laptop and loading up the universities page. He typed his real name, Alexander Hudson, into the student database and was immediately fed a list of various Alex’s, none of which were him. He tried a few misspellings, perhaps there was a clerical error but nope, no matter what he typed, his picture didn’t show up.

He flopped back against the chair, momentarily stunned. How could that be? How could a whole person just disappear off the database? He tried the housing lists next, then searched through his humanities major; still nothing. There was no Alexander Hudson attending the university of Sydney. Not only that, but searches of Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites didn’t show his face either, nor did his old high school alumni website, it was as if his entire identity had been wiped from the face of the internet.

A ping at the side of his screen, an email from Professor Lancaster, his English professor, reminding them all about the term paper that was due mid next week. He’d been writing a discussion about the symbolism of *The Great Gatsby* and spurred with curiosity he began searching

through Niketa's files and lo' and behold, there it was. His paper, exactly as he remembered writing it, but with her name at the top of the page. This didn't make any sense!

He scrolled through her facebook and instagram, faces popping into his head with each name he saw, memories of the photos he viewed solidifying. This life was as much his as it was hers, he remembered it all, it felt as real and solid as Alex had leaving him trapped in a strange sort of limbo. First things first, he needed some fresh air, but that meant getting dressed and doing that meant changing. He couldn't help but blush a little bit; despite having all Niketa's memories he still felt like something of an interloper. Seeing her, seeing himself naked felt almost skeevy. It was necessary though and taking a deep breath he grabbed some random clothes from the drawers, threw his towel over his shoulder and walked back to the bathrooms.

He felt like the biggest fraud walking into the shower room, the air already steamy from several other woman in the various stalls. He kept his eyes forward, just because he had unfettered access to these spaces for the moment didn't mean he was going to abuse it by perverting on other woman. Tempting though it may be. He closed the plastic door behind him and took a deep breath before placing down his clean clothes and grabbing the hem of his sleep shirt. His fingers fisted into the material, flexing and relaxing as he nervously fiddled with the hem. It was now or never. He pulled it over his head, feeling the slight tug as his breasts followed the fabric slightly before dropping back down. It was discarded on the damp floor without a thought as Alex's eyes roamed his new form.

Dark gold skin met his eyes broken up only by the deep pink circles that were his new nipples. As he stepped out of his panties he saw a smattering of neat, curly hair between his legs and couldn't help but inspect it; even now he felt as though there was something missing from that space. He flicked on the shower and stepped under the spray, marvelling in just how smooth his skin felt under the stream. Of course, his skin was smooth, he shaved regularly and moisturised to ensure he was always lush and hydrated. Mentally, he reminded himself to do that when he returned to his room. He sighed, closing his eyes and tilting back his head to soak his long dark hair, the extra weight of it seemed to ground him, even sooth his stressed soul as he ran his fingers through it, gently working out the kinks and knots. This quiet, necessary job gave him purpose, a distraction from all the confusion and he felt himself calming as he gently massaged shampoo and then conditioners through his locks till they were smooth as silk. He turned off the water as it turned cold and sighed deeply, the world and the new challenges he had to face seeming just that little bit more manageable now.

He rinsed off, enjoying the way the water ran down the curves of his body and pooled at his feet even after he'd shut off the water. He took his now cleaned hair and squeezed out the water before towelling off and, before he could even think, he was bending over, wrapping his hair in the towel and standing straight once more. He blinked in surprise, touching a hand to the towel turban now atop his head. It had been instinctual yet still felt odd. Like riding a bike for the first time in years and being surprised at how easy it was. He looked over to the neatly folded clothes he'd bought from the dorm room, atop the pile was a simple bra. As a man, his only experience with them was frustratedly trying to undo them mid make out session, never putting them on. He closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on that calm serenity that had come with washing his hair and then, let those instincts guide him once more. Looping his arms through, gently lifting each breast into the cup and then hooking the back together. Muscle memory doing much of the work for him.

With a soft smile he pulled on his jeans and shirt, struggling a little as the humid air of the shower room made the fabric cling to his skin. The outfit was simple yet he felt feminine and cute

and what's more, he liked that. A man should never feel cute, and deep down that's what he was right? So he really shouldn't be enjoying how his curvy body looked in a green floral t-shirt, but he did. He was just leaving the bathroom, trying to deal with his conflicting emotions when his name was sung out. A pretty Asian woman clad only in a towel with almond eyes and short wavy hair was waving to him.

For a second he was confused before Niketa's memories kicked in; Jung-ah. Her best friend. A young Korean woman who had travelled to Australia to study and just so happened to share a birthday with Niketa and now him, he supposed. They had bonded not only over their shared birthdate but the fact that both their parents were deeply traditional and bemoaned their modern daughters' attitudes.

"Sorry, I am running a bit behind." Jung-ah smiled sheepishly, "I was up late last night working on our term paper for English. Give me ten minutes and I'll meet you down by the entryway?"

Another memory, yes; they had agreed to meet and get breakfast together at a nearby café this morning. He did his best to smile, hiding his irritation; he was really hoping for some more time alone to figure things out and maybe do a bit of research. Now he was going to have to work twice as hard not to say something suspicious, the last thing he needed was people thinking he'd gone mad. But he couldn't just blow her off either; Niketa was always punctual and fiercely loyal to her friends; she wouldn't cancel without a good reason and he was coming up blank right now when it came to excuses.

"Sounds great!" He said, just a little too enthusiastically, "I'll just go grab my purse."

Did he even have a purse? God, that felt weird to say. Jung-ah gave him a grateful nod and rushed toward the showers leaving him frozen with a tight smile on his face. Okay, deep breathes, look at the positives here, Jung-ah, according to his own recollections, knew Niketa pretty much better than anybody. Maybe he could ask a few probing questions and get some answers as to how and why this happened. As he thought on it another idea popped into his head, making his eyes go wide and a smile split across his face.

Alex rushed back to his dorm, yanking open the laptop again and quickly typing in a few names to the school's database as well as social media. His smile grew; Raymond, Dan, James; all his friends from his life as Alex, they still existed! After breakfast with Jung-ah he could seek them out, maybe they still remembered him! Right now, it was the best he could hope for.

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His eyes were glued to the front doors of the dorm across the street; *his* former dorm. Was his room still there? He checked his phone; it had been fifteen minutes and Jung-ah still wasn't here. Since she

was late already, surely there was no harm in running over to do a little investigating while he waited? He thanked his lucky stars this was university and nobody batted an eye watching a woman walk up the steps to the male dorm, he probably looked like a visiting girlfriend or sister coming to visit as he stood before the room listings board. He ran a finger down the numbered rooms, each with a little typed name beside it; his old room was 305 but as his finger pressed down against the little typed number it didn't read Alexander Hudson, it said Justin Fairchild.

Something about the name tugged at him; he had no memories of anybody with that name, in either lifetime. Back when he was Alex, he knew every guy on his floor, none of them were named Justin. As he ran his finger down the line of names, he could see nothing else had changed, all his old mates were still in the same room they always had been. It was just him and Niketa who had changed, yet nobody else seemed aware of it. He walked out, chewing on his thumbnail before realising that it was a habit from both lives, both Alex's and Niketa's mother had bemoaned the habit. The former saying it wasn't manly, the latter stating it was unladylike. He couldn't help but smirk at this little shared flaw both his lives had.

"There you are!"

Jung-ah was standing by the steps and ran over to meet him.

"What were you doing in there? Is there something you want to tell me?" She grinned.

Jung-ah, like Niketa, dated and flirted despite her parents' admonishments and took great delight in hearing other people's torrid affairs. Funnily enough though, Jung-ah never went on a date with the same man twice.

"No gossip for you today, sorry Jung." He shook his head as they started walking, "I was just wondering...have you heard of a guy named Alex Hudson?"

"No, is he is one of your classes? Is he cute?"

Alex rolled his eyes.

"Seriously Jung, it's not like that. Get your mind out of the gutter."

Jung-ah cackled, nudging him with her shoulder.

“I’m just teasing, but seriously, no I don’t know him. Why?”

“I found a textbook with his name in it.” Alex lied smoothly, “I thought I might try to return it but I couldn’t find him on the school database at all.”

“Probably an old student.” Jung-ah shrugged, “Left his textbook behind for somebody else to use.”

He knew that wasn’t the case, but couldn’t think of an argument to the contrary so they lapsed into silence. Enjoying the brisk morning air as they walked, funnily enough it wasn’t awkward. Alex had always been confused by the idea of companionable silence; his mates were always chatting, ribbing one another and teasing, there was never a quiet second. He found himself grateful for Jung-ah in this moment, it gave him time to think about how to approach the rest of his day.

The café was cosy and they were soon settled in, sipping at lattes waiting for their French toast and pancakes to arrive. They had easily fallen into a discussion on English, their one shared class, and how stressful that midterm paper was.

“It’s easy for you.” Jung-ah complained, “You grew up speaking English, I only started learning three years ago.”

“Jung, you’re English is better than half the troglodytes in our class and you know it.”

“I wish.”

“Jung, I just used the word troglodyte and you didn’t bat an eye. Pretty sure if you sucked at English that word would have tripped you up.”

She blinked and then pouted.

“Dammit, I am losing my only good excuse.”

Alex laughed; his laugh was so beautiful now, like tinkling bells and he found he loved it. Not only that, it helped him relax. Sitting here with Jung-ah, he almost felt at home despite all the panic of this morning. If he focused hard enough, he could almost forget Alex entirely and fall into this life to its fullest. It was almost tempting, but he couldn’t do it. This wasn’t his life and even if he did want to stay, surely he would be stealing it from the real Niketa, whoever and wherever she was.

“Say Jung, I was wondering, have we ever hung out with Raymond, Dan or James?” He asked, “They live on the third floor of the boys dorm.”

“No.” Jung-ah’s eyebrows furrowed, “Why would you ask me that? Surely you know who you’ve been hanging out with.”

“Yeah I just, never mind it’s nothing.” He back peddled, fuck that was a really stupid question to ask.

“Is everything okay?” Jun-ah reached across the table and grabbed his hand, “Did one of those guys...do something to you? You haven’t got a blank after drinking with them or something?”

“Oh God, no!” He shook his head vigorously, “No, nothing like that.”

“Because if you had-“

“No, Jung, seriously.” He cut her off, “They are all great guys, they just seem like a lot of fun and I thought I might want to get to know them better, I just worded that...awkwardly.”

“Alright, so long as you’re sure.”

Alex did his best not to sigh with relief as Jung-ah dropped the subject just in time for their food to arrive. He was grateful to have an excuse to stop talking, immediately shovelling his mouth full to avoid any more awkwardness. He had to admit though, he was touched by his friend’s earnest concern. He was telling the truth when he mentioned the guys, they were a lot of fun, but there was no real openness between them. Their own problems were their own problems, you know? It was almost refreshing to have a friend so ready to help, even with a potentially heavy subject. The two of them enjoyed their breakfast, laughing at the barrage of texts on his phone from his very disgruntled mother. Apparently, she did not take having her weekly call cut short and ignored. Alex vowed to call her again tonight when he was more prepared.

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Breakfast left him with a spring in his step, the sweet taste of icing sugar and strawberries still melting on his tongue as Jung-ah waved goodbye and made for the library. She was lovely, but a

dead end so far, his next lead was Alex's old posse. He glanced at his phone, eleven am, knowing them; they were just getting out of bed after a night out and all gathering ready to head to the gym. Alex had never liked the gym, but when all your mates do it, you tend to tag along just to have another excuse to hang out. At least in this body he wouldn't be expected to spot anybody. He made his way over to the campus gym, delighted to see the world hadn't changed too much as he spotted Dan and Raymond spotting James doing deadlifts. He cleared his throat and felt an uncomfortable blush seep up his cheeks as Raymond's eyes looked him up and down; it felt so weird to be on the other side of such a stare, especially from his former friend.

"Hey there." Raymond gave him his most charming smile, "No offence, but you don't really look dressed for the gym, you looking for something? Some one?"

"Yes actually." He replied, James and Dan snickered as Raymond's shoulders fell ever so slightly. "Do you three know a guy named Alexander Hudson?"

His hopes were dashed immediately as the three glanced between one another, as if looking for confirmation. There was no recognition in any of their eyes.

"No sorry, does he usually come here?"

"Sometimes." He sighed, "Thanks anyway."

"Hey, wait!" Raymond called, catching him by the wrist then immediately letting go looking sheepish. "I uh, I'll ask around, give me your number and if anything comes up, I can text you."

Alex felt his eyebrows raise, that was the most transparent pick-up line he'd ever heard. Rifling through his memories of Alex, Raymond had always seemed like such a smooth talker, now he was on the other side he cringed slightly, recalling some of the man's other lines.

"Swing and a miss." Dan whispered non too subtly to James.

Alex regarded his former friend; he was hitting on him for sure but there was also an earnestness to his eyes. Alex got the distinct impression that he did mean what he said, he would ask around. He smiled, holding out a hand for his phone and giggling when Raymond fumbled it out of shock.

"I'm not usually that clumsy." He said, passing the phone over so Alex could type his number in.

“Don’t worry about it.” He teased, “I’d be surprised that awful line worked too.”

James and Dan burst into laughter and Raymond’s ears turned red. Alex just giggled and gave him a friendly wave goodbye; that had been another dead end but it had felt nice to be with his old friends even under pretence. It gave him hope that he could still have his old life back. He could hear James and Dan giving Raymond a hard time as he left.

“There is something familiar about her though, don’t you think? I feel like we’ve met before.”

That comment buoyed him a little, perhaps there was a chance they too would remember Alex in time. He made a mental note to respond when Raymond inevitably texted him so that he could keep nudging them in that direction.

Question was, now what? It was very unlikely Raymond would find any Alex Hudson, since he had basically already exhausted every avenue; it was clear that, for whatever reason, Alex didn’t exist anymore. Now the question to answer was why and how. But he didn’t have the foggiest idea of where to even start to answer that.

In his back pocket his phone started to buzz and Alex groaned as he looked at the screen. His mother, again. They had made the agreement when Niketa moved to Sydney that she would call every Sunday morning, probably to ensure her daughter wasn’t hungover or with somebody after a big Saturday night. Still, he was a grown adult, he shouldn’t have to *wait*, his mother called every *Sunday*.

There it was, the date in bold letters above the call icon; Sunday the 6th. When he’d gone to bed as Alex last night it had been Friday night and as he racked his brain, he found his last memory as Niketa ended there as well. What had happened to Saturday? And why did neither of his lives remember it?

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That missing twenty-four hours was his only clue and so, with renewed purpose he made for the library. With a quick wave to Jung-ah in the entry way he made his way to the computers, opening the database and typing in ‘memory loss’. Over the next few hours, he steadily gathered a collection of books covering the subject; everything from medical textbooks to historical archives, even news articles covering things like Agatha Christie’s disappearance and claimed amnesia. He needed to cast as wide a net as possible until he knew exactly what he was dealing with. Once he had those, he did the same for ‘split personalities’ and ‘false memories’ until it was almost dusk and he had a pile of books half as tall as he was.

The library hissed under her tongue when he approached, muttering under her breath about how they really needed to enforce a limit on the number of books a student could take out at once.

“Pray tell,” The old bat asked, “Exactly what degree is it that requires you to study both medical history and famous literary authors?”

“I think it’s the Major of Minding My Own Business.” He snapped, scanning his card before stuffing the mountain of books into a provided bag and walking off.

Of all the things to stay the same, why couldn’t that stuffy old bitch have been replaced with somebody nice?

By the time he’d gotten back to his dorm, having turned towards the men’s dorm out of habit before having to double back, his back was in agony. He dumped the heavy bag on the floor and collapsed to his knees next to it with a groan, he was almost too tired to start but he had to. With heavy limbs he dragged himself over to the desk, slamming down a thick medical textbook and flipped to the chapter on memory loss and its causes. It was full of technical jargon that made his eyes blue and his head ache but Alex pushed through, the more he knew the better his chances of discovering what exactly had happened to him and how to reverse it.

His study ran late into the night, broken up only by the inevitable phone call from his mother where he profusely apologised for his earlier ‘rudeness’ and explained it away with needing to study hard on this new project; it wasn’t even an outright lie. But as the night went on, book after book being added to the discard pile Alex felt his hope waning and his eyes beginning to burn with tiredness and frustrated tears. Nothing was adding up, nothing was even inspiring a different avenue. By the time he finally fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, head slumped against another thick, useless tome, his hope had diminished almost entirely.

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It took him three days to get through all the books, he spent another four trawling through internet pages; reading everything from digital medical journals to blog posts on conspiracy websites. He’d even missed a few classes, so absorbed in his research he didn’t notice the time. From what he could tell, nothing about the world had really changed save for him; his major was the same, the professors, world events, everything except his body and social life seemed to have stayed the same.

Alex finished reading what felt like the thousandth article on personality disorders late one evening. Closing the laptop, he groaned as the early morning light peaked through his window; it had been another accidental all nighter. Despondently he grabbed his phone, opening up the camera and staring at the woman looking back at him. She looked tired, there were dark rings framing her narrow eyes and he watched as slowly, they took on a sheen on frustrated tears.

He had to face the truth, he...she was Niketa.

Alex had just been...some sort of psychotic break or incredibly vivid dream. The fact that nobody seemed to think she had been acting strangely showed that somehow, she'd managed to keep it quiet but there was no denying that this life, this woman was real and for whatever reason, she'd dreamed up an entirely separate personality and history to go with it. It was the only explanation that made sense.

Still, why? Stress? Repressed identity issues? She did feel somewhat strange being in this body, but that was only because she remembered being a man, if that wasn't the case, would that dysmorphic feeling go away? Perhaps she should go talk to the university councillor? That's what crazy people did, isn't it? She closed the phone, flopping down face first on the bed and lifting the covers over her face to hide from the world. She *was* a crazy person; if she told anybody about this, they'd send her off the loony bin for sure and then this life would be ruined as well. The only piece of the puzzle that didn't fall into place was that missing twenty-four hours. From what she'd read, trauma could cause memory loss, so perhaps something happened that created Alex and then she repressed it? After days of thinking on it, locking herself away, barely even replying to Jung-ah's messages she was at her wits end.

Her only recourse was to try and forget about Alex, live this life as best she could and pray this unease feeling in her stomach vanished in time. If she kept fixating on this, she'd only drive herself insane, well, more insane. A buzz; she poked her head out of the blankets to see her phone vibrating on the side table. A message from an unknown number.

'Hey, it's Raymond from the gym. I looked around but couldn't find anybody who knew your Alex guy sorry.'

Before she had a chance to reply a second message appeared, then a third.

'Oh shit, you probably don't get up at 5am to go to the gym I'm so sorry for waking you!'

'And for sending that follow up message and waking you even more. Fuck, I am just going to stop texting now.'

She couldn't help it, she started to giggle, which then turned into an all out laughing fit. The tiredness mixing with the humour of the situation until her eyes were burning with a completely different kind of tears.

'I was already awake you loser. Thanks for checking.'

Raymond never did think things through very well. Niketa sighed happily, that had been the release she needed with so much emotion bubbling under the surface. Raymond had been his best mate as Alex, he'd been so caught up in his research and coming to terms with this new body and the

implications of it he hadn't even realised just how much he missed the guy. Alex felt his brow furrow, hang on a moment, if Alex had really been imagined up by him, how did he know Raymond, Dan or James? Had he just seen them around at the gym and subconsciously made up a friendship? It was possible, but surely there was no way his brain invented the exact same personalities they had in real life if that was the case.

'Oh good. I hope you find your friend.'

"Me too, Ray." Niketa sighed, "Me too."

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With all the major assignments for the term submitted, the students in his major were enjoying the calm before the storm that was midyear exams. Two weeks with no extra work to study and prepared before the lecturers were over and the testing season began. Students tended to spend this fated fortnight in one of two ways; locking themselves in their dorms to study like mad and get a head start, or partying while they had the chance. One more Niketa was confused by the warring memories within herself; last year Niketa had done the former, Alex the latter. Now she felt a pull in both directions; as if her two lives had her each by the hand in a tug of war. Trying to move on and forget Alex was impossible, that had been clear hours after she made the decision and so, she was left in limbo.

It was the first Saturday of the two week window and she sat at her desk, book open but unable to bring herself to study. She still hadn't replied more than a single word to Jung-ah or her parents, she wanted to but she couldn't help but feel fake, like she wasn't really the person they wanted her to be. Her phone pinged and a relieved smile formed on her face; Raymond.

It felt good to have him back in her life, even if it was clear the dude had a little crush on her. He'd non to subtly asked her out to coffee after their 5am chat which had set him giggling again. Alex may be gone but Niketa could never see Raymond as anything more than his old drinking buddy. He took the rejection pretty well and when he'd offered friendship, she'd been hesitant, worried it might be some trick but to her delight, it was genuine. At least so far.

'Me and the boys are heading to a house party, want to join?'

She pressed a knuckle to her lips in thought; Niketa of last year would say no...but she wasn't that Niketa. She'd spent so much time worrying about who she was on the inside, she needed to let herself relax and have some fun.

'Sounds good, meet you downstairs in ten.'

She felt a certain naughty thrill pass through her body as she jumped to her feet; this was exactly the sort of activity her mother didn't approve of and a big reason her parents wanted her to stay in Melbourne. Their little girl, dancing, drinking, and partying with strangers; it was a conservative parent's nightmare. Didn't they know that made doing it all the more fun?

She threw off the hoodie she'd been wearing and began ruffling through her clothes; she'd not really paid much attention to them lately, just throwing on whatever fit but for the first time she wanted to look nice. Fuck whatever lingering sense of masculine pride she had; she had a rocking body and she wanted to have fun with it. Eventually she found a pale pink crop top that complimented her light brown skin perfectly. It showed off her midriff and she couldn't help but smile as she took in her reflection. It paired perfectly with her tight, blue jeans; both of them showing off her curves without being too slutty. Grabbing her phone and purse she made for the door only to stop one step outside as a cool breeze blew through the open hall window. It was midyear after all, perhaps a crop top wasn't the best choice. Niketa pouted; but she looked so cute! She'd finally built up the confidence to act girly and the damn weather was getting the way.

Then realised there was something at her feet. A small box with her name, tucked to the side of her door with a note atop it. Instantly she recognised her best friend's handwriting and picked it up.

'Dear Niketa.

I know you've been really stressed the last week and I have been too busy to help. So, I hope this makes up for it a bit. Send me a photo the first time you wear it! I'll talk to you when my studying is done!

Love Jung-ah'

Niketa opened the box and felt her eyes burn; a knitted jumper, the kind with a thick collar and long sleeves designed to be pushed up so it could be worn almost year-round. She touched her fingertips to the soft, white wool; it was like touching a cloud. She picked it up reverently, holding it in the air and spotting a single loose thread near one sleeve. A tell-tale sign that Jung-ah had made this herself. The fabric was warm white, a perfect contrast to her dark skin and hair, Niketa threw it over her crop top, finding it matched the jeans perfectly and kept her warm while still looking good.

How had her friend made it the perfect size? The soft material hugged her body in all the right ways and Niketa couldn't help but close her eyes and sigh contently, it was so warm and comfortable she could almost fall asleep in it. Jung-ah had been raised not to make a fuss, to keep emotions hidden, so when they had first met it had taken a while for her to open up. Gestures like this proved just how much their friendship meant to her. Niketa flushed slightly, vowing to do something in kind for Jung-ah as soon as she could.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket and snapped her out of her reverie, Raymond was probably waiting! She bounced down the stairs, taking them two at a time; between the promise of a fun night and Jung-ah's gift she was feeling lighter than she had in weeks. Quickly she flicked a text thanking Jung-ah for the message and passing on the address for the party in case she wanted to

join. She was probably too busy studying to check her phone, but on the off chance Niketa wanted her to know just how much the present meant.

Raymond waved as she approached.

“Hey! You look great, that’s not weird of me to say, right?”

“You’re fine.” She waved him off, “Let’s get going I could use some fun.”

“James is bringing jelly shots.”

Niketa snorted.

“Is he trying to make this the most stereotypical party ever? I didn’t think anybody but underage teenagers trying to be cool did jelly shots.”

“Yeah, I know I did. Fifteen-year-old Raymond thought he was the epitome of awesome. Throwing up rainbows in his best mates’ bathroom.”

Niketa laughed.

“Is that the same time you tried making flavoured vodka with skittles? Didn’t it come up your nose?”

“Yeah...” Raymond gave her a funny look, “How did you know?”

Fuck; she realised her mistake too late. Raymond had told Alex that same story months ago. Without meaning to she’d fallen back into their old comradeships, completely forgetting this relationship was brand new to him.

“Oh I...heard Dan and James mentioning it in the hall the other day.” She tried, hoping he bought it, “Or something like that, they talk pretty loudly, I swear I’m not an eavesdropper.”

Raymond narrowed his eyes playfully.

“Sounds like something an eavesdropper would say.”

She punched him on the shoulder and Raymond’s eyes widened in genuine shock before he threw back his head and laughed.

“You know, I’m glad you turned me down. You’re violent!”

Niketa stuck out her tongue; running ahead as they made their way out of the university grounds and out into the streets. It was only a short walk to the address of Raymond’s friend; as they approached Niketa could feel the bass of loud music thumping beneath her feet before they’d even turned the corner. She could see people moving about inside and the front door flung open revealing James, beer bottle in hand.

“Raaaaaaaay! You bought the new chick! Good on you!”

A can of beer was thrust into her hands as they entered by Dan who was already leaning on James for support despite the fact the clock was yet to hit double digits.

“She doesn’t want that, man!” He cried, “Get the lady a cruiser or something.”

Niketa grinned. Calling on her inner Alex; she locked eyes with James and skulled the can, dropping it empty on the ground and crushing it under her foot. The three men cheered, just like they would have for Alex and Niketa felt a warmth bloom in her chest, though maybe that was just the alcohol.

“Well, we can’t let her outdo us!” Raymond beamed, grabbing his own can and sculling it, only for the bubbles to get into his nose leaving him spluttering and the rest of them in fits of laughter. Pretty soon they were all lounging across the couches, James half laying on the floor using Dan as a pillow while they all drank and shot the shit. It felt...good, if she closed her eyes, she could almost pretend nothing had changed; that she was still Alex, enjoying a night with his mates.

“Hey, you’re not passing out on us, are you?”

Raymond was poking her shoulder and Niketa realised she really had closed her eyes.

“Nah, I was just...savouring the moment.”

“Ooooooh, are we at the level of drunk where we get all deep and shit?” James asked, “I love that.”

“God you’re such a softie under everything, aren’t you?” Dan scoffed and the two descended into passing barbs back and forth while Raymond and Niketa looked on and snickered.

“One day,” Raymond sighed, “They’ll figure out that they’re in love and we’ll all get some piece.”

“Provided they’d not moaning the house down.”

Raymond spluttered, punching her on the shoulder as he groaned in disgust at the mental image. Niketa was just reaching for her sixth, or was it seventh, beer when a hand grabbed hers and she turned to find Jung-ah glaring down at her.

“Jung!” Niketa happily flung her arms around her friend, “I’m so glad you made it!”

Jung-ah pushed her away, gripping her shoulder with a serious look on her face.

“What are you doing getting drunk with a bunch of guys on your own, are you nuts?” She hissed, “It’s a good thing I decided to take a break, come on, let’s get you home.”

“What, why? I’m just having fun. I’m one of the guys!”

Raymond, James and Dan cheered and Jung-ah’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re not ‘one of the guys’, Niketa. You’re drunk now we’re going home.”

Niketa stumbled as Jung-ah practically dragged her out the door, Raymond and the guys giving one another awkward looks as to whether or not to intervene. They had gotten halfway up the street before Niketa finally managed to wiggle her wrist free and stand her ground.

“You’re not my mother, Jung.” She scowled, “And I am not off my head, I’ve had a few beers with friends. You could have joined us! That’s why I invited you.”

“We should be studying, not getting drunk.”

Niketa blinked. Jung-ah loved getting drunk and partying just as much as the next person; yeah, she did it in moderation and took her studies seriously but this was something different. She could tell by the way she was holding herself, there was something else at play here. Where was the playful smile from breakfast the other day asking if she’d met somebody?

“Wha-Jung, are you okay? You sound like...well, our parents.”

Normally, if one of them said something to that effect the other would gasp in mock horror, yelling ‘you take that back’ before deciding into giggles. This time Jung-ah just bit her lip and looked to the ground. Suddenly sober, Niketa moved forward to wrap an arm around her shoulders only to pause as her friend spoke.

“Sorry,” Jung-ah whispered, “I guess I just got...jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“You’ve barely spoken to me since we went to breakfast the other week.” She mumbled, “And then you just text out of the blue that you’re going to a party and when I get there, you’re drinking and laughing with those guys like you’ve been friends for years.”

Niketa winced inwardly; yeah, that probably did look pretty bad now that she thought about it.

“I guess, that’s why you’ve been too busy to hang out...you’ve been with them being ‘one of the boys’.”

“Oh, no, no Jung, that’s not it at all!” Niketa insisted, “We haven’t been hanging out at all, I’ve just been...really focused on studying and when Raymond text I decided it would be a good time to take a break I’m not replacing you with them or anything.”

Jung-ah crossed her arms over her chest.

"It feels like you are." She whispered.

Niketa felt her heart break a little bit. This whole process, becoming, or more accurately, remembering herself had been so all encompassing she'd not even spared a moment to think of Jung-ah. How awful it would feel to have your best friend shut you out overnight and then suddenly find them hanging out with other people, having invited you seemingly as an afterthought. The revelation left her feeling suddenly sober and she walked over to Jung-ah, wrapped her arms around her tightly.

"I'm so sorry Jung."

For a moment, she was afraid her friend would reject the hug but then she returned it; and for the first time since she woke up as Niketa, she felt at home. The jumper Jung-ah made seemed to make the hug all the warmer and it was only after a car drove past, breaking the silence that they sprung apart and realised almost a full minute had passed. Jung-ah blushed, looking embarrassed but then smiled, eyes glancing down at the jumper.

"You wore it." She sighed, "I'm glad, I'm not much a knitter."

"This is evidence to the contrary." Niketa argued, "Hey, I'll text Raymond and tell him we're heading back to the dorms. Why don't we go back to mine and watch a movie on my laptop? Your choice, as an apology for being such an arse."

Jung-ah pretended to think about it for a moment.

"Two movies, and they get to be in Korean." She grinned.

"But I suck at watching movies with subtitles!"

"Don't worry," Jung-ah laughed, linking their arms together, "I'll translate for you."

~

They'd fallen asleep halfway through the second film, at least Niketa had. When she woke up with dark hair in her face and a mouth tasting of ash. She was trapped in a tangle of limbs, her and Jung-ah had fallen asleep on her bed together and suddenly Niketa's skin felt hot. She had to take a

moment and remind herself that this was totally normal, girls shared beds all the time and it didn't mean anything, even if they woke up cuddling. It was just what girls did, the increase in his heart rate was just because she remembered being a straight guy where this situation would have very different connotations.

Luckily, Jung-ah was still asleep, chest rising and falling steadily, mouth slightly open. She was really pretty. She had the high cheek bones and dark eyes so many Korean women would die to have and her skin was so smooth. Niketa couldn't resist reaching out a finger to stroke her cheek. Jung-ah stirred and suddenly Niketa realised the intimacy of the situation and practically flew out of the bed, jerking her friend awake.

"Mwo..." She mumbled, "it's morning already?"

"Yeah, sorry I woke you." Niketa's palms were sweating. "I uh, really, need a shower. Do you mind waiting here and then we can go get breakfast?"

"Sure?" Jung-ah was rubbing sleep from her eyes and Niketa couldn't help but notice how cute she looked doing it. As she shifted her loose blouse fell forward, the top buttons having come undone in the night, showing her a flash of Jung-ah's cleavage.

Niketa's cheeks burned with the amount of blood rushing to them and she practically flew out of the room, grabbing a towel and pretending not to hear Jung-ah call out that she forgot her clothes. She wrenched the shower facet to cold and stood under the spray shivering, letting the icy water cascade down her curves and soak her hair. Niketa was not a lesbian, she liked boys, she'd only ever liked boys, having...thoughts about her best friend was not her. It was Alex. She squeezed her eyes closed in frustration, she was trying to hard to stick to one personality over the other but no matter how hard she tried, Alex kept bleeding through. She ran her fingers through her long hair, trying to achieve that calm from that first day and only partially managing.

Soon her shivers turned violent but at least the blush in her cheeks had diminished. She got out and wrapped a towel around herself, feeling foolish as she walked back to her bedroom with her dirty clothes clutched in her fingers. When she opened the door, Jung-ah was holding one of the text books she'd been using for research books; *The Psychology of Sexuality and Gender*. Her brow was furrowed and Niketa felt a cool sweat form on the back of her neck.

"What are all these for? You're not studying psychology or medicine."

"Oh, that's just a little light reading." She wanted to curl up and die, that was the least convincing lie she'd ever told and the look on Jung-ah's face said she agreed.

"You've certainly got a lot of...light reading here."

“You know me, I sure do love to read,” She laughed nervously. Jung-ah but the book down and walked over the bed, patting it slightly with her hand in invitation.

Niketa sat; why did she feel like she was in an interrogation?

“Niketa...” Jung-ah took a deep breath, “I won’t pretend to understand but if you feel like you’re discovering something about yourself, you can tell me.”

“D—discovering...?”

“You’ve been acting strange lately, hanging out with those guys, you even called yourself one of them, if all this,” She waved a hand over the books, “Is you trying to figure out if you’re...trans. That’s okay. You don’t have to keep it a secret.”

Affection bloomed in Niketa’s chest at the words; Jung-ah may have been more liberal than most but she had still been realised in a traditional, conservative Korean family. Trans people were sure to be something that made her at least a little uncomfortable, but she was so open and caring that she was pushing that away to be here for her friend. Was she trans? Fuck, Niketa didn’t even know, did having an entirely different set of memories as a man count? She didn’t think so. Still, there was a pressure building in her chest and a lump formed in her throat. Before she could stop herself, words were spilling from her lips admitting everything, Alex, the old memories, her research, her old friendship with the boys, everything. She knew she sounded like a crazy person but she just couldn’t stop. By the time she reached the end she was almost sobbing, only just managed to hold back her confusing feelings about waking up next to Jung-ah.

For her part, her friend rubbed her back and squeezed her hand tightly in support the whole way, asking the occasional question but never probing too far. Finally, they sat in an awkward silence with Niketa sure she’d convinced her best friend she was a complete psycho.

“You really mean all of that, don’t you?” She breathed after a moment, “At first I thought you were playing some sort of joke but...you wouldn’t do that.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what’s in character for me at all.” She chuckled darkly, “I’m somehow a Desi girl and a white dude at the same time. All mushed together in the same body.”

“I believe you.” Jung-ah said after taking a deep breath, “This is all way too intricate to be some sort of delusion.”

“You think so?” Jung-ah just nodded.

“I think that missing twenty-four hours is key, both your lives don’t remember it. If we can figure out what happened there, I think we’ll find the answer.”

The lump in her throat was back.

“We?”

“Of course, *we*, I can’t believe you’ve been doing this all by yourself.” Jung-ah said matter-of-factly, “Now, I’ll go back to my dorm and get some clothes, shower and we can discuss battle plans over breakfast.”

Niketa gave a snort of laughter, Jung-ah was tackling this with the same level of dedication and seriousness as she did everything, which is to say 110%. It was as if a weight had been lifted; she wasn’t crazy, at least Jung-ah didn’t think so and at least now she had somebody to confide in. She new now, more strongly than ever, that she had to forget those confusing feelings from this morning. There was no way she was going to risk losing such an amazing friend. A message appeared on her phone just as Jung-ah was leaving, Raymond.

‘Hey, just checking you guys got home okay last night?’

‘We’re both fine, sorry to bail.’

‘All good, I could tell something was going on. Me and the guys are heading to the beach on the weekend before exams, you guys are welcome to join us!’

Niketa smiled; she’d really underestimated Raymond when she was Alex. Maybe he was a nicer, deeper guy than she’d given him credit for. She texted back in the affirmative; keeping Alex and Niketa separate was clearly not working, at least for now. So, she may as well try and have the best of both worlds.

Niketa winced as Dan slammed into the sand trying to reach the ball before it bounced. He and Raymond had made the mistake of challenging the girls to a game of beach volleyball and had thoroughly underestimated just how intense Jung-ah could be.

“Best three out of five?” Raymond offered while Dan spat out sand and James cackled like a hyena on the sidelines.

“Only if you’re ready to be defeated five times in a row.” Jung-ah replied and Niketa gave her a high five.

“Forget it, dudes. This is just embarrassing to watch!” James called running in and grabbing the ball before tossing it back on the pile of bags half buried in the sand before going over to help Dan wash his mouth out.

It was a perfect day; normally the beaches around Sydney were busy even in the cooler months but Raymond had managed to find them a tiny spit of sand and sea that nobody else was visiting today. The air was cool, the water frigid, but the day was unusually warm which meant all of them were more than comfortable. Well, all but Jung-ah who still hadn’t quite adapted to the Australian weather and found swimming in autumn completely baffling. Niketa was trying very hard not to notice how Jung-ah’s nipples were tenting the top of her white bikini. She was surprised none of the guys seemed to have noticed, that or they were very good at hiding their interest.

Despite the extra help, she was nowhere closer to figuring out what happened during that missing twenty-four hours. Jung-ah had been in her own room all day studying and hadn’t heard from Niketa at all during that time. Considering the big assignment, she hadn’t considered it odd. It was likely Raymond and the boys would have been with Alex, but seeing as they no longer remembered him, that wasn’t a lead they could follow either. In the end, Jung-ah had simply suggested she try as many new experiences as possible in the hopes that something triggered a memory. It wasn’t much, but it was all they had.

“Last one in the water buys drinks on the way home!” Raymond yelled, dashing for the waves.

“You’re mad!” Jung-ah laughed, taking off after him with Niketa and the others in hot pursuit.

Niketa could feel her ass and tits bouncing as she ran, this bikini giving absolutely no support. She still wasn’t used to it, the feeling of this body. She couldn’t help but look down at the skimpily clad skin and grin; red was definitely her colour. She and Jung-ah had both delighted in getting dressed this morning, imagining the horror on their mother’s faces if they knew their precious little

daughters were about to go parading around in such revealing swimwear in the company of three men.

Niketa dove into the waves and regretted it immediately; the water was like ice and instantly she could feel her own nipples turning diamond hard in response. She gasped, breaking the surface and instinctually wrapping her arms around herself. Jung-ah was standing, only thigh deep in the water already shaking with a grin on her face.

“C-come on in, Jung. The water’s g-great!”

“You’re a shit liar!”

The guys all followed Niketa, soaking her with silver spray as they all jumped and splashed.

“Jung-ah’s paying for drinks!” Dan teased and she pouted.

“Just because I’m not some Aussie freak who likes swimming no matter what the weather!”

“Oh, come on Jung, you’re basically one of us anyway!” Niketa called and Dan and James started chanting in the background.

“One of us! One of us!”

Finally, she rolled her eyes before squeezing them closed and jumping under an incoming wave. Niketa laughed as she surfaced, spluttering and shaking, immediately making a beeline for Niketa and hugging her close.

“You got me into this mess you can warm me up.” She hissed; Niketa tried to laugh it off but her mind was instantly distracted.

She could feel Jung-ah’s nipples pressing against her own. Despite the freezing water she felt her cheeks begin to heat. Their bodies were so close; she could feel Jung-ah’s soft skin against hers in so many places, thin swimsuit material the only thing between her and her friend’s naked body. She swallowed, glad for the sea water that washed away the wetness forming between her folds. For a second, Jung-ah turned to face her and their noses almost brushed. Her lips were right there, one push from a current and they’d be pressing together.

And then James fell off Dan's shoulders right next to them, coating them both in freezing water and causing them to shriek and jump apart.

"James, you're a complete ass you know th-th-that?" Jung-ah shivered; her voice sounded thick.

"I think maybe we should head back soon before Jung freezes." Niketa suggested, "It'd feel bad having to write her parents a letter explaining that she somehow managed to freeze to death on a famously hot continent."

The humour was good, it defused the strange sexual tension that was suddenly between them and the others agreed. They dragged themselves out of the water and went about getting dry enough to all pile back into Raymond's car.

"Are you guys going to Justin Fairchild's party tonight?" He asked them, "His parents own this massive house in the suburbs and he's left all the guys in our dorm an open invite."

"Oh man, I love Fairchild's parties, they are off the hook!" Dan sighed, "It's not often he holds two in such quick succession, normally it's a once-a-year sort of deal."

"I hear about them, but I never go." Jung-ah admitted, "But if Niketa is going--"

"That's where I know you!"

The exclamation was so loud it made the rest of them jump; James was pointing straight at Niketa with a victorious grin.

"I knew you felt familiar when we first met you at the gym. I remember you from the party last year!"

"You do?"

Niketa wracked her brain; she couldn't remember going to any party hosted by a Justin Fairchild before except...that was the name on her former room at the dorms! Jung-ah, whom she had mentioned it in passing to, seemed to have the same thought she did, grasping her shoulders tightly.

“When was his last party? Was Niketa there too?”

“Wow, territorial much?” James laughed, “Last one was a few weeks ago...the day before we met actually, Niketa. But no, I didn’t see you then, just the one last year which was around the same time I think.”

Jung-ah’s grip on her shoulders tightened almost painfully and they shared a knowing look; this could be it. Odds were, she was missing the memory from that party last year as well but never realised because well, who could remember every single day of their life in perfect clarity. She had assumed this Justin guy was just a random person who had been assigned his old room in this reality but perhaps he was at the centre of all this.

“What time? We’ll definitely come with.”

~

Niketa fiddled with her nose ring as they drove through the darkened streets; normally she didn’t wear one, it only increased the amount of ‘wow your English is so good’ comments every second-generation Australian was sick of. But for whatever reason, tonight it felt needed. Jung-ah grabbed her wrist, giving her a look.

“Stop that, it looks like you’re picking your nose.”

She flushed.

“Sorry I’m just...”

“I know.” Her friend patted her arm understandingly.

Raymond had decided to drive them, James and Dan having gone ahead to help Justin prepare. Which Raymond had informed them just meant getting drunk before everybody else arrived. She switched to fiddling with her necklace as they finally pulled up to a massive house with white walls and technicolour lights flashing in every window. Already she could see the silhouette of dozens of people inside and more making their way up the street.

“You weren’t kidding about the open invite.” She breathed, how on earth was she going to find Justin in this sea of people? And when she did, what was she going to say?

Niketa had been wracking her brains all day with how to approach this; meeting Justin could go one of a dozen different ways. He might see her and instantly know why she was there, or he could have no idea. It was entirely possible whatever wiped her memories and forced her to change was completely unrelated and just so happened to take place at his house. Then what? Gatherings like this, nobody would know for sure who was here and when, especially not a year ago. Her nerves must have shown on her face because Jung-ah took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze; she’d not even realised it was shaking.

“Alright, I’m going to go find James and Dan to make sure they’re not about to do something entirely idiotic.” Raymond grinned before adding seriously, “These things can get out of hand, if anybody gives either of you any trouble come find us, okay?”

Niketa and Jung-ah nodded; it was a protective, almost gentlemanly side to Raymond she’d never knew he possessed. If nothing else, Niketa was glad this new life had given her the chance to know this other side of her friend. He ran up the stairs to the front door leaving Niketa and Jung-ah to join the crowd.

“Let’s get some answers.” She smiled, “And maybe have some fun while we’re at it.”

The inside of the house was thrumming with people; groups gathered around the PlayStation, others were already organising shots in the kitchen and every room, no matter its purposed was filled with people in various states of intoxication. Niketa grabbed two plastic cups of punch and handed one to her friend, they clinked them together and them immediately almost choked on the burning drink.

“At what point does it stop being punch and start being straight bundy?” Jung-ah coughed with a grin before taking another swig.

“I don’t think taste is the point.”

Honestly, she didn’t care though. What she needed right now was the confidence and calm alcohol provided so readily and so she downed the rest of her cup and half another before they went back to wandering the party, asking every other person if they’d seen Justin. Funnily enough, half the people didn’t even seem to know who Justin was, having rocked up via word of mouth and the other half were already tipsy enough that they couldn’t quite pin point where they’d last seen him. The only useful information they managed to pick up between them is that he was tall, blonde, and

wearing a slipknot shirt. Which wasn't much to go on when it seemed half of Sydney was contained in the building.

An hour and several cups of 'punch' later Jung-ah leaned up against a wall and sighed.

"I don't think we're going to find him, Niketa."

"I can't just give up now, not when we're so close!"

"Let's just relax and have some fun. Maybe we'll find what we're looking for when we stop looking. Besides, the punch is going to my head."

Niketa sighed in frustration, joining Jung-ah in leaning against the wall, but her eyes never left the steady stream of people making their way up and down the hallway. Checking each man that walked by for blonde hair and slipknot shirts. Jung-ah nudged her.

"Relax, Niketa...Why do you even want to find Justin anyway? Do you want to turn back into Alex?"

Her voice had become more hushed as the sentence went on, Niketa could hear a nervous tremble in her friend's voice and she turned to face her.

"I...don't know. I just want to know which of us is...real."

"Why? Aren't you happy in this life. With me." Jung-ah's cheeks flushed slightly at the last part. "Alex was never friends with me as far as you mentioned. What if I don't exist in that universe and if you leave, will the 'real' Niketa still be...I don't know. I feel like I'd be losing you."

She was drunk, babbling; alcohol plying all her insecurities out. Niketa could feel it in her blood as well and with more confidence that she usually felt, she reached out, placing a palm against Jung-ah's soft cheekbones.

"I promise, no matter what reality I end up in. I will always be your friend." She whispered, watching Jung-ah's dark eyes shine under the low light.

“What if,” her tongue darted across her lips, eyes lowering, “what if I want to be more than your friend.”

Niketa’s stomach filled with butterflies and for a moment, her head was filled with thoughts of their families, how they would certainly disapprove of such a relationship. Then she realised she didn’t care, nor did she care what ‘Alex’ would do in this situation; in the here and now she was Niketa. And Niketa really wanted to kiss Jung-ah.

So she did.

The sounds of the party melted away, searching the crowd passing through the hallway forgotten as her whole universe shrunk to just the feeling of Jung-ah’s lips against hers. Soft, sweet, made slightly spicy by a thin coating of punch. Jung-ah sighed, opening her mouth and letting Niketa’s tongue explore. Her awareness expanded as a gentle hand gripped her arm, squeezing her close. Niketa’s whole body felt like it was made from live wires, each brush of skin, every touch of nail or hair sent shivers running down her spine. She couldn’t help but moan slightly, burying a hand in Jung-ah’s long hair and deepening their kiss. They began pressing harder, pushing their bodies together, before she knew it, Niketa had her pinned against the wall with their breasts squashed together. Jung-ah gasped and it was the most beautiful sound Niketa had ever heard.

They broke apart, lips slightly swollen and Niketa pulled back; taking in Jung-ah’s dilated pupils and parted mouth. An ache was forming deep between her legs as warm wetness leaked from her hole; she’d never been so turned on in her life. Justin entirely forgotten she pressed her forehead against her friends.

“Let’s find an empty room.”

Jung-ah just nodded, almost in a daze. Their fingers interlocked they weaved through the crowd, up the stairs to the quieter second floor; judging from the sounds coming from behind closed doors, several other couples were already engaged in similar activities. Finally, after far too long, they found an empty bedroom. The bed was small and sheets crisp, a spare room by the looks of it. Niketa really didn’t care, all she cared about was the lock on the door. She snapped it closed as soon as they were inside and then Jung-ah was on her; hand sliding under her shirt and up her back, another cupping her ass while her mouth kissed the hollow of Niketa’s throat. Her eyes rolled back in her head for a moment, overwhelmed by the sudden, wonderful sensations. She could only wrap her arms around Jung-ah and hold on for dear life.

“I’ve been wanting to do this,” Jung-ah breathed, “For *so long*, Niketa.”

“Me too.” She croaked, “Gods me too-ah!”

A hand was under her bra now, finger tracing the underside of her breast and back again.

“Oh that’s...oh fucks that’s nice.”

“Just nice?” Jung-ah teased, hand deftly unhook the back of her bra before returning to the front and taking her nipple between thumb and forefinger. “How about this.”

Niketa could only moan; she’d been so preoccupied trying to figure out what had happened to her she’d not even touched herself since waking up in this body. She had no idea it was capable of such...feelings. Her hips bucked against Jung-ah’s leg, eliciting another gasp as her aching pussy pressed against the warm limb. She wanted more, soon she was pushing back, hands slipping under Jung-ah’s clothes and lifting them off taking in every inch of smooth olive skin, running her fingers over it, kissing her shoulders as they stumbled back towards the bed; shedding clothes as they went.

Each of them naked save their panties, they fell onto the bed. Niketa on top, pinning Jung-ah down as she gently kissed at the soft flesh of her breasts.

“Your tits are amazing.” She whispered, running her tongue over the nipple and drinking in the sound it caused.

She raised her head, silencing Jung-ah with a kiss as their nipples rubbed against one another. Both of them groaned, Jung-ah raking her nails down Niketa’s back before cupping her ass and pulling them together. Two thin lines of fabric the only thing from keeping their aching pussies from rubbing against one another.

“I don’t normally rush into things like this.” Niketa said feeling breathless and Jung-ah laced their fingers together and they continued to writhe together.

“Let’s be honest-ah! We’ve practically been dating forever.”

Now that she said it, Niketa realised it was true and felt stupid for not doing this sooner. Jung-ah’s free hand snaked between them, gently pushing the fabric over the curve of Niketa’s ass and down so she could wiggle them off entirely. For a second their eyes met, then Niketa felt a finger parting her folds and her eyes closed automatically, her head came to rest on Jung-ah’s shoulders as she raised her hips, allowing that hand better access.

“Oh...Oh, ah!” With each slow stroke more sounds were coaxed out of her, she couldn’t help it, the sensations were just too strong.

The finger swirled around her clit, never pressing hard enough to be fully satisfying, instead teasing out as much pleasure as she could. Niketa bucked her hips, desperate for more but Jung-ah kept her on the edge, swiping down from her clit to her hole, pressing inside for a few short thrusts before returning. It was all one big tease and Niketa was seeing stars. With some reluctance she pushed the hand away, pussy still tingling, almost burning with need but she knew she had to do this.

“You’ve been there for me for so long. Let me pay you back.”

Jung-ah raised her hips obediently and Niketa pulled off the panties, discarding them without a second thought. She took a second to admire her new lover’s pussy in the dim light; the hair was dark but neat, almost orderly, just like Jung-ah. She could see slick wetness shining between the dark pink folds and without hesitation Niketa lowered her lips to them. A high-pitched squeal burst from Jung-ah’s throat as her tongue swiped down her folds, her hips wiggled but Niketa held her down firm continuing to lick and suck at the sensitive skin, even gently scraping her teeth across that wonderful little nub and feeling almost drunk on the sound Jung-ah was making.

“Oh fuck, Oh Niketa y-you have to-ah, you h-have to stop-oh! I’m going to...going to...ah!”

Niketa gave her one last slow lick, tasting the sweet juices and swallowing down as much as she could, making sure to leave Jung-ah on the edge just like her. Jung-ah was so addled by pleasure she couldn’t even speak, simply sitting up and grabbing her, pulling Niketa down into another passionate kiss as their clits rubbed together. They were both already so overly sensitive it wasn’t going to take long. Their hips were thrusting against one another hard as their tongue danced until the pleasure became so much Niketa couldn’t even kiss anymore, her mouth forming an O as she began to crest. Jung-ah’s name on her lips she came, a torrent of wetness squirting from her hole as her lover followed suit, both of them writhing and shuddering together as pleasure overwhelmed them both.

Niketa collapsed against her best friend, enjoying the way the post coital haze made everywhere their skin touched feel wonderful. They were both breathing heavily, chest pressed together until Niketa finally rolled over and Jung-ah curled around her side.

“I bet half the party heard that...” She mumbled, “Fucking in a strangers house, very classy of us.”

“Our mothers would be so proud.” Niketa chuckled and Jung-ah giggled, the sound was like the tinkling of a bell; how had she never appreciated how beautiful it sounded before now?

They laid together for a few beats before Jung-ah spoke again.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“We can’t stay here naked forever, eventually somebody will come knocking.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Yeah...yeah I know.”

Niketa stroked a nail gently up and down Jung-ah’s spine, listening to the muffled sounds of music and laughter from outside. She’d been enjoying life lately, melding Alex and Niketa together, if she was honest, it was the life she wanted. She closed her eyes, picturing a coin turning in the air as if tossed; heads for Alex, tails for Niketa. She imagined it landing on heads and the stab of disappointment was immediate and that told her all she needed to; even if it turns out Alex was who she was originally, that wasn’t who she was now. She wanted to stay like this; stay as Niketa with Jung-ah as her girlfriend and the boys as her mates.

“Come on,” She whispered, kissing Jung-ah’s temple, “Let’s get back to the party.”

When they emerged from the room, clothing slightly ruffled from being tossed on the floor, nobody batted an eye. So many were using these rooms for hook ups they were just another pair in the crowd, much to their relief. Not five steps away from the door another couple came tumbling up the stairs, half naked already and fell into the room and the two girls giggled. They made their way downstairs and heard a loud and familiar yell from the yard.

“Sounds like Raymond didn’t find Dan and James in time.” Jung-ah chuckled.

Sure enough, there they were; thoroughly sozzled and play fighting with long poles made of beer cans all stuck together with electrical tape.

“What on earth?” Jung-ah blinked in shock; Niketa just laughed.

“It’s called Wizard Sticks, each time you finish a can you stick your next drink on top, then when you’re completely wasted you fight with them like kids with lightsabres.”

“How do you win?”

“You don’t have a hangover in the morning.”

“Ah.”

They stood, watching as the two did ‘battle’ and even spotted Raymond off the side, head in his palm with a goofy grin as he shook his head in disbelief. Niketa scanned the crowd and suddenly froze; two piercingly bright blue eyes held her gaze. They belonged to a normally looking blonde man around her age wearing a slipknot shirt. Normally, you’d never pick him out of this crowd of similar drunks but on some institutional level Niketa knew; this was Justin Fairchild and judging by the way he was looking at her, he knew her as well.

She slipped her hand out of Jung-ah’s taking a step back into the crowd and making her way through the throng of people towards Justin. He held her gaze the whole time, knowing smile on his face. When she finally reached him he’d separated himself, moving further into the garden to sit on a stone bench right at the back, away from the commotion, he patted the space next to him with a welcoming smile.

“Niketa, so lovely to see you back.”

Niketa wasn’t sure what she had been expecting but this friendly, honest and open demeanour wasn’t it. She was forced to remind herself that this man was the cause of her turmoil the last few weeks and certainly shouldn’t feel like an old friend.

“Who are you?” She asked, getting right to the chase, “What did you do to me?”

Justin sighed and gave her a look that seemed genuinely apologetic.

“I did warn you, a spell of that calibre tends to have side effects, memory loss around the time it takes hold is the most common.”

“Well, I certainly don’t remember the warning so why don’t you enlighten me.” She could feel her temper starting to rise, “Do you have any idea what it feels like to wake up one day as a woman, with an entirely new set of memories in your head? To have to juggle two completely different aspects of yourself and lose all your friendships while trying to balance the new ones?”

“I don’t suppose you would believe I warned you about that as well?”

“Just bloody tell me what happened.”

Justin sighed, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“Alright, first off, do you remember me at all?”

“No, otherwise finding you at your own damn party would have been a lot easier.”

He chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s fair. Okay, so my family is from an old European line, we came here way back in the 1700s to escape persecution because we’re, well, magic.”

That should have felt more ridiculous than it did but after everything she’d been through, magic being the answer almost felt like the most believable option.

“We met a year ago, you’d had a shitty day and wanted to blow off steam, something about a fight with your parents about what you should or shouldn’t be doing with your time.”

That sounded familiar; she focused, thinking back to the last time she and her mother had fought badly. She’d been insisting her daughter go to India for a gap year to ‘get in touch with her culture’ because her Hindi was slipping, Niketa has been staunchly against it, wanting to stay and focus on her major. They had clashed; her mother believing their culture was more important than an English major and Niketa insisting her mother just regretted ever moving and was trying to force her to be something she wasn’t. She’s been so angry she wanted to go out and do something rebellious, a wild house party was just the ticket, so when she had heard two girls in the hall talking about it, she’d tagged along on a whim.

“I remember that...” She whispered as Justin continued.

“I saw some guys giving you a hard time, talking real slow and stuff because they thought you didn’t speak English and you blew up at them. You seemed upset so I came and tried to help.

You told me I had it easy. That if you were a straight white guy, you'd never had to deal with so much condescension; you wished you could be somebody totally different and leave Niketa behind."

It was coming back to her now, the fight, those ogres who just rubbed salt in the wound and a kind stranger who listened and offered his help.

"I didn't believe you at first." She said, "I thought you were joking but then you made a flower bloom at night."

"That's right."

"You said you didn't want to do it permanently, that wiping my memories and changing reality was hard enough, you didn't want to make it permanent."

"So, I gave you a year."

"A year to live that other life, the easier life..."

She let that information wash over her; Niketa was who she really was, not Alex. Alex had been somebody she invented to run away from her problems.

"Alex was never real." She breathed and Justin placed a hand on her knee.

Normally, the gesture would feel like a boundary crossing but she could tell there was no romantic or sexual intent behind it.

"He was, you made him real, you lived that year as him but as for who you were 'originally', yes. Niketa was your first identity. I made sure to invite your old friends to the party last week and when you showed up, I spiked your punch with a little something extra, to turn you back when you next went to sleep."

"Why didn't you come and check on me?" She asked, "Do you have any idea how much stress you could have spared me?"

“This was something you needed to work out on your own. Granted, I did throw this extra party in the hopes you might come along. If you hadn’t, I probably would have come to see you. Besides, how would you have felt that morning you woke up if a stranger just showed up at your door and went ‘hi I’m the warlock who changed you, here have some exposition?’”

She snorted and they both laughed, he wasn’t wrong, that probably would have made everything worse. She certainly wouldn’t have done nearly as much soul searching. They sat for a moment, Justin withdrawing his hand.

“I’m glad you did it. Changed me I mean.” She said after a few seconds, “I think I needed that clarity.”

Justin seemed shocked.

“You want me to change you back again?”

“No, never.” She shot down quickly, “Alex’s life was...fine but bland. I feel like maybe it would be an easier life; Alex wouldn’t have to convince his parents to accept a gay relationship for one but...I want this life. I want to be Niketa.”

Another cry from the crowd, James had won wizard sticks and now Raymond was challenging him while Jung-ah helped dan to his drunken feet. A soft smile pulled at Niketa’s lips; her friends from both lives, come together. Just like she had.

“I think I have had my fill of magic.” She stood, looking back at Justin, “I think I’ll go enjoy your party.”

He just nodded.

“I guess I’ll see you round campus, *Niketa*.”

~

One Year Later...

“Am I too dressed up?”

Niketa was wearing a long flowing, yellow dress that complimented her complexion, she'd even put in her nose ring and golden studs; it was a beautiful outfit that bordered on neat casual.

“Dude, you're asking the wrong person.” Raymond slouched back on her bed. “You're making a big deal out of this. Just relax, they're going to love you.”

“That's easy for you to say.” She collapsed in her desk chair only to spring back up when she realised it could crease her dress.

“It's a little old Korean couple, how scary could they be?”

“Fucking terrifying.” She deadpanned, “Jung-ah said they about hit the roof when she finally told them she was dating a woman. They wanted her to find a nice, handsome Korean man; and in case you weren't paying attention I am none of those things.”

“You could make an argument for handsome.” Raymond mused, before facetiously adding, “If you smiled more.”

Niketa threw a notebook at him.

“You're no help at all.”

“Well, you're the one who begged me to come over so you didn't have an aneurysm.”

Niketa laid her head in her hands; she had one shot to make a good impression on Jung-ah's parents. What if they thought she looked like a slob, or had dressed too extravagantly? What if she messed up the Korean phrases Jung-ah had taught her and accidentally insulted them? She felt hands grip her wrists and gently pull them away from her face.

“Hey,” Raymond gave her a smile. “You're going to be fine. Just be yourself, be polite and show them how happy you make Jung-ah.”

Niketa took a deep breath.

“Alright.”

She glanced over to the clock, Jung-ah would be bringing them by the dorm any minute now. A knock at her door made her jump and Raymond answered, surprised to find Jung-ah herself. She looked right past him, eyes wide as she stared at Niketa.

“You look beautiful.” She beamed, walking forward and taking both her hands in her own, “Yellow is my mother’s favourite colour, good choice.”

“Where-?”

“Downstairs, I told them I wanted to come down with you and introduce you properly.”

“Okay then.”

Raymond waved as they left, heading for the stairs while they took the elevator. Niketa clung to Jung-ah’s hand tightly, she could feel her fingers shaking. They’d been dating almost a year now but only let their families know a few months ago. It had been...rough. Niketa’s father had been especially disappointed, calling Jung-ah an ‘experiment’ until, strangely enough, her mother stood up for her. She’d stated that Niketa was a woman now, capable of making her own decisions about who to love and that he needed to get over his old-fashioned ideas. Though she had quite the time keeping her face straight when her mother continued on by saying she was sure her virginity was still in tack, especially since she was seeing another woman. There was no way she was throwing oil on that fire by trying to explain how that worked.

Jung-ah’s family on the other hand, took a lot more convincing. Half a dozen times her girlfriend had come by teary eyes and sobbing after a phone call with her parents. It broke Niketa’s heart; for the first time she almost regretted not becoming Alex again, at least then they would only have a cultural barrier to cross. Then finally, three weeks ago they decided to come and visit; saying they didn’t want to risk losing their daughter. Which bought them to this moment; Jung-ah turned to her as the elevator descended, giving her a chaste kiss.

“Whatever happens, I love you.”

Niketa smiled and tightened her grip, bringing up Jung-ah’s hands and pressing her lips to her girlfriend’s fingers.

“I love you too. I promise, everything is going to be okay. We’ll convince them.”

“Are you sure?” There was a slight wobble to her voice, Niketa gave her a quick, tight hug.

“I know it.”

Jung-ah had been with her through so much; helping her find balance with her own identity and now it was her turn to be there for her. Niketa swore no matter what happened, she would stand by her no matter what and she knew James, Dan and Raymond would as well. The five of them had become quite the little family on campus and no matter what happened today, Jung-ah would always have them and Niketa on her side.

They pulled apart just as the elevator pinged, opening to reveal a stern looking Korean couple. Niketa took a subtle but deep breathe; she knew exactly who she was and if that person wasn’t good enough for them, that was their issue. She grasped Jung-ah’s hand in hers and walked forward, warm smile on her face.

“My name is Niketa, it’s so lovely to meet you.”

