Casual Lunacy

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Casual Lunacy

by lonelypond (Blinkkittylove)

Summary

Maki Nishikino is a college student aimlessly wandering through classes and life and finding herself drawn to Nico Yazawa, fellow student, actress in training, barista by night. There are things about Maki she's not sure how to tell anyone, if she even remembers them, and Nico's not sure exactly what to do when the cute redhead with the odd vibe wanders into her coffeshop early one morning. But danger is looming for Nico, when magic meets theatre and strange things begin to happen.

Notes

Well, there I was happily IdolPunking, but my big summer project started, and once again, my mental bandwidth is too full of other things. So that's on a necessary pause while I tame a Shrew.

I wrote a haiku and the middle line screamed 'this is a great title.' I've always had the urge to write a werewolf NicoMaki and there's a full moon so my impulse control is shot. I may just throw every trope I know into this to distract myself from actors so apologies in advance. I'm
going to shoot for a weekly posting schedule.

Of course, there's a playlist, this one's still a work in progress so drop suggestions in the comments, if you will. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLko9fiFcKQ06g5h7pWPIBB0PNHtMi7sgN

Haiku for the curious:
Deep still sky, moonlight
Casual lunacy calls
Wander Howl Dark Dawn

Thanks for reading.
Clear, cold night, smell of snow drifting in as lightly as the clouds drifted across the low crescent moon. Maki Nishikino, hands in the pockets of her peacoat, stared up, sniffing the air, ears alert for any change in the after city midnight soundscape.

It wasn’t so much about the tail or the ears or the claws or the howl. Very low levels of bloodlust. Practically cute fangs that just dig a little into the underlip. Nothing like B horror movies, at least the nights she remembered. The nights Maki Nishikino wandered after midnight and remembered had an edge of daring, the glowing tease of a thrill, an innervation that sharpened everything: sound, taste, smell … each extending Maki’s awareness like the hairs raised and poised on her arms.

There it was. Maki ended up this street far more than she’d care to admit, on a quiet corner half a block from a late night coffee shop. Tonight’s barista was the draw, a musky smell mixed with peach, a tantalizing hint of latent magic and flair of vanilla. Maki had never actually wandered into the coffee shop, she had nerved herself to walk by the window maybe twice, sneaking a peek at a petite, pretty woman with lush sable hair and crimson eyes quick to catch any glances. She was womanning the counter tonight, and Maki could feel the moon acutely suddenly, a crescent edge of dare slicing through inaction. Howl, Maki thought, free the air in her lungs, stretch out her arms into the dark, reach for something, anything.

Her ears picked up a low grumble. The barista.

“I will cut the next person who orders anything more complicated than an espresso.”

Maki’s sense of mischief pricked suddenly, along with her ears. With a skip, she strode toward the shop. She threw open the door, chime banging dissonantly, and watched with amusement as the barista jumped. Maki grinned. The crimson eyes narrowed suspiciously, then the woman forced a perky smile on her face.

“Welcome to Cup o’.”

Maki scanned the menu quickly. “Extra Large Rainbow Espresso Mocha Iceberg with exactly 2 and ¼ scoops of ice.”

“It’s 14 degrees outside,” the barista gritted out with a shiver.

Maki’s grin got goofier. “Okay, then three scoops of ice exactly.” Maki leaned against a post and grinned, flashing a bit of fang.

The barista shrugged with a bounce of her hair and pulled a cup off the stack. Maki focused on her name plate. Nico.

Maki crossed her arms over her chest. Nico was watching her, and Maki enjoyed the attention. “Aren’t you going to cut me?” Maki asked in her sweetest voice.

Nico stopped writing on the cup. “What?”

“I heard you before I came in. That’s a complicated drink. Aren’t you going to cut me?”

Nico put both her hands down on the counter, leaning forward. Maki echoed her movement. Nico seemed to be sniffing the air, her eyes staring into Maki’s, who was trying not to glance down.
“Are you drunk?” Nico asked.

“Nope.”

“Masochist?”

“Nope.”

“Sadist?” There was a quick wink, which startled Maki.

“N … no …”

Nico turned away, putting the weirdly purple, light blue and brown drink together much more quickly than Maki expected. “$8.27”

Maki reached into her jeans, hoping she had cash in her wallet. Nico grabbed the grubby $10 bill and pushed the drink Maki-ward, turning abruptly, leaving Maki staring in surprise at her back.

Maki picked up her drink, confused, as Nico took her phone out of her pocket and started swiping through screens, oblivious to Maki. The silence was as eerie and as cold as Maki’s slightly glowing drink. She took a sip. Icy and weird tingled on her tongue. Too sweet. She should have just ordered an espresso. Did she have enough cash for a plain cup of coffee? Wait. She’d never gotten her change.

“You owe me $1.80.”

Nico held her phone behind her back, screen toward Maki, who leaned over the counter. Maki read the screenshot: 20. To refuse to recognize socially; to shun ostentatiously.

Maki barked a laugh, and Nico half turned, quirking an eyebrow.

“Dog?”

Maki shrugged. “Can you keep the $1.80 and get me a coffee. Please?” Maki leaned her elbows on the counter, hands propping her chin, letting her eyes go wide and needy.

“It’s $1.73 and don’t you tip?” Nico grumbled.

Maki doubled down on the eyes, sensing Nico’s wavering. Nico placed a cup in front of Maki, a small cup, and filled it barely halfway. “Decaf.”

Maki inhaled, fancy flavors swirling and tickling her olfactory curiosity. “Liar.”

Nico, arms crossed over her chest, had watched Maki curiously as she sniffed. “Definitely dog.”

“Woof.” Maki winked.

Nico picked up a cleaning rag. “All the weirdos come in at this hour ...”

“Don’t you get spooked?” Maki wondered, swirling the coffee around her mouth before swallowing.

“I can take care of myself. Probably better than you, Puppy Eyes,” Nico laughed. “Plus Sergeant Alvarez stops in a few times each night. And she’s cute.”

Maki sat at the counter so she could continue to watch Nico, swirling her coffee and savoring the way the caramel and whisky tones blended with Nico’s peach and vanilla musk. Nico worked
efficiently, humming, occasionally glancing quickly at Maki, but not interrupting her workflow.

“I’m a student.” Maki felt fidgety as Nico’s humming seem to take on tactile qualities.

“Didn’t ask.” Nico snapped her rag.

“Oh.” Maki felt her lips turn down into a pout, as if Nico had turned away uncaring from a gift.

Nico refilled Maki’s cup, to the half point again, shaking her head. “What’s your name, Pouting Puppy Eyes?”

“Maki.” And why did she sound so earnest, Maki thought as she heard herself. Maybe if she got back up and leaned, perhaps winked, she could instead sound mysterious and cool. What good was a lunatic edge if you turned into earnest, completely harmless insomniac when you finally got brave enough to talk to a girl.


Maki pulled her hand back, surprised by the contact. Nico looked worried, checking to see if she’d jostled Maki’s cup. “Did I splash you?”

Concern. And her eyes so close. And the hand right back, softly caressing Maki’s. And so close.

“Maki? Are you okay?” And the voice got softer too, with the undertones that had been twisting through the humming. Maki gulped.

“I’m fine.” She pulled her hand back. “Long night. I’ll leave you to the sergeant.”

Maki sensed that Nico too was suddenly having trouble finding words. “Just wait a minute. I’ll close up and drive you home. You seem kind of punchy.”

Maki nodded, suddenly tired. Nico bustled off, and Maki stared down into her cup, dangerous lures drowned, no silver edge calling, a gentle hum replacing the thrum of excitement. Moonset.

Nico opened her door, trying to be quiet. She should have been at work for another couple of hours yet. It had been one of her stranger nights. She took the late shift twice a week most weeks, three times during exam weeks. She didn’t have to solo often.

Umi Sonoda, most reliable roommate in existence, shuffled into the hallway, alert. Fortunately, she hadn’t picked up her kendo sword to confront a potential intruder, Nico thought. That had been one sure way to scare off a clingy nonpotential girlfriend.

“You’re home early.” Umi yawned, rubbing the sleeve of her blue pinstripe pajamas. “Is everything all right?”

Nico nodded. “Sorry Nico woke you, Umi. Just decided to have an early night.”

Umi’s stare didn’t waver. The golden eyes never registered curiosity, Nico had decided, just unrelenting belief that you would eventually assuage all concerns Umi might have.

“Let Nico get us coffee.” Nico headed for their kitchen, Umi following in her adorable blue whale slippers. Such a mix of serious and cute, Nico thought, Kotori had done well.
“So?” Umi sat at the table, deciding not to be impassive for once. Interrogation would get her back to bed sooner. Something about tonight had been unsettling anyway, she’d never been fully asleep or she wouldn’t have heard Nico’s return.

“Just a girl.” Nico had her back to Umi and stayed busy, making it easier to downplay the effect the amethyst-eyed, leggy redhead had had on her.

Umi knew Nico very well after six months of living together and nudged, “A girl you like …?”

Nico sighed and turned, holding her coffee mug against her chest. “Cute. Flirty. Maybe. She seemed smart too, but a little weird.” Nico tapped the mug with her thumb. “Then she crashed like a someone who been studying for 72 hours straight, and I drove her home.”

“That was very civic of you.” Umi stretched, debating if she was hungry enough for a snack. She watched Nico’s body language, red eyes worried, hands fidgety, tongue curled over her lip, refusing to make eye contact. Long story tells. “Please hand me the popcorn.”

Nico reached behind her and grabbed the bag, tossing it to Umi. “There was a vibe.”

Umi snorted. “A vibe? You’ve been spending too much time with Nozomi. Next you’ll be divining the future from coffee grounds.”

Nico snorted and stared into her mug, one hand making circular passes over it. “The great Nico Ni sees a late morning for one of unerring aim. And a quick breakfast for one who chooses wisely to sleep through her alarm before rehearsal.”

“Sounds accurate.” Umi munched on a pinch of popcorn. “Now about this vibe?”

Nico put the mug down. “She was cute, all right. And seemed like she might be interested. But skittish, like Nico was dangerous. And Nico is nothing but cute and fluffy, like a bunny. No fangs.”

Nico paused, remembering Maki biting shyly down into her underlip, the tip of a canine visible. Shouldn’t that only be adorable in felines?

Umi chewed rather than comment. Kotori’s pushes to be more open aside, Umi found in was best to say nothing in the face of disagreement with Nico. It led to fewer complaints from the neighbors about Nico’s volume.

“Anyway, Nico can catch up on her sleep now. So that’s a good thing,” Nico decided, uncharacteristically heading for her bedroom without rinsing the mug.

“You know where she lives …” Umi let the sentence linger.

“She knows where I work.” That was it, Nico decided, that was the right choice. Leave it up to the redhead. Maki had been so out of it during the car ride, she might not even remember Nico taking her home. And that would be odd to explain. And Nico didn’t want to add any more odd to the feeling she got when she thought about Maki. “Good night, Umi. Sorry I woke you up.”

“Good morning, Nico. I am always available if anything concerns you.” Umi’s voice was warm comfort. And she was always available; Nico was glad she’d decided to take a costume design class, which led to meeting Kotori Minami, which led to sharing an apartment with Kotori’s nice but reclusive girlfriend, as opposed to Honoka Kousaka, Kotori’s nice but center of the social universe girlfriend. Honoka and Kotori lived together, Umi claimed she could never study in any room next to Honoka. Nico’s reaction was “hey, if it works for them,” and a few grumpy hours of girlfriend envy, especially on cold nights.
Princess At The Door

Chapter Summary

Nico makes a new friend, but have they met before? Rin bounds into the scene, Nozomi tries predicting the future and Umi gets a couple of visitors.

Chapter Notes

Want to post this before I start rehearsals for this week. Have been working out the magic and werewolf rules for this universe...this is not a magic the clothes back environment, eye color will be a measure of how much control a person is in, and heightened emotions can also trigger changes, although transformations are mostly voluntary, although the closer to the full moon, the more difficult control can be.

Hope you enjoy this chapter and drop me a line in the comments, please and thank you.

AFTERNOON ACCIDENTAL

Light class morning for Maki Nishikino so she showed up in Psych 303 and napped until someone nudged her that the class was over. Then she headed back to the dorm she had a meal plan at, in time for lunch. She’d grabbed a drinkable yogurt for breakfast so hunger after last night’s wander downtown still lurked. She filled up a tray with salmon and salad and found a corner table. Then Rin Hoshizora slid into the seat next to her, bumping into her side and jostling the latest bite off her fork.

“RIN.” Maki slammed her fork down.

“Maki didn’t come over last night.” Rin whined, her eyebrows flat.

“I was busy.” Maki shoved Rin with her elbow.

“Busy?” Rin had a burger in her hands and continued to talk while chewing her way through it.

“Tried out a new coffee shop,” Maki muttered, dragging her fork through her salad.

Rin put down her burger and tilted her head to stare at Maki, who looked away, refusing to acknowledge Rin at all. Rin jumped up on her seat, waving her arms above her head, shouting across the room, “Kayo-chin, Maki went to meet that barista without us.”

Maki just reached one hand up to tug on the back of Rin’s sweatshirt, dropping Rin back into her seat, “Shut it, Rin.”

“We’re going back tonight. I want to see her too. She smells nice.” Rin pushed against Maki as a flustered and rushing Hanayo Koizumi arrived at the table.

“Hi Maki! What was her name? Did she like you? Was she pretty? Did you talk?” Hanayo’s words rushed out as she slid her tray into Maki’s.
Maki shrugged, “It was only 5 minutes.” Maki would never tell them that she’d crashed and Nico had driven her home. Maki would probably never tell them Nico’s name, if she were honest. But they knew where Nico worked because Rin had been prowling with Maki the first night she’d become aware of Nico. And Rin told her fiancee everything.

Maki could feel the growl starting, probably her ears were starting to slide up, if the worried look on Hanayo’s face was a clue. Rin knew that anger was a trigger for Maki, she liked to nudge Maki into transforming so they could play, but a dorm cafeteria was not the place. Maki stood, automatically heading toward the nearest exit. Empty classroom, then Lakefill.

Rin watched, a gleeful expression on her face, but Hanayo reached out a hand to press Rin’s forearm against the table. She shook her head and Rin’s entire aura drooped. Maki would have teased her friend, but she was too busy trying to hold herself together until she could be alone somewhere.

AHHHHH, Nico was behind schedule and almost sprinting across campus. First day of rehearsal for the new musical and Nico was late late late. She’d even managed to nab one of the bigger parts, with two solos and a love interest. At least she hadn’t worn heels, the cute sparkly sneakers were perfect for racing across campus. But not as perfect as paws, Nico thought as a red streak stopped directly in front of her, causing Nico to tumble forward into a warm, largish animal body.

“What the heck?” Nico grumbled, as the dog?! shrugged and Nico fell back onto the ground, one arm draped across the its shoulders. Then the dog lowered its head and stayed still, not looking at Nico.

“Nico was dressed really well for rehearsal too,” Nico grumbled, imagining the dirt stain on her skirt, but the dog, although awfully big for a dog, with teeth that looked more dangerous than anything that showed up at the Westminster Dog show, was giving off more of a shy vibe than anything else, which made it hard for Nico to be as angry at it as she might have been. Nico tried to remember how to treat friendly strays and reached a slightly shaking hand toward it -- no collar -- only to be surprised when it skipped back with a yelp. Nico sighed and stood up, brushing herself off, “Nico is now officially the scariest person on campus.” Nico cocked her head at the dog, whose fur was a dark reddish brown with soft cream color underneath, “At least for redheads.”

The dog chuffed at Nico, bumping her, and Nico laughed, “Guess you have a sense of humor.” Nico petted the dog’s side as she heard two sets of footsteps arrive at a sprinting pace.

“There she is,” said one, a light haired brunette with glasses and soft purple eyes.

“Is she yours?” Nico wondered, hand still resting on the silky soft fur of a surprisingly quiescent canine, “Good. I’m late for rehearsal, but I didn’t want to leave her. She’s very pretty. Does she have a name?”

“M…” a short ginger haired woman started but the dog barked a sharp warning and Nico pulled her hand back, startled. The short haired woman glanced at the dog, who shook her head, confusing Nico, who thought dogs responded differently than people. “I don’t remember her name.”

That was ridiculous, but before Nico could snap out a response, Glasses said, “She belongs to a friend of ours. We’re sorry she bothered you. I’m Hanayo Koizumi and this is Rin.” Rin waved, before squatting to whisper something to the dog.

“Nice to meet you. I have to run. You might want to try a leash.” Nico nodded, started to reach down to pet the dog then decided to not get too friendly and sprinted off, not looking behind her to
see a laughing Rin grab the dog and hold it back. Then Rin transformed into a smaller, browner form, as Hanayo chided her, “We’re out in public, Rin. You can’t.”

Nico thought she heard a bark like a laugh behind her, but didn’t look back.

Nozomi had saved Nico a seat. Nico liked to be in the front row, where everyone could be dazzled by her, but Nozomi was more of an edge person. And as Nico was at least 10 minutes late, she appreciated being able to sidle into a seat.

“I signed you in.” Nozomi leaned over.

Nico nodded, grateful, trying to get her breathing back to nonsprinting levels in case the director or production stage manager called on her. Nozomi slid her a script and a pencil. “So how cute was the person you met on the way here?”

Nozomi was pulling the divination scam again — or something. Nico wasn’t sure if Nozomi brewed up potions, scattered tea leaves or whatever you did with them … chewed maybe, or just laid out those worn Tarot cards of hers in intricate patterns. Nico’s personal theory was that Nozomi had all her friends bugged and a zoom lens capable of Cassini-level detail on her camera.

“Very cute.” Nico stretched and then when Nozomi giggled, “for a dog.”

“Really?” Nozomi sounded surprised, which Nico realized was unprecedented for her friend.

“Yep. Are you sure you don’t need a tune-up?” Nico teased, tapping Nozomi’s noggin with her pencil.

Nozomi turned, turquoise eyes serious, “Magic doesn’t work like that, Nico-chi.”

Nico flipped open her script, keeping one eye on the scrum at the front where Professor Asuka was speaking intently to her management team. One of them, a cute light brown haired girl with an undercut, stared at Nico and Nico waved. Always good to have friends backstage, especially cute ones.

“She’ll be a redhead, Nico-chi.” Nozomi took Nico's wrist, lowering the hand.

“And she was.” Nico smiled, remembering. "Have you seen a dog running around campus before, Nozomi? Very pretty, red and cream, kinda wolfish.”

Nozomi shook her head as Professor Asuka stepped forward, finally ready and Nico shushed Nozomi’s reply, intent on her next theatrical conquest.

Nico opened the door to her apartment and heard her name shouted, “NICO” so she prepared for the spin that would come when the blue eyed, orange haired vortex that was Honoka grabbed her and lifted her off the ground, “Kotori said you got a great part!”

“Nico got the best part! Two solo songs and a love interest. And Nico helps catch the bad guy.”

Umi appeared suddenly, separating Honoka from Nico, with a stern glance at Honoka, “Honoka and Kotori stopped by after class, but they will be leaving soon so we can study without interruption.” Honoka still had an arm around Umi, and a silly grin as she kissed an unyielding Umi on the cheek,
“As I attempt to explain to Honoka on a near daily basis, routine is important for success at anything.”

Kotori looked over the couch, fawn hair spread over her shoulders, and snapped a stealthy pic of Umi and Honoka together, “Hi Nico! Nozomi texted me you needed a little luck in love so I bought over this.” Kotori held up a long light pink scarf with an irregular pattern of rose petals, “I found it in a vintage shop my last trip, I thought it would match your eyes.”

Nico took the scarf, silk from the feel, “Thanks, Kotori.”

Kotori winked, “I’ve picked out a really cute pattern for your trance nightshirt. Want to see a picture?”

Nico bounced over the couch, as Kotori swept through her pics, “Are you and Honoka staying for dinner? I can make a quick stirfry.”

Kotori glanced back at Umi speculatively. She had herded Honoka into a corner and from what Nico could hear was lecturing about advance preparations for midterms. Kotori giggled, “If we can change the subject.”

“Trust Nico, we can change the topic,” and then Nico groaned as her phone beeped. She pulled it out. Text message from Dario, her Cup o’ coworker, who needed a HUGE favor.

Nico wanted to stay home, cook something and have more fun harassing Umi but Dario was begging her to take his shift tonight and promising to cover for her whenever she had rehearsal for the next two months.

Nico showed Kotori the text, “Nico has to go.” Kotori nodded, a little sad. Nico knew that it was too good an offer to ignore right at the start of a complicated show. Plus, Nico was too kind by nature.

Umi stopped berating Honoka when Nico opened the fridge, “Was that work?”

“Dario needs me to switch.” Nico grabbed a slice of pizza.

Kotori came up behind her, wrapping the scarf around her neck. It was so light, “Don’t forget this, in case that redhead stops by again.”

Nico glared at her roommate, “UMI!”

“Ooohh,” Honoka grabbed Umi around the waist, “Is Umi in trouble?”

Nico was amused as she watched an Umi torn between breaking Honoka’s grip and leaning back into a hug, but she glanced down at her scarf before Umi noticed the scrutiny.

“Nico knows I only have her best interests in mind when I share information,” Umi blustered.

Nico chuckled, “Nico knows you can’t say no to Kotori.”

Umi blushed and broke free, “Leftover pizza is not a meal.”

Nico ignored the chiding and hurried out the door, “Enjoy your evening!”

Maki had gone back to their dorm room with Rin and Hanayo, to change, after she’d led them to where she’d stashed her clothes. So she was lying on their spare bed and snacking on apple chips
while Rin crashed cars over and over in the newest MarioKart. Rin had made Maki buy her the latest Nintendo game system for Christmas. Maki hadn’t minded, it would keep her on Santa’s good side.

“Going to go home tonight, Maki?” Hanayo asked, noticing Maki’s increasing fidgets. Maki sometimes crashed there when she had an early class or had been out too late roaming. Her friends had a drawer set aside with spare t-shirts and sweats she’d left there.

“Yeah.” Maki decided, rolling the bag closed and standing. “My mom’ll be there. I haven’t seen her in a week or so.”

“Tell her we said ‘hi.’” Rin said while shaking the Switch uselessly. Princess Peach still vroomed to her doom.

Maki nodded, “See you tomorrow.”

As soon as Maki left, Rin tossed the game aside and pulled Hanayo out of her seat, “Let’s go Kayo-chin. I wanna meet that barista Maki’s trying to hide from us.”

Hanayo pursed her lips, “Maki won’t like that.”

“Maki won’t know.” Rin grinned.

Maki stopped outside of the dorm entrance, sniffing the air. She wondered if Nico would be back at the coffee shop tonight. She could sense the moon, just over the horizon, giving everything an overlay, a pulse of magnetism. Some directions, some people pulled her, some pushed her away and Maki had decided years ago just to move with the pulse and not question the why of anything. Not questioning the why was how Maki pushed through most challenges, relying on animal instinct more often than other decision making processes.

Maki knew a secluded place to change near Rin and Hanayo’s dorm, her clothes were usually there in the morning and the moon was daring her to take a chance. If Nico wasn’t there, she could come back, call the driver, go home. If Nico was there...well, last night had been fun, Nico had surprised her. And she felt a call to further serendipities surging in her blood. But first stop, student center, locker for her phone and ID.

Slow night again, mostly regulars, so Nico was reviewing her lines. Biggest part she’d ever had. Fangs, a world premiere contemporary adaptation of Bram Stoker’s Dracula by a composer-lyricist Pulitzer winning alum team. Prestige. People would know about it. The NY Times would write an article. The Tribune’s theatre critic would write a review and find Nico darling. Opportunities. Her ringtone would never stop, producers begging her to take their job. All those thoughts had Nico so excited, she found herself hopping and humming the songs she had to learn. Halfway through her shift, the place had emptied out and Sergeant Alvaraz was likely to swing by. Nico couldn’t wait to tell her about the show.

And then she heard the low growl. Growl? Nico’s head snapped up and she checked the door, still closed. She’d heard rumors about packs of dogs but she’d never seen them. She’d also heard rumors about werepanthers but she’d never seen one of those either. Now the Lake Monster, that she might have seen, but she’d been very tired that night and the fraternity’s punch had been rancid swill.

Nico moved to the door. Something was moving outside, blocking the door. Sergeant Alvaraz also stood there, brown hair tucked under her hat, hand slowly reaching for her com. Nico took a good
look, the reddish and cream fur looked familiar...she opened the door, “Wait.”

The dog growled at Sergeant Alvaraz but thumped her tail against Nico’s leg.

“Do you know this dog, Nico?” the sergeant asked, speaking softly and quietly, never taking her eyes off the dog.

“We met this afternoon. I guess she got away from her owners again.” Nico rubbed between the dog’s ears, once again surprised by how silky the fur was. Then she remembered the scarf Kotori had made her wear and quickly took it from her neck, tied a knot and pulled it over the dog before she could react. Nico was good with knots, having helped her sisters with their Girl Scout badges and a quick bowline was simple enough. The dog twisted around quickly, eyes wide, surprised to find Nico had control of her head, but there was no snarl, just a confused noise. Nico remembered Rin squatting next to the dog and did the same, but the dog refused to look her in the eye, “Hey, pretty girl, remember me? Sergeant Alvaraz is going to call animal control so we can get you back to your owner.” The dog leaned against Nico.

“DON’T CALL ANYONE!” Nico heard a shout and the orange haired girl from this afternoon sprinted around the corner.

The dog growled slightly but stayed pressed against Nico; Sgt. Alvaraz continued watching the dog and Nico, her voice still calm, “Is this your dog.”

“uhhh....” Rin stuttered, Nico rolled her eyes.

“Does she have a name yet?” Nico stood, scarf held tightly.

RIn’s mouth gaped open, “N....no...”

Nico looked down at the dog, which actually made eye contact for a second, eerily luminescent eyes, lavender mixed with neon green, which Nico was sure looked more CGI than animal, maybe it was an experimental robodog? But the fur was so soft and warm to the touch and there was a plea as she looked at Nico and a worry and other emotions Nico could only feel, not read in the blink of a glance. But much less strange than Nico would expect from an animal. “Well, Nico keeps rescuing you, so I think I’ll call you Princess.”

Rin giggled as Princess yelped. Then Hanayo came around the corner at a much lower speed than Rin. Nico nodded at her, “You should tell your friend to keep a better eye on Princess.”

“I agree. It’s dangerous for a dog to run loose, without a collar.” Sgt Alvaraz shook her head. Rin nodded earnestly. Hanayo looked like a 5 year old who’d been scolded.

“I have to get back to work.” Nico announced. “Can you get her back to her owner?”

Rin snorted, “Back?”

Princess growled and surged Rin-ward. Nico kept a firm grip, her voice sharp, “Princess.” The dog sat.

Rin turned away, doubled over, shaking with what Nico assumed was laughter.

“Rin.” Hanayo shushed Rin and then smiled at the sergeant, Princess and Nico, “I’ll make sure she gets home. Rin just gets silly when she’s tired. Don’t worry about Princess...” Hanayo held Nico’s glance.

“It’s Nico.”
“Good night, Nico. Nice to see you again.” Hanayo smiled.

Nico rubbed Princess’s ears, whispering “Stay safe, you” before handing the scarf to Hanayo. Princess looked away again and Nico sighed. “Want some coffee, Sergeant?”

Alvaraz couldn’t help frowning suspiciously as Princess pulled Hanayo down the street, Rin skipping after. “Yeah, Nico. It’s been a weird night.”

“Tell me about it. Last time I take a shift for Dario.” Nico shivered as she opened the door. When she wasn’t standing next to Princess, the wind seemed much colder.

Alvaraz laughed as she followed Nico inside, “Isn’t that what you said last time?”
En-Thrall-ed

Chapter Summary

Maki meets parental interrogation, Nozomi is fascinated by dancers and Nico has someone run into her on campus, again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki ditched Rin and Hanayo as soon as they got near campus and ran home, transforming in the shed and letting herself in the backdoor. Her mother was in bed, her father had been called in to St. Joseph’s. But sleep wasn’t even lurking. She sat in the TV room, music videos running on the screen, twisting Nico’s scarf between her hands. Not a strong Nico smell and someone else’s mixed in slightly, a recent gift maybe...but there was still the trace of peach and vanilla and musk and magic that had become something she searched for whenever she went outside.

“Maki?” Her mother stood in the doorway, bathrobe wrapped around her nightgown.

“Was the music too loud?” Maki stretched for the remote, muting some random K-Pop group.

“A little.” Her mother smiled, “but I’m glad to see you.”

“Yeah,” Maki returned to her default sprawl along the couch’s length, “We’ve both been busy.”

“Out for a prowl tonight?” her mother wondered.

Maki blushed, dipping her head, “Just a brief one.”

“Be careful. And be discreet.” Maki had gotten the same warning in the same strict tone ever since her first transformation at the age of eight.

Pacing back and forth in front of Cup o’ probably didn’t meet her mother’s definition of discreet but Maki just opted to nod and smile, unmuting the TV while her mom searched her non communicative daughter’s face and posture for any cues.

“How is your Cognitive Psychology class?” Maki’s mother decided to take this rare moment as an opportunity.

Maki shrugged, “The cognitive aspects are more interesting than the social so it’s an improvement on last quarter.”

“Are you really interested in Psychology?” Her mother made certain to drain any judgement out of her voice as Maki seemed in a talkative mood.

“With the headache clinic, Papa spends so much time talking about how people’s actions affect their health, I thought it might be beneficial to get some insights into behavioral sciences.”

“But do you enjoy it?”
Maki wondered what her mother wanted her to say. The most honest answer would be ‘not as much as music, but I know I’m expected to pick some scientific major to become the latest Dr. Nishikino in the long line of doctoring Nishikinos’. But this was only her freshman year, Maki still had a few quarters to play the piano, take a music composition class occasionally and dabble her way through sciences until one of them called to her like music -- or the moon.

“I’ll probably take my stats class next quarter and knock off a Distribution requirement in Anthropology. I think there’s an ethnomusicology one being offered.”

“Sounds like you have a plan.”

Maki yawned, starting to feel the run in her muscles, “I’m going to take a hot shower.”

“Good night, Maki.” Her mother smiled fondly as her daughter slowly rose from the couch. “I’m glad you’re home.”

Nico hadn’t run into any obstacles, furry or otherwise, on her way to rehearsal this afternoon. She wasn’t on the call sheet, but she wanted to get a feel for the production and today, they were working on the choreography for the Jonathan Harker and the Three Sisters big confrontation scene. Micah Ling, the actor playing her character’s fiancee, Harker, was a friend of Nico’s. They’d been in a few ensembles together.

Nico recognized a certain dark haired woman lurking in the back row and slid next to her, voice an admonitory whisper, “You can’t just come to rehearsals to ogle the dancers, Nozomi.”

Nozomi raised an eyebrow and put on the sweet smile that had never once tricked Nico about the depths of dark truths Nozomi was willing to push, “You’re here as well, Nico-chi.”

Nico slouched in her seat, smugly confident, “Micah invited me. We’re helping each other.” Nico tapped the armrest between her and Nozomi to make sure she had the green eyed gossip’s attention, “I’m mostly here to pick up tips on how the dancers express being under Dracula’s thrall.”

“Thrall....” Nozomi drawled.


Nozomi giggled, “Oh, Nico-chi, you’re so amusing.”

Nico shrugged, watching the three women on stage weave around Micah, wondering which one Nozomi was here stalking. As far as she could tell, Nozomi didn’t have a type, unless it were easily embarrassed so Nozomi could have as much fun as possible teasing them. Nico had had to intervene when Nozomi had gone to far with Umi one night and now if she wanted to see Nozomi, Nico went to her place. Umi had a long memory.

“Speaking of ogling, how’s your new friend, Nico-chi?” Nozomi’s voice had her usual mocking undertone.

Nico was paying close attention to the dancers so her reply was matter of fact. “Princess? She ended up at Cup o’ last night, but I still haven’t met her owner. Just two goofy girls who might know the owner.”

Nozomi turned around in her seat, “You really did meet a dog?”
Nico chuckled, “And she is a pretty redhead.”

Nozomi stared at Nico, genuinely puzzled, and then the tallest dancer, a lithe blonde crawled to the front of the stage, her movements long, slow and seductive, and Nico smirked at how fast her friend dropped their conversation. Crush mystery solved. Cue Nico’s chance to bait.

“I didn’t know you liked blondes, Nozo?”

Nozomi hissed out of the side of her mouth at Nico, hand gripping the armrest, “Her name’s Eli, she’s in my Economics of Gender class and she never gets a question wrong.”

Obviously not the crush of just a moment so Nico let herself get absorbed in the action happening onstage. How did one cue the audience to ‘under vampiric thrall?’

Maki had to eat lunch, she was starved and the dorm cafeteria was the closest but that meant Rin. Maybe if she just grabbed some cereal and ran, she could avoid her intrusive, seemingly caring friend.

Nope. Maki set foot on the stairs leading to the dorm and she felt someone grab her in a hug. Rin.

“Maki Maki Maki. Your barista is so cute.” Rin shouted.

Maki pried Rin off, “Shut it, Rin. She’s not my barista. We’re not even friends. She’s just interesting. A little.”

“I bet Princess wants Nico to take her for a walk.” Rin pushed Maki into the line.

“What, like Hanayo does with you?” But Maki’s attempt at withering scorn was ruined when Rin nodded eagerly, excited by the idea.

“Rin and Maki can play and Nico and Kayochin can talk. It’d be awesome.”

Maki groaned. Needling Rin about how she behaved around Hanayo never had any traction. They just orbited each other in a state of mutual adoration that deflected any harassment or criticism by others. But Rin wouldn’t understand ‘discreet.’ Maki stopped and dragged Rin out of line, letting her eyes go full werewolf glow green to impress upon Rin the seriousness of her next statement, “Nico can never know about us, Rin.”

“But…” Rin’s green eyes dimmed.

“Never.”

“She seems nice.” Rin pleaded as Maki’s grip on her arm tightened enough to bruise.

“Rin.” Maki snarled again, loud enough to draw attention, eyes commanding agreement from Rin.

“Okay, Maki.” Rin hung her head, and looked so sad Maki was sure Rin understood the gravity of the situation. “But Rin was excited about a new friend.”

Maki’s tried to make her voice soothing as she released Rin, “Friend, yes, but you know we can’t trust just anyone.”

Rin nodded and Maki felt a surge of empathy. Rin was so close to her animal side that it was hard for the smaller girl to hide it. Without Hanayo, Maki didn’t know what Rin would do. The other two
girls had met in elementary school. Hanayo had witnessed Rin transform at the age of 5 and been by her side ever since. Maki wondered what it would be like to have someone she could rely on like that in her life.

“Let’s get lunch,” Maki pushed Rin back toward the line.

Lunch, check. No class for another hour. Maki would have to remember to reserve a practice room for afternoons like this. Rin had gone off to her classes; Hanayo had an appointment with her advisor. The snow on the Lakefill was still fresh and relatively crisp to walk through...Maki had fun jumping into larger drifts, dragging her boots through and enjoying the sun as she drifted in the direction of Norris.

Nico...musk, peach, vanilla, magic, coffee, so close...just left Norris? Maki felt herself drawn in that direction and pushed through a snowbank, only to trip over a student veering into her path. Maki stumbled forward and realized a surprised Nico was practically in her arms, also suddenly aware that she’d caused Nico’s coffee to spill. Now Maki’s fisherman’s sweater had coffee beading off it.

Nico’s voice snapped, “So you drink coffee but you don’t want anyone else to?”

Maki was still thrown off by the sudden appearance of Nico and found herself muttering an indecipherable excuse as the shorter woman, enveloped in a voluminous white quilted parka, brushed some of the liquid off Maki’s sweater with a pink mitted hand.

Nico laughed, “Nico is kidding, Maki, student, coffee, black, fancy mansion, serious sweater. But you do owe Nico a coffee now.”

Maki met Nico’s eyes, the smaller woman gleamed at her and reached out to yank her back Norrisward. “Ok.” Maki managed to squeak out.

“Enthusiasm, I like that.” Nico kept towing and teasing as Maki found herself tripping along.

Get it together, Nishikino, she told herself, ask a question, “Do you have a class, N...N...Nico?”

“No. Music rehearsal later for the play later. Nico stopped by to watch one of the other scenes and think about how to play someone under a thrall.”

Thrall? Maki wondered what exactly the play was about? Werewolf form wasn’t the best for retaining details and nuances, but Maki couldn’t remember if Nico had said what she was doing.

“Thrall?” Maki stepped ahead to open the student center door for Nico who nodded gratefully as she swept past.

“Didn’t I tell you? Oh, I hadn’t gotten the part yet, that night. Dracula bites Nico and Nico is in a trance.”

“Bites?” Nico kept rushing through words and Maki found herself getting a bit dizzy from the storyboard of visuals her brain was creating as she struggled to keep up with Nico’s trajectory toward the Dunkin Donuts counter.

“Oh, no actual biting. Or fluid exchange. Nico is very careful.” Nico glanced speculatively at Maki, “Nico skipped the donut last time.”

Maki pulled out her wallet and ordered, “Two coffees and two donuts, one, toasted coconut,
“Strawberry frosted please. And make my coffee a medium in a large cup.”

Maki watched the server put a very pink donut on a napkin. “Nothing should be that pink.”

“Nico is that pink.”

“On the inside, yes, after eating that.” Maki moved to a table at the window looking out over the Lakefill. “Like a mutant.”

Nico snorted as she slid across from Maki, “Nico is 100% Cute Girl™.”

Maki took a bite of her donut, watching as Nico poured creamer into her coffee, lots of creamer. That explained the larger cup. “Do you even like coffee?”

“Shush, serious sweater girl. Nico is a professional and knows what she's doing.” And Nico winked. Then they both started sipping their coffee, with Maki yelping at the heat on her lip. She refused Nico’s offer of creamer to dilute the coffee, but did hold the chilled metal container against her lip.

“That’s embarrassing. And unhygienic.” Nico chided.

Maki let her eyes go wide, “But it hurts.”

“There we go with the pouty puppy eyes. Now I really recognize you.” Nico stole a chunk of Maki’s donut. “So do you have a class soon?”

“Probably in a half hour. Freshman seminar.”

“Oh, WCAS.”

“Yep.” Maki put down the creamer and tried her coffee again. Drinkable.

“Nico is a theatre major.”

“Northwestern’s a good school for it.” Maki remembered hearing that sometime.

“Exactly. The only one.” Nico slammed her coffee cup down, “Nico was expecting to be in LA by now, but Fangs is the opportunity Nico was waiting for.”

“F...fangs...” Maki spit her coffee out and Nico grabbed a napkin to clean the table between them, frowning.

“Fangs...the play Nico is starring in. Don’t you pay attention to what’s going on on campus?”

“No.” Maki said flatly, amused by how Nico’s mouth dropped open.

Nico made a fairly random and highly amusing exasperated noise, Maki couldn’t help grinning, canine tooth peeking out. Nico glowered at her audience’s disrespect. “Nico has to run but stop by Cup o’ tomorrow night and Nico will explain the variety of arts this campus offers.” Nico pfffted, her cheeks puffed out. “Freshmen.”

“Maybe.” Maki winked, Nico shook her head, corner of her mouth almost quirked into a smile.

I like terrible puns. Share some (ノーんー)

Casual Lunacy is now officially set at my alma mater, since I don't have time to research or make up another college, but it is definitely an AU Northwestern, as I haven't been back in awhile. Theatre department details are mostly my invention as I spent most of my time between Lakefill, library and books related to Shakespeare, Poe and whatever I was researching outside of classes any particular quarter.

Thanks for reading and for those of you who might miss her, Princess is eager for her return.

Comments lacking puns or poetry are also gladly accepted d(¬_¬)
The Moon Is Alive

Chapter Summary

Princess returns, Nico's dreams run into a human obstacle and Nozomi consults the cards...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TRUE HORROR

Nico stared at the stage in disbelief. Next to her, Nozomi clutched Nico’s bicep so hard Nico felt like her skin might burst. Yuu Kashima, the dark haired darling of the theatre department, followed around campus by hordes of fans, truly extraordinary in such nuanced roles as Hamlet, Cyrano de Bergerac, Gary Lejeune and Faustus had just sung a note so low, flat and loud that Nico found herself believing that the sound ignored the curvature of the earth and pummelled its way through urban architecture until it fell off the edge of an alternate earth as flat as it was.

“Oh my gods,” Nico hissed at Nozomi as she pried the other woman’s fingers off her arm, “That’s why Kashima’s never auditioned for Waa-Mu.” Or any other musical, Nico added to herself.

“So why’s she on stage now?” Nozomi whispered.

“Looks the part?” Nico glanced up and caught a pair of piercing green eyes turned in her direction, attracted by the conversation. “Definitely tall and charismatic. And skinny androgynous pale enough to read only gets calories from blood? Those cheekbones...”

‘Hmmmmm…” Nozomi only had the attention for a speculative noise since the blonde econ genius dance goddess had just walked down the theatre aisle.

Nico ripped through the pages of her script and found the ‘Trance’ duet. Nico knew she was talented but there was no one cute and talented enough to sound good singing with a partner who continued to crash through a warm up like Kashima was crashing through hers. Or like Godzilla crashed through Tokyo. Nico saw the rehearsal pianist wince. Complete sympathy there. This wouldn’t do. Not even glancing at Nozomi, Nico bounced up to the stage, her cutest smile bright.

Kashima stopped singing -- blessing there, Nico realized. The entire theatre seemed to sigh in relief.

“Nico Nico Ni,” Nico dialed up her own charisma, fluttering her eyelashes, flashing her standard greeting with both hands at her temples. “Nico has never gotten to work with Kashima before.” Nico’s hand hand dropped to skim Kashima’s sleeve, and the much taller woman smiled, the angles of her face chiseled like a marble Apollo. Damn, Nico thought, they’d look good together onstage too...but that voice.

“Nico?” Kashima asked, her speaking voice as high as her singing, a discord with the masculine dress and presentation.

“Oh, Nico.” Recognition. Kashima’s smile got sharper and her voice dropped an octave, as she leaned in, “You would definitely draw Dracula’s attention, very biteable.”

Oh my gods, Nico thought, how could Kashima say that with a straight face. And judging by the reaction of the students in the front row, her singing voice didn’t affect the likelihood of any of the weak minded swooning over very questionable pickup lines. Nico shook her head, drawing her hand coyly up to her mouth. “Mina isn’t easy prey.” Neither was Nico.

Kashima flickered the fingers of her left hand in the air, open French cuff on her shirt sliding back and forth with the movement, “And yet, Dracula hypnotises you.”

Nico decided to change the subject before she got annoyed. “Maybe Nico could help…” Kashima’s face fell and she suddenly had a hunted aura. Perhaps she knew how bad she was. Nico quickly adjusted her approach, “Maybe we could rehearse together and Nico could give you a few tips.”

Kashima perked up. If she’d been a dog her tail would have wagged, Nico decided, and groaned. Why was she seeing dog behavioral tics in everyone now? One cute four legged redhead and suddenly Nico’s a dog person. No, Nico was not that easy.

“Oh good, you’re here, Yazawa.” The grad student in charge of musical rehearsals, Billie Suara, jumped up onto the stage. “Let’s give Kashima a rest and go through your solo.”

Maki was bored. She’d crashed in Rin and Hanayo’s room after classes and pretended to look over her research for a paper in CogPysch, but really she was considering whether she wanted to wander down to the Cup o’ as Nico had suggested yesterday. Bored led to restless which led to… Rin. “Let’s go play”

“Sure.” Maki’s wasn’t surprised at her answer, although Rin was. Hanayo glanced up from her computer, considering, “Do you mind, Hanayo?”

“No. Do you care if I stay here? I’m developing a survey for my stats class.”

Rin hugged her, “We’ll be fine, Kayochin. Nobody pays attention to us on the Lakefill.”

“Be careful, Rin.” Hanayo frowned over her glasses. Maki thought her friend had gotten the same ‘take care of werewolves’ gene her own mother had. The gentle notes of warning reverberated the same.

Rin transformed immediately, clothes falling off her body, Maki stepped behind Rin’s closet curtain for privacy as Hanayo leaned in closer, watching Rin, transfixed.

Hanayo walked them out of the lobby and said she’d come down again in about an hour. Rin barked happily and tore off into the center of the Lakefill, daring Maki to catch her. Ha, Maki thought, easy. Rin might be fast, but she always checked back to see if Maki was following. Which Maki started to do when musk peach vanilla magic Nico caught her nose and she veered south. Maki heard a yelp behind and then a forlorn howl; Rin had noticed. Maki was sensing another smell near Nico, female overlaid by the woody, cinnamon notes of a strong cologne. Her pace picked up. Rin howled again.

Nico was in the arms of the taller female, who loomed over her, mouth open, staring at Nico’s neck, leaning in with a sneer. Maki charged, launching herself between them when she got within three body lengths of Nico. The other woman fell with a high scream, Maki’s weight half burying them
both in a snowbank, Maki’s snout right in her face as the wolf growled, teeth visible. Nico was sprawled across Maki’s back and wrapped her arms around Maki’s neck, trying to pull her back. “Princess.” Nico’s voice was a barricade, free of surprise, full of command. Maki was impressed. But she kept snarling at the woman she had pinned as Nico knelt next to her, “Princess. Nico is fine. Nico is…” Nico inhaled, then snapped “Look at me.”

Maki whipped her head around, Nico’s ruby eyes were concerned. Not afraid. Maki snuffled Nico. Not afraid, unlike the other woman. Who was afraid of Maki. Good. But Nico didn’t like this. And she was shivering. Bad. Maki dropped her head. Nico rubbed affectionately around her ears again, “Nico is glad to see such a pretty girl again, but please let my friend up.”

Maki whined, but stepped back, and leaned into Nico’s petting, “That’s good, Princess.” Nico rose, “Stay.”

Maki sat, curious. Nico helped the other woman stand, “Sorry, Kashima, Princess is a little protective of me.”

The other woman brushed off her shirt, which had come untucked and no longer gleamed under her open jacket. Maki nodded, pleased at the disarray she’d caused while the other woman wondered, “Is she your dog?”

Nico glanced at Maki, who pushed her head into Nico’s side again, rather than make eye contact. “Nico was never really a dog person.” She laughed, “Nico also never knew they came this pretty.” Nico knelt again, taking Princess’s head in her hands and forcing Maki to make eye contact, “nearly lavender this time,” Nico said to herself, then spoke slowly, “Princess, this is Kashima. We were rehearsing. She has to play Dracula.” Nico wondered briefly if she was insane explaining this all to a dog, but as Princess was currently paying more attention than Kashima, who was busy winking at a giggling girl in a sorority jacket, Nico continued. “Not someone you tackle.”

Maki whined.

“Pet her and make friends, Kashima.” Nico ordered, keeping her hold on the wolf.

Kashima took a step back at the same time that Maki snarled. Guess that wasn’t the best idea, Nico decided.

“Okay, new plan.” Nico announced, stretching her cramping legs, “I’ll see you at rehearsal, Kashima. Try those exercises I showed you.”

“Thanks, Nico,” Kashima ran off in pursuit of the giggler.

Nico crossed her arms over her chest and glanced down at the wolf. “What am I going to do with you?”

Maki butted into Nico again, playful. Nico laughed, “Let’s see if we can find who actually owns you before Nico has to go to work. Maybe she’s as cute as you are.” Maki ran a few steps forward, then paused, looking back over her shoulder and sticking out her tongue.

“Nico is usually the one being chased, you know.” Maki barked and ran forward again. Nico caught up and put a hand on her back, “Take me home, Princess.”

Maki wondered what would happen if she did.
“Nico Nico Ni!” The ringtone Nico had created for Nozomi’s phone drew the attention of most of the people left in the rehearsal space. The ones who knew Nico sniggered in Nozomi’s direction, probably thinking they were dating. But no, Nozomi was Nico’s product tester. If Nico had a promotional idea, she tried it out on either Nozomi or her roommate first. But Umi always refused to let Nico anywhere her phone, while Nozomi had been distracted enough by a Tarot reading one recent afternoon that Nico just lifted it out of her pocket, went into the nearest bathroom to record and returned it to Nozomi’s pocket. Nozomi hadn’t realized what Nico had done until Nico had texted her for her reaction later that night.

Nico: Can’t meet for dinner. Princess found me again; have to return her to SOMEONE ( ・eteor・`

Nozomi: Princess?

Nico: The cute redhead Nico’s been mentioning, the four legged one?

Nozomi considered Nico’s statement for a minute. Was she serious about there being a dog or was she just trying to keep the existence of an actual cute two legged redhead from Nozomi. Because Nico should realize by now that never works.

Nozomi: Lunch tomorrow?

Nico: (o^-‘)b ᕕ( ᐛ ๑)ᕗ ε=(。。・ω・)ノ

Nozomi pulled out her well worn Tarot deck and sat with her back against the front of the stage. Two of the three Sisters were waiting for the third, as was Nozomi, but Nico’s recent actions puzzled her. She dealt three cards out. Eight of Pentacles. Hard work, improving in your craft, very Nico, past and present. Knight of Cups, flipped, someone moody, but genuine and loyal, so let emotions move forward. In the present position too. Nozomi stared at the card, could work for a dog, she supposed. Five of Swords, flipped. Let go of past frustrations, move on.

Not the clearest reading ever, but Nico was obviously on the brink of some change if she would open up and accept it...then Nozomi was distracted by a new sensation as she pulled out another card, someone was watching. She placed the Ace of Pentacles down and glanced up. Serious blue eyes followed her hand, examining the card.

Ah, a strong signal Nico-chi was on the verge of establishing her foundation for future success and tying together all her efforts, current and to come. Maybe the actress was right and Fangs was the opportunity she’d been waiting for. And here, standing next to her, was the opportunity Nozomi had been waiting for.

Nozomi waved her hands over the spread of cards, “I’m doing a reading about a friend. I’m worried about her.”

Eli nodded, “You just looked so...rapt.” There was a puzzled smile.

Nozomi swept up her cards and made them disappear and watched as Eli’s eyes searched to see where she’d stashed them, “ Nico-chi is on the verge of a big change. I think this play will be a decisive part of it.” Nozomi extended a hand, “I’m Nozomi Tojo. We have Economics of Gender together.”

The blonde took her hand with a firm grip, “Eli Ayase.”

“I can do a reading for you…” as Eli started to pull back, Nozomi flipped her hand over, and traced a finger across Eli’s palm, “Or do you prefer other forms of divination?”
Eli gulped and swallowed, “Uhhh no, I’ve never...tried anything like that before.”

“Not even a fortune cookie?” Nozomi continued to draw lines across Eli’s palm, enjoying the other woman’s attempts not to squirm, “Or a magic 8-ball?” She released the hand with a wink.

Eli rubbed her hand, Nozomi noticing a slight shiver, “I threw a coin in a fountain in Italy once.” Eli offered.

“What did you wish for?” Nozomi asked, surprised to see the other woman blush slightly.

ZZZZZZZZKKKKKKZKKKKKKZKKKKKKKZKKKKKKZKKKKKKKKKKKZKKKKKKKKZZZZZZZZZZ

A screamingly loud electronic noise pierced Nozomi’s skull, the lights exploded, and she heard Eli scream in the darkness and then she felt arms around her torso, someone breathing heavily into the back of her neck.

“Eli?”

“Just don’t leave me alone.” Eli whispered, terrified.

Nozomi was trying to remember if she’d ever wished the smart, sexy blonde of her dreams would be wrapped around her in need of comfort while the practical part of her mind was struggling with the best way to help Eli. She had a flashlight but her bag was out of reach and Eli seemed locked in place.

“Eli?”

“Uh huh?” Eli sounded worried.

“You don’t have to let go of me, but if we take a few steps forward, I can get my flashlight out of my bag.” Everyone else had started chattering, someone had run off to the backstage circuit breaker but from the profanity Nozomi could hear, they were having no luck with the cause. Nozomi wondered if the rest of the campus were dark.

Nozomi felt Eli nod into her shoulder. They took three steps forward together, Nozomi pulled her flashlight out. When she clicked it on, Eli let go.

“Sorry.” the blonde muttered.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Nozomi held the flashlight between both of them. “I’m just glad I was here to help you.”

Eli, face ethereally gorgeous in the low light, looked up at Nozomi, almost expectant. Nozomi decided to take a leap without seeking guidance from the cards for once, “My friend just stood me up for a dog and I was on my way to dinner. Want to join me? Our latest assignment really irked me and I’d love to rant about it.”

Eli put her hands in her pockets, then glanced up at the dark stage, “I have rehearsal.”

Nozomi grabbed Eli’s hand again, it was now warm, a little sweaty. She pulled her up the aisle. “I bet they don’t miss you in the dark.”

Eli laughed, “You’re probably right. I know a nice little Russian place where we can rant as late as we want.”

“Sounds perfect.”
Nico. Coffee. Not wolf. Maki paced. She’d led Nico to Hanayo and Rin, watched an ecstatic Rin jump and drool all over a friendly Nico, heard Hanayo stumble over the ownership question again, recovered her clothes, had a huge fight with Rin over Rin NOT visiting the coffee shop and stormed off to the music building, hoping to find an unused piano. She did run into one of her teachers, who let her use the upright in her office. Which calmed Maki down. But now the nerves and the tension was back. Maki fidgeted with Nico’s scarf, wrapped tightly around her wrist since that night, usually hidden under the cuff of her sweater.

Maki was outside, on the steps of the Crown Center, debating crossing the street into downtown Evanston. Cup o’ was about a quarter mile away so even in human form, Maki could smell and hear Nico when the door opened. The moon was waxing, not bright enough to be completely compelling, but its tug still a seductive crack in the facade of reason Maki liked to wrap around her impulses. Maki rolled her shoulders, sniffing the air, so many draws, so much information to pull in. She visualized the cold air and the clear moonlight as a corridor, buzzing with potential and vitality, ruby eyes and dark hair swirling in a silver cloud of sparks, reactions to the things Maki could not yet know. Eyes half green, quickened by the randomness she was about to trigger, she raised her head to howl, then ran down the stairs, aiming for Nico and whatever came next.

Nico looked up when the chime nearly bounced off the wall. Maki, serious sweater, coffee black, glorious eyes. Nico added loud entrances to the mental list and smiled to reassure the very shy engineering student, Irish breakfast tea, hot, honey shoved into one of the two booths that everything was all right. The Comp Lit TA at the counter, always flirty, espresso or Turkish coffee, little sugar, depends on the night, spent what Nico registered as too much time checking out Maki so Nico glared and slammed a metal pot into the sink and he jumped, nearly falling back off his stool. Nico raised her eyebrows at him and he put up a hand in surrender. Maki stared at them during the exchange, not understanding.

“Hey, serious sweater, glad you decided to come in and have Nico teach you about the arts.” Nico announced as Maki approached the counter, “But does Nico have to teach you how to wear a coat? It’s 12 degrees outside.”

Maki grinned, fangs prominent, amused by another temperature update from Nico. And when Nico frowned in his direction, Mr. CompLit suddenly got reinterested in his book of poetry.


Maki shrugged, sitting on the other side of the counter, wondering if Nico was going to get him something else to drink. Nico watched the redhead for a minute, saw nothing register, knocked on the counter next to Mr. Comp Lit and when he looked up, she pointed in Maki’s direction and they both shrugged.

“Under her skin the moon is alive.” he intoned, his spare smile wry.

“Don’t I know it.” Nico dug out the copper pot used for Turkish coffee. She might drink a few cups herself tonight.

“Hello? Customer here.” Maki was genuinely puzzled at the interaction, but then Nico winked and Maki felt herself blushing, so she grabbed a menu, which Nico took out of her hands immediately.

“You are getting a coffee,” Nico peered closely into Maki’s eyes for the ten seconds before Maki
looked away, “Probably decaf. Have you been running?”

“Walking fast.” Maki hesitated, wondering why Nico was scrutinizing her. “It’s how I stay warm.”

“Right.” Nico poured Maki a mug of whatever was on tap tonight, it had fewer caramel undertones than the last one and more tobacco. Maki sneered. Nico took the cup away.

“Hey.” Maki grumbled.

“You didn’t like it. I’m making Turkish coffee, with only a little sugar in it. You’ll enjoy that more, if you can wait.” Nico kept most of her attention on the pot she was heating, but smiled at Maki.

Maki nodded and watched as Nico started to stir.

Mr. Comp Lit, translating Neruda, Turkish coffee tonight had left. Maki was sitting at the counter, pushing her demitasse cup around with her left hand, not making eye contact with Nico. Nico was used to people who returned to the shop and became regulars to talk to her, sometimes even flirt, but Maki was just sitting there, staring out the front window, seemingly caught by the sight of the waxing moon lighting the sky. She pushed up her sleeve, restless. Nico wondered if she was getting overheated.

Then Nico noticed the fabric wrapped around Maki’s right wrist, familiar, the pink silk scarf Kotori had given Nico, with scattered petals that matched her eyes.

“Are you Princess’s owner?” Nico blurted.

Maki jumped, knocking over her cup, “w..what?”

“Princess, big red and cream wolf looking dog. She was wearing that scarf, “ Nicole fingered the fabric, Maki’s wrist in her grasp “a day ago. Are you her owner? What’s her actual name?”

“N…no, I found it…” Maki stuttered, pulling her hand back, not convincing Nico at all.

“What is with all of you? Do you know how irresponsible it is to let that dog wander loose? Are you hiding her in a dorm or something?” Nico threw up her hands in frustration.

“N…no…..” Maki felt trapped. She wondered what would happen if she just bolted.

“Did you get that from Rin or Hanayo? Or Princess?” Nico leaned into the counter, confronting Maki, much like the first night they met. “Are you the mystery owner?” Nico was sounding and smelling angry and Maki felt nervous. Would nervous trigger a change? That would be so bad right now.

“She’s not exactly mine.” Maki decided that was a safe statement, one that she hoped would calm Nico down. The hairs on Maki’s neck were starting to thrum with kinetic energy, adrenaline surging. Nico’s anger overwhelming all of Maki’s senses. Maki opened her mouth in a panic and stupid ran out, “Maybe she’s yours.”

Nico stepped back, just staring at Maki, eyes unamused, voice dangerously controlled. “That makes as much sense as anything any of you say.” Nico moved Maki’s cup to the sink and started to clean up the spill, “Maybe if I whistle, she’ll come and we can ask her.” Nico started to purse her lips and Maki watched her own fingers reach out to interrupt the process, brushing across Nico’s lips.
“Don’t.” Maki nearly cried. What the hell was she doing. Why was Nico so…

“What is going on?” Nico asked, grabbing Maki’s fingers tightly in her own. Nico wondered if everyone was playing a joke on her or if something had happened to Princess. And why had the touch of Maki’s fingers tingled like green Thai curry?

Maki ripped the scarf off her wrist. She knew wearing it had been a bad idea. Her eyes were so open, so vulnerable, Nico wasn’t surprised to see tears gathering. “I’m sorry, Nico. Please don’t worry. I have to go.” Maki ran, only just remembering to open the door first.

Nico stared after the redhead, completely confused, still caught by the lure of pouting, pleading eyes. She raised the scarf to her nose, dog smell, mostly. No surprise there. Surprises and confusion everywhere else. For the only time ever, she almost wished she believed in Nozomi’s psychic ability and could get some answers.

Chapter End Notes

The Neruda poem is called Ode To A Naked Beauty. I ran across it fairly randomly and the line I lifted seemed to suit the werewolf concept I have in my head. Neruda is one of my favorite poets.

I needed a Dracula and I wanted to make it a girl and I remembered Kashima from Monthly Girl's Nozaki-kun. I don't think you need to be familiar with Nozaki-kun to enjoy Nico and Maki's interactions with Kashima, but that's where she's crossed over from.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter and the return of Princess. Thanks for reading and drop a hello in the comments, if you feel so inclined, please and thank you.
Reach Out

Chapter Summary

Maki has an existential crisis and things take a turn for the weird for everyone’s favorite future star of stage and screen. Plus, A-Rise makes their official entrance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE WEREWOLF PHILOSOPHICAL

Nico. Nico wanted answers. Maki wanted to just curl up and not think...but she’d stopped at the downtown book store 5 minutes before closing and ignoring the glares of the clerk, made him find her a Neruda book. So now, here she was, home, the memory of Nico pointing at her, ruby eyes twinkling, lips pursing around “Don’t I know it” looping in her head. The poem had not really been much help. Seemed to be directed at an attractive woman…”Ode To A Naked Beauty”, Maki blushed at the title and then growled at the thought of CompLit Turkish Coffee Guy thinking of her...or Nico that way. Did that mean Nico...Maki tossed the Neruda on the table and wandered over to the stereo, instrumental, classical, Beethoven...Für Elise. No words. Words were always confusing. It was easier to be...Princess...around Nico...Maki didn’t feel as shy...was she really now thinking of her wolf form with another name? That would be confusing. And a disaster of a habit to get into. But when Nico said Princess, Maki felt herself warming at the affection she remembered in Nico’s voice...and the concern. Nico had been so mad that Maki might be the one letting Princess wander...no, this was a wrong road, a bad bad road to go down. Maki was Maki, even with a tail too ready to wag when Nico called to her. There was no Princess.

But then who would Nico call pretty?

Maki threw herself on the couch and grabbed the Neruda again. There had been a poem…”that our mouths are not filled with all these dubious names.” Dubious. Too...ha...Maki laughed at herself...two many names. “When I go to sleep each night what am I called, not called? And when I wake up, who am I” More muddling thoughts. Maki had never really questioned anything. Sometimes, she had wolf senses and people made a little more sense, sometimes she didn’t and everything was a little less...elemental but she could play the piano. No one had ever made her prefer one form or the other. Did Nico prefer one form or the other? Nico was confusing. Yet felt right. But Nico was mad at Maki. And filling every one of her senses whenever Maki moved around the campus, although here, a few miles away, safe in the sanctuary of her parent’s house, Maki couldn’t sense Nico. And yet, still, the small, sparkling dynamo stole center stage in every thought. Maki groaned and turned a random page, pulling the throw over her legs. Maybe this next poem wouldn’t shiver with hints of ruby and sable.

Dr. and Dr. Nishikino came home from the gala charity event well after midnight to find their only child snoring on the couch in the media room, a paperback open across her chest, her legs tangled and twitching in a throw as she dreamed.

Her mother carefully picked the book up and read the title. “Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda.”
“Poetry? Maki?” The taller Dr. Nishikino chuckled in his wife’s direction. “Not schoolwork, I guess.”

Dr. Nishikino handed the book to her husband and watched as he read the open page. “I know Maki’s working on a paper for Cognitive Psychology and and her freshman seminar is something about sports and music so I don’t think so.”

Maki whimpered in her sleep and her mother touched her shoulder, attempting to calm her. This close to the full moon, Maki tended to sleep transform when stressed. It was part of the reason she’d opted out of university housing.

“Maki, wake up. We’re home.” Her mother announced softly, the combination of curious and worried too much of a prickle to ignore.

Maki’s eyes opened, slowly, “Mama? Papa?”

“You were having a nightmare, weren’t you?” Her father prodded.

Maki sat up, nodding, untangling fabric from her legs. Her mother handed her the book back, “I didn’t know you liked poetry?”

Maki snatched the book back, shoving it into the kangaroo pocket of the hoodie she wore around the house, “Someone quoted him so I was curious.”

“What did you think?” Her father asked, sharing a glance with his wife.

Maki shrugged, a slight blush on her cheeks. “It’s...um...very descriptive.”

Her mother managed to choke back a laugh while her father folded up the throw, “If you like Neruda, I’ve got some Federico Garcia Lorca on my shelves.” He paused, “and “The Ink Dark Moon,” full of Izumi Shikibu poetry.”

“That’s a good one.” Maki’s mother smiled at a memory, leaning into her husband’s side, both watching their daughter nod earnestly, with a focused, familiar look that meant she was memorizing names and titles. “Good night, Maki. Get some sleep. We’ll see you at breakfast, right?”

Maki agreed, “Good night.”

MEETINGS

Once a week, Nico and Umi had a roommate meeting. Nico would prepare breakfast, Umi would have prepared a list of discussion topics, shared with Nico at least two days in advance so Nico could amend the agenda, if necessary.

Not much to talk about this week. Umi would be spending the weekend with Honoka and Kotori, the trio were throwing a Lunar New Year party. Kotori had been showing Nico pics of her decorations for weeks. Umi beamed proudly when Nico mentioned how impressed she was by Kotori’s designs. With the weekend plan discussion checked off the list, the discussion turned to current events.

Umi finished the last of her omelet. “Delicious as always, Nico. Thank you very much.” She dropped her napkin across her plate. “How are rehearsals going?”
Nico tapped her fork on her plate, “Nico is excellent, of course, but Nico’s co star is a lot of work. Nico is worried that she’s going to drag the show down.” Nico poured herself more tea; Umi shook her head, refusing. “And drag down Nico’s future plans too.”


“Kotori says she fits the role.”

Nico raspberried, “’Kotori’s swooning with all the rest of them. Sure, Kashima’s handsome, maybe charming, but...’ And Nico stared straight at Umi, dragging out the pause for extreme dramatic effect, “She can’t sing. Fangs is a musical. And I have to do a duet with her.”

Nico’s eyes sparkled with indignation. She grabbed the plates from the table and started to rinse them. Umi moved to take over as she usually did when Nico cooked but Nico refused the help. “Cleaning is better than fuming. Leave me some leftovers tonight.”

Umi understood. Performing an activity was always preferable to stewing in emotions. She decided a helpful gesture would be to change the topic.

“How’s the redhead?”

Nico stopped and turned, leaning back against the sink, “Dog or person? Nico hasn’t seen either for a couple of days.”

“Dog?” Umi quickly reviewed what she remembered of the lease. Was there a pet policy? Was Nico planning to adopt a dog? If they had a dog, Honoka might visit more often. The orange haired affection blanket often felt homesick for her family’s dog, never for the Japanese specialities of her family bakery which Umi had always enjoyed.

“That’s right, Nico told Nozomi not Umi. There’s a dog that’s been finding me on campus.”

“A stray?” Umi sounded concerned and a little frightened.

“No.” Nico’s answer was instant, but the more she considered, the more convincing it was, “She’s beautiful and too well groomed for that. Plus there’s these two nice but odd girls who seem to know her.” Nico dried her hands off in her apron, “I call her Princess. She seems to like it.” Nico’s phone popped, “I’m going to be late for class. Can you please finish the dishes, Umi? I’ll pick up food later.”

“Of course,” And Umi took Nico’s place at the sink, wondering why her roommate hadn’t said anything about the human redhead.

Chemistry class. Hanayo, her glasses pushed down her nose, ignoring both the professor and her laptop, was instead frowning at Maki, doing her best to guilt the redhead into apologizing to Rin. And it was working. Maki really hated seeing either of her friends upset. Plus, it wasn’t really Rin’s fault she was so friendly and outgoing.

Maki messaged Hanayo: “Talk after class.”

Hanayo jumped when her laptop barked at her. The professor stopped to stare, along with the rest of the class.

“Sorry.” Hanayo mumbled, then nodded at Maki when she read her screen. As her fingers moved
over the keyboard, Maki knew she was typing a message to Rin -- and muting her notifications. Track practice hadn’t started in earnest for Rin yet so her schedule was still mostly flexible. Maki fully expected an excited ginger to be waiting for them when class finished. Maki felt more cheerful than she had in a couple of days. Rin’s relentless optimism was the mood boost she needed.

Nozomi was settled in the back of the theatre, watching the stage crew assemble on stage. Nico was a little late today, unusual. Perhaps delayed by a redhead. Nozomi did wonder about that possibility, but before she could pull out her cards to get a reading on Nico, Eli had slid into the seat next to her.

“Good morning, Nozomi. How are you?” Eli smiled as she bumped slightly into Nozomi’s arm.

“Eli-chi!” Nozomi leaned into Eli’s arm, ”Good morning!”

“I never asked you how you were involved in this?” Eli sounded serious. And apologetic. Like it had been a massive oversight on her part. Nozomi giggled.

“I’m going to help make your scenes as creepy as possible.” Nozomi grinned.

Eli’s blue eyes were curious, though she waited patiently for Nozomi to continue.

“I’m helping the lighting designer with video effects; I managed to swing some class credit.”

“What’s your major?”

“Art theory and practice, but I’m more camera and performance oriented than most of the students so I end up collaborating with theatre projects a lot.” Nozomi stretched, letting a yawn out; Eli watched her movement but resisted joining the yawn.

Eli raised an eyebrow, “Interesting. So what do you have planned?”

“That would ruin the surprise.” Nozomi ruffled Eli’s hair as her arms dropped from their stretch, “Don’t you like surprises?”

“Not really.” Eli admitted, fixing her ponytail.

“Nozomi.” Nozomi and Eli looked up to see a tall woman with long dark hair, an iPad and a very serious look in the aisle.

“Oh, hey Erena! Do you need me?” Nozomi asked brightly.

Erena nodded, “Suzu’s here and we need to talk about the exterior castle effects.”

“Great,” Nozomi stood, eager to get to work, “Talk to you later, Eli-chi. Have to make you look good on stage.” Nozomi winked.

Eli frowned as Nozomi followed Erena to the stage, still considering surprises.

Nico spotted Nozomi talking to two women on the edge of the stage. Today, she was working on one of the London diary writing scenes so she had the stage to herself and images were going to be projected behind her. Nozomi had explained what she had planned and Nico was anxious to work with the tech as soon as possible. She wanted to make sure her performance was still the emotional center of the scene. The cute green eyed stage tech she noticed the first day wandered toward her and
Nico broke out a fairly dazzling smile, about 5.5 on the scale. New friends were always good, as she’d told Nozomi, especially if they were cute.

“Nico, right?” The woman extended her hand, “Tsubasa Kira. I’m in charge of the scrim and fabric effects. We’ll be working together on the Trance sequence.”

Nico bumped the smile up 2 notches, “That’s one of Nico’s favorite scenes. I can’t wait to hear what you’ve got planned, Tsubasa.”

“Well, if you’ll come backstage with me, I can show you the fabric we’ll be working with. Professor Asuka said you had a few minutes.” Tsubasa dropped a hand to Nico’s waist to show the way. Nico danced a little ahead of her grasp after the first step.

Nozomi was watching them, while still managing to be involved in whatever was being planned, which didn’t surprise Nico. Nozomi had a third eye and a hidden ear, both for gossip. There were some diaphanous white sheets tacked to the back wall of the theatre. Nico headed straight for them and as she passed between the flats the stage crew was painting, the lights blinked and there was an electronic buzz….Nico heard Nozomi grunt and looked back to see her friend wince in pain, and then Nico felt something wiry against her cheek, scraping. She turned back to see the white sheets billowing forward, reaching out like arms, as the lights started blinking again, then with a crash, everything went dark and there was a scream.

“Eli” Nozomi shouted. Nico pulled the fabric off her face, trying to remain calm as she confronted Tsubasa, “Is this supposed to attack Nico?”

Tsubasa had pulled out a flashlight and her eyes were wide as Nico threw the fabric on the floor, away from them both, watching it flutter like a wounded moth. It wouldn’t stop moving. Nico knew she was equally torn between stomping on it and joining the screamer while fleeing.

“Nico?!?!?” Tsubasa’s voice shook a little. That decided Nico. She grabbed the other girl and headed for the EXIT light. Outside. Afternoon. Freezing. But free of this weirdness.

Maki walked with Hanayo out of class, Rin would be waiting for them at the dorm, she’d been napping and didn’t want to go out in the cold. Maki found it invigorating, but Rin was definitely more into cozy than cold weather. Maki stood tall, facing the Lakefill, arms stretched out to the sides, and inhaled. Clear, crisp cold, musk, peach, vanilla, magic, feAR, BLOOD...with a snarl, Maki transformed faster than Hanayo could track, howled and bolted into the center of campus. Hanayo knelt to pick up her clothes and wondered if sending Rin after their friend would complicate things for Maki.

Nico was searching for Nozomi, who seemed to have stayed inside the theatre. Tsubasa was sticking close beside her. Nico heard a howl...next thing, Nico thought, an actual vampire surrounded by bats would show up in a cloud of mist. Nico wondered if all shows about spooky themes ended up being weird.

“You’re bleeding, Nico.” Tsubasa sounded worried, pulling Nico to a stop and raising a hand to the cheek where Nico had been scratched. Nico had felt something but hadn’t thought that it might be blood. Just as Tsubasa was about to touch her, a red and cream blur pushed the other woman back, snarling dangerously. Princess. Princess with a very different vibe. Nico put her hand to her cheek. Was it the blood?

“Hey, calm down.” Tsubasa skipped back, hands out in front of her. “Nico? Some help?”
“Princess…” Nico put a hand between Princess’s shoulders, but the dog kept snarling and started to crouch for a leap. Nico quickly moved between Princess and Tsubasa, kneeling. “Just get out of here, Tsubasa. I’ll handle this.” Princess surged around Nico, about to chase Tsubasa away and Nico fell into the snow, exasperated by everything and overwhelmed. She could feel tears starting, which was pathetic and undignified for a future star of stage and screen. Just a minute and she would recover. Nico laid back on the ground, cold intruding everywhere. Suddenly she felt warmth at her cheek, Princess, a worried Princess, a Princess snuffling Nico’s face with concern, not a vicious, strange, snapping Princess. Nico relaxed, linked her arms around the dog and pulled herself up, whispering into silky fur. “It’s ok, Princess. Nico is fine. Just cold and confused and tired.” Nico leaned into Princess’s sturdy warmth and let herself cry. Just for a minute.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. Busy week, complete with a bout of under the weather...this chapter was tough to write, it felt like a wall the story had to get over before it could start the official obstacle course.

Hope this finds you well. Enjoy and drop a howdy, if you feel inclined.
Owning Up (Not Quite)

Chapter Summary

Nico recovers with a little help from Princess, Maki gets an unexpected lecture from Nico and nosy Nozomi finally meets a redhead and finds a way to intrude.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico was crying. And shaking. And that person who’d been touching Nico -- sandalwood, bergamot, copper, too calm -- continued to hover. If Maki snarled in her direction, would it upset Nico? Maki settled for glaring over Nico’s head, eyes full werewolf green, making sure not to disturb Nico, sternly willing sandalwood, bergamot, copper and too calm to go away. The woman glanced down at Nico, then raised her hands in surrender at Maki and left. Maki buried her snout in Nico’s hair, the slightest hint of lavender mixing into her vivid awareness of Nico. Nico let go of Maki suddenly, Maki nearly whimpering at the loss of contact. Nico’s voice was so close to her ear, so gentle, so caring, Maki’s every nerve and sense fluttery at the sound. Nico smelled...calmer, closer, happier?

“Nico could get used to Princess.” Nico stood, Maki watching as she brushed snow off herself. “But Nico can’t.” Nico tilted her head and frowned, Maki noticed Nico getting distressed again and bumped into Nico’s leg. “So what am I going to do with you?”

Maki barked, tail wagging. She could smell Nico’s amusement. And Hanayo and Rin getting closer. Hanayo must have gone to get Rin, but convinced her to stay human. Rin could still track Maki in that form.

Maki sat. Nico crouched down next to her, voice soft, “It’s no good to explain things to you is it, Princess? Nico has rehearsal to get back to. There was a scary thing that happened, but Nico…”

Nico glanced back over her shoulder at the theatre, “Nico thinks it’ll be ok.”

Maki huffed, poking her head under one of Nico’s hands, forcing Nico to rub her ears. This was easy, Nico could read her actions and Maki didn’t have to say anything.

“Princess!” Hanayo’s voice carried; she was worried and it made her braver, Maki knew. Rin just flew up, running at top speed and had to remember to stop and pull back before she sniffed Maki.

“You’re ok?” Rin asked, glancing from Nico to Maki.

“Nico had a minor scare, but then Princess showed up to help.” Nico had left her hand on Princess’s shoulder, Maki wasn’t sure if Nico even noticed.

“She seems very fond of you.” Hanayo ventured, back to shy. Rin sniggered. Maki remained very still, not really paying attention to her friends, enjoying how Nico’s breathing seemed to be synching with hers as Nico’s hand sank deeper into her fur.

“I’m sure Maki will be glad she keeps running to you.” Hanayo stated.

“Really glad.” Rin kicked some snow in Maki’s direction, pointedly. Nico looked puzzled at the act.
Maki silently yipped at Rin.

“Oh, so she is Maki’s.” Nico took her hand back and Maki drooped. “That’s nice. They seem suited to each other.” Maki shuffled closer to Nico, but Nico didn’t respond.

“Yeah…” Rin bounced in place, hands behind her back, huge grin on her face and about to continue when Hanayo grabbed her arm, yanking her back so fast Rin yelped.

“Anyway, take good care of her.” Nico turned and stepped away, waving in Maki’s direction, “I have to get back to rehearsal.” And suddenly remembering how cold she was, Nico sprinted for the building.

Maki watched her go, pensive, wondering why Nico suddenly smelled so sad. This was hard, Maki not being able to read Nico’s thoughts, not being able to say anything. But she could do something. Maki bounded after Nico, pushing the other woman front first into the snow by the side of the path. Nico rolled over, blowing snow out of her reddened face, Maki standing over her, so close, so warm, worried lavender green eyes intently roving over Nico’s expression. Nico was taken aback for a moment, then snorted.

“Oh, Nico forgot to tell Princess she was pretty.” Nico curled up and quickly bopped a kiss on Maki’s nose. Maki reared back, with a whine. Nico laughed as she stood, ‘Thanks for coming to my rescue. Again.’ And then with a wink and a shiver, Nico ran into the building.

Maki let out a lonely whine as Nico disappeared. She felt Rin next to her.

“Better get you home.” Rin paused for emphasis and then made her voice a mocking falsetto, “Nico’s Princess.”

Maki bit Rin on the forearm. It helped.

Maki pulled her sweater over her head, glowering. Rin was sulking on the top bunk, face mostly behind a pillow, light green eyes burning. Hanayo sat at the desk, laptop closed, biting her lip, unsure of what to say to break the tension.

Maki strode to the door, Rin snarling a good riddance.

“W..where are you going?” Hanayo squeaked out.

Maki stopped, “To find out what scared Nico.”

“Maybe it was Maki, being mean.” Rin muttered.

Hanayo scrunched up her lips, her eyes begging Maki not to upset Rin further. Maki looked from one friend to the other, rubbed her hand over her bicep and sighed, “I didn’t mean to bite you that hard, Rin. I’m sorry.”

Rin sniffled.

“You can come to my house tomorrow and we’ll play in the trees, ok?” Maki climbed two steps up the ladder, reaching out a hand to Rin, who nodded and bumped it with her head.

“Treehouse slumber party?” Rin grinned, fangs prominent.

Maki rolled her eyes, “Sure.”
“Invite N…” Rin rolled over, clasping the pillow to her stomach, ready to tease her friend

“Don’t.” Maki jumped down to the floor. “You are not allowed to mention her.”

“Kayochin!” Rin whined.

Hanayo shrugged, glad they were talking again, “Maki doesn’t want to be teased, Rin.”

Rin sat up, Maki knew she wasn’t going to get out the door before the cascade started but she tried, “No, but Maki wants to be Princess so Nico can pet her, so Nico can….”

Maki slammed the door, blocking Rin’s taunts. There were more important things to think about. Could she actually crash a rehearsal? And what would she say to Nico?

Eli had just stopped by rehearsal to say hello and chat with Nozomi about their shared class. After the blackout, she went back to her dorm. Nozomi stayed, wanting to ask Nico what she thought. Nico and Professor Asuka were discussing something on stage, Nico behind Mina Murray’s desk, when there was a commotion at the entrance to the theatre. Nozomi spotted a confused, very cute redhead with a Dunkin Donuts bag and the largest coffee cup possible. When the mystery redhead saw Nico onstage, her face brightened and her tension eased. Nozomi grinned. Here was a chance for both mischief and the answering of a few questions.

Nozomi raised a hand and waved at the stage, her voice loud enough to ring through the theatre, “Hey, Nico-chi, Princess is here.”

The redhead’s head whipped around, eyes burning dangerously, like a feral creature’s in a dark forest, lips turning up into a…

Snarl, was Nozomi’s first thought as the redhead challenged her glance, but then Nico’s voice broke into the oddness and the redhead turned with a sweet smile, “That’s just Maki, Nozomi. Hi Maki! Nico will be done in a few minutes.”

The redhead nodded and chose a seat, ignoring Nozomi. Does that mean there was actually a dog? Nozomi really had to bug Nico about that one.

Maki tried to calm her panicky heart. Nico’s friend didn’t know anything, she’d obviously just heard Nico talking about Princess. So that was ok. And of course people would notice a stranger walking into their space. And red was an uncommon hair color. So that was all ok. No need to be panicky. But her heart kept racing as she kept noticing Nico glancing in her direction. What wasn’t ok was Nico saying ‘oh, that’s just Maki.”

Would Nico have preferred Princess to show up? Would Princess have made her feel safer? Should she have followed Nico into the building? Did Nico like Princess better? Maki fought the sudden urge to growl at herself. Which, like so much since she’d started running into Nico seemed both impossible and unavoidable, all at exactly the same time.

Maki really wanted to take a calming sip of coffee but she’d fixed it for Nico, half coffee, half creamer and even a sip of the sweetness would make her gag. She should have picked up a cup for herself. Maybe if Nico wasn’t headed to work, Maki could convince her to head back to Norris. Maki looked down at the cup. Maybe just a sip. Nope. So sweet.

“Isn’t that for Nico?” a hand plucked away the cup and drank. “Just right. Nico is impressed.” Maki looked into merry ruby eyes, “Is that a donut for Nico too?”
“The pinkest they had.” Maki handed over the bag.

“Maki pays attention. Nico is impressed.” Nico collapsed into the seat next to Maki. Maki noticed the cut on her cheek had scabbed over, but no one had bandaged it. She raised a finger to it.

“You should clean that.”

Nico shrugged, “Nico will wash it off when she has a minute. Did Hanayo and Rin tell you Princess found me again?”

Maki nodded, still not comfortable lying to Nico. “I’m sorry if Princess bothers you.”

Nico shook her head, “No, Princess doesn’t bother Nico.” Nico sat up in her seat, leaning at Maki, very serious, “You need to take better care of her. Nico would be very upset if she got hurt.”

“I...I do…” Maki insisted.

“Give Nico your number.” Nico handed Maki her phone, Maki just stared.

Nico explained slowly, rolling her eyes, “So Nico can call you if she finds Princess.”

“Oh.” Maki typed her numbers into Nico’s phone and watched Nico add her contact info as Princess, “That’s Maki Nishikino. N-i-s-h…”

Nico bit into the donut, waving her free hand dismissively in Maki’s direction, “Princess is shorter than coffee, black, student, fancy house, serious sweater, IRRESPONSIBLE dog owner.”

Maki gritted her teeth, “I am not irresponsible.”

“My 8 year old brother keeps better track of his stuffed animals.”

“You have a brother?”

“And two sisters. And I know where they are right now.” Nico sounded angry, “Do you know where Princess is?”

“YES. I know.” Maki realized she was shouting. And curled down into her seat, sulking. This was not how the conversation was supposed to go.

“Good.” Nico nodded and began to drink her coffee. They both let the silence happen for a moment and just as Maki was about to speak, Nozomi interrupted.

“Nico-chi, introduce me to your ‘friend’.” Nozomi loomed over the back of the row, between the two of them, having waited until the most awkward moment possible on purpose as Nico knew from long experience.

“Maki, this is Nozomi. Nozomi this is Maki. Nozomi is a terrible gossip so don’t say anything important within a mile of her.” Nico shoved the other half of the donut into her mouth.

“Hi.” Maki scooted away from Nozomi.

“Did you hear about the big scare?” Nozomi asked.

Maki nodded, “I was just going to ask Nico how she go the cut.”

“Ooh, Nico, this one pays attention. Your standards are improving. You used to just care if they
“Nozomi, stop lying.” Nico snapped.

Maki realized she could usually smell when people were lying and nervous but Nozomi didn’t give off any of the usual tells. Just rain and sage and calm.

“A ghost tried to grab Nico.” Nozomi hugged Nico from behind, “We were all worried when the lights went out.”

“It wasn’t a ghost,” Nico fidgeted in Nozomi’s embrace, “Tsubasa was going to show me the fabric for the trance scene, it was back on the wall, and it reached out and grabbed me.”

“Tsubasa?” Nozomi prodded. Nico scowled at her.

“You know, that stagehand…” Nico looked warningly at her friend.

“Oh, the one you said was cute.” Nozomi grinned as Nico dropped her head into her hands. Maki might have laughed at the interplay between the two but she was too busy wondering if that had been the woman touching Nico’s cheek and smelling too calm. But she couldn’t ask that.

Maki stood, “Show me.”

Nico seemed doubtful, “What are you a detective?”

“Just curious.”

“Take the cute girl on a backstage tour, Nico-chi. I can tell you some of the good shadowy corners.” Nozomi released Nico, who jumped up, grabbed Maki’s arm and dragged her out to the aisle.

“Anything to get away from you,” Nico snarled over her shoulder, while Maki stumbled forward, into Nico’s back, her body jolted by the sudden contact, hairs raised. Too close, too nervous, can’t change.

Nico had stopped as Maki was concentrating on not wrapping her arms around Nico so her legs were going in two different directions, almost tripping the shorter woman. Nozomi sniggered, but Maki was too busy trying to get all of her suddenly jangling nerves under control to respond.

“Maki?” Nico sounded concerned.

Maki smiled at Nico, apologetic, eyes wide, but she could feel the blush coming, and quickly looked away, “Need caffeine.”

“Next time, remember to buy some for yourself, Ms. pouting puppy eyes detective.” Nico strode toward the stage. "Nico’s schedule is full so let’s hurry.”

Nozomi watched them go, considering Nico’s new redhead friend. She was glad the cards had been right about that...her more recent predictions had been lacking clarity. But Maki was definitely cute, definitely weird, and definitely into Nico based on the way she was trotting backstage after her, paying no attention to anyone else. Nozomi wondered if Nico realized how much of an effect she was having.

Chapter End Notes
Howdy! Here's the latest, a bit early as the drive to Taming Of The Shrew tech begins...my current state: trying to avoid panic and too many to do lists

Hope you are enjoying fun things and seasonal weather. Take care! Drop a line in the comments, if you can. I appreciate the feedback. And it usually makes me smile, always a plus.
Why Do Birds Sing So Gay?

Chapter Summary

Nico and Maki get some alone time...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico was watching curiously. Maki’s quick eyes darted everywhere, but Nico was pretty certain that was only a distraction from the fact that Maki was surreptitiously sniffing everything. Oh, she wouldn’t lean in too close, but Nico could tell from the facial movements and twitches that olfactory cues were taking up more of the redhead’s attention than visual ones. Or else she would have noticed Nico staring by now. And as Nico thought that, the glorious lavender eyes turned in her direction, half lidded, “Is something wrong, Nico?”

“No,” Nico shook her head, trying not to inhale deeply and mirror Maki’s motions. “Nico was just wondering what your nose was telling you?”

Maki frowned, her facial features not quite managing mask of denial. Nico waited, relaxed, only curious. After a moment, Maki gave up and grinned, “Actors should wear less cologne.’

Nico snorted. She could definitely agree with that. “Anyone could smell that with a cold. Any other insights, Ms. Detective?”

Maki shoved her hands in her pockets, turning her head to take in every corner of the theatre, “Too much activity.”

“It will only get busier.” Nico glanced at her phone. “Nico has to head to work. Want to walk with me? I’ll treat you to a coffee.”

As they searched the backstage area, Maki had been finding herself in a pattern: get close to Nico, feel the hairs rise on her arm and her heart rate increase, then step away. She didn’t think Nico had noticed that, the sable haired dynamo was too curious about the sniffing. But being near Nico was like being several inches off the floor, buzzing with caffeine and moonlight. Maki could barely keep from bursting out into some kind of physical contact or activity...or changing. She needed to burn off energy and soon. And she just couldn’t change into Princess and run, because then she’d be right back, pacing outside the coffeeshop, keeping between people and Nico. And tonight, Nico might let Officer Alvaraz call Animal Control.

Maki took a liberty, leaning over Nico’s shoulder and lingering for a slow, invigorating breath to check the time on Nico’s phone. “Rin’s meeting me to play basketball. She gets bored when she doesn’t have track practice.”

“Are you an athlete?” Nico realized winter was not the best time to assess how frequently a person went to the gym, although Maki seemed on the lean but curvy side based on the fit of her serious sweaters. It was a good side to be on, Nico thought to herself.

Maki ran a hand through her hair, forcing herself to lean away from Nico, even as she was sensing
Nico’s interest. “Nah, I just like to shoot and sprint a little. Clears my head.”

“Ah, Nico likes to sing for that. Plus, it’s always good to practice.” She did a quick turn, smile bright. Maki suddenly wanted to follow Nico everywhere, but that urge would not get her anywhere. Maki needed a plan -- or at least a topic of conversation. Nico was watching her closely again, obviously curious. The cut on Nico’s cheek caught Maki’s attention and she raised hesitant fingers toward it.

“You should take care of that.”

Nico snorted, “What are you, a future doctor?” Maki dropped her hand and her next movement was half surprised shimmy, half embarrassed shrug, total shy blush, lavender eyes still warm with concern. Nico was positive she’d never seen anything so endearing and she had younger siblings totally willing to play the cute card.

“Maybe.” Maki glanced away. Nico was uncertain how to reply, but Maki shook herself and winked at Nico. “I’ll see you later, Nico. Don’t take donuts from strangers.”

Nico found herself shouting “Nico will take donuts from whoever ...” after the bounding redhead, but when Maki turned quickly back and stuck out her tongue, Nico’s train of thought derailed and she found herself wondering what that reminded her of. Which was not an ideal moment for Nozomi to whisper in her ear.

“The cards are on your side, Nico-chi. Take a bold step.”

Nico elbowed Nozomi, irritated at her nosy friend’s interrupting what had seemed like an important thought. “Those cards couldn’t tell the difference between person and puppy. You’re a charlatan, Nozomi, and a silly one. Here, let me pull a card and Nico will show you how useless it is.” Nico held out a hand, surprised when Nozomi hesitated.

“Now might not be the best time, Nico.”

“Charlatan.” Nico’s voice carried, denting Nozomi’s smile.

“Fine.” Nozomi pulled out her deck with a flourish. “Shuffle, at least once.”

Nico ignored Nozomi and pulled a card out of the middle. Her crimson eyes blinked, twice, and she looked up at Nozomi cautiously.

“Nico-chi?” Nozomi raced through card possibilities. Maybe Nico had misunderstood the Death or Devil card...or was holding The Lovers?

Nico’s voice was tentative, soft. “There’s dogs on all the cards, right?”

“Ooh, Nico-chi, what did you get?” Nozomi leaned forward, but Nico was quicker, grabbing the deck out of her hand and shoving the card back. Nozomi quickly flipped through the cards, hoping to catch a lingering warmth, but she didn’t need a physical clue when The Fool fell into her palm. So Nico, bold and brave, moving forward, chipper, joyful, loving, about to learn the lessons necessary to advance with a feisty friend at her heels to protect and guide.

Nico stared at the card, then at Nozomi. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“Don’t you want to know, Nico-chi?” Nozomi waved the card under Nico’s nose, enjoying her friend flinching.

“No.” Nico’s voice was flat. “You’re a charlatan.”
“Slandering me won’t make the card any less true, Nico-chi. The cards never lie…” Nozomi hesitated, remembering the last time she reached out for insight, but Nico was not paying enough attention to catch Nozomi’s doubt.

“I already had my visit from a dog for the day.” Nico sighed.

“The dog’s there to be a protector and push on a new journey. You don’t have to go alone.” Nozomi shuffled the cards together before stashing them.

Nico pushed her way through Nozomi, disgruntled, “Nico has to go alone now or I’ll be late for work.”

Maki had lied, a little. She had no actual plans with Rin and actually hoped her energetic friend would still be at dinner when she stopped by their dorm room to change into shorts before hitting the gym. Maki wanted thinking time and a chance to just sprint and pound and sweat and maybe talk to herself a bit. But she wasn’t ready to talk to anyone else about Nico yet, she wasn’t even sure what there was to talk about. But Maki did know that she had to not change tonight, no matter how much the moon and convenience tried to convince her that prowling was the solution, ‘that sniffing the twilight, hunting for you’ was best choice, that Nico preferred petting an affectionate puppy to having Maki sit awkwardly near her, unsure what to say. What really mattered was what Maki preferred and Maki knew that Nico filling every sense wasn’t enough. There was curiosity, the urge to discover things that couldn’t be sniffed out, what Nico cared about, what Nico liked to do, how Nico thought. For that, Maki had to brave the door of the Cup o’ in human form, and speak words. Coherent words. Friendly words. She slammed the door to Rin and Hanayo’s room closed and raced for the sports center.

Alert, calmer, almost emboldened, Maki strode downtown, Nico-ward. She’d opted to stay in her shorts and hoodie, the freezing air felt merely chilly after her 90 minute one on none basketball spectacular. She’d won, resoundingly, and now, here she was, hastening downtown, grin wide enough to expose both canine teeth, waxing moonlight a tempting, teasing thrum along her nerves. Nico. She could finally talk to Nico, for more than a few minutes. There was no Princess doubt, the moon would be up for hours yet and Maki felt as awake as she ever had. And then a hunger pang reminded her of a stop she needed to make before Nico.

Nico glanced up when the chime bounced off the wall. She recognized the clank and Maki bounding in wasn’t a surprise. The fact that Maki was wearing shorts and a gray Wildcats hoodie was. Once again, a tooth bit a little into Maki’s underlip as she leaned against the post, grinning at Nico, “I’ll have an iced…”

“No.” Nico raised a hand, shaking her head as if horrified. “It is 10 degrees outside, not factoring in the wind chill. Nico refuses to serve you anything on ice. Nico will hand you the cup, pour the coffee into it and you can go outside and dump the snow in yourself.”

Maki pouted but her lavender eyes laughed and Nico suddenly found herself smiling back at this odd redhead who obviously lacked an internal thermostat. Or maybe the red hair signaled that Maki had lava running through her veins.

“Fine.” Maki sat at the counter, noticing Nico’s solitude. “Slow night?”

“Wednesday. Everyone’s at a frat party. A few might wander in later to sober up a bit, but it’s…”
And here Nico tapped a finger on the counter next to Maki’s hand, “cold outside. Some people pay attention to this.”

Maki reached into the kangaroo pocket of her hoodie and pulled out a bag. Buffalo Joes. Opening the bag, first came the Cheddar Fries, followed by what was probably a burger by the size.

“That’s rude.” As Nico frowned, Maki unwrapped a burger dripping with cheese and grilled onions and took a huge bite.

“Hungry,” Maki said before chewing.

“We sell food here.” Nico pointed to the cold case, “I can even heat up a sandwich.”

“This is better.” Maki swallowed.

“Who brings their own food into a coffeeshop?” Nico glared.

“Hungry people?” Maki took another bite, noticed Nico vibrating with disapproval, stopped to glance at the burger then grin at Nico, offering it across the counter, “Want a bite?”

“No, Nico does not want a bite.”

Maki pushed the Cheddar fries Nico-ward, “Fry?”

‘Uuuuuhhhggggghhhhh,” Nico resisted the urge to flip the cheddar fries all over the front of Maki’s hoodie.

“Can I get that coffee? You know, the one you pour in the cup, so I can dump snow in it.” Maki’s eyes twinkled. Nico seized what was left of the burger and Maki whined as Nico tossed it in the trash.

“Nico makes the sandwiches here, you know, rude, hungry, whiny, pouty puppy eyes. And Nico makes the best sandwiches.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.” Nico echoed Maki’s hollow tone perfectly.

Maki considered the fries, regarded Nico, about to rupture with distaste, then picked up the fries and handed them, mournfully, to Nico. They joined the burger in the trash, melted cheddar spread slowing their slide down the side of the bag.

“Good girl.” Nico handed Maki her coffee, “Nico will now warm up the sandwich of your dreams.”

“I don’t fantasize about food.” Most of Maki’s dreams were movement and noise and shadows, not much memorable content.

“You will now.”

Maki was impressed. The sandwich had been a modified Monte Cristo, ‘jambon’ as Nico said, smeared with a little butter and mustard, a thick chunk of Jarlsberg, and what Nico called her ‘special spice mix.” Maki was not familiar enough with spices to sort out all the ingredients, but it was warm and peppery at the same time, with a hint of clove and the memory of its taste made her mouth water. Just the smell while Nico was working the panini press, had sharpened Maki’s hunger. Nico had
laughed at her when the sandwich disappeared in two bites and offered a second, but Maki had shook her head, embarrassed, and Nico had gone off to clean things. Now Nico was back at the counter, refilling Maki’s coffee, but Maki still had no idea what to say.

But it was time to say anything. She swigged the coffee, squared her shoulders, inhaled and said what she’d been practicing in her head on the basketball court and the walk here.

“Do you like Neruda?” her voice collapsed at the end when Nico stared blankly at her, stopping in mid motion and obviously baffled. Maki’s leg started to jiggle as the panic crept up the hairs on the back of her neck and her ears flattened. Nico was supposed to say yes, Maki was going to toss off the lines she’d memorized, Nico was going to be impressed and....well, Maki was only going to have gained about 3 minutes before the panic point in that scenario but she really thought the last bit of “Oda al Libro” would have launched a conversation:

Send books back to their shelves,
I’m going down in the streets.
I learned about life
from life itself,
love I learned in a single kiss
and could teach no one anything

But no, only confusion launched...Maki willed calm through her body as she breathed and spoke again, slowly, holding Nico’s glance, “That night, that line you and...’moonlight is alive.’”

“Oh.” Now Nico seemed surprised and disappointed, “Did you want to talk to Jens? He’s usually here Thursday nights, prepping for his Friday class.”

“N...n...no.” Maki gripped the counter, hard, trying to keep frustration out of her voice but the nervous hitch remained as Nico’s ruby eyes questioned...everything. “Y...you agreed with him so I th...thought you might know the poem too.” Nico wasn’t exactly smiling but amusement was building behind her downturned expression so Maki settled, calmer and her next sentence came out proudly. “I looked it up.”

Nico bit her cheek, squelching a chuckle and the urge to tease as Maki’s eyebrows raised hopefully.

“No, Nico is not much for poetry.” One of Nico’s talents was reading an audience and hers drooped, “But sometimes when Jens shows Nico poems, Nico thinks some of the lines might make good song lyrics so Nico remembers them. But Nico has never told anyone else that.” Nico beamed encouragingly at Maki and the redhead perked up a bit, lightening the atmosphere.

This was good, Maki thought, songs and music she could talk about. “I like lyrics too, clever, fun ones...Cole Porter, Gilbert and Sullivan.” She leaned forward in her seat, glad to have a topic that excited her.

Nico bounced a hand off the counter, “Nico would make an excellent Reno Sweeney.” Then Nico swung her hair over her shoulder, stepped back and lowered her head and the pitch of her voice:

My story is much too sad to be told,
But practically everything leaves me totally cold.
The only exception I know is the case
Where I'm out on a quiet spree
Fighting vainly the old ennui
And I suddenly turn and see
Your fabulous face.

When Nico raised her head slowly to lock eyes with her, Maki found herself pulled in, by the voice, the emotion, the seemingly literal sparkle that limned the air around Nico. Her hands reached out to a
keyboard that wasn’t there and she channeled the melancholy of the song into notes she could hear playing in her head, supporting and merging with the dark cherry of Nico’s voice. Maki was getting lost in the melancholy and sensation and maybe an invitation? She was completely unprepared for when Nico finished, chin in hand, so close to her face Maki could feel Nico’s breath, eyes twinkling, “What do you get a kick out of, serious sweater?”

Maki tried to speak, but her throat throttled any sense that might have hoped to come out. There was coughing instead. And near choking. And gurgling noises. But NO WORDS. She could feel her eyes open wide in shock and Nico’s breath on her skin and the urge to jump and run somewhere, so her throat would unstick, her heart would settle back into her chest, the sandwich in her stomach and maybe there would be a moment where Nico’s voice was not vaulting everywhere.

And then a trumpet blared, “Nico! That was great! You have to sing that at the party!”

Nico winked at Maki and patted her SYMPATHETICALLY on the cheek and stood, “Nico is in rehearsal, Honoka.”

Maki whirled herself off her seat, half crouched, sniffing frantically. Jasmine and honey and cinnamon, a girl, bright blue eyes, straying ginger hair, dodging around the counter to pick up a laughing Nico. “Honoka, put Nico down.”

Maki growled agreement in the back of her throat, clenching her fists to control the surge of werewolf energy.

“Not until you promise to sing that at the party.” Honoka demanded.


“Please Nico. If you don’t sing, Umi won’t sing and then Kotori will be sad.” Honoka dropped her head on Nico’s shoulder, eyes shamelessly begging. “You don’t want a sad party, do you Nico?”

“Nico has work and rehearsal and her voice is tired.”

“You sounded great!!!!!!!!!”

Maki counted the exclamation points as Honoka gleefully shouted. At least seven. Time to actually not be useless. “You did.”

Nico quirked an eyebrow at Maki, “Oh good, Nico was afraid she’d stunned you into muteness.”

Maki shook her head. Honoka came back around the counter, approaching. Maki clenched her fists tighter, she would not growl or change, “Who’s your friend, Nico? Oh is this the cute redhead Umi told Kotori about?”

Maki saw Nico blush. She didn’t answer Honoka directly. “This is Maki, Honoka. Maki, meet Honoka, who is dating my roommate and her roommate and having a party this weekend.”

“Ohoooh!!” More exclamation points, Maki thought as Honoka continued. “Come to our party, Maki! It’s Friday. You can help me convince Nico to sing. Where’s your phone. I’ll give you my number.” Honoka held out her hand, eager friendliness in every movement and Maki’s hands unclenched. Neither threat nor rival here, just someone near Rin on the affectionate extrovert scale. Maki reached into her pocket and handed over her phone, glad to see Nico’s approving glance out of the corner of her eye.

Maki took her phone back. Nico and Honoka were talking about the food for the party. Maki felt awkward again. And cold. And tired from the assault of so many sensations. She stood at the
counter, drank the rest of her coffee and waved at Nico, “I’m going to head home.”

Nico looked worried, “Nico closes up in an hour, I can drive you. It’s freezing out there.”

“No, I’m fine.” Maki put her hands deep in her kangaroo pocket. “But tired.”

Nico was doubtful, but Maki seemed nervous again, so Nico decided not to push. “Text Nico when you get home.”

Maki nodded, “How much for the sandwich?”

“Nico considers it an investment in the future. Next time, eat here instead of buying a burger.”

“Thanks. Good night, Nico. Nice to meet you, Honoka.” Maki’s smile was a little shy as she hurried into the night.

“Come to the party!” Honoka yelled after her, then nearly jumped over the counter, “Nico likes a girl!”

“Go home Honoka.”

“Kotori used to feed me sandwiches before we started dating. Really good bread too.”

Nico started cleaning again and the door opened, with someone straggling home after a frat party and needing a kickstart. “Nico just thinks Maki needs calories if she’s going to dress in shorts in January.” Not that Nico minded the view.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. Sorry about the delay. I’ve been wanting to write the Maki attempts to start a conversation with Nico chapter for awhile so here it is.

Last Shrew dress rehearsal happened yesterday. We open on Friday. Stay cool.
Honoka was half asleep after exhausting herself nagging Nico about singing. She was hanging around to grab a ride home with Nico and tuck herself into bed with Umi and Kotori. Nico cleaned around her, humming softly, glad the friendly ginger had invited Maki to her party. Nico felt it might be fun to be at a party with Maki.

The door banged open and cold air and Nozomi stumbled in, followed by the blonde econ genius. Honoka startled and nearly fell backward off her stool.

“NICO-CHI!” Nozomi rushed the counter and fell over it, with a giggle. Ayase nodded apologetically in Nico’s direction, tried to help Nozomi up and staggered as Nozomi fell back into her.

“Frat party, right?” Nico grumbled as she helped Ayase wrestle the giggling Nozomi into a booth.

“Sorority.”


Ayase stared at Nico, who elbowed her friend and shrugged at the blonde.

Honoka was back to falling asleep. And Ayase had decided to slide in next to Nozomi, which Nico conceded was probably largely an effort to keep Nozomi from sliding to the floor.

“I’ll get you coffee.” Nico stated, tempted to drop Nozomi’s head on to the table to emphasize how dumb Nozomi looked leering at her new blonde goddess friend when said friend wasn’t looking. Honoka had turned around on her stool, a little unsteady. “Just lay down in the other booth, Honoka. I’ll wake you up when I’m ready to leave.”

Honoka gave Nico a thumbs up, waved to Nozomi and stretched out on the bench Nico pointed her to.

“That’s Honoka.” Nico informed Eli as she put two coffee mugs down. “She’s dating my roommate.”

“Eli’s coming to the party.” Nozomi announced.

“I’m Eli.” Bright, earnest blue eyes met Nico’s as a hand reached to shake hers. Nico frowned and did the hand apron wipe before letting the blonde nearly crush her hand.

“Nico.”
“Nozomi talks about you a lot. You’re playing Mina Murrary, right.” Eli was obviously a statement not question person so Nico just spoke to the important point.

“Nozomi only mentions me so much because she likes to torture me.” Nico tsked in Nozomi’s direction.

Nozomi sniggered, “Go away, Nico-chi. I’m readying...reading Eli’s cards.” Nozomi once again pulled her Tarot cards from somewhere Nico couldn’t catch and handed them to her blonde captive.

“Shuffle and pull three.”

Honoka was fine so Nico malingered to watch Eli shuffle efficiently, intensely focused on every step. Nozomi whispered something in her ear and Eli laid out three cards. Nico remembered a few things from Nozomi’s tutelage: there was a Sword card, a flipped Page and The Hanged Man.

Nozomi tilted her head to examine the cards. Eli leaned back on the bench, clearly a little nervous. Nico continued eavesdropping as she swept down the booth Honoka was snoring in.

“Have you been having trouble sleeping, Eli-chi? Do you need help with that?” Nozomi reached out to touch the sword card.

Eli blushed, Nico laughed, Eli glared and deliberately turned into the booth, to block out Nico and face Nozomi.

“Yes, I’ve been having trouble sleeping.” Eli paused. “Did you really get that from the cards.”

“Nine of swords, anxiety and a sense of peril interfere with ease.” Nozomi’s voice softened. Nico shook her head, remembering Eli’s screams during the theatre blackouts. Nozomi really was a charlatan, a sharp one. But that was her business.

“What’s this one?” Eli was matter of fact.

“The Hanged Man?” Nozomi hmmmmed. “It’s not as bad as it looks. You’re waiting. And the Page of Wands in the present position tells us….”

Nico’s phone went off so she tuned out the dating by divination session.

M: Hi, Nico. I made it home. Didn’t get distracted by the moon at all.

Nico smiled and then wondered why Maki had mentioned the moon. Maybe another Neruda line? Nico would have to borrow a book from Jens.

N: Nico is glad you made it home (o^-')b Now change into something warm and tell Princess ★reau~ ★reu she’s a pretty girl from Nico.

Nico expected a nearly immediate reply but instead the pause lengthened enough that Nico had almost completely cleaned the brewing machines. Nozomi had finished with the cards and was now nuzzling into Eli’s shoulder. Just as Nico was about to tell Nozomi to take her too public display of affection somewhere without Nico as Nico had had enough of horror recently, her phone popped again.

Video message. Princess snuffling at Maki’s phone, which was at a weird angle. Was Maki holding it on the floor? Princess howled and whined quietly for a minute, sounding lonely, and then the message ended, with no good night from Maki.

Nico grimaced, confused. Was Maki too shy to video chat? Had she spooked Princess somehow?
After a minute’s thought, Nico typed.

N: Join Princess for her next video message. Nico thinks Princess's owner is cute too (・・・) 

Maki had transformed back from wolf form and sat in front of her bed, wrapped in a robe, staring at Nico’s message, too many thoughts banging through her head as her heart raced. She shouldn’t have done that. It was silly. She’d take that minute back now, if she could. Could Nico forget about Princess? Could Maki invent a nice relative in the country to send Princess off with? Would Nico hate her then? Maki groaned and leaned back against her bed.

There was a knock on the door before her mother opened it, “Are you all right? I thought I heard a howl.”

Oh gods, Maki had tried to be so quiet, but her mother was too used to listening for odd sounds in the night. Maki hadn’t had a flare of embarrassment this bad since her mother had walked in on her reading some fairly erotic manga.

“Maki?” Her mother sat on the bed, close to Maki, who fought the urge to shift farther away. She did turn her phone over. “Talking to a friend?”

Maki closed her eyes, hoping her mother wouldn’t ask too many questions. “Not really talking.”

“Was it Rin?”

Maki clenched her jaw “N….n….no.”

“Someone I haven’t met?”

Maki nodded. Her mother was silent, then said “Invite them over sometime.”

Invite Nico over. She’d want to see Princess. Maybe Maki could convince Nico that Princess needed to be at the vet. Maybe Maki could suddenly develop an allergy. To herself. That might be what was happening now. A mental allergy as the thought of Nico and Princess made her twitch. Not Princess. Don’t say Princess, she told herself. Say werewolf. Nico and the werewolf. Say me. Nico and me. Nico and Maki. Forgetting her mother was there for a moment, Maki sighed, running both hands through her hair and letting out a cross between a frustrated bark and a whimper.

“Maki.” Her mother’s voice snapped. Maki looked up, furtive. “Your father and I are here if you need to talk.”

“I know.” Maki knew she was sounding sullen, but it was either that or start crying all over her mom and she didn’t want to do that. “But I’m….I’m not good at…people…or…so how…”

“Do you want to tell someone?”

Maki shook her head, wanting to be a wolf again for a moment so she could put her whole body into the movement, shaking off pressure. Instead she drew herself into a tighter ball. “No…but she’s seen…the wol…me as a wolf.” Maki reached back over her head, fists balled up. “A couple of times.”

“Were you playing with Rin?” Her mother sounded more and more puzzled.

“N...no.” Maki pressed her fingers into her back, but there was no easing her tense muscles. Hot hot bath, epsom salts, listening to music, no thinking about anything. Or anyone.
Her mother was surprised by the admission and how obviously Maki was holding back information. Maki had always been careful. To be roaming campus in werewolf form was out of character. So her mother decided to go with a hunch.

“Do you trust this person?” Her mother asked quietly.

Maki nodded and chuckled, “She gave me a lecture today about being a responsible dog owner. If I don’t show up with Princess sometime, she might think I…” Maki’s breath caught, “hurt…her.”

“Princess?” Curiosity had Dr. Nishikino leaning forward.

Now Maki really wanted to turn and run. She hadn’t meant to say this much. She pulled her bathrobe closer around herself and jumped up, perching on her desk, feet pressed into her chair. “Do I have to tell you?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow and she sat up, her expression a determined one, “Guess.”

Maki gulped and panic triggered her haste tendency, “Nico tripped over me on the Lakefill and Rin showed up and I didn’t want her to call me Maki so I barked and she didn’t know what to say and got scared that I would get mad and the next time Nico got mad because no one would tell her my name so she decided to call me Princess.”

“The next time?”

“I went to see her again. Where she works. And there was a police officer. And Rin and Hanayo showed up and didn’t know what to say again and…” Maki looked at her mother, tears in her eyes, “I don’t know what to do.”

The elder Nishikino spoke carefully, considering every word. “Sometimes, especially, if you meet someone attractive to you, impulse takes over and planning goes out the window. Your father doesn’t transform, but he does have that tendency. He was very unpredictable from the beginning, skittish, wary but attached. He didn’t calm down until we got to be friends.”

“When did he…?” Maki pushed the chair back and forth with her legs.

“Before I met your grandmother, soon after we started dating. He invited me out to dinner and we went for a long walk after and talked about our families. His was just a little more complicated.”

“It didn’t scare you?”

Her mother leaned forward, knowing that this was the most important part of the conversation, “I trusted your father. When he told me, he was confident and charming and open. Not apologetic at all or embarrassed. I wasn’t 100% certain he wasn’t playing some kind of prank on me, but I knew that he was a good friend and I trusted him.”

“Trust.” Maki muttered.

“The longer the confusion lasts, the more damage to trust.” Maki nodded. Her mother stood and hugged her daughter. “Rely on your instincts.”

Maki’s instincts, when she was in wolf form and with no real filter, seemed to be doing nothing but urge her Nico-ward. They had already decided. Neruda popped into her head again:

Last night
she
came
livid,
night-blue,
wine-red;
the tempest
with her
hair of water
eyes of cold fire

Nico had hair of night and eyes of heated fire, but she had swept across Maki’s life like Neruda’s tumultuous storm, waking Maki up, illuminating a path entirely fresh. Maki hadn’t really thought through what her interest in Nico meant. Poetry and feelings new to Maki had resonated, words lifting off the page to create sensations unfamiliar, and she’d spent sleepless hours, open eyed and dreaming, her hands tangled in sable and crimson, lashed to the mast of a cutter, Nico’s hum a breath in the sails, as the horizon stretched farther away and fog and blue rolled up, obscuring any guide. But whenever Maki had shaken herself out of the dream haze, nose desperate for hints of musk and peach and vanilla and magic, she could feel another tie to Nico. And those were links Maki wanted to knot together, tightly. Which meant she had to give Nico a chance to choose whether or not a werewolf, however pretty or cute, was a person Nico wanted to know.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay; next week I want to get back to my Monday or Tuesday posting schedule. Taming Of The Shrew had a great opening weekend/week after, but tonight's show got rained out, which is always sad, but left me some time to polish this chunk.

Hope your July is ending well. Thanks for your patience.

For a Tarot reference, I've been using Melissa Cynova's Kitchen Table Tarot. It's practical and warm and funny and straightforward and a good read even if you're not that interested in Tarot.

Take care! Thanks for reading.
Danger Zone

Chapter Summary

Hanayo goes on a solo mission and there's a MakiRinPana sleepover planned in the Nishikino treehouse, at least until Nico starts shivering on the Lakefill.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DANGER ZONE

Hanayo read the printout in her hand again, nervous. As a freshman biology major, she’d taken classes in Tech, but had never wandered down into the legendary sub basement level. But there had been the ad in The Daily:

Curious about werewolves on the Lakefill and demons in Deering? Help us find the scientific proof. Biology and biomedical engineering majors preferred. Stats experience necessary. Paying job. No Ghostbusters cosplay. Contact: Anju@nu…

Hanayo had sent off an email, without telling Rin or Maki, and received an almost immediate reply with a time and a room number in the third level of the Tech sub basement. So now she was climbing down stairs, trying not to jump at various mechanical noises and not making eye contact with any of the shuffling, shaggy students, gender identities ranging the spectrum, whose only commonality was appearing never to have showered or slept. Hanayo cherished her eight hours minimum and wondered if the more time you spent as a college student, the less time you actually spent comfortably curled up with a pillow or loved one.

The number was obscured, the room was dark, no light to be seen beneath the door and Hanayo considered whether to knock. But the email had said nothing about that so she turned the doorknob and tried not to squeak as she said ‘hello!’ into a room full of monitors running graphs and numbers in what must be real time.

“Koizumi?” A high voice trilled from the back.

“Yes.” Hanayo took a deep breath.

“5 minutes early. That’s a good sign.” The lights flicked on, fluorescent, buzzing and blinking a little. Hanayo raised her arm to shield her eyes instinctively. A woman with long hair not quite as orange as Rin’s stood in front of her. “And you’re cute too. That’s another plus.” Hanayo felt a hand on her wrist pull down her arm. Pale magenta eyes twinkled at her, “I’m Anju. Welcome to our little hideaway.”

Hanayo nodded, trying to make sense of what the numbers on the monitors around her were measuring and not really paying attention as Anju guided her back to a desk, until Anju pulled out what looked like a TSA handheld scanner.

“What’s that?” Hanayo hesitated.

“Nothing invasive. We just have to make sure that no supernatural creatures get access to our
Anju winked as she passed the scanner over Hanayo, “Would you trust them?”

“Who?” Hanayo decided it was best to ask questions about everything, with as much interest and enthusiasm as she could muster.

“Werewolves, demons, witches, vampires, ghosts...beings that generate or use occult energy. All those horror stories must come from somewhere.” Anju’s eyes glittered. “Have you seen any? Is that why you’re here.”

Hanayo had been telling herself repeatedly since she sent the email to not ask any questions about werewolves if she got an interview. She couldn’t let her concern for Rin and Maki show if she was going to discover anything useful. She had met a couple of witches Fall Quarter but they seemed more interested in helping the environment than harming anyone. She remembered when Rin had dragged her down into the tunnels at Deering Library. That was a genuinely creepy experience. Random bursts of air had been cold on the back of her neck and she’s never been so aware of the smallest noises. Hanayo had been very happy for the reassurance of Rin’s superior senses that night, when she was starting at every noise, even safe in her own room. Hanayo let that flashback cause a tremor in her voice, “I can’t go into Deering alone anymore...there’s something dark...lingering."

Anju’s eyes blazed with evangelical fervor, “Exactly. We need to identify the areas where the supernatural and paranormal lurk and gather as much information as possible. Places like Deering and the Music Administration Building and the Barber Theatre. My colleagues and I are doing a study and we need an assistant to monitor and analyze data while we do field research.”

Hanayo shivered and glanced around the room. It was easy not to sound too eager. “Would I have to be alone here?”

Anju’s high pitched trill of laughter seemed more sorority than sub basement, “Erena, Kira and I are down here all the time. There’s a mini fridge and a hot plate. It’s homey. And we can set up some kind of alert system to let you know when there’s a spike in levels and we need coordination or active data capture.”

“Is there a Faculty member overseeing this?” Hanayo adjusted her glasses to cover her nervousness.

“One of my colleagues is consulting with an Associate Prof in the Biomedical Engineering Department. We can’t offer you any course credits, but you will be cited in any publication and we can pay, although it’s not a work-study job. You said you were a freshman right?”

Hanayo nodded, her heart racing.

Anju glanced down at the scanner and smiled. “You’re clear. Take a seat. How much do you know about programming?”

Classes had been calm. Maki sensed that Nico was on campus too, but without the added sensitivity of her wolf senses, managed to control any urges to head Nico-ward. Late nights and no sleep and poetry and dreaming had cut into her studying time so she used her class time to figure out how far behind she was and how much catching up she had to do. Hanayo sat subdued through Chemistry class but Maki assumed she was tired as well. Rin seemed to have an inexhaustible battery and had avoided morning classes so that must be hard to keep up with. Maki wondered vaguely if Nico were
a morning person...couldn’t be with the late night hours, right? Now Maki was home to nap before Rin and Hanayo showed up. Her parents would be back after work, but for now Maki had the house to herself. Restlessness surged and she found herself at the piano. Something to do with her hands.

The intercom buzzed, breaking Maki’s fugue state. Maki had been at the piano for hours, alternating between Beethoven and Chopin and now Rin and Hanayo had arrived.

“No biting.” Rin snapped as she tossed her duffle on the couch; Hanayo smiled at Maki, a little apologetic.

“I’m sorry about that Rin.” Maki sighed, this was the fifth apology and the third verbal one. Maybe she should just convince Rin to bite her back.

“Good. It hurt. And I was only trying to help Maki get a date.” Rin sniffled, Hanayo giggled and Rin turned to hug her fiancée.

“I don’t need your help.” Maki slid open the back door, letting the cold air blast through.

Rin let go of Hanayo and bounded over to Maki, “You and Nico went on a date?”

“No.” Maki blushed.

“Oh.” Rin’s disappointment disappeared in the wag of a tail as she transformed quickly and raced outside. Maki was only slightly tempted to close the door behind her, but when she snuck a look at Hanayo, her friend was giving off a worried aura.

“Is everything all right, Hanayo?” Maki inquired gently.

Hanayo smiled, pushing up her glasses before twisting her index fingers together, “Everything’s fine, Maki. I’m just tired. I’ll read for awhile.”

Maki nodded and stepped into a different room to transform, following Rin into the snow. Rin was leaping from snow drift to snow drift, angling herself to launch off trees whenever she could, howling happily in the twilight. The moon was only a few nights from full and the white snow gleamed brightly where the moon’s reflected light fell. Maki joined the howl and jumped at Rin, forcing the smaller wolf into the snow as they wrestled.

Maki and Rin had been playing nearly for an hour when the Doctors Nishikino came home. Maki could hear Hanayo talking to her mother. Dr. Nishikino asked a question that mentioned Nico. Maki rushed the door, barking a warning. Her mother ignored the attempted intrusion and continued to interrogate a Hanayo who was more than happy to answer her questions. And then Rin bit Maki’s tail, causing the redhead to turn on her friend with a snarl. Whatever was being said inside was now forgotten as Maki’s new goal was payback. Rin transformed and scrambled up into the treehouse, naked, before turning back, knowing Maki was reluctant to transform without privacy and clothes.

Maki jumped over the half wall of the shed, and grabbed her poncho, following Rin, and transforming again as she reached the platform. Rin was already on the second floor and Maki took the ramp at full speed, ready to launch herself at Rin, not thinking too much about the 20 foot fall if they both went over the side. Werewolves bounced. She’d learned exactly how much after meeting Rin and Hanayo at the summer mixer for incoming Northwestern students. Rin had zero impulse control in either form and Hanayo had told stories of Rin’s exploits that made Maki shudder. Maki’d never really needed to test her rapid healing ability. Rin and Maki wrestled at the edge of the platform, growling and whining, Rin not caring which way they went and Maki trying to force them back toward the trunk. Eventually Rin got tired of being hedged in by Maki and dropped off the side, attempting to swing herself back to the first platform. Maki ran down the ramp, whining a warning
only to see Rin fall past her and land in the snow. Maki knew she could reach the roof of the shed from the tree so she jumped over and then down again, to where Rin was, lying in the snow, whimpering a little, favoring a front paw as she attempted to stand. Hanayo had seen the fall and was kneeling next to Rin, soothing her. Maki remained stock-still, watching her two friends interact, a moment of jealousy pinching at her as she wondered if anyone would ever accept all of her like that. She felt a hand drop gently between her ears. Her mother, there were no scent descriptors Maki used when she thought about her mother, it was just Mama. No one else had that smell, it was mixed into so many memories.

“Rin will be fine.” Dr. Nishikino comforted her daughter.

Hanayo agreed, “She can put weight on it. She’s just a bit startled.”

Maki howled at her friend and Rin whimpered. Maki nudged Rin with her head, in an attempt to comfort.

“Let’s go inside, girls. Time for dinner.” Dr. Nishikino decided.

Dinner had been quick; Rin and Maki were quite hungry and Hanayo had little appetite. Now they were all up in the treehouse, Rin and Hanayo wrapped in a heavy wool blanket, Maki in wolf form, staring at the stars with occasional glances at her friends. And using her wolf senses to stay alert for any sign of Nico, but she wasn’t sharing that fact with anyone. Hanayo smelled sad and worried, but Maki didn’t think it was about Rin’s injury. Rin was in human form, leaning on Hanayo. Maki was a little surprised, knowing how comfortable Rin was in her wolf form. Hanayo smiled at Maki’s inquisitive whine and Rin laughed. Maki curled up into a ball, unable to ignore the feeling of being left out of some secret.

It was the music, Nico thought, as she shivered, putting on her coat and watching Kashima and Micah vie for the attention of a stagehand in a short skirt. Nico had read the Dracula in Mina’s bed scene in Stoker’s book over and over again in an effort to play the emotions involved effectively; fear for her husband, frustration, half asleep, half entranced helplessness. Kashima’s Dracula performance, when not singing, was masterful, commanding, cruel. Nico had expected the taller woman’s skin to be cold and her breast to be still when she pressed Nico’s face to it. There was no mist or duet tonight, Professor Asuka was having them go through the scene multiple times without singing to set the feel. So Nico had asked for background music and Asuka had obliged, her sound designer offering a bleak Industrial Goth Christmas album that twisted familiar carols into dark metallic echoes of holiday horror. Nico could still feel harsh echoes in her skull, her neck muscles knotted and the feel of Kashima’s grasp burning into her skin. No wonder Nico was shaking. Micah was too caught up in whatever he and Kashima were plotting to acknowledge Nico’s wave so she headed out of the theatre alone.

The moon’s edge seemed jagged as clouds clustered around it and a mist rose off the snow and the Lake. It was after 10 and Nico had to walk home. Alone. No one was out, the wind was doing a knife’s work, lashing the chill through Nico’s multiple layers, and making a sound almost human as the shivers went up Nico’s neck. Kashima’s eyes, green and cold and sharp, came to mind and Nico found herself wishing for a warmer color, a softer touch than the wind’s, and company.

“Nico is too cute to be this cold!” Nico shouted, pumping her arms, following with a muttered “I bet Princess and Maki are warm.” At least the thought of Maki’s mischievous grin cheered her up, until she remembered the one cute fang biting into the underlip, which brought back Kashima’s feral snarl, prosthetics sharp and bloodied, her breath hot on Nico’s throat and the pleasant image was ruined. This was going to be a long rehearsal process, Nico realized. She should probably make an effort in
the future to leave in a crowd, not that she was scared, but…

Maki’s head whipped up, just as she was starting to doze off. Rin and Hanayo had gone inside at some point and Maki was alone. And Nico was...Maki sniffed the air, ears attuned to Nico’s voice, Nico was alone And anxious.

With a ringing howl, Maki made her way to the ground and ran for Nico’s voice.

Nico had pulled her parka tighter around her, rewrapped her scarf and stepped out from the building’s overhang, into the rising mist, too cold to stall any longer and ready for the trip home. Only a 20 minute walk. Nico did it most nights. It would be okay. “Nothing to be afraid of, Nico.” she repeated. And then a speeding form bolted into Nico, knocking her into the ground, nuzzling Nico frantically, whining as she sniffed the air around.

“Princess?” Nico pulled off a mitten, touching the warm fur with surprise. Where had she come from? Had she heard Nico say her name? Would Maki be upset now? Princess continued to frantically search for any threats or injury to Nico, her breaths warm and tickling Nico’s face. Nico giggled, surprised that her mood had lightened so fast.

“Hey, Princess.” Nico rolled her shoulder into the dog’s, hoping to get her attention. Princess did stop, her eyes warm and worried, lavender more than green, intelligent. Had Maki gotten a dog to match her eyes, Nico found herself wondering. Nico kissed Princess on the top of her snout. “Nico is glad to see you but you don’t have to worry. Nico was just cold and nervous.”

Princess kept staring at Nico, who felt like an explanation was being demanded. She’d have to ask Maki what breed of dog Princess was, it almost felt like a conversation as Princess pushed into her and whined softly. “Nico had to let Dracula bite her.”

Princess growled. Nico was fascinated, watching as green swirled into the lavender, “Not a real bite. She didn’t break the skin.” Maki tilted her head down, dubious, and Nico realized she was once again in the ridiculous position of sitting in a snowbank, trying to explain to someone else’s dog what had happened during rehearsal. And that dog was waiting and giving off an air of disapproval.

Nico groaned and stood, “Nico is not cut out to be a pet owner. Too many bruises.” She took off her other mitten and ran both her hands back and forth over Princess’s fur several times, enjoying the silky warmth and the activity, laughing when Princess whined, wagging her tail, then tipped up her head, nudging Nico’s chin.

“Walk Nico home, Princess, and then we’ll call Maki and I’ll explain.” Nico gave Princess’s ears a last rub.

Princess sat and once again, shook her head. Nico shoved her hands into her pockets, “Stubborn.”

Princess whined.

“Walk Nico home and Nico will explain on the way?” Nico really tried not to make it a question but she was having a temporary lull in tenacity. And arguing with a dog. Who was winning. What a night.

Princess stood, leaning into Nico and waiting. Nico chuckled at herself, of course, Maki’s dog wouldn’t know where Nico lived. It’s not like you could just tell her an address, Nico would have to lead...Nico glanced down, to be met by eyes that she was starting to read too well. Affection, concern, curiosity...Princess let out a snapped whine, impatience. “Orrington. I live on Orrington Ave, near the Plex.” And Princess trotted west, leaving a wondering Nico to follow.
Nico fumbled with her keychain as Princess jumped between the door and Nico, excited, tail wagging, howling softly, as if aware of the neighbors. Nico put her key in the lock and then forced Princess to sit, “Listen to Nico, pretty girl. Umi hates it when someone wakes her up so we have to be quiet.”

Princess, very alert, nodded. Nico had given up wondering and had just proceeded to speak to the dog as if she understood every word, a theory not contradicted by Princess’s habit of bumping up against Nico playfully and demanding petting when Nico was grumbling about Kashima or the weather.

Nico continued as she opened the door, “Now, pretty girl, Nico usually stays up to work on her lines after rehearsal but tonight, Nico is tired of pretending to be a victim. So I’m going to make a snack and we’re going to watch Noises Off, so Princess knows what rehearsal is like and because it’s the funniest play in the English language and Nico needs a laugh.”

Princess’s howl was quiet, but seemed to indicate agreement. Nico rolled her eyes at herself and they stepped inside the apartment.

“Good evening, Nico.” Umi was sitting on the couch, her voice surprised Princess, who barked and then Umi was no longer sitting on the couch, she was poised next to it in a defensive stance.

“It’s ok, Umi. This is Princess, the dog I was telling you about. She found me after rehearsal. I brought her home until I could reach her owner. I was walking home and it was too cold to stop and call. I'm sorry I didn't warn you.”

Umi nodded, acknowledging that the hour and chill outweighed normal formalities. Nico had a nervous hand between Princess’s shoulders and Princess dropped into a slight bow. This was Nico’s home, after all and Umi smelled of Honoka and another human and not like Nico.

“She is a beautiful dog.” Umi stated. “Can I pet her?”

Nico glanced at the very calm Princess and shrugged, “I guess.”

Umi reached down for a perfunctory rub behind the ears and Princess whined softly. Nico chuckled, “She's been growling at everyone else I know. You made a friend, Umi.”

“Smart dog.” Umi winked at Nico.

“You don’t know the half. I think she’d do better on non written tests than Honoka.” Nico removed her coat and Princess wandered the apartment, spending time with everything that smelled like Nico, rubbing against the furniture and counters, which now smelled like Princess. Mission accomplished.

Umi started to frown, debating for a moment if she should defend Honoka’s studiousness and then recalled the conversation she’d had earlier that evening with her ginger haired girlfriend, in which Honoka explained in great detail how being allowed to take tests while snacking would raise her scores by several grades. After that, Honoka had admitted she didn’t know where she’d left her textbook. So Umi changed the subject.

“Did you call her owner?”

Nico paused and looked around the refrigerator door as Princess whined at her, “No, I’ll do that right now.”
No answer, just a tone to leave a message so Nico put on her best smile, “Hi Maki! This is the irresistible Nico Ni. If you’re looking for Princess, she’s with me. Call me so we can discuss the ransom.”

Nico heated up some hot chocolate with cinnamon as Princess continued her explorations, “Want to join us, Umi? We’re watching Noises Off. I’m going to teach Princess about rehearsal.”

“She’s a dog, Nico.” Umi said disdainfully as Princess brushed by her. “And isn’t that the play where the actress runs around in lingerie?”


Umi’s confusion was evident, “Those are cookies.” Nico snorted but Umi continued, ignoring her “Are you sure you should be showing that to…”

Nico’s mouth dropped as she watched Umi stiffen, her arms across her chest. Then she mimicked Umi’s tone of a minute before perfectly, “She’s a dog, Umi.”

Umi was not amused. “I’m going to bed. Put a blanket down. Will she be quiet?”

Nico looked to Princess, Princess looked to Umi and nodded, waiting while Nico spread out a tattered afghan. Then she hopped on the couch, waiting until Nico settled down to position herself.

“Enjoy your company, Nico.”

“Thanks!” Nico waved back at Umi, “We won’t disturb you, I promise.”

Umi watched as Nico started the dvd and Princess wagged her tail and rooted into Nico’s side, encouraging Nico to drop an arm around her. Umi was reminded for a second of Honoka in her affectionate moods and decided to make a phone call before bed. Just to clarify a few party details, of course.

The movie started and Nico’s whispered commentary began, “this is a dress rehearsal that’s been running all night. People in shows that are about to open never sleep, pretty girl, but Nico always tries to steal a nap. Keeps the face fresh…”

Umi grabbed her phone, dialing Honoka as Nico’s whispers were occasionally answered by whines and short howls. If anyone in her dreams tonight actually conversed in normal tones of voice, Umi would consider it a blessing.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Still not quite used to not having rehearsals and performances, although there was a thunderstorm today and I just got to enjoy the cool so that was nice.

Are you a party animal or a movies on the couch person? And what movie? Shin Godzilla arrived in the mail today so that’s my weekend plan.

Oh, I remembered which universe my werewolf physiology ideas are riffed off of: Terry Pratchett and his Discworld series. The books about The Ankh-Morpork City Watch are my some of favorite go to reads to relax and one of the characters, Angua, is a
werewolf. I realized this around Chapter 3 so it's absorbed werewolf knowledge I was using as a foundation. Also, originally, I had a different plan for Nozomi and the antagonists, but the story has developed a little differently so I've tweaked the description a bit.

Thanks for joining me on this adventure. Let me know what you think as we get closer to the revelation.
d(¬_^)
Some Mornings You Should Just Stay In Bed

Chapter Summary

Someone answers Maki’s phone, Umi makes coffee, Nozomi gets an early start...plus, Nico and Princess in the morning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico’s apartment was quiet. Maki, still in werewolf form, snuggled with her head under the blanket, nose soaking up Nico’s scent. She could hear Nico’s even heartbeat, an occasional snore. Surprisingly, the sable haired whirlwind actually did slow down long enough to sleep. Maki had wondered. Umi also appeared to be a sound sleeper so Maki closed her eyes and concentrated, limbs elongating. She wrapped the throw around her shoulders and made her way quietly to the bathroom. Then back to the couch, but to consider her situation, not nap, so Maki stayed human, half an ear cocked for any movement or change in Nico’s sleep. Maki wanted to think, thoroughly think, without every sense being overwhelmed by proximity to Nico.

She had to tell Nico. Maki hadn’t planned this evening, Nico constantly threw everything Maki had ever had planned into disarray, not that it was Nico’s fault. Maki knew she had been taking the easy choices, not the good ones. Tonight had been a series of hasty decisions, recklessly rolling Maki into a trap, but it had started from a helpful impulse. But that wasn’t excuse enough. There wasn’t excuse enough for this delay, this gutlessness, this unwillingness to share truths with Nico. Maki knew she could just stay changed and just let Nico discover her on the couch in the morning, but there was Umi to consider. And Maki wasn’t sure she had that much self confidence, to sit there in only a throw, and wait for Nico’s reaction. She was as likely to transform into the wolf at any frown or fright from Nico and bound away. And that would be counter productive. And she’d still have to go back and explain to Nico sometime, if she wanted Nico to stay in her life.

So as she felt the moon drop below the horizon and dawn approach, Maki tried to let bravery beat back melancholy. To fill the air with decisiveness, to not waver or wander.

‘Before I loved you, love, nothing was my own:  
I wavered through the streets, among  
Objects:  
Nothing mattered or had a name:  
The world was made of air, which waited.”

Maki had been making a list of Neruda lines, to bring Nico’s song lyric thought to life. The Sonnets and Odes had offered the best harvest, full of raw and new love, and wonder. Was this love, this drifting through thoughts of what Nico was doing at random points of the day, planning things to amuse or please her, the full diving into sense memories of crimson and sable and musk and vanilla and magic when alone, the echoes of Nico’s voice that seemed now to drive the rhythm of Maki’s heart? Was this the prelude to some even bigger wave that would sweep her up if Nico...if Nico...if Nico...

Maki sighed and transformed back to the wolf, worried, wandering thoughts now dampened by the awareness of Nico everywhere Maki turned. It was a safe cocoon, though temporary, and she
burrowed deep, remembering the feel of Nico’s arm resting on her and the lifting glow where she had nestled into Nico.

Umi had wandered to her bedroom door, not even half awake, and seen an unfamiliar silhouette on the couch, told herself it must be Princess’s owner come to claim her and shuffled back to bed, not wanting to disturb Nico’s rendezvous.

Princess was sound asleep on the couch Nico noticed as she came out of her bedroom, pulling her bathrobe around herself. Umi had already started the coffee and was probably finishing dressing. Nico grabbed her phone and dialed Maki’s number again.

After three rings, someone who wasn’t Maki spoke, startling Nico, “Hello?”

Nico paused and then spoke in her most polished timbre, “This is Nico Yazawa. I am trying to reach Maki Nishikino. Her dog, Princess, walked me home last night.”

Nico heard a sigh, and then the voice returned again, after a moment’s pause, very contained, “Hello, Nico. This is Maki’s mother. She’s...” another pause, and Maki’s mother voice wound a bit tighter, “not feeling well right now. Thank you for taking care of her...dog.”

There was a whimper and Nico glanced to the couch, Princess had woken up and was questioning Nico with a glance. Nico shook her head, then held up a hand to indicate Princess should wait. Princess yawned and flicked an ear with a back paw.

“I can drop Princess off at your house, if you want. I think I remember where it is.” Nico was distracted by how quickly Princess hopped off the couch and loped over to where she was standing, sniffing through Nico’s robe with some urgency. Nico tried to push her away, but with only one hand found herself being forced back toward the couch by Princess, “Excuse me a minute.” Nico dropped the phone into her pocket and crouched to stare down Princess, “This is Maki’s mother. Behave.”

Princess whined, her eyes wide and lavender. She nudged Nico’s cheek. Nico sighed, refusing to be charmed. “Nico has a busy day, you can’t stay here.”

“Ms. Yazawa?”

Nico put the phone back up to her ear, “Sorry, Mrs, Nishikino. Princess just woke up.”

“Hold the phone near her ear, please.” Mrs. Nishikino sounded grim. Nico shrugged and did as requested, watching as Princess’s ears drooped and the dog started whining. Nico couldn’t hear what Mrs. Nishikino said but after a brief exchange, Princess tapped the phone toward Nico and wandered disconsolately into Nico’s bedroom, sniffing everything as she went.

“Princess, stay out of there, Nico doesn’t want pretty cream hairs all over the clothes she’s wearing.” Princess huffed over her shoulder and continued as Nico remembered she was in the middle of the world’s strangest three way phone call. “Hello again, Mrs. Nishikino.”

“If you’ll text me your address, I can come get my daughter...’s dog in a few minutes. I’m sure you have a class to get to.” Maki’s mother sounded friendlier.

“Nico does. That would be a big help. I’m sorry Maki’s sick. Please tell her Nico says she better get well or Nico will have to bring her germ killer chicken soup by.”
Princess howled from Nico’s...Nico glanced over, Princess was on her bed, Nico growled and hustled back to her room. She was going to be late.

“I’m sure she’ll get your message.” Mrs. Nishikino stated, an odd tone underlying her voice, but Nico was too busy trying to one armed wrestle a dog that weighed nearly as much as she did off her bed.

“Good.” Nico grimaced at Princess; Princess flicked her tongue at the tip of Nico’s nose. Nico muttered in Princess’s ear. “Nico is not doing this for fun, pretty girl.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” Mrs. Nishikino ended the call and Nico tossed her phone toward a pillow, looping both arms around Princess’s torso and trying to leverage the stubborn canine off the bed.

“Nico’s not going to have time to look good for company now.” Nico grumbled and Princess stopped suddenly, springing off the bed and shoving Nico’s clothes toward the now disheveled future star of stage and screen. Then Princess sat, looking proud of herself, and waited. Nico frowned, brows furrowed, “Now you cooperate? Stay here. Nico has to wash up quickly.”

Nico practically sprinted to the bathroom. Fortunately, she planned to shower later, before the party. Umi had just walked into the kitchen. “Did Princess’s owner pick her up last night?”

Nico stopped, confused. “No. She’s in my bedroom.”

“Her owner?” Umi raised a disapproving eyebrow.

“No, Princess. Maki’s mom is coming to get her now.”

“Oh.” Umi shrugged, puzzled, “I thought I saw someone on the couch last night. Must have been a dream.”

Nico nodded at Umi and looked back to her own bedroom, where Princess had poked out her head, sniffing curiously, “Stay in there, you. Nico will be right back.”

“Strange.” Umi poured coffee for both of them.

“Welcome to Princess’s world.” Nico poured too little creamer into her coffee, took a swig, gagged at the bitter burn on her throat, “Please make sure she doesn’t get out.”

Umi picked up her own mug and seated herself in a position where she could intercept Princess if the dog made a run for the door. Which left Nico free to wash her face and brush her teeth. Before Maki’s mother arrived.

Princess wandered Umi-ward and Umi, while continuing to maintain a guarded and skeptic air, allowed herself to rub Princess behind the ears. Princess whined and Nico popped her head out of the bathroom at the sound, toothbrush in hand. “You can’t steal her to lure Honoka over here, Umi.”

Umi snorted, smiling at Princess, “Honoka would love her.”

“We have a make Honoka happy plan, remember. You let Kotori dress you, I already texted her notes, and we make like Tony Bennett and Lady GaGa with a classic. Your girlfriends will swoon.”

Umi sighed, ignoring Princess for a minute to face Nico, “Why did I agree again?”

Nico had ducked back to lose the toothbrush and came out, drying her face in a towel, “Because the
great Nico Ni is a genius.” Umi quirked a dubious eyebrow. Nico grumbled and continued. “You know Honoka will nag you until you sing and Nico really is tired so a duet will be easier. Plus, Nico is tired of duets with people who can’t sing. And Umi is a good friend with a great voice.”

Princess started howling something that sounded familiar and musical. Nico and Umi both stared at her, then at each other. Nico impulsively ruffled the fur all along Princess’s back, “We are not adding you to the act, pretty girl.”

“No.” Umi stood and looked sternly down at Princess, “You have not been invited to the party.”

Princess snorted, sticking out her tongue. Nico remembered her soon to arrive visitor, “Princess, stay. Umi, watch her. Nico has to put on clothes.”

Princess and Umi nodded, then glanced at each other. Princess settled down on one end of the couch, Umi poured herself another mug of coffee and took the other. Nico sneaked a peek and chuckled softly at their mutually awkward, mostly impatient postures.

Nozomi preferred not waking up too early, lingering in bed, preferably because she was having a racy dream that might or might not involve a certain blonde dancer, but when forced to be somewhere and allowed coffee and calories, Nozomi was as bright and perky as any lark. Erena had requested Nozomi stop by the theatre for a few hours before any rehearsals started. That meant 9 a.m. since the dancers were due in on their lunch breaks. So Nozomi took some extra care with her hair and made sure to pick a sweater dress that draped well.

Most of the morning had been spent going through lighting cues and discussing where on the set to throw the projections. Nozomi had been impressed with how well the environments she’d created on her laptop fit in with the colors and moods chosen by both the lighting and set designers. But now she was getting tired of going over and over the same cues again and starting to feel a bit punchy. Plus, the dancers would be arriving soon. Erena had disappeared backstage to find a Genie so she could tinker with one of the light’s focus but hadn’t reappeared so Nozomi went in search of her.

No sign of Erena when Nozomi called out, pulling herself up on the stage. The house lights weren’t on and Nozomi had left the last cue up at half strength, so the area around Jonathan Harker’s window view was minimally lit, but the rest of the stage was dark. A blinking red light a little above head height upstage right caught Nozomi’s attention. As far as she knew, there were no alarms or meters built into the wall so no reason for a blinking red light. Nozomi tilted her head, considered calling for Erena again but instead walked straight toward it to investigate. There was a click as Nozomi cleared the side curtain and a sudden screech from behind her. As Nozomi turned, a dark, flying form came toward her head as another electrical surge popped, filling Nozomi’s head with painful static.

“Uggghh.” Nozomi doubled over, head throbbing, eyes not able to focus, the sudden urge to hurl up anything she’d eaten today leaving a vile taste in her mouth.

“Nozomi!” Two voices, but only one set of hands grasping her shoulders. Eli, a frantic Eli by the voice, but Nozomi couldn’t make out her face and fell forward, unconscious.

Maki hadn’t really processed the thought of her mom in Nico’s apartment, of her mother meeting Nico. She’d heard both Nico and her mother, however, she’d been distracted by so many new discoveries about Nico. Now, she feared Nico was about to make a new discovery about her.
On her way out to meet Kotori for shopping, Umi opened the door for Dr. Nishikino. When her mother stepped into the apartment, Maki bounced up, happy to see her, but not happy to be caught out. Her mother wrapped both her arms around Maki, half lifting her off the ground and held her so tight, voice shaking, “I was so worried about you. You scared us.” Maki whined apologetically, very aware of her mother’s fear, anger and concern.

But as soon as Dr. Nishikino let go, Maki trotted to Nico. Nico frowned and stepped forward, not petting her. “Hi! I’m Nico. Thanks for coming to get Princess. She found me on the Lakefill, after rehearsal. I called Maki but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Maki was spending the night in our treehouse with her friends. Her phone was inside.” Dr. Nishikino’s tone was sharp. Maki had her head lowered, looking away.

“No wonder she’s sick.” Nico shook her head, “Your daughter doesn’t take the cold seriously enough.”

Dr. Nishikino considered for a moment and her voice, when she spoke, was stinging. “There are too many things Maki isn’t taking seriously enough right now but I’m sure she’ll recover quickly. Although, she might be too busy with her studies to socialize for awhile. I believe she’s been neglecting them.”

Princess buried herself under the throw on Nico’s couch with a whimper. The conversation was making Nico feel increasing uncomfortable, especially since Maki wasn’t here to respond to her mother’s criticisms.

“Did you bring a harness?” Nico asked, wondering if Maki’s mother had stashed a leash and collar in her coat somewhere.

Dr. Nishikino coughed, embarrassed. “No. I’m afraid I rushed right out of the house after you called.”

“It’s no wonder Princess keeps wandering away. Irresponsible dog ownership runs in the family.” Nico shook her head at Dr. Nishikino, lips pursed. “Nico will fix this.” She glanced back at Princess, who had poked her head out of the throw so it rested on the back of the couch. “You stay there.”

Dr. Nishikino and her daughter had a staring contest, neither yielding, until Nico came back from her bedroom, once again slipping her knotted scarf over Princess’s head before Princess could react. “This worked before. Just keep a tight grip on it. I left it loose and tied it with a bowline, so it won’t hurt her neck.”

Princess whined at Nico and Nico quickly kissed her snout, causing a yelp and a surprised wolf fall onto the floor, “Nico is going to take proper care of you, pretty girl, even if no one else does.”

Dr. Nishikino, frowned, arms folded over her chest, not sure how to feel about this scene as she watched her daughter scramble to regain her equilibrium.

Nico stared at her visitor expectantly, but when there was no movement, half dragged Princess over. Arm and core workout, Nico told herself, good thing. “Be careful. Nico worries.”

“I will.” Dr. Nishikino grasped the makeshift collar, feeling odd about the arrangement, but Nico expected her to treat Maki like a dog. And honestly, as she felt Maki’s trembling nervousness, she wasn’t entirely certain her daughter wouldn’t bolt. “It was nice to meet you. Thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“It’s what Nico does.” Nico stopped to pet Princess, her hand sweeping gently through fur from eye
to ear, and Princess leaned into the touch, humming.

Dr. Nishikino watched her daughter, who was watching Nico, who was opening the door so they could leave, “Hey, Mrs. Nishikino?” Nico sounded curious, but uncertain.

“Yes?”

“What’s Princess’s real name?”

Dr. Nishikino squelched a nervous giggle, part amusement, mostly exasperation as her daughter loosed a melancholy howl. This was quite the tangle Maki had gotten herself into.

“My daughter will have to tell you herself.” The answer was decisive and Dr. Nishikino strode out into the morning, a nod to Nico, her daughter at her side.

Nico watched them for a moment, unhappy at the recurring thought that everyone knew something but her. Followed by the suspicion that someone was playing a joke. Nico was still dressed for indoors not an introspective and brooding lean on the edge of cold so she closed the door on strangeness and doubts, went inside and poured herself some more coffee while looking over the Much Ado About Nothing scenes her Acting II class was working through.

Maki sat at the table, orange juice in front of her, twining Nico’s scarf around her wrist. Her mother had opted for coffee and a frown.

“Your father and I were frantic. Not to mention how Rin and Hanayo felt.”

Maki drank half the orange juice, sullen. “Nico was scared.”

“And is Nico all that mat…” Dr. Nishikino stopped herself, trying to generate some sympathy for the early thrills and tunnel vision of attraction, but overprotective parenting had had 19 years to become entrenched and it wasn’t going anywhere. “You were irresponsible, Maki, leaving like that, without even a note. Not telling Nico is irresponsible. Running around on campus as ‘Princess’ is irresponsible.” She inhaled, then threatened. “Do I need to buy you a collar and license?”

Maki dropped the glass and it rolled as the orange juice spilled out. “I’m not a dog.”

“Tell Nico that.”

Maki closed her eyes and threw her head back, shouting. “I DON’T KNOW HOW.”

“Well, you’ll have at least a week to figure it out. Your father and I want you to return home directly after class. No wandering.”

Maki shook her head, anger pushing through frustration, ears lengthening, dangerous neon green swirling into irises, lips drawn back. She shoved her chair, standing, hands gripping the table…

“Maki.” Her mother’s voice was soft, but unshakeable. “Control yourself.”

Maki raised her hands, relaxing her shoulders, her voice resolute. “I’m going to a party tonight.”

Her mother watched as the lavender reclaimed her daughter’s eyes, noticing the depths of worry Maki couldn’t hide. “Be home by 1 a.m.”

Maki nodded.
“And tell Nico.”

Maki transformed and whipped out of the room, her clothes falling to the floor. There was a thud as she worked to slide open the door to the backyard. And then the howls began.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy!

Writing this as I listen to The Tragically Hip's "I'm A Werewolf, Baby." There's a second playlist, to start the list of things I forgot to mention while Shrewing. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLko9fiFcKQ06UZtyua28FaegPpAJTsoiT

And last night, Asuka A05 (Tumblr) asked me about posting some Casual Lunacy fanart she'd done, which can be found here: https://asuka-05.tumblr.com/post/163990389199 Take a look if you need a cute and cuddly moment.

Which reminded me I never mentioned that kuro--sawa (also of Tumblr) also did some fan art a month ago (cast was getting off book, always a hectic time), which can be found here: https://kuro--sawa.tumblr.com/post/162643098258/my-take-on-werewolf-maki-from-lonelypond-s-fic Also cute, and I love that you can see the one canine tooth biting into Maki's underlip.

So thanks for that. It's cool to see different takes. I think that's part of why fanfiction and fanart appeals to me. I'm a detail person and it's fascinating to see how minor tweaks can change worlds and dynamics.

Taming Of The Shrew finished off well; lots of laughter. It was fun to watch all the hard work everyone put in onstage.

Thanks for stopping by. I appreciate your support. Now, I have to get in a party mood (ノ・̀'_-)☆

Want to help? Drop a song for the KotoHonoUmi Lunar New Year extravaganza in the comments, please and thank you ┌{(☆o☆)}┘
What to do about Nico? First, don’t lie. Maki picked up her phone and texted.

M: Hi, Nico! Thanks for last night.

N:Σ(゜゜)

N: Oh, Princess (✿ヘヘ) She wasn’t a problem. I just worry about her.

Maki hesitated but then just fast typed and hit send.

M: I want to talk to you about something. Can we walk to the party together?

N: Sure. Nico has to work and then shower, but stop by my apartment at 9 and we can head over. I’ll text you the address ٩(θ‿θ)۶

M: See you then.

Odd message, Nico thought as she put her phone back in her coat pocket, but Maki was a bit odd anyway. But cute. With the eyes. And the legs. And the mischievous, tooth biting into the underlip grin. Nico hoped it was a cute thing Maki wanted to talk about, like an invitation to dinner or something. Nico had no time, but she might work out something, if Maki asked nicely.

Maki had stepped carefully around her mother all morning and texted a sincere “Sorry” to Rin and Hanayo. She’d spent most of the afternoon in her treehouse, rehearsing things she could say to Nico, imagining things Nico might say to her. None of them seemed right, all of them gave her a twitch. Running off some stress was the only part of the day that her mind felt clear, although she was careful to do it in human form and found herself missing Rin’s cheerfully optimistic company. But Rin would just say blurt it out and Maki knew she couldn’t. When the sun finally started to set, Maki swung down from the platform and went inside to shower. Her mother had gone out, her father was
sitting, relaxed on the sectional, watching a documentary.

“Hi, Papa.”

“Hi, Maki.” Her father turned off the television and turned around to look at Maki, “How are you?” Maki shrugged.

“Poetry not helping?” Dr. Nishikino chuckled; Maki flushed. “Your mother liked Nico.”

Maki shrugged again, still blushing a little, slouched, hands in the pocket of her hoodie.

“Maki, talk to me.” Her father leaned on his arm, worry lining his face.

Maki frowned, then climbed over to another leg of the sectional, “What did you say?”

Her father chuckled again, “When you meet my mother, she might bite you.”

Maki stared at him, sure it was a joke. “Really, Papa?”

Now her father shrugged, his expression playful. “I loved your mother’s sense of humor. I thought it might help to appeal to it.”

Maki laid down, staring at the ceiling, grudgingly admitting, “I don’t know that much about Nico.”

“You like her, right? And she likes you. That’s a good start, even if you don’t have something in common like a class.” Maki heard her father shift his position.

“She likes music. We talked about Cole Porter.” Suddenly Nico’s voice singing filled her head “I get a kick every time I see you, Standing there before me, I get a kick though it’s clear to see, You obviously don’t adore me.” What would it be like to tell Nico and see fear in her bright crimson eyes instead of warmth, to smell dismissal instead of welcome. Whatever Nico’s initial reaction was, Maki would know immediately. And that terrified her.

“Remember: ‘Faint heart never won fair lady.’” Dr. Nishikino tapped his daughter’s knee.

“Huh?” Maki glanced up at her father, confused.


Fortune favors the strong. Maki needed to be strong enough to look Nico in the eye and say “I’m a…” She couldn’t even finish the thought in her head and leapt up, “I have to shower.”

“Your mother wants you home by 1.” Her father relaxed again, his eyes sympathetic, “If you need a ride or a little more time, text me.”

“I will.”

Maki had left herself most of the evening for choosing an outfit. She heard her mother and father talking when she stopped in the kitchen to eat a quick dinner warmed up in the microwave and wished she could have just run down to Cup o’ for a sandwich made by Nico. And a smile. Mostly a smile. She turned up her speakers and let Sugar for Sugar’s ‘Bizarre Love Triangle’ cover blast.
Every time I see you falling
I get down on my knees and pray
Waiting for that final moment
You say the words that I can’t say

Right. Grey cashmere t-shirt, Black blazer with jagged white stripes across the back and black pants tucked into kicky boots. Maki grabbed a slouched fedora and a beret to compare the two, but opted instead for a gray and white NU wool bobble hat to pull over her hair, which wouldn’t maintain its shape anyway. It was like her nerves were deciding to rearrange the follicles every two minutes. She hoped her nerves wouldn’t decide on their own to rearrange her ears. Then she bounded downstairs, stopping by the table in the foyer where a fresh array of flowers always greeted visitors. That’s where her mother ambushed her.

“Maki.”

“Mama.”

Another staring contest and then the older woman smiled at her daughter, grabbing her for a quick hug. “Have a good time.”

“Thanks Mama.” Maki felt her heart pounding in her chest. This was really going to happen. She was going to be strong, no matter how much her head was spinning with fear and want. Everything would change after tonight. Nico would…well, that Maki couldn’t know, so she plucked the freshest rose out of the vase and ventured out, howling bravely into the night as she closed the door behind her. She smiled when she heard Rin’s encouraging response echo. Her boots made no noise in the new snowfall and the moon glittered brightly at her, winking from its perch above the trees as her pace increased.

Nico had neatened up the kitchen, showered, eaten a small dinner, and was now fixing her makeup. Kotori and Honoka’s place was too close to drive to, parking would be a nightmare, but that left the shoe problem. Boots obviously, there’d been snow, but Nico’s purse was too small to stash heels in, she’d have to settle for ballet flats, unless Kotori had something near her size. Purse and parka at hand, she was ready for her escort.

A knock. Polite. Maki on the doorstep, no coat, of course, just a modish blazer, blocked out in black and white with a knit grey t-shirt underneath it and black pants dusted with snow above the bootline. A nice match, colorwise, for Nico’s most stylish of little black dresses. A good omen for the night, Nico thought cheerfully as she greeted Maki with a wave. Maki’s face was reddened from cold and wind. She entered at Nico’s invite, pulling the hat off her head, her hair falling in front of her eyes.

“Hi, Nico.” Maki’s eyes were hidden behind her red hair, but the smile was adorably nervous, the voice beguiling and Nico felt herself pull in air nervously as her chest contracted.

“You look nice, Maki.” Nico watched as Maki pulled something from behind her back, a nearly budded red rose, holding it out in front of her.

“You look amazing. Thanks for letting me walk you to the party.” Maki’s voice was soft, shy.

Nico took the rose, glanced at it for a moment, then broke off the stem, reached a hand out to Maki’s lapel, slowly searching along its length for a buttonhole, and sliding the rose in carefully when her fingers found one.
In the dim light of her foyer, across every spectrum, Nico glowed. Maki raised a hand to stroke Nico’s, shock in her lavender eyes from what Nico could see of them. Nico wanted a closer look so she reached out, sweeping the hair back from Maki’s temple to her ear, sliding her fingers through silky hair, breath catching, feeling Maki lean into her touch, a soft hum vibrating through the redhead, the lavender eyes luminous and unfocused.

Maki couldn’t help it. It felt SO good after all the worry. Nico’s touch was a familiar comfort by now in her wolf form and to feel Nico’s hand brush tingles across her skin and through her hair in this form was too much. With every breath, Nico’s essence became sharper, stronger, more magical, cocooning her and Maki felt herself measuring the new sensations bolting through her body with each heartbeat, pulsing with each surge of blood and breath, pressing her Nico-ward. Then Nico stopped, her hand frozen, breath released in a shocked gasp, fingertips hovering over Maki’s ear. Maki woke up from her dream to find crimson eyes wide with shock, disbelief, awareness. Nico stepped back, almost tripping, confused, heart racing almost as madly as Maki’s. She knew. Maki read it everywhere, instantly, in Nico’s touch before she broke away, in her eyes, in the way her heart skipped, her body withdrew. Nico knew. And it was over.

“Nico, I can ex…”

Nico flipped her hand up, palm out, lips tight, words hissed through, sputtering while Maki cringed, “Princess??!” Then Nico’s voice revved near its volume max, her face darkened by anger, betrayal. “Everyone else knew, didn’t they, Maki? Rin, Hanayo, your mother…” Nico laughed, her voice quieter but colder, ”of course, they did. Nico’s the only idiot. Worried about a ‘dog’.”

“N…no Nico, you’re not an…they…”So many emotions coming from Nico, a confusing wave of sensation Maki couldn’t buffer.


Maki stretched to touch Nico, but Nico turned away. Maki thought she saw tears. Oh gods, this mess was worse than fear. Panic was close to triggering the transformation, but Maki flattened her hands against her thighs, counting her breaths, inhaling deeply, trying to calm every flight/fight instinct pricking at her.

“No, Nico it wasn’t like that. You’re great. No one laughed. They were all too busy yelling at me.” Maki realized she spoke a little too loudly when her words echoed in the foyer. “I’m sorry.” she whispered.

Nico shot a look of contempt at over her shoulder.

“Let me explain…” Maki felt her ears flatten as Nico stomped past her, the wolf starting to fill in her senses, panic ebbing, boldness surging.

“Nico can’t be late. People are expecting a performance.” Nico zipped up her coat and turned, hands on her hips, eyes red tides of turmoil. Maki started to respond, stepping forward, but then Nico snapped “Heel,” disdain and disappointment rip currents in her voice.

Maki fell back, startled at the bitter splash of Nico’s command, head hanging down, sullen, dread oozing everywhere.

“Nico doesn’t have time for this. I have an audience waiting, friends to see, people to entertain.” Nico chirped, in a forced, bright tone, her eyes a blazing storm. “Nico is going to be the hit of the party.” Then Nico’s voice lowered, sharpened, edged with an emotion Maki couldn’t classify, one
that demanded she yield. “You WILL talk later.”

Maki gulped, following behind Nico as she stepped outside. Even without a tail, Maki’s posture screamed defeat. The wall of Nico’s embarrassment and bewilderment buzzed between them, anger the most minor theme. How to break through that? Maki started to howl, but froze in fear when Nico spun quickly, arms crossed, lips set in a critical sneer.


Maki nodded, then remembered, “I have to be home by 1 a.m.”

Nico snorted, “Isn’t it usually midnight?”

Maki tilted her head, confused, but Nico ignored her, heading once again toward the party, grumbling as she stamped her feet through the snow, “cold...doesn’t even get jokes...what is Nico supposed to...but cute...damn pouty puppy eyes...uugghhh...Nico doesn't have time...”

Somewhere in the torrent of Nico’s grumbles, Maki heard a chance.
Chapter Summary

As promised, we have achieved level: party. There’s karaoke and a scene on a balcony. Enjoy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WITH A BOLT OF YOU

Maki looked beautiful in the soft lighting of the foyer, adorable, shy, reaching out with the rose. Elated, fizzing with anticipation about all the evening promised, Nico slid her fingers up the smooth fabric of Maki’s lapel, settling the rose in. Feeling the redhead’s heart pound, Nico suddenly realized how near she’d stepped to Maki, how right it felt. And familiar. Maki’s eyes were hidden, screened by her tousled hair, but Nico had to see them, her hand brushing through silken hair as Maki leaned into her touch, humming contentedly, and Nico relaxed at how easy this all felt, Maki vibrating against her palm, so warm, head lowered, eyes...Nico was close enough to see the tiny flecks of green pulsing in the lavender glow, neon green, unnatural green, Princess green...Awareness punched into Nico. Princess. Time froze.

“Pouty puppy eyes...Nico should have listened to Nico...ha!...barked at Nico....all over Nico’s room....sleeping on Nico’s couch...laughing at Nico with her friends...friends didn’t know her name, Nico is so stupid...” Nico picked up speed; Maki matched her pace, keeping within arms’s distance of Nico. Nico glanced over her shoulder, shook her head quickly and then picked up her pace again before Maki could say anything...”Nico is too busy for this...”

Maki’s sense of everything spinning out of control increased with each step and each grumble of Nico’s, both booming to her hearing, even in non wolf form. Nico had said ‘you will talk later’ and ‘no running off” so surely Maki would get a chance to explain that none of this was on purpose. Nico had just smelled friendly and pleasant...or would that description get her in trouble as well? People usually said looked pretty or was smart or seemed kind or acted nice or dressed cute. Smell came with bad connotations. Humans relied on their noses so much less than other species, even though it affected so many decisions. They just refused to acknowledge its importance. Or didn’t realize. Nico must like Maki’s scent...she’d been happy to have Maki snuggle into her side while watching that movie that made Nico laugh so many times. So, if Nico felt comfortable around Maki in wolf form, Maki just needed to get Nico to realize Maki without the fur could be equally enjoyable company.

Nico turned into a walkway, slowing her pace slightly. Must be the location of the party. She opened the door with a key, confusing Maki until she remembered Umi must also spend a lot of time there and it made sense for Nico to have an emergency key.

Umi was the first person Maki sensed, determination mixed into cedar and sea, tweed skirt and vest sharp, standing resolutely in front of Nozomi, amusement mingling with the scent of sage, flowing flower patterned dress rippling. Nozomi was frightened. Had Umi done something? Standing behind Umi, blue eyes narrowed was a blonde woman, green cable turtleneck, gray pants, earth and mint
and apple.

“Hand it over, Tojo. This is an alcohol free party and I intend to keep it that way.” Umi gritted out, hand extended.

“I’m sure Nozomi isn’t smuggling anything.” the blonde spoke in Nozomi’s defense, although her voice cracked a little and Maki smelled doubt.

Nozomi giggled, her arms thrown open, sleeves loose “Why don’t you search me, Umi?” Nozomi winked salaciously, leaning over Umi with a jiggle and Umi nearly crawled up the blonde to get away. “I’m sure Kotori wouldn’t be thrilled at the way you’re treating her friends.”

Nico sighed, stopped, Maki nearly bumping her. “Hold this,” Nico hissed as she shoved her purse in Maki’s midriff. Then she crept up on Nozomi, quickly stepping around her, reaching a hand down where Maki couldn’t see and pulling out a flask, “Here you go, Umi. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union would be proud.” Nico patted Nozomi on the shoulder, “Weak, my friend.” Then she winked at the blonde “Don’t try anything I haven’t.”

Maki dropped the purse, Umi spluttered, Eli went pale and Nozomi’s raucous laughter attracted the attention of the entire party as she smacked a kiss on Nico’s cheek, “You are intoxicating, Nico-chi.”

“You’re welcome.” Maki couldn’t tell if Nico had said that to Umi or Nozomi but both nodded as if she had meant it for them, “Come on, Neruda by Moonlight.” Nico scooped up her purse and grabbed Maki’s hand to pull her past the crowd at the door. Maki was too busy staring at her hand tingling in Nico’s fingers, the grip warm and strong, to notice where they were heading.

“Nico!” A trill of a voice and the soft, feathery smells that surrounded Umi and Honoka drew Maki’s attention as Nico released her hand.

“Kotori!” Nico waved her hand at the red lanterns with the painted figures of the Chinese Zodiac hanging everywhere, making the dim room seem like a series of light pools, “This is gorgeous.”

Kotori, dressed in a very non seasonal crimson sarong with a gold floral border, glanced past Nico, her gaze lingering on Maki while whispering ‘so is that’ in an intake of breath.

“Maki, this is Kotori, host of the party and the best clothing designer you’ll ever meet. And Nico knows the best. Kotori, this is Maki…” Nico paused, frowning, searching for words.

Maki stepped forward hand extended, “I have the honor of escorting Nico. For tonight, anyway. It’s very nice to meet you, Kotori. I appreciate Honoka inviting me.”

Kotori giggled, “Honoka was right, you are dreamy.”

Nico glared at both of them as Maki bowed her head, acknowledging the compliment. Nico pushed Maki further into the party, muttering again, “So now you can talk.”

“Greeting the host is expected.” Maki explained.

Nico’s trajectory put them in a quiet corner lit by a rabbit lantern, not yet claimed by any of the other 40 or so party goers. Maki recognized a few scents, Kashima, who really did need to not bathe in cologne, most prominent.

Nico snapped, eyes bright “So you can be polite. Is keeping things from Nico polite?”

Maki’s throat started to close as Nico hovered…”I...I thought you didn’t want...to talk...party...
Nico kept staring, considering, arms crossed, fingers of one hand tapping her elbow, while Maki tried to sort through the confusion of feelings she was sensing from Nico...anxiety, curiosity, concern...one that Maki was having a hard time classifying, protectiveness? Another different and even more confusing cocktail of sensations just seemed to be pulling Maki Nico-ward, without any active effort on Maki’s part.

Without warning, Nico chirped “Nico has to go.” and rushed forward, pulling off her parka, not leaving any time for Maki to clear out of the way and once again, Maki’s arms were full of Nico, for one sharp, vibrating, glorious moment, and then Nico bounced away, leaving Maki with her parka, “Be polite and put that away for Nico.”

Maki nodded, resisting the urge to let her nose dive into Nico’s coat while she watched Nico adjust her own hair with a quick hand as she approached a group of partygoers, smiling cheerfully.

Maki had taken refuge on the balcony. She didn’t know anyone at the party and Nico was ignoring her, except for an occasional glare Nico threw her way, barely interrupting Nico’s flitting through the entire open room of the loft, flirting, hands on shoulders, arms, lips pursed, kissing cheeks, throwing in a few quick dance steps here and there, once letting Kashima twirl her. And that was when Maki decided the balcony was a good hiding place.

She pulled out her phone to text Hanayo and Rin.

M: Nico knows.

Rin’s response was immediate. She must have been in the middle of a game.

R: (脒) Now we can play!

M: No, Rin. Nico’s mad at me. She thinks we were all laughing at her.

H: Oh.

M: Oh?

H: (‘A’) I was afraid that might happen.

M: ? And you didn’t...never mind. What do I do now?

R: KISS HER (∼๑з๑∼)

M: NOT HELPING

H: Did she say anything?

M: “You WILL talk later” but now she’s ignoring me unless she’s glaring ●.○

H: Just be patient, Maki. I’m sure everything will be fine (つд´)つ

R: Kayochin is right. You know Nico likes you ♡●●♡

M: No, I don’t.
The karaoke had started and Maki was only half paying attention to the party. You might have thought no alcohol would improve people’s vocal performances, but no, they all just sounded tense. She heard an unexpectedly jazzy lead in and suddenly, Nico came into sharp focus again, excited, scared. Maki dropped her phone into her pocket and stepped back into the room, just as Nico lifted her leg up onto a coffee table, arching her slipped foot, Umi standing next to her, arms crossed, bow tie not an inch askew, clucking disapprovingly. Maki could feel all the heart rates that just skipped faster, the sudden surge of attention focused on Nico as Nico winked at Umi, and then flipped her already short dress hem up to adjust the lacy garter on her thigh high stocking. People stepped away as Maki’s low growl turned into a whine while Nico’s fingers traced their way up the stocking. Nico must have heard the growl because her eyes blazed at Maki for a moment and then her voice rolled out, slowly, sensuously as she turned in, beckoning Umi.

“In olden days a glimpse of stocking,
Was looked on as something shocking
Now heaven knows
Anything goes”

Umi took Nico’s hand and spun her out, a mischievous wink as she picked up the duet

“Good authors too who once knew better words
Now only use four letter words,
Writing prose,
Anything goes”

Maki was in some kind of a new torture zone, sensations lancing into her awareness from so many people, so many angles, while Nico’s voice teased and twisted every nerve Maki had. Nico’s performance pummeled all her senses until Maki was breathless as Nico draped herself around Umi. Maki desperately wanted to return to the balcony, swallow the saliva gathering in her mouth, the want whimpering out through her lips, then vault to the ground and escape the tension knotting her into a statue but Nico’s voice had cast her in stone.

And then the duet ended. Maki took the three steps backward, and slammed the door shut behind her, hanging her head over the balcony railing, breaths too fast. No howling, no running away, she told herself, which left only echoes of want. Nico did like her, Rin was right. There was something there when Nico focused on her, something that pulled at Maki so tightly breath and thinking were cut off, something demanding, but nothing she could articulate. Ignoring the urge was impossible but Maki wasn’t an animal, although the nearly full moon was not her friend at the moment, pouring wild temptations into the confusing swirl.

And then another presence: Honoka, jasmine, honey, cinnamon, Christen Press Red Stars jersey, ripped jeans, grabbing Maki, dragging her back to the party, “You have to sing with me, Maki! Nico stole Umi, so I get you.”

“W...what...wait..” Maki tried to hold Honoka back but the ginger’s momentum dragged them both forward.

“You know One Direction, right? Kotori’s going to play “Beautiful.” The music started, Honoka released her and started to sing, urging Maki to join her, blue eyes full of eager hope. Maki didn’t know where to look so she started singing and copying Honoka’s dance moves, quickly catching the ginger’s enthusiasm, matching her daring, happy for a release. Honoka flipped her hair and shimmied toward Umi while Maki turned to where Nico was gawking at her

"Baby you light up my world like nobody else
The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed
The way you smile at the ground it ain’t hard to tell"

Nico looked away, Maki grinned, suddenly feral, nearly at her ear.

“You don’t know oh-oh!
You don’t know you’re beautiful!”

Nico slid behind someone, and Maki laughed, dancing back to Honoka and doing a goofy modified Charleston at her, which Honoka copied. Their audience cheered.

“Right now I’m looking at you and I can’t believe…” Maki caught Nico staring again and winked, wondering why Nico was getting angry. Nico huffed and shuffled her position again.

They finished with a bow, Honoka boisterously wrapping up Maki in a side hug. So much like Rin, so Maki enjoyed the affection and the physicality. It was nice not to have to hold back. Nico had started a conversation with someone Maki didn’t know, so Maki let Honoka drag her into Umi’s orbit. People were rushing to surround them, congratulate them, but neither cared. Honoka was focused on getting to Umi and Maki was trying to figure out where Nico had ended up.

“See, if Nico can borrow you for an awesome song, I can borrow Maki,” Honoka announced proudly as they neared her girlfriend.

“People are not bartering units,” Umi stated sternly, but her smile was pleased as she undid her bow tie and top button. “Thank you for assisting Honoka, Maki. I am sorry we were not properly introduced at the door.”

“You were busy.” Maki took off her jacket, too hot after the dancing, sweat making her t-shirt cling to her back.

“Yes. Nozomi enjoys ignoring both rules and the comfort of others.” The smile leveled to a frown line, although Maki found the specificity of Umi’s complaint amusing. “How’s Princess?”

Maki startled and Nico exhibited werewolf levels of hearing acuity and began shifting toward them, “...Safe. I have to get a drink.”

Umi nodded, “Proper hydration is vital.”

Maki dodged in the direction of the punch bowl and across the path of Kashima, who was brandishing fangs at everything dainty and dandy and now targeted Maki.

“Hello, beautiful,” Kashima’s voice dropped, smile marred by prosthetic fangs, head tilted for a thrust at Maki’s neck. “Have we met?”

Maki growled a yes, nearly full voice, Kashima dropped back, frightened, the other party goers in the vicinity fled and then Nico was right there, stripping the fangs out of Kashima’s mouth.

“No biting.” She glared straight at Maki, who tried to make her eyes as wide and innocent as possible.

“No!” Kashima wailed, holding her hand to her mouth.

“Save it for rehearsal, Kashima.” Nico slid her arm through Maki’s, “I have to talk to Hairy Styles, Jr. here so I’ll see you later.”

“Can’t I be Liam?” Maki teased.
“No.” Nico dragged Maki out onto the balcony, scowling at the couple currently occupying, her foot tapping impatiently until they moved.

Nico forced Maki against the balcony rail, voice shaking with anger, “You didn’t tell Nico you could sing.”

“I...” Maki started to stumble through an apology and then realized they weren’t talking about the wolf thing. Why weren’t they talking about the wolf thing? Nico continue to fret, annoyed, muttering nothing Maki could make sense of, then Nico remembered her audience and her tone became accusatory.


“Hey. Nico is serious here.” Her brow shadowed as she got closer to Maki’s face, “You can’t just go and upstage Nico at a party. Nico is a professional. Umi and I rehearsed; we had choreography.”

Maki shrugged, still amused. “You didn’t like my performance?”

“Not the point.” Nico's arms were now on either side of Maki and her intensity fascinated the werewolf. Nico was gleaming. Maki felt herself swallow again, still thirsty.

“You glow” came out of Maki’s mouth before she realized she was speaking.

Nico paused. She was so close, Maki thought. Her lips were almost as bright as her eyes, Maki couldn’t decide which to stare at. Nico’s fingers under Maki’s chin tipped her head enough that their eyes locked onto each other. Maki couldn’t tell whose heart was beating more wildly. Nico really was intoxicating, Maki thought, as her nerves fizzed with new thrills.

Nico sighed and pulled back, shivering. Maki instinctively wrapped her jacket around the smaller woman, lingering for a moment, and Nico pulled it close. Maki put a nervous hand in her pocket and remembered she’d brought the scarf along.

“Here. This is yours.” She handed it to a surprised Nico, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I...I didn’t know how.” Maki paused, willing every ounce of charm she’d ever had into her eyes, “I like you, Nico. So much.”

Nico twisted the scarf, considering for a moment, then gently wrapped the fabric around Maki’s wrist and forearm, slowly, her fingers delicate, strong, her touch dancing, even through the thin fabric of Maki’s shirt.

“Did you get bitten?” Nico’s question was disarmingly casual, her hand reluctantly dropping Maki’s.

Maki was still processing sensations, trying to channel them into memory, not action, “Huh?”

Nico snorted at Maki’s obliviousness and tried again, “Are the cute ears contagious, you know, like herpes?”


Nico nodded, humming, stepping closer to Maki, seeing if she could kindle that look in the redhead’s eye again, that mix of surprise and need that Nico suddenly craved, just like the moment in her foyer. The humming was getting under Maki’s hairs and she trembled as Nico slid a hand up her arm, through her hair, pulling her head down.
“Good.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this clarifies the reveal a bit, without disappointing. Sorry for any confusion. I do hope you are enjoying the party so far ; )
I'm Not Sure What This Could Mean

Chapter Summary

Party still on...we interrupt a scene on the balcony, check in on other partygoers and shenanigans ensue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All passion, all pressure, no finesse...due to Nico’s vast experience with kissing...onstage, she’d felt all finesse, no passion, but this, Maki’s lips pushing into hers, this was dizzying, this lightness, this joy, was this what lifted the wings of butterflies as they dazzled, soaring into the ecstatic air? An amazing, giddy ride until Maki flinched when Maki’s fang bit into her lip. Maki pulled back with a worried whimper and Nico was quick to make eye contact, still holding Maki’s head. This was a familiar feel, Maki skittish, eyes wide, spooked, ready to run, would she go over the balcony if Nico kissed her on the nose? But instead, Nico smiled as Maki looked away, mumbling an apology.

“Look at me, pretty girl.” Nico whispered into Maki’s ear, her fingers stroking Maki’s hair, and the lavender eyes shyly met hers, “Nico is fine.” Nico laughed, “Nico is beyond fine.” Maki tilted her head, curious and Nico stepped closer, standing on her toes, gently pressing a kiss against Maki’s yielding lips, leaning in as the kiss got bolder, her hand moving to Maki’s waist, holding the redhead steady. Maki’s arms were wrapped around Nico’s torso, lifting her off the ground, which Nico barely noticed, as light headed and hearted as she felt at that moment.

The balcony door slid open, then closed. A pause, then it opened again and there was a cough. Nico recognized the cough and pulled Maki closer before she broke the kiss. The redhead seemed aware of nothing but Nico, her eyes eagerly searching Nico’s expression for some hint as to what happens next.

“Umi.” Nico watched her roommate in her peripheral vision. Umi was almost as jumpy as Maki, looking everywhere else.

Umi shook herself and stepped forward. “Kotori wants us to do the encore we rehearsed.”

“Nico is busy.” Nico informed her roommate, her free hand teasing the hair at the back of Maki’s neck so she could feel the redhead shiver.

Umi’s response was dry mischief, “Is the future star of stage and screen ill? Your audience awaits.”

Nico half turned her head with a growl, winking at Maki, who giggled, “You have two girlfriends of your own, Umi. Let Nico have a chance to get one.”

“Let me remind you that house rules apply even when I’m not at home, Nico. No sleepovers without advance notice.” Umi declared.

Nico really was feeling giddy so her response was meant to amuse Maki, “You didn’t mind last night.”

“I KNEW IT. She was on the couch.” Umi’s indignation triggered an unusually fierce accusation.
Maki must have changed in the middle of the night, Nico realized. Umi hadn’t had a dream. Nico fumbled for a response, not having meant to…”No, Umi, that’s not what I meant.” Nico could feel Maki trembling, Nico needed Umi to go back to the party. This really was confusing. “Nico was joking. I meant Princess. What, do you think Maki is a dog? Rude.”

Maki yelped, Nico closed her eyes, cursing in her head, but when she opened them, Umi looked more confused than angry.

“No.” Umi stated slowly, not sure what the mood was turning into.

Nico went on the attack, “Didn’t I find you last weekend on the couch, on the bottom of Kotori Honoka pile, with NO advance warning.” She let disappointment color her voice, “Nico’s heart skipped a few beats when she woke up to make breakfast. Such lacey und…”

Umi backpedaled, forgetting to slide open the door, pausing to say something, mouth gaping open, and then just running back to the party. Nico fell back against the balcony with a chuckle, her hands dropping to her sides.

“That secret identity thing really does get complicated.” Nico frowned, glancing at the taller girl next to her. Maki nodded, eyes barely glancing away from Nico’s lips. “But Umi won’t be back to bother us, although she might send Honoka.”

Maki’s phone went off. She read the text and frowned.

“What is it, gorgeous and can’t take her eyes off Nico?” Nico wondered, smirking, dropping her head on Maki’s shoulder while Maki nearly dropped her phone.

“Mama reminding me to be home at 1.”

Nico grabbed Maki’s phone, typed quickly and hit send.

M: Hi. This is Nico, Maki told me and I still have some questions. I’ll make sure she gets home by 2.

Maki took her phone back, after her mom texted agreement. “Questions?”

“Well, if your mom asks, yes. But since you did...” Nico turned to face Maki, her fingers again running through the silky red strands, their tips exerting gentle pressure to bring Maki even closer as the green started to swirl through the lavender and a low growl built in the back of Maki’s throat. Maki’s face was close enough to Nico that she nudged Nico’s cheek with her nose, taking a breath and a moment to really be aware of Nico, magic and musk and peach and coffee and vanilla, brighter than the incandescent moon, shattering the pull of night and impulse, tearing through worn urges with fresh impulses Maki couldn’t yet name.

Lots of movement, Kotori thought as she remixed the punch bowl. Good sign, people were circulating through different groups, Honoka’s playlist was the perfect undercurrent and Nico wouldn’t be monopolizing the balcony much longer. Maybe Honoka could convince Maki to sing again. That had sent a thrill through the room, following up on the buzz from Nico and Umi’s duet.

Anju broke away from the clump of actors she was talking to and approached, her severe black pencil skirt and white frilly blouse a severe contrast to Kotori’s colorful splash.

“This is SO much fun.” She gushed, flipping a hand through her cinnamon hair. Kotori smiled. It
was always interesting to see people outside of classes and work. Kotori had noticed Anju very methodically working the crowd, always keeping in sight of Kashima, usually standing in a pose that emphasized the side slit of her skirt. As if cued, Kashima now drifted their way.

“Everyone seems happy.” Kotori poured ginger ale into what was a dark purple mix until it lightened enough.

Anju picked up a cup at the same time as Kotori and Kashima swept up, grabbing the ladle, “Allow me. Such lovely ladies should always have someone at their beck and call.”

Kotori giggled, but Anju raised an eyebrow, letting Kashima fill her cup, “Are you volunteering, Kashima?”

Kashima bowed, managing somehow to put the ladle back in the punchbowl and not sling liquid everywhere, “For someone as enchanting as you, I would go to the farthest corners of the world.”

Kotori briefly wondered if Kashima realized a globe wasn’t squared off anywhere. But Kashima in action was too entertaining to watch to quibble about facts and accuracy. It was all smooth and slick and charm and it worked so well. Anju had wrapped an arm around Kashima’s, letting the taller actress lead as they made their way to another group. Now, what was taking Umi so long?

“Nozomi!” Kotori drifted up, a slight grimace on her face. Eli suspected she had heard Nozomi’s last comment.

“Kotori!” Nozomi bowed to the designer, “you have the most amazing taste. The decorations and music are so lively. How did you end up with U…”

Eli could see a crisis coming and stepped in, “Everyone seems to be having a good time. I’m trying to convince Nozomi to sing with me when you start up the karaoke again.”

“Umi’s gone to get Nico.” Kotori cheered at the thought of another flirty Umi performance. “What do you want to sing?”

“I’m not that familiar with popular music.” Eli draped an arm over Nozomi’s shoulders, hoping to exert a stabilizing influence.

“Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?” Nozomi slurred. Kotori winced and Eli groaned.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think Nozomi’s feeling well. She had a…” Eli started to explain.

“Hush, Eli. Don’t give away my secrets. Or I won’t tell you anymore.” Nozomi threatened, while raising a flirty finger to her lips, and then latched onto to a random partygoer, leaving Kotori and Eli staring awkwardly after her.

“I should stay with her.” Eli was following Nozomi’s path, “Do you know where Nico is? She might
be able to help?”

Kotori nodded, “I’ll tell her.”

“Thanks!”

Time had passed in a pleasantly buzzy blur and Nico’s fingers were tracing the muscles of Maki’s back as the kissing practicum continued, the younger girl still pulsing forward in a dangerously distracting way that made Nico just want to forget her current location, her plans for tomorrow and Maki’s curfew.

Maki’s senses were both out of control and deadened to anything but Nico. It was the strangest feeling. The slightest brush of Nico’s fingers or hair or Nico’s breath on her lips and skin would register seemingly infinite sensations. Maki’s awareness became a tunnel vision of every sense but that as she closed her eyes, getting more and more wrapped up in a tangle of ruby, sable and thrill. She couldn’t control the whimpers rising in her throat or the growls when Nico paused and Maki felt herself surging forward to recapture Nico’s attention. So the voice of her host sounding to her left was a complete surprise and Maki yelped and would have gone over the side of the balcony if Nico hadn’t immediately wrapped both arms around the werewolf’s torso as an anchor.

Kotori didn’t apologize, ask questions or tease, although she did let her eyes linger over the sight of Nico with a very mussed and nervous Maki pressed tightly against her.

Kotori sighed, “Nozomi’s causing problems.”

“Figures,” Nico muttered, still focused on Maki, who was trying to calm herself by breathing deeply, bosom rising and falling. Which was certainly not encouraging Nico to let go. “What about Eli?”

“She asked if I knew where you were.”

Nico reluctantly let one hand drop from Maki’s waist and Maki relaxed. Nico smiled and stepped back. “You wait here and howl quietly or something. I’ll be right back.”

Maki nodded, Kotori watching curiously as the redhead stepped back from Nico and leaned gracefully against the balcony. Nico pressed a quick kiss to her cheek, “I won’t be long.” Nico shoved her hands into the pockets of Maki’s very warm jacket and followed Kotori into the party.

“NOZOMI!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The shout electrified the entire party. Nico and Kotori both took off for the upper loft where Umi’s voice was booming from. Honoka took a turn wide and nearly caused Kotori to fall when they met at the bottom of the stairs. Nico sprinted, ignoring the tangle next to her. Honoka always ended up on her feet...eventually...and Kotori was used to her. What Nico was worried about was Umi killing Nozomi, although the charlatan probably deserved it. Nico tore through the curtain blocking the view of the bedroom area and Umi was supporting herself on a chair, Nozomi was on the king sized platform bed, straddling Eli, whose face couldn’t be seen because Nozomi was working her sweater over her head. Nico heard muffled pleas and felt slightly sorry for the blonde, but if she were planning to seriously date Nozomi, this was her fate. Nozomi got the sweater off, ignoring Umi, and after she tossed it to the side, dove in for a kiss, her hand sliding under the cup of Eli’s blue sports bra. Eli whimpered and Umi paled. Nico decided the best thing to do was remove Nozomi from the blonde. And then the party. At some point, Maki had made her way through the crowd and was watching with wide eyes. Probably too educational, Nico
thought as she grabbed Nozomi by the shoulder, “Yo, Grabby, get off the blonde.”

Nozomi managed to flip a confused Eli while frowning at Nico, “Geez, Nico-chi. Since you moved in with Umi, you’re no fun anymore.”

“This isn’t fun, Nozomi. This is crazy.” Nico handed Eli her sweater and the blonde managed to sit up, flushed, not looking anyone in the eye. Honoka was supporting Umi while Kotori kept the rest of the party back from the loft. Tsubasa had managed to sneak through and was lurking in a corner, with her phone out. Maki was paying more attention to her than the mess with Nozomi, Nico realized and wondered why. But then Nozomi grabbed for her and Nico had to concentrate on breaking the hold before Nozomi did something even stupider than getting to second base in Umi’s bed.

Eli was more worried than angry, which surprised Nico. And there was no alcohol on Nozomi’s breath, also a surprise. “Did you lose a bet?” Nico asked Eli, confused.

“She’s been acting strange since she fainted at rehearsal.” Eli frowned, “I tried to get her to go to Student Health.”

“If you’re going to ignore me, I’m going to…” Nozomi rose off the bed, but Nico just grabbed her dress with one hand, yanked and let Nozomi fall back.

“No, you are not.”

Maki, meanwhile, was trying to figure out why sandalwood, copper, bergamot and too calm was the only person at the party not surprised and concerned by Nozomi’s actions. Maki sensed curiosity and...satisfaction? She would have to remember to tell Nico. And make sure sandalwood, copper, bergamot and too calm stayed away from Nico. Maki might have snarled in the shorter woman’s direction, but that just turned the green eyes to her with a piercing look Maki found disconcerting.

Eli and Nico had agreed that Eli would take Nozomi home and stay with her. Nozomi had not been allowed a vote, but after Honoka led Umi off somewhere, Nozomi had been less aggressive. Kotori’s mood had turned foul and Nico was probably going to have to fix that sometime soon, getting Nozomi to apologize, but for now, Nico just wanted to be alone with Maki again.

Eli and Nozomi grabbed their coats and Nico grabbed Maki.

“Let’s go.” Nico put on her parka over Maki’s jacket when the redhead refused to take it back. Maki had gone even quieter, her attention elsewhere. Nico would fix that, once they got to her car. There was still some time before she was supposed to drop Maki off at her home. And Nico intended to leave an impression. Maki could answer boring questions some other time. Nico’s lips were tingling for another slow dance up Maki’s neck, while the redhead said nothing intelligible. Because right now wasn’t about getting all the details. Right now was about making sure they both went home dreaming about what could happen next.

Chapter End Notes
Howdy. I realized what writing a weekly serial is like -- one of those paper aka vintage roadmaps that open up and then can never quite get refolded properly. At least, that’s my experience with them ; ) I hope you are enjoying the scenic route through the plot points I originally mapped out; I think we may be approaching the midpoint.

Feel free to drop a hello or reaction in the comments; I’m off to start the 2nd season/half of Little WItch Academia which seems to have appeared on Netflix. Take care.
Every Day My Confusion Grows

Chapter Summary

We have post party fun, spend the morning after with Nozomi, and Hanayo stumbles into enemy territory.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold air had cleared Maki’s head. Now there was not so much a cacophony of smells, crowd, noise closing around her, with everything Nico permeating the room. Now there was fresh air, free swinging arm movement, distant traffic noises, the crunch of snow, boot heels cracking through frosty crust, moonlight glinting off everything white and polished. And everywhere, in every sense, Nico. Who was humming happily, although Maki didn’t recognize the tune. But the pull was familiar, Nico’s voice wrapping around her senses, frissons of thrill connecting, the feel of Nico’s caresses etched by passion across her skin still vivid. The moon seemed so distant compared to this joy. Maki ran a couple of steps forward, bumping Nico. Nico laughed, merry bells and chimes of wonder, and Maki threw up her head in an ecstatic howl. Nico twirled, “Going to push Nico into the snow again, Princess?” Nico’s eyes twinkled.

“But change my name in your phone.” Maki demanded, feeling silly and bold, resisting the urge to bump Nico with her head. There was a new body language to learn, new moves to try. Maki pulled Nico close, tilting down to kiss the red lips that opened as a spark hissed between them, Nico’s tongue flicking Maki’s lips, Maki murmuring Nico’s name, need driving her to uncharted actions, so she pressed forward, lips tasting Nico’s cheek, ears, neck. Nico’s voice lowered, her mouth so hot near Maki’s ear, her voice another thrill as Maki heard her name whispered and moaned with vibrations that made her want to push Nico down in the snow right there, her hands ripping through Nico’s parka. Then Nico shivered. And Maki pulled her in, wrapping both arms around her, the silky smooth of Nico’s hair tickling her chin, and that was a new pleasure, Nico nuzzling into her, both of her arms pulling Maki closer, Nico breathing in everything Maki and then Nico’s scratchy mittens sliding under Maki’s shirt as she started kissing her way across Maki’s shoulder. They were both going to freeze, Maki thought, pulling back before Nico’s lips grazed her neck. She bent down and lifted Nico, bounding back to Nico’s house.

Nico unlocked the door and they fell into the foyer, Maki practically tearing off Nico’s parka, Nico nearly duplicating Nozomi’s favorite strategy, as she struggled with Maki’s shirt. Maki was completely undone, all instinct and action, Nico’s hands everywhere, Nico’s eyes gleaming in the dark, Maki’s fangs leaving little marks along Nico’s arms and neck as the singer traced her fingers back and forth across Maki’s neck, through the now wild hair, lips driving the werewolf into a whimpering frenzy. And then Maki’s ringtone went off again and she froze. Nico was suddenly holding a coil of confused, half dressed panic. The glorious lavender eyes were frantic, Maki’s gaze skittering everywhere in an effort to avoid Nico’s.

“But Maki.” Nico forced her voice to be as soothing, as calming as she could, but Maki was already back at the door, tearing it open, howling as she leapt, what clothes that didn’t fall to the floor, Maki shredded with her claws as she became a red blur racing into the moonlight.
Nico stared, at the clothes, at the open door, at the space in front of her where girl had become wolf in a nearly instantaneous origami of weird angles and impossible melding. Clothes. Scattered. Shredded. Not being worn. Maki had been naked all that time. On the couch. Up against...Nico had been…

So that was what the world going dark felt like, Nico thought as her knees recovered some stability after a dangerous moment. Not pleasant. Not pleasant at all. But after a few minutes standing, silent, in the dark, pragmatic Nico returned, picking up Maki’s clothes, making sure to grab Maki’s phone. She’d have to call Maki’s mother to check the redhead got home safely. Nico groaned. So complicated. But Maki obviously had zero experience with...anything, and she had been so agitated and out of control when she bolted. Frantic. Nico hurried up the stairs and hit “Return Call.”

“Hello?”

“This is Nico. Is she there yet?” Nico was surprised by how concerned she sounded. What had it been, two weeks and here she was, breathless with worry over a skittish, gorgeous redhead, nudity and tail optional. And then Nico recognized a familiar snuffling sound coming through the phone. Princess, no Maki must have heard her voice. Nico smiled, just a little, picturing Maki eagerly nudging the phone.

“Get some sleep, pretty girl. Nico will drop off your phone tomorrow morning.”

Maki howled a response; Nico thought she sounded worried. What to say to be reassuring? And was her mom listening?

“Nico has plans tomorrow, but come over for brunch Sunday. Nico will cook.” There was a whine and suddenly Nico could see the scene in her head, Prin...Maki tilting up her head at her mother, the nod and then a short, determined howl.

“Good night, Maki. See you in the morning.”

A whine in response. Nico ended the call, restless, tired and with too much to think about.

Maki had refused to transform. Her mother had not been happy, but the absolutely last thing Maki wanted to do was talk. She had sprinted home, run up the treehouse, howled her heart out at the moon, informing the listening world of the change in her status, her voice a melody dedicated to the thrills of being caught by the lure of lips and sable and sensation.

After Nico’s call and an annoyed dismissal from her tired mother, Maki retreated to her bedroom, transforming, robe half tied, scenes from the night replaying in her head as her heart raced and she longed to hear Nico’s voice or have her there, near again, eager again, reaching again.

There was sleep, maybe, but Maki’s dreams were lost to memory, agitation and new awareness searching for avenues of expression, fear sneaking in as somewhere, Maki realized she had no idea what happened next, what was on the other side of the leap.

Last night, Eli had texted that she’d gotten Nozomi to sleep and described Nozomi’s faint. As she packed up some muffins to take to her friend, Nico wondered if Nozomi was overworked, ill or if there really was something weird going on at the theatre. Nico was a pragmatist; she knew all about theatre ghost rumors and made sure to avoid obvious jinxes, but in her heart of hearts, she believed in practical things like hard work, family, and friendship.
Now, the hot, very kissable girlfriend with bonus cute, furry ears and a tail was not really a practical thing, but Maki, while a little skittish, mostly just seemed shy, not dangerous or magical. And yet...Nico frowned. Maybe there were more things in this world than she had previously dreamt of...But surely Nozomi was merely a clever charlatan whose nosiness gave her an aura of awareness. Nico had been certain of that...yesterday morning.

Nozomi had been a bit too glad to see to see Nico, too free with the air kisses and “Nico-chi”’s while a worried Eli watched from the bed. Tea was being served on the small table Nozomi had acquired. Singles in the Mid-Quads were large enough to move in, unlike the ones at the Plex. Nico had tried asking questions, expressing concern, but Nozomi had just dodged, finally just shoving her deck at Nico.

“If you won’t tell me how your date went, Nico-chi, the cards will. Shuffle.” Nozomi’s voice had an edge; Eli moved to the foot of the bed, watching Nozomi closely. Nozomi poured tea for herself, ignoring both of her guests as Nico shuffled.

“Three. Line them up. You know how it goes.” Nozomi ordered, her voice stripped of any warmth, curiosity or mischief. Nico raised an eyebrow at Eli, who shook her head and mimed dealing out the cards. So Nico did. Nozomi’s chortle when Nico turned them over was nearly a cackle.

Nico looked at the cards in front of her closely. First, that card with the dog, again. She would have suspected Nozomi of subterfuge but Nico had shuffled and drawn herself. Next to it was a flipped card with a two people holding cups, then another flipped card, two raggedy people trudging through snow in front of a church window...didn’t look cheerful, Nico thought. She should have stuck with drawing a single card. The first, with the dog, at least it looked warm and fun.

“Well.” Nico stared at her friend, who had her arms crossed and was only half looking at the cards.

Nozomi shrugged, her voice dismissive, “The Fool is a new phase, the 2 of Cups and the 5 of Pentacles, inverted, mean you have to beware of difficulties.” Nozomi’s voice got a little of its snap back and she leaned toward Nico, “Your ego is in the way, Nico-chi, of course, but you can move forward if you don’t let pride hold you back. So be nice to the redhead and remember she has feelings.”

And fangs, Nico thought, but her reply was a simple, “Nico knows.”

Nozomi took the cards back, reluctantly it seemed and shuffled the cards, much more anxious than Nico had ever seen, muttering. Nozomi turned to Eli, who nodded and moved to sit next to her. Nozomi flipped one card, a shining, naked, blonde woman pouring water into a pool. Nico shifted her glance to Eli and smirked, “So is that card a flashback or tonight’s plan?”

Nozomi recoiled, tears in her eyes, hands trembling, the deck dropping. Nico was almost sure the other woman hadn’t heard her at all. Eli just stared.

Nozomi stood, then threw herself on the bed.

“What the hell?” Nico pushed back from the table, demanding an answer from Eli.

Eli sighed, and moved to wrap an afghan around Nozomi, “The Star, reversed. Nozomi’s only been able to draw that or The Tower for a week. They’re not optimistic cards. She’s been having piercing headaches, at rehearsals and then at the party. She’s scared.”

Nozomi was still huddled, sobbing.
“Nozomi?” Nico asked quietly.

Eli sat next to Nozomi and wrapped an arm around her, Nozomi shifting to put her head in Eli’s lap, still ignoring Nico, “She’s been having problems since the first blackout at the theatre. The headaches getting worse every time she goes in and staying when she leaves.”

Nico kept hoping Nozomi would make eye contact or speak to her, but her friend just burrowed closer to Eli, “Why doesn’t she talk to a doctor? Or quit?”

Eli shrugged, “She’s been looking forward to this project and it’s a big chunk of what she’s promised her advisor.”

“Nozomi…” Nico sat on the other side of Nozomi and hugged her. Maybe Maki could find out if there was anything strange going on. Nico would have to smuggle in a…wolf, somehow, but if it was only Nico and the stage crew, that might work. Tsubasa seemed to like her.

Rin was off training so Hanayo didn’t have to explain much about her job yet. That could come later. She’d been called in to the tech sub basement this morning and wanted to be at least five minutes early. Walking through the noisy corridor, trying to remember unfamiliar steps, Hanayo saw the door was propped open, heard voices and slowed, not wanting to interrupt a conversation.

An unfamiliar voice was speaking, excited, “I can’t seem to find any time to chat up Yazawa, but since you’re making progress with Kashima, I’m going to focus on proving the werewolf is…”

Hanayo stumbled through the door, scared and surprised. Anju was sitting on the edge of the desk, another woman with shorter hair and green eyes not as bright as Rin’s leaning next to her.

“Sorry.” Hanayo squeaked as she fell into the room.

Anju smiled, “Five minutes early, as expected. Tsubasa, this is the assistant I hired, Hanayo Koizumi. She’s a freshman biochem major who can code. Hanayo, this is Tsubasa Kira, who started the whole project.”

Tsubasa winked at Anju as she extended a hand to Hanayo, “You give me too much credit, Anj. Welcome, Ms. Koizumi.”

“H…Hanayo’s fine.” Hanayo tried for a firm grip and decided since she’d walked in on a conversation, a question wouldn’t be unexpected. She let her nervousness shake her voice, “Did you say werewolves? Are they real? There’s a full moon soon…but surely they don’t…”

Anju giggled and took Hanayo by both shoulders, nodding to Tsubasa, “I told you she was adorable.”

Tsubasa stretched her arms in front of her, “Don’t worry about it, Hanayo. You won’t have to go stalking werewolves with me. We have a backlog of data for you from our primary location that needs to be sifted through, strictly stay in the office stuff. Erena and I handle the hunting, Anju’s the people person and you’re our computer cruncher.”

The excitement in Tsubasa’s voice when she mentioned hunting made Hanayo angry. Rin and Maki were both in danger. She needed more information. And an ally.

Chapter End Notes
Howdy. In my country, the current administration and GOP continue to sink to new levels of cowardice, bigotry and cruelty, but I hope this brings a bit of brightness to your part of the world, even if it is here.

This is on the shorter side and I did try to get them to the car, but impulse won out. As it sometimes does. Drop a comment, please and thank you, cheer is welcome. And stay safe, whatever your weather.
Chapter Summary

Brunch, you're invited. Umi's not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki barely slept Friday or Saturday, between the full moon, thinking about Nico, her mother’s lectures on responsible adulting. Nico had texted her about brunch details; she’d spent Saturday night with her family and would return around 10 a.m. Then Nico had a 3 p.m. rehearsal with Kashima and then work at the Cup o’. Nico wasn’t sure when the next chunk of time she’d have was.

Maki looked over her clothes, again. Still debating what to wear. Nico always mentioned her sweaters, but she’d get warm. Maki smiled, remembering Nico teasing her about not dressing for the weather and briefly considered tank top and shorts. Maki pulled a long sleeve t-shirt over her head and tucked it into black trousers. Then she grabbed a purple track jacket and her NU bobble hat and prepared to go down and face her mother.

Nico had told Maki 10:30. She’d left at 8, in case of traffic, rare on a Sunday, but still. Home by 8:30, she’d already made a coffee cake. Too early to put on a pot of coffee, apartment was pretty clean, hash browns had been prepped, eggs shouldn’t be cooked until Maki actually showed up, so Nico decided to put up her feet for 5 minutes.

10:25. Doorbell. Nico woke up, panicked, nearly falling off the couch, ready to chide Cocoa for making so much noise. No, Nico was at her apartment. Oh, right, Maki. Nico ran downstairs, there was the redhead, kicking snow while she waited -- in a TRACK JACKET, strangely bulky at the waistline, but at least Maki was wearing a hat. Nico opened the door, pulled Maki inside and kissed her before either of them had time to think. Maki’s lips were still warm somehow, after her walk in the cold Evanston morning, and greedy, pushing forward against Nico’s.

Nico stepped away with a twirl, half dragging Maki up the stairs to her apartment. When Maki stepped inside, the Nico-ness of the whole place hit her. She inhaled, still finding traces of her last visit. Good. Nico dropped Maki’s hand and headed to the kitchen, coffee needed to be started. After that walk, Maki would probably be hungry.

“You’re too warm.” Nico teased. Maki shook her head, as if to clear it and Nico thought the taller girl hadn’t been paying any attention at all.

Hi Nico.” Maki grinned, fang still adorable, purple eyes still glowing. Maki reached into her pockets and pulled out 3 oranges from each, “Have a juicer?”

Nico reached into a cabinet and handed one to Maki, “How do you like your eggs, black coffee, no more takeout allowed?”

Maki snorted, watching Nico while grinding the first orange half into juice, “However Nico makes them.”
Nico pushed up on the counter separating the kitchen from the rest of the apartment and quickly kissed Maki on the tip of the nose. The redhead dropped the juicer. Nico chuckled, “Not as much fun when you’re like this.”

Maki raised an eyebrow, “Y..you didn’t say that Friday.”

“Breakfast first, then we need to talk about a few things. Like clothes.” Nico frowned.

Maki appeared puzzled for a moment, then scared, then she blushed.

Nico inhaled, hands expertly cracking eggs in an effort to cover her nervousness, “So...werewolf, right?”

Maki nodded, cautious, her muscles coiling for a leap away. Nico smiled, that was the first time she’d said the word anywhere that wasn’t inside her own head. Now it was real. Maki was staring at her and Nico could feel the tension in the air.

“Were you out running after cute girls last night? Full moon right. You prowl?” Nico thought she was being amusing, maybe flirty, but Maki just looked shocked and pulled back.

“N...no.” Maki ducked her head, serious, “I don’t chase anything.”

“You chased Nico.” Nico whipped the eggs, debating whether to pour them into the pan, which would mean turning her back on Maki and not being able to see her reactions.

Maki snorted, “Tripped over Nico. You kept getting in my way.”

Nico tapped the spoon on the edge of the bowl, “That’s not how Nico remembers it...Nico remembers being tackled on the Lakefill...Princess.”

Maki blushed again. Nico grinned. This was fun. Time for another topic change, “So is Neruda a werewolf?”

“W...what?” Maki face twisted as she stared at Nico.

“I borrowed a book from Jens. It was full of stuff about the moon so Nico thought...ah, that’s why Maki likes it, howling and moon and werewolf stuff. Connects on the subconscious level.” Nico felt like she should have glasses to push up her nose to add to her “literary aura.”

“Neruda isn’t a werewolf.” Maki sounded aggrieved.

Nico didn’t call herself a future star of stage and screen without taking pride in her ability to deliver a line:

No one else, Love, will sleep in my dreams. You will go,
we will go together, over the waters of time.
No one else will travel through the shadows with me,
only you, evergreen, ever sun, ever moon.

“Sounds werewolfy to Nico.” Nico crossed her arms, winking.

“Werewolfy?” Maki was bemused by the mischiefous upward twist of Nico’s lips.

“Werewolfy,” Nico nodded very seriously, happy with how Maki’s eyes had gleamed, her lips tightening, tongue flicking out as Nico recited the bit of poem. Nico was also glad the mood had relaxed. “Nico has to cook now so don’t do anything too werewolfy or cute while Nico is turned
Maki had started chuckling. “Now you’re an expert on werewolves.”

“Nico knows. There was reading.” Nico tore some fresh sage and tossed it in with the onion and potato mix, warming them up before she added the eggs. “Which reminds Nico, no rubbing Nico’s things with your scent unless you ask Nico first.”

Maki snorted, and figuring Nico would be turned around for long enough that Maki could shrug out of her clothes and transform, did so, ducking below the island as she took off her t-shirt. As Nico added the eggs to the mix, she heard a plaintive whine and suddenly something was nudging her hip. Maki, wolf form, completely covered in fur, and from what Nico could read in the always luminous eyes, laughing.

“Hey, Nico is busy cooking delicious things! Keep that snout out” Nico waved her spatula in Maki’s direction as Maki put her front paws on the counter next the stove so she could lean over and sniff Nico’s cooking. Nico hip checked, unbalancing Maki who scrambled not to fall heavily on her side. Maki bounded up, pushing into Nico, who frowned and concentrated on her cooking. But then Maki stood on her hind legs and put her front paws on Nico’s shoulders. Nico shook her head and turned the stove off, last thing she needed was to know if werewolves caught fire easily.

The eyes really were the same, Nico thought, but the snout was certainly a different effect. Nico bopped another kiss on the end of Maki’s nose, “This is better when Maki’s a cute girl.”

Maki laid her head on Nico’s shoulder and howled in Nico’s ear.

“Hey” Nico yelped, “Loud.” And then Nico grabbed Maki around the torso and dropped them both to the ground, “Change.” She ordered and Maki’s eyes went wide, green swirling and a panicked whine coming out of the wolf’s throat. Why would Maki be scared, Nico wondered, oh wait, that’s right naked. “No, don’t change, Nico will…” and Nico released her grip, although she was still half on top of the werewolf.

And then the door opened and Umi walked in.

Maki bounded up with a whimper of surprise, tossing Nico to the ground and sprinting around the counter. There was a thud and a groan from Nico. Maki grabbed her clothes in her mouth while Umi stood still, shocked at the explosion of motion, then Maki dropped the clothes as she realized there wasn’t anything she could do with them. The fakest ‘woof’ Nico had ever heard out of anything with fur came out of Maki’s mouth and then, as Umi continued to stare, Maki whined and looked to Nico.

“Nico? Is everything all right? Are you hurt?” Umi took a tentative step into the apartment, remembered Princess liked her and decided to be bold, “Did Princess follow you home again? Are those” Umi got near Maki and leaned down, “your clothes?”

Umi reached a hand toward Maki’s ears as she tried to process the scene and suddenly there was Nico batting it away, her voice angry, “Don’t pet her.”

“Nico?” Umi fell back, legs splayed out, confused.

Nico picked up the clothes, ignoring Umi and tossing them over the couch. She shouldn’t have reacted like that. Umi didn’t know under all that fur was a naked girl. Nico's naked girl. Umi wouldn’t be in the room if she did. Maki followed Nico, whining, nudging, worried.

Nico crouched down, rubbing behind Maki’s ears and sighing, “We’re bad at this, pretty girl.” Pause. “We should tell her.”
Umi watched as the dog shook her head at Nico.

“I trust Umi. She can keep a secret.”

Now there was a low howl, sad. Umi remained on the ground, legs splayed out in front of her, fascinated by the conversation.

“Nico wants you to spend time here. Really. But Umi lives here too.” As Nico ran her hands along Princess’s back, the dog stared at Umi, eyes glowing green as she snapped her jaw. Didn’t like her after all, Umi thought.

“Maki!” Nico growled. The dog hung her head and Nico hugged her. “If you don’t want to, it’s fine; I’ll take you home like this.” Nico glanced at Umi, her smile caught somewhere between entertainer and cynic, “Can we try your entrance again, Umi? Silly Nico missed her cue.”

Umi nodded. But as she stood, Princess walked right up to her, eyes mostly lavender. Umi crouched like she had seen Nico do, but still surprised by Nico’s outburst, held her hands out palm up, no contact with Princess. Just meeting the remarkably intelligent, searching glance squarely.

Princess turned around, nodded at Nico, grabbed the clothes on the couch and took them into Nico’s bedroom, closing the door with her rump.

“No marking Nico’s things.” Nico called after her, then went back to the kitchen. “If I throw in a couple more eggs, you can join us for brunch, Umi.”

Nico’s cooking was one of the perks of having a roommate. This might be a confusing morning, Umi thought, especially as she was still recovering from a busy, teasing weekend of Honoka and Kotori, but Nico’s food would be a welcome taste of real.

“Thank you, Nico. That sounds good. Honoka decided donuts would be breakfast enough.” Umi smiled.

“Honoka always decides donuts are breakfast enough.” Nico turned on the stove, busying herself with warming up the egg and potato mix, glad the atmosphere was returning to a normal Sunday feel.

“Sometimes, there’s cheese danish.” Umi picked up an orange half and the juicer.

“Maybe Nico should make you a salad.” Nico quirked a teasing eyebrow at her roommate, “Or did you get enough exercise to burn off a weekend of Honoka menu planning?”

“Nico.” Umi’s tone was warning; Nico just chuckled.

“Nico enjoyed the party.” Nico took three plates from the cabinet.

“So did I.” Maki stepped out from the bedroom, obviously having dressed in haste, hair a tousled, sexy mess Nico really wanted to run her fingers through so she forced herself to look away and turned to the stove, concentrating on finishing before things burned.

“You could have borrowed Nico’s hair brush.” Nico chided, lifting the pan off the burner.

Maki grinned, both fangs prominent, and took the orange and the juicer from Umi, who seemed to have frozen, her mouth open. “You said not to mark anything.”

Nico suddenly felt like a fortuneteller, “Grab her” she shouted as Umi paled. Maki caught the
brunette before she fell into a full faint. “Couch.” Nico ordered as she put the plates of food in the oven to keep them warm. Nico wondered if she’d actually get to eat anything before she had to leave for her session with Kashima.

Maki dropped Umi on the couch, and wrapped an arm around Nico’s shoulders when the smaller woman stood next to her.

“We should have rehearsed this,” Nico said dryly.

Maki snorted.

“Go brush your hair.” Nico leaned into Maki’s shoulder, “You look too...just woke up for Nico to think properly.”

Maki nipped Nico’s earlobe, whispering “I thought you liked pretty girls?” Nico ignored that provocation as the redhead bounded back into the bedroom. One day, Nico hoped, very soon, Nico would bound right in after gorgeous and bitey, but this day, they had an Umi sized problem collapsed on the couch.

And then her phone buzzed. Not a calm Sunday at all. But as Nico watched Maki run a brush through her hair in front of the bedroom mirror, Nico was ready to sign up for another one just like it.

Chapter End Notes

Another short chapter and a day later than I’d planned. My apologies. After this, I think we go back to exciting and let the villains of the piece have a little fun. Hope this finds you well, my weekends keep getting thrown into a state of entropy and I now have to go actually read (not skim) the latest chapter of arcanine’s "critical rules for not-dating" because I like to believe I can handle cliffhangers... " Honestly.

What else are you reading?
Chapter Summary

Brunch wraps up and Sunday afternoon is anything but a calm experience for our plucky band of collegians.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico glanced at her phone and grimaced, “ARRGHHHH. Kashima!”

Maki’s head snapped toward Nico, who smiled and shrugged before frantically scrolling through her contacts. And then Maki was behind Nico, leaning over her shoulder, arms wrapped around Nico’s waist, voice a low, sexy growl that made Nico shiver, “What did Kashima do?”

Nico shook her head, getting more frantic as she got closer to the end of her contacts list, “Not Kashima. Kashima’s singing voice.” Nico put her phone away and turned around, exasperated, eyes dull, “My rehearsal pianist quit.”

Maki frowned. Nico sad was unacceptable. No sparkle in the ruby eyes was a crime against cuteness. And this, Maki could fix, “I can play the piano. I’ll do it.” Maki kissed Nico and grinned proudly, having easily solved this first problem for her GIRLFRIEND.

Nico stared. Surely not...then she remembered the karaoke, “Can you sight read?”

Maki shrugged, “Sure.”

“I have a piano reserved for this afternoon…” Nico sounded tentative, like she was having trouble believing Maki was telling the truth.

“More time with Nico for me.” Maki twirled Nico. Umi sat up behind them, stared at the two of them for a minute and then moved to the kitchen, pulling a plate out of the oven and pouring coffee.

“Kashima will be there too.” Nico broke away from Maki, hands on hips, brow darkened, “And Nico needs Kashima. You can’t scare her.”

Maki moved closer, sliding her arms through Nico’s, enjoying the feel of her hands on the curves of Nico’s hips, “I will only be paying attention to you.”

Nico still looked suspicious, “And the music.”

Maki nodded her head as she angled for a nip at Nico’s neck, “And the music.”

“Explain.” Umi’s coffee mug hit the table and Umi’s voice echoed. Nico pulled her neck away from Maki, who blew air along its length, making Nico shiver.

“Nico.” Umi’s voice was threatening. Nico pushed Maki toward the kitchen.

“Grab the plates for us, pretty girl. Nico’s starving.” Nico sat down across from Umi, “I only found
out right before your party. I didn’t know the night Maki slept over.” Nico shook her head at the
smug redhead, “Nico’s still a little annoyed about that too, by the way.”

“You.” Umi turned to Maki. “Explain.”

Anxiety and confusion from Umi, worry from Nico, worry and that new mix of scents that made
Maki want to get as close to Nico as possible. She slid her seat Nico-ward and took the suspiciously
still dynamo’s hand under the table, swallowing a whine.

“I transform into a wolf, voluntarily, sometimes involuntarily if I’m stressed enough and the moon’s
full. It’s from my father’s side, as long as anyone remembers, long before we immigrated from Japan.
Papa doesn’t transform…” Nico was paying close attention to Maki’s expression, her hand a squeeze
of encouragement. Umi continued stoic, but her vibe was a friendly one, so Maki powered through
her hesitation to share, “M..my first transformation happened at 8.” She turned to Nico, lavender eyes
troubled, “Some things are more…” Maki sighed, trying to think of the right word as Nico rested her
head on the werewolf’s shoulder “urgent when I’m in wolf form.”

“Can it be transmitted to others?” Umi folded her hands together.

Maki shook her head. “There’s no science I know of, but Mama, my grandfather and other relatives
have always been fine.”

“Genetic anomaly then.” Umi stated. Maki nodded. “Interesting.”

Nico hummed, relaxed on Maki’s shoulder, and the warmth spread. Maki felt her tension ease,
slightly. “Papa’s done some research, but he can’t publish it anywhere.”

“Is there a network?” Umi wondered.

Maki glanced down at her still folded hands, considering, for a long, nervous moment. Maki heard
Nico’s sotto voce thought, “That’s how you knew Nico was scared.” Maki sniffed her nose through
Nico’s hair, finding the hints of lavender, as Umi looked up with a serious expression. Maki froze.

“Maki, No cute, na...no clothes wolfdog in front of Honoka and Kotori. Ever.” Umi tapped her
finger on the table, “And Nico.”

“Honoka” with a snort, putting the coffeepot, two mugs and muffins on a tray, and
Maki leaned forward, paying close attention as Umi continued speaking, her tone uncompromising.
“And while I am not Nico’s immediate family, should you cause her any distress or trouble, I WILL be your immediate concern.” Nico almost dropped the tray at the chill in Umi’s voice as Maki’s eyes went wide.

Maki wondered if meeting Nico’s actual family would be this nerve wracking. Nico put a muffin and a mug in front of Maki without even looking. Barista reflexes, Maki realized.

“Don’t scare her, Umi. She’s skittish enough. I don’t want her jumping every time you open a door.”

“Hey!” Maki barked, indignant. Nico patted her on the head.

Umi glared at Maki, her syllables precise. “Roommate talk. Interruptions by romantic partners are discouraged.”

Nico poured coffee, “I use that clause on Honoka all the time, don’t blow it for me, pretty girl. More, Umi?”

Umi nodded. Nico poured, then sat and bit into a muffin. Maki picked one up, sniffing cautiously, pumpkin, cinnamon, ginger and cardamom exploded inside her mouth and she salivated, suddenly starving.

“Never play poker, coffee, black, ears, cute, dating Nico for her cooking,” Nico’s knee bumped Maki’s playfully under the table; Umi laughed as Maki swallowed the muffin nearly whole. Nico was definitely liking this Sunday mood.

Eli was impressed by so many things about Nozomi, but her grit in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming pain was pretty high on the list. Nozomi had a meeting with Erena Toudou, the lighting designer’s assistant and she refused to miss, reschedule or relocate it. Nozomi had scrubbed her face, left off her makeup, tied a bandana around her head, pulled a pretty purple and white sweater dress over black leggings and headed to the theatre. Eli came along, even though she didn’t have a dance rehearsal scheduled. She was both worried about Nozomi and curious about what the artist was doing. Nozomi had shown her some sketches last night. Eli wanted to see the full effect, how light and color added to depth of the mood Nozomi had managed to capture in a few lively pastel strokes.

Nozomi had been mostly quiet over breakfast. Eli figured she was saving her energy for the explosion of pain being in the theatre seemed to cause. Eli was wearing her jacket open, not that bothered by the chill and thrilled to see the sun, when Nozomi stopped in front of her, gloved hands reaching for the parka’s zipper, “You should really zip up, Eli-chi. I don’t want you to catch cold.”

“Russian blood,” Eli stamped her foot and grinned, “This is summer.”

Nozomi stepped closer and closed the zipper, her lips also closing the gap to Eli’s, her hands on settling below Eli’s shoulders. “Your lips are cold.”

“Liar.” Eli smirked, as she drew Nozomi closer.

“Convince me.” Nozomi winked.

“Anything the lady wishes.” Eli leaned in, Nozomi’s lips tingling at the connection.
Erena was perched on the edge of the stage, typing urgently into her laptop. Nozomi stopped once she got inside the door, her hand reaching for Eli’s.

“Nozomi?” Eli whispered, concerned. Nozomi squeezed Eli’s hand once and smiled brightly as she let go and headed toward the stage.

“Erena!” Nozomi chirped.

Erena looked up, her brows frowning, “Nozomi. You sound in a better mood than the last time we talked.”

Nozomi giggled, “It’s a beautiful day, I’ve been kissed by a beautiful girl. And now I get to work with a handsome one.”

Erena nodded, “Glad to see you’re in a good mood. I had an idea for the lighting during the “Ringed By Wolves” song.”

“Oh, let me see it.” Nozomi jumped up on the stage, and leaned into Erena. Eli smiled over her Econ textbook, glad to see some liveliness back in Nozomi’s eyes.

Maki had waited at the table, drinking coffee under the watchful eye of Umi, who was cleaning up the counter, while Nico changed.

“You live in the area?” Umi asked.

“A little bit north of campus.” Maki sipped as Umi joined her at the table.

“Honoka, Kotori and I are from Minneapolis. Kotori wanted to study costuming and fashion here; Honoka and I decided on Marketing.”

“Did Kotori do the party decorations?” Maki asked.

Umi nodded.

“Pretty. I loved the lanterns. My mother can never find a decorator to do the Lunar New Year theme with the right flair.” Maki found herself wondering how long Nico was going to take. She couldn’t hear much going on in the bedroom, Nico was surprisingly quiet when doing anything other than talking.

“Kotori will be pleased to hear that.” Umi expression was a subtle take on pleased and proud without going so far as to smile.

And Nico was about to walk back into the room. Maki turned, eager, and Umi chuckled, making Maki whirl with a barked, “What?”

“Your body language is very similar in whatever form you’ve taken.”

Maki rolled her eyes, hopped out of her chair and grabbed Nico for a hug. Nico batted at her arms, but Maki just laughed and whirled Nico. When she put Nico down, the smaller woman readjusted her cherry red dress over her snowflake leggings, grumbling, “Nico will just wear blacks if you’re going to mess everything up the second I walk into a room.”

Maki knew Nico wasn’t really upset so a question was safe. “Blacks?”
“Stagehands wear black backstage. Less distracting. Every theatre major has some.” Nico explained. “If you’re ready, let’s head out. I want to get there before Kashima so you can run through the song with Nico.” Nico grabbed a small backpack covered with cute pins and kitschy patches. Maki shrugged back into her track jacket, following Nico. “I have work later, Umi so I won’t be home ‘til late.”

“Honoka’s coming over to study; Kotori’s going to be working at the costume shop all night.”

“I know. Nico can’t wait to try out Mina Murray’s vampire hunting outfit.”

Any clothes Maki was wearing were vampire hunting clothes, if Kashima was the vampire, Maki thought with a scowl as the taller woman preened and Nico frowned in Maki’s direction. But Maki had promised Nico she would not scare Kashima so Maki bit back both a growl and a whine and sat up a little straighter at the piano, waiting for Nico to cue her. If only she could avoid gagging on the all too pervasive stink of Kashima’s cologne. Maybe she could beg Nico to have a word with Kashima now that she didn’t have to hide the truth about how sensitive her werewolf nose could be.

Along with Kashima had come a crowd of three tittering girls neither Maki or Nico knew. They were who Kashima was preening for. One of them detached from the vampire in training and leaned on the piano. It was only a console piano, but Maki didn’t care as Nico was what she was there for. The girl, short, blonde, lilac, murmured at Maki, “Are you a music major?”

Maki shook her head, not really paying attention as Kashima leaned in the doorway and winked at Nico, who then suddenly noticed one of Kashima’s hangers on was missing and whirled, moving quickly to the piano and pushing the straying girl Kashima-ward, “Kashima, if you can’t control your groupies, they have to leave. Nico can’t work with so many distractions.”

“Sorry, Nico.” Kashima shrugged, not looking sorry at all as she whispered something in the ear of the one who smelled mostly of chocolate. More tittering. Maki flexed her fingers and started improvising, to distract herself from Nico’s increasing flutterings of anger and impatience. Maki was going to snarl at Kashima if this kept up and she was pretty sure Nico would not be willing to take provocation into account.

“OUT!” There was a shout and Nico somehow managed to wrestle the three girls, all taller or broader than her, out of the room, barely breaking a sweat, “Nico needs to work.” On her way back into the room, Nico dragged Kashima to the piano by the collar. Maki was impressed by Nico’s ability to physically exert her personality. Kashima, bereft of her following and faced with the prospect of an angry Nico and actually singing, seemed subdued. Maki smiled, close lipped, no fangs, thinking encouraging thoughts on Nico’s behalf. Surely Kashima couldn’t be as bad as Nico claimed.

Nico leaned toward Kashima and Maki narrowed her eyes, her fingers off the keys. Nico waited until Kashima met her glance, then smiled brightly, “Thanks for coming today, Kashima. I’ve been looking forward to working with you.” Maki couldn’t help it, she snorted. Nico kicked straight back, her heel colliding with Maki’s ankle, causing a yelp. “Let’s start with warm ups.”

Kashima opened her mouth and Maki realized that Nico had not been exaggerating. Maki glanced at the sheet music again and groaned. No one had rewritten the music to reflect Kashima’s higher range than the baritone who should have been cast. This was a disaster from the start, Kashima’s natural lack of ability aside.

“Nico?” Maki hesitated. Nico was right there, arms around Maki’s shoulders, her head resting right
next to Maki’s ear as she whispered, “Is there a problem, pretty, pouty, piano playing girl?”

“Kashima’s part is written for a baritone. I’ll have to take it up an octave for an alto…but someone should rearrange this.”

Nico sighed and hugged Maki, “Director has no musical skills, musical director is terrified. It’s a bad combination.”

“I can rearrange it. Maybe have Kashima Rex Harrison her way through it, but the composer might object.”

Nico kissed Maki on the cheek, then stood, “Maybe not more than hearing Kashima stumble in a range not natural to her.”

Kashima had taken a seat and was staring, worried, “Nico?”

“Don’t worry, Kashima, Maki’s going to help us. Nico’s going to make sure no one actually dies on stage.”

Nico started leading Kashima through warm ups again while Maki grabbed Nico’s backpack to search for a pencil or pen. This was going to be a long afternoon. But music was a challenge she had missed.

Rin was relaxed in Hanayo’s lap as they listened to K-Pop stream over Hanayo’s laptop speakers, Hanayo singing along softly, her hand brushing through Rin’s hair. Then an alert went off and Hanayo tensed.

“Kayochin?” Rin was puzzled, they spent a couple of hours every Sunday afternoon like this, when Rin didn’t have practice or rehearsal.

“Sorry. I have a message. From work.” Hanayo grabbed the laptop and put it to the side, so she could read without disturbing Rin.

“What kind of work?”

“Computer coding.” Hanayo’s answer was automatic (she’d rehearsed) as she read the urgent message from Erena. “Rin, remember you promised you wouldn’t change when I’m not here, right.”

“Sure, Kayochin.” Rin was picking up an unusual mix of worry and fear from her fiancée

“Good.” Hanayo pulled Rin up into a serious hug, ruffling the ginger’s hair, enjoying the softness, “I have to go out for a little while. Why don’t you study for that quiz you’ve got? And when I get back we’ll play video games.”

Rin raised a suspicious eyebrow, but Hanayo was too busy getting ready to go outside to notice. Unaware of Rin’s scrutiny, Hanayo paused in front of the mirror, checking her hair, straightening her hat and muttering, pausing for a minute to look herself in the eye, then nod. “I won’t be long, Rin. Please don’t follow me.” Hanayo turned around, kissing Rin before Rin could get out any questions, “And remember your promise.”

Rin stood still for a second, arms slack at her side. Then, she grabbed her phone and sent a panicky text to Maki.
Nozomi hadn’t flinched even once, which was great, but Eli found herself putting her textbook aside to watch Erena, who seemed to be paying as much attention to Nozomi as Eli had initially. Eli’s arms had crossed over her chest and her blue eyes gone ice, which attracted a puzzled look from Nozomi before the artist got involved in shuffling between projections.

“E...excuse me?” A soft, shy voice sounded from the back of the theater.

“Koizumi!” Erena boomed and hurried to the center aisle.

“I...I think I found w...what you wanted.” The mousy brunette nervously fidgeted with a messenger bag.

“Great!” Erena grabbed the bag, “I’ll show you what to do in case this happens again.”

Koizumi nodded, glancing nervously around the room. As Erena led her backstage, Eli decided to interrupt Nozomi.

“I can’t wait to see your art with the finished set.” Eli slid next to Nozomi on the bench that had been moved to the front of the house with a temp table for the light board.

“I know. The colors are so evocative of the tension inherent in every interaction Dracula has. Who knew you could do so much with gray?” Nozomi leaned into Eli, “I love when the set is half built and the theater is empty. There’s a lurking mood. It’s exciting.”

Eli hugged Nozomi, glad to hear excitement in her voice. But then Nozomi tensed with a hiss.

“Nozomi?” Eli glanced at Nozomi, who had raised a hand to her head.

“I’ll be all right, Eli-chi. Don’t worry.” Nozomi muttered.

Eli frowned, “I came over here to tell you I’m going for a quick walk, but I’ll stay if you need me…”

“No,” Nozomi raised her head and smiled at Eli, who noticed her eyes watering, “If you sprint over to Norris, I could use some food.”

“On it!” Eli stood, kissed Nozomi gently and strode out of the theater, stopping as soon as she hit the corridor to lurk. It was a only a few minutes before Erena’s delivery girl left and Eli followed her outside, waiting until they were clear of the entrance to grab her arm and pull her to the side.

“What did you and Erena do to Nozomi?” Eli’s voice was a furious whip. Purple eyes widened, then there was a squeak.

“Nozomi?” Hanayo tried to pull away.

“Nozomi Tojo, the artist doing the projections.” Eli knew she was looming over the smaller girl but she didn’t really give a damn.

“Is she a w...werewolf?” Another squeak as Hanayo struggled.

Eli stepped back, staring, “What?”

Koizumi shook her head, “Never mind.”
“No. Not never mind.” Eli was getting louder. “What are you doing to Nozomi?"

Hanayo flinched, but her eyes were sympathetic, “Don’t shout. Please.”

Eli snorted, taking a step in, “Why should I listen to you? You listen to me…”

“STOP!” The loud cry surprised Eli, who let go. The smaller woman panted from the exertion, but continued, her tone urgent, “I’m p…p…protecting someone too.”

Eli froze, shocked silent. What was going on?

Nico had sent Kashima on her way and crashed next to Maki on the piano bench, exhausted after the nearly ninety minute session. Maki had been impressed by how much seriousness Nico brought to her practice. No flirting, no joking, no breaks for more than a swig of water. Relentlessly leading Kashima by example and encouraging Maki to demonstrate how to work through the song. Maki had, after picking up a few hints from Nico’s ever agile expression, managed to find a way to help Kashima without completely overshadowing her vocally.

“We should sing a duet.” Nico murmured, “Maki has a nice voice.”

“Next party.” Maki offered, enjoying Nico’s proximity, deciding not to tease Nico about liking her duet with Honoka. Maki swung a leg over the bench so she could wrap her arms around Nico and pull the smaller girl into her torso. Snuffling her nose through Nico’s hair, inhaling the even muskier, sweaty Nico magic helped cut out the lingering Kashima funk.

“Nico needs a shower.” Nico sighed, her weight against Maki.

“Nico is fine,” Maki murmured, eyes closed, lips working their way down to Nico’s neck, tongue flicking out for a quick lick. “Tasty.”

Nico laughed, “Nico is not a donut. Does Maki need a snack?”

“I prefer Nico.” Maki nipped at Nico’s ear, her hands tightening around Nico’s waist.

With a groan, Nico forced herself away, leaving Maki staring after her with a pout. “Nico has to work, pouty puppy eyes. And then Nico has classes and rehearsals and studying and more work.”

And Maki had a week of going home right after her classes unless her mother softened. Maki stood, reaching over to pick up Nico’s backpack and sling it over her shoulder, “I can walk you wherever you’re going.”

Nico’s pursed her lips, hand resting on Maki’s forearm, “When do you have to be home this week?”

“By 5:30 most days.” Maki looked down at Nico, letting her eyes glow with the surge of desire that Nico’s touch triggered.

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“You look too tempting.” Nico slid her hands until her arms were around Maki’s neck, making sure her hands were in contact with Maki for the entire motion. The luminous green deep in the pools of lavender pulsed as Maki’s breaths raced. Nico was fascinated. And the fangs were back, with that endearing, impish grin as Maki tilted her head, her hands pressing Nico closer, fingers learning Nico’s every twitch and tell.

“Maki.” Nico let her voice wrap the syllables, warm and teasing and certain and affectionate and
Maki’s eyes went wide, Nico’s voice a cunning, provocative charm, and then she pounced, kissing Nico with a breathtaking fierceness that drove Nico forward, every change in pressure as Maki’s lips explored, scattering more and more of Nico’s practiced discipline.

“YOU NEVER ANSWERED YOUR PHONE!” Rin complained as she slammed the door open.

Nico jumped; Maki growled, her heart going so fast blood thudded in her ears, her fists clenched “Are you kidding me? What the hell, Rin?”

Rin yanked Maki away from Nico, frantic, “This is serious, Maki. SERIOUS. An emergency. Kayochin’s dumping me. I can smell other women.”

Nico took a good look at the shorter ginger haired girl. Smell? Did Maki have a werewolf friend? And who was Kayochin?

“Didn’t Hanayo get a job?” Maki asked, calm more quickly than Rin deserved. That was a name Nico recognized. The nice friend with glasses. “That’s probably why she smells different.”

“She’s acting sneaky, Maki. Something’s wrong.” Rin was sullen, suspicious, pacing the room. “She told me not to follow her. Or...”

“You know she worries about you. Because she...” Maki glanced quickly at Nico, blushing, ‘I...loves you. Didn’t she propose?”

“But that was before...” Rin’s eyes had no gleam left.

“Before what, Rin?” Maki had never seen Rin this low.

“College.” Rin collapsed into the corner, arms over her head.

Nico immediately pulled Rin to her feet. “No sulking.” Nico announced, “It never helps. You two are walking Nico home, then going off for a run or something.” Nico winked at Maki, “Nico is sure Maki has some energy to burn off. And Nico is sure Maki’s cute friend will feel better soon, right?”

Rin just shruffled as Nico pushed her out of the room. This was ridiculous. Maki knew there was no way Hanayo was doing anything with anyone who wasn’t Rin. And If Maki had to shake Rin out of her gloom to convince her, she would.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience and sorry about the delay in posting. And I appreciate those of you who Tumblr and expressed your willingness to wait for a complete chapter (and your support) while some professional upheaval settled. Tada! Complete chapter. Hope you enjoy. Things are getting serious. Now, if only I can stop interrupting Nico and Maki alone time, right (=｀Φ´=)

Also, Adam Ant songs are always fun to be reminded of (¬‿¬) = ★
Cup o' Questions

Chapter Summary

Maki tries to comfort Rin as Nico's social circles begin to collide.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nozomi’s phone buzzed. Message from Eli.

E: Meet me at the Cup o’, as soon as you can.

“Nozomi?” Erena called out from the stage.

Nozomi frowned at her phone, considering.

Rin had been so grim that Maki had only kissed Nico quickly, with a whispered apology, before dragging the smaller girl home with her. Rin transformed as soon as they got to Maki’s house so Maki ducked into the shed and changed, chasing her friend up to the treehouse, where Rin sat and howled sorrowfully into the twilight. Maki wondered if Hanayo heard her and what the hell had gone on. Rin kept howling, but Maki was sure her friend would be crying if she transformed so Maki grabbed the scruff of Rin’s neck and shook her. Which got a growl and a leap at Maki from Rin, which led to wrestling until Rin collapsed exhausted and Maki went back down to transform and change, climbing back up the treehouse ladder with a blanket for Rin. She put it over her friend, sitting close enough that Rin could lean on her.

“Hanayo loves you, Rin. You know that.” Maki said quietly, watching Rin’s ears twitch. Rin whined. Maki refused to respond. If being in love made you think crazy things about the person you were in love with...Maki shook her head, best not to compare herself to Rin. Rin’s self confidence had always been shaky, Hanayo had told her. And school was making things difficult. Rin loved the running part and hated the study part, but she had not wanted to hold Hanayo back from a school the other girl really wanted to go to. And Rin’s speed and stamina were top prospect Division I, even if her grades weren’t stellar.

Maki nodded off, leaning back against the tree, thinking about what Nico would say when she brought her up here. Rin would not be present. Or in hearing distance. Maki sighed, there probably was no not in hearing distance, but she could at least make sure it was timed so Rin was probably safely locked up inside a building with Hanayo.

“Maki?” Rin sounded so sad.

“So are you ready to tell me what happened?” Maki stretched out her cramped legs. Rin had transformed and sat up, wrapping the blanket around herself.

“Kayochin’s lying to me. I can always tell.” Rin’s response was so quiet Maki knew she wouldn’t have heard it with just human hearing. “And she made me promise not to change or follow her.”
“Sounds like she’s worried.” Maki pointed out.

“Sounds like she doesn’t want to date a werewolf anymore.” Rin whined.

“Rin.” Maki’s voice was a bark of anger, “Hanayo loves you. Things probably seem different because you’re stressing about college and her new job.”

Rin shook her head, “It’s not that, Maki. I can tell. She’s hiding something. Kayochin doesn’t trust me anymore.” Even in the dark, Maki could see Rin’s eyes glittered with tears.

Maki didn’t answer right away and when she did, it started with as sympathetic a howl as she could get in human form, “Talk to Hanayo, Rin. Tell her what you told me. Maybe it’s not as bad as you’re afraid of.”

Rin shrugged, “Maybe it is.” Maki felt like growling at her friend until she got out of the gloomies, but then Rin continued, contrite, “Sorry I interrupted your afternoon with Nico.”

“It’s ok. You’re my friend, Rin. I care if you’re upset.” Maki nudged Rin with her shoulder, “I put your clothes in the shed, if you want to go in and eat. My parents are out for the evening so we can order a pizza or something.”

Rin nodded, transformed again and jumped down to the shed roof. Maki folded up the blanket and made her way back to the ground.

Eli and Maki’s meek friend with the glasses were already in the farthest booth from the door when Nico arrived. She waved at them and took over from Damian. Sunday night was a single person shift on slow weekends. A steady influx of people mostly grabbing drinks to go kept Nico busy, but when there was a lull she watched Eli and...Hanayo, who were involved in an intense conversation, Hanayo pulling up multiple things for Eli to look at on her cell. Nico was curious if Eli was the reason Rin was so upset. She could see that. Of course, no one could be more attractive than Nico but Nico could expand her empathy enough to see where the leggy econ dance genius would undermine a person’s confidence.

“Nico-chi!” Nozomi’s voice boomed, Nico whirled before her busty friend could sneak up behind her for mischief. But Nozomi just nodded and slid next to Eli, who kissed her, ‘Who’s your adorable friend here, Eli-chi?’

“You want the usual, Nozomi?” Nico leaned on the counter.

“Tea, please, the herbal chai.” Nozomi smiled, seeming a little sad. Nico wondered what was up.

“How’s your head, Nozomi?” Eli slid her arm around her girlfriend’s waist.

“Better now that I’m out of Wirtz. Thanks, Nico.” Nozomi took her tea and inhaled, sighing as the warm steam drove out the dryness of a cold January late afternoon. Nico chuckled, wondering if everyone was part werewolf now. Hanayo looked at her curiously.

“Hey, Nico,” Eli frowned, “Can you talk? Hanayo and I have been talking about something you and Nozomi probably need to know, working in that space.”

Nico sighed dramatically, then slid in next to Hanayo, “Just until a customer comes in.”

Eli nodded, then glanced meaningfully at Hanayo, who stared back uncomprehendingly for a
minute, then jumped, “S...sorry....I...I...don’t...” She shook her head at Eli, “Help me.”

Eli grimaced and stretched her arms out in front of her, then leaned forward, dividing her attention between Nico and Nozomi. “Hanayo came to the theatre to meet Erena today and I noticed after she left that Nozomi’s headaches started again, so I followed her.”


“I’m worried about you.” Eli’s smile was serious. “Turns out Hanayo is worried about someone too.”

Hanayo nodded and took up the story, “I...I saw an ad for help studying the supernatural and I have a...friend...”


“T...these 3 students are trying to find proof of demons or ghosts or witches or...w...werewolves.”

Nico got up, switched the sign to “Closed” and locked the door. Hanayo watched her, nodding approval.

“Nico-chi?” Nozomi was puzzled, Nico just shook her head and sat back down next to Hanayo, who continued.

“I’ve only started and I mostly work with data they’ve already gathered, but today Erena needed to make an emergency repair so she sent me a message.” Hanayo sipped her hot chocolate daintily.

Eli broke in with a matter of fact summary, “And the meter they have measuring and broadcasting energy frequencies seems to be what’s hurting Nozomi, if what Hanayo and I think is true.”

“B...but if I just break the meter, they may find another way to hurt Nozomi. And my friends. And I won’t let them do that.” Hanayo lost her shyness as she got more upset.

“So we have at least two problems.” Eli sat back, her arm behind Nozomi. Nozomi was still caught up in suspicions triggered by Nico’s latest action, so she leaned across the table.

“Why do you look so worried, Nico-chi? Is someone you know a demon, oh, wait maybe you are. You can’t be that concerned with little old me.” Nozomi poked Nico’s forearm, Nico hissed.

“Do you have a plan?” Nico wondered, completely ignoring Nozomi.

Hanayo looked embarrassed, “I...I don’t know enough yet...or if they’re doing anything illegal or against university research policies.” She smiled at Nozomi, “I didn’t know they were hurting anyone until Ms. Ayase told me about you and your foreshadowing abilities, Ms. Tojo. And I was about to text Nico.”

Nozomi patted Hanayo on the hand, “Call us Eli and Nozomi. You’re too cute to hurt anyone, Hanayo.” Nozomi kept hold of the hand, “So why are you telling Nico-chi, here? And how do you know her?”

“Hanayo’s a regular.” Nozomi’s eyes narrowed, increasing Nico’s unease, so she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I got bit by a werewolf. There’s a rumor. Nico started it to drum up Fangs interest.”

“I haven’t heard it.” Nozomi was even more suspicious now, giving Nico the side eye. Hanayo
giggled.

Nico smiled, her dazzler, and her hands flew up to her temples, “Nico Nico Ni. Nico can’t help it if Nozomi the charlatan’s been too ill to talk to the best people.”

“I have heard a few Kashima’s a real vampire whispers,” Eli suggested. Nico snorted.

“One of my bosses did say she wasn’t getting anywhere with Yazawa.” Hanayo added, pulling her hand back from Nozomi.

“See. Proof that news about Nico gets everywhere.” Nico folded her arms over her chest in a self congratulatory fashion, trying not to panic about Hanayo’s confirmation, “Who was it?”

“Tsubasa Kira.” Hanayo frowned at her cup, “I don’t see her much.”

That’s because she’s spending all her time hovering around me and getting glared at by Maki, Nico realized, going silent as she reconsidered Tsubasa’s actions. She wondered what Maki had been sensing.

“Isn’t that the cute stagehand, Nico-chi?” Nozomi seemed taken aback by actual confirmation that someone was interested in Nico.

Nico grunted.

“You’re not getting headaches too?” Hanayo fidgeted with her fingers.

Nico shook her head, still lost in thought.

“It doesn’t matter.” Eli’s voice was stern, “I’m not letting them hurt Nozomi anymore. I’m ripping that meter down.”

“No. I told you,” Hanayo cried out. “I think I can switch a dead transmitter in and the meter will still keep recording data, without sending out the frequency that is causing the problem. So they won’t know as long as…”

Nozomi’s eyes lit up, “I keep having headaches.”

Hanayo nodded.

“But Nozo here can’t act.” Nico flipped her chin up, “It requires talent.”

“I’ll just think of the pain of looking at your face during your duet with Kashima.” Nozomi smiled sweetly.

Nico growled, and stood, heading back to the door, unlocking it, “Go home, Nozomi.”

Nozomi laid her head on Eli’s shoulders, trilling, “Anywhere Eli is is home to me.”

Eli coughed up a little of the coffee she’d been drinking and blushed as it dribbled down her chin.

Nico dropped her head to the counter, “Please, don’t make your girlfriend spew liquids everywhere, Nozomi. Use another one of your super powers. For Nico.” Who had to get up at 6 a.m. and has no patience for this. Nico finished that thought internally and began the noisiest task she could think of, hoping to discourage lingering.

Nozomi’s glance was speculative, but she merely stood and linked arms with Eli, “The cards will tell
me the truth, Nico-chi, even if you won’t.”

“Good luck with that.” Nico saluted as Eli and Nozomi left, Nozomi whispering in the blonde’s ear. Nico continued to move large and clunky things until she heard a soft voice, “Nico?”

Hanayo. She had waited.

“So they’re after Maki and Rin?” Nico sighed, head falling into her hands. Too long a day. Girlfriend with cute ears in both forms and bonus tail and now a bounty hunter or something after her, “Do you know why?”

Hanayo was angry. “They don’t seem to care about the people they’re gathering data from. It’s all malice and curiosity, I’m not sure why. They assumed I’d had a bad experience when I interviewed.”

“Did you tell them about…?” Hanayo didn’t seem surprised that Nico knew Rin was; she must have expected Maki would tell her.

“Never!” Hanayo interrupted before Nico finished her question, “I think they suspect...someone, but they don’t actually know.”

Did Tsubasa suspect Maki? If you realized there were werewolves, would you put the similarities together?

“I haven’t told Rin or Maki.” Hanayo fidgeted again, “Rin...Rin’s not good at hiding things.”

“And Maki’s not calm…” Nico continued for Hanayo, as the younger girl sighed.

“I...I have to get home. Rin’ll be back soon.” Hanayo apologized, checking her phone and still not seeing a text from Rin.

“Thanks for telling Nico. And helping Nozomi.” Nico poured herself a coffee, planning to drink it bitter, without any added sweet at all. Now was a time she needed full awareness.

‘Are you going to tell Maki?’” Hanayo asked, shy again.

“Nico hasn’t decided.” Nico raised her mug, “Nico needs a minute. At least.”

Hanayo half smile was sympathetic, “Good night, Nico.”

“Be careful.”

Rin had headed out and Maki’s parents weren’t due back for hours. Which left her pacing, ignoring anything she should be doing and thinking about Nico. And the party. And how nice it had been, on the balcony, to have some privacy and Nico’s undivided attention. But their last interaction felt like an unfinished conversation that kept needling Maki. She could call Nico. Or text. Nearly 10, Nico’s shift at the Cup o’ would be done soon and Maki’s parents weren’t there to interfere with impulse. So Maki slid open the back door and prepared to transform.

A couple more customers had wandered in, cold and in need of conversation and an energy boost so Nico had had an easy evening to get through, not much time for worrying, no lines of impatient stress puppies. Nico stopped wiping down the counter and shook her head at herself. Stress puppies was a phrase she’d have to wipe from her vocabulary; it just brought pouty, worried lavender eyes to mind.
A bark, outside the door. Maki. As if summoned. Nico grumbled and opened the door, Maki leaping up to lick her cheek, “You’re not supposed to be here, Maki. Your parents are going to hate Nico.” Maki ignored that and wandered into the Cup O’, sniffing curiously, stopping where Hanayo had been sitting to stare at Nico.

“Yes, your friend was here.” Nico went back to the counter, “Don’t make any messes for Nico. Nozomi couldn’t keep her girlfriend from drooling, but don’t you start.”

Maki was still sniffing the booth, then whined inquisitively.

“Nico will tell you later, pretty girl. Don’t worry. Let Nico finish.”

Maki sat on her haunches and watched as Nico shut everything down, then grabbed her oversized parka. Bounding outside, Maki was ready to trot in the direction of Nico’s place, when Nico put a gentle hand on her shoulders.

“I drove, Maki. Nico will take you home.” Nico opened the passenger door and urged Maki into the car with her hip. Once Nico was settled, but before she put on her seatbelt, she turned to Maki, who leaned forward to sniff Nico, sensing worry and a little fear. “We have to talk.”

Whimpering, Maki frantically tried to fit herself into Nico’s lap, between the actress and the steering wheel, which crunched Nico back in her seat. Nico wrapped both arms around Maki as she whispered, “No, pretty girl. Nico didn’t mean to worry you. Maki and Nico are fine.” Nico pulled Maki tight and kissed the side of her head. Maki’s panting breaths calmed, although Nico decided to keep her arms around the wolf. She was so warm. But heavy. After a few moments, Nico reluctantly urged Maki off her lap, and when her girlfriend resettled in the passenger seat met the luminous swirls of green pinwheeling in Maki’s eyes calmly, “Nico has a problem. Maki can help. I’ll explain when we get to your house.”

Maki sat up, proudly. Surely, she could easily solve this, a second problem for her GIRLFRIEND.

Nico started the car, watching Maki out of the corner of her eye, “Try not to be so cute Nico can’t keep her eyes on the road, pretty girl.”

Maki howled softly and stuck out her tongue, then snuffled her nose through Nico’s hair.

“Hey, stay back. Nico is busy.” Nico flailed at her with one ineffectual hand until Maki rolled over on the seat, exposing her belly. Nico wondered briefly if wolves needed seatbelts and put the car in drive.

The room was dark when Hanayo walked in, Rin curled up in their bed, as far under the blankets and against the wall as she could be. She’d sent no texts at all.

“Rin?” Hanayo’s voice echoed in a too-still room, even at a whisper. Still no response from Rin. Taking off her coat and shoes, Hanayo crawled under the covers, reaching for Rin, who pulled away at first and then threw herself at Hanayo, sobbing.

“Rin?” Hanayo’s voice squeaked with panic, “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Rin took a huge breath, but her voice was a frightened mumble, “Does Kayochin have someone else?”

Hanayo didn’t register what Rin was asking at first and then the surge of panic raced through her,
“Rin. NO. I love you, Rin. Only you, Rin.”

Doubly green eyes blinked at Hanayo, the effect eerie in the darkness as cold voice alien to Rin’s natural cheer accused her, “But you’re lying to me.”

Hanayo sat up and waited for Rin to do the same, seizing her fiancée’s trembling hands and repeating, over and over again, between kisses, “I love you Rin, I love you Rin, I love you Rin” until Rin relaxed against her. Then Hanayo let the silence sit until once again their hearts were in synch, beating to the calm, steady, mutual rhythm that had given her so much strength and confidence to draw from over the years. Only then could Hanayo say the words that made their worst fear real, “Someone’s hunting werewolves, Rin.”

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. I am determined to get back to a weekly posting schedule and I appreciate your patience 'til then. We are getting more Fall like weather here, which is nice as I enjoy wandering around in both shorts and a hoodie. And baby pinecones are adorable : ) Have been having fun on the side skimming Bram Stoker's Dracula and figuring out how many musical numbers are actually in Fangs.

I hope this chapter has answered some of your questions. As I'm in question answering mode, ask away. Or tell me what's your favorite spooky read. I'm still mulling my favorite NicoMaki fics list.

Thanks for reading.
Eli enjoyed watching Nozomi cast cards from her Tarot deck. The sage would often concentrate hard enough on the cards in front of her that she would bite her lower lip, which Eli found sexy enough to make her forget what Nozomi was doing and sneak forward to kiss the back of her neck.

Nozomi twitched at the touch, but ignored Eli, except for scooting farther away from the bed. Three cards lay in front of her, Eli only recognized the middle one.

“What’s there besides The Lovers?” Eli wondered.

“Knight of Pentacles, flipped. 8 of Cups.” Nozomi touched the cards, fingers lingering on each. “Nico-chi’s fortune is boringly normal for nearing midterms. But a little worrisome.” Nozomi sounded concerned.

Eli looked at the cards. “You got that eight card the first time I saw you read. Was that about Nico too?”

Nozomi turned, with a gleaming smile, “Good memory, Eli-chi. But this is the Eight of Cups. That was Pentacles. And yes, that card turns up a lot for the ‘future star of stage and screen.’ It’s for the diligent, overcoming whatever problem with hard work.” Nozomi shook her head, “Which, although she would never admit it, is Nico’s defining characteristic.”

“But that’s such an important trait.” Eli sat down on the floor, next to her girlfriend.

“For someone less vain, yes.” Nozomi fidgeted with the center card and its 3 figures, the two lovers linked, “But maybe she will finally have someone to appreciate all of her qualities.”

“Is that what that card means?” Eli was curious. She wondered if Nozomi ever drew it for them.

Nozomi frowned, “The Lovers means PASSION, all caps, sometimes, but considering Nico just started dating, I think it’s safe to assume it at least means this new person will have an impact.”

“Impact on this?” Eli pointed to the Eight.

Nozomi picked up both the Knight and the Eight, “Irresponsible, impossible people and trials and exhaustion in a difficult situation for Nico.”

“The new girlfriend?” Eli sounded surprised.

“No,” Nozomi shook her head, “I don’t really get much from Maki, except concern for Nico. Raw emotions but very hard to read...” Nozomi face scrunched, as she lacked exact words, “untamed? She wants to...protect.”
Eli put an arm around Nozomi, “Do you riff scenarios based on insights you’ve had about people?”

“No-chi!?!” Nozomi pulled away, hand dramatically clasped to heart, “surely you don’t want all of my secrets?”

Eli stole a quick kiss, “Actually, I do. But I’m also curious how you’re being affected by…”

“Oh.” Nozomi winced. For a brief moment as the cards were laid down and started to make sense for Nico, she’d forgotten the trouble she’d been having.

“So. Sorry,” Eli’s voice was soft, contrite, her hand touching Nozomi’s cheek briefly.

Nozomi sat up straighter, “If I’m with someone, there are images that I see...random scenes and situations, people I can feel their responses to. The cards help focus it, the questions people ask help control what I let myself pay attention to.” Nozomi sighed, “Recently, there’s been a flood of random images or nothing. None of my centering and focus tricks help.”

“So were you thinking about Nico when you dealt those cards?” Eli was treading carefully, Nozomi had never been this open before.

“Nico, the situation with Erena, Hanayo’s worry…” a pause, “which is why I don’t think the cards read breakup for Nico, unless it’s with theatre.”

Eli laughed, “That would never happen. Nico is the most actress-y actress I have ever met.”

Nozomi smiled but the corner of her lip twisted downward, “And that’s all Nico-chi wants to you to see.” Nozomi picked up The Lovers, sliding all three back into the deck. “Maybe she’ll finally let someone behind the curtain.”

Nico expected they would walk in, Maki would change into something that showed a lot of leg and talking, cuddling and comfort would occur. With perhaps a warm snack before Nico went back into the cold. But no, from the initial Maki barking Nico through the security keycode to Nico refusing to follow Maki up the treehouse (“Not until Nico wears sneakers and the weather gets 50 degrees warmer”), mischief seemed to have seized Maki’s mood. And so now, Nico was in front of a large sectional sofa, in an emotional tug of war with an overgrown, very spoiled puppy, but adorable, which didn’t help AT ALL. Nico was tempted to try out her gymnastic moves and swing over the back of the sofa, putting furniture between herself and the bounding affectionate, wolf version of her girlfriend.


Maki sat back and cocked her head to the side, ears twitching, eyes sadly luminous.

“No pouty puppy eyes either, Maki.” Nico did scramble backwards, getting caught half way when Maki grabbed at her dress with her teeth.

“Hey!” An indignant Nico tugged her dress free and the hem tore, “Nico loved this dress.” Nico dropped back to the floor, glaring, nose to nose with a Maki who had a piece of fabric snagged on a tooth, “Rude. If you want to date Nico, you have to use your mouth to talk to Nico. With words.”

Maki howled, with a pleading whine for punctuation.
“No. Nico said words.” Nico had one arm in front as a barrier and the other on the sofa as a pivot, if she decided to go over the top again. As Maki sniffed Nico’s arm, another voice cut into the ‘conversation.’

“Hello, Nico. Nice to see you again. Is Princess misbehaving?” The maternal Dr. Nishikino let her voice snap on “Princess.” Maki whirled, growling at her mother.

“Hey.” Nico snarled and Maki swivelled her head back to Nico, “Nico has more important things to do than watch you fight with your mother again.” Nico pulled the fabric scrap from Maki’s mouth, “Plus, still rude.” She grabbed her parka, nodded at the Nishikinos, and ignored a Maki who was frantically nudging her. “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Nishikino. Sorry to intrude. I’ll be going home now.”

Maki threw herself in front of Nico, blocking the path out of the room, whimpering.

“Maki, let your guest leave,” The paternal Dr. Nishikino finally spoke, his voice stern.

Nico glanced over her shoulder, “I got this.” She crouched down, hands on both sides of Maki’s head, forcing Maki to make eye contact, “Listen to Nico.”

Maki nodded, only slightly but Nico felt it and continued, ‘Hanayo says there are people looking for werewolves. Talk to her.” Maki whined, Nico continued, “Two of them are working on Fangs. Nico doesn’t think you should come to rehearsals anymore.” Maki barked stubbornly but Nico only shook her own head. “I mean it, Maki. Nico worries.” Nico bopped a kiss on the end of Maki’s nose and her girlfriend yelped, “Call Nico sometime soon, pretty girl.”

Maki slumped as Nico let go and walked to the door, leaving a miserable werewolf behind to glare at her parents for interrupting a perfectly fun visit.

The Doctors Nishikino exchanged a glance. Maki’s mom pulled out her phone, searching for Hanayo’s number while her husband took their coats to the closet. Maki followed him, huffing disconsolately.

“Maki,” her father rested a gentle hand on her head, “You can’t just avoid conversations. They usually go better than you might expect. I bet Nico missed hearing you say good night before she left.”

Maki howled a complicated series of notes, mainly morose.

Her father laughed, “Try that on the piano.” He pointed up the stairs, “Maybe you should actually talk to Nico.”

Maki sighed and climbed the steps to her bedroom.

Verbalizing had always helped Nico but now it seemed to be draining energy she didn’t have. 6:30 a.m., sleepy siblings reluctant to let her leave seemed like both another day and another life.

Nico opened the door to the apartment, muttering, “Sure, super sexy, cute, smart girlfriend but what good does that do Nico if all she wants to do is climb trees and rip Nico’s dress. Nico had plans, Nico has lines to work on, Nico…” Nico might have let the door slam. Honoka had been half asleep on the couch and jumped. Nico snorted, imagining Maki doing the same thing.

Umi came out of the bathroom, toothbrush in hand, “Nico?”
“Sorry about the door, Umi. Nico’s had a long day. Hi, Honoka,” Nico flopped on the couch, staring at the Fangs script she’d left on the coffee table to remind her to study when she got home from work. Two hours later...Nico sighed and her head fell back to the couch.

“Did something happen?” Umi’s royal blue bathrobe had her name embroidered in gold. A Kotori touch. Honoka was still dressed, rainbow rugby shirt and denim. Nico guessed she wasn’t staying.

Nico glanced over at Honoka who was yawning, “Nico can’t talk about it right now.”

“Oh,” Umi leaned over Honoka and kissed her on the cheek, “You can sleep here, you know, Honoka.”

“You can have Nico’s bed, if you want. Nico will sleep here.” Nico slid toward the end of the couch, pulling the throw over her. If she were Maki, she could probably smell Maki on it.

“You’re too efficient in the morning, Umi,” Honoka whined, “You make me wake up and shower.”

“And you get to class on time.” Umi stated, as if that should be an obvious plus.

“Kotori” Honoka whined out the syllables of their girlfriend’s name, “was supposed to be here by now.”

“She’s not out hunting werewolves, is she?” Nico grumbled.

“Nico!” Umi’s glare hardened her eyes from soft honey to amber; Honoka appeared confused.

“Sorry. Nico is really tired.” Nico sat up, trying to look as apologetic as she could, “I’m having a snack. Want something Honoka? I brought back my mom’s banana bread.”

“Ooohh, thanks Nico.” Honoka grabbed the remote.

Umi followed Nico to the kitchen, hands and presumably also toothbrush shoved in the pockets of her bathrobe, voice low as Honoka turned on the television, “Why did you say that about Kotori, Nico?”

Nico glanced at Honoka, who had reverted to oblivious as she watched the evening’s entertainment news, “Just a bad joke. Nico is having trouble believing the last few days are real.” Umi nodded. “A friend of Maki’s thinks there are people searching for werewolves and witches and magic to study.”

Umi scratched her cheek, thoughtful, “Is Maki in danger? Are you?”

Nico shrugged, “She wouldn’t talk, stayed werewolfy, so I told her and left her to her parents after she came down to meet me at the Cup o’.” Nico’s phone buzzed, she gave it a quick glance, “And here she is.” Nico tossed the phone on the counter and unpacked the food her mom had sent with her.

“Are you not speaking to her?” Hands back in her pockets, Umi was practically professionally calm.

“No, Nico will call her back after I snack. She’s not the biggest problem.”

“Do you need help?” Umi was also practically professionally helpful.

Nico sliced the banana bread although Umi turned down the piece Nico pushed in her direction. Teeth already brushed, after all, Nico thought. “Maybe. Put it on the agenda for this week’s meeting.” Nico winked.
“I will.” Umi picked up a plate, “I will also bring Honoka her snack.”

“Thanks, Umi.” Nico stared reluctantly at her phone, “Nico has a call to make.”

Maki stared at her phone. Nico hadn’t picked up. Nico was probably mad about the dress. What a stupid thing to do. But instinct and impulse had triggered the lunge...and not wanting Nico to leave. She couldn’t call Nico again, maybe Nico was asleep...or talking to Umi...or....Maki growled in frustration. She should have transformed. But Nico smelled so worried and Maki didn’t know what Nico was going to say so it was easier to stay a wolf and not have to talk. Maki threw herself on her bed, grabbing the Neruda Love Sonnets off the nightstand. But she didn’t need to open it, the lines had lanced themselves into her being.

“I hunger for your mouth, your voice, your hair
I silently hunt in the streets, starving...”

Maybe Nico was right and Neruda was a werewolf. Maki could almost taste Nico in her mouth, the texture of Nico’s hair against tongue, soft but crisp with the magnetic charge that wouldn’t let Maki pull away. Why wasn’t Nico calling back? The light was on, but Maki had her eyes shut, her hands gripping the book so tightly it might have condensed to half its size had it not already spent part of its life boxed up under the weight of its fellows. She was spinning, pulling everything she could remember about touching Nico, being near Nico, kissing Nico...

"drunk with the great starry
void,
...I felt myself a pure part
of the abyss,
I wheeled with the stars,
my heart broke loose on the wind.”

And there it was, the music she could hear in her head, that had been coming through her fingers, pounding into the piano, all the knotted up empty that now echoed Nico, until those moments, those breaks, when crimson eyes twinkled in her mind and her fingers danced with light mischief across the keys.


“Nico?” Maki didn’t shout but all two syllables of Nico’s name rushed out faster than she blinked.

There was a laugh, “Breathe, Maki. Hello. Sorry I didn’t pick up when you called.” Maki heard a door close, Nico must be in her bedroom, “Kotori just got here, so she’s talking to Umi. Honoka fell asleep on the couch.”

Maki’s hand trembled as she held the phone, she’d been rehearsing her apology. “I’m sorry about your dress, Nico. You looked so pretty in it.”

“Nico looks good in everything.” There was a pause, Maki wondered what Nico smelled like? Friendly, mad, plus that luscious tempting indescribable mix that compelled Maki to nudge Nico-ward...”But the next time, you want to get Nico out of her clothes, try it as a cute girl.” Maki found herself blushing and thinking about hands and Nico’s curves and...”Maki?”

“Thanks for calling me back.” Maki laid back down on the bed. She heard Nico yawn, “I missed talking to you.”
“And that was Maki’s fault, not Nico’s. Nico talked.” Maki could see Nico’s lips pursed together.

Maki flipped over, “I’m sorry. We keep getting interrupted.”

Nico sighed, “We do. And Nico is too busy. I have to memorize my lines and learn some scenes from Much Ado for class."

“Much Ado?”

“Shakespeare. Nico has her Shakespeare class this quarter.” Nico paused and Maki could hear her drop onto her bed, "'No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born.' Beatrice’s lines are better than Hero’s. And Nico hates fainting onstage. 'No, not till a hot January.' Nope, not for Nico.”

Maki was going to have get Nico’s reading list to make sense of conversations as Nico just seemed to roll through whatever she was thinking about if left unchecked. Maki decided to be bold, “Let’s go on a date. I’ll take you out to dinner. Any night. Do you like Italian?”

Nico groaned, “Nico is busy every night.”

Maki drooped, forehead in her pillow, “Oh.” Then she remembered, “My parents decided as long as I keep them posted, I don’t have to be home immediately after classes.”

“Good.” Nico yawned again, “But Nico really doesn’t think you should come to rehearsals. Did you talk to Hanayo?”

“Mama did. She’s going to talk to our lawyers too, to find out what Hanayo should look for.” Maki sat up, proud to have a plan to report.

“Good. But Tsubasa’s at every rehearsal and she keeps looking suspiciously at you, Maki. So Nico worries.”

“But Hanayo said they mentioned you too.” Maki held back the growl that started when she remembered the first time she’d forced sandalwood, bergamot, copper and too calm away from Nico. Apparently, she hadn’t been aggressive enough.

“Nico will be fine, Nico can handle her.” Another yawn and Nico had started muttering, “Meet Nico for coffee at Norris tomorrow, before rehearsal, 3 o’clock, pretty girl.”

“I’ll be there.” Maki smiled.

“Good. Maybe we can avoid our friends and talk.” Maki heard more Nico settling into the bed noises, “Nico is too tired to change into her pajamas.”

"They were very cute pajamas.” Maki noted.

“Mmmmm…right, Maki slept over,” Nico’s getting comfortable voice purred along Maki’s auricular nerves. "So what kind of pajamas does Maki sleep in?"

“Uhhhh…bathrobe, mostly.” Maki didn’t feel comfortable explaining that her tendency to change in her sleep made no clothes an easier option. Would that weird Nico out too much? Would sleeping in a strange...Maki shook her head, way too far ahead, but the feel of Nico pushing into her was coming back vividly again and the tantalizing, tempting breathy touch of Nico whispering things into her ear as tingles of urgency roved up her back, wild flares of...Maki heard a snore, “Nico?”
Another snore, and some random consonants mumbled. Maki giggled. Nico was probably adorable, curled up around a pillow. A different set of images came to mind as Maki remembered cuddling against Nico, watching that movie. She wondered how different that would feel if she stayed a ‘cute girl.” Nico would like it better. She might too.

“Good night, Nico. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Maki whispered into her phone, smiling at the unintelligible even for werewolf’s ears response. Time to see if she could meet Nico in her dreams, Maki thought, grinning as she yawned. Neruda knew his stuff. “By night, Love, tie your heart to mine, and the two together in their sleep will defeat the darkness.”

Chapter End Notes

And, I think that gets me back to weekly. Now, I have to finish Healing Hearts and then consider if I want a go at another holiday story, which I'll have to start now to fit around Casual Lunacy as there are still more chapters to go...

Wow. Still more chapters to go. This has been a very educational (and fun) experiment so far. I love the immediacy and impact of the feedback (Thank you commenters!) and I'm astonished how often my plans are upended by Maki refusing to stop capering around as a wolf...but that's probably my fault ; )

Weather's gotten chillier, still working on that recommended fics list, hope this finds you well.
Werewolf In The Rain (I)

Chapter Summary

Full moon, full impact, not so casual

Chapter Notes

Why yes, I did name this chapter after the playlist I wrote it to. Rain currently only a metaphor.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Maki woke up, strange smells, musk, magic, vanilla, peach, lavender...Nico smells...she was...Maki sat up, a sheet falling from her torso, blinking...Nico’s bedroom...why was she in Nico’s bedroom? The last thing she remembered was getting sleepy watching a movie. Maki had been worried about Nico canceling their coffee date at the last minute, the thought that Nico was not as eager to see her as she was to see Nico kept looping. And anyplace she went on campus, if Nico was anywhere, Maki was too aware of who she was with and often, what she was saying. All of Maki’s senses had locked on Nico. Werewolf dating...or mating, to be more accurate, Maki realized as she dropped back onto Nico’s bed, clutching a pillow. But that wasn’t human dating. Human dating was slower. Rin and Hanayo had gone slower because they’d met so much younger. Pre puberty. Maki ran a hand over the curve of her hip, imagining Nico’s fingers there instead, inhaling the heady mix of Nico smells that seemed to go right to her core. Definitely post puberty.

Maki rolled over to check the time, no clock, but there was a note taped to the speaker where Nico recharged her phone, “Hey, Pretty Girl, don’t panic. Nico will have to leave for class in the morning so if I’m not here, I’ll be back soon.

We didn’t sleep together, Nico stayed on the couch. You didn’t hurt anyone. I texted your mother so she doesn’t think you’ve gone missing.

See you soon. Nico will bring clothes.

Nico.

P.S. Nico left you a sandwich ; ) ”

A sandwich? Nico taking care of things. “You didn’t hurt anyone.” Had she tried? “We didn’t sleep together.” Did Nico want to? “See you soon.” Nico sounding so reasonable. Maki growled. At herself. Again. She was not a problem to be handled by other people. She didn’t know exactly what happened last night, or how she had ended up in Nico’s bed but it had been a long time since she’d been so out of control as to have no memory of her actions. Not a good thing at all that it was starting again now, with Nico. Not acceptable.

Maki knew where she had to go.
Two and half hours later, Maki pulled the car up to the Nishikino’s Wisconsin lakeside cabin. She was starting to feel the effects of the full moon, tingling under her skin, urging her to just change and run until she got what or where she wanted. Grabbing the duffle from the backseat, she hurried inside, locking all three of the bolts and quickly checking the windows and the back door. Secure. She was safe here. Her great-grandfather had built it to keep her grandmother safe and her father had updated the locks when Maki had begun her transformations. In her normal werewolf form, Maki could figure out some doors or switch back to human long enough to work a handle. In her moon buzzed werewolf state, Maki would just get increasingly frustrated and tear through everything in the cabin until she wore herself out and slept. That would be tonight. She’d left a note for her parents explaining, but she’d only left a brief response to Nico’s note. Time to text.

M: Hi Nico. I’m sorry I left so abruptly. Thank you for taking care of me last night.

N: Where are you? I sent you so many texts. Nico was worried ■ ■

M: Nico has to worry too much about me. It’s not good ● ● I’m in Wisconsin.

N: Why the heck are you there?

M: My family has a werewolf proof cabin.

N: oh

28 Hours Ago

Maki’s phone buzzed as she was leaving class. Nico. Her heart skipped and her smile was wide when she answered, “Hi Nico!”

“Hi, Maki! You sound good.” Nico chirped. “Sorry I fell asleep last night. Nico was exhausted.”

“You had a long day.” Maki paused, ruffling her fingers through the hair at the back of her head, “And I made it longer. Sorry.”

“It’s ok, Nico’s always glad to see you. Nico would just like,” Maki heard Nico take in a long breath and her voice dropped to a seductive purr, “to kiss Maki without chewing on fur.”

Maki snorted. Leave it to Nico to mix provocation and complaint in an irresistible and irreproducible concoction. So very U-Nico.

“Maki?”

“Just thinking how u-nico you are.” Maki decided to tweak her GIRLFRIEND.

“Ha.” Maki could picture the half sneer on Nico’s face, “Leave the puns to the professional. Nico will handle it.”

‘Nico can handle anything.” Maki shifted her bag, preparing to head outside, to her next class.

“Sometimes Nico makes a mistake.” Nico sounded guilty.

“What happened?” Maki stopped, unaware of how she was half blocking the Harris Hall doorway until someone pushed into her. He cursed, she growled.
“Something wrong, Maki?” Nico, concern in her voice again.

Maki bounded down the stairs, feeling like a howl. One more class and she could see Nico, “Just a traffic jam. Everybody’s rushing to their next class. Are you?”

“No. Nico is preparing for an important meeting with her adviser that she forgot about until she looked at her schedule this morning. It starts at,” Nico hesitated, “2:45”

“Oh.”

24 Hours Ago

Time to work on her Cognitive Psychology Paper should be a good thing, Maki knew. She was starting to get far enough behind in her reading that she’d have to devote some extra time to schoolwork. She rolled restlessly across the spare bed in Hanayo and Rin’s room, ignoring her open textbook, while Hanayo watched curiously over her glasses, distracted from her laptop.

“Something wrong, Maki?” Hanayo half closed her laptop.

Maki jumped up to a seated position, “Restless. Nico was supposed to meet me, but she forgot an appointment.”

“Do you have a date tonight?” Hanayo wondered.

“No. Nico’s too busy. She has rehearsal or work all week.” Maki was now actually standing on the bed, reaching up to the ceiling, then hopping a little to see if she could palm it.

“Is this the first full moon since you started dating?” Hanayo frowned, debating whether asking Maki to watch her actions would trigger a mood change.

“Yeah, why?” Maki stopped bouncing to stare at her friend.

Hanayo considered how to phrase her next statement. “Rin gets very active sometimes.” Hanayo glanced at her phone, “But track practice should tire her out. Maybe you should take a run.”

Maki jumped, the bed creaking, pulling her knees up like a cannonball dive and landing hard on the floor, “I’m fine. I need the energy to study. I can pull an all nighter. I’m behind in all my reading anyway.”

Hanayo glanced at the book Maki had forgotten on the bed, then back to her friend, “Reading isn’t much fun sometimes.”

Maki laughed. Hanayo thought it sounded frenetic. “After Rin and celebrity websites, books are your favorite things.”

“But…” Hanayo leaned forward.

Maki shook her head, “I’m heading home. Tell Rin I’m sorry I missed her.”

“Ok.” Hanayo’s eyes dimmed as her internal argument continued, then she stood, “Maki…” Maki turned, head tilted, lavender eyes flashing and Hanayo got a vivid flash of her wolf form, “Be careful.”

Maki smiled at her friend, “Keep an eye on Rin. I’ll be fine.”

The door shut and Hanayo had to force herself to stop staring anxiously at the Cognitive Psychology
text Maki had left behind her. Maki had more control over her changes than Rin, surely everything would be fine.

23 Hours Ago

Nothing was fine. Nothing felt fine. It had never been like this before, Maki realized, the restlessness, the needles under her skin, the urge to change, to run, to howl, to...Maki didn’t even have words for what she felt, something inside was using hammers of adrenaline to persuade her that only in wolf form could she be fully articulate, throat open, fangs gleaming, eyes emerald daggers, voice a roaring demand...and then she would pick up Nico’s voice or scent and her heart would add another hammer, pounding in her chest, blood pounding in her ears, saliva gathering in her mouth, tongue constantly flicking out, ears straining for any syllable from Nico, muscles tensed...maybe a shower would put up a barrier, driving out other sensations, outside sounds, leaving Maki with just the pounding of water...she sprinted upstairs, throwing off clothes, turning on the shower, chill or burn, which would help, both, back and forth, panting, it had never felt like this, the moon, alive, calling...oh gods, was that what Nico saw, the moon alive, crawling, underneath, hairs twisting out, Nico, no, don’t think about Nico now, Maki dug her fingers into her thighs for the distraction of the pain, doubling over, water pounding off her back as claws drew blood and her body hit the bottom of the tub, and there was only time for a breath and a whimper before she was thrashing, too wet to find footing on slippery porcelain, desperate to get away from the water and the pounding...

Kashima was waiting for Nico. Since their session Sunday, Kashima had been filling Nico in on all her hopes, dreams, aspirations and ongoing flirtations and Nico was starting to realize how Maki felt about Kashima’s cologne. The cloying essence extended through Kashima’s conversation and clung. And yet, on stage, a switch flipped and she was Dracula. Nico aspired to that level of concentration, the charisma to pull the world into any performance with her. Some nights, Nico could feel it, but she never really got a full charge without an audience presence. Kashima only needed a bare stage. Nico was impressed. Kashima seemed to have no self awareness when she walked out into the lights, somehow, there was only the script. And the character. Nico vowed to memorize faster. Kashima was already off book and her hands and gestures were becoming an integral part of the character she had developed.

“Nico is impressed by how fast you got off book.” Nico zipped up her parka and pulled her mittens out of her pockets, Kashima held the door open, a black scarf with a thin green stripe wrapped around her throat and tucked into her camel hair coat.

Kashima nodded, “Always do. Now I can spend that time reading up on illusionists and how they misdirect people with their hands. Hori, the set grad assistant, suggested it for Dracula.”

Nico chuckled, breathing in a last bit of warm air before she stepped through the door, “You’re going to learn card tricks?”

Kashima leaned over, she was even taller than Maki, and with a sparkle in her green eyes, ran her fingers through Nico’s hair and around her ear, pulling out a quarter, “Coin tricks.”

“Clever.” Nico winked, “Distracts from the biting.”

“Exactly.” Suddenly Kashima’s hands were grasping Nico’s shoulders and Nico felt herself being forced forward as Kashima tilted her head, voice dropping, “but the audience will see all the tricks the fair maidens don’t.”

Nico felt the shiver and snapped, “Kashima!” Kashima’s hands fell and Nico stepped away, “We
talked about this. Only onstage and only in character.”

“Method acting is fascinating, don’t you think.” Kashima raised a hand to her chin, looking the very picture of brooding romantic thought.

“No.” Nico raised both hands, flicking them out, exasperated once again by what had started out to be a perfectly normal conversation with Kashima, “Just no.”

Kashima shrugged and whistled the theme from Jaws. Nico sighed. A howl suddenly sounded, angry. Nico recognized a few of the notes as it carried.

“Kashima, I have to go back inside. Go home by yourself. Now. Really fast.” Nico turned around, facing in the direction of the howl.

“Nico?” Kashima touched Nico’s shoulder, Nico pivoted and pushed the taller woman away, “Just go. Please. Now. Turn into a cloud of bats or something.”

Kashima’s teeth gleamed in the moonlight and she swept her coat out around her, swooping away, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mina.”

“Flee, o fiend of darkness!” And Nico turned back, bracing for impact. It came sooner than expected, a cold, Maki weight, soggy???, whining, growling werewolf sniffling all around Nico, tracing Kashima’s trail. No greeting, which confused Nico. It looked like Maki, although the color was off because of the wet. She must be freezing. What had happened, had she fallen into the Lake? Maki seemed tensed to spring and she was pointed in the direction Kashima had gone. Nico stepped closer and Maki whirled.

“Maki?” Nico’s voice was soft, a question. Maki snapped back. She was trembling, probably from cold. So Nico’s reply was sharper, not louder, but demanding attention. “Maki.” The werewolf tilted her head, sniffing Nico, growling at Nico’s left ear where Kashima’s touch had lingered with the coin, eyes completely luminous green and narrowed, no recognition. Nico calmed her breathing, telling herself not to panic, took a mitten off slowly and reached out a hand, Maki skipped to the side, wary.

“Nico is back to being the most frightening thing on campus. “ She grumbled, glancing up, glaring at the bright moon, “Nico blames you.”

“Princess.” No response. Nico couldn’t leave Maki like this and there was no guarantee that this Maki would follow her anywhere. “Hey, Pretty Girl,” Nico hummed “I Get No Kick” and Maki’s ears perked up, “can you follow Nico into the theatre where it’s warm? Nico thinks you might be freezing.” Nico kept humming, Maki’s eyes were now tracking her every movement, Nico hoped Maki would follow her. Nico took a tentative step backward and Maki shadowed the movement.

“Nico should start carrying jerky around. Come on, pretty girl.” Nico would have to remember compliments got Maki’s attention, even in this state. Nico continued with the “Anything Goes” soundtrack and opened the door. Maki began to sniff more rapidly, drawn to the warmth. Nico hoped Tsubasa wasn’t around; Maki was likely to have a visceral reaction to her as well. “Come on, pretty girl, Nico needs your help.” Nico urged, sotto voce, Maki looked at her and Nico almost saw a glimmer of reaction. Nico reached out her hand again and Maki skittered to the left. Nico pushed the door as open as she could and stood in front of it, willing Maki forward. Maki sniffed the ground, finding a scent she liked, and barrelled into the building, Nico in pursuit.

“Maki!” Surprise at Maki’s speed prompted a shout from Nico, struggling with a parka not designed for rapid movement. Maki slid to a stop outside the costume shop, howling.
“Quiet down, Maki.” Nico was trying very hard to keep both panic and irritation out of her voice. This was frighteningly different from her previous interactions with Maki in wolf form, no eye contact, no acknowledgement of Nico’s statements, only the barest, most intermittent flicker of any awareness at all. Why the costume shop? Nico wondered as Maki kept throwing herself at the door, until Nico reached for the handle, which caused Maki to shy back. Nico opened the door a little, Kotori was still working. Kotori? Nico frowned. Had she left that big of an impression on Maki at the party? Nico drew the line at Kotori poaching her girlfriend for further polyamorous fun. But Maki ignored Kotori and headed straight for the tote bag laying on a table so Nico recalculated.

“Nico?” Kotori stepped off the pedal of her sewing machine, sounding curious, staring at the intruder in her space.

“What do you have….” And suddenly it clicked for Nico, “Umi gave you a sandwich, didn’t she?”

Kotori nodded. Maki had grabbed for the bag but it slipped to the floor. Nico grabbed it and ran for the door, turning the corner, seeing a room, opening the door to check that no one was inside and pulling out the sandwich and tossing it into the room, Maki leaping after. Nico slammed the door, sitting in front of it, taking a moment to breathe. Well, at least Maki was more attracted to Nico’s cooking than she was to Kotori. That was something. Nico snorted, but such a small something right now. Unzipping her parka with one hand, Nico took her phone out of its sleeve tech pocket with the other. Multitasking and the werewolf girlfriend. Maki was whining behind the door. Probably freezing, but Nico wasn’t opening the door until…

Kotori had also followed Nico, but not at werewolf speed. Her eyes were suspicious, “Nico?”

“Give Nico a minute.” Nico dialed Umi’s number, “Umi, it’s an emergency and I need a favor….bring my car to the Wirtz Center and any of those sandwiches that are left and grab my longest scarf or a rope of something…oh, wait, Kotori can probably find me something….yes, Kotori’s here…yes, you can bring Honoka…..yes, it’s about her.”

Nico glanced up at Kotori, “I can never thank you enough for introducing me to Umi. Also, she says she’ll see you soon.”

Kotori pursed her lips, “‘About her’?”

“My…” Now Nico was on the spot. How hard not to slip into a lie, how easy to stumble without any answer that sounded right. So she skipped to the next item on the list. “Right now, I need to get Princess calmed down.” Nico stood, determined, “that’s the first thing. Can you find something I can use as a collar and not ask questions, Kotori? Please?”

“Sure, Nico.” Kotori’s voice was breathy and soft. Maki’s howls got louder and sadder. At least she wasn’t sounding angry, that encouraged Nico.

“It’s all right, pretty girl,” Nico whispered in a pause, knowing Maki would hear her, “Nico will take care of this. Umi’s bringing food and we’re going to take you home and dry you off.”

Nico waited for a response, a howl, a whimper, a whine, but there was none, just the sudden sound of a body knocking through seats. Nico felt lonely. Would a howl reach Maki, the Maki inside there somewhere? Nico leaned against the door, forehead pressed against the metal. Were there tears? Of course not, Nico would insist. Nico can handle this easy. A future star of stage and screen surmounts all obstacles with style and panache. A full moon crazed werewolf girlfriend? That’s nothing compared to an empty Sunday matinee theatre.

“NICO!” Honoka’s shout echoed, giving Nico time to whirl and wipe a quick hand across her eyes.
Umi was running alongside Honoka, her pace even, but the mechanics of her stride restrained.

“Here are the sandwiches.” Umi handed Nico a lunch cooler. Nico opened it: half a dozen left, that should be enough.

Kotori returned with a long piece of braid, which Nico knotted a loop in as Honoka rushed to embrace the fawn haired woman.

Nico took Umi aside as Honoka and Kotori chatted. Nico kept her voice quiet, “She’s not like she was, Umi. She doesn’t respond to me when I talk. I’m not even sure she reco....”

Umi made a sympathetic rumble, then stayed right on topic with a question, “Which is why the sandwiches and the car. So how do we do this?”

Nico had been planning so her answer was quick. The sooner they all got out of the building the better. “I’ll open the door. Honoka can hold out a sandwich and I’ll slip this around her…” Nico held up the braid, wincing at the thought of calling it a leash or a collar, “Then we lead her out to the car, where you are with a couple of sandwiches…”

Maki howled, interrupting, she sounded impatient. Nico knew more delay would be counterproductive, “So we get her into the car, carefully, take her home, stash her in my bedroom, dry her off and call her parents.”

Umi frowned, “Can’t we take her to her house?”

“Nico is not leaving her unsupervised tonight. Nobody seems to care.” Nico felt her own anger rise. Who doesn’t have a plan for a werewolf daughter? Not irresponsible dog ownership, irresponsible parenting. Maki could get hurt. Or sick, Nico thought, remembering how drenched her fur looked.

Umi nodded, aware of how much concern Nico was still hiding. “Give me 5 minutes to put the car outside the nearest door. I’ll text you.”

Nico handed Umi 2 sandwiches, “Thanks, Umi.”

“You’re welcome, Nico.” Umi hustled off, with a calm certainty Nico appreciated.

A group of random students wandered by and Nico waved. Honoka jumped out to hug a friend, but Kotori pulled her back, shushing her. Nico walked over to them, handing Honoka a sandwich, “We’re going to walk Princess back to the car, Honoka. Give her the first sandwich and then lead her out to the car with the others.”

Kotori kissed Honoka on the cheek. “Be careful, sweetie.”

“Don’t worry, Kotori. Umi and I can do this. See you later.” Honoka gleamed, unwrapping the sandwich as Nico prepared to open the door. Nico turned the handle, pushed the door with her foot and there was a rush as a dark red head popped out of the door, nose eagerly searching for its target. Nico slipped the braid over Maki’s neck in one quick motion, holding her breath as the werewolf snapped in irritation but then Honoka shoved the sandwich into Maki’s mouth and took off down the hall, waving another one, pieces of ham falling to the floor and being slurped up by what was an apparently starving werewolf. Nico was keeping up with Maki’s pace, not willing to get involved in a tug of war. Honoka turned the corner and then, there she was, opening the door to the outside, Maki picked up her pace, now half dragging Nico, but then there was Umi, who had braced herself between the car and the now open door and used what looked like a karate throw to shunt Maki into the back seat of the car, diving in after her. Nico let the braid go and followed Honoka into the front seat, Umi used her arms and torso to create a moving barricade to prevent Maki from leaping over
They had wrestled and coaxed Maki into Nico’s bedroom, although once she realized where Nico was trying to make her go, Maki had become more cooperative, jumping onto Nico’s bed and even standing still for half a minute while Nico tried to towel her off. But still no affection or playfulness, just watchfulness as Nico tried to look as harmless as possible and ignore the fact that all of her things were getting damp, grimy werewolf all over them. Nico had taken a moment to crouch down in front of Maki and try to capture her head again, to make eye contact, but Maki had raised her snout, pulling back her ears with a squint, tail slightly curled from the middle, looking ready to bolt again so Nico backed away. Finally, after circling the room several times, stopping once or twice to sniff curiously in Nico’s direction, Maki curled up in front of Nico’s closet, on Nico’s best outfit for winter cuteness. Maki so needed to spring for a “Take Nico shopping date” after tonight. Nico stood in the door for a minute, considering the picture as still entirely green eyes stared into hers for a brief moment, before the werewolf tucked her head into her side.

“Get some rest, pretty girl.” Nico slumped and shut the door, realizing how tensed she’d been keeping her muscles.

Umi was on the couch, Honoka sprawled across her. Both exhausted. Nico imagined she looked battered. Umi pointed to the table. A mug, full of hot chocolate, and some leftover banana bread had been put out for her, “You probably need the calories, Nico. Is” Umi glanced down at Honoka, “Princess all right?”

Nico nodded as she drank the warm liquid. She’d gotten so cold. And wet. Steaming shower was the next step. But first, forgetting she had an audience, Nico dropped her chin down, hands wrapped around her torso to stop the shaking, cinching her eyes closed so no tears could start, first Nico would feel just a little sorry for herself that at no point had Maki let Nico reach out and hug her, at no point had there been that connection Nico had always felt, even before Maki had revealed the truth. That lack left Nico with such an empty feeling in her chest. If Nico were a werewolf right now, howling, the sad would bounce in that hollow, desolate space, bruising her heart as the notes made their way out of her throat. And, as if cued, the actual werewolf howled from Nico’s bedroom, the lost sound a forlorn echo of Nico’s ache.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. Things get a little out of control this chapter. Apologies if you get thrown by the slight time skip from the last chapter, but I think the disconnect adds to the mood this bit needs.

I keep promising you a fave fic list so I’m just going to list titles here until I do a proper list, if you need links, let me know. These are long term memory mostly, not more recent examples -- and I probably missed a few: anything arcane, 24 Visits, Doctor’s Orders, nikoxnii Tumblr shorts, Restless Sleep (more NozoEli, but the NicoMaki is fun), You’ve Got To Be Kidding, How To Handle a Nico, Interview With An Idol, Buy Your Love, and The Number 54’s Harry Potter AU

Here’s the playlist, I’ve just been putting it on shuffle starting at the end so there’s no rhyme or reason in the order. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?
What's your favorite stormy mood song?
Nico jumped. Her head lolled forward, and the movement startled her out of the light drowse that had fallen over her in the quiet of her seemingly empty apartment. But no, not empty. Couch was unoccupied. Honoka and Umi must have gone to bed, quietly without disturbing Nico. And then there was Nico’s bed, in the same room with the werewolf tucked into the front of Nico’s closet. Nico stood up, stretching with a groan. How long had this weekend been...oh wait, it was Monday. Only Monday. With a long, busy week ahead. It had been a werewolf weekend, Nico chuckled to herself, thinking of some of the highlights, letting them push away tonight, Maki wink flirt singing, Maki crushed against her on the balcony, Maki’s lips yielding as the redhead...Nico decided to sneak into her bedroom to check up on her sleeping girlfriend.

Maki was still curled up, oblivious to Nico’s arrival. She must be exhausted, Nico was used to her starting at sounds and surprises. To see her so unconscious was worrisome. Nico wondered if Maki would transform back to girl at some point, surely the floor wouldn’t be comfortable then.

Nico decided to risk a whisper, “Maki? Pretty girl?” The werewolf grunted, shifting her position. Nico pulled a pair of warm pajamas out of her drawer, changing quickly. If she could get Maki onto the bed, Nico would go back to the couch, and then check on her again before leaving for class. Humming, that had worked before. Nico started with her solo from Fangs but that just made Maki curl up into a tighter ball. So Nico sang, softly, the same song Maki had responded to earlier.

“I get no kick in a plane
Flying too high with some bird in the sky
Is my idea of nothing to do
Yet I get a kick out of you”

Nico understood the sadness in that song better now, she realized, hearing her own voice play up the bittersweet tones. Maki stirred and Nico knelt down next to her, ruffling the fur around her neck, “Hey, pretty girl, let Nico take you to bed.” Nico blamed Cole Porter for that one. Wordplay. Flirting. Anything going. Maki, out of wolf form, would have blushed, Nico found herself amused at the picture. Maki leaned into Nico’s touch, Nico loved that feeling, in whatever form Maki did it, the warmth, the openness to her caress, inviting Nico to...Nico pulled both hands back and Maki whimpered. But Nico needed to stop those tilting dominoes of urgent now, before the first one tipped. She felt a movement and looked down to see half purple, half green eyes barely open.

“Hey, Maki.” Nico whispered. The werewolf huffed. Nico leaned into Maki with her hip, levering her up and getting her moving. Nico crawled next to her, nudging Maki toward the bed. Weirdest feeling. Nothing like acting exercises, much more tactile. Muscles spoke to muscles without...
conscious effort. Maki tilted her head up, sniffing the sheets, yawning. Nico bumped her girlfriend. Maki turned her head to Nico, surprised, eyes still wary, empty. Nico bobbed her own head toward the bed, climbing up, rolling quickly to the far edge, watching Maki who sighed and hopped up, again curling up and tucking her nose into her side. And then there was light snoring amid the snuffling and Nico sat up. Time to get some sleep on the couch. Overnight guests made for busy mornings. And Nico had early classes.

Nico practically sprinted back to her apartment. She hated leaving Maki alone, but there were three other students involved in her Much Ado scenes and Nico couldn’t just leave them hanging. No one in the living room and she didn’t bother to take off her coat before tearing into the bedroom. Which was also empty. Nico stood, still, heart pounding, confused, breathless. Her note was still taped to the charger, but it looked like Maki had written something.

Something short and uninformative. Didn’t Maki appreciate what a great and patient girlfriend Nico had been, this whole time. And what Nico got was a “Can’t stay. Don’t worry. M.”

“Can’t stay. DON’T WORRY! WHERE ARE YOU, MAKI!” Maybe Maki could hear her, wherever she was. Nico must have roared as she spun because she thought she heard something rattle in the kitchen.

“Nico?” Honoka popped up in the open door. Of course, Honoka was still there, Honoka never woke up before noon. Of course, Umi had a girlfriend, two girlfriends, who stayed where she left them. This sort of thing only happened to Nico. She pulled her phone out of her sleeve texting a “where are you?” to Maki as she brushed by Honoka.

“No, this only happens to Nico. Changing girlfriends, disappearing girlfriends, everyone knows what she is and where she is but Nico. Probably went to stay with Hanayo or her mother came by to break and enter Nico’s place, burgling Nico’s things, not that Maki’s a thing, but there’s a principle here and YOU HAVE TO TELL NICO WHERE YOU ARE.” No, Nico’s throat was not raw from the shouting. Or last night’s tears. Nico was fine. Nico was ALWAYS fine. “Do you hear that, Maki, NICO IS ALWAYS FINE.” Nico took in a breath, swallowing a sob, “Nico doesn’t need y…”


“Don’t touch Nico. Don’t do anything to Nico. Nico is busy.” Nico threw her phone into the couch and started slamming dishes around in the kitchen. But Honoka hadn’t even started her breakfast and the kitchen was already mostly spotless so Nico was just slamming cabinet doors.

“Nico.” Honoka grabbed Nico in a hug, Nico batted against Honoka’s arms but the ginger held on. And then, as if on cue, Umi walked in the door, glaring when confronted with the sight of Nico in Honoka’s arm.

“Umi help me. Nico’s gone crazy. She keeps yelling.” Honoka tried to hold Nico still as she thrashed.

“Nico?” Umi went immediately to concern and reached out her hand; Nico slumped. Honoka loosened her grip reluctantly. Umi led Nico to the couch, “What happened.”

“What happened is Nico rushed home to take care of her girlfriend who she was super worried about
and nobody was here.” Nico glared at the door, “What happened is -- AGAIN -- no one ever tells Nico anything. Or lets Nico help.”

Honoka perched on the arm of the couch, watching Nico, puzzled, “Maki was here? To get her dog?”

“She’S NOT HER DOG!” Nico was right in Honoka’s face, “She’s…” Nico stopped. Everything stopped. No one breathed. Nico fell backwards into the couch, staring up at the ceiling, eyes wild, “mine, isn’t she?”

“Nico...you can’t own…” Umi frowned, arms crossed.

“Of course, you can’t own people, Nico knows all about dead guy philosophy and personal autonomy,” Umi started to interject but Nico bopped up, leaning over the back of the couch, glaring at Umi, “Which doesn’t make you and Honoka there any less Kotori’s, right, practically speaking? Or vice-versa.”

Umi shifted her stance, more centered, “There is certainly a mutual respect and responsibility…”

“PFFFFF.” Nico tapped a finger toward Umi, “Nico is right and you know it.”

“That’s not...ummm...ummm…” Umi spluttered as Nico’s finger weaved in front of her eyes.

Honoka had been ignoring their exchange, her face scrunched up as she thought her way through Nico’s problem, “I get it. You and Maki are together so her dog is yours now, right, Nico?”

Nico bashed her forehead against the couch, “IT’S NOT ABOUT THE DOG, HONOKA.” Nico lifted up her head, hands gripping the couch so hard the fabric dented, eyes chipping flames, “Please take Honoka somewhere and explain this, Umi.”

Umi fidgeted, “Everything?”

Nico exhaled, “Everything.”

Umi nodded, “Come on, Honoka. Let’s get you home and make lunch for Kotori.”

Honoka stepped around the couch, but stopped in front of where Nico was, her head hanging down, hands still embedded in the furniture. Honoka crouched and slipped her hands over Nico’s, grinning when the actress raised her head, “You got this Nico. I know you can do it. And Umi and me will always help.”

Nico managed a nearly convincing smile, after all, she had an audience, “Of course, Nico has this. This is just the tense, dramatic moment before Nico saves the day.” Honoka gave Nico two thumbs up. Umi patted Nico’s shoulder. Nico laid her cheek briefly against Umi’s arm, “Thanks. Nico has the best friends.”

Umi blushed and Honoka gleamed as she grabbed her coat and followed Umi to the door.

The theatre was bustling. Rehearsal was starting in 15 minutes. They were running the first half of the show, at least twice. Next rehearsal was off book. Nico really needed to take time to work on her lines she thought as she pushed frantically through the doors, searching the seats for a purple tinged
head. Or a blonde one. If Eli was here, Nozomi probably wasn’t far away.

Ah, Nozomi was in one of the back rows, legs up, sliding through photos on her iPad. Nico ducked into the row behind her, voice unnaturally loud, “How’s your head, Nozy?”

Nozomi glanced up and winced, remembering the fake a headache plan. “Oh, how nice of you to remind me, Nico-chi. Did you bring the aspirin I asked for?”

Nico nodded and reached into her bag, palming her lip balm off to Nozomi, who felt the cylinder in her hand and giggled.

“Ok,” Nico bent over the row of seats, close enough to whisper in Nozomi’s ear, “Nico has done you a favor, now you do the thing for Nico.”

Nozomi turned around, the scandalous look on her face only half posed, “The thing, Nico-chi?”

“You know, draw the cards, look at the stupid pictures…” Nico paused, coughing before continuing, “tell Nico about her girlfriend.”

Nozomi achieved full, wide eyed incredulousness for ten seconds before she recovered and winked at Nico slyly, “Nico will have to stop calling me a charlatan.”

“Yeah, right, whatever.” Nico pulled Nozomi out her row, dragging her into the hall, “Just deal the cards.”

Nozomi moved to a quieter corridor, sat cross legged and made her card stash visible. She handed them to Nico, who was settling into the same position, “Shuffle and think about…Maki, right.”

“Yes, Maki. Maki is Nico’s girlfriend.” Nico glowered, muttering as she shuffled, “even if she can’t manage to stay in the same apartment as Nico. Or the same species.”

Nozomi tilted her head, watching Nico with ever more curiosity as the future star of stage and screen slammed three cards down in front of her and challenged Nozomi with a snarl, “There.”

Nozomi giggled, “You have to turn the cards over, Nico-chi. X-Ray vision doesn’t come with the package.”

Nico grunted and flipped the cards. First, rider on a horse with one staff in hand and five others in sight; second, upside down, seated woman with a huge sword, and third, big, overflowing cup with a bird diving in. “Well?”

“So much respect, Nico-chi. You move me.” Nozomi shook her head and reached out to nudge the center card, “The past was great and the future looks promising, but your trouble is now.”

“Duh.” Nico pulled a knee up to lean her chin on it.

“Does Maki have trouble communicating? Is she aloof?” Nozomi was paying attention to Nico’s every twitch, but Nico’s open mouth shock would have been impossible to miss even if she hadn’t been.

“The Ace of Cups means a focus on romance, but there are obviously obstacles.” Nozomi moved her finger from card to card, Nico’s eyes locked on, “Things she was proud of in the past may be part of the problem now.”

Nico sighed, “So what does Nico do?”
“Talk to Maki, don’t let her isolate herself, try to get her to think with her head and not her…”

“Nose?” Nico muttered.

“Nico-chi?” Nozomi was puzzled, wondering what Nico was referring to.

Nico waved the question away, “So, get Maki to talk?”

“Maybe. Try to get her to be a less emotional and more realistic about your relationship.” Nozomi flashed the Cup card at Nico as she returned them to the deck, “This means Love matters to her. And that things will get better.”

Nico stood, her jaw set. “Nico can do this.”

“Nico-chi?” Nozomi called after Nico as the other woman headed back into the theatre. Nico paused with her hand on the door handle and glanced back, “Good luck.”

“Mama, Papa…

Nico says she texted you about last night. I took the RX 8 to the cabin. I’ll stay there at least one night, maybe two. Don’t tell Nico where I am if she asks. I don’t think it’s safe for her.

I have my phone. Love you!
Maki”

The Doctors Nishikino stared at the note. Maki had obviously scribbled it in haste.

“I hope her driving was better than her handwriting.” Her mother quipped, an attempt to cover nerves and frustration.

Her father shook his head, unamused, pacing the kitchen, “She might get hurt again.”

Her mother knew he was recalling a night when Maki was 15 and they found her in the backyard, bleeding and whimpering, with bites and gashes all over her torso, “I’ll pack an overnight bag. You cancel everything we have scheduled tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Nico stared at her phone. She wasn’t due onstage for two more scenes so she had a little bit of time. It probably wouldn’t be enough to process the text conversation she was currently having with her absent girlfriend. Nico read Maki’s last text again as she walked to the back of the house. “Werewolf proof cabin in Wisconsin.” What the hell. Nico hit “Call;” Maki picked up immediately.

“Nico, I really can’t talk.” Her voice sounded tense, tightly wound.

“We need to talk. Do you remember anything?”

“No…” A whine with crying.

“Are you changing?” Nico leaned forward, oblivious to anything but Maki’s words.
“Don’t…want…t…” nearly a bark, Nico thought.

“Tell me where you are.”

“No.” There was Maki, briefly, insistent, “not safe.” Another whine.

“Maki…” Nico heard the phone drop. Then a howl. Nico was getting used to picking up howl nuances, this one sounded...pained. Nico’s hand gripped the phone so hard the edge cut into her palm, “Maki?”

“SHHHHHHHHH” Management frowned in Nico’s direction. Nico waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the stage and stepped back into the hall, still listening for sounds. Some movement, another howl, moving away from the phone. Nico ended the call, shaking. Not safe for Nico was probably what Maki meant. But how safe could it be for Maki? Surely she wouldn’t injure herself. Or try to get to Nico.

Nico glanced at her contacts. Hanayo. The only other person she knows with a werewolf girlfriend. Time for a call.

No answer so Nico sent a "Call me" text. Nico wondered if Rin kept Hanayo as busy during the full moon as Maki had kept her last night. Did Rin get jealous and territorial? Was Rin herself during the full moon? Nico kept finding new questions she needed to ask someone, which disturbed her.

Would Maki’s parents tell her where the cabin was if she asked? Did she even have the time to drive up there? Nico was more afraid for Maki than she was of her after last night. Did her parents even know Maki had gone off to the cabin? Did they care? Her mom had looked really worried the morning after Maki had spent the night on Nico’s couch. Surely Maki wouldn’t have disappeared without telling them again. Nico checked her phone. Her scene was probably coming up. Maybe Hanayo would call her back by the time it was done. Nico certainly had enough to do while she waited for answers.

Dawn. Maki blinked at the light coming through a small window. She was on a bed again, covered again, sore. She tried to get up and fell back, with a yelp. Touching a hand to her ribs, she winced.

“We think a few ribs might be broken.” Her father’s voice startled her. She glanced up to meet worried eyes, “how are you feeling?”

“Sore.” Maki burrowed under the blanket, “Tired.” She didn’t say ‘terrified.” She suspected her father knew.

He sat on the edge of the bed, voice subdued, “I’ve always been glad not to have had to go through the transformations. My mother never really got them under control. She always fought them.”

Maki’s phone buzzed. She looked puzzled as she picked it up, wincing at the movement. Nico. “Are you all right? Text Nico the address of where you are now. No arguments ⌊⌋”

Maki leaned against the wall, staring at her phone. She had a few darting memories of Nico from two nights ago, humming, warmth, ruby eyes searching hers. And last’s night phone call ended so abruptly Maki was surprised Nico hadn’t mentioned it. She wondered where her parents had found her phone.
“What is it?” Her father touched her forearm lightly, reconnecting her to their conversation.

“Nico.” Maki laughed, “Demanding my location.” She could see Nico glaring at the phone, eyebrow quirked, quick fingers tapping out a rhythm, glistening lips still enticing, even in a frown.

“She’s very determined.” Her father stood again, smiling down at his only child, “And she obviously cares.”

“Yeah,” Maki whispered to herself, almost smiling for the first time in 36 hours.

“Your mother and I just came to check up on you. You probably shouldn’t drive for a couple of days, depending on how you heal. Otherwise...” Her father shrugged, watching curiously as Maki’s internal argument played out across her face, hope and worry chasing after each other in a loop.

Maki typed quickly into her phone.

Maki’s father shouted over his shoulder, “Come in and talk to Maki, dear. We’re leaving soon. She’s got company coming.”

Maki had sent a quick answer. Nico was a little surprised. After a frustrating night of no sleep and no one willing to pick up their phone, she’d expected Maki to do the same. After all, the redhead had a stubborn streak. But no, there was a Wisconsin address. Two and half hours away by car, according to the mapping feature of her phone. Nico could listen to the recording she’d made of her lines on the way. Time to pack up food and clothes and text everyone she was canceling on. Everyone she was canceling on. Nico met her own eyes reflected in the mirror of her vanity, wry, worried. Her reputation for reliability had been carefully built every day of her life and moment of her college career. But Nico had also always paid attention to her gut. Maki, relying only on instinct, had run to Nico, trusted Nico. And now, Nico’s instincts were driving her to Maki. Nico narrowed her eyes, remembering her argument with Umi. Respect and responsibility...sure, that was the stuff you wrote down on forms, the math, the qualities you emphasized for prospective in-laws. But trust and instinct, that was the stuff that sang, the poems, the feelings too big for one heart. The moment. Nico recognized it, the breathless, brimming pause before you stepped out onto the stage, with nothing but everything you were. That step was here, that breath, that boldness. Maki had stepped into a coffee shop one night, hoping. Now it was Nico’s turn.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, these never go quite the way I planned so you're probably getting a Werewolf In The Rain (III). There is a short ‘Girlfriend in The Rain’ playlist https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLlLtSG7xe4&list=PLko9fiFcKQ07o3m6fXcDxbmsiDsXDEID. Rain continues metaphorical although the playlist might have been more accurately titled ‘Girlfriend In The Mosh Pit.’

October continues. Are you dressing up for Halloween? I'm thinking a scary (but not gory, unless Edward -- ha!, sorry couldn't resist the pun) movie night. ParaNorman maybe? And I've been appreciating recently how the Vincent Price narration steals
Thriller.
Werewolf In The Rain (III): Together

Chapter Summary

Nico and Maki have some cabin time, Hanayo watches a video.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico’s car. Miles away yet. But Maki could hear it, which is why she was on the porch, in wolf form. Should she change? Would Nico be freaked out? Would Nico think she was trying to avoid her again? Maki inhaled and her ribs didn’t scream as her lungs expanded. Wolf form healing had done at least a little of its magic. Good. Nico had always liked Maki when she thought she was Princess, maybe wolf form would be an advantage? Pettable, puppy dog eyes, warm. Maki nodded her head and howled happily. This was a good idea. Maki bounced as Nico got closer.

Nico pulled up to the cabin. Really beautiful. Trees swept with snow; lake view. Two story wooden cabin looked snug. And there, on the porch, was a beautiful redhead, the version with four legs. Even from a distance, Nico could tell that this was a Maki she would recognize, her girlfriend was practically bouncing and Nico could hear the howls. They sounded almost gleeful. Nico laughed, her tension easing.

As soon as Nico opened the car door, Maki was all over her.

“Let Nico get out of the car, pretty girl.” Maki pulled back, after Nico hugged her. “If Maki were a cute girl, she could help Nico…HEY!” Maki had dodged around Nico, found the cooler with food and was sniffing every inch of it. “Go change so you can help Nico bring things in.” Maki glanced at Nico, eyes completely lovable lavender. “And Nico can kiss you.” Maki licked Nico’s cheek and then bounded back to the door, shoving it open.

Much better experience than the last time Maki was in wolf form, Nico thought to herself. This might actually work.

Maki came back out as Nico was pulling her makeup bag out of the back seat, dressed in a very unbuttoned gray, white and purple flannel shirt and tight jeans. Nico could see the swell of her breasts as the shirt shifted. Nico shook her head, squelching her initial impulses. First, she and Maki really needed to have a conversation. Then, maybe, maybe, she could see what her gorgeous girlfriend wore under her clothes. Maki bounded up to Nico, pulling her into a hug, snuffling her nose through Nico’s hair with a happy laugh. Nico rested her head on Maki, so relieved to have Maki in her arms, unharmed, happy and human that she tightened her embrace. Then she heard Maki whimper and glanced up to see the redhead wince.

“What’s wrong?” Nico pulled back without releasing the hug.

Maki shook her head, but her lips trembled, “Still a little sore from last night.”

“What happened? Did you get hurt?” Nico let her hands rove, searching for sore points and watching Maki’s reactions.
Maki shrugged and kissed Nico, biting into Nico’s glistening lower lip, “My parents visited and patched me up this morning. And I stayed in werewolf form ’til you got here. We heal fast.”

Maki’s eyes were half closed and she moved in for another kiss, her nose darting playfully so Nico couldn’t predict where her lips would land. Neck. Lingering. Nico shivered. Maki once again scooped Nico into her arms and carried her into the cabin. Maki fell slowly back into the couch, kicking a leg out, Nico jarred not at all.

“We need to talk.” Nico was staying focused, darn it and then languid lavender eyes blinked at her innocently.

“Okay.” Maki kissed Nico again, seeming to see no contradiction between the need for conversation and the urges that were driving her Nico-ward, the tantalizing mix of scents and glow and touch. Maki growled and surged into Nico, Nico’s lips and full attention her only goal.

“Maki.” Nico got the name out between kisses. Barely. Both Maki’s hands were in Nico’s hair, strands tangling around eager fingers, tips brushing ears. Nico tried again, her resolve softening.

“Maki.”

“Mmmmmm?” Maki pulled Nico backwards with her and suddenly Nico found herself on top of Maki, amethyst eyes staring deeply into hers, arms locked around Nico’s neck, redpink lips swollen and parted, shirt falling open mid breast, Nico’s legs trapped between hers. Maki was pressing up, against the full length of Nico’s body, whispering Nico’s name and as one of Maki’s fingers dragged across her lips, Nico’s eyes narrowed and she felt a switch flip, she wanted to see what Maki did when Nico pushed her a little further, hand suddenly slipping between Maki’s shirt’s open neckline and skin, fingers tracing a rough line up a very soft curve until they hit…

Maki yelped, eyes wider, the kiss following coarser, demanding and Nico’s fingers pinched harder, while her other hand caressed the curve of Maki’s hip, taking time to draw slow loops against the skin while the redhead threw her head back, a howl ending in a low, sexy whine. Maki convulsed, out of control, throwing them both back into a sitting position, panting, her eyes glowing, wild green sparking and Nico was practically breathless with the need to feel Maki under her again. She put everything she felt into a caressing series of kisses, starting well below Maki’s throat, their pressure raising as Maki’s throat, their pressure raising as Nico’s head did, her hair brushing Maki’s nose, her lips...Maki could feel the panic rising, the urge to change, to run. Something was different. Magic, musk, vanilla, magic, Nico yes, but there was that...feel that Maki had never quite identified, that urge that seemed to freeze her, Nico’s eyes shimmered, feral, as Maki met their gaze and Maki saw a longing, a challenge there that shadowed everything. She whined, sounding lost.

“Maki?” But Nico’s voice was still familiar, concerned, an antidote to the hackles Nico’s eyes were raising. Maki knew she shouldn’t look away, but she did, skittish, barely managing not to jump away as well. But her arms wouldn’t let Nico go either. “Pretty girl?” A soft question from Nico again, a gentle touch on Maki’s cheek relieving the pressure on her breast, and then Nico’s voice thumped, full of wonder, and the cocoon of sensation and sense around Maki tightened again, “You really are such a pretty girl.” Ruby, sable and lightning crackle swirled through all of Maki’s senses. Nico’s kiss started out gentle and Maki pushed into it and then Nico pressed back, shattering Maki’s control, driving her forward and back with equal force. Maki broke away, frantically crawling backwards, tingling, her entire body suddenly craving a Nico who was just as suddenly changed, sharper, an aggressive, driving edge under the glow. Nothing felt safe. Maki’s ears lengthened, a whine in her throat, hands hitting the arm of the couch, her legs pulled up to make a barrier, frantic. Nico followed Maki down the couch, not breaking eye contact. Then Nico stopped, dropping her head for a moment, taking a deep breath, before sliding, from the couch to the floor, in front of Maki, her hands taking Maki’s, her touch soft, her posture penitent, “Maki?”
There was the twisting again and the confusion, the dissonance, a more familiar kind of loss of control making Maki tremble and then Nico’s arms claimed her, holding all the pieces together, Nico’s hand in Maki’s hair, pulling Maki’s head down to Nico’s shoulder, “Maki. Stay with me.” It was a command, a request, gentle, firm, impassioned, calm. Maki turned her head to see ruby eyes full of kindness and warmth, the shadows and primal need that surprised and distressed her just moments ago kept at bay by concern. Maki pushed into Nico’s shoulder again, still wanting to be closer, still confused, still thrilled, still frightened. Nico started talking, keeping her voice as calm as possible, no matter how much her heart was racing, as she ran her fingers slowly through Maki’s hair, “It’s all right, pretty girl. Nico knows we don’t need to rush, there’s no hurry.” Maki was still shuddering, Nico could feel an ear shifting under her fingers, “Maki?”

Maki whiffled into Nico’s shoulder, almost crying from the chaos of sensations. Nico hugged her tighter, hands still gently stroking, humming, eyes alert for any sign of change in the ear, which seemed a starting point.

“Maki, Nico’s right here. Everything’s fine. I’m right here. It’s just me.” Nico rested her head on Maki’s, stray hairs teasing her nose, willing calming vibes into her girlfriend. “You’re okay. Nico promises.”

“Sorry.” Maki mumbled into Nico’s shoulder, as the tension lightened.

Nico laughed, but it was a gentle one, “Sorry for being cute and honest? You have nothing to be sorry for.” Nico cleared her throat, nervous, “Nico is sorry if she scared you.”

Maki shook her head, “Not scared. Not by you.” Nico waited, Maki shifted a little, head still on Nico’s shoulder, “It was...just too much.” Lavender eyes met Nico’s, so much vulnerability in their depths that Nico was breathless again. All new territory. So much trust to keep true to.

Nico nodded, her face serious, “Too much for Nico, too.”

“Really?” Maki sat up, eagerness sneaking back.


Maki snorted, “Of pretty girls.”

Nico popped up on the couch next to Maki, “Only the prettiest. Which is you.”

“Good.” Maki laid her head against the couch, “N...Nico is the prettiest girl I’ve seen.”

Nico’s head was next to Maki, “Nico knows.”

Maki giggled, turning to look at Nico, caught again by the chiseled angles of Nico’s profile, the translucence of her skin, the smirky confidence of her upturned lip. “I love you, Nico.”

Nico’s hair was in front of her ruby eyes, but it couldn’t hide the glow of warmth as Nico turned her head. “Everyone knows that.”

“They do?” Maki yelped.

Nico poked her with a finger, “You’re kind of obvious...Princess.”

Maki flushed and glanced away, embarrassed.
“No, look at Nico, pretty girl. This is important.” Nico sat up, facing Maki, “When you weren’t yourself two nights ago, running all over campus after sandwiches...”

“No, look at Nico, pretty girl. This is important.” Nico sat up, facing Maki, “When you weren’t yourself two nights ago, running all over campus after sandwiches...”

“Sandwiches?” Maki frowned.

Nico raised a finger to her lips, shushing, “Nico will tell you someday. Don’t interrupt.” Nico dropped the hand to Maki’s thigh, “Nico kept hoping you would recognize her, that I would see that spark. And when I didn’t...” Nico gulped, remembering the new nightmares since, “I was so worried. So I realized how much I care about you, tail or not. Big night for Nico.”

Silence as they sat there, connected by the light touch of Nico’s hand, eyes finding sympathies in each other’s glances.

Maki sat up, leaning forward to kiss Nico, “Can we try again, soon?”

Nico held the kiss, but didn’t linger. “Nico will be waiting for you.”

Maki stretched back over the couch, her shirt riding up as she did. Nico watched the motion, imagining for just a second what rolling with those curves would feel like. Then she saw the bruise.

“Maki?!?!?!?!?” Nico pointed to Maki’s torso, horrified. “What happened?”

Maki looked down, pulled up her shirt and saw the bruise, “Oh.”

“OH?” Nico was right in Maki’s face. “What happened?”

Maki scratched her cheek, thoughtful, “I probably threw myself into the door a few times. Papa said I might have broken a rib. But it doesn’t hurt much.”

Nico grabbed Maki’s shirt and yanked up, exposing the mottled discoloration that took up her left flank and muttering, “Yeah, you’re going to have to heal a lot more before Nico even thinks about...”

Maki frowned, shoving her shirt back down, blushing, a growl starting. “I’m fine. Don’t fuss. Stop worrying about me.”

Nico glared at Maki for a few seconds, meeting an amethyst wall of stubborn, then shrugged, “If you’re so fine, go get Nico’s luggage. I’m going to see what’s in the kitchen. We need lunch.”

“My parents brought some takeout with them. There’s not much else.” Maki never really cooked. If her parents hadn’t been worried, they probably would have just packed frozen meals made by the cook. But Maki had been spoiled this time, with deep dish pizza and pastas from her favorite restaurants.

“Nico took some baked ziti out of her freezer. Special recipe. We can heat it up.”

“That sounds awesome. Let’s do that. You don’t need to look...” Maki sprang after a Nico who’d rushed for the kitchen, knocking against the opposite arm of the couch and suppressing a yelp of pain.

Nico already had the refrigerator open. She glanced back at Maki, hungrier after reading the names of the best of the North Shore’s restaurants on the carrying bags, “Tell me at least one of these has a dessert.”

Maki chuckled, “I know a place we can get donuts if they don’t.”
Hanayo settled her feet into her slippers, smiling at the cute cat faces staring up at her. Rin had brought them matching slippers for Christmas. Rin had been reluctant to get out of bed this morning and for once, Hanayo had indulged her, trading class for snuggling closer, affectionate kisses and playful pillow tugs of war leading to...Hanayo blushed. Even alone, after all these years, the depth of her connection with Rin was still a fiercely guarded private treasure. Indescribable. Irreplaceable. A morning full of warmth and love with the one person Hanayo would do anything to protect. A grim, determined mask fell over her features. That brought her to this. While Rin was heading to a scheduled study session with her track team appointed tutoring team, Hanayo reached into her bag, pulling out a nearly invisible, clear flash drive. She’d copied every file she could find marked “wolf” when she was working yesterday. She’d also video chatted Eli through disabling the transmitting feature of the metering device.

Hanayo slid the flashdrive into a laptop port and opened a video file. Then she stopped breathing. It was Rin. They were after Rin. They had Rin on video, changing. Rin and Maki didn’t transform into anything resembling the same breed. Rin’s coat was coarser and her orange hairs blended in with the brown, unlike Maki’s bifurcated red and cream fluffiness. So Kira probably wouldn’t have connected Nico’s presumed pet and protector to the person she’d been studying video of. Hanayo rewatched the video. Rin transforming was still one of the most stunning things that Hanayo had ever seen, muscles twisting and stretching, hair suddenly lush over radiant pale skin, pure joy in Rin’s every movement as the motion and energy she had to contain as a human exploded into action. Rin’s bright eyes and bright grin, they never altered. And Hanayo would never let anyone change that. She clicked on another file. If there was a plan, she would find it. And find a way to end it. Her purple eyes gleamed with fervor as she started reading.

Empty takeout containers were scattered all over the table in front of the couch. There had been several desserts, all shared. Maki peeked a look at Nico. She hadn’t been sure how Nico would enjoy the movie Maki had chosen off the shelf. Topsy Turvy, sure it was a backstage story, like the one Nico had made her sit through, but it was three hours long, full of Gilbert and Sullivan music and set in the 1880’s. And yet, Nico had been leaning forward the whole time, repeating lines under her breath, leaning back into Maki during the songs, curious about the details (Maki could smell her interest), tearing up at one scene. As the final credits rolled, Nico turned to Maki, her eyes bright with enthusiasm.

Maki used the arm she had on the back of the couch to pull Nico closer, “So you liked it? We could go see a Gilbert and Sullivan production sometime.”

“That was great, Maki. Nico loved watching the actors work. Hasn’t changed much.” Nico slid into Maki’s lap, hand reaching up to casually play with a twirl of red hair, ruby eyes teasing, “So is everything you like written by a werewolf?”

Maki jumped a little. “Huh?”

“Nico knows the signs now.” Nico winked, opened her mouth and did an impressively accurate imitation of Shirley Henderson singing.

“Oh, pray make no mistake,
We are not shy,
We're very wide awake,
The moon and I.
Sounds werewolfy to Nico. Was…” Nico’s face scrunched cutely as she tried to remember,
“Gilbert…” Nico pauses, with a dramatic whisper, “a…”

Maki barked a laugh, guessing what Nico was going to say, “You mean Great Uncle Wills…”

Nico’s eyes went wide, “Nico was right.”

Maki nipped at Nico’s earlobe, “Nico is tasty, not right.”

Nico turned Maki’s head, catching Maki’s heart again with her mischievous flirting, “Nico is always right, Maki will find out soon.”

Maki shook her head, laughing, “I’m a tough audience.”

Nico tapped Maki’s cheek and broke into
“Three little maids from school are we
Pert as a school-girl well can be
Filled to the brim with girlish glee
Three little maids from school”

Maki started nuzzling behind Nico’s jaw, but Nico continued singing merrily, bouncing lightly in Maki’s lap, hand still teasing Maki’s hair. Maki could feel the vibrations from Nico’s voice tickle.

“Everything is a source of fun
Nobody’s safe, for we care for none
Life is a joke that’s just begun
Three little maids from school”

Nico turned her head, whispering “You can applaud Nico being a quick study now, tough audience.”

Maki walked her fingers down Nico’s side and around her waist, “My hands are busy.”

Nico leaned her head against Maki’s shoulder, yawning, batting her eyelashes over the rubies Maki was lost in. “Nico has had a long week. Applause would lead to sweet dreams.”

Maki’s head was full of Nico again, each breath charged with magic and musk and vanilla and peach and…Nico. It was amazing, having her this close, being this calm.

“You feel good, pretty girl.” Nico murmured, snuggling as close as she could, listening to Maki’s heart. “Nico has an early drive tomorrow.”

“I’ll take you.” Maki offered.

“Nico needs her car. Doesn’t Maki?” Nico sounded more asleep every minute and Maki’s heart expanded at the thought that Nico could be this relaxed around her after Monday night. “Maki’s so warm…are you going to…?” Hints of worry crept into Nico’s drowsy mumble.

Maki whispered into Nico’s hair, softly blowing strands to watch them dance, “I’m going to stay with you.”

“Good.” Another yawn, “Nico likes cute, cozy girls best.”

So did Maki. What was surprising was that she especially liked cute, cozy Nico when she snored. Love seemed to be full of the odd and unexpected. What would be the next discovery, Maki wondered as she gently lifted Nico. Tonight, nobody was sleeping on the couch, in any form.
Realized as I was finishing this that two different werewolf stories are going on...Rin and Nozomi are stuck in a thriller and Maki's bounding through a screwball romantic comedy. It will be interesting to see what happens when they collide.

Hope your November is starting off well. Hit the polls to VOTE next Tuesday if you're in the US and wherever you are, have some fun, darn it.

Have been reading Dracula. Stoker's language is lovely and he describes scenes and people with such power -- just got through the storm at Dracula's arrival in England. You can smell the sea in the air.

Also, metaphorical rain has ended, at least for now. Take care!
Dawn. Nico was rarely up this early. And rarely this warm. Turning her head to the side, she noticed, tucked into her shoulder, holding down her out thrown arm, a very messy redhead, very soundly asleep, very very cute. Smiling, Nico kissed the top of Maki’s head and carefully slid herself free and got up. There was enough light not to trip over anything by. Maki had apparently carried Nico to a small bedroom taken up mostly by a queen bed, basic, white pine, Hudson Bay Blanket half tossed aside. Nico paused in the doorway on her way to the bathroom, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of Maki, seeming wearing only her flannel shirt, legs half in the open, posture completely relaxed. It was a scene Nico would be hurrying back to.

Nico had changed into slightly comfier clothes when they’d decided to watch a movie, but still not the best for sleeping. Nico grabbed a t-shirt out of her overnight bag, which Maki had also moved to the room, and switched to that in the bathroom. Nico would have to be on the road back to Chicago too soon, but she wasn’t ready to leave this particular cozy nest quite yet.

Nico slid back under the covers, pulling up the blanket, being careful not to jar Maki. But whether it was werewolf senses or just the cold when Nico’s bare legs brushed Maki’s, an accidental thrill, or at least an unconscious act on Nico’s part, Maki woke up enough to wrap her arms around Nico, pulling her closer, “mmmm...you got cold.”

Nico giggled, Maki’s hair tickling her cheek. Maki pulled away, looking aggrieved, opened one eye and stretched, “Did I make a joke?”

Nico watched as the redhead pretty much completely kicked the covers off both of them, but with such athletic grace that Nico didn’t notice she was shivering from cold for at least five seconds. Then the chill hit her brain, she yelped, “Hey” and reached across Maki to grab for the toasty warm wool blanket, only to freeze in place when she realized she was half lying across Maki’s torso and the redhead’s heart was starting to pound rapidly. “Oh,” Nico thought, suddenly remembering the night before. Being this close to Maki, feeling both their chests rise, in synch, with shaky, nervous breaths, the sense that Maki’s warmth touched Nico’s skin and then got underneath somehow, with Nico suddenly needing a way to vent a sudden fever. With each twitch against Nico’s body, each whimper of need sneaking out of that luscious mouth...the waking comfort Nico had felt was transforming into something explosive, pushing both of them to the edge of change, of chaos, wiping anything other than Maki out of Nico’s world.

Nico pushed up from the bed with one hand, most of her weight propped on Maki. The gorgeous lavender eyes glowed at her, the green quiescent, barely visible. Maki rolled slightly underneath her, the flannel shirt riding up curvy hips enough for Nico to realize by the prickly warmth against her thigh that it really was all Maki had decided to sleep in. Nico looked down, still shivering from cold and want, her eyes drawn to the contrast of skin and fabric, her free hand sliding under the flannel, pressing against firm, warm muscle, feeling Maki push into the contact.
“Nico.” There was a throaty, urgent whine at her ear and a rush of air as Maki threw the blanket over both of them, inexactly, but enough to make a tent of warmth around their bodies. Nico, hand still strolling over Maki’s curves, fingers enjoying the little starts Maki would make, met Maki’s eyes, which were now wide open, curious, questioning, “Nico?” Those enticing lips parted, tongue flicking over the plush, top lip as Maki breathed Nico’s name out again, this time a dare, ”Nico.”

There really was something in the back of Nico’s eyes, in her smell, in her touch, that confused Maki, that she had no words for, something she’d never sensed before Nico, a compelling lure that she wasn’t going to fight any longer. Sleeping together seemed to have brought Nico into her physical awareness. Nico’s actions, even sudden movements, rather than registering as threats, they had somehow become an extension of Maki’s self, hints to respond to, suggestions for her muscles to listen to, to learn from. Nico had shifted, so her weight was on her knees, still hovering over Maki, one hand teasing the length of Maki’s thigh, the other coming up underneath to cup her breast.

“You are so so hot and so so bad for Nico’s schedule, pretty girl.” Nico winked, her voice trembling only a little as she packed it full of bravado. Her hand lightly palmed Maki’s breast, causing a whine and a shudder that might have thrown Nico to the side, if she hadn’t anticipated it. Then she leaned down, her lips full and forceful, scattering Maki’s senses further as Maki’s legs pummeled Nico’s side.

Maki’s hands reached for her shirt, hastily unbuttoning, wanting to throw the fabric off, to have nothing between her tingling skin and Nico as the sable haired dynamo adjusted her legs so that one of Maki’s was pinned between hers and Nico had the leverage to kiss her way to Maki’s ear without toppling, one hand helping Maki with the shirt.

“I want you so much, Maki.” Nico murmured in Maki’s ear, after blowing a gentle breath across that made the werewolf whimper again, “Do you…” Nico kissed Maki, altering pressure with each subtle movement.

Maki thrashed, head back, eyes rolling, hands reaching out for anything to grab, to use as an anchor, legs bucking, nearly all sensation, frantic for Nico to...

“Maki?” A bite on her neck, another whispered question, a fingertip across her lips that Maki bit at.

Words, Maki forced that thought through her brain as she met Nico’s eyes, the gleaming ruby starting to darken with doubt, use words, “N...Nico…”

Nico’s eyes brightened and her hand stroked up Maki’s thigh, Maki’s hands grabbed for Nico, fingers digging into her back, “Do you want this?” Nico whispered again.

Maki curled, quick and grasping, as Nico ran gentle fingers through her hair, arms refusing to let go of Nico, words struggling to find their way out as Nico started to pull back, “W...want this.” Maki forced herself to remain still for a heartbeat, eyes locked on Nico’s, pleading, “Want you.”

Lips met, crashing, Maki wasn’t sure who was whimpering now or how they’d managed to flip themselves but everything was an explosion of motion, of feeling, of flying, she curved up, backwards, thrown against the headboard, arms nearly snapping the wood, Nico’s eyes thrilling at every motion, Maki’s ears eager for every dancing heartbeat, every breath driving them closer together, every motion tightening the embrace between them, every spark forcing Maki nearer to….

Shattering.

And then, after forever, there were only Nico’s arms around her. And for both of them, this place, this moment, this rising joy, this was all the world.
Maki was trying not to bound. There was Nico, yes, NICO, beautiful, talented, caring NICO sprawled out in Maki’s bed, sable hair silky and wild all over two pillows, perfectly carved lips in a smile so sweet that as much as Maki wanted to KISS and NUDGE and BITE those lips, she had no plans to mar their unconscious serenity. So here she was, trying not to BOUND or HOWL or KISS or even move much. Instead, she snuck her arm Nico-ward, to test how close she could get without the hairs on her arm raising from the charge that still lingered. Inches away, it was still so easy to feel as if Nico was an extension of this field of happy security that vibrated to limit of Maki’s awareness. She sniffed, but there wasn’t enough to memorize the scene, to etch it in her memory, to shield these moments from the fickle moon. But…Maki laid back down, leaving as much space between her and Nico as possible and concentrated, reaching out with all of her senses, opening in a different way, freeing her instincts, accepting the change, not fighting it. Expanding. Everything around her gradually falling into wolf focus, especially Nico. She could smell the way their encounter had changed them both, the new mix of enticements that swirled as she let Nico flood through her system.

“Nico Nico Ni. Nico Nico Ni.” Too loud, not from Nico. Startled, Maki yelped and fell off the bed, whining as she hit the ground with her not quite completely healed left side.

“Maki?” Nico sat up, searching next to her with her hand. The ringtone continued “Nico Nico Ni…”

Maki got to her paws and shoved her nose in Nico’s bag, the sound was coming from there, she’d tossed Nico’s phone there last night. The blinking screen confronted her, Nico Nico Ni blaring as her nose contacted it, Maki jumping back and growling.

“Don’t kill my phone, Maki. Nico needs that.” Nico was right next to her, one hand tenderly ruffling Maki’s ears, the other swiping the call live, “Can I call you back in two minutes, Umi?”

Maki heard some grumbling and then a “Yes.”

“Thanks, Umi.” Nico ended the call, tossed her phone on the bed and knelt in front of Maki, “Hey, pretty girl, why’d you change?”

Maki snuffled her nose through Nico’s hair, fur tickling Nico’s cheek, shoulders enjoying the softness of Nico’s bare skin…and for the first time ever, Maki transformed from wolf to girl without consciously willing it. Nico’s arms tightened around her for a minute, confused by the muscles shifting against her, and then Nico pulled back, awed, a hand still in Maki’s hair, “Maki?”

Maki KISSED Nico, sending them backwards, Nico awkwardly twisting to keep them both from hitting the ground at speed. Maki kissed Nico again, enjoying the breathlessness, the Nico-ness pulling her in, the pounding of her own heart, the dizzying new excitement of being sprawled across her LOVER.

"Maki.” Nico sounded reluctant and Maki frowned as she pushed back up, off Nico. Nico slid out, sitting on the bed, grabbing the blanket as she shivered, “Prickly.” She winked, eyes twinkling, "Sleek satin Maki is so much smoother against my skin,” Maki’s ears perked at the suggestive lilt in Nico’s voice, but then there was a switch to practical tones before she could join Nico, “Nico has to call Umi back now, pretty girl.” Nico kicked off the edge of the bed, toward the headboard, reaching for her phone, pulling the sheet over her, “Don’t be too distracting.”

Maki laughed, turned around, transformed as Nico hit video chat, wagged her tail and bounded downstairs to the front door, whining when she realized she couldn’t open it. Nico chuckled as Umi answered.
“Good morning, Nico. I trust you will be home soon.” Umi’s always polished voice was a careful mix of indignation, worry and civility, her brows knit together with distaste.

‘Actually, Umi, I’m in Wisconsin. I’m sorry I forgot to text you that I was going to be starting back too late to make our meeting.”

Umi drew her lip up, “Is Maki all right?”

“A little bruised but fine…” Nico let herself reconstruct the earlier part of the morning, enjoying the visuals.

“Why do you look so pleased with yourself?” Umi was sitting at the kitchen table and Nico knew the hand not in view was tapping in irritation.

“You really don’t want to know.” A howl, loud, full, ecstatic, from outside, below the window, Maki must have switched back to open the door, Nico thought as she leaned against the pillow, listening to the notes ring out.

“Are you still in bed?” Umi sounded outraged. Nico really wasn’t responsible for where she was or what she was wearing when other people chose to call her and startle her werewolf girlfriend.

“You scared Maki.” Nico pouted.

“That howl didn’t sound scared.” Umi sternly shook her head at Nico, one more trigger away from launching a lecture on propriety.

“Anyway, Umi, Nico is sorry, and the fewer questions you ask, the less Nico will have to tell you about the hot night she spent with her so so se…”

Umi coughed, meaningfully, “I am glad you are both well. I have decided that you should be the ones tell Honoka.”

Nico heard a bark from outside. Werewolf hearing. Before she could count to 5, her girlfriend came tearing back through the bedroom door, timing her change and leap so that she was grabbing the phone out of Nico’s hand and turning to land, glaring at Nico while shouting at Umi, “You told Honoka?”

“M...Maki…” Umi inhaled, Nico imagined she looked pale, “Are you n...na...not wearing any clothes?”

Blushing, Maki dropped the phone, also not a great angle for privacy and Nico took it back, letting her hand drag across Maki, enjoying the tremor Maki couldn’t help even as Nico sensed her confusion and anger.

Nico threw the blanket over Maki, although it instantly began sliding off curves in ways that made Nico almost forget she was in the middle of a conversation.

“Nico.” Umi’s voice snapped with anger, although the view through the phone was now of Nico’s ceiling.

“Why do you want us to tell Honoka?” Nico went back to the last save point.

“And Kotori.” Umi had calmed down, but there was still a nervous edge in her words.

Nico sighed, Maki was watching her closely, sniffing. Nico smiled at Maki, pleading. Maki huffed.
Nico tried to sound apologetic, “We’ll figure it out when we get back, okay, Umi?” Maki shook her head, Nico rolled her eyes, Maki exhaled furiously, got up off the bed and put her shirt back on, pulling on her jeans, Nico almost crying at the sight of those legs going back into clothes. Maki left the room, nose indignantly held high. “I really have to go, Umi. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Drive carefully.” Umi’s voice was still shaky or she might have spent a few minutes giving Nico some driving safety tips.

“Nico is always safe.” End conversation. Now to soothe the irritated girlfriend. Nico was tempted to grab the lacy nightie she’d packed and attempt to distract Maki enough to make her forget about anyone other than Nico, but Nico really did have to get back to Evanston. Act II off book and work after and Nico had already blown all her ‘you owe me a favor’ cards. So t-shirt it was, wool socks and hoping she wouldn’t be forced to follow Maki into the snow.

“Maki?” Nico found Maki in the kitchen, scarfing her way through the food Nico had brought, “Are you okay?”

“Starved.” Maki muttered, mouth full of muffin.

“Need coffee?” Nico guessed right the first time, opening the cabinet coffee pods were stored in. Maki nodded, biting another muffin in half, “Does changing make you hungry?”

Maki puffed air and crumbs in Nico’s direction, “Don’t change the subject. You can’t tell anyone. No one.”

Nico started the coffee, sat next to Maki, scooted her chair as close as possible and took Maki’s hand, “I’m sorry.” The werewolf chewed sullenly, her glance once again skittering everywhere but Nico. “Look at me, please, pretty girl.”

Maki’s expression screamed hurt and hunted, the lavender pools tears. Nico felt like slamming her head into the table. She hadn’t been thinking. Just panicking and feeling. And overwhelmed. And now things were even messier for Maki. And Umi.

Nico laced her fingers through Maki’s, “Nico made a mistake. I was worried and Honoka was excited, she kept asking me questions, wanting to know if you were ‘Maki’s dog’ and then she decided you were mine and I…” Nico closed her eyes, “I just wanted to shut her up, so I told Umi to tell her everything. I wasn’t thinking.” Nico paused, letting all the stress of that night be fresh again, “I was scared. It was stupid. I’m so sorry, Maki.”

Maki glanced away, pushing her chair back a little, letting Nico’s hand fall, grabbing another muffin as she muttered to herself, “I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.” Then she jumped over the back of the couch, pulling her legs up and swallowing, chin propped, frown obvious.

“Neruda, right? I’ve been reading too.” Nico picked up the coffee mug and put it on the table in front of Maki. She slowly and deliberately tangled her fingers in Maki’s tousled mess of silken strands, careful to brush the tips of Maki’s ears. She bit her lip, then licked it, letting want flare in her eyes, her voice so soft she could barely hear herself. “In one kiss, you’ll know all I haven’t said.”

Lavender eyes sharpened and Nico got a sudden sense that she’d captured Maki’s full attention and without warning swooped in to seize that kiss, kneeling across Maki, almost tearing as she remembered how frantic she’d been with worry the night Maki had gone full werewolf, how grateful she was to have the beautiful, playful, irritated girl she’d fallen in love with here now, warm, alert, alive, loving, kissing back. Too soon, Maki broke away, gasping, shocked by the flood of feelings,
"Nico?"

"Nico will never tell anyone else Maki’s secret." Nico’s fingers were gentle as they swept down Maki’s jawline, thumbs brushing Maki’s lips, “Nico will do whatever it takes to protect you.” In Nico’s eyes there was more than want, more than mischief, more than care. Maki was watching the last barrier drop in Nico’s eyes, one she hadn’t known was there, but now she could see, clearly, feel clearly, Nico’s heartbeat pulsing in the ruby, love quilting together the mosaic of emotion reaching out to enclose her as Nico whispered, “I love you, pretty girl.”

First KISS, then HOWL, Maki told herself but all thought was swept into sensation again as she pressed into Nico.

Chapter End Notes

Σ(° ° )

Next, we have friends to save and villains to thwart. Buckle in.
Better Hold On Tight

Chapter Summary

In which Nico and Maki return to campus and Rin and Hanayo only have time to talk to other people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nico carried her bag out to her practical silver Audi, parked next to Maki’s sleeker, sportier red MX-5. Maki followed with her duffle and the cooler. Nico stared at the redhead, “Are you really going to leave your car here?”

Maki shrugged, “It’ll be fine. We can come up with my parents sometime.”

Nico opened the backdoor, pausing to lean into Maki, glancing up, eyes mischievous, “You’re spoiled, pretty girl.”

Maki huffed, then grinned cheerfully, pulling a muffin out of her side pocket, “Says the latest person to fall into my trap.”

“Ha!” Nico laughed, dodging out of Maki’s grasp and sliding into the driver’s seat. “Don’t tell Umi, but thanks to Maki finding Nico oh so very tasty…” Maki fumbled with the cooler, almost closing the door on herself as Nico watched over her shoulder, amused, “this morning, we are going to have to speed back to campus.”

Maki adjusted the cooler and bags, refused to look at a triumphant Nico and closed the door, “Do you want me to drive?”

”Nah, Nico’s good. You can heal some more. Nico spotted some bruises.”

Maki let herself into the passenger seat, wondering, “Why aren’t you using the trunk?”

“Nico stores heavy stuff there in the winter to weight down the back. Fishtails aren’t sexy.”

Maki leaned over to nip Nico’s ear, “Not into mermaids, then?”

Nico leveled a withering glance at her girlfriend, “You tell me”

Maki buckled in, trying to make her voice sound husky and sexy, “Four legs are better than none.”

There was silence. Then Nico shook her head and started the car, “That was terrible, Maki. Leave the jokes to the professionals.” Nico sighed, “I did like this cabin though. We could come back.”

Maki practically bounced off the seat, happy to think of returning here with Nico.

Nico moved on to her next topic, “Nico wants to meet your friends officially.”
“Okay. We can have dinner or something. Rin will probably drool on you.” Maki had discovered Nico’s music options and was sifting through them, “You still have cassettes?”

“Not still. Some of them are new. Cassettes have under the radar street cred.” Nico was proud of her music collection.

“No.” Maki took a close sniff of one and growled, “Cassettes are cheap, clunky, flat and very low fidelity. Bad for music.”

“Good for Nico. Very portable. Cheap. Works in Nico’s car stereo. More personality than mp3’s.” Nico turned her head briefly, ruby eyes flashing a dare at Maki, “Plus, Nico is a cute girl and you should agree with cute girls. And ooh and ahh over their music collection.”

Maki pulled out her phone, “Does your stereo bluetooth?”


Maki swiped through a couple of screens on her phone and John Coltrane’s “Favorite Things” played.

A very staged yawn from the driver’s seat. “Nico will fall asleep.”

Maki squeezed Nico’s knee, bold. “Maki can jazz and drive.”

“Maki can jazz…?” Nico stuck out her tongue, “That’s terrible too. Nico is not impressed with your verbal skills. Or your music.” Nico accelerated through a merge, “We want a cassette. Listen to Nico. Pick a tape, any tape, pretty girl.”

Maki sighed dramatically, including a hair toss she knew Nico caught in her peripheral vision and grabbed a random cassette. The Dollyrots -- Family Vacation: Live In Los Angeles. Kicky, punky, fun guitar riffs instantly shredded the mood Coltrane’s smooth sax had created but Maki found herself caught by the beat and the vibrant strength of the singer’s voice.

Nico giggled, “Maki found the werewolf band.”

Maki whirled in her seat, eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nico tilted her way enough to blow a kiss before singing along,

“So you caught my wink
And you got my hint
Can I take you home tonight
Come outside
Where the moon is bright
For at least tonight you’re mine
With that look in our eye-eyes
So hand in hand we strut on out
And we hop into my ride
Reach on over steal that kiss
And you better hold on tight…”

And then Nico’s voice turned matter of fact, “Nico will take you home tonight, gorgeous and bitey.”

Maki blushed. Nico chuckled, running a hand lightly through Maki’s hair, as Maki wondered if she’d ever stop being thrilled by…everything Nico, “You’re amazing.”

“Nico is awesome too. Just keep listening to the songs, we’ll get to how awesome Nico is.” Nico’s smile was as bright as the sunlit new snow.

Maki sat back in her seat and let herself enjoy the ride, closing her eyes and reveling in Nico’s voice teaching her more things entirely new. Through all her senses, Maki was deliberately mixing herself into this speeding world full of Nico-ness. It was elating, the urge to BOUND, race faster than the car, howling her satisfaction loud enough to reach the Lakefill. Nico must have noticed fidgeting because a gentle hand touched her knee, “Don’t burst out of the car, pretty girl. Nico has rehearsal to get to. Save some energy for after.”

Maki rested her hand on Nico’s. Touch, a tangible warmth, a physical connection, a reminder of passion, of the bond they were creating. Maki let that calm her as they raced toward home.

Hanayo was getting used to the routine. She’d stop in the Tech Subbasement, check on the numbers, speculate what was happening at the Fangs rehearsals to cause various surges and do some online research. There was a surprisingly robust dark web supernatural network. Everything from dating apps to stores catering to magical clientele to acquire cryptid body parts exchanges. Hanayo realized Rin had been very fortunate to avoid scrutiny until now. Maybe there was a streak of luck mixed in with her werewolf genes. The Nishikinos seemed to just keep everything on lock down. Rin was the first werewolf in her family for four generations so her grandmother had been the only one with any practical werewolf knowledge.

Anju would be there most afternoons. She never talked business, just told Hanayo how cute she was and giggled about clothes and celebrities. Those chats were easy for Hanayo to half pay attention to. Erena would usually saunter in at some point, grump about actors and theatre majors, glare in Hanayo’s direction while asking if there were any glitches and saunter back out, seemingly bored by the array of equipment and readouts. Tsubasa was the difficult one, but she rarely stopped by in the afternoon. Today was one of the exceptions. Tsubasa had spent an hour standing over Hanayo, double checking each number, then sat across from her at the desk, grumbling at her own laptop.

“Know anything about animal tracking, Hanayo?” Tsubasa snapped suddenly.

Hanayo squeaked and lost track of her place. Shaking her head, ignoring Tsubasa, she ran her finger down the line of numbers on the screen trying to figure out where she’d been interrupted.

“Hanayo? I asked you a question.”

Hanayo sighed, turning away from the computer, pushing her glasses up her nose and frowning at Tsubasa, “Is it fun?”

Tsubasa looked at Hanayo warily, as if a pet mouse had just bit her finger, “What do you mean?”

“Is this fun, monitoring people, tracking people?” Hanayo fidgeted. “Why do you do it?”
Tsubasa chuckled, “You do have a personality.” She moved behind Hanayo, pointing her own finger at the numbers, “This is just information. Information is neutral. Information helps us.”

“Does it help the people you’re monitoring? Does it help anyone?” Hanayo rubbed her forearm, still antsy.

“Eventually it will.” Tsubasa smiled.

“And no one gets hurt?” Hanayo twisted her fingers. She knew Tsubasa’s answer would be a lie. Hanayo had been shocked by what she’d learned from Eli and Nozomi.

Tsubasa’s green eyes glittered coldly, so different from the charming friendliness of Rin’s. Hanayo had been wrong. It wasn’t a lie that came out with the smile, “Why should I care? They obviously have something to hide.”

“They’re people.” Hanayo stopped herself from standing and took a deep breath to slow her next words down. “They have friends, families.”

Tsubasa shot a question back, suspicious. “Do you know any?”

Hanayo had rehearsed this in her head, over and over, so her answer was immediate. “No.” She met Tsubasa’s eyes bravely, ”But they’re not lab rats.”

“Lab rats are boring.” Tsubasa leaned against the desk, looking down at Hanayo, “I think bigger. There’s a reason there’s all those legends. These creatures find places to lurk, to wait. Are any of the stories ever fluffy and friendly werewolf helps little old lady?”

Rin would help anyone, probably even Tsubasa, but that thought appeared nowhere on Hanayo’s face. She turned back to her computer and sighed, “If you’re right. Maybe there’s a vampire in Fangs then, right? Good camouflage.”

Tsubasa finger gunned in Hanayo’s direction, winking, “Now, you’re thinking. And when we unmask whoever’s making the meters surge, you’ll be part of a famous team.”

Hanayo could make all the data disappear faster than Tsubasa’s cheesy grin. She was looking forward to the day she hit the key that triggered that macro, “Maybe I’ll get to meet some real ghostbusters.”

Tsubasa nodded. “They’ll be asking for our autographs. And hey, Hanayo,” Hanayo nodded, “Double check the werewolf sightings for me on the Wall of Weird, will you? It’s been too quiet.”

“O.K.” Hanayo let her fingers fly. Maki hadn’t been in town and she knew Rin hadn’t been out and about. Maybe Tsubasa would get bored if there was no reported activity.

Maki had managed to drop Nico off at rehearsal on time then dodge her parents by going to Rin and Hanayo’s to take a quick shower. She was going to convince her friends to go out for burgers. But only Rin was there.

“Kayo-chin’s working again. She spends the afternoon there when she doesn’t have classes.” Rin was folding her freshly laundered workout clothes.

Maki was perched on the top bunk, sipping from a coffee, “Does she know anything more? Mama said she didn’t have a lot of information yet.”
Rin groaned and threw herself down on the floor, arms and legs stretched out like a starfish, “She’s not telling me much. I just want to chase her bosses into the Lake.”

“Rin!” Maki was startled by the vehemence in her friend’s tone.

Rin sat up, bright eyes cloudy, arm wrapped around her knee, staring at the seat where Hanayo usually sat, “We never have time together in the afternoon anymore. And practice’ll get more intense soon.”

“We can’t chase people into Lake Michigan in winter.” Maki insisted.

Rin shrugged, “Only up to their ankles.”

Maki shook her head, “Rin…”

“I can take care of myself. Kayo-chin doesn’t have to worry so much.” Rin sounded mad.

“We can take care of ourselves.” Maki agreed with that part of Rin’s statement and took a long sip before she continued, surprised by her own thoughts, “But isn’t it nice to have somebody care?”

Rin grumped, digging her chin into her knee, “It’d be nicer if Kayo-chin were here. I miss her. If I scared her bosses, they might lay off me.”

“We can’t just terrify people. That would start even more rumors. I like Northwestern. I don’t want to slink off.” Maki frowned at her friend.

“It’s not so easy to be calm.” Rin stared at Maki, not backing down. “What would you do if they did something to Nico? Did Kayo-chin tell you Tsubasa said she’d been trying to get somewhere with her?”

Maki crushed her cup, anger first starting at the goading, knowing gleam in Rin’s eyes, then realizing Nico saw Tsubasa nearly everyday. And might be in danger. Hanayo hadn’t mentioned her boss being interested in Nico. Neither had Nico. Hackles instantly raised, anger at Tsubasa flooded Maki’s system, eyes green, ears lengthening, low growl from the back of her throat. Maki remembered forcing bergamot, copper, and too calm away from Nico on the Lakefill. She’d do much more if she got the chance again. Rin watched, satisfied as Maki didn’t even try to fight the change, howling a warning as she fell back on the bed, letting the transformation happen.

“See, you’d be chasing her to the Lake too.” Rin announced, her point proved.

Maki stood up, snapped at Rin, shaking her head, snarling as she sniffed at the window Rin had left open. Was Nico all right?

Rin smirked, her fangs gleaming, “Fine, biting it is. I’ll take the right side, you take the left when we see her.” Maki jumped down on Hanayo’s desk, scattering papers. She nodded at Rin, whining.

Rin grabbed for Maki, sadly wrapping one arm around the wolf, “Kayo-chin made me promise not to change so I can’t go for a run.”

Maki whacked Rin with her snout.

“Hey! She made me promise.” Rin pushed away from Maki. Maki dived into Rin’s closet and grabbed a Frisbee, dropping it in at her friend’s feet.
“Oh. We can do that.” Rin’s eyes gleamed, “Just don’t bite it in half this time.”

Maki huffed.

When Nico stepped out of the Wirtz Center after rehearsal, two werewolves greeted Nico. Her girlfriend was not the one in human form.

“Hey, Nico! Maki wanted to play.” Rin sprinted up, waving, Frisbee in the other hand, wearing a unzipped track team hoodie and sweats, Maki keeping an even pace. Nico wondered if all werewolves ran warm.

“Hi, Rin. It’s good to see you.” Nico braced herself for Maki knocking her over, but this time Maki was careful and let Nico catch her in a hug, not putting more weight on Nico than Nico could handle. “Hey, Pretty Girl, Nico missed you.”

Maki replied with a happy, low in volume howl, a private conversation not one for the general public. Nico was starting to understand the distinctions.

“I'm late for dinner with Kayo-chin so bye.” Rin waved again, sprinting off. “Have fun!”

Nico glanced down at Maki, “Does she ever do anything at a walk?”

Maki shrugged. Nico was finding it fascinating how Maki adapted human expressions to wolf form. Many more muscles rolling.

Nico glanced around, making sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop. She’d waited until most people had left before even putting on her coat. “You can walk Nico to work, but then you have to go get Nico’s car and put on clothes. Nico doesn’t want to walk back to her apartment after her shift.

Maki howled agreement. And then whined a little.

Nico crouched, “What’s wrong, pretty girl?”

Maki opened her mouth and panted, tongue licking her snout.

“Tired?” Headshake. “Hungry?”

A bark.

“Nico will smuggle you a sandwich before she sends you off.” Nico bopped a kiss on Maki’s nose.

Maki howled happily as Nico got to her feet, “Let’s get moving, pretty girl. Nico is cold.” Maki bumped Nico’s hip and Nico rested a mitten on her back, “You can warm me up later.”

The response was a howl Nico was pretty sure you could hear in Wisconsin. And then there was an answer. Must be Rin, Nico thought. Maki hopped a little, excited, howling again, bumping Nico gently as they walked Cup o’ward.

Chapter End Notes
And we ease back into action.

Time to build another playlist -- for {redacted}. Drop fave Christmas songs (and cookies) in the comments, please and thank you. And thanks for reading!
Stay A Minute

Chapter Summary

We have a busy night at the Cup O'...

Also, Umi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back at work. The counter. No evening customers yet. Coffee smell everywhere...was Nico starting to think like her girlfriend, nose first? Nico inhaled, then scrunched up her face at the over the top dose of COFFEE. So nose not the best way to take in a scene, at least not for Nico. Nico liked the glints of light sparkling off warm metal, the shadows falling across the floor, the sounds that came in when the door swung open, the bell clanking. Yes, Maki did smell amazing, a little like a warm, sweaty cinnamon roll fresh out of the gym, with just a hint of pepper. Nico would have never put those together but it worked, mostly because they translated into a gorgeous, leggy, playful redhead who kept looking at Nico with glowing amethyst eyes. Who Nico liked to look at and listen to and lean into. So nose first was probably not going to become Nico’s default.

Nico shook herself out of a daydream about Maki in flannel and nothing else, hoping for a customer to open the door and let a bracing bit of cold air into the room. The past 24 hours had swept her up in a dizzying series of emotions and she needed a chance to go back to a routine she recognized, to clear her head, to figure out what happened next.

But no, next person to open the door was Nozomi and her blonde tagalong.

“Nico-chi, you’re back.” Nozomi opened her arms, ready to swoop in and hug Nico, but Nico just ducked behind the espresso press, letting its brass and copper levers and dials run interference. Eli waved at Nico as she guided Nozomi to the back booth.

“You want your usual?” Nico peeked out from behind her barrier, verifying that Nozomi was ensconced in the booth before she came out.

“I’ll have a mocha.” Nozomi leaned in to Eli, “I want to make sure I taste like chocolate.”

“Don’t make me poison you.” Nico pulled out a couple of mugs. “Hot chocolate for you, tall, blonde and thrall-y?”

“Thank you,” Eli paused, to emphasize that one should use actual names in the interest of respectful communication, “Nico.”

“So how was your road trip, Nico?” Nozomi leered, “Did Maki keep you up all night?”

“My road trip is none of your business.” Nico gritted her teeth, letting professional reflexes take over and stir the hot chocolate as it warmed so as not to spoil it in any way out of aggravation. Because Nozomi was aggravating. Sure, Nico appreciated her friendship and in a pinch, Nozomi was always right there, but along the way, she was deep mud on the road to progress. And some days, Nico just didn’t have the patience for Nozomi’s seemingly bottomless appetite for mischief making.
Heh, Nico thought to herself, maybe there’s a Tarot card for Nozomi. “Hey, buxom and boisterous, is there a NozoNozy specific Tarot card? Like The Teasing Devil or the Ten Of Feathers or something.”

Nozomi frowned. Nico had learned almost immediately that one sure way to poke a hole in Nozomi’s superiority was to misappropriate Tarot concepts in some way. Nozomi’s voice was chiding, her finger wagging, “The Devil means something entirely different than mischief, you know that Nico, and there are no feathers.”

“But feathers are quills, quills can be used for writing, pens are used for writing and like Nico, pens and quills are the mightiest, so Nico has decided that the swords are now feathers. Metamorphie swordus.” Nico bowed with a flourish, then poured the hot chocolate carefully from the pan into two mugs.

"It's Oruihon Deance," Nozomi turned to Eli, “So much of my Tarot knowledge has fallen on Nico she is now designing her own deck.” Nozomi smiled sweetly at Nico, but her eyes were spiky, green thorns, “One that will fail her.”

Nico shrugged and handed over their drinks. All this chatter was tiring. And wasted time. Nico wanted to just be on her couch, letting Maki keep her warm as she reviewed her scenes for tomorrow’s rehearsal. Her lines were still shaky. This needed to improve. Playing Mina Murray was an opportunity Nico was not going to blow, no matter how distracting the people around her tried to be. Nico was steel, forged by trial and so many many supporting roles and chances to hone her craft. Nico was not lost in daydreams about sexy, shapely hips and curving lips. No, Nico was focused, sharp, shining and about to seize the stage.

“Nico-chi?” Nozomi giggled, her voice a tease. “Thinking about your redhead?”

Nico shook her head and started cleaning. “Nico is back in town and focused on Fangs. Nothing is going to get between Nico and the spotlight.”

Red eyes glittered with determination. Nozomi knew Nico wasn’t just dodging the redhead question. Nico had always had grand plans and Nozomi doubted a three week crush would be anything but crumpled if it got in the way.

Umi had gone over to her girlfriends’ apartment in the hopes of getting Honoka to sit down and work on their Integrated Marketing project: Digital Trends and Social Media. But Honoka had begged off, refusing to leave the couch and turn off her PS4. So Umi had settled for reading out loud what she had done so far on their assignment, hoping Honoka absorbed some of it.

Distracted by Honoka rolling across the couch, cheering her fighter on and waving the controller wildly, Umi kept tensing to leap and grab when Honoka sent it flying. So Umi didn’t hear Kotori enter the apartment and startled when she felt arms slide down her shoulders. Kotori giggled.

“You’re so jumpy, Umi.” Kotori hugged her close, always thrilled when she came home and found both the women she loved there.

“She’s grumpy too. Nico did something but Umi won’t say what.” Game paused, Honoka pointed her controller accusingly at Umi.

Kotori tightened her grip slightly but Umi knew the fawn haired girl would try to keep her locked in until Kotori found out what she wanted to know. But Maki’s secret wasn’t Umi’s to tell. Or Nico’s
really. As exasperated as Umi was currently with her roommate’s new girlfriend, she also realized how great a leap of trust it had been for Maki to agree to share that secret with a stranger.

“What did Nico do?” Kotori fingers drummed on Umi’s pectoral muscles, causing Umi to shift uncomfortably.

Umi cringed, this would only make Kotori more suspicious, but Umi needed space to breathe and think. She put her hands over Kotori’s, gently pulling them up and turned to smile at Kotori’s warm golden eyes, “She skipped this week’s roommate meeting.”

Kotori frowned, “Why? She missed rehearsal yesterday too. A senior claimed it was the first time in 3 years, but Nozomi said Nico wasn’t sick.”

Maybe if Umi told Kotori everything but the werewolf thing, Kotori would be distracted and not notice Umi hedging. So Umi harnessed her discomfort and embarrassment from the morning and let it race out with an abbreviated version of Nico’s last couple of days, “MakihadgoneofftoWisconsinandNicofollowedherandwhencalledthismorninnoonewaswearingclothes.”

Honoka had stopped rolling, her mouth dropped open; Kotori leaned over the couch, eyes trapping Umi’s, “You had a naked phone conversation with Nico?”

Umi patted herself on the back, internally; distract Kotori, check. “Maki. Nico was wearing a sheet.” Kotori’s eyes went distant for a minute, Umi realizing she was probably reviewing Maki’s measurements. “I dropped the phone. Immediately.”

Honoka roared with laughter, finally tossing the controller to the side but Umi was too busy warily watching Kotori to catch it. Honoka’s hysteria continued as she rolled off the couch, “Umi’s so shy. I want to see your face when you realized…”

“Honoka…” Umi’s voice cracked, somewhat predictably as Kotori loomed closer, “Maki dropped the phone as well.” Umi offered helpfully.

“If,” Kotori leaned even further over the couch, nose nearly touching Umi’s, eyes getting chillier by the second, “you dropped your phone, how do you know?”

“Nico,” Umi smiled, relieved, happy to have thought of an excuse, “yelled at Maki not to break her phone.”

Kotori was actually stronger than she looked and seemed to be holding herself up in a partial plank on the back of the couch, eyes suspicious, “Does this have to do with the dog from the other night?”

Umi nodded, gulping, backing up into the coffee table. She sat. Honoka was now on the floor, watching the conversation while lying on her back.

Umi had actually thought this part through and done some quick research. “Wolf hybrids are legal in Wisconsin, not here. Maki shouldn’t have let it get loose. They needed to return it.”

Kotori let herself fall into the couch, kissing a Honoka who rose to meet her, “Hi honey.”

“Hi!” Honoka pulled herself onto the couch, embracing Kotori from behind and winking at Umi, “We’ll have to make sure Umi forgets about her phone call.”

Kotori’s hand started to lazily travel up Umi’s inseam, stretching Umi’s nerves even more. “I can’t stay tonight.” Umi stood and quickly put the table between Kotori’s hand and her leg. “I really do need to talk to Nico about her…” Umi sighed, she wasn’t going to lie and call Maki a dog, “about
Princess.”

Kotori pouted. Honoka knew Umi needed a break between interrogation and conversation so she decided to be irresistibly persuasive and create a compromise, “If you come back after you talk to Nico, I’ll have 3 social media insights.” Honoka winked, “5 if you spend the night.”

Umi had been planning to spend the night anyway, the better to avoid eye or any contact with Maki, but if she could get Honoka to do some homework by not admitting that, well, it was for Honoka’s own good. Kotori could always read Umi’s mind but getting Honoka to work on assignments was a mutual struggle so Kotori let Honoka’s assumption pass.

“I won’t be long.” Umi kissed Kotori apologetically on the cheek, and let herself get lost in Honoka’s bright blue eyes for a heartbeat, “Better get working on those 5, Honoka. You’ll be busy after I get back.”

Honoka bounced up, “Hand me that book, Kotori.”

Eli was in the bathroom so a prowling Nozomi was leaning on the counter, invading Nico’s personal space, “So how far did you get, Nico. Is she under your” Nozomi let her voice match Nico’s pitch “thrall now?”

“No one is under anyone’s thrall, Nozomi.” Nico heard a whine in her voice, her subconscious pushing through with the ‘when was the last 10 seconds you weren’t thinking about Maki’ thought.

Eli slid back into the booth, pulling out her phone. Nozomi produced her cards. “Pick three, Nico-chi, you know the drill.”

The door opened. Nico shook her head at Nozomi, “Busy, busybody” and glanced over the taller woman’s shoulder to see a grinning Maki, in a thermal shirt, jeans and a quilted vest, red hair under the NU bobble hat that seemed to be her default, “Hi, Maki! How’s my car?”

Nozomi whirled, eyeing Maki speculatively. Eli looked up from her phone, suddenly alert. Nozomi rolled her hand out toward Maki, Tarot deck in her palm, “Shuffle and pick three. Your girlfriend won’t tell me anything.”

“Want a coffee, Maki?” Nico poured as Maki nodded, “And feel free to ignore Nozomi. She’s desperate for attention.” Nico turned her head, “You should do something about that, chocolate and crazy.” Eli grunted and went back to her phone.

Maki glanced between Nico and Nozomi, sure Nico was grumbling about Nozomi, but Maki could only smell positives. Which meant Nico liked to pretend she didn’t care, which meant Nozomi was actually Nico’s friend, which meant Maki should make an effort. She took the cards and sat at the counter, shuffling. Nico clucked her tongue, but ran a quick hand through the hair over Maki’s ear.

The door opened again and Nico spun into her professional mode, “Welcome to...oh, it’s you, Umi.”

Umi blew out a breath, “Hello to you too, Nico. And Maki.”

Nozomi had just found something even better to play with and made a grab for Umi’s arm, which the black haired martial artist easily dodged, “No hello for me, Umi?”

“No.” Umi sat at the counter, next to Maki, then noticed who she was sitting next to and jumped off the chair as Maki fumbled the cards and blushed. Nico grabbed Maki’s arm and dragged her to the
booth shoving her in, across from Eli. “Bring the cards over and leave Umi alone, O Tarot Terror.” Nico stomped toward Nozomi, who fluttered her eyelashes at a locked down Umi instead of complying.

“Double shot.” Umi tapped the counter as Nico neared.

“You’ll be up all night.” Nico chided.

“What I do all night is none of your business.” Umi’s voice was flat.

“You look like you’d have stamina.” Nozomi leered.

“Nozomi!” Three voices. Umi sounded embarrassed, Nico angry and Eli beleaguered. Maki just stared at the three cards she’d laid on the table in front of her, ignoring the static.

“What do I do now?” Maki asked.

Eli had decided to physically intervene, coaxing Nozomi back to the booth with a push/hug combo. “Turn them over,” Nozomi said as Eli’s hip met hers.

“Okay.” Maki did, concentrating, fang biting into her lip. Nico leaned her elbows on the counter, watching her girlfriend think so adorably seriously.

“Nico” Umi hissed, “double.”

“Sorry, Umi.” Back to the job. Nico’s hands flew, maneuvering cup and levers and suddenly Umi had a small cup of the dark, dark doom of sleep in front of her. She reached to chug it, Nico’s hand stopped her, “Let it cool off for just a minute.”

Umi chugged anyway. And forced herself not to choke or cough. Or scream.

“Another.” she croaked.

Nico tilted her head forward, searching Umi’s haunted eyes, “What the hell happened?”

“Kotori wants to know about…Princess.” Umi made sure Nozomi was absorbed in the cards and then jerked her head in Maki’s direction.

Maki had proudly turned the cards over, Nico saw her sniffing above them as if that would help, “What’s this?” She pointed to the center card.

“The Hanged Man.” Nozomi was doing her own version of back to work, fingers resting lightly above the card she was examining, eyes intent on first the card, then the person. Maki’s eyes refused to meet Nozomi’s and her cheeks reddened a bit. “With the sneaky flipped five of swords there, you’re being warned to take no action against an adversary, even though you’re tired of…” Nozomi paused, considering, then decided. “You have to think different, try a new strategy.” Maki nodded, obviously curious. Nozomi continued, moving her fingers to the far right card. “But the 10 of Cups here promises you satisfaction, although” and here Nozomi glanced up, catching Nico totally entranced by Maki’s reactions, “you might want to let someone else take the lead.”

Maki whined a little, under her breath, as she picked up the middle card. “He looks calm.” Nico thought she sounded confused.

Nozomi chuckled. “He is. Although you drew him reversed. Usually, he’s hanging from the tree.” She turned the card.
“Ha! Rin does that sometimes, in my treehouse. When she’s thinking.” Maki smiled and flicked the card, remembering Rin with her legs wrapped around a branch, letting herself sway.

“Smart friend.” Nozomi replaced the cards, stashing them again.

Maki shrugged, “She doesn’t care about smart. She cares about people.”

“Even smarter friend.” Nozomi took Eli’s hand, “I’d like to meet her.”

“Didn’t Hanayo say she was dating a Rin?” Eli squeezed Nozomi’s hand back.

“Yes, that’s them.” Maki was puzzled, “How do you know them?”

Eli fidgeted, her hands moving to her mug, “We’re working on something together. We haven’t met Rin yet. Hanayo’s very protective of her.”

Maki remembered coming here to meet Nico and this booth smelling like Hanayo. And Nico explaining that someone was hunting werewolves and Hanayo was getting information. Maki sniffed, concentrating on the woman in front of her. Nozomi still just smelled like sage, willow, chamomile, with a different minor magic note than Nico, but nothing werewolf. So why was she interested? The cards. Could Nozomi really have some kind of magical insight?

“Hey, pretty girl.” Nico had snuck up next to her and slid an arm around her shoulders. Maki jerked a bit in surprise, “still hungry after that sandwich earlier?”

“Sandwich” Umi muttered, darkly, slamming her second double espresso down.

The sudden nearness of Nico made Maki suddenly skittish, her heart racing, her legs bracing themselves to race somewhere less cluttered. Nico felt the impulse, pulling her into a hug. Maki let Nico’s essence surround her. No bolting. Just deep breaths, inhaling vanilla and peach and musk and magic. And coffee, Nico was drenched in the smell of it. Maki was going to be up all night, without having to shoot back espressos like Umi. But she was going to be with Nico so...distracted by that thought, she nuzzled into Nico’s neck.

“Nico-chi, this is a place of business.” Nozomi brayed, Nico knew her friend’s hand was splayed out dramatically over her chest, “I can’t believe this. Control your girlfriend.”

Maki pulled back, blushing again. Eli smiled at her sympathetically.

“Go home, Nozomi.” Nico demanded, heading back to the counter.

“Please.” Umi was examining her empty demitasse cup sadly. Then she pushed it at Nico. Nico shook her head.

“No more for you.”

Umi scowled at Nozomi, “If only I could blame you.”

Nozomi couldn’t resist a cue that obvious and swapped her seat for the one next to Umi, eyes aglow with malignant curiosity.

“So who is driving you to the edge, if not Nico-chi?” Nozomi reached into her cleavage, “Shall we ask the cards?”

The door opened, and the Cup O’ was suddenly busy with chill and chatter.
“No.” Umi’s defiance reverberated and echoed, surprising the crowd of five who had just come in, ambling their way to a booth. Nico recognized them, regulars, a Linguistic Anthropology study group. She wandered over, smile bright, nudging Maki’s shoulder with her hip as she passed the booth. Eli stood, stretching, grabbing her coat and Nozomi’s. “It was nice to see you again, Maki.”

Maki nodded, most of her attention on listening to Nico as she flirted with the study group. But then there was a wail and the sound of Umi’s forehead connecting with the counter. Nico froze, horrified, as she heard Umi mutter “I can’t lie to Kotori, she’ll never forgive me” into the wood of the counter.

Nico apologized to her customers and spun, staring at the Umi wrecked tableau. Maki had slid to the edge of her seat, glancing at Nico, who bobbed her head in Umi’s direction, “Do something.”

“W..what?” Maki cocked her head, sniffing. Umi smelled panicked and very nervous. “She’s your friend.”

“Just don’t let her hurt herself for now. Take her outside or something.” Nico whispered, her eyes worried.

This was not an easy problem to solve for her GIRLFRIEND, but she could do it, Maki told herself, trying to muster that excitement again as she cautiously approached an Umi who seemed about to pound her fists down through the counter. Whining softly, hoping Umi would hear it as a friendly sound, Maki sat on the stool next to Umi. Umi turned her head, and groaned, “No.” She raised her head, shifting her stool away from Maki, pointing in an accusatory fashion “Nico, tell your n..no..naked..no clothes…”

The Linguistic Anthropology group suddenly got very interested in Maki, who could feel her ears starting to quiver.

“Oh no you don’t.” Nico’s exclamation was flat, grim and fueled by frustration. She marched over to the counter, her hand dropping over Maki’s, who found herself holding onto it like she was about to fall off the John Hancock Tower observatory level. Nico’s other hand slid under Umi’s chin, forcing the amber eyes to meet her glance, “Leave Maki alone. She didn’t cause any of this on purpose. We will deal with Kotori.” Nico inhaled, her voice relaxing slightly, “All you have to do is go back, look cute, get Honoka in distracting mode and tell Kotori that we’re all having dinner tomorrow.” Nico glanced at Maki, questioning and after a breath, Maki nodded and raised Nico’s hand to her cheek, leaning into it, eyes closed for a moment, focusing on the contact, only on the touch and tingle of Nico’s skin against hers. Nico would figure something out. And tonight was just the two of them, alone, after this. Maki needed that. Soon.

“I’ll be right back, pretty girl.” Nico’s hand disappeared, but a quick kiss apologized to Maki’s cheek for the loss. Nico grabbed a plate and opened the display case, “Sorry about the fuss, folks. Nico will make up for it with Nico’s best cookies, on the house.”

Which left Umi and Maki sitting side by side, aggressively and awkwardly not acknowledging each other’s proximity. Umi pushed herself up, dramatically, carefully stepping around the stool so as not to brush by Maki. “I won’t be home tonight, Nico, so do whatever you want.” The Linguistic Anthropology group, high on surprise cookies, ”ooohhed”, only to instantly realize their mistake when Umi’s fists clenched. Maki almost laughed at how the coffee shop quieted after Umi’s aggressive gesture, but she knew better than to draw the attention of someone so near a break. Umi shrugged into her coat, pleased at the response, but then, discomfort again obvious, she paused. “Tomorrow, you take care of this, Nico.”

“Nico promises. And Nico will make Umi’s favorite dish too.” Nico didn’t go all the way boastful, doubling down on conviction, her smile contrite.
Umi’s expression was wry as she actually caught Maki’s eye briefly, then rested a hand on Nico’s shoulder, “Make Kotori’s. We…” she smiled ruefully at Maki, “are going to need all the help we can get.”

“You are a gem, Umi Sonoda!” Nico crowed as Umi strode into the night to the cheers of the Linguistic Anthropology Group, now forever fans. Maki figured a howl wouldn’t do any more damage and joined in, striking a respectful note. Umi flipped her coat out behind her like a cape and pivoted to tip her hat in farewell.

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter than usual. Hope it finds you well : )
Nico woke up suddenly, cold, not remembering a dream, her heart racing. She heard a whimper to her left and opened an eye. Red hair askew in the sexiest possible way, somehow justifying all the covers stolen in a heap half under Maki’s graceful, glowing, currently human curves. Maki twitched, then curled into an even tighter ball. Nico carefully slid an arm under the werewolf, careful not to jar her, pulling her so so warm girlfriend as near as possible, even happier when Maki instinctively nuzzled closer. So warm, so vibrant, Nico leaned forward and let Maki’s hair tickle her nose as she held in the happy laughter that wanted to roar out. From what Maki had said, sleeping this soundly was a rare thing for the werewolf recently. Nico didn’t want to break the charm of last night, when they’d fallen into bed together, every motion, every breath, every thought in sync until the joyful arch of their joined bodies thrown into mutual ecstatic exhaustion. It was a great night. One of Nico’s best, no matter how many Broadway openings or movie premieres came her way. This moment, this pause when the sun shook itself into a new day and Maki lay in her arms, completely calm, content, slightly shaggy around the edges, this was perfect.

So of course, the next thing she heard was Honoka.

"Hey, Nico!" Honoka blared a greeting as she slammed the door, “Kotori wanted breakfast instead of dinner and Umi’s worried you’re…”

There was a crash. Nico knew that Umi had grabbed Honoka, covering her mouth before the word naked came out and they both had crashed into the table. But she didn’t have time to deal with that because Maki woke with a start, jolting up, staring wildly around her, starting the change. Nico had begun to notice the signs: forehead tightening, hair sliding around the ears, green flecks growing, pinballing at increasing speeds, low growl or whimper. Nico held on to Maki’s torso, whispering, not wanting to startle the werewolf more, in case Maki was confused about where she was, “Stay calm, pretty girl. It’s just Umi.”

Maki’s nostrils flared. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for an out, Nico realized.

“Maki.” Nico’s voice was calm, but impossible to ignore. The green in Maki’s eyes froze as she met Nico’s level stare, “You can’t just run all the time.” Nico paused, her hand caressing the curve of Maki’s jaw, fingers threading through tangles of hair, “We are worth staying for.” Then she pulled Maki in for a kiss, lips a gentle press. Maki pulled back, eyes a little sad. Nico’s half smile picked up that mood as she jerked her head at the window, “You can go out that way if you want, pretty girl. It’s just Umi.”

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“Maki.” Nico’s voice was calm, but impossible to ignore. The green in Maki’s eyes froze as she met Nico’s level stare, “You can’t just run all the time.” Nico paused, her hand caressing the curve of Maki’s jaw, fingers threading through tangles of hair, “We are worth staying for.” Then she pulled Maki in for a kiss, lips a gentle press. Maki pulled back, eyes a little sad. Nico’s half smile picked up that mood as she jerked her head at the window, “You can go out that way if you want, pretty girl. Nico will take care of it.”

Maki grabbed the sheet, falling back to meet Nico’s head on the pillow, pulling up the sheet to cover both of them, “S...sorry.”

“S’okay. Nico knows this is all new for you.” Nico smiled, hand caressing Maki’s jaw still. There
was a polite knock on the door. Umi. Maki only trembled for a moment. Nico turned her face away from Maki and yelled, “Give me 5 minutes, Umi. Start the coffee.”

Umi grunted and moved away from the door. Maki relaxed.

Nico grabbed Maki and pulled her into a huge, full body hug, “You are amazing, pretty girl. I want to bring you home every night and wake up like this after.” Maki quirked an eyebrow when Nico released her, causing Nico to giggle, “Well, without the extra company. Nico only wants an audience when she’s onstage.”

Maki left her head resting on Nico’s shoulder and stared at the ceiling, “My parents never wanted me to tell anyone. So I didn’t. Until you.”

Nico waited. She knew when a scene needed a ‘moment.’

Maki turned, her eyes wide and lavender and torn between fear and flight, “I don’t like people knowing things about me.”

Nico rested her chin on Maki’s head, “Neither does Nico.”

Maki frowned, “But you’re a future star of stage and screen, right?”

“Which makes privacy even more important.” Nico raised a hand, pointing at the ceiling. “But we can’t just stay in bed until the roof falls in.”

Long pause, longer exhale, “No. We can’t.”

Nico nudged as she kissed the top of Maki’s head, “Three of the best people I know.”

Maki rolled off Nico’s arm, letting Nico stretch some life back into it. Nico stayed under the covers for a moment, appreciating the muscles of Maki’s back as the redhead grabbed for her shirt. Nico reached out a hand, stroking the curve as feeling came back to her fingers. Even softer without the fur. Maki glanced back over her shoulder, fang pricking her lower lip, shy smile raising Nico’s heart rate and hopes, “M...miss me already?”

Nico was all in like she’d never been in her life and Nico had always been an enthusiast. Her ruby eyes glittered, shadows of sensuality adding depth, “Terribly.”

Maki grinned, pulling her t-shirt over her head, then leaned down to kiss Nico, “Put on some clothes. You’re too distracting.”

“Says the half naked supermodel in my bedroom.” Nico let her hand tease Maki’s hip, playfully patting the curve just under her waist before jumping out of bed.

Maki was suddenly too close for Nico to do anything but pull her even closer and their lips crashed. So did a fist into the door. Umi’s voice was stern, “Two minutes and I send in Honoka.”

Maki slipped her lips to Nico’s ear, nipping as she whimpered, “After. P...please, Nico.”

Nico snorted, heart pounding, glancing at the clock. 8 a.m., her first class was at 11. She hoped there wouldn’t be much conversation with Umi and company. It would be hard enough to concentrate with the fresh memory of Maki leaning into her, amethyst eyes flaring with need. Right now, it was nearly impossible to think responsibly so her lips teased the curve of Maki’s ear as she murmured, “You. Me. Like spring and cherry trees.”
Maki nuzzled briefly into Nico’s shoulder before Nico sighed and traded warm and SEXY girlfriend for fuzzy and voluminous bathrobe. Maki pulled on her jeans. Nico might have to skip a shower this morning, if Maki slid out of her jeans anything like she had just slid into them, but that’s what cute winter hats were for, along with the prevention of ear tip frostbite.

Eli and Nozomi had been prompt. 8 a.m. Hanayo had brought home some danishes yesterday and made coffee as soon as she woke up at 7:30. Rin was still in their bed, grumbling about the early hour and refusing to do anything but peek out from under their comforter and yawn morosely.

Eli’s knock was crisp. Hanayo opened the door to let them in, relocking it as Eli and Nozomi settled on the bed.

“Where’s this girlfriend of yours, Hanayo?” Nozomi wondered, glancing around the room.

“Fiancée.” Hanayo squeaked as she pulled out mugs and Rin flipped so she was facing away from the visitors. Nozomi caught the motion and stared, curious. “Rin doesn’t like early mornings when she doesn’t have track practice.”

“Oh, is she on the team?” Eli asked politely.

Hanayo gleamed proudly, “Scholarship. Illinois State Champion at the 400 and 800.”

“Impressive.” Nozomi stood, stretching, “I’ll have some of that coffee.” She took a mug from Hanayo and shuffled nearer the bunk bed.

Eli leaned forward, earnest, mug in both hands. “Nozomi’s been crying on Erena a lot so I think that part of the plan is convincing them.”

Hanayo looked toward the bed, “They’re spending more time at the theatre.”

Eli had been mid sip but lowered her mug, “We’re getting close to tech so that’s makes sense.”

“Tech?” Hanayo stress chomped half a danish, crumbs falling all over her sweater.

“When the lights and sound get added in. It’s this weekend.” Nozomi got on her tiptoes to peer into the bunk bed. No sign of its occupant. “I’ll be sleeping at the theatre. With Eli-chi.” Nozomi winked.

Eli shook her head, “I’ll be studying for midterms Friday night, not keeping you company.”

Nozomi pouted.

Hanayo interrupted, “They sound like they’re building something. Erena’s been coming in for a lot of electronic components.”

“I’ll check backstage.” Eli took out her phone to make a note, “What should I look for?”

Hanayo shrugged, still sneaking worried glances at Rin…”Something that reminds you of that meter we already found? I’m setting up a separate data stream for something but it won’t be activated until the 12th, Tsubasa said.”

“Opening night.” Nozomi looked thoughtful, “If they mess up the show, Nico-chi will kill them.”

“Maki and I will help her.” Rin’s voice came through, slightly muffled by the comforter.
Nozomi pulled the comforter up. Rin’s bright green eyes blinked at her, “You’re pretty. No wonder you keep her in a tower, Hanayo.”

Rin huffed and sat up, pulling the comforter tight around herself, short hair sticking straight up in three places, “I’m not locked up.”

Hanayo face fell. She offered a chocolate croissant to Rin who glared at it before taking a bite. “Any milk?” Rin asked while chewing.

Hanayo reached a boxed milk toward the upper bunk. Nozomi figured this was as good a time as any to ask the awkward question, “How do you know Maki?”

Hanayo dropped the box, scrambling to pick it up. Rin snarled at Nozomi. Eli put her mug down and pulled Nozomi down to sit next to her, “That’s not what we’re here for. Let’s stay focused. I’m sorry, Hanayo. Rin.”

Hanayo still flustered, Rin climbed down to hug her and glare at Nozomi. The two of them stood there, together, so small, so young yet so fiercely protective of each other. Eli made sure to seem as friendly as possible, hoping Nozomi would do the same.

“Why are we here, Eli?” Nozomi turned her attention to Eli.

“Hanayo wanted to discuss something.” Eli took Nozomi’s hand, squeezing it.

Hanayo picked up a flash drive off her desk, handing it to Eli. “I’ve activated the alert and tracking system we found for my phone. If it goes off, you need to get to the Tech Sub-Basement and make sure to follow the steps I’ve listed.”

“Alert? Tracking? For your phone?” Rin forehead scrunched as she realized the implications. “But they only have video of me.”

Nozomi’s ears perked up at video, but a glare from Eli kept her silent. She would find out later.

Hanayo hugged Rin, “They might see us together or find out we room together.”

Rin growled, which made Nozomi sit back on the bed and stare. Too loud and fierce a noise for so small a body.

“I can always find you.” Rin insisted. “I will always find you.”

“But what if…” Hanayo tried to argue but her words trailed off as Rin’s glower intensified.

Eli put a hand on Rin’s shoulder and got snapped at, but she didn’t back away, “Let me help you both. They’ve been hurting Nozomi too. I want to stop them as much as you do.”

“So do I.” Nozomi agreed, fascinated by how instinctively Eli was navigating the emotional storm swirling around the two younger women.

Rin sniffed the air between the two strangers to her, needing to get a read on their intentions, to decide. She knew Kayochin was taking too much on herself and that Maki was distracted by Nico and in nearly as much danger as Rin was. If these two were actually friends, they might be the help Kayochin needed. Rin took a closer sniff of Eli’s hand on her shoulder as Nozomi watched, fascinated. Eli just kept a friendly smile on her face. Earth, mint, apple, very confident, very kind, lingering traces of contact with Nozomi. Rin nodded and met Kayochin’s worried gaze, “Okay.”
Nico stepped out of her bedroom, Maki right behind her. Umi and Kotori were both in the kitchen, Honoka had decided to wait on the couch and had fallen what seemed to be pretty soundly asleep.

“You were going to get her to sleepwalk into my room?” Nico teased as Umi poured herself more coffee, glaring.

“Coffee? Or juice?” Kotori trilled.

“Juice please.” Maki moved to the counter. Kotori poured Nico a mug of coffee without waiting for a response.

“We are having breakfast first No arguments.” Nico pulled out a bowl, eggs and started breaking and scrambling. “Hand me the sage, Umi.”

Maki took her juice to the table, all her attention on Nico; Kotori leaned into Umi’s side, all her attention on Maki. Nico took 5 minutes, directing Umi to grab some bagels from the bread basket. Which left Kotori leaning on the counter. Nico left a plate for her, then slid in next to Maki with a plate and two forks. Maki happily started, Nico giggled at the thought, wolfing her way through the large pile of eggs Nico had delivered. Nico was going to have to start keeping more food around. Maybe she could convince Maki to go shopping.

As soon as everyone at the table was done with their breakfast, Honoka still only dreaming of one, Kotori decided to play hardball. Her voice was tinged with cloying sweetness as she gleamed at Umi, “When did naked phone calls get added to the roommate agreement?”

Maki spat out juice; Nico rolled her eyes; Umi turned to Nico, desperation in her posture as she neared faint or flight mode.

“Ha!” Nico put her fork down, tilting her head at Kotori, a speculative glimmer in her eye, “That was accidental. But not as bad as it sounds. Nico was PG 13, at the worst.”

Kotori pushed the pawn out slowly, two spaces, “And Maki?”

Nico put her hand on Maki’s knee and squeezed, “Even more accidental. Upset her as much as Umi…” Nico stopped herself from saying ‘once she realized’ as Maki nodded earnestly.

Kotori examined her manicure, mocking disinterest, “Why was Maki so upset?”

Because of course we all know why Maki was naked, Nico continued her internal play by play, thankful that mindreading was not a werewolf trait as Maki’s twitches spiked.

Maki sighed, taking Nico’s hand in hers and setting her jaw, clear eyes meeting Umi’s, “Because I’m a werewolf.”

Kotori tilted forward, curious eyes examining Maki’s face, “So you’re…”

Nico, surprisingly, exploded into the hovering, tensed cloud of silence before Umi did, “Princess. She’s Princess. Well, she’s Maki, but she was Princess that night at Wirtz. There was a full moon…”

Maki’s voice cut in, smooth and calm, “I wasn’t in control.’ Maki grimaced, searching the blank in her memory again. “I don’t remember anything. It rarely happens like that. I’m very grateful that Nico, Umi, and Honoka helped me.”
Attention was now centered on Kotori. Queen to… There was a broad, excited smile on Kotori’s face, “I want to see.”

“What!” Nico and Umi’s mutual, shocked discomfort became an echo chamber.

“5 more minutes…” Honoka muttered sleepily. Umi sighed.

“I want to see Princess.” Kotori insisted, too interested in Maki for anyone’s liking.

“We don’t call her that.” Nico snapped.

“What do we call her?” Kotori giggled, “Cutie?”

Nico debated saying “Mine” but bit back the impulse.

“Fine.” Maki stood. “I’ll be right back.”

“We’re not redoing this for Honoka.” Nico crossed her arms over her chest.

Umi shrugged, wanting this whole morning over. The “how prepared are you for the midterm” quiz scheduled for her Philosophy class was the most relaxing thought in her head.

Maki trotted out of the bedroom, eyes bright, fur mostly unruffled, heading proudly for Nico when she was interrupted by a fawn haired, heart and honey eyed squealing torpedo.

“SO CUTE!” Kotori wrapped her arms around Maki in a surprisingly tight grip as the werewolf startled and barked, whining unhappily, “SO SOFT.” Kotori rubbed her cheek against Maki’s ruff.

“Hey!” Nico shouted, vaulting out of her chair, but was beaten to her target by Umi, who shoved herself between between her girlfriend and Nico’s girlfriend, detaching Kotori’s arms from the ‘now we know she’s naked werewolf’ with the solemn demeanor of a forensic investigator. Maki threw herself back as soon as Umi took control of one of Kotori’s arms, immediately fleeing behind Nico and snuffling into her side. Nico crouched down, arms around Maki’s shoulders, “It’s all right, pretty girl.”

“Ooh, pretty girl, that’s so cute.” Kotori gushed as Umi kept a tight grasp on both her arms, the better to prevent another surge toward Maki.

Due to the color of Nico’s eyes, her glare could best be described as bloody daggers. Umi caught the edge of it and began to lead Kotori to the door. Maki barked. “We are done now.” Umi announced firmly, “I’ll be home tonight, Nico. It was nice to see you again, Maki. You are always welcome.”

Maki howled a short response at Umi, the notes amicable. Nico relaxed. Kotori and she would be having a conversation the next time Nico was in for a fitting, but Nico was glad that Maki wasn’t holding any of this mess against Umi.

Umi slammed the door and Honoka shot up from the couch, “Kotori?” She shook her head, yawning, rubbing her eyes, “ooh, Princess.”

Maki glanced up at Nico, who sat on the floor next to her. Maki laid her head on top of Nico’s and Honoka laughed, “She’s silly isn’t she?”

Maki snorted air through her nostrils while Nico muttered something about this turning into a comedy routine. The door reopened and Umi marched in, grabbed Honoka’s collar and yanked, “We’re leaving. You missed breakfast.”
“UUUMMMMIIII….I want to pet the puppy.” Honoka fell over the couch, “And I’m HUUUNNGGGRRRRYYYY.”

“No.” Umi pushed Honoka through the door.

Nico let herself fall back as Honoka’s complaints faded, rolling over to the couch, Maki following, “That was too much excitement.”

Maki, like she had that first night as a wolf in Nico’s car what seemed like months ago, draped herself across Nico’s lap, lavender eyes sharp, tongue lolling out playfully, about to lick Nico’s cheek. Nico dodged, chuckling, “Not so fast, pretty girl.” Nico’s hands roved through Maki’s fur, trying to find familiar curves as Maki’s nose bumped hers, “change for Nico.”

It was a little like unwrapping a warm, furry present and finding a sexy girl inside, Nico’s hands slid across soft and muscular and silky to find soft and yielding and trembling with every caress. Whimpers turned throaty moans, Maki’s fingers tugging Nico’s tangles, Maki’s lips throbbing at hummingbird speed against Nico’s and that was all Nico could feel, the redhead’s fiery, relentless push driving her own rush. If Umi walked back into their apartment one more time, Nico would be homeless. And she didn’t care.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. Short note, longish chapter.

Next chapter will be at least two weeks from now, my apologies, because I have Christmas stories I really want to just sit down and work on, but I'll try to make them worth your while. And the next chapter of this worth the wait.

Take care!
Friction, We Hit Some

Chapter Summary

The morning continues into afternoon, as do the conversations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The walk to the MidQuads was too solitary, even with company, Eli realized. Nozomi was distant, muttering and frowning, occasionally stopping to stare back at where they’d been. Eli had learned fairly early that prodding Nozomi for insights only led to convoluted and frustrating cul de sacs where Eli ended up knowing less than she had at the beginning of the conversation. Patience was the key to unlocking the secrets and thoughts Nozomi held back. Patience and trust. Eli twirled through a series of brisé en avant, serving the double purpose of working through some frustration and attracting Nozomi’s attention.

“Very pretty, Eli-chi.” Nozomi smiled, her green eyes suddenly here in the now, appreciative.

Eli curtsied, “Thank you.”

Nozomi’s knowing smirk was one of the things Eli liked best about her, but it could be disconcerting when turned on her, “I know you’re just trying to distract me.” A wink softened the accusation, “Doing a good job of it too.”

Eli took Nozomi’s arm and turned onto the path to her dorm, “Thank you.”

Nozomi leaned into Eli’s side, “But wouldn’t knowing why Erena and her friends are bothering Hanayo’s girlfriend help us figure out how to stop them?”

Eli shook her head, blue eyes kind but firm, “We can’t just invade their privacy. Rin obviously doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“No.” Nozomi refused to be convinced, “Hanayo obviously doesn’t want Rin to talk about it. That’s something different, Eli-chi.”

Eli shrugged, “Doesn’t matter, does it. Either way, they don’t want to tell us.”

Nozomi opened the main door to the dorm, “I’m not just curious, you know. I want to help. And the more we know, the more we can.”

Eli followed Nozomi up the stairs, “I know. But we have to be patient.”

Once in her room, Nozomi knelt at her table, pulling out her cards, forcing thoughts and frustration away so they wouldn’t weight the reading, “Time to see what the cards will tell me, since no one else is talking.”

Eli shut the door quietly and stood for a minute, considering what to say, “Want some tea?”

Nozomi nodded, shuffling, “What did Hanayo tell you when you confronted her?”
Eli sighed. She really did trust Nozomi, but she also knew her girlfriend was not one to let curiosity fester. “Not much. Just that she was protecting someone too.”

“Rin. That’s obvious. And Rin doesn’t seem happy about it. She was cute though.” Nozomi put the cards down. “And Nico didn’t know Hanayo before Maki, I’m certain of that, even though she claims Hanayo’s a regular at the Cup o’.”

Eli filled and plugged in the electric tea kettle, letting busywork soothe her jitters, prepping two mugs of cardamon black tea. Warming would help. Nozomi continued, “And Nico seemed very concerned. And Hanayo stayed after we left to talk to her.” Nozomi frowned, pulling a card, but leaving it unturned, “And I know Nico hasn’t been bitten by anything that wasn’t a Kashima and Kashima’s not a werewolf. Or a vampire.”

Eli froze, Nozomi’s comment knocked something off the shelf of her memory, “Hanayo asked me, the first time I met her, if you were a werewolf. She seemed really nervous about it.”

Nozomi took a steadying breath and turned over the card. The Moon. A wolf and a dog who might be howling at it. A strange, fairly random mystic lobster to add to the odd feel. “Could the explanation be that easy?” Nozomi whispered to herself, amazed at the thought. “Is there only one redhead?”

“Nozomi?” Eli had poured the tea, setting it next to Nozomi’s hand.

Nozomi met Eli’s gaze. “Werewolves. I’m not a werewolf. But Rin and Maki are.”

“No way.” Eli crossed her arms over her chest, jittery again, “That only happens in movies.”

“Probably not like the movies.” Nozomi continued, picking up the card, “obviously not like the movies. Movie werewolves are never that cute.” Nozomi tapped the card against her chin, “And Nico was missing the day after the full moon, with some kind of a mystery crisis that involved driving to her girlfriend’s family cabin in Wisconsin.”

“That’s a stretch, Nozomi. Surely there aren’t wolves roaming the campus in the d..dark once a month.” Eli sat on Nozomi’s bed, eyes clouded, tea ignored.

Nozomi hummed happily, suddenly sure all the pieces were in place.“Occam’s Razor, Eli-chi. It makes the most sense.”

“Werewolves make the most sense?” Eli couldn’t hide her disbelief, hugging Nozomi’s pillow. Fangs had been giving her enough nightmares, she didn’t need werewolves roaming campus, let alone her sleepscapes.

“You haven’t questioned my insights…or my cards…” Nozomi countered.

“There’s rational explanations…you could just be…it’s not unnatural…” Eli stared wide eyed at Nozomi, not sure how to react to this new possibility.

“Or maybe it is a natural thing.” Nozomi said very quietly, leaning back against Eli’s knees, moon card still in her hand.

“Werewolves…” Eli closed her eyes, “really?”

Nozomi sighed, turning to face Eli, leaning on the bed, “We need to be open to possibilities.”

Eli shook her head, contradicting. “We need to be open to proof.”
“Are you going to ask Hanayo. Or Rin? Or Maki.” Nozomi tilted her head up, green eyes curious.

Eli felt punchdrunk, confused, her lips tight with tension, only able to shrug helplessly as her mind imagined conversations, each segueing into visions of darkness and moving fog that left her shuddering.

Rin was frustrated. So frustrated. People staring at her, poking at her, taking videos, wanting to know things about her, worrying Kayochin...Rin sat on the edge of the bunk bed, staring out the window, watching people walking along the Lakefill, friends playing in the snow. She jumped down, restless, growling, hairs on the back of her neck starting to lift. Locked up, she’d never felt locked up like this before, unable to...run, all because she promised Kayochin. Rin dropped into a hunched ball, spasms suddenly shaking her and shooting pains. Growls turned to whimpers, eyelids closed over swirling neon green and growls turned into whimpering howls. There was no joy triggering this sensation, no thrill to leap toward. The door opened and Rin could see Kayochin in front of her, but as she fell to her side, spasms taking over, she knew this time there would be no promise kept.

Maki and Nico, now clothed, eyed each other warily from opposite sides of kitchen table. Nico slowly stretched her right hand toward Maki, Maki mirroring the motion with her left. When their fingertips touched, Maki grinned while Nico shook her head, “We have to leave the apartment. Do serious things.”

Maki captured Nico’s hand with a quick grab, “This is serious.”

Nico leaned forward and kissed the side of Maki’s index finger, “Don’t you have schoolwork to do? Nico has a busy Fangs weekend ahead and several scenes to rehearse for Acting Class.”

Maki responded in kind, letting her lips linger on the back of Nico’s hand, enjoying the shiver that moved through her girlfriend, “I’ll be fine. I’m a quick study.”

Nico ignored the tingle, making sure her voice was even and stern. “Then why was your mother worried enough about your schoolwork to ground you?”

Maki sighed and collapsed back into her chair, Nico’s hand still in hers, “I don’t need much time. It’s only a paper...”

“Paper? For?” Nico realized she didn’t know anything about Maki’s class schedule. Or major.

“Cognitive psychology.” Maki muttered.

“Cognitive psychology?” Nico remembered something from several days ago, her free hand going to the healed cut on her cheek, “Are you really going to be a doctor?”

“Probably.” Maki dropped her head to the table, Nico’s hand nestled under her cheek.

“Probably?” Nico’s voice was sounding more and more dissatisfied. Maki’s attitude puzzled her, “Don’t you kind of have to be a doctor on purpose? They don’t just discover you on a street corner and say, hey, academic genius, be the next Dr. Mae Jemison.”

“Can’t we talk about how cute you are? How kissable? You like that. I like that.” Maki tilted her head, eyes bright and hopeful, lips in a spoiled, expectant pout Nico was becoming very familiar with.
“No.” Firm, Nico was proud of herself as her memories of the morning started throwing themselves at her determination.

Maki huffed and sat up, arms crossed, “My parents are both doctors.”

Oh, Nico was struck by belated embarrassment, “I called your mother Mrs. She probably thinks I’m an idiot.”

Maki shook her head, “She knows I never tell people anything.”

“Plus,” and Nico worked gentle chiding into her tones, “You were a wolf both times I saw her. Not great for introductions.” Maki’s howled reply sounded aggrieved, but Nico couldn’t help smiling a little at the still pouting redhead, “You were cute. And you owe me a dress.”

“Let’s go shopping.” Maki stood, eager to be doing anything that didn’t involve quizzes.

Nico never minded shopping, even if it only turned into window shopping. But not on a weekday. She stayed in her seat. “Nico has class in 40 minutes. And rehearsal. And work.”

Maki scrubbed her fingers through her hair, barely thwarting a growl. “You’re too busy, Nico.”

Nico moved in front of Maki, hands at the redhead’s waist, Maki stilled instantly, eyes only for Nico. This time, Nico made sure flirtatious notes sounded, “Nico didn’t plan for a smart, sexy girlfriend.” Maki leaned in for a kiss and Nico’s lips met hers, one hand raking through Maki’s hair before she pulled away. “I want us to be together as often as we can, pretty girl, but Nico had things she was doing before you came into the coffee shop. And so did you.”

“I don’t care.” Maki stole another kiss.

Nico stepped back, hands on her hips, “You sound like a little kid.”

Maki shook herself, throwing out her arms, before rubbing her forehead with an exasperated sigh, “I’m sorry, Nico. I know you’re busy…” She paused. “I’m just excited.” Maki ducked her head and smiled, a little shy, fang peeking out, “About us. About everything. It all...thrum, I guess.” Her eyes glowed at Nico, lavender shot through with lazy, sexy, swirls of green that Nico had to force herself not to swim in.

“You can stop by Nico’s work tonight.” Compromise offered, and then Nico paused, scowling, “No iced drinks.” Maki snorted as Nico continued, “You need to warm Nico up after her long, busy, lonely day. And tomorrow night, I can go to your place to study my lines while you work on your paper, if that’s okay with your parents.”

Maki felt her shoulders relax, this was going to be okay, she hadn’t completely put Nico off. She pulled Nico into a hug, “Stay over tomorrow? Please.”

Nico let herself enjoy the nearness for just a few minutes. “No treehouse. And your parents have to be okay with it.”

Maki nodded, closing her eyes and making as many sense memories of this moment as she could. Nico felt so right in her arms, sable hair with subtle lavender hints tickling her nose. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she grimaced, pulling it out to look at the lockscreen with its Nico in an overstuffed parka wallpaper. Hanayo.

“Hey, Hanayo. What’s up?”
Nico couldn’t hear the other side of the phone call, but Maki’s expression became more and more alarmed as she let the other woman just talk.

“Are you all right?” More things Nico couldn’t hear, but Maki seemed relieved by something, “I’ll be right there. Don’t worry. Stay with her.” Maki ended the call, one arm still holding Nico, “I have to go.”

“Is Rin okay?” Nico took a guess.

“I don’t know.” Maki moved quickly, gathering her wallet and keys, shoving her bobble hat on her head, “She won’t change back. Hanayo doesn’t know if it was an involuntary transformation.” Maki put her hands in her pockets, obviously troubled, “Rin’s never lost control before.”

“Be careful.” Nico’s firm kiss was a ward against harm and a private invitation, “Text me when you know more.”

“I will.” Maki held Nico tight enough to squeeze the breath out of her. Then she bolted.

Nico’s voice was a little weak but she tried, “Take care of yourself, pretty girl. Nico is looking forward to being warmed up later.”

Maki paused halfway out the door, her wink flirty mischief, “You’ll melt.”

Nico laughed, glad Maki could still be a little silly. She wondered if Tsubasa had anything to do with Rin’s situation. And what Maki had meant by ‘thrums.’

Chapter End Notes

Howdy!

Thanks for your patience. One Idol Protection Program Christmas short fluff added to that AU. And a chunk of the larger Christmas project sorted.

Speaking of IPP, after the St. Snow centric episodes of LL Sunshine, I’m feeling guilty about having broken up Leah and Ruby and considering if I need to AU my AU...which is a weird feeling.

Hope your December is at least a little merry.
The Fighters

Chapter Summary

In which, we get a view into a couple of the other couples ; )

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki found her steps hurrying once she got inside Rin and Hanayo’s dorm. She could hear the low growls, Rin, still wolf, still defensive and frightened. She could smell Hanayo’s sadness and confusion, more anxiety than fear. Maki opened the door to Rin and Hanayo’s room, not sure what to expect. Rin was, unusually, on the bed opposite the one they used and Hanayo was seated on the futon underneath the modified bunk bed, moving as little as possible. Rin’s head snapped in Maki’s direction, but Maki waited, low howl of concern her only comment. Rin huffed and turned her attention back to Hanayo.

“Maki.” Hanayo whispered, “Do you know if…”

Maki closed the door, calling to Rin with a series of whines. She didn’t want to transform, that would mean that she wouldn’t be able to communicate as well with Hanayo. As a human, she could understand Rin, mostly, except for some of the more physical aspects of expression. But she wasn’t here to wrestle. If she could get Rin to look at her…the room was light enough that Maki would be able to judge how in control Rin was from the mix of greens.

“Rin…” Hanayo sounded on the verge of tears and Maki moved toward her, which got a reaction out of Rin. The smaller werewolf jumped between them, shaking her head.

“Rin, I just want to help.” Maki knelt. Rin lowered her head, a growl rumbling through her body. Maki thought the light green and neon green pretty evenly mixed. Whether it had been a voluntary transformation or not, what they probably had now was an irritated werewolf with a full body headache.

Then Rin whined. Maki heard Hanayo scrunch forward, “She won’t talk to me. Or let me come close.”

“She’s scared.” Maki stated, reaching a hand out to Rin, who accepted the touch, her head hanging down. “Of you, I think.”

“ME! No Rin, that’s...” Hanayo’s voice squeaked and Maki heard her spring from the futon. Rin whimpered and fell back to the other bed and Maki extended her arm, forcing Hanayo to stop. “Me?”

Maki nodded, keeping part of her attention on Rin, but making eye contact with Hanayo, “I think she’s mostly in control, although I bet the transformation was triggered by stress. What’s been happening?” Maki wondered what she’d missed while she was spending so much time with Nico.

Hanayo couldn’t meet Maki’s eyes, “She’s…” Rin barked, and Hanayo let the truth rush out, “Rin’s been upset and restless because I made her promise not to transform. We haven’t really been talking
for the past day. She’s been spending most of her time at the gym and with her tutors and I’ve been working.” A hesitation, "And planning strategies with Eli and Nozomi.” Hanayo twisted her hands, “Nozomi said something that really upset her when they came by.”

Maki remembered the night of the party, Nozomi trying to swagger past Umi with alcohol and insults and wasn’t surprised, “What was it?”

Hanayo muttered, glancing away from both werewolves.

“Hanayo.” Maki’s voice snapped, with a howl of support from Rin.

Hanayo squared her shoulders, “That she could see why I kept Rin locked away.” Hanayo put her glasses to the side and crouched, hand in front for balance, eyes set on Rin. “I thought Rin was angry at me.”

Rin howled, sad, frightened. The emotions echoed in the small room.

Hanayo crawled forward, a few inches at a time, her voice soft, “Rin?”

Rin tensed, muscles ready for a spring and Maki knew her friend was tempted to duck behind her, but there was no threat in Hanayo’s body language so Rin only scooted backwards half a length. Hanayo stopped.

Rin glanced to Maki, whining. Maki nodded. “I think she’s afraid if she transforms, you won’t let her be a wolf again.”

“Oh Rin,” Hanayo threw herself impulsively at her fiancée, catching Rin by surprise. There was a startled whimper and an attempt to scurry away, but Hanayo held fast. “I never meant...I love you…I love all of this...I was just so scared for you.” There was a struggle for a moment as the still frightened Rin attempted to free herself, but Hanayo clung tighter, face in Rin’s fur, whispering, determined. Maki took a step back, arms crossed, the emotion she could hear in her friend’s pleas making her uncomfortable.

Finally, Rin ceased struggling and rested her snout on Hanayo’s shoulders. Maki watched the tension ease away, leaving exhaustion. And a very human Rin crying, “Kayochin…”

Hanayo pulled Rin as close as she could, kissing her way through the orange hair, “Do whatever feels natural, Rin. I’m so sorry. I wanted to protect you, not trap...”

Rin whined, nudging Hanayo with her head. Hanayo pulled Rin up on the bed, tenderly wrapped a blanket around her. Both were completely oblivious to Maki’s presence as they muttered apologies and endearments, tracing each other’s profiles, their scents blending...Maki hated her blush, not that those two would notice or would ever mention this scene again, not if they wanted Maki to be within ten miles of them, but she couldn’t help the vivid sensation that ambushed her, Nico reaching out like that, fingertips drawing paths to pleasure, lips a tantalizing lure...Closing the door behind her, happy Rin’s involuntary transformation aftermath was smoother than hers had been, Maki wondered how Nico’s afternoon was going.

Nico couldn’t pace, she wouldn’t let herself, that would be showing weakness and Nico wasn’t nervous, no not at all. The blackout that let her sneak into Mina and Jonathan’s bed was about to be cued and Nico prepared to step onstage. Micah stood next to her, as usual a pillar of calm.

“Nico has everything under control, no matter what Kashima does, not matter how…” Nico croaked,
trying to not despair at how dry her throat sounded.

“Nico-chi!” Nozomi’s trill next to her made Nico jump, her heart pounding.

“Nozomi!” Nico’s whisper was a hiss as she spun to face the shameless tease.

“So, did Princess keep you up last night, howling?” Nico couldn’t really see the expression on Nozomi’s face as the backstage blue merely cast eerie shadows at this angle. She didn't have to. It would be smug.

“I don’t have time for this.” Nico snarled. The blackout cued as she shoved past Nozomi to get onstage. Nozomi giggled and Nico knew that meant trouble. What had she done to attract Nozomi’s ‘interest?’ Shouldn’t Nozomi be focused on either the projections or her econ genius, dancing hottie, completely useless, hot chocolate addicted girlfriend? As Nico shifted the sheets and felt Micah settle in next to her, she reminded herself to be nicer to Eli, who did actually tip well when Nozomi wasn’t looking. But for now...the lights came up, low, shafts of moonlight on the floor, moving cloud gobos drawing attention to the window. Kashima, somehow taller than her 6 feet, threw the curtains open, the drape of the fabric drifting down as she posed, contemplating her evil actions. Then, o so very swiftly, the quiet creep of her steps slid into the seductive hiss of anticipation that released from her mouth as Dracula cornered his prey.

There was a break and Nico had two choices. She could avoid Nozomi or she could find Nozomi, confront her and let the gossip engine get whatever it was off her bouncy, flouncy chest. Actually, Nico realized there weren’t two choices. Harassing Nico backstage in the middle of an important rehearsal was a friendship fail. It was time to let Nozomi know there were boundaries to what Nico would tolerate from anyone.

Nico came offstage when the 10 minute break was called, brushed past Kashima and headed right for the back of the theatre. Nozomi was leaning against the wall, enjoying Eli’s attention until Nico pulled the blonde back with a snapped, “Go somewhere else. I need to talk to your girlfriend.” Eli stepped away from Nico’s glare, wary, nodding at Nozomi.

“Why Nico-chi, what’s the matter?” Nozomi drawled, after she finished pouting in Eli’s direction as the blonde joined the other two Sisters. “So rude.”

Nico’s arms hands were on her hips and her eyes blazed, “Not as rude as teasing Nico when Nico is about to make her big entrance. What the hell is wrong with you, Nozomi? You don’t deserve any girlfriend time. You’re a disgrace to theatre.”

Nozomi patted Nico on the head, “You vibrate up and down when you’re angry, Nico. Like a pogo stick.”

Nico snarled. Maki’s wolf verbal tics were infiltrating Nico’s vocabulary. Great. If Nico went outside after her upcoming opening night triumph and howled euphoria at the moon, she’d have to check and make sure all the biting really hadn’t transferred anything werewolfy between them. Not that the fangs went in any deeper than the surface, not like...Nico shook her head, too many distracting thoughts...back to the problem at hand as she refocused on the exasperating being in front of her.

“What’s your problem?” Nico demanded.

“You lied to me.” Nozomi crossed her arms over her chest. “And do you really want to talk about it here?”
“Why not?” Nico frowned.

“You know, because your new girlfriend is a werewolf…” Nozomi stretched out each sound, green eyes glittering with malice. Nico nearly pulled off Nozomi’s arm dragging her into the hall.

“Shut it.” Nico ordered as the door slammed, pinching Nozomi’s forearm so hard the taller woman winced.”Not another word.”

“But I want to know all about Princess.” Nozomi grumbled, pulling her arm free, rubbing it as she stared at Nico, body language leaking melodramatic levels of wounded.

Nico glanced at her phone. 5 minutes before they started up again, redoing that scene. Not enough time to deal with Nozomi in a good mood, let alone with that capricious pique lurking in her expression.

“I don’t have time for this Nozomi. I won’t ever have time for this. Stop this. Now.” Nico used the command tone of voice she’d been practicing so often on Kashima these days.

“Ooh, so does Maki roll over for you when you tell her to in that tone. ‘cause sexy…” Nozomi laughed in advance of Nico’s complete meltdown, the shorter woman’s arms flailing, words failing as rage sputtered out of her mouth. “You’re too easy, Nico-chi.”

Nico paused, just standing, completely still for a moment, fuming. The universe only took a second to center on the future star of stage and screen as she focused all of her personality. Then, striding forward as she inhaled, Nico forced Nozomi back against the wall. Nico didn’t bother to soften the edge in her voice or disguise the power in her threat, “If you do anything, anything, to upset or endanger Maki, I will end you, Nozomi.” She flipped her hair with a deceptively casual gesture, eyes blood red and ruthless, face as ominous as a marble Medusa’s. “Don’t mess with Nico.”

Nozomi was actually taken aback, and had no quick comeback or recovery before Nico turned on her heel and stomped back into rehearsal. The next thing Nozomi saw was an furtive Eli, opening the door and taking quick glances behind her. When Nico had enough time to get out of earshot, Eli smiled at Nozomi, leaning next to her, shoulders touching as they both stared at the door to the theatre.

“So, Nico…” Eli left the question out there.

“So very Nico…” Nozomi closed her eyes, taking Eli’s hand. Their palms vibrated, a warmth connecting them.

“She’s got an impressive amount of personality for…”

“A gremlin?” Nozomi snorted. “Nope, Nico-chi is not all hype. The real deal is under all that makeup and patter.”

Nozomi could almost hear Eli thinking, cogs grinding as she tried to choose the best way to say something she suspected Nozomi was not going to like, “You could just be…” Eli powered through, tightening her grip on Nozomi’s hand, “helpful.”

Nozomi laughed, throwing her head back and colliding with the wall. She winced and let her once again throbbing head rest on Eli’s shoulder, “You have so much to learn about me, Eli-chi.”

“I’m an amazing student. A pluses all the time. You’ll marvel.” Nozomi gained so much comfort from Eli’s bright faith in her. It was a wonder to rival any in the world, the solidity Eli brought to Nozomi’s too often shifting life. When loneliness weighted, Eli would lift. Whatever tilted up in
Nozomi’s head, Eli accepted. Everything. Anything. Rather than be offended or put off, Eli would just grin at Nozomi with such gentle, amused affection that Nozomi was left breathless. And she’d only been expecting herself to have that reaction to Eli’s profile. This was so much more.

“Marry me, Eli-chi.” Nozomi’s heart tilted those words out, a surprise to both parties. She swore she heard Eli’s eyelashes flutter as they blinked once in the sudden silence. And then there was a chuckle.

“Today if you want.” Eli leaned her head against Nozomi’s. “But I’m not throwing Nico in the Lake to kick off the honeymoon.” Nozomi tried to pout but the picture made her giggle, Eli striding from the Wirtz Center to Lake Michigan, Nico’s heels digging stubbornly into the Lakefill as she thrashed against Eli’s grip. Eli pivoted, Nozomi somehow drawn into her arms, ballet trick, Nozomi thought. Eli’s expression was unforgettably, unforgivably sincere, then her smile cracked open, “And I’ll need a ring.”

Nozomi fell into a kiss against that gorgeous mischief, sans guile, “Anything you want, my love.”

“You.” Her response, like everything else about Eli, was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. The shorter days leading up to the Solstice really hammer me

I was surprised by where the Nozomi-Eli moment went and then I wasn’t. So I decided not to interrupt them : )

May the Solstice bring you brighter moments. Thanks for reading. Now I have to go bake some(fictional) Christmas cookies ; )
Scream

Chapter Summary

Nico has rehearsal trouble, Maki has maternal issues and we find out more about one of our villains.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Electricity practically buzzed in the stank, stifled air, starting when you entered from the alley leading to the Tech Sub-Basement’s door. Anju would occasionally hold the ends of her hair up, watching as they danced in the static from a bank of server racks, pressurized testing chambers and miscellaneous equipment. A different wind than she’d grown up with. No one to keep her company yet this afternoon so Anju sat behind the desk, examining her nails. She was very pleased with the way her new manicurist swirled red and blue polish together to create practically hypnotic purple spirals. She then turned her attention to the window up on the main screen. Tsubasa had been here last and lazy. With a disdainful tap, Anju closed the "Taser" search. A small shake of her head was the most she let herself react, even with no one else there, but werewolves? A waste of time. What use were they? Not even residual magic could be gathered from them. So what good was that?

Anju zoomed out another window, the one the camera Erena had deployed unnoticed on the light board fed into. Fangs was in rehearsal and Kashima and Nico were onstage, Nico’s head gripped against Dracula’s half bared, bloody breast, Kashima’s fanged scowl a gloating triumph. Anju delicately opened the thin silver cover of what everyone assumed was a watch at her wrist. Inside a small, polished shard of blue-red gemstone pulsed. Anju opened another window on the computer, the one tracking the feedback from the backstage meter. As the numbers jumped higher the gem gleamed brighter. That was what Anju was here for. Tsubasa could distract herself ineptly hunting useless werewolves all she wanted. But Anju was here to see if an audience would let Kashima and Nico unleash the levels of power she needed.

The theatre was silent, shocked. Kashima, having fled the vampire hunters, had paused on the other side of the window, staring back at Nico. The actors playing Seward, Van Helsing, Holmwood and Morris surrounded the bed, stock still. Nico’s mouth had dropped open, nothing coming out. Micah stirred in the bed next to her, considering if he should “wake up” and startle Nico. Nico never froze. Her ability to improvise a line was legend. Micah wondered briefly what was going on to interfere with Nico’s formerly rock solid work habits. Then Nico snapped back in, with a scream that shook the walls.

“Feel guilty yet?” Eli whispered. She was leaning against the foot of Nozomi’s stool, waiting until The Three Sisters scene came back around. This rehearsal was to lock in the Dracula effects they were using so tech would go easier. Nozomi had her deck out and her boots off and was considering the latest message from the cards while her foot stroked Eli’s back.

Nozomi muttered, unhappily, before meeting concerned blue eyes, “The cards agree with you.”
“Really?” Eli bounced up to stand behind Nozomi, arms pulling the other woman into her chest.

Nozomi snapped fingers at them as she frowned. All reversed. Eli got that right off. Four Of Swords. The Sun. Queen of Swords.

“They don’t look bad?” Eli ventured, still unsure about meanings. “What do they tell you?”

Nozomi clucked at herself, fingers tracing the Queen of Swords’ profile. “Don’t be a bitch.”

Eli didn’t reply, she just held Nozomi closer.

The scene couldn’t be over soon enough for Nico. Her blanking on lines kept getting worse and worse, which pulled everyone even more out of character. Ben Thani, playing Arthur Holmwood, came down with a fit of nervous giggles, bringing everything to a complete stop until he recovered. Kashima stayed in the wings, watching, eyes full of sympathy. Nico had never had a rehearsal like that. Echoes of Nozomi’s voice kept taunting her, memories of Maki kept tempting her and Mina Murray wasn’t locked in enough to give Nico an escape. So she froze and stuttered and failed. And wanted to SCREAM. Again. Out of character. But before Nico could get offstage to vent some of her frustration, Professor Asuka’s voice stopped her.

“Ms. Yazawa, we will be in much better shape this weekend, if you start to take this seriously.” The director’s tone of voice wasn’t snarky, just considered, professional appraisal. It lashed Nico, who was feeling like a complete amateur, someone who thought you could just make lines up. Pained, Nico bit back a chirpy response. She knew the director was right. She had a head full of werewolf danger and an ear full of shrill teasing. Nico needed to focus on Fangs, opening night was next week. She had obviously not cleared enough room in her schedule for practically a starring role, love interest, two solos, her regular work and class schedule AND a sexy, clingy, werewolf girlfriend. But there was nothing Nico would quit. Nor could she continue to perform this badly. Too much was at stake.

Nico nodded at the director, heading backstage to change out of her nightdress. Vampire hunting outfit. Anju and Kotori had found her costume jewelry, a lovely silver brooch inset with blue-red stones.

Nozomi was waiting at the rack. Nico really didn’t have time for any of this and attempted to ignore her current nemesis, but unsurprisingly, Nozomi refused to acknowledge Nico’s obvious rancor.

“No, Nico has to change. Privacy please.” Nico glared, whacking Nozomi with the end of a hanger.

Nozomi shrugged, expression smug.

“No, Nico is not telling you anything.” Nico stepped into her skirt, then pulled the nightdress over her head.

“The cards are worried about our relationship.” A teasing moue from Nozomi pushed Nico to almost her limit, but backstage was a quiet, sacred zone. “I might have been rude, Nico-chi.”

Nico stopped, arms still trapped in the nightdress, staring at Nozomi in disbelief. “We don’t have a relationship. Nico tolerated your company but now we both have better things to do…”

Nozomi giggled, Nico groaned internally hearing her own phrasing. “Such a crass and impersonal way to refer to…”
Nico bared her teeth as she buttoned herself into her blouse.

Nozomi changed tacks, without apologizing, smoothing out the nightdress on its hanger, “Oh, Nico-chi. We’re not through yet. We’ve been friends for two years and we will continue.”

The less Nico responded, in any way, the sooner Nozomi would disappear.

“I’m serious about you leaving Maki alone.” Nico gritted.

“I know.” Nozomi paused. “I shouldn’t have baited you like that.”

Nico shrugged.

“No response? But I’m being sincere.” Nozomi sounded puzzled.

Nico was fed up and just wanted to be somewhere with her script and no one demanding she have a reaction to their drama, so her response shredded any belief in Nozomi’s sincerity. “Should I thank your girlfriend or the cards for your change of heart?”


Fiancée. Of course Nozomi, who spends her time harassing everyone she knows and ruining their peace of mind, if not their lives, gets a girlfriend, now a fiancée out of it. While Nico got gray hairs from werewolf worries. The next time Umi started in on her litany of complaints against Nozomi, Nico would just pull an endless series of double espressos and cheer her on, rather than try to defend the psychic blunder.

“Nico has to go.” She pulled on her jacket, “Congratulations. You don’t deserve her.” The look in Nozomi’s eye as she shrugged was so self deprecating that Nico softened slightly. Not that she’d let on, “As long as we’re clear on that.”

Nozomi headed for the exit. Nico headed to the other side of the stage, where the rest of the vampire hunters were waiting for their next entrance. She felt weary again as her anger drained. More rehearsal, then work. The thought of Maki’s bright, amethyst eyes glowing with joy at seeing her was the only thing keeping Nico from crying, overcome by exhausted frustration.

Maki slid her arm into her flannel shirt. Her father had just finished prodding her ribcage through her tank top.

“All healed up as far as I can tell without an x-ray.” Her father announced. Then he put an arm around his daughter’s shoulders, “I’m glad you decided to stop by. Your mother and I were worried.”

Maki shrugged. She didn’t really want to start a Nico related conversation with either of her parents. Pretty much ever. On cue, her mother returned, carrying a tray with a pot and three cups.

“How’s your paper coming?”

“All been busy.” Maki sat on the couch, crossing her arms over her chest. Her mother raised an eyebrow at Maki’s curt response, but held back her own retort, taking a moment to pour the tea out. “So when are you bringing Nico home to dinner to officially meet us?”

“Tomorrow.” Maki, sighed, letting a minor note of apology color her voice, “So she can work on her
lines while I work on my paper.” Maki stared into her tea, nervous, “Then she wants to stay over, if that’s okay.”

The Doctors Nishikino exchanged a quick glance, before Maki looked up, voice earnest. “Nico’s very serious about her…’ studies didn’t seem a serious enough word, considering Nico’s views on Nico’s future in theatre, “career.” Maki sipped, satisfied at that phrasing.

“Ambition is a laudable quality,” Maki’s mother sat next to her daughter, smiling. “As is effective planning. We’d be happy to have Nico here with us tomorrow. Or any day.”

Maki was suddenly suspicious of parental intent, head full of Nico in performance mode and parents in inquisitive mode. “Don’t make a fuss, please.”

Dr. Nishikino winked at her husband and laughed at her daughter, “No promises, Maki, dear. Meeting prospective spouses is like a full moon to a parent.”

“Mama.” Maki whined, covering her blush with a pillow, trying not to imagine Nico’s reaction to being called a “prospective spouse.”

N: ღ ゝ◡╹ (ノ♡( ̄□ ̄;))⇒ Not a spare seat. Can you just wait at my apartment, if you still want to see Nico?

Maki was helping her mom finish the dishes when her phone went off. Her mother leaned over her shoulder, shamelessly snooping. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with Nico, haven’t you.”

Maki nodded, biting her lip as she considered her response.

“Sometimes, spending every minute together isn’t a positive thing in a relationship, Maki.” Maternal nudging wasn’t going to stop.

Maki closed her eyes, trying to clear out thoughts of what she’d been hoping Nico would be wanting to do after work before she tried to have this conversation with her mother. Take a deep breath, think wolf on the couch watching a movie cuddled next to Nico thoughts. “Nico gets cold.”

Dr. Nishikino nearly pulled off the refrigerator door as holding in the laughter at the earnest sincerity in her daughter’s voice tried to double her over. Dr. Nishikino the taller wandered in, curious as to what had amused his wife. She was holding a hand to her forehead, eyes closed, attempting to regain control as Maki started to back away. She’d shoved her phone in her pocket and was nearly out the door when her mother spoke again, “S…sorry, Maki. We were just having a discussion, dear, about not needing to be with someone every minute.”

Maki was feeling increasingly besieged as her parents exchanged another look, although her father was remembering the recent night she’d gone missing, “I think Maki and Nico are both responsible enough to set their own boundaries.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Maki kissed her father on his cheek and ducked into the living room to reply to Nico’s text.

“You know I’m right.” Dr. Nishikino frowned at her husband.

“I’d rather know she was at Nico’s than wake up in the morning and find her missing.”

“Oh.”
M: If you want me to, I’ll wait for you at your apartment.

Maki paused before typing the next sentence, remembering what her mother said and wondering if Nico would be too tired after a long day for company.

M: Unless you need some alone time.

Instant response.

N: Nico was looking forward to the gleam in your eyes when you see Nico ♡ It was a rough rehearsal. Cuddling while Nico runs over her lines sounds perfect.

M: I’ll bring coffee and donuts (*^◇^*)

N: Maki is the best girlfriend (*̄▽̄)d

M: Nico is the best (っ´▽`)っ

N: See you soon, Pretty Girl (~℃~)

M: (ﾉ∀`♥)

Nico blew a kiss at her phone, before picking up the pot for refills. Maki was adorably goofy in a naively thoughtful way. Only Maki would offer to bring coffee over when Nico had just spent her entire night at the Cup o’, without thinking maybe Nico could bring home her own if she wanted. Or make it. But Nico wouldn’t mind the donuts. Or the company. Or the coffee, for that matter. Nico leaned in closer to Jens than she intended as she poured his refill, but he’d recover. It was a comforting feeling, knowing that there was someone out there, someone smart and gorgeous and sexy and cuddly and caring, who wanted to do something to make Nico smile. Nico had never expected that.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! May you have friends and fun and whatever else you look forward to.
Late Night Activities

Chapter Summary

Does anyone ever sleep in college?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki rang the doorbell of Nico’s place, one arm full of donuts and coffee. Umi didn’t make her wait long. But after Nico’s roommate opened the door, she hesitated. She smelled...uncertain, which was rare, Maki realized even on their short acquaintance.

“Umi?” Maki tilted her head, inquisitively, as she took off her bobble hat.

Umi coughed, apologetically. “Nico’s running late. She’s picking up Kotori.” A pause, uncertainty flaring. "Honoka will probably want to see Princess. She knows.” There was a grimace as Umi dodged Maki’s sudden stop on the stairs. Maki reviewed her own reactions, surprised, yes; upset, not really.

Maki snorted, remembering Nico teasing Umi. “Can’t say no.”

Umi raised an eyebrow, “You try it, when she keeps saying how much she wants to see Princess.” Umi flexed her fingers, “No petting.”

“Agreed.” Odd, but adding another person to the list of people aware of her secret didn’t freak Maki out. Kotori hugging her, and the high pitched squealing, that had freaked her out, but she felt no threat from Umi or either of her girlfriends, just acceptance and curiosity. No reason not to be calm. It was nice to feel safe, not to have to hide here, at Nico’s place.

Umi nodded and led the way upstairs. Maki hadn’t even stepped foot in the apartment, when she heard Honoka’s happy cry of “Is she here, Umi?”

Maki closed the door behind her and waved in Honoka’s direction, dropping the donuts and coffee on the table.

“MAKI!” Honoka vaulted over the couch, “Can I see? Please?” Umi rolled her eyes and Maki found herself getting suddenly shy as Honoka’s blue eyes gleamed hopefully at her.

Umi put a hand on Honoka’s shoulder, “Remember, we can only talk about this here.”

Honoka nodded earnestly, “I know. Maki’s a friend. We take care of friends.” Honoka threw an arm over Umi’s shoulder and pulled her in for a kiss. “Don’t worry so much, Umi.”

Honoka really was a lot like Rin. Honest and caring. Wandering into the Cup O’ that night had been a cure for the severe social isolation Maki had lived in most of her life. Now, she had a girlfriend, and whenever she thought about Nico her posture got a little prouder, and more friends than Rin and Hanayo.
Nico had the heater in her car on full blast as she waited outside the Wirtz Center for Kotori. Too cold to let anyone walk home, Nico thought to herself, even if they had tried to assault your werewolf girlfriend. Maki was very cute in wolf form and like Nico, Kotori found cute things irresistible. It wasn’t like Nozomi, going out of her way to make trouble. Kotori was a blur as she rushed into the passenger seat, a green scarf wrapped nearly completely around her head, golden brown eyes barely visible.

“Thanks, Nico!” Kotori breathed, cloud of cold mist at her mouth, buckling herself in.


Kotori giggled, “Oh, Nico, she was so scared when I grabbed her. I couldn’t do that to anybody twice. I was just being silly.”

“I can’t believe Honoka slept through all that.” Nico chuckled.

Nico and Kotori stood before the apartment door. So far, just since coming up the stairs, they’d heard two growls, one Umi yell and Honoka saying a bunch of things neither could understand. Then there was a thump that rattled the floor. Nico opened the door. Maki, in wolf form, was in front of Nico’s bedroom door, some article of clothing in her mouth, Honoka was recovering her balance on the back of their flipped couch, some other article of clothing in her hands, and Umi was between them, wielding kitchen scissors like a martial arts weapon. Three sets of eyes, blinked once and then Umi and Honoka started babbling. Maki opened her mouth and half of one of Nico’s favorite winter dresses fell to the floor. Nico glared at Honoka as she stomped by, shook her head at Umi and ignored Maki, opening her bedroom door long enough to enter, but closing it before the werewolf could follow. Maki sat, facing the door, whining softly.

“Kotori.” Umi stated, carefully putting aside the scissors, arms open for a hug. “Welcome home.”

Honoka examined the half a dress she still held, then smiled at Kotori, holding it out. “Maybe you could fix this for Nico, Kotori?”

Kotori pulled Honoka off the couch, “Let’s help Umi lift the couch back up. Then we can talk about Nico.”

Maki looked over her shoulder and howled, sadly and pointedly in their direction. Then she trotted to the table, retrieving the donut bag.

“Do you want to borrow a set of clothes to change into?” Umi asked the werewolf, as the couch was restored.

Maki shook her head and kicked Nico’s door with her back paw. She could hear Nico grumbling but the door opened.

“If you’re going to change, do it under a blanket, into clothes. No sexy swaying of Nico’s attention. I’m working on my lines.” Nico glared at Umi over Maki’s back, before shutting the door again.

Umi dropped to the couch, her head on Kotori’s shoulders, “On the whole, that went better than I expected.”

“Not for Nico’s dress.” Kotori balled up the ruined fabric. “Please don’t try whatever you did anywhere near my closet.”
Nico’s door opened and the diminutive actress stomped out, grabbed the coffee and slammed the door as she disappeared. Maki yelped.

“Loud noises. Werewolf hearing. Nico should be more considerate.” Umi shook her head.

Kotori turned to Umi, letting the fabric fall in her dark haired lover’s lap. “Nico should be more considerate?”

Umi shrugged, the portrait of laissez faire.

Honoka laid back across both of them, head on the fabric, winking. “Guess we’ll have to be quiet then.”

“Honoka.” Honoka recognized Umi’s tone, it rarely meant that whatever Honoka had planned would happen. There was still Kotori, but she was looking wistfully at Nico’s door.

“Were those donuts Maki had? I didn’t have time for a dinner break. We have so many costumes left to finish. I can’t believe tech is this weekend.”

“I’ll get you one, Kotori.” Honoka bounced up and almost got a step before Umi’s hold on her shirt stopped her.

“Privacy, Honoka.” Umi chided, “Remember. A closed door after 10 means only knock in emergencies.”

“This is an emergency.” Honoka moaned as her stomach rumbled. “Kotori reminded me how hungry I am.”

“I’ll heat something up. I think Nico has some leftovers.”

“Ooohh,” Kotori clapped her hands together as Honoka followed Umi into the kitchen, “yummy.”

Nico sat on her bed, half eaten donut in one hand, coffee in the other, apologetic werewolf slobbering over her sweater. “Calm down, Maki. Nico’s not mad at you. Nico is sure you have a perfectly good explanation for why another one of my favorite dresses is ruined.”

Maki howled, but Nico recognized none of the notes.

“More words, pretty girl, PLEASE, for Nico.” Nico sighed, without a free hand she had no way of encouraging Maki to give her enough space to eat the donut. Hmmm. Nico had a thought and wondered if that would still work. She swooped down, bopping an emphatic kiss on the werewolf’s nose and giggling as the startled wolf scuttled backwards.

“Good to know Nico’s still the scariest thing on campus for redheads.” Nico winked.

Maki collected herself and her lavender eyes narrowed as she huffed at Nico, then she sprang past Nico with a whoosh of air, sliding under the blanket and by the time Nico had swallowed the donut and put the coffee safely on her nightstand, a pair of girlfriend sized arms reached out to draw Nico down into the bed.

“I missed you, Nico.” Maki’s voice smoothed over Nico’s agitation, soft and sultry, a whisper of want.
Nico had several, preplanned, incredibly valid excuses for not letting Maki lure her anywhere near horizontal, but as she felt Maki’s arms tighten around her, she discovered there really were nearly endless depths and hopes glinting like rare crystals in the green swirl of Maki’s amethyst eyes. Or at least enough distractions that Maki’s lips pressed urgently into hers before Nico could get a word out. Nico’s hand grasped for something solid, expecting to feel the crinkle of sheet or fabric, but her fingers pressed into warm muscle and Maki whimpered, rising up, biting into Nico’s lips. Was this last night’s forgotten dream, Nico wondered, and would she ever get any work done if gorgeous and bitey kept changing into girlfriend form around her, but never actually putting on clothes. How did nudists manage?

And then Nico stopped thinking as Maki breathed across her ear and Nico’s fingers drifted down Maki’s side, teasing every curve, riding even the tiniest twitch of the werewolf’s torso as Maki thrashed her head back against the pillow, red hair a crazy chaos, giving up her advances as Nico’s lips tangoed down her neck, forcing an urgent beat that had Maki open mouthed, on the verge of a scream Nico swallowed with a demanding kiss, leaving Maki shuddering uncontrollably.

At a nod from Kira, Erena knelt down next to the coffin, prying off the false panel built into the bottom. Backstage was eerily silent, the rest of the set and lighting crew finally all headed home after a long night of getting in shape for dry tech. Nozomi had been one of the last to leave, face twisted in pain, complaining of another headache and snapping at the lights running crew. Erena would honestly be glad when they switched over from the receiver to these transmitters; that should cut Nozomi’s symptoms and make her easier to work with. Anju had been disappointed when she realized Nozomi was only sensitive to fluctuations in the spectrum of magical energies but didn’t actually generate them.

“We’ll have to replace the batteries midweek, but this will be a good test to see if feedback surges blow anything out. If the frequencies stay the same, the tech should work.” Erena worked quickly, putting the light weight car battery in and using a power screwdriver to make quick work of installing the regenerative monitor. “I am worried about overheating.”

“I can keep an eye on it. Plus, there’s the backup.” Kira nudged the coffin with her steel toed boot, but it didn’t move. “This’ll be fun.”

Erena frowned, “In the future, we’ll try to get access to vacuum channel transistors, but if anyone wonders why it’s so heavy, just tell them it’s a safety feature to cut down on shifting.”

“Did you put in air holes?” Kira crouched, lifting the coffin lid for scrutiny. Erena put the screwdriver down for a minute, opening her tool kit and handing a power drill to Kira. “That should be a good sized bit.”

The door to the theatre opened. Kira turned as Erena continued to work, sliding the false panel back in to place. Anju stepped in, “Costumes are done for the night. Everyone’s out of the building.”

“3 minutes and I’m done.” Erena moved into a darker part of backstage. Kira drilled three holes near the top of the coffin in front of her.

“Don’t forget to mark the coffins.” Anju leaned against the stage, yawning, curls falling over her face.

“They’re the only complete ones.” Kira stretched with a groan, Anju’s yawn reminding her of the sleep she didn’t get last night.
“They’re not actually. Asuka decided she wanted more for the ship scene so they’ll be building all
day tomorrow.” Erena reached for the drill and finished the air holes in the second coffin.

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“Then mark those two.” Anju rolled her eyes.

“I did.” Erena took a moment to make sure her tools were secure in their place.

“Then let’s go home.” Anju couldn’t keep herself from sniping, Kira raised an eyebrow. “Kotori
wouldn’t stop talking about some dog.”

Eli had been asleep when Nozomi came back to her dorm room. She rolled over, expecting Nozomi
to wash up and crawl into bed next to her. But the next time Eli came out of her sleep state, there was
still no Nozomi. Eli sat up, “Love?”

Nozomi was sitting at her table, laptop open, muttering to herself and taking a pencil to...Eli wrapped
the sheet around her shoulders and sat next to Nozomi, “Is that the light plot? Are you still working?”

“There’s an extra light fixture.” Nozomi circled one on the grid, toward the front of the stage. “I
couldn’t find any cues it’s used in.’ She tapped the laptop screen. “I didn’t want to make Erena
suspicous, so I didn’t ask. But I want to take a look at it.” Nozomi started to stand, but found that Eli
had wrapped both arms around her waist.

“It’s too late.”

Nozomi closed her laptop. “Erena and Kira were hovering so I finally left.”

Eli put her head in Nozomi’s lap, yawning, “They might still be there then.”

Nozomi sighed, one hand drifting to play with the loose ends of Eli’s hair, “Yeah.”

“I’ll ask Hanayo about it tomorrow, okay?” Eli smiled up at her lover, “Let’s get some sleep.”

Nozomi blew out a long breath, her fingertips tracing Eli’s cheekbones, “All right.”

Maki woke suddenly, with a yelp. No sheets, cold, no Nico. She sniffed the air, Nico was on the
couch, worried, scared? Had something happened? Maki bounded off the bed, then realized living
room was shared space and pulled on her flannel shirt.  Nico was under the throw, script in hand,
muttering, largest coffee mug in the apartment half full  in front of her.

Maki howled softly to warn Nico of her approach, then whispered, “Nico?”

Nico glanced up from her script, her expression pensive, “Hi there, pretty girl. Did I wake you?
Sorry.”

Maki shook her head, frowning, “Got cold.”

Nico snorted, “That’s my line.” She held open the throw, “If you promise not to distract Nico, we
can share.”

Maki shook her head again, “Why are you scared?”
Nico had gone back to her script, but Maki’s question couldn’t be ignored. “Maybe because Nico is feeling like Mina after Dracula makes her drink blood.”

Maki twitched. That image was one she was trying never to visualize, Kashima pressing Nico into her chest, forcing her character into vampirism. Thinking about it always started a growl in her chest.

Nico reached for her hand and yanked Maki to the couch, “Don’t think about it, Maki. You’re going to have to get used to that scene. Nico can’t have you growling through her debut as the hottest new triple threat in the industry.”

“Triple threat?” Maki sat and let Nico arrange the throw around them both.

“Singing, dancing, acting...like Fred and Ginger. Nico will bring back the big screen musical.” Nico leaned back against Maki, script in her lap for a moment. “But bigger. And gayer.”

Maki nodded, relaxing at Nico’s touch, but the sable haired wonder still smelled off. There wasn’t the usual...Maki thought about, hint of magic, still there, the cozy, post cuddling smells that kept Maki in a snug cocoon of Nico awareness, yes, but Nico seemed a little less sharp maybe… “Confidence!”

Nico tilted her head up, ruby eyes scrutinizing Maki’s face, “Maki?”

Maki nuzzled into Nico’s shoulder, “You don’t smell as confident as usual.”

Nico’s chest puffed out, her voice indignant, “Nico is always ready to seize any day, any stage and be the best” She ruffled Maki’s hair, “Boldly.”

Maki shook her head, bangs falling over her eyes, sniffing her way up to Nico’s ear, “Nope. No sale. Try again.”

Nico turned her head and nipped at Maki, “Nico is fine. Nico is Nico.”

Maki stretched her leg across Nico, and shifted so they were nose to nose. Nico couldn’t look away from the worry or the affection in the lavender eyes. Maki waited.

Nico shrunk down, scrunching her face as if a sour taste had invaded her mouth, “Nico may be a little worried.”

“Why? You’re amazing. You make everyone pay attention.” Maki’s cheerful, fanged grin gleamed with honest admiration. Nico had really never had that much faith directed at her. She sat taller.

“Nico does do that.” Nico brightened, but her voice still hinted doubts, “But Nico’s been busy and confidence is preparation and Nico is sooooo not prepared.” Nico dropped her head, rubbing Maki’s shoulder. “Did I tell you I blanked on a scream at rehearsal today. That’s not even a line.”

Screaming? Maki could feel her jaw tighten. What else happened to Nico on stage?

Nico felt the werewolf tense, snuffling through her hair, whining. “Pretty girl?”

Maki pulled back, “Sorry. I just wondered if you’d smell scared when you screamed onstage…” Maki sighed, suddenly confronted with a new and unsettling array of werewolf based complexities.

Nico put her hands on Maki’s waist. “Maybe Nico should sneak you into rehearsal so you can…” then leaned in for a quick, gentle kiss, “smell what’s going on. So you don’t try to save Nico.”
Maki’s eyes unfocused, fang biting into her lip, heart racing suddenly, remembering Nico and Kashima on the Lakefill, seeing Kashima grab Nico, not knowing what was going on, rushing up to separate them...her lips snarled as the growl built and then Nico’s hand was on her cheek, her voice soothing.

“Nico is right here, pretty girl.” And Nico’s hands slid under Maki’s thighs, gently forcing her back onto the couch after an initial squeeze, “But I really do have to work on my lines.”

Maki dropped her head, eyes pleading behind the tangles of her hair falling down. Nico laughed, hand out to block. “No pouty puppy eyes, Maki. Nico is impervious.”

Maki whined and nudged Nico with her shoulder as Nico turned to pick up her script again. Ignored, Maki draped the blanket over herself.

Nico opened to the Dracula scene as a soft cream and red head nestled into her lap, yawning, lavender eyes half closed. Nico chuckled and scritched Maki under her chin, “Cheater.”

Chapter End Notes

Howdy. So what's the longest you've gone without sleep? I think, and it's a blur, I once topped out somewhere after 72 hours and before 90. Finals week my freshman year in college were fun...

Hope this finds you well. We got through a cold weather snap here and Christmas decorations are still up in the neighborhood. Take care!
Mornings are busy in the world of werewolves.

Dawn. Maki heard more noises as people and animals began to interact with the day. There was a weight on her right flank; Nico had fallen asleep using her as a pillow. She was almost afraid to shift. Waking Nico rudely or causing her to end up on the floor were not acceptable options. This sort of situation was more difficult with paws. Transforming would most likely jar Nico so Maki slowly slid her hindquarters out from under Nico, being careful to shift Nico’s weight to the couch. Then Maki concentrated, triggering a transformation, enjoying the brief moment when full human intellect and wolf senses coexisted and she could absorb, and etch into her memory, every single amazing breath and hair and reaction of the lovely woman lying in front of her, so tiny and yet so much of the world. Maki ran a tender hand through the satiny sable trailing off the couch, as Nico muttered in her sleep.

Maki stood, picking up Nico in her arms, once again surprised by the lightness. Nico was truly tiny and yet, when awake and animated, she had no limits, filling every room, every moment, every thought Maki had. Nico rubbed a cheek with one hand and Maki froze, waiting to see if those ruby eyes would open, glowing, if the matching lips would offer a tender, tingling tariff. Neruda, his Matilde had been tiny too, and yet...Maki hummed as she whispered a few lines to the oblivious Nico, walking them both to back to Nico’s bedroom:

roselet,
it seems
as though you would fit
in one of my hands,
as though I’ll clasp you like this
and carry you to my mouth
but
suddenly
my feet touch your feet and my mouth your lips
you have grown

Too tempting, Maki realized as she settled Nico into the bed and knelt next to her. Just a simple, single kiss:

I lean down to your mouth to kiss the earth

Nico’s eyes half opened at the gentle pressure, “Pretty girl?”

Maki slid into bed next to her, cuddling Nico in her arms, enjoying the way the smaller woman felt against her bare skin, “Shhh...go back to sleep.”

“Classes...” Nico mumbled, as she rubbed against Maki’s chin.
“Not for hours, yet. I’ll wake you up.” Maki yawned. If Nico hadn’t set the alarm, she was sure Umi and company would make enough noise to serve the same function.

“O..okay,” Nico’s head on her shoulder, perfect words passing perfect lips, “Love you.”

Maki almost BOUNDED. The Nico-ness of this moment, musk and magic and vanilla and peach and the lavender Nico kept in her pillow, the way the sheets now smelled as much of Maki as Nico, blended by sweat and intimacy, the way Nico’s voice sleepily melted around those words, it was a jolt, heart leaping, feelings wanting to throw themselves into a howl, body wanting to crash into Nico, to stroke through sensuality, dash into a duet. But a glance down, seeing Nico so peaceful, so tiny, quieted that impulse, stilled that surge. But the music lingered, heart slowing to its rhythm, Maki humming the tune that became clearer every day, every day easier to weave through Neruda’s words. Tomorrow night, she’d play it for Nico.

And when you appear
all the rivers sound
in my body, bells
shake the sky
and a hymn fills the world
Only you and I,
only you and I, my love,
listen to it.

“NICO NICO NI! NICO NICO NI!” followed by barking. Nico sat up. Her phone was vibrating on her nightstand and her girlfriend was falling forward in the bed, mid transformation, landing on all four paws as Nico paled, her eyes not quite ready for half girl, half wolf geometries before caffeine. Maki snarled, tensed to leap at Nico’s phone as Nico grabbed for it, quickly typing the passcode, who was calling at 7 a.m. “What the hell?”

“Nico?” Eli. Sounding confused. She could probably hear Maki growling and barking on the other side of Nico’s head as Nico slid an arm around the furry shoulders.

“Hang on a sec, Eli.” Nico let the phone drop and hugged Maki tightly, “Calm down, pretty girl. Nico’s phone is friendly. It’s Eli. Eli is friendly.” Nico let her head rest on Maki, who was vibrating. Probably scared. Nico started humming “You’d Be So Easy To Love” and the wolf quieted, snuffling everywhere she could reach on Nico. Then Nico’s bedroom door banged open and Umi stood there, bo staff in hand, hair standing out from the left side of her head, striped pajama shirt untucked and Maki pulled out of Nico’s grasp, turning to growl at the intruder.

“Nico? Maki? What’s wrong?” Umi’s eyes searched the room for threats.

“Honoka, in a t-shirt, ran in after Umi, stopping behind her, “What happened? Is there a burglar?” Kotori followed, wearing Umi’s bathrobe and her hair in a towel.

“This is what happened to Nico’s dress, isn’t it?” Nico muttered, “You startled Maki.”

“No.” Umi lowered the staff, a slight blush on her cheek, “What happened was Honoka,” Umi
glared at her girlfriend, “wanted Maki to play when Maki changed into wolf form so when Maki refused, she grabbed something of yours and Maki tried to ‘save’ it.”

Maki huffed in agreement, Kotori giggled, Nico sighed. And then there was the other party.

“Nico?” Eli’s voice could be heard.

“No one move.” Nico swiveled, grabbing her phone, “I will call you back in 5 minutes, Eli.” Nico swiveled her head to star down the crowd surrounding her bed, “Now, everyone else needs to leave.”

Maki whined.

“No, not you, Maki.” Nico put the phone down, shook her head, once again fighting the laugh or cry feeling that was happening so often these days. Hands on the bed, take a big, grounding breath, bounce up, face down the world and all the maddening, lovely, amazing people who want to ‘save’ her. Kotori was still giggling, Honoka nearly asleep again on her shoulder. Umi had taken two careful steps into the bedroom and was crouched, offering a hand in peace to Maki, who, after a couple of skittish starts, sniffed it. Nico crossed her arms over her chest, holding back a smile, how could you not love them. Love them AND ban them from any room with breakables.

Maki glanced back over her shoulder and winked. Happiness bubbled up and Nico jumped on the werewolf’s back, embracing her. Umi grinned and stood up, ruffling behind Maki’s ear, “I’ll go make us all breakfast.” She slipped Honoka’s arm over her shoulder, “Come on, Honoka. You can sleep on the couch until it’s ready.”

“I’ll make toast.” Kotori took a step toward Maki, hand sneaking out, but Nico rumbled threateningly and Kotori rushed after Umi instead.

“See, Nico can save you too, pretty girl.” Nico was enjoying lying across Maki’s back, warm, soft, a nice buzz from being close to the cute girl. But she had to call Eli back. Who called at this hour? And why? Had something happened to Nozomi? Nico slid off Maki, “Sorry, Maki. Need to check and see what Eli wanted.”

Maki whined. Nico snuffled her nose through Maki’s fur, “Change back and Nico will make Umi blush if she walks in on us again.”

Tsubasa sat at her desk top, updating the interactive werewolf map she’d developed with recent suspected sightings. She expected to have more of them with the recent full moon, but the only incident seemed to be rumors of a large dog running amuck in costumes. Yazawa had been involved and it sounded like the same dog that had snapped at Tsubasa on the Lakefill. But nothing was being reported about the actual werewolf Tsubasa was trying to find. Had the full moon caused it to hunt off campus, where it could kill smaller animals? Or had someone kept it locked up? Did the moon control changes? Some of the sightings had occurred during daytime hours. Tsubasa hit enter, watching the grid of sightings, realizing that this was more complicated than she had originally thought.

Hanayo opened the door, five minutes early, as always. Her first task every morning was to check the overnight readings from the theatre.

“Good morning.” Hanayo booted up her computer but didn’t respond to Tsubasa’s greeting so Tsubasa leaned forward, “You live on the north end of campus, right?”
“Y...yes,” Hanayo stuttered, surprised.

“Have you seen this dog?” Tsubasa rolled her chair to the Hanayo’s side, placing her phone on the desk between them, “A lot of people spotted it Fall Quarter, said it seemed friendly.”

Hanayo glanced down at the phone, held back a twitch at the sight of Rin’s wolf form, then shook her head.

“Let me know if you do.”

Hanayo nodded and started typing.

“Not talkative this morning, Hanayo?” Tsubasa retrieved her phone, puzzled at her assistant’s unusual recalcitrance.

Hanayo finally looked up, reserved smile, a bit shy. “Have to meet my Chemistry TA so this morning’s more rushed for me than usual.” She ducked her head, “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” Tsubasa went back to her map. “We didn’t hire you to talk. Just keep the numbers straight.” Tsubasa hit escape and opened the window with the Campus Wall of Weird. “And let me know if you spot any stray dogs on the Lakefill.”

“Oh okay.” Hanayo relaxed as she sorted the numbers into columns, “I can do that.”

“Good.” Tsubasa started typing into the search.

Nico put down her phone, Maki observing from the bed, back in her flannel shirt. Nico seemed frustrated. From what Maki could tell when she returned from the bathroom, Eli wanted to talk to Nico and that made Nico...angry?

“Nico?” Maki ran her fingers through her hair, human nose confused by the nuances of Nico’s reaction.

“Is it too much for Nico to ask to just get through one rehearsal without weirdness or a crisis or…” Nico yanked her pillow, twisting it, then slamming her face into its fluffiness. Maki hesitated, unsure of what to do. Then Nico screamed. Maki skittered back a little, proximity and surprise affecting her. She bit into her lip, discouraged by her own reactions that morning. Too much startle. Nico’s ringtone shouldn’t nearly trigger a transformation, even from the deepest of sleep comas. That was dangerous. Could you practice being surprised?

Maki touched Nico, fingers brushing rumpled sable hair back into order, “What did Eli want?”

Nico looked up, dark circles under her eyes, “Nozomi found an extra light and she thinks Erena and Tsubasa are up to something that sounds really complicated and Eli doesn't completely understand. Hanayo says it’s going to happen on opening night. Eli wants us to take a look around tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Maki nodded, thinking that sounded practical. Nico and Eli were already planning to be at the theatre all day. “That makes sense.”

Nico pounded the pillow into her lap, eyes fierce as she turned to Maki, “No, it does not make sense.” A sigh, then Nico’s hand under Maki’s chin, “Listen to Nico. Nico is busy. Nico is one of the leads. Nico has a lot to do. Costumes, blocking, not missing lines or entrances. Nico has no time for playing Daphne to Eli's Fred. Remember Noises Off, the third act when NO ONE came on
Maki, feeling a bit embarrassed, had to shake her head no. That night, her first in Nico’s apartment, had mainly been spent memorizing everything Nico.

“Next time, we watch it, there’ll be a quiz.” Nico pinched Maki’s cheeks. “Nico doesn’t want that to happen to her, yesterday’s rehearsal was bad enough. The director’s starting to think I’m an amateur.”

Maki didn’t believe that, but was sure Nico would have some snappy rebuttal if she tried to disagree, so maybe change the subject? Worth a try.

“My parents think…”

Her ringtone went off. Nico collapsed dramatically across Maki’s lap as the werewolf answered her phone, “Hey.”

Rin. “Kayochin wants to talk to Nico. SOON. Where are you, Maki?”

“Nico’s.” Maki kept playing with Nico’s hair, as Nico frowned at the ceiling, muttering lines from Fangs under her breath.

“I’ll be there in 10 minutes.”

“Rin, wait!” Call ended, then an immediate ring.

“Where does Nico live?”

“Orrington Ave.”

“Nine minutes.”

Maki leaned over to kiss Nico, “Rin’s coming over. In nine minutes.”

Nico pulled the werewolf down, rolling to the side so they were nose to nose, “Okay.” Then one hand slipped through Maki’s hair, the other to her waist and Maki hoped Rin dressed warmly because she might have to wait at the door.

Maki had let Rin in. Her ginger haired friend happily bounced through introductions to Umi, Kotori and Honoka, who had just finished eating breakfast and disappeared to dress quickly as they were running late for their 9 a.m. classes. Rin eagerly grabbed a plate and piled toast and eggs on it when invited so by the time Nico came out of the shower, and poured herself a mug of coffee, Rin was elbow deep in second breakfast, chewing happily.

“Hi, Rin. How’s Hanayo?” Nico took the heaped plate Umi had left for her out of the oven. Maki was impressed by the little things Umi and Nico did to help each other, not to mention how willing Umi was to step up in the face of the unknown in the form of Nico’s werewolf girlfriend.

Maki nudged Rin with her shoulder, being a good friend made for solid friendships and she’d been spending so much time with Nico, she’d been neglecting Rin.

“Too busy with work.” Rin scowled. “We think we should all go out for dinner sometime. Plus,” Another scowl, “Kayochin wants to talk about ‘those people.’” Rin growled, Nico had to bite back a laugh because it was just too adorable, Rin’s cute face, scrunched up in disapproval. Maki bumped
Nico with her knee, drawing her girlfriend’s attention back and then Nico did chuckle, ruffling Maki’s hair.

“Nico thinks you’re the cutest, pretty girl.” Nico put a muffin on Rin’s plate. “And you have matching friends.”

“Kayochin’s the cutest.” Rin stated matter of factly. “But she never smiles anymore. She smells sad.” Rin dropped her head, not entranced by the muffin.

Maki could tell how much this situation was dragging on Rin’s natural buoyancy. And she wanted to help, but she and Nico already had…

“Why don’t we have dinner together tonight? My parents are already expecting company.” Maki was getting excited. She could help Rin and Hanayo, Nico wanted to go out with them anyway and this way, her parents wouldn’t have much of a chance to interrogate Nico or mention schoolwork. Smart, efficient planning not really just an avoidance tactic.

Nico watched, bemused, as all of that flashed across her girlfriend’s face, lavender eyes proud as Maki nodded to herself, jaw set. Maki took her hand, “Really not eager for one on one time with your parents AND your girlfriend, huh, Maki.”

Maki whined, but although she was trying to feel guilty about her impulse, she really couldn’t. She tapped Rin's shoulder to make sure she was paying attention. “You have to leave early though, Rin. I have something to show Nico.” Maki boldly grabbed the muffin off Rin’s plate, still hungry. More importantly, Nico made the muffins for her.

“Something to show Nico?” Nico was curious, Maki hadn’t said anything to her.

Maki chewed loudly, ignoring Nico.

Rin leaned forward, head tilted. “Okay, I’ll call Kayochin. Sounds like fun.”

Maki smiled, mouth exclusively full of Nico baked goodness, and nodded, thumbs up. Nico stood, starting to rinse dishes at the sink.

“Eight o’clock.”

“Nico might be a little late.” Nico tied the apron around her waist, “I have to get there from work. And you have to get to class.”

Maki glanced at the wall clock as Honoka came tearing out of that bedroom. 8:55.

“See you, Nico!” Honoka waved.

Kotori followed, “Slow down, sweetie.”

Umi detoured to the kitchen, “Nice to meet you, Rin. Have a good tech, Nico. You’re staying at Maki’s tonight, I believe?”

“Yes. Oh right, I have to pack a bag.” Nico dried off her hands on the apron, “I’ll see you Sunday, Umi.”

Umi buttoned her coat. “Take care of yourself, Maki.”

Maki saluted Umi, then stretched out an arm to pull Nico in, “Can I help?”
Nico kissed Maki on the nose, “No, pretty girl, Nico is afraid Rin will toss you the plates like a Frisbee on the Lakefill.”

“No, fun.” Rin tried out that grip on hers. Nico rescued the breakable.

“I could pack for you.” Maki whispered in Nico’s ear as she nipped at it.

“You forget to put in underwear so no, thanks.” Nico danced away from Maki’s reach.

“Me too.” Rin announced; Nico giggled; Maki blushed. Sexy morning mood torpedoed, best friend-girlfriend amity progressing.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy!

Neruda translation credit goes to Donald D. Walsh. There’s a lovely, pink, pocket sized edition titled Love Poems that the two I quote (La Reina and En Ti La Tierra) in this chapter are part of.

Nearly back on track with this one. For those of you waiting for the next installment in this year's Christmas extravaganza, beginning of next week is likely. I overreached a little scheduling wise, but I am writing diligently.

Anybody a Winter Olympics fan? I tend to get very interested in curling and spend way too many hours considering how sliding granite across ice smells/sounds/feels. And watching snowboarding. I'm very glad they're finally including Women's Ski Jumping. Take care. Stay warm/cool/safe/well.
Eli sat in Norris, staring out the window, waiting for Nozomi, hot chocolate going cold in front of her. An hour of exercises at the barre followed by her Dance in Cuban History class study session had done nothing to clear her head after the phone call to Nico.

Eli had heard it: panicked barking, the growls, whines...multiple people crashing into the room, someone mentioning Maki transforming into wolf form. Eli reached out a hand to take a sip of her drink before it completely cooled off, but she watched her hand tremble and pulled it back.

Werewolves. Nozomi had been right. Maki at least, probably Rin...werewolves roaming campus, after dark, snarling...Eli pushed both hands down into the table, closing her eyes, taking in a deep breath. Nozomi had been right. Maki had been growling. How had Nico gotten involved with someone like that?

“Eli?” Nozomi’s gentle greeting prepared Eli for the feel of a hip next to hers, “I got your text. Are you all right?”

“I heard her?” Eli kept her eyes closed.

“Her?”

“Maki.” Eli dropped her head into her hands, and whispered, “barking.”

Nozomi glanced around, this early in the morning, most people were in “grab something fast and rush to class” mode, “I don’t think we should talk here, Eli-chi.”

Eli nodded and let Nozomi pull her out of the booth, “I have a class.”

“Is there a test?” Nozomi kept her arms around Eli, who didn’t seem to be shifting her weight to move anywhere.

Eli shook her head. ”Dance class. Can’t skip.”

“O.K., Eli-chi, I’ll walk you there, then we’ll take lunch back to my place after.”

“No hungry.”

“You will be.” Nozomi took Eli’s hand with a squeeze of encouragement, “Everything will be fine. Moving helps.”

Eli stood a little taller, “Thanks, Nozomi.”

Nozomi giggled as she kissed Eli on the cheek, “I like to take care of my girl.”
Eli blushed, but gratitude lit the blue in her eyes.

Nico stopped on the front stoop to take a fond look at the two werewolves aka really really cute girls leaving her apartment. Maki halted on the steps, tilting her head at Nico, curious.

“The way the two of you are dressed people will think Easter is next week.” Nico slammed her mittens together as she breathed out a cloud of white mist.

Rin bounced past Maki toward Nico, stripping off her track suit jacket, “If you’re cold, Nico, you can borrow my jacket.” Rin stuck her tongue out at a snarling Maki, who grabbed the jacket and shoved it in Rin’s face before Nico could do anything.

Nico lowered the hood of her parka and pulled the bobble hat off Maki’s head. “There, Nico has something that smells like Maki, now stop growling.”

Rin was doubled over with laughter and about to say something Maki was sure she would object so she put Rin in a headlock and grinned at Nico, eyes wide with what Maki hoped read as innocent charms.

Nico hopped down the stairs, until she hit sidewalk, where her footing became more careful. She blew a kiss in Maki’s direction, “See you both tonight.”

Maki waved, one arm still throttling Rin. When Nico was too far away for Rin to grab, Maki let go. Rin shoulder shoved Maki, amused at her friend, as Maki watched Nico head into campus. Then Maki turned back, eyes serious. “Are Daphne and Fred dating?”

“Daphne?” Rin hesitated, trying to remember anyone from her dorm Maki might know.

“Scooby Doo, Rin. Daphne, Fred, aren’t they dating?” Maki was sounded more and more worried, confusing Rin who vaguely remembered the cartoon about the dog and maybe 4 teens. Now, if Scooby had been a cat…

“Rin?”

Real worry. Rin tried to remember names, “Don’t know. Isn’t someone dating Velma? Or Scooby?”

“Scooby’s the dog.” Maki kicked an ice chunk and winced.

“But he’s always with that tall, scruffy, hungry guy…” Rin was still puzzled and Maki sighed, starting to stomp toward her next class. “Why are we talking about this?” Rin wondered if Hanayo could have made more sense of the conversation.

“Nico said she didn’t want to be the Daphne to Eli’s Fred.”

“So that’s good, right? That’s not dating.”

“But why would she think of those two? About her and Eli?” Maki couldn’t shake the picture of Nico and Eli together, even though she knew neither was interested.

“So…” And Rin took her time, making sure she got the names right, “You want Nico or Daphne or whoever to date…” pause, this was the only thing that made sense to Rin, “Scooby?”

“No, I want Nico to date me.” Maki had shouted, there were echoes. Rin waited for them to fade under traffic noises.
She spoke slowly again, still not understanding why Maki was smelling so...concerned. “Nico IS dating you. Right? She just took your hat. On purpose.”

Which would only help discourage a wolf/werewolf who decided Nico was cute. Humans wouldn’t read scent cues. Maki was getting gloomier.


“You just ate.”

“Betcha can’t catch me.” Rin sprinted across the Plex courtyard.

“I can beat you.” Maki wondered if she actually could as she raced after Rin. But the exercise and the cold air clearing her mood would be worth the teasing even if she couldn’t. Maki grinned as she accelerated, dodging a nearly stationary pedestrian.

Nozomi tied her hair up in a black bandana, matching her sweater dress and leggings. She felt like swiping some eye black across her cheeks, to complete the fit for a heist, riot, or backstage at a show look. Erena was backstage flipping switches, turning on the dimmer packs.

“Hey, Erena. So you think we’ll get through before midnight?” Nozomi leaned across the plywood holding up the lightboard and the laptop running the sound cues.

Erena turned, barely visible in the blue lights, “With this many cues, we’ll be lucky to get out of here by dawn. How’s your head?”

Hanayo had texted Nozomi that the receivers were going to be off today. Daily updates allowed Nozomi to adjust her behavior based on the response Erena expected. Today would require no acting.

“Last night, I nearly kept Eli up all night crying, but today, my eyes are tired, but no pain.” Nozomi began to put the scattered notes in order, trying to see if the director had actually left any changes that needed to be done before dry tech officially began. “Asuka says she wants cooler lights in the asylum, want me to get the genie and change a few filters? I’d like to use more blues than gray.” That would give Nozomi a chance to check out the phantom light.

“Yeah, gray’s a Dracula mood. Blood gray. We should trademark it.” Erena laughed, “Go ahead if you know what you want. I have to double check all the cords.”

Nozomi tittered, “I always know what I want.” Erena rolled her eyes and went back to flipping dimmer switches. Nozomi hummed to herself, Erena was too easy.

Nico had trouble finding a parking spot anywhere near the Cup o’. Then she stepped ankle deep in a slush puddle, fortunately she’d opted for practical boots as footwear, knowing that Maki would try to drag her out to the treehouse, whether or not the redhead went full puppy eyes, Nico would probably have to spend more time out of doors than she would have on a normal February evening. Practical clothes for the impractical girlfriend. Nico snorted as she imagined revamping her wardrobe to include clothes suited for afternoons with a playful werewolf girlfriend she might have to throw a Frisbee to. Fewer heels, more sneakers...but Nico had seen some glittery Adidas and Chuck Taylors.
Nico could do sporty. Especially in the spring. A car whooshed by, sending icewash Nico’s way. Only two blocks to go, at least the Cup o’ would be warm.

Another car, but this one slowed down. Nico heard a window zip down followed by a whistle and a shout.

“Hey, short and sassy, how about I warm you up?”

Nico turned with a growl and quick hand gesture as the car honked and speeded off. One more block. Then there would be peace.

No peace. Kashima was sitting at the counter, green eyes dark with despair, usually waxed and whip smart hair flat, shoulders slouched....

Nico walked in and Kashima’s mouth first opened in an “O” of near crying, then there was the strangled death cry of a defeated demi god, “I can’t remember how to sing. Nothing comes out, Nico. Nothing.”

Nico needed a minute. Nico rarely needed a minute, but her day had started off with a frightened werewolf attacking her phone, a daft junior detective demanding her assistance...Nico was the star, not the assistant, everyone should know that, then came afternoon with cars and jackwagons literally kicking up rubbish all over her clothes and mood and now here was Kashima, as high maintenance as they come, as low as Nico ever seen her, moved into her workplace at what was traditionally the start of a super busy afternoon shift. So Nico needed a minute.

“Hey, Dario, cover for me for 5 more minutes, PLEASE.” Nico raised her hands, begging as the mild mannered Dario shrugged and poured a refill for one of the late afternoon counter crew.

Shoving Kashima into the back booth with an herbal tea, Nico slid in across from her, phone out. Kashima slouched, lower part of her face practically hidden in her green turtleneck, “Niiicooo....” she whined.

“We can fix this, Kashima. You just need a little confidence.” Nico tapped her fingers on the table, frantically racing through options. The one she kept coming back to didn’t thrill her, but Maki was already familiar with Kashima’s vocal “quirks” and had actually been helpful the one session they’d all had together.

“Are you busy tonight?” Nico picked up her phone, swiping through to the Princess text message stream. She really should change Maki’s nickname in her phone, but Gorgeous and Bitey was more information than she wanted Nozomi to have the next time that delinquent “borrowed” it.

Kashima shook her head, fingers trembling as she picked up the cup. Mopey and morose, Nico thought looking at the charismatic actor she’d often found herself envying, just proving everyone has doubting days, even dashing demigods of theatre.

Nico started typing.

N: Hi, pretty girl! Nico misses you. Kashima just crashed the Cup o’ in crisis. Would you mind if I brought her with me tonight for a short vocal session...she just needs some reassurance. You were fantastic the last time and Nico really needs you. After that, Nico will be all yours (づ ̄ ³ ̄)づ (´・` )♡

No answer yet, but back to Kashima, who had almost let her cup drop. Nico took one of her hands, “Nico’s got this, Kashima. Maki’s going to help us out.”
Kashima’s turtleneck had crept up to her nose as her confidence continued to droop. Nico confiscated the cup, “Just sit here. Nico has a couple of hours to go. Then everything will be fine.”

After classes, Maki had gone to Rin and Hanayo’s dorm to transform. Then all three walked back to her house, wolves Maki and Rin scuffling while Hanayo followed, keeping a vigilant eye out for anyone who might be paying too much attention. Hanayo carried Maki’s backpack with her clothes, keys and phone stuffed in with textbooks and a laptop.

No need to dig out the keys, Hanayo pressed in the keycode and they went straight to the backyard where Hanayo let herself into the house as the other two played outside. The Drs. Nishikino had yet to arrive so Hanayo made herself some tea and watched as Rin made up for all the days she’d been stuck in human form, howling happily and leaping on every raised surface she could as Maki nipped at her hindquarters. Hanayo was very grateful for a safe space where Rin could indulge her wolf side.

“Hanayo!” Dr. Nishikino put her purse down on the kitchen table, then joined Hanayo on the couch, “It’s good to see you. I was surprised when Maki texted you were coming.”

Hanayo chuckled, “I think Rin guilted her into it.”

“How is Rin? Maki told me about her involuntary transformation.” Dr. Nishikino unbuttoned the collar of her sweater as she acclimated to indoor temperatures. Tea seemed like a good idea but it was nice to just sit for a minute, not having to shuffle between patients.

“She’s still…” Hanayo frowned, “embarrassed?” Hanayo put her mug down, steepling her fingers. “I can’t believe I put so much pressure on her.”

“How are you?” Dr. Nishikino’s question was soft, this wasn’t much different from work after all.

Index fingers tapping together, Hanayo smiled, “Fine. As long as Rin is happy, I’m fine. Happy and safe.”

Both glanced over to the window as gleeful howling could be heard, Dr. Nishikino put an arm around Hanayo’s shoulders, “Don’t worry. We won’t let anything happen to them.”

Hanayo gulped and nodded, her fingers now tightly clasped.

“How have you talked to Nico much about your employers and their plans?” Dr. Nishikino hadn’t really even talked to Maki much about this as Maki had been spending most of her free time with Nico.

“No, Maki says Nico is super busy with Fangs. I was hoping to get some time to chat with her tonight.” Hanayo tilted her head forward, letting her glasses skip to the end of her nose.

Which is probably mostly why Rin guilted Maki into inviting them, Dr. Nishikino realized. Rin and Hanayo worked extremely well as a team, Dr. Nishikino had noticed over the past 6 months. She wondered how Maki and Nico negotiated things, having only ever seen Nico interact with Maki when Maki was stubbornly remaining a wolf. Which Nico had handled well. Parenting is seeing your child give someone more leverage over their decisions than you have.

Maki shoved the door open and greeted her mother, who leaned forward, ruffling eager ears. Rin draped herself over Hanayo, tail nearly knocking over the mug.

“I think we’ll just order dinner in tonight.” Dr. Nishikino leaned her forehead against her daughter’s,
“Does Nico like pizza as much as you do, Maki?”

Maki whined an affirmative. Her mother doubted that, but with salads and some appetizers, they could probably find something to satisfy the new addition to family dinners.

Nico felt odd enough, waiting for Maki’s door to open after she rang the doorbell. Kashima skulked behind her, hands shoved deep in her coat pocket, hat pulled over her ears. Maki’s mother opened the door, smiling broadly until she noticed the second person on her stoop.

“Hello, Nico. Who’s your friend?” Dr. Nishikino couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice. There was a sudden bark. Nico groaned, Maki hadn’t looked at her phone.

“Good evening, DR. Nishikino.” Nico held out a box of scones she’d brought from work, “This is Yuu Kashima, my Fangs co-star. Kashima, this is Dr. Nishikino, Maki’s mother.” Kashima started to step forward but Nico held her arm out as Maki came in to sight, shoulders swinging aggressively, snout dropped, ears back, “Just stay put Kashima.” Nico stepped forward, “Hi, pretty girl, Nico’s happy to see you.”

Maki’s howl at Nico was short and ended with a snap in Kashima’s direction.

“Kashima, why don’t you come inside, and we’ll leave Princess to Nico.” Dr. Nishikino dropped a casual pat between her daughter’s shoulders. Nico crouched, her hands reaching for Maki’s head as the door closed.

Maki whined a complaint, then growled.

Nico frowned, “Kashima needs your help, Maki. I sent you a text. She’s completely freaking out over singing, beyond even what Nico can cheer up with a pep talk and a few “Nico Nico Ni’s.””

Maki howled along as Nico broke out her catchphrase.

Nico's voice was firm, inviting no argument. “I need you not to be jealous, pretty girl. Kashima is a friend and a colleague who needs our help.”

Maki whined again, then full body leaned into Nico.

Nico ran a hand through Maki's mane, “You know, Nico didn’t accidentally date you, right, Maki.”

Maki whimpered, confused.

Nico put both arms around her girlfriend, enjoying the warmth, getting as close as possible so Maki’s sensory world would be full of Nico. “You are the person I want, pretty girl. All of this. All of you. You don’t have to worry about Kashima.” Nico nuzzled her cheek against Maki’s, “Nico will have a lot of co-stars, but I won’t be in love with them, no matter what happens on stage because Nico is in love with you.”

Maki surged forward, throwing herself into a howl, Nico wincing from proximity and volume.

“Let’s get inside. Nico is cold and hungry and needs a kiss.” Nico stood, legs glad of the position change.

Maki pushed Nico into the door as Nico laughed, “Slow down, Maki. Nico has to use her hands on the door.”
Maki dodged past Nico and raced upstairs, coming back down just as Nico put her coat on a hook, dressed in purple sweats and a grey and white baseball henley. Without a word, she wrapped Nico in her arms, nose to Nico’s neck, taking a tickling breath. Then Nico heard her whisper, “I’m sorry. I love you, Nico.”

“I love you too.”

“But do you love pizza?” Dr. Nishikino popped into the foyer, “Maki claims you do. My husband is running late so he’s picking up takeout. I can adjust the order.”

Nico remembered the restaurants on the take out bags at the cabins. The Nishikinos frequented 5 star restaurants, restaurants Nico was willing to become more familiar with, “As long as there’s salad and dessert, Nico will eat a slice to be friendly.”

Maki grabbed Nico’s hand, giving off nothing but an enthusiastic vibe. “Come on, Nico, let’s go fix Kashima before the pizza gets here.”

Nico relaxed, finally. This was how to end a long day: warm house, pretty girl, dinner Nico didn’t have to cook, friends, and music.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Finally, we get to the parent dinner, which has grown...

Enjoy!
Do You Want Some Pizza With Your Warning?

Chapter Summary

Party at the Nishikinos! Who will take center stage?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

OH MY GODS...Nico couldn’t take it anymore. Maki had Kashima howling to try to loosen up her throat and Nico was pretty sure they were howling their way through the duet, which was just too strange for Nico. So she left the music room, closing the door behind her, groaning as she leaned back for a moment. This was the cure more painful than the condition phase. Kashima seemed to be really enjoying the howling. Nico dreaded the possibility that Kashima would convince the director to let her work it into her performance as Dracula. Nico was so not into that possibility.

Rin was sitting at the table, wincing, hands near her ears. Nico wondered if the ginger haired werewolf had been covering them. Nico guessed Kashima howled about as well as she sang. She’d really have to thank Maki later.

“Nico.” Dr. Nishikino glanced up from a text conversation with her errant husband, “Dinner’s going to be late.” She smiled apologetically at Nico, “That happens a lot around here. How’s the voice lesson going?”

Nico jerked her thumb over her shoulder, “You hear them as well as I can.” Full volume howling managed to beat the sound muffling.

Rin whined, laid her head down on the table and made an arm fort over her ears. Hanayo rubbed the nape of her neck, “It’ll be over soon, Rin.” Hanayo glanced at Nico, desperate optimism awash in her violet eyes.

Nico considered, “They’ll have to try with the actual words sometime. Kashima’s got to manage the song tomorrow.”

“You have rehearsal tomorrow?” Dr. Nishikino put down her phone, glad to finally get a chance to talk to Nico without a furry cream and russet head nosing into the conversation.

“Tech. All day. 10 am ‘til we’re done.” Nico perched on the back of the couch, near Maki’s mom, keeping an eye and an ear on the music room door, in case an intervention was required.

“Tech?” Dr. Nishikino leaned back, observing Nico, curious about the woman her daughter seemed willing to follow into anything.

Nico pulled up her knees, swinging them from side to side, “Costumes, lights, sounds...all the details around the actors. We’ve been working on the set and with some of the props, but tomorrow is the first time the director gets to see how close to performance ready the show is. Nico is looking forward to finally getting to wear Kotori’s beautiful clothes.”

“Kotori?” her mother didn’t remember Maki mentioning that name.
“Kotori’s a good friend of mine. She introduced me to her girlfriend, Umi, my roommate. Maki probably mentioned her.” Nico waited for the nod of acknowledgement, then continued, “Kotori’s got mad design skills, the perfect match for Nico’s awesome on stage talents.” Nico dropped her legs, leaning back into her arms, chin tucked to her chest. “My vampire hunting outfit is amazing. Kotori based it on fox hunting outfits but managed to get this frilly, feminine, deadly feel with a slash edge of goth, since Mina’s under Dracula’s thrall. Nico could conquer the world wearing it.”

Dr. Nishikino wouldn’t call it boasting, she thought, Nico’s Nico centric description of Fangs tech rehearsal. It was a fast, overflowing, surprisingly informative Nicofall of information, Nico happily chattering about the quality of all the things that would go into matching the standard of her performance. Her ruby eyes were bright, her sharply cut profile certainly drew the eye and Dr. Nishikino could see why the reclusive Maki might be drawn to such an animated and energetic sprite.

“Sorry I’m late!” The deep voice of the dinner bearing Dr. Nishikino sounded from the foyer. Rin bounced up, hurrying to help with bags and boxes, looking cheerful for the first time in an hour.

Nico pushed herself off the couch, “I’ll get the Howl twins.” Hanayo giggled.

Nico had taken over the kitchen island and was directing food sharing as everyone milled around the kitchen, deciding what to try. Maki smiled at Nico’s comfort and confidence level as she surreptitiously grabbed the first slice of pesto pizza, before Nico noticed her.

“Hey, Maki, Nico will share some of her salad.” Nico announced, fork out, searching for the redhead, surprised to see her already halfway through a slice of pizza.

Maki “mmmppphed”, grabbed another slice for her plate and headed back to the media room, dodging Kashima.

Nico turned to Maki’s parents, who were a little taken aback by the dent hungry actors and werewolves had put in the dinner choices available, “Don’t worry. Nico is breaking her of the fast food habit.” Nico drizzled oil and vinegar over her salad, “Slowly.”

“That’s…” The Drs. Nishikino shared a look, and Maki’s mom took the spokesparent role, “commendable, Nico, but Maki has an awareness of healthy diets.”

“Really,” Nico frowned as she speared variety greens with fork tines, “so late night cheeseburger and fries is a “my parents are doctors” approved choice?”

In the face of a lecture reminiscent of Nico’s “be a more responsible dog owner” classic, Dr. Nishikino decided to check the refrigerator for more drink options and leave her husband to take the hit.

He just laughed, “Only if Maki brings some home to share.”

Nico shook her head, minimal movement, maximum disapproval, and crunched through her salad.

Kashima was an unexpected hit at dinner, especially with Hanayo, who had apparently swooned through her October performance in the title role in Cyrano De Bergerac.

Hanayo was leaning over the arm of the couch, Rin next to her leaning forward, head in her hands,
Kashima about to collapse, “Oh, death scenes are great fun…”

“Nico hates them.” Nico muttered, so soft that only the werewolves in the room could hear and Maki giggled. Rin was obviously not having the best evening of her life.

“It was so romantic, Roxanne crying over Cyrano…” Hanayo’s breath caught as she remembered the scene, Kashima clutching a tree as she fought off all the evils of man, sword slowly falling, knees slowly failing, Roxanne reaching to clutch…Hanayo started to tear up.

“Dying over love is DUMB.” Rin looked a little abashed when her declaration echoed, but then she raised her head and continued, “Just tell her. How hard is that?” Nico grinned as Rin rammed an iceberg in the Titanic of fictional romantic imaginings, “What happens after is the fun part. If you die, there’s no after.”

Nico decided to help Rin out. “I’ve never really liked Cyrano. Or any of the stories where they know but die anyway. Like Romeo and Juliet. Or Jack and Rose. Just tell the person. Or pull them up on the board. Nico likes the cozy parts.” Nico relaxed against Maki.

Maki looked blank at the last reference but Nico wasn’t going to explain the plot of Titanic to her. She wondered if werewolves would have smelled or heard the iceberg.


“If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.” Kashima reached for Nico’s hand as Maki snarled, so Nico pulled it back, covering her heart.

“Take away the fool” Nico tapped Kashima on the head, commanding.

“Oh ho” Kashima sat back, then recovered, her voice rolling out to fill the room.

“If I did love you in my master's flame,
With such a suffering, such a deadly life,
In your denial I would find no sense;
I would not understand it.”

Nico tilted her head, considering Kashima as Viola. Tall. Intriguing, but suddenly a sharp tooth nipped slyly at her earlobe as Nico remembered that as fun as it might be to play Shakespeare with Kashima, this was not a theatre party.

“We have to spend all day at rehearsal tomorrow, Kashima. Let’s not wear ourselves out.” As Nico spoke, Maki puffed in her ear. Nico reached down to pinch her thigh in retaliation.

“All day rehearsal, that must be fun.” Hanayo had tried to take Rin’s hand, but Rin had gotten up for more food and was shifting things around in the kitchen. Maki glanced in her direction, nostrils flaring to pick up mood cues.


“Huh?” Hanayo blurted, confused.

Nico clucked, people were always underestimating the amount of effort being entertaining took, “You’re probably thinking it’s not like science genius homework, where you’ve got math and books and boring stuff you have to do.”
“Science geniuses probably don’t think it’s boring stuff,” Maki whispered in Nico’s ear, Nico was tempted to swat her on the nose, but just glared into a pair of mischievous eyes.

Nico turned back to her audience, ignoring the frisky werewolf, “For the worst techs, it’s all stop and start, adjusting for light and sound cues, the more cues, the more things that can go wrong with the show, the more actors just have to stand around.”

Maki’s mother jumped in. “That must be tedious.”

Nico shrugged, “It’s part of the job. Nico doesn’t really mind. The big problem is you have to pick right up when they’re ready to go so no one can break character or things get silly and we never get back on track.”

Kashima had slid in next to Hanayo. Maki growled, with Nico leaning hard into her to prevent any intervention. Rin came quickly back into the room, perching on the couch arm next to Hanayo, offering her a handful of arancini, completely drawing her attention away from Kashima.

“And sometimes, random things will just happen...that can be so much fun.” Kashima leaned forward, eager to charm the audience.

“Nico and Kashima don’t really agree about ‘fun’.” Nico demurred as Kashima claimed center stage again.

“But you missed this one, Nico. We were working with coffins for the first time and the Three Sisters had trouble making sure their voluminous nightgowns fit inside. So, the first couple times, all the vampire hunters were stepping carefully around but then Van Helsing forget, when they nearly dropped their blade,” Kashima was on her feet, pantomiming someone searching their clothes, “Van Helsing was so distracted, their boot caught in the gown that was lying over the edge of the coffin and they spun around,” Kashima twirled into the room, one leg extended, hopping on the other, ‘trying desperately to maintain their balance,” Kashima’s arms windmilled, “and fell back into the coffin, right on top of poor Mia, who let out a scream.” Kashima was now doubled over with laughter, most of the room joining her; Nico had her arms crossed, not amused.

Maki’s dad seemed a little overwhelmed by the amount of people gathered in his media room, but gamely tried to engage his daughter’s girlfriend by diverting the conversation from Kashima, “Are rehearsals always that crazy, Nico?”

“No.” Nico’s tone was scornful, but had no dampening effect as Kashima prepared to launch in to her next story. Maki was starting to fidget as Nico tensed.

Dr. Nishikino turned to his wife for help, having expected another story or something from Nico, but before either could say anything, Nico recovered, cutting off Kashima, “Two people nearly getting injured isn’t really funny...but sometimes,” and Nico’s voice gave the impression that this was a thing she allowed on rare occasions for morale, “Nico does enjoy when everyone gets dragged into a wild conversation. Nico always learns things.” Maki’s arms slid around her waist and Nico picked up speed. “We had this amazing rehearsal long debate that started with someone mentioning Kitty Pryde and the X-Men versus Dracula and whether Jewish or Muslim holy items would actually work against him in the hands of a believer. And if Superman could just disintegrate Dracula with heat vision. And which superhero would have the best chance against a vampire? Nico doesn’t know that much about comics that she hasn’t seen in the movies, but decided Wonder Woman would obviously just chop off his head. She’s a goddess, right? So that makes her sword a holy item.” Nico let the room have a minute to disagree if they dared and when no one did, continued. “Then, the next rehearsal everybody showed up in their favorite superhero shirt. Nico had to borrow a White Canary shirt from Umi.”
Kashima fell back into the couch next to Hanayo, whispering something in her ear. Nico was getting tired of Kashima’s shenanigans and changed the subject, “So are you feeling more confident about your singing, Kashima.” Nico felt slightly guilty when Kashima’s aura collapsed.

Maki weighed in, chin on Nico’s shoulder. “She’s been doing all right. I’d like to try the duet again before she goes home, if you wouldn’t mind, Nico.”

“That’s what Nico’s here for,” Nico glanced at a restless Rin, “although we have to talk about the other thing.”

“Other thing?”

Nico muttered wolf under her breath, betting on Maki’s hearing.

“Oh.” Maki hugged Nico, “Hey, Kashima, let’s go warm up a little before we get Nico into it.”

“Oh.” Kashima reluctantly pulled herself away from Hanayo, pausing to blow a kiss over her hand. Hanayo giggled, Rin glared, Nico sighed.

Everyone except Kashima and Maki had moved to the second floor, in the shared study of the Dr. Nishikino. Nico was pacing, Maki’s mom was staring out the window, Maki’s dad had settled behind the huge desk and Rin and Hanayo were sitting at an awkward distance from each other on the couch, Hanayo’s face a study in concern as she watched her disgruntled fiancée.

“So what are Tsubasa and company up to?” Nico was standing in front of bookshelves, staring at books but not registering titles.

“A lot of construction. Wiring things. Erena keeps taking more components to the Fangs set.”

Hanayo reached out a hand to Rin, “It’s distracting them from the werewolf search, I think.”

Rin whined.

“So that’s a good thing, right.” Nico turned, lips tight, “Nozomi hasn’t been getting the headaches anymore?”

“No. But they’re very excited about something that they’re planning opening night.” Hanayo’s mild demeanor was blighted by a mix of anxiety and fear as her violet eyes stayed locked with Rin’s back.

Nico wanted fangs, just for a minute, to bite through something. Her brow darkened, her fists clenched and once again, she commanded the attention of the entire room, although for once she was unaware as she raced through too many emotions to fit into non broken sentences. This was ridiculous. Opening night was a sacred thing, neither actors nor audience should be put in any danger by IDIOTS. No one should be hunting Maki or Rin. EVER. Nico should be WORKING ON HER LINES, not standing here trying to decide who was in the worst danger from overzealous, unethical science creeps.

No, Nico didn’t burst into flames, but everyone in the room could feel the friction and the tension building, freezing them in uncertainty, an escalating peril emanating from Nico that suddenly burst when a frantic redhead fell into the room with a crash, nearly breaking down the door before she remembered how to work handles, “Nico! What happened?” Maki scrambled up, hands on Nico’s shoulders, sniffing frantically.

Nico, still wordless, but grateful for the distraction, hugged Maki hard enough to squeeze the air out
of the redhead.

Breathless, puzzled Maki kept trying for an answer. “Nico?”

Hanayo started to snuffle. Rin nuzzled into her shoulder, triggering full sobs as Hanayo threw herself into Rin’s open arms. Maki’s mom stood behind her husband, hands on his shoulders, both wondering what Nico would do next.

“It’s all right, pretty girl. Nico just wants to bite someone.” Nico whispered into Maki’s shoulder, holding on for another minute and then stepping back, raising a hand to run her fingers through Maki’s hair and check on the werewolf’s ear status. Baffled but human. Maki’s forehead was pressed against Nico, her eyes frantically searching Nico’s for reassurance. Nico smiled, “Go back downstairs. I’m fine. We’ll be done here soon, then Nico will sing and we can send Kashima home.”

Maki whined, nudging Nico’s nose with hers. Nico bopped a kiss on the end of her nose, “Give me 10 minutes, pretty girl. Your parents have some things to tell us, I think.”

Maki turned her head to look at her parents. Her father nodded. Maki hugged Nico, “Ten minutes.”

“Nico promises.” Nico scrubbed her fingers through her hair, heart racing from both frantic werewolf booming through the door and sexy girlfriend desperate for reassurance. After Maki left, with too many backward glances, Nico restarted the discussion. “So what are we going to do?”

“Nozomi’s found some discrepancies she’s investigating.” Hanayo piped up, face and voice relaxed as she cuddled up to Rin.

Dr. Nishikino reached into his desk, pulling out a folder, “Here’s a summary our lawyer prepared. We’ve been talking to one of our friends in the Chemistry department and she’s expecting your call, Hanayo. I put her card in here. She should be able to help you get the University officially involved.”

“So what do I do?” Nico was more specific.

“Be careful.” Hanayo was looking through the folder, “Something is definitely being planned for opening night.”

Nico shrugged, “Nico will be fine. There’s always people backstage. What can happen?”

Hanayo didn’t know how to share the feeling she’d been picking up from Anju, the increasing excitement, the hope...the almost feral, hungry look whenever Anju checked the numbers registering at Fangs rehearsals.

“I don’t understand the plan yet, Nico, but I...just be careful, please. They’re dangerous.” Hanayo’s voice faltered as Nico’s brashness dented her confidence.

“Nico will be fine.” Nico heard nothing but vague in Hanayo's warnings. The worst that had happened to Nozomi was a headache. A headache wouldn’t get in the way of Nico’s debut as the lead in a world premiere musical. Nothing would get in the way. Right now Nico had a duet to perfect. And a girlfriend to cheer and charm.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, thanks for reading.
Everyone else survive the Kotori-Maki madness?

Last chapter of Christmas is in progress and I'm amping up the romance and the farce.

Take care!
Nico (and Neruda) By Music Room Light

Chapter Summary

A musical interlude

Chapter Notes

This chapter is just a short interlude, but next we get to mood: Dracula meets Faux Fred and Daphne so I wanted to keep the feel of this one consistent. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Love I learned
A single kiss
Hair of Night
Eyes Of Fire
In one kiss
You’ll know
I Hunger
Your mouth
Your voice
Your Hair
Only you and I,
Only you and I,
My Love,
Drunk WIth the Starry Void,
Moon alive
Heart broke loose
I haven’t said
Only you
Evergreen
Ever Sun
Ever Moon
I hunger
I hunt
In one Kiss
Only You and I,
Only You and I,
My Love”

Nico stared at the sheet music, recognizing some of the lines from her hurried skimming of a Neruda collection, trying to hum the tune Maki had scribed so casually. Maki had gone to see Kashima out, her parents had popped in a half an hour ago to say they’d see them both in the morning, Hanayo and Rin had left after the meeting, Hanayo eager to read through the lawyer’s notes, Rin grumpy. So Nico was poking around the music room, waiting for Maki to return, curious about what Maki liked to play. The mood of the room suited Maki, light wood panelling on the wall contrasting the dark sheen of the piano tucked in a corner, framed by tall windows, a cream sectional sofa filling the other half of the room, bookshelves behind, an unexpected Yumiko Kayukawa print dominated by pink flamingos highlighting a wall. On the chair next to the piano she’d found a folder marked “Nico (and Neruda) by Moonlight.”

Maki came back, locking the door behind her, hand smoothing her hair, “Kashima smelled much more confident. Although,” amused amethyst eyes met Nico’s, “She still needs to leave the cologne in the bottle.”

“Don’t you mean vat?” Nico held out the sheet music, “Is this what you wanted to show Nico?”

“Oh.” Nico blinked and Maki looked skittish again, hand reaching behind her for the door handle, blush dusting her cheeks.

“Maki.” No eye contact, Nico slipped an arm around the redhead’s waist and yanked her toward the piano, “Play. Please.”

Nico smiled gently as neon green flecks started pulsing in deep crystal. Maki gulped nervously, sat, took a moment to place the music and then with another, quick, shy tip of her head at Nico, started.

Nico wasn’t sure whether Maki’s fingers were on the piano or on her skin as the notes rolled over her, waking her out of a daze with a splash of clarity. Maki would always be murmuring how Nico glowed, but Nico suddenly caught a taste of that; Maki at the piano, eyes sometimes closed, sometimes referring to the music ahead of her, every muscle in motion, Nico reminded of when Maki had transformed in the foyer of her apartment, spooked while they were caught up in passionate kiss, Maki springing, human form becoming something else, something wilder, like the sensations, the sounds skipping from the piano. Then Maki started to sing, her voice hoarse, the music a little darker as desire drummed fantasias in the air between them. Nico found herself leaning against the piano, holding back a hand that wanted to dig into Maki’s hair and pull the redhead in for a kiss that might explode them both.
Gorgeous and Gershwin, green and lavender mad equal swirls, lost in the music, full fanged, turned to Nico as one hand slowly created a melodic lure, the other ranging to lilt a sensuously soft harmony, “Only You and I, Only You and I,” and skimming chords quietly to an open finish, “My Love.”

“Maki…” Nico’s voice slid into the charged air as Nico pushed Maki back from the piano, joining her on the bench, hands sliding over shoulders, reaching up into hair, careful to tickle just enough of her lover’s neck that Maki shivered before Nico started to play with the tangled red silk, “That was amazing, you are amazing.” Maki’s lips were on Nico’s before either could add anything else, their pulses thrumming, continuing the driving pace of the middle section, Maki’s lips and teeth finding Nico’s mouth and hair, Maki’s hands on Nico’s waist as Nico whispered nothing that made any sense, adjective after adjective, gorgeous, beautiful, stunning...so many words, so many kisses, lips pressing lightly, fingers stroking shivers across Maki’s shoulders, breaths tingling across Maki’s throat until she moaned and then Nico pounced, hands diving under Maki’s shirt, down the firm curves of her hips, pushing forward until they were both on the floor, no words left, music devoured, hunger howling.

Several interludes later

“So, pretty girl, what do you dream about?” Maki was mostly asleep in Nico’s lap, Nico tenderly moving sweaty strands away from a now relaxed profile.

“You.” Maki murmured, nuzzling into her own shirt, now draped over Nico.

“Of course, Nico is an addiction.” Nico giggled, then turned serious, “But what’s your dream dream?”

“Still you.” Maki yawned, curled up.

Nico sighed. Sexy, stubborn girlfriend. Nico would just have to give up hinting. “Nico loved working on singing with you…”

“Loved it too…” Softer murmuring, lips barely opening.

“The music you wrote for Nico was…” Nico hesitated, she didn’t know how to describe it, to express the soaring, or the way it had raised every hair, plucked every instinct Nico had for quality. Be blunt. “I’ve rarely heard better, and Nico listens to the best.”

“Mmmmm…” Half murmur, half yawn, one arm flopped across Nico’s lap.

Nico, realizing this was only half a conversation, picked up Maki’s hand, kissing the palm, “Maki, make more music. Play more music. For Nico. Okay, pretty girl?”

A snore. Nico leaned her head back against the couch, a new dream forming, Maki, vibrant, glowing, music everywhere her fingers touched and Nico right there, melded into the flow.

Maki woke, stiff. She was sleeping on Nico, who couldn’t be comfortable with her head tilted at that angle. Sometime before dawn, everything was too quiet for it to be the waking part of the morning. Maki stood, stretched, wrapped the throw around her and considered if it was practical to carry Nico upstairs. Both her parents were asleep so not likely to surprise her clothes free in the hall. Nico had her shirt on...so cute how it bunched around her…that was okay. Maki nodded, decision made,
leaving the throw on the loveseat and sliding her arms under Nico. She loved the feel of Nico as she carried her, the tiny woman leaning into her, the warmth, the way the sable hairs would tickle her chin or nose and she would hold in a sneeze or a giggle so as not to wake the sleeping beauty. Maki still wasn’t used to Nico quiet...or calm...sure, there was sleep, but somehow, a Nico so still was a little...heartbreaking, but only in the way that love and tenderness would crack tiny, spreading lines open in Maki’s heart so she could pull Nico closer, so the tearing up could be buried in silky, tickly, lavender dusted sweetness that woke up every want.

Maki snapped up, with a bark, cold, solitary. It felt wrong. Where was Nico? Only a breath and then full werewolf senses as four paws hit the ground and Maki searched for traces of an absent bedmate, hurling downstairs and nearly bowling over her mother.

“Maki. Calm down. What’s wrong?”

Maki whined, then howled, where was Nico, circling her mother, frantic as all traces of Nico she could sense were fading.

Her mother knelt, hand on Maki’s shoulder, “Nico had to leave, said you were so soundly asleep she didn’t want to wake you.”

Maki whimpered.

Her mother, rustling her own hair, thought it was still too early to deal with werewolf logic, “Nico said she left you a note.”

Maki tilted her head, considering, then raced BACK upstairs, changing as she charged into the room.

A piece of paper was almost half under the bed. It must have been next to Maki and fallen in her rush to search for Nico.

“Hey, Pretty Girl.

Nico is surprised you didn’t jump when Nico woke up and nearly fell out of bed. Guess Nico wore you out last night ; P”

Maki blushed. No one in the room and here she was, flustered, heart racing, hearing Nico’s smug, flirty voice in her head, remembering everything Nico had...Maki shook herself and continued,

“Nico has a LONG day so I’m going to grab a quick shower and check back in…”

“Still asleep. You really are such a pretty girl. I love you, Maki. Nico has to go, but maybe we can see each other tomorrow? Nico wants to tell you how much she loved the music.

Work on your paper so your mom doesn’t ground you. Nico will text when she gets a break. Phones are a no go during rehearsals.

I'll miss you.

XOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOX

Nico

And a lipstick kiss. Maki sniffed it. Chemical smells, wax, thick scent of castor clinging, an acridness sharp in the brighter upper lip print, just a hint of chemical sweetness...Nico must have done her
makeup for rehearsal. Their first date, the night of the party, Nico had been all made up, with vividly red lipstick that had a bitter bite, but the thrill and sensation had completely overrun any distaste. Since then, Nico had mostly tasted of lip balm, waxy, coconut, lavender

“Maki?” Her mother's voice brought Maki out of a daydream ranking Nico’s kisses, “Come have breakfast.”

Maki dropped the note on her pillow, grabbing the borrowed shirt Nico had left on the bed, pulling it over her head. She stopped, inhaling, fabric covering her face. Musk, peach, magic, vanilla, sweat. Nico. Much better than traces obscured by a waxy mask.

“Just a minute.”

Chapter End Notes

If you didn't notice, I "accidentally" wrote another Bibi werewolf AU story, Moonlight Becomes You, different were rules, different wolf character. I may have a problem.

But keeping Casual Lunacy going with some regularity is something I'm serious about, we are just in the 10-14 day time frame right now.

Thanks to Physicist-Pi on Tumblr for some lipstick insight.
Dark had weight. You could only measure it in quality, not quantities, but Dark possessed heft, presence. It had to be pushed through. Or shattered. Yes, possibility existed on a stage empty of light and actors, opportunity thrived, but Eli and Nico were both preoccupied with more practical thoughts as they opened the door into the unlit Fangs set.

“There’s no lights on.” Eli’s voice quavered. Nico bit back a ‘duh’ and pulled out her flashlight, shining it in front of them. They’d entered from backstage, as Eli wanted to check the set, but neither of them had considered that absolutely no one would be present. The thin stream of light threw odd shadows, the set the ruined chapel, piles of dirt and debris threatening footing and coffins presenting solid obstacles to straightforward progress.

“We’d better go around to the front and hit the houselights.” Nico flashed the light around the space, noticing the shadows thrown by the crossed planks overhead, creating a tunnel effect. Everything that looked so ruined smelled of freshly cut wood and paint. Nico remembered Van Helsing’s lines describing King Laugh, the laughter overtaking you at inappropriate times and places, as she giggled at the irony of the malevolent and decrepit “King-Vampire of the Un-Dead” splashing on a coat of new paint and moving into a snazzy, top of the line coffin with all the best amenities.

“Nico?” Eli’s hand clamped on Nico’s shoulder, so hard the smaller girl could feel the nails go in.


“Oh, sorry.” Eli’s grip relaxed. “Can we go turn on the lights, now.” A pause, and Eli’s voice wavered again. “Please.”

Nico was about to say yes and turn when she heard a tapping.

Eli froze, “What was that?”

“I don’t know.” Nico now really regretted having left her practically superpowered girlfriend in bed that morning. Maki would have been able to tell Nico what or who was making the noise with one sniff, Nico guessed. But here was Nico with Nozomi’s nowhere near superpowered, useless in the dark fiancee. Nico sniggered at that last phrase, once again aware of King Laugh’s complete lack of discretion in timing his visits.

“Nico…” Eli drew out Nico’s name, pleading.

More tapping, a low whispering...Nico’s grip on the cold metal of the flashlight turned slippery and sweaty. She stepped forward carefully.

“Nico, that’s not the way out.” She felt Eli swipe at her coat and shushed over her shoulder.
“Who’s there?” Nico called out, her voice sounding braver than she felt.

More whispering, a creak, a thump.

“NICO!” Eli screamed.

The noise was coming from the central coffin. Nico held the light on it, eyes tracking the motion, as it started to rock back and forth.

Another thump and the lid burst open, a figure shrouded in white flying up, Eli’s next scream was a pure, extended, panicked note that split Nico’s ears as she felt Eli’s arms crush her. The flashlight slid out of her hand and rolled.

“Hahahahahaahhhahahhaah. You sounded terrified.” A high, giggling voice crowed triumphantly.

Nico recognized that voice, Nico was going to kill the owner of that voice. With her bare hands, not needing an axe, knife or sword.

“This is pretty comfy though.” Nico shook Eli off and grabbed the flashlight as Kashima continued her conversational rise from Dracula’s coffin.

Nico shone the light on Kashima. Illuminated from underneath, the hollows, planes and shadows of Kashima’s features gained a menace that the chirpy smugness of her words shattered irrevocably. Nico heard a soft chuckle from Eli and wondered if King Laugh had a daughter, who reigned over silly flashes after moments of extreme fear. Princess Titter...oh, Nico was going to have to take a pass on sharing her thoughts today, there were too many bad jokes...speaking of...

Kashima was stretching. “I could do this every night.”

“You spent the night here?” Eli was still standing a little too close to Nico, Nico could feel her trembling.

“Nope. Wandered over when I woke up at 5 and couldn’t get back to sleep.” Kashima tapped the coffin with her foot, “Pretty comfy for napping. Padded. Kinda heavy though. And there’s a weird hum.”

Eli’s head collided with Nico’s spine as she muttered “I’m going to throw up now.”

“Not on Nico’s coat, you’re not,” Nico hissed.

All the theatre lights came on, startling the onstage trio. Nico blinked as a too cheerful voice echoed.

“Good morning, everyone. Elichi, you’re not supposed to be helping Mina hunt Dracula.”

“Nozomi” Eli fled the stage, in search of a sympathetic embrace.

Nico turned her back, without comment, on an Kashima eager for praise. There would be coffee and donuts and quiet in the greenroom. At least for a few minutes.

Maki glanced at her phone, toweling off her hair. She’d been for a run after breakfast, then had a long shower and was now about to sit down and actually work on her CogPsych paper. Maybe she should have chosen a topic related to memory, she might have been able to help Nico with memorizing her lines. Of course, Maki was also probably a little too good at forcing Nico to split her attention. Wait, messages from Nico.
N: Turns out Eli’s Shaggy not Fred (∩▃▃▃▃▃▃▃ﾆ) And Kashima’s an IDIOT (/¬o¬)/ ^|
N: Guess you’re still asleep, Pretty Girl门户 ） Nico is sorry she had to go.
N: So Kashima ，たんてんに決意 did decided to nap in a coffin and then jump out when Nico and Eli were trying to find their way around in the dark
N: Eli screamed ( 〇◯◯ ) Nico was calm and cool ▽ ( ◐◐メ
N: Now Nico is having a not pink donut and watered down coffee (T=T) and remembering last night (♀˘˘♀), which makes everything better
N: Maki is amazing. Have a great day. You can miss Nico ☆〜●
N: PSM is calling us in for a pep talk. Queen Smile will text you later
♀＞( ｡・□・)ʃ ﾟ
M: Queen Smile? Have a good tech (^_^) b  Sorry I missed you. I was in the shower. Now, I’m going to stop thinking about you and write my paper (´д`)  
Okay, that was a lie. There was no not thinking about Nico. But if Maki zinged through her paper during Nico’s tech, no one could complain when she showed up to walk Nico home at the end of rehearsal. Especially not if she leaned cute ears. With a pleased howl, Maki pulled on a hoodie and went to grab a snack.

SUNLIGHT. FRESH AIR. Hanayo had stopped into the sub basement as requested to make sure all the meters were working. And now all she wanted was Rin and to spend time not in the underneath of Tech. Erena, Anju, and Tsubasa were all working on Fangs today. Maybe it was time to relent and spend some time playing on the Lakefill with Rin in wolf form. That might restore some sparkle to those beautiful eyes.

Hanayo smiled and raced to catch up as Rin whoomped through the snow, the orange highlights in her brown fur catching the sun to glow. Two very bundled up for the weather girls stopped on the path to stare at Rin, one pulled out her phone, then they pointed to Hanayo.

“Is she yours?” One of them asked, pulling her scarf down and uncovering her mouth.

Hanayo was never comfortable with that question and just nodded, although Rin barked happily, coming up to be petted, “My parents drop her off occasionally. No pets in the dorm.”

The girl pushed her phone at Hanayo, “Someone’s saying they lost a dog that looks a lot like that. There’s a reward.”

Hanayo was confronted with a blurry screenshot of Rin. She recognized the number as Anju’s.

Hanayo scrambled for an explanation, the doubting looks were making her nervous and Rin was whining, “T...that’s my boss. Anju. Rin got away last week and my boss was helping me find her. She must have posted that.” Hanayo rested a hand on Rin’s side, “But she’s back.”

“No collar. No wonder she gets away.” The second girl spoke and Hanayo heard a quick click.
“Yes, well, we have to go.” Hanayo turned and signaled to Rin to follow. She could feel two sets of eyes on her, but she didn’t know what to do. Maybe she should have just offered to call the number instead? Rin whined and her cold nose touched the underside of Hanayo’s hand, “It’s okay, Rin. Nothing to worry about.” Hanayo’s lies were even more obvious when Rin was in wolf form. They both started to hurry.

N: Nico is on break. How’s your paper?
M: Not Nico (´._.`) (⌣ ˘ ˘)
N: ha! Nico remembered all her lines, no flubs. Asuka is impressed, Nico can tell (¨﹏¨ ;)
M: See, I didn’t distract you (v^−°)9
N: Yes, you did. Nico has to be all business this week ✧*๑ (´ ˘ `๑)* ٩(ˊᗜˋ*)و and Maki has to help.
M: I can help.
N: Good. Have to get back. Miss you, pretty girl (˘ ³˘)۶ Finish your paper and I’ll see you tomorrow (•‾‑‾•)و̑̑♡
M: See you (・_・)❤

Nico laughed and put away her phone. Maki had just found an emoticon site and was trying to impress Nico with both nuance and variety, which was adorable. But now it was time to get back to Mina. They were starting again with Mina finding a sleepwalking Lucy.

Maki reread the message thread before going back to her paper.
M: Hey, what was ‘Queen Smile” about (ー_ー;)

Nico was going to hate violins by the end of the Fangs run. The shrill, shearing build to a screech as Dracula threatened her, the hint of Psycho as her throat was exposed, the shiver of a shriek underneath her scream...all of this had brought her to the point where she almost welcomed the croak of Kashima cooing “flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, kin of my kin” in the middle of the whole meticulously scored climactic duet. Nico would bet her fledgling career on no one in the audience going home to a sound, smooth sleep.

Nico and Micah were in the Harkers’ bed, Nico could barely see Kashima lurking offstage, behind the window, no shadow cast on the stage. The mellower cellos playing a hint of a lullaby gave way to a surge of the small strings. But Nico would never underestimate the power of a smaller instrument and neither had the composer. The tension swelled, the moonlight cue came up and Kashima appeared in the window, swooping into the scene.

And Asuka’s voice sounded from the house, “Kashima, I need you about two steps to the right so the light hits your profile for maximum effect.”

Kashima shuffled stage right, “Here?”

“Exactly. Erena can we redo that cue, orchestra take it from the violin entrance, Nozomi do we have a light we can use to have a giant bat shadow move across the floor?”
Nozomi’s sounded thoughtful, she was a more patient person than Nico, who could feel the aggravation building at the 645th interruption in the orderly progression of 512 light cues, “Do you want me to add a light backstage, make it a manual? If you want the shadow falling from the window, we couldn’t use the projector.”

“Let’s talk about it after.” The sound of a pencil scratch could be heard, “Pick it up with the violins, Cyd.”

The snarky, nasally tones of the conductor graced the theatre. “For those of you actually looking at the music, pick up to 13, please.”

Micah faked snored, Nico pulled the sheet over his head. And it began again.

Nozomi watched again as Kashima held Nico’s tiny form in her arms, Nico looked so fragile, but there was the slightest resistance as Dracula forced Mina’s lips to his breast, a revulsion, a fight. Nico and the director had been worrying over that all week, how far under Dracula’s thrall -- to use Nico’s current favorite word, Mina was. Nozomi wasn’t sure anyone who hadn’t seen it before would see the effort Nico was putting in, but the tension between the two characters, onstage in this moment of silence in their struggle, was gripping. Even without an audience to feed from, the two actors managed to create a tension that sizzled.

BZZZZZZTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT……

The scream of static was followed by a ominous “POP” as everything went DARK.

“Kashima, get the hell off me.” Nico shouted, then a weight thumped on the stage.

“Ow. Sorry, Nico, I went to put my hand on the bed…”

“Just shut up….”

A flashlight turned on, and Professor Asuka shone it under her chin, “Erena? Nozomi? Shalin?”

Shalin, the freshman running lights for the show was already running out of hairs to pull out of their NROTC Marine buzzcut. They turned to Nozomi desperately, “What happened?”

“Overload in the system. Just sit tight.” Nozomi pulled out her flashlight, wondering where Eli was and if the whole building had gone out, “Erena, where are you?”

“Dimmer packs,” Erena’s throaty purr sounded from backstage. “They’ve overheated. Hit the house lights.”

Nozomi moved to the back of the theatre, after verifying that the board had fried too. “Light board’s down as well.”

“Son of a…” the sound of cables shifting backstage accompanied the lights in the house coming on. Maybe Eli was in the green room and had missed this part of the drama.

Nico, face twisted with anger, had swung her legs over the edge of the bed and was glaring at a Kashima sprawled across the stage.

Asuka glanced from her actors to Erena who’d stepped center stage, shaking her head and made a quick decision, “Half an hour, eat your dinner now, we’ll let the lights cool down and get back to it.”
There was a murmur as the actors headed to get out of costume and the crew assembled around their leaders.

Eli was sitting next to Nozomi, her head against Nozomi’s shoulder. Nico was on the other side, back in her nightgown, head resting on the seat in front of her, fists clenched on either side, muttering “I will not punch Kashima’s stupid, pretty boy face” as if it were a mantra. Nozomi patted her best friend on the back, giggling at Nico’s snapped snarl.

Professor Asuka stepped forward before the crowd could get too restive.

“We’re not getting the lights back tonight.” Nico raised her head, swallowing a groan, “But we’re going to keep going.” Asuka paused, “The good news, if we’re only dealing with sound and music cues, we should finish up faster.” A longer pause, ‘The bad news: if you had any plans after 3 p.m. tomorrow cancel them. We can’t get the orchestra, but we will be running the light cues with piano accompaniment, thank you, Billie.” A smattering of applause. “Unless you are attending your own funeral, you will be here tomorrow. If you have a problem with that, talk to management now.”

PSM Chantal Robinson stood, headphones around her neck, clipboard raised above her head, “If you’re going to be late or absent, talk to me NOW, fam. You know the drill.” Two of the crew and the actor playing Quincey Morris rushed forward.

It was after 11 and they were finally done...the pace had progressed from a snail’s pace to a tortoise’s, with only 378 more interruptions in the orderly running of 281 sound and music cues, only one of which involved the total reconfiguration of the orchestra.

Nico was sitting in the dressing room, sweater in her hands, listening for the sound of Kashima’s voice leaving the area so she could make a quick run for the hall and outside. Kotori poked her head in, “Not done yet, Nico?”

“Sorry, Kotori. Nico didn’t mean to delay you.” NCico pulled the sweater over her head.

“That’s not it. Honoka just called. Umi’s at our place so if you wanted to call Maki…” Kotori winked.

Nico’s smile was tired, “She’s working on a paper. I don’t want to disturb her. Not really in the mood to do anything other than strangle Kashima anyway.”

Kotori giggled, “Yeah, I can’t believe how many times she fell into you.”

“I can.” Nico didn’t want to deal with werewolf jealousy over ALL the places Nico smelled like Kashima, due to the King of Cluelessness’s clumsy fumbling. Nico was doing Kashima a huge favor.

Nozomi had the Genie out seeing what bulbs needed to be replaced. While Erena was talking to the building manager about the electrical situation, Nozomi had quickly used the lift to check out the front light not on the plot or used in any cue. No bulb inside, just melted, still warm glass from what looked like a vacuum tube. Wires had fused, whatever the previous layout had been, it was now unrecognizable. Nozomi snapped a quick picture. Maybe she could find another lightning design
student to take a look at it and see what they could guess about its intended use.

Nico stepped out into the cold, looked up at the stars, inhaled, and regretted pushing the “see you tomorrow” thought so heavily on Maki. Not the worse tech she’d ever been through, at least the director hadn’t run screaming into the only working bathroom after the first act and refused to come out at all, leaving the production stage manager to run the show, while the set designer removed the door hinges when the director stopped responding to questions. Nope, this had just been a technically difficult show with the erratic spurts of stopping and starting that threw all the actors off, especially Kashima who had been running on Red Bulls after the restart and skipping through lines. There were still a couple of scenes toward the end that were still rough for Nico, specifically Mina’s pleading with the group to read the Burial Service before she loses control to Dracula completely. Nico shivered as the cracked, nearly drowned whisper of Micah reading the holy words over her slumped exhaustion looped in her head. She felt like throwing back her head and howling out frustration and anger and mourning and fear.

Howling was everyone’s solution tonight. Nico’s ear picked up a familiar sound, a musical voice filling the night. Before Nico could finish her laugh, a russet and cream bundle of happy to see Nico bounded into her, nearly bowling Nico over as Maki snuffled everywhere she could reach, licking her chin, rumbling a little grumpily when Nico’s hair fell over her nose and she picked up an extra dose of Kashima. Nico reached down, arms around Maki’s torso, and hugged her girlfriend, lifting the werewolf off the ground, “Nico is so glad to see you, pretty girl.” Nico kissed near Maki’s ear and Maki whined a bit, paws scrabbling, as the hug continued. As soon as Nico let go, Maki turned around, shook her head, stuck out her tongue and ran off toward Nico’s apartment.

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“Hey, Nico is not racing you.” Nico shouted. Maki turned and howled a challenge. “Nico wants to save some energy for later.”

Maki scampered off again, Nico counted to three and suddenly, Maki wheeled around, racing back to Nico, maneuvering behind her and shoving Nico forward with a cute whimper.

“Nico is always glad to see you.” Nico let herself fall backward across the werewolf’s back, staring up at the stars as Maki’s tail ended up in her mouth. Nico blew out fur, giggling, “But sometimes you taste better than others.”

Maki shook Nico off with a low growl. Nico, flat out in the snow, still giggling, saw luminous lavender eyes looking down at her, that in any form couldn’t hide their glow at being near Nico. Maki flipped Nico’s scarf with her snout, Nico wrapped her arms around Maki’s ruff and pulled the werewolf down to bop a kiss on her nose. Then she pulled herself up as Maki whined a complaint.

“Come on, pretty girl. Time to catch Nico.” And Nico sprinted off, trying to beat the cold seeping through the back of her parka. Things would be warmer once they got home, Nico thought as her girlfriend raced ahead, tail bouncing playfully.

Chapter End Notes

Right ho. Christmas story finished, now I turn to Moonlight Becomes You, and then we buckle in for the finale of Casual Lunacy.

Spring is about to blast in; daffodils are bravely breaking through in my backyard and
my thoughts are turning to Shakespeare. I found a bookstore with more Neruda books than my usual one today and several new poems to love.

Take care!
De-Lovely

Chapter Summary

We finish off the evening at various locales.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk home had been as romantic as you could get when handholding meant Maki brushing Nico’s hand with her warm furry shoulder and serenading meant Maki howling what Nico suspected was an approximation of “It’s De-lovely.” The night was almost young, the air was nearly clear, Fangs' tech was done for the day, and Nico could go home, collapse on the couch and ACTUALLY relax, at least until tomorrow when she had to wake up early, head to the Cup o’ to work a shift and prep the Sunday/Monday food, and then go back to the theatre for a redo of Fangs tech. Nico was not looking forward to that, having to rework cues was boring. Yes, Nico knew it was necessary, but that didn’t make having to be there while it happened any more fun.

Maki was having a slightly less relaxing night, every time she snuffled at any part of Nico, she smelled Nico PLUS Kashima, which in wolf form, was bringing out the urge to chase Kashima down and...Maki raised her snout, sniffing the air, she could smell Kashima halfway across campus, going home with some woman other than Nico. Maki glanced at Nico, tempted to sprint off and return quickly. But then Nico ruffled the fur behind Maki’s ear and said, “Nico is happy to see you, pretty girl. I was feeling lonely.”

Maki sniffed Nico’s hand. Besides a huge dose of Kashima and a surge in vanilla and magic, there was fatigue and frustration and not so much of the delicious and delirious mix that would always entice Maki Nico-ward. A little more than half the moon shone brightly and Maki could feel that tug again, although not in any way she could currently articulate. She howled, full voice, then drifted a little ahead of Nico, wary of potential dangers. Maki had been eager to see Nico, practically desperate to push Nico toward her apartment so they could...Maki shook her head, that thought was a bit blurry, mostly an urge to roll around on Nico’s couch in her current form while Nico...Maki stopped, letting Nico catch up and stood taller when she felt Nico’s bare hand on her shoulder, the connection a magnet between them even if something in the atmosphere pricked at Maki’s primal instincts, friction seeding cantrips of doubt. It was probably only that Nico smelled so different, stage makeup and strangers, people Maki couldn’t make a mental map of from trace fragments. And Kashima, smelling bold and...forceful. Maki whined.

“What’s the matter, Maki?” Nico nudged Maki with her hip, “We’re almost home. You can tell Nico all about it, then Nico will tell you exactly why she smells so much like Kashima...Nico only wishes it was a funny story instead of a list of how many places can Kashima accidentally put her hands wrong. She was so busy trying to…”

Maki snarled. Nico stopped. Lavender eyes were glinting too green for Nico’s liking. Something was off...Nico smiled, hands back in her mittens, clapping them together to signal a new scene starting, one where Nico fixed the mood by talking about Nico.

“Come on, Maki, let’s hurry up. Nico is too too cold,” Nico very dramatically hugged herself while shivering, directly in front of the werewolf’s nose, Nico concentrating on memories of last night,
Maki at the piano, Maki sprawling underneath Nico, no human sounds passing those lips carved out of perfect pink...Maki pushed forward, sniffing eagerly, and Nico could feel the change, Maki’s renewed interest in her. Nico trotted past Maki, only two more streets to cross, then Maki gets the “don’t be jealous” lecture and Nico gets to brush her lips against something more yielding than the starched fabric of Dracula’s collar.

Nico was great at planning. Pick any strategy game, any historic battle, and Nico’s thinking would be the mirror image of the winning general. Nico knew how to identify a problem, create a plan to solve that problem, and put that plan into action. Easy peasy. Got Nico where she was right now. Which was up against the wall that was the realization that a stubborn werewolf girlfriend might not exactly be a problem Nico could use her strategic resources to solve.

Maki was sitting in front of Nico’s bedroom, obstinately blocking Nico’s passage. And trying to actively shove Nico toward the bathroom. When Nico refused to move, Maki would sniff Nico and whine, eyes lavender and pouty over a drooping snout.

“Maki is jealous, huh? Upset because Nico smells like Kashima.” Nico dropped back into the couch, wooly socks propped up on the table in front of her, “That’s cute for maybe 10 seconds, pretty girl, but we can’t have this. Nico is in a business where in order to maximize Nico’s talent and cuteness, I’m going to have to get close to sweaty, possibly hairy people who are not you.”

Maki whined, adding a particularly pathetic howled series of notes at the end. Then she leapt over the table and landed across Nico’s lap, rocking the couch.

“Ooooppphhh...ow, Maki, Nico wasn’t ready for that.” Nico spread her arms across the back of the couch, refusing to encourage Maki with petting. Maki took advantage of this to lick Nico’s face from chin to ear, then dragging her rough, wet tongue across Nico’s nose to slobber from the other ear back chin-ward, then nuzzling into Nico’s neck, softly whining.

“Uuugghhh” Nico pushed against Maki, but the werewolf had settled most of her weight on Nico’s lap and was snuffling her way down Nico’s sweater, distending the neckline, “This is ridiculous. Nico has better ways to spend her Saturday night than being a sponge for werewolf saliva.” Nico grabbed under Maki’s snout and forced the redhead to make eye contact. “MAKI.”

Maki froze.

Nico dislodged the werewolf from her lap. “Good. Nico is going to go shower, to get the smell of Kashima AND YOU off her.” Nico sighed as Maki whimpered. “While Nico is doing that, find something to wear. Nico needs to get you a werewolf backpack full of clothes.” Nico stood, arms crossed, “Actually, Nico will be right back.” Nico disappeared into Umi’s room, Maki shuffling after her, puzzled. Nico came back with a dark blue corduroy shirt, muttering, “Girlfriend who never brings clothes” surely falls under the “joint resources in case of emergency” clause.” Nico draped the shirt over Maki’s back, “Wear this. It’ll be a little tight, but Nico deserves a perq after all this. And no peeking at Nico in the shower.”

Maki sat back on her haunches and nodded. Nico chuckled, hands mussing the fur between Maki’s ears, tone playful, “Don’t worry, fur, red, standing up, eyes, jealous, green.”

Maki snorted, brow furrowed, suspicious.

Nico ignored her and continued. “Nico has an idea about how you can make this up to her.”
Human Maki might have wondered why Nico smelling brash and confident was such a draw, wolf Maki just clamped her jaw closed to stifle the thirsty whimper.

Smirking, Nico tapped her nose on Maki’s, voice a low thrill, “See you soon, pretty GIRL.”

Pleased. It was an odd feeling, Nozomi thought, her face open and cheerful, her loving fiancee on her arm, snuggling as close as she could because after dark, and a difficult tech done for the day. Satisfaction surrounded the two of them like a precious bubble and Nozomi slowed her steps to enjoy every breath of it.

“I was looking forward to a free day tomorrow,” Eli sighed.

Nozomi patted her hand, “You were looking forward to more time to study for midterms.”

Eli sounded hurt, “While lying in your bed, next to you, Nozomi.”

Nozomi, “Ah, you wouldn’t have gotten much studying done then, Eli-chi. You were very distracting on stage today. I’m glad Shalin’s running the light board not me, I’d be missing cues while you slink across the stage being sexy.”

Eli’s grip tightened, “It’s fun playing a villain. It’s so physical, looming over Micah, trying to snatch Harker before Dracula ruins the party.”

“Dracula, the Party Ruiner.” Nozomi started to cross Sheridan Road, but Eli pulled her north.

“Remember, Nozomi, we have to meet Hanayo. She’s in a panic. Someone saw Rin on the Lakefill.”

“Poor Rin.”

Eli shrugged. “More like nasty ‘People Threatening Rin’.”

“True.” Nozomi swung her hand down to grasp Eli’s and picked up the pace, “Let’s go help some cute girls.”

Rin’s eyes were a curious mix of two greens Nozomi thought as the small woman stared at her from her perch on the desk. Eli had just finished shaking Hanayo’s hand and was about to ask a question when Rin spoke, “Just tell ‘em, Kayo-chin.”

“Rin!” Hanayo turned, ignoring the other two women in the room.

“Everybody else you talk to seems to know,” Rin sounded peevish and Hanayo paled. Rin stood, anger altering her pixie cute appearance so she looked feral in the shadows of the half lit room. “Hi, I’m Rin. I’m a werewolf. If I don’t get captured by Kayo-chin’s STOOPID bosses, maybe I’ll rip something off you.”


Rin shrugged, and climbed into the lower bunk bed, “What’s the point?”

Eli squared her shoulders, voice calming. “We’re here to help both of you. Thank you for trusting us with your secret, Rin.”
Rin flipped her hand, tossing off Eli’s offering, “You're scared. Of me. And "They" get to do anything they want.”

Hanayo knelt in front of Rin, “No, they don’t. I’m making copies of everything for Professor Põder. They’ll be expelled; there might be criminal charges. It'll be a better case…”

“I DON’T WANT TO JUST SIT AND WAIT FOR SOMETHING BAD TO HAPPEN TO SOMEONE…” Rin shouted, hands gripping Hanayo's shoulders. “Maki’ll bite through walls if they do anything to…”

“Rin…” Hanayo hissed, frantic; Rin paled, suddenly nervous.

Nozomi tried to mirror Eli’s posture, with the addition of a mostly truth, “Nico-chi already told me. Don't worry.”

At that, Rin, though still angry, relaxed and Hanayo’s stir of panic calmed. Nozomi’s curiosity to see Maki in action as a wolf increased.

Hanayo pulled out her chair and offered the bed opposite the bunk for Nozomi and Eli to sit.

Nozomi kept an eye on Rin, while Eli began trying to coax what had happened out of Hanayo.

Hanayo hiccupped, “Two girls took a picture of Rin, we think. Anju has a “lost dog” story posted in some NU social media groups, with a reward. It’s the screenshot of Rin Tsubasa showed me.”

Eli nodded, taking care to continue to exude calm, “So you think they’ll get in contact with Anju?”

Hanayo nodded, hands atremor as she fidgeted, “And if I’m in the picture…”

“Just text Anju that you saw the dog this afternoon.” Nozomi leaned her head on Eli’s shoulder, “At the very least it will confuse them.”

“Sneaky.” Rin said, sounding impressed.

“Yep.” Nozomi waved her fingers in the air as if an invisible card trick were happening. “Delay, staying on the attack, and an honest face are your friends.”

Hanayo gulped, pulling out her phone and looked to Rin who nodded. “What do I say?”

Nozomi moved to lean over Hanayo’s shoulder, “Just that you saw the post somewhere and that dog ran up to you this afternoon.”

Hanayo typed with one finger and all of her concentration. Rin sighed and laid back on the bed.

Anju was staring at her phone, eyebrows very low, eyes narrowed and moving back and forth between the text from Hanayo and the email on her computer screen with a jpeg of Hanayo on the Lakefill, next to what looked a lot like the werewolf Tsubasa had been searching for. Anju had posted that picture around, frustrated by Tsubasa’s obsession distracting her from coming up with solutions to the transmitters crashing the Wirtz electrical infrastructure. Anju just needed everything to go exactly as planned once. For that, she needed Tsubasa focused on her problem, not the werewolf. And Koizumi had been too good to be true, it turns out. Now, and pale purple eyes gleamed with the strategies gelling behind them, how could Anju use this to her advantage?
Maki was pacing. In human form. Wolf would be a bad idea right now, Maki was restless enough, the moon still prickling under her skin...damn Neruda...and the nightmare...so many Kashima notes in the air around Nico earlier that Maki could still pick them up, which had led to waking in a cold sweat from a dream of Nico in white gown, offering her hand to a glowing eyed Kashima, who started to transform with a howl when Maki woke up. Nico had mumbled something, but not woken, and Maki had grabbed Nico’s fuzzy, oversized, pink bathrobe and fled to the couch, her heart racing, breathing out of control. At least Nico had put her outfit from earlier in the laundry hamper so Maki wasn’t actively confronted by it. She pulled Nico’s bathrobe up around her mouth and nose, concentrating on taking in as much sense information on Nico as she could absorb. She fell into the couch, kicking her legs in the air, then pumping them as if she were cycling a bike. She didn’t want Kashima to make her crazy; rationally, Kashima was low on the competition scale, Maki had NEVER sensed any hint of attraction from Nico when Kashima was around...but on a more primitive level, Maki was jealous. She pushed the imaginary bike to a sprint pace, legs flying, then flopped out full length.

“Maki?” Nico was standing in the door of her bedroom, nightgown back on.

Maki huffed, “I’m jealous.”

Nico sounded sad, Maki could smell the disappointment, “Nico knows, but…”

Maki flipped on her side, eyes glinting green at Nico, self awareness subduing her tone, “I’m jealous of the time Kashima gets to spend with you, the duet, the work you do together…”

“Oh.” Nico came into the room, sitting on the coffee table once again, “Nico is more interesting than writing papers.”

“Yeah.” Maki admitted. She had finished the paper, but pre Nico Maki would have considered her effort a rough first draft.

Nico tenderly stroked the line of Maki’s cheek, “That song you wrote for me was better than Porter. Please tell me you’re at least minoring in music.”

Maki sat up, taking Nico’s hand in hers, “We never really had this kind of a talk did we?”

“Nope,” Nico yawned, “There were too many conversations where Nico had to lecture you about taking proper care of your dog. Or wearing warmer clothes. Nico has given up on that.”

Maki laughed as she raised Nico’s hand to her lips, “Hi, I’m Maki Nishikino. I’m a freshman, I haven’t picked a major yet, but…” Maki slid Nico’s fingers so the tips were resting on her lips, “I live for playing the piano. And touching you.” Maki nipped at Nico’s fingers, “Oh, and I howl, very tunefully, pitch perfect, always in the direction of the moon.”

“Not true, sometimes you howl at Nico.” Nico tapped Maki’s nose, then ran her hand up in to Maki’s hair.

Maki leaned in, “It’s your skin that the moon lives in, Nico.” Maki swept Nico’s hair back behind her ear, “You glow. Brighter than anything. You’re amazing.”

As much as Nico thrived on compliments from discerning audience members, this was a conversation train she had to derail. “Nico has an early morning. And has already expressed her appreciation of your songwriting skills.” Nico winked, “Remember?”

Maki laid back down on the couch, robe falling open at the waist, enjoying the delicious mix of want starting to stir in Nico, “I can still feel your...”
“Good.” Interrupting her far too smug and unclothed to be that hot girlfriend, Nico stood, reciting her near death scene lines over and over again in her head, forcing herself to look away from Maki, “Nico likes to be thorough.”

“Nico?” Maki let a plead of a whimper out, her own hand tracing the line of her hip.

Nico turned, but her eyes were on the wall behind the couch, not Maki, “This is an important week to me, pretty girl. You said you’d help. So help.”

Maki started singing, staring at the ceiling,

"I've got you under my skin  
I've got you deep in the heart of me  
So deep in my heart, that you're really a part of me  
I've got you under my skin  
I've tried so hard not to give in  
I've said to myself this affair will never go so well  
But why should I try to resist, when baby will I know so well  
That I've got you under my skin  
I'd sacrifice anything come what might  
For the sake of having you near"

Maki knew Nico was moving closer, and amused, but she let Nico’s kiss surprise her, “We can get much nearer tomorrow night, pretty girl. Come to bed when you’re ready to sleep.”

A quick glimpse into the depths of ruby swirling with so many emotions Maki hadn’t identified yet, a finger tingling from a brief touch on Nico’s bare leg, the smell of contentment and sensuality and comfort filling the air of the room. Not all that Maki’d hoped for, but so much better than the nightmare,

"Don't you know, silly fool, you never can win  
Use your mentality, wake up to reality  
But each time I do, just the thought of you  
Makes me stop before I begin..."

Good night, Nico.” Maki whispered to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Right, and now I get this back on track.
The atmosphere had changed, Eli noticed. Rin’s…discontent had infected Nozomi. Nozomi had lost her ease, her head was down and they were hurrying back to the MidQuads. Eli started to say something, to ask if…, but each time she glanced in Nozomi’s direction, it was as though the darker haired woman had a storm swirling around her, mouth tight, all her energy directed into the path straight ahead. Eli picked up her own pace, determined to be at Nozomi’s side should she choose to open her thoughts.

Still silence as they climbed the stairs to Nozomi’s room, where Nozomi took off her coat quickly and turned on the reading light at her table, but not the overhead. She knelt, muttering, and her Tarot Deck appeared in her hand. Eli removed her own coat, flopping on the bed, opening the folder on her phone that held her notes on the history of Cuban dance.

Nozomi dealt out three cards, turned them over and stared. Eli tried to concentrate on the chronology of Ballet Nacional De Cuba, but Nozomi keep drawing more and more into herself, the tension ratcheting to a point where Eli had nearly decided that breaking into it was better than the weight Nozomi was somehow manifesting around herself when Nozomi turned, her turquoise eyes supernaturally aglow in the dim light, “We have to stop it, Eli.”

“We have to stop what, Nozomi?”

Nozomi gestured for Eli to join her, and as soon as Eli knelt beside her, Nozomi pulled the two flanking cards toward them. Both were reversed. The past slot held a Knight, golden and determined, rod over his shoulder; the future slot, the Fool.

“One of these cards would scream impetuous, bad decision making is about to take the stage, but both…” Nozomi’s voice sounded only warning notes.

“Are these about Rin?” Eli wondered.

“Maybe…” Eli had noticed that Nozomi never committed fully to a conclusion if she could help it, always leaving wiggle room somewhere. “Between the bad air at Rin and Hanayo’s and all the glitches at tech today, it feels like something’s building. Or breaking. Probably breaking.”

“There does seem to be a lot of stress between Rin and Hanayo, Rin disagreeing with Hanayo’s decisions.” The relationship strain between the two young women was obvious even to Eli.

Nozomi shrugged, “Rin knows Hanayo cares, they trust each other, they’ll be fine…” Nozomi turned to face Eli, “These cards…Rin might act hastily and upset the plans you’ve been making with Hanayo, especially if she thinks Anju is a threat.”

Eli wondered where Nozomi found such assurance about Rin and Hanayo’s relationship. Eli had
been studying Tarot, Nozomi suggesting several books. Eli had chosen the one that had the most practical language. None of the cards on the table had anything to do with a relationship or romance. But only on the surface, Eli reminded herself. Nozomi had brought her own map of worry to the table and the cards had given her this key. “So why do you think they’re okay?” Eli pressed.

“Oh, Eli-chi, I don’t need the cards for that.” Nozomi shook her head at Eli’s earnest worry. “What we do need to be concerned about is how badly Rin might endanger herself doing something… STOOPID.”

Eli had a flash of feral, angry, frightened Rin, left alone to imagine what Anju and company were plotting against Hanayo, and realized the cards had pinpointed the more urgent problem.

“We can talk to them, reinforce the precautions we’ve taken…”

“I don’t think that would be enough.” Nozomi shuffled the cards, a signal she had come to a decision, “Rin won’t listen to us, but Nico-chi will listen to me. Maki will listen to her. And…”

“Maki can talk to Rin.” Eli finished. “You’re not Nico’s favorite person right now, you know.”

Nozomi shrugged, a graceful gesture that drew all of Eli’s attention, “How can you say that, Eli… Nico-chi loves me…” Nozomi giggled, “at least more than she does Kashima.”

Eli threw back her head and laughed, staying half propped against Nozomi’s bed, glad for the lighter mood, “Very low bar, my love, very low bar.”

Nozomi turned, eyes now full of warmth and only focused on the present, “I’ll be sure to be at my most charming.”

“No too charming.” Eli leaned forward, “Save that for me.”

“As you wish.” Nozomi turned off the desk lamp, a different kind of glow in her eyes, one that sent a thrill down Eli’s spine.

Maki had dragged herself out of bed to watch Nico go through her morning routine and then they could eat breakfast together. Afterwards, Maki was going to go back to bed. Nico ruffled her tangled, red hair with a tender look, “You look so tired, pretty girl.”

Maki would have grumbled, but Nico only spoke the truth, “Where do you get your energy?” Maki had waved off Nico’s offer of coffee, planning to sleep ‘til lunch.

“Nico doesn’t take breaks from sleep to howl at the moon and pace tracks in people’s living rooms.” Nico’s quick breakfast was a fried egg on a piece of toast. Maki had just opted for toast, to give her something to chew on while Nico chattered.

“I think this week, I’ll make scones instead of muffins or cookies. Maybe Nico will try some savory ones, I ordered some interesting cheeses for sandwiches, but give Nico a grater and magic can happen. Plus, Nico’s going to need food to eat on the run this week.”

“Do you have to work a lot this week?” Maki buttered another slice of bread. Nico had chosen a particularly chewy whole grain loaf so it was fun to listen to the crackle as the knife edged the toasted bread, scraping down to melt the butter into the softer center.

“Tuesday morning Nico has no classes so then. And Nico can’t find anyone to cover my Thursday
afternoon shift, which is bad because we’re having a preview audience that night. SO Nico will be rushed.” Nico took a sip of coffee, enjoying her morning view, Maki, amethyst eyes half closed with sleep, frowning with intensity as she applied butter to toast more methodically than Nico had ever seen anyone, red hair bouncing forward to screen her eyes, Umi’s shirt not nearly buttoned enough for Umi, but just perfect for a minor thrill that would get Nico through her morning.

Maki looked up from the toast, amethyst awakened by swirling neon, full fanged grin smug, “You’re remembering last night.”

“Pffftttt” Nico stuck out her tongue, “How do you know I’m not planning tonight. You’re really not good with keeping your clothes on,” Nico pointed her mug at Maki’s shoulder as Umi’s shirt slid off it. Maki blushed, and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Oh, don’t do that, pretty girl. Nico is only teasing.” Nico put down the mug, reaching down to stroke Maki’s thigh.

Maki turned her chair a little to the side, ignoring Nico.

“Anyway,” Nico’s tone turned practical, “Nico has something for the cutest, warmest girlfriend in the world.”

Nico couldn’t help but be amused as Maki scooted her chair marginally closer to Nico, obviously curious. Nico reached into her cardigan pocket and pulled out a key on a cutesy plush heart keychain, “I asked Umi to make you a key to the apartment. Just text her if you’re going to come over.” Nico waited until Maki hastily turned to face her, surprise widening her eyes, mouth open, hand nearly covering it, “Rehearsal will run late all week, Nico will have to stay for notes and it’d be nice to come home to someone to cuddle.”

“Nico…”

Nico leaned in, with a quick, demanding kiss, and while her werewolf girlfriend was still blinking, turned Maki’s hand over and put the key in “Nico doesn’t expect you to cook for her, but if you know any places that make great desserts, Nico always enjoys a midnight snack after rehearsal.”

“I.I…” Maki’s heard herself near tears and paused, to compose herself, “I might know some.”

“Great,” Nico hopped out of her chair, popping another kiss on Maki’s forehead, “I’ll see you later then.”

Maki nodded, watching the key turn in front of her.

“Lock up when you leave, pretty girl.” Nico tossed over her shoulder as she slid an arm into her parka.

“Wait, I’ll walk you.” Maki put the key down.

“You’re not dressed for the weather,” Nico might have sounded complacent.

Maki reached for her buttons, “I can change.”

Nico giggled, “Then you won’t have pockets. Just come kiss Nico goodbye, silly girl.”

Maki, one button barely holding the shirt on, stood over Nico and took a deep breath. After a long moment, Nico’s eyes tilted up to meet hers, ruby depths full of wry humor, “Yeah, that’s cheating.” And Nico’s hands were suddenly under the shirt, on her hips, Nico kissing her way to Maki’s neck,
“Try going back to sleep now, pretty girl.” Nico winked and let herself out as Maki managed to make it to the couch on wobbly legs, flopping over the back, breathless again, senses swirling with Nico. Nico had no idea how much of Maki’s day was spent just trying not to notice Nico. But Maki wouldn’t get to that part of the day for awhile yet.

Hanayo was nervous. She had to go over to the sub basement again, to check that everything was running. She let it go long enough that by now all three of her bosses should be at the Wirtz getting ready for another day of Fangs’ tech rehearsal.

Cold, windy afternoon. She hadn’t dressed warmly enough, leaving hastily rather than have another standoff with Rin about the situation. She wrapped her scarf tighter, around her mouth, opening the door with a bare, shivering hand. The sub basement was never the warmest place, but it would be better than this. Two sets of stairs and then opening the door into a room she’d come to dread, numbers constantly running, machinery continually humming, the sense the walls were encroaching on her somehow…

Hanayo pushed her glasses back up her nose as she paused outside the door to the office, opening it, she headed straight to the laptop, flipping it open, typing in her password, focusing only on calling up all the feeds, not letting the atmosphere enclose and oppress her.

And then she felt the arm slide across her shoulders and screamed.

“I’m impressed with you, Koizumi,” Anju’s whispered slithered out of a shadow, “Not only are you cute as a button, here you are, even now, trying to protect your” Anju’s turned Hanayo’s chair, crouching so her narrowed, vengeful eyes were on a level with Hanayo’s “fiancé.”

Hanayo froze, hands gripping the sides of her chair as Anju loomed closer, “So I’m going to offer you a deal.” Anju put her hand over Hanayo’s left one and pushed down, two fingers cutting into the skin, “Are you listening?”

Hanayo nodded, frenetic thoughts crowding out everything but panic.

“Good.” Anju stood, one hand digging into Hanayo’s shoulder, the other resting with deceptive gentleness on her cheek, “You are going to keep helping ME.” There was a pause as Anju measured Hanayo’s reaction and seemed pleased at the amount of terror radiating off her captive audience. Anju leaned in closer as she flicked Hanayo’s cheek hard enough that Hanayo’s glasses tilted, “And I won’t tell Tsubasa where to find her werewolf.”

Hanayo blanked. She had no way to process this, the near violence in the air, the menace, the openly stated threat to Rin.

“Koizumi!” Anju shook the seat.

“Why are you doing this?” Hanayo bleated, eyes wide.

“Ah, that’s my business.” Anju shoved the chair back into the desk, unrelenting in pressing her intimidation. “And none of yours. Just make sure everything stays on line. And keep your mouth shut.”

Hanayo could feel her teeth grinding. She could brave this for Rin. She pushed her glasses back up and let herself be impressed by the firmness she mustered in her reply, “Leave Rin alone.”

“Gladly.” Anju shrugged, flipping her hair ends, already bored.
“Good.” Hanayo deliberately turned her chair and her back on Anju and began swiping open feeds, pulling out her phone to text Erena that everything was on line. The door closed as the room lightened. Then, shaking, Hanayo let the sobs out.

“Nozoooomi...” Nico wailed as her dark haired friend dragged her from the green room, down the hallway and into an empty room, “Nico still has to do her eyes.”

The door closed behind Nozomi, who didn’t bother with any introductory chit chat, “You have to get Maki to stop Rin.”

Nico chucked her chin forward, lips slightly open in a half frown, surprised by Nozomi, “First, Nico is not the boss of Maki and second, stop Rin from what?”

Nozomi, now that she was certain she’d captured Nico’s attention, toned down the shock value, “When Eli and I got back to room last night, the cards had a warning.”

“So the deck jumped up and yelled ‘STOP RIN’?” Nico crossed her arms, not wanting to think about Rin and Maki in some kind of danger.

“The Knight of Rods reversed is a bad card for the impulsive, the reversed Fool gives an even stronger message.”

Nico kicked at a chair, “I am not texting Maki to tell her friend to unreverse The Fool and disarm The Knight? What the hell, Nozomi.”

“No.” Nozomi’s voice crashed down on the second syllable, serious, “The cards tell me someone’s going to do something impulsive and it’s not going to go well.”

“Did something happen?” Nozomi was too serious for Nico to continue deflecting.

“Hanayo thinks her bosses might be sent a picture of her and Rin in wolf form.”

Nico’s fists were clenched, her jaw jutting sideways as she chewed the inside of her lip, “All right, I’ll text Maki.”

N: Hey, Pretty Girl (∩ o ˂ -indent). Nico is in a rush, but Nozomi’s SUPER worried (~_~;) about Rin doing something stupid so go talk her out of it.

N: Don’t do anything stupid either. Fangs need Nico to rescue it and Nico needs someone to cuddle after (ɔ^ ³(-indent)c)

Hanayo blinked her eyes and looked up. Somehow the room seemed gloomier. She’d been staring at numbers scrolling by so long when she closed her eyes she still saw neon green and red columns. 7:14. Rin would be back from training by now and worried. Then the door burst open, Rin’s eyes all neon green and cool suspicion, no kindness or warmth. Hanayo watched her search the room for anyone else, then move closer, sniffing where Anju had been, lingering on Hanayo’s sleeves and shoulders, a low growl as she recognized how steeped in fear Hanayo was.

“What did she do, Kayo-chin?” Rin barked.
“N….nothing. She just w...w...wants my help.” Hanayo stuttered out, heart fluttering, unease impossible to hide from Rin.

“Quit.” Rin demanded, hands on her hips, implacable in the middle of what had become an emotional torture zone for Hanayo, “never come here again.”

Hanayo shook her head, reaching a hand out to Rin, “I can’t. They might hurt someone.”

“They’re hurting you.” Rin said it quietly, then nodded her head. Hanayo knew she’d reached some kind of decision, “I’m stopping them. Go home, Kayo-chin.”

“Rin, wait! Let me call M…”

The door slammed before Hanayo could finish but by the time she got to the corridor, Rin was out of sight. Hanayo took some relief from not finding clothes. Rin wasn’t in wolf form yet.

Nico had a break while Micah had to run the Dracula/Three Sisters gauntlet. So she finally had a chance to pull out her makeup kit and put the heavy on the purples eyeliner/eyeshadow combination she’d settled on to help the audience subconsciously track Mina’s stress levels. She’d skipped applying the base layer thanks to Nozomi so now it was just straight to no letters from Jonathan and Lucy fading mid level shadowing. With a mascara boost for her eyelashes. As she was about to freshen her lipstick, she remembered her pre rehearsal texts to Maki. No reply, according to her phone, which puzzled Nico and then she remembered the no clothes, no pockets daily werewolfing dilemma...no place to carry your phone. Umi should be back at the apartment by now, if Maki were still there, Umi could pass on the message about Rin.

Maki paced Nico’s living room, still only wearing Umi’s shirt, running the various combinations of plus key, sans clothes, and coming up with no good solution to having to leave in werewolf form that also had her leaving with the key. Nico would surely object to fang marks on any of her purses and Maki had already ruined enough of Nico’s favorite things. But the key was important. As was the ability to lock the door behind her. So more pacing, more serious thinking. In werewolf form, if Maki had the key in her mouth and got startled, it could easily get lost. Which wasn’t a responsible girlfriend kind of thing to do. But waiting until whenever Nico got done would just turn this into a tomorrow problem and tomorrow, Maki had an early class, with a quiz. Which she would score better on if she didn’t try to hold a pen with her paws. Much more pacing. Much more thinking.

Umi opened the apartment door, stepped in, stepped back when she saw what Maki was wearing and ducked into her bedroom, coming out a minute later with sweats, a t-shirt, a pair of flip-flops, and her eyes closed, “Please.”

Maki took the clothes into Nico’s room to change, stopping to sweep the key off the table and make sure it was safe in her pocket. She folded the blue shirt, handing it to Umi, who was making herself an espresso. Umi shook her head, “Keep it.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you like an espresso?” Umi asked.

“No thanks.” Maki would have preferred bare feet to flip flops, but the icy ground temperatures would probably change her mind.
“Nico called me. She thought you might not have your phone because…”

“Werewolf…” Maki finished.

Umi coughed, eyes closing briefly, as she relived the no clothes trauma, “Exactly.” Umi chose a floral demitasse cup, “Nozomi thinks Rin might do something rash...because of the cards...and she asked Nico to tell you.”

Maki felt her heart skip faster. Was Rin in trouble? If anyone was going to upset the “let the criminals incriminate themselves” plan, it would be Rin. Maki rushed to the window at the front of the apartment, throwing it open, leaning out and howling a question.

The answer came too soon. Rin was hunting.

Chapter End Notes

So what's your go to breakfast?
Snares

Chapter Summary

We get some insight into the villains. And a fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rin had left Kayo-chin fueled by anger, a wave of anger just a fast walk hunting an intrusive, unwelcome scent wasn’t going to burn through. It was time to show the people harassing Kayo-chin what they were up against, how dangerous Rin could be...a howl, Maki worried. Rin threw her head back and let out her need to take action, her frustration, her resolve.

Maki raced toward campus, tempted to try a partial transformation so she could get a better smell of what Rin was feeling, but she’d never tried to “pause” a transformation. She needed to reason with Rin. Rin’s howl had come from a human throat, maybe Rin was planning to “reason” with whoever she was in search of. Maki picked up the pace, irritated at both the flipflops and the fact that Umi had held her in place until Maki told her what was going on. Umi would probably call Nico, but if Nico was still in rehearsal she wouldn’t see her phone. Which would give Maki time. If she had to fight Rin to stop Rin, she didn’t want Nico to see it. Maybe she could force Rin back to her house. Or get her to agree to wait and trust Hanayo and everyone else. Rin might be easier to intimidate in wolf form, although they’d never had a real fight and Maki wasn’t sure how far she’d have to go to control her fellow werewolf, but if Maki could keep Rin talking in her human form...

One more question from an actor and Tsuabasa Kira was going to forget her manners. Bad enough Anju was constantly nagging her about finishing the amplifier and the obnoxious Nico Yazawa was constantly flouncing by, distracting everyone by double checking everything to ensure it was on a level suiting a “future superstar of stage and screen.”

“Excuse me?” A soft voice behind Tsuabasa, kind of shy sounding and she turned to see one of the Weird Sisters, the one who was dating the lighting specialist, coming up behind her, dressed in the clinging, cleavagy, draping all over the set nightmares of nightgowns the breathy costume designer had chosen. Costumes should not be traffic hazards. “Sorry to bother you, I’m Eli.” Blue eyes with super long eyelashes blinked at Tsuabasa. “I’m having a little bit of trouble with getting out of the coffin...” there was a pause while the tall blonde flipped up her nightgown, exposing bare leg, “I think it’s the dress.”

Of course, it’s the dress, Tsuabasa grumbled to herself, the coffin works perfectly fine.

The blonde hesitated, “Could you show me how to work the lid?”

Tsubasa sighed, bit back a snarky comment and jumped up on the stage. Time to end this.

Erena Todo was finding herself with downtime now that the tech was running smoother. She wasn’t
enjoying it. That left her moments to contemplate how three friends had taken a late night drinking session about magic and things that walked the night and turned it into something out of a thriller, with cobbled together tech blinking incessantly in the shadowed basement, and the atmosphere between her and her fellow co conspirators starting to feel a bit like something from John Carpenter’s Thing had set in, either the chill of Antarctica or the other...sure, rumor had it that somewhere in the Tech Sub Basement, someone did have 5 degrees above absolute zero locked down somewhere in its corridors, but that wasn’t what was raising Erena’s hackles. Tsubasa’s jonesing for a werewolf pelt was probably cabin fever and at least it got her out of their shared dorm, away from the flickering screens endlessly looping Cat People and Gingersnaps. And Anju, those first few meetings, the flirtatious hairflips, the leaning on Erena’s arm, the giggles when Erena would point out stupid things straight couples were doing, that had dulled to an occasional wink and one night last week when an exhausted Anju had rested her head on Erena’s shoulder...and even that had felt a bit off.

But, Erena had seen the girl changing into a doggish/wolfish creature video so Tsubasa wasn’t hallucinating. Just missing deer hunting. And Erena had witnessed Anju make a rock glow, its intensity linked to the numbers registering at rehearsal, but right now, exhausted, 71 plus hours into a no sleep three day tech weekend, Erena couldn’t remember what she wanted...and then Nozomi, damn Nozomi with the headache, the whining, and the pain and...just then, Nozomi whispered “oh no’ from behind the lightboard and every alarm cell in Erena’s body went off…

Erena turned slowly, pain pounding in her own head, “Tojo?”

Nozomi glanced up, mouth gaping stupidly, green eyes bright with shock, “I...I was putting in an adjustment on a cue and…”

Erena was next to her in seconds, there were no numbers, there was nothing, just the blink of a unprogrammed lightboard awaiting its first input…”What did you do?”

“I don’t know.” Nozomi reached out a finger, about to tap a button, when Erena grabbed it and held it above the board, every ounce of self control she had required not to snap Nozomi’s finger in half, “Touch nothing.”

“But I can fix it.” Nozomi freed her finger with her other hand. Erena knew she was in no state to reprogram the show, with 72 exhausted hours of waking now in the tank, but she was damned if she was going to let the ass who had just wiped out days of adjustments mess with her board.

Elena spit out the words, green eyes quartz hard, “Just find me my clipboard.”

Anju had hung up the last item in the men’s dressing room, tomorrow, there would be a little lecture on the proper after care of your costume. Now, now, she could leave and finally sleep, sweet dreams of home coming clearer every night as she got closer to her goal. But when she gripped the knob to leave, the door refused to open...Anju shook the door, but there was no give, somehow the door had been locked...or jammed...or….

“Kotori?” Anju called out; Kotori had taken the women’s dressing room, maybe she hadn’t finished yet.

“Hmmmm?” Anju heard Kotori, it sounded like she was somewhere in the green room.

“Kotori?!??!!” Anju was rougher with the door, to no effect; she was tempted to kick it, “The door’s jammed.”
“Oh no.” Kotori’s sad, quiet tones slithered into the room.

Typical Kotori, Anju thought, emotion before action. “Can you try to open the door? Please.”

“Oh okay.” Kotori’s attempt was a gentle pull; Anju balled her fists.

“Try harder.” Anju hissed.

“Let me get someone...Tsubasa maybe, she’s good with doors, right?” Kotori’s voice faded and Anju heard the green room door close.

Everything about this show was intolerable, Anju thought, and grunting with frustration, kicked the door with her heel as she turned. It rattled but stayed as stubborn as before. Disgusted, Anju considered the the bench. Would a nap be more useful than a little costumer’s revenge switching out pants between characters?

Maki had ditched the flipflops. No more howls from Rin, but Maki had just hit Harris Hall and Rin’s mix of anger and terror was blowing off the Lake, mingled with the Rin’s usual sweat, warm spiciness, and damp Spring earth scents. Maki picked up her pace, oblivious to cold and the few people she pushed through. It was dark. Maki was navigating by feel and nose. The ground bit into her feet as she sped toward her friend.

Rin was in motion, pacing, behind the Wirtz building, the angles of her face blades in the spillover light. She hadn’t changed yet; Maki let herself be relieved for a moment, then refocused, her voice a sharp bark, reminding herself this was not a negotiation, it was an intervention.

“RIN!”

Rin turned, crouching low, lips in a snarl, “If you’re not here to help me, Maki, go away.”

“Hanayo wouldn’t want this.”

Rin was suddenly in Maki’s face, snapping, “Don’t tell me what Kayo-chin wants.”

Maki pulled back, not ceding ground, but allowing Rin some space, “You know I’m right. This isn’t how we’re handling this.”

Rin shook herself, her voice a guttural growl deep from her chest, “This is how I’m handling this.”

Maki closed her eyes, breathing deeply, Nico was in the building behind her, the building behind her was important to Nico…”Protect Nico, protect Rin,” Maki told herself as she stepped forward, hands open and ready to grab, knees bent to absorb shock, fangs showing, shoulders wide, chest open, making herself as large as possible, stepping forward with a yell, “Stop.”

“No.”

"Rin." It was a growl, a low dangerous one, rolling through Rin's name, a primal demand for the smaller werewolf to bow to Maki’s will.

Rin’s nose elongated as her brows met over furious neon green, hands snapping off her track pants, leaping. Maki raised her forearm and Rin’s jaw caught it, teeth pressing into the skin as Rin’s momentum drove them both out of the snow onto concrete. Pain, Maki wondered if there was blood yet, before all her concentration went to not transforming. She had anticipated Rin’s initial move and
now her other forearm shoved into Rin’s throat, Maki forcing them both to the ground, “Stop this.” Maki gritted out, jaw clenched with effort as her knee drove into Rin’s stomach, forcing the challenging werewolf to whimper. Rin bit down and Maki flinched enough that Rin was able to wriggle free, fur bristling, tail stretched out behind her, now circling a Maki who was hunched in the snow, steadying herself with her bleeding arm, watching Rin closely for an opening, shifting to stay between Rin and the building. Rin jumped forward, colliding with a solid Maki, trying to force her back to the ground and Maki wrapped both arms around Rin’s neck, falling sideways, catching Rin off guard with the change and using her legs to flip their position as Rin writhed and snarled.

“Stop it, Rin.” Maki squeezed Rin’s neck, knee in the wolf’s flank adding pressure, “Please. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Rin howled and tried to scoot sideways, but couldn’t shake Maki’s grip. Maki raced frantically through ways to get Rin to submit before Maki was forced to change, but Rin’s frantic efforts to free herself left little for Maki to do but act on instinct. Another bite and Maki had Rin completely flat, controlling her head, half lying across Rin’s back, mouth near the wolf’s ear, as loud a growl as Maki could manage in human form demanding Rin’s surrender. How much fight would Rin have in her?

Tsubasa was watching as Eli managed to catch her gown on the inside of the coffin for the third time, each time nearly pulling the fabric off, Tsubasa had sanded and finished these herself, there was nothing for cloth to catch on. She knelt down, fingers reaching out for where the fabric was actually caught, was that a screw jammed between the base and the wall, she looked up and Eli was hunkering down, gown still sliding off her shoulder, blond hair falling between her... Tsubasa looked back to the caught fabric when another voice entered her nightmare, “Is there a problem with the nightgown? That fabric tears so easily.”

The damn breathy costumer, Tsubasa thought, about to stand up as Eli moved toward the newcomer, but Eli’s gown was still snared and she bumped into Tsubasa, lost her balance, and they both fell half into the coffin, Tsubasa’s legs now wrapped in flowing white fabric, her head lowered into the base of the coffin, Eli’s torso braced on hers. Weren’t dancers supposed to be feather light? Why did this one feel like a rugby forward? Tsubasa grunted as Kotori helped Eli up, and then she heard the sound underneath her, silk shearing. Kotori’s hand was instantly underneath Tsubasa’s shoulder, levering her up with surprising strength, “What happened? We don’t have any more of this fabric.”

“I’m really sorry,” Eli, eyes downcast, crossed her arms over her chest, “There’s something inside that keeps catching the fabric.”

Golden eyes glared at Tsubasa and pouty indignation flowed across Kotori’s no longer mild mien. “I was promised smooth interiors.”

“I sanded smooth interiors.” Tsubasa defended herself.

Kotori flipped the hem of Eli’s nightgown at Tsubasa’s nose, “Smooth didn’t tear that.”

Tsubasa glanced down at the coffin, definitely a polished gray glint of something, “Someone put a screw there.”

Kotori shook her head, “I can’t replace these.” She sighed, rolled her eyes, shared a glance with Eli and then batted her eyelashes at Tsubasa, “Can’t you fix it for us?”

A buzzing. Kotori pulled out her phone, read the text message, and smiled, stroking Tsubasa’s elbow, “I’m sure you can handle it. I have to run. My ride’s here.” Kotori skipped to the stairs, and
stopped halfway up the aisle, “Oh, the men’s dressing room door is jammed. I think someone’s stuck in there.”

Eli, arms still crossed across her chest, smiled shyly at Tsubasa, “Long weekend, right.”

Biting back profanities, Tsubasa shoved the coffin, “Just stay out of this until I tell you otherwise.”

Erena glanced up from the lightboard, to where Nozomi was leaning over a seat, giggling, “What’s so funny?”

Nozomi froze, then turned slowly, stretching languidly, “People in costume always look so silly on stage in the bright lights.”

The only person on stage now was Nozomi’s girlfriend, still dressed in her cling to any curve nightgown. Silly wasn’t the word Erena would have used, but Tojo wasn’t exactly equipped with the standard set of interactions.

Nozomi was looming over the board, reaching for the list of cues, before Erena, distracted by Eli adjusting her gown, noticed her approach, “Can I help?”

Erena pushed Nozomi back, “No. Please. You’ve done enough. Go help Eli out of her gown or something.”

See that was the other thing about Nozomi, conversations always turned to…Erena shuddered, she wasn’t going to go down that thought corridor, not with Anju so prickly as opening night neared.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and continuing to keep up with this story. It keeps me going.

Had a surprise visit from my youngest brother last week so instead of writing I was taking a much needed mental vacation catching up on K-pop (does the Banana Allergy Monkey song get stuck in anyone’s else’s head?), watching the end of Re:Mind, and trying Disc Golf for the first time (muddy but fun). Hope you’re having some fun, comments much appreciated, and TAKE CARE!
Bitten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico’s heart was racing. Umi had sent the text about Maki and Rin 20 minutes ago, when Nico had been onstage and not near her phone. Nico had never changed so fast, leaving her clothes in a heap on the dressing room floor, to the surprise of everyone else in the room. Kotori would understand and Nico didn’t really give a damn what Anju thought. Barely into her coat, she sprinted out the front door, listening for any clue. Umi texted she was going to call Kotori and pick up Honoka, but Nico wasn’t going to wait…

Perhaps behind the building? Nico sprinted to the corner, parka open, wind cold, and heard the growling. As she cleared the corner, her heart stopped for a moment, there was Maki, barefoot, in a t-shirt and sweats, desperately trying to pin a wolfish Rin to the ground. Even in this light, Nico could see where Maki was torn and bleeding.

Nico. Maki hesitated for an instant, her head lifting away from Rin’s neck as the smell of musk and peach and vanilla and magic and…fear hit her system. Rin dipped lower and shoved forward with her hindquarters, breaking a distracted Maki’s hold, running toward where Nico had come from, there must be a door, people would be coming out, Rin could…

Too many impulses, tongue flicking out, eyes narrowing on Rin’s neck, the waning moon teasing as it turned to strength, Nico’s fear and worry, adrenaline zinging like electrified air around all of them, Rin’s bloodlust…Maki snarled, shaking her head, ears flattening, and in a second changed, shredding constricting clothes with her claws, as Rin charged in Nico’s direction.

“No” it was a scream and a howl and Rin’s neck was in Maki’s mouth and Nico was standing very still and the world froze…

“Rin?” Hanayo’s voice broke through the whining, warring howls.

With a new surge, Rin pushed backwards, and Maki was on the ground and Nico was cursing and Hanayo was running and the air was wet with worry and fury and blood. Rin flipped, but couldn’t grab Maki’s neck so snapped her jaw on Maki’s front leg and the red wolf whimpered and Nico’s smell suddenly changed from fear to determination.

“Stop it.” Nico’s voice rang across the Lakefill, without being a shout, “Rin.”

“Rin?” Hanayo’s despairing plea merged with Nico’s command, and terror darkened her usual sunshine, sweet rice, and wisteria scent. Rin was confused. Where was the threat to Kayo-chin? That moment cost Rin her temporary advantage and Maki was back on her paws, snarling and about to leap. Nico, looming suddenly, was heading toward Maki and Rin felt arms around her neck, Kayo-chin sobbing into her shoulders, “Rin...please, stop.” When had Kayo-chin starting smelling this dim, this heartsore?

Maki was limping, glaring at Rin, about to make a final charge and Nico was there with Maki, near Maki, connected, both their eyes locked on Rin’s, Nico reflecting Maki’s growing assurance, not a drag on her...like Kayo-chin was dragging Rin back...but Kayo-chin would never not help, so why...Rin crouched, uncertain and Maki loped over, easily, boldly, ignoring the sharp pain in her foreleg, forcing the smaller werewolf’s head under her own head and chest. Nico was trying not to shiver as the Lakefill went quiet and Umi and Honoka tore around the corner. Nico held up a hand,
not taking her eyes off the werewolves and Umi held her bo staff at the ready in one hand and Honoka back with the other.

Maki’s move had forced Hanayo to let go and she was in the snow, shoving her glasses in her coat pocket so she could wipe away the tears. Rin whimpered, frightened, pacing a half circle, but Maki’s weight on her head and shoulders was a yoke, a constant reminder of the larger wolf’s menace. Rin let out a few half hearted whimpers of complaint, but Maki’s musk just intensified, half her body weight forcing Rin lower, and Rin realized that her mistake had been rushing in Nico’s direction. And as Maki controlled Rin’s motion, powerful, protective, sensual, possessive, all that washed over Rin, already struggling with her own mate’s fear and worry. Maki growled, letting Rin up but only to bite the nape of Rin’s neck, rumbling a threat, deliberately puncturing the fur and muscle, and a pained Rin whined surrender. With a huff, certain she’d gotten her message across, Maki tapped Rin with her chin and stepped to the side, Rin immediately rushing to Kayo-chin, who touched the bloody marks Maki had left, “Rin…”

Rin whined and pushed Hanayo to her feet, neither of them glancing back to where Maki held the ground in front of Nico. When they had moved out of sight, Maki shifted to her left foreleg, sagging as Nico knelt in front of her, about to reach for her leg. Maki yelped.

“We have to take care of that, pretty girl. Rin did a job on you.”

Maki growled, then lowered her head with a softer whine.

“Yes, Nico knows you didn’t want to bite your friend.” Nico closed her eyes, and pushed her forehead into the soft fur of Maki’s, “It was hard to watch you get hurt, Maki. Let me take care of you, please.”

The softness in Nico’s tone, the calm concern, the care, drained Maki’s adrenaline and she stumbled, falling to her side.

“Honoka get the car, Umi, help me with her before someone else comes out here,” Nico was grateful it was a cold, dark February night and the Lakefill was empty. She could feel herself trembling, her arms unsteady as she gathered Maki into them, but Nico wouldn’t scream or cry. Tomorrow. Alone. Scream and cry. Nico bit her lip, willing warmth into a frigid Maki as Umi’s arms helped her cradle the wounded werewolf.

Eli was wrapping her scarf around her neck, while the persistent Nozomi was getting shooshed away by a territorial Erena one last time. Kotori, her face showing worry, was zipping her long, fawn colored coat closed.

“Did you hear from…”

Kotori pursed her lips, fumbling her steps, startled but when she saw it was Eli who asked, she nodded, choosing her words carefully in still working theatre, “Honoka said they were heading north in Nico’s car. 10 minutes ago.”

Nozomi skipped up to Eli, her arm sliding through the dancer’s, “We’ll walk you home.”

“Thanks.”

They had made it to the Nishikinos. Umi and Honoka had carried a whimpering Maki in to the
nearest cushioned surface, the couch in the media room. Maki’s mother was dealing with the wounds, Maki’s father was pacing almost as nervously as Nico in the kitchen now that he’d made cocoa and coffee for everyone. Umi and Honoka sat at the kitchen island, holding hands, Honoka strangely subdued. Umi watched Nico, amber eyes warmed by empathy. Nico flopped onto a stool suddenly, grabbing the mug in front of Umi and chugging.

“No creamer.” Nico coughed.

“No.” Umi’s response was mild as she considered if thumping Nico’s back was needless or necessary.

“Hey, Nico?” Honoka’s voice was nigh on a whisper. Umi squeezed her hand.

“Huh?” Nico blinked, dropping the mug.

“Maki’ll be okay, right?”

Nico closed her eyes, unaware of the attention being paid to her by the pacing Dr. Nishikino, very aware of her wounded girlfriend’s werewolf hearing, “She’ll be fine, Honoka.” Nico glanced to Dr. Nishikino, hoping for confirmation. “It’s just cold and shock and she heals fast.”

He rested a hand on Nico’s shoulder, briefly. “Probably more exhaustion than shock.”

Honoka nodding, more cheerful. Umi released her hand, “It’s getting late. We should return to the apartment. Kotori will be worried.”

“Take my car.” Nico smiled at her friends, “Thanks for everything.”

“Of course,” Umi stood, relaxing as Honoka leaned in to her side, arm around the taller girl’s waist. “Let us know how Maki’s doing.”

Nico nodded, then poured herself half a mug of coffee, adding creamer, enjoying the calm of an empty kitchen as Dr. Nishikino escorted Honoka and Umi to their coats. But a moment was all Nico wanted or needed and she welcomed the sight of Maki’s mother leaning in the doorframe, hair much neater than Maki ever managed, Nico thought, not surprised to find herself grasping at silly thoughts to break the tension.

“She’s mostly asleep, no damage that won’t heal by Tuesday,” Dr. Nishikino was feeling a new kind of parental as she prepared to hand off her daughter’s care. It was an unsettling sensation, but if she didn’t move out of the way, Nico would barrel through her, she realized watching as the tension in the much smaller woman face’s eased and a private smile replaced anguished lines. Nico jumped off her stool, careworn but still with the spring of tenacity and Dr. Nishikino stepped aside, “I think she wants you with her.”

Maki was under a blanket, still in wolf form, unbandaged, but with a bag full of bloody gauze on the floor next to her. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow, and Nico’s heart tore, to see Maki’s vitality so low. Maki whimpered and Nico knelt in front of the couch, shoving aside bloody gauze and low table, “Maki?”

Luminous lavender eyes opened and Nico wondered how had she not known from the beginning, with so much warmth, humor, and intelligence gleaming, set in the amethyst like jewels in gold. Maki inched her head to the side, encouraging Nico to sit next to her. Nico settled into the couch, helping Maki shift into her lap, gently petting the damp russet fur, “You’re not cold are you, Maki?” Nico asked, paying attention to avoid wounds.
Maki whiffled, her breath warm across Nico’s fingers.

“You were so” Nico’s mind raced through her wolf research for a suitable compliment, “dominant, cute ears, sexy snarl.”

Maki whined, fidgeted, her head movements a little uncomfortable in Nico’s lap. Nico could feel the embarrassment. Not good, she hadn’t meant to make Maki self conscious. Not the time for humor. Reassurance, not flirtation, was what Maki needed now.

“Sorry, pretty girl. Nico knows it’s not anything like that...it’s like when Nico has to be strict with Cocoa so she doesn’t hurt herself.”

Maki relaxed. Funny how many conversations Nico had with Maki in wolf form, and how much Nico understood of the werewolf’s replies, but somehow between the openness in the lavender eyes, the full body expressiveness, and the fact that Maki could smell any hesitation Nico had, those talks had the same raw honesty as the ones that took place when they were both undressed and exhausted, sweat, sheets and secrets scattered.

The quiet inside the Hoshizora-Koizumi dorm room was unnerving. Rin, still in wolf form, had immediately and deliberately taken over the bed Maki usually sat on, rolling around, snarling, bloodying the sheets. After five minutes of that and Hanayo ignoring her to open her laptop, Rin laid still, green eyes monochrome and watching Hanayo intently as her fingers flew over the keyboard. After another few minutes, Hanayo sat back, massaging her forehead, “No footage.”

Rin whined. Hanayo continued to ignore her, gathering her shower needs and bathrobe and leaving for the communal bathroom. As the door shut quietly but emphatically behind her partner, Rin transformed, sadness now shadowing anger.

Kayo-chin hadn’t said anything on the walk back to the dorm, or reached out a hand. There was no simple emotions for Rin to deal with, Kayo-chin didn’t smell sad or angry or frustrated....she was distant and determined and cold...and Rin didn’t know how to deal with that. Rin yawned and stared at the ceiling. Sleepy. She’d done enough for one day.

“We’re going upstairs now, Maki.” Maki’s parents stepped into the room and her mother spoke, “If she transforms and starts bleeding, you know how to apply a bandage, right, Nico?”

Nico tilted her head back so she could see the Dr. Nishikinos, “Nico was a Red Cross certified babysitter, first aid is easy.”

“Good night.”

As soon as her parents had reached the top of the stairs, Maki opened her eyes. Nico snorted, “You were faking it.”

Maki blew air out through her nose.

“Do you want to go upstairs, pretty girl?” Nico played with Maki’s ear, and then it started to shift between her fingers, leaving Nico with a handful of red silk. Maki turned over, blanket sliding off, of course, it was, Nico thought and suddenly Nico was trapped by her girlfriend crawling over her, amethyst eyes wary.

“Why aren’t you scared?” Maki asked.
“Of you. Like this?” Nico almost sniggered and patted a handy curve, but then she saw the deep cuts on Maki’s forearm and sobered.

Maki shook her head, unsteady on her wounded arms so Nico reached out, leading the redhead back to sit on the couch, her head on Nico’s shoulder, “Earlier. You stopped being scared when...”

Werewolf nose, Nico reminded herself, “If Nico ever smelt frightened, it was for you, not of you. Or Rin. Nico knows you. You wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“I hurt Rin.” Maki muttered.

Nico very gently touched the lightest of Maki’s wounds, “You stopped Rin. Got between her and people who want to hurt her.” Inside Nico continued silently “and you, if they knew”, before pep talk Nico amped up the cheer, “Rin did this to you. And you let her. And Nico knows why.”

Maki made a confused noise.

“You know how frustrated she’s been so you let her take it out on you.” Nico put an arm around Maki, “You’re a good friend, Maki. Rin will remember that.”


“Go to sleep, pretty girl. Nico will stay right here.” Nico made sure the blanket covered Maki.

Maki snuggled into Nico’s side and it felt just as right to both of them as it always had, even that first night on Nico’s couch. Princess or very pretty girl, Maki was Maki. Nico would remind her of that more often, Nico decided as she glanced down at this wonder who had trusted her with such an immense secret. And it was time for Nico to start thinking about how to protect her.

Chapter End Notes

It snowed today.

This chapter reached a stopping point earlier than I meant it to, but they do that sometimes. Things are still tough for Rin, but that might ease up as we speed toward Fangs opening night.
Monday Werewolf Blues, Part I

Chapter Summary

Nico gets Hanayo some help, Maki knocks on Rin's door, and villainy continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast with her parents and Nico had surprised Maki with its comfortable air. No discussion of the events of last night, just general chatter about what everyone had planned for the day and Nico giving an extended explanation of what happened the week before opening night, with a side of mild grumping about Kashima. It was such a laid-back atmosphere that Maki’s attention kept drifting. And then the knock on the sliding back door happened. Hanayo, knitted hat with ears flapping around her head, violet eyes sad.

Maki bounced up to let her in, Nico following. “Is everything all right?”

Hanayo stepped inside, shrugging off the question, staring at the dark purple bruising on Maki’s right forearm, “Did she hurt you badly?”

Maki waved off the concern. Hanayo smelled off, low key anger mixed with exhaustion, affection, worry. “I’m healing.”

Hanayo seemed at a loss for any other conversation, standing in front of them, head down, hat sliding over her forehead, shoulders tensed.

“How is…”

Hanayo imperceptibly shook her head, stress spiking, and Maki didn’t finish her question. Which left Nico to breach the awkwardness, “Hey, Hanayo, I was going to call you anyway. I want you to meet a friend of mine. Are you free after 4?”

Maki’s head snapped around, all senses now on Nico, who was giving off a mix of confidence and impetuousness that Maki was beginning to view skeptically. Especially since Nico hadn’t mentioned anything to her about Hanayo or “meeting a friend.” Maki let a low growl escape her throat as she tilted her head at Nico.

Nico kissed her on the cheek, “Don’t worry, pouty puppy eyes, it’s only Sergeant Alvarez. I thought she could give us some advice so I called the precinct when you were in the shower.” Nico slid her arm around Maki’s waist, “So, can you come Hanayo?”

“I have a class.” Maki stated. “And a quiz.”

“And your name is not Hanayo.” Nico waved a hand in front of the zoning girl’s eyes, “Hello?”

Hanayo shook herself, “What time?”

“4?”
“4:15?”

“Sure. I’ll text you my address.” Nico scoffed at Maki, “You can chaperone so that neon eyes and jelling there doesn’t worry.”

Maki’s snarl parried Nico’s scoffing, but Nico pulled Maki back into the kitchen to finish breakfast, knowing Maki’s amicable mood would return without much effort.

Tsubasa had a long, thin metal tube suspended between two clamps and was carefully soldering wires in its interior together when Erena entered their Tech sub-basement lair.

“Hey.” Tsubasa nodded.

“Koizumi texted me she had something to do this morning.” Erena turned on more lights.

“Right. Where’s Anju?” Tsubasa raised her safety goggles.

Erena shrugged, “On her way to class probably.”

Tsubasa pushed her stool back, “So do you think she’s a witch.”

Erena was standing in front of a monitor, about to tweak a setting, but Tsubasa’s question earned a glare, “Who?”

“Anju.” Goggles back down, Tsubasa continued, “The person we’re making this fancy metal tech magic wand for.”

“Does it matter?” Erena leaned against a corner of the desk.

Tsubasa shrugged, “Not really, it’s not like witches are monsters or something…” Tsubasa looked up, anger in the back of her green eyes, “other. But aren’t you curious?”

Erena shook her head, “Can’t I just want to help a pretty friend?”

Tsubasa snorted with laughter, “How chivalrous.”

Erena put her hands in her jeans’ pockets, “And how’s your dating life, third wheel?”

“Ha ha. We need to test this later.” Tsubasa put the soldering iron on its stand, sliding the access door in the wand closed. “I’ll bring it to rehearsal.”

“I’ll let Anju know.”

Maki was at the door. With a peremptory knock. Rin opened it, but only a crack, with a warning growl. There was a five second staring match and then Maki pushed right by with a roll of her eyes and a “not happening” while settling herself on the still bloodied sheets of her usual perch.

“Why didn’t Hanayo let me mention your name when she stopped by?” Maki had no sympathy for Rin’s hunted look, or furtive smell.

Rin pulled herself up to the top bunk, “Don’t know, won’t talk to me.”
“Make her.” Maki considered tossing nearby balled up socks at her friend.

“Not that easy.” Rin muttered.

“Just ask her.” Maki prodded.

“IT’S NOT THAT EASY.” Rin shouted, “She’s really mad at me, Maki.”

Maki sighed, not really wanting to get into relationship nuances with Rin but... “Do you know why?”

“Don’t care.” Rin hugged a pillow and flipped over, “You wait til you fight with Nico.”

Maki crossed the room, tapping on the headboard of Rin’s bunk, “We talk.”

“You apologize, you mean.” Rin snarled.

“Maybe…” Maki admitted.

“I’m not apologizing for not wanting people to hurt Kayo-chin.”

“Even if that hurts her?” Maki snapped.

Rin flipped back over, her green eyes wide, “What do you mean?”

“She’s so sad, Rin, and scared. And it’s because of you, NOT them.” Maki reached up to flick her friend’s forehead, “She’s terrified they’ll take YOU away from her.”

Rin hesitated, “Did she say that?”

“No, you idiot, she doesn’t have to to. Did you smell her last night…” Maki frowned, “I did overhear her talking to my mom sometime, saying that she has nightmares someone’ll find out and do something to you. And you’re making it easier by putting a target on yourself.”

“She never tells me…” Rin complained.

Maki should have thrown the socks. “Hanayo probably doesn’t want you to feel guilty. Do you ever talk to her?”

“Everyday, duh.” Rin’s chin shoved into her pillow, Maki glared and Rin sounded less cocky, “about the usual stuff.”

Maki sat at Hanayo’s half of the desk, her voice chiding, “Well, try, “I’m sorry, Kayo-chin, I’ll do my best not to get captured for scientific experiments.” See how that goes.”

“Maki’s so mean.”

Maki rumbled a low growl, her arms crossed over her chest, “I don’t want to lose either of my best friends. So have some faith in your future wife and Nico’s friends.”

A little of the ebullient Rin bubbled back at the opportunity of an easy strike, “Your future wife, you mean.”

Maki blushed a little, but steady lavender eyes knocked back mischievous green ones, “Do not mention that in Nico’s hearing until I’ve asked her or I’ll rip your tail off.” Maki turned back to the other bed.
“Ooh, Maki’s going to…” Rin was rewarded for her speculation by a murderously fast pillow to the face.

Hanayo was very nervous as she rang Nico’s doorbell. What did Nico want to talk about? Was it Rin? Was Nico mad about what Rin did to Maki? Did Nico think Hanayo…

Nico opened the door with a bright smile before Hanayo pinwheeled any further down a very grim corridor of thought, “Hanayo, hi! Come in and get warm. Nico made cookies.”

Nico followed Nico up the stairs, still nervous.

Nico kept up a flow of conversation as fast and varied as her skihops up the stairs. “Nico wasn’t sure if you were a tea, coffee or cocoa drinker so I just put water in the kettle and you can choose, Umi likes instant coffee for some weird reason, have you met Umi, you probably saw her la…” Nico hesitated between two steps, then got right back up to speed, “she’s a great roommate but too efficient in the morning. I invited my friend, Sergeant Alvarez to come by, she’ll be here in 15 minutes, the cookies are on the counter with the mugs,” And they were inside Nico’s apartment before Hanayo had a chance to say anything, remember who Umi might be, or object to Nico’s choice of company. “Nico deserves a treat and will have cocoa.” Nico announced that, then made herself instant cocoa with a grand flourish, as if to encourage imitators so somehow Hanayo found herself going through the same motions, sitting down at the table with a sugar cookie and a large mug of sweet chocolate. Nico nodded approval as she dipped her cookie. “Nico needs a sugar hit before rehearsal.”

“Oh.” Hanayo managed, trying not to crumble the cookie from nerves, “You don’t get a night off?”

“Not this week. We need every one, especially after Saturday’s fiasco with the lights.” Nico bit and dipped, “It’s how we get perfection.”

Hanayo nodded, nibbling at the cookie. Nico stared at her for a moment, but the violet eyes kept avoiding hers so Nico just put on her director’s hat (every actor has one, much to the chagrin of every director) and plowed right into instructions for the afternoon.

“I know the Drs. Nishikino have a professor friend of theirs helping you, but I figured it might be a good idea to explain what you’re doing to someone who will know if there’s any laws being violated. I told Sergeant Alvarez a little about Nozomi’s headaches but you know better than anyone how they’re doing it, Hanayo,” Nico smiled at Hanayo, trust in her eyes and the warmth of her hand on Hanayo’s forearm, “so if you could explain, maybe we can all figure out a way to save our girls.”

Hanayo gulped the rest of her chocolate and nodded earnestly, feeling the sugar buzz of new hope. Maybe there was a way to make them stop. Maybe they could get help beyond “academic suspension and a stern warning letter.”

Rin was tired, but had sweated out some of her agitation. She’d done a half mile over the training distance and after a hot shower, was finally calm enough to think about things, not just feel confused and betrayed. She let her towel fall around her shoulders as she returned to her locker from the shower and heard a shout from the junior assigned as her training buddy, “Hey, Hoshizora! I didn’t think your fiancée was the biting type? What happened to you?”

Rin froze, not sure why Ami would say anything, when she remembered that the bitemarks on her
shoulders hadn’t completely healed.

Rin pulled a sweatshirt on and stepped into her underwear, “Nah, not Kayo-chin. Wrestling with a friend’s dog.”

“You gotta watch out for them, W-hosh,” Ami came over, looking critically at the visible scab above the neckline of her crewneck, “Is that the big red one I see you playing with on the Lakefill sometimes?”

Rin nodded.

“It has its shots, right?” Ami pulled Rin into a side hug, “We need our Kid Flash on the 4X400 relay. Tell Hanayo to take better care of you.”

And the guilt punched Rin in the gut again, Hanayo shouldn’t have to take care of her. But she was and Rin was just moping around, making her worry more. Rin sat on the bench, grabbing a pair of socks, frowning at herself. Maybe if she picked up dinner from Kamakura, Kayo-chin’s favorite Japanese fusion place, they could get back into team mode. Rin always did better in Team Mode.

“Thanks, Ami!” Rin stood, snapping her sweatpants in place, “I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow.”

“Get some rest, Rin. Healing takes energy.”

Rin saluted with a cheery grin, almost feeling a bounce in her step.

Corey Alvarez watched the two girls sitting before her. They’d told her a lot, but there was obviously something they were withholding. Nico had very few tells, but Hanayo would start at nearly every question and once or twice Nico had coughed meaningfully, with an apologetic eye roll in the Sergeant’s direction. So Nico knew Alvarez knew that there was something else. Corey wondered what Nico would tell her if she forced it.

“Ok, so your bosses,” Corey pointed to Hanayo, “are threatening people you know, but those people don’t know it, except Nozomi, because you told her about the transmissions.”

Hanayo nodded.

“Are any of these “people you know” involved in something illegal?” Corey asked in a neutral tone.

Hanayo’s response was immediate, with a flash of temper, “No, never, Rin never would…” Hanayo squeaked and stopped. Nico turned her mug a quarter turn while considering her response to Hanayo’s blurt of truth.

Calm red eyes met curious brown, “Nothing illegal. Just being themselves.”

Alvarez smiled, “I believe you.” She pushed her chair back a little, glancing quickly at the notes she’d been taking. “I don’t think your friend, Nozomi, has a case for stalking or harassment, unless it happens again and you can document it more effectively somehow --”

“Plug a brain wave scanner into the lighting grid.” Nico’s snark was an attempt to draw Hanayo back from frightened, Corey suspected. “Not obvious at all.”

“Right.” Corey took a sip of coffee. Nico’s homebrew was, of course, as good as the Cup o’ standard. “You probably don’t know this but there are people who run illegal, pirate radio stations all
over the country and the FCC is cracking down on them. Non licensed broadcast transmissions in any form are a no no.” Corey nodded at the level of comprehension she saw in Hanayo and Nico’s expressions. She could safely skip the recap and move to her action item. “I can talk to a friend of my wife’s at the FCC Chicago field office and see if this fits that category. Do you know the frequencies?”

Hanayo nodded, reaching for Alvarez’s notebook and pencil, “I’ll write them down.”

“They’re transmitting this from the theatre? But you don’t know exactly how?”

“Yes. Every night this week.” Hanayo frowned, “I don’t know where they stashed the transmitter; it must be sizeable, they were using a car battery.” Shaking herself out of a thought, Hanayo scribbled quickly, “The second set of frequencies are what they used when they were testing the effect on Nozomi by transmitting to the theatre. The receiver was on the back wall. They’ve been testing to see which frequencies are the most effective.”

Alvarez took the notebook back and wrote her own string of numbers on two halves of a torn out page. “This is my private number. Call me if they threaten you or your friends. If you need immediate help, call 911.”


“It’s ok. And call me Corey when I’m out of uniform. You make good coffee, Nico.” Alvarez stood, shoving the notebook in her bomber pocket, and turned to Hanayo, “Thanks for trusting me, Hanayo. I’ll do my best to help.” She chuckled, “My wife used to be a radio operator in the Army so this’ll make an interesting story to tell her.”

“Stop by tomorrow, Nico’s got the morning shift.”

Alvarez flashed a thumb’s up.

There was an audience, one of Professor Asuka’s intro classes had filled only a scattering of seats, but there was a new energy in the air and Nico could feel it. She needed it for this scene, one of her hardest, writing Mina’s last letter to Lucy, thinking of Lucy as her beloved, lovely, bright friend when Lucy had actually already become an eternal victim of Dracula. Nico’s theory was that Mina was just a little gay for Lucy, and Bram Stoker, ending this letter, had written something that was near poetry. And now Nico had an audience to share those feelings with, the need to cheer Lucy, the joy of having Jonathan back, knowing Jonathan was hers, sharing a name and a life, and then sharing that with the person she’d opened all of her hopes and fears to. So many emotions colored what might seem a few simple words on a page, but those words were the life between three people, a moment of joy before horror buried the happier shades in Dracula’s crypt.

Nico’s voice caressed the words, as Mina expected they would bring an ailing Lucy some comfort, “Jonathan asks me to send his ‘respectful duty,’ but I do not think that is good enough from the junior partner of the important firm of Hawkins & Harker; and so, as you love me, and he loves me, and I love you with all the moods and tenses of the verb, I send you simply his ‘love’ instead. Goodbye, my dearest Lucy, and all blessing on you.

Yours,
Mina Harker”

The audience was breathless as Nozomi’s light show did its work on the other half of the stage,
ominous sadness tinting Lucy’s burial as Dracula perched in the shadows, glorying in the vanity of power. Blood gray. No life, just hunger. Ownership. Dracula’s possessiveness lacked warmth, comfort, reciprocity; it had none of the fierce protectiveness of Mina’s. Dracula’s instinct was to own; Mina’s to aid. Dracula was the cold of winter dirt; Mina the warmth of summer air.

A bright glint distracted Nico. Glancing down, she saw the brooch flash, blue and red pulsing erratically. Must be some lighting reflection effect. Nico would have to check with Nozomi that it wasn’t too distracting for the audience.

A small pocket of what looked like heat lines shimmered around the end of the metal rod. Anju’s eyes gleamed as Tsubasa checked her phone.

“Levels are registering much higher tonight, although I still think something’s distorting the signal.” Tsubasa frowned, picking up the wand.

“Wait.” Anju took the wand back, closed her eyes, whispering a few words Tsubasa couldn’t make out. The heat lines started to twist, a red glow increasing as if they were heated but Anju cupped them in her palm without any visible discomfort.

“Don’t show that to Nozomi. She’ll want to use it when Lucy’s being buried as a hint of the taint.” Erena grumped from the doorway, “Kotori’s looking for you, Anju. There’s some quick repairs.”

Anju flicked open the compartment to release the quartz, returning it to her bracelet, then handed the wand over to Tsubasa, “Thanks, Tsubasa. The metal heats up a bit…”

“Too narrow to install a fan.” Tsubasa stated. She was tired of working on a project that had very little interest to her, but the numbers and the visual proof might get them some academic legitimacy.

Anju sighed and flipped her hair, “Silicon mitt it is.” She swept by Erena, pausing for a brief slide of her fingers along the inside of Erena’s forearm, “Thanks for the message.”

Erena watched Anju shimmy down the corridor, “She’s in a good mood.”

“She better be. I put 14 hours of work into that damn thing yesterday.” Tsubasa cough yawned, “Tomorrow, I’m getting some sunlight.”

Erena grunted in sympathy, knowing that between tech and dress rehearsals and the hours in the sub basement, all of them were an even pastier shade of winter quarter waxen than usual. Like Dracula, after an ocean voyage without even scravny sailors to drain.

Chapter End Notes

Have to put a lot of things in the air to juggle with this chapter...we will see which fall and/or turn into chainsaws.

Thanks for reading; drop a hello. Spring's been difficult, but there are plum and cherry blossoms.
Monday Werewolf Blues, Part II

Chapter Summary

Rin stays in, Maki goes for a walk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The smell of rice hit Hanayo when she opened the door. Rin was curled up in their bed, in Hanayo’s fuzzy yellow robe, bright eyes watching for Hanayo’s reaction. Rin shifted and Hanayo thought she saw a flash of lace when the robe fell open. She closed the door, heart beating an excited rhythm, and smiled to herself.

“I’m home, Rin.”

Rin exploded from the top bunk, knocking her back into the door, arms grabbing her so tight that breathing became impossible, “I’m sorry, Kayo-chin. I won’t let them catch me. I won’t let you worry. I’m sorry I…”

Hanayo shushed Rin, hugging her back, “We’re okay, Rin. You know that, right?”

Rin put her head on Hanayo’s shoulder, “I bought your favorites from Kamakura. And ‘Who’s That Girl’ is cued up.”

Hanayo snuck a hand under the robe to confirm that Rin was wearing the lacy chemise that had been her Christmas present. Hanayo was willing to forgive many things for that. Rin blushed as Hanayo kissed her cheek. Adorably shy Rin always made Hanayo a little bolder.

“I love you, Rin.”

Not a large audience, but Nico still felt like she could take on 5 teams of villains when she came offstage after the curtain call. Applause. FINALLY. The night was approaching. Not that Nico was JUST interested in applause, but when you have cake, don’t you want icing too? Nico did. It was elixir, ambrosia, blood, she thought with a giggle, thinking of Dracula as Kashima approached, gray from makeup, shirt buttons popped open, underwear tank plastered to her chest, “Hey, Nico! That was amazing! You…” Kashima, seemingly at a loss for words, grabbed Nico and spun her in, as if they were dancing, “We are going to rock this.”

There went Nico’s makeup, all over Kashima’s tank. Ah well, she’d be removing it before too long anyway.

Micah joined in the hug. “We are going to ROCK it. With our fangs out.” He winked as Nico frowned, ducking under Kashima’s arm. Too much sweat, very unpopular with Nico, potentially even more unpopular with Nico’s very hot, very nosy girlfriend. “Hey, I know a couple of girls in the intro class and they want to meet you, get some drinks and karaoke. You in, Nico? Kash?”

Nico considered, running through her checklist. Fastest run through yet and notes tomorrow so it was
early-ish, Maki had still looked wrecked at breakfast and was probably tired and needing to rest after
last night’s fight, Nico had Sergeant Alvarez working on the stop the baddies angle, and Nico hadn’t
flubbed any lines. And she was fizzing like champagne, sleep hours off yet. A friendly drink and
karaoke with her adoring audience and co stars sounded perfect. She’d just text Maki not to wait up
if Maki decided to come over. Good decision giving her the key. Made things easier.

“Nico can always make time for new fans.”

Micah slung an arm around Nico, “Great! Let’s party!”

Kashima cheered and shoved them toward the green room.

Umi had put away the night’s studying. She had midterms under control. Honoka was even ahead of
schedule on their joint project. All good. Now her only problem was actually Nico’s. To be more
precise, Nico’s restless, wandering, knocking into every little thing girlfriend. Umi extrapolated the
damage Maki could wreak on the carefully maintained orderliness of the Sonoda-Yazawa apartment
if she transformed based on the havoc she was wreaking on only two legs. If Nico actually had a
dog, Umi assumed she would have asked Umi to take her out for a walk before boredom turned into
a mess so Umi checked her phone and cleared her throat.

“Maki.”

Maki stopped, and flopped on the couch. Umi could almost see the slow sad tail wag that would
have accompanied that movement. Disconcerting. “I’m distracting you, aren’t I? Sorry.”

“No, you’re fine.” It wasn’t a lie, Umi had completed her tasks with no interference and worrying
was not a direct synonym for distracting. “Kotori says the karaoke is wrapping up. Do you want to
head down and walk them home?”

Maki bounded up, grinning. “Sure.”

This had gone better in Umi’s head. She feared she owed Nico an apology. They had reached
LakeStar just as the theatre crowd was spilling into the street. Nico was in the center, still singing,
surrounded by a crowd, suddenly jumping on Kashima’s back with a loose chokehold. That’s when
Umi heard the growl next to her. Nico did as well, her eyes immediately going to where Maki stood
as she slid down from Kashima with a beaming smile. Umi assumed there would be an alcohol
smell. Tipsy Nico was friendly and huggy. Maki was probably unaware of this tendency. Umi used
Honoka as a human shield on those nights.

“Pretty girl!” Nico rushed Maki, threw her arms around her neck and smacked a kiss on her lips.
Maki whimpered and stepped back, her nose twitching wildly as Nico hung on, Maki’s lavender
eyes charging with neon as all the singing, jostling crowd clamored around them, the voices
mingling, off key, dissonant, Kashima galumphing after Nico, Maki registering too many familiar
scents from Nico.

And then it happened. Maki caught a scent, one that that she recognized, one that was part of the
group that was threatening Rin. Sandalwood, bergamot, copper and too calm. Maki’s sudden snarl
was vicious and Nico stepped back, shocked. She had no idea what triggered Maki’s reaction but as
she watched Maki’s ears start to slide back, shocked, Nico realized an intervention was urgently needed
and stepped in front of the werewolf, pulling her head down, meeting a furious glare with no fear.
“Don’t. Not here”

Maki’s lips twisted with the start of a low, coarse howl.

“Maki.” Nico spun her around, pushing her down the sidewalk, as Honoka strolled up.

“You should have come earlier, Maki. We could have sung together. You have a great voice. Hay, Nico, make sure you text her next time.” Honoka stared, realizing Nico’s mood had changed, “Is Maki okay?”

Oh, Honoka, Umi thought. Now, what would Nico do? And was she too drunk for this?

“Everything’s fine, Honoka, Maki’s just not used to Nico having so many fans.” Nico’s grin was forced and she twisted Maki’s arm in an effort to control the werewolf’s direction, “But Nico always has time for her best fan.”

Nico would do fine, Umi realized as she hurried to the other side of the problem, giving Honoka a brief hand squeeze.

Maki tried to turn, but Nico and Umi between them had her movements restricted, dragging her quickly down the street, while a confused but energetic Honoka had turned around and started singing “What Makes You Beautiful” to the cheers of the following crowd. Kotori was giggling in Anju’s ear, Honoka broadly waving her arms to distract, encouraging more people to join in while Umi and Nico wrangled Maki into an alley as everyone else followed Honoka like she was the One Direction Piper.

“Calm down, Maki.” Nico moved in front of her girlfriend, taking both hands as Umi blocked the alley, “Is this about Kashima or Tsubasa?”

“Yes,” Maki growled and Nico swore the nose started to elongate as Maki tried to dodge around Nico.

Nico kissed her, desperately trying to get the taking-a-corner-on-two-wheels-and-out-of-control redhead to focus on her. That was a mistake. Tension had locked both of them out of sympathy and sandpaper slid against steel wool. But it did get Maki’s attention on Nico.

Maki closed her eyes, chest heaving from the effort of calming her breathing and arresting the transformation. Nico could hear their two hammering hearts echoing in the narrow alley, bouncing between the walls while the rest of the world was full of swift winds and slow cars, sliding through the shivers of night.

Maki’s eyes opened, still pulsing with neon, “You smell like” pause, reluctance, Maki’s face contorted with confusion and indignation as she whispered, “us…”

Nico froze as Maki refused to look at her, racing desperately to figure out what Maki meant. She couldn’t be upset about Kashima if what she said was “us,” surely then she would have said “someone else…” So what did she mean?

“I don’t understand, Maki.” Nico forced the exasperation out of her voice.

“You smell…” There were Maki’s eyes, glowing, the shadows nervous, wounded, “happy…” the next syllables were ground out over a shattered glass field of reluctance, “sexy…”

Ah, Nico didn’t let the words fade before she pulled Maki in, brushing hair away from her forehead, “Of course, Nico is sexy…Nico had an audience for the first time and it was great, no lines dropped,
people on the edge of their seats….APPLAUSE” Nico’s grin would have been irresistible on any other night, “Nico lives for those nights.” She let Maki register that, saw neon green fade, saw brightness flicker, “But I love you, Maki. That’s a separate sexy” Nico slid a hand behind Maki’s neck, letting her fingertips barely sweep up the hairline, “Only for you.”

Maki huffed. Nico’s hand dropped to her shoulder. Maki stiffened.

Umi stomped back to them. “It’s too cold to be out much longer. Let’s head home.”

Nico rested her head on Maki’s chest while Maki stood solid, no give. Then the future star of stage and screen took a deliberate step back, voice determined, “Umi’s going to walk me home, pretty girl. I’ve had a long day and need some Nico time. I’m going to have an exciting week and I want you to be there.” Nico made sure Maki was looking directly at her. “But you can’t do this…”

There was too long a pause as both of them reviewed the last ten minutes. Then Maki nodded, biting the inside of her lip, “No. I can’t.”

“Walk me home from work tomorrow, if you don’t have class, okay, pretty girl?” Nico’s kiss on Maki’s cheek was soft and too short. Maki shook herself, trying to move away before the tears started.

Watching Maki just barely not sprint off, Umi offered Nico her arm, “Are you all right, Nico?”

“There’ll be fine.” Nico said, mostly to herself, over the sound of their synched, solid steps striking the cold ground.

Umi knew her friend had done a hard thing. “I’m proud of you, Nico. Boundaries are brave.”

Nico pulled herself closer, the wool of Umi’s coat rough against her face, there might have been a sniffle, but then Nico’s cheekiest tone boomed, ‘Yeah, yeah, Nico is the best. Sucking up won’t save you the next time Honoka steals my lunch leftovers.’

Maki hadn’t transformed, she was proud of that. Nope, still on two legs, a shaky two legs from rage and fear and want, Nico had smelled so enticing, that particular swirl of everything that had always drawn Maki Nico-ward, intensified somehow and now that Maki had it in her nose, it was everywhere. And she wanted Nico to be everywhere, hands, lips, hair, soft, sliding, overtaking every sense, pushing her...away, Nico had pushed her away, by stepping back. And it scared her, Nico closing down, and the tears and Umi there for Nico, and all the other people surging around Nico, wanting Nico near….a howl, tearing out of her, tears lashing behind her, mispunching the code in
the gate, slamming the door, her mother worried on the stairs, Maki shaking her off, into her room, slamming another door, music blasting, some music, random music, wait that was it, the crescendo, the crash, Maki rolling back and forth on her bed, tears and skin crying out for sable and softness.

The warm waters rose around Maki as she lowered herself in the tub. Lavender, huge inhale, calm, hints of Nico, but not enough to...Maki clutched the sides of the tub, fighting the urge to slide her hand down her leg...not enough to overwhelm her....

She had checked Nico’s TWIG feed, wanting to see a picture of cheerful, twinkling rubies and that dazzling smile, she hadn’t taken any herself and Nico had only sent her one so far, a bored in class pic that was mostly eye roll. There were so many faces of Nico, with so many people, people Maki didn’t know and she found herself going further and further back in Nico’s history, seeing Nico with all these people, happy people, smiling people, hugging people, dancing people...tonight, there had been a post curtain selfie of Micah, Kashima, and Nico with the caption “Dracula is rising from the grave to go party.” It was one of the few recent ones. After the selfie Nico had taken of her “super cute little black dress” the night of Umi, Honoka, and Kotori’s party, there had been fewer pictures. And none of Maki, either in girlfriend or wolf form. That was obviously not the standard for Nico. There were no sibling pictures either, though, so maybe Nico was private about some parts of her life, she’d said that one night, hadn’t she, but still...Maki was obviously impacting Nico’s habits...or, Maki sighed, and slid into the water, Maki was monopolizing the formerly very social Nico’s time...which Nico didn’t seem to mind. And Maki definitely wanted to keep doing. But not at the cost of a Nico who smiled less, who was Nico less...Maki slid even lower, finally letting her hand drop under the water, a cold tingle against warmed skin, Nico’s smirk in her mind, Nico’s voice tantalizing, sensuously slow, sexy and low, teasing Maki, as Maki let the memory of the night in the music room push away worries and pull Nico back to her...inhale...another night...lavender....hints of Nico’s bed...pushing down into pillows... and....stroking...and shivering....and...thruuuummmmm....

Nico picked up her phone. She and Honoka had eaten their way through all the ice cream in the freezer while sitting between Umi and Kotori and watching the latest episode of M Countdown. Now Nico was ready for bed. There were several messages from Maki.

M: Sorry, I snapped <( . __ . )>. Not the best at surprises. Please let me meet your friends next time.

The next was a picture of Maki, wet hair hanging down, flannel shirt a little too short and open for her to send as a picture, Nico thought, but there it was, all those curves as evidence it had been sent, followed by:

M: I miss you, Nico (‘-‘*)

That was cheating, definitely cheating, Nico thought, suddenly more awake. Maki was never meeting her friends looking like that. And Nico’s head would not be meeting her pillow yet. Nearly naked girlfriend pics after an ice cream sugar binge was a jolting combo. Nico would be setting sexy selfie boundaries the next time she talked to distracting in dishabille.

A fourth text buzzed in.

M: I’ll see you tomorrow. You can tell me show stories. I want to know more about everyone in Fangs. I love you, Nico. (‘-‘*) Sleep well.

Sleep. Nico snorted. Like anyone could sleep with that picture in the room with them.

N: I love you too, Maki. See you tomorrow. Wear more clothes (￣﹏￣;)

M: What do you want me to wear? A Ghost in the Shell uniform? Or a full body suit of some sort? That would be kind of hot. Or maybe just get some pants and a shirt on. I never notice if you wear pants or not, honestly.
TWIG is my standard Twitter/Instagram mashup for the purposes of fanfic so I don't have to worry about using anyone's actual handle. Taking suggestions for Nico's in this universe as No1Nico doesn't seem theatre enough.

Update a little quick, but I wanted to keep the Mondays together.
Tuesday's Gray, Part I

Chapter Summary

Tuesday morning is a bustling time for our collegian crew.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki had her laptop out to check a few references from Dr Costas I. Karageorghis papers for her Sports and Music freshman seminar. Cereal out of a bowl is, of course, the only way to accomplish studying while breakfasting so she chewed happily on something soggy and cinnamon. Her mother wandered in, “Feeling better?”

Maki shrugged and chewed. It was an easy rhythm. Of course, there would be a follow up question, but she could swallow while processing an answer.

“Did you talk to Nico?”

Maki shook her head, “Texted.”

“You’re productive this morning.” Her mother chose a blueberry yogurt as the coffeemaker worked its single cup magic.

Maki shrugged again, her face serious. She’d been reviewing her actions since meeting Nico and decided to reboot, “Getting back to some of my study habits.”

Her mother smiled, “That’s a very good idea.”

Maki didn’t bother to shrug at that particularly parental thought and put another, larger spoonful in her mouth at the same moment the NicoTone sounded. She looked at her phone and spat out the cereal, coughing and choking.

Nico had sent a selfie in her voluminous-enough-for-two, pink fluffy robe, wearing her hair up in a flower towel, and with her cucumber and green face mask beauty treatment on her face. The caption, which Maki read through teary eyes as she continued to choke: “Nico took this last night to show you what a real sexy selfie looks like ; P”

Maki’s mother pounded her back, concerned, leaning over Maki as her daughter hastily moved an elbow to cover her phone’s screen.

“Are you all right, Maki?”

“Fine.” Maki stood, “I’ll clean this up.” Maki slid her phone into her hoodie, “I probably won’t be back tonight.”

Her mother put both hands on her daughter’s shoulders, waiting for Maki to realize neither of them was going anywhere until eye contact was made, “Please talk to me if you need anything. I love you, Maki. You don’t have to go through things alone.”
“I know, Mama.” Maki glanced down, then smiled, “Thanks.”

Hanayo had gotten hyper efficient about her morning routine in the Tech sub-basement office. Unless her bosses decided to check in. This morning’s obstacle to progress was an Anju who was very concerned about why there were distortions in the transmissions.

“I’m not an engineer.” Hanayo let frustration darken her voice. It was a relief not having to pretend politeness anymore.

Anju had her arms crossed over her white cable sweater dress, “There must be a reason. You’ve spent more time with this equipment than I have. Suggest something.”

Hanayo’s lips twitched in a snarl reminiscent of Rin’s, “I suggest tearing this place apart before anyone arrests you.”

There was a silence. Too long. Anju’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Hanayo decided anger was her safest haven so she just let it out with every physical movement. Is this what Rin did? It was exciting, slamming, the noise, the relief, the way she could feel Anju jump. And then the hand grabbed her wrist, wrenching Hanayo to a standstill so she was staring into cold magenta slits.

“What do you mean?” A hiss.

Hanayo dropped back into her chair, letting it slide back, away from Anju, who had to let go or be pulled along. Then Hanayo pushed forward, one touch awakening her computer screen with its multiple windows.

“Koizumi?” A shrill snap.

Hanayo turned around, “I don’t know what I mean. I don’t know anything anymore. I’m just…” Hanayo paused, inhaled, let her voice go shakier than she felt, “scared.”

And at that cue, Erena entered, pulling down the furry hood of her big gray parka, “Good morning, ladies. What’s the problem?”

Hanayo turned so that Anju was cut out of the conversation, “Anju wants to know why the distortion keeps happening. And how we can increase the transmission strength.”

“Ah,” Erena hung up her coat and began to alter dial settings, “I was thinking about that last night. We are dealing with many frequencies, so it might be cross modulation, a stronger signal overtaking a weaker. We could build an oscillator, but I’m not sure we’ll have the time.”

“No,” Anju sighed, “Tsubasa is slower than I expected.”

Erena scratched her chin, “It could also be we might need some more voltage, so the waveform doesn’t get clipped.”

Done with her chores and having no useful radio frequency knowledge she was willing to admit to, Hanayo grabbed her coat, knowing it was time to pull a quick exit. “I’ll be back tonight.”

“Meet me at the theatre at 5, before rehearsal, please. I need some assistance.” Erena requested.

Hanayo nodded. Anju watched her leave, displeased, but there was no sour mood when she turned back to Erena, just an appreciative nod, “Thank you for always being helpful.”
Erena paused, ducked her head, then just dove in, “Hey, Anju, this has all been so distracting….do you ever...I feel like we....”

Anju tilted her head to the side, twirling her hair, not certain what she was encouraging, “Yes?”

Erena crouched down, her elbows on the desk, “like all this interrupted a conversation we started at Pumpkin Prom.”

Anju giggled, tapping her index finger between Erena’s eyebrows. “That’s very perceptive of you.”

Erena frowned, unsure how to read either the mood or the compliment. “Can I take you out to dinner?”

There was a flash of anguish in Anju’s eyes, so brief, and then a sly smile, “Ask me again next week.”

“I will.”

Nozomi’s phone “Nico Nico Ni”'ed and Eli groaned, “Change that please.”

“It amuses me.” Nozomi stretched across the bed, pulling her phone in, enjoying Eli’s hand sliding along her back as she moved.

Eli rolled her eyes, “What does Nico want?”

Nico: Hey, I’m probably dragging Maki to rehearsal tonight so she gets used to Dracula attacking me professionally ψ (´Д´) ψ. Can she sit with you?

Nico: NO GROPING

Nozomi: You’re no fun. And wouldn’t it be petting?

Nico: NOZOMI!

Eli was reading over Nozomi’s shoulder, “I agree with Nico.”

Nozomi stuck out her tongue at Eli and continuing texting.

Nozomi: How about treats?

Nico: ................

Nico: Only if she doesn’t growl at Dracula.

Nozomi snorted with laughter.

Nico: But your cookies aren’t as good as mine.

Nozomi was shaking with laughter and Eli had an eyebrow raised.

Nozomi: I guess some people like small portions.

Nico: Go to hell (・﹏・)

Nico: And thanks (o^-' )
“Are you really going to feed Maki cookies?” Eli had her hands around Nozomi’s waist, having been lured away from her orderly morning routine by curiosity and curves.

“I would have gone for candy, but if Nico says cookies…” Nozomi tossed her phone to the table, turning so she was face to face with Eli. “Chocolates and kisses worked for you, but…”

“Hey,” Eli’s indignance was undercut by her blush, “you make it sound like…:

Nozomi went for the kissing option, “I make it sound like I giving you things that make you happy, Eli.”

“Well, yeah…” The blush didn’t fade as Eli hid her face in Nozomi’s shoulder. All this adorable was taking Nozomi’s edge off; she’d have to double Nico’s teasing later.

Maki had opted for one of her ‘serious sweaters’, jeans, and the bobble hat that still smelled a little like Nico. Should be 1. enough clothes and 2. a combination Nico would think was cute. Sexy was for later, not picking Nico up at 1:30 p.m. She also had a backpack full of extra clothes and things to study slung over her shoulder. Prepared for business of being a helpful girlfriend during Nico’s super-busy week, check.

A Nico who smelled slightly worried was talking to a tall, dark haired woman and Maki found her pace accelerating, a quick sniff identifying her as Sergeant Alvarez, crisp citrus, snowy wind drift, and confidence. Nobody smelled like dating, so hands out of pockets, charming single fang smile, Maki could do this.

“Hi, Nico.” Maki bounced next to her GIRLFRIEND with a wave, then turned to Sergeant Alvarez with her hand out, “You must be Sergeant Alvarez. Nico always mentions you. I’m Maki Nishikino. We just started dating so I’ll probably be running into you more.”

Sure, Maki had said it super-fast and probably sounded super-nervous, but there hadn’t even been the hint of a growl, amusement overtook Nico’s worry and Maki scored a kiss on the cheek for her effort. Alvarez’s handshake was firm, but humor twinkled in her brown eyes, “Nice to meet you, Maki. Nico’s been mostly telling me about Fangs recently, but you probably already know that…”

Maki might have started just a little at the ‘fangs’ mention but Nico’s hip nudge distracted her enough that Nico had time to swoop in with clarifying information, in case her girlfriend was slow. “Opening night is on Friday after all, and Nico needs all of her fans. Are you and Orla coming?”

“Already bought the tickets. She loves horror movies so I’m surprising her.”

Maki fidgeted, trying not to hum, standing close to Nico and enjoying the smaller woman lean into her a bit.

“See you around, Maki.” Sergeant Alvarez nodded at Maki, taking a moment to search out something in her expression, but Maki was paying attention to Nico now and only radiating “good mood.” “Be careful, Nico. Remember what I told you. I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks, Casey!” Nico slid her arm through Maki’s.

Maki took a quick sniff of Nico’s hair, mostly positives, caught for a moment by musk and magic and vanilla and the memories her fingers had tangled in the soft, silken strands. “What were you
talking about?”

“Nothing for you to worry about.” Nico kissed Maki again as Alvarez disappeared at a fast jog. “I have to finish up, pretty girl; Damian’s running late. Let Nico treat you to coffee, black.” Nico chuckled as she shivered in the cold, “I like the serious sweater. Very seasonal. And afternoon friendly.” Nico’s wink verged on a smirk and Maki knew Nico might be commenting on this outfit, but her head was full of the selfie Maki had sent last night.

Maki spun, too full of Nico sensations and the promise of future thrills, to do anything that wasn’t wander in a sort of foolish, merry circle, kicking snow and grinning, before following Nico into the Cup o’. After last night’s late night disaster of a street meeting, this encounter was SO much better.

A seat was open at the counter so Maki slid in, elbows up, leaning her chin in her hand, watching Nico bop around the small room, topping off everyone’s coffee, making jokes, throwing back her head to laugh so her sable hair bounced around her shoulders. Then she was in front of Maki, ruby gems glinting with beguiling fun, “All right, pouty puppy eyes, serious sweater, behaving well, Nico promised you coffee.” She pulled a cup out from under the counter.

Maki reached out to stop Nico, grinning at the tingle when contact happened, “Can I get that i…”

“Don’t make Nico regret saying you were behaving well.”

“Iced.” Maki finished.

Nico clicked her tongue at Maki, but her eyes gleamed at the challenger. “Nico prefers people who listen.”

“I prefer you.” With a crazy adrenaline rush of relief at how normal this felt after last night and a happy bark, Maki leaned over the counter and bopped a kiss on Nico’s nose, then fell back, crossing her arms over her chest and fighting a blush as she realized everyone in the Cup o’ was now staring at her.

Nico leaned forward, whispering in her ear, “Now you have fans, pretty girl, and know how Nico feels.”

Maki remembered something else from last night as Nico poured out her coffee and her next word was a hesitant query, “Nico?”

Nico had been about to pivot away and greet a customer who’d joined the study group in the back booth, when the shyness in Maki’s inflection made her stop and focus on the redhead.

“Something wrong, Maki?”

Maki tapped the counter nervously with the tip of her boot, “How come you’ve never posted a picture of us on your TWIG?”

“Ha! You’ve been cyberstalking Nico.” Nico’s crow of victory stopped all conversation and studying yet again as the Cup o’ crowd began chattering across the counter and over the top of booth benches, trying to figure out what was happening with Nico and this new entry in her life.

Maki tried to ignore the comments about her appearance and Nico’s tastes but it was getting to too much and she could feel her ears sliding back as someone not quite whispered “so is that the crazy, hot, loud redhead that Nico and her roommate dragged into an alley for a threesome last night?” Maki gagged on the scent of licorice candy and lurid curiosity.
Then Nico’s hands were on her cheeks and Maki had the sense to shut out everyone but the only person she wanted to hear, “Look at me, pretty girl.”

Maki gulped and nodded, “Sorry…it’s just…they keep saying…”

Nico leaned forward, shaking her head, close enough to Maki that the dark strands of hair tickled her chin. “They’re mostly idiots, loyal fans of Nico, of course, but idiots and the people in the front booth are Fangs crew so they were at karaoke last night.” Nico turned to glare, triggering giggles and the guilty shuffling of chairs and bodies. “Don’t worry about them. Worry about Nozomi.”

The complete change of topic threw Maki as Nico steamrolled right into what she wanted to talk about, distracting the werewolf from TWIG, “Nozomi?” Maki sniffed, turning her head, but there was no hints of the sage she identified with Nozomi anywhere, “Is she in the bathroom?”

“No, she’ll be at rehearsal tonight. I want you to come and watch rehearsal tonight so you can see that Nico is ACTING when she’s onstage, not falling in love with other people, or under Kashima’s” and here Nico paused so she could get the full dramatic reverberations of tone she’d practiced into the word, “thrall.”

“Sure.” That sounded like a good idea, Maki thought.

“I asked Nozomi to sit with you so nobody bothers you.”

“Okay.” If Nico thought that was best.

“And I told her not to grope you.”

Maki shoved the stool back as she rose, startled, “What? Why?”

Nico frowned at the booth full of Fangs crew again as they all leaned a little bit closer to the action, “Nozomi has a habit of being handsy. If she gets anywhere near you, bite her. Nico gives you permission. Leave a painful dent.” Maki barely stopped herself from just fleeing the Cup o’ at a backward sprint and sticking her inflamed by embarrassment face in a bank of ice, but Nico kept rolling downhill, “Umi nearly broke every finger that touched her when Nozomi decided to surprise ‘measure’ Umi’s abdominal chi production.”

The weirder and more disturbing the conversation got, the more Maki wondered if everyone involved in Fangs had been driven to strange by a theatrical version of cabin fever. Or proximity to Nico. Since she’d met the sable haired celebrity in training, Maki had slid at jet speed to the thinnest ice in the middle of an emotional Lake Michigan, never certain where the next crack would appear. She glanced down, catching Nico in a rare, unguarded moment of doubt, watching Maki, protective Nico twisting into sexy, possessive Nico the way lavender hints twisted through the musk of her sable hair.

“Don’t worry, I’ll bite.” Full fanged grin, then, before Maki thought too much about it, a wink she hoped was more flirtatious than leering, “I’ve been practicing.”

Nico shook her head, her frown a shallow dip in disappointment, “As Nico keeps telling you, pretty girl, leave the jokes to the pros.” Her fingers found the exact spot behind Mak’s ear that always elicited a needy whine, “And the flirting.”

Chapter End Notes
Howdy!

Points if you know what song the title's from.

Got hammered by a cough so this is a little delayed.

I'm thinking 6-7 more chapters, maybe, and I've stopped thinking of it as "THE END," more like the Season 1 finale, because that's less pressure.

Thanks for reading! And the comments; we've been at this together for almost a year now and a part of this is yours.
Tuesday's Gray, Part 1.5

Chapter Summary

Everyone's en route to rehearsal. There may be a slight detour for Nico and Maki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A knight with two pages, Nozomi thought with a smile. How very Nico-chi to have an entourage even in a Tarot reading she was not present for. The younger faces in the cards were flipped, but the shiny, boldness of the Knight of Cups was ready to surge through any obstacles sneak attack prone Sword and solid obstacle Pentacle might present. Nozomi would have to warn Nico to watch out for surprises -- or, considering the knight’s penchant for non traditional romance, to take her eyes off the cute redhead occasionally. Nozomi pulled the cards back, leaning back in the booth, her tea getting cold, staring out at the Norris view of the Lakefill, shuffling through her previous encounters with Maki as if they were cards. Perhaps that could provide some insight. There was the night of the party, Maki with eyes for nothing but Nico and Nico looking everywhere else, but once the redhead seized the floor with Honoka, flirting with what Nozomi now realized was a feral intensity, Nico had closed the both of them off on the balcony. Nozomi winced, remembering the end of that party, her head splitting, Maki standing in Kotori, Honoka, and Umi’s bedroom, nose leading suspicious eyes to...well, honestly, Nozomi hadn’t been paying enough attention to notice who had tweaked Maki’s interest, just that Maki was the only one not watching Eli being forcibly disrobed. Even Nico had paused for a moment to check out the blonde. The memory of Eli sprawled across the bed should have given Nozomi a hit of shame, but nope. Nozomi had been lost, crawling up the red hot, sliding sharp metal walls of her own mind, hands burning and Eli was the only solid, cool salve she had to hold onto. Eli....Nozomi smiled, no longer reviewing scenes with Nico’s girlfriend, but eager for Eli’s arrival so they could have a few minutes together before they had to head over to Wirtz.

Anju didn’t have much patience for classes; they were a necessary step to staying in good standing with the university and having access to her fellow conspirators and their technical solutions to magical problems. She had taken lighter ones this semester, introductory things, the one night a week geography class EVERYONE took for an easy WCAS distribution credit and Anju took for the entertainment of watching the people watching the Powerpoint slides. But she had not been in a kind or curious mood today. Hanayo, the most unprickly of personalities, was worrying at her, like a thorn in her sandal. The cold fierceness in the assistant, merely an assistant and a tool, Anju reassured herself, the cold fierceness in the assistant’s tone as she spat out “before anyone arrests you” had frightened an Anju who had convinced herself she was unflappable, who had braved so many challenges. But something about the conviction of a mere pawn had her here, hurrying back to her dorm, black hood pulled up against the cold and increasingly gray of the weather, considering. If Hanayo was willing to gamble with the safety of her werewolf fiancee, what options were left for Anju. She opened her door, heading to her closet. As always, surprise and allies were the strategies. And, as always, Anju’s tactics for gaining allies to her cause started with charm. Kashima was manipulable by anything pretty and Anju had never not been pretty. The new plan would start there.
A familiar smell on the way to meet Nico, mostly wisteria and worry, Maki could also pick up the words Hanayo was muttering as she headed in Maki’s direction, a stream of concern about Rin. Maki increased her pace to a jog, startling Hanayo as she pulled up before nearly hugging her. After last night’s isolation, Maki’s emotions seemed to be bursting out with an unexpected honesty.

“Maki?!?!?!” Hanayo squeaked.

Maki stepping back a little, suddenly shy, kicking the path. Hanayo giggled, seeing the nervy wolf who so often skittered away from emotion in the tall girl in front of her.

Maki shoved her hands in her pocket, “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know anymore.” Hanayo exhaled, throwing her arms out to the side, flinging her head back to scream “I HATE MY JOB.” As the echo died, the fair haired woman smiled at her friend, “I’ll be so glad when this is all over. I never want to see those people again.”

Maki nudged her friend with her shoulder, “Thanks for watching out for Rin...and Nico.”

“And you too, Maki.” Hanayo’s concern, always gentle, always sincere, always warmed Maki, “Especially after…” grim dimmed Hanayo’s pleasant tone…”the f...fight. Someone might have seen something.”

“I’ll be careful.” And there it was, musk, peach, vanilla, magic, the hurried muttering of lines, Maki’s full fanged grin as she barely kept her head from snapping in Nico’s direction, managing to keep her eyes on Hanayo as every other sense pounced Nico-ward.

Hanayo recognized the shift and touched Maki’s forearm to make sure she was listening, “Tell Nico I said hello. Bring her to lunch sometime.”

Maki nodded at Hanayo, body too full of actions and emotions to get single words out through her throat, and pivoted to Nico, who’d stopped to watch their interaction.

Nico didn’t like it. This feeling. It was out of place. She wasn’t jealous. She was Nico, future star of stage and screen, destined by determination to sweep up the aisles and collect multiple awards to the thunderous, standing ovation applause of her peers. Hanayo was Maki’s friend, a rare treasure for the werewolf. Nico knew, on a primal level, that Maki never looked at Hanayo with the open need Nico had seen in her, that the depths of those glorious eyes never glinted with feral, neon, sexy mischief at anyone but Nico. So Nico wasn’t jealous when she realized the distant but familiar silhouette that had loped toward someone else had actually been Maki. But Nico did stop, not wanting to intrude, knowing her lip was turning up in a snarl. And then there was Maki, bounding to Nico, as brightly as ever, hands reaching for Nico’s hips to twirl her and Nico tried to let the joy of the movement clear away the mood. But instead, she cocked her head at Maki, eyelashes fluttering, hands keeping Maki’s hands on her hips as she stepped in to the werewolf, on her toes to press a hard kiss against melting lips, “Hey pretty girl,” Nico glanced up, pleased that Maki seemed frozen, startled, eyes wide, “Nico has something to show you.”

And then Nico was dragging Maki into a small, dark room, closing the door, hands sliding under Maki’s serious sweater as Maki’s backpack fell to the ground, werewolf whimpering as she nuzzled into Nico’s neck to get closer to that delicious mix of dangerously distracting that pushed Maki to a place where she was unaware of anything but Nico so close but not close enough. The sweater had to go, Maki reached up to her collar, about to tear down, but Nico’s hand stopped her, red eyes feral,
reminding Maki of the first night in the cabin, when Nico had been so overwhelming…

“Don’t…” Nico moved Maki, sitting her down in a chair, biting her way up Maki’s neck with increasingly excited murmurs, increasingly deeper pressure, her weight pressing Maki against the chair, her hand sliding down to unbutton Maki’s jeans. Maki’s eyes rolled back as Nico’s fingers started to tease and then, with a yelp, threw herself forward as Nico once again slipped a hand under the sweater to pinch.

“Nico…” Maki whined as Nico leaned her weight into the redhead, forcing her back into the chair, “please” desperate, ears sliding back, hands gripping the chair and then Nico’s mouth was there, at her ear, as if she knew, whispering, blowing, commanding, fingers now playing across Maki’s abdomen as her other thumb pulled Maki’s lower lip down, running across it with frenetic unpredictability.

“Say yes to Nico.” The chair was pushed back as far as it could go into the wall, Nico was kneeling across Maki, thrilling at every twitch of sensation, hands tearing crazily through Maki’s hair, tugging at snarls, knee grinding close enough that Maki’s whimpers were sounding pained as the chair was forced even further back by…

“Yes.” Nico almost needed werewolf hearing for the hiss of breath. Maki’s eyes were closed, lids fluttering, her teeth biting into her mouth.

No more words, Nico made sure of that, swallowing every one as her hands created every tremor, every spasm, claiming every choice Maki could make until …

"ni..ni..NICO..."

Chapter End Notes

Did not want to get too far off track so here’s a short chapter to tide you over as I continue dodging full fledged pneumonia. Comments and cheer welcome. Take care!
Tuesday's Gray, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Fangs rehearsal is about to begin...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every day, Kashima’s arrival in the dressing room stopped all progress as the actress playing Lucy and two of the three Sisters would jostle for position, giggling and pleading for Kashima to lace their bodices. Kashima, while not the most ept at the task, was always willing to try. And then Kotori or Anju or Nico or Eli would have to undo the damage.

Kashima was having her own problems today. No matter what she did, her collar would not lie properly. With a sigh, she glanced in the mirror, hands clumsy. This would all have been fixed if Kotori had just agreed to the cape. Kashima didn’t need special effects to convince the audience of Dracula’s mesmerizing powers and sure the lighting was cool, but if she just had a cape for swooping around the stage like a bat, how much better would the audience be able to visualize the full potential of the King Of Vampires. Working in the howl had filled out her portrayal, if only she’d had as much support from the costumers.


“These wing collar tips feel grounded.” Kashima groaned. “And I still want a cape.”

Anju flipped them, “Not enough starch.”

“Starch?”

“Spray starch. If you take off your shirt, I’ll fix it.” Anju undid Kashima’s top button with a flirtatious smile but Kashima’s only reaction was to pop the rest of the snaps in a rough haste that made the seamstress in Anju wince. Right, this was Kashima, flattery was the way to win the field.

Anju hummed as she helped Kashima out of the shirt, “We can’t have anything drawing attention away from the way you get Dracula’s fierce hunger down to the bone.”

Kashima leaned in, looming over Anju’s neck, drawing her lips back, as if she already had her fangs in, “I skip dinner.”

Anju folded the shirt over her arm as Kashima sat with a sigh, “I can’t get you a cape. Kotori is so stubborn…” she let a hint of complaint invite Kashima to confide.

“I know. I have a vision for the character and the costume designer needs to respect that.” Kashima turned her head to smile as Sister #2 headed backstage.

“She really should.” Anju tugged the shoulder of Kashima’s tank top and let her voice swoon into the confidential range, “But I have an idea that’ll really make an impression on the audience, if you want to take a chance.”
Kashima’s eyes gleamed as Anju leaned in to whisper.

Maki stared at the ceiling, Nico had left but NICO was still everywhere, smug, confident, bouncing, sexy, demanding….breathless, Maki was still breathless and positive her legs would give out if she tried to stand.

“I can’t believe we did that.” She whispered to the ceiling, which had seen everything, but offered no explanation for Nico’s sudden....territorial tendencies.

“No-zooom-i” Nico’s voice dragged out Nozomi’s name shrilly as the future star of stage and screen leaned over the back of the seat next to Nozomi, “Maki’ll be here in a bit. Remember, no touching.” Nico patted Nozomi on the head as if she were a child and then flounced toward the stage to check her props, smug confidence in every rapid motion. Nozomi raised an eyebrow. What had Nico done with her girlfriend? Nozomi had gotten the impression that Nico was nervous about Maki watching Fangs, but there she was, pulling herself up onstage with the energy of three people and a smile that could outshine the downtown lights. Nozomi pulled out her cards. A little insight into how to treat Nico’s changeable girlfriend might be of benefit. King of Rods, reversed. Judgement. The Lovers. Of course, The Lovers. Nico was certainly at least half of a very volatile situations and surely, adding in a touch of lunar sensitivity intensified the mood. Judgement signalled choices would be made.

Nico was anxious for her cue, for the lights to start. Mina was a dream role, the real center of the play. She was the first onstage, the first speaker, the actual heart of the play, the woman who struggled so hard to save both friend and fiancé, the only one to defy Dracula, suffering the bite, but not bending under the threat, still holding on long enough to outlast him, to see her predator destroyed. MINA would have been a nice title for the play, but it was always about the men, or, in Kashima’s case, those who could use the tropes of masculinity to their advantage, who caught the attention. Although, Nico admitted, Fangs could also mean the Sisters and Lucy, poor Lucy, done in by Dracula and barely able to menace a baby. Nico shivered at the thought, suddenly grateful she had a nice, warm girlfriend with friendly, flirty fangs to curl up with when nightmares happened, when Kashima’s face, dark and hollow loomed from every shadow as Nico fled across a campus suddenly strange to her. Shaking herself out of that thought, Nico wondered if Maki had found her way to the theatre yet. The 5 minute call. Time to go over her opening lines in her head, Mina’s first letter to Lucy, ranging from the buoyant, friendly flirtatious optimism of “Forgive my long delay in writing, but I have been simply overwhelmed with work. The life of an assistant schoolmistress is sometimes trying. I am longing to be with you, and by the sea, where we can talk together freely and build our castles in the air” to the later concern laced with enough grim overtones that the audience feels a shiver up their neck, ‘I have just had a few hurried lines from Jonathan from Transylvania...I am longing to hear all his news. It must be nice to see strange countries. I wonder if we -- I mean Jonathan and I -- shall ever see them together.” So much foreshadowing in one short line. Nico was thrilled to have such material to play with. She knew that by the end of each performance, the audience would be Team Heroine, cheering Mina, thanks to the deft portrayal by the queen of both smile and nuance herself, Nico.

“Hi.” Maki slid warily into the seat one down from Nozomi, red hair hidden under the gray hood of her Northwestern sweatshirt. No coat. Werewolves must run hot. Nozomi sniggered and Maki stared, eyes mostly shadowed, but Nozomi could see a glint of green glow.
“Hello, Maki. Welcome to Fangs. I’m Nozomi, your tour guide. Right now, the actors are getting into costume and doing hair and makeup. We’ve already checked props, light, sound and are now just waiting for the 7 o’clock start.”

Maki nodded, slouching.

“Did Nico-chi feed you or do you want a cookie?” Nozomi held out a small bag, full of no longer warm chocolate chip cookies lifted from the cafeteria. Maki’s hood fell back a little, Nozomi thought the redhead tired, a bit out of it as her hand reached for a cookie.

“So, having trouble sharing Nico?” Nozomi inquired, timed precisely to Maki biting down into her treat, then spewing cookie crumbs everywhere.

“What?” Maki rose, leaning over the seat between them, “how did you...what...did Nico say…that’s not...that’s.”

Nozomi waved a hand, “Calm down. The cards tell me these things.” A wink, “Didn’t Nico warn you about that?”

Maki pulled her hood back up, sulking.

“And I heard some interesting after karaoke stories.” Nozomi thought she heard a snarl. “So when Nico bopped in here, cheerful, and you weren’t with her, I was…” Nozomi wondered if Maki would react badly to the honesty of curious, “Concerned.”

A slight head movement in her direction told Nozomi the redhead was listening, “So I drew cards for you.” No response, so Nozomi barrelled right through her points, “Even if you were acting selfishly, that’s the Reversed King of Rods for you, always wanting things, that’s still a valid part of you, so accept it and get better. Judge yourself worthy.” Nozomi paused again. Still nothing. She was used to having a much more reactive audience. Maki was not going to be nearly as much fun to tease as Nico or Umi. “I pulled The Lovers again for you and Nico.”

Maki moved another seat away. Nozomi considered and moved to the seat next to Maki, offering another cookie, “I just want Nico to be happy. Don’t you?”

Maki sniffed at the cookie, considering. This time her voice was more confident, “It’s not really any of your business.” Maki took the cookie, watching Nozomi warily.

Nozomi winked, “You need to make your own choices, Maki, not go where Nico…”

Maki stood, about to storm out of the row, possibly out of the theatre, and then Nico would want to know what had happened. Nozomi grabbed the hem of Maki’s hoodie, “I really am just trying to help, Maki. Nico’s never really let anyone this close before. I’m just getting used to it.”

Maki turned, pushing the hood back, eyes narrow, mouth in a sexy, near feral snarl Kashima would have killed to be able to do, “It’s not for you to get used to. You may be Nico’s friend, but we don’t know each other.” Maki relaxed enough that the aggressive aura faded, “I’m getting used to this too and I don’t want to disappoint Nico. I didn’t ask you for advice. Please don’t push me.”

Nozomi nodded and sat back.

Maki dropped into the last seat in the row, leaving her backpack in the seat next to her, ignoring Nozomi, munching sullenly on the next cookie Nozomi handed her.
Maki was still too sensitive to her environment. Nico had ruthlessly activated every nerve and sense pathway she could reach, leaving Maki too open to sensations. And then, Nozomi, with Maki too aware of exactly how attractive Nozomi found her and everyone else with curves in the theatre. Eli was probably fortunate not to have werewolf senses. Maki was still in enough of a Nico haze that that just triggered more of a longing to just forget everything and steal away with Nico, which led to grumpiness and not dealing well with Nozomi’s impertinence. How did Nico handle that? Cloying and concern in equal mix with annoying and nosy. Maki was too used to guarding her privacy, keeping things hidden away. She was not going to turn into a person who had casual conversations about lycanthropy in the middle of a bustling theatre person. She had too much at risk and now with Nico, too much to lose.

Erena was back in the costume room with Anju, sitting on a table, kicking her leg back and forth, waiting for Tsubasa to be finished with her second act cues. Anju was working on several repairs, sewing machine motor purring as she slid the fabric under the needle. Kotori was in the theatre tonight, making notes about any changes she still needed to make.

Erena glanced at her phone. She had developed an app that alerted her to spikes in strength of the frequencies being transmitted. “It’s definitely the presence of an audience. Yazawa’s got her girlfriend here and her numbers are much stronger than Kashima’s tonight.” Erena pocketed her phone, “Thursday there’s a preview audience so we’ll be able to verify that and plan for surges.”

Anju nodded, finished the repair of the split inseam, “That will be useful.”

Erena stretched, “I’m a fan of as much data as possible.”

Tsubasa opened the door, stepped in and locked it behind her, “It’s getting harder to get any time alone this close to opening. I was here at 4 a.m. this morning and there were 3 people painting.”

“Everything’s already set up, isn’t it?” Anju stood, folding the pants over a hanger.

Tsubasa shook her head, glancing at Erena for support, “I’m afraid we’re going to run out of battery power, since we can’t plug a transmitter into the lighting grid or everything goes down. So we’re relying on the coffin set up.”

“Maybe we could go dark until Friday, get the most out of our equipment without risking anyone getting suspicious if we have to swap out the power.” Erena suggested slowly, curious as to how Anju would react.

The caramel haired woman glanced down at the metal wand Tsubasa had created for her, her fingers sliding across its surface, “Caution…” She frowned, “But what about calculating for surges?”

Tsubasa frowned, “Yeah. We’ve blown so many tubes.”

Erena grabbed a piece of scrap paper, bending over to do some quick calculations, showing the paper to Tsubasa, who read it over and nodded, “Could work. We do know the frequencies.”

“What?” Anju came up behind Erena, leaning over her outreached arm in an attempt to read the paper.

“I could adapt a field strength meter. We’d just have to leave it in the desk or something. Wouldn’t test the equipment but would give us numbers.”

“And if that doesn’t work tomorrow, we do a test run Thursday.” Anju stated, light eyes focused on
distant thoughts.

“Agreed.” Erena took her calculations back. “I’ll head back to the office. Tojo can handle things here. Worst case scenario, we try again the next play.”

Anju had no time for that, but she smiled at Erena. Tonight, she was encouraging her allies. That was an easier task than dealing with the suddenly trickster Hanayo Koizumi.

Chapter End Notes

It's back!
Chapter Summary

How is our favorite werewolf/redhead coping with a night at the theatre?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Intermission. A break. Outside. Away from Nozomi. Away from so many misleading sensations. Smells not matching voices, actions not matching emotions. All a muddle, and Nico at the heart of it, Nico and Kashima, magic and musk strengthening with every gasp or confident stride. Nozomi alert to Maki’s every twitch. Sensation overflow. Barely a moon buried under banks of clouds, barely a thrum, low levels of late evening noise. Weather was going to get bad, Maki could smell the wet, waiting snow. But she could breathe here, for a few minutes before she had to go back inside, to finish the full Fangs experience. Maki wanted this to be over, so over, so she could just go back to Nico’s place and…

Maki howled, softly, suddenly lonely and longing for a caress and Nico to lean into. But no, back inside, to watch Nico on stage, ruby eyed dynamite unleashing all that vitality, creating moments, catching the interest of anyone watching, like she did at the party, heartbeats raised, heads tilted, everyone’s eyes following Nico. Nico thrived on the attention, her delight coming through every sense. And Maki was happy for Nico, really she was, although suddenly waking from a new lovers haze to find herself so connected to someone so connected to so many others’ reactions was a shock. Then, as Maki was processing this new Nico, who wasn’t really a new Nico, just a Nico who had kept all her focus on Maki for too brief a while and was now renewing her contacts with the world, there was old Nico suddenly surging on the Lakefill, surprising Maki, leading Maki into that tiny control room and stripping away all the emotions, leaving them both breathless with the physicality, the fierceness of the bond between them. That had been…unsettling. And sexy, sensual, provocative, risky, raw. But Maki kept returning to how off balance she had felt as Nico bounced out of the room, blowing a kiss, heading to conquer the stage as confidently as she had just conquered Maki. And once again, Maki had found herself sliding, unsteady on breaking, drifting ice over emotional depths she was afraid to be tossed into.

Sister One, also known as Deidre, and Sister Two, Amira, were sitting in the green room, gossiping together, a few feet away from where Eli had settled at the mirror. Eli had a decent working relationship with them, but they were senior theatre majors and Eli’s junior status and minor in dance meant they hadn’t interacted much before this show. Deidre and Amira knew everyone in the theatre department and had long been Kashima confidants.

“Can you believe Nico skipped the CosPlay party at Chapin last week?” Amira complained as she searched for her mascara.

“I know. She hasn’t had time for anything this quarter. First, it was this part, then work, then that redhead.” Deidre checked her hair in the mirror, redoing the tie holding it up and back.

“She’s in the audience tonight. I hear she’s a freshman. And loaded.”
Diedre sniggered, “Oh, is that why Nico is keeping her to herself.”

Amira quickly applied her mascara, “You know I’m really not going to mind if Nico gets mad at us and Kashima for this. She barely talks to me anymore anyway.”

“Kashima’s doing Nico a favor.” Deidre took a lipstick out of Amira’s bag.

“Exactly.” Eli found herself scooting her chair down as she brushed her hair, but when Amira caught her paying attention, the brunette nudged her companion, “Hey, Eli, what do you think about Nico? She’s BFF with your girlfriend.”

Eli was a bad liar but…Eli shrugged, “She could be nicer to Nozomi.”

“I know. Nico always wants it like “Nico Ni”” Deidre mocked Nico’s pose, “thinks it should be. Getting a part this big just made her ego even more inflated. She’s been nagging Kashima about her singing when what Kashima really needs support. Which is why Kashima comes to us.”

Amira nodded. “And we give her love.”

Eli watched her two fellow vamps smile mysteriously and wondered if just asking what was up would get her anywhere. Should Eli even care? Kashima wasn’t the problem. Surely Nico was up to handling intracast spats. She seemed to have Kashima pretty well heeled.

Eli decided to continue being a friendly vibration. “I’m just glad we don’t have solos. Kashima looks so pale before she sings.”

“She claims it’s on purpose, to add to the ‘King of the Un-dead’ effect,” Deidre sniggered, “But I know she’s just trying not to throw up.”

Someone’s phone pinged. There was a groan as a voice announced to the dressing rooms, “Bad snowstorm tonight. Hope we get out of here before it starts.”

“Yeah. Maybe we could get started soon…” another grumble, “I have a test tomorrow.”

Eli stood, “I’m going to find a stage manager and see what’s up.”

It was just so cute. But Nozomi had to not giggle because the first couple times she almost, Maki shot her glare full of neon threat. But there was Nico’s Big Bad Girlfriend, curled up in her seat, holding her backpack like a teddy bear, huge eyes watching the stage as Nico lived Mina’s fight against Dracula, whimpers and low growls escaping the tensed redhead. Nozomi swore she saw Maki bite into her bag when Mina was under hypnosis, describing what she saw through her bond with Dracula.

Fortunately, Maki knew when Nico set foot in the audience part of the theatre, otherwise she might have jumped when she felt the arms slide over her shoulders. But she did stiffen. Maki could tell Nico was surprised by that reaction, but Maki was about ready to run howling laps around the Lakefill to get the moody darkness of Fangs out of her head. She now knew what Nico meant when Nico complained about how screechy the music got, and how hard it was to keep that out of her nightmares...add musical cues to Kashima bending threateningly over a swooning, vulnerable Nico and Maki knew she would be the one having nightmares tonight.

“Hey, pretty girl, wasn’t Nico brilliant?” Nico kissed Maki’s cheek, throwing Maki right back to the chair, before the show, heart racing, suddenly as empty as the room…Maki shivered. “Whoa, are you
cold, Maki?"

Before Nico could continue, Nozomi let out all the amusement she’d been keeping in for the past hour, with a booming laugh, “She’s TERRIFIED, Nico-chi. Almost bit her bag in half, didn’t ya, Maki?”

Nico glared at Nozomi, while Maki shoved her backpack a little away from her. Maki was at the end of the row of seats so Nico slid into her lap, fingers tangling in red silk before pulling her girlfriend in for an embrace as she whispered, “It’s no good if Nico’s not convincing on stage. But Kashima doesn’t even nip me, I swear.”

Nozomi continued to giggle, Maki was too embarrassed to look up and let her head drop to Nico’s shoulder, inhaling confident Nico masked in the fakery of makeup and the Kashima overlay. Olfactory thrall. No clear scent, no clear head…

Maki sat up, eyes catching Nico’s. “I’ll walk you home.”

“Isn’t it the other way around?” Nozomi leaned over to poke Nico.

Nico swatted at her and stood up, “Shut up, Nozomi. Come backstage with me, Maki, I have to change and grab my bag.”

Maki was restless. Nico wondered if it was having to sit still for two and a half hours while so much “happened” on stage. Or the aftermath of what happened before rehearsal. As sexy as it was to have Maki so frantic for Nico’s touch, there had been an odd mood, an unfamiliar expression on her lover’s face, one that Nico didn’t have a name for.

Nico slid her arm through Maki’s. The snow had started and the sky was layers of gray clouds, shedding wet, heavy flakes.

“So are you ready for opening night now?” Nico opted for a less pressing question, one that might encourage Maki to share any thoughts looping in her mind.

Maki shrugged, stopping to stare up at the sky and let a few snowflakes hit her in the face, “I suppose.” She grinned, “I won’t bite Kashima now that I know how it ends.”

Nico leaned in, “She’s really improved, thanks to you. You saved Nico.”

Another shrug, “You would have done fine. People know you’re…” Maki considered, translating wolf through partly human senses into human language was puzzling sometimes, but then she remembered one of Nico’s favorite claims, “a star.”

“So they respect Nico.” Nico bounced at the confirmation.

“Oh fear you. Machiavelli got that right.”

“Who?” Nico asked.

“Dead Italian guy. Wrote books.”

“Another poet?”

Maki snorted, “Playwright. Actually philosopher. It was the Renaissance, people were a lot of things.”
“Triple threats. Like Nico.”

Italian philosophy seemed heavier than snow so Maki changed the subject to one sure to distract her lover, “But not as cute.”

“Aw, Maki loves Nico.” Nico nuzzled.

Maki’s noise of agreement was subdued enough that Nico suspected their pre show encounter was at the base of Maki’s odd mood.

“Did Nico leave Maki too…” Nico let the question trail off, not sure how to read the redhead’s mood.

Maki picked up her pace. Nico pulled her back, “Maki.”

Maki hung her head, expression shadowed by her hood, “We should get you home.”


Maki collapsed into a crouch, and Nico reached out to touch her shoulder as the redhead muttered, “Don’t know.”

Nico crouched as well, “Tell me what you’re thinking. Maybe I can help.”

Maki picked up some snow and started to form it into a ball, “Acting is weird.” She stood and threw the snowball at a streetlight.

“Is Nico weird?”

“No.” Maki shook her head as she shoved her now red hands in the kangaroo pocket of her hoodie, “You were actually pretty amazing. I was so worried for you even when I knew you were fine.”

“So why don’t you want to come home with me?” Nico stood, pulling Maki’s hood back far enough that she could see her eyes, which were full of swirling green and shadows. Nico knew there was something big that Maki wasn’t articulating, but Nico was almost certain that pushing the skittish redhead on the subject of their sex life’s debut performance in a semi public location would just lead to a howl and run. Careful phrasing. “We missed the cuddle part.”

Maki’s eyes glinted amethyst ice, “You didn’t miss it. You were on full thrill.”

“Did you?” Nico’s question was soft as they stood in a pool of light, disconnected and awkward.

“I don’t know. Maybe…” Maki turned, arms out, “I’ve just…it’s been…” Maki took a deep breath, “I’ve felt so many things, so many people, closing in all evening...that and the...I want… I need...to play...to hear...something that makes sense.”

Nico didn’t have a piano. Maki had had barely a moment to breathe since Nico took her hand and dragged her into the Wirtz Center. There hadn’t been any calms, just increasing tension, rising restlessness, the knowledge that something was going to break through, to rip out from under Maki’s skin, a howl or leap or a...storm. Maki swept a hand through some falling snow, wondering what this mood might manifest...she could hear the screechiness of the Fangs orchestra merge with the softer fall of a cello in snow and the quick hammering of her heart as Nico...Maki felt her fingers twitch, wanting to search out the notes that would transform this whole evening into meaning.

Nico watched Maki for a moment, as Maki stared off into the distance, unaware of anything other
than whatever was going on in her head. She’d have to get used to that, Nico realized, but thoughtful Maki, thoughtful Maki was Depth and Beauty carved against the snow. Nico could certainly hold that image in her heart until playful, flirty Maki returned.

“Maki?” Nico’s touch on her arm was firm but when Maki looked down, Nico’s smile was warm, “You can head home. Nico can manage from here. It’s only a block.” Maki sniffed, uncertain. Nico was concerned, but calm, loving, detached. Some of the pressure lifted and Maki grabbed Nico, spinning the smaller woman off the ground, hugging her. Releasing Nico, with a howl, Maki sprinted off. Bemused, Nico shook her head, counting snowflakes for awhile as she watched Maki disappear into the gray. She was positive an affectionate Maki would remember to call or text at some point, but right now, Nico respected this mood she was on the outside of. Besides, she could use a good night’s sleep. It was already a hectic week.

Chapter End Notes

Tuesday extended itself for more chapters than I expected, but Maki had some things to process before we could progress.

Merry Wives is hectic as we approach going off book.

Take care of yourself. And do something you love.
“Shut out the month’s light with your fragrance;  
Close all the doors with your hair”

Maybe Nico had a point and Neruda was a werewolf. So many scent cues. And hair to be wrapped around in. Maki closed her eyes, remembering Nico’s hair falling down, ends tickling against her skin, taunting her with the barest of touches, Nico’s ruby eyes a fire in the cavern they were both lost in, the only light Maki could see…

Maki curled up further, pulling the throw over her torso, slight traces of Nico’s scent lingering there and the rest of the room. Not enough. Her mother had tidied. Maki really wanted a shirt that Nico had slept in, some physical reminder, maybe some lingered on her pillow, if she went upstairs, but half asleep, even the faintest trace of Nico was making her lazy to leave. Nico had been so vivid here, in the music room... The music still pounded...Nico, so close, so demanding, Nico so far, so aloof, and the space of the night between those two Nicos.

Howling. Loud. Close. Rin. Happy. Maki sat up. She’d left the door to the music room open so outside sounds were filtering in. Maki ran to the back door, to see Rin in wolf form in the backyard, doing flips through what looked like two feet of new snow. Maki waved and slid the door open to be half tackled by wet, cold, happy Rin, who then rushed over to the couch, under a blanket and suddenly human Rin was grinning at Maki.

“Classes are cancelled. Let’s go PLAY! Kayo-chin’s waiting.” Rin wrapped the blanket around her small frame and rushed to the cabinets to find food.

“They never cancel classes.”

“TWENTY inches of snow.” Rin spun, half a scone in her mouth, “SNOW DAY!”

“Hello, Rin. Good morning, Maki. I didn’t know you were home. Is Nico here?” Maki’s mom was still in her bathrobe.

“Hey, Dr. Nishikino. We’re going to go play on the Lakefill.” Rin pulled out a chair while Maki turned to her mom.

“No, Nico’s at her apartment.” Maki decided a scone sounded good.

“Can I make you girls eggs and bacon? The office is staying closed today, I think.”

“Lotsa bacon.” Rin ordered as Maki sat next to her.
“I thought Hanayo was waiting.” Maki needled.

Rin shrugged. “Give me your phone.”

Maki unlocked it and slid it over, Rin typed a quick message, “She’ll get breakfast there. We’ll meet outside.”

Maki hurriedly grabbed her phone back, she had a girlfriend to text too.

M: Hi! Rin’s here. Miss you ♡

N: Did Maki dream about Nico? (σ° ³(ˆ⌣ˆc))

M: Maybe...We’re going to run around on the Lakefill. Want to meet us?

A pause.

N: (ᵔ̴̶ ̤᷄ ⁿ̥̥ sıɾ) лʱ♀⁎.*.

N: Nico will be sitting wrapped up in a warm blanket sipping hot chocolate, waiting for a visit when you’re done.

M: ●∧●

N: Oh, Nico knows you’ll be adorable, pretty girl. But Nico can’t afford to get sick.


M: (´∀`) 

N: Love you, Maki ⊃ ♡ (⊃) ♕ Be careful.

M: (^^)ρ

Maki slid the phone back to Rin. “Ask Hanayo to pack a bag for us. Nico’s cooking lunch.”

“Ooohh,” Rin phone pounced, typing rapidly. “Snow days mean snow much homecooking. I could get spoiled.”

Maki shook her head at Rin’s goofiness while her mom dropped a plates in front of both of them, “And you should. Tell Nico and Hanayo I said hello. We’ll have to have another dinner here, when Nico’s not so busy with rehearsal.”

“...when Nico’s not so busy with rehearsal,” At that thought, Maki sat up, eager, as her mother ruffled her hair.

“You’ll have to pick classes soon for next quarter.” And then practical Mama struck, “What are you planning to take, Rin? Maki can’t decide on a...”

And Maki tuned out, her mouth full of the crinkly, layered, slightly burnt sweetness of bacon, her mind full of Nico with evenings free.

Erena had her tool chest out and was tinkering. Tsubasa came back from the bathroom, towel
wrapped around her hair, bathrobe tightly closed.

“Classes are cancelled.” Erena announced, “Everything’s shut down. 20 inches.”

Tsubasa sat on her bed, “Anybody delivering? We’ve eaten our way through the food stash.”

“Sargent cafeteria’s open. We can walk over there. Just let me finish this.”

“What is it?”

“Modified field strength meter.”

“Anju really owes you.” Tsubasa pulled on pants.

Erena closed up the back of the meter, shaking her head, “Nope. Free will kind of thing, my friend. I want to be helpful.”

“So you can…”


“So build me a werewolf finder.” Tsubasa wheedled, “We’ve been friends for longer.”

Erena frowned, “I don’t believe in werewolves. No scientific evidence.”

“What about the video?”

“Low budget DIY horror.”

“Really?”

Erena shrugged, “Maybe if there are werewolves, I don’t want to make their lives any harder.”

“But what if they’re a danger?” Tsubasa’s voice got shriller, “What if they make people change?”

“Then I’m sure we’d hear about it like Ebola or Rabies or…things like that are hard to hide. Not even the tabloids do “Human with bite walks into ER, 3 werewolves trot out” stories. Why do you care so much anyway?”

“It bugs me. People masquerading as something they’re not.” Tsubasa pulled her sweater down, then grabbed a pair of wool socks out of a drawer.

‘Bit hypocritical for semi closeted you.” Erena grabbed her jacket.

“I only bite volunteers.” Tsubasa countered, “What would it take to convince you werewolves exist?”

“Proof. Data. I can work with data.”

“Fine. I’ll get you proof. If all this magic runs on frequencies, maybe the moon has one.”

Erena stopped, surprised at her friend, eyebrows raised with interest, “That’s actually pretty intriguing.”

Tsubasa nodded, glad to have finally landed a bullseye in Erena’s scientific curiosity.
Eli stood at the window, stretching. She’d missed her morning workout at the barre, so she definitely needed to make up for that. She started the electric teakettle while Nozomi dealt out cards kneeling at her table.

“What are you worried about this morning, Nozomi?”

“Nico.” Nozomi’s tone was so bleak that Eli immediately knelt next to her.

“Is something wrong? Did Nico say something yesterday?”

Nozomi shook her head, “No. She seemed in a good mood. But there’s something I can’t... I just can’t shake the feeling there’s a darkness looming…”

Eli rested her head on the bed, remembering the chatter at the makeup mirror, “The other two sisters yesterday were plotting something, but it sounded pretty innocuous. High school evil. And Kashima seems to be a Nico fan now, Nico and Maki have helped her so much with the singing.”

“Everybody ‘seems’ something,” Nozomi tapped the cards she’d laid out, seeming reluctant to turn them over, “But I don’t get a sense of Truth from anyone.”

“No even Nico?”

Nozomi turned, her frown thoughtful, “I get so many different reads from Nico. And from Maki there’s turmoil. And uncertainty…”

Eli wrapped her arms around Nozomi’s shoulder’s her head dropping to rest there, “They’ll be fine. They care about each other. They can figure it out.”

Nozomi hummed, turning over the Page of Cups. “Love will save them, huh, Eli-chi.”

Eli squeezed, “It’s a nice thought.”

Nozomi sighed, “The cards agree with you more often than me when it’s about Nico.” She turned over the next card, another bright, young person bearing an offering. The last was a woman, seated on a throne, glowing with power and security, a knowing glint in her eyes. The card dropped from Nozomi’s fingers and Eli had the oddest sensation that her lover had just stalled, unable to process whatever the cards had offered her.

“Nozomi?” Eli’s tone was soothing.

“That’s not possible?!!?” Both Nozomi’s hands were splayed out on the table, cards between them.

“What is it? They all look cheerful.”

Nozomi nodded, speaking in an odd rhythm, as if she were testing out a theory. “They are, because Nico’s younger, adorable, playful love interest has happened along at just the right time for Nico’s hard work to pay off and for them to start a family.”

“Oh.” Eli tried that one out in her head and understood why Nozomi seemed stalled, “But you keep getting the feeling that Nico’s in some danger, right.”

Nozomi nodded, “Every time I set foot in the theatre, it’s intense. And Nico won’t listen.”

“Is it.” Eli hated to say it, but the thought of werewolves still itched at her, especially walking home
after dark, “Maki? Is she a threat?”

Nozomi’s belly laugh cleared out the awkward feeling in the room, “Maki Nishikino would gnaw off her own tail before she did anything to hurt Nico.”

“So…”

“I don’t know, Eli-chi. My instincts and the cards have never been this split before.” Nozomi leaned over her table, head in her hands.

Eli hesitated as she slid her arm around Nozomi’s waist, “Do you think the headaches threw you off?”

Nozomi considered that, but then shook her head, “Maybe Maki’s influence is stronger in the cards than whatever I’m sensing at the theatre. That makes the most sense.”

Eli smiled at the Page of Cups, “So Happy Ending Nico?”

“Family Ending Nico, anyway, it seems.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Hey, pretty girl! Did you have fun?” Nico opened the door and Maki jumped up with a whine for a quick lick of Nico’s cheek. Rin bounded through the foyer, sniffing everywhere and Hanayo looked pleased but cold, “Let’s get you upstairs so Hanayo can defrost.”

“Thank you.” Hanayo whispered as she rubbed her hands together, Rin bumping up against her.

Rin and Maki came through the door simultaneously, Nico having stopped to take the backpack from Hanayo. Honoka yelled and Nico stepped into the room to see the ginger haired enthusiast run toward the werewolves with both arms out, “Maki! Rin! You're ok! I’m so happy!”

Maki yelped as Honoka tried to hug both of them at once, and managed to skitter out of her grasp and duck behind a chuckling Nico.

“I’m so glad you’re friends again.” Honoka and Rin were playwrestling on the floor, Rin fake snarling.

“Yes, Honoka, we’re glad they’re okay, too.” Umi put a hand on Honoka’s shoulder, “Now let Rin go.”

“Aw, Umi.” Honoka gave Rin one last squeeze and stood, “Rin doesn’t mind.”

“Hanayo might” Nico stated drily, as her own werewolf girlfriend snuffled her way through every inch of Nico’s clothing her nose could reach. Rin bounded up to Nico and took the backpack in her mouth, “You can use my bedroom to change, Rin.” Nico pointed the way, “Are you going to change, Maki?”

Maki shook her head, whining, continuing to sniff Nico. Nico ruffled the fur around Maki’s ears, bopping a kiss between them, “Well, Nico has to finish cooking so keep your snout off the stove.”

Maki howled and followed Nico into the kitchen. Nico thought if she and Maki ever got their own
apartment, she’d have to make sure to factor in enough space for a wolf who liked the way Nico’s cooking smelled.

Nico had seized her usual spot on the couch, claiming “Number One Chef in The Universe” privileges, Maki, sitting on the floor in human form, was curled up at her feet, the coffee table pushed to the side. Umi had offered Hanayo and Rin the other couch spots but they had opted for sharing the half smooshed huge pillow in the corner that doubled as a chair. So that left Kotori and Honoka snuggling on the couch, Umi sitting on the arm and leaning in...

Honoka was still excited about having two werewolves in the room with her. As many times as Umi would shush her Honoka would just pick up the conversation again, until they got to here, where Umi was playing with Kotori’s hair and too tired and content to curtail Honoka’s enthusiasm.

“You must heal super fast,” Honoka grabbed Maki’s arm, “You looked pretty wrecked that night, Maki.”

Maki pulled her arm back and Nico shifted a little, leaning down to whisper in her ear, at a level only the werewolf could hear. Maki blushed and Nico answered Honoka’s question, “Nico takes good care of her girlfriend.” Nico nudged Maki, who whimpered softly as Rin giggled. Maki put her head on Nico’s knee, enjoying this Nico mood, magic and musk and peach and vanilla and wanting Maki but content, surrounded by friends.

Umi was grateful Nozomi had decided not to take Nico up on her offer to come over. That would have dragged the conversation down alleys that Umi refused to admit she was ever in the neighborhood of.

“Kotori was telling us how much fun it was to watch Eli annoy Tsubasa.” Honoka laughed, “And Erena, tell ‘em about Erena’s face, Kotori.”

Kotori giggled, “She was so mad at Nozomi, all those light cues erased and Eli flouncing around stage in that nightgown, which she had sliding off her shoulders...Erena looked like she was going to tear something in half, pale and red, tensed and nostrils flaring, and then when I went to tell Tsubasa to be careful with the costume…” Another giggle, “I was glad Tsubasa didn’t have any kind of power tool, she might have stapled me to part of the set.”

Umi was watching Nico, who wasn’t listening at all, her fingers in Maki’s hair as she hummed and her girlfriend rubbed her cheek against Nico’s knee. “Nico.” Umi snapped.

Nico frowned, head tilted, “Really, Umi, you can’t object to this much. You were just doing the same to Kotori.”

Umi shook her head, “It’s not that. I suspect you are not taking this threat seriously.”

“Nico is serious. She took care of Maki.” Nico quickly countered.

“But who takes care of Nico?” Umi’s voice stumbled over the next name but she pushed through, “Nozomi keeps telling Kotori how many times she senses a shadow around you.”

Maki growled. “Hush, pretty girl,” Nico kept brushing fingers gently through red hair, “Nico takes care of Nico. I’m paying attention. Everybody’s around backstage; I’m usually with Micah or Kashima, what’s going to happen?” Nico sighed, leaning back, both hands locked behind her head, “Nozomi just wants to poke her nose into Nico’s business now that Nico has a girlfriend.”
“She did ask a lot of questions last night.” Maki muttered. Nico’s expression turned stormy.

“Kashima was asking a lot of questions too. And huddling with the other Sisters.” Kotori added.

Nico bounced up, Maki turning her head to follow Nico’s movements, “See this is the TROUBLE.” Nico’s arms started to fly out and around her body, “We should be focusing on opening night, planning the party, getting ready for the interviews, telling Nico how great her solo sounds after she sings it to you, instead we’re making up conspiracy theories about Techies.”

Maki crawled up on the couch, leaning over the arm as she spoke, “Hanayo’s been really worried too, Nico. And she doesn’t make up things.”

Head thrown back, arms out, Nico sang “I don’t care.”

Umi caught Maki’s glance and rolled her eyes. Honoka’s expression was thoughtful, Kotori’s concerned. Rin and Hanayo were snuggling closer by the word, eyes widening.

Hanayo squeaked as Rin nudged her encouragingly with her cheek, “Anju’s been more...avaricious every day, Nico. She keeps pushing Erena and Tsubasa to get a better handle on the frequencies generated when you and Kashima are onstage.”

Nico was suddenly attentive, “It’s different when it’s Nico and Kashima?”

Hanayo nodded.

“Of course, it’s different when it’s Nico and Kashima, Nico and Kashima are stars…” Nico was pacing, but her gestures were contained now, thoughts racing to pile possibilities....

“Nico?” Maki sounded worried, Nico was losing some of the homier, cozy scents and surging with a more private avidity, one that left Maki out. Nico kept pacing. Maki jumped off the couch, putting her arms around her mate. It took Nico a moment to relax and register Maki’s touch. Maki nuzzled into her neck.

“Nico just wants opening night to go well.” Nico sounded apologetic.

“I know.” Maki whispered, “It will.”

“We” Umi indicated the entire room, “just want to ensure you are there to receive the applause and acclaim you have worked so hard for, Nico.”

Nico tried to skip toward Umi, giggling when Maki’s arms didn’t release, “My girlfriend doesn’t want me to give you the kiss on the cheek you deserve for that, Umi.”

“Good.” Umi slid in behind Kotori for extra protection.

A whole day of solitude and stillness. Thank goodness the room was a single, Anju thought, that had been one of the pleasanter surprises when her situation became clear. No roommate to explain any oddities to. And today nearly two feet of snow softened and silenced the noisy mechanical motorized world. A blessing. She prepared the candles and sat in the center of the room, counting down her breaths, closing her eyes, focusing everything inward as the outside world stayed behind its winter barrier. This was a perfect gift, a positive omen. Anju breathed in slowly, slipping into the swirling colors of a trance state. “Tomorrow,” she whispered.
Takes 20 inches of snow to close the Northwestern campus. Didn't happen when I was there, but did happen fairly recently. I wanted Rin to have some fun, it's been a rough trip for her so we're having a snow day.

We are being deluged with rain here, Merry Wives opening night is Friday, and tonight I had to walk Falstaff, which makes directing difficult. But Falstaff is a flirt and flirting can be fun.

Hope this finds you well. Oh, by the way, there's an AU Yeah August grid going around Tumblr and I'm taking prompts for short hints of AUs. I've been wanting to try shorter aka 1000ish words fics so if there's one you like to see, drop a suggestion in the comments. List here: https://lonelypond.tumblr.com/post/175999865562/au-yeah-august
Thursday's A Thrill: Setting The Stage

Chapter Summary

We get set up for the big Fangs preview event.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki woke up, alone again, more stiff than sore. She sniffed, no Nico in nose range. Grumpy, she
rolled over, transforming before her limbs hit the floor, and trotted into the living room. Nico had
conveniently left the bedroom door propped open just a bit. Cinnamon, nutty still slightly warm
cinnamon, Maki hurried to the table where a pile of muffins waited. With a piece of paper, no two,
Maki sniffed, laying on top. Maki shoved the paper to the side with her snout and ate the pile of
muffins in three bites. Then she loped back to the bedroom to change into apartment common area
approved attire aka flannel shirt and a loose pair of Nico’s pajama shorts, which were not loose on
Maki so Nico didn’t mind when she borrowed them. She’d just send Nico a pic and then maybe the
super sneaky diva would remember a goodbye kiss before leaving in the morning.

First note: chock full of Nico-ness and cutesy, cursive writing.

Hey pretty girl,

Guess Nico wore you out again ; )

Early class then work then rehearsal so Nico will see you tonight. Don’t know when rehearsal will
be over. Driving from work. Prepare to warm Nico up thoroughly later.

Love you!
Nico

Second Note: much more serious handwriting:

Nico’s Opening Night Etiquette Guide For Cute Werewolf Girlfriends

*Show up at least 30 minutes before curtain
*Send flowers (with note) before show or have in hand after
*Dress as if there were a red carpet (refer Janelle Monae for style tips)
*Prepared to be introduced, have a few non controversial opinions handy
*People will be complimenting/hugging Nico. DO NOT GROWL.
*If the people hugging Nico smell like they are enjoying it too much, fangs can be added to your
smile
*Keep the cute, non furry ears
*People may want to talk to you about Kashima’s singing. Be diplomatic.
*Feed Nico after
*Do not read program or look at phone during performance
*You may pace around outside during intermission, but then return to your seat
The performance of the assigned scenes from Much Ado About Nothing had gone well. Nico had always had an appreciation for what looks and charisma and energy could do for a performer, but now, between spending a quarter on Shakespeare and having a girlfriend who processed her emotions through howling and a werewolf-y Spanish poet, Nico was gaining a new appreciation for the power of language. Plus, Ki had a little of Cocoro’s earnest energy, so that made it easier for Nico to tap into Beatrice’s practically a big sister rage/sorrow at Claudio’s -- what a git -- mistreatment of her beloved cousin. It had been refreshing to sink into that, to play those emotions, without the physical triggers that actually being in love involved. That must be why Maki found the Fangs rehearsal weird....there were levels missing. But she wasn’t going to start twitching at the sight of Kashima or swooning at the sound of Micah’s voice for an authentic sensory experience. That would lead to Kashima and/or Micah in need of first aid, Nico suspected.

Waving to Ki, Nico hurried to where she’d left her car. No time for trooping through snow today, work, then the final rehearsal. An audience, the authors, most of the department faculty. The anticipation was delicious. Nico couldn’t keep a twirl every few steps out of her pace.

It had been a fairly ordinary day at the Cup o’. A few regulars stomping in through the snow, mainly there for the company, and to prove they could get out and about. So Nico went through lots of hot sandwiches and hot coffee. She was adapting her standard grill cheese, adding a touch of horseradish to the standard cheddar mix to wake and warm.

A cold blast brought in Sgt. Alvarez, bundled in her uniform parka, red faced, gloves covered with snow.

“Coffee, BOTTOMLESS. Anything warm and food.” She sat at the counter, pulling off her gloves, unzipping the parka, sighing.

Nico put coffee in front of her, Alvarez wrapped her hands around the mug and held her face in the steam. “Better.” She smiled at Nico, “Hi Nico.”

“Hi.” Nico slid the grilled cheese she’d been making for herself in front of Alvarez, “This is a test run.”

“Is it warm?”

“Hot off the panini press.”

Alvarez bit the sandwich in half, Nico amused by the resemblance to Maki’s usual approach to her sandwiches. “I’ll take another.” Alvarez swallowed, “Wasabi?”

“Horseradish.”

“Interesting. Should put a slice of roast beef in then.” Alvarez finished off the sandwich.

“And a dab of mustard -- good idea.” Nico assembled the next, then did a round of refills while it cooked.

Alvarez relaxed as she waited for sandwich number 2, “Orla and I are disappointed that we won’t be able to make your opening night.”

“What happened? Is Orla’s vertigo...?”

“No, she’s fine. No tinnitus recently, new hearing aids working well, specialist the VA doc referred
her to helping.”

“That’s great but I was looking forward to seeing her.” Nico leaned on the counter. “So why are you missing the fabulous debut of your favorite actress.”

“Had to trade shifts with a pal.”

“Oh…” Nico slid the sandwich number two off the spatula onto a plate, “Come tonight, if you’re not busy. It’s a preview for the writing team. They’ll be there tomorrow too, but tonight’s more of a department thing. Bring Orla.”

Alvarez considered as she chewed, “First, this combo is a keeper and second, I’ll ask her. When do you need to know by.”

“Just show up. I’ll let the stagehands know.”

“Will the hearing assist system be set up?”

“Nico will double check, I think it’s Mobile Connect though so if she has the app, Orla will be set. Everything’s the same as tomorrow, except no intermission snacks.”

“So I smuggle in Milk Duds.” Alvarez winked.

“Classy.” Nico assembled another sandwich, no cheese, to heat quickly once Damian took over so she’d have fuel for the night.

“Is your girlfriend coming? Maki right?” The edge off Alvarez's hunger, she savored the new flavor meld.

Nico shook her head. “Nico made her sit through rehearsal Tuesday so I’m giving her the night off. She’s got opening night tickets. Need an eye candy escort for the parties after my triumph tomorrow.” Cue the Nico Wink™

“Smart.” Alvarez chuckled, glancing at her watch.

“Nico has everything planned out.” Nico cleared the empty plate.

“Good. I’ll let you know about tonight. Add that to the menu. Great taste.” Alvarez put a $20 on the counter, “Thanks for the entertaining lunch break, Nico. Stay warm.”

“You too.” Nico waved and went around for another round of refills as Alvarez rezipped.

Anju had initially been impressed by the variety of wardrobe available to her, but today she had chosen the simplest from the closet, black leggings and a black turtleneck, hidden under a flowy knit dress for the purposes of getting herself to the theatre, but once there, and certain no one else was present, a quick change and the addition of a black beret and a pair of frumpy glasses and Anju hoped she would just register as an anonymous member of the set crew as she shuffled between the coffins in the blue lit theatre. She had a small flashlight, but only used it sparingly. Half the coffins were piled, half scattered, the whole thing was an organizational nightmare a better set designer would have avoided. Tsubasa had been joking that the rigged coffins were always either at the bottom of the pile or in use on the set since once people realized how heavy they were, no one wanted to move them. Anju was working mostly by feel, sliding the lids off the coffins, searching for the notch to slide the panel at the base to access the transmitter. She’d have to shine the light quickly
to find the tiny “On” switch. Soon, the rest of the cast and crew would be filtering in and she had a few more tricks to put in play.

Hanayo had skipped her morning session in the sub basement, due to nothing planned and REALLY not wanting to troop through snow to possibly have another conversation with Anju. This needed to be over. Tomorrow. Door locked. Good. No one else there. Hanayo opened the door with the key Erena had given her and slid into her usual seat, plugging in her portable hard drive. Once, she’d planned to destroy all this information, completely wreck everything Anju, Tsubasa, and Erena had ever done, but Sergeant Alvarez’s contact at the FCC had impressed on her that more evidence was better so now Hanayo was in preservation mode.

The buzz of meters activating startled Hanayo. Everything at the theatre was supposed to be shut down tonight, to preserve power for tomorrow. Had they changed plans without telling her? Was Nico in danger? She grabbed her phone out of her pocket.


Maki was lounging in the media room, random book of Neruda open, not reading, imagining Nico after rehearsal, high on an audience, tempting and dazzling, whispering her name

“But I only hear your voice, your voice
soars with the zing and precision of an arrow,
it drops with the gravity of rain”

Maki had recently realized the biggest perq ever of being a werewolf was being able to hear Nico say her name from nearly anywhere on campus. Since she’d told Nico that, Nico had taken to singing ”Maki Maki Ma” to whatever tune was in her head as she walked between classes.

Phone. Hanayo. Warn Nico. Maki looked at the time, Nico would be finishing her shift, Maki might be able to catch her in wolf form before she got to the theatre. Maki’s clothes were off before she got off the couch and as her mother walked in, Maki zoomed out the sliding door with a ringing, warning howl. Her mother grabbed Maki’s phone before the screen locked, telling herself this counted as an emergency.

Nico waved at Damian as she grabbed her parka, but before she could zip herself in it, she caught a flash of red outside the window. Maki. Why? They had a plan, Nico would stop by her girlfriend’s house after rehearsal. Maki would get something slightly decadent for a midnight snack, and semi healthy for breakfast and they would unwind with a relaxing movie. Nico had no morning plans so taking a late night soak in Maki’s designer, sunken bath and sleeping in sounded like a perfect way to get ready for a long night.

Nico rushed outside, parka open, Maki jumping all over her, howl sounding distraught.

“What’s the matter, pretty girl? We had a plan. And Nico knows the way to the theatre by now.” Nico went in for a calming hug but Maki was too much in motion.

Maki shook her head, eyes wide, worried, and amethyst, and whined as mouth gentle around Nico’s sleeve, she pulled Nico to her car. Nico unlocked the door on the passenger side and Maki jumped over, into the back seat, sliding under the blanket Nico kept there now. When Nico got behind the wheel, a pair of arms slid over her shoulders, pulling her back, “Hanayo sent me a text. Everything’s
on at the theatre. She said to warn you.”

Nico snorted. “Of course, everything’s on. There’s an audience. It’s just the same as opening night.”

Maki bumped her head against Nico’s shoulder, “I don’t think that’s what she meant.”

Nico half turned, shaking her head at Maki, “You worry too much, Maki.”

“Tell me that Monday, after a weekend where nothing happens to you, Nico.” Maki left her head down, never getting enough of musk, magic, peach, and vanilla, and a little high from the intense coffee overlay. She could feel herself vibrating.

“Nico will.” Nico pulled out her phone, Maki’s arms still loosely looped, and scrolled down to a message, “Plus, Nico has backup. Sergeant Alvarez had to cover a shift tomorrow so she’s bringing her wife tonight. Nico promises to pull her out of the audience if anything seems weird.”

Maki read: “Hey, Nico! Thanks so much. Orla’s excited about tonight. We both want to see you stake Dracula.”

“Nico doesn’t actually stake Dracula, but it’s a good image. Mina The Vampire Slayer would be a legit franchise.”

“You’d have to call it something else.” Maki muttered as she snuffled her nose through Nico’s hair.

“Hey, that tickles.” Nico started giggling, a hand starting to bat at Maki but caressed her hair instead. “Nico has to get to work.”

“You just finished.” Maki nipped at Nico’s fingers.

There was a pause, Maki picked up the subtle, sexy shift in Nico’s scent as the vampire and warning impervious super actress’s confidence surged, “Nico’s real work.”

Maki transformed and flumped into the front seat, whining, nuzzling into Nico’s lap.

“Later for that, pretty girl. Right now, Nico needs to drop you off at your place and get to the theatre. But there will definitely be cuddle time later. Nico wants to try out your tub.”

Maki’s howled response was a complicated series of notes, mostly cheerful sounding with hints of warning and threats directed at things outside the windows of Nico’s car.

“Nico suspects that means you’ve scared all things that want to bump into Nico in the night, which Nico appreciates.”

Maki sat up, proud, happy that Nico had understood.

Nico glanced to the side as she pulled into the street, biting her lip to keep from laughing at a Maki, who, whichever form she was in, always looked so adorkably pleased to be protecting and/or helping Nico.

Hanayo was almost finished copying files when her phone sang at her. Maybe Maki, finally returning her text. No, Erena.

E: Meet me in the tunnels at Deering. Bring a receiver. Hurry.
Hanayo was puzzled. No one had ever mentioned Deering as part of this project. Had there been something she missed? Was Tsubasa trying to summon a Great Old One? Hanayo pursed her lips, dubious about braving that. She hadn’t been lying in her interview when she said the Deering tunnel had creeped her out. But Erena was the least annoying of her three bosses. She had never seemed happy about Tsubasa’s werewolf hunting nor been anything but kind. And Hanayo still had a day or two to stay on their good side before the FCC raid.

Hanayo shut down the computers and put the hard drive back in her pocket, still considering. There were a couple of receivers on the shelf, and from what she’d learned from Nico about the rehearsal process, actors would be getting into costume, which was Anju’s busy time. WItth a sigh, she sent two text messages.

H: Hi Erena, I’ll be there as soon as I can.

H: Hey, Rin. Have to run a quick errand for work, but I’ll be at dinner as soon as I can. Love you ♡

Anju was sitting at the light console, Erena’s phone in her hand. Hanayo’s reply came through and Anju turned off the phone. Now to rid herself of the last obstacle to her success.

Chapter End Notes

No excuses, no promises, just a request for you to pay attention because this, this is what we're all here for...

<( *•̀✩•́ *)>
Thursday's A Thrill: The Magic Begins

Chapter Summary

We learn a little more about Anju and Rin's nights continue their downward trend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maki had Nico’s list out, in an effort to distract herself from the thought of Nico, IN DANGER. Maki had already placed an order for a post show gift that she could pick up tomorrow and was now tapping a pen through the dress for the red carpet item. She had a tuxedo, tailored to fit, but Nico was seemingly expecting something...flashy? Maki frowned at the search results on her phone and the tapping increased. Her mother had arrived behind her and was sneaking a peek at the list.

“Need the florist’s number?” Maki jumped at her mother’s voice.

“Nope.”

“Worried about what to wear?” Maki’s mother settled into the couch, mug of tea cooling off.

Maki tilted her head, “Maybe.”

“Need to go shopping? I have some time tonight.” Her mother’s eyes gleamed.

One, Maki hated shopping and two, she wanted to be near campus in case Nico needed her, although she supposed she appreciated her mother’s willingness to help. “Can’t. I’m meeting Rin and Hanayo for dinner in a half an hour.”

“Oh,” Her mother sounded disappointed. Maki shrugged.

But she did want a second opinion, “I was thinking about my tuxedo.”

“Not a bad choice…” Her mother’s voice trailed off…

“But not a great one. Too stiff.” Maki threw herself across the couch, staring at the ceiling, “They don’t warn you dating requires fashion expertise.”

“What dating really requires is showing your...true self.” Dr. Nishikino sounded smug at having slipped in a Mom Talking Point™.

Maki snorted, “That’s a huge cliche.”

“Read any good poems recently?” pointed tapping on the mug between sips. Morse code sarcasm.

Maki sat up enough to glare at her mother, whose smile was as sharp as Maki’s angry bite.

“People tend to think the tuxedo is purposely a bit plain for men so that the woman’s dress could be shown off like a flower.” Maki’s mother sighed, “which really doesn’t help you. The question is….”

“That’s dumb, I’m not there to show Nico off...Nico” Maki continued her roll up to sitting position,
propping her chin on her knee, "does just fine on her own." Maki frowned, tangling a strand of hair, "I have to keep up."

"No," the older Nishikino’s voice was firm, "you have to be you."

"Yeah…" Maki let her mother win that point, as it was comforting, falling back to review for the 100th time since reading Nico’s note what she had in her closet. She bounced between that and wondering what exactly Hanayo’s bosses had planned for Nico tomorrow. Maybe talking to Rin and Hanayo would clear this funk of multiple worries.

"I should go." Maki decided. "Nico’s coming here tonight. I ordered some food for later. Would you mind waiting for the delivery, Mama? It should be here soon."

"I’m waiting for your father to get home anyway." Her mother nodded, finishing her tea. Maki bounced up, briefly hugging her mother in passing. "Thanks, Mama. See you tomorrow. You’re coming to the opening, right?"

"Got our tickets last week. Have fun tonight." a wave.

Maki waved and bounded to the door to grab her sweatshirt.

If someone had asked Nico if she were tired and she wasn’t exactly paying attention, she might have admitted it -- BRIEFLY -- but then rolled into a stream of chatter that would belie her previous statement.

"Nico tired? A little, but what’s important is Nico is ready to perform and the second she walks onto that stage, everyone will notice Nico."

Stepping into the theatre before she headed backstage, of course Nico was there early, long before any audience could be expected, Nico stood in the back of the theatre, staring at the stage, set in its preshow configuration, Mina’s desk on stage left, only the house lights, none of the moody, tending gray colors that the lighting design had chosen. Mina’s scenes were always a little brighter, a little warmer, as were Lucy’s, until Dracula began to prey on her life force.

There really was no feeling like this, the anticipation, the buzz, the need to step out, the challenge of meeting your fellow actors as the play tested your preparation and your teamwork, the connection with the audience and being able to ride their attention, each night different scenes, different moments striking that sweetest of spots where an actor could feel the breaths held, the hairs raised, the truths recognized. Nico lived for that, the no net below diving into each performance, each experience, each audience. Some nights were a gift, some a struggle but there was nothing as satisfying as the effort.

Post renovation, the tunnel to Deering Library looked a little warmer, much less industrial, smooth terrazo floors glinting with hints of marble and quartz, warm woods humanizing the utilitarian vibe, than in the archival pictures Hanayo had seen, but there was still something dank and distressing in the air, a clinging coldness that made her hurry as the lights flickered suddenly. Few students used these corridors anymore, the West Entrance having gained in popularity with its Hogwarts feel. This corridor was narrow, too narrow, the walls close, and Hanayo couldn’t help feeling it was coming to a point somehow, a point that shimmered in front of her, in a swirl of pulsing lava red and cresting sea blue, sort of like the green swirl in Rin’s eyes when she was transforming, how the colors would
weave and wave back and forth but never merge, every spin opening new depths Hanayo would just feel herself leaning into, warm...the orbs lighting the tunnel seemed to drift down, turning and dancing, lava lamp bubbles floating in a cooling sea and Hanayo....

Anju lowered her hand, the stone she’d reclaimed from Nico’s costume brooch dropping to her palm. She placed her other hand on the wall behind her, willed access, and watched as the shimmering portal appeared. Hanayo’s trance was holding so simple commands should work.

First: “Hand me your phone.” A blank eyed Hanayo complied, “Now walk forward.” Anju commanded and Hanayo took three hesitant steps, breaking the threshold of the portal, but maintaining the trance, although Anju could feel her previous spells weakening. Neither trance would hold much longer, but Anju only needed a few hours and had no energy to waste. Neither of her prisoners would have any idea how to release themselves.

Anju watched as Hanayo stopped, rendered captive and motionless by the energy vibrating around her. A quick gesture closed the portal. The first success of the night. The next stage of this plan would require so much more of an energy expenditure. She placed the receiver in her bag, placed the stone next to its twin in the metal wand Tsubasa had created and rested for a moment. The glamor she had put in place would discourage anyone else from entering the tunnels. And by the time she got to the West Entrance, the library would be closed.

Hanayo’s phone barked.

R: Kayo-chin, where are YOU? Maki’s here already!

Anju thought for a second then typed. Hanayo seemed like the cutesy name type.

H: Sorry, sweetie, had to go with Erena to rehearsal. Having some issues. See you around 10.

Rin looked up from her phone, frowning at Maki. “Kayo-chin just called me Sweetie.”

“Huh?” Maki stopped stacking french fries.

“She never does that...’sweird.” Rin turned her phone over a few times.

“Maybe she was distracted? Nervous?” Maki tried to lighten the mood with teasing. “Or maybe she’s just trying out something new.”

Rin’s mood lifted slightly, ‘Do you and Nico try out new things,” her grin turned wicked, “Princess?”

“Shut it, Rin.” Maki snarled.

Rin pushed her mashed potatoes around her plate. “Anyway, it’s ‘sweird. I don’t like it.”

“Anyway,” Maki tried to divert her friend back to their previous topic, “What am I going to wear?”

Rin shook her head, but then grinned at her friend, “Fur. Maybe a bow tie.”

Maki’s reply was grave. “Nico would kill me.”

Rin shrugged, “Nah, you’d be too cute. Plus,” and Rin giggled, “Bad publicity for show.” She threw
her arms out dramatically. “Lead actress mean to cute ball of fluff.”

“I am not a ‘cute ball of fluff’.” Maki hissed, leaning in.

Heads turned, Rin kept giggling, Maki blushed and glared. Rin grabbed Maki and hugged while Maki struggled, shouting, “LET ME GO.”

Too much attention. Maki’s ears shifted and she felt her nose start to elongate, moisten, smells swarming. Hanayo would have stopped Rin, soothed Maki, but...

Maki bolted, sitting to sixty in one leap, barely holding back to a growl, heading for the lobby. Rin rolled her eyes at her friend and went back to staring morosely at her phone, tapping out several different messages, not happy with any of them.

R: Where are you?

Anju bit her lip. Last thing she needed was a nosy werewolf on the premises. Maybe she should have told Erena the truth, well, part of the truth, so that there’d be someone to keep a lookout. But Anju had vowed to trust or endanger no one. So she composed a careful message.

H: In a hurry. Erena’s frowning at me. I’ll meet you back at the dorm as soon as I can.

Anju paused.

H: Tsubasa’s been talking about hunting again so don’t come here.

The more Hanayo texted the less happy Rin got. She picked up her tray and Maki’s and went to find the embarrassed redhead. Rin wasn’t going to ignore her gut feeling.

Hanayo opened her eyes. Cold. White walls. No warmth. No wood. She was in pre renovation Deering somehow. Or hallucinating. Hypnotism? Hanayo pinched the skin between her thumb and fingers. Not dreaming. No light outside the windows. Eerie silence and then with a boom, she heard it, someone running toward her, huge, panicked steps. Hanayo whirled around, the corridor stretched beyond what her eyes could register. She shivered, the steps getting closer, someone rushing toward her. Caramel hair, darker and longer than Rin’s, an orange dress billowing out behind her, head forward like a charging goat...Anju...Hanayo stepped forward, arms up to block.

“What did you do?” Hanayo screeched.

“Who are you? Where is this?” Desperate hands clutched Hanayo, high notes hitting a shattering shrill. “You’re real. You’re here.”

Hanayo slapped the hands away, nearly shouting, as she glared into confused dark purple, “What did you do?”

Sobbing. Anju’s body slamming against Hanayo, whose arms were suddenly full of a sodden, sobbing villainess. The weight dropped them both to the ground as the lights flickered out.

Nozomi was a free agent for the night. She and Erena had agreed not to make any changes but the director hadn’t signed off on every effect yet so Nozomi was planning to pay close attention to every
cue. Even if Eli was onstage being slinky and sexy. Even if Nico decided to strangle Kashima instead of ‘thralling’ for Dracula…” Nozomi laughed as she adapted Nico-chi’s favorite word. She was going to miss this show. It had been an insane challenge but also one of those magical alignments of project and people. So much talent onstage and off, bringing to life a streamlined version of a legendary tale that still resonated with so many today. Decades ago, Dracula had spoken to the AIDS/Gay panic; in this era, there was a Mina Murray-Harker armed with Mjolnir borrowed from Ragnorak Thor and a wooden stake gifted from Buffy, ready to lead platoons against the evil (mostly) men whose crimes and aggressions had been exposed to public scorn as the #MeToo movement strengthened.

Pre show lighting was up, actors were offstage, audience was filtering in, Chopin nocturnes and elegies setting the aural mood. Tonight, tonight was the night. Nico had been on a high since she arrived, all her energy focused, all her actions efficient, hair swept up in a tight bun, eyes fierce; Eli had been looser when Nozomi had seen her, a little nervous, a little jumpy, hair loose, nightgown clinging, blue eyes with no trace of the harm Eli would force into them as she crept close to Jonathan Harker. Nozomi still felt restless, like there was an undercurrent somewhere that had only reached out to her, an unease that just teased the back of her neck, like a breath of winter’s threat on a summer day. She pulled out her cards, shuffling quietly as she sat in the back row, carefully dealing three cards on the shaky platform her bag provided. Holding her breath, she turned over the face, two people about to enter a chuppah, joy on their faces, but staring at her from the reversed position. Next card, the blindfolded woman holding two crossed swords, under a crescent moon. Also reversed. And last, ah, Nozomi shook her head, what Eli now called “The Nico card,” 8 of Pentacles, a craftsman hard at work at success. Not reversed. Delay, lies, false starts, maybe even traps affecting Nico’s path to triumph. Nozomi considered her options, faced as she was with another warning from the cards. Should she try confronting Nico again. Right before one of the most important performances of Nico’s fledgling career was not optimal timing. But if something was going to go wrong…Nozomi loved the freedom the cards gave her to interpret, to guess, to read any situation, but sometimes, oh so very rarely, a “this will happen at 8:09 p.m., do this to avoid it” screamer might be nice. The pit started the overture; too late for a timely intervention in whatever Nico’s future held, Nozomi realized, settling back in her seat.

Maki was standing outside Sargent Hall, hands shoved in her hoodie’s kangaroo pockets, head tilted up to stare blankly at the waxing moon. Rin could always feel its influence, but as she rarely fought the urge to transform, it had never loomed as large for her as it had for Maki.

“Maki!” Rin’s barked call was sharp, a slap to get Maki’s mind off the moon. Maki turned, Rin could see the neon still swirling, “We’re going to the theatre. Kayo-chin needs me.”

Maki nodded and fell in step with her friend, not questioning. Her agitation over Nico being in danger was adding to the drag of things ‘encouraging’ her to make the world simpler by just letting her wolf senses take over. Diverting that instinct was taking most of her attention. So Maki was very willing to follow Rin’s lead and quietly ensure that neither Hanayo or Nico were in danger. Then she and Rin could go race around her backyard until Nico showed up, safe and thrilling. Win-win.

Eli would be very glad when this was over. While grateful for the chance to put her dance training and abilities to dramatic use, she had not factored in the literal darkness and gloom that would be involved in a production adapting Bram Stoker’s Dracula. When she crawled out of the darkness with her two ‘sisters’, transforming the gut punching fear that chilled her fingers into a sort of feral hunger the audience could see took every ounce of willpower she could muster. Nozomi had had to
hold her after so many nightmares. She couldn’t remember the last night she’d slept alone in her bed. Nor did she want to. For more reasons than Nozomi’s comforting voice. Eli felt herself smile as she adjusted her costume and caught sight of the simple ring on her left hand. Nozomi had taken some silver wire and under Eli’s tutelage, twisted it into a ring, wrapped around a small chunk of a blue stone that matched Eli’s eyes. As much as Eli hated the dark and shivered from the fear, Fangs would always be the reason she’d gotten to talk to Nozomi finally and so all of her memories of it would always have a warm tint to them.

Suddenly Nico was next to her, stepping offstage. The show was getting to Mina’s reading of Jonathan’s journal. Soon, Eli would have to be her most menacing. Nico gave a quick grin and squeezed Eli’s hand, whispering. “Great audience. We’ve got ‘em.” Eli nodded, suddenly nervous as Nico’s surging confidence shadowed her.

Once they got to the Wirtz Center, Maki took over the lead as she’d actually been to rehearsal a few times (in non wolf form) and knew where to go. Rin was getting more and more worried as there were no fresh traces of Hanayo. Maki could smell that Nico had passed this way and more importantly, could hear her voice onstage. As they approached the doors allowing the audience entrance, Rin grabbed Maki and yanked her back, “What do we do? Unless Kayo-chin came in another way she’s not here, Maki.”

Maki knew Rin was right, but interrupting the play by shouting “Where’s Kayo-chin?” Rin’s probable next step was several kinds of disaster about to happen.

“Give me a minute.” Maki hissed and opened the door, letting her nose and ears tell her if there was anyone she knew in the seats. Sergeant Alvarez was toward the front, but a much nearer presence was Nozomi, her sage scent mixing with excitement as the play progressed. Maki shut the door, “Nozomi’s here.”

“Let’s ask her.” Rin strode forward, but Maki stood in her way.

“I’ll get her out here. We don’t want to mess up the rehearsal.”

Rin muttered unhappily, but stayed put as Maki crept into the theatre. Nozomi jumped a little when Maki put a hand on her forearm but when Maki gestured for her to follow, Nozomi did without any questions.

As soon as Nozomi hit the hallway, Rin began. “Kayo-chin’s not here and she’s supposed to be. Where’s Erena? She needs to tell me where Kayo-chin is…” Rin’s eyes narrowed as Nozomi’s curious look turned to shock. Maki could smell the wolf taking over and stepped forward.

“Nozomi.” Her hand on Rin’s shoulder, Maki tightened her grip, to remind Rin of their recent tussle. Rin snarled.

“Hmph. Why did you bring me here? I’m useless.”

Nozomi drawled her way through the tension, “Two cuties desperate to see me. My Eli-chi is going to be so jealous.”

Maki felt her lip turn up, Rin just stared as Nozomi’s playful tone clanged dully off the mood.

“We need your help.” Maki eased her grip on Rin.

“Yeah. Which one’s Erena?” Rin’s eyes were searching everywhere.

“What happened?” Nozomi asked.
Maki kept a hand on Rin, “Rin got a text from Hanayo saying she had to drop something off at the theatre. Because Erena asked her to.”

“It didn’t sound like Kayo-chin. Something’s wrong. I can tell.” Rin shook Maki off and circled, her pace increasing with each step.

Nozomi sighed, “I can tell too.” Rin paused, as Nozomi continued, “I just drew cards for Nico that…” Nozomi chose her words as carefully as she could, aware of how volatile her audience’s tempers were, “suggested some kind of deceit or trap.”

Maki would have sprinted Nico-ward, but Rin grabbed her around the waist, “I can hear Nico, Maki. She’s fine. But Kayo-chin’s MISSING.”

Nozomi crossed her arms over her chest, continuing to speak slowly in an effort to keep the tinder of the werewolves’ tempers dry, “I know where Erena is.”

Rin shoved Nozomi back toward the theatre, “Take us.”

“We have to go upstairs. To the booth.”

Maki remembered Tuesday and a small room and Nico’s hands everywhere and blushed. Rin half turned her head, picking up on the surge of Maki’s want.

“Kayo-chin.” Rin hissed at the redhead. Maki nodded, abashed. She could feel the prickles as the hairs on the back of her neck tensed, ready to elongate. Too many smells feels people worries pressure.

Maki had never seen Rin so furious. The much taller lighting designer had been shoved against a wall, Rin pulling Erena’s head down with both hands full of sweater. Rin’s full fanged snarl kept widening and Maki knew they were one action away from wolf Rin tearing out the taller woman’s throat.

Erena glanced at Nozomi, pleading, “What’s this about?”

“Kayo-chin.” Rin snapped her jaw next to Erena’s ear. The force echoed.

“Who?” Erena tried to pull back.

Nozomi looked to Maki, who stepped up next to her friend, Maki wincing in expectation of a bite as she shoved a forearm between Rin and Erena, “You have to explain properly, Rin.”

Rin let go of Erena, turned and pounded the opposite wall with two open palms.

Maki spoke, “Her fiancée, Hanayo, got a text from you, asking her to bring a receiver here. We can’t find her.”

Nozomi watched as Erena’s face, not the most expressive, paled with a flash of panic before it locked back into neutral cool, “Oh, yeah, she took care of that hours ago.”

Rin leapt, Maki barely catching her, the momentum thudding both of them back into the wall.

“You’re lying!” Rin screamed, arms trying to reach through Maki.

Maki was pleased that Erena was smelling concerned and terrified, over the musk and hazelnut.
Maki leaned close to Rin’s ear, words lower than a whisper, “Don’t change. We need to be able to talk, to ask questions. For Hanayo.”

Rin inhaled, her whole body shuddering with effort. Maki had lifted the smaller werewolf off the ground, but as she sensed Rin’s transformation urge easing back, Maki released her.

“Where is she?” Rin growled.

Erena raised both hands, “I don’t know. I’m sorry. Let me check my phone. It’s in the booth.”

Rin stepped to the side, fists clenched. “Bring it out here or we go in.”

Erena returned, showing Rin the text message. “I didn’t write that. I swear, I haven’t seen Hanayo. I left my phone in my jacket. Anyone could have…”

Maki shook her head. She’d smelled bergamot, copper, and too calm when they were downstairs. That left only one other person who would have written to Kayo-chin and who might have her somewhere else now. Anju.

“If she stole your phone,” Maki said slowly, staring at Rin, “she probably…”

“Stole Kayo-chin’s…”

Maki grabbed Erena’s phone, reading quickly, “Maybe Hanayo never left Deering.”

Rin was on the ground before anyone could blink, a blur of orange and black fur, shredding clothes around her.

Maki needed to follow Rin as fast as she could, but before she ducked into a room to change, she stopped in front of Nozomi, the start of her transformation sharpening the angles of her face, deepening her voice as she growled, fangs prominent, “Keep Nico safe.”

Nozomi nodded, suddenly not so sure she wanted to see Maki as a full wolf. Or disappoint her.

“What’s going on?” Erena asked as Maki disappeared down the hall at a sprint.

“Your girlfriend’s got herself in real trouble.” Nozomi snorted, wishing Eli were there to help her sort out all this confusion.

There was no longer any semblance of cool on Erena’s face as everything that had just happened registered. Then she took off after Rin and Maki.

Chapter End Notes

And here we are. Comments are fuel, I read somewhere, drop me some ; )
Thursday's A Thrill: Magic And The Missing

Chapter Summary

Magic and the missing...actually pretty much sums it all up. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were cute. For techies. Especially the tall, quiet one with the deep voice and the amused eyes. Cute even with the gray makeup turning Erena into Victoria Frankenstein’s patchwork person for the night. And Tsubasa's quick wit and charm made laughing easy. And it was Halloween so talking about Ghostbusters, Star Trek, Pacific Rim, time travel, and alternate dimensions...that seemed natural. And Pumpkin Prom was bustling...Anju’s witch outfit had done well in the contest, her skirt as short as Little Witch Academia’s Akko and her broom with a very subtle hint of engine boost. Because speed was fun. As was learning how to create the best material to wrap a speeding motorcyclist in. Adding a materials science angle to her costume design studies had led her to a niche she thrived in. Erena would probably look killer in a traditional motorcycle jacket, but Anju was working on polymers that would create something like sleek armor, right out of the TRON sfx pool. The movies, Anju grinned, that was what she liked best about her conversations so far with Erena and Tsubasa, that they’d been able to dissect and breakdown the science fiction movies all the theatre kids skipped to sing along to another musical. Anju had big plans for the upcoming Spring production of A Midsummer’s Night Dream, where the fairies were a mashup of several science fiction futures. It would be her first time as the lead costume designer and she’d been experimenting with getting light native to the fairy’s wings with conductive thread. Erena had been enthusiastic about the possibilities, offering to sketch out a few options to talk about over dinner soon.

Time to get back to Frankenstein and Frankenstein’s much more attractive Monster. Anju took one last look in the mirror, adjusted her hat and the fabric belt slung across her hips. Then she turned and shock halted her steps. Staring back at her...HER...dressed in a dark gray tunic, black breeches, tall boots, caramel hair in a bob, face lined, skin darkened by sun, magenta eyes staring.

“Who?” Anju sputtered, her broom too flimsy for defense, her mind too confounded for action.

Anju watched as her...reflection...raised a hand, flicked her wrist and muttered. Suddenly, there was warmth and a small, red, growing light trapped in the heart of a blue crystal that Anju could feel pulling at her attention. She looked up and caught a wink as a long finger pointed back at the floating crystal…

“Tell me all.”

Anju felt her feet hit the ground. Had she been flying? Where was she? White walls, stretching out...not Norris. Shivering. She reached out a hand...solid...and her ears suddenly ached as pressure whooshed in...and she realized that her hearing had been muffled, everything wrapped in cotton or swaddling or the silk of spider’s trap. And cold, so cold. Especially in the short dress she was wearing. Distance was doing weird, warping things to Anju’s vision, but like a cat, she registered motion in the distance. Someone was there. Or here. Time to run. And hope for an answer.
Kotori could feel her nerves straining. She’d just snapped at Holmwood, who only needed help with their suddenly slumped hat. Too many minor costume fixes, pants split, boots missing. And tonight, of all nights, with a super important audience already settled into their seats, she had NO help.

Plus, Kashima was in full on diva mood, leaning into the mirror, minutely examining every aspect of her appearance from boots to back molars, her mouth open as she stared into the mirror.

“Kotori?” Doubt left Kashima’s voice in its rarely heard native soprano register.

“Hmmm…” do not engage, Kotori told herself in the hopes a low mumble of disinterest would drive Kashima elsewhere for the attention she craved.

“This shirt makes me look too alive.” Kashima turned, as serious as the grave Dracula would soon rise out of.

That startled Kotori, “Wha...what do you mean?” So much for do not engage, Kotori thought with a sigh, letting her fingers roll over the solid metal of her scissors. The rule was do not cut paper, nothing about actor’s flesh.

“Shouldn’t it be grayer…or shouldn’t I be grayer….maybe somebody has some extra makeup...what do you…”

Where was Anju? Kotori found herself thinking. Usually, she was the one who soothed Kashima’s crises.

“KOTOR!” a welcome and familiar cheerful shout cut through the whispers, diverting the diva who went back to tying her tie when she realized that Kotori would be paying no more attention to her. Honoka had come by wish Kotori good luck on her final dress rehearsal. Her timing was perfect.

Rather than chide Honoka for noise, Kotori just threw herself at the ginger cheerbomb and allowed herself the comfort of Honoka’s arms wrapping around her.

“What’s wrong, Kotori? Did something happen?” Honoka squeezed her girlfriend.

Kotori let the stress sob out, indulging in just the one, as Honoka petted her hair, cooing. “Anju didn’t show up…”

Honoka glanced around, noticing how different from the usually organized scene the costume room was, “Wow, Kotori, you’ve had to do it all yourself tonight?”

Kotori nodded into Honoka’s shoulder.

“Um, Kotori?” Simpson Callan, the actress playing Lucy’s mother approached, hesitant.

Honoka smiled encouragingly, as Kotori continued her brief respite in the cozy nest of Honoka’s arms, “Can I help you?”

Simmy shook her head, “Probably not, but I hope Kotori can. Anju said she’d fix my bodice and my second dress isn’t hanging in its spot.”

Kotori stood, shaking herself and setting her shoulders, then smoothing down her dress, “I think I saw that over here, Simmy. Sorry things are so crazy today.” Kotori stepped back to a rack mostly full of men’s jackets.

Honoka picked a few things off the floor as Kotori helped the actress. Then Kotori fell into her seat,
head back, sighing, “You can’t be here, Honoka.”

“Just pretend I’m invisible.” Honoka, kneeling, passed a hand in front of her face, and winked.

“Honoka…” Kotori giggled, just a little.

“I know, I know. I date Umi too. Rules are important.” Leaning over the back of Kotori’s chair, Honoka was pleased to get a full laugh, “How about I go sit in the back and help you after everyone leaves?” And text Umi to somehow get her hands on one of Kotori’s favorite desserts on her way back from teaching her kendo class, Honoka continued in her head.

“Oh, Honoka, that’d be wonderful.” Kotori rubbed her hair against Honoka’s forearm.

“Then that’s what I’ll do. Come get me if you need me.”

Kotori blew a kiss up at Honoka as the ginger squeezed her shoulders encouragingly. Kotori couldn’t believe Anju would just desert her like this. On such an important night. Maybe Kotori should reconsider helping with the Spring show. But the fairies were going to be so cute.

Maki was flying across the Lakefill after Rin, every sense, every feeling, every muscle engaged. Enough of a moon to make the snow a glittering landscape and the library got closer with every step. The cold of the air fled against the rush of blood and exertion as Maki opened her throat in a howl, joyful as she dropped the last barrier holding back her animal instincts. Rin countered, howling a threat, Maki joining in with added echoes of warning for their prey. The few students approaching the library with them moved to the sides of the path, letting the wolves through, one of them jokingly joining the howl, the rest wondering where they’d come from. As the moon pulsed, quickening every nerve, hyperboosting the sensitivity of nose and ear, the traces left by Hanayo seemed fresh and Maki ignored anything but that thread of sensation tying Rin and her mate.

Rin moved quickly to follow a student through the library door. Maki would have to do the same and be as fast, low to the ground, and discreet as she could. Perhaps the student checking bags and IDs wouldn’t notice two wolves tearing through. Or wouldn’t believe their eyes. Maki could feel vague worries pressing about DPS and police officers, but as Rin howled again outside the library doors, Maki rode the primal surge. Nico would be so proud if they rescued Hanayo.

Nico, wrapped in a near stifling winter coat, prepared to go onstage, to stand resolute against the dark temptation to join Dracula’s brides. After that, the scene moved to Van Helsing’s destruction of them, with Nico adding her voice to muddy the hero’s drive. And then, the final showdown, Mina inside a holy circle, while Dracula met his end. If Nico had had a say, Mina would be there at his throat with the sharpest of the weapons, but at least the authors had given her a glorious solo song, her voice rising out of the thrall, the light brightening as she refused the taint, her posture growing more confident as she heartened her fellow heroes. It was a clever way to keep Mina at the center of the play, the heart of the action, without altering Stoker’s original impulses. Mina was leading them to Dracula, Mina was resisting every minute, every hungry impulse, every hidden evil.

Kashima had a stage manager (male) assigned (unofficially) to ensure she didn’t miss any of her entrances. Because she would sneak up behind actresses (not Nico, who had a sharp elbow) and tease and tickle them. Or Kashima would be off with her phone (contraband) somewhere, checking
her messages.

So Kashima was chilling in the hall, before her big death scene, waiting to be nudged onstage by management, having doubts about the curtain call plan she and Anju had developed, but then a message blinked in.

A: Can’t wait to see you and Nico surprise everyone. There’ll be a standing ovation. (*・∀-)*

Then the Sisters crept up on either side of Kashima as she read, sliding their arms through hers, giggling. “Are you ready, Kash?”

Kashima loved the fangs. She’d been practicing her facial expressions for weeks now so she knew that when she stretched out her lips, what she was giving her melting audience of two was sexy mischief. Sexy mischief might not have been in Dracula’s character, but it was the bedrock of Kashima’s.

Anju stepped into the entrance lobby of Deering. Not much traffic, a simple cloaking spell would hide her from any exiting students as she prepared herself. Soon, Nico and Kashima would be at peak power and if all the complicated calculations Erena had done were correct, enough energy should be transmitted to power through...It had been tricky, guessing about the seasonal variations without giving away prior magical knowledge. Never mentioning in detail the probable effect of what some cultures knew as Samhaim on veils between worlds, Anju had had to flip any question to a simpler trying to find the time when magic was most effective to avoid giving away any hints as to her true goals. Scientific hypotheses had proved as effective a glamour as magic. Tonight was too far from the equinox to get any kind of a boost and the moon wasn’t in an ideal phase, midway was always murky, but the tasty possibilities presented by the magic Nico and Kashima had no idea they were generating was too tempting. So, having missed the Solstice and rather than wait til Midsummer, here Anju was, finally, seizing this chance, at most a half an hour from a triumph no one would be aware of. She raised her head, listening as howls could be heard on the lower floor. If only she could keep the pesky werewolves out of the way. Searching for Hanayo should slow them down, as would the few obstacles she’d had the time to arrange. Everything was on such a tight schedule. And everything needed to go precisely right if Anju had any chance to return home.

Rin and Maki hit the tunnel, managing the door on their own, but while there was a lingering trace of Hanayo, there were no fresh clues. Just an end. No Hanayo, no scent, no message, no trail. Anju’s presence was vivid, as was the slightly raw, shaved, metallic zest of magic in the air. Rin circled, whining, near panic. Maki sat, confused, Rin’s distress a growing distraction, Maki trying to think deductively, which she wasn’t as equipped to do in this form. But if Hanayo hadn’t passed them when they approached, she should be somewhere ahead. That must be right. Follow Anju’s scent. She had called Hanayo here. The right choice made, Maki sprinted down the corridor, howling for Rin to follow as they prepared to leap into Deering proper. Crossing a door threshold, Maki’s lead paw caught a wire, which tangled around her leg with a wincing cut. Maki heard a quick snap, followed by the shaking whoomp of an explosion and a stinging, acrid, clinging, chemical smell that had Maki throwing herself back against the wall, choking and crying, transforming back to human. Rin was behind her, whining, rubbing a paw against her face, howling with outrage. Maki had taken the brunt of the chemical burst and her ears were still ringing. Anju had planned for werewolves.

Someone slid next to Nozomi. She turned her head and recognized the unkempt ginger head.
Honoka. Nozomi raised a hand to wave and Honoka leaned toward her, with a very bad imitation of a whisper.

“Kotori’s so mad.”

Nozomi thought for a moment, then came up with the most likely irritant, “Is Kashima still demanding a cape?”

Honoka shook her head, “Anju never showed up.”

That distracted Nozomi from Eli’s and her stage sisters slinky attack on Nico’s virtue. Rin and Maki’s guess had been right. Which meant their run to Deering would bring a confrontation with Anju before Hanayo could be rescued. Had Erena known Anju wasn’t here? And did Anju expect the wolves?

“She’s probably at Deering.” Nozomi frowned.

Honoka gaped at Nozomi, “Did the cards tell you that?”

“No, Honoka, Rin’s phone did.” Nozomi frowned, “She and Maki went there because Hanayo is missing.”

“Everybody’s missing tonight.” Honoka said, not even attempting a whisper. Several people glared and Nozomi hushed Honoka.

“No…” Not yet anyway. Possibly tonight’s mischief was not done, thought Nozomi, remembering the cards she’d cast for Nico.

“Should I go check on them?” Honoka asked.

Nozomi considered, curiosity almost causing her to say yes. But her gut told her something was yet to happen, and Anju on the premises or not, it was going to happen here, in this theatre. She watched Van Helsing’s torch flare as the Sisters fled and then the stage lights darken as Nico dropped to the floor and Van Helsing took his holy quest to the Sister’s unholy tomb.

“No, stay here. I’m still worried about Nico.” Nozomi patted the arm rest between them.

“Okay.” Honoka settled down in her seat, eyes eagerly following Van Helsing’s deliberate and desperate killing actions.

Anju took the time to write out the symbols, just three, one to open, with the receiver on top of it, one to hold, and one to direct, which was where she chose to stand. Charged with power, these should be enough to allow her a gateway back, home to a battlefield possibly long covered by snow and the blood of the dead and injured. Did time run quicker there? Anju was decades older than her counterpart, but there was no way to compare the flow of time until she returned, once again, to a world where she would be welcomed. Curse those sorceress’s, warping her shielding spell and forcing it to propel her to this elsewhere, another fullness, another...page in the multiverses’ book, where Anju existed, but without having developed her connection to magic, because so few were aware of its potency in this technologically driven mayhem of a world. Here, Anju found herself again among companions, ones she missed terribly, but these younger incarnations knew nothing of her history or her loss. It seemed safer to keep her secrets as close as she could. So she learned and struggled and planned and hoped and used Erena’s courtesy to keep her at a distance as a kindness to both them and the version of herself trapped in magical stasis. And now, tonight,
here Anju was, desperately fighting to warp once again what was present, to transform the air surrounding her, to release the strange gravities holding her here, to deliberately return to a place she had been ruthlessly rent from.

It had been amazing. Nico could hear it, the audience so still, her voice ringing through the theatre, every breath the audience took as if it was choreographed, each second of the confrontation, each blow, each reveal of blood, the moment when Dracula finally crumbled, when Quincey spoke his last words as the sun rose. Silence, then Nico’s voice rising on the final ecstasy of a victory note. And then, then the applause, the waves of applause. Nico stepped offstage, revved, buzzing, right into the arms of the two not Eli brides of Dracula. Hugging, everyone was hugging, Nico wasn’t surprised, but suddenly she felt firmer grips on her arms, her wrists twisted behind her as...but no, Deidre and Amira were pulling her back toward the stage, behind the two curtains as Van Helsing wrapped up the tale and the coffins were screened by a scrim for curtain call, so that shadows could be projected as Dracula and Mina approached.

“Where’re you goi…” And just as suddenly fabric was shoved in Nico’s mouth, she felt someone fasten...handcuffs? around her wrists and unlike the play, a slick and sweaty Dracula was hoisting her in his arms. Giggling. Struggling, her feet off the ground as Kashima wrapped her arms tighter around Nico’s waist, Nico kicked back at Kashima’s shins. As Kashima grunted, Nico continued her attack, whacking her head into Kashima’s chest, aiming for a nipple, which only broke Kashima’s stride a little as the much taller actress slid Nico into a coffin, Dracula’s brides closing the lid with gleeful smirks on their faces. Something clicked above her and although Nico raised herself immediately, head and shoulders off the coffin’s floor, the lid didn’t move.

“Won’t this make a great curtain call trick, Nico?” She heard Kashima say as she moved away, and another coffin lid closed.

“Hell no” Nico thought as she rocked the coffin, but it didn’t move at all, Nico was too light to have any momentum, it felt like the box had more weight at the bottom than Nico expected. Her heart racing, from the surprise and the dark and the RAGE, Nico closed her eyes, inhaling for a three count, then breathing out for six. This was no time to panic. There was only about 90 seconds before Nico was due onstage for curtain call. To get her hard earned APPLAUSE. Her absence would be obvious. But so would Kashima’s corpse when Nico did get out of there. But how was Nico going to free herself. Wondering whether there were air holes wasn’t a helpful thought. Nico tried to forget she’d ever learned the word stifling as the smell of Kashima’s sweat and cologne filled her nose. Maki would choke if she were here. The idiot losers had cuffed Nico’s hands behind back and there was so little space in the coffin that any movement was difficult. For once, Nico was grateful she was tiny. She could turn on her side, that would give her more power, striking the lid with her shoulder. Maybe she could dislodge it. Or at least someone would hear the bang. As Nico tried to force the gag from her mouth with her tongue, she realized Umi was going to be covering Nico’s mistakes resulting from overconfidence at the next roommate meeting. Then the lid banged as Nico slammed into it, but the crescendo of applause just took the noise in, as if it were another row of audience clapping their acclaim.

“Damn it, Kashima.” Nico muttered into the chemical rainy laundry detergent taste of the fabric as she threw herself upwards again.

Anju could feel the surge in power. She raised the wand, concentrating...remembering what the shimmer had looked like, she’d impressed it in her mind, forcing herself to recall the look, the feel,
the smell, the acrid taste of the air as the velocity forced her mouth open and the bitter, metallic foam she was ripped through coated the inside of her screams. Every night she’d taken herself through the memory and then again on waking, etching every detail into the space behind her eyes, and the walls of the cavern that held her heart.

The red wolf was the first through, angry, snarling, vicious as her fur burned with the lashes of chemical banes, and Anju nearly dropped her wand. Her last vision before the spell warped had been of the red wolf, striking again and again against the barrier protecting their enemies as their allies rode forward. But right now, Anju’s enemy was time. This surge wouldn’t last. The red wolf was no ally tonight. Diverting a spark of power, she struck at the wolf, projecting an image in her mind, of the actress, Nico, trapped, struggling, in a small space, gagged, desperately trying to make breathing possible. The wolf froze, staring at Anju, eyes narrowed, snarl deadly.

“You should hurry, before your mate runs out of air.” Anju hissed. And with a terrified whimper, under a howl angry enough to drive back the Lake, the red wolf threw herself at the doors, shoulders straining the locked wood further and further, until the doors broke open and the cold rushed in and the desperate wolf rushed out. Then came the second wolf. That was an easier challenge. Just release the other spell as Hanayo’s mate sped into the room.

With a flourish of the wand designed to catch Rin’s attention, Anju let off a little spiral of illumination, “She’s free. Go to her.”

Rin pulled up with a snarl, dodging the darting light, nose frantically sniffing the air, Anju wondered if the pepper spray bomb effect would linger and interfere with her plan, fouling the wolf’s senses. But if her nose had failed her, Rin’s throat didn’t and she howled a question, tilting her head to listen for a response. After only a heartbeat, with another howl, Anju’s last difficulty tore off back down the corridor, to return to the passage between libraries leaving Anju a few hard fought moments to recreate a passage between worlds she wasn’t sure existed.

Eyes closed, wind sweeping in, power swirling in patterns no one on this world could touch, Anju bit her tongue, as the magic around her mounted, roaring, the blood slightly metal, the bitter tang a sacrifice and a reminder of mortality as she immersed herself in the glory and beauty streaming around her, her only thought of home.

Chapter End Notes

This caused me nearly as much turmoil as we approached this point as the werewolf reveal. All the flaming chainsaws are in the air, where will they fall?
Thursday's A Thrill: Nico vs. The Forces of Fools

Chapter Summary

Chaos on the stage as Anju's plan progresses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hanayo had never really understood the concept of revulsion before. College really was educational. As a seemingly altered Anju clung desperately to her arm, whining, Hanayo felt like shaking the woman off and shoving her away...Then she glanced down and saw real terror in purple eyes very close to her own, felt the frigid chill that radiated off Anju as she clung, shivering.

So Hanayo gritted her teeth and mitigated her rage, “Let go of me.” They were trapped here, in an impossibly endless corridor, there would probably be time for venting her rage later. Hanayo sighed as Anju fell to the floor, blubbering into her hands. Pity. Hanayo took off her coat and wrapped the other woman in it. Hanayo refused to let any compassion color her voice. “I’m taking it back if it turns out you’re the Anju who trapped me here.”

Anju looked up at Hanayo, eyes wide and much more open than Hanayo had ever seen them, “What do you mean?”

Hanayo kept moving, pacing, imagining a fanged snarl, “Who are you?”

“Anju Yuki.”

“Well, we agree about that.” Hanayo crossed her arms and glared down at the woman, “What do you know about werewolves?”

“Like the MTV show? Or American Werewolf in London? We studied the makeup for that one.” Anju wiped away tears, then put her arms through the sleeves of Hanayo’s parka, “I’m majoring in costume design and materials science.”

“I know.” Hanayo shook her head.

“How do you know? Have we met?” Anju’s voice was gaining some strength, although confusion was still the dominant tone.

Hanayo rolled her eyes. She had no intention of answering questions, just asking them. “Do you know Erena and Tsubasa?”

“Yeah, we were at Pumpkin Prom together. Did something happen to them?” Anju got to her feet, reaching out for Hanayo with a trembling hand. Hanayo stepped back, turned around, and muttered as Anju continued. “What are you saying?”

“I need to get back to my fiancée. She’s in danger. So is my friend.” Hanayo whirled, temper loosed. “If you know where we are, HELP ME.”

Eyes locked, both too kind for such a clash of wills. But both too stubborn to yield.
Nozomi was never going to tell Nico, but by the end of Fangs, Nozomi found herself holding back tears, both at the peril of those facing Dracula and the triumph in Nico’s voice as she held out the closing note of her final song, light effects going through their paces around her, heightening the emotion, masking the quick switch Kashima had to pull off, setting a sunset mood of finality for Dracula and a dawn of rebirth for the world. Nico had certainly earned her avalanche of applause. Eli had been striking and confident and certainly claimed more than her share of the audience’s attention, but in the final confrontation with Nico, Eli and her sister brides had paled, bloodless imitations of the life Nico’s Mina was holding on to so fiercely. A tour de force, Nozomi realized. She was seeing one of those breakout, once in a lifetime performances. And Nico, on stage, Nico showed no sign that she was literally killing it as she gave voice to Dracula’s demise. No, onstage, there was only Mina, a tiny, unstoppable force weaponized by Van Helsing and blessed by nature with a will sharper than any vampire’s tooth or sword’s edge or sharpened stake.

Nozomi watched as the curtain closed, briefly, as the lights came up on Micah, as Harker, looking at a family scene, closed out the show with his final narration, about how much was sacrificed by all for the love of Mina. Honoka was leaning forward, arms hanging over the seat in front of her, mouth half open, completely caught up in the Harker photos flashing across the curtains as they slid open and the ensemble members came out to a huge swell of applause.

“Wow.” Honoka propped her chin on the chair back, tilting her head so Nozomi could see blue eyes glittering in the dark of the theatre, “That seemed so real.”

Now, Nozomi probably wouldn’t have said that, as life, even in its most exciting moments, did not involve a rising aria or a choral interlude. But she knew exactly what Honoka meant, “Yeah, Nico-chi really made you feel every stroke at the end there.”

Honoka sniggered at Nozomi’s choice of words, then frowned, “I didn’t know Nico was that good.”

“She’s never had a part that suited her this well.”

“Yeah. Tiny. But FIERCE.” Honoka leaned back, as the applause started to sputter, “Where is she?”

“Huh?” Nozomi stared as Honoka pointed to the stage.

“Shouldn’t she be out there?”

A whisper onstage was turning into a mutter was turning into Nozomi on her feet, shouting, “Where’s Nico-chi?”

Someone else added, “Kashima’s missing too.”

Oh hells, Nozomi thought as she rushed to the stage, watching Eli put her hands on the shoulders of her sister brides, both of whom were giggling like silly fools, Maki wasn’t going to like this at all.

The surge was a physical blow, rocking Anju. Concentrating, wavering, palms together, hands braced in front of her, Anju let the energy gather, none of it passing as she stripped off her protective glamours, interrupted the tunnel phase shift. Anju was a single point gathering universes to herself, ready to open her hands and rip through anything between her and her home. Sympathetic magic had done her many favors so far, finding her doppelganger in this world, keeping up the illusion that she was as youthful as the students surrounding her, finding metals and materials that would help her channel her power...now it was going to do her one more favor and catapult her through the folds
blocking and buffering the planes and pages of the multiverse, get her back to the one page where her pace, her pulse would be absorbed into the world surrounding her, not a constant, jarring reminder that she had never belonged here. Neon colors started to swirl in the muted red, blues and purples of the vaporwave neon cyber dystopias Erena had been showing her too many artist's visions of. Anju forced those recent impressions from her mind, they were not the pulsing starry black and red she had willed herself not to forget, the metallic night and hot foaming lava from her arrival. She concentrated, clearing the magic of blue and purple swirls, remembering the scorched smell, the metal tang, the heat coming off everything. Abandon these neon cool imaginings that had begun to alter her brain, plunge willfully into a scorching flow that would fling her across a maelstrom of multitudes, return her to a familiar shore.

Maki had never transformed this many times in a day. She wasn’t even certain she could remember what she’d eaten last and at some point she was going to sleep for DAYS, but right now, her panicked legs propelled her rapidly through the short distance from Deering to Wirtz. This late, the front entrance was deserted so Maki concentrated, managing a roll as she became human again. The sure grip of hands would save entrance time. Tearing the doors open, tearing up the stairs, trusting the faint hints of Nico she could smell meant her mate was alive and breathing, Maki burst into the back of theatre, grabbing a random long coat tossed across a seat and zipping it over her bare skin, her arrival thankfully unnoticed in the bustle centered onstage.

The floor dropped. Hanayo felt the shudder and Anju, still unsure on her legs, fell into her. It was not a pleasant sensation, the drop, the way the world shivered around them, white walls flicking back and forth between polished wood finish and dingy white decay, the dark floor swirling into familiar terrazzo colors, spiral lamps bouncing and tilting in this surreal lava lamp funhouse. For a swirl of a second, everything cramped, collapsing, and then Hanayo could breathe again, pushing Anju away from her, “Don’t touch me.”

She heard Rin, howling, worried, calling to her, and Hanayo knew it would be all right. Hanayo turned toward her fiancée’s voice, “RIN! I’m here. RIN!”

Nico could barely hear Kashima trying to get someone’s attention, but she was right next to her. Nico could also hear the thunder of applause. That was for her, all of it, stupid awful Kashima be damned. This was Nico’s show, Mina’s story, and Nico was going to show them all. Nearly kneeling, Nico shoved up, as her pride, her surety surged, but as her back struck the coffin’s lid with bruising velocity, there was a twist, the air got hotter, and Nico could feel herself flagging, like she did at the end of a dance rehearsal or a long tech weekend, weakness, exhaustion in her legs instead of strength, her heart fluttering, her shoulders slumping. “No.” Nico told herself, “this is not happening” and made another effort, this time succeeding in rocking the coffin. The applause had stopped in what seemed like a sudden confusion. Now was the time to make a real fuss. Sweating in the close air, Nico dropped to the floor of the coffin and began kicking the sides with all the strength she could still muster.

Eli had Ami pinned up against the wall, while Nozomi, arms crossed, aura angry, had blocked Deidre’s retreat. Eli’s voice was brusque, commanding, “What did you do? Where’s Nico?”

Ami paled and stuttered meaningless syllables in the face of Eli’s icy anger. Deidre stepped forward but Nozomi’s arm broke into her advance, “It was Kashima.” Deidre whined, “She thought it’d be a fun curtain call trick.”

Professor Asuka had vaulted onto the stage, “What’s going on? The entire department is here. This is
extremely unprofessional. Chantal, what’s happening?"

The PSM stepped forward, a quick glance at an unsettled audience stalled on a shaggy redhead in gray puffy down coat rushing the stage, face twisted in an expression that promised destruction for anyone or anything that stood in her way. Behind her, a tall, dark haired woman moved to the aisle, reaching out a hand, but the redhead shook it off with a sneer.

“Chantal...” Asuka gritted, smiling at the department head as she nudged her PSM back into focus with a hip.

“Nico and Kashima are missing.”

“What?!?!??!” Asuka’s hands reached out to strangle something. Nozomi thought it would probably be Kashima, if Nico didn’t do it first. Nico...Nozomi watched Maki for a clue.

“Nico’s here.” The redhead leapt to the stage, nose sniffing desperately, head swiveling as she sorted through a confusion of stimuli, then as she oriented on the only thing that mattered in her universe, leaping forward to tear through a curtain, the sound of fabric shredding as it was ripped from its metal rods surprising everyone as Maki slid to kneel next to a coffin, hands trying to tear off the lid, “NICO!”

“Oh fuck.” A slightly familiar voice cursed and copper, bergamot, and too calm was intruding behind her. Maki turned with a snarl, on her feet in a graceful movement too fast to clock with the eye and instantly Tsubasa was halfway across the stage, on the floor, redhead snarling on top of her, face close enough Tsubasa could see incisors that would give her new nightmares.

“What did you do?” The words came out in a sharp hiss and Tsubasa watched as Nico’s girlfriend’s nose stretched, saliva gathering, growls reverberating through the body that had Tsubasa pinned to the floor, one hand raised and quickly becoming dark with russet fur and deadly with claws about to slash.

When Tsubasa hesitated, Maki yanked her half up off the floor with one hand, letting her thump back.

“I didn’t...there’s a trick…” a breathless Tsubasa could barely keep herself from screaming as she looked into eyes with no trace of human empathy, only a savage storm of green. Maki’s face was a warped grotesque of a human expression, with random tufts of fur in an expanding rash-like growth.

Maki’s jaw snapped near Tsubasa’s neck, her claws a heavy, pricking weight ready to slash across Tsubasa’s throat, “Nnniiicccoo” could be heard through a dangerous growl.

“Hey, let’s slow down here,” Sergeant Alvarez, in a non uniform chocolate colored chunky knitted sweater and khakis, moved to where Maki could see her, close enough to grab the arm threatening Tsubasa, “Maki, tell me what’s happening. Where’s Nico?”

“Maki, wait.” Nozomi’s voice carried across the stage as she knelt next to the coffin Maki had been trying open, knocking on its side. “Are you there, Nico?”

Maki’s ear picked up the muffled sounds Nico made in response and as the redhead turned toward Nozomi, pulling Tsubasa off the floor again, Honoka tackled the werewolf across her body, “Maki, don’t do this, please. Nico wouldn’t want it.”

Tsubasa scrambled to her feet, but fell backwards and slid herself across the stage, shaking, arm raised to protect herself. “There’s a magnetic latch, top center, Nozomi. You have to press down on it, then slide it toward the left.”
Nozomi’s fingers found a hint of metal and slid, the lid popping and then Honoka thrown off. Maki was there, wrenching it off, lifting Nico out. She grabbed the gag out of Nico’s mouth, and was surprised when the first words out of it were directed at Nozomi, “Kashima.”

Nozomi swivelled to the other coffin, finding the same latch, opening the lid, and looking down to see a panting Kashima, eyes half closed. Micah was right there, levering Kashima up out of that box. The tall brunette stared around her, obviously confused, sweat soaked through her white shirt.

Ignoring everyone else, Maki had her nose in Nico’s hair, snuffling through, whimpering, Nico’s arms clasped around her as she recovered her breath. “Hey, pretty girl, Nico’s okay. It’s all right.”

Honoka stood in front of them, blocking them from the view of the audience, giving them some privacy, occasionally glancing behind her. Maki lifted Nico, standing, ready to leave the stage and carry her mate to safety, but Nico was whispering something to her, Maki was shaking her head.

“Put me down.” Nico demanded, louder.

Maki whined. Nico sighed, pushed her forehead to meet Maki’s, let her eyelashes flutter once, felt the skip in Maki’s already rapid heartbeat and spoke in low voice, but one that invited no argument, “Put me down now.”

Maki let Nico drop out of her arms, sulking, and Nico took a second to ensure her legs were solid, before stomping toward Kashima. As she came into view, the fascinated audience cheered, and with a slight smile, Nico felt her strength start to return.

Hanayo saw Rin pounding toward her but before she could resolve the orange flecked brown speeding blur into a recognizable shape, Rin, in human form, was falling at her, arms wide, grip tight, swinging Hanayo in a manic circle, crying with relief. Then the werewolf became aware of Anju and the mood changed, Rin falling to all fours, changing, snarling, approaching slowly, slinking, head low, shoulders set, hindquarters tensing for a leap. Anju shrank back, hitting a wall, eyes wide with terror. Hanayo, watching her reaction, dropped a hand to Rin’s back, “Wait.”

Rin growled. Hanayo crouched, “Does she smell like Anju, Rin?” Rin turned her head, attitude curious. Hanayo tilted her head toward Anju, “Is she the same?”

Anju had her hands on the wall, as if she were going to push through. She shrank back, eyes closing, as Rin approached.

“She won’t hurt you.” Hanayo reassured Anju as Rin sniffed the frightened mystery cautiously, maintaining a few inches of distance.

Rin whined, confused, and Hanayo stepped forward, but before she could speak, the building shook.

“Where is the other one?” Hanayo asked.

Rin whined and waggled her head toward Deering proper.

“Show me?” Hanayo asked.

Rin took off, Hanayo following, until she felt a hand grabbing her. Anju.

“What do I do?”
“I don’t care. Let me go.” Hanayo frowned, Rin growled and pushed her snout under Anju’s hand, loosening it from Hanayo’s clothes.

“I don’t understand.” Anju rubbed her face, eyes starting to tear.

Hanayo sighed, head dropping, Rin nudging at her. “There’s another you back there blowing up the building. You you should probably stay here while I take care of it.” Hanayo paused, hand still on Rin to indicate her fiancée should wait before taking the lead, “Unless you have a phone I can borrow?”

Anju shook her head, Hanayo rolled her eyes, urging Rin forward and following her down the hallway. Anju wrapped her arms around herself, then decided not to be left alone, hustling after the strange couple.

Nico strode right up to Kashima, who was stretching and shaking her head as the bustle around her continued, whistles and cheers lingering. Maki was half a step behind, Sergeant Alvarez was helping Tsubasa to her feet while keeping an eye on Maki’s trajectory. Eli had a one hand on Ami’s shoulder and one hand on Deidre’s and a ‘don’t even think about talking’ look in her eyes.

“Hey, stupid.” Nico barked. Kashima glanced down surprised at her co star’s tone, just in time to feel Nico grab her wrist, pull the taller woman off balance, locking Kashima’s elbow as Nico shoved Kashima face down onto the floor, rattling the wind out of her. “You’re lucky Umi wouldn’t teach me karate.” Nico hissed, “You’d be split in half now.”

Professor Asuka shook herself, suddenly hyper aware of the highly distinguished crowd focused on them. “Nico. This is not the place for this.” Asuka put her faith in Nico’s love of impressing an audience.

Nico paused, tempted by the thought of grinding Kashima’s stupid, pretty boy face into the hardwood, but caught sight of the spellbound audience leaning forward or on their feet, gradually moving closer. Maki was open mouthed as Nico twisted Kashima’s arm viciously enough that Kashima yelped with pain over Nico’s calm declaration. “We’ll be talking later.”

Sergeant Alvarez had stepped up next to Maki, “Talking is a good idea, Nico. Why don’t we all take this backstage?”

“Good idea.” Asuka smiled, “And you are?”

“Casey Alvarez. Friend of Nico’s. Off duty police officer.”

Nico let Kashima go and Maki wondered if the wistful look as Nico stood was because she was obviously restraining herself from kicking the dazed Kashima. Fury had added a feverish tinge to the musk and magic that Nico was exuding like a cloud of steam and Maki could barely keep herself from licking her lips, or nipping Nico’s neck. But Nico still vibrated like a bomb about to go off so Maki kept a respectful distance.

Eli pushed her two ‘buddies’ forward. “What do we do with these two, Sergeant?”

“Backstage.” Alvarez sighed and glanced in her wife’s direction. Orla had settled comfortably in her seat, with her phone out, probably reading technical manuals. She’d be happily occupied for as long as sorting this out took.
Nico was muttering, pacing, glaring at Kashima, avoiding Maki, pausing and glaring dangerously when she bumped up against Deidre in her circuit of the stage, but Eli deftly maneuvered her captives toward the stage left wings. Kashima following.

Nico looked to Maki and took a big breath, exhaling residual anger at her fellow actors, inhaling cool charm. “Nice outfit. Doesn’t Nico always say wear more clothes.”

Maki blushed and shoved her hands in the pockets, “Sorry. Was worried. Anju…”

Maki froze. Rin…alone…

Nico’s hand was soft on the redhead’s cheek, “What’s the matter, Maki?”

“Rin. Anju.” Maki’s shoulders hunched as she raced through options.

“Nico will be fine. Go.” Nico pulled Maki in for a biting kiss that left the werewolf weak and reaching for her borrowed coat’s zipper. “Do that outside. In the dark somewhere. Away from people.” Nico hissed, pointing at the audience.

Maki gulped, hugged Nico hard enough to bruise anything the coffin hadn’t and leapt off the stage.

Nico whispered, “Be careful, pretty girl” as the werewolf exited the theatre. Then the future star of stage and screen headed backstage to deal with the human fools she knew too well and needed for her debut tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy! How are you holding up?
Thursday's A Thrill: We Battle

Chapter Summary

Title says it all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Erena had let her fitness regime slack a little since winter had locked down the Lakefill. Now she was regretting it as she made her best speed on too slippery, indirect walkways, but trying to break a path through the knee deep snow would have slowed her down even more. In sight, but still two crosswalks away from Deering, she heard a splintering thud as the doors burst open and a red blur sped across the snow. Erena watched for a minute. Looked like the blur was heading to the Wirtz Center. Probable werewolf, probably Nico’s girlfriend, Erena realized, regretting her slow foot pace, wondering what other damage the werewolf tag team had wreaked. No time for hesitation, Erena stepped off the neat walkways, heading for the now open west entrance. DPS would probably be along before too long, but Erena wasn’t sure whose side they’d be on. Just dragging her legs through the snow was more effective than high stepping...but when Erena reached the angled walk that would lead to Deering, a booming wave of force pushed her back. Surprised, she stumbled into the snow. As she was scrambling to stand, another wave forced her down. They were about 30 seconds apart. Could she get to the door if the cycle stayed stable? She crawled forward, staying on the rough, cold ground, hoping a lower profile would let the next wave crest over her without knocking her back.

Eli had dragged her sister brides to a empty room and everyone else had followed. Eli threw Diedre and Ami at chairs, standing solid between them and the doors, arms crossed, Nozomi backing her up. Then came Sergeant Alvarez, Tsubasa, and Kashima. Kashima dropped into the nearest seat, still looking confused, while Alvarez debated whether or not she should go in search of pen and paper to take notes. Or was it time to call in the FCC? It looked like tomorrow’s planned raid wouldn’t be necessary, although two of the targets were currently missing. Alvarez glanced at Tsubasa, who was looking paler than Kashima did under the lights in vampire makeup.

“Are you all right? Any wounds?” Alvarez wondered, her voice neutral.

Tsubasa shook her head, slumping down, braced against a wall.

“Good. One less problem.”

Alvarez watched Tsubasa closely. She recognized the sullenness, the inwardness. The young woman had seen something she wasn’t prepared for, had been too close to something much more primitive than most college students were prepared for -- bodily danger, primal fear. Alvarez had been deployed at Tsubasa’s age, and she could still remember the shock, the shakiness, in reaction to her education in what humans were capable of. Some of her fellow soldiers had never quite shaken the vulnerability of awareness, exposure to so many threats. Distraction and something warm to drink was probably the best she could do for the young woman right now.
“Any coffee around here? Some of us could probably use a cup.” Alvarez directed her question at Nozomi and Eli as Nico rushed in through the door.

“Nico is off duty, Nozomi will have to go raid management’s secret pot.” Nico was a little breathless and more Nico sized off stage, Alvarez realized, surprised.

Eli nodded, her eyes on Deidre and Ami, and Nozomi hurried off. Nico charged Kashima, “What the hell were you thinking, stupid.”

Kashima’s jaw was set, but not out of stubborness, Alvarez realized, the tall actress was trying to keep in tears, “I’m sorry, Nico. When Anju suggested it, it sounded fun…”

“Yeah, Nico, you’re never any fun any more…” Ami ventured as Eli stepped forward threateningly and Nico snarled.

“Shut up. No one is talking to you.” Nico grumbled.

Tsubasa’s eyes widened at Kashima’s claim, “Anju?” She shook her head, “That can’t be right. Everything was planned for tomorrow.”

Nico whirled to confront Tsubasa, “You were going to stuff Nico into a coffin on opening night?”

“No.” Tsubasa sat up, puzzled, “The transmitters were hidden in the coffins so they could be closer. You and Kashima were never supposed to be in them…well, except when Dracula needed to…”


“I don’t know. Anju didn’t talk to me…or Erena…where’s Erena?” Tsubasa’s voice suddenly shot up, shrill with tension.

“She ran off to Deering.” Nozomi announced as she handed Tsubasa a cup of coffee.

“Why?” Tsubasa ignored Nozomi.

Alvarez ran a hand through her hair, “We’d all like to know that.”

As Hanayo followed Rin through the corridor, she was hit by remnants of some acrid chemical scent that still packed enough pungency to make her eyes water. Rin must be miserable, she realized, watching Rin stay ahead of her, but not at full speed so Hanayo would always be able to keep her in sight. Hanayo wondered what had happened to Maki when the building shivered. Anju, behind her, yelped, but Hanayo didn’t look back. As they hit the stairs to the main floor of Deering, another shiver, floors quaking, about 30 seconds after the first. Rin paused, hesitating. Hanayo came up next to her, “Where’s Maki?”

Rin howled something that meant “Nico.” That made sense.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Hanayo asked.

Rin’s response sounded confident.

“We have to stop her, right?” Hanayo muttered.

Rin nodded, her eyes watering from the olfactory assault she’d just stepped through again..
“Yeah, I know. Who knows what she’s doing.” Hanayo glanced back at the Anju following her. Then the floor shook, a little sooner than the last burst.

Rin whined, stepping a little forward.

Hanayo hugged her, “I love you, Rin. Lead the way.”

Rin rolled through happy howl to warning howl as she climbed the stairs.

The shockwaves were closer together. Erena stood in the ripped open doorway, doors blown off, scattered across the snow, holding onto the frame, trying to make sense of the scene before her. Anju, but an altered Anju, older, lined and weathered, was hovering -- Erena did a double take and yes, Anju seemed to be gliding slightly above an erratic, fluid hole, an uneven gush of red and black viscous fluid. For a second, Erena had a sense of skipping, as if film had spooled in a projector, piling image on image, from Anju, as if she were preparing a midnight sacrifice to an ancient god, floating over a volcano’s hungry mouth in the stripped lobby of Deering, no vestibules or security desk, blasts of acrid heat, lightning hissing, then the entrance lobby was back, a sudden bustle of students, darkness and gargoyle shadows, and then Anju again, hands flung open, waves of red and phosphorescent darkness raising around her. Then before Erena could catch her breath or focus on a single image, 5 quick pushes that had her hugging the door as a red blur charged forward purposefully, slunk low to the ground, growling with exertion.

“Maki?” Erena guessed.

Neon eyes stared for a moment, then there was a threatening snap.

“I won’t hurt you. I want to help Anju. What’s going on?”

Maki turned her body, confrontational, growling, fangs out, as the next wave hit, staggering both. Then, there was a shiver and a hiss as air rushed and sound fled, leaving an eerie emptiness, charged by hisses and sparks. Erena looked over the wolf’s back, seeing only blackness in the distance, no sign of the rest of campus, past the entranceway. Maki whirled, sniffing, howling, running out, but hitting a barrier and being tossed back. She tried again and again, but finally sat back on her haunches, howling, whining. Then she spun, sniffing and stormed into the building.

Anju was standing over a tumultuous storm, red and black churning over and over, hands open and hovering at chest height. Magic and heat combined into a caustic, burning smell, but ignoring the pain in her head, Maki launched herself at Anju. With a casual finger flick, Maki was sent back toward the door as Anju crowed, “Should have stayed with your mate.”

Erena saw the red and black storm at Anju’s feet growing. “Anju?”

Anju blew a kiss in Erena’s direction, “Don’t worry. I’ll be gone soon. If you survive the second set of shockwaves every…”

The world rocked and where there had been silence, there was now roaring as the starry lava surged to Anju’s shins, random tendrils still whipping around the room.

Rin charged Anju, blindsiding her, taking her down, forcing her off the black and red hole she’d to the floor. Erena found herself wondering if any of the laws of physics were at full effect right now. She reached for the brown wolf pinning Anju, but felt a body slam into her side, forcing her back. Maki, savage, followed Rin’s initiative with a headbutt, knocking Erena over. Without Anju holding the center, without restraint, the lava started to flow out, broad, viscous strands reaching everywhere
to grab.

“Rin!”

Hanayo’s voice, Erena turned her head, Hanayo, and behind her, Anju, but an Anju still in her Akko costume. Maki’s weight disappeared, she’d gone to help her fellow werewolf, but a hissing, growing tide was impeding her progress.

The werewolves were always going to be the real problem, Anju had realized, if they decided to interfere. Staunch allies once, now they were stubborn obstacles. Rin had her pinned down and she felt the teeth close on her shoulder as she released the spell she’d cast on the wand and it exploded, a dart of motion, skewering Rin’s side as the werewolf bit deep into Anju’s muscle. No time for healing, a quick gesture to call a coiling tendril and Rin was whimpering from the burn as it wrapped around her torso, pressing hot metal sharpness further into her wound. Hanayo was searching, presumably for a weapon, and the red wolf was dodging the surging turbulence surrounding her.

“Anju?” Erena called, confused, eyes warily maintaining contact with the woman at the center of the room while she edged toward the other.

“Just go. Take her.” Anju commanded as she crawled to her feet, “It’s about to start.”

Hanayo grabbed for Rin, pushing her arms under the stinging heat of the mercury solid lash, breaking its cohesion, pulling the wand free of Rin’s haunches, knowing the werewolf would heal before crippling blood loss. Hanayo considered tossing the wand back, but holding it firmly in hand, a dagger, she rushed Anju, while Maki leapt with a roar. Anju clapped her hands and the air exploded with the shrillness of the fire alarm, magnified beyond tolerance. Maki dropped as if struck, human again, hands over her ears, whimpering, Rin just falling and Hanayo dropping to her knees next to Rin immediately, to know for herself that her mate was only unconscious.

Erena, wincing, had reached the Anju in the witch costume as the other Anju gestured, opening a small corridor through the pulsing surge of heat and sizzling fluids for them. Erena glanced back as Anju mouthed “Go” before she drew herself back to the dizzying vortex spewing impossible physics. Erena made a decision, reached down to take the closer Anju’s hand and drag her out the ruined doorway.

Maki had never been in so much pain. Her head was splitting, the blaring alarms wouldn’t stop, she was rolling through phase shifts of flame and ice. It was an insane, impossible world and there was no mooring. And now Maki could feel a suction, pulling at her as she struggled to rise, eyes closed from pain, nose making what sense it could of things, the tide of metallic tang and frothing warmth ebbing toward the center of the lobby, where the altered and older Anju was making her stand. Erena was leaving, with one Anju. Rin was unconscious with Hanayo huddled over her, so that left Maki. She stood, hunching, her feet burning, debating the change. But her wolf strengths had only made her more sensitive to Anju’s planned attacks. So fists it was. Half of year of wrestling with Rin in wolf form and nearly a month of ‘wrestling’ with Nico in girl form had left Maki with an excellent sense of her abilities as a grappler. Early fencing classes had left her with a tendency to analyze opponent’s weak points. Anju was obviously expecting attacks in wolf form, so...Maki hissed and hopped as her feet began to feel the burn. That decided her and she charged, trying to remember the one time Rin had roped her into an intramural rugby game. She aimed for Anju’s midriff with her shoulder, channelling pain into rage and rage into velocity and when she struck, she and the sorceress both flew back, Anju nearly dropped into the vortex like an 8 ball at the end of a game.

“Thanks, that helped.” Anju pushed Maki off, hands lingering on the redhead’s bare breasts. “I like this you better.” Maki could hear the smirk in her assailant’s voice, smell the triumph.
Maki changed instantly, instinctively and bit down, Anju’s arm in her mouth. Finally, Anju broke, screaming in pain, drawing back her arm to physically throw Maki off, But she stopped, concentrated and Maki felt the heat rising off Anju’s skin, burning through the roof of Maki’s mouth. As the werewolf whimpered, shaking her head, teeth tearing through Anju’s arm with each pained reflex, Anju’s other hand grabbed Maki’s chin and suddenly Maki’s head was flooded with images, stone walls and tapestries, Nico in a huge fur coat, in front of a fire, holding a child, Maki very close and playing with a smaller, dark furred wolf; Maki, russet fur darker, striding through a large room, growling and howling; Nico’s friends, older, attentive, as Umi stood in front of a map; Anju, striding on to a field, hands up, shimmers of light pulsing out of them, Maki racing in front of her, then the light altered, to the black and red turbulence Maki could feel around her, see wrap around Anju as she thrashed, falling through cloying dark. Maki’s jaw released, as pain, noise, and Anju’s memories clashed against the reality she was desperately holding to.

Maki’s eyes opened. Anju was staring, wild purple eyes begging, “Let me go home. I know you understand home. I’ve seen it.” Closing her eyes against pain and emotion, Maki smelled exhaustion, failing magic, defeat, sorrow, fear...Anju whispered, ”Please.”

A pulse hit, then another, then three seconds later another. Anju gritted her teeth and stood, hands together, muttering, all the fluid returning in a rush, draping over her, shivering, encasing her, racing to cover her skin, eddies of color and temperature roiling, another force pulling them, the greedy vortex wanting to swallow everything it could touch. Maki could feel the pull, its strength, she’d either have to leap or run NOW and another pulse hit her as she saw Rin spring toward Anju and Maki forced herself sideways with all her will, slamming into the smaller wolf, both of them rolling wildly toward the gaping entrance. Hanayo was watching the scene, horrified, clinging to a display case as the pulses kept happening, intervals lengthening. Maki shoved Rin out the doorway, angling both of their bodies behind the wall for protection as another wave struck. Maki had lost count, letting the stone protect her from the force, wounded Rin whining weakly for Hanayo. Maybe three minutes after it started, Maki felt like she’d been lassoed, the pulse returning, the nothingness surrounding Deering speeding toward them, passing through Maki and Rin, grinding them against the stone, Maki certain her heart had stopped as cold seared through her.

Then, blessedly, a world of cool soft returned to her ears, this world, with its open sky and its comforting sounds, campus sounds, cars scraping by, students chatting, sirens dim and distant, Rin and Hanayo breathing easily and Nico somewhere, safe, Maki’s name her song.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Let me know what you think. And thanks for reading this far : )

Stay tuned for opening night; Nico would never forgive you if you skipped ; )
Aftershocks, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Reality is back to normal...and everyone is dealing with the consequences of Anju splitting it open.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For forty years, the maternal Dr. Nishikino didn’t realize the her motherhood skillset would require a nuanced understanding of wolf howls. But midway through Maki’s eighth year, it became imperative to distinguish between pained and playful and so quantum leaps of learning occurred. But her daughter had never sounded this panicked...and there was Rin’s voice too, weaker than normal. Dressed for bed, Dr. Nishikino ran for the back door, sliding it open, to be nearly tackled by a frantic Maki, Rin following at a footsore pace, her fur singed and a barely scabbed wound on her side. Dr. Nishikino fell back, coughing, Maki smelled like an acrid mix of pepper spray, smoke, and rusty decay. Maki paused, worried, staring at her mother.

Dr. Nishikino put a reassuring hand on her daughter’s head. “I’m all right. What happened to you two? Where’s Hanayo.”

Rin whined sadly, howling at the door behind her; Maki was sniffing through bathrobe pockets, looking for her mother’s cellphone. She pulled it out, carefully held between her teeth.

Dr. Nishikino took the phone. “Maki, you have to change. I don’t know what you want. Who do you want me to call? Nico?”

Maki snorted, dove over the couch, and a very tousled head popped over as Rin paced whining, nudging at Maki’s mom, “No. Nico’s fine now. Call a lawyer. The police grabbed Hanayo.”

“Where is she?” Dr. Nishikino had a hand on Rin’s shoulder, trying to comfort the gloomy werewolf as she took at look at Rin’s wounds. She crouched, “Rin, can I clean your wound?”

RIn shook her head and growled.

Maki barked “Rin” then addressed her mother. “She doesn’t want anyone to take care of her until we do something about Hanayo.”

“Where is Nico?”

Maki huffed, not wanting to think about her GIRLFRIEND and possible danger and sandalwood and bergamot and copper and too calm...“At the theatre, dealing with jackasses.” Maki knew her lips were turning up into a snarl that this situation didn’t deserve, but she could smell her mother’s concern and confusion and it was triggering her own...she breathed, trying to focus on the light in Nico’s eyes during that last, biting, demanding kiss, and then Maki could feel her ears sliding and shook her head, forcing herself to grit out words as she fought the transformation, “Sergeant Alvarez is there so she’ll be okay, but...”

Nico settled, Dr. Nishikino went down the list of people to be concerned about. “Did Northwestern
“WE DON’T KNOW.” Maki shouted as Rin howled a mourning and anger remix. Neon was swirling quickly into Maki’s eyes and her hands, clutching the couch, were sprouting fur.

“Maki.” Her mother’s voice snapped. “Stay in control.”

Maki gripped the couch, biting her lip hard enough that she was bleeding, attention split between her mother and Rin, who was starting to growl. “What do we do?” Maki hissed between clenched teeth.

“What happened?” Dr. Nishikino thought it a perfectly reasonable question but suddenly Maki seemed furtive.

Then Rin’s voice was a flood of jarring information, “Deering blew up. Maki broke the doors. Kayo-chin’s stoopid boss called up some kind of burning tentacle pit monster, made Kayo-chin disappear, made a clone, ripped up the floor, bombed us and then just peaced out,” Rin’s snapped two fingers of her right hand, “And Kayo-chin made Maki drag me away when the cops came.” Rin had moved to the couch, chopping Maki’s head, which got the ginger gnashing of teeth in response.

Dr. Nishikino handed her robe to Rin, who reluctantly put it on, tripping over the dragging hem as she moved to vault over the couch next to Maki, who had wrapped a throw around herself.

“You broke the doors to Deering?” Dr. Nishikino was quickly recalculating her daughter’s strength.

Maki shook her head dismissively at her mother, as if busting doors was a thing the werewolf did everyday without comment, like eating breakfast. “Nico couldn’t breath.”

“Nico was there?” What Dr. Nishikino needed was a diorama with little figures the girls could move as they explained.

Rin screamed, interrupting the mother-daughter interrogation. “STOP WORRYING ABOUT NICO! KAYO-CHIN IS IN JAIL WITH THE BAD GUYS!”

Dr. Nishikino reached over the couch and hugged the trembling Rin, the werewolf yelping at the contact with her wound, “She’ll be fine Rin. She’s smart. She knows you’ll find a way to help.” Dr. Nishikino refused to let go of the thrashing Rin until the tears started, then let Maki take over and scrolled through her contacts for the best lawyer for this. She should send off a text to her husband as well. Not a good night to be stuck late at a board meeting.

Hanayo sat very very still in her chair, glasses sliding down her nose, reviewing the night in her mind, the sights, the strangeness. She really wanted to speak to Rin. Rin would be upset again. Asking Maki to forcibly remove Rin from the scene would bug her. Werewolf healing would take care of the wounds, but Hanayo worried that all of her actions had made Rin feel useless. She hated that thought. Rin was so sensitive to dents in her self esteem. Hanayo sighed. Well, now she didn’t have a job so that would give her more time with Rin.

Campus police had nabbed Erena and Anju running from the building so they had caught the brunt of the initial questioning. Much of the damage had...Hanayo tried to think of an appropriate word after the psychedelia of the Anju she knew’s activities...evaporated, leaving a Deering lobby mostly untouched, although Hanayo’s physical wounds had lingered. But flesh was more vulnerable than stone. Perhaps Deering had been built to withstand to such forces. After all, it had ancient tomes no one was permitted to access and sightings of librarians who seemed carved out of the same weathered pages as those books.
Hanayo shook her head, then leaned forward head in her hands, trying to forget everything she’d learned while working for Erena, Anju, and Tsubasa. She shouldn’t be fascinated. The only supernatural she wanted in her life was Rin, who was the kindest, prettiest, most human person she’d ever met. So she shouldn’t be here, realizing the pulses were timed based on the Fibonacci sequence counting down from 89 and the spiralling back out again. She wanted nothing to do with that...Hanayo sighed and realized she was futzing with her fingers. Rin would be calling her out on it...Hanayo also found herself wondering what the explosion of magic around them had been like with werewolf senses.

She wanted to be home, in their bed, holding Rin so very tight. And only focused on that. Not this dangerous new interest.

Erena was perfectly happy to be just sitting alone in a well lit, windowless room. Because until that door opened, and something/one came in or Erena went out, she could still remain in a Schrödinger’s cat state of being unaware of what she might find behind it, what flavor and taste of reality. Erena could maintain her tilting belief that she would step out into the Evanston night, everything would be calm, Fangs opening night would be happening on schedule tomorrow, and next week, she could ask Anju...her brain skittered away from that thought like the viscous fluid had ebbed to make a path for their escape.

Erena closed her eyes, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed, trying to remember every interaction with, every word from Anju since they’d met at the beginning of the school year. At some point, the puzzle must surely make sense.

Anju rocked, arms hugging herself. She was still so cold, she knew moving might warm her up, but she wanted to stay there in the chair, pushed into the corner, solid walls pressing on both sides. Erena’s hand taking hers, that was the moment she wanted to keep. The other woman, the one with the dog, had been harsh, reluctant, but although Anju could sense Erena’s confusion, the match of hers, there was nothing in their contact but comfort and strength. Was Erena on the other side of that door somewhere? What happened next? There had been a few basic questions, someone had brought her food, coffee and a blanket, but now there was silence, but a silence full of the world, not just an almost awareness of immobility.

Nico was glaring, Kashima was looking small, Deidre and Ami were clustered around Kashima, Tsubasa was sulking in a corner, sipping coffee. Nozomi and Eli were sitting on a table, near Nico, Sergeant Alvarez standing in the middle, having failed at starting a conversation that would resolve this. There was a heavy silence as Nico muttered. Then she threw herself off the bench she was on, fists swinging back, her body aimed straight at Kashima, her voice ringing off every corner of the room, belying her size.

“What the hell were you thinking Kashima. Not only did you put your hands all over me without asking, THE ENTIRE THEATRE DEPARTMENT SAW US MISS CURTAIN CALL. THEY THINK WE’RE AMATEURS NOW. Dumber than dumb, you idiot, Nico’s been nothing but helpful and then you have your idiot friends gag me and you....” Nico was in punching range of Kashima and the room went even stiller, Sergeant Alvarez started to take a step forward but Nico pulled up, waves of angry motion suddenly compressed into a dangerous glare, “Nico should have you arrested. Nico SHOULD have you arrested.” Then with a slide, Nico pivoted within punching distance of Sergeant Alvarez, “Can Nico have her arrested?”
Alvarez smiled at Nico, who rolled her eyes. “Is that really what you want to do, Nico?”

Nico’s body language changed, her mood went from angry and laser guided to smug and broader and taller than she could possibly be as she drawled out her response, spinning slowly on her heel to confront Kashima again, “Soooooo Nico could have them all arrested….”

Nozomi snorted. Kashima stood, hand out, “Ni…”

Nico shook her head, “Nico has not given you permission to speak yet, dumbass and Dracu-lite.”

Kashima slumped. Deidre seemed to be considering defending Kashima but a headshake from Eli quieted that urge.

“So Nico has all the power…” Nico leaned back against a wall, stretching her arms in front of her, fingers locked. “Whatever will Nico do?”

No one was swinging at anyone so Alvarez decided the best thing to do was to let Nico play out her hand exactly as she wanted. There was mischief in her tone. And after being stuffed in a coffin by her co star, Nico (not a Sergeant Alvarez on duty opinion) deserved a little payback.

A new voice startled everyone. “This is boring.” Tsubasa crumbled her paper cup and tossed it in the direction of a trash can, “Just pick somebody to execute or something…”

Nico tilted her head, looking Tsubasa over, “You’ll get yours, don’t worry, pirate and techy. Now pipe down, Nico is thinking.”

Tsubasa frowned, “I’m not waiting around while you try to get a spark out of the three brain cells you have left after deciding on a lipstick color.”

“ Mostly beeswax, not much color, Nico does her research. Off stage, Nico likes Fenty’s Cuffing Season, no pink is too ho…”

“Oh my god, I didn’t ask you for makeup tips…” Tsubasa stood, scowling.

“And Nico didn’t ask for your opinion at all.” Nico was on her feet and prowling, finger ready to poke some fear into her enemies, “The police know all about what you’ve been up to. You might want to lawyer up before you start talking.”

Deidra and Ami immediately started whispering. Tsubasa shoved past Nico, nearly knocking the slightly smaller actress over, which gave Nico an excuse to grab the back of Tsubasa’s shirt and yank, which gave Sergeant Alvarez an urgent need to separate the two.

“That’s enough.” Alvarez kept a hand on Tsubasa’s shoulder while Nico bounced wide, taking a second to glare Kashima back into cowering.

Nico’s lip curled, “I’m leaning toward jail.”

“Nico!” Kashima’s cry was desperate.

Eli had been almost interrupting since Nico’s lean and stretch and now decided to speak up, her voice clear and cool in an increasingly heated room, “I don’t know about Tsubasa, but I think the rest of this is something we have to deal with as a cast.”

Nico narrowed her eyes, trying to read Eli for intent.

“I just want to get home sometime tonight, Nico. Really.” Eli raised an eyebrow, “Don’t you have
someone to get home to?”

“Especially after how she and her friend TROTTED out after Erena earlier.” Nozomi added, making a special effort not let her voice tease.

Sergeant Alvarez was fascinated as Nico’s face went through a year’s worth of expressions at Nozomi’s choice of verbs in what must have been the blink of an eye, then locked into suspicious by the time Nico was in Nozomi’s face, her voice tight, “Maki was here earlier than curtain call?”

Nozomi nodded.

“Why?”

Nozomi shrugged.

Nico exhaled, batted her eyelashes, squared her shoulders, and decided, “No charges, Sergeant. Thanks for your help. Nico’s suddenly very tired.”

Alvarez heard the tremble in Nico’s voice but then Kashima was cheering and grabbing Nico to hug her.

“NEVER TOUCH NICO AGAIN.” Nico roared, slapping Kashima’s hands away. The ringing in everyone’s ears might stop by tomorrow’s opening, might. Kashima’s arms dropped to her sides like weights. Deidre and Ami were about to drag her out of the room when Sergeant Alvarez blocked their path.

“Nico may not be pressing charges, but what you three did was stupid, dangerous, and cruel. I wouldn’t be surprised if your director decided to take some action. As a matter of fact, I think I will encourage her to.”

“We’re sorry. We really are sorry, Nico.” Ami pleaded, Nico pffed, waving her hands dismissively, on her way out the door, Nozomi trying to keep up. Werewolf girlfriend crisis. Nico had no time for whiners.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy!

It's hard to follow Nico so I just ended it here. Probably two more chapters. Hanayo's trying to get me to admit I want to continue this AU, but there is my Christmas tradition and some AU’s I owe people to consider. So we'll see.

If you're in the US, you'd better be registered to vote and planning to in November. I'm tired of Nazi sympathizing anti LGBTQ white supremacist bigots having no consequences for their crimes. So let's change that.

So are you fond of sweater weather? I'm hoping we get to it sometime soon here. I have hoodies that need airing out.

Take care; drop a comment, I need some cheer. And thanks for sticking with the story for this long.
Chapter Summary

We meet some new people and Nico finally escapes her co-stars.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The door opened; Hanayo looked up. She’d gotten bored looking at the utilitarian walls, completely surreal after being in the middle of a reality that was cracking open and trying to grab her. But Hanayo needed a distraction so she didn’t just dwell on how Rin looked as Maki dragged her off, both werewolves burned and bleeding. So here it was, two new problems to deal with: a dark skinned woman, tan hair in an Afro, soft grey suit, followed by another woman, black hair in a severe bun, black pinstripe suit that seemed more suited to a Wall Street office than a police station. The first smiled, and her British accent made the entire evening even more unreal, “Good evening, Ms. Koizumi. I’m Special Agent Davies and this is my partner, Marshal Tam.”

Hanayo tensed, she’d asked for her phone call, planning to call the Nishikinos, but received no response. And now, these two, obviously not Northwestern police officers appreared.

“We have a few questions about your evening.” Agent Davies pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the table. Marshal Tam stood at ease by the door, one thumb casually hooked in her vest pocket, an odd gesture for someone so permanent pressed. “We’ve already reviewed the information you’ve given the FCC.” Davies smiled, “That’s actually the reason why we’re here now.”

Tam quirked an eyebrow, “This is when you might want to mention how very classified all this is.”

“Oh right. Silly me,” Davies’ grin got broader, “The Marshal is what you Americans call the ‘bad cop.’” A cough, “EVERYTHING you’ve discovered since you started working with” a quick glance at the file, “Kira, Todo, and Yuki is so top secret Netflix writers wish there were conspiracy theories about it they could steal.”

“Your analogies are fascinating, Mel.” Tam drawled.

“Should I have said Dr. Who?” Davies half turned.

“Always timely.” A flicked finger salute.

“Excuse me. Can I have my phone call now.” Hanayo was tired and sore and not in an indulgent mood. Wasn’t she on the right side of this?

“No.” Two voices, too quickly.

“You have very few rights here.” Tam stated.

“I was trying to stop them.” Hanayo couldn’t believe this.

Davies’ tone was almost sympathetic, “There is an unprecedented and pretty complete cockup here and you are right in the center. Whatever your initial intentions, you are now part of the problem.”
Hanayo lost her last shred of lingering optimism as she looked up into Tam’s unemotional, dark eyes and wondered how long this night was going to be.

The door opened in the small, mirrored room; Anju stared, wondering who was coming through. Erena, tall, hands in the pockets of her borrowed NU Police sweatshirt.

“Hey.” Erena waved, dark hair falling forward as she stooped a little. “Did they feed you? Mind if I sit?”

“Yeah…” Anju pushed her chair a little out from the wall, “Go ahead.”

Erena pulled a chair out from the table, “Did you tell them what happened?”

Anju crossed her arms over her chest, “I didn’t make any sense.” Her mouth tightened, “But it just seemed like I was confirming things for them. They didn’t pressure me.” She stared straight at Erena, eyes cloudy, “I think they actually believed me.”

Erena shrugged, “After the rest of this night, I believe you too.”

“Believe what?”

Erena considered, steepling her fingers together, trying to find appropriate words, “That you’re the woman I wanted to get to know, but not the woman I’ve been working with since Halloween.”

“What about the…”

“Magic?” Erena rubbed the bridge of her nose, “I have a feeling THEY will be telling us more about that.”

“Why?”

“ Haven’t talked to any actual police; aren’t allowed to call a lawyer. We are obviously an above people’s paygrade problem.”

Anju scooted her chair a little closer to the table, “Then why did you talk to them?”

Erena leaned back, scuffed boots crossed at the ankles. “This is way outside of what I ever intended to do. Those weren’t special effects.” She raised a leg, pointing above her knee, where a rip was scorched in her black jeans, “Every substance had heat and weight and properties. Maybe we broke something.” Legs back to stretched out, eyes staring at the ceiling. “If we did, they might know how to fix it.”

It wasn’t exactly frantic pounding, Dr. Nishikino thought as her very solid front door shuddered, more like very determined. She’d changed into comfortable clothes, not intending to sleep until
they’d managed to get Hanayo out of police custody. Both werewolves were cleaning up, Maki in the master bath, Rin in the largest guest room. As she headed for the door, Dr. Nishikino heard a howl, then a thump. She opened the door, Nico stepped inside, said “Where’s Maki?” and got tackled by a soaking wet wolf, snuffling all over Nico’s body. Nico fell with a grunt, but immediately wrapped her arms around Maki, hugging the werewolf so tightly Maki whined a little. Dr. Nishikino stepped around to close the door and went back to the kitchen, where she was making a pot of coffee and warming cookies.

“What happened to you, pretty girl?” Nico let tender fingers lightly trail over the burned fur surrounding Maki’s mouth.

Maki responded with growling, whimpering, and a triumphant howl, which Rin echoed from upstairs, sounding weaker than usual.

“So the bad guys didn’t win. Good.” Nico hugged tighter.

Maki howled proudly.

Nico lying on the floor, arms around the werewolf on top of her, chuckled, as Maki’s amethyst eyes glowed at her. “Yes, Nico is very impressed. Nico will be even more impressed when Maki TALKS and tells her the whole story.”

“Kayo-chin’s stoooopid boss ripped apart everything, burned Maki, stabbed me, made Kayo-chin disappear, cloned herself, then got dragged down a hole by a pit monster.” Rin appeared at the top of the stairs, towelling off her hair, dressed in a pair of sweats and a long sleeve t-shirt. They fit so she must keep clothes here too, Nico realized. Nico also realized that proximity to werewolf fresh out of the bath had soaked through her coat to her clothes.

“Nico needs to change.” Nico let Maki go, sitting up. Maki sprinted eagerly up the stairs, turning at the halfway point to stick her tongue out at Nico.

Rin hipchecked her bff, “Don’t forget about Kayo-chin.”

Maki snorted.

Nico laughed. Cute werewolves being safe and silly was exactly what she needed right now.

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Casey Alvarez sighed, glancing at her phone again. Tsubasa was waiting. Everyone else had gone off to change or finish shutting things down for the evening, but Tsubasa had lingered.

“Nico’s not pressing charges, but there are a couple of people who want to talk to you tonight.” Alvarez’s expression was wry, “Things always go better if you walk in voluntarily.”

Tsubasa grunted, “Is that your professional, off duty cop, friend of Nico advice?”

“Nope.” Alvarez hardened her stance and her voice, “That would have been don’t rig dangerous traps in set pieces your co workers have to use.”

“Yeah.” Tsubasa kicked at something. “That’s a point.”
“I don’t know exactly what’s happening” Alvarez rubbed her temples, “Which I always hate. But I talked to somebody at the FCC who talked to somebody somewhere I can’t even know the name of who just texted me that I should escort you to the Campus Police, if you’re still here…”

Tsubasa sniggered, ignoring the opening Alvarez might have left her. “Am I getting shipped to Roswell?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Alvarez’s voice was flat.

“Can I file a missing persons report on myself in advance?” Tsubasa’s voice was taunting, her green eyes sparkling at Alvarez.

“Whatever, chica.” Alvarez’s easy dismissal of her tease just amused Tsubasa. “Your friends are there.”

“Yeah.” Tsubasa picked up her coat, “Do you have to cuff me?”

“Nope. Just have to walk my wife to our car, if you don’t mind.”

“Nope.” Tsubasa wrapped a scarf around her neck, “Let’s get this over with.”

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Davies pushed the transcript toward Hanayo. “So you’re certain it was a different Anju?

“Yes.”

“And the werewolves can confirm this?”

The question was dropped in so casually Hanayo was almost caught, but the habit of more than half a lifetime kept Rin’s secret safe.

Davies leaned forward, “We know about your fiancée. And the Nishikino girl.”

Hanayo remained silent.

“Our branch of the Marshals has been tracking werewolf family lines for centuries.” Tam added, “Like every other American citizen, they have rights, and we can only intervene if they break the law or present a deadly threat.”

Hanayo shrugged with disinterest, picked up a pen and started reading through her typed statement.

“The best way to protect her is from the inside.” Tam continued.

Hanayo frowned, upper lip hinting scowl, “What do you mean?”

Tam answered bluntly, “You’ve been very impressive, picking up the science so rapidly.”

Davies chuckled, “And you can obviously keep a secret.”

“And you seem to have a good working relationship with…”

“That’s not true,” Now Hanayo could start to let some of the anxiety fuel anger. They obviously
wanted something from her.

“Whether or not there was friction, the four of you were effective. You basically created and survived your own boot camp. We need women like you in the program.”

“What program?”

“Think of this as a job interview.” The Agent and the Marshall had dropped the topic of werewolves; Hanayo wouldn’t be bringing it up.

Nico had been shoved into Maki’s room by the very insistent werewolf. Maki dripping on her tights, Nico pulled out a few things to change into, then started undressing. Before she could even get out of her skirt, Maki was there, naked, skin cold and damp, with very very human hands, ignoring the usual progression of zippers and other fasteners to rip through fabric to get to Nico. Active as she was, Maki was still chilled and trembling, so Nico guided them both to the bed, raising Maki’s blanket over their shoulders. Once there was a warming cocoon, Nico grabbed one of Maki’s hands.

“Slow down, pretty girl. Nico wants to know what happened.” Nico could see healing cuts, scrapes, and burns all over Maki. What had the werewolf gotten into, a firefight? Were there bullet wounds or something? What exactly had Rin said? Hanayo’s bosses. As the impatient redhead whimpered, Nico ran her hands over Maki’s skin, feeling for open wounds. “Who did this?”

Maki shook her head, pushing into Nico’s shoulder, whining plaintively. Nico wondered if something had happened to Maki’s voice. A growling kiss disrupted her thoughts.

Nico responded, but then she wrapped both arms around Maki again and dropped them both back to the bed, “Maki, what happened? Who did all this? Nozomi said Erena..”

A huge inhale by Maki and Nico’s mouth was full of wet, red hair with metallic smoke taste as Maki flopped into her girlfriend’s side. Her arrival must have interrupted Maki before shampooing, Nico guessed. Now to get some kind of verbal response before Maki stressed back into wolf form.

“Were you in a fire?” Nico wondered.

Whine. Nope not fire.

“Help Nico out here, pretty girl.” Knowing how sensitive Maki was to moods, Nico took care to just enjoy the feel of being close to Maki, not letting worry or impatience interfere with the tactile pleasures of warm, cozy lover. “Talk to me.”

Maki just snuggled closer. Nico could feel her warming up, which was good. A knock on the door; no response from Maki, so Nico answered, “Come in.”

Maki’s mother stuck her head in, staring at her daughter for a moment, then meeting Nico’s glance, “Maki’s father is here so we’re going to take Rin to the police station and meet with the lawyer. She hasn’t been able to talk to Hanayo yet, but is going through some kind of Non Disclosure Agreement before Hanayo signs it.”

Maki whiffled, moving even closer to Nico, who could feel the fur against her torso as Maki shifted,
changing. Then Maki howled a chiding series of notes at her mother.

Nico glanced down at the russet and cream head now blowing warm, drooling breaths across her chin and wondered how much of a crisis just asking Dr. Nishikino what was going on would cause.

“Ummmm…” it didn’t help if Nico couldn’t figure out the right question. The shaggy foreleg angled across her diaphragm had her trapped under the covers, which was fine, because Nico needed more clothes before being seen by anybody not Maki.

“Maki was frantic when she arrived, and her wounds were pretty bad.” Dr. Nishikino volunteered information as Nico struggled to phrase a question, “Serious healing takes up a lot of energy. My daughter is much less verbal when she’s exhausted.”

Maki howled at her mother, an annoyed note.

“Sorry. Maki communicates quite clearly, but when tired she tends not to use words.” Dr. Nishikino sounded amused, “Does that answer meet with your approval?”

Maki’s more agreeable howl was quieter than the others had been. Nico could feel the werewolf starting to relax, her breaths slowing. “I’ll take care of things here.” Nico whispered, not wanting to stir up Maki.

A wry smile crossed Dr. Nishikino’s face. Maki had made it quite clear who she intended to be comforted by, “Raid the refrigerator for anything you want, Nico. I hear you had a crazy night yourself.”

Nico was stroking gently Maki’s fur, cheek resting against Maki’s head, only half paying attention to the conversation, “Nico will turn into a great story sometime.”

“I look forward to hearing it. I’ll text you when we know more about Hanayo.” Dr. Nishikino closed the door.

“Thanks.”

汉乃也站在那里，想要她的手机，知道 Rin 是在那里与 Maki 的爸爸，但是不能看到她。Nishikinos 已经联系到 Abril Cohen，一个律师，实际上拥有谈判与 Agent Davies 和 Marshall Tam 的权限，所以 Hanayo 选择暂时不参与法律术语的讨论，根据 Hanayo 给 Cohen 的列表，一些细节正在商定。

The door opened and Erena and the other Anju walked in, Erena striding confidently up to Hanayo, Anju more tentative.

“Koizumi.” Erena extended her hand. Hanayo’s dubious expression didn’t discourage Erena, who refused to pull back, “Look, I’m sorry this happened, Koizumi. I had no idea what she was planning. It was supposed to be data collection. I should have recognized that everything was getting out of control.”

“Tsubasa.” Hanayo nearly spat. Anju glanced confused from one to the other.
Erena raised both her hands in a sign of surrender, “The werewolf hunt thing was completely on her. I say live and let live and I told her that.”

Anju sat down, remembering the evening’s scenes, the two what she thought were dogs, were they werewolves?!?!?...what else was actually real in this world. Erena immediately noticed her discomfort and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Anju?”

“What’s her deal anyway?” Hanayo knew it was a different woman, but it was hard not to seethe with resentment.

“The other Anju put her in some kind of suspended animation during Pumpkin Prom. I guess she had the ability to make herself look our age and hypnotized Anju into telling her enough details for a start. Magical identity theft.” Erena’s voice warmed with an atypical flare of annoyance. “After that was when we stopped talking about how to measure paranormal activity theoretically and began to build tools.” Erena squeezed Anju’s shoulder, “I’d started designing a few after our Ghostbusters conversation.

Anju smiled, “I started designing better hazard suits. With a little style.”

Watching them flirt, a frowning Hanayo became decisive. “I want to see Rin.” She said as if convincing herself, moving to the door and banging. After several minutes, Marshall Tam stepped in.

“I want to see Rin.” Hanayo repeated.

“You’ll have to wait…” Tam started.

Hanayo’s eyes were feverish and she left barely any space for comprehension between her rushed words. “Bring Rin in here now or you can fight Maki’s lawyer after you put me in whatever deep pit you want because if I don’t see Rin in two minutes, I am never ever helping you.”

There was a staring match. Anju and Erena watched curiously, Erena surprised by a Hanayo she thought mild’s fight. Tam turned on her heel without a word. Hanayo kept an eye on the clock and then 97 seconds after Tam left, Rin bounded in, grabbing Hanayo in a hug that lifted her off the floor. “Kayo-chin!”

Mel Davies frowned at her partner as they stood outside the door listening to Rin shout happily. Three years together dealing with Quantum Extra Consciousness hotspots all over the world had not endeared her to Tam’s not rare enough flashes of eccentricity.

Davies cleared her throat, “So you’re going to play this one by something other than the established protocols?”

Tam shrugged, “In love with a werewolf or a dryad or a …” A wink, “We’ve all been there.”

Davies paced. This whole situation was going to rewrite the manual, which would probably be her next tiresome task, “You have never been funny.”

“I have never tried.” Tam leaned against the wall, watching Davies fidget.

“You realize we’re probably going to get a werewolf added to this bloody team.” Davies recognized that smile. It was Tam’s “I’ve won at chess” smile.

“Oops.” said the Cheshire Marshal.
Umi and Honoka exchanged a glance. Kotori was in their walk in closet, removing clothes from hangers and either tossing them in a pile or putting them on a different hanger and then moving them to another part of the closet.

Umi spoke first, “Kotori? Can we assist you in any way.”

Kotori shook her head, ducking it, and making a small, unhappy noise. Two sets of eyebrows shot up, this was serious. Honoka made broad gestures, encouraging Umi to follow her out of their bedroom. Umi finally nodded agreement, but touched Kotori’s shoulder before leaving, “We will return shortly.”

Kotori ‘dropped’ a hanger on the floor, nearly knicking Umi’s toes. Umi skipped back, not taking her eyes off Kotori until she had to negotiate the stairs because Honoka had started dragging her down them.

“Umi Umi Umi, what are we going to do? Kotori’s so mad…”

Umi was puzzled. “But who is she mad at? I got her favorite cheesecake after you texted me. Did you do something”

“Umi…” Honoka winced and Umi felt a little guilty for her doubt.

And then Honoka went into a blaze of motion, orange hair flopping over her bright blue eyes as she shook her hands in front of her, “It was so crazy, Umi. Nico got locked in a coffin, half the cast got dragged into a room with Nico’s cute cop friend, and Kashima and Eli and Deidre and Ami didn’t get out of costume until like 15 minutes ago. And I think Kashima tore off some buttons. And Anju never showed up. And Erena left and…”

Umi grabbed Honoka’s hands, holding them tightly until her extremely excitable girlfriend slowed to silence.

“Who is Kotori upset at?” Umi needed specifics, not a flood of speculation.

Honoka eyebrows furrowed as she tried to work it out, “Mostly Anju I think. I tried to help, but there’s a lot of work.” Honoka flopped on the couch, “You actually have to know where everything goes.”

Umi sighed, “That is to be expected. There are more than thirty people in the cast and most have multiple costume changes. Poor Kotori.” Umi glanced upstairs.

“I think the director fired people.” Honoka scratched her head, “Maybe. Or they were getting arrested. Or Nico was hitting them.”

“What?” Umi’s attention immediately shifted back to Honoka.

“Well, Nico hit Kashima. But it wasn’t a big deal.” Honoka paused again. “But Officer…Alvarez was talking with a real serious face to Professor Asuka and walking one of the stagehands out, Tsubasa, I think.”

That would make sense, Umi realized. Maki’s friends had been worried about Tsubasa’s interest in Nico.
“How can we help Kotori?” Umi sat next to Honoka, hands clasped.

Honoka thought for a moment. “Hang costumes tomorrow if Anju doesn’t show. Too many actors leave ‘em lying around.”

“Perfect.” Umi grasped Honoka’s closest hand, raised it to her lips, and kissed it softly, “We will assist Kotori by taking over the more onerous tasks.” Umi considered. “Or I will.”

“What about me? I can help.” Honoka chirped, happy Umi agreed with her idea.

“We will ask the Professor if there is a job more suited to your talents.”

“Ooh, good idea.” Honoka mimicked a hand over hand action, “I could open the curtains.”

“I believe that’s automated, Honoka.”

“Oh…” Disappointed, Honoka dropped her head on Umi’s shoulder, “What do we do now?”

“Wait until Kotori wants her cheesecake.”

“Yeah.”

Rin was back to fidgeting with the Doctors Nishikino in the hall; Hanayo was leaning forward at the table, watching intently; Erena was relaxed, leaning back; Anju was slumping in her chair, exhausted; Abril Cohen was ticking off points with a pen, with Marshal Tam opposite her and Agent Davies observing from a corner seat.

“So this is where we are: you, an intergovernmental task force, are going to sponsor these three plus Tsubasa Kira…”

“I am not signing anything or going anywhere without Rin.” Hanayo insisted stubbornly.

“There isn’t a provision for that.” Tam said simply.

“If I’m a government employee and get transferred, can I take my wife?” Hanayo pressed.

Davies glanced at Tam, who made a grimace, “You don’t have a wife.”

“I will.” Hanayo crossed her arms.

“We could send you to prison. Or just walk you out of here handcuffed between us, Ms. Koizumi.” Davies pointed out.

“For helping you find out about this?” Hanayo’s voice was shrill, but with outrage not fear.

“Yes.” Tam snarled.

Hanayo paled, but didn’t waver, “Rin comes with me. If you want us to recreate what they…” Hanayo glared at Erena and Anju, “were doing and restart the Princeton Engineering Anomalies program…” here Hanayo hesitated, still wary about sharing Rin’s secret, “werewolf senses will
help.”

Erena shifted, “She’s probably right. I wonder what all that felt like for…” Erena hesitated, wondering if the room also knew about the redhead, “Hanayo’s fiancée. It would be a useful perspective.”

Although Anju was still wary of Hanayo, she decided to join the consensus, “Koizumi’s fiancée is probably more useful than I am right now.” That admission surprised Hanayo and Erena leaned forward in support as Anju continued to speak, “I understand I’m the only link to this other…”

“Pocket of Quantum Extra Consciousness…” Davies offered.

“You really need a better vocabulary for this.” Erena

Davies and Tam shared a look, then the Marshal spoke. “We don’t disagree.”

“It’ll be part of your job.” Davies stated, then muttered, “if I have any say.”

Anju repeated her statement when the room went quiet, “I understand I’m the only link, but I don’t have any of her practical knowledge.”

“But you can learn.” Erena’s response was quick.

“And…” Anju’s head fell, and she shivered a little, “I want to, so I can...so I can...understand what she did to me. And the werewolf could accelerate our discovery process.”

Davies had her phone out and was typing quickly, “What about Tsubasa? There was a lot of mutual animosity mentioned by both parties during their interviews.”

“Take her out in handcuffs.” Hanayo mumbled. Tam almost let herself seem amused, Davies’ nod was a confirmation of her point.

“I’ll talk to her.” Erena turned to Hanayo, “She’s not really a terrible person.”

“Hmmmpphhh…” Hanayo began to smolder, fingers tapping an angry rhythm. Abril Cohen decided to intervene.

“So my client is not committing to anything unless you agree to also transfer her wife to Princeton University, with status equal to the other parties to this arrangement. Is that correct, Hanayo?”

Hanayo nodded, maintaining eye contact with Tam.

“Do you want me to talk to Tsubasa?” Davies slid her phone into her pocket.

“Yes.” Tam answered, standing, “Come with me, Koizumi, and see if your future wife agrees to this.”

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This was not one of Tsubasa’s better nights. When Nico’s girlfriend had landed on top of her, snarling, starting to shift like the characters in Ginger Snaps, Tsubasa had a new, visceral understanding of fear. But then the werewolf had stopped, more concerned with saving Nico than
eviscerating Tsubasa. Which was unexpected and confusing and did ABSOLUTELY nothing to cut the complete terror at the thought of being that close to the woman again. Tsubasa fell into a chair, head in her hands, trying to remember how all of this had started. Too many late nights, too many energy drinks, too much Lovecraft, too much imagination, and then the tantalizing thought of knowing things no one else did. But that had all fled with the weight of claws against her throat and very human rage in unnatural green eyes. And with Nico locked in a coffin…

Door banged open, Agent Davies walked in, brows lowered over tiger’s eye irises. “Hello again, Ms. Kira.”

“Can I go home yet?” If you don’t ask you don’t get, Tsubasa told herself.

“No. But nice try.” Davies pulled out a chair, leaned forward, elbows on the table, “How do you feel about werewolves?”

“Terrified.” Tsubasa raised her head, “Why?”

“Want one for a co worker?”

Tsubasa’s expression straddled curious and aggravation. “Is it the one that wanted to gut me?”

“No.”

“Will agreeing get me out of here?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Tsubasa dropped her head back into her hands.

“It’s Koizumi’s fiancée.” Davies had her phone out again, checking her notes.

“Oh, that’s why Hanayo was so fond of me…”

“Well spotted.”

“Is she going to gut me?”

“The fiancée?”

“Koizumi.”

“She has, in practice, agreed not to by expressing a willingness, though reluctant, to work with you as long as we agree to her conditions.”

“The werewolf.”

“Yes.”

Tsubasa thought for a moment, then repeated “Okay.” Leaning forward, nose over Davies’s phone, “Co-worker?”

Davies grinned and pulled her phone back. “Longer story. What do you think of New Jersey?”

#
Tam had led them to a room with a couch so Hanayo sat down and leaned against Rin, not saying anything for several minutes. Rin, after her initial sniff through Kayo-chin’s hair, picking up exhaustion, worry, frustration, just enjoyed the sensation of being close to each other. Eventually, they ended up lying side by side, Rin realizing how tired she was but too curious about what Hanayo was holding back to actually drift off.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Rin.” Hanayo whispered.

“Me too.” Rin’s voice boomed, “That was too scary.”

“Too scary?” Hanayo smelled furtive, like she had when she was keeping her job from Rin.

“Only when you told Maki to drag me off.” Rin sat up, proud, leaning back onto her arms. “I can handle anything. Kayo-chin doesn’t have to worry when I’m there.”

“I know.” Hanayo smiled, turning on her side to watch Rin, “I always feel safe with you.”

Rin knew Hanayo so well she didn’t need her nose to tell her that her mate was about to tell her something she was afraid Rin would be upset about.

“Just tell me, Kayo-chin.” Hanayo flopped over, face in her arms, while Rin nudged her, “I know you're nervous. It'll be okay.”

“Marry me.” Hanayo squeaked.

“I already said yes, did you forget? Did something fall on your head?” Rin started sniffing through Hanayo’s hair again, wondering if she’d missed an injury.

“No,” Hanayo giggled, Rin’s quick movements were tickling her. “How’d you like to be a tiger?”

Rin sat back, her face serious, “That’d be cool but people would be scared if I turned into a tiger. Now they think I’m a dog and everybody loves dogs.”

Hanayo laughed, falling into Rin, “I love you.” Then she took both of Rin’s hands, violet eyes determined as she looked over the glasses that had slid down her nose, “We’re getting married Saturday, Rin, and moving to Princeton.”

“You want to be a tiger?” Rin asked, not sure what this was about.

Hanayo forced herself not to glance away. Rin’s eyes were as honest and accepting as always so Hanayo let herself be brave and spoke the truth. “I want to know more about everything that happened tonight. I have an opportunity to do that. And I want you there with me.”

Rin thought quickly. She shouldn’t be surprised. When things caught Hanayo’s attention, she dove right in. At least this time she’d learned enough that she was willing to take Rin with her when the stuff was scary. There was only one answer.

“All right, Kayo-chin. If you go, I go.” Rin bumped forward, glomping onto Hanayo, “I love you.”

Hanayo felt every burden she’d been feeling ease as Rin embraced her, “I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes
Wow, this chapter....

Hi!
Maki and Nico have some time alone.

With as jumpy as Maki was during the day, Nico was always surprised to wake up and find the redhead so soundly asleep that not even Nico poking her, or shifting weight off her, or (most of the time) prying out a flung out limb from underneath the torso of a clingy girlfriend would stir the redhead. At some point, Maki had transformed back into human form, most of the bruises, scrapes and burns healed away. Maki snored as Nico eased her way out of bed, finding the t-shirt she’d pulled out of a drawer and a pair of fuzzy wool socks in the dark. After 3 a.m., no news from the parental Nishikinos, and Nico was restless, unsure of what had happened to Maki or her friends early in the evening, uncertain of how walking into the theatre and seeing Kashima would feel, just generally restless. And HUNGRY. Nico knew as soon as Maki woke up, she’d probably be in search of a snack and both cooking and cleaning served the same purpose, calming Nico when there was too much to think about. So with a gentle breath of a kiss on Maki’s forehead, Nico headed downstairs to see what kind of pantry the Nishikinos kept.

Having accomplished the task of repurposing pancake mix to blueberry muffins, Nico had left them to cool, and invited herself into Maki’s music room, wanting to look at the music Maki had composed to Neruda again. Maki had written it for her, right, so surely no one could object if Nico pulled it out and played it herself. The Nico (and Neruda) by Moonlight folder was lying out on top of the bookshelf, so Nico opened it and sat on the piano bench, shuffling through the scored sheets to see if there was anything else Maki had been working on…

“How like you are to the longest kiss, 
Its fixed shock seems to nourish you, 
And its thrust of live coals, of fluttering flag, 
Goes…” Maki’s voice trembled nervously “throbbling in your domains…What if I was planning to surprise you?”

Nico glanced up, Maki was leaning in the doorframe, hair hanging down over her eyes, bathrobe loosely tied around her, but half falling off her shoulder. The werewolf was trying very hard to glare at Nico, but a huge yawn destroyed any non cute mood she’d been setting. Nico bounced off the bench and wrapped Maki up in a mighty hug, “Nico’s girlfriend is a genius composer.” Nico bopped a kiss on the end of Maki’s nose. Maki leaned into Nico’s hair and Nico could feel the smile.

“Nico made you muffins. You seemed like you’d wake up hungry.”

“I did. They smell wonderful” Maki nodded and looped her fingers through Nico’s, “Come watch me eat.”

The muffins were cool enough to just drop on the plate and Maki grabbed two for a start, to go with
her mug of warmed milk.

“These are amazing.” Maki mumbled as she chewed.

“Nico had to unpancake them and spice them up...mostly cinnamon and crumbled candied ginger, since your kitchen has nothing…”

“We order in a lot. My parents go to a bunch of events every month and a chef drops off frozen meals.” Maki grinned at Nico, grabbing another muffin and wiping crumbs from her mouth, “This is so much better.”

“You could kiss the cook.” Nico teased, sipping her hot chocolate, glancing around the Nishikino kitchen, considering what she’d have to bring with her to make Maki a decent home cooked meal. Pretty much all Maki had was assorted caffeinated products, some candy, and a supply of candles.

“Later.” Maki winked, continuing to decimate the muffin fortress. “I’ve been so HUNGRY.” Maki groaned, “I lost track of how many transformations I went through. Everything was....” Maki pulled a muffin in half, “split...confusing.”

Nico, content to watch her girlfriend enjoying Nico’s cooking skills, let Maki finish eating before asking for anymore details.

As Maki swallowed the last bite, Nico put her mug down. “So what exactly happened to you?”

Maki grimaced at Nico's straightforwardness, taking a few seconds to stare sadly at the empty muffin plate, “Um…” Maki bit her lip, fang out, but her girlfriend was locked in too introspective a mood for Nico to get many clues.

More encouragement maybe. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to…but Nico will listen.”

Maki nodded her head, still staring ahead blankly, fingers rubbing at her temples as she tried to push into phrases that Nico could understand the dissonance that had confronted her senses. Maybe a painter could have shown all the levels but...Maki could hear Nico humming under her breath, it was something the future star of stage and screen had taken to doing when she was trying not to rush Maki with questions. But the humming had reminded Maki of a thought...

Maki stood abruptly, inspired, grabbing Nico’s hand again, dragging her back to the music room, leaving Nico standing while Maki pushed up the fallboard and began to play, her hands gliding over the keys at first, and pausing and then pounding across the piano, more drift, a lift from her seat and then diving into the keys to strike jarring, strident notes, then a quick trill, then a circular swing of the head into a pause to launch broadly ominous strokes with both hands, gentler touches and desperate strikes sounding with no real pattern...Nico twisted her own hands, she’d never heard music like this before, no way she was going back to sleep for hours as the notes, stripped of any familiar rhythm, bored into her ears. But watching Maki, radiating passion, unerringly precise, caught, completely absorbed in the storm she was creating, grace and melody warring with seemingly random lurching crashes of notes kept Nico from pleading with the musician to stop. When Maki did let her fingers fall silent on the keys and the quakes of music stilled, amethyst eyes, charged with emerald neon, swirling with haunted shadows, cried.

Nico couldn’t move, overcome with….reverence, like the deep of heart at prayer. Maki seemed unapproachable, aloof, so distant, face a pained carving in hard experience. But Nico needed to reach out, Maki was too alone, porcelain not marble...Hesitating, Nico spoke softly into the silence, which almost pulsed as it filled the places the music had painfully torn. “Did you…”
Maki shook her head, “Arnold Schoenberg. I learned it to study atonal music.”

“It was…” Nico debated whether to compliment the player or strike the truth, sliding next to Maki on the bench, searching the pain clouding Maki’s eyes, “awful.”

Maki surprised herself with a laughing grin, “Yeah, it was.”

Nico stroked Maki’s chin, gently, thumb teasing Maki’s lip, “You were brave.”

Maki gulped and nodded.

“You saved your friends. And Nico.” Nico shivered, remembering the stifling closeness of the coffin.

Reminding Maki of Nico’s peril was a misjudgement if Nico wanted her ribs unbruised because the werewolf jerked forward and threw her arms around Nico, practically driving them both off the bench, snuffling madly through Nico’s hair.

Nico’s words were rushed as she tried to calm Maki, “Nico is fine, pretty girl, nobody hurt Nico, everything is okay, you’re home now, we’re home now, Nico is here…”

The Schoenberg still in her ears and the strange tingle of another existence lingering, Maki had a sudden fear she would wake up and be in a nightmare, again, alone, strange smells, dissonant sounds, no weight, no Nico…when the barrier had stopped her and there had been no trace of Nico anywhere in the strangeness she and Rin and Hanayo had been trapped in, Maki had felt a harder, scarring hit than any of Anju’s traceless attacks.

“Nico…” There was a frantic urgency in Maki’s voice as she threw her body into Nico, rolling them over and over as she kissed the sable haired dynamo desperately. Nico was trying to keep some control but when Maki took Nico’s hand and placed it over the curve of her breast pressing against Nico, whispering Nico’s name, kiss biting Nico’s lip in a the hastiest, messiest, sexiest way possible, Nico let her own primitive instincts take over, forcing the werewolf to stop long enough for Nico to regain control of their equilibrium, Maki’s neck no longer a moving target, but a bullseye Nico could hit with her eyes closed, nipping kisses that made Maki’s head roll back, mouth open, moans and whimpers filling the music room with a melody Nico preferred.

Nico had already gotten used to the feel of feather light, ticklish red hair sprayed across her face like a light mist of water. It did still occasionally trigger a near sneeze and as her face contorted, Maki rolled with laughter, pushing them both into the couch. Nico tenderly pulled Maki’s robe over her lover, the door was still open after all, but Nico knew werewolf hearing would have warned them of anyone’s arrival. Nico stretched out, one arm under Maki, thinking how nice it was to have this much space, to stretch, to think, to exist, without anyone crowding. Maki didn’t count, Maki didn’t crowd, Maki was a warm, gladdening weight reminding Nico of exactly how on top of the world she was. And that was a wonderful feeling after the frustrations of the earlier part of the evening, the idiocy of Kashima and company. Maki sensed Nico’s focus turning elsewhere and nudged Nico with her nose, human so not wet or cold, just a tickling tease to remind Nico she had an audience right there. Nico flipped up on her side, kissing the nuzzling Maki on the forehead, “All better, pretty girl?”

Maki nodded, a little shy, still uncertain about revealing so much vulnerability. Nico, head propped on her fist so her eyes were level with naked and nervous’s glowing amethyst emotional barometers, smiled softly, “You’re kind of amazing, Gorgeous. Nico still can’t believe how lucky she is to have
you for her adoring girlfriend.”

Maki blushed and ducked her head. Nico held her closer, “Of course, Nico does have her own charms.” Emboldened by the way Maki melted into her, Nico couldn’t stop the self congratulatory train, “Maki would be lost without her Nico.”

Once again a wrong note, mixed with the brash smirk Maki found so irresistible, too close in time to the vision of a Nico not breathing and a small world of air that held no traces of Nico. Maki sat up, pulling up her robe, pushing off the couch to get to her feet, “You can’t just say that...why would you say that…” tears, so many tears from Nico didn’t know where, then a whimper as Maki shook her head, red flying everywhere, “I can’t do this…”

Nico’s heart started racing from panic, “What did I say, Maki? What happened?”

Maki was pacing, too fast, long legs flashing and distracting Nico from trying to figure out where the mood went wrong. Nico tried for an embrace, but Maki didn’t stop, one hand up. “Just don’t…”

“C’mon, Maki...tell me what’s happening....Nico was just teasing…” Nico forcibly adjusted her focus, watching Maki’s expression for clues, wondering what else she could say to maybe get a reaction from Maki that would explain what was going on.

Nico was just too close. How if Nico kept being so close could Maki process all of this? Nico joking about not being there, daring the universe with how fragile their connection was, the terror Maki felt at the thought of losing her, the fear now, knowing there were worlds without Nico and Maki had been there, needing Nico’s touch but not wanting to need it...if Nico was there, eyes full of a matching fear, an echoing future loss, fingers tingling even at the distance Maki was desperately trying to keep, the sanity of a solitude now impossible that Nico had blasted open Maki’s heart, pieces in every pore, skin rippling, want resonating. No, no, now music was resonating, Maki was at the piano, Neruda and Nico once again intruding in her head, taking over, driving out everything but impulse. Pounding impulse, pressing need, an absence ripped bare by Nico’s presence.

“Safe in the midst of Spring
crazy with light in the cold,
walking tranquil in the fire, lifting your petal
weight in my arms
as if I had never walked
except with you, my heart,
as if could not walk
except with you,”

Then she whispered aloud, Nico’s presence forgotten as her fingers found the right notes, “as if I could not sing/except when you sing.” And then she played through the whole passage,

“Safe, crazy with light, tranquil in fire, singing….as if, as if never, never...except with you, except with you.”

“Never. Except with you.” What had happened to the Maki before Nico? Before Neruda?

Maki wrote notes quickly on the score, then jumped when Nico’s hands dropped on her shoulders, “You would do fine without Nico, pretty girl. This” Nico tapped the sheet with her finger, “is genius.”

“It just happens.” Maki frowned, not looking at her lover, “I have to get it out of my head…”
“Good.” Nico played with Maki’s hair, keeping her tone deliberately light, “more room for fantasies about me.”

Maki almost shook off Nico’s hands, her obvious discomfort surprising Nico. Nico couldn’t keep the annoyance out of her voice, “What is wrong? What did I do?”

Leaning forward, Nico could see Maki’s eyes, the neon green an unsettling slow pulse around the werewolf’s pupils, mouth opening and closing several times. Then Maki took a deep breath and howled as effectively as she could as a human. Maki let her throat open and freed the fear, that this was the moment her need of Nico left bare the truth that she had no idea how to get back to neutral, to solitary Maki, to a Maki not lost in a swell of feelings and physical needs.

Nico tried to make sense of the emotions she could feel mashed up in Maki’s voice, the tension under her hands...there was withdrawal, isolation, uncertainty, searching...but here they were, both here together, safe, Maki had not even a thirty minutes ago, screamed out Nico’s name in cresting, crashing ecstasy...how had that become this, this feeling that Maki had taken herself somewhere else, somewhere Nico didn’t know and couldn’t find, but that wasn’t true, Nico would find Maki anywhere...not knowing what else to do, Nico hugged Maki as tightly as she could, whispering “Maki” over and over again, and waiting, feeling Maki’s hasty breaths as the werewolf tensed, possibly debating whether to stand or run or...talking was a new option for Maki, Nico realized, one the werewolf had yet to grow comfortable with. After several minutes of Maki’s awkwardness, the feeling that her girlfriend wanted to bolt, but...Nico let go and sat on the bench next to Maki, legs just touching.

“Sorry, pretty girl…I don’t know what I did but...” Nico pressed a long note.

Maki shook her head, hands clenched in front of her, “You’re fine...”

“What are you?” Nico questioned gently, choosing words more carefully than ever before.

A shrug, Maki’s head thrown back, tumbling curls of hair freed from gravity for a moment in a graceful sweep through the air, arms shaking out some of their tension.

After a minute of thought. “I’m tired, Nico.” She let her head fall on Nico’s shoulder.

“Yeah.”

Nico imagined a ghost of a smile. She wondered if she was right. So many things still to discover. But first, she needed to get Maki back to bed. And not in the sexy way.

“Nico will tuck you in.” Nico took Maki’s hand, glad to feel a warmth between their palms, as if the redhead had decided to close this sudden distance between them. “And sleep down here, if you want.”

“Let’s just stay.” Maki, head still on Nico’s shoulder, sounded years worth of weary. Nico needed to ask Rin and Hanayo for more details when she saw them.

“If that’s what Maki wants.” Nico reached across to stroke Maki’s hair.

“I do.”

Chapter End Notes
Well, this chapter was meant to be longer but no one else wanted to intrude.

Take care.
A Little Action Before The Show

Chapter Summary

"The morning after the month before..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daylight outside the window, wolf Maki exploding off the couch, yelping, shoving Nico to the floor. Nico, confused and a little sore, watched as her girlfriend tore out of the room on four paws. Nico stood, stretching, wincing a little, unclumping the t-shirt that had shifted off one of her shoulders. She heard her ringtone “Nico Nico Ni, Nico Nico Ni” blare as Maki bounded OVER the couch, dropping Nico’s phone in front of her, then sitting proudly to watch Nico’s reaction, furry ears cocked and waiting for praise. Nico grabbed her phone, hand now wet from werewolf saliva, smiled with a “thanks, pretty girl” and then looked at her screen. 7 am, the Fangs poster for a profile pic so Chantal, PSM, was the caller. Nico swiped.

“Hey, Chantal.” Nico shook her head at Maki who was bumping her snout against Nico’s midriff in her continued effort to get some praise, “Why’d you call Nico so early?” Nico paused and raised an eyebrow at Maki as she dropped a hand between her girlfriend’s ears, “No, you didn’t wake me up. You had some help.”

Maki howled, softly, then continued to snug against Nico’s side as the phone call continued.

Nico sighed in response to a long statement, “No, I don’t have breakfast plans now that sleeping is out of the picture...do we have to...really...can Nico stab her with something…” Nico flumped on the couch, Maki settling against her legs and leaning back, obviously eavesdropping. Nico flicked one of Maki’s ear playfully and got a whine, which she laughed at, “All right, Norris, one hour, but if Nico is five minutes late tonight because she took an afternoon nap, you look the other way.” Nico ended the call and looked sadly at Maki for a moment, then lunged forward to hug the fluffy goof, “Nico has breakfast plans now, but I’m glad you’re feeling friendlier, pretty girl. Last night was scary.”

Maki howled agreement, and turned her head to lick Nico’s cheek.

Nico bounced up, looking down at her t-shirt pajamas. “Nico has to go shower off saliva now...and borrow some sweats. Does Rin have something here; it’s closer to Nico’s size.”

Maki shook her head, whining.

Nico leaned over so she was at Maki’s eye level. “Maki just wants Nico to smell like her.”

Maki nodded, whiffling happily, nose bopping Nico’s.

“Silly Maki.” Nico yawned, stretching again. That shower would feel great after a cramped night on the couch. Too bad they’d missed the tub soak last night. Oh right, Nico thought, remembering. “Change and make Nico coffee, please. I packed a change of clothes so I’ll just smell like me. Maki loves that.” Mocking her girlfriend, Nico stuck out her tongue as she headed for the door.

Maki flipped her tail as she followed, eyes glowing.
Eli frowned at her phone, then glanced back at the bed, where Nozomi had pulled the blanket over her head so all Eli could see was a pair of gleaming turquoise eyes.

“Come back to bed.” Nozomi wheedled.

Eli shook her head as Nozomi crept out of the bed, blanket still pulled over her head, “Have to meet Chantal and Nico and Kashima and…” Eli grimaced, “etcetera for breakfast.”

Nozomi tiptoed behind Eli, then threw the blanket over both of them, pulling it in at Eli’s waist so the blonde stumbled back into her. “I spent an hour last night convincing you not to set your alarm. They can’t have you. I want you.” Nozomi started to blow on the curve of Eli’s left ear, causing her to shiver.

“Nozomi…” Eli groaned, trying to pull away, but not with any seriousness. “Stop. I have to go.”

“Is Asuka making you?” Nozomi’s hand started drawing a line up Eli’s abs.

“No, Chantal. The PSM.” Eli closed her eyes, letting herself enjoy the attention for a few seconds, “The Boss. She thinks we need to resolve this before tonight.”

Nozomi reached the fullest part of Eli’s breast and squeezed, Eli pulling herself free as Nozomi declared herself, “First, I wanna be The Boss” Nozomi swiveled ahead of Eli, using her fiancee’s momentum to get them both landed back on the bed, “and second, is it really important? I had plans for you.”

Eli rolled her eyes, blowing out an exasperated breath, as Nozomi leaned in to her. “You know it is. Those three were complete asses and Nico and I have to work with them tonight. I think clearing the air is a great idea. I think firing them would be an even better…”

“Asuka’d never replace Kashima.” Nozomi let the conversation continue practical, while her hands searched out Eli’s most sensitive spots. The blonde writhed, trying to control her motions.

“True,” Eli was a little breathless, earnest blue gaze battling Nozomi’s smitten smirk. “I have to go, Love. It’s important.”

Nozomi paused, her hand hovering, just skimming the inside of Eli’s thigh, “I know, Eli-chi.” Eli had yet to figure out how Nozomi could lace the laissez faire in her voice with so much sensuality, “But they can’t have you just yet.”

Rin was sitting on the futon, in Maki’s usual position, head drooping. “Maki’ll miss us.”

Hanayo smiled, “And we’ll miss her. But she has Nico now.”

“But Nico can’t race her around the Lakefill. Or wrestle.”

Hanayo sat next to Rin, yawning. They were about to go get breakfast and then sleep away the rest of the morning, “I’m sure Maki and Nico will find things to do, Rin. So will we.”

Rin nodded and leaned her head on Hanayo’s shoulders, “I know, Kayo-chin, but…”

Hanayo pulled Rin closer, “It was nice to have a friend near who understood.”
“Yeah.” Rin was pensive for a moment, then did a bounce turn, green eyes bright, “Maybe we can get a kitten? And name it Maki Jr?”

Hanayo giggled, “We can definitely get a kitten, Rin. It might like its own name.”

“You’re the best, Kayo-chin.” The start of a wide Rin smile erased most of the previous’s night tedious worry.

Rin never stayed down for long and this whole experience had been a drain. But Hanayo had never met anyone who was better at bouncing back or being brave. And tomorrow, Rin would be her wife. Hanayo kissed Rin quickly, watching her ginger sweetie blink and blush.

“Kayo-chin!”

“You’re the cutest girl ever, Rin, and I can’t wait to be married to you.” Hanayo knew her smile matched Rin’s.

Rin hug pulled Hanayo to her feet, swinging them both around the room. “Me neither! We’re going to rock this world.”

And maybe a few others, Hanayo thought to herself.

Nico hopped downstairs. Showered. Maki safe and in a good mood. Coffee waiting. Opening night curtain approaching. Excitement fizzing EVERYWHERE Nico went because Nico was READY. Time to explode the mind of the cutest girlfriend in the galaxy. Who was standing over her family coffeemaker frowning. Maki had obviously gone upstairs and changed, she was now wearing short flannel boxers and a loose tanktop. Nico appreciated the view from behind for a moment, before springing on her favorite redhead.

“What’s the matter, pretty girl?”

Maki shrugged, sounding glum. “Just slow.”

Nico put her hands on Maki’s waist and spun the redhead, “Nico will keep you from getting bored.”

Maki tilted her head at Nico, single fang adorably pressing into a bottom lip Nico would be happy to memorize the contours and qualities of with every sense, and grinned, “And how is Nico going to do that?”

Nico let a fingernail trace up Maki’s back from waist to neck and watched her target quiver, “Nico has options.”

A low growl started in Maki’s chest and she leaned in, looking ready to bite, neon green aggressively surging like swells in mischievous amethyst, but before her mouth opened, teeth ready to nick Nico’s neck, her attention snapped to the door.

“Maki?”

“Car.” Maki kissed Nico’s neck, “My parents are home.”

“And the coffee is done.”

“Yeah.” Maki turned to hand Nico her mug, shoulders slumped.
Nico shoulder bumped Maki, “There’s a party after Fangs at Kotori and Honoka’s, Umi’ll be staying there, and after, Nico will need someone to walk her home.” Maki’s eyebrows shot up, corner of her lip quirking up as that indescribably delicious concoction of scents started to pull her Nico-ward.


“Nico has a breakfast meeting.” Nico explained as she sweetened her coffee, Maki leaning in to sniff and fake gag.

“We brought donuts.” Maki’s father flipped open the bright white, orange, pink and green box.

Nico glanced at Maki and shook her head, “Are you sure they’re doctors?”

Maki was already halfway through a toasted coconut donut, “Huh?”

Maki’s mother took her coffee and sat, choosing a Boston Creme donut, “I’ve had too long a night to worry about nutritional contents, Nico, dear. Maki, Marshal Tam and Agent Davies want to talk to you this afternoon.”

“Who?” Nico asked, deciding to join the donut party, finding a strawberry frosted.

"Federal agents." Maki’s dad pulled a drinkable yogurt from the fridge.

“They are coming here for the interview and our lawyer will be present.” the seated Dr. Nishikino continued as she sipped her coffee, leaning back into her husband.

“Why…” Maki whined, starting to stack donuts inside the box.

Her father sighed, “They want you to confirm Rin and Hanayo’s statement.”

Nico stared at Maki, remembering the shattered music of the night before. “Are you going to be all right, pretty girl?”

Maki nodded, everything about her now grumpy.

Nico finished her donut and turned to Maki, taking her hand under the table, “Stop by my place after class. Nico’s done about 4.”

Maki nodded, still frowning.

Nico bounced up, trapping Maki in a quick hug, kissing the top of her head. “I have to run, but I’ll see you later, Maki. Goodbye, Dr. and Dr. Nishikino.”

“We’ll see you tonight.” Maki’s mother waved as Nico made a grand bow, winking at a redhead too busy grumbling to notice.

Deering had been closed off. Agent Davies had changed into jeans, snow boots, avocado turtleneck, and a dark gray parka. She had the largest coffee size available on campus in one hand and the other shoved in a coat pocket.

“Why are we doing this again?” Tsubasa wondered as she swept their sole scanner up the walls of
Deering, while Erena fidgeted with the modified field strength meter, rapidly dialing through possibilities.

“You invented the technology. Here’s your chance to use it.” Davies shrugged, leaning against cold limestone, sunglasses hiding both scorn and humor, if either crossed her glance.

“Shouldn’t we be going over this with a Geiger counter?” Tsubasa moved to another chunk of wall as the scanner stayed inert.

“Hazmat team did as soon as everyone cleared. No known bio hazards left behind.”

Erena made a note on her phone, “Probably a function of the multiple universe effect. This space reverted back to normal and anything out of place got lodged somewhere else.”

“Not a bad analogy.” Davies admitted.

“So everything that didn’t belong here is cosmic dust underneath someone else’s sofa cushions.” Tsubasa tapped the scanner against her thigh, double checked the settings, and moved three feet to the left.

Erena tensed at Tsubasa’s flippant tone, “What about the other Anju?” Erena had been wracking her memory all night for conversations and clues, “She occasionally mentioned ‘sympathetic magic.’” Would it have returned her to her point of origin?”

“Home.” Tsubasa muttered.

Davies shrugged, “That’s something to add to your research list.”

Chantal Robinson had claimed one of the lounges at Chapin and brought an assortment of egg sandwiches, pastries and a hot pot full of cheap coffee. Eli was the first to arrive, followed by Kashima. Eli had a cup of black coffee in front of her on the table as she ate a sandwich, watching Kashima spin lazily in a nearby striped chair.

Then Nico’s high pitched broke the awkward silence, “Nico Nico Ni...Nico’s here, let’s get this started. I have studying to catch up on.” Nico settled on the couch, opposite Eli and Kashima, arms crossed into the muff-like sleeves of her white and red dress, legs pulled up underneath her, boots on the floor.

“Ami and Deidre aren’t here yet.” Chantal looked at her phone, “I’m sure they’ll be on time.”

“What do you want to talk about?” Kashima continued the slow spins, staring open mouthed at the ceiling.

Nico rolled her eyes and muttered, “How Nico wants to rehearse Dracula’s death scene before lunch with real knives?”

Eli snickered, Chantal shook her head, and Kashima levered herself up.

“But I apologized, Nico.” Kashima sounded aggrieved, arms wide open as if she expected an embrace.

“You’re unbelievable.” Nico leaned back into the couch, refusing to engage with a Kashima who was now looming above her.
Kashima slid next to Nico “I was trapped in a coffin too, Nico. I didn’t like it. I’m really sorry, but when Anju suggested it, I just...I just...” Kashima frowned, dramatically tossing her forelock back with a quick head motion. Nico appreciated the expertise, though not the aggravation, “didn’t feel like I could say no.” Kashima leaned forward, hands reaching for Nico’s, but the future star of stage and screen kept them neatly tucked away. Kashima bopped to her feet, eyes on the window, “Perhaps I was under her…” dramatic pause, and almost unbelievable, a wink at Nico, “thrall.”

Chantal snorted. Eli leaned forward, head in hands. Nico rolled over, burying her face in the couch back, arms still muffed. Kashima stood proudly, hands on hips. Deidre and Ami appeared at the door, stepping in and glancing around the room curiously.

“All right, Nico. I changed my mind, you can stab her.” Chantal announced, slinging the duffle off her shoulder, unzipping it and pulling out an armful of foam swords. Nico rose, still on the couch, and grabbed one, test swinging it, eyeing Kashima.

Kashima raised both hands in surrender, “Hey! That’s not fair.”

“No.” Chantal handed a sword to Kashima, “it isn’t.”

Nico, with a gleeful cry, sword swinging up over her head, leapt off the couch at Kashima, who automatically moved hers to block as she fell back. Eli glanced up, stood, put an arm around Deidre and Ami and chivvied them into the hall, “Let’s not be here.”

“Yeah.” Ami glanced over her shoulder as Nico slammed Kashima back into a chair, Kashima falling forward on her knees, shaking her head, hand out to intercept Nico.

“Ha! If I stay on my knees, we’re the same height!” Kashima crowed.

Eli had to look. Nico had paused, eyes flaming, sword point tapping the ground, “Nico will make you wish you hadn’t said that.” Eli shut the door quickly before the carnage, though thuds could still be heard.

Eli leaned against the wall, head back, trying to visualize Nico’s trajectory from the knocks, slides, and grunts.

“Eli?” Deidre asked.

“It’ll probably be 10 minutes before Nico’s bashed Kashima enough and THEN Chantal will drag us back in for more conflict resolution exercises for who knows how long…” Eli sighed, hands in her pockets, “And I’m not in the mood to go through all that. It’s too early. Plus, it’d be really irresponsible if we get injured...” there was the crash of a couch against a wall and a wail, “by tripping over broken co stars.”

Ami shook her head in agreement, eyes wide as she wondered what Eli was going to say next. Deidre, as always, leapt into the silence.

“Look Eli, we were stupid. Nico didn’t deserve that.”

Eli cut off Deidre, pushing herself off the wall, hand slicing between them. “Bullying is exactly the opposite of good castmate behavior.” Eli took the time to impress her personality on each of her antagonists, “And if it were me, I’d fire all of you. But it’s not.” Eli paused to listen as Kashima yelled, “NICO NO!” and the sound of a spinning chair rolling across a room could be heard through the door. “But it sounds like Chantal is going to make those two work it out and it’s not fair for you to suffer consequences if Kashima isn’t going to.” Eli put a hand on each of their shoulders, blue eyes sharp threats, “Don’t make me regret this.”
Agent Davies heard the beleaguered howl as she drove through the Nishikino’s security gate, echoed by its distant fellow. Tam was standing on the steps, hands in the pockets of her camel colored overcoat, head cocked as she listened.

Davies unlocked the door, Tam slid in.

“So didja have fun?” Davies nudged.

Tam buckled her seatbelt, hands steady, voice wry, “Just be glad we got Koizumi’s future wife on the team and not this one.”

“What happened?”

“Schoenberg.”

“What?”

Tam closed her eyes, putting together what Maki had said. “According to Ms. Nishikino, when the planes of multiverses shift because someone punches a hole in one, atonal music, featuring hexachordal inversive combinatoriality and random pitch intervals, happens across all of a werewolf’s senses.” Tam clucked her tongue, “I am now prepared to ace a midterm on dodecaphonic composition.” Tam leaned back against the headrest. “Hoshizora just said it smelled like burnt foam, tasted like cotton candy made of fluffy wires, and felt like a dentist forgot the novocaine before drilling through her ears.”

Davies decided not to harass her partner about further werewolf involvement being her fault. “Sounds like it was better not to have werewolf senses.”

Tam opted for non committal.

Davies went for a segue, something that in her tired state was resonating more than she wanted it to, “So Nishikino is dating Yazawa, one of the human batteries Anju was using?”

“Correct. Ms. Nishikino was present at both scenes.” That answer had been hard to pull from the wary student. “But Sergeant Alvarez has neatly avoided having to question anyone.” Davies knew Tam’s almost smile meant she’d buy Alvarez a pint if they ever wandered into the same bar.

“Do you think Nishikino and Yazawa dating is coincidence?” Davies wondered.

“Who knows? Kashima was the other person throwing off energy and she appears to exist in a pool of admiring women, not dating a werewolf.” Tam shook her head, “I don’t think we have to worry about it.”

“But they’re the only two sources…” Davies said.

“We will encourage the McGyver Magic Busters to find new, non people ones.” Tam took out her phone and made a note, “And if that fails, we’ll be keeping tabs on Yazawa and Kashima.”

“Got a ticket to Fangs?” Davies teased, “Or would the ending hit too close to home.”

“I have a report to finish.” Tam slid her phone back into her pocket, her voice calculated neutral, “And you have a briefing to deliver before we head to Princeton with most of our new recruits.”

“Right.”
Sure, Nico was still buzzing with excitement, but she was also exhausted. Up too early, last night too strange, plus, while pummeling Kashima with both a foam sword and a couch had been very very gratifying, it had also been a dancer level workout. She put her key in the door, goal, get out of the cold, stretch, drink something warm, look at something sexy when Maki showed up, relax.

But Maki was already in Nico’s apartment, pacing, in shorts and a hoodie, looking cold, which Nico realized was a first. “Maki?”

Maki whirled, hands shoved in pockets, eyes all human but also somehow furtive.

“Did something happen with your interview with…?” Nico took off her coat, new energy surging as she eyed her girlfriend speculatively.

Maki shook her head, “No.” Maki snorted, “Rin would have called it boring. Or ‘stoopid.’ I just described what happened, Marshal Tam asked me a few questions, and then left. Shouldn’t have to talk to them again.” Maki didn’t feel bad about leaving out a few details, like the more than once when she might have growled at Tam or when the lawyer had to interrupt to cajole an answer out of a snarling Maki when Tam wondered why Maki had fled Deering and returned. But Tam had eventually left, Maki had howled her off, Rin had echoed, and then Maki had torn off for a run to burn off some frustration. Then to Nico’s, but maybe she should have stopped for food because not only was she cold, she was starving.

And shivering. Nico could see that Maki was trembling so she immediately wrapped her arms around the taller girl and dragged her to the couch, supplexing them both into the cushions. Nico had learned a few tricks keeping up with Cocoa’s MMA and wrestling fixations. Maki ‘whoofffmp’ed as the air went out of her. Nico giggled and pulled the blanket over them, “Let Nico warm you up, pretty girl. And then Nico will show you the sandwiches stacked on the girlfriend shelf in the fridge.”

Maki sighed and fell off Nico and into the couch, propping herself up on her elbow, glancing down at her gleaming with mischief girlfriend. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Nico has two free hours and my gorgeous girlfriend hanging on my every word.” Nico slid her arm under Maki’s, letting her fingers tickle as they went.

Maki narrowed her eyes, suspicious, sniffing, traces of musky exertion and Kashima’s cologne still lingering on HER girlfriend, “What did your breakfast meeting involve and why do I still smell Kashima?” Maki sat up as Nico began to grin like a googly eyed fuzzy sports mascot, “And what are you so smug about?”

Nico flipped and did a single arm plank, twisting to flex her free arm, “Nico is super strong. First I demolish Kashima with a sword, then I drop a tall, sexy redhead into my couch.”

“Who gave you a sword?” Still suspicious, Maki flopped back into the couch, maneuvering herself under Nico, glaring playfully as Nico pursed her lips in a caricature of flirtation.

“Chantal.” Maki looked blank so Nico explained, “The PSM. It was foam. Kashima bowed before my wrath.” Nico giggled, “Eli wussed out and fled.” Nico reached across Maki, bopping a kiss on her nose. Maki had her hands on Nico’s hips, concentrating so seriously Nico could see a furrow above her nose, “What are you thinking so hard about, pretty girl?”

Maki blushed and shook her head.
“Oh,” Nico’s grin got even more outrageous. “Does Maki want a sneak preview of how world shattering Nico’s charm can be before tonight?”

“No. I don’t need a preview.” Maki slid a little, attempting to get herself off the couch, refusing to make eye contact with Nico, whose arm was surprisingly steel like, barring Maki’s escape.

“You put yourself in this position, Maki.” Nico’s leg suddenly slid between Maki’s as the smaller woman shifted her weight, “And Nico would much rather wrestle you than Kashima or a couch.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Maki accused, trying not to lick her lips or stare blatantly at Nico’s pearl pink embouchure and imagine what Nico would wrap it around.

“Ridiculously sexy.” Nico murmured, enjoying the feel of Maki trying so hard not to squirm under her, one hand teasing the hair over Maki’s ear.

Eyelashes fluttering nervously, Maki took in a big breath of musky, peachy, magical, smugly overconfident, irresistibly annoying Nico, deep crimson eyes bubbling with so much affection, effervescently bursting out of the depths of an adoration that left Maki breathless, eager for Nico’s next move, desperate for her attention, surging forward to connect to the lips that she had exploded into, never planning to be put back together, impatient to be shattered again. And then Nico pressed into her, and all Maki’s inner dialogue turned dynamite, the driving deliciousness of desire overrunning all sense, piercing heart and melting restraint, Maki tantalizingly aware at this glorious edge of how thrown Nico was, how ferocious a need could be, her burst of joy as Nico’s hands, lips, breaths became ever more frantic, unwilling to part from Maki by even the width of hair, or halt the frenetic pleasures skin demanded of skin.

Chapter End Notes

So many false starts....

But Sabrina’s Carpenter’s new album has rescued me from a looming funk...

Choose your snazziest threads because next up is Opening Night and Nico’s expecting everyone to be in their seats.

Drop a hello. It’s nearly our 18th month anniversary.

P.S. US Voters, you know what you did and it was awesome (~_^)b
And The Curtain Rises...

Chapter Summary

Will everyone be in place when before the curtain rises?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico had her closet open and Maki was lying on her bed, barely covered by a sheet, hanging off the side, enjoying an upside down view of Nico in her slip. Nico was vibrating with excitement, humming, happy, a quick fresh shower having invigorated her.

“Wear something warm.” Maki suggested, her arms stretched out, waving fingers at a smirking Nico.

“Nico didn’t realize you knew that was a thing, pretty girl.”

Maki rolled up, distracting Nico only for the briefest of moments before she turned back to the vitally important issue of which little black dress to receive compliments and awed praise while wearing. Then something soft whumped into her face, and she felt the pillow fall at her feet. Nico snorted, “Don’t you have a date to dress for?”

“I’m fast.” Maki flipped so she was on her stomach, any sheet or clothing covering option totally ignored. Nico pulled out her bathrobe and tossed it in Maki’s direction, “If you’re going to drool over…

“I’m not…”

Nico rolled her eyes and continued, “If you’re going to drool over Nico in lingerie, at least cover those curves. Nico has a busy night.” Nico swivelled, pounced at the bed, crouched, arms on either side of Maki, nose to nose with the suddenly flustered, blinking madly, not up to Nico’s level of game redhead, “Plus, Nico recently paid very close attention to you.”

Maki continued to be fascinated by the way the thrill and presence of Nico’s lanced through every other sensation she could get off Nico, a core of mutual want they kept layering and texturing more levels of…

Nico bumped Maki’s nose, to get the werewolf to refocus on the conversation and not just drift aimlessly through whatever olfactory clues she was picking up from Nico. Maki whined slightly, then her eyes locked onto Nico’s slightly scolding glance, recent sexiness still smoldering like the chips of neon green, banked down to be revived later. Nico shook her head, now she was getting distracted.

Maki grinned, full fanged, and then kissed Nico with an overly dramatic noisy smack, “Wear anything. People will be so impressed by Mina they won’t even notice.”

Nico dropped her fuzzy bathrobe over Maki as she sat herself on the bed, next to her never clothed in the bedroom girlfriend. Nico nearly crossed her arms with a side of discouraging scowl, but Maki was gazing up at her with such open, adorable goofiness that she decided to side step the opening for
teasing and untangle a few tousled clumps of silky mane, “Nico’s so excited. This show is going to be amazing. You did so well, pretty girl, helping Kashima almost sing.”

Maki snort laughed. Kashima was managing to not cause the entire orchestra to wince in pain, but it was a very near thing. Fortunately, all the audience would be hearing in their heads was Nico’s final solo, a soaring triumph of hope cresting over loss.

“They’ll only remember you.” Maki body hopped into Nico.

“That’s the plan.” Nico let her hand linger across the length of Maki’s back one more time before practical, professional Nico took over. Maybe Maki was right and warm was a good idea. That would help narrow down the dress choice and Nico suddenly knew what she wanted her post curtain TWIG feed to feature. A ribbed dark charcoal dress with a cowl neck that fell nicely forward. Warm, stylish, mature, eye catching and she had a sexy set of black tiger stripe tights that Maki would probably find irresistibly eye catching. Nico grabbed it off the rod, but then paused, with the dress in front of her, eyeballing Maki suspiciously.

“What?” Maki sat up, Nico’s robe wrapped around her as best she could, which meant barely hanging on a shoulder and completely open in the front.

Nico shook her head, “Never mind.”

“What? Tell me?” Maki bounded up, nearly leaving the robe behind her, to loom over Nico.

“Nico just wondered if you ever use your eyes instead of your nose.”

Maki whiffled her face through Nico’s hair, completely rendering Nico’s post shower coiffure tending irrelevant, “You...you” embarrassed werewolf now had her chin driving into Nico’s shoulder “every way, every sense.”

“Good.” Nico dislodged the clingy girlfriend and pulled the form fitting dress over her head, “Time for you to go, pretty girl. We both have a busy night.”

“Yeah.” Maki grumbled, head hanging a bit low.

“Hey,” Nico put her hands on Maki’s forearm, “This is very exciting for me. You’re the one person Nico really wants to be there tonight.” Nico didn’t know how to explain that, the feeling that Maki, the woman she loved, the woman she’d opened up to, the woman who made her feel like she could achieve anything, would be there, eyes locked on the stage, paying attention to every nuance. It took Nico’s normal opening night champagne levels of fizz and boosted it to a nearly illegal high. And watching the neon glow steadily pulse in Maki’s eyes as Nico’s lips brushed against hers, Nico knew Maki understood.

Not hushed, backstage is never hushed until the audience is allowed in, but efficient quiet chatter reigned as stagehands checked set and prop placement, light and sound cues were doublechecked, and actors began to arrive. A giggle here and there, but surrounding the stage, there was a bubble of intensity that left the hubbub of happy, nervous extroverts in the green room. Ninety minutes until audience arrival and everyone was a little early. Forty five minutes to fight call. Ten minutes to dance warmups. Eli found herself pacing, the half lit contours of the stage suddenly strange. She was in her warmup gear, white leotard, powder blue tights. Nozomi paused at the lightboard, ignoring Shalin for a minute, to watch as Eli paced back and forth, head down, hands wringing out something in front of her, ponytail bobbing back and forth.
with the slight movements of her head.

“I’m still a little worried about the manuals. Erena was tweaking the timing until last night.” Shalin muttered.

Shalin waited, not certain of what the designer or director had left things with so many last minute changes. Now that Erena had resigned from the show and from what anyone could tell left school, along with Anju and Tsubasa, Nozomi was the go to for lighting questions. Which was fine, Nozomi had always had a strong vision and Erena’s absence just let her tweak things to be more in tune with her aesthetic. Asuka hadn’t mentioned anything yet. But in costumes, Kotori was in a fluttery panic, Umi and Honoka had offered to help, but Umi refused to set foot in dressing rooms and Honoka was too easily distracted. Free after the cues were all finalized and the show began its run, Nozomi had volunteered to take Tsubasa’s place on the set crew, but maybe she should switch with Umi...give her a night to get familiar with the show, let her take over tomorrow, and then Nozomi could help Kotori. But first, Shalin’s question.

“Let’s run the storm…” Nozomi started, then caught sight of Eli again. “Oh wait, please, Shalin. Just pull up the cue. I need to take care of something before we actually try out the timing.”

Shalin nodded, her fingers typing instructions while Nozomi headed to the stage.

“Eli-chi?” Nozomi called softly as she approached the front of the stage and Eli’s head snapped up, a small smile at the sight of her fiancée.

“Hi, Nozomi! When did you get here?”

Nozomi shrugged, “We need to run a cue before your warm ups so you might want to head backstage.”

Eli looked puzzled.

“It’s the storm.”

Eli paled.

Nozomi smiled encouragingly. “Do me a favor and tell Kotori I can help her after I settle Shalin a bit. And if you see Umi tell her I want to talk to her.”

“Why?” Eli didn’t know Umi well but she could picture the dubious look at that request.

“I want Umi to learn Tsubasa’s job but she’s going to have to assist me for a night.”

Eli shook her head, blue eyes amused, “Good luck convincing her it’s not some kind of trap.”

“I have only the best interests of the show at heart.” Nozomi put her most sincere attitude, hand dramatically clasped to heart, “Umi will sense my intent.”

Eli, hand on hips, leaned forward as she chuckled, “I’ll run your messages, Nozomi.”

Nozomi winked, “There’s a tip in it.”

Eli waved, “You might not have anything left after you get my bill.”
Kotomi closed her eyes and focused on the aesthetics as Dracula loomed, reflection very apparent in the mirror. Kashima was fussing with her cuffs now, her collar being left for another time, probably when Kotomi had five repairs to make.

“The cufflinks weigh down my arms.”

Kotomi stepped closer as Kashima swooped her arms up, so close to Kotomi’s nose she squeaked, startled. But with a quick inhale, Kotomi the charmer was back.

“The look is so dashing.” Kotomi’s hands adjusted the shirt over Kashima’s shoulders, smiling up at the actress.

“True.” Kashima contemplated the effect in the mirror, baring her fangs, swooshing her hands in front of her, above Kotomi, as if hypnotizing herself, “But what if we went without them?” Kashima reached for her left wrist but Kotomi was faster, hand wrapped around the cuff so hard she could feel the cufflinks cutting into her palm. Kotomi yanked Kashima’s arm down.

“There are no changes.” Kotomi’s voice was soft, but Honoka, sitting in a corner playing a game on her phone, glanced up, putting the phone away. “This is the look I decided works for Dracula.”

“But, Kotor…”

“There are no changes.” Kotomi repeated, voice a little louder, words a little faster.

“Hey, Kashima, where’s your jacket? Do you need me to go get it for you?” Honoka leaned over the chair behind Kashima, her reflection smiling from the mirror. “Or maybe you could show me where you hang your clothes so I can have them ready for your change?”

“That’s a great idea, Honoka.” Eli agreed as she stepped into the room, “Oh Kotomi, Nozomi wanted me to tell you she can help when she finishes checking the storm timing.”

“Oh that’s sweet.” Kotomi’s face relaxed, “She can help me with repairs. Everything’s tearing.”

“It’s the extra weight.” Kashima intoned, holding her arm out and letting her wrist drop toward the floor while glaring accusingly at her French cuffs.

Kotomi’s eyes narrowed. Honoka took that as a cue to shove Kashima into the hallway, “We’ll be back Kotomi. I’m gonna find Umi.”

“Okay, Honoka.” Kotomi sighed.

Eli turned to watch Honoka’s progress with removing Kashima from the room before something crashed into her pompaded coif. “It’s almost too bad Chantal didn’t let Nico hit Kashima with a real sword.”

“Yeah.” Kotomi nodded, stabbing a pin into a lapel.

Opening Night. Closing the backstage door behind her, the rush hit Nico, her excitement surging even higher. Chantal was hurrying down the hall, black turtleneck and skirt, clipboard under her arm, but she paused to greet Nico.

“You’re early. I thought I owed you a nap.”
Nico twirled, “Nico is a professional. And I need to try the quick change again, after Kotori made adjustments.”

Chantal flashed the Vulcan blessing, “Just be ready and on time for vocal warm ups. Conductor’s flipping out a bit. I think she’s been having Kashima nightmares.”

“No will keep Kashima on key.” Nico chuckled, “by pure willpower if necessary.”

“You know, I think you could. Break a leg, Nico, just not Kashima’s.”

“Thanks, Chantal. Make sure you don’t miss any of Nico’s light cues.”

Chantal shook her head, “You’re laser focused, aren’t you. We’re not all just here for you, you know.”

Nico’s half shrug was a study in modest disbelief, “Tell yourself whatever you want, but Nico’s what they’re going to remember.”

Chantal continued on her backstage ramble with an amused nod, not wanting to fuel Nico’s ego any further by telling the junior how right she was about what was looking like the breakout performance of the decade. After last night, chatter about Nico’s performance was outpacing chatter about Kashima’s curtain call prank, although Chantal was sure several TWIG posts about it had been mysteriously deleted, based on comments made by a few members of the cast.

Maki knew she shouldn’t have left it this long. And yet here she was, in a small clothing boutique, behind schedule, with nothing to wear that would impress Nico. And she needed to run home before going to the theatre. PROBABLY. There was a florist nearby. And she’d already stopped by the jeweler to pick up the earrings she’d ordered for Nico.

A saleswoman, about Nico’s height, came up to her, “Hi. Can I help you?”

Maki sighed. Time to get some assistance. “I need an outfit…”

“For?”

“Opening night.” Maki stood a little taller, “My GIRLFRIEND’S got two solos.” How long ago had it been that Nico had excitedly been explaining the concept of ‘thrall’ to Maki, unaware that Maki was the ‘Princess’ she’d christened the night before? A different lifetime almost, Maki thought, compared to her current easy habit of rolling off Nico’s bed in human form and hitting the floor with four paws, while Nico giggled, reaching to grab her for a hug.

“Well,” brown eyes took in Maki’s current outfit of hoodie and shorts, “You’re obviously not bothered by the cold and we just got an eye catching asymmetrical pleather skirt in.”

Nico liked Maki in shorts so a skirt would probably be the right choice for grabbing her attention.

“And there’s this to go with it, it’s a different kind of sweatshirt.” Stepping to a display, the saleswoman offered Maki a shoulderless heather gray top with overlong sleeves that laced loosely up to the elbow. “But it’s a sexy way to keep the sporty in your outfit.”

Maki nodded, eyes gleaming a little, nose picking up interest from the woman helping her, whether in her or the sale, Maki wasn’t sure.
“Why don’t you try it on? See if you like how it feels?” Maki took the offered hanger as the saleswoman continued, “I’ll grab the skirt and bring it back to the dressing room. What are you, a 10?”

“Huh?” Maki frowned, didn’t she just mention she had a GIRLFRIEND.

“Your size.”

“Oh,” Maki relaxed, her hackles flattening, “Medium.”

“Okay, I’ll bring you an 8 and a 10 to try.”

“Thanks!”

The dressing room was starting to fill, actors in various stages of prepared for the first act. Nico was checking her night gown. Kotori was supposed to repair it yesterday, the hem had come undone and was getting ragged.

“Nico!”

Nico whirled, to see Eli striding toward her, “I’ve got vocal warm ups in a minute, Eli.”

“I know. We just finished ours. Have you seen Umi?”

“No. Dressing room’s probably the last place to look.” Nico rehung her nightgown, happy with the repair, “Why do you need her?”

“Nozomi wants…”

“No.” Nico crossed her arms in a ‘do not pass’ gesture.

Eli sighed, “It’s to help Kotori. Nozomi wants Umi to take over set duties…”

“So Nozo can help with costumes...not a bad idea.” Nico acknowledged, stepping out of her dress.

“Just tell Umi that.”

“Nope. Nico is a busy woman.” Nico was happy Kotori hadn’t insisted on corsets. Breathing freely was so important to performance. “Your bedroom buddy is on her own there.”

“Fiancée.” Eli corrected, flashing the crystal and silver ring at Nico with a fox eats Nico sized canary grin Nozomi would have been proud of.

Nico ignored Eli, who headed for the stage, planning to grab Umi if she passed her.

Dr. Nishikino was handing his wife her coat when their only child came tearing through the door. He veronica-ed the coat like a bullfighter as Maki charged past him, carrying shopping bags.

“Maki, you’re late.” Dr. Nishikino the chider stated as she retrieved into her coat, rolling her eyes at her husband.
“Five minutes.” The racing werewolf panted at her mother.

Dr. Nishikino’s voice went high, as did her judgier eyebrow, “I thought Nico’s list said ‘30 minutes before curtain.’”

“Be nice.” Maki’s father pulled his wife in for a quick embrace.

He felt the shrug. “Punctuality is an attractive trait.”

“So I’ve heard.” Dr. Nishikino glanced at the watch his wife had given him many years ago after he was nervous and late to their first anniversary date. “Maki, your mother and I will wait for you.”

“Thanks, Papa” was shouted from the upstairs.

In the wings. One step away, one moment...poised, Nico could hear the audience breathing, shifting, rustling, their talk fading as the lights did. The orchestra began the overture. As the opening notes for each song played, blending together, the scenes flashed through Nico’s mind, Nico aware of every word, every angle, every connection that she could use to leverage the audience members forward, under Nico’s thrall for a night, tilting toward the stage, each one caught in Mina’s struggle, to be freed by the triumph of actor and art. The lights darkened, the music stilled, and there was Mina, striding forward, ALIVE for this night, this audience, sharp, smart, loving, brave, vital. Ready to cheer friend and face foe, as yet unaware of the storm approaching. Nico let that joy, that optimism fill her as Lucy stepped out from stage right, letter in hand, Mina joining the scene from stage left, Nico’s voice rising, amused, self deprecating, then twisting around the roots of worry over Jonathan. What shadow would Transylvania cast on their future?

"My dearest Lucy,

Forgive my long delay in writing, but I have been simply overwhelmed with work. The life of an assistant schoolmistress is sometimes trying. I am longing to be with you, and by the sea, where we can talk together freely and build our castles in the air..."

The lines from Lucy’s reply had haunted Nico for a week or two as she tried to make sense of Mina, to find Mina’s strengths in herself, to find the place where fear could never break either of them.

“Do you ever try to read your own face?”

There were no secrets left in Nico’s mirror. All the discoveries possible were here, on the stage, in front of an audience anticipating wonders. And there, breathing in possibility, speaking out magic, Nico ventured, to dare much for Mina’s sake.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my name is...well, surely you know by now, and I am addicted to the casualness of Casual Lunacy, which surely also you know ; )

An after party is planned, although a Christmas treat or two may delay its arrival.

I could write a book's worth of poems about how grateful I am for your patience, support, questions, answers, puns, comments, et alia. Casual Lunacy has kept me on
track through 18 of my more difficult months and I am thankful for your company.

Drop me a Christmas song in the comments, it's making a playlist time ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!