Love Novels

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Summary

Nico gains an unexpected roommate and Maki drags herself through medical school armed with only Nico's coffee maker and the last remnants of her dignity.

Notes

who wants to get sad for 10 years. well have i got a story for you.

bless the idol gods for gracing me with Ashirene, who is my surprise editor and also probably my platonic soulmate. go read what she writes once you're done reading this.
Maki Nishikino had very few regrets in her life when it came to rash decision making, but sitting at her kitchen table clutching the acceptance letter tightly in her hand makes her reconsider one of the more calculated choices she’s made.

It’s a letter from the University of Tokyo, and she already knew what would be inside before she opened it. Her papa had congratulated her before anyone had even read it, but the praise still felt awkward in a backwards sort of way. Not that she didn’t think she deserved it after giving her life away to her textbooks once μ's officially disbanded, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Nothing was wrong, though. Everything’s fine.

Everything sort of felt better than fine, in fact. Maybe she was still revelling in the landmark moment that had been the final members of their long gone idol group graduating from high school, but was that so bad? To still feel accomplished for what she’d done two years ago?

In the days leading to her graduation ceremony, Maki had thought very little about what she would be doing in the near future. Whenever anyone brought it up, she would robotically answer that she would probably be studying for her entrance exams. It wasn’t like her plans had changed in the last few years - or even since she was born. Such was the life of a Nishikino.

The ceremony had been nice, though. Rather, the people there, with her, had made the experience much more bearable than she’d anticipated. She’d sort of expected to feel the same way she did the last two times she’d sat through it - when her closest friends had taken turns graduating - but crippling sadness had been the last thing on her mind when she felt Nico’s tiny arms throw themselves around her neck the second she’d stepped off the stage.

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“I’m so proud of you, Maki-chan!” Nico practically screams into her ear.

“Get off, it’s embarrassing!” Maki retorts, red in the face and itching to pick a fight with the walking ego that was Nico Yazawa.

“Aww, Nico is hurt. She took the whole day off just to congratulate Maki-chan, and this is the thanks she gets?”

Surprisingly eager to fall into their familiar dance, Maki had been prepared to hiss a response when she felt an odd tug inside upon seeing Nico’s disgusting pout. She was inexplicably good at looking like a kicked puppy when she wasn’t getting her way, and it was concerning how often Maki let herself fall for it.

So instead of making fun of Nico’s stupid frilly pink dress, she leans over and hugs her for the briefest of moments, before immediately recoiling as she realizes her friends were watching them. If anyone noticed Nico looking more smug than usual, they didn’t say anything.

Nozomi makes a big show of pretending to weep.

“Our little first years have all grown up! Ready to head out into the big scary world, all on their
“S-scary?” Hanayo whispers, clutching her diploma with shaking hands. Predictably, Rin was there to take hold of them and make her funny little cat noises.

“There’s nothing to be scared about, Kayo-chin!” She yells as she dragged her best friend down the aisle in a strange half skip-half run. “We have the whole wooooooorld to see, nya!”

Maki listens to the laughter of her friends and she gave them her own sort of half smile. She can’t help but feel a little displaced amidst the celebration of new doors opening; truly they were opening for everyone but her. But that was okay.

Papa hadn’t been able to make it, but her mother was there, elegant and smiling with the comforting grace she always had about her. She was proud, Maki knew. She glances at the envelope full of scholarship awards in her hand and back up at her mother before handing them over. It was a little surreal, the number of awards they’d announced she’d won before calling her to the stage. Nobody seemed surprised.

She can see Nico still, out of the corner of her eye. She hadn’t followed their friends as they’d paraded out the door behind Rin and Hanayo, instead choosing to stand around like she owned the place, hands on her slim hips. Maki looks at her, and Nico is staring. She probably wanted something.

Maki turns to her mother. “Is it okay if I go to Nico-chan’s first?”

She receives a nod in response. “Just make sure you’re back in time to get ready for the party.”

“Thanks, mama.”

Nico was wrapped around her arm before she could even turn around.

“Can’t resist spending more one-on-one time with Nico-nii?” she prods, tone sickeningly sweet.

Maki shrugs as they began walking towards the doors. “You were looking at me funny. I just assumed you wanted something.”


Maki didn’t really know what to do with herself when Nico was being clingy. Back when they were all in school together, when they used to fight all the time, things were comfortable in a weird sort of way. But now she was seemingly everywhere, all of the time. Calling when Maki was up studying late at night; Maki would put her on speaker and tune her out while she talked about whatever she fancied in the moment. Stopping by the school when the day was over to shove tea and homemade pastries into Maki’s empty hands, bragging about her self taught culinary skills and how they must be Maki’s new favourite whatever-it-was.

It was kind of nice, but Maki figured Nico was just lonely, what with all her friends staying in school. Nico herself never applied for anything once she graduated. As was expected of an up-and-coming super Idol, Nico would say, but she hadn’t really done anything about that either. It wasn’t something they talked about.

They stepped into the sunlight together.

“So what are you going to do now?” Nico asks, as if it were the easiest question in the world to answer.
“Nothing’s changed since the last time you asked me, you know,” Maki says, obviously uninterested in the direction their conversation was about to go.

Nico’s fingers squeezes her arm. “Rin’s right though, you know? You can do anything you want.”

Maki rolls her eyes, even knowing Nico wasn’t looking at her face. “And you know that isn’t really true. When are you going to be an idol again?”

Nico speeds up a little. “I know you love to talk about me, Maki-chan, but you can only avoid the question for so long.”

“I’m not avoiding anything! I have my answers, you’re the one who made a big huge deal about getting signed right out of high school, or whatever.”

Nico huffs. “You think medical school is the answer, but Nico knows it isn’t really your answer. Even after all this time, you still never think for yourself.”

Maki stops them at the gate in the courtyard. “What’s that supposed to mean? Not everyone gets what they want, Nico. Not even people like me.”

Nico looks at her then, really looks at her. She let go of Maki’s arm and reached for her wrists. Her hands are still very tiny, and she has pastel pink nail polish on.

Maki thinks Nico is angry with her, for a moment, but Nico is actually smiling.

“I think I know that better than anyone, Maki,” she grins. “Some of us really don’t get a choice. Maybe one day you’ll realize that you do.”

“What do you mean?” Maki asks. Nico is being funny again.

The petite girl looks thoughtful for a moment.

“Let’s go to my place,” Nico deflects, with unrivaled precision. “I made crepes this morning, and the leftovers won’t eat themselves.”

Maki can only sigh as her arm is claimed again, and they begin walking towards the train station.

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Nico lives by herself in Akihabara, in the tiniest apartment Maki has ever seen with her own two eyes. She moved out shortly after picking up a job and graduating, though Maki never really paid attention when Nico talked about work. It was a little surprising for everyone, since it was well known that Nico adored her siblings almost as much as they adored her, but she insisted that it had nothing to do with wanting to leave her family behind, and everything to do with becoming independent and successful on her own terms. Maki still wasn’t sure what Nico considered ‘success’ to be, but she imagined it wasn’t this.

Nico throws her purse on a hook near the door and kicks her shoes off with the grace of a hurricane. They land somewhere behind the TV and Maki stands awkwardly in the doorway, like she always does when she comes over. She isn’t there very often, Nico prefers it when they hang out at the park or an arcade somewhere.
The whole apartment is kind of one big room, with a bedroom tacked on the side. The kitchen is small but Nico has enough room for a little table and two chairs, and she doesn’t have a couch, opting instead to decorate her living space with pillows and her mother’s old kotatsu. There are a few idol related DVDs next to the small TV, but not much else to signify Nico’s idol otaku power level. Everything is pink, though.

Maki carefully removes her shoes and puts them beside the door as Nico rummages through her fridge and mutters to herself. When she looks up, Nico is putting a plate of crepe wraps on the table, as well as a round cake covered in purple frosting. Nico looks up and her brow creases.

“Are you coming in or what? Quit being awkward. What do you want in your crepes?”

Maki doesn’t answer as Nico turns around and shuffles through the fridge again. She walks towards the table, stepping over the pillows Nico has kicked all across the floor. The cake has flowers on top, and written across it in pink (of course) icing is ‘Congratulations you nerd!’

“Really? You couldn’t just put my name?” Maki groans with lidded eyes.

Nico puts a carton of strawberries and whipped cream on the table next to the stack of crepe wraps. She adjusts one of her pigtails before whipping a knife out of a drawer and pointing it at Maki.

“Don’t act so spoiled, I did this out of the kindness of my heart, just for you. If you don’t want it I could always give it to Hanayo.”

“Are you five years old?”

“Are you? Sit down and make your crepes while I cut the cake.”

Maki sits down and looks at it again. She hopes that Nico knows somehow that she really appreciates it. Maybe she even loves it. She’s not a nerd, though. Maybe she should say something.

“Thank you, Nico. It’s nice.” And that’s all she can muster.

Nico sits down across from her at the little table, and has the nerve to wink.

“I’m a generous soul, I know.”

Maki smiles and picks at the flowers on top of the cake. Nico snatches one up and tosses it in her mouth as she cuts ‘Congratulations’ in half.

“They’re chocolate. Do you like it?”

Maki nods, and they spend the next half hour indulging in Nico’s baking.

When they’re done, they find their way to the floor in front of the TV, lounging on pillows and flicking absently between channels. Nico doesn’t have any kind of cable, so there isn’t much on anyway. There’s still time to kill before the party though, Maki notes as she glances at her phone.

“Why do you always work?” Maki blurts out. She almost regrets it, but Nico smiles at her anyway.

“I don’t always work. Just the normal amount.”

“You know what I mean,” Maki says as she picks up a pillow and hugs it to her chest. She feels a little bit tight for some reason.
Nico sighs and lies down on her back, pigtails splayed out every which way. She looks at Maki through half lidded eyes.

“Why are you always so busy? You don’t do anything except school anymore.”

Maki flicked Nico’s arm. “Don’t start this again.”

“Fine, fine,” Nico waved her off. She sat up and tugged the pillow out of Maki’s arms before she knew what was happening, and plopped her head directly in Maki’s lap.

“Bweh?”

Not the most eloquent response in the world for someone like Maki, but she could never truly be prepared when Nico was around. She should probably come with her own warning labels, or something.

“I’m getting comfy, Maki-chan. You can’t just ask a girl about her work and expect an answer to be all prepared, you know,” Nico said matter-of-factly. Truly one of a kind.

Maki could feel her face burning up, but Nico seemed unfazed, staring past her at something invisible on the ceiling.

“You know Nico’s family has it a little tough, right? Being a single mom with four kids is one of life’s greatest challenges.”

Maki nods, but she can’t really say she understands what it’s like.

“Well, since I’m the oldest I also have to be responsible, right? Like I’ve always been. Every super idol knows you have to consider the important things first, even before you think about what you want for yourself.”

Nico rolls so she’s facing outwards, away from Maki. The redhead tugs at Nico’s pigtail absently before realizing what she’s doing, but Nico doesn’t do anything except grab her hand and hold it gently.

“My fans are the most important to me, and the kids are my biggest fans of all. After Maki-chan, of course.”

Maki chooses to ignore the jab at her and thinks of Nico’s siblings. She knows by now that they’re who Nico is talking about when she refers to “the kids”. They’re small and a little bit loud, just like Nico is. Really they’re all just mini versions of the girl in her lap, though Cotarou is a little more reserved.

“So,” Nico continues, “I’m doing what any responsible adult in my position would do. Mama can’t afford to send them all to school on her own, of course.”

Oh.

“If I work hard now, then mama won’t have to worry about it when the time comes. Not everyone wins eleven scholarships and goes to doctor school.”

*Doctor school.*

Maki wonders if Nico is making fun of her, but neither of them are laughing. It’s kind of sad. Nico squeezes Maki’s hand, still looking away.
“So, maybe when I have enough money for them, I can try being an idol after that if there’s still time. Maybe I missed my chance already, but it’s okay.”

Maki tugs her hand back gestures for Nico to sit up, so she does. Maki isn’t really sure what to say, actually, but she talks anyways.

“What do you mean missed your chance? You’ve wanted to be an idol since… for as long as I’ve known you, and before that. You’re okay with just giving it up? I know it’s far away Nico-chan, but I didn’t think you’d dismiss your dreams so easily.”

Maki can feel herself frowning as Nico begins to stand up. It’s odd when Nico is looking down on her, for once, especially since she’s grown and Nico hasn’t.

“Why do you think I’m so frustrated with you all the time, Maki-chan? Sometimes I wonder if you even have a brain up in your head.”

A hand pats her on said head and Maki wants to scream.

She looks down at her hands instead. “I guess it’s just disappointing after seeing you work so hard for µ’s.”

Nico is ignoring her now, cleaning up the kitchen and not looking at her. The feeling in her gut when Nico decides she isn’t worth a reply isn’t foreign to her, but she can’t bring herself to be mad. It usually means that Nico thinks the answer is obvious, but typically she just makes things more frustrating between them. Maki knows she’s a little dense sometimes, but really Nico is just like Nozomi, when she wants to be pointlessly cryptic. Maki is a person of logic, and Nico defies it whenever she can.

Maki looks at the time and begins to gather her things, tugging her socks up and digging for her purse amongst the pillows. When she’s back together, Nico is already waiting at the door, looking in that moment as if Maki putting her shoe on is the greatest inconvenience she’s ever had to deal with in her entire life.

“You know,” Nico says as she reaches for the doorknob, “it’s disappointing for me too. Every time I look at you I get disappointed.”

There’s an odd sensation in the pit of Maki’s stomach. She wants to be offended, but Nico is smiling at her again.

“I look at you an awful lot, Maki-chan, so you better do some real thinking if you want to cheer Nico up, alright?”

Maki lets Nico pull her out the door by the hand.

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They get to Maki’s place with thirty minutes to spare before everyone else shows up. Her mother greets them at the door and someone who cleans the house takes Nico’s sweater and hangs it up for her. Maki imagines Nico kicking her shoes off again, and wills with all her might that Nico behaves in front of her family. It shouldn’t matter if Nico makes an idiot of herself in front of everyone, but the notion bothers her anyway.
Instead Nico is polite and proper, and offers to help set food out on the table in the living room for everyone.

\textit{Gross}.

Maki goes to her room to change into something more suited for a social gathering and puts her high school diploma on her desk. She has a sudden vivid memory of Otonokizaka haloed by the bright blue sky amidst the cherry blossoms. She probably won’t ever go back.

When she comes back downstairs, Honoka and Kotori are at the door, and Rin is lounging across one of the couches while Nico plays games on her phone. The parents have already begun mingling, and Maki feels like retiring for the night already.

Eventually everyone is there, minus Nozomi’s parents for obvious reasons. Mrs. Yazawa even brought the kids, and Maki sees her mother fawning over them after Honoka sneaks them cookies. Nozomi is showing Hanayo something on her camcorder, and Umi is chatting with Kotori over a plate of cucumber sandwiches. Eli is scolding Rin about something, but they’re laughing too, so it probably isn’t anything bad.

Maki is sat in her armchair for barely an entire minute when Nico decides to sit on the floor in front of her, back to the chair. Maki spreads her legs awkwardly so she isn’t touching Nico’s shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

“Sitting, idiot. I brought you some snacks from the kitchen.”

Nico lifts an arm over the back of her head, and Maki takes the bowl of cherry tomatoes from her without saying thank you. Eli excuses herself and gives Rin the ‘I’m watching you’ stink eye before heading for the nearest washroom. Nico starts up a conversation with Nozomi across the table, and Maki is content to listen for no particular reason. It isn’t much of a party, but they could only do so much when every parent they knew was also in the general vicinity.

When Eli comes back, she asks Maki when she’s moving.

“Huh? Moving?” Nico says, as if she’s never heard the word before in her life.

The redhead shifts uncomfortably before pulling her legs up and sitting cross-legged in the armchair.

“Who told you?”

Eli shakes her head. “Nobody, I just heard your mom mention it when I walked through the kitchen. Are we not supposed to know?”

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“You’re moving?! Where?!”

“Shut up, Nico-chan. I’m just moving out, not moving away.”

Honoka’s face lights up. “Woah, you’re moving out? All on your own? That’s amazing, Maki-chan!”

“I’m a little surprised,” Umi says. “But I think it suits you. You’re responsible and level headed, it sounds like a good idea.”

“You’re moving and you didn’t tell me?!”
“Nico-chan, shut up.”

“Fight me!” Nico yells and leaps to her feet.

“Fight who?” Maki’s mother asks from the doorway.

Maki wants to whither away into the void. She sighs instead, and feels traces of secondhand embarrassment. Nico looks a little bit lost, or maybe like a deer caught in headlights. An overwhelming sense of dread approaches as Maki realizes Nico is about to raise her hands up and do what she always does when she doesn’t actually know what to do, no Nico don’t-

“Nicocchi,” Nozomi begins, “I’m sure Mrs. Nishikino will tell us all about it, hm?”

Jesus Christ, thank you, Maki wants to say to her. Maybe another time.

Nico sits back down on the floor, looking meek and a bit guilty.

Maki’s mother laughs behind her hand, in good nature.

“Don’t worry girls, she isn’t going far. It’s our graduation gift to her, to set her up with her own place and give her some freedom.”

Nozomi crosses her legs. “Whereabouts? I’ll have to come visit, when I can.”

Maki can feel Nico twitch even though she isn’t touching her at all.


“Isn’t that where all the rich people live?” Honoka pipes up, without a trace of tact. Umi hits the back of her head with an open palm.

Maki’s mother laughs again. “I suppose you could say that. It’s a nice place, I’m sure Maki will invite you all over sometime. We’re just waiting for entrance exams and then we’ll be sending her on her way. You’ve all grown up so fast…” she drifts off wistfully as she leaves, back towards the kitchen.

There’s an awkward silence before Honoka asks Maki if she has to pay rent. Umi hits her again, and Maki tries not to look at anyone.

“Well, I’ll be 18 soon. I get my… inheritance…”

The discomfort in her voice is probably obvious to everyone, but Maki isn’t sure how to redirect the conversation now. Luckily, there’s a Nico for that.

“Let’s watch a movie! This party is shit,” Nico exclaims, and she wanders over to the cabinet full of DVDs beside the TV. She puts something on, some rom-com, and everyone lounges on the couch after the lights are dimmed.

Half an hour into the movie, Maki notices Nico isn’t in the room anymore, so she gets up and goes to find her. She isn’t really interested in the movie, and she still feels… something, from not having told Nico about her moving. It shouldn’t even really matter anyway, Maki doesn’t think it’s such a big deal. Nico has her own unique perspective on everything in the world though, which just makes everything more difficult for everyone.

Predictably, Nico is lying on Maki’s bed playing with her phone again.
“Hey,” she says.

Maki nods, even though Nico isn’t looking again.

“Why are you in here?”

She puts the phone down and rolls over to look at Maki.

*Why does she have to have red eyes. Who even has red eyes?*

“I didn’t know Maki had it in her to lie to Nico like that, who knew you could be so careless?”

Maki put her hands on her hips and huffed. “I didn’t lie to anyone. Not saying anything isn’t lying.”

“Sure, sure.”

“It’s not! Why’s it such a huge deal to you anyway? I thought you’d be happy for me. You’re always telling me to do things for myself.”

Nico tutted and kicked her feet up. “I can’t believe you would treat poor Nico-nii so horribly! I’m the shining star in your life and you have the nerve to move out all on your own without saying a word to me!”

Maki gets frustrated when she realizes Nico is smiling, again. She’s just being a brat. *Again.*

“Shining star my ass! I actually felt bad for a moment, you know!”

Nico erupts into giggles and tosses all the pillows on the bed at Maki, one by one, and Maki has a lot of pillows. She catches one and deflects the rest, then charges forward and swings at Nico, but Nico ducks and grabs at her waist, pulling her onto the bed. They land in an undignified heap, and Nico is still all laughter. Maki can’t help but smile and laugh a little too, but it’s cut short when Nico rolls over, until she’s on top of Maki, supported by her elbows.

Nico pokes her red, red nose. “How are you gonna survive on your own? You can’t even use a microwave.”

“Ugh, not now, Nico-chan…”

“Remember when you left the spoon in your soup and set my microwave on fire?”

“Nico-chaaaaan…”

“And that time you got my rug stuck in the vacuum?”

Maki punched at Nico’s shoulders. “I told you I never used a vacuum before! You didn’t even show me how!”

“Jeez,” Nico mocks as she rolls back onto the bed, “you’re totally hopeless. It’s a good thing I’m here to show you how to be a real adult, huh?”

Maki feels less hot now than she did a second ago, but she kind of misses the sensation. “Too bad you still look like a twelve year old.”

“Resorting to short jokes so soon? You’re getting rusty, Maki-chan.”

“Your face is rusty.”
Nico takes her hand.

They lie there for a while, probably long enough that everyone else is wondering where they’ve gone. Nothing really matters anymore though. Tomorrow Nico will go back to work, and Maki will do what she’s always done, and study for exams. Nothing is really all that different.

“Really though, if you need help, just ask. Okay?”

Maki nods. It couldn’t be that hard. Could it?
A little while after Maki is accepted into TokyoU, everyone gets together to send Eli off at the airport. After moving in with Nozomi out of high school and bumming around for two years, she’d finally decided to study language abroad. Nico couldn’t recall her ever having an interest in it before, but Eli seemed happy enough with her choice.

It’s busy in the departures lounge, everyone is heading back to school it seems. Kotori shoves a bag filled with knitted clothing into Eli’s arms.

“I made you a few things, I heard it gets pretty cold in Wisconsin!” she chirps.

“Thank you, Kotori. I’m sure I’ll make good use of them…”

Honoka gives her a paper bag full of sweets, and Umi gives her a stationary set.

“I know we can just email each other, but this could be fun, don’t you think?”

Umi tries her best.

Nico even gives Eli a signed photograph of herself, so she never forgets her favourite fellow senior (after Nozomi). One day that photo will be worth thousands of yen, and Eli will thank her for giving her such a grand investment.

Maki is standing there not really doing anything, but she hugs Eli.

“Don’t hurt yourself, okay Maki?” Eli tuts.

“Huh?”

“Nico’s told me what your cooking is like,” Eli tries to whisper, but everyone hears it and Maki goes red in the face when everyone else snickers.

Nico smirks and bumps Maki’s hip with her own. “Don’t worry Eli, I’ll make sure she’s still here when you come back to visit.”

“Nico-chan!”

“Don’t Nico-chan me!”

They begin arguing about nothing again, and Nico is back to feeling comfortable even though one of her best friends is about to fly across the world. Though, it likely doesn’t bother her as much as it does Nozomi. It’s probably harder to be away from someone you love, who, you know, actually loves you back. Nico is a patient woman though, especially for pretty girls like Maki.

Nozomi sees Eli to the security checkpoint, and Nico looks away and fidgets with her skirt when they start to make out. It’s not as if she’s hasn’t seen it before, Nozomi loves to throw herself all over her girlfriend when Nico is visiting them, which is probably way too often for her own good. Who can blame Nico, when Maki is so busy being smart all the time? She can’t give Maki every hour of her free time, that might seem too desperate.

At least Nico could admit to herself that she was, in fact, desperate.

Nozomi comes back over to them and she doesn’t shed a single tear.
“Shall we go, then?” she says, looking way too mischievous for her own good.

Umi and Kotori go with Honoka, who for some reason is allowed to drive a real vehicle on the actual road, and Rin and Hanayo head for the train station. Nico is about to follow them when Nozomi grabs her arm.

“How about I give you a ride home, Nicocchi?”

“Fuck you,” Nico says to her, because Nozomi is definitely scheming again.

Nozomi shakes her head. “Wow, that was very rude, Nicocchi. You don’t want to spend time with me? We haven’t talked in days!”

Nico looks at Maki and tries to beg for help using only her smile. Purple eyes dart between Nico and her captor, and Maki raises a finely shaped red eyebrow. All she does is wave at them.

“Bye, Nico-chan. Have fun with Nozomi.”

And she walks out the door to where her papa is waiting to drive her home.

Good. Great. Perfect.

Nico considers throwing herself into oncoming traffic to escape, but doesn’t have enough time to make a decision before Nozomi shoves her in the passenger seat.

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“My my, Nicocchi, don’t you think you’re coming on a little strong?”

Nico throws one of her pillows at Nozomi from where she’s lying on the floor, but misses by at least a foot.

“Don’t you think you’re a little bit too nosy for your own good?” Nico retorts.

Nico had tried her best not to say anything on the drive home, ignoring Nozomi’s weird questions and pretending she was literally anywhere else. Her troubles didn’t end when she got home though, rather Nozomi had followed her swiftly inside and sat herself down at the kitchen table, as if she lived there.

“Nico is suffering,” Nico whines, “go away and let me suffer in peace.”

Nozomi laughs at her (definitely at her) and crosses one leg over the other.

“Why don’t we talk about school? Honoka just finished her culinary certificate, did you hear?”

Nico shoves a pillow over her face. “No! I don’t want to talk about anything. Get out of my house.”

“Did you know Hanayo is going to school to become a teacher? I think that suits her, do you?”

“Nozomi.”

But as Nico knows all too well, Nozomi is unforgiving and unrelenting. The bane of Nico-nii’s
existence forevermore.

“Did Maki tell you she got accepted to the University? I’m sure she called you right away, right before she called me.”

Nico frowns. Maki had, in fact, not called her. No texts either.

“No…” she mutters.

Nozomi taps her chin. “I wonder why that is? I always thought you two were fairly close. Could it be that you’re drifting apart?”

“I’m not in the mood, Nozomi,” Nico hisses. She stands up and rights her skirt, and stomps off as loudly as she can to her room.

Her room is small, like the rest of her living space. There’s enough room for a single bed, a night table, and a desk she barely uses. There’s a shelf in the corner full of μ's memorabilia, every magazine and album and newspaper clipping they’ve ever been in. There are a few photos around too, and the one on her bedside table has an elusive smiling Maki in it. Nico’s arm is looped around her junior’s waist, and she doesn’t want to look at it right now.

Throwing herself on her bed, Nico engages in the well practiced art of sulking as Nozomi watches from the door. She flicks the light on.

“Nozomi! You’re ruining the mood.”

“Hmmm, maybe you shouldn’t put yourself in these moods to begin with?” Nozomi suggests innocently.

“It’s not me, it’s you! You always say stupid things when we talk about this and then I feel like shit for hours. You could always just not talk about it.”

Nozomi knocks on the doorframe lightly. “We never really actually talk about it, Nicocchi. Don’t you think three years is long enough to wait?”

“Are you implying I should give up? You know I’m too invested.”

“Isn’t that what you used to say about becoming an idol? You’ve given up on that too, though.”

Nico shoots upright. “I haven’t! I’m just doing what I have to, I’ll do all that later. If I could be an idol and magically provide for my family at the same time, then I would. Don’t be an ass.”

“Right, so we agree that you giving up on your idol dream is something you can’t control.”

“Nozomi, I-”

“But you can still do something about Maki, yes?”

Nico’s mouth presses into a thin line.

“What do you think I’ve been doing for ages? I hang all over her, I hold her hand, I even made her a cake! She’s as emotional as an angry rock. What do you want me to do!”

“Hmm,” Nozomi hums, “she is quite oblivious, isn’t she? Maybe you should ask for help, Nicocchi.”

Nico rolls her eyes. “From who? You?”
“Well, I do have a girlfriend of my very own, I like to think I’m experienced when it comes to emotionally awkward brick walls. Though Maki has a much shorter fuse than Elicchi, I suppose.”

Nico pulls her knees up to her chest, still perched on her bed. “How are you gonna do that? Grab her boobs and whisper stupid things into her ear? Don’t do that, by the way, you’re not allowed.”

Nozomi looks amused. “Possessive, aren’t we?”

All Nico can do is blush and look at the pile of laundry in the corner.

“We could talk,” Nozomi begins, “about Maki-chan, about her future. But why don’t we start at the bottom? What’s the very first thing you wonder, when you see her?”

It’s a question she hasn’t been asked before. Nico just kind of thinks about Maki in general, her hair, her eyes, her incredible voice, but she prefers to shove all of her doubts to the very back of her mind and pretend everything is going according to plan. Sure, the one year plan has sort of stretched well into three by now, but Nico has a lot of time to spare. Surely one day everything will click, and Maki will realize how totally hot and amazing Nico is, and Maki can go back to writing music and they’ll both be happy.

Perhaps she’s a little ahead of herself, but Maki is a lot of work. How could she not dream of the day all her efforts finally pay off? And yet…

“I guess,” Nico says, “if we’re starting at the very bottom… I don’t even know if Maki is like that, you know?”

“Like what?” Nozomi asks.

“Like me and you, and Eli. And probably everyone else we know, I guess. What are the chances that we’re all totally gay?”

“Pretty low.” Nozomi says with a smile.

Nico narrows her eyes. “This is why I don’t talk to you.”

“Who do you talk to, then?”

“Maki…”

“Well then, why don’t you just ask her?”

“I can’t do that!” Nico shrieks. “You can’t just ask someone that, especially Maki-chan!”

Nozomi raises an eyebrow. “Why ever not? That’s how I found out Eli was seriously interested, after all.”

“Maki-chan and I aren’t like you and Eli. We don’t just… do that. What if I’m wrong? What if she gets offended? Then she’ll know I like her and she’ll think I’m a creep for wanting to hang out all the time, and then she’ll move away away and we’ll never talk to each other ever again. I’ll die alone and single!”

Nozomi pat her knee gently.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit of an exaggeration? You’re her best friend, I doubt she’d abandon you like that.”
“I am?” Nico whispered sharply. “Really? Did she say that?”

“Yes, just earlier today on the phone. I asked her why she hadn’t called to tell you about her letter yet, and she said ‘Nico-chan is my best friend, but she’s mad at me so I’m ignoring her’.”

Nico bit her lip. “Did she really say it like that?”

Nozomi laughed. “Well, not quite, but why does it matter? There has to be something else stopping you from asking her. I’ve never known you to be so reluctant to go after something you want, and you have no tact so just blurting it out should be easy.”

“Excuse me? I’m the most tactful person I know! Everything I say is carefully calculated.”

“Of course, Nicocchi. But my question still stands. What’s stopping you?”

Nico was quiet for a moment. Should she really say anything? Maki probably never brought it up again for a reason. But this is an important matter, and maybe Nico’s entire future hangs in the balance.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Nico starts, “but back when you and Eli got together, like officially, Maki told her parents about you, and how happy you were and that you were moving in together and all that. Her mom… didn’t really say anything. But her dad, he gave her this look. I mean, I was there, at her house when she brought it up.

He said he was glad Maki could be happy for her friends, but that he was proud of her for not being like that.” Nico spat the last words as if they were poison on her tongue.

“He didn’t specify, but we knew what he meant. It hurt me a lot more than Maki probably knows, obviously, but she just seemed satisfied that he didn’t forbid her from hanging out with you guys or anything. Like, she just accepts it. It’s stupid.

So, let’s say I ask her if she would ever be interested in girls, and it turns out she is. How awful do you think she’d feel? You know how she is, she always wants her parents approval and whatever, she’d probably feel guilty about just being who she is. So maybe it’s better if she’s not, or if she never questions it. Not asking isn’t about me, it’s about her.”

Nico felt Nozomi put an arm around her back.

“Thank you for telling me, Nicocchi. It’s very noble of you to put Maki first. I don’t think any of us knew, we just assumed you were both hopeless.”

“We?”

Nozomi nodded. “You’re pretty obvious.”

“I guess… and maybe it is hopeless. Maybe this is all I’ll ever have, so I should make the best of it.”

“You did say you’d take care of her, after all. You promised to keep her alive for Eli’s visit-”

They’re interrupted as Darling!! starts playing loudly from the living room, where Nico has left her phone. Nico whips her head to look at Nozomi, daring her to say something, but she’s just grinning like an idiot. She huffs and runs for her phone.

It’s Maki.

“Hello?”
“Nico-chan? Are you busy?”

“Nozomi is still here, but I can make time for my best friend,” Nico says, loud enough for Nozomi to hear her in the other room. “What’s up, Maki-chan?”

“I just thought I should tell you, I got accepted to the University of Tokyo.”

“Yeah I know, Nozomi told me already.”

“Oh.”

There’s a bit of silence before Maki speaks again. “Are you mad at me?”

“No. Why would I be?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought you’d be upset about it. The school thing.”

Nico sighed. “You can do what you want, Maki-chan. I can’t be mad at you just for being smart, you know. Maybe almost as smart as me.”

Maki laughs, short and quick. “Of course, Nico-chan. Listen, I don’t really have anything else to do today. Should I come over?”

Nico wanted to say yes, of course, but she’s also serious about her responsibilities. Sometimes Maki has to come second, as much as Nico hates to admit it.

“I have to go watch the kids for a while and make them dinner. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Well, I’m moving tomorrow, so I might be busy… I’ll text you when I’m free, okay?”

“Sure, of course,” Nico replies. “Nico’s schedule is very packed, but she can always make time for Maki-chan.”

“Yeah, yeah. Talk to you later.”

Nico hangs up and Nozomi is back in the kitchen, sitting in a chair at the table.

“Have you ever considered getting a roommate? Maybe then you won’t have to work as much as you do.”

“Go be annoying somewhere else, Nozomi. I have things to do before I go back home.”

“Of course. I’ll call later?”

Nico shakes her head no. “I choose life”

Nozomi will call anyway though. She always does.

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Nico gets back just before midnight, and she has work the next morning at eight, but she still lies in bed and texts Maki anyway.
Nico: hey r u awake
Nico: maki-maki-maaaaa
Maki♥: what do you want. it’s late
Nico: wow hello to u too
Maki♥: is there a reason for this or are you just being annoying for no purpose
Nico: wow who pissed in ur cereal this morning. can’t i just say hi
Maki♥: at midnight?
Nico: ur not my mom. how was your day
Maki♥: it was ok. i had a lot of phone calls from family about the letter. i mostly packed
Nico: sounds boring. when do i get to see the new place?
Maki♥: whenever you want i guess, but before classes start. after that i’ll be busy
Nico: too busy for nico? i am betrayed
Maki♥: how many times do you say your own name in a day
Nico: clearly not enough, if you aren’t going to make time for me
Maki♥: seriously nico-chan, it’s going to be tough for me to spend time with anyone. not just you. university is a lot of work
Nico: (◞‸◟;)
Maki♥: don’t
Nico: maki why
Maki♥: you know i’m gonna miss seeing you too right? and everyone. i don’t like it either
Nico: then don’t?
Maki♥: nico
Nico: i’m kidding, i’m kidding. i’m happy you’re going to nerd school to do nerd things and be a super smart doctor
Nico: just don’t forget about your favourite person in the world, ok
Maki♥: you mean rin?
Nico: what
Maki♥: i’m kidding, loser. it’s not like i’ll never see you again. quit being so dramatic
**Nico:** yes princess nishikino

**Maki♥:** i changed my mind i don’t want to ever see you again

**Nico:** i’m wounded! maki-chan is so very mean to nico

**Maki♥:** sucks to suck

They pause for a moment and Nico closes her eyes. Will Maki really have so little time for her? If she wants perfect grades, maybe. Which of course she does, she’s Maki. Nico will have to make the most of the time they have before classes begin.

**Nico:** can i come over and break in your new kitchen tomorrow

**Maki♥:** sure

**Nico:** wow, inviting nico over to her brand new apartment, all alone. i wonder what could happen?

**Maki♥:** you invited yourself over

**Nico:** details details

**Maki♥:** i need to go to bed now. see you tomorrow, nico

**Nico:** ♥♥♥ xoxox

Nico puts her pyjamas on and lies facedown in bed, but she isn’t tired anymore. Her conversation with Nozomi is still eating away at her, more so than any other they’ve had in recent memory. Even though Nozomi is obnoxious and invasive, she’s still right a majority of the time. Really, Nico has two options. She could do nothing, and just be a very good, very close friend to Maki forever, or she could reveal her intentions and openly pursue her. She’s not sure how much more open she could be about it though.

Maybe Maki doesn’t realize *Nico* is into girls. No, she’s so obvious all the time… but Maki is a little thick when it comes to romance. She’s never even had a crush on anyone, as far as Nico is aware, and Nico is pretty goddamn aware. She knows the signs, she knows what to look for. She noticed Umi’s interest in Kotori before Umi herself even noticed, after all.

But Maki is just blank, all the time. Sometimes Nico thinks she’s making progress, but nothing ever happens and Maki shuts down if she doesn’t want to talk about something anymore. She’s difficult, complicated.

*Why is she so fucking hot. I hate her so much.*

Nico covers her eyes with her palms. Things would be so much easier if Maki just didn’t exist. She’d never want that of course, but still.

Her father… if there was anything Nico didn’t want to do, it was cause trouble for Maki. She knew when it was okay to set her off, to light that short little fuse with a spark only Nico is capable of creating, but this was something so completely different. It could be a huge terrible mistake waiting to be made.

She probably shouldn’t say anything.
Everything will be okay.
A Better Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

i think it was destiny that my darling Ashirene and i met over idols, because when i planned this story i knew jack shit about med school and only did some surface research. but as luck would have it, Ashirene is a med student, and she is here to save me from making a fool of myself. thank you idol gods.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nico is the only one of her friends she sees before classes begin. She didn’t mean for it to be that way, really, she just got so busy preparing for school that she didn’t have time to call anyone. Nobody else is like Nico, they won’t call her up and tell her they’re going to be there in twenty minutes.

Her apartment is nice and everything Nico owns could probably fit in her kitchen. She almost feels guilty that she likely won’t even use said kitchen, it’s easier just to buy food when she’s out anyway. The whole thing is… big. Big and empty. She has a grand piano in her living room, on the top floor of some fancy know-somebody-to-be-a-tenant-here apartment building, and she can see the mountains in the distance through her floor to ceiling windows. She doesn’t own enough to really flesh it out, and everything is oddly modern and sterile. Nico thinks it’s too much, and Maki is inclined to agree.

Nico is jealous of her clothes dryer though.

Honestly, it was just like living at home, except she didn’t have anyone to do her laundry or make her things to eat. Nobody was ever around, and she went to bed every night in total silence with absolutely no expectations for the following morning. She’d been back and forth a few times to her parents’ place to get a few odds and ends, but otherwise, she was spending her time hunched over old medical textbooks for no real reason other than that she could.

She wasn’t expecting anything too difficult in her first year, but she had the advantage of her last name and parents who kept everything they’d ever bought during their own University days, and she wanted to do anything she could to get ahead. She considered students spending upwards of nine years to complete their medical degrees to be something of a horror story, and she had every intention of finishing on time, maybe even early.

So after discussing the pros and cons with her parents, she applied for a course overload. This was easily approved, thanks to her stellar track record. Her grades were impeccable and she’d passed the entrance exam at the literal top of her class. She was also pretty certain that was the youngest person in that exam room.

Her goal was neurosurgery in the long term. Having been briefed on the process of actually getting work once she was finished by her family, she resolved that she would need to be at her absolute best for the entire duration of her post-secondary education in order to be matched and placed exactly where she wanted to be. Perhaps she truly didn’t know what to expect, but she’d been tutoring third years during her second year at Otonokizaka, so she figured she could handle it.

If she was good at anything, it was retaining knowledge. Memorization, interpreting information, and
then spouting it back out whenever she needed it. It was the foundation of her brief musical career, her excellent grades, and her ability to perform as an idol. While she’d been dubbed a prodigy at the piano bench, she’d always attributed her talent to her thirst for knowledge more than anything else. Sheet music, microbiology textbook, what’s the difference?

She was actually interested in music, for one.

Seeing the piano in her living room every day was almost depressing.

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True to her nature, Maki doesn’t interact with anyone during her entire orientation. She doesn’t say anything and she doesn’t have any questions, so she just stands around twirling her hair and feeling like a child. She is definitely the youngest student present, but at least she’s taller than a majority of her year. It’s easier if you look the part.

She’s already toured the campus on her own time, so walking around with her group is kind of boring, but at least the leaves are starting to turn for fall. She considers texting Nico, but it would probably look bad, and image was probably important because of who she was. She’d already heard a few whispers behind her back, but she wasn’t sure what exactly they were about.

By the end of the day she has almost 20,000 yen of textbooks to carry home, and she knows there will be more tomorrow. Even though the train is packed, she still feels very much alone and she has nobody to talk to, and it’s as if she doesn’t exist. It sort of begins to sink in on her first train ride home from the University that this is what she’s going to be doing with her life.

There’s a new layer of finality to it, now that it’s begun. Even her second year of high school hadn’t felt this dull before the real day one, but maybe being vice president of the Idol Research Club had eased her heartache.

Well, heartache was a strong word, but she couldn’t think of anything else more fitting.

She picks up takeout when she gets off the train in her district, and immediately goes home to study. She’s already got readings to do before her first classes have technically even begun, but she knew it was coming so she was one of the few who hadn’t complained on the campus when everyone in the orientation was told to check their emails. She reads everything, looks at every diagram, burns it into her brain as best she can. When she’s done, she goes to bed undisturbed.

She falls into a routine of getting up early to go to campus, where she stays for the entire day thanks to her overload. It’s easier to skip breakfast but sometimes she remembers to grab a pastry from the seven-eleven at Todai-Mae station before heading to the lecture hall.

Class consists of a lot of people sleeping in their chairs, but Maki is all ears and typing notes into her laptop as fast as she’s able. It’s a little boring, but she tries to stay interested even though it lasts for hours. She catches a few students staring at her sometimes, and she ignores them they way she used to ignore everyone else. She can’t make time for...distractions anymore. Being an idol wasn’t really a distraction though. She just misses it a little.

The sun is setting by the time she leaves every day, and the train ride seems drearier and drearier the more she stands through it. There’s never any space to sit by the time she has to go home, ever. It feels like it takes forever. As per usual, she gets takeout by the station and goes home to hunch over
her books for hours, highlighting important texts and pages, and she already has a ten page paper due in four days.

Her parents call sometimes as they are wont to do when the nest is empty, but she doesn’t hear from her friends at all. Not even Nico.

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Four weeks in, Maki is having doubts about the amount of work she’s subjected herself to. Her sleep schedule has already slipped and she has to put more makeup on than usual to mask the bags forming under her eyes. Both of her wrists hurt a little from typing so much every day, and four other students have already dropped out of her anatomy class. She feels bad for anyone who has a job to go to after school.

Her first class tomorrow morning is canceled, so she decides to take a detour and relax for the first time since she moved. A longer walk to a different train station is really all she can come up with, though. Kanda Myojin is in that direction anyway, it might not hurt to stop by and see if Nozomi is around. She feels like she hasn’t truly interacted with another human in eternity. It isn’t far to Akihabara station after that, so it’s not like she’d be straying much.

Though her load is relatively light today, her back still hurts and her feet drag a bit. Coffee would probably help. She used to hate the stuff, but trading the bitter taste for more waking hours has become invaluable. She stops at a cafe just down the street from the shrine.

The menu is too complicated for her to bother reading, she just wants coffee. Coffee and sugar. Cake.

She goes up to the counter.

It’s Nico.

“Maki-chan?”

“N-nico-chan? What are you doing here?”

Nico looks annoyed. “I work here, genius. Are you getting anything?”

Maki blinks a few times, looking utterly bewildered.

“Uhh, coffee, two sugars. And whatever cake has the most sugar in it.” Maki sputters out.

Nico looks at her suspiciously. “Doesn’t seem very healthy, Dr. Nishikino.”

“I would honestly prefer if you’d use princess, at this point.”

Nico’s eyes go wide. “Okay, wow, you’re really out of it. Go sit down, I’ll take my break now. Your snack is on the house.”

Maki mindlessly obeys, but watches Nico pour her coffee as she wanders over to an empty table. For some reason Nico is wearing a bright pink apron, while everyone else is rushing around in a deep shade of brown. She definitely stands out.
Maki drops her bag to the floor and sits down, and her exhaustion overcomes her all at once as her forehead connects with the table.

Seeing Nico should feel as exciting as it usually does, but she’s too tired to really give a shit and it concerns her. When did she start feeling so old? Does medical school really do that to a person?

“Earth to Maki-chan, are you still alive?”

Maki just groans as Nico sets a tray on the table. She looks up a little, and Nico is… concerned? She definitely looks concerned.

“Barely.”

She sits up and examines what Nico has brought her. It’s a thick slice of white chocolate cake, to go with her bitter terrible coffee. She can barely pick up the mug.


Maki sips at her scalding drink, hoping it will keep her from passing out in front of everyone. She doesn’t really know what to say, she didn’t exactly intend to run into Nico today.

"Why is your apron different?" She asks dumbly.

Nico eyes her with curiosity. “I don’t look good in brown.”

“So they just let you wear whatever?”

“I know how to fight for my rights,” Nico replies as she reaches for her own mug, probably milk tea with more sugar in it than Maki’s cake.

Maki picks at her confection.

“Nico-chan?”

“Hm?”

“Why… haven’t you called or anything?”

It sounds sadder than she intends it to be when she asks. Her lack of sleep is probably still leaking through.

Nico looks surprisingly confused. “I thought you were going to be busy all the time. I just figured I shouldn’t bother you.”

Maki sips at her coffee again.

“You know, Maki-chan,” Nico says without her usual sass, “I tried to skype with Eli like two weeks ago. She was so busy we could only talk for like ten minutes before she apologized and hung up. I just thought it would be a bother for you.”

“You’re never a bother,” Maki says with sincerity.

“You sure about that? I’m pretty sure it’s in my job description to bother you.”

Maki smiles and it feels like she’s almost forgot how to in these past few weeks.
Nico points and shouts “Ah-ha! I got you, you smiled. I’m the best.”

Some people turn to look at her, but she ignores them. “You look so miserable right now, you know that?”

“Do I?”

“Yes,” Nico says as she reaches a hand across the table. She falters a little bit, but she rests her hand on the side of Maki’s face, and swipes her thumb softly under her tired eye.

“I think you forgot to put powder on over your foundation. It’s coming off…” Nico gets quieter as she speaks, and pulls her hand away gently. Nico puts both hands in her lap and breathes in a bit too deeply.

“Maybe I did. I don’t really remember this morning very well.”

Maki is talking quietly now too. They’re having some sort of moment again. Usually Maki is the one who ruins them, by way of not responding to anything. But she hasn’t heard Nico’s voice in weeks, and she feels a desperation to continue their conversation.

“I guess I’m just really tired lately. I didn’t think it would be… this much work.”

Nico laughs at her and puts her elbow on the table, resting her chin in her palm. “Of course it’s a lot of work, Maki-chan! Especially with your standards. I’d be happy just to pass.”

Maki pokes Nico in the cheek. “I know you barely passed math in your last year. I have to get good grades though, or I don’t get to do what I want later.”

“You mean compose?”

Maki frowns. “Neurosurgeon.”

“You and I both know that’s not what you want, Maki darling.”

“Don’t sweet talk me. What makes you think you know what I want, anyway?”

The question is a farce, though. Maki knows that Nico knows it too, but she doesn’t know how to take the conversation somewhere else without physically leaving. Nico is right like she usually is, when it comes to Maki. There’s something nice about knowing someone like her, but there’s also something equally as frustrating about it for the same reasons.

Nico looks at the table, at the wall, anywhere but Maki’s eyes. “I guess I don’t.”

Maki has a sneaking suspicion this is about more than just her school life.

“Do you have any days off? Like, from class?” Nico asks.

“Not really. Homework doesn’t go away on Holidays.”

“Have you been eating right? Three meals a day?”

Maki makes a strange noise in her throat. “I...kind of? If by three you mean one, and by right you mean this cake you bought me, then yes.”

Nico slams a fist on the table and people look at her again. “Maki-chan, are you serious? No wonder you look so terrible. I bet you just eat shitty takeout every night.”
“Nooo...Maybe. Yes, kind of.” Maki feels a little embarrassed, as if she’s only just realized how she’s been living for the last few weeks.

“Jesus, how are you even alive?”

“I don’t have time! I feel like I have more work to do in two weeks than all the work I had to do in an entire year in high school.”

Nico looks thoughtful for a moment, but only a moment. “Well you brought it on yourself, you know.”

“I’m really not in the mood to fight with you about this, Nico-chan,” Maki says as she seriously considers leaving. She doesn’t want to be badgered, she came this way to relax.

Nico’s eyes go a little wide. “You don’t want to...? I’m worried about you, Maki-chan. Maybe you should go home and take a nap.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I’m not saying you are,” Nico says, her voice soft again as she reaches under the table and takes Maki’s hand. Maki squeezes it and doesn’t want her to let go. “I seriously get worried about you, you know? Sometimes you just need to put everything down and rest.”

Maki can’t do anything else but nod. Her hand is warm and it makes her not want to look at Nico, so she lays her head down on the table, and they continue to hold hands as Nico quietly sips at her drink. She feels like she could fall asleep, exactly like this, it doesn’t matter if they’re in a cafe full of people or if she has a quiz the next evening. It’s just nice.

But as Maki is well aware, nice things don’t last forever, and someone calls Nico’s name to come back to work. Nico lets go of her hand and Maki hears the screech of her chair sliding on the floor as she stands up.

“Hey,” Nico says, and Maki looks up at her.

Nico runs a hand through her crimson hair. “If you need someone, just text me, okay? You don’t have to be alone and grumpy all the time. Like Nico said before, she’ll always make time for you. Just make time for Nico sometimes too, okay?”

And she winks before turning around and heading for a room in the back.

Maki immediately wishes she would come back, but she knows she has to go home. She’s already spent way too much time taking this detour. Sighing, she picks up her bag as if she’s picking up the burden of the entire world, and slings it over her shoulder. As she pushes the door open to leave, Nico calls out to her.

“Hey Maki-chan! Come by again later, okay?”

She smiles.

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Maki is more distracted than usual when she tries to focus on her schoolwork. The sun set a while
ago and she has a pretty decent view of the stars, but all she can feel is a longing.

She hasn’t studied enough to get 100% on her test tomorrow, she’s pretty sure. Things aren’t sticking to her brain as well as usual, probably because she still feels so scrambled from her encounter with Nico. The cafe was like some sort of salvation, a light she didn’t know she had at the end of the tunnel. Well, more like in the middle, but the sentiment is there.

One thing was for certain; she definitely needed to swallow her pride and accept that things weren’t exactly going according to plan, and it’s okay to ask for help. What kind of help, she isn’t sure. Nico can’t read her textbooks for her, even though she would probably try given the right motivation.

Maybe that was Maki’s issue, actually. No motivation. She was living each day in something akin to misery with no goal in mind besides graduating, but that wasn’t really so much a positive reward as an inevitability. Letting herself go to the cafe after class from time to time seemed like the optimal solution, but the only reason she’d been able to go that day was because her early morning class the next day had been canceled. Then she had to account for her transit time too, which was becoming the biggest drag in the universe. It wasn’t really something she could consider.

She missed Nico, though. And everyone else, of course.

That feeling was only amplified by their brief meetup that day. She looked guiltily at her styrofoam container of noodles from the Family Mart around the corner. She’d probably feel less awful if she ate better, or if she didn’t have to lie to Nico about not eating like a social recluse.

A break sounded nice. Maybe she should take Nico’s advice for once in her life.

She stood up and stretched, and her back cracked in a gross way. Grabbing her phone, she flung herself over the back of her couch, something she used to scold Nico for doing every time she wanted to sit down on one. A fifteen minute break would be fine.

Maki: nico-chan?

Maki expected an instantaneous reply, but there was nothing. She rested her hands on her stomach and shoved her phone under a pillow. Maybe she could sit at her piano for a while, it probably needed a good dusting by now.

Minutes later, her pillow vibrates.

She almost scares herself with how fast she shoves the pillow off the couch, grabbing at her phone and swiping it open.

Nico-Nico-No: hey babe whats up

Maki: don’t call me that

Nico-Nico-No: well one of us has to come up with cute pet names

Nico-Nico-No: i'll gladly take this responsibility

Maki: whatever. can we talk

Nico-Nico-No: i’d love to more than anything maki-maki-maa

Nico-Nico-No: but i have to work early tomorrow and i need my beauty sleep
Maki: oh. that’s fine. maybe later?

Nico-Nico-No: you got it. and i gotta rest. nighty night ♥♥♥ xoxoxo

Well, she tried. It wasn’t as if Nico could be available all the time, she did have her own life, her own schedule to follow. It still felt unreasonably disappointing though. Next time she’ll try Rin.

Reluctantly, Maki stands up and makes her way back over to her desk.

*Back to the grind, I guess.*

Later that night, she dreams of music and a soft hand in hers.

Chapter End Notes

Nico works here (https://goo.gl/maps/HindpdSHPnJ2). you can see our favourite shrine a bit below it, Akiba station is to the right, and Honoka's house is over the bridge. TokyoU is up and to the left!

Roppongi is quite a bit farther south along the train line.
Maki hasn’t tried to get in contact with her since they spoke at the cafe a few weeks ago. Maybe it’s for the better, because Nico found that even after resolving to let her attraction to Maki die down, she still couldn’t resist touching her. It’s what she’s used to, after all, and Maki doesn’t really let anyone else do it anyway. She needs the comfort.

It’s still concerning, not hearing anything from Maki, but Nico is determined to give her space. Maki doesn’t need to be dealing with Nico at a time like this anyway. It hurts a little, though.

Nico is closing the cafe on her own at the end of the evening, hanging up aprons and sweeping the floor and trying really hard not to think about it. The sun sets earlier every day, and she’s pretty sure that soon she’ll be going home in the dark again, but she doesn’t live very far away so it isn’t too bad. If Maki walks out this way sometimes, maybe they’ll run into each other. Hopefully she’ll be feeling a bit better, that would put her in a better mood, a safer one.

Closing up shop isn’t exactly like closing out a Live show, but Nico still feels the same satisfaction for doing a good job and carrying out her plans. At least, she thinks she does a good job. She probably deserves employee of the month, just for being so cute and attracting in so many lovely customers. Maybe she should think about switching to a maid cafe. Work is work, after all.

Nico still uses a scarf Kotori knitted for her last Christmas, with the μ's logo on it in hot pink. There are eight matching counterparts, so she hopes the others are using theirs too.

The walk home is somewhat boring and she carefully avoids going in the direction of the shrine, because Nozomi still works there and Nozomi is to be avoided At All Costs. She’s been breathing down Nico’s throat ever since she mentioned Maki accidentally found her cafe, and no amount of long distance calls to Eli will make Nozomi change her mind. Nico still isn’t sure exactly what Nozomi is after though, she just knows she wants no part of it.

When she gets home, she kicks off all her things and then goes outside to the railing across from her front door, where her laundry has been drying all day. There’s something calming about doing boring housework. Rewarding, even, if you’re Nico and being self-sufficient is one of your favourite things about your life. She’s really so talented, with all of the things she can do on top of being the world’s cutest super idol.

When she’s done folding her clothes and everything is clean and in order, she lets her hair down, puts on A-Rise’s newest DVD and relaxes under the kotatsu. She only really has the DVD because Tsubasa gives them to Honoka for free, and Nico pressures Honoka into lending them to her indefinitely. She’ll give them back one day. Probably.

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Just before eight, there is a knock on Nico’s door. Who it could be at this hour is a mystery, but if it’s Nozomi she’s just going to lock herself in the washroom for the night.

“Who is it? I’m coming-”

Maki doesn’t wait before she throws the door open and dumps her book bag all over the floor. Her
hair is askew and the bags under her eyes are visible even at a distance. The door slams shut behind her and she unceremoniously kicks her shoes off so hard they fly all the way under the kitchen table.

“What the fuck Maki-chan?”

“I need to sleep.”

Maki is just standing there, doing nothing.

Nico eyes her cautiously. “And you’re here…because?”

Maki throws her hands up and doesn’t give a real response, instead walking into the washroom and locking the door.

Nico hurls herself to the floor and digs under the kotatsu for her phone, typing out a message in record time.

Nico: help me nozomi send help

Nozomonster: good afternoon nicocchi

Nico: maki is here she’s pissed but like not even at me

Nozomonster: what would you like me to do about that

Nico: i don’t know do u have advice

Nozomonster: nope. have a nice night nicocchi :^)

Nico: r u fuckin srs

Nico groans and throws her phone to the floor just as Maki comes back out of the washroom. She looks exactly as pissed as she did when she walked in.

“Where can I sleep?”

Nico fumbles around for words, suddenly nervous.


Maki shuffles around the room until she decides on a hot pink pillow with frills around the edges, and then she bumps into Nico a little bit getting her lower half under the kotatsu. The floor isn’t really all that comfortable but Maki doesn’t seem bothered by it.

“Maki-chan?” Nico asks. “What’s wrong?”

Maki groans a little bit and rolls over until she’s facing inward towards Nico, almost against Nico’s legs under the table. She looks completely miserable.

“I just need to sleep a little bit. I’ll be fine.”

She’ll be fine? Yeah, sure. Okay.

“I got that the first time you said it. What are you doing here though?”

Maki’s eyes are already closed, but she’s not dead to the world yet.
“I fell asleep on the train yesterday. Your place is closer than mine, to the campus. Easier.”


Maki shakes her head. “No. Wake me up at nine, I have to go home and work on a paper.”

Nico is still a little bit stunned at the whole debacle. “Okay? I Guess?”

And just like that, Nico has a worn out sleeping redhead on her hands. The whole thing is so very unlike her, but Maki is very good at working way too hard nowadays. It shouldn’t be surprising, really. Nico struggles not to play with the mess of hair decorating her pillow.

She sits there for a while, mostly because she has no idea what to do next. Maki probably needs all the rest she can get though - like, really needs it - so Nico carefully and quietly gets up and goes to turn the lights off. Anything to help Maki sleep more soundly. Her nerves don’t go away.

She resolves to spend the rest of her waking hours in her room with the door closed browsing the internet on her phone.

Does Maki only talk to her when she’s at the end of her rope now? It sure seems that way, though Nico feels like it’s sort of her fault as well for not calling Maki herself or anything. But she’d been very clear that day, that Maki could ask for help, or support, or whatever she needed. Nico would make time for her always. Who else would Maki even talk to?

“Rin.” Nico mumbles to herself. She browses the contact list in her phone until she hits Hoshizora.

“This is Rin, hello!”

“Rin, it’s Nico.”

“Nico-chan! Long time no chat, huh? What’s up?”

“I have some really important questions for you,” Nico begins, “like super important. So don’t play dumb or anything.”

“I would never!”

“Yeah okay sure,” Nico says. “Listen, have you or Hanayo heard from Maki-chan at all lately?”

Rin hums thoughtfully for a moment. “No, she hasn’t talked to either of us. Rin is pretty sure Kayo-chin would have mentioned if Maki-chan called.”

“So not even a text? Nothing?”


Nico sighs. “Maybe, I don’t know. Maki-chan is lying on my floor and she looks like the total opposite of cute right now.”

“Oh, that sounds bad. I wonder if something happened at school?” Rin questions, her voice a touch sad.

“I don’t know, we don’t really talk much. I was hoping she’d called you guys or something.”

“Sorry Nico-chan, we haven’t heard from her either. Kayo-chin is coming over after class tomorrow, I could ask her just in case, but I don’t think either of us have even seen her since graduation.”
They’re quiet for a moment, and Nico hears Rin fiddling with what sounds like pots and pans over the phone.

“Rin?”

“Hm?”

“What do you think I should do? Like, about Maki. She’s not doing so good and I don’t think she’s about to admit anything to me,” Nico says, voice quiet.

“Well,” Rin replies, “you love her, right?”

“Rin!” Nico shouts before slapping a hand over her mouth. Maki is right there, in the next room.

“Sorry sorry, I thought you did!” Rin rushes out.

“Are you like, incapable of being subtle or what? You don’t just say things like that, Rin.”

“But…” she says “but it’s true, right?”

Nico moans and her palm meets her forehead. “Look, just forget I said anything. I’ll deal with it myself. Just tell me if Maki calls either one of you, alright?”

“Nyaaokay, whatever you say. My advice is just to take care of her! Rin knows you can do it, and so does Kayo-chin,” Rin says, voice laced with confidence. The kind of confidence Nico wished she had. But she and Maki were complicated, things were never that easy for either of them.

“Yeah… thanks, Rin. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye!”

Nico ends the call and buries herself under her covers. If she could be more outspoken about her feelings like Rin, maybe they could have resolved whatever this was much earlier. Then again, if she were more like Rin then maybe Maki wouldn’t come around as often. There would be nobody for her to pick on, and nobody to bite back. Still, it would be nice if she could magically procure a solution to whatever was ailing Maki so awfully.

It wasn’t like she didn’t realize what was up, though. Maki is tired, overworked, and perpetually sad in general. Nico feels like Maki has barely even been in school for that long, it’s only really been a few weeks, right? She couldn’t imagine herself living that kind of life, even if everything was provided for her.

Maybe if Maki wasn’t so stubborn about getting perfect grades all the time? In Nico’s honest opinion, there’s no need to strive for the top percentage if it’s something you don’t even care about. You could just ask… well, any of her teachers from high school, but Nico was sure they weren’t exactly impressed with her bare minimum passing marks. But Nico was a unique and talented individual, and nobody pursued their dreams half as well as she did. There’s no time to be blinded by things you don’t really want to do even if you feel obligated, you need to keep your eye on the prize. Maki is weak in that regard.

It’s no secret to anyone that her twenty year plan was drafted up the moment she was born - perhaps even before that, knowing what her father is like - and Maki had done nothing her entire life besides play the part of Hospital heiress. Their brief stint together as idols, that was when Maki had shined the most, surrounded by her passion for the musical arts and an unrivaled support group who was just as committed as she was. Nico knew she’d spent hours and hours after school in the music room
pounding away at the keys, composing their songs and writing music for instruments she didn’t even play.

Prodigy? Musical genius? Nico didn’t know what to call it, but it didn’t really matter because as long as Maki was happy, there wasn’t much else that mattered to her. That’s how Nico had figured out the way she felt one day, looking into the music room through the window to where Maki sat at her bench as if she were born to play. Sunshine casting it’s golden glow across ivory keys, a smile on her face, and a song in her soul. Nozomi had found her sitting on the floor outside the room, listening in, and she’d never let it go after that.

Here they were three years later, and Maki was still convinced she was going to be some kind of doctor for the rest of her life. Nico knew what kind of hours they worked, how hard they pushed themselves. Maki would have no time for her first love anymore, and she knew the piano in Maki’s new apartment had gone untouched since she moved in.

What a disappointment.

Nico snaps out of her thoughts when her alarm to wake Maki up goes off on her phone. If Nico were in charge, she would just let her lie on her floor for as long as her body actually needed it, but Maki had asked her to do something and she intended to do it. Whether or not she agreed. It seems maybe Nico is a bit weak when it comes to doing what she’s told, too.

When Nico opens her door, she can hear a clattering in the kitchen accompanied by a string of swearing and frustrated groans. Maki is already awake, and she’s trying really hard to figure out how the coffee maker works all on her own. It would be cute if she wasn’t already so angry at the kitchen appliance for literally doing nothing.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never used a coffee maker before, Maki-chan.” Nico says.

Maki isn’t even startled. She turns around to face Nico and gives her the most pathetic look she’s ever seen on a human being in her entire life. Sad eyes, and a frown that Nico is always determined to turn upside down. Nico is an expert when it comes to such things.

"Nico-chan… help me…” Maki whines.

Nico laughs. “Are you for real right now? Don’t tell me you buy coffee from Starbucks every day or something.”

Maki shuffles her feet. “It’s not always Starbucks.”

“I can’t believe this is happening right now.”

“Nico-chan! Don’t laugh at me.”

Nico rolls her eyes and resets every setting on her coffee maker, because Maki has pressed every button at least once trying to figure out how to make coffee come out of it with no success. She sets it up in seconds, and Maki sits down at the kitchen table, looking a little meek.

Nico puts her hands on her hips.

“Did you get enough sleep?”

Maki chooses not to answer and instead puts her elbow on the table and her chin in her palm, not looking at Nico. It’s enough of an answer.
Nico leans against the counter.

“Do you talk to anyone?”

“About what?” Maki asks, still looking away.

“Anything. Nobody hears from you. We’re worried, you know. I’m worried.”

Maki looks uncomfortable.

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about. I can handle it.”

Nico scoffs. “Clearly you can’t if you’re here right now for no reason other than to sleep for like 40 minutes. That’s not even a real nap!”

Maki wrinkles her nose. “And how would you know? You could barely even handle -”

“Don’t finish that sentence!” Nico points at her. “Don’t make this about me! You look like shit every time I see you and you tell me not to worry?”

“You barely see me anyway.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

They’re interrupted by the beep of the coffee maker and Nico is quick to turn around and reach into her cupboard for a travel mug. She puts the same thing in it as the last time she made Maki a drink. Not nearly sweet enough.

Nico hands her the mug and their fingers brush for a moment. Maki is looking at her again, biting her bottom lip a little bit.

“Look, Nico-chan, I… I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

“I’m serious,” Maki says quietly. “I really am sorry. I just don’t… I’m not-”

Nico huffs and steps forward, putting her hands on Maki’s shoulders and looking down at her once again. Her hair is still loose and she looks and feels the part of an actual adult. A change of pace.

“It’s okay to admit that you don’t know what you’re doing. Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she says softly.

Maki reaches up and puts a hand over Nico’s.

“I guess,” Maki says. “I should know what I’m doing though. I thought I was so prepared, so sure of myself. But I don’t know anymore.”

Nico drops their hands.

“Does anyone really know what they’re doing?”

“You always seem to.”

Nico laughs. “Maki-chan, I don’t even know what I’m gonna be doing ten minutes from now. You even proved that to me like an hour ago.”
Maki looks… puzzled?

“But you work so much, and you always seem fine. You have so much to deal with, with your family and saving money for them. How are you just fine all the time? You don’t feel any pressure?”

“Well, it’s not like I hate what I do. I’m as happy as I can be for where I am now. Plus, Nico has to keep a level head for whenever pretty girls barge into her apartment with no notice.”

Maki quirks an eyebrow. “You? A level head?”

“Is this going to turn into another short joke?” Nico says, and Maki finally lets a giggle out.

Nico claps her hands. “There, I did it again! Even the great princess Nishikino can’t help but fall for Nico’s charm.”

“Gross.”

“Nico knows you love her, it’s okay to say it Maki-chan.”

Maki sips at her coffee and she’s still grinning, almost from ear to ear now. Be still Nico’s tiny, emotionally challenged heart.

“Anyway,” Nico snaps, “didn’t you have to leave do go do a dumb boring homework thing?”

Maki stands up suddenly. “My paper, right. I need to finish it tonight.”

Nico helps Maki gather her books back into her bag and fishes her shoes out from where they landed under the table. Maki cradles the travel mug the entire time, as if it’s an actual baby. She probably drinks way too much coffee.

When they’re at the door, Maki stands there awkwardly, as if she wants to say something.

“Well,” Nico says, “I hope if I tell you to call me that you’ll, you know, actually call me this time?”

“I’ll think about it”

“Seriously? We just had a good moment, could you not be stubborn for like ten minutes?”

Maki smiles at her again.

“I’ll call next time I need help. I promise, Nico-chan.”

Nico nods. “Good. Now go home and do nerd stuff.”

Maki waves and Nico shuts her door, slumping and sliding down the back of it until she’s sitting on the floor. Maki is going to send her to an early grave, she swears.
Two days after Maki visits, it’s Nico’s turn to close the shop again. Business as usual, though this time Nico is considering calling Maki when she gets home. You know, just to check up on her, Nico is the caring motherly type and it’s time she started showing it. She can’t expect Maki to do everything, especially now.

This time, Nico detours and walks in the direction of the shrine. Kanda Myojin had been a staple in her life for an entire year, and she hadn’t gone back often since leaving school. She had no reason to, really, outside of New Years with her siblings. She didn’t really have a reason now actually, but it felt like the right time, and Nico has always been a woman of the moment.

There’s nobody around as she walks up the stairs. It feels weird to be walking instead of running, but she gets the same fulfillment as usual when she reaches the top. It’s empty and quiet, and Nico hopes Nozomi isn’t lurking around any corners or reading her mind or anything. There’s one older shrine worker still there across the courtyard, closing the ice cream stand up. No Nozomi yet.

Nico walks past the rows and rows of ema, to the shrine itself. The little wooden plaques are still decorated with well wishes for the final Live show µ’s ever performed, along with the occasional prayer that they’d one day find the inspiration to return to the stage. If only it were that easy, because Nico sure wishes real life worked that way. To perform again with her friends… she tries not to think about it often.

Fishing through the pockets of her soft pink peacoat dress, Nico considers what she wants to actually wish for. Though really, it’s obvious. Her fingers close around a few 100 yen coins, and she pulls them out and tosses them into the donation box.

“I uh, don’t do this often,” Nico begins, clapping her hands together, “but I think now is a good time. Maybe? I don’t know. I just wanna know what’s up with Maki. I mean I know what’s up, but I want to help her fix it. Maki is tough though, I can’t help her if she doesn’t want to help herself.

“So I guess, I wish for Maki to be less of… less of a coward. I don’t mean that in a bad way, I think everyone is a coward sometimes. I feel like I understand her the most out of all our friends, but I still can’t figure out exactly what’s going on in her head or why she thinks the way she does. It’s easy to tell when you don’t really like something, right? Maki is stubborn but she’s also super smart, so I hope she can figure it out one day. Like, tomorrow would be nice. The sooner the better. Thanks.”

Nico bows deeply, hands still clasped together. If anything, she felt a little less heavy than she did when she was climbing the stairs. The whole shrine thing always seemed like a load of you-know-what to Nico, but this is also where Honoka yelled at the sky to stop raining, and it stopped, so maybe it has something to do with the location. Or maybe Honoka is just a magical girl and Nico is wasting her time, but it’s the sentiment that counts.

She heads up the stairs to her apartment a little later than usual after the short walk home, and when she gets to her front door, Maki is sitting there on the ground, back to the door and Nico’s travel mug in hand.

Maki looks up at her. “You’re late.”

Nico shrugs. “Was I supposed to be on time for something? You didn’t say you were coming.”

Maki stands up and wipes her skirt down. “I thought you got home at the same time every day.
Anyway it doesn’t matter, I’m just really tired.”

Nico digs out her key and starts to fumble with the lock. “You need a nap, I gotcha. How long have you been sitting out here though?”

“I don’t know, maybe thirty minutes.”

“Okay so I’m making you some tea first. You aren’t allowed to say no. Also you still look like shit.”

Maki was definitely about to say no, but instead she lets Nico open the door. Nico tosses all of her stuff on the floor and Maki looks at the coat hook for only a moment before doing the same thing. This time her shoes don’t go flying off though, instead she carefully places them on the mat at the door.

Nico stalks off to the kitchen. “Maki-chan, turn on the kotatsu, will you?”

“Okay.”

It’s nice that it’s been not absolutely weeks since she’s seen Maki, for once. It’s especially nice that Nico is her first resort, even if it’s just to pass out on her floor for a while. If Maki is at Nico’s place, Nico can at the very least take care of her herself, and make sure Maki isn’t overworking. Time spent with her is time spent away from books. It’s comfort enough just to see her.

“How do I turn this on?”

“Really, Maki-chan?”

“Hm?”

“Nico-chan?”

“Hm?”

“How do I turn this on?”

Nico looks at her incredulously. “Really, Maki-chan?”

Maki grimaces. “I’ve never had one of these before. What did you expect?”

Nico laughs. “I guess I shouldn’t expect too much from someone who can’t even work a coffee maker.”

Maki sits cross-legged on the floor and Nico turns the kotatsu on herself before going to pour them both a cup of tea.

“I didn’t come here to be sassed, you know,” Maki says.

Nico nods towards the door. “You know where the exit is.”

“I don’t know why I thought I actually wanted to see you today.”

“Don’t you want to see me every day?” Nico smiles at her.

Maki shakes her head. “Sometimes I think I’d be just fine if I never had to deal with you again.”

Ouch. That one sort of hurts.

“Well you don’t have to. Nobody’s forcing you to come here or talk to me or whatever.”

Maki looks at the floor and Nico turns around to put sugar in the tea. They fight all the time, but Maki’s tone is different today. Different enough that it strikes Nico in the worst way, and she almost wishes Maki hadn’t come back again so soon.
Well, not really. But lately she’s just felt so left out, like she’s been shoved aside and forgotten. She probably isn’t the only one though, but nobody else has to deal with deep-seated feelings like Nico does, nobody else has to worry over Maki like she does.

Nobody else has to deal with periodical scathing comments, like she does.

“Nico-chan…”

Nico turns back towards the living room and Maki is right there, right in front of her, looking down - literally, she has to look down to look Nico in the eyes - and her exhaustion is more prominent than ever before. Nico puts the two cups of tea on the table without tearing her gaze from Maki’s.

Maki looks nervous, on top of everything else. It doesn’t look good on her.

“I-I’m just,” Maki splutters, “I’m just tired. I didn’t mean it, you know I never mean it. Right?”

Nico sighs. “I know you don’t mean it. You just really sound like you do sometimes.”

“I don’t try to. It just…”

“Comes out, I know. You should work on that, Maki-chan.”

Maki hums. “I will. I’m sorry I’m so difficult.”

She starts twirling her hair.

“Don’t apologize for being yourself. I’ve been dealing with you for years, I should be used to it by now.” Nico waves her hand dismissively.

Maki looks away, sort of off into the corner of the kitchen and behind Nico. There’s a shine in her eyes that Nico doesn’t normally see, something contemplative.

“What? Is there something on my wall?”

Nico is about to follow Maki’s gaze when purple eyes suddenly lock with hers, and calloused fingers grab at her bare arms. Nico immediately turns red when she realizes Maki is hugging her, or holding her, or something like that. She sort of has to stand a little on the tips of her toes so the height thing isn’t totally awkward, but it’s a trivial price to pay when Maki is the one making the moves.

Maki breathes slowly and buries her head between Nico’s neck and shoulder, fingers clutching tightly at the back of her shirt. Everything is lovely and warm and Maki smells like strawberries. Why did it have to be strawberries?

Nico is sort of at a loss, because she feels conflicted about being affectionate. But this is Maki Nishikino, a girl typically void of any kind of emotion related to affection. Opportunities like this don’t come by very often.

Well, what the hell ever. She can beat herself up about it later.

Nico leans into the embrace and brushes her nose against Maki’s hair. One of her arms wraps around Maki’s waist, and the other one weaves itself gently through bright red locks. Maki pulls her closer, if it’s even possible, and Nico continues stroking her tresses as lightly as she can.

“Hey hey, it’s okay. It’s no big deal, Maki-chan,” Nico says softly.

“I’m still sorry,” Maki replies, her lips brushing against Nico’s heated skin. Nico is dizzy for a
moment, and she desperately hopes Maki didn’t feel her entire body shiver. This was a bad idea.

“C’mon, let’s have tea and then you can go to sleep,” Nico says as she pulls away reluctantly. Maki leans back too but keeps her arms on Nico’s waist. Her eyes are half-lidded and her hair is a little tousled from Nico’s attentions, it’s almost too much for the older girl to handle.

Nico nods at the chair beside them.

Maki finally lets go of her, and Nico releases a breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

They both sit down and sip at their drinks, while Nico struggles to think of something to say. Her brain is a little scattered right now, still trapped thirty seconds in the past in the arms of the girl sitting across from her.

“So,” Nico starts, “how is school, anyway? You don’t really talk about it.”

Maki brushes loose hair behind her ear. “It’s about as exciting as you would imagine.”

“So not at all?”

“I can only get so excited for a two hour pharmacology lecture.”

“What’s pharmacology?”

“Studying the effects of chemicals on living organisms. Biochemical functions, pharmacokinetics, a little bit of toxicology. All that stuff.”

Nico is at a loss. “That’s uh… cool…”

Maki rolls her eyes. “Drugs. I learn about what drugs do.”

Nico groans. “Why are you so smart?”

“Why are you so dumb?”

“Wow, rude.”

Maki winks at her and Nico wonders if her soul has left her mortal body yet.

For a little while, they talk about what Maki actually does for ten hours a day when she’s on the campus. The parts about actual school bores Nico to death, but she’s entertained when Maki mentions the weird boy that tries to sit next to her in every lecture they share, which is really difficult when said lecture consists of several hundreds of students at a time. Nico thinks it’s because Maki is just super attractive, a fact Maki herself never disagrees with, that or maybe because everyone knows that medschool is her destiny and she’s already guaranteed a place at the Nishikino general hospital. Which is hardly true, but it made sense to assume, they supposed.

“Maybe he’s got the hots for you, Maki-chan.” Nico says with a grin.

“No thanks. I don’t even know his name, he just… looks at me.”

“Want me to beat him up for you?”

Maki wears a sly smile. “I might even pay to see that.”

Nico punches her fist. “Just say the word.”
Maki yawns after that, and Nico cleans up their empty cups. A few minutes later, Nico is flicking the lights off and retreating to her room, her companion already passed out in the same place as last time.

Nico sits on her bed.

Why’d Maki have to hug her like that? Why does her life have to become more difficult with each passing day?

Maybe if Maki weren’t driving herself headfirst into the ground, Nico would see her visits as more of an opportunity than anything else. Like all super idols should, Nico excels at the very prospect of opportunity when she really wants something, but in this instance she also needs to consider what Maki wants. Well, less of what she wants and more of what she needs. She needs help. Support.

But there is always the possibility of more moments. Moments of the unexpected variety, where Maki is too close and Nico can smell her perfume or put her hand on her waist. What if one day Nico just can’t help herself, and everything comes pouring out and Maki decides they can’t be friends anymore and she transfers to a school in Osaka and they never see each other again?

She has to call Nozomi.

Nico doesn’t know whether she wants her to actually pick up the phone or not.

“Nicocchi! What a lovely surprise.”

Well, it’s too late now.

“Nozomi, I don’t have time for your smug ass to say you told me so.”

“Why would I say that?”

Nico can already feel a headache coming on.

“Nevermind. Maki is here.”

“Oh? What for?” Nozomi actually does sound genuinely surprised, for once.

“She was here a couple days ago too. My place is close to school and she’s basically a zombie now. She comes here to sleep.”

“Do you take pictures?”

“Nozomi!”

“Well I would, if I were you.”

“Don’t take pictures of Maki when she’s asleep,” Nico warns. “As much as I know I’ll regret saying this, I’m gonna say it anyway. I need your help. Or your opinion, whatever you’ve got.”

Nozomi hums happily. “It’s so nice to hear you say that. I feel like it was only yesterday that Elicchi and I sent you off on your own, and now you’re all grown up and pursuing the love of your life. I’m proud of you!”

“You make it sound like Eli’s my dad or something. Which is totally weird, you know I’m older than her right?”

“But you’re much shorter.”
Yeah, that feeling in the pit of her stomach is definitely regret.

“Stop it Nozomi, I’m serious. I’m not going after her, like, romantically. Maki doesn’t sleep and I can tell she hardly eats now too. When she does eat, it’s always gross takeout or whatever. I’m worried.”

“Oh,” Nozomi says, tone steering well away from mocking and into concerning, “that does sound like a problem. What’s her complexion like?”

“Pale. She looked pretty bad when I saw her at the cafe a few weeks ago too, so it’s been like this for a while.”

“Hm, and she doesn’t think it’s a problem?”

Nico lies back until she’s flat on the bed. “I don’t think she even gives herself enough time to notice. I’ve brought it up but it doesn’t really bother her.”

“She probably feels like her grades are a bigger problem than her diet.”

Nico nods to herself. “Probably. She also drinks a lot of coffee, like black coffee, and I know she never used to drink it before.”

“Well,” Nozomi says, “what do you think you should do about it?”

“Me? Why just me?”

“Nicocchi, nobody else hears from her these days. You’re the one she’s confiding in, if you could even call it that. I think it’s best if you handle it.”

Nico rolls over. “It’s not like she calls me, she just shows up. She was waiting outside my apartment today. Just, waiting for me to get home.”

“Well she obviously still feels you’re an important part of her life. I think if anything you should live up to that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you’re going to have to play by Maki’s rules for a while. She clearly needs someone, but she’ll only let herself seek help on her own terms. We both know how she is.”

Nico is quiet, thinking.

“You should support her, Nicocchi. Any way you can, just be there when she needs it. She’ll come around, if you wait for her to catch up.”

“Do you mean like with life? Or… you know…”

“I don’t have that answer for you, though I wish I did. Maybe you’ll find out together, with Maki.”

Nico sighs and curls into herself a bit, tangling her feet in her blanket.

“So just be here for her.”

Nozomi laughs, but it’s warm and kind. “Like you always have been. Stop doubting yourself, Nicocchi. You’ll find a way.”

Okay, maybe Nico doesn’t regret the entire conversation. Maybe she even really appreciates it this
time.

“Thanks, Nozomi.”

“Anytime.”

For once, Nico doesn’t feel like dying after one of these conversations. Instead, she feels a renewed sense of determination, as if she’s finally discovered what her purpose is in this chapter of Maki’s life. It seems obvious in retrospect, but Nico isn’t afraid to admit that even her mind can become clouded at the sight alone of Maki Nishikino. Or even just her thoughts, no sighting necessary. The outside perspective helps.

It’s time to work her magic.

Feet light and housecoat on, Nico tiptoes from her room to the kitchen, mindful of the sleeping girl only feet away from her. She flicks the switch on the little night light she has plugged into the wall behind the kitchen counter, and gets to work as quietly as possible. Working in the dark is bothersome, but Nico knows her way around a kitchen with her hands behind her back. There’s not much left in her fridge because she hasn’t gone shopping lately, but she figures she has enough to put something together.

If Nico can put in a little extra time and effort, Maki shouldn’t have any reason to subsist on day old reheated Chinese food. Step one in Nico’s plan to save Maki from herself: make her eat real actual food.

At least two real meals a day should do her wonders, even Nico herself skips breakfast on the rare occasion that she sleeps in. Maki probably only eats once a day, so any improvement would be a good one.

A short while later, Nico has a stack of three bento boxes tied together, her travel mug re-filled with black coffee, and an empty fridge.

Maki’s generic phone alarm goes off as soon as Nico finishes putting her dishes in the sink.

“Uggghhhhh.”

“Wakey-wakey sleeping beauty. How was your 40 minutes of freedom?”

A pillow flies past Nico’s head.

Maki groans again and tries to fold herself further under the kotatsu.

“Was it really that bad?”

“Why am I alive?”


Slowly, Maki crawls out of her blanket cocoon, hair splayed everywhere and bangs sticking out at an odd angle. She wipes the sleep from her eyes and Nico thinks it might be the most adorable thing she’s ever seen.

Bed hair Maki is way too attractive for her own good, that’s for sure.

They don’t say anything as Maki gathers her things with as little enthusiasm as she can possibly muster, before mindlessly wandering towards the door. Nico meets her there.
“Take this,” Nico demands. It’s all she can bring herself to say.

“Huh?”

Nico holds out the bentos and the travel mug.

“I made you something to eat that won’t kill you. You have to eat one tonight, don’t fight me about it. Okay, Maki-chan?”

Maki looks… stunned? Her lips are parted, and her eyes are drooping, but she’s looking at Nico in a way that makes her heart leap from zero to a hundred. She reaches out, in disbelief.

“You made this? For me?”

“Who else? Take the stupid food.”

Maki takes the bentos, all wrapped up in Nico’s nicest furoshiki. They aren’t that heavy, but Maki’s arm dips down for a moment after she takes them, like she’s surprised by the heftiness. Slowly, she raises a hand and points at the mug in Nico’s other hand.

“Is that..?”

“Coffee. Black. Like my soul? Your soul? Whatever it is.”

Maki’s expression is still one of disbelief.

Nico shoves the mug into Maki’s other hand. “Are you really so astonished at Nico’s generosity? Nico has to set a good example for her junior, after all.”

“Nico-chan,” Maki mutters, ignoring Nico’s self-praise, “thank you. Really, this is…”

And there it is, Maki’s lip is wibbling. She’s biting it, trying to stop herself, but Nico can see what’s coming and she doesn’t want to watch it.

“Don’t cry in front of me! Go home and eat your dinner like a good girl. Come back when you need more, or else I’ll come embarrass you at school.”

Maki nods, eyes watering a little bit. Her body turns and steps through the door, but she’s still looking at Nico. She looks away for a second, and then back again.

“I-I’ll see you, Nico-chan.”

And she’s gone. Nico shuts the door.

It’s tiring business, looking after a walking tsundere stereotype. Nico herself hasn’t even eaten, and she frowns when she realizes she doesn’t actually have anything left to make for herself.

“Oh how the tables have turned,” Nico grumbles as she calls up the nearest sushi delivery place. It’s a 40 minute wait, but Nico doesn’t want to bother calling around so she resigns herself to hunger and lying around in anguish. Maki’s depressing demeanor is starting to spread, it seems.

Just as she’s about to flick her TV on, her phone rings again. Can’t Nico have just a moment to herself? Nico is for everyone, but not when she’s trying to relax in her own home.

The caller ID reads...Umi?
“Umi?”

“Nico-chan, it’s good that you answered.”

“Why, what did you need?”

“I’ve been calling Maki but her phone just goes to voicemail, and her voicemail is full.”

“Oh,” Nico says, a little surprised. “Maki just left my apartment like twenty minutes ago.”

“So she’s okay? Nothing is wrong?”

“Well I dunno, she has some stuff to deal with. What have you heard?”

Nico can hear Umi tapping her fingers against something through the phone, maybe a table.

“I had dinner with Rin and Hanayo tonight, and Rin mentioned Maki might not be feeling so well. She hasn’t returned any of our calls, so we were all getting worried.”

This was news to Nico.

“Not returning… she didn’t say anything about that. Maybe she just forgets. She’s really busy lately.”

“I certainly hope she’s just being forgetful in the moment. It’s concerning to us that she’s not being her usual self.”

“Actually I think the problem is that she’s being more of her usual self. It’s like she’s regressing, I guess.” Though she’d been the one to say it, Nico had never really thought of it that way before. Was Maki retreating into herself? It sounded way more dramatic than it probably was, but it was still worth a thought.

Umi hums in agreement. “It seems that way. Hanayo and Kotori also go to TokyoU, but they never see her and she doesn’t really make an effort to reach out. I’m beginning to wonder if we should do something about it.”

“I’m like ten steps ahead of you there, Umi-chan. I was talking to Nozomi about the whole thing a couple hours ago. We’ve decided the best way to deal with it is for me to just be there for her.”

“Oh, well it’s good to know that you two are on top of it. You know, Maki-chan and Eli-chan and I used to talk pretty often, just to catch up with each other. We both miss her. Just keep me updated, if you might?”

“Sure, I’ll text you if anything happens.”

“Thanks, Nico-chan. Say, why do you think she’s only hanging around you? I figured you two would still have clashing personalities.”

Nico raises her eyebrows. “Uh, really? I mean, Maki and I are pretty close, I like to think.”

“Oh?” Umi says, voice laced with surprise. “It’s going to sound bad, but I always imagined you’d be the last person Maki would go to during troubling times in her life.”

“Yeah,” Nico agrees, “that does sound bad.”

“Sorry, it just doesn’t seem logical to me.”
“Well Maki likes to pretend she’s the most logical person in the world, but she also believed in Santa until she was sixteen.”

“I suppose you’re correct,” Umi replies.

“Yeah, so, don’t worry about her too hard okay? Nico-nii has everything figured out, you can depend on me to make sure Maki doesn’t get too lost.”

“…”

“What? Did I say something dumb?”

“Well,” Umi mutters cautiously, “you and Maki don’t exactly have the best track record…”

Nico feels confusion again. “Huh? I mean, you know how I am about Maki, right? Nozomi told me it’s obvious…”

“What do you mean?”

“You mean you don’t… I mean, never mind. I’m serious about it, okay? Super idol Nico is on the case.”

“Hm. Okay well, if you ever need help I’m always around, and I’m sure Kotori is too.”

“I’ll remember, thanks. Bye Umi.”

Well that was an awkward conversation if Nico’s ever had one. Nico can’t decide if it’s Umi or Maki who’s more oblivious, but at least it’s funny when Umi can’t read other people to save her life. Maki is just frustrating.

It does warm Nico’s heart though, to know that their friends haven’t become to busy for each other. They’re all still here for Maki, there’s no way they can’t help her now. It’s just like old times, in a way. All working together for a good cause. The best cause, even.

Nico can handle it though, because Nozomi is right and Nico has always been there. Why does talking to Umi have to be so stiff and awkward though…

It’s no matter, really. Today has been productive, in terms of problems solving. Nico has a direction now, and she’ll fight Maki every step of the way if it means keeping a smile on her face.

Everything is Nico’s burden to bear, and she’s only grown stronger with every challenge she’s encountered.

Nico’s burden indeed.
Nico’s day off has gone pretty well so far, despite having issues getting to sleep with this whole...thing going on. She’s an early riser so it isn’t too bad when she doesn’t get enough sleep, and there’s a lot of work to be done when she isn’t at her actual job. Like taking care of the kids.

Her mother had recently picked up a second job, because working in the office doesn’t exactly pay enough for four people to live comfortably. This means there’s not usually anyone home to get things done around their place, so Nico volunteers her valuable free time and spends a few hours doing laundry, cleaning, and cooking for the rest of the Yazawas. Cocoro is old enough to watch her younger siblings now, but she still isn’t allowed to use the stove when nobody is around to watch her, and they can’t live on microwave food. Nico has a living example in Maki of what that does to a person, and it isn’t pretty.

The kids are always happy to see her, and they’re still her biggest fans even though she isn’t technically an idol anymore, and it cheers her up when they mimic her catchphrase back at her like clockwork. Her mother tells her they do it constantly when Nico isn’t over too, and she feels a little prideful about that.

So that was where she’d spent the morning, washing their clothes and dishes and making them well balanced lunches, and dinners to reheat later. Cotarou still doesn’t talk much, but he eats three times as much as he used to so Nico always has to make extra for him.

Just past noon, Nico says goodbye and heads to the grocery store because Maki has all of her food now. It’s really no big deal, since Nico has a bunch of extra coupons this week, but it’s an unexpected financial detour for someone who is stingy with even 1 yen coins. Coupons are a poor girl’s best friend, she likes to say to nobody in particular.

It occurs to Nico as she’s picking out a carton of eggs that she’s taken on something of a costly endeavor, providing food for two people on top of saving for three kids to go to college. It’s not impossible (nothing is truly impossible for Nico Yazawa) but she didn’t really think about it when she mentally committed herself to the task of feeding another human being. Her weekly grocery budget will have to be doubled. It’s for Maki, though. Think about Maki.

So, she puts two cartons of eggs in her basket this time, and counts the coupons in her purse before browsing the refrigerated fish. Nico absentely wonders if Maki herself has ever gone to a grocery store before, never mind actually shopping in one. Family Mart definitely doesn’t count, and neither does Starbucks. It seems like a life skill the Nishikinos might not have to worry about, since Nico’s
been at their house when they’ve had groceries literally delivered to their kitchen. And then they
don’t even have to cook any of it, they have a chef!

Whoever decided Maki could make it on her own needs to be fired. From where, Nico doesn’t
know, but they need to be.

She also doesn’t mean to imagine Maki as being so incompetent, but a lot of those rich girl
stereotypes are true about her and it’s a little bit funny, but only a little. Mostly it’s detrimental and
Nico should really do something about it, when they have time. Like, after Maki graduates. Maybe
she’ll have time for Nico then.

A short while later, the shopping basket is full, but Nico still ponders over buying a little cake or
something, just a pick me up for when Maki is extra miserable. But then she remembers she works at
a bakery cafe, and she can just bring home leftover cakes at the end of the day. Working there for so
long has since killed her sweet tooth, so she hardly ever grabs anything for herself.

The checkout line is sort of long, which is unfortunate for everyone about to get in line behind Nico,
because she’s definitely about to use at least fifteen coupons and she needs time to sort them out at
the register. Her purse is practically bursting with them, because she brings all of them just in case.

As usual, people groan and complain as she counts her coupons and struggles to do the math to make
sure she’s getting the best deal, and then she has to count her bills and her coins… okay, maybe she’s
being a little obnoxious, but pinching yen is important these days. Maybe the people behind her in
line should have got there earlier, the wait is definitely no fault of Nico’s.

She has a sneaking suspicion that everyone may or may not have applauded when she left, but it
doesn’t bother her. Nico-nii is on a mission way more important than whatever anyone else is doing.

When she gets home, Maki isn’t waiting there to surprise her outside the door. She’d half expected it,
but maybe she’s still in class. Nico really has no idea what her schedule looks like, besides that
there’s no time for anything except homework and studying. Asking about that at some point would
probably be a good idea.

Nico kicks her things off, puts her grocery bags down, throws her coat on the floor and -wait, are
those Maki’s shoes? There is definitely a pair of Maki’s shoes sitting on the mat by the door. Did
she… somehow forget them and go home in socks last night? They both had to have been way out
of it to not notice something like that, but there was no other explanation. Unless…

_No way._

Even though Maki can’t fit her whole body under it, Nico checks the kotatsu anyway. She’s not
there, she’s not hiding under any blankets in the living room, and there’s nowhere to hide in the
kitchen. She’s not locked in the washroom either, which means that Maki is probably in her bedroom
right now. The thought is oddly thrilling.

Her door is open and the main light is off, but there’s a glow coming from the corner, probably her
desk lamp. Nico can see the bed from the door, and she’s not sleeping there which is a surprise. She
steps into the room.

_Oh._

Sitting at Nico’s desk, face pressed extremely unattractively into a page of her text book is one
sleeping Maki Nishikino. Just sleeping, upright in the desk chair.

“Maki-chan?”

Leaning in to hover near Maki’s ear, Nico takes a deep breath.

“Maki-chan!”

“Ahh, what?!” Maki’s eyes fly open and she kicks out a leg, foot connecting with the wall behind the desk. Nico realizes what’s about to happen as the chair leans back and Maki’s arms shoot forwards trying to grab at the desk’s edge, but instead she grabs onto her textbook and continues to fall backwards.

Luckily Nico has what Mrs. Yazawa likes to call ‘mom reflexes’. As Maki falls backwards, Nico sticks her arms between the back of the chair and Maki, bending her knees and bracing herself as much as she can in half a second. The chair back hits the hardwood floor with a deafening thump and Maki’s upper half is in Nico’s arms while her legs are splayed out over the seat of the chair. It’s awkward and terrible for both of them.

“What the hell, why are you so heavy!” Nico grunts as she struggles to right the fallen redhead.

“I’m not heavy, you just have weak child arms,” Maki sneers, not at all trying to help.

“Seriously, can you just work with me for like a second!”

Maki crosses her legs in the air. “No.”

“I know you love being in Nico’s arms but she’s going to collapse if you don’t stand up.”

That’s enough to make Maki shimmy her legs down the seat of the chair and onto the floor, roll her body over and stand up. Nico stands herself up all the way and rubs at her elbows while mumbling curses under her breath, and Maki wipes lazily at her eyes as if she hadn’t almost nearly died. Well, maybe that’s an exaggeration, but Nico swears her life flashed before her eyes.

“So,” Nico begins, “why are you sleeping on my desk?”

“Well I didn’t mean to. I was studying, and honestly I should really get back to-”

“Wait, hold on, how the fuck did you even get into my apartment? What the hell is going on?”

For a moment Nico thinks Maki is about to ignore her question as she stands the chair back up and sits down in it. In Nico’s chair. At Nico’s desk.

Maki shrugs, uninterested in Nico’s confusion. “Nozomi gave me the spare key.”

“That bitch.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” Nico replies with an unusually high voice.

“Okay well, I really need to get back to work. I have a quiz in an hour,” Maki says as she flips her textbook back open.

“So you just came here to study for a dumb test? Don’t they have libraries for that shit?”

Maki pauses for a moment and turns to look at Nico. “So you don’t want me here? Is that what you’re saying?”
Nico flushes red and waves her hands around. “No! I mean, no, you can be here whenever you want. It was just unexpected? Coming home and you’re just...here?”

Maki continues to stare at her. “So then, it doesn’t matter why I decided to come here, right?”

“I mean I guess not, I was just wondering. Seems out of the way for you.”

Maki nods. “It is. But I like you, and I like it here. A good environment for me to relax in.”

“Eeeeyup, yeah, sure. Come over whenever. All the time. Anytime. Nico-nii always has time for Maki-chan.”

Nico’s eyes dart back and forth as Maki narrows her questioning gaze. “Are you okay, Nico-chan?”

Nico rubs the back of her neck and wills herself to stop turning even redder. “I’m fine, why would I not be fine? Wait, shouldn’t I be asked you that?” Nico wrinkles her nose and points an accusing finger at Maki. “You literally fell asleep reading, how many hours do you get a night?”

Maki shrugs and looks away. “Maybe four or five. It sounds worse than it is.”

“What?! Are you dumb? That’s how you get sick! Aren’t you supposed to be a doctor?”

“I’m a student, not a doctor.”

Nico sighs in exasperation. “That doesn’t make it okay! It’s not okay. You gotta cut the study time for some extra winks or you’re gonna sleep through the rest of university. I’m serious, you’re gonna hurt yourself, Maki-chan.”

Maki picks up a pen and starts taking notes, and Nico can’t tell if she’s really listening or not.

“Well what do you propose then? There’s never anywhere for me to sit on the train or I’d sleep on the way to and from school, and that takes up like two hours of my day.”

Maki could… well, should Nico even suggest it? She’s pretty good at making things worse for herself either way, at least if Maki agrees then Nico can keep a closer eye on her. That’s definitely a good excuse.

“You could stay over here. Like, on days where you especially need it maybe.”

Maki stops writing. Nico wants to die. She should never have said anything, Maki barely tolerates her most of the time anyway. OK so, like two minutes ago she straight up said she likes Nico, but why is she still quiet? Is it weird to suggest that? Does Maki know? Nico will have to change her name and move to -

“Sure, that sounds good. I’ll come back after my test this evening.”


“Thanks, Nico-chan. But now i really have to focus on this, so could you…?”

Right, she should leave Maki to do whatever it is she’s doing. Some biology thing.

“Of course of course. I have to put away the groceries anyway,” Nico says as she turns to leave. She stops for a second, resting a hand on the doorframe. “Hey Maki-chan?”

“Hm?”
“Can I make a long distance call on your phone?”

“Sure.” Maki pulls her phone from her pocket and tosses it to Nico before immediately touching pen to paper again. Nico fumbles a bit and almost drops it, but Maki doesn’t pay her any mind.

Nico sits down at her table and dials Eli’s number.


“It’s Nico. Would you mind keeping your girlfriend on a fucking leash?”

“Bwuah?”

Nico’s fingers grip the phone a little tighter than usual.

“Nozomi gave Maki my spare key! Nico’s tiny heart nearly gave out when she found Maki-chan in her room!”

“No, it’s almost five in the morning. Leave me alone.”

Oh, that’s right. The time difference is pretty big between Tokyo and Wisconsin. Maybe Nico should have checked that first, but she needs to deal with this now.

“Can you at least say something? Maybe Nozomi will listen to you, she needs to keep her nose out of my business unless I ask for help. You don’t just give out keys!”

“I literally don’t care right now, I have to get up for class in two hours. This couldn’t wait?”

“Righteous anger waits for noone, Eli. Tell her to stop!”

“Look, Nico, I know Nozomi can test your limits sometimes, but you need to get over your weird phobia of Maki figuring you out. You’re never gonna get anywhere. Also next time you tell me to put Non-tan on a leash, I’m hanging up on you. Good night.”

There’s a click and then a dead signal, and Nico is tempted to throw the phone across the room before she remembers it’s Maki’s. Nozomi and Eli are insufferable, the both of them. Clearly they don’t know what it’s like to be in Nico’s shoes, or they would understand her endless inner turmoil.

With the stinging feeling of rejection fresh in her mind, Nico puts her groceries away and tries to look as offended as humanly possible while doing so. Nobody is going to see it, but it makes her feel better to look like she’s mad at someone. As if it justifies how she feels.

When she’s done, she pulls out her laptop and sits under her kotatsu, determined not to disturb Maki but also tempted to check on her to make sure she hasn’t passed out again. Though Nico doesn’t flaunt her idol obsession very much anymore, she still has a daily ritual of catching up on all the latest news and gossip. Visiting no less than four different internet forums at least once a day is almost as essential as eating or breathing, she absolutely must know what Kira Tsubasa ate for breakfast this morning, and she has to watch every promo video from each of the new upcoming Love Live competitors so she knows which groups she actually needs to pay attention to. Sure, she could probably just ask Honoka what Tsubasa is up to these days, but that feels too easy.

Eventually, Maki wanders into the living room with her bookbag and starts to put her shoes on.

“You’re done? How long’s your test?” Nico asks.

“Only an hour I hope, but if it goes well then maybe I can finish and leave early. I’ll be back around
seven since I need to stay after to ask one of my professors something,” Maki answers as she puts her arms through her coat sleeves.

“Good luck Maki-chan, ace that test for Nico, okay?”

Maki smiles and Nico’s heart soars. “I’ll ace it for myself, but we can say I did it for you I guess.”

“Well at least you’re self-aware.”

“Bite me.”

Nico waves her out the door before returning to her forum perusing.

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Maki sighs as she finally lets herself leave her professor’s office. It’s already past seven, so Nico is probably wondering where she is. It’s not like she means to be late, but her school work is important to her so she strives to understand everything she’s taught in the clearest manner possible.

Her back still hurts from falling asleep in Nico’s chair. Hopefully that never happens again.

It’s refreshing to leave the campus and not have to take forty minutes of trains to get back to her own place for once. Time spent standing around on the train is time wasted, and though she does consider using the extra time to get ahead in her immunology course, she already knows she’ll get an earful from Nico if she tries to do anything that isn’t sleeping. As much as she hates to admit it, Nico is right and she’s going to make herself sick if she keeps doing what she’s doing. She doesn’t really know how to stop though, everything just seems to important to set aside for a couple extra hours of sleep. She already struggles to not fall asleep during lectures, even though everyone around her does it.

As she walks down the street past Nico’s workplace, Maki is struck with the thought that someone is at home, waiting for her. She isn’t going back to her big, lonely, empty apartment, and she knows Nico well enough to figure that she won’t be eating takeout for dinner again tonight either. It’s more stressful than she had anticipated, working alone with nothing but a piano for company, one that’s gone painfully unplayed since the day she bought it.

Visiting Nico’s place during her break had given her more relief than she thought she needed as well, though the circumstances of the visit were still a little mysterious. Nozomi had stopped by her place earlier than morning before she’d left for school to present her with the silver key, clipped to an oversized pink rabbit keychain. “I think Nicocchi would prefer you to have this,” was all she said before going on her way to wherever. Maki had just assumed it was a key to Nico’s apartment based on the dumb keychain, and she’d been right.

Obviously Nico didn’t know she would have the key, since she was so surprised Maki was there in
the first place. Nozomi is playing games again, and she isn’t sure why.

She reaches the end of her thought at same time she reaches Nico’s apartment, and she just about knocks before she remembers that she does, in fact, have her own key.

When she steps inside, she sees Nico setting something down on the kitchen table.

“Maki-chan! Welcome back. You should tell me all about your test, but first I made dinner and you’re late so come eat,” Nico gestures to the spread on the table. Steamed fish, a fresh veggie mix, and two big bowls of rice topped with egg. The table is set for two.

Nico is wearing the ugliest apron Maki has ever seen. It’s just plain white, but across the front in big hot pink block letters is ‘KISS THE COOK ♥’.

“Y-your apron is...I just…” Maki is trying to tell Nico she thinks the apron is gross, but she has a bubble in her throat and her eyes are starting to water.

Oh good, she’s crying.

“Maki-chan?”

Maki tries to swallow her tears but a few slip out and she has to sniff a little bit. She quickly dabs at her wet cheeks with her sleeves, but she knows she’s already been caught.

“This is just really nice. I haven’t… had this in a long time, Nico-chan. Thank you.”

Nico is giving her the sincerest look Maki thinks she’s ever seen, and she isn’t making a fuss about the tears. She’s just letting Maki feel. It’s almost like she hasn’t felt anything besides tired in more than a month. Maybe things really are getting as bad as Nico makes it seem…

After recomposing herself, Maki finally sits down at the table across from her twin-tailed companion, and they talk about everything from today’s text to how Nozomi managed to pass off the key to Maki. Nico seems a little peeved about it still, not so much that Maki has her key now, but that Nozomi so easily handed over the spare that Nico counts on if she ever locks herself out. It’s definitely happened once, because Maki remembers being in a group call where Nico screamed into the phone demanding to know who took her keys and complained about being stuck in the rain outside for hours. In the end, it turned out Nico had just left her keys at work, and the subsequent visits to literally anywhere with any of their friends had been an embarrassing mess of teasing and key puns.

When they’re done, Nico insists that she does the dishes herself even though Maki offers to help. Normally she’d make fun of Nico for being such a mom, but all she can bring herself to feel is overwhelming gratitude. She can still feel her body being tired, as it always is, but coming back to another living person, a homemade dinner; it’s much less mentally taxing and she can already feel the difference company makes.

When Nico is finished with the dishes, she declares that it’s bedtime and Maki is not allowed to fight her. She stuffs a handful of clothes into Maki’s arms and shoves her towards the washroom.

“Obviously none of my cutest sleepwear will fit you, but this should be fine.”

Maki raises an eyebrow. “Well maybe if you weren’t-”

“Four feet tall, I know. You need to come up with some new short jokes.”
“Maybe you should just get taller.”

Nico doesn’t reply, she just turns around and stalks off to her room. Maki wonders if nico keeps a tally for them somewhere, she’s sure she’s winning by a landslide.

After changing and thoroughly examining the bags under her eyes in the mirror, Maki leans in the doorway to Nico’s tiny room. There’s just enough space for the futon to fit on the floor beside the bed, but there would probably be more room if Nico hadn’t brought every pillow from the living room as well.

“I just want you to be comfy,” she stressed. “You need real people sleep, not half-assed student sleep.”

“One pillow is fine, Nico-chan.”

“But doesn’t your bed have like thirty pillows?”

Maki nods. “Mama says they’re decorative. I don’t really get it, because I just put them all on the floor when I go to bed anyway.”

Nico sits down on the edge of her bed and pulls out her hair ties. “Interior design is a challenge even for Nico, when her apartment is just a glorified shoebox.”

Maki flicks the light off and uses her phone to find her way down to the futon. “I kind of like it. It’s cozy.”

“I guess, if you’re into that sort of thing.”

Maki lies down and pulls the blanket up, listening to Nico do the same above her. Once they’re both settled, it’s silent. Maki’s apartment is quiet like this all of the time, but if she listens really closely she can hear gently breathing that isn’t hers. For the first time in weeks, Maki doesn’t feel crushing anxiety when she closes her eyes.

“Hey, Nico-chan?”

“Hm.”

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing? Like with school?”

There’s a pause for awhile, long enough that Maki thinks Nico might have fallen asleep. There’s a rustling of sheets though, probably Nico turning over.

“I don’t know Maki-chan. How do you know if it’s wrong until you do it?”

“I guess. I just want to know what you think.”

“I think you should do what you want. I’ll be here either way,” Nico mumbles, voice fading into tiredness.

Maki believes her. Maybe they can share the burden.

“Good night, Nico-chan.”

“Night…Maki…chan”

And the dark of the night envelopes them both.
Daydream Warrior

Chapter Notes

a bit of a delay with this one, classes have started back up again. shouldn't be a problem from now on though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nico has another day off today, but this time she doesn’t actually have anything to do. No kids, no shopping, no chores await her, and she feels better about the whole Maki situation even though she still seems so exhausted all the time. Even if it isn’t immediately apparent, the extra sleep is likely doing her a world of good. Even just two more hours.

Right now Nico is doing what she often does when there’s nothing else to do: lying around on the floor and watching her idol DVDs. Typically it’s whatever the newest up and coming group is, but sometimes she’ll pull out her old µ's ones and pretend she isn’t as sad as she really is when she watches herself dance across the stage. Even though she tries not to show it, she still feels the ache inside.

It’s not as if she wishes things could go back to the way they were. What µ's had was special, and they performed together for exactly as long as they needed to. There was a time before she graduated when Nico dreamed of an endless stage, but when they’d all finally stepped down they had stayed together, friendship stronger than ever before. Stepping out into the spotlight was surreal, and sometimes she feels like she imagined the entire thing - a whole year of her life as just a figment of her imagination.

They’d been so young, and now she felt so old. It’s silly to feel old at her age, but it’s likely that anyone would if they’d achieved as much as µ's had in such a short time. It was over, and yet she still longed for the sensation of fulfilling her innermost desires.

Reduced to a dream once again.

It was part of why she was so frustrated with Maki all the time. Always reaching, but never taking hold. Maybe Nico should hold her hand for a while, figuratively, but also maybe literally from time to time.

Nico is snapped out of her thoughts when Maki’s voice starts playing out through her phone. Nozomi is nowhere to be found, but Nico still glances around uneasily as it continues to ring. The caller ID is Rin.

“Hello?”

“Nico-chan!” Rin shouts into the phone as Nico pulls it away from her ear. She can hear Hanayo in the background telling Rin she should stop shouting whenever she calls someone, like she does every single time. Classic Rin.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Welllll Kayo-chin and I were just talking about how long it’s been since we’ve seen you, and
everyone else. And you know, Eli-chan is coming to visit over the holidays, nya…”

“Eli is a filthy traitor,” Nico grumbles into the phone. “Huh?”

“Nothing, nevermind. What are we doing?”

“A party! A riot! We’re gonna do karaoke until we pass out!” Rin shouts again. Before Nico can respond, there’s a scuffle and a few sharp whispers. When Nico hears a voice again, it’s Hanayo’s.

“W-what Rin-chan means to say, is that we’d like to have a get-together. Something low-key so that everyone is comfortable. Right, Rin?”

A disappointed cat noise echoes in the distance.

“I see,” Nico says, “and by the sounds of it you want me to bring Maki-chan?”

“Yes, if she’s willing. We know you’re looking after her, but we’re still worried and I’m sure everyone else would feel a little better if we could see her again.”

“Well, I can’t make any promises. I only just got her to sleep for real hours for the first time in forever.”

“Oh?” Hanayo pipes, voice laced with curiosity. “Did she stay over?”

Nico gripped the phone a little tighter. “Y-yeah but that’s not important! I practically had to force her okay, it’s not like she wants to!”

Hanayo’s laugh was bound to haunt Nico for the rest of the day. “Don’t take it so personally, Nico-chan. It’s not that serious.”

“Whatever.”

“Hm, well do you know when Maki-chan will be finished with her semester? Kotori-chan says things should be wrapping up the week before Christmas.”

Nico realizes yet again that she doesn’t actually know Maki’s schedule. Not when her classes are, how long they are, when she’s finished, nothing. Maki is just “at school” whenever Nico doesn’t know where she is, and that should be rectified.

“I actually have no idea, but she should be on the same schedule as Kotori I guess. Just different exam times.”

“Well, everyone else is free on the 24th during the day, what about you?”

Nico frowns. “Everyone else? So what you’re saying is you’ve already planned everything and now you just need me to convince Maki-chan.”

“Yep!” Rin interjects.

Nico listens to Hanayo scramble for the phone. “Rin-chan, don’t! She didn’t mean that!”

“Yes I did! We want to see Maki-chan!”

“Rin!”
Sometimes Nico wishes she could just hang up on her friends. “Both of you shut up!”

Silence, finally.

“You both realize Maki-chan’s gonna see right through this, right? She’s gonna figure it out in like two seconds and she hates being doted on or worried about or whatever. She hardly thinks anything is wrong! You think she’s just gonna listen because it’s me?”

“M-maybe…” Hanayo squeaks.

Nico doesn’t truly know whether or not Maki would listen to her. The whole thing just sounds like something that would be intensely offensive to the struggling independent Nishikino. Nico just imagines them all sitting in a circle at a restaurant, each of their friends grilling Maki one-by-one about how she’s feeling and if she’s okay. In every scenario, Maki flips the table and gets up to leave and never speaks to Nico again for setting her up while she’s so much more irritable than usual. And during her winter break, no less.

Alright so, maybe Maki wouldn’t flip the table over, but Nico still couldn’t see it going very well. But, she also knew that Maki really needed a break. And her friends, she probably needs them too. Nico’s love alone can’t keep Maki afloat, and the others deserve to see her too.

“Look, here’s the deal,” Nico begins. “I’ll convince Maki to come, but you both have to promise me that nobody’s gonna make a big deal about her… lifestyle. That sounds so fucking awful but I don’t know what else to call it.”

“T-that should be fine,” Hanayo stutters. “I’ll make sure to tell everyone. If it means Maki-chan will come, I’m sure everyone will listen.”

“Make sure Nozomi knows that if she doesn’t, I’ll literally put her in the ground.”

Nico listens to the phone change hands, again.

“That seems a little extreme, nya?”

“Well maybe if Nozomi wasn’t so extremely infuriating then I wouldn’t feel like physically fighting her all the time!”

Rin giggles. “Eli-chan told us you’re the infuriating one. She said you called her in the middle of the night for a stupid reason.”

“She told you?!” Nico gasps. “Are you all plotting together or something? And it wasn’t stupid, it was important!”

“So’s our party! So make sure Maki-chan comes, alright? Bye Nico-chan!”

Rin hangs up before Nico can blurt out any kind of comeback.

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Maki has been on campus since seven in the morning and she’s already running out of steam before noon. It’s not even like she’s physically tired or anything, but her brain keeps threatening to shut off and zone out every few minutes. While she genuinely does find her lectures interesting, she would
also finally agree that they’re incredibly boring. It was sort of exciting at first because Maki is the kind of person who is eager to learn, but now she’s only ever eager to leave.

Someone’s taken the seat by the nearest outlet and her laptop is almost out of battery. When she got her backup notebook out, she’d dropped her pen and it had rolled away into the abyss of the gap between the step down and the seats in front of her. One of the lights above her is flickering ever so slightly and someone two seats away from her is tapping their pencil over and over again on their desk.

Maki fiddles with the key in her pocket, the one with the rabbit keychain on it.

Though she still has trouble admitting it, the sleep she’d got at Nico’s had been the best and most satisfying she’d had in awhile. There was a very specific and welcome comfort in knowing that someone was physically there for her, and that they still would be when she got up in the morning, and when she dashed out the door for class. She used to get by just fine without talking to anyone at all when she was younger, but now she realizes it’s not a way of life she could ever go back to. Being alone for so long was also the reason she was so emotionally stunted, a fact not even she could dispute.

By trying to become what she thought independant meant, she’d locked away the part of herself that her friends had set free. It was still complicated though, because she still felt like she could work with what she had. She was still determined to accomplish what she’d set out to do, and make her parents proud.

Once upon a time, she’d taken the advice of Nico and Rin, who had suggested one day during her first year that she stop being so uptight and relax instead of working so hard whenever they weren’t practicing. Maki considered this to be a time when she was trying to figure out who she was and who she wanted to become, so she’d gone along with it and spent a week hanging around and trying not to worry so much about her grades. Perhaps it was a lack of studying, or maybe just the overwhelming stress she’d felt as she sat down to take a test at the end of that week, but something had short-circuited and her final mark was a miserable 68.

It was the lowest grade Maki had ever received, and her father had almost forced her to quit being an idol because of it. And she’d almost done it too, because of how absolutely awful she felt when she hadn’t even met her own standards.

Maki was the kind of person who wanted to be as perfect as possible. Not perfect perfect, but intellectually perfect. Her parents are both smart and therefore she should be as well. The Nishikinos are a name, after all. Why she followed Nico’s advice when it came to her schoolwork was still an absolute mystery, but feeling like a bit a rebel for a while had been nice, up until the crushing weight of her grade finally settled on her shoulders.

Once, Nico had borrowed Nozomi’s three sided pencil for a test and wrote one to three on it, one number for each side. For the entire multiple choice section, she’d rolled the pencil and then answered with whichever number ended up facing her. In an astonishing turn of events, she’d guessed correctly for the entire thing and scored above a 90 for the first time in her whole life. That was the kind of person she’d taken educational advice from, and she could still hardly believe it.

Maki snapped out of her thoughts as someone bumped her shoulder. Everyone was standing up and packing their bags, and Maki had stopped taking notes almost twenty minutes ago. That was the downside of not talking to anyone - she had nobody to get missing notes from. Hopefully the lecture would be online later at least.

She packed up her things and and the weird kid that followed her around presented her with the pen
she’d dropped.

“Thanks,” she said, before standing up and walking away as quickly as possible.

After the frustration of her early morning and her daydream memory, Maki felt like there was only one place she could truly go for her lunch break. Stepping out into the cool autumn air, Maki dug her phone out of her pocket and pulled up the only text conversation she was keeping alive.

Maki: i’m coming over

Maki: is that ok?

Nico’s reply was instantaneous.

Nico: lunch?

Maki: that would be ideal. my morning was kind of shitty.

Nico: i feel like every morning must be shit for you

Maki: only when i wake up at your house.

Nico: wow that’s cold. you’ve wounded me

Maki: you’ll get over it.

Nico: only you would beg me to make you lunch and then immediately insult me

Maki: i didn’t beg, you offered

Nico: same thing. i bought cherry tomatoes

Maki: i’m on my way.

Despite her exhaustion, Maki starts up a brisk pace, leaves crunching beneath her soft brown boots. Things are a little different now that she has somewhere to go. Her own apartment, though much bigger and nicer, populated by various luxuries she’s had all her life, is dreary and dull in comparison to Nico’s little hole in the wall. Embarrassed as she is about her understanding of people who are not as wealthy as her family, she’s never exactly cared for the frivolous extras in her life. There’s nothing wrong with having what Nico has. The Yazawas seem much happier all the time than her family, anyway.

What’s important is that Nico is there. When she thinks about how she can finally leave class and go to a home where someone, Nico, is waiting for her, making sure she eats and sleeps and has someone to talk to… a warmth, soft and gentle, settles in the pit of her stomach and her fatigue is forgotten. Maki is smiling before she even leaves the campus.

When she walks through the door, the first thing she sees is Nico picking up tiny tomatoes from the floor. As soon as she notices Maki is looking at her, kicked puppy mode engages and she pouts as if
they are her tomatoes that have gone to waste.

Maki raises an eyebrow.

“Really?”

Nico scowls. “I stubbed my toe on the stupid table leg.”

Maki looks around. “All of them? You dropped all of them?”

“No! Only like, ninety percent of them. I hate myself.”

“No you don’t.”

Nico stands up. “You’re right, I just hate tables now. I did manage to get some in your salad at least.”

Nico gestures to said table, a plate of various sandwiches and the aforementioned salad set out at Maki’s usual seat. There are two cherry tomatoes in it.

“I can’t believe this,” Maki says.

“Sit down and eat your fucking tomatoes!” Nico growls.

Really, it’s hilarious, but pretending she’s upset about it is way more fun. Provoking Nico is one of the best ways for her to take her mind off of school, and it’s astonishingly easy because Nico’s favourite pastime is likely provoking her back.

She does sit down and pick up a few sandwiches, watching Nico toss the spoiled food into her garbage can. At least she isn’t wearing the horrible apron this time. Not long after Maki is munching away, Nico sits down across from her with a piece of cheesecake.

“Really, Nico-chan?”

Nico stabs the cake as if it has wronged her in some way. “Leave me alone, I deserve this.”

“Someone’s grumpy,” Maki observes. “You sound more like me today than usual.”

“Everything was fine until I dropped the tomatoes.”

“You don’t even like tomatoes, did you get them just for me?”

Nico nods, still frowning even as she chews on her cake.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. It’s just fruit.”

“But I got them for you!”

“Yes,” Maki agrees, “and I’ll enjoy all two of the ones I can eat. It’s nice, thank you.”

That shuts Nico up for a while. It’s probably not so much that she ruined something she did for Maki as much as it is that Nico hates being clumsy at any capacity. Her laziness is intentional, calculated, but accidents are not things that Nico-nii does. Meanwhile, Maki consistently trips over her own furniture when she’s at home and in one of her paranoid homework states, but nobody is there to see it so it definitely hasn’t actually happened.

“Hey, Maki-chan.”

“Hm?”
“I can see your eye bags through your makeup. Did you pick the wrong shade or something?”

Maki pokes at the skin below her right eye.

“No, I think they’re just worse. Probably stress related.”

“Maybe you should try being not stressed,” Nico suggests helpfully. “You’re gonna get pimples too you know.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll just become not stressed. That’s definitely how that works.”

Nico inspects her nails. “Don’t get sassy, princess Nishikino. Obviously I mean you should do something that isn’t stressful for once in your life.”

“You’re pretty stressful,” Maki snaps. “I could start by going to my actual home instead of listening to you talk at me.”

“But you want to see Nico, right? That’s why you came over.”

Nico is back to pouting, with her big red eyes and deep dark lashes.

Maki sighs and picks at her salad, shoving the tomatoes aside for later.

“I guess. Maybe.”

Nico starts leaning towards her, closer and closer, eyes locked with hers. The table is small, so it doesn’t take much for her to lean her whole body across it. Her grin is huge and bright, with a tinge of satisfaction. She winks, and Maki can’t hold her own smile in any longer. They start laughing at the same time and Maki nearly drops a tuna sandwich down the front of her shirt.

“So!” Nico begins as she leans back in her chair. “Why do you look like your cat died or something?”

“Exams are coming up soon,” Maki replies.

“Gross. How soon is soon?”

“A few weeks. Technically we haven’t really started going over that yet, but I want to get-”

“Good grades, yeah yeah. Have you ever tried just getting a ‘B’?”

Maki rolls her eyes. “Have you ever tried just getting an ‘A’?”

“Oi!” Nico wags her finger at Maki. “I did just as well as I needed to! I graduated and everything.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either.”

“Oh ha ha. I should have failed two years just so I could be in your class and bother you all day.”

Maki finishes off her sandwich and puts her chin on the back of her hand, resting her elbow on the table. “Thank goodness you didn’t do that, right? I have to count the little blessings.”

Nico shoves more cake in her mouth before continuing the conversation.

“Really though, Maki-chan. This exam stuff, is it gonna be super awful? Like what do you have to do?”
“Probably become an antisocial hermit for four weeks and drink a lot of coffee. Can you show me how to use your coffee maker?”

Nico considers it for a moment.

“No, I don’t think I should give you that kind of power. But seriously, how are you not gonna die? Where are you gonna do this hermit thing?”

Maki shrugs. “The library?”

“There’s a perfectly good key in your pocket, you know.”

There is. If she were to be honest, Maki hadn’t really considered using Nico’s apartment for much else besides periodical breaks. The one time she’d ended up at Nico’s desk had been something of a fluke when she fell a little behind. It was a possibility though. At Nico’s, there were no weird people lurking around or looking at her or talking behind her back. It was quiet, not lonely, and she didn’t feel like she was trapped there like she did whenever she was anywhere on campus nowadays.

“There is. I could use it more often, I guess.”

Nico looks satisfied with that answer. Whether or not she’ll follow through...well, who is she kidding, of course she will. The library is awful.

“Oh yeah,” Nico says as she leans forward. “Another thing. You doing anything during the day on Christmas Eve?”

“I don’t think so, maybe sleeping. Why?”

Nico winces a little and looks contemplative before continuing.

“Well, Eli is coming back for a bit and everyone is kinda getting together. So like, if you’re not dead then we should go hang out. It’s been a while.”

Nico sounds oddly suspicious. Her poker face isn’t as horrendous as Umi’s, but it’s still pretty terrible.

“I feel like I’m being scammed,” Maki deadpans. “But I still miss everyone. I can’t just hang out with you for the rest of my life, I need some variety.”

“Wait, you’ll come?”

“Did you think I would say no? It’s during the break, it should be fine. I probably can’t stay late because my parents will want me over for dinner. But I can go, for a little while.”

Nico visibly relaxes. It’s a little odd that she was tense about it, and maybe Maki will regret it later, but she’s not completely heartless. She’s not fooled though.

“Want to tell me why you’re being so awkward about it?”

“I’m not!” Nico practically shouts. Maki just looks at her, entirely expressionless for a good ten seconds or so. Nico is so easy.

“Okay okay, stop doing that. I just didn’t want to bother you with it. Sometimes the others call me to ask me how you’re doing and I just figured you wouldn’t want to deal with that. I made them promise to leave you alone about everything, so I’m sure it’s fine.”
Oh, so that’s it. To be completely fair, Maki had made a point of ignoring all of the calls and texts she’d received from anyone except Nico because they would likely just distract her. Nico would inevitably badger her for eternity so she couldn’t be ignored for long without being offended, but eventually Umi and Rin had given up trying to call her after she let her voicemail fill up. She didn’t mean to make it worse, it was just easier.

If she’s learned anything from Nico though, the easier way isn’t usually the right one.

It was probably correct to assume that being bothered about how she was living her life would make her not want to be there, and Nico had already thought of that. It’s still fun to piss her off though.

“You really think I’m that shallow, Nico-chan?”

“What?!” Nico shouts. “No, I didn’t say that!”

Maki starts twirling her hair. “It’s implied.”

“Imply my ass! Don’t forget whose table you’re at, nerd.”

Maki hummed a laugh and then checked the time.

“I have to go, next class is coming up.”

Nico nods and then gets up and pushes a button on the coffee maker.

“To be clear,” Nico says as she points at Maki, “I’m not encouraging this. But you clearly need it, and Nico is a provider.”

She takes out the travel mug and fills it to the top before gesturing to her container of sugar. Maki shakes her head no and Nico grimaces.

Maki gathers her things and accepts the warm mug. Nico starts fidgeting with her pigtails, it’s kind of cute but it also typically means she’s unsure about something.

“Nico-chan?”

Nico turns around and faces away from Maki.

“Well, Maki-chan, with exams coming up and all the studying garbage and whatever, maybe you should be a bit more responsible with your time?”

Maki slings her bag over her shoulder. “I’m sure you’re itching to share your wisdoms with me. What do you suggest?”

“Maybe you should come back here tonight. You know, to save time.”

To save time.

It would save her valuable time. But it would also just be nice. It’s okay to do things you want to do just because it’s nice, right? It would seem that Nico is something of a magnet lately.

“Okay.”
That night, after yet another homemade meal, Maki lies wide awake on the futon on Nico’s room again. Nico has already drifted off and her soft snores carry themselves to Maki’s ears. It’s warm, Nico has started turning her heat on to keep up with the weather, and she’s given Maki more blankets than she knows what to do with. There had been a pit stop to her mother’s place at some point to gather all the extras, so now Maki definitely knows Nico was going to ask her to stay over anyway.

It’s nice to feel wanted. At school, she feels like everyone else just wants her to go away, or stop making them look like bad students. Something, who knows.

Maybe Nico doesn’t have a dryer, or a piano, or even a couch, but her apartment feels more like home than the one she actually pays to live in. It’s somewhat depressing to realize that even when you can have everything you want, you’re still missing something. Maki purses her lips as she considers the idea that Nico is her missing piece, but it feels weird to think about. Nico is her closest friend, but there’s something else about the metaphor that eats away at her on the inside.

Nico is something, but she’s not sure what.

Chapter End Notes

if you don't play SIF yet then you really should, because the whole Nico pencil thing is absolutely stolen from the storyline. Maki's low grade episode comes from the manga, where her father did actually try to make her quit.
so you know Ashirene, another wonderful author and my pre-reader/editor? we live in the same city and we met up the other day at a starbucks and spent like four hours talking about LL. she’s definitely the eli to my nico!

anyway, here's a chapter.

(also i found quite a few errors in my last chapter, which i'll eventually fix. just spelling issues.)

Nico’s internal clock wakes her up before eight. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she arches her back and stretches out her legs before remembering that there is someone else sleeping in her room again.

Maki is there, down beside her.

She carefully rolls over, blankets shuffling about as she peers over the edge of the bed to look at the girl on the floor. It’s a struggle not to laugh, really. Maki is starfished out on the futon, limbs splayed every which way and hair askew. The numerous blankets Nico piled on her are shoved to the side and her head is just barely on the corner of the pillow, but the funniest part is that her mouth is wide open and Nico is also fairly sure she’s drooling. Maki definitely isn’t a morning person.

Nico looks at the time on her phone and decides she may as well make herself useful, tempting as it is to linger and stare at the redhead on her floor. Maybe a few photos will be fine, it’s too good to pass up. She pushes her blankets back and lowers her feet carefully to the floor, only a few inches from Maki’s arm.

Maneuvering around Maki isn’t too difficult, because Nico is small and barely weighs anything, so she escapes the room with ease. Maki doesn’t even flinch, or make a noise, nothing. She just lies there with her legs all over and her mouth wide open. It’s almost gross even, but it doesn’t stop Nico’s heart from beating any faster. It’s a terrible place she’s put herself in.

Nico makes her way to the kitchen and puts on her lovely apron, which Maki seemingly hates more than anything else Nico owns, since she constantly threatens to put it in the garbage or set it on fire. She doesn’t bother tying up her hair before she gets to work at the stove. Eggs, flour, milk, some vanilla… she lists off the ingredients as she imagines what Maki’s reaction will be when she wakes up.

As far as Nico knows, Maki either eats nothing or a pack of flavoured bread from seven eleven every morning, but nothing is probably closer to the truth. Something more solid would probably be appreciated, especially from a world class chef like Nico. She definitely makes the cutest pancakes she’s ever seen, though she’s only ever made them for her siblings, who love absolutely anything she does. But still.

It doesn’t take long for Nico to whip up a breakfast she thinks is fit for a Nishikino, and Maki walks in just as she finishes drawing a heart on a stack of fluffy pancakes with a tiny tube of pink icing.
Maki looks terrible, as she usually does in the morning. Or most of the time lately, but the morning is particularly bad even on a good day.

Instead of even acknowledging the breakfast banquet before her, Maki stretches and yawns, her too small shirt borrowed from Nico riding up to reveal her stomach. Nico had accidentally bought a shirt in the wrong size a long while back, and while it was too big for her, it was still a little small on Maki. Specifically in the chest area, but Nico tried not to think about that too much. Still a sore spot after all these years.

Nico watches as Maki wanders past the table and bumps into the counter. She groans oddly before pulling the coffee maker to her chest and looking at Nico with lost, sad eyes. Of course, the coffee.

Nico walks over and pries the machine from Maki’s lazy arms, instructing her to sit at the table and be a good girl. While waiting for the coffee to make itself, Maki stares at nothing in particular, eyes barely staying open. It’s a little weird. As soon as Nico pours her a mug, her hands reach out and grab for it.

“God, you’re like an actual baby,” Nico mutters. “I can’t believe you’re like this.”

Maki ignores her and takes a swig of the scalding drink without even flinching. Nico sits down at the table across from her and ignores what Umi might call ‘table etiquette’, digging in without waiting up for Maki to fully wake up. It’ll happen eventually.

It takes until Nico is through her first pancake before Maki finally joins the waking world. She puts the mug down on the table but still holds the handle with a vice grip and her eyes flutter and widen as she finally takes in what Nico has done for her. Clearly Nico has outdone herself this time, because it takes a good moment before Maki finds any words.

“What is this?” she deadpans.

Nico drops her fork. “Really? That’s the first thing you say?”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Nico slavess over a hot stove for… for a long time, just to make you her special breakfast with her special pancakes, and all you say is-”

“Why’d you draw a heart on it?” Maki interjects. She picks up a fork and pokes at the fluffy golden brown cake.

“Because it’s cute! Sometimes Nico can’t believe how rude Maki-chan is. It’s not even noon yet.”

Maki shrugs and shoves a bit of the pancake in her mouth. “I have to keep a tight schedule, may as well get picking on you out of the way first.”

It looks like she’s about to continue, but she stops for a moment, and Nico presumes it’s to savor her culinary creation.

“You know, Nico-chan,” Maki says plainly, “I don’t know what I’d be doing without you.”

Nico finally feels like giving her a smile. “Burning down your kitchen?”

“Likely,” Maki nods in agreement.

It’s quiet for a little bit, and Maki helps herself to the bowl of strawberries between them on the table.
There’s no tears, no overwhelming gratitude, not even a real thank you. It’s not even really a backhanded compliment, but Nico can see through Maki blindfolded and it’s clear that she appreciates it. Or at least Nico really hopes she does, because she’s still eating it. Either way, she’s just happy that Maki is here with her, and not wasting away somewhere in Roppongi.

“I have to support Maki-chan, after all. She’ll never make it without Nico,” Nico says with confidence.

“Make it where?”

Nico pushes around some eggs on her plate and glances at Maki.

“Anywhere.”

When Maki doesn’t look away, Nico knows they’re having some kind of moment again. It’s the kind where they’re both thinking, and while Nico knows she’s thinking about blurring out her feelings, she would much prefer to know what Maki is thinking, about her. If she’s even thinking about her. Every time something like this happens, they never talk about it later. Nico also knows it never happens with anyone else. Just her and Maki.

Maki’s gaze wavers and she peers down at her hands in her lap. Nico wants to reach out, to touch her arm and tell her it’s okay even though she’s not sure what’s going on in Maki’s head, but she doesn’t. This isn’t like the hug, where reacting was easy because Maki was the one who set the boundary. It’s just another one of the many times where one of them could do something, say something, but Maki won’t and Nico won’t and they return to square one again. Square one of what, though? Nico needs the answers.

But she also needs to do what’s right for Maki.

“Don’t you have class soon? Should you go?”

Maki shoots up and looks at the clock on the wall above the table before running back to Nico’s room to get changed, without saying a word. Nico suddenly feels about as miserable as Maki looks, because now she’s the one avoiding the unspoken question when she doesn’t know what to do. It must be hard to be Maki, to be like that all the time. To be unsure.

Of course, Maki is unsure about her future, not about Nico. It’s different.

Maki rushes back out of the room while slinging her book bag over her shoulder, not even bothering to conceal the bags under her eyes before heading to the door. She barely gets her shoes on before stepping outside into the chilly morning air.

“Bye, Nico-chan.”

Nico waves as her door swings shut and then slumps in her seat. The whole breakfast thing could probably have gone better, but Maki has something of a one track mind and it’s the most frustrating thing in the world, especially now. Nico’s gaze settles on Maki’s half-eaten stack of pancakes, the pink heart smeared and melted. She can’t let herself get discouraged, though. Maki herself even just said she didn’t know where she would be without Nico, so Nico has a duty to fulfill.

Of course Maki would be lost without her, obviously.

Nico lazily finishes off the bowl of strawberries before cleaning up the table and getting dressed, tying up her hair just as her phone starts ringing. She decides that people have been calling her too much these days, but she’s curious when she doesn’t recognize the number, so she answers anyway.
“Hello, super idol Nico-nii here! How can I help you?” she says cheerfully.

“Is this Nico Yazawa?” a woman’s voice comes through, and Nico thinks it sounds a little familiar.

“Yes, that’s me. Who can I say is calling?”

“Oh good, it’s Mrs. Nishikino. I was worried you wouldn’t pick up.”

Maki’s mother? Why would she be calling Nico of all people?

“I’m so sorry to bother you Nico, but I’m not sure what else to do. We haven’t heard from Maki in weeks, and she never answers her phone. I’ve tried leaving voicemails, but she never gets back to us.”

Nico is reminded of Umi saying the same thing to her not long ago. “Really? She doesn’t like, call you or anything?”

“No, she doesn’t. We were worried so we stopped by her apartment a couple days ago during her off hours, but she wasn’t there. She wasn’t in yesterday either, that or she wasn’t answering the buzzer. I’ve been calling around to the other parents and your mother mentioned she was spending time with you at least, and she gave me your number.”

Nico isn’t sure what to say, really, because Maki hasn’t said anything about her parents that she can recall. Nothing positive, nothing negative.

“Uh, yeah, I see her sort of often I guess? I’ll make sure to tell her to clean out her voicemail, maybe she just didn’t notice it’s full,” Nico says, trying not to sound awkward.

Maki’s mother lets out what sounds like a sigh of relief. “Okay, good. We just haven’t heard anything in so long. Do you know if she’s doing well at the university? Has she been eating right? I hope she isn’t working too hard, I’m sure you know how she is.”

Nico’s mind runs a mile a minute as she realizes she has a choice to make, and only several seconds to make it. It’s hard to imagine that Maki would be ignoring her parents on purpose, but she can’t think of any excuses in Maki’s stead. First ignoring her friends, and now her family? But why? There must be a good reason for it, or at least a reason that Maki would consider reasonable, though Nico isn’t sure what reasonable might mean to her anymore. Apparently it’s ‘reasonable’ to subsist on flavoured bread packets now, so who knows.

She thinks about how little Maki sleeps, how much time she spends buried in her books, how grumpy and pale she looks when she comes over after class.

Why would she hide it from her parents?

It’s not even noon yet, Nico doesn’t have the brainpower to problem solve on the spot. Her best option is probably saving Maki from her stupid self, again.

“She’s fine, Mrs. Nishikino,” Nico finally answers. “I think she can handle it. She’s just really busy.”

Nico doesn’t like to think of it as a lie, but it kind of is. Maki is busy, that much is true. It’s better not to worry her family though. Maki doesn’t need the added stress that comes with phone calls from home, they’re not like the Yazawas. She wonders if maybe her dad said anything to her to deter her from communicating literally anything about her life to them, it’s not that unlikely.

“It’s a relief to hear that from you, Nico,” Mrs. Nishikino says. “We used to talk every week but it’s
been so long… I’m sure she’s just very focussed on her schoolwork. Let her know that I called, will you?”

Nico nods. “Of course, Mrs. Nishikino. You don’t have to worry.”

Goodbyes are exchanged and Nico gets to work doing her chores and paying her bills, anything to occupy her mind before she has to bring the whole parents thing up with Maki. Why does it always have to be Nico? Is she Maki’s secretary now or something? She dreads making a phone call she already knows Maki probably doesn’t want to deal with. But there’s got to be something going on, something that needs to be resolved.

Nico frowns as she goes through her bills and her budget. The margin for error is a bit worrying, and she doesn’t want to cut her already minimal payments to the college funds for her siblings. Something will have to change fairly soon. At least she didn’t go over her data plan again.

“Maybe if Maki paid for her own food…not like she doesn’t have the money…” Nico mutters to herself. She won’t ask for it though, she can’t. It’s not like Maki asked her to cook for her or buy her decent food, Nico volunteered and she has a reliable image to upkeep. She’ll chalk it up to an expensive lesson in being a sucker for cute redheads that don’t have any basic life skills. Nico can handle it, what’s the worst that could happen?

Nico finishes up her payments before ripping up her statements and tossing them in the recycling bin under the sink. Now is a good a time as any, probably. She pulls out her phone.

Nico: hey maki-maki-maaa, are you busy now

Nico hopes she’s not interrupting anything important, but she doubts it considering what Maki’s told her of her classes. Boring and long.

It’s not long before she gets an answer.

Maki♥: class is just wrapping up. why?

Nico: can i call you

Nico: like right now

Maki♥: i guess so?

Nico takes a deep breath, and dials.

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Maki isn’t sure what’s so important that Nico has to call her right now, immediately. The professor has only just finished speaking and her classmates are standing up around her, packing bags and calling friends with lunch plans and everything else Maki doesn’t do. It’s good that she checked before making the call though, because Maki definitely forgot to put her phone on silent and that could have been awfully embarrassing.

Though the lecture hadn’t been intellectually stressful, she could still feel an oncoming migraine in the back of her head. They’d been more frequent lately, which was annoying, but she was getting
better at ignoring it. At least she thought she was. Her phone starts to ring just as she puts her laptop in her bag.

“Hey, Nico-chan,” she says, a little mindful of the people around her who are looking her way, likely because they’ve never heard her talk to anyone before. It’s not her fault she has nothing to say.

“Maki-chan, how’s class? Are you still alive?”

“It’s fine, just dull. I’m definitely not dead.”

“Oh, okay. Well that’s good.”

They pause for a moment.

“Nico-chan? Is there a reason you’re calling?”

“Yes! There is in fact a reason,” Nico says a little loudly.

What’s up with her?

Maki’s eyes drift to her text book and she starts trying to put it in her bag with one hand. “And that would be?”

“Oh, well, my mom just mentioned that she talked to your mom recently. Like today, this morning.”

Maki nearly drops her book. “Ah. And you’re telling me because?”

“I don’t know,” Nico replies, “she didn’t say anything specific. Do you know why she’d call my mom though?”

Maki closes her eyes and breathes in. “No idea. Moms talk all the time, it’s probably nothing.”

“Right, nothing,” Nico affirms.

Nothing.

Maki wants to hang up. She knows why her parents are calling around, and she knew it would happen eventually, but it was easier not to think about. Her parents were a problem for future Maki. Except not, because it’s happening now.

It’s not like she meant to ignore her parents. Or her friends. Or anyone not named Nico. It was just easier in the moment, to push them aside and soldier on. She didn’t mean to hide anything. She could make it on her own, right?

Except she knew that she couldn’t. The last conversation she’d had with her father hadn’t gone so well, when she mentioned how worried she was about an upcoming test, back when she’d first decided to keep in contact with Nico. Nico, who would at the very worst judge her for choosing medical school over music, who happened to be magically there for her whenever she needed it, who made her eat and sleep and treated her like a real person and not an accessory to a hospital.

Trying to confide in her parents had been a bad idea, because her father was still worried about Maki’s wavering loyalty to her predetermined future. It wasn’t subtle disagreement, it was more like some kind of threat with no spoken consequences. Keep up your grades, top your class, become the best in your field. He’d gone full throttle the day after she’d left Otonokizaka, because now she had no excuse to pay attention to anything else. The idol days were over.

Constant calls plagued her, asking about what classes she was taking, how much time she was
spending studying, if she was in the top percent of every class or not. If not, why not? She doesn’t have a job, she just needs to study. Study harder, get better. No time for friendships, no time for family values. It hadn’t taken long for the anxiety she felt for incoming phone calls to develop into fear. Scared to answer her own phone? To talk to her own father? Pathetic.

And then Nico, always nudging her about what she really wants to do with her life. It’s not very fun to deal with recurring thoughts of what could have been, but Nico doesn’t know any better, she doesn’t understand the situation. There’s a duty that comes with being the only child of two Nishikinos that Nico isn’t aware of. Part of why it’s so nice to stay over at Nico’s is that she doesn’t have to see the piano she never played, a housewarming gift from her mother that her father expected her to ignore.

And then her friends… she feels way worse for ignoring them, but her fear of failure is stronger than her need for them, at this point. The weight of her decisions - of her parents’ decisions made for her-keep her down. It was never supposed to be this way, she was supposed to be satisfied. Content in where her life is going. She knows she’s privileged. Attractive, wealthy, smart, you name it. So why does she feel so awful all the time?

“Maki-chan? Are you still there?.”

“Yes,” her voice wobbles. Not now, please. Any time but now.

“Okay so,” Nico starts, “I kind of lied. Your mom actually called me.”

Maki hangs up and hopes her hand will stop shaking. Of course, Nico calls back seconds later and Maki stares at the screen trying to compose herself and think of an excuse for why she suddenly hung up like an idiot.

“Maki-chan! What the hell!” Nico yells when she answers.

Come on Maki. You can talk to her. It’s just Nico.

“I-I’m sorry. Accidently hung up. I have to leave now though.”

“No! You don’t hang up on Nico and pretend you didn’t mean it! What’s going on?”

“Well I’m sure you know, if you spoke to my mother,” Maki snaps, though she immediately regrets it.

“ Excuse me for being concerned. What is wrong with you, seriously?!“ Nico shouts back.

“Nothing is wrong with me!” Maki yells, and lingering classmates turn to look at her. She does her best to ignore them. “You’re the one who lied about my mom calling you, Nico.”

“So what’s worse? Me lying about that for two seconds or you ignoring your friends and family for eternity for some mystery reason?”

Maki’s eyes dart around and she stands up with her bag. She can hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

“It’s none of your business. You wouldn’t understand,” she says as she struggles to keep her thoughts in check.

“Then make me understand! I thought I was getting through to you but you’re still determined to make your own life suck as much as possible.”
“D-don’t you think I know it’s my fault? All of this is my fault,” Maki is barely taking breaths between words now, she feels like she wants to explode and her head has started pounding.

“What? What do you mean ‘all of this’? All of what?” Nico asks.

“Everything. The way I feel, the way you feel, the way my parents and our friends feel. It’s all me, I’m the one making everyone worry, disappointing my parents and disappointing you! Everywhere I look I feel like I’m failing. I can’t even be honest with myself, Nico! I hate this, I hate what I’m doing!”

“Maki-chan, I-”

“No, you don’t understand! You don’t know what it’s like to really fail. Everything works out fine for you because nobody has any expectations for Nico. I have so much I’m supposed to live up to, so much I’m supposed to be,” Maki’s voice cracks and she can feel the tears streaming down her cheeks, but she can’t stop now. Everything is all coming out at once

“You think it’s easy! You think it’s so easy, but you can do anything. I’m going to be like this forever. It’s doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t just be happy all the time like you!”

“Maki-chan,” Nico manages to interrupt, “you’re breathing, like, really crazy right now.”

Nico is right, she is. It’s erratic and her face feels disgusting from the tears she can’t stop. Her heart is racing, her head is killing her, and she’s let her guard down in the worst possible way.

“I-I c-can’t. I d-don’t-”

Maki doesn’t really know what she’s trying to say, or what she wants to say. She can’t stop the breathing.


“Yes,” Maki says, but it comes out as a high pitched whimper. Most of the students have left, but there are a few there watching her, and noticing them has just made her feel worse.

“Okay, don’t worry, don’t worry Maki-chan. Is it far to outside? Just focus on getting out, don’t look at anyone. Just get your stuff and go out.”

“Mhm,” Maki squeaks out. She sniffs and her whole arms is shaking but she picks up her bag and walks as quickly as she can out the door and down the hall, all the while listening to Nico, who is just talking to her, at her, just saying words for her to listen to.

Everything is just too much. Keeping her life from her parents, avoiding the truth about how she really feels, putting Nico in such an awkward position… lying….it’s all her fault. She never thought it would come to this. It’s only her first year. The first year of the rest of her life.

She makes it outside.

The cobblestone walkways sound impossibly loud under her feet and she feels so utterly lost.

“Nico-chan?”

“I’m here, I’m here. Are you outside? Go somewhere quiet, go behind a tree. There are lots of trees on campus right?”
Maki tries her best not to look at other students as she speed walks off the walkway and into a grassy shaded garden of sorts, to the side of the building she just walked out of. She drops to the ground and puts her free palm to her forehead as soon as gets around to the back of the tree. She struggles to stop the sniffing and the tears, but it’s hard. So very hard.

"Maki-chan? Are you with me?"

"Y-yes. I’m here."

"Okay okay, everything’s fine. Just try to breathe, slowly. I’m not going anywhere."


Her chest hurts from the heaving, and her nose is still running, but nobody is looking at her anymore. But her responsibilities, her obligations, they won’t go away and-

"Don’t think about it. Whatever it is, it’s not important. Just let it go."

Maki does listen. She closes her eyes tightly and wills her thoughts away as her breathing slows. It’s okay. It’s okay to make mistakes.

"Maki-chan, I’m here for you, you know that right? No matter what," Nico says, voice unwavering. "It’s not you against the world. We can work on it together, okay? I’m sorry I yelled at you."

Neither of them say anything for a while, until Maki’s heart has finally slowed and she finds her voice, quiet and tired. It’s rough and scratchy, but her tears are drying and she needs to say something.

"Thank you, Nico-chan," she croaks. "I didn’t realize - I mean I didn’t know I would -"

"You never really see it coming, those kinds of things," Nico says softly. "Nico had to deal with it a lot, back when papa passed away. Chronic problem for a while."

Maki hadn’t known that about her.

"I’m sorry."

"It’s nothing, don’t worry. It was a long time ago. Look, Maki-chan, I really think you should-"

"Come over?"

"Yeah. Like right now."

Maki sighs. "I have another class, I can’t."

"Yes you can," Nico stresses. "Get the notes later. Come home, Maki-chan."

She rubs at her eyes and grabs at her hair. What does she have to lose now, anyway? Everything is out in the open.

"I’m coming."

The cold air seeps into her bones.
When Maki steps through Nico’s door, she’s worried for a second that she might have to explain herself. Her outburst, her breakdown, whatever she called it made it sound so terrible.

But Nico is just sitting on the floor under her kotatsu, looking up at Maki with sympathetic eyes and a gentle smile. Relief is the only word she can use to describe what she feels when she realizes Nico isn’t going to say anything about it, or convince her to talk. Maki considers going to the washroom to clean her face up, but she doesn’t really want to see what she looks like right now.

Nico lifts up the blanket on the floor next to her. An invitation.

Maki drops all of her things, her coat, her bag, her burden. She slide her shoes off and puts them neatly by the door.

She breathes deeply, calmly, and joins Nico on the floor, sitting next to her under the heated table close enough that their sides press together from knees to shoulder. Nico picks up the remote and turns on another A-Rise DVD. Maki doesn’t really care about what’s on, or what she’s supposed to be doing for the rest of the day. She doesn’t think about her homework, the exams that are starting all too soon, her parents.

All she needs right now is the warmth beside her. She has to slouch a little to do it, but she rests her head on Nico’s shoulder and closes her aching eyes.

There’s a new tightness around her waist- an arm.

She drifts off just after Nico puts µ's on the TV.
In the days that follow Maki’s breakdown, neither of them talk about it. It’s not that Nico doesn’t want to know or help, but she’s worried that bringing it up will shut Maki down even more than she already is. They never discussed it, but Maki hasn’t left Nico’s place since skipping class over a week ago. Well, she’s gone to school, and she’s had to have gone back to her own place at least once because there are definitely more of Maki’s things scattered about Nico’s room. A bag full of clothes, pencil cases and notebooks, and enough medical texts to fill a library. Maybe that’s an exaggeration, but her books are definitely taking up most of Nico’s desk and now they’re slowly taking over the floor too.

Maki has been more quiet than usual, and too focused on things that are not Nico. Last night she was particularly disengaged with anything conversational, instead holing herself up and cramming for her first exam. Talking to her about her problem, or really about anything wasn’t an option anymore. Maki was becoming a master at deflecting even the most innocent of questions Nico asked, everything from ‘how is the weather?’ to ‘what do you want for dinner?’. She either had no answer or said she didn’t care, and Nico didn’t know what to do anymore.

In a way it was kind of like being a fulltime babysitter, except for a grown woman with more emotional baggage than anyone deserved to have over the course of their entire life. That’s what it seemed like, anyway.

What’s a Nico to do when she’s cornered like a rabbit? The last thing she wants to do is make things worse. Telling anyone - that was out of the question, though when she’d called her mother to let her know she couldn’t watch the kids for a while for undisclosed reasons, she’d received a wish of good luck in response. Nico needs more than luck to fix this, though. She really just wanted to go to their friends for help, and that was the first thing she’d voiced to Maki a few days ago. The disgruntled girl had only told her no, and that the best way to help her right now would be to let her deal with it herself. That definitely wasn’t true, but Nico was... well, Nico was afraid. She is afraid, because she’s backed against the wall, pinned between her loyalty to Maki Nishikino and the almost instinctual drive to keep her safe from her parents and herself.

Maki is fragile. What should she do? What can she do?

Support her. Be there for her. It’s not enough anymore, but it’s the only thing Maki will take from her. Though it seems Maki has nothing to say anymore, Nico goes about her business each day as if nothing has changed and nothing is wrong. She gathers the dirty clothes from around her room and wherever Maki leaves hers, and cleans them and hangs them to dry outside, like always. She gets up early to make breakfast for them both, to prepare Maki something to eat between classes, to clean and tidy a place that is too small for two people. She tells Maki when to go to sleep and makes sure to wake her up on time, because Maki never remembers to set her own alarm anymore. She checks the chair at her desk periodically to make sure Maki hasn’t fallen asleep upright while studying again. Sometimes she notices Maki staring blankly at her notes, not even reading them.

Nico went out and got a fancier futon when Maki started complaining about her back hurting, probably from hunching over all the time. If she noticed, she didn’t say anything. She sleeps there every night on Nico’s floor, and Nico loses sleep worrying about the next day before it’s even come. At least Maki seemingly listens to her when she’s told to eat or lie down or do whatever. It’s all she can ask for now.

And of course, the biggest change for Nico, something she’d decided on a while back when her food budget had to be doubled - working seven days a week. It’s not like it’s particularly hard, but with no
time to truly relax, there is a new kind of exhaustion that was never present before. Grocery shopping was a little awkward to do now, because the proper stores aren’t open long past the time Nico’s shift ends. But it’s doable, so she does it. She still hasn’t asked for monetary contributions from Maki, even though she’s sure her water bill is going to be unfortunately high next month. Maki shouldn’t have to give her anything, Nico is just doing what’s right.

It sucks.

It sucks when Nico wakes up and Maki can barely drag herself out the door, it sucks when she comes home after work and Maki is too deeply invested in a textbook to even notice. It sucks to watch Maki pick at her food and crease her brow as she fights with herself internally about who knows what. It sucks to look at Maki’s beautiful face and see someone so hollow, so defeated. It sucks to love someone so much without being able to help them, to save them from themselves. Nico barely knows how she does it.

Love. It’s all about love. Maybe Maki will never know.

It’s a sad existence but Nico is the number one super idol in the universe, so in an attempt to keep some normalcy about herself, she smiles as often as she can. When she’s cooking, when she’s folding laundry, and when she’s around Maki, even though Maki doesn’t really pay attention anymore. She just looks either permanently concerned with something, or totally void of any emotion whatsoever. The unbecoming eye bags are still there, uncovered.

When exams begin, Maki is out the door before Nico even wakes up.

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After another long day at work, Nico gets a call from Honoka who is sitting with Umi and Kotori in a restaurant across the street from the cafe. It’s become a real drag to go home and be ignored by Maki as of late, so she doesn’t see a reason to refuse an invitation to dinner, even when she really just wants to go lie on a floor somewhere and not do anything. Before she can even close shop properly, Honoka is waving at her rapidly from the window.

Maki can just reheat something something in the fridge right? Microwaves aren’t hard.

The bell on the door jingles as Nico steps inside out of the cold and makes her way over to her friends.

“Hey, Nico-chan!” Honoka shouts, her usual air of energy about her.

“Nico is here to grace you with her presence, and she’s hungry.”

Umi rolls her eyes but Kotori looks cheerful as usual sitting next to her partner. At least someone at TokyoU is having a good time.

“It’s nice to see you, Nico-chan. How’s work been?” Kotori asks.

Nico sits down and takes the menu Umi hands to her across the table.

“Work is fine, but other things could be going better for Nico at the moment. Why is the hot chocolate here 600 yen?”
Honoka ignores her question and points at something on the menu, prawns and pasta. “I got this last time, it’s pretty great. Do you like tomato sauce or no?”

Nico shakes her head no and continues to grumble about the prices. “I could make food better than this in my own kitchen. Why’d I come here again?”

Umi gives her a look. “Because you haven’t seen your friends in a while and you like us?”

Nico wrinkles her nose. “Are you trying to be sassy?” She looks at Kotori. “Is she trying to sass me?”

Kotori giggles. “It’s cute, isn’t it?”

“Kotori!” Umi cries. “You’re supposed to be on my side…”

“I am, but it’s still funny.”

Nico makes a face and gives up on the menu, ordering whatever Honoka suggested when the waitress comes around. The hot chocolate has whipped cream on top, but it’s nothing special.

“So,” Nico starts, “what have you all been up to? Is Honoka still banned from that ‘rival’ bakery or whatever?”

“I don’t...I don’t think there’s a rivalry,” Umi says. “I think they’re just tired of Honoka bothering them for discounted baked goods at the end of the day. Every day.”

Honoka ignores Umi’s glare. “Not my fault, it’s always all sold out at my store by then! What else am I supposed to do?”

“Maybe you could just make some extras for yourself and hide them away?” Kotori suggests.

Honoka frowns. “But that’s extra work, I’d have to get up even earlier to do that.”

The waitress comes back and sets their meals on the table, and Honoka grabs a fork so fast she nearly flings it off the table.

Nico pokes at her pasta. “So what, like ten minutes earlier? You’re weak.”

“Ten minutes is huge, Nico-chan!”

“It’s really not,” Umi interjects.

“It is!”

Umi and Honoka start bickering and Nico suddenly feels quite a bit more tired than usual. Gently twisting her meal around her fork, she thinks about what might be going on at home. Did Maki get home okay? Does she know there’s food in the fridge for her? Is she going to eat it? Did her exam go well today? God, even when she’s trying to relax she can’t stop thinking about the depressing mess of a girl she’s looking after.

Depressing.

Nico’s grip on her fork tightens. Maki is depressed. It’s not right.

“Nico-chan?”
Nico looks up, and Kotori is giving her a soft and sympathetic gaze. Umi and Honoka are off in their own world.

“Hm?”

“Is everything okay?”

It’s a good question, but Nico doesn’t have a good answer. Lying isn’t really all that great anymore either, and she does it way too much over the phone to Maki’s mother.

“I’m fine,” Nico says. Sometimes her mouth moves before her brain is finished thinking.

Kotori glances at Umi and Honoka before looking back at Nico.

“You don’t look fine. Is something wrong with Maki again?”

Nico brings herself to nod, but looks away.

“You know,” Kotori says gently, “Umi tried to call her again, just the other day. She doesn’t even have a voicemail anymore, so she couldn’t leave a message.”

Nico sighs. Of course. Everything Maki does is designed to make her own life more difficult, and by extension, Nico’s.

“Honestly you wouldn’t have much luck trying to talk to her in person either.”

Kotori looks at her, confused and concerned. “What do you mean?”

Nico puts her elbow on the table and leans into it a bit. “Maki-chan practically lives with me and she barely says two words to me any time we’re home together. It’s basically like living alone except there’s twice as much stuff everywhere and twice as much work for me.”

Kotori’s eyes widen and she hurriedly pokes at Umi’s side. Honoka tries to continue their conversation until she realizes everyone is looking at Kotori now.

“Kotori?” Umi asks.

“Did you know Maki lives with Nico now? Isn’t that good?” The last bit is more of a statement than a question, Nico notices.

“Woah woah woah,” Nico waves her hands. “It’s not really like that, it’s not like she’s moved in for real or anything. It’s just...school stuff.”

“Suuuuuuure it is, Nico-chan,” Honoka taunts.

Umi kicks her under the table and Kotori glares at them both.

“I’m serious! It’s not what you guys are thinking. Nothing’s changed between us. I mean, kind of.”

“Suuuuuuure, Nico-” Umi smacks Honoka’s hand on the table.

“Don’t be rude, Honoka. Nico-chan, what do you mean? What would have changed? Is Maki feeling better?”

Kotori looks at Umi with something akin to pity, and Honoka is giggling behind her hand.
Nico shakes her head. “No, she’s even worse. She had a…”

Well, probably not a good idea to bring that whole incident up. It was likely an incredibly embarrassing situation for Maki, so the fewer people that know the better. Best not to make it worse.

“She had a couple bad days at school. Just worried about exams.”

Kotori nods. “Exams are pretty rough, especially for medical students. I don’t have very many this year, just a fashion portfolio sort of thing.”

“Do you think Maki-chan will move in for real soon?” Honoka lifts her eyebrows as high as they can go and Nico gives her a look that could wilt flowers.

“No. I’m sure she’ll leave when she catches up or whatever it is she’s doing. She won’t really say.”

Honoka leans back in her seat. “So you don’t think she… y’know?”

“I just said she barely talks to me now. It’s like I’m her invisible housekeeper.”

Umi looks between them. “What does Honoka mean? What’s ‘y’know’?”

Kotori pats Umi’s knee. “You’re a little slow sometimes, Umi-chan.”

Honoka gasps. “This is serious! What should we do?”

Kotori puts her hands neatly in her lap. “Honoka-chan, I don’t think we can do anything. I think that maybe, this is something for Nico and Maki to solve together.”

Honoka’s face turns from surprise to straight worried. “But what if Maki doesn’t… if she’s not?”

“Interested?” Nico says flatly.

Honoka nods.

“I came to terms a long time ago. She’s with me because I’m the closest thing she has to a solution. I’m sure if any of you lived nearby and actually had the time to deal with her, she’d be all over you too.”

Kotori hums sadly and Umi is still not sure what they’re talking about.

“Did I miss something? I feel like I have no idea what you’re saying. What’s going on with Maki?”

“We already know what’s going on with Maki,” Kotori says. “Nico-chan is taking care of her, and I know we can depend on her to do what’s best.”

Umi looks between them all for answers. “How come everyone is so insistent on Nico handling Maki? I know you’re friends good friends and everything, but aren’t we all?”

Kotori ignores her and takes Nico’s hands across the table. “We know you’ve had so many people doubt you in the past, and maybe sometimes you’re a little abrasive, but you’re here now and you have all of us, you know? If what I’ve heard about Maki is true, then I have to admit I’m very worried for her. But I’m also worried for you, Nico-chan. How has this all been for you?”
Nico squeezes Kotori’s hands in hers. It’s sucked. Nico wants to cry about it, but she has time for that later, when everything is better.

“It’s not great, but...thank you. For being worried about me. You don’t have to be, okay?”

“I don’t mean to interrupt, and I want to agree with what Kotori said, but can someone please give me some kind of explanation? What am I missing?”

Kotori lets go of Nico’s hands and silently asks permission. Nico nods and looks down at her food.

“Umi-chan, how would you feel if someone you loved was feeling really awful about themselves? Working too hard, hmmm, not sleeping well, things like that? Someone very special to you, someone like me?”

Nico found it a little odd that Umi was still so... Umi. It didn’t take long for her to go red in the face, as she usually did every time anyone brought up what she preferred stay private. As always, Kotori isn’t bothered and remains as patient as a saint as Umi collects herself.

“W-well if you were feeling like that, I’d be very worried about you. I don’t think I would think much about anything else.”

“And what would you do to help me?”

Umi was still red but her eyes were serious. “Anything. I wouldn’t stop until you’re feeling better, no matter what.”

Kotori nods. “Of course. It’s the obvious answer, right? You don’t even need to think about it.”

"Of course not. I wouldn’t consider any other option.”

At that, both Honoka and Kotori turned to look at Nico, who was still observing her plate with intense concentration.

“So, Umi-chan,” Kotori continues, “maybe you can understand where Nico is coming from a little better?”

“But Nico and Maki aren’t...” Umi’s eyes go wide and her jaw drops. “You’re not...are you? You and Maki?”

Nico finally looks up. “No, we aren’t.”

It’s sad, in a way, to say it out loud like that. As sad as it is for Nico to hear some perspective from Kotori, maybe. Because really, it is upsetting. To know that they could be like Umi and Kotori, who had everything worked out, to know that now her friends are concerned for her on top of worrying after Maki. It’s Nico’s responsibility.

Honoka apparently doesn’t think Kotori is being clear enough, so she does what she does best.

“Nico loves Maki, but Maki is Maki. It’s awful,” Honoka frowns.

Nico is tempted to get up and leave.

“Yeah, thanks for summarizing. It gets better every time I hear it,” Nico grumbles.

Umi slams her palms down on the table, probably harder than she meant to. She ignores the stares that result.
“What?! Are you serious? For how long?”

Nico rests her chin in her palm and tries not to look as dejected as she feels. “Since high school.”

Umi looks as though she still has trouble being anything other than astonished. “For that long? I can’t believe I didn’t notice...and you both knew?” She points at Honoka and her own girlfriend and looks back and forth between them.

Kotori hums. “Everyone except you, it seems.”

Unexpectedly, Umi stands up and walks around the side of the table until she’s beside Nico. She’s not red anymore, at least, she just looks determined in the way Umi does when she feels strongly about almost anything. She takes Nico’s hands in her own.

“Nico-chan,” Umi says sternly, “I’m sorry I didn’t see it, or understand what was going on before.”

Nico looks away from Umi awkwardly.

“That’s uh, that’s fine. It’s no big-”

“No! It’s a big deal, a huge one. I did not realize the passion behind your motivation. I know what it’s like, Nico-chan. I really do.”

As dramatic as Umi is being right now, she’s probably not wrong, Nico realizes. Umi does know what it’s like to care for someone the same way Nico does, to be so drawn to another person that they dominate your everyday thoughts even when you try to escape them on purpose. Umi knows all about the feeling of the unknown, the urge to do what’s best for someone she cares for. Nico remembers Kotori coming back from the airport after changing her mind at the absolute last minute. What had Umi been thinking then?

“I know you can do it,” Umi says with conviction. “If you really feel the way you do, you’ll find a way. And Kotori is right, you need to look after yourself too. We’re still here, okay?”

Umi is a bit like night and day sometimes, Nico supposes, but nothing stops her from feeling touched by her words. By Kotori’s, too. And Honoka is willing to support her friends in any endeavor by default, she’s the last person that needs to voice her commitment. It’s heartwarming.

“You know what?” Nico says, her usual spark back in her voice. “You’re right. I can do it. I can help her. I am helping her! I mean sure she’s a grumpy coffee zombie right now, but when she’s back to normal she’ll still need Nico, right?”

Umi nods. “Right.”

“So what if life has to suck for a bit? Nico can handle anything. Even miserable Maki.”

Honoka nods her head in agreement. “You’re the best idol in the universe, after all. Right?”

“Right, I am. I’m the best.”

Nico pauses and thinks for a moment.

“I left Maki at home to fend for herself. What the fuck am I doing here?”

“You should go!” Honoka shouts, a little too loudly. It doesn’t bother Nico though.

“I should, I’m going. What if she needs something? What if she still can’t figure out the microwave?”
Nico stands and gathers her things with renewed vigor. Maybe she just needed a little dose of friendship to get herself through the next few days, or weeks, whatever. It sounds corny and dumb but Nico doesn’t have time to consider better metaphors.

She doesn’t really spare a glance back as she hastily walks towards the door, until Honoka yells at her from across the restaurant.

“Are you guys still good for Christmas Eve?”

Nico nods.

Truthfully it’s actually her only day off now, because of the whole work thing. But that’s fine, because it needs to be done. No alternatives.

Nico goes home to Maki and, as she frequently does, leaves someone else with her bill.

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Maki hasn’t touched the food in the fridge.

Nico tries not to drag her feet to her bedroom, but she can’t help but feel disheartened when she finds Maki asleep at her desk again, papers and notebook scattered all around her. It’s not good for her back.

Nico has never seriously tried to pick Maki up before, but now seems like it might be a good time to try. Maki’s back has suffered long enough, and she only needs to scoot her down to the floor so she can lay on the futon properly - Nico doesn’t bother to put it away anymore. As she shifts Maki carefully so as not to wake her, she recalls the time they had their first and only physical fight. It ended as quickly as it began, when Maki hoisted Nico up over her shoulder with little to no effort, and Nico was left to pound helplessly at her back with her dainty little fists. The whole thing was something of a debacle, but Nico only had time to really think about how easily Maki had lifted her.

It was totally hot, that Maki could just do that, but also Nico wished she could do it in return.

Nico tries, but she can’t really get proper leverage. It isn’t long before Maki startles awake.

“What? H-huh?”

Nico lets go of her. “Sorry, Maki-chan. Just trying to move you to the futon. You fell asleep at the desk again.”

Maki ignores her. “What time is it?”

Nico pulls out her phone. “Like quarter after nine. It’s kinda cold, so I’ll get you extra blankets -”

“No time. Pathophysiology exam first thing tomorrow.”

“Come on Maki-chan, you need to sleep or you’re not even gonna wake up in time for your stupid test,” Nico insists as she starts arranging the blankets and the futon into a more acceptable state for sleeping.

“No. I’ll be up late.”
“You didn’t even eat anything!”

Maki has her nose back in a book. “No time for that either.”

Nico is left to stare at the back of Maki’s head, and she knows Maki can’t see it but she tries to look as angry as she can anyway.

“Well, some of us need to sleep for real. So I guess I’ll go sleep in the living room tonight.”

She waits for a response, but there’s nothing. Not a word out of Maki’s mouth. Nico tries to be as loud as she can, swiping her quilt off the bed and digging for clean sleepwear in a pile of clothes in the corner. She feels like a child throwing a silent tantrum, but it feels better to let it out somehow. Emotional constipation is Maki’s specialty, and she’d rather leave it at that.

Thirty minutes ago, she’d felt great about her personal mission to save one Maki Nishikino. Said girl also unfortunately held the power to crush Nico’s resolve by simply saying or doing nothing, and Nico didn’t really know what to do about it besides put up with all of the moping and cold shoulders. Any sleep she got that night was caught between her own manifesting anxiety and bad dreams.

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On the final day of Maki’s exam schedule, Nico sets all of her doubts aside and starts baking a cake as soon as Maki is out the door. It’ll be just like graduation, when Maki was happy to come over and have her own private congratulations with Nico. She’ll be finished, finally, at least for a little while. Despite her heartache, Nico is determined to put a rosy glow back in Maki’s cheeks and a smile on her face. Maki’s parents call her again and Nico gives her typical update, that Maki is still busy with class but today is her last exam so maybe Maki can call them later? Nico hasn’t really told them that Maki hasn’t left her place in a really long time, but that’s a trivial detail and for now they’re just happy to hear about grades.

Nico cleans her whole place and hangs up some old paper decorations, nothing fancy, just tissue paper flowers and a few streamers here and there. She can’t go halfway when Maki deserves so much more for surviving her first crippling semester as a straight A+ student. When she lived with her family, they would celebrate something as simple as Nico actually passing a significant test, even if it was by the skin of her teeth. Mrs. Yazawa was someone who believed in supporting her kids’ dreams, and she had no qualms about Nico focusing on her idol career over her grades in math. Their little parties were the perfect pick-me-up, to encourage Nico to keep going and to appreciate everything she did. She wanted Maki to feel the same way, even if Nico still thought she made the wrong choice in the end.

When she’s done, she has a very nice looking apartment and a two layer cake with the same phrase she used last time on it. Hopefully Maki sees some humor in it. There’s no way she could ignore something like this, right? Nico has done her best to keep Maki in check for the last few weeks, all on her own. She’s the most humble person she knows, so she doesn’t need a thank you. Just acknowledgement.

Maki drags herself in the door in the late evening and brushes off the fresh snow peppering the tops of her boots. Nico watches her from the kitchen as she tosses her coat, her scarf, her bag to the floor. Maki isn’t really looking at anything, not looking at her. She looks defeated more than anything else.
Depressed and defeated.

When she looks up, Nico springs into action and raises her hands above her head in her signature pose.

Make Maki smile.

“Nico-nico-nii! Nico is here to congratulate you! You finished a whole semester, Maki-chan!”

Nico gives her the brightest grin she can muster, despite Maki’s appearance.

Maki’s mouth is left hanging as she walks slowly into the little kitchen, just like last time. For the first time in a long while, it’s like Maki is looking at her and not through her. Nico missed those amethyst eyes.

Maki stops when she gets to her usual chair and looks down at the cake with “Congratulations, you nerd!” written across the top of it. Nico’s heart pounds in her ears and she feels nervous. Why does she feel nervous?

Maki gently reaches out and hooks her fingers on the edge of the plate, dragging the cake closer to look at it. Red frosting with green piped letters looks sort of gross, Nico thinks, but it’s nearly Christmas anyway and it was on sale. Maki doesn’t say anything, she just looks at the cake with tired eyes.

Nico leans towards her.

“Maki-chan?”

Maki looks up at her suddenly and rips her fingers away from the plate. She blinks rapidly and it seems like she’s trying to look at Nico, but she keeps looking back down at the stupid cake. Her mouth opens and closes, like she wants to say something, but Nico can tell she’s struggling. Who wouldn’t, after what Maki’s been dealing with?

Nico comes around the side of the table and places each hand on either of Maki’s cheeks, forcing Maki to look at her. Gentle and firm.

“Maki-chan, you can rest now, you know? Try not to worry so much.”

Maki tries to look away, but she can’t. The blank look on her face slowly deteriorates, replaced with a deep frown and a wobbling lip. A wetness collect at the corners of her eyes.

Oh no.

When Maki starts crying, Nico’s heart rips in half. She doesn’t know what to do though, because she’s tired now too and she’s worked so hard. So they stand there for a moment, Nico cradling her face and Maki trying and failing to hold her tears in. It gets worse when Maki starts to sob, and Nico finally lets go. She reaches out again, but Maki turns away and runs for the bedroom, sniffing and letting everything out all at once, again.

Nico follows her and gets to the door just in time to watch Maki throw herself onto the bed. She clutches at the blankets and buries her face in Nico’s pillow until her cries are muffled. Nico has never seen this Maki before. She hates it.

Nico leans in the doorframe and decides to let Maki’s tears run dry before doing anything. Sometimes even Nico needs a good cry, but it’s been awhile for her. It’s so awful to listen to the
heaving and sniffing but there’s nothing to be done now. Nico already wants to forget about the cake.

Eventually Maki quiets down, but she doesn’t lift her face from the pillow, only clutches it tighter. Nico makes her move then, and walks over the bed. She slowly pushes Maki’s legs out of the way, there’s no resistance, and she sits on the edge. Nico feels a little empty, but there’s no time to reflect on that now.

She leans over and carefully starts running her fingers through Maki’s hair. There’s nothing to say, nothing else to be done. Eventually Maki stops shaking, and Nico thinks she might have fallen asleep.

Maki rolls over and looks up at Nico, who is nearly on top of her. Even in the darkness, Nico can see the red around her eyes, the dampness on her cheeks. The little bit of light pouring in from the hall highlights her brilliant crimson hair.

“I don’t want to do this,” Maki says. “I’m sorry I’ve been ignoring you. I don’t know what else to do. I don’t make any sense.”

Nico smiles and wipes at the remnants of tears on Maki’s cheeks.

“You don’t have to worry about that right now, okay? Just relax. Nico is here.”

Maki nods. “Nico is here. You’re always here.”

“Always.”

Maki closes her eyes and breathes deeply. Nico just watches her, in the dark.

Nico should probably go turn off the lights so Maki can sleep properly. She can have the bed tonight, and every other night forever if she needs it, Nico decides. When she starts to pull away, Maki grabs at her arms. She opens her eyes and her mouth, but doesn’t manage to get anything out. Instead, she scoots herself over and curls up her legs, trying to make room on the bed. Maki is still too tall for it.

She pulls at Nico’s arms again.

Maki looks like she’s about to protest when Nico pulls her hands away, but relaxes as Nico only reaches for her hair ribbons, untying them and laying them neatly on the bedside table. Nico pulls back the sheets, which takes some doing because Maki is still mostly on top of them. Nico wishes she could maybe change into something more comfortable first, but Maki finally wants her there so she’s not about to leave, even for a second.

Nico lies down on her back next to Maki, and pulls the blankets over them both. Maki is still on her side, looking at Nico with her head barely on the edge of the single pillow. Nico is worried that if she turns to look at Maki, she might do something she’ll regret.

The sheets rustle and a body presses into Nico’s side, an arm wraps around her waist and hair brushes against her shoulder. Maki is hugging her, pulling at her. Fate is unkind.

Throwing her caution to the wind, Nico turns on her side in Maki’s embrace and wraps her arms tightly around her, pulling them closer and closer until they’re both curled around each other. Nico’s eyes are shut tight and Maki’s breathing is still shaky.

Nico never wants to move, not ever again.
She dreams of a future she’s always wanted.
In the days that follow, Maki doesn’t move. That is to say, she is reluctant enough to get out of Nico’s bed that Nico eventually gives up and stops pestering her about it. Well, it was less pestering and more slightly encouraging her to do literally anything, but every time she suggested it, Maki would give her such a grumpy pout that she couldn’t fight it anymore.

So Maki would lounge around quietly and Nico would make her breakfast and dinner in bed, skipping lunch because of work. She was so needy, but really Nico took some kind of pride in taking care of her. The best part of the whole ordeal was that Maki talked to her now, in actual full sentences. Most of what she said the morning after dragging Nico to bed were apologies, even though Nico insisted she had nothing to apologize for.

The way Maki was looking at her lately, it was different. The moment Nico entered the bedroom with food or another pillow or anything else she insisted Maki have, purple eyes would focus on her immediately and she wouldn’t look away, even when Nico did.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Nico had said.

“Because I want to.”

It felt good to hear that. It felt even better to...well, Nico tried not to think too much into it, but Maki was pretty insistent that Nico not sleep on the floor or the couch or anywhere else except the bed, and Maki refused to leave the bed. It couldn’t be helped.

She did have trouble verbalizing it though, which Nico found cute. Maki was still very good at embarrassing herself, but also wasn’t entirely receptive when Nico tried to poke fun at her about it. She needed a bit more recovery time for that. Maki just says she needs it - time, that is.

So Nico would leave her laptop with Maki, and Maki would spend all day in bed while Nico went to work. Nico would come home tired and make dinner, then sit on the bed next to Maki and check her email, ask Maki how she’s doing, and then they’d go to sleep.

For three nights, Nico would lay down and fall asleep wrapped around the girl living in her room, or holding her, or whatever it was they were doing. On the second night, she’d come so dangerously close to saying something that could have changed their entire dynamic forever. Who could fault her for considering it though, when her nose is buried in red hair and slender fingers grasp at the back of her shirt. When she’s surrounded by warmth in a way she never thought she could be anymore, despite the biting chill in the air outside. When she can feel Maki’s heart beating softly alongside her own.

It was all so sappy, the more she thought about it, but Nico is a romantic and she savours every moment she can swipe from her dreams. She stops herself from saying anything when she remembers that this is not a romantic situation, what she feels is not mutual. Maki is coping with herself, in her own way. Coming to terms. Something. Nico doesn’t really know.

Things are complicated for Nico. She mostly wants to rest as well. Part of her even wants Maki to go to her own home at some point, to relieve Nico of her growing desperation, to let her rebuild her walls and hide behind them again just like she did in high school. Kind of like Maki. But Nico also
knows she is selfish, maybe a little brash, and so she thinks about what it might be like for Maki to stay forever. Probably something akin to torture, if nothing ever happened between them.

On the third night, Maki ignores her phone after looking at the caller ID and frowning. Nico is in the room when she does it, sitting in her desk chair and ranting about rude customers. Maki just sits there in the bed, all wrapped in blankets and surrounded by a growing pile of pillows from the living room, letting her phone ring until it stops. Nico watches her put her phone down on the night table after turning off the ringer.

“My dad is trying to call me,” she says.

Nico is about to comment on it when her phone starts ringing too. The ringtone is still *Darling!!* and Nico does her best to look as innocent as possible when Maki raises an eyebrow in her direction.

It’s Mr. Nishikino.

Nico excuses herself from the room after making something up and plays the usual game of twenty questions about Maki, about her grades mostly. How did the exams go? Nico doesn’t know, but she says Maki is doing fine anyway. Why can’t Maki talk right now? Nico tells him she’s busy reading ahead for the next semester, because it sounds like something Maki would be doing if she wasn’t suffering from a bad case of inner turmoil. Talking to either of Maki’s parents is still incredibly awkward for Nico so she sounds a little stiff the whole time. But Mr. Nishikino sounds like a definite stick in the mud, so maybe that’s always what it’s like to talk to him.

When he’s finally satisfied and hangs up, Nico goes back to the bedroom and sits on the edge of the bed as if nobody had called her in the first place.

At last, Maki reaches out.

“Nico-chan, I want to talk to you.”

The weight lifts from Nico’s bruised and battered conscience.

That night, bundled together and face to face under every blanket Nico owns, Maki whispers to her all of the secrets she’s kept inside ever since Nico graduated. Everything she’s thought about, every option she’s considered, everything she’s afraid of. She doesn’t want to live this way forever, in fear, in regret. This time, Nico doesn’t ask her why she won’t become an idol instead. She just listens, because if she talks then maybe Maki will stop.

When everything’s said and done, Nico feels like crying. She doesn’t know if it’s for herself or for Maki, or maybe both at the same time.

“How do you feel now?” Nico asks her genuinely.

Maki takes her time, fiddling with her hair and closing her eyes. Deliberating. There’s a lot she could say now, Nico figures.

It’s not what she expects though.

Maki settles in, sinking into the bed and the pillows and Nico.

“Safe.”
Maki finally talks to her parents on the day they’re scheduled to meet with the rest of μ's. Rather, she carefully avoids talking to them by sending them a text, and arranges to be at their place for Christmas Eve dinner later that night. Thankfully when Nico had reassured them not long ago that she would be home for Christmas, she’d been right.

Maki also decides today to get out of bed when Nico does, but doesn’t have much to do besides follow her around aimlessly or watch TV. Today is Nico’s only day off so she wants to make the most of it, giving her apartment another good cleaning while she has the chance. Nico tries to watch Maki out of the corner of her eye when she can, not only because she likes to look at her but also because Maki’s complexion has started clearing up somewhat. Three days of doing nothing at all had done wonders for her, even though she was still a little bit off.

If anything Nico expected to feel even worse about everything after Maki opened her heart to her, but all she felt was true relief. Being so unsure about what was ailing Maki was definitely worse than actually knowing how she felt about the whole ordeal, and knowing is half the battle. Whether or not Maki wants to do any fighting is up to her of course, but now Nico knows what to say and what to do. Nico is an excellent actor when she needs to be, she thinks, especially when she knows she’s keeping Maki out of any potential trouble. It all leads back to responsibility.

And right now, Nico is responsible for getting Maki to get dressed so they can actually go outside. A late lunch at a hole in the wall out by where Nozomi lives, that she guarantees won’t be swarmed with fans trying snap a cheap photo of the elusive μ's reunion. It's been a long time since Nico has really thought about the supporters they left behind when they disbanded. At the very least, the Love Live is still successful and there are still some good looking groups around. Maybe one day everyone will forget about what they were.

When Maki comes out of the washroom, she looks fresher than she has in days. A clean outfit, tights and a skirt and a big fuzzy red sweater. The bags under her eyes are hidden and her eyeliner is even and tidy. Best of all, she’s smiling. Or at least doing Maki’s equivalent of a smile, it’s a little bit shaky but the effort is there.

Nico nods at her. “You look good, Maki-chan.”

“Are you fishing for compliments?” Maki quips.

“Me? I would never,” Nico puts a hand to her chest, hardly able to contain the joy that comes with the revival of sassy Maki.

Maki rolls her eyes - Nico’s heart beats even faster - and grabs Nico’s arm before heading to the door.

“Narcissism is unbecoming, Nico-chan.”

“Your face is unbecoming.”

“Aaaand we’re going,” Maki deadpans as she pulls Nico outside. All Nico wants to do is drag Maki around and dance in the snow, maybe make some snow angels or something else she usually does with her siblings. Right now she’s savouring the first sliver of genuine happiness that’s come along in a while, and she hopes it will continue into the get-together. She absently wonders if Maki even remembers Eli is back in town for a while as they head for the train.
Hopefully Eli doesn’t have a memory for grudges, but Nico doubts it.

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Seconds after taking her shoes off at the door, Eli has Nico in a vicious headlock. Nico struggles in surprise as Eli ruffles her hair until her pigtails are all sloppy.

“Desist! Let me go you giant-”

“This is payback,” Eli says sharply.

“You’re messing up my hair!”

Maki flicks her ear.

“Ouch, hey!”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

“Why are we all ganging up on Nico! Nico is innocent!”

Eli lets her go and Nico pulls her silky red ribbons from her dark locks. “I guess I’ll just wear my hair down today. You’re bullies, both of you,” she says pointing at Maki and Eli respectively.

Maki just shrugs and walks past her to the private room they’ve reserved, Eli not far behind.

“You’re supposed to be on my side, Maki-chan! I didn’t miss you, Eli!” Nico whines.

Everyone is there already and the atmosphere is decidedly cheerful and bubbly. Umi is lecturing Honoka about something bread related - probably has to do with the several empty bread baskets in front of her - Rin is heavily invested in the menu, Nozomi is looking suspiciously in Nico’s direction…

Nico makes sure to sit at the other end of the sunken table, between Hanayo and Kotori. That’s when everyone looks up at Maki, who is the only one still not sitting down. It’s a tense moment, but Maki surprises just about everyone when she smiles and waves.

“Hey. How is everyone?”

“Maki-chan! Do you want some bread sticks? I mean I ate them all but…”

“It’s the real live Maki-chan, nya!”

Everyone starts talking at the same time and Maki’s face goes a touch red before Nozomi loudly suggests that she sit somewhere. Kotori automatically moves over a cushion so Maki can sit next to Nico. Nico does feel a little smug about it, that Maki was already coming to sit beside her anyway, but she tries not to let it show. Even though it doesn’t matter, because everyone knows now, even Umi.

It’s not long before the table is decorated with plates topped with a dozen different dishes and appetizers, and everyone has burst into conversation about one thing or another. Catching up about school, work, and anything else that went on in the last four months. Nico feels a little deprived of
her friends, having seen very little of them, so she pokes her nose into every conversation she can
while Maki idly picks at the food on her plate - Nico’s plate - and sips at her water.

Nico eyes Nozomi warily as Eli pesters the waitress for a drink menu.

Umi notices too. “Eli-chan, don’t you think it’s a little early for that?”

“College has taught me that it’s never too early,” Eli retorts. “Besides, I wanted to get something for
Maki-chan.”

“Hm?” Maki perks up from beside Nico.

“Drinks on me. For a job well done, you know? Surviving the semester. Heard you had it rough.”

Nico flinches as Eli kicks her under the table.

Maki looks apathetic about the whole thing. “I don’t really need anything.”

“You bet you don’t,” Nico says, poking Maki in the side. “You’re still practically a kid. Maki-chan is
underage!”

“And yet,” Nozomi adds as she adds more food to her plate, “she looks and acts twice your age,
Nicocchi.”

Nico is about to yell something, but Eli is quick to follow up.

“You’re responsible enough, Maki-chan. Just let me buy you something.”

Nico feels Maki seize up a little beside her, because nobody else really knows the truth. Nico knows
it isn’t that Maki has lost her sense of responsibility, but it’s definitely a touchy subject. Thankfully,
Maki relaxes just as quickly.

“Fine. What is there?”

It’s time for Nico to change her angle.


Honoka, ever observant, decides to contribute. “Nicocchan, you’re so small. Can you even handle
one drink?”

“I’ll handle your face with my fists,” Nico jabs.

“Don’t be rude, Nicocchi,” Nozomi chides. “What would you like, Maki-chan? Did you want the
menu?”

“Hmm.” Maki hums as she taps her chin.

Nico flinches when a hand comes to rest on her thigh. That is definitely Maki’s hand. There’s no
time to take it in, because Maki is right near her, looking at her with consideration and… something
else, Nico doesn’t know.

Maki turns back to Eli.

“Just get me something fruity. Lots of sugar.”
Eli gives her a look. “What? No tomato mixes?”

Maki shrugs.

Nozomi takes the drink menu from Eli’s hands and hands it to waitress before ordering for the table.

Kotori steps into the conversation with her usual kind demeanor. “So Nico-chan, Maki-chan, how have you both been?”

“Tired,” they say at the same time.

Nico feels much too warm and her mouth runs faster than her brain again.

“Quit copying me, Maki-chan!”

“Copying you? What else would you expect me to say?”

Nico hugs herself. “You could say, oh I don’t know, I’m feeling way better now because my best friend in the whole world took such good care of me?”

Maki shoves her a little with her hip. “You’re so full of yourself. Aren’t you supposed to be setting an example for me?”

Nico sputters a little, searching for a snarky reply she isn’t quick enough to come up with. “Y-yeah, well, it’s okay to be a little proud of yourself sometimes. Maki-chan is never proud for Nico, so Nico has to think of herself sometimes.”

“You idiot, of course I’m proud of you.”

Nico blinks. “Yeah well you - wait, huh?”

By now, everyone has paused to look at them. It’s just like old times in a way, where everyone gets to see them dance around each other and wonder what exactly is going on. Nobody else knows the steps.

Maki looks at her cup of water. Maybe she doesn’t know everyone else is looking at them now, or she’d certainly be twirling her hair.

“I am. There’s nobody else like you, Nico-chan.”

Nico doesn’t really know what to say to that, if she’s honest with herself. It sounds like something Maki might say to her when they’re at home under the covers, or out for a walk in the park. Not sitting around with their friends for lunch.

When Nico doesn’t say anything, everyone sort of retreats back into their own conversations, and there’s a lingering feeling of universal disappointment in the air. Nozomi winks at Nico before turning to Eli.

Maki goes back to picking at the egg on Nico’s plate.

She looks so overwhelmingly normal compared to what Nico has seen of her at home over the last few weeks. She looks...like Maki again. But a little bolder, only a smidge. Maki’s right hand is still on her thigh, and Nico covers it with her own, itching to lace their fingers together but not wanting to push her luck. She hopes her palms don’t sweat.

When Nico’s hand touches hers, Maki glances up a little, but otherwise doesn’t move.
“There’s nobody else like you, either,” Nico says quietly, just enough so Maki can hear it.

Maki’s hint of a smile comes back just as the drinks are served. The waitress hands Eli something with an obscenely high alcohol content, Honoka too, and Hanayo is sharing some kind of rice wine with Rin. Something pink and flashy is placed on the table in front of Maki, and Nico is about to make fun of her for it when Maki drops two straws in and puts the glass between them.

“You like this kind of thing, right?”

Nico nods dumbly. Their hands are still touching under the table. It’s way too warm inside.

Yet life carries on, and when the drink runs out, Maki orders another one for them to share, even though she could just get two of them if she really wanted to. If anyone notices, nobody says anything and Nico is thankful. Eli seems a little buzzed, but Honoka acts as if she hasn’t had a drop. Umi says it’s because she eats so much and it balances out, but it could also be some supernatural ability, knowing Honoka.

Nico doesn’t really feel anything either, besides her frequently problematic desires for the girl she’s sharing a drink with. Nico can hold her alcohol, but she’s not so good at keeping her daydreams at bay. There’s a flash in her mind, an image of herself taking Maki home and… well, it doesn’t go anything like it usually goes in real life. Daydream Maki is assertive, and likes it much better when Nico’s clothes are on the floor or under the bed, among other things. Daydream Maki comes around much more frequently, as of the last few days. The thought goes away and Nico wonders if Nozomi can read minds, because she’s looking her way again.

Maki ends up in a conversation with Rin about her job, something to do with track at Otonokizaka. Still, her hand remains on Nico’s thigh.

The rest of the afternoon passes by almost in a haze, accompanied by lazy chatter and a few more refills, with a touch of Nico’s imagination running wild here and there. Shortly before two, Maki sort of slumps against the table and bites back a yawn.

She does look a little breathless. Unsurprising considering her recent lack of any activity whatsoever.

“Nico-chan, could we go home?”

Honoka slams her fist on the table. “What?! We’re just about to order dessert!”

“It’s only been a couple hours, Maki-chan,” Eli adds.

Maki shifts a little until she’s leaning more into Nico, and Nico struggles in vain not to look visibly flustered.

“I’m just tired, is all. Not that I haven’t missed you all…”

Everyone else exchanges glances before nodding in similar resolve.

“Maki-chan should do what’s best, nyokay!”

Hanayo reaches to pat Maki on the shoulder. “You should go home to rest if you need it. We all understand.”

Umi smiles at her before her face flashes immediately to serious. “Nico-chan, can we trust you to get Maki home safe?”
Oh yeah, that’s right. They don’t know *that* part. The whole bit where Maki still hasn’t left.

“All of my stuff is at Nico-chan’s place. Well, most of it,” Maki says.

Their friends all look at each other, again. Nico resorts to begging with her eyes, so Maki doesn’t get suspicious. *For the love of god, please don’t make this harder for Nico than it already is.*

Luckily Nico is especially talented at body language (definitely not begging) and everyone seems to get the message while Maki remains seemingly oblivious. Truthfully Nico wishes they could stick around longer, but if Maki feels like she needs to go, then they’ll go. Maybe she’s getting nervous about seeing her parents later that night. Or the depression related anxiety is coming back.

They both stand up and shimmy around their friends, while Eli and Nozomi tell Maki not to worry about her bill but to make sure Nico pays for hers for once. Nico scowls but doesn’t look in their direction as she heads for the till, fishing her wallet out of her purse. She’s about to slam down a handful of bills when Maki gently nudges her aside and pulls out a matte black credit card with her name written in gold on the bottom corner.

“I’ll cover that whole table,” she says to the girl at the counter, nodding in the direction of the table they were just sitting at.

Nico just swallows her words and lets Maki do her thing, trying not to feel a little upset about how trivial Maki is able to treat her funds. It wouldn’t be proper to ask Maki for money, not now.

She follows Maki wordlessly out of the restaurant.

It’s lightly snowing out now, and the sky is a pale grey. Nico applauds herself on her own fashion choices for the moment, pastel pink absolutely fits the mood. As they walk, Maki doesn’t say much and her pace is slow. Nico makes sure to keep in step with her as their arms swing loosely at their sides.

Even though she’s wearing three or four layers, Nico still finds herself shivering, because the cold is the devil and she doesn’t retain heat very well. It’s only been ten minutes, but she already misses the warmth of their meal and especially Maki’s skin on hers.

When Nico’s arm swings down, Maki’s swings forward and their hands brush together a little. The third time it happens, Maki takes Nico’s hand in hers.

Nico wants to stop, to say something, but it feels wrong to do it that way. Moreso it feels right that they don’t have to talk about it. It feels natural.

When they board the train, Nico has a revelation. Maki is being... clingy. Nico knows that *she herself* is a bit of a physical handful, but Maki is usually pretty distant in comparison. She rarely acts out physical affection of her own accord, but the last few days have been nothing but touching and holding and leaning against Nico, in a stark contrast to the singular hug from all those weeks ago.

“Hey, Nico-chan.”

Nico looks up at Maki, who still clutches her hand tightly even though the height difference makes it a tad awkward.

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry I made us leave early. I just don’t feel very good.”
Nico pats her cheek. “Nothing to worry about. You’ve got a lot going on.”

Maki nods. “Today was nice, but it just reminds me of what I’ll be missing out on when the next semester starts. My break isn’t really that long.”

Oh yeah. She has to go back. It has to happen all over again.

For four years.

Maki might be thinking about the same thing, because when Nico looks up, she sees her biting her lip. Nico doesn’t know what else to do but squeeze her hand. There won’t even be much time for Maki to rest once they get home, because she has to go back out again soon to see her parents. It’s something of a nightmare for the both of them, but for different reasons.

Nico will be busy tonight too, with her own preparations for Christmas morning. She has presents to wrap and-

“Shit!” Nico shouts. “Maki-chan, I didn’t get you anything. I can’t believe this. I’m horrible!”

A few people on the train look their way, but quickly go back to minding their own business.

A smile inches its way onto Maki’s face for a brief moment. “You’ve given me plenty.”

Nico still feels guilty though, all the way up until they get to her apartment, and beyond. Maki has just enough time to clean herself up and get changed into something worthy of a Nishikino dinner before she has to head back out the door again. Nico just watches helplessly as Maki starts to look gloomier and gloomier, until she’s halfway out the door. Nico meets her there.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess. They want me to stay over.”

“Think you’ll survive without Nico? I make a pretty good teddy bear.”

It’s a joke, but neither of them are laughing. Maki looks past Nico into the apartment with a glimmer of longing in her eyes.

“See you,” Maki all but whispers, and she steps outside. When the door finally shuts, Nico slumps against it and feels a dreary case of deja vu.

How could everything go from feeling so normal to so glum in such a short time? Why must Nico suffer? Even more? Sure, Maki is probably suffering more than she is right now, but it’s a cause and effect kind of thing. It’s not fair that everything is still so convoluted, that there’s still this uncomfortable detachment that comes between them every now and again. Though maybe Nico is the only one of them that thinks that.

Nico glances at her calendar on the wall in the kitchen. Not a single free day for the foreseeable future, and Maki will probably regress again as soon as classes start up. Could things really last until the summer?

Nico breathes deeply a few times, until she’s cold and everything has gone quiet. She’ll feel better when Maki is back tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes
nobody ever checks my ID when i go out drinking in japan and i look like i'm 12 so.
good luck to everyone scouting for devils in SIF tonight.

After insisting she doesn’t need to be picked up from anywhere, Maki takes a taxi to her parents’ house. They still live in the same place in the same house that is way too big for two people, and Maki hasn’t been there in so long that she feels like she’s going to a stranger’s place instead of her family home. Then again, even back when she was living there she still felt like something of an outsider, like she didn’t belong. That likely had to do with the personality she grew into more than anything else though, because her parents had always been mostly supportive outside of a few bumps in the road.

Her papa was full time at the hospital, on call almost twenty-four hours a day. She never really spent much time with him outside of birthdays and Christmas, but even that lost its charm as she grew older and wiser. Christmas was a little weird now, ever since that whole thing where Nico accidentally let it slip that Santa doesn’t exist when Maki had been standing right next to her. It led to a verbal fistfight she wasn’t exactly proud of, because it really was an accident on Nico’s part, but it felt bad to be so wrong about something for so long. She still felt embarrassed about it even now.

Maki usually got everything she asked for when it came to Christmas, because there was nothing stopping her parents from buying anything and everything, but the last few years had really dulled her whole perspective on the ordeal, especially after becoming friends with those much less fortunate than herself. At least she could admit that she still had a hard time grasping the concept of money as a whole, and the fact that other people don’t have very much of it. She never asked for anything anymore.

The ride over was silent save for the driver’s GPS giving directions periodically. It gave her time to watch the snowflakes swirl past the window and think about what was really going on between herself and Nico.

Nico.

Maki felt like the worst person in the universe for essentially giving Nico the cold shoulder for days on end, and it was only made worse by the fact that she was literally living with her - something she could no longer deny. She really wanted to say something, or do something the entire time, but it just kept stretching out and the stress kept piling up, and she never ended up resolving that particular conflict with herself. Instead, she let all of her negative emotions linger until her will to hold it in gave out.

She knew Nico was hurt, too. She had to be. What kind of best friend ignores you for days, and only takes from you? But she didn’t know how to approach it, how to solve it, so she didn’t do anything. If everything else on her plate could just conveniently disappear, maybe she could have handled the situation with Nico the way she wanted to. Everything used to be so simple, when did her thoughts become so scattered? It should be easy to prioritize any one of her friends over her fear of failure, especially after what they’d been through together, so why was it so hard? Is she really so afraid?

Maybe if her parents stopped pushing her, things might be better. Maki hated to place any blame
with them, she really did, but there was no denying that a majority of her anxiety came from the possibility of disappointing them. The deal was that she could do the whole idol thing in high school and enjoy herself while she could, and after that she would commit herself fully to the family business, because she’s the only heir in name and it’s her duty to continue in her family’s stead. It was all she knew until Honoka found her in the music room that day.

Nico represents possibilities. Things she can have, things she can’t have, things she doesn’t know if she wants or not… her shortstack of a senior had wormed her way in past long standing defenses, determined and fearless as she was. Nico is dedicated too, but to herself, and not to a pre-determined life in a white coat that smells of sanitizer. Maybe some would call it selfish, but Nico gets around that too, because despite her personality, her fans come first whether anyone believes her or not. Nico insists Maki is one of her biggest fans after all. Perhaps Maki’s dedications are misplaced, but she’s not sure she has a choice.

Exactly what she and Nico are doing, Maki doesn’t know. More accurately, Maki doesn’t know why she’s doing what she’s doing, why she’s been so...touchy. It wasn’t like it was something she considered before just doing it, even though acting before thinking was more Nico’s style, but even when she’d spent days lying around and not doing anything, she hadn’t taken the time to think about anything beyond when Nico would be home and when she could go back to sleep again. Being asleep means she doesn’t have to think about things, she doesn’t have to worry about anything.

Why exactly she pulled Nico into the bed with her is still something of a mystery. Well, not entirely, but Maki is still working on that. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time, like it was something she needed, because as soon as she was pressed up against Nico, the last couple months melted away from her memory and she was finally able to rest fully and properly. Maybe it had to do with Nico being the only constant in her life recently, which wasn’t even entirely by Maki’s choice. It’s just where she kept ending up. Feeling that heartbeat against hers...it did things to her. Things that were best not thought about, because in the end it’s better if nothing happens. She couldn’t help but crave that feeling though, the one that came with Nico’s presence, and her persistence.

Had she always felt this way around her? Definitely not to this degree. Maybe she’s finally having feelings and emotions the way normal people always do, because she knows now that the way she used to be wasn’t right, or healthy. You can’t be alone forever. You can leave your comfort zone without losing sight of who you are.

It’s easier now. Lying with Nico right there beside her, whispering things to her in the night, it doesn’t make her embarrassed or flustered like it should. She wasn’t lying when she told Nico she felt safe.

Earlier today, at the restaurant, that had been interesting. Normally Nico was the one naturally gravitating towards Maki, whether or not Maki was receptive, but today it had been the reverse. Maki was the one seeking Nico, sitting unreasonably close to her and putting her hand on her leg. Maki wrote that little detail off as a comfort thing, but there was a stirring of something else involved as well. When they left and she’d grabbed Nico’s hand, that had been a split second decision too, because she missed the sensation of touch and it was the most obvious course of action.

Maki is snapped out of her thoughts as the car door unlocks outside the gates of her former home. She should be worried about this, about what to say to her parents after barely talking to them for months. Her mother especially, she was always worrying after her despite her own busy schedule. At the very least, she could offer them news of her exam grades, since she’d already had some back. As per usual, Maki Nishikino remains irrevocably at the top of her class.

Hard work pays off, it seems, but the price is higher than it’s ever been before.
Her mother welcomes her home.

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It’s exactly as awkward as Maki expected it to be. The Nishikinos have an abnormally large dining table, which they frequently only use one end of when it’s just the immediate family. So Maki has to sit there, feeling as though she’s in some tiny uncomfortable space despite the vast emptiness of the dining room alone. She’d spent many a mealtime there in her youth, unaccompanied save for the family chef periodically checking in.

Maki thinks about Nico’s determination to not waste a single morsel of anything in her household as she gazes down the table at way too much food for three. Nico will scrape the last speck of butter from the plate before adding it to her shopping list, but here it doesn’t matter and most of the leftovers will probably be thrown out. She’s never thought about it until now.

Her mother is smiling like she usually is whenever Maki is around.

“So,” her mother says, “how have you been? Busy?”

Maki nods as she pushes some vegetables around on her plate. She’s not really hungry.

“It’s been a lot of work, but I’m okay. I’m sorry I never—”

“Called?” her father finishes. “We did want to ask you about that. We understand how busy you must be, but surely you could spare a moment every now and then? We just want to make sure everything is going accordingly.”

Maki straightens out her posture, trying her best to look confident in what she’s saying.

“I was just worried about distractions. You’re always warning me about that kind of thing, I just figured it would be better that way.”

Her parents look at each other.

Maki’s mother hums thoughtfully. “Well it’s a good thing Nico didn’t mind us calling so much. She always seemed happy to give us updates from time to time.”

Wait, what?

“You… called Nico to ask about me? More than once?”

“Well, we were out of options when your voicemail stopped working. She always assured us you were doing well, but it’s odd she never told you. We asked her to let you know we called after you.”

Maki notices her father put down his fork with a clatter, but she’s still processing that Nico’s been talking with her parents - both of them - about her.

Her father clasps his hands together in front of his chin. “I appreciate that you have friends you’re close with, Maki, but Nico has always struck me as the irresponsible type. It’s concerning to us that she didn’t say anything to you about our calls.”

Maki automatically scrambles to Nico’s defense as the pieces fall into place. “She did. She did, but I
think maybe I just forgot. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

Maki’s father nods, but still looks unsatisfied.

“I can’t imagine what else you could be thinking about besides your schoolwork. You don’t have a job, you have your own apartment, you have us. You have such a huge advantage over everyone else in your program, because your mother and I have worked hard to get you there. I think you can make time to call us every once in awhile.”

Maki looks to her mother for a moment, who is still smiling softly.

“We just get worried about you when we don’t hear anything, that’s all.”

Maki’s father nods. “We were also wondering about your grades, since all we’ve had to go on is your friend’s words.”

Had it even been ten minutes since they’d sat down? Maki doesn’t want to talk about school anymore.

“I got some results back today. Hundred percent in pharmacology and immunology so far. I’ve been working hard.”

It’s such a flat answer, but Maki doesn’t want to say anything that will make her father doubt her, or get her in trouble or anything. It’s not like she’s lying, honestly.

“That’s good,” is the only thing her father offers her in response. “I hope you’ve done the same in your other subjects. We really want the best for you, you know.”

At this point, Maki doesn’t know what’s best for herself anymore. Two years ago, she would have absolutely been in line with her father, and now that her doubts were manifesting in such destructive ways, she was beginning to wonder if things were meant to be this way or if she was just being a stubborn child again after having a taste of her real passion for a year.

“Have you learned to cook yet? I’ve always been self-taught, you know.”

It’s not really the kind of question she expects from her mother right now, and by the way her father is looking, he wasn’t expecting it either.

“I don’t think we need to discuss that while we have her here right now,” her father says.

“Well, don’t you think Maki would like a rest from all this chatter about school? It’s her break, after all.”

Maki holds in her sigh of relief as best she can, but wonders if her mother can see her clear discomfort, or how tense she is.

“I-I haven’t really had time for any of that. Nico is a good cook though.”

“Well, it’s good to know you’re being looked after. Nico sounds like she’s got you handled, right dear?” Maki’s mother nudges her father’s elbow.

“I suppose. You’ll be going home during the next semester though, right? If you’re worried about distractions then you should probably stop bothering your friend.”

It was a simple statement, but to Maki it was more like a cold punch to her gut. The idea that she would return to her big empty waste of space, and the idea that she was perhaps bothering Nico
somehow. True isolation was the last thing she wanted.

“Right,” Maki replies quietly.

“Are you alright, dear?”

Maki looks up at her mother. There’s genuine concern in her eyes, like nothing she’s seen from her father as far as she can remember. There’s no sense in making her worried, and yet…

“I think I’m just overworked. It’s tiring.”

Maki expects some kind of sympathetic comment, but her father steps in instead.

“When you’re working at the hospital, you won’t even have time to think about how tired you are. You’ll have to get used to it eventually. I’m sure it will come naturally to you.”

There’s a flash, a glimmer, a speck of a memory that manifests before Maki’s eyes. A memory of the sun shining through the window, a gentle breeze blowing at the curtains and her slender fingers grazing ivory keys. Naturally.

Maki drops her knife and fork loudly to her plate. “I think I need to go lie down.”

She stands up abruptly and disregards the way her father is looking at her.

“Maki?” her mother asks.

Maki does her best to smile, she really does. It’s Christmas Eve and she feels unwelcome though, so it’s difficult.

“I know it’s not very late mama, but I have to get back home early. I have to prepare for next semester.”

Her mother looks hesitant.

“Of course…”

Her father doesn’t seem bothered though. “If that’s what you need to do. Are you going to bed? We haven’t touched your room since you left.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good, we’ll see you in the morning then. There isn’t much under our tree for you this year because of your apartment, as we discussed before, but we would love for you to join us when you’re ready.”

Maki nods lamely and leaves her plates and things at the table for the maid to clean up later. She only gets a glance at a huge, brightly decorated Christmas tree sat right in the middle of the living room before she walks up the stairs two at a time. Anywhere but in that conversation is where she wants to be right now.

Her room is exactly the way she left it, with all of her old furniture, but it’s eerily empty with no books or photos or anything she’s got spread across her and Nico’s apartments. She fishes into her overnight bag and pulls out her pyjamas and her toothbrush and gets ready to lie in bed for what will likely be hours, because she isn’t actually tired. It’s only eight in the evening and she just spent the last three days sleeping.

Over dinner there had been something growing inside her, like a void, pulling in everything she’d
felt better about today and locking it away. It was like the opposite of butterflies maybe, like a headache in her heart. That wasn’t medically possible, but that was the best comparison she could come up with. Why couldn’t her father just say he’s happy for her? Praise her for doing so well on her tests? Anything but passive interest would have been a welcome change. At least her mother had other things to talk about, even though she was seemingly shut down by the greater interest of the evening.

Nico never asked about school and neither did her friends. Maybe they knew she hated it. Maki didn’t even really know if she hated school, or if she just hated the idea of what was coming after it. Maybe both. Get married, pop out some kids, and work until retirement. Maki’s mother was particularly fond of imagining life as a grandmother, but her father, of course, was more concerned about having someone around to take up the Nishikino throne after Maki’s had her turn.

She never really talked about that part with anyone, because it’s just how things are supposed to work. It’s been ingrained in her mind since she could walk.

Maki lies down in her bed, in her big empty room, and Nico is the first thing she thinks about.

Nico.

Nico is the problem. That’s what her father would tell her, if she were to elaborate on the whole situation without omitting truths, or dare she say it, lie.

When she tries to imagine a life beyond her post-secondary education, ring around her finger and a faceless man standing across from her in some chapel somewhere, she can’t do it. Isn’t it supposed to be a thing, where young girls dream up their entire wedding plans when they’re fifteen and agonize over what dress to wear for three years and what kind of diamond they want in their ring? When she was younger, the girls at school would talk about it all the time. Maki never thought much of it, because there was nothing for her to consider.

A future without the cutest idol in the universe to nag her and fight with her and hang off her arm for hours? Blasphemy, Nico would say. An idol never gives up on her fans.

But Maki did, and maybe she’ll have to do it again.

Maki lies in bed for hours. The silence, the lack of another breathing person to be around her in the darkness - it’s getting to her. Even though her parents are likely asleep somewhere else in the house, the loneliness she felt when she first moved out is settling in again in the worst way.

Her sheets are cold, rigid and probably haven't been touched since she left. Her pillow isn’t comfortable, it doesn’t smell right. There are no hairs tickling her chin, no hands to pull her close and rub her back, no legs to tangle hers in. There is no heartbeat next to hers, no heat beneath the blanket to keep her warm and content. Now that she’s felt those things, not having them is like not having an arm, or being blind in one eye. Just, a part of her doesn’t work anymore. She rolls over, and over and over and over, but there’s nothing good about where she is, nothing feels like home.

She considers sending a text or two, but Nico is probably asleep, because she has Christmas with her siblings in the morning. Still, Maki longs for what she’s missing.

Just before one in the morning, Maki gets out of bed and shoves all of her belongings back into her bag, not bothering to get changed before leaving her old room. Downstairs in the kitchen, she writes an apology letter to her parents. She doesn’t feel well, it’s a long story, but things will be better if she goes back...home. It’s vague enough, but truthful. Hopefully they understand, or at least her mother does.
She quietly leaves through the front door and whips out her phone to call for a taxi.

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Maki unlocks Nico’s door with her own key an hour after getting out of her old bed. The digital clock on the kotatsu is the only thing she can see in the dark after she shuts out the cold night air. Her pyjamas aren’t exactly the warmest things in the world, and her teeth are still chattering a bit. To save money, Nico once explained to her, she only heats one of the rooms in her apartment overnight, which is obviously the bedroom. So everywhere else is just about as freezing as the outdoors are right now.

Maki fumbles around after tossing her bag to the side, stepping on and around the pillows littering the floor and hoping she doesn’t do anything to disturb Nico. The pounding in her chest gets louder and louder as she slowly opens the door to the bedroom and - there she is, it’s Nico, cocooned tightly in all of her blankets with the heat cranked as high as it will go by the feel of it.

Maki makes her way to the bed and looks for a way to break into the blanket nest without waking Nico up.

She’s about to lay a hand on a fuzzy pink quilt when -

“Hey, Maki-chan.”

“Guh?”

Nico laughs softly. “It’s not proper to break into the houses of ultra cute idols in the middle of the night, you know. Some would say it’s indecent.”

Maki feels her face turning crimson and crosses her arms.

“I have a key, it’s not breaking in.”

“I don’t remember giving you a key.”

“Are you really going to be difficult right now? It’s too late for this. Or early, whatever.”

Maki puts her hands on her hips and Nico snickers.

“It’s just funny that you’d come all the way here in the middle of the night just for Nico. If you’re not careful I might start thinking you’re trying to tell me something…”

Maki’s arms drop to her sides and her hands bundle into tight fists. “I-I didn’t, I’m not…”

Nico waves her hand. “Relax, Maki-chan. I’m just messing with you. I wasn’t even asleep.”

Maki relaxes. “Huh?”

Nico nods. “Yeah I dunno, I just feel weird. Restless.”

Restless is a good word, it describes a little of what Maki had felt that made her decide to come here in the first place.
“Me too. My old room didn’t really feel like my old room. That doesn’t make sense, but I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Well you haven’t been there in a while, and I bet it’s just all empty and cold. Nico’s place is much more homely.”

Maki rolls her eyes. “Well you know I hate to say you’re right, but I can’t argue with that.”

“And here I was, hoping to rile you up. Nothing like a two in the morning fight to the death, am I right?”

Maki can’t help but let out a giggle. “You’re so...you’re so Nico.”

She ducks and lets out a cry as Nico tosses a few pillows every which way and kicks her feet until the blanket unravels from around her. When she’s finished the bed looks mostly normal again, until she flings back the covers and holds her arms out wide.

Maki feels a warm comfort enveloping her before she even moves. This is it, this is what she was missing. Tossing and turning for hours, just like Nico, craving that feeling.

She climbs into the bed, into waiting arms, and Nico pulls Maki down against her. They fumble around a bit, trying to figure out how to fit properly.

Maki flinches as her foot connects with the wall on the other side of the bed. “Ouch! When are you gonna get a bigger bed?”

Nico tries to reach around Maki and grab at the blankets, but her arms are too short.

“Does it look like I can fit a bigger bed in here? Just curl up your long stupid legs or something.”

After a bit more scuffling, Maki finally settles down on top of Nico, head buried against her shoulder. Her legs are curled up and they’re both tangled together, but none of her is hanging off the edge this time. Nico loops her arms under Maki’s and rests her palms on her back, red hair tickling her fingertips. Maki reaches to either side and pulls the blankets tightly around them.

Their breathing evens out a few moments later.

“Maki-chan, did you want to come with me tomorrow? Christmas with the kids?”

Maki hums against Nico’s neck, sleep weighing heavily on her eyes. “You mean today?”

“I guess so. Do you wanna?”

“Hmm yeah, I think that would be nice. I’m bad with kids though.”

“You’re bad with everyone,” Nico quips.

Maki pinches her side.

They’re quiet for a little while longer, but Maki remembers something very important before she can drift off.

“I just remembered, I got you something. For Christmas.”

“Oh?” Nico’s voice is fading, like she’s struggling to stay awake.
“I set it up while you were at work, on your laptop. I made some phone calls. I guess it’s not so much for you, but…”

Nico yawns. “Are you gonna tell me what it is any time soon? Nico needs her beauty rest.”

Maki starts fiddling with the fabric of Nico’s top. “I opened college funds. For your siblings.”

Nico practically launches herself from the pillow, suddenly fully awake. Her forehead collides with Maki’s and they both nearly fall off the bed.

“You what ?!” Nico shouts, ignoring Maki’s grumbling. “Are you serious? How much? Are you…I mean, are you paying for it?”

Maki nods and rubs at her forehead. “It’s enough. Or, it will be enough by the time they’re all grown, so they can go anywhere. I’m paying for it.”

For once, Maki thinks Nico Yazawa is actually speechless. She’s just staring at her, it’s kind of unsettling.

“You- I just,” Nico struggles with her words, “do you even know what this means? Am I dreaming?”

“I already pinched you, idiot.”

Nico breathes in deeply before grabbing either side of Maki’s face with her hands.

“I’m honestly too tired to think about this properly, but thank you Maki-chan. I won’t have to - I mean I don’t have to worry anymore. You have no idea what this means. Mama will be so happy…”

Maki takes Nico’s hands in hers. “Well, we won’t be able to tell her tomorrow unless we get some sleep. So lie back down.”

Nico wordlessly obeys and Maki maneuvers into the same position they were in before, though Nico holds her just a little bit tighter.

If Maki could just forget about everything that waits for her outside the front door and stay like this forever, she would do it in a heartbeat. Maybe it’s her sleepy conscience talking, or the satisfaction she feels for making Nico so happy, but the sentiment is something she might not have even considered even just a few months ago. Everything is changing so quickly. Maybe this is what it means to grow up.

Did Nico have to deal with anything like this when the third years graduated, when everything changed? Had she been missing something all that time? In the end Maki had been more concerned with her schoolwork, like she had been before joining μ’s. Everyone else had mostly left her alone, because they respected what she chose for herself, though Maki still didn’t exactly see it as a choice. But Nico never left her alone - in the sense that she was an annoying brat who tried to convince Maki to skip class every other day. Maybe Nico knew something she didn’t. About life, or being an adult, or something. Everyone else seemed to be getting on just fine though. Perhaps they were the odd ones out.

One thing is for sure though.

The way things are now; it’s what she’s always imagined being truly home feels like. It’s as if…

Well, she feels like she did when she recorded the first song for μ’s. When she dragged Hanayo to
the rooftop and told her she could do it, when Honoka made her get down on the floor and do pushups, when they finally convinced Eli to give them a chance, and follow her dreams with them. When the first thing Nico did after meeting her was insist they take a selfie together.

As she drifts away to the sound of Nico’s slow breathing, Maki collects all of her fondest memories and dreams of the day she’ll make more.
Black Butterfly

Chapter Notes

a couple things. firstly a small thing - some of my chapters are named after Pile (the real life maki!) songs, including this one. the lyrics are pretty accurate, so go have a look and a listen. her stuff is great!

and two major things, the most important of which is: sapporo is the first major city in japan to fully recognize same-sex partnerships! it isn't marriage but it grants all the benefits of marriage. just a relevant thing people reading this might like to know that happened this month.

lastly, i won the chance to purchase tickets to a live viewing of the first aqours love live in tokyo this month! i'm pretty over the moon about it, and though i won't be able to take pictures inside, you can follow my twitter @nidofeathers for other LL in tokyo shenanigans. tickets to the first live are all based on random lottery, so this is especially exciting being a foreigner that won something for once.

enjoy this chapter!

The first thing Maki feels when she wakes up is a hand patting the top of her head. She groans and shoves her face further into her pillow, which feels oddly like a person.

“Hnngggg.”

“Wakey wakey, Maki-Maki-maaaa.”

Oh yeah. Nico.

“Leave me alone,” Maki grumbles. “You’re not my mom.”

Maki feels Nico sigh beneath her.

“Come on Maki-chan, I know it would be nice to lie around all day again but we really gotta get going. I have to go to work after seeing the kids.”

That’s right, they’re supposed to go see Nico’s mom and her siblings for Christmas morning. Christmas morning with small, hyperactive mini Nicos. And Cotarou.

“Leave me to die,” Maki groans.

Nico has to struggle to do it, but she manages to wiggle out from under Maki enough to sit up and lean back against the headboard. Maki gives up trying to push her face into the bed and rolls over, trapping herself uncomfortably tight between Nico and the wall.

Nico taps her forehead. “Come on, you grump. Where’s your Christmas spirit?”

Maki can barely keep her eyes open, and there’s too much light coming in through the curtains.
“You killed it two years ago.”

“You’re still salty about that?” Nico huffs. “It was an accident!”

“I’ll remember that day for the rest of my life.”

Nico seems strangely energetic for someone who definitely only got a few hours of sleep. She throws the covers back all the way and hops out of bed.

“Come oooon Maki-chan, you’re gonna make everyone so disappointed if you make us late,” Nico whines. Maki wants to cover her ears and roll over.

“Can’t they just come here?”

“There’s not enough space. I’m gonna go get ready and if you’re not up by the time I’m back I’m gonna pick you up and drop you in the shower,” Nico says, halfway out the bedroom door.

“You can’t pick me up, you’re weak, Nico-chan,” Maki calls after her.

She listens to the washroom door slide shut and struggles to stop squinting. Maki suddenly has no idea how she managed getting up early every day for class, because right now she feels like she’s just going to pass out the moment they get to the Yazawa’s. She remembers when her friends used to make jokes about her notoriously terrible morning personality, which is really just an amplified version of everyday grumpy Maki who is neither ready nor willing to deal with anything resembling Nico, in any form. Mornings should be illegal and Nico is banned from getting up before ten until further notice.

Maki tries to get up, but all she can manage is rolling over onto her stomach before she considers the mission a failure. What’s Nico going to do anyway? Talk at her until she gets dressed? Actually that does sound kind of terrible now that the thought has crossed her mind. Nico nagging her and pulling her arm and throwing pillows it her. It’s not worth it.

She’ll need coffee.

Fifteen minutes later Maki is nursing a chipped mug of strong black liquid while Nico scolds her for clogging the filter. It’s not like Maki knew it had to be cleaned out or anything, nobody told her that. Tuning Nico out, Maki absent-mindedly wonders if her parents have read her note yet. It’s probably easier not to think about that.

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Maki can barely hold in her laughter watching Nico try to waddle up the stairs to her family’s apartment. She looks more like a big pink marshmallow than anything else.

“Don’t you think maybe two coats and a cardigan and everything else you’re wearing is a bit much.” Maki says, a statement, rather than a question.

“Nobody asked you!”

Maki points at the big fluffy white pom poms dangling from Nico’s boot laces. “You’re going to trip over those.”
“No I’m-” Nico starts to say as she immediately trips up the stairs. Instead of falling, she just kind of leans against them, huge coat cushioning her fall.

“I told you so.”

“I told you so,” Nico sneers mockingly. “Help me up.”

Maki sighs and instead of helping her stand, she grabs both of Nico’s arms and drags her backwards up the stairway.

“Seriously?” Nico groans, tilting her head back to look at Maki, who is relatively expressionless. As if she does this every day. “The least you could do is carry me, Maki-chan.”

“Well maybe if you were wearing fewer coats I could actually fit my arms around you and do that. You can’t possibly be this cold…”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“I’m calling you dumb,” Maki says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Wow, Nico is offended. What if one of my siblings heard you say that?”

“Well they’ll have to learn the truth someday.”

Nico kicks her feet. “It’s wrong to lie to children, Maki-chan. They’re very impressionable.”

Maki drops Nico’s arms when she finally gets to the right floor, but Nico continues to lie there, unable to right herself.

“I know they are,” Maki says with her hands on her hips. “I’ve been living with one for the last two months.”

Instead of lashing out, like Maki expects her to, Nico claps her gloved hands. “Damn, you’re on a roll today. Maybe you’re finally learning something from Nico?”

“I’m leaving you here.”

“No! Help me up!”

Maki shrugs before yanking on Nico’s arms until she’s finally standing up again. Nico flinches and rubs at her elbows. “Couldn’t you be a little more careful? I’m delicate, you know.”

After a split second of hesitation, Maki reaches out and takes Nico’s hand as they head for the Yazawa household.

“Worried I’ll bruise your ego?”

“Don’t make me regret inviting you.” Nico says with narrow eyes. She sticks her index finger out and jabs Maki in the side.

Something about today has Maki feeling lighter. Happier.

They stop at the door and before Nico can even knock, three kids who look a lot like her have thrown the door open and attached themselves to Nico’s legs. One of them, Cocoro, backs up almost immediately and shoves a camcorder in the direction of Maki’s face.
“You’re Maki! I’m filming you.”

Maki staggers back a little and her face heats up. High school flashbacks abound.

“Cocoro, don’t film people without asking!” Nico scolds, the other two Yazawa children still attached to her legs and screaming her name. Well, Cotarou isn’t screaming out loud, but maybe internally.

“How come oneesan gets to bring a friend? You said I’m not allowed, mama!”

“Backup dancer.”

Maki blinks at Cotarou, still red in the face. “I-I’m not, I don’t… I’m not your sister’s backup dancer anymore.”

Nico’s mother appears at the door suddenly, and Maki realizes she’s never seen her wear anything other than her office attire. Today she’s still in sleepwear and a big fluffy robe, the rest of the Yazawas who aren’t Nico dressed in onesies of varying colours.

“How about you all let them come inside? You know how your sister is with the cold.”

All at once, the Yazawa children disappear through the door, filtering around their mother. Maki can see Cocoa jumping on the couch in the background.

“It’s nice to see you again, Maki-chan. Nico-chan talks about you a lot,” Mrs. Yazawa says.

And then - Maki can hardly believe it - Nico’s mother winks at her. Maki opens her mouth to say something about it, but Nico interrupts her.

“Mama please,” Nico stresses, placing her hands on Maki’s back and shoving her towards the door.

“She didn’t come home just to be embarrassed for two hours!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, dear.”

Nico huffs and rubs at her rosy red cheeks as she shuts the door behind them.

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Christmas at the Yazawa’s is nothing like how Christmas was at home for Maki. When she thinks of Christmas, she imagines the huge elaborately decorated white and gold tree her mother puts up every year, dozens of professionally wrapped gifts under the tree, and tinsel stuck in her hair for days. Maki resolves that her parents liked to spoil her for whatever reason, even though she never really wanted anything specific. The Santa thing didn’t exactly help them keep a budget, especially if they were away at one of their vacation homes and had to send everything there.
Here, the tree is smaller but no less charming, covered in mismatched hand-made decorations and ornaments with birth dates and things like ‘Baby’s first Christmas’ written on them. Some of the decorations are definitely just cut out photographs of Nico, and Maki doesn’t know if she should ask if the kids made them or if Nico really is that vain. There aren’t too many presents, and nobody seems bothered that Nico hasn’t brought anything. Because Maki seems to be the thing she brought them.

“Are you old?” Cocoa asks her as she sits on the couch. “Why are you so tall?”

“Uh,” Maki says intelligently. “I’m younger than your sister. And I’m not that tall, am I? Nico-chan, do you think I’m too tall?”

Nico looks up from where she’s dividing the gifts under the tree. “Everyone is too tall, especially you.”

“Too tall,” Cotarou nods from beside Nico.

Mrs. Yazawa rests her elbows on the back of the couch.

“You’ve definitely grown since you first came over. I can’t say my daughter has changed much in that department though.”

Okay, Maki has to giggle at that one.

Nico crumples a bow on top of a gift with her fist by accident. “Is this seriously happening? It’s been like three minutes and you’ve already teamed up. Now all we need is Nozomi…”

“I’m still filming you,” Cocoro says as she appears next to Maki on the other side of the couch, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Um, okay?” Maki can feel her face going hot again.

Mrs. Yazawa pats Cocoro on the head. “Nozomi gave her a hand-me-down camcorder.”

“Oh, well that’s nice of her.”

Seconds later, Cocoro is up again, following Cocoa around the kitchen. “I’m going to be an idol producer one day, then oneesan can work for me.”

Maki doesn’t really know what to say. “That’s...ambitious?”

Mrs. Yazawa nods. “I think that runs in our family. I guess they’re a bit more enthusiastic because their sister made it, you know?”

“Are you guys talking about me? Don’t talk about me.”

“I guess… Maki says, quietly, “I guess she did. I feel like Nico-chan does everything she sets out to do.”

“Even if she fails,” Mrs. Yazawa says with a smile on her face, “she always finds her way back. I think it’s important not to get lost along the way, don’t you?”

Lost. Lost is a good descriptor for how Maki feels about her life right now. The dynamic here is so different, so encouraging and hopeful. No wonder Nico would rather lie to them than let them down, after all she’d done.
“Oh, actually, about that,” Maki says quickly, “I know Nico-chan was mostly working so she could-”

“Maki-chan, don’t spoil it! Wait until after the kids are done at least,” Nico says as she stands up from her neatly organized gift pile. A few presents for each of the younger Yazawas, and one thing for Nico herself. The thing for Nico isn’t wrapped, it’s a bunch of gift cards for grocery stores.

Mrs. Yazawa gives Maki a curious look, but it’s friendly and inviting. Maki feels like she could tell her anything, anything at all, and get nothing but kindness in return. Very different from Nico’s consistently bratty-cutesy look. How are they related?

Watching the younger Yazawas tear through their gifts is something of a spectacle. Every time one of them opens something, they have to get up and show Maki, even though she’s sitting right there watching them. Cocoa gets a soccer ball and a new set of nail polish, which she makes use of as soon as possible by painting Maki’s nails an odd mix of green and neon blue while they watch Nico put together a new mini easel for Cotarou. Cocoa cannot paint nails to save her life, and it kind of itches on Maki’s skin, but she doesn’t have the heart to say no.

Mrs. Yazawa gives them mugs of fresh hot chocolate halfway through and Maki has to use her left hand to drink it. Cocoro predictably gets a few books about film, and an A-Rise DVD signed by Tsubasa, but she immediately whips out a pen and demands Nico sign it too. Even though Nico isn’t in the idol business anymore, it would seem her family still thinks she’s the greatest one in the universe. It’s charming, but when they all put their hands up and do the Nico-nico-nii together, Maki feels a little like throwing up.

Nico gives her mother some coupons for a local spa and tells her to make sure she uses them this time. Once everything is said and done, Nico cleans up the crumpled wrapping paper and they all sit around the living room, and the kids decide they have to show Maki everything they got again, except this time Cotarou insists that he has to sit on her lap.

“You should come over more often, they really like you,” Mrs. Yazawa says to her, “I’m sure Nico-chan wouldn’t mind.”

“So you can show her all my baby photos? I’ll admit I was definitely the cutest baby ever but some things aren’t meant to be shared, you know?” Nico rushes out. It’s a little suspicious.

“I’ll come over if you show me Nico-chan’s baby photos,” Maki says.

“Maki-chaaaaaan!”

Mrs. Yazawa hides a smile behind her hand. “Shall we do it now, while she’s here?”

“No!”

Maki feels a pull at the side of her head, and when she turns to look she sees Cocoa holding a hairbrush. “Your hair is nice.”

“Thank...you?”

How are these children everywhere at once? Are all Yazawas like this when they’re young? They’re cute and all but Nico definitely never grew out of being annoying. She hopes Nico doesn’t want kids. Well, maybe one, but definitely not -

Blood rushes to Maki’s face in less than a second as she realizes what kind of scenario she was imagining.
Nico having kids in the future has absolutely nothing to do with her. It shouldn’t.

“Why’s your face so red?” Cocoro says as she starts filming again.

“I-I don’t…”

Mrs. Yazawa pats her shoulder. “Think an embarrassing thought? Don’t worry, Nico-chan does that all the time.”

“Mama.”

Maki shakes her head. “It was nothing. Forget about it. Nico-chan, can we?”

Nico nods. “Alright, listen up little fans!”

Instantly her siblings have all their eyes on her. It’s kind of creepy.

“Maki-chan and Mama and I have important adult things to discuss. So everyone gather all your stuff and go play in Cocoro’s room!”

Like clockwork, they all salute, even Cotarou, before scrambling to pick everything up and rush off in the direction of Nico’s old room. When they’re gone, Maki examines her nails.

“Cocoa only painted eight of them,” Maki says as she holds out both of her hands. One of her nails has a tiny smiley face painted on.

Nico sighs and sits down next to Maki. “Thanks for putting up with them, I know they’re a little…much.”

“I live with you, don’t I?”

As soon as the words have left Maki’s mouth, she tenses and turns around to look at Mrs. Yazawa who is seated on her other side.

She just grins. “Don’t worry, I know my daughter is looking after you. It’s why she doesn’t watch the kids anymore.”

“Oh,” Maki says, relief flowing through her. “Wait, so who does then?”

“Hanayo and Rin, but mostly Hanayo.” Nico answers.

That makes sense, because Rin does have quite a lot of free time when she isn’t working at the school track.

“Anyway, that’s not important. Maki-chan is crazy, you won’t believe it.”

The curious look makes a return as Mrs. Yazawa re-wraps her robe around herself.

Maki is a little nervous for a reason she doesn’t know. Why would she be nervous? But she tells Mrs. Yazawa everything anyway.

There are hugs, which Maki expects, and there are also tears, which she probably should have expected. Mrs. Yazawa has questions of course, where the funds are coming from and do her parents know (they don’t know, and most of is coming from the inheritance she’s about to get from her
mom’s side) but mostly she can’t stop saying thank you.

“They’re gonna have a good future, you know. I know it’s easy for you to do but... I don’t know if I could have given them everything I wanted to on my own,” Nico says to her. The way she’s looking at her, it’s so soft. Gentle. Something Maki doesn’t know how to describe. It feels good to see Nico like that.

They don’t have much time to really talk about it, because Nico’s shift is in thirty minutes and she has to get going. It takes her at least five of those minutes to put all of her winterwear on.

Maki isn’t exactly ready to go yet, but she goes with Nico to the door.

“I’ll see you back home Maki-chan, and I’ll even make you a special Christmas day dinner,” Nico says to her before pointing her finger directly at her face, “and don’t talk to my mom about me while I’m not here.”

“No promises,” Maki says with a sly wink.

Nico sort of moves forward, hesitating for only a moment before pressing her lips to Maki’s cheek. It’s only a second, but Maki splutters anyway and slaps her cheek as soon as Nico backs away.

“Nico-chan!”

“Bye Maki-maki-maaaaa!”

And just like that, she’s out the door and gone. Maki is mortified when she remembers Nico’s mother is still standing behind her.

“She’s definitely a handful, isn’t she?”

“Bweh?”

“Tell me about it,” Mrs. Yazawa laughs as she rolls her eyes. “But, she’s lucky to have you.”

Maki blinks and tries to reconstruct her thoughts. “Honestly I feel more lucky that I have her, even if she is a pain.”

“Mhmm,” Mrs. Yazawa says wistfully. “You definitely have her. Listen, Nico doesn’t tell me everything, but she does talk to me. If you ever need anything, just say the word.”

Maki looks down. “I...thank you. You know, it took me so long to just accept Nico’s help. I think she’s right when she tells me I need to stop being so stubborn.”

“Well, if there’s anything you should know about us, it’s that we’re very close and very persistent. Nico leaving home was difficult, but we all understood why she did it. She has dreams to follow.”

“Hm,” Maki hums.

“Do you want to be a Yazawa?” Cocoa yells from the bedroom, where all three kids have probably been listening to them through the crack in the door.

“I just remembered I need to go see Rin and Hanayo. I should get going.”

Mrs. Yazawa laughs as Maki gathers her things.

“You’ve been learning from Nico, I see. She’s good at avoiding things too. Try not to bottle it up too
Maki doesn’t really know exactly what she means, but it’s probably something she should think about. After saying bye to the kids, Maki steps outside and decides that maybe she should actually do what she says she’s going to do. Hopefully they’re both free.

Once Maki is gone, the phone rings and Mrs. Yazawa picks up, answering with a cheery holiday greeting. As she expected, it’s Mrs. Nishikino. Time to tread carefully, for Maki’s sake.

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Maki meets up with both Rin and Hanayo at the Denny’s in Akiba for brunch. It’s not the first place Maki would have chosen, but they’re having some special promotion for cat shaped pancakes so Rin insisted. The delight on her face when she sees the chocolate syrup whiskers on her cat-cake is unparalleled.

“It’s nice to see you again so soon, Maki-chan!” Hanayo says cheerfully. “How was your Christmas?”

“It was…interesting.”

“So does that mean you went to Nico-chans, nya?”

Hanayo gasps. “Rin, we shouldn’t!”

Maki shakes her head. “No, it’s okay. I ended up staying at Nico’s last night even though I was supposed to stay with my parents. We had Christmas at her mom’s place this morning.”

It feels like things are about to go from zero to a hundred real fast.

Rin makes a swooning motion but Hanayo looks concerned. “What did your parents say about that?”

Maki fiddles with a container of butter. “They don’t know. Or, they do, but I haven’t talked to them yet. I left a note.”

“And they haven’t called you?”

“I may or may not have left my phone at Nico-chan’s on purpose.”

Rin stops her silly motions and frowns. “That doesn’t sound good. What if they get the wrong idea? Or worse, the right one?”

“Rin…” Hanayo whispers.

Maki wants to know. “What do you mean?”

“Do your parents know? Like, about you and Nico-chan?”

Maki frowns. “About us? They know I’ve been staying with her if that’s what you mean.”

Hanayo looks nervous, but she doesn’t try to interrupt Rin.
“About you and Nico-chan being together now?”

Maki drops her fork. “What? Rin, we aren’t. I can’t. That’s not- I mean I’m not like that. Don’t be stupid.”

But Rin doesn’t stop.

“Me and Kayo-chin were right there beside you guys, don’t think we didn’t totally notice you being all touchy-feely. You don’t have to keep it a secret, nyokay?”

“There are no secrets,” Maki huffs. “We aren’t like that. Period.”

Rin slouches in her seat and looks at Hanayo, asking for help. Something, anything.

Maki starts cutting the ears off her cat-cake a little too harshly. “I didn’t invite you out so you could make assumptions about me and Nico-chan.

“But Maki-chan, wouldn’t it be easier if you could just be honest with yourself?” Hanayo whispers, just loud enough for all of them to hear.

“Do you pester Nico-chan about this too?”

Rin shakes her head. “We don’t have to pester her, she doesn’t hide anything.”

Maki stops cutting and puts everything down, dropping her hands to her lap. She looks away from her friends, out the window. She tries to stop her lip from trembling, but she can’t. She’s not strong enough.

“I know,” Maki says. “I know she doesn’t hide it.”

Hanayo reaches a hand out across the table towards Maki. “She does a lot for you, doesn’t she? We don’t know all of it, but we hear things sometimes. With that kind of dedication, that loyalty, you have to know right?”

Maki closes her eyes, but continues to look away.

“I know she loves me,” Maki swallows, biting back her hesitation. “I’ve always known. I’m not stupid.”

When she looks back at them, both Rin and Hanayo are wide-eyed. Stunned, though they really shouldn’t be, Maki thinks.

Perhaps it’s time to come clean. Better late than never.

“When I was growing up,” Maki begins, “I was always told exactly what my future would look like and how I would get there. How I would inherit the hospital, money, my name, everything. I always listened, I never thought about anything else except music. Maybe I was even excited.

The plan was I would go to school and top my classes, study hard, make all the right friends. I was supposed to go to UTX, but my mom knows Kotori’s mom so I ended up at Otonokizaka. And then I didn’t make any friends until you all came along, and then I fell out of line. Or my father’s line, I don’t know. I always assumed things would go the way my parents wanted, but when they didn’t I got scared. Scared of disappointing them, scared of being who I am.”

Maki pulls at a strand of her hair, twirling it around her index finger.
“I was going to grow up and get paired off with some other intern, have kids and then continue on exactly the way my parents did. I’m their only child, how could I do anything else but what they wanted? I never thought anything of it, I just took it for what it was. But when I met Nico-chan… you know I hated her at first? At least that’s what I told myself. It didn’t take me long to figure out it was the opposite.

It seems stupid, but to me at the time, it was just another thing about me that ended up being wrong. My father, he’s never found that kind of thing acceptable. You know, two girls. But when you’re raised around someone like that, the idea that it’s wrong or bad becomes normal. So I pushed the feelings away as much as I could. But you know Nico-chan.”

Rin and Hanayo nod. They’ve been waiting for this moment.

“And then, all of you started getting together, and Nico-chan graduated. I thought maybe things would change and it would go away, but Nico-chan wears her heart on her sleeve and she stuck around. Just like always, she never really gave up. When Nozomi and Eli moved in together, I mentioned it to my parents, that I was happy for them. Testing the waters I guess, since Nico-chan wasn’t going to go away. My dad said he was glad I wasn’t like that. Right in front of her. What was I supposed to say?”

After that I didn’t really know what to do. If Nico-chan and I got together, she would have had to deal with that. I know we all think it’s nothing to be ashamed of, but the truth is that not everyone approves or thinks it’s normal, people like my father. How could I do that to her? So I pushed everyone away and tried to forget about it. It seemed like the easy way out, to lose myself in my work. And I thought that I did it, that I stopped feeling the way I did in high school. I thought I’d moved on. I convinced myself it was all one-sided.”

When she pauses to breathe, she notices her cheeks are damp. Hopefully nobody is looking their way.

“But now I know it was never like that. It’s still the same as it always was, but now we - I mean, you aren’t wrong, Rin. We haven’t talked about it, but there’s something there that isn’t going to go away and I don’t want it to go away.”

So yes, I know she loves me. I just don’t know what to do yet, and I keep digging my hole and making everything worse. So, I would appreciate if neither of you ask me about it again.”

Maki is met with absolute silence. This isn’t the situation she imagined revealing herself in, if she ever did at all, but now it’s all out in the open. There’s no going back.

Rin suddenly slams her fists on the table and stares intently at Maki, directly into her eyes.

“You have to tell her.”

“What? No-”

“Yes! You have to! You love her this much and you’re not even doing anything about it! What do you want Maki-chan?”

Maki shrinks in her seat. She hasn’t seen Rin this intense in a while, and Hanayo looks just as confident.

“Kayo-chin and I know what it’s like to feel so strongly. Don’t you want to share that?”

“Of course I do,” Maki mutters.
“Then do it. Stop hiding who you are! μ’s is about making your dreams real, that’s who we are! You gotta let yourself shine, nya!”

Hanayo nods rapidly next to her. “You know Nico-chan better than any of us. What do you think she would do if you confessed to her, even if she knows how your father is?”

The answer comes to Maki easily. At last, something she is sure of.

“She would stay with me. I know she would. Nothing stops her.”

Rin holds out her hand for a high five. “You know it, Maki-chan!”

Reluctantly, Maki’s hand reaches out to meet Rin’s.

The rest of their meal is much less intense (or exciting, that’s what Rin would call it) and when they finish up, Maki finds it in herself to thank her friends for setting her off. Sometimes she really does need that push, and not always from Nico.

She goes home, to her actual home, the one she shares with Nico, and digs her phone out from the blankets on the bed, where she deliberately left it. Surprisingly, there is only one message. A text from her mother.

**Mom:** I spoke with Mrs. Yazawa this morning. Call my cell.

But Maki has had enough of an emotional roller coaster ride today, and opts to text her back instead.

**Maki:** i’m sorry i left. Please trust me, i had a good reason for doing it. I feel better where i am for now but i promise i’ll call tomorrow.

The response comes quickly.

**Mom:** It’s alright. I could tell during dinner that you’re having a hard time right now. Try not to let what your father said bother you, okay?

If anything Maki wishes her mother was talking about what he father had said all that time ago, when Nico was there listening. She knows she’s just talking about school again though.

Tomorrow she’ll call her mother, and they’ll talk and hopefully everything will be resolved. If she can tell her friends, she can tell her parents. It’s shouldn’t be so hard, she just needs to channel her inner Rin. Just say what’s bothering her.

In the meantime, she needs to think about where to go from here. As courageous as her friends are, Maki herself is not quite there yet but it’s about time she gives herself something other than graduating to work towards. Rin asking her what she wants never leaves her mind. Maki knows what she wants. Whether or not she can have it is another monster entirely. Though, if she never takes a step forward, how is she going to know? This isn’t something she wants to pass up anymore.

This is real.

It’s exciting, despite the doubt. It’s clear to Maki, to everyone, that Nico has a lot of love to give. Nico deserves everything Maki has to give back. But juggling school… she’ll have to keep it up. Maybe if she can do both, if she can keep up her marks and turn her relationship with Nico into something more defined, then maybe her parents will come to accept it. It’s the only thing she can do.
Tomorrow.

Tomorrow is when Maki Nishikino finally takes charge of her own life, for better or for worse.
Maki’s return to school goes about as well as she expected it might after spending a majority of her break asleep, or lying around and trying to sleep. At the very least, her plate is a bit less full thanks to Nico convincing her to not apply for an overload again. Maki was admittedly very stubborn about it even though it was more to her benefit to avoid working herself into oblivion again, but the logic was there in that she was still considering how many years she might end up spending in post-secondary. Nico’s logic was more like “don’t do it if you don’t want to do it,” which was fine, but it’s not something Maki is used to.

In a way, it feels like she’s starting her first semester all over again, except this time she knows what to expect. The worst part of knowing is that now she has the ability to dread the last few weeks before the summer, the impending doom of going mentally catatonic again even though nothing good came of it the first time. While she anticipates that things are going to go much the same way as before, Nico insists that this time everything will be different because now Nico understands what’s running through Maki’s brain.

That may be true to an extent, but there are definitely still secrets. Well, one secret. Maki still hasn’t worked out exactly when it might be a good time to bring that up.

While Maki braves the classroom frontier, Nico surprisingly continues to work her seven-day week without complaint, citing her poor excuse for a personal savings account as the reason. Being so preoccupied with funding her siblings had robbed Nico of any yen she might have saved for herself, for emergencies and the like. Simply put, her own savings account was empty and she needed to get on top of it.

As much as Maki wanted to do something about that too, she wasn’t necessarily paying much heed to Nico’s schedule because she was back to struggling with her own. This time, she was determined to do things as optimally as possible from the get-go, which mostly meant listening to Nico. Nico, who insisted that she still cook for the both of them, goes grocery shopping, does the laundry, and all of those other things she was told she didn’t have time to worry about. She did worry though, because at last there were signs that Nico wasn’t getting along so well herself.

Maki didn’t really know what it was like to work an actual job, but she imagined it was a bit like full time school except you got paid to do it. Imagining herself in class all day, seven days a week… it’s no wonder Nico is acting a little more irritable than usual. Actually, it’s hard to discern whether she is or not, because she’s always irritable in one way or another. On the rare occasion that their schedules align and they see each other, Maki goes out of her way to ask Nico how she is or how her day is going.

Sometimes her voice sounds a little ragged, but Nico is always, always smiling when she answers,
and she tells Maki not to worry. Maki also wants to call Nico out on the bags that recently formed under her eyes, but she actually isn’t sure how recent it is because one of Nico’s genuine talents is applying makeup, and she only gets to see non-makeup Nico when they’re crammed in the bed and they both pass out within thirty seconds.

And then there’s the hole - the one Maki’s been digging for far too long to quit now. The conversation she’d had with her mother over the phone the day after Christmas had actually gone pretty well, partially because it didn’t involve her father, and partially because Maki had gone into the conversation with more confidence than she remembered having only a couple days prior.

There was something about the way her mother spoke to her that made Maki wonder if she knew something was up. Her questions had been precise, but not so much that they demanded precise answers, to Maki’s relief. So for all intents and purposes, Maki was living in her own apartment, didn’t need her own chef or house cleaner, and most definitely did not want any surprise visits made by her parents in case they interrupted her study time.

That had been a bit of an oddly worded inquiry. *If your father and I came to visit without letting you know, would that be a bad thing?*

Of course it would be, because Maki wouldn’t be there. Instead she was off living with irresponsible (according to her father) Nico Yazawa, whom she now definitely wanted to pursue a romantic relationship with. It all sounded like some terrible Korean drama where Nico was the secret boyfriend and Maki was the rebellious teenage daughter. It was almost kind of true. The worst thing about keeping the secret isn’t that her father might find out before she can fix the whole lying situation (if it even is fixable - she has to try, at least), but rather that he finds out that her secret potential boyfriend is actually a secret potential girlfriend.

She can’t keep secrets forever. Hopefully one day, preferably sooner rather than later, there wouldn’t have to be any secrets anymore. Every time she thought about it - about confessing to Nico and introducing her officially to her parents or whatever - she would remember what her father said about Nozomi and Eli. If that happened, what then? Would she have to choose between Nico and her family? There were horror stories about that all over the internet and she never really imagined a lifetime where she would voluntarily put herself in that position. If only she could find out how it would go before actually doing it.

She just needs more time to think about it.

She wouldn’t really have to choose, would she?

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Three weeks into the semester, Maki starts to feel the drag in full force, and starts to show it when she forgets her homemade lunch in the fridge, constantly. As in, more than once. Several times in the same week, actually.

The fourth time she does it, Nico notices.

Just as Maki is packing her bag to leave her lecture, her phone buzzes.

**Nico:** you forgot your lunch, you dingdong
Maki: i’ll just buy something and bring that tomorrow.

Nico: yesterday’s is still here too!

Maki: it’s not like i’m doing it on purpose.

Nico: of course not, but nico works hard to make sure you eat right. no regressing allowed!!

Maki: it’s not going to kill me to eat out for literally one day.

Nico: sure but it’s not just about that, it’s about respecting all of nico’s hard work. this isn’t easy you know

Maki: then don’t make me food every day?

Nico: quit being so selfish

Maki huffs and frowns as she looks down at her phone. How is it selfish? She can’t even tell if Nico is being serious or not.

Maki: are you serious right now? How am i being selfish?

Nico: never mind that. i’ll bring you your lunch before work

Maki: you don’t have to do that.

There’s no reply, and Maki assumes it’s because Nico was already out the door to deliver it, that or she was already halfway to the school to begin with. When she looks up from her phone, her classmates are staring at her again.

“What are you looking at?” she says to them accusingly.

Probably her, because the last time some of them saw her with a phone, she’d made the biggest, most terrible scene in probably all of TokyoU history, yammering away to someone on the phone and hyperventilating in the most unattractive way imaginable. They were probably waiting for something to happen again, but Maki wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. A few of them linger behind her as she heads outside.

The air is still crisp and cold but the snow is mostly gone, so it isn’t much trouble for Maki to make her way over to the hospital on campus, which she assumes is where Nico will end up even though Maki rarely goes anywhere near it. She doesn’t like to think of herself as a paranoid individual, but she swears that some of the other medical students are following her. Maybe they have their own business in the same general direction, but Maki really can’t help but feel insecure about them.

People still always just look at her, but never talk to her. Sure, she deliberately never talks to anyone else either, but it feels better to think that everyone else is at fault.

Just as Maki passes two benches on the walkway towards the hospital, a high pitched and slightly whiny voice calls her name.

“Maki-chan! I brought your stupid food!”

Does she really have to yell?

Maki turns to see Nico marching across a grassy field, bundled up in a coat and scarf and clutching a
wrapped up bento tightly in her gloved hand.

“Seriously,” Nico scowls, “do I look like your mom? Is this elementary school or university?”

There’s a rising urge within Maki to slap Nico on the back of her head, but now people are looking at them, even stopping on the walkways to stare at her - or maybe they’re looking at Nico? Either way, Maki wants it to end.

As soon as Nico is in front of her, Maki reaches out and yanks the bento from her grasp.

“Okay, you can go now.”

Nico crosses her arms. “Wow, rude. Not even a thank you?”

“It hasn’t even been five minutes since you told me you were coming. Were you already walking here?”

Nico raises an eyebrow as if she is offended. “What is this, twenty questions?”

Maki narrows her eyes. “That was one question, Nico-chan.”

“I didn’t come all the way out here to be interrogated!”

Maki’s palm meets her face. “If you could be an adult for like, ten minutes, that would be nice.”

Nico pokes Maki in the cheek before resting her hands on her hips. “If you could stop forgetting your lunch, that would be nice. Hey, are you gonna introduce me to your friends?”

Maki moves her palm away. “Huh?”

Nico points behind Maki, to the three girls who followed her out of the lecture hall a few minutes before. They’re just standing there watching them, and one of them has a phone out.

“Hey, you!” Nico calls to them as she starts walking in their direction. “Are you recording this?”

One of the girls shakes her head as Nico gets closer, her face going red.

Maki doesn’t really know what to do, this is likely the worst possible outcome in a situation where Nico shows up uninvited to the campus. Reluctantly, she follows Nico, if only to make sure she doesn’t start any fistfights.

“It’s rude to do that without asking you know. Did you take pictures too?”

The girl fumbles around with her phone and shoves it in her pocket.

“N-no! I wasn’t - I didn’t do anything!”

Nico leans towards them, and despite being significantly shorter than all of them, her accusatory gaze makes them step back. She doesn’t say anything, she just stares back and cocks her hip as if she’s expecting something.

Maki decides it’s time to step in.

“Just leave them alone, Nico-chan.”

“You’re Nico Yazawa!” one of the girls blurts out before slapping her hands over her mouth.
Maki sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose as Nico claps her hands together excitedly.

“You know me? I mean, of course you know me, who doesn’t? I’m the number one super idol in the universe, after all.”

The girl who had the phone out before pulls a crinkled piece of paper out of her coat pocket and nervously holds it up, glancing for a moment at Maki before slowly inching away from her and closer to Nico. She opens her mouth to speak, but Nico beats her to it.

“You want my autograph? I don’t know, I have a pretty busy schedule. Nico has things to do, people to see…”

Maki grimaces. “No you don’t.”

“Shut up, Maki-chan! Nico can always make time for her fans.”

Maki rolls her eyes as she watches Nico whip out a pen and take the paper from the girl, who nearly falls over when she can barely bring herself to actually hand it over. There’s something about idol mode Nico that is exceptionally insufferable, but there’s a tiny, miniscule part of Maki that also finds it charming or endearing, she isn’t sure which and she mostly ignores that feeling. Humble is a foreign word to Nico when she’s in the presence of strangers who recognize her.

Nico finishes her signature and looks from the girl to Maki and back again, because the girl is still periodically glancing in Maki’s direction.

Nico points the pen at Maki. “Did you want hers too? Of course you do.”

The girl makes a funny high pitched noise and clutches her bag. “Uh, um, well, she doesn’t have to if she doesn’t want to. It’s fine, it’s fine!”

“No no,” Nico says, “she’ll sign it for you. Even I want Maki-chan’s autograph, and it’s extra special if it’s next to mine, right?”

The girl shifts from foot to foot. “Oh, well, Maki is just…”

“Just what?” Maki snaps.

Nico hits her arm. “Be nice, you grump. We have to be kind to our fans!”

“My fans? They just look at me and follow me around and take pictures of me.”

“Yeah,” Nico stresses, “look, you’re scaring them! Why can’t you just act all embarrassed like you used to?”

“I’m too tired to be embarrassed.”

“Sign the damn paper!”

“Fine! Give it.”

As Maki is signing the paper, the girl turns to Nico. “Sorry. I mean, we just… we don’t mean to be weird but we didn’t want to bother her. We’re big fans, but… Maki doesn’t really talk to anyone? Except on the phone. But she’s so amazing…”

Maki stops writing and looks up, about to say something, but Nico is faster as usual.
“I know, right? Maki-chan works so hard that I bet she forgets to even talk to anyone, like a weird hermit. She’s got the looks, the brains, the talent!”

“I know!” the girl nods her head vigorously. “How does she do it?”

Maki feels sort of awkward because they’re not even looking at her, talking about her as if she isn’t there. Compliments from people she doesn’t know - the ultimate in embarrassing conversations.

Nico hugs herself. “She learns from the best. But you know what the number one things is about Maki-chan?”

“What?” The girl says excitedly.

Nico leans back against Maki’s arm and flutters her eyelashes in the most obnoxious way possible.

“She’s got me.”

Maki instantly heats up. Nico has a horrible choice of words when it comes to talking about them in public, especially when the meaning behind them is questionable.

The girl is looking at both of them, eyes wide and begging for something more, some tidbit of information that Maki doesn’t want anyone to know about. Nico and Maki haven’t talked and Maki hasn’t said anything otherwise, it’s too much. Though her thoughts are scattered and she’s pretty sure Nico is flustering her on purpose, Maki still finds a way to walk all over Nico’s implicative statement.

“We’re roommates.”

Nico’s expression immediately drops.

“Yeah, roommates.” She says, obviously uninterested in continuing the conversation.

Maki ignores her pout and hands the girl a wrinkled paper with two autographs on it.

“I have to go to work,” Nico says. She doesn’t sound like it, but Maki knows Nico is sulking now. Seriously though, what did she expect?

“I have to eat before class. Bye.”

As Maki walks away without looking back, she instantly regrets how she made her exit. Nico should know better than to put her on the spot like that though, even if it is a joke. But that’s the problem, it’s not a joke. Maki’s feelings are not something to be played with, so when Nico does it… well, even then Maki has to try her best not to place blame. Nico probably doesn’t know that Maki knows. It’s a terrible cycle.

Even though there’s a smiley face drawn across the omelette in Maki’s lunch, she still feels cold and rigid inside as she eats it.

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A few days later, Nico gets pulled into a couple double shifts, and her attitude takes a turn for the worse. It’s not as if she’s even recovered from the whole incident on campus yet, which is weird
because she’s typically great at springing back from self-instigated rejection. Usually because she’s joking.

Maki shouldn’t have a reason to feel bad though; it’s not her fault. It’s not like she can magically tell whether Nico is trying to be sincere in her implications or not, and if she is then maybe Nico should actually talk to her about it instead of dropping increasingly unsubtle hints. Especially if they’re around other people. Who knows what could get out? She couldn’t imagine it taking very long for medical student gossip about Maki Nishikino to make it to her father. Maybe it was unreasonable to think he’d hear anything, but she needed to be careful.

Sometimes when Nico snaps at her about something - leaving her shoes in the wrong spot or taking too long to get out of bed - Maki wonders if there’s something else going on. Things like that never bothered her before, and usually when Nico is being accusatory about something minor it means she just wants to have a little bit of a back and forth. It’s what they do.

But the way she’s been saying it lately, there’s no invitation to bicker about anything. It’s just Nico being annoyed and tired and taking it out on Maki. At least, that’s what Maki thinks.

If there’s anything Maki has been told time and time again about relationships of any kind, it’s that communication is the key. So one day after school, even though she’s tired and her wrist is cramping up again, she decides to confront Nico about her recent sour attitude. It doesn’t start off very well.

“What’s wrong with you?” Maki says to Nico, sounding entirely void of concern. It’s not like she meant for it to come out that way; it just does.

Nico stops stirring the pot on the stove and looks at Maki, who is leaning against the wall by the table with her arms crossed.

“Nothing. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nico-chan,” Maki says flatly, “maybe you should take a break.”

Nico looks back towards the stove. “From what?”

“I don’t know, just in general. I thought you wouldn’t have to work so much anymore,”

Nico cracks open the fridge and shuffles about. “You think all the financial stuff gets to magically go away? I still have myself to think about, and you.”

Maki takes a step forward. “I’m not as bad as I was last semester. I know it’s only the start again but -”

“I don’t mean that, I mean feeding you. Heating, hot water, that sort of thing. I guess you wouldn’t know about that, even though your pockets are too deep for your own good.”

Maki frowns. That one sure didn’t sound like a friendly jab.

“This is what I was talking about, Nico-chan. You’re not usually like this. And if you need help with money, you could always just ask. You know I’m not good at this stuff.”

Nico slams a chunk of butter in a pan a little too forcefully. “You know me better than that. How could I ask you for money? Even if I wanted to, you didn’t say two words to me for weeks, and all I did was help you.”

Maki shakes her head. “Didn’t say two… what do you mean? You mean you needed help back then
and you didn’t say anything?”

There’s a thunk as Nico flings a fork into the sink, followed by her turning around to face Maki and giving her a look Maki hasn’t seen before. An angry, ugly one.

“I don’t need help, I can do it myself.”

“Okay, then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know!” Nico yells as she throws her hands up.

“What am I supposed to do to help if you can’t even tell me?”

“It took me months to get anything out of you, so don’t pull that card on me, Maki,” Nico spits as she points an accusatory finger at Maki.

No good natured insults, no mocking sing-song voice, no usual honorific. There’s something very, very wrong here.

Maki can’t bring herself to look away from Nico. “We’re different people, in case you hadn’t noticed. You don’t usually hide like this.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“Then tell me what you think is wrong. Is it me? Did I do something?” Maki questions, gesturing to herself.

Nico crosses her arms. “You do everything!”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Do I embarrass you?”

Maki is a little taken aback at that. Where did all of this come from? She wasn’t ready for this kind of conversation. She just wanted to resolve the tension that materialized out of nowhere. Or maybe it didn’t come from nowhere, but Maki is out of ideas.

“What would make you think that?”

Nico looks ready to burst. “What do you think? I’ve just been wondering lately, about how all of this,” Nico motions to herself and Maki, “happened. How’d we end up here?”

Maki doesn’t know what to say, she has no idea what Nico is getting at, or where any of this came from.

“Is it just because I offered or what? Was it easier for you? You could have gone to Rin and Hanayo instead.”

Oh, so that’s where this is going.

“Nico-chan, you-”

“No, listen!” Nico shouts at her. “I really don’t get it, you know? I’m giving up a lot to help you, I don’t think you realize, but that’s not what bothers me. What bothers me is that you turned into an emotionless unreactive lump that acted like I didn’t exist, after I spent weeks trying to get you to let me help you. Why wouldn’t you want my help?”
“Nico-”

“And then you get all weird about me, all touchy and stuff when we’re out with our friends. That was you, not me. You started doing things that Maki Nishikino never does!”

Maki steps towards Nico again and buts into her monologue.

"Gee, thanks for pointing out everything I’m doing wrong. What does that have to do with me thinking you’re embarrassing? And I thought you liked the touchy stuff, so excuse me for going outside my comfort zone for your sake."

“How would you know what I like? It’s obvious that you don’t, if you’re still dragging me around like this.”

Maki finally raises her own voice. This is it, this is the moment they’re going to have a real, honest-to-goodness hostile fight. She can feel it coming, but something inside her doesn’t want to stop.

“What do you mean dragging you around?! I don’t get you.”

“And I don’t get you! How come when you do it, it’s okay, but when I do it you just shut me down?”

“Do what? Could you take two seconds to clarify what you’re actually mad about?”

This time, Nico takes a step in Maki’s direction.

“You’re not really this fucking dense, are you? Do you even like me?”

Maki scoffs at the insult. “Well I thought we were best friends, but you know.”

Nico grimaces as if she’s just tasted something sour. “Yeah, best friends. Roommates. Real tactful.”

“Don’t lecture me about tact, Nico. What did you expect me to say? I can’t read your mind!”

“I don’t know!” Nico shouts. “I don’t know what I expected! Sometimes I think I do but I’m wrong every time. It’s like you’re bipolar or something!”

Maki steps forward again and glares down, so they’re finally eye to eye.

“Tell me then,” Maki urges. “Tell me what you want me to say. Tell me what I’m supposed to do when you treat me like I’m some kind of punchline.”

“A punchline? You’re the one with all the snarky insults. You put me down every time I try to...to...”

“To what, Nico? What do you want from me?”

Nico doesn’t look away, but her voice finally lowers. She just sounds defeated and tired, if anything.

“I told myself I wouldn’t, but... you can’t not get it. Or are you really that blind?”

Maki’s fists clench together uncomfortably. This is not how she expected things to go at all. This wasn’t how she imagined them talking about it. Why couldn’t Nico understand?

“I’m not blind; I’m just not stupid, Nico. Maybe everything seems obvious to you and you think you have all the answers, but for some of us, actions we take have consequences.”
Nico reaches forward and takes hold of Maki’s sweater, jerking her down so their foreheads are pressed together.

“Like what?” she all but whispers sharply.

Maki can feel everything at once - all the rage that came from seemingly nowhere, all of the feelings she’d deprived herself of in an attempt to hold herself back. Nico’s breath on her lips, the smell of Nico’s shampoo, the feel of small hands clutching at her clothes like they do every night.

Maki shudders as one of the hands leaves her shirt and comes to rest gently on her cheek. She knows. She knows what’s going to happen, because Nico is tired of waiting. She knew it would happen eventually. It’s not like Nico is wrong after all, with the way Maki’s been behaving. Too many tastes of what they could be and still nothing to show for it.

She’s not ready though, so when she watches Nico’s eyes drift closed and feels her start to lean in, Maki grabs her wrists and pushes back until they’re separated.

She makes the mistake of looking at Nico, wide eyed and hands hovering uselessly where Maki let go of them.

Maki shakes her head and turns away.

She starts crying before she even gets out the door.

---

Maki curses herself for forgetting her coat as she sits down on the steps to the shrine. It’s dark out, and quiet, save for a few cats lurking around. The perfect atmosphere for sulking.

Maki closes her eyes and puts her head in her hands.

How are they both so stupid? It’s not just Nico, Maki can admit. They could have been a lot more civil. In another universe, they probably talk about it like reasonable adults instead of shouting back and forth like bratty children. It just goes to show that sometimes you don’t get the time you need to think before you have to act.

Maybe if Maki was good at talking about her feelings, it all could have been avoided. Maybe it could have devolved into something fun like usual. Actually having a genuine fight with Nico felt horrible, like she’d just ripped off her own arm or something, especially since she’d so brutally ended it by pushing Nico away and literally running from her problems. It’s the kind of stuff she used to see in her mother’s dramas on TV, the kind she always thought was stupid and contrived for no reason when nothing was stopping anyone from talking about it.

Now she’s learned that sometimes there is more at stake than anyone can really know.

She jumps out of her thoughts when she feels a hand rest on her back.

“Maki-chan?”

Maki looks up to see Nozomi’s gentle and concerned eyes staring back at her.
Neither of them say anything as Nozomi takes a seat next to her, still dressed in her shrine clothes. Maki doesn’t feel much besides the cold, eventually.

Nozomi taps on Maki’s knee. “Did you want to talk about it?”

It takes her a moment to really consider the question. Normally it would be a strong no, but this time the problem is Nico. Or herself. Both of them. Either way, the thought of what she said and how she left is enough to urge her to open up.

“Yes.”

Nozomi nods and crosses her legs.

“Where would you like to begin?”

Maki sighs. “I guess I should warn you that it’s about Nico.”

Nozomi smiles. “Of course. I figured that much out on my own.”

“Mhm. Do you think it seems like I’m using her?”

“What do you mean?”

Maki wraps her arms around her knees. “Nico accused me of dragging her around. Emotionally, I guess.”

“Why would she do that, do you think?”

“I think she’s finally wearing down, like I did. She never got a break, but she never asked for help either. Sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, I don’t know. It all came out at once today, and I had no idea.”

Nozomi laughs and Maki can’t believe it.

“This isn’t funny!”

Nozomi shakes her head. “No, it isn’t. But you’re both just as stubborn as each other. I’ve heard Nicocchi has been working hard to support you?”

“Yes, but she’s acting like I’m taking advantage of her. Obviously I would never do that. And she’s putting me in a complicated position that she doesn’t understand, and-”

Maki stops when Nozomi holds up her hand.

“So Nicocchi is tired. Frustrated. Perhaps I would be too, if I were in her place. Maybe she hit the end of her rope faster than she was expecting?”

“In regards to what?”

Maki, of course, already knows the answer. Nozomi has a way with words though, and an invaluable perspective that Nico hates hearing about.

“How she truly feels, of course. Is it something you’ve considered?”
Maki closes her eyes for a moment. It’s all she’s considered for so long now. Maybe, finally, Maki is sure of something that even Nozomi is in the dark about.

“It’s mutual.” Maki finally answers.

Nozomi blinks. “Mutual?”

Maki nods at her. “You know what I’m talking about, right?”

For once, it’s Nozomi who looks surprised about something.

“So you and Nico…?”

“Not exactly. We don’t talk about it but we may as well have been dating already.”

“Is that what you fought about?”

“I think so, but not really. Indirectly, because we’re both cowards. It’s more complicated for me than she thinks it is.”

Maki takes a moment to look up at the night sky, dark and cold from light pollution. What she wouldn’t give to see the stars right now.

“Nozomi, how did your parents feel when you told them about Eli?”

“Hmm,” Nozomi hums as she taps her chin, “they were surprised, but mostly happy.”

“Surprised because she’s a girl?”

Nozomi gives her a look, something inquisitive. “No, not really. They weren’t around much so they were just surprised I grew up and found someone so quickly. Though judging by your question, I think I’ve figured out what’s holding you back on my own.”

Maki nods and fiddles with the hem of her sweater. “It’s my father. I don’t think he would be very happy about it, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you know for sure?”

“I’m almost certain. He’s said some things in front of Nico, and I was an idiot and didn’t think to say something about it. It’s just hard when he’s my father. He’s my family and I know he cares, but he’s also the reason I’ve been suppressing everything for so long.

I thought I knew what I wanted to do but I just keep wondering what’s going to happen. I get scared all over again, and then there’s school on top of it all. And then I keep making everything worse by lying about it, about where I am and about Nico and just, everything. How do I get out, Nozomi?”

Nozomi takes Maki’s hand gently into her own.

“That is quite the problem, Maki-chan.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Hush,” Nozomi whispers. “I know you can’t really explain everything you’re feeling, or all of your worries, but maybe you can find your answers a bit closer to your heart than you think.”

Maki clenches Nozomi’s hand. “I would appreciate something more literal.”
Nozomi smiles softly. “We both know someone else who isolated herself and told lies when she couldn’t live up to her own expectations. Sometimes we do the wrong things for the right reasons. Perhaps you really do have something to learn from Nicocchi after all…”

Of course. Nico, the girl who told her siblings that her friends were nothing more than backup dancers because she couldn’t stand admitting to her family that she’d failed. The girl who lied about having a chef and who tried to convince Honoka to quit when she couldn’t come to terms with her own shortcomings. Though really, none of that had transpired because Nico herself was a failure. Everyone around her just gave up, and she took it out on herself, and her future friends. And now she probably felt like Maki was shoving her aside too, coming too close and then giving up, and then trying again, and then ignoring her, and everything else.

It’s not about who’s at fault. There is nothing Maki should be faulted for.

“Nozomi?”

“Hm?”

“Let’s say we do talk. And we figure everything out, and Nico and I...what happens then, if my father doesn’t agree? What do I do if things go wrong?”

Nozomi reaches out then, and pulls Maki into a soft hug.

“Maki-chan, I know that everyone likes to think that talking about it will solve their problems, that they can work everything out with words and smiles and optimism. Sometimes we have to talk about it whether we want to or not. In the end it might not be the outcome you dreamed of, or the one you deserved, but at least you’ll have an answer.”

Maki nods and loops her arms loosely around Nozomi’s back.

“I don’t like to think about it.”

“Nobody does. I’m sure you’ve been told before that life isn’t always as fair as we’d like it to be. You should do what makes you happy.”

Maki pulls away and takes a deep breath. Her fingers are shaking a little, likely not from the cold.

Nozomi’s eyes are still soft and full of the love she usually carries about with her. Maki is glad she has so much of it to share.

“So Maki-chan, what makes you happy? Or should I say-”

“Who?” Maki finishes.

Finally, Maki smiles. It doesn’t last long though, because the reality of what happened less than an hour ago crashes back down all at once.

“Oh no,” Maki groans, pulling at her hair. “After what I did, what I said, Nico-chan probably thinks I don’t… I have to go. Thank you, Nozomi.”

Maki practically leaps from the stairs and nearly trips as she breaks into a run. The cool air nips at her heels and her cheeks flush, but she has somewhere to be and there’s no time to waste anymore.
When Maki gets home, she has to knock on the door because her keys are in her coat pocket and she forgot her coat on the hook inside. She has a brief moment of anxiety while she waits for Nico to open the door, because what if she’s so mad she doesn’t? They’ve entered unpredictable territory now, but Maki is still determined despite how utterly worn out she feels. Her eyes, her legs, everything hurts. Nico probably does too.

Maki’s breath hitches as she listens to the door unlock from the other side.

Nico slowly reveals herself by gently pulling the door open, though it’s apparent that she doesn’t want to look at Maki right now. Her hair is down, tangled and bunched up around her housecoat, and even though she won’t look in Maki’s direction, it’s obvious she’s been crying because her eyes are puffy and red around the edges. She’s not smiling either.

“Hey,” Maki whispers, hardly more than a breath. “Can I come in?”

Nico nods and steps away from the door. The lights are all off inside, save for a small night light on in the kitchen. It’s all the light that remains when Maki shuts the door behind her.

For a long moment, they stand there across from each other in the darkness. When Nico shows no signs that she’s going to acknowledge Maki’s presence, Maki takes the initiative and slowly walks forward until she’s in front of Nico, as close as she can get.

She moves, hand cautious and deliberate as it lifts Nico’s chin up until they finally lock eyes. Maki can hardly believe she left the girl in front of her behind only an hour ago.

“I’m sorry, Nico-chan. I didn’t-”

“’I’m tired,” Nico says softly, “can we go to bed?”

Maki doesn’t know what else to do but nod, incapable of doing anything but listening to Nico in the moment. Nico goes to the bedroom and Maki takes a moment to change and wipe her face, and gather the last remnants of her resolve. She’s tired of running, and Nico, no doubt, is tired of chasing.

When Maki climbs into the bed, Nico is facing the wall and she has to shove her until she rolls over. They’re close together again, like they usually are, sharing the same pillow and the same air and the same blanket.

Nico just stares at her, as if she’s waiting for something. Anything. So Maki gives back, at last.

Her right hand finds its way to Nico’s waist and Maki pulls her closer, and although she’s already decided what’s going to happen next, she can’t help but feel nervous. When she looks, really looks into Nico’s eyes though, she knows that in the end she has nothing to fear. Nothing to lose and everything to gain, to love. Closer and closer she leans in, eyes sliding shut, until...

Everything washes away when Maki presses their lips together.

Finally

It doesn’t take long for Nico to react, her hands pressing into Maki’s hair, pulling her even closer. They don’t stop until Maki has to pull away to breathe, but Nico only shoves her onto her back, rolling them before bringing their lips back together harder than before. Maki wraps her arms around Nico’s neck and indulges in the warmth that surges to the surface of her skin. She can feel the press
of Nico’s fingers against her cheeks, and it burns in the best way.

When Nico pulls away, she sits up in Maki’s lap and flicks her in the forehead.

“Ow, what the hell!”

“You jerk!” Nico shouts. “You horrible, terrible jerk. I can’t believe you.”

Maki rubs at her forehead, still looking up at Nico.

“I can’t believe me either.”

Nico leans back dramatically and puts a hand to her forehead.

“Maki-chan came back to confess her undying love for me. I always knew she would!”

“You’ve ruined it now.”

“Are you complaining?”


Nico grins at her in a mischievous way, and Maki smiles back. It feels good to be on the same page, at last, and it’s especially nice to have Nico in her lap.

As if Nico can read her mind, she pulls the blankets up around them before laying herself all over Maki, resting her head just below her shoulder.

“This is nice, I’m usually on top,” Maki says, instantly regretting her choice of words.

“Are you calling me a bottom?” Nico mutters into Maki’s neck. The proximity and the implications are enough to make Maki sweat.

“No, forget I said anything.”

“I’m definitely a top.”

“Nico-chan, I didn’t mean it like that. Go to sleep.”

“We’re sleeping like this from now on, so I can’t have you getting the wrong idea about me. The charts aren’t the only thing Nico’s gonna top.”

“Nico.”

“You might be at the top of your class, but you-”

“I’m sleeping on the floor.”

That shuts Nico up, faster than Maki’s ever experienced before. Eventually all she can hear is Nico’s breathing, and everything feels right. It’s as if she has nothing to worry about anymore, and maybe she really doesn’t. It’s nice to think that way at least.

She has Nico. Nico has her.

For now, it’s enough.
today i'm plugging an author i like! everyone go read the amazing nickmacks and in progress kotoumi by NERV.

their work is part of my inspiration for how i write nico, definitely worth a look (and a comment or two).
When Nico wakes up, the first thing she notices is that something, or rather someone, is missing. A single shaft of light peeks in through the curtains, illuminating a pair of Maki’s socks that didn’t quite make it into the laundry bin. Luckily, it’s chore day, so the misplaced clothing won’t linger around to bother Nico for much longer. Normally, when she wakes up and has things to do before work, the stress of her busy schedule is immediately apparent, but right now she can’t bring herself to feel anything more than content.

She rolls over and buries her face in her pillow, inhaling the lingering scent of her girlfriend. Because that’s what Maki is now, right? She definitely is.

Nico shoots up onto her knees. “Oh my god…”

The revelation hits her at full speed. Nico Yazawa, the number one super idol in the entire universe, is totally dating the super-hot, totally gorgeous has-the-voice-of-a-thousand-angels Maki Nishikino. Maki, the musical prodigy, dating Nico, the idol prodigy. Okay, so nobody has ever called Nico a prodigy, but there’s no other word to describe Nico’s raw talent for performance. Maybe they aren’t even dating, or they already skipped that step. Is moving in together supposed to come before or after they make out?

It doesn’t matter to Nico anyway - they can do whatever they want now. She can still barely comprehend it.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a crash and a shout from somewhere else in the apartment, and it startles her so much that she falls backwards off the bed, nearly kneeling herself in the forehead.

She scrambles to her feet and whips her tangled hair out of her face before rushing out of the bedroom. When she can finally see into the kitchen, she freezes and her jaw drops.

Maki is there, on her hands and knees, picking up bits of egg and rice that probably came from the pot that was also sitting bottom up on the kitchen floor. Nico can only watch and put two and two together, experiencing a moment of disbelief.

Maki skipped school to make Nico breakfast. More accurately, Maki skipped school to drop food all over Nico’s floor. It’s charming, in a hopeless sort of way. Maki finally looks up, like a deer caught in the headlights.
“Um… I made you breakfast.”

Nico nods. “I hope the floor enjoyed it.”

Maki sighs and drags herself to her feet. She’s still dressed in her own sleepwear and her hair looks like it hasn’t been brushed yet, but Nico can appreciate a good bedhead when she sees it.

“Can you call in sick to work today?” Maki asks.

Nico raises an eyebrow. “Asking Nico to ruin her perfect record? Why?”

Maki gestures for Nico to sit down at the table. “I want to do everything today. For you.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“I just wanted you to have a day to relax, that’s all. After our fight-”

“Could we just pretend that didn’t happen? Nico prefers to think about what happened after that instead.”

Maki gives Nico one of her looks. “After our fight, I thought a lot about what you’ve been doing for me. I realized I’m not really reciprocating and I wanted to change that.”

“By dumping food all over my floor?”

“Well that obviously wasn’t supposed to happen!”

Nico looks at her for a long moment before taking a step forward. “I’m cleaning this up.”

Maki rushes forward and grabs Nico’s arms. “No, I’ll do it. Go lie in bed or something.”

“Are you going to burn down my kitchen?”

“I’m going to bring you breakfast in bed.”

Nico snorts. “I don’t think that works if I’ve already gotten up, Maki-chan.”

“Yeah so,” Maki starts as she spins Nico around, “go call in sick and lie back down.”

Nico thinks it might be funny to resist Maki, who was now pushing her in the general direction of the bedroom, but she’s still too astonished to follow through. Instead, she mindlessly obeys and climbs back into bed per Maki’s instructions. Does Maki really mean to do everything today? Now that she’s thought about it, Nico can’t imagine anything going smoothly after what she just witnessed. Has Maki even hand-washed anything in her entire life? She must know how Nico does it by now, right?

Snapping free of her thoughts, Nico grabs her phone from the bedside table and dials up work to call in for the day. While skipping class had been a trend Nico encouraged, skipping work was absolutely not the same thing and she always tried her best to maintain her perfect record in hopes of a wage increase or something like that. For Maki though, she would tarnish every attendance record she’s ever had, now and forever. Employee of the month plaque be damned.

Because Nico is such a wonderful, amazing, perfect employee, getting the day off is a simple affair. She’s barely hung up when Maki walks in the door with a small plate of toast and presents it to Nico as if she’s proud of herself for using a toaster. Honestly Nico herself is kind of proud of Maki, because it means she isn’t one hundred percent kitchen illiterate at the absolute least.
It’s perhaps the lamest breakfast anyone has ever made for her, but Nico takes the plate with a smile even as Maki awkwardly looks away.

“Thanks,” Nico says, meal already halfway to her mouth.

She chews deliberately, slowly, as if she’s savouring it. All for the sake of mocking the redhead still standing next to the bed.

“You’re a real connoisseur, Maki-chan.”

“Bite me,” she growls before swiftly walking away.

“Maybe later,” Nico calls after her. “Do you bite back?”

“E-eat your toast!”

Nico giggles to herself as she imagines Maki going red in the face. At this point her toast is more of a warm bread than anything else, but she eats it anyway because it’s the thought that counts.

When she’s done, she gets up to go bring her plate to the kitchen out of habit, only to be shooed away again by Maki who is doing her best to wash the dishes from yesterday. Nico only gets a glimpse, but she’s fairly certain Maki has put way too much dish soap in the sink because there are bubbles overflowing onto the counter and down the front of her cupboards. As she gets back into bed again, Nico wonders if they’ll still have a place to live by the end of the day.

With nothing else to do for the first time in as long as she can remember, she decides it’s time to browse her idol forums and update her blog. Propped up in bed by her ridiculous number of pillows with her laptop in her lap, Nico attempts to do as Maki says and take the day off.

All she can really think about is Maki, though. Her girlfriend Maki. She’s right outside the room, in their apartment. Their apartment, where the both of them live. A literal dream come true. She just has to ignore the part where Maki’s father might still be an ass about it, but that’s a problem for tomorrow’s Nico. Today, she wants to be pampered and doted on, or at least pretend she feels pampered and doted on, because it’s immediately apparent that Maki has no idea what she’s doing.

“Nico-chan,” Maki asks from the door, “is there a laundry place nearby?”

Nico shakes her head. “Nope. There’s a basin in the storage cupboard in the living room. Soap is in there too; don’t use dish soap for clothes.”

Maki stares in disbelief. “You hand-wash everything?”

Nico nods as she tries to focus on browsing the net. “Like my papa taught me to. What’s wrong, scared to touch my undies?”

Maki obviously hadn’t thought of that part, because Nico swears she’s never, ever looked so embarrassed in her life before.

“N-no! They’re just clothes. I’m not scared of... clothes.”

“Nico is here if you need her, you know.”

“I don’t need you! I can do it, just stay here,” Maki grumbles as she walks away again.

Maki wanders back in a few minutes later to the surprise of nobody.
“There’s a lot of laundry, Nico-chan.”

Nico looks up from typing on her blog. “Yeah, because there’s two of us, genius.”

Maki stares forlornly at the basket full of worn clothes in the corner.

“Did you really hand-wash everything? All my stuff?”

“Your stuff, my stuff. All the stuff. Twice a week.”

“You’re crazy.”

Nico laughs at her. “I’m responsible. Do you want me to help?”

Maki shifts uncomfortably on one foot. “I want you to relax.”

“Doing laundry is relaxing. Come on, we’ll put some music on and it’ll go by faster than my jokes going over Rin’s head.”

Together, still in their pyjamas and with old BiBi tracks playing from the living room, Nico and Maki sit on the floor in the kitchen and wash their clothes. It takes some time, but for Nico the time is well spent and it reminds her of when she was a kid helping her papa do the same thing.

“Mama has always been the breadwinner,” Nico explains as she wrings out some socks, “so Papa taught me how to do things around the house. He only worked part time so he could stay home and look after us, but mostly Cotarou.”

“So you mean you’ve been doing this since you were a kid?” Maki asks.

“Careful with that shirt, sequins are delicate,” Nico scolds before continuing. “I always wanted to help out because it made everyone smile. You think my gimmick came out of nowhere?”

Maki shakes her head. “I don’t know. I never had to do any of this stuff. Did you say your stupid catchphrase all the time when you were a kid too?”

Nico laughs and flicks water at Maki.

“Hey!”

“My papa taught me the Nico-nico-nii. He made it up because I was always going around trying to get everyone to smile.”

“Oh.”

Maki’s expression instantly fell. No doubt she was having flashbacks of all the times she told Nico to shut up or quit it with her stupid pose.

“Don’t feel bad about it, you’re still allowed to think it’s stupid. I’m not offended or anything.”

Maki still looks dejected though.

Nico huffs and dunks a pair of Maki’s pants in the basin.

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna pout like that for the whole rest of my day off. It’s fine, Maki-chan. Really!”
Maki looks down at the water. “If you say so.”

They spend a short while focusing on their task, with Nico periodically showing Maki how to get stains out or how to wash something lacey. All news to her, evidently.

“Nico-chan,” Maki prods, “do your siblings remember your father?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so. Cocoro kind of does but she was still pretty young when he died. It doesn’t seem to bother them.”

“Do you think it’s because they’ve had you?”


Maki nods. “I guess you’re right. I’m sure your mother appreciates everything you’ve done though.”

“Well, don’t forget, Nico had troubles of her own. It was rough for a while.”

“Oh right, the… well, you know.”

“Panic attacks? Don’t be scared to say it, Maki-chan. It doesn’t make you a bad person to suffer from that sort of thing. I had them all the time for like a year, because I was worried I would wake up and Mama would be gone too. We don’t have any other close family, so I didn’t know what would happen.”

“I’m not scared to say it, I just don’t like remembering it.”

Nico nods as she pulls the last of the clothing out of the soapy water. “Neither do I, but without that experience I wouldn’t have known what to do with you, so I guess I’m kind of thankful in a backwards way.”

“I guess that’s true,” Maki says as she dries her hands.

“You’re just gonna get wet again. We have to dump this down the drain in the shower.”

“We do?”

“What else are we gonna do with it? It’s the least messy option.”

Maki stands up and Nico follows, but Maki fights Nico about being the one to carry the gross water to the washroom. It’s a nice gesture, but Nico worries about having to replace the tatami in the living room if Maki accidentally dumps it everywhere on the way. Eventually she agrees to let Maki do it herself, but on the condition that Nico is allowed to help her hang everything to dry on the railing outside. It’s still a bit chilly, so they put their coats on when they go out.

“Isn’t it a little strange to hang all your stuff out here where anyone can take it?”

“What, you think this is gonna fit anyone else?” Nico asks, holding up a pastel pink bra. “Everyone puts their clothes out here to dry.”

Maki can’t help but laugh, even though she’s trying really hard to look like she feels bad about it.

Nico pulls a clothesline from seemingly nowhere and ties it up on the railing so they can fit more clothes, and they spend a good few minutes clipping things up with clothespins. Maki seems a little tense, but to Nico, hanging their laundry together is the most relaxing thing in the world.
“I still think I could have done this myself,” Maki mutters as they take the laundry basket back inside.

“But wasn’t it nice to do it with Nico?”

Nico takes her coat off and heads for the kitchen to clean up some rogue soap suds still lingering on the floor. When she turns to grab the paper towel, she sees Maki still standing by the door out of the corner of her eye. She’s just staring, with her mouth a little open.

“Something wrong, Maki-chan?”

Maki starts walking towards her while shaking her head.

“No, everything is fine. More than fine.”

Nico’s heart picks up speed as Maki leans down, arms coming around her waist. Nico pushes herself up on her toes, eager to meet Maki’s lips with hers. There’s still something inside her that’s telling her this could all be a dream - that it really is too good to be true. Nico sighs happily into the kiss, and pushes herself forward to deepen it.

When they pull away, Nico can’t help but grin from ear to ear.

Maki smiles too, but her eyes are still lidded in a way that Nico finds way too alluring. Maki probably doesn’t even realize she’s doing it.

“I did enjoy it. Doing laundry with you.”

“Maki is much bolder than Nico remembers her being. We should do this more often.”

“Laundry?”

Nico runs her hands up Maki’s arms and wraps her hands around the back of her neck.

“No, kissing. Idiot.”

Nico is about to pull her back in when her phone starts ringing in the bedroom. Her expression turns from devious to annoyed in a matter of seconds.

“Really? If that’s Nozomi I’m never speaking to her again.”

Maki grumbles under her breath. “I think I understand why she offends you so much now.”

“Finally, someone gets it!” Nico yells as she throws her arms up and follows ringtone-Maki’s voice.

Fortunately enough it isn’t Nozomi, and instead Nico finds herself in a conversation with her mother. She needs someone over to make dinner for the kids last minute, because Rin and Hanayo aren’t free. She’d even tried Kotori before calling up Nico to see if she could come over after work. Nico is a selfless individual and she really does love her family, so it’s easy for her to agree to go over. In fact, she’ll even go right now, in fact.

When she’s asked why she isn’t at work, she just says she’s taking a Maki-related mental health sick day. It’s all the explanation anyone in her family should need.


“I’ll come too,” Maki says without hesitating. “I like your family.”
Even though she was sort of joking about it before, Nico really does wish they could just do this forever instead of worrying so much about work and school and everything else. Just live day to day and have time for themselves. Though Nico is still surprised Maki was willing to skip a whole day of class just to let her relax, she thinks it was the right thing to do. Yesterday had been a whirlwind of emotions both good and bad, so simplicity was a welcome concept.

No work, no school, a visit with the kids, and Maki? There isn’t much that could make this day any better, and it wasn’t even noon yet.

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Impossibly enough, the day does get better when Nico opens her mother’s fridge and finds an entire strawberry cheesecake inside.

“You can have some if you like, but after dinner,” Mrs. Yazawa says from the other side of the kitchen. “Have to set a good example.”

Maki still looks like she feels out of place in the Yazawa household, though Nico’s siblings are still quick to wrangle her into playing something on a toy piano in Cocoro’s room. Nico can see her through the door and the sight of Maki crouching down on the floor to play a broken version of some classical song on a hot pink piano is almost too good.

“So how are things on the Maki front?” Mrs. Yazawa asks as she tucks paperwork into her bag.

Nico looks uneasily in Maki’s direction. “Mama, she’s right there.”

“Yes, that’s why I’m asking. You’re always bringing her over…”

“I’ve brought her over twice! Two times!”

Maki’s head pokes out from the bedroom door, followed swiftly by Cotarou’s head.

“Are we talking about me?”

Nico scowls. “No.”

“Yep,” Mrs. Yazawa confirms. “I just wanted to thank you for taking such good care of my daughter.”

Maki is quick to catch on. “Oh, it’s no problem. It’s a lot of work to deal with Nico-chan.”

Nico sits down at the table, determined not to lose this time. “Mama, Maki-chan dumped my breakfast all over my floor. She did laundry for the first time today. In like, her entire life.”

“You’ve even got Maki making breakfast for you? And doing your laundry? Give the poor girl a break.”

Maki nods. “Nico-chan isn’t very good at doing what she’s told.”

“I won’t swear at you ‘cause my brother is right there, but I’m thinking it. I’m thinking it directly at you,” Nico says as she looks pointedly at Maki.
Mrs. Yazawa pats her on the head. How demeaning.

“You should be nicer to girls like Maki. Where would you be without her?”

“Yeah Nico-chan, aren’t you supposed to set an example for your siblings?”

Cocoa runs out of the room and into the kitchen with a handful of hair ties. “Onee-san, can you put my hair up like yours?”

Nico’s mouth twitches as she struggles to turn her frown into a smile. “Of course, come here.”

Nico is acutely aware of her mother and Maki sharing matching smirks over her head as she bunches up Cocoa’s chestnut-coloured hair with one hand.

“I’m smiling on the outside, but I assure you I’m seething on the inside,” Nico mutters.

Cocoa hands Nico a ribbon. “What does seething mean?”

“Onee-san is angry,” Cocoro says from behind Maki. “She’s mad.”

“Who’s she mad at?” Cocoa asks.

Cotarou leans out of the bedroom door, gripping Maki’s pant leg. “Why?”

Nico glares at a smirking Maki as she ties a ribbon. “My good for nothing giiir-friend. My terrible, horrible friend named Maki.”

Nico and Maki both shift uncomfortably and train their eyes on Mrs. Yazawa, who looks nothing but thoroughly amused. The kids remain completely unfazed and Cocoro whips out her camcorder again.

Mrs. Yazawa does nothing but smile and wink, and Nico wants to throw the hairbrush in her hand across the room.

No mother deserves this much power.

Especially if it involves ganging up on her with Maki.

“Go to work,” Nico mumbles.

Mrs. Yazawa laughs and grabs her keys from the hook by the door. “Whatever you say, dear. Don’t have too much fun without me.”

“We’ll try.” Maki says.

As soon as Nico is done tying the ribbons, Cocoa ducks under the table and slides across the floor back into the bedroom. “Maki, come play!”

While Maki crouches back down at the toy piano, Nico swallows her pride and starts cleaning up the living room. There’s a lot to do, but if Maki is around then the kids are going to be distracted until the second she steps out the door. Maybe she’ll leave with all of her nails fully painted this time.

Some time later, Maki sneaks out of the bedroom after putting something on TV for the kids (They insisted on watching something with Nico in it, of course, so she dug up some old promo videos from Cocoro’s stash) and sits at the kitchen table, watching Nico prepare some vegetables.
“We’re having Nico’s special curry tonight.” Nico says as she rapidly chops a carrot into evenly spaced slices.

“Sure, whatever. How does your sister have so much energy?”

“Which one, Cocoa?”

Maki nods. “Yeah, she was… exercising or something. While I was playing fake music.”

“Fake music?”

“It’s a fake piano, I had to skip so many notes.”

Nico laughs and tosses some veggies in a pot on the stove. “Kids don’t usually try to play Mozart on those things.”

“I tried to play Chopin.” Maki sighs and puts her chin in her palm.

“Well it’s not like they’re gonna know you did it wrong or anything.”

Nico takes off her apron and checks the rice cooker before taking a seat next to Maki.

“I still wish I could have just taken care of you at home today.” Maki mutters. “I just wanted to do something nice.”

Nico reaches out and takes Maki’s hand in hers.

“This isn’t nice?”

Maki shakes her head. “No, it is. I mean, it’s just not what I expected to be doing today.”

“I feel like even what you expected to be doing today isn’t what you expected,” Nico says.

“Hm.”

Nico rests her head on the table, still holding Maki’s hand in hers. Maki just sits there and starts twirling her hair.

Nico waits a few seconds before saying something, because hair twirling may as well be a Nico signal at this point.

“Something up, Maki-chan?”

Maki turns away for a moment before looking Nico in the eyes. “Well, I was just wondering. How does your mother feel about you? I mean, about me and you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Has she always known how you felt?”

Oddly enough, Nico realizes she’s never actually thought very much about that before. There was never a time when she and her mother talked about it; there was no epiphany that made Nico reconsider her whole perspective on life or anything. Nico rolled with whatever came, and she was a lousy liar to begin with. Her mother had jokingly pestered her about crushes as parents are wont to do, and it had come out that in Nico’s third year at Otonokizaka, she met a girl.
“I think moms have a sixth sense for that kind of thing,” Nico explains. “Mama didn’t react any differently than I expected when she found out. She just acted like… a mom.”

Maki lies her head down on the table next to Nico’s so they’re facing each other.

“She winked at me a lot last time we were here.”

Nico rolls her eyes. “Yeah, because she knew I had the hots for you. Or have, I guess.”

Maki predictably blushes but otherwise doesn’t react.

“Do you think my mother has that sixth sense?”

Nico shrugs. “Dunno. Moms are weird. Mine is especially cruel.”

Maki gives her a confused looks. “Cruel?”

“Yeah, teaming up with you to pick on poor Nico? You get along way too well and you’ve been in the same room together maybe three times. Nico is scared.”

“I guess you should get used to it,” Maki says with a smirk.

For a while all they can hear is the muted noise of the TV from the bedroom, but Nico is just fine with sitting around drawing circles on the back of Maki’s hand with her thumb. It’ll be nice to go home and have Maki to herself again, which is a strange thought considering she’s technically had Maki to herself for months now. But things are different now, because romance is definitely involved, and Nico wants to find out if Maki has been just as desperate as she herself has been all this time. If she has, then there are a lot of things that they could do – things that Nico’s spent way too much time thinking about.

Step one is going home. Speaking of home…

“Hey Maki-chan, what about your apartment?”

Maki’s eyes go wide. “Oh, yeah. I kind of forgot about that.”

“You forgot about an entire apartment that you own?”

Maki sits up. “I don’t own it. I like your place better though. Some of my things are still there.”

Nico keeps her head down and Maki’s hand in hers. “Should we go get your things? No point in leaving anything there, right?”

“Right. You’re right. I’m just not sure how I’m supposed to tell my parents I’m going to live with you for real. They think I’m back there right now.”

“Well, that’s going to go well.”

Maki sighs. “Tell me about it. Also, I’m paying rent from now on.”

Nico sits up and looks at Maki dumbly. “Uh, what?”

“Did I stutter?”

Nico doesn’t know what to say besides “no.”
Is Maki trying to kill her? Is she already dead and gone to heaven?

“Are you sur-”

“Nico Nico Nico Nico!” Cocoa shouts as she races into the kitchen. “Nico curry!”

“Curry.” Cotarou mumbles as he follows his sister.

Maki jerks her hand away a bit, but Nico holds it tight despite the new audience. It takes her a moment to collect herself, but she pushes her unbridled joy down so she can remain a civilized adult in front of the kids and feed them dinner like she’s supposed to. All she really wants to do is run outside and scream about how ridiculous Maki is, but there’s time for that later.

Mrs. Yazawa gets home shortly after dinner is finished, and Nico decides that it’s time to leave before her mother can team up with her girlfriend again. They have a lot to do and the day isn’t getting any younger, after all.

“Where are you off to now?” Mrs. Yazawa asks.

“My old place,” Maki answers as she puts her boots on, “to get the rest of my stuff.”

“Oh, did you need help?”

Maki shakes her head. “No, there are only a few bits and pieces left. School supplies and some clothes. Nothing we can’t carry on the train.”

Nico emerges from the bedroom attempting to say bye to her siblings, Cotarou on one leg and Cocoa on the other.

“I gotta go, but I promise I’ll come back. Get off my legs!”

Cocoro follows a waddling Nico to the door. “Does Maki live with you? How come she gets to?”

“Yeah!” Cocoa shouts. “I want to live with Maki, no fair!”

Maki, who as it so happens is slightly better with children than anyone could have anticipated, smiles at them and promises she’ll come over with Nico again soon. That seems to satisfy them enough to get off of Nico’s legs and let her put her coat on.

Cocoro films them until they leave, despite Nico’s protests and much to Maki’s amusement.

“I could get used to this,” Maki says as they walk down the apartment steps.

“The Yazawa lifestyle is a hectic one, I will admit,” Nico says matter-of-factly.

Maki takes Nico’s hand as they head for the station. It’s not so bad for them to do it when they’re out walking around - it’s something friends do all the time. Nobody has to be any the wiser.

“Yazawa is nice last name, don’t you think?” Maki nudges Nico’s shoulder with her own.

“Don’t play with Nico’s heart, it’s delicate!”

Maki laughs and spends the rest of the walk to the train fiddling with Nico’s short fuse.
Maki’s apartment is just as big and empty as it was when she moved in. Nico still thinks it’s much too big, even for two people, and Maki is inclined to agree.

Together they wander around pulling open drawers and cupboards to find everything Maki has left to take with her. As Maki expected, it’s mostly school supplies, a few books from her long-ignored bedside table, and some makeup she forgot she even owned. Nico takes a few moments to fawn over some expensive perfume before nearly walking out the door when Maki says she can have it.

“You’re so great, I hate you,” Nico says as she fakes opening the front door.

“I’m getting mixed signals here,” Maki replies as she piles her things into plastic bags. There’s not much; only two bags each for them to carry.

“Ready to go home?” Nico asks.

“Hm.”

Nico follows Maki’s gaze to the lonely piano in the living room. There’s something heartbreaking about leaving it behind, even if Maki had never actually had the chance to use it. Maybe that makes it a little worse.

“You should play something.” Nico blurts out.

Maki doesn’t say anything, but she puts down her bags and walks over to the piano anyway. Nico follows suit, and takes a seat on the bench beside the pianist. There’s a thin layer of dust on the cover and some of it rubs off onto Maki’s fingers as she lifts it up to reveal the glittering keys below it. It’s been so long since Nico’s heard her play.

“What are you going to play? Chopin?”

Maki shakes her head. “You don’t even know who that is.”

“No! Maybe.”

Maki laughs and closes her eyes, lifting her hands and resting them on the keys.

“I’ll play one you know, Nico-chan.”

Nico watches with all of her love as Maki takes a deep breath. There’s always been something special about watching her play, and though the golden glows of the sun in the window and the gentle breeze drifting through the music room are long behind them, Nico still feels the same way she did when she first heard her play all that time ago.

Maki begins to play, and the words come as easily as they always have.

“Aishiteru banzai…”
The Opened Way

Chapter Notes

sorry for no update! i wrote the first half on the flight to tokyo and then got too tired to finish it for my whole stay. aqours was fantastic though, i had a great time and immersed myself in LL for two solid weeks.

that said, vancouver canada is having a delayed viewing of the livestream of the concert, so if you happen to be at that one then keep an eye out for someone covered in dia merchandise. i assure you i'll be the only one.

enjoy!

In the days that follow, Maki deliberates over how to tell her parents about the now empty apartment she’s left behind. They’re the ones that put her up there after all, and she can’t just pretend it doesn’t exist. Though the matter is somewhat pressing, she can’t help but forget about it whenever she’s alone with Nico. She forgets about most things, in fact, because Nico is a persistent soul who demands more of Maki’s attention than usual now that things are official.

It’s not like it bothers her though, because as she’s come to realize, she is just as demanding in that department and she has to admit that maybe - just maybe - she was just as eager for action as Nico was during all that time they spent dancing around each other.

“Why study biology when you could study kissing instead?” Nico would say over her shoulder, voice sickeningly sweet and less bothersome than Maki usually anticipated.

For a short while Maki would ignore her and keep writing out her notes, but eventually Nico would get annoyed and snatch her pencil right out of her hand. The ensuing fight about personal space and how stealing is bad would only rile both of them up even more, and by then the time Maki was supposed to use for schoolwork would be lost anyway. In the end Nico always “won” and they would wind up fooling around in their room and being generally unproductive for the rest of the evening despite Maki constantly insisting that she should get back to work.

But Nico.

It’s not like Maki didn’t want to take advantage of the fact that they were almost always alone together, but there was still that nagging fear in the back of her mind that somehow everyone who wasn’t supposed to know about them already knew. If everyone could be more like Mrs. Yazawa in terms of acceptance, then things would be much easier and maybe she’d be willing to get a bit more adventurous. Thankfully Nico doesn’t push for anything beyond stealing her time and kissing, and Maki knew it would be her choice to do anything else, if and when. Well, it was definitely when and not if, but the unease she felt whenever she thought of the big reveal always crept up on her whenever thoughts of going any further bubbled to the surface.

The big reveal being Nico. Living with her without really telling anyone, dating, all that jazz. It was going to come up eventually whether she wanted it to or not, so Maki resolved to do her best to control when it happened at the absolute least. It was the only option she had left, to try to prolong
the inevitable until she could come up with a way to put everything out in the open that wouldn’t
ruin her relationship with her parents. Or worse, ruin anything she might have established with her
twin-tailed partner. But really, what could anyone do about that? It’s not like anyone could force
them apart. Right?

Though as Maki has learned time and time again, nothing ever goes as planned. On a day when Nico
is at work and Maki is home from class early, she answers her phone without thinking twice or
looking at the caller ID and her mother is on the other end.

At least it’s not her father. Count the little blessings.

“Maki?”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called,” Maki rushes out. “I’ve been really busy but everything is okay.”

There’s a pause on the line before her mother puts her on the spot.

“I went by your apartment to check on you because you haven’t called. I let myself in with a spare
key.”

The dread settles like an unbearable weight in Maki’s stomach and she snaps the pencil in her other
hand clean in half. She didn’t even know a spare key existed, though she supposed it did make sense
for her parents to have a key to the apartment they set up for her. She just didn’t expect them to stop
by. Ever.

Her thoughts are going a million miles an hour but there’s one more urgent than all the rest that
makes it out of her mouth before she can consider the implications.

“Was Papa there?”

She can’t help but wince at her own voice, wobbly and cracked. There’s no way her mother doesn’t
know something is going on.

Her mother sighs on the other end. “No, he wasn’t. But neither were you. I know I say it all the time,
but I’m worried. You told me to trust you and I want to. You’re my daughter, but what am I
supposed to think when I go to visit and you and everything you own is gone? Where are you?”

Maki bites her lip and her eyes dart around looking at nothing specific. She should have an answer
for this because she subconsciously thinks about it happening all the time, being found out and
having to explain herself. In every scenario, she always imagined that by then she would have the
answer. An impossible answer, because nothing short of going back in time and starting over could
save her from her own lies. Maybe this was how Nico felt when everyone showed up on her
doorstep after following her home from school, when they tried to force her to explain herself and
she told them all to leave.

She couldn’t tell her mother to leave though. It’s much different.

“Are you with Nico?”

Her mother’s voice is still calm, and it comes out almost as a whisper that Maki can barely hear. It
takes her a moment to understand her mother isn’t asking if she’s ‘with’ with Nico, but rather if she’s
there at Nico’s apartment. Which she is, because it’s her apartment now too.
“Yeah. I’m at Nico’s.” Maki barely breathes out.

“Thank goodness,” her mother says with relief, “I’m glad you’re there. I just had no idea what to think. Why did you bring all of your things there with you?”

*Stay calm, Maki. She’s not mad.*

She’s not mad, she’s just happy you’re with someone everyone knows. But why would she be at Nico’s? That’s a good question. May as well stick with what works.

“After last semester we decided it would be easier if I stayed here. It saves a lot of time I could be using to study instead.”

“Like last semester, right?”

“Right.”

Maki finally lets go of her broken pencil and starts fiddling with her hair. The whole time saving thing still makes sense, so there’s no reason for anyone to doubt her. Roppongi is just far enough away to make going to school annoying, and every student yearns for a shorter transit time no matter who they are.

“Is it really so important that you live somewhere else just to save time? We could always set you up in a different apartment in Akihabara.”

If anything her mother sounds sincerely concerned, but Maki feels like she’s searching for something by asking that question.

“Every minute is important.” Maki replies.

Homework isn’t what she thinks of as she says it though, even though that’s what she feels like she should be thinking about. Every minute. Every second. It all adds up and time passes by way too quickly nowadays, especially with the guilt of conversations like this one looming overhead. Conversations where she can’t even admit to her own mother why she is where she is. When did she start putting Nico first? It must have been years ago for her to be this ingrained, this entangled in her emotions, and this torn about who she is. She’s the diligent and hard-working only daughter of a prominent family of doctors, but she’s also just a girl in love.

“And thank you, Mama,” Maki continues, “but I’m fine here. You don’t have to worry and it doesn’t bother Nico-chan.”

“If you say so. It would have been nice if you said something, you know? Papa and I are here to help. Maybe we could have resolved this earlier and moved you to a new place, something like that.”

Maki tries to keep her voice from shaking. “I don’t know. Maybe. It can’t be helped, right? I didn’t know it would be a problem for me.”

“I see. If you’re absolutely sure, then I won’t doubt you. You can make your own choices - it’s why we got you that apartment after all. I suppose I can’t worry after you forever.”

Her mother sounds a little disappointed, but Maki knows it isn’t directed at her. It’s just a mom thing
that comes with letting your only daughter out into the big wide world. Especially Maki, who might be considered a somewhat sheltered individual thanks to her upbringing (and personality). Something more urgent comes to mind a moment later.

“Could you… not tell Papa about this? About where I am.” Maki says quietly into the phone. She’s not sure if she’s worried her mother heard her, or that she didn’t. And if she did hear, was she going to ask about it? What should she say? Maki couldn’t have made it sound any more suspicious if she tried.

“Alright. I won’t tell him. But I can’t keep him away if he really wants to know. You know that, right?”

Maki nods and air fills her lungs again. “I know.”

“Enough of that, though.” Her mother says with a suddenly cheerful tone, “When was the last time we just talked? I know you were never big on mother-daughter bonding time, but I still never hear from you. How are you? How is Nico? What have you been learning at school?”

Maki can’t help but smile at the enthusiasm. The gross feeling in her stomach evaporates instantaneously as she tries her best to answer every question. They range from academically specific to typical and mundane. No, we don’t dissect animals in class, that’s high school. Dinner last night was home fried tofu and rice that Maki put in the rice cooker all on her own. No, she doesn’t eat takeout every other night. Yes, she can finally do her own laundry (without an actual washer and dryer - that one really sent her mother for a loop). Sure, Nico still does most of the work, but Maki oddly feels like boasting about it. About being able to do normal things that everyone does; about making simple recipes even a child could handle.

Half an hour into their conversation, Maki is smiling and happy and isn’t even concerned about her work. Not thirty minutes ago she’d felt her impending doom approaching, but things took such an easy turn for the better. Why her mother is so compliant, she doesn’t know. It’s nice, though. Until…

“Have you met any nice boys at school?”

Maki turns the same rosy red shade as her shattered pencil. “N-no!”

“Not even one? You can’t tell me nobody’s given you a second glance! If you’re anything like I was in university, you can’t keep them away…” her mother trails off, likely reminiscing about topics Maki would rather avoid.

“Mama.”

Her mother laughs. “The way you say that makes me think I’m onto something. Is he tall?”

“No!” Maki yells, barely aware of her own shaking fist slamming against the surface of the kotatsu.

“Hm, you’re right dear, you did go through quite the growth spurt in your second year. It must be a little embarrassing for him though.”

Maki lets out something that sounds like a cross between a whine and a groan, much higher pitched than she intended.
“Maki? You know I’m just teasing you, right?”

“I know.” Maki grinds out.

She wonders if this is how Nico felt when her own mother pestered her and teased her in high school, only that was different because Mrs. Yazawa knew that Nico had been talking about her - about Maki - so really, there had been nothing to hide anyway. It was something almost every child had to deal with probably, though Maki was technically an adult and she felt too old to be teased like this.

Then again, maybe it was an opportunity in disguise. She had, after all, been searching for an opening, a way to test the waters before revealing anything significant. If she was careful about it, maybe she could imply just enough without giving anything drastic away, and listen for a reaction. Anything was better than nothing. Even in this moment of resolve, she could hear her father’s words echoing in the back of her head, still burned into her memory after so long. It’s a chance she’s willing to take though, while her mother is being so receptive.

“There might be… someone.” Maki mumbles. She winces and closes her eyes as if she’d been punched in the stomach, irrationally expecting the worst even though what she said really doesn’t mean anything.

Maki’s mother gasps. “Really? Someone from school? Is he in your program?”

*He.*

Maki struggles to find her voice, already slipping away in a river of hesitation.

*What am I doing?*

“No. And we aren’t… I mean, it’s just a maybe. I don’t know yet.”

Even though she isn’t lying so much as omitting the truth, she gets the sinking feeling that usually accompanies a lie settling heavy on her chest. Though she’s been increasingly vague and private about everything in her life for the last few months, verbally communicating something not entirely truthful about her relationship is more painful than she anticipates.

Maybe it’s all Nico’s fault. Nico’s fault, for making her feel the way she does. For making her wish she didn’t have to hide those feelings; for making her feel like she’s betraying their relationship by hiding it away. She doesn’t want to have to hide Nico. She wants to be proud of them because she is proud, and she wants everyone to see what she sees when she looks into striking crimson eyes and witnesses everything that makes Nico who she is. Everything that sparks Maki’s unrivaled yet quiet adoration; everything that challenges their differences and ties them together.

She wants to yell her thoughts into the phone, to prove to herself that she isn’t afraid to show everyone the heart she wishes she could wear on her sleeve, but she holds back. Nico has told her before that it’s okay to be afraid, especially when it comes their relationship. Not everyone is as lucky as Nico is, to have such a supportive and enthusiastic parent, and Nico knows it.

She holds back.

“I’ll tell you if anything happens. They’re…they’re a bit of a handful.” Maki says. It’s all she can come up with.
“I’m sure he is,” her mother says, “but I don’t doubt you can manage. You’ve been doing fine so far but you always seem stressed. A relationship might do you some good. Get you away from the textbooks from time to time, you know?”

Boy, did Maki know. If she were dating someone from school then neither of them would have the time for that to begin with.

“I-I…I don’t…”

Curse her emotional ineptitude.

“You probably don’t want to talk about it, I know.” Her mother sounds oddly disappointed. The concept of her daughter being interested in literally anyone is probably somewhat of a surprise, especially considering that she never talks about anyone from school at all. Mostly because she still doesn’t talk to anyone.

Even Nico has spoken to her classmates more than she has.

“It’s not that,” Maki says, because it’s true. “I just didn’t expect to talk about anything like this. I’m not the best at being open.”

“I know I know, I’m just happy for you. Papa and I were always worried about who might approach you because, well… it’s a combination of things. I’m sure you understand.”

She did because she could still remember her grandfather (or maybe her aunt, someone in her family that Maki could barely put a face to) telling her when she was a young girl that talking about money wasn’t appropriate, because some people have no shame and will readily take advantage of you for the yen in your pocket. That of course didn’t do anything to ground Maki’s sense of financial reality, but she did think about it sometimes.

It was that and her natural good looks, because everyone related to her always told her she had the best combination of features from both sides of her family. She wasn’t stupid, she knew what she had going on, and Nico loved to reaffirm that she was indeed unfairly attractive.

There would be no sons of business partners or interns from the hospital waltzing around her - the people most often mentioned by her father whenever they talked about the future - or anyone at all, for reasons that were obvious to only a few select individuals, and probably Nico’s siblings. They’re old enough to understand, right?

“I get it. You don’t have to worry, it’s nothing like that.”

“Alright, if you’re positive.”

Maki fishes a second pencil out of the jar of knickknacks on the kitchen counter as her eyes fall across the pages of her forgotten textbook.

“I am. I have to go though, I have some work to finish before dinner,” she says as she sits back down on the floor.

“Oh? I’ll let you get to work then. How about you come over for dinner when you’re done? I’ll send the driver to get you.”
Maki drops her phone to her chest to hide her groan. She can’t really say no, but she knows what it’s going to be like if she says yes. Hopefully Nico hasn’t planned anything too exciting.

Maki puts the phone back up to her ear. “Okay. I’ll text you when I’m finished writing. See you later.”

The second she hangs up, Nico flicks the side of her head and throws herself into Maki’s lap like a cat begging for attention.

“Honey, I’m hoooooome!” Nico sings. “Pay attention to Nico.”

“A little demanding aren’t we?”

Nico shrugs and throws her arms around Maki’s neck. “I had the worst customer ever today, his girlfriend must have dumped him or something. He threw a spoon at my coworker and called me a… something, I don’t know, I can’t remember. It was very unkind though.”

Maki does her best to ignore the tingling sensation under her skin where Nico’s bare arms touch her neck, but it’s a challenge, especially after her phone conversation. She wraps her left arm around Nico’s back and scoots forward towards the kotatsu until she can finally touch pencil to paper.

“Really?” Nico scowls from her now cramped spot in Maki’s lap.

“Yes, really. I have to finish these notes before dinner.”

“I’ll finish your notes before dinner.” Nico counters, trying to sound suave.

Maki shakes her head and continues to write. “That doesn’t even make any sense, Nico-chan.”

“Well it’s not my fault you aren’t giving me enough to work with. You don’t even care that some guy threw a spoon at me! I could’ve died.” Nico huffs as she tries to cross her arms, but her left side is too squished against the kotatsu.

Maki doesn’t even glance her way. “I thought he threw it at your coworker.”

“Sure, but it sounds more dramatic if I say he threw it at me. Wouldn’t you be worried?”

“You aren’t going to die if you get hit with some silverware, Nico-chan.”

Instead of continuing their banter, Nico reaches up and unties the silky red ribbons in her hair. Maki still considers admitting to Nico that seeing her with her hair down was something of a turn on to be one of the gravest mistakes she’s ever made, because Nico takes advantage of that fact way too often. Maki doesn’t even know why - that’s just how it is.

“It makes me look more mature.” Nico had insisted.

“You wish,” Maki had retorted, “it just makes you look like you without pigtails.”

Maki pointedly ignores Nico when she begins to play with the buttons on her blouse.

“Why do your homework when you could be doing-”
“Nico-chan.”

Nico lets go of Maki’s shirt and pats her chest. “Alright alright, sheesh. You have the dinner from hell to go to later anyway.”

Maki shifts Nico around in her lap to look for her eraser. “I don’t think it’s going to be that bad. Maybe.”

“Maybe.” Nico repeats.

It takes Maki a few moments to realize that Nico has started playing with her hair. Not really playing with it though, more like gathering it.

“What are you doing?” Maki asks, eyes still heavy on her work.

“You should wear your hair different. Surprise them.”

“Huh?” Maki finally looks towards her shoulder just as Nico finishes tying red locks to one side with her ribbon.

Nico nods at her handiwork and closes an eye. “The red does kind of clash with your hair, but I don’t want to get up and find a different colour.”

Maki smiles.

“Thanks, Nico-chan.” And before Nico can react, Maki kisses her on the cheek and then immediately returns to writing her notes.

“What the heck.” Nico states more than she asks. “This isn’t fair.”

“You’ll get over it.”

Maki spends the next hour trying her best to write about liver functions with a squirming Nico in her arms. It’s not practical by any means, but she finds she doesn’t mind the invasion of personal space this time. Even if Nico’s elbow digs into her ribs a little every time she leans too far forward.

Just as she finishes her final summary, Nico strikes again.

“So what are you gonna do now that your mom thinks you’re dating some guy?”

Maki’s palm meets her forehead. “How much of that did you hear? I thought you got home right at the end.”

“Pretty much all of it,” Nico admits, “I noticed you being careful with the pronouns so I just guessed.”

Maki sighs. “Yeah, well, I just wanted to see what would happen I guess. And I never said I was dating anyone.”

Nico leans into her. “But you implied it. And you totally are dating someone.”
“Did we even date?”

“No, but you can take me somewhere fancy and expensive after the semester is over. Don’t change the subject. What are we gonna do?”

Maki rubs at her eyes with her free hand and leans back slowly until they’re both lying on the floor.

“You mean what am I gonna do. You don’t have to come with me to the dinner from hell part two.”

Nico’s hand finds hers, and she feels small fingers threading around her own.

“No Maki-chan. We. Me and you, both of us. I know it’s way overdone to say this, but we’re a team now. Your problems are my problems.”

“A team. I see.”

“Yeah, I’m the team captain though.”

“Of course.”

Nico pokes her stomach. “So what are we gonna do?”

Maki shakes her head. “I don’t know. I want to say I need more time to figure it out but I don’t think we have that. Maybe I’ll know tonight. Have you thought of anything?”

“No,” Nico grumbles. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin if I were you.”

“Wow, thanks for all your help.”

“Hey!” Nico shouts. “I’m doing my best! What would you do if you were me?”

“I… don’t know. Probably feel guilty for not being able to do anything.”

Maki looks down only to lock eyes with Nico, who is looking up at her from her less than comfortable position splayed across Maki’s front. It takes Maki a solid few seconds, but she catches on eventually.

“Nico-chan, no. Don’t feel bad about it; there’s nothing you can do. It’s not your fault.”

“But it is my fault. I’m too irresistible and now you’re trapped between a rock and your parents.”

Maki narrows her eyes. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” Nico replies, “and I do feel bad and you can’t stop me from feeling bad. It’s my job to feel bad when you feel bad.”

“Don’t feel bad!”

“No, you don’t feel bad!”

“Uuugh,” Maki groans as she hugs Nico close and sits up.
“I agree,” Nico says into Maki’s ear.

It takes all of Maki’s willpower to put Nico down and stand up. The driver would be there any minute now and she didn’t want to spend any more time on this excursion than she had to. Nico followed her around like a lost child as she collected her keys and her bag and put her shoes on. Maybe they were both lost children, or maybe it was really just Maki.

Even as Maki gets in the car out in the parking lot, she watches Nico looking at her through their cracked open door. She can’t help but feel something ominous in the air as she settles into the black leather seats. Her hand fiddles with the ribbon tied around her hair. Perhaps tonight would be something she needed, a push or a shove. Maybe another chat with Nozomi would have to be arranged if she made it home in one piece.

Maki wasn’t one to believe in magic or superstition anymore, but a deck of cards with all the answers sounded like a fine alternative to anything else she could think of.

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It’s almost midnight when Maki crawls into bed, and Nico moans in her sleep until she’s nudged awake.

Nico doesn’t even try to wipe the sleep from her eyes. “Hey, Maki-chan.”

“Hey.” Maki says quietly.

Maki doesn’t move much as Nico wraps herself around her like she always does, though she struggles a bit in her half-awake state.

“How’s dinner go?” Nico mumbles sleepily.

“It was dinner. Nico-chan, we have to talk.”

Nico pets her hair. “Yeah, yeah, in the morning. Sleep now, talk later…”

Maki frowns. “We should really talk now. Like right now.”

“Maaakiiiiiiii.”

Maki licks her lips and sits up, pulling Nico with her.

“Hey! I was comfy. Why-”

“Nico-chan,” Maki rushes out, “Nico-chan, they…”

“They? Who? Whatnow?”

Maki looks her in the eye and just like that, Nico is awake. Nico knows fear when she sees it, even when she’s barely coherent.

Maki takes a deep breath and grasps Nico’s hand in hers.

“They know.”
“I hate you so much! I can’t believe this!”

“Nico-chan, it’s serious!”

Maki follows Nico as she stomps out of the bedroom in the dead of night wearing nothing but one of Maki’s oversized shirts and underwear with pink rabbits on them. The redhead struggles to keep both her composure and her gaze from dropping too low, because what her parents think after last night’s discussion really is important and Maki has no idea what to do. They need to talk about it now.

“You don’t know what it was like - they just assumed I was lying all this time because I’m emotionally repressed! My papa laughed, like a real genuine laugh! He laughed at me!”

“You are emotionally repressed,” Nico stresses as she grabs a glass from the cupboard and fills it with tap water. “You’re driving me to drink, look! And you almost gave me a heart attack. You can’t possibly have worded that any worse than you did.”

Nico points at the clear liquid before chugging the entire thing and slamming her glass on the kitchen counter.

“That’s just water. Quit being stupid, we have to talk about this.”

Nico narrows her eyes. “Is that your way of saying you’ll take me out for a real drink?”


“Maki-chan,” Nico snaps as she begins to pace around the kitchen. “I thought you meant they knew. Like, about me! That they knew everything!”

Maki blinks. “Oh. Well…I guess I could have said it differently. What actually happened still isn’t good though. They seriously do think I’ve been lying about everything and staying with some guy.”

Nico cringes and pulls at her loose hair. “And they think I’ve been your accomplice or something? Trying to cover for you?”

Maki sighs and takes a seat at the table. “That isn’t quite how Papa worded it, but he wasn’t exactly smiling when he mentioned you.”

“Great, so your dad is more upset with me for covering for you than he is with you lying about secretly dating a mystery guy for months and months? And staying at his house?”

Maki snorts and puts her chin in her hand. “Well you did cover for me, just not for that reason.”
Nico stops pacing and sits down across from Maki, rubbing her eyes and clenching her teeth. She drops one hand to her side and points at Maki directly between her eyes with the other.

“Also, I totally would cover for you if we lived in some alternate universe where your dad’s made up scenario is true, but that’s not what’s happening. I seriously thought we were in major trouble, after everything you’ve been worrying about. But your parents are happy you’re dating!”

Maki shakes her head. “I denied everything, but I don’t think they listened.”

“Probably because you turn redder than your hair when you’re embarrassed,” Nico mutters. “You’re too easy to read when you’re feeling anything related to embarrassment.”

“It’s all my fault, I know.” Maki grumbles. She turns her head down and grips the hem of her shirt.

Only seconds after sitting down, Nico stands back up again, hands closing into fists at her sides.

“That’s not what I said. I’m just… ugh, I really thought you were done for. Which would be my fault.”

“Our fault.” Maki corrects.

“Right. I thought - I mean, you’ve imagined it right? Your parents find out and the worst that could happen comes true?”

“I imagine it all the time.”

“So you have to know I worry about it too, Maki-chan. I worry about you and I don’t want to mess everything up, just like you. What exactly did they say?”

Maki looks up and momentarily considers slamming her head against the table. Just repeating what happened would sound ludicrous, even though there was a partial truth hidden amongst the fabrications. Though she had denied every accusation thrown her way, her flushed complexion had betrayed her as she sat across from her parents at the dinner table and tried not to think about Nico.

“Well,” Maki starts, “I didn’t realize Mama intended to keep the whole conversation I had with her a secret, just the part where I wasn’t at my old place. So I thought Papa would have known that I said something about there possibly being someone.”

Nico’s jaw drops. “Are you telling me you outed yourself?”

“I didn’t know he didn’t know! I guess I looked suspicious, because he asked me if I was okay. I thought he was leading into what I told Mama, so I apologized for not telling him right away that I was… interested in someone. I thought it would be better to keep my mouth shut after that but all it did was provoke him even more.

“He said he knew something was up, that I must have met someone and that’s why I’ve been so secretive. I tried to play it up, the whole naive sheltered daughter thing, but he kept asking me questions about ‘him’, - Maki makes quote gestures in the air with her fingers - “but when I didn’t say anything or insisted there was nothing serious going on, he only told me it’s fine to be interested in dating and that I didn’t have to lie about it.”
“Hmm, so it’s okay then?” Nico asks.

Maki shakes her head. “No, because that means he’s only okay with it if it fits his vision. He thinks I’m dating a guy in the medical program, even though I already told my mother there’s nothing going on and that this fictional person doesn’t go to school with me. It’s like my dad thinks his dream for me is coming true. I didn’t know what to say.”

Nico looks thoughtful for a moment before resting her head on the table. “Did your mom say anything?”

“No,” Maki replies, “she just listened. She looked… I don’t know, she just had this look on her face. I don’t know what she thought of it.”

“Alright,” Nico says with resolve as she lifts her head up, “so all things said and done, we’re still technically safe. It feels pretty shitty to have to hide behind someone who isn’t real, but Nico will do it for Maki-chan.”

“We aren’t safe, Nico-chan. Papa said he wants to meet you - him, whatever - and I can’t put that off for eternity. I already thought about telling him that whatever ‘we’ have going on didn’t work out, but then you and I are just back to square one again.”

Nico sticks her tongue out. “Wouldn’t square one be more like going back to when you couldn’t admit to yourself how totally ho-”

“Hot and amazing you are, yes I know. You know what I meant. What do we do?”


“Huh?”

“Get up and come here. I wanna hold you.”

Nico scoots her chair out and away from the table and holds her arms out expectantly. She looks a little grumpy, tired, and a touch pink in the cheeks. Her hair is all over the place and Maki’s shirt is slipping down her bare shoulder. Maki silently thanks the powers that be that Nico decided to stop wearing her horrifying green face masks to bed. Though even then Maki would probably still feel the little jump in the pit of her stomach that comes around every time Nico looks particularly striking. Attractive, even.

There’s nothing she can do to stop herself from obeying; it’s inevitable. She stands and walks the few feet over to Nico, who whines pathetically when Maki stops in front of her.

“I-I’m bigger than you, this is going to look stupid…” Maki trails off, though she maintains eye contact with her grumpy partner.

“Who cares? Nobody’s gonna see. You don’t want Nico to hold you?”

“That’s not - I didn’t say that.”

“Then sit down, drama queen,” Nico commands as she reaches out. Maki lets her pull on her arms and move her about until she’s settled. It probably does look stupid, but she finds that leaning her side comfortably into Nico is instantly calming. She could happily fall asleep like this, but likely so
would Nico’s legs.

“I’m not a drama queen.” Maki mumbles into Nico’s hair, because even sitting down doesn’t let her lean her head on Nico’s shoulder.

“Whatever you say, Princess Nishikino,” Nico mocks as she wraps her arms around Maki, “but maybe this is the kind of drama we’ve been waiting for. Maybe it’s an opening.”

“An opening?”

“Yeah. Your dad is fine with thinking he knows what you’ve been up to, so maybe it’s almost time to actually tell him? We have to do it eventually and things just get worse the longer we wait. I feel like I’m in a TV drama.”

Maki groans and closes her eyes. “You’re right. I know you’re right, but I don’t know how to do it. What if… what if your mom tells them?”

“You want my mom to tell your parents we’re gay?” Nico says flatly. “That’s the dumbest idea you’ve ever had.”

“It’s the only idea I have. Besides, I don’t even know if Papa really is okay with whatever he thinks is going on. I think he might be withholding judgement until he meets… you.” Maki grumbles.

“Silent but deadly? Judges you secretly and waits for the perfect moment to strike you when you’re down?”

“You make it sound so much worse than it is.”

Nico slumps a little in her seat. “Do I really?”

Maki pauses for a moment, thinking back to the day she handed over the worst grade she’d ever gotten to her parents. The result was a suggestion - more of a demand - that she quit µ's. Maybe Nico wasn’t too far off the mark.

“He doesn’t really give me a chance to explain anything, Nico-chan. Once he’s decided what he thinks, it’s hard to change his mind. Even though µ's was successful I know it still bothers him that I wasted my time performing.”

“Wasted? I’ll waste him, that -”

“I think you’re just making it worse.” Maki sighs.

Feeling the rise and fall of Nico’s chest, the rhythm of her breathing and the warmth radiating from her small form is enough to make Maki want to pass out right then and there in the middle of the conversation. Couldn’t they just skip all this? Maybe they could just run away to the other side of Japan and not tell anyone. Surely nobody would be any the wiser.

“Okay, that’s definitely the dumbest idea I’ve ever had.” Maki mutters to herself.

“What?”

“Nothing, you’re just rubbing off on me more than I’d like. Also, don’t turn what I just said into an
inappropriate joke.” Maki says sharply.

“Nico is always appropriate. Maki-chan just needs to learn how to read the mood. Anyway, I wasn’t going to make a joke, I was about to suggest that we could go talk to my mom tomorrow,” Nico pauses to look at the time blinking on her stove, “or I guess later today. She might have some ideas.”

Maki sits up in Nico’s lap, pulling herself away from the heat that threatened to put her to sleep.

“But don’t you have work?”

Nico shakes her head. “No, I’m back on my old schedule now, remember? Weekends off. It’s all thanks to my wonderful, genius, super attractive -”

“You’re welcome.” Maki deadpans. “And I think talking to your mom is a good idea, Nico-chan. I’d like that.”

Nico grins and pokes Maki’s nose. “All of my ideas are good, but you never believe me.”

“I’m going to bed.”

Nico finds herself grasping at empty air as Maki swiftly walks away.

“Hey, Maki-chan! What the hell!”

---

At half past noon, Nico walks in the door of the Yazawa household with Maki in tow. They’re immediately surrounded by her siblings, who insist their mother didn’t mention anyone was visiting today even though they were all clearly waiting next to the front door.

They’re particularly happy to see Maki for reasons she can’t comprehend, and Nico looks a little bit smug about the whole thing.

“They all have good taste,” Nico explains as they take their shoes off. “They learn from the best after all.”

“Don’t make it weird.” Maki whispers, taking caution in what she says under the watchful eyes of Cotarou.

“Tomato.” He says with certainty.

“Tomato?” Maki asks. She turns to glare at Nico.

“I didn’t do anything!” Nico blurs out before hurrying into the kitchen. “Mama, we’re here!”

Maki follows her with a scowl plastered to her face, all three of the younger Yazawas behind her. Mrs. Yazawa is seated at the kitchen table, so very obviously amused at the antics of her children.

“Welcome back, Maki-chan. I think they missed you.”

Maki nods. “Thanks. I...missed them too?”
“Can you play the piano again!?” Cocoa shouts.

“Can you play any other instruments?” Cocoro chimes in eagerly.

Maki looks thoughtful for a moment. “I can play the flute.”

“You can play the flute?” Nico questions. “How did I not know this?”

Maki rolls her eyes. “It’s basically the same thing as a piano.”

“How is a flute the same as a piano?”

“I’m not explaining this to you right now, Nico-chan.”

Cocoa tugs at her mother’s sleeve. “Mama, can we get a flute? I want Maki to play. Can she come over every day?”

Nico pulls out a chair and sits down across from her mother, gesturing at Maki towards the seat next to her. “Maki-chan is busy with school, she doesn’t have time to come over every day.”

“But she always comes when you come. Can you come over every day, onee-san?”

“Uh.” Maki says.

“Real elegant there, Maki-chan.”

“Shut up, Nico-chan.”

“Hey, you can’t-”

“Hey now,” Mrs. Yazawa interrupts, “Maki-chan has a point.”

Nico’s forehead connects with the table as Maki pulls out the chair next to her and sits down.

“Every time…” Nico mumbles into the wood surface.

“How come Maki comes with Nico all the time now? She didn’t before.” Cocoro observes.

Mrs. Yazawa smiles. “That’s what they’re here to talk about. I think you three will be satisfied, at least.”

Nico and Maki trade unsure looks before turning back to Mrs. Yazawa. The kids gather together in front of their mother with excitement, or rather Cocoro and Cocoa do and Cotarou acts like he usually does. Maki isn’t sure what to think of it.

Nico shoves her in the side. “You tell them!”

“What? They’re your siblings, you do it!”

“Well you, uhh… you suck, so you do it!”

Mrs. Yazawa, thoroughly entertained, takes the opportunity to do it for them.
“Your sister is dating Maki!”

Cocoa and Cocoro simultaneously cheer and gasp respectively, while Nico defaults to her catchphrase in a poor attempt to hide her blush. Maki drops her face into her hands.

“Yay! She can stay forever!” Cocoa yells and throws her hands up in the air. Moments later she mimics her oldest sister’s trademark pose, smiling from ear to ear.

“Dating? Like girlfriends?” Cocoro says wide-eyed.

Maki nods, face still hidden. “I may have regrets.”

“But super idols aren’t supposed to date!”

Nico smiles. “That’s why you have to keep it a secret when I make my comeback. It’s fine, I promise.”

Satisfied with the response, Cocoro moves on to the next point of interest.

“Are you gonna get married?”

Mrs. Yazawa bursts out laughing and Nico’s eyes widen.

“No!” Maki shouts, just before Nico kicks her leg under the table. “Ouch - Nico-chan what was that for!?”

Nico jumps as Maki kicks her back. “Don’t kick me!”

“You started it!”

“You don’t wanna get married?!”

Maki yanks on her own hair with both hands. “It’s not even legal here!”

Nico stands up, trying her best to loom over Maki. “Then we’ll do whatever that other thing is!”

“Civil partnership?”

“A little eager, aren’t we?” Mrs. Yazawa quips.

Nico shuts up and sits down, trying her best to look dejected and miserable. Maki stares pointedly at Nico, feeling every bit as annoyed with her antics as she usually does.

“Are you really going to throw a tantrum right now?”

“Nico would make a good housewife.”

“You really are shameless, you know that?” Maki drones.

“Whatever, Umi.”
Maki feels like strangling Nico, but she holds off when she remembers there are three children and their mother watching them. She’s being just as shameless as Nico right now, probably.

“Sorry,” she says meekly to Mrs. Yazawa.

Cocoro giggles and whispers something into her mother’s ear. Mrs Yazawa grins, and Nico stares accusingly at them both.

“Well,” Mrs. Yazawa begins, “I think it’s time for a little adult chat. Would you kids mind playing in Cocoro’s room for a bit? No listening in, please.”

Cocoa nods and shoots off, with Cocoro and Cotarou not far behind. The sliding door shuts, but not quite the whole way. There really isn’t any winning with them, Maki supposes, but she knew what she was getting into long before she let Cocoa paint her nails.

When they’re finally settled, Nico puts her composure back together as best she can and Maki tries not to feel guilty about making a scene when they’re supposed to be discussing something important. Mrs. Yazawa doesn’t seem phased though, but she does wink - again - in Maki’s general direction. If Nico notices, she doesn’t say anything.

“So I suppose we have some important things to discuss.” Mrs. Yazawa says.

“We have no idea how to do this.” Nico states flatly.

Mrs. Yazawa nods. “I wouldn’t either, if I were in your position. Especially after you told me what happened with Maki last night.”

“We’re on a timer now,” Maki confirms. “I wasn’t really feeling this kind of pressure before. I know I can’t hide forever.”

Nico nods her head in agreement. “You could probably keep the school troubles on the downlow at least. That’s something we can deal with later.”

“Well…” Maki sighs, “I haven’t exactly been committing myself to my studies as much as I was before. It’s going to come up if my grades drop.”

“But you’re happier now, right?”

“Happy and scared. Not the greatest combination in the world.”

“Hm,” Mrs. Yazawa hums, “So the only problem we have to deal with right now is Nico.”

“I’m not the problem, it’s Maki-chan’s narrow minded dad. How do we do this?”

Her mother crosses her arms. “There isn’t much you really can do, besides tell him. That’s the plain answer. You might not like what comes after, but that’s all there is to it.”

“You make it sound so easy.” Maki says quietly.

The eldest Yazawa shakes her head. “I know it isn’t easy. You don’t know what could happen, how he’ll react, and that’s scary. Maybe things won’t ever be the same for you again. I wish I could come up with something to resolve this but… it’s inevitable that something’s going to change, we just
don’t know if it will be for the better or worse.

“I think you need to consider what’s most important to you right now. Your parents’ approval, or”

“Nico.” Maki finishes.

She turns to look at the girl beside her. There’s a tiny glimmer sparkling there in her crimson gaze a hint of something. Determination? Adoration? Perhaps a mix of both. She looks a little sad, but hopeful.

“Whatever you want to do, I’m with you.” Nico says. She takes Maki’s hand and looks into her eyes with a drive - no, a passion - that only Nico is capable of expressing. “If it means making up some huge bogus lie to keep me a secret until you’re ready, then I’ll do it. Anything you want.”

Anything. Anything for her, for Maki.

Nico doesn’t deserve to be hidden away.

Maki feels like crying. “My birthday,” she says, “my birthday dinner. I’ll ask to invite… you… to my birthday dinner. We can tell them together.”

A split second later she has an armful of Nico. “Yes! Okay, we’ll do it together.”

Nico leans back, half in Maki’s lap and half standing on one leg. “That’s like… really soon. When should we ask about it?”

“Now’s as good a time as any,” Mrs. Yazawa says. “You could call them right now, while we’re here. Just in case.”

Maki feels a sudden spike of anxiety as she processes what she herself has just suggested. This is it - there would be no going back after making this phone call. It was either going to lead to the best or worst birthday of her life, but at least Nico would be there with her. The entire time she’d been hiding everything away, she’d never really come to the realization that she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

If Nico deserves freedom from the shackles of her lies, then so does Maki.

She whips her phone out and dials before she can change her mind.

“Hello? Mama?”

“Maki-chan, it’s nice to have you call me for a change! What are you up to?”

Maki can feel Nico squeezing her hand. Maybe she’s nervous, or maybe she can tell that Maki is too. She doesn’t really have time to think about it now.

“Not much. Look, about yesterday… I sort of… I-I mean I was embarrassed a little. And I still am, but,” Maki pauses and breathes in, “I am seeing someone. It’s been… a while.”

“Ah, I see. I’m proud of you, Maki-chan.”

...That’s it? Really?
“Huh? What for?”

“Admitting it. I know Papa was being a little pushy and presumptuous. You just looked like you were struggling with something the whole time we were eating. I’m just glad you finally told me.”

So far, so good.

Maki bites her lip before continuing. “Thanks. I mean, I know Papa wants to meet them. My birthday is soon and I know birthday dinners are usually our thing, but maybe that might be a good time to…?”

“Invite him over? That sounds wonderful, I think Papa would like that. Should we do the whole formal thing? You and I both know what he’s like about first impressions, it might make it easier for you if you’re both dressed for the occasion.”

Maki decides immediately that she’ll have to buy Nico a new dress. Sure, she owns a lot of cute casual fashion, but the closest thing she has to formal wear is her old Love Wing Bell costume. As adorable as Nico looks in a suit, it isn’t really her.

“We can do that.”

“Alright, perfect,” her mother says cheerfully. “I’ll let Papa know for you, okay? No need to call him.”

*Thank god.*

Maki lets out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“O-okay. Thank you. Thank you Mama.”

Maki feels like there’s something else she needs to say, but she isn’t quite sure what. Nico is still looking at her, not a trace of her determined expression lost. Mrs. Yazawa nods at her, a light smile gracing her features.

But it’s Mrs. Nishikino that has more to contribute to the conversation.

“Maki-chan… try not to worry yourself too much, alright? I know it’s hard, but you’re almost there. If a Nishikino woman is anything, it’s not afraid. You’ve already accomplished so much, why stop now?”

It’s almost too much, because Maki swears right then and there that her mother has to know. But if she knows, why is she still playing along with the whole guy from med school thing? Those words are exactly what she needed to hear, what she wished she could hear with more clarity. How sad it would be, for Nico to show up at her door and be turned away now. Maki supposed if that were the case, she would leave too.

Why stop now indeed.

“Thank you, Mama. I’ll see you then.”

When she hangs up, Nico’s expression has changed to one of concern.
“Are you okay? You went all pale at the end there. Did she say something?”

“I...no, it’s just nerves. I don’t think we should worry about it.”

Nico smiles. “Whatever you say. I guess this is it, huh?”

Maki’s eyes drift closed. “It is. I still feel really unsure, but... I know I have you.” She opens them again, and looks to Nico’s mother. “All of you.”

Mrs. Yazawa smiles softly, a glowing reflection of her daughter. “You’re stuck with us now.”

Stuck with the Yazawas. That doesn’t sound so bad, even if it means she has to play fake music on a toy piano for the rest of her life.

Regardless, Maki finally feels a sense of stability in that there’s an end to everything, just over the horizon. Good or bad, she has support, and maybe she has her mother too, suspicious as she may sound. It feels a little bit like she’s had to choose sides, when there shouldn’t even be sides to begin with.

“This might end up being your worst birthday ever, you know. Promising to bring a handsome date and then showing up with me instead.”

Maki leans her head back in her chair and stares at Nico. She can’t help but smirk.

“You mean to tell me the oh-so-talented Nico-nii can’t do handsome?”

Nico blinks. “Uh, um, well of course I can! I can do anything. Look, we’re gonna show up on your parents’ doorstep, you and me, and we’re gonna look totally hot and fabulous. Just let me choose your wardrobe and we can’t go wrong. They’ll be begging me to stay!”

Maki laughs - really laughs. If there’s anything she needs right now, it’s Nico’s unparalleled optimism. It’s something Nico’s learned over time, after being led astray again and again, after doubting herself and being alone with her dreams in empty hallways and forgotten club rooms. If Nico can do it, so can she.

They can do it together.
The Golden Lie

Chapter Notes

applying for Aqours second live next week, wish me luck!!

On the weekend before Eli returns to Japan for spring break, Maki gets her most recent test scores back and discovers she is averaging a B in microbiology. She’s sitting at Nico’s desk (it may as well belong to Maki now) in front of her laptop, utterly mortified, while Nico is in the living room chatting away on her phone with Nozomi without a care in the world.

She did figure her average might drop a little bit, what with her trying her best to spend less time with a pencil in her hand and more time with Nico, but... dropping an entire letter grade? Preposterous.

What would her parents think, especially now? Now they know, or at least they think they do, which might be just as bad as knowing if not worse. They aren’t going to be happy if she graduates without earning a placement at the Nishikino hospital, that’s for sure. But how much could one letter grade in her first year really matter anyway? Surely there were surgeons and nurses who didn’t excel in one subject or another, for whatever reason. But she’s a Nishikino. How terrible would it look if she couldn’t even do her residence at her own hospital?

Her irrational imagination procured an unfortunate thought - her father in a meeting room, the laughing stock of his employees for having a daughter who couldn’t even live up to her own family name. Would the Nishikino brand still remain even if nobody followed in her father’s footsteps? Maki feels like she’s going crazy - she has no idea how that kind of thing is supposed to work.

Then again, she’s never had to worry about failure before, until this year. Everything was supposed to work out exactly the way she accepted that it would.

“Maki-chan,” Nico leans her head in the door, “do you want to go on a double date with Eli and Nozomi?”

It only takes a split second for Maki to bottle up all of her insecurities, because the opportunity to crack jokes at Nico’s expense to this degree doesn’t come around incredibly often. That, and it takes her mind off the impending anxiety attack.

“Are you going to make Eli keep your worst nightmare on a leash?”

Nico chokes on thin air and blushes. “I- I wasn’t being serious when I said that. We went over this already, remember?”

Maki smirks. “Just checking. Won’t it be fun to be alone with Nozomi, Eli and I?”

“... I’m telling Nozomi we aren’t going.”

Maki does her best pout, trying her hardest to look the way Nico does when she’s trying to make her feel bad about something. “But I want to see Eli...”

“Stop that! You learnt that from me!” Nico shouts, her hand gripping the doorframe a little harder than before. “I want to see Eli too, but at what cost?”
“I wonder what Nozomi will think of us?”

Nico’s eyes dart back and forth as she imagines the most likely scenarios. Her frown gradually gets deeper and Maki has to hide her smile behind her hand.

“If she gropes you I’m hiring a hitman.” Nico says without a hint of sarcasm.

Maki can’t hide her laughter at that, but Nico’s expression doesn’t change.

“I’m serious! What if she does it to me? What then?”

Maki’s face darkens inexplicably fast. “She won’t.”

“Woah,” Nico gasps, momentarily snapped out of her serious state, “you looked like Umi for a second there. Can you show me how to do that?”

“Soldier Game trade secret,” Maki says, “but in all honesty I don’t think I can spare the time to go out. My grades… I’ve been goofing around too much. Things were bad enough already.”

“Like with your dad? Wait, did you… did you fail something?” Nico asks, astonishment flashing across her face.

Maki shakes her head. “I may as well have. I got a B.”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was,” Maki sighs as she drops her gaze to the floor, “Papa won’t be happy about it.”

Nico blinks and shakes her head quickly before stepping into the room and sitting on the bed, in the corner closest to the desk. Maki can feel it - the same anxiety she felt before, when she was on the phone with Nico in class and she had to run outside to calm down. The momentary respite had vanished in an instant.

“Maki-chan? You know that’s not like, a bad grade or anything, right?”

Maki can’t even think of anything to say, because it isn’t something Nico would understand. She’s the kind of person who got by on the bare minimum, only just scraping together enough of a “grade” to pass. Not everyone is meant to comprehend the pressure of being a straight A student, wherein any alternative is deemed unacceptable. If you aren’t at the top, you’re at the bottom.

Maki can feel the tears threatening her again, the ache in the corners of her eyes and in the back of her head. It stops when small fingers take hold of her chin and draw her upwards.

“Hey, c’mon Maki-chan. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Red. It’s all Maki can see. Red, black, pink…

A softness on her lips. What was life like before Nico?

Nico pulls away and smiles softly, “I was always a C average, but look at me now! I came out just fine. You’ve always had a bigger brain than anyone I’ve ever known.”

Maki rolls her eyes. “Yeah, look at you now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Nothing,” Maki takes a deep breath before standing from her chair and sitting beside Nico on the bed, “you came out better than fine. But different people have different expectations for me, and I’m already failing them.”

Nico hums and leans into Maki’s side. “Sounds more like you’re failing yourself. You don’t have to listen to what everyone tells you, you know? I don’t think you deserve to be so worried over nothing.”

“But it’s not nothing. It might mean more than it should, I don’t know. I don’t even want to think about it right now.”

Maki lets out a shaky breath and leans into dark silky hair.

“Then don’t think about it. Let’s go shopping.”

“Huh?”

“Shopping? The thing where you go outside and spend money? I don’t consider what you did yesterday to be grocery shopping either, so we need to teach you how to do that.”

“I went to the grocery store and bought things I thought we needed. I don’t see the problem.” Maki grumbles.

Nico pinches her leg. “You spent twice as much as I usually do for half as much. You didn’t even bring any coupons, I counted the ones in the drawer.”

“I don’t need coupons, Nico-chan.”

Nico throws her hands up and narrowly misses punching Maki in the eye. “It’s not about whether you need them or not, it’s the principle! It’s about learning to make the most of what you have!”

Maki reaches out and grabs Nico’s outstretched arms, firmly pressing them back into her sides. Her left arm lingers around Nico’s waist.

“I’m less than a month from inheriting more money than I know what to do with. I don’t need to waste my time with coupons.” Maki argues. “You don’t even pay rent anymore, why bother?”

Nico makes a sound that resembles a cross between a whine and a disappointed grunt. “Speaking of that, rent is gonna go up a little. I told the landlady you’re moving in at the end of the month.”

“Oh, that’s fine.”

“I’m sure it is. You’re lucky I’ve been here for so long or she might not have let you. I left out the part where you live here already.”

“Thank-”

Maki struggles not to tip over as Nico leaps up from the bed and throws open her closet. It’s stuffed with familiar fashion, some clothes that Nico can still fit into from her first year of high school, and a select few retired performance outfits. The majority of her wardrobe is a mix of pink, red, and grey, and everything looks good on her. Maki thinks so, at least - even she’ll admit that if Nico has an eye for anything, it’s fashion. A rogue flash of jealousy burns for a split second as Maki recalls all of the time Nico spent in the company of nobody other than Kotori, sewing outfit after outfit for their shows. Old habits die hard.
“I can’t wear any of this to your birthday thing, it’s all old. Nothing flashy enough.” Nico says to herself as she thumbs through each ensemble.

Maki crosses her arms. “Why do I feel like the shopping suggestion is less about me sucking at getting groceries and more about you wanting a new dress?”

“Because you’re totally right. You said you’d buy me a new one, right?”

Maki sighs, throwing caution to the wind. “Yeah. I guess now is as good a time as any.”

“Perfect, I have a few ideas in mind already. Pompoms look good on me, right? What’s the limit on the number of bows before it becomes socially unacceptable?”

“We’re not going to Harajuku, Nico-chan. It’s formal.”

“Do you think I’d look good in leopard print? I mean I know I look good in everything, but what do you think-”

Maki cuts her off by throwing a pillow at the back of her head.

“Ow, what the hell! Leopard print is totally in right now!”

Maki ignores her, standing up and closing the laptop on the desk before walking swiftly towards the bedroom door.

“I’m going without you.”

“What? No, Maki-chan, that’s not fair! Wait, don’t forget the coupons! Maki-chan?!”

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“Everything here is way too expensive.” Nico decides as she drifts along beside Maki. The weather is nice at least, a bit of sunshine and a light breeze, reflections of the clear blue sky flashing by on the glass panes of the multi-story department stores.

“You haven’t even gone inside anywhere yet, how would you know that?” Maki mutters.

Nico gets distracted for a moment by an extravagant window display for a line of designer purses, and her grip on Maki’s arm loosens a little.

“Look, there’s no prices in the window. I don’t even see prices inside, that means it’s too expensive. Whose idea was it to come here anyway?”

Maki shrugs and Nico returns to clinging to her arm, looking more like a child than anything else. “I always come here when I have to get gifts for people. Mama took me here to buy a dress a long time ago for some doctor’s social we hosted. That was before my growth spurt though, so it doesn’t fit anymore.”

“So you need to get something too?’

“Mhm,” Maki says as she looks around for an appropriate store. “We may as well match a little.”
“I’ve never been to Ginza in my whole life,” Nico says, drifting off and eyeing an exceptionally gaudy diamond ring in a window display. “I’m sure you can figure out why.”

“Because you’re uncultured?” Maki offers.

“Nico is plenty cultured, and so is her wallet.”

“Mama used to bring me to galleries here pretty often, before I was in high school.” Maki explains, brushing off Nico’s comment. “Art galleries. I didn’t care for the shopping bit so much.”

“Sounds boring.” Nico says flatly.

“It’s interesting. I always enjoyed it.”

“Then you must have been a boring kid-” Nico suddenly cuts off and a rebuttal dies on Maki’s tongue as her partner lets go of her arm and wanders back the way they’d come from. Maki watches her curiously from the middle of the sidewalk, the crowd flowing around her as if she isn’t even there. There’s a weird moment when Nico is illuminated in the soft glow of the sun, where the butterfly sensation Maki used to feel every time she walked past the clubroom returns to her in full force. The red ribbons glimmering in the light, hair that she knows is just as soft as it looks, the gentle hue of Nico’s favourite pink peacoat. She’s so small for someone who is so much braver than Maki is.

As she watches Nico stop to look in a window they’d already walked past, she feels like a silly schoolgirl with a crush all over again. Nostalgic for love. Does she get feelings like this too? Does the red of her hair look more vibrant through Nico’s eyes? Does her skin look softer?

Nico waited for this for years, after all.

There’s the lingering feeling that she’s still behind - that she has to catch up to Nico. Metaphorically, and also right now, physically. Maki walks over to her slowly, thoughts ebbing away as she draws nearer to whatever it is that has Nico so enraptured. She can see her face now, eyes big and mouth a little open.

“Nico-chan?”

When Maki turns to look, she sees herself dancing. Neon lights, shimmering glitter, thousands of miles between herself and her memories. She’s transported back to the stage under the starlight of the city, a fleeting glimpse into everything she used to be. Everything they used to be.

Three years ago, they saw themselves reflected in gold. Maki still has the metallic fan packed away, somewhere that she can’t see it.

“We really made something of ourselves, didn’t we Maki-chan?”

Maki turns to look at Nico, whose gaze hasn’t left the screen in front of them. Above the TV hangs a replica of Honoka’s Angelic Angel outfit (it has to be a replica, because Kotori insisted on keeping the real one, along with Umi’s) surrounded by silver paper stars strung up to the ceiling. It’s some kind of promotional display for a Japanese inspired fashion line from New York, and it’s something of a surprise to find themselves shoehorned into it after being absent for so long.

Maki nods. “We did.”

They watch themselves dance for a while. It’s just the same footage over and over - the same part of the song, not even the full version - but they can’t look away. Maki doesn’t know if Nico is thinking
the same way she is though. For Maki, it’s something she’s already left behind. For Nico, it’s a reminder of everything she still has left to achieve.

“Why don’t you do it?” Maki says, without looking at Nico.

“Do what?”

Maki turns back again, and Nico is finally looking at her, away from the screen. “Become an idol. You weren’t doing it because you needed to make money for your siblings. Now you don’t need that, or money for anything else. Why don’t you do it?”

Nico smiles, but it’s in a sad sort of way.

“Who’s going to take care of you, then?”

Maki wants to say something about how she isn’t a child and she can take care of herself, but after everything that’s happened she can’t even bring herself to finish the thought. The answer is nobody, because as it stands Maki can barely even get herself out of bed in the morning. What would she do if Nico really threw herself back into idol-dom full force? Training, finding an agent, auditions… they would never see each other.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s all Maki can think of, because good or bad, she’s just another reason why Nico can’t move on.

“Sorry for what?” Nico says as she steps forward and takes Maki’s hand. “You haven’t done anything.”

“That’s the problem,” Maki stresses. “I can’t do anything. Not… I feel like I can’t do anything without you.”

“I feel the same way. Can’t live with you, can’t live without you.” Nico winks.

Maki frowns. “But aren’t you sad? I’m the only thing in the way now.”

Nico shakes her head. “You’re not in the way of anything. It’s my own choice. You’re more important than anything else right now. Do you remember what happened to all of my idol otaku crap?”

Maki considers her question carefully. “I just figured you grew out of it, like when you grew out of your horrific room decor.”

Nico looks back towards the TV, watching herself dance across the screen for the tenth time. “I thought I told you, I sold it all online.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Money for the kids. How could I justify having all of that shit lying around when my mom is sitting at the table, struggling to figure out how she’s going to send all of us to college? I was sad about it, sure, but we have to let go of things for a while sometimes.”

“Oh. I didn’t…really think about that. Having all that stuff, it was just who you were.”

Nico nods. “Right, past tense. Super Idol Nico-nii knows when she needs to step out for a while.”

Maki squeezes her hand. “But you still call yourself a super idol.”
“And I am one. I’m just resting, I’ve got things to do.” Nico winks in her direction again. “I was born to be an idol, how could I do anything else?”

“I don’t doubt that. When you see things like this though, do you…”

“Do you miss it as much as I do?” Nico asks Maki’s question for her.

There probably isn’t anyone who misses it as much as Nico does. Maybe Hanayo, but they haven’t talked about it. What a question that is… if she were to be honest, she missed them more than anything else, all of them together working towards their goals, striving to accomplish more than they could ever dream. It just so happened that what united them had to do with school idols, or rather with Honoka. If Honoka never existed, maybe Maki would be alone at home, slowly rotting away over diagrams and medical texts.

“I’m not against becoming a doctor,” Maki says. “I want to help people.”


“Of course I miss it, but not like you do.”

“How would you know that? You don’t seem to like talking about this very much.”

“Because I don’t,” Maki snaps quietly, “but I can’t stop myself from remembering. It’s just flashes, they come and go. Usually when you’re around.”

“The heart wants what it wants. Nico is a patient girl, she can wait for eternity. Maki-chan, though…”

Maki looks down at her. Nico is looking a bit sly, like she knows something nobody else does, but it’s more likely that she’s making assumptions again. Truthfully, Maki can’t remember the last time anything Nico assumed about her was wrong though.

“Maki-chan just wants to skip the next three years of her life. You just want it to be over, don’t you?”

Maki tugs on Nico’s hand and they start walking again, away from the costume in the window and hopefully away from the conversation.

“I’d actually like to prolong this as much as possible. I’m not in any rush to start working forty-eight hour shifts while living off of hospital food and coffee dregs. What do you think you’ll be doing three years from now?”

Nico snickers. “Doing your laundry and making you coffee.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever.”

“Nico doesn’t think that far ahead. Doesn’t leave any room for change. Who knows where I’ll be?”

Maki eyes a department store up ahead with a bridal shop inside it. That should do for dress shopping, if Nico could behave for once in her life. Maybe she wasn’t giving her enough credit though, because mentioning civil partnership had sent Nico on a quest across the internet, where she’d actually dedicated a decent chunk of her free time to learning about something for once. Maybe that was a little harsh, but… Maki really couldn’t recall her being so enthusiastic about educating herself in all the time they’d known each other. It was a little daunting to see her so eager about it.
It would be nice if they could talk about something else now, though.

“What kind of dress do you want?” Maki asks, though she knows it’s a poor diversion.

She can see Nico side-eyeing her in the way that she does when she’s annoyed. The look doesn’t last long, but Maki has no doubt that it’s going to come up again later.

The idol thing. It always seems to come chasing after her again and again, no matter how hard she tries to put it behind her. Or maybe it’s just Nico, nipping at her heels and dancing circles around her, staying one step ahead. Nico is much too smart for her own good, really.

“Something pink and horrible. I’ve decided I want to embarrass you.”

Maki groans and prepares for two hours of dress shopping agony.

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It takes them a little longer than expected. Not because Nico took forever to find something, but rather because everything she tried on had to be adjusted to account for her lack of anything resembling a chest.

“There’s not enough there for you to wear anything strapless, Nico-chan.”

“Bite me. Then go get me the one with the neck thing.”

Eventually Nico had settled for something short, pink, and a little bit frilly (that tied behind the neck - strapless genuinely wasn’t an option) while Maki went with something long and purple upon Nico’s insistence.

Evidently, it was a grave sin to wear anything that didn’t bring out her eyes, according to her judgmental senior. Maki wasn’t particularly picky and went along with it, though it was a bit of a task to avoid showing Nico the price tags on either of the things they bought. Especially the matching shoes.

And so, after spending a very high but nonspecific amount of yen on extravagant formal wear, Maki found herself clutching two designer clothing bags in the middle of Nico’s usual supermarket, wherein they were going to attempt to make the most of a stack of carefully organized coupons.

Maki still didn’t see the point, but Nico insisted that she had to learn how to do it properly.

“I can’t believe you spent like three thousand yen on one bag of rice, Maki-chan.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Maki questions, trailing along uselessly behind Nico.

“We don’t need jasmine infused miracle rice from the other side of Japan. Rice is supposed to be cheap!”

“So I just messed up the rice?”

“No,” Nico mumbles as she turns sharply around a corner. Maki feels like an idiot, following her around in the discount section carrying clothes worth more than everything in the grocery store combined. “You also bought the most expensive cut of tuna I’ve ever seen in my life. Couldn’t you
just get something cheap like tilapia?”

“But I wanted tuna.” Maki sulks.

Nico doesn’t reply, but she does do a double take as they walk past a particularly eye-catching display - some promotional goods for the next Midnight Cats single. Nico looks as if she’s studying it, debating with herself internally. Maki recognizes confliction, and maybe regret.

A split second later, Nico is off again, in the direction of the dairy section. Maki moves to follow her, but hesitates. It’s strange to know what happened to everything in the clubroom. Maki offhandedly wonders how much Nico made reselling Minalinsky’s autograph as she grabs a brand new PV bluryay and shoves it in her shopping bag. Nico doesn’t have any posters either - maybe she needs one of those. Some keychains wouldn’t hurt, so she reaches to grab a couple, but realizes they’re blind packed. May as well get the whole box, just to be safe. How much does Nico like Midnight Cats, anyway? Does this store have an A-RISE section?

“Maki-chan?”

She jumps a little at Nico’s voice, shoving everything into her bag at once. There’s probably no point in hiding it, though; she’s going to see everything when they get to the till.

Nico starts ranting about something, eggs or butter or whatever, when she rounds another corner and runs face first into Nozomi’s generous cleavage.

“Maki-chan, how nice to see you!” Nozomi says with a smile. “I guess Nicocchi is here too.”

“What are you doing here?” Nico asks suspiciously.

“Probably grocery shopping, Nico-chan,” Maki drones, “you know, at the grocery store?”

“That’s what she wants you to think,” Nico says sharply.

Maki pulls lightly, but with intent, on one of Nico’s pigtails. “Why are you being so hostile? You literally asked if we could go out with Nozomi and Eli earlier today.”

“Because I want to see Eli.” Nico whines. “I miss the BiBi dynamic.”

Nozomi giggles. “You mean when you and Maki-chan start fighting and Elicchi has to give you both a time out?”

Maki crosses her arms. “Leave me out of this.”

“It’s a wonder Elicchi even survived.” Nozomi observes thoughtfully.

Maki exchanges a perturbed look with her counterpart.

“We weren’t that bad.” Nico insists.

Nozomi grins. “You were both pretty terrible. I’ve heard that writing Trouble Busters was quite the experience.”

Nico blushes, while Maki looks away shamefully. That particular incident wasn’t one they liked to recall very often, especially Nico, who was barred from writing any songs that included even the faintest trace of rap in them for the foreseeable future.

Maki is about to ask if they’re still going out later when Nozomi nods at her shopping bags. “Looks
like you’ve been doing some heavy duty spending. What’s the occasion?”

Nico waves her off. “We’ll tell you later. Over dinner?”

Nozomi nods. “I’ll text Elicchi to meet us. She’s still a little jetlagged.”

“Okay,” Nico says as she takes Maki’s hand, “you do that and I’ll finish showing this idiot how to shop like a normal human being.”

Nozomi sends a puzzled look in Maki’s direction, but all Maki can do is shrug. She doesn’t get it either.

Instead of going her own way, Nozomi follows them. “I was just getting ready to head out, so I may as well come with you, right?”

Maki would prefer not to be berated about buying the wrong milk in front of Nozomi, but there’s no polite way to prevent it. Maybe she should just let Nico do everything from now on, like before. Maki can wash the dishes and do the laundry, or maybe she could just hire someone to do it for them.

Twenty embarrassing minutes later, Maki lines up behind Nico and dumps everything she picked up from the idol display on the counter. Nico is too busy shuffling through her purse and sorting her coupons to notice, but Nozomi is standing at the end of the checkout looking directly at her as she fishes out her credit card. She’s just smiling, the way she does when she’s trying to bother Nico without doing anything. Maybe part of dating Nico is losing her immunity to Nozomi’s all-knowing demeanor, that air she has about her, like she knows everyone’s secrets and she could reveal them at any moment.

It’s such a ridiculous notion though, there’s nothing to worry about.

“What’s that?”

Maki snaps her gaze away from Nozomi and looks into Nico’s eyes, but Nico is looking at everything Maki’s just dumped out of her bag.

They don’t say anything to each other as the cashier rings them up, but Nico stares at her the entire time. When they’re finished, Maki shoves the bag of Midnight Cats merchandise in Nico’s direction with the straightest face she can muster.

Nico eyes her warily, pointedly ignoring Nozomi. “This is a slippery slope,” she says, “buying things for an idol otaku like Nico. Dangerous.”

Maki rolls her eyes. “Just take your stupid idol stuff. I’m hungry.”

Eventually they do make it out of the grocery store and into a Saizeriya, where Eli is already waiting for them.

“A double date at a cheapo diner, just what I always wanted.” Nico grumbles.

“What exactly did you expect?” Eli asks her. “I can’t really afford luxury at the moment.”

Maki nudges Nico’s foot under the table - a warning. “How’s America been?”

“Ehhh, it’s okay. I’m not sure about continuing my program though.” Eli replies. “Translation isn’t as enjoyable as I thought it might be.”
“It did seem kinda random for you,” Nico adds. “You didn’t know what to do for so long, then you just up and leave the country?”

Eli laughs sheepishly. “Well to be honest, I was sort of inspired by our trip to New York.”

Nico and Maki trade glances. Maybe Nozomi isn’t wrong when she insists everything happens for a reason.

“I just thought, what if idols really do hit it off outside of Japan? I had this dream about flying around with some idol group and acting as their translator when they went to America. They went to Russia too, but I know there’s no way that would ever happen.”

Nozomi rests her chin in her hand. “There was more to it than that though, right Elicchi?”

Eli nods. “Yeah, but that’s not really important. It made sense to me at the time I guess, to want to try to do more for idols.”

Nico leans back in the booth and crosses her arms. “So you went to study in a different country because you had a weird dream? Isn’t that a little dumb?” Maki nudges her under the table again.

“Quit it!”

Maki doesn’t move. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m just going to ignore you both,” Eli continues, “but yes, I did. I asked Nozomi-chan about it actually, and she told me I should follow my heart. Sounds cheesy but I decided to go for it. I don’t think it’s for me though.”

Nozomi smiles at her softly. “Maybe in the dream, you were meant to be one of the idols.”

Eli laughs her off. “No, I don’t think so. I might take up ballet again though. I suppose that’s close enough.”

Maki doesn’t understand. “I don’t see how you can change your mind so easily. Isn’t your future more important than that?”

“You’ve never changed your mind about something before?” Nozomi asks.

“I-I, well no… but it just seems like a waste. To spend so much time doing something you don’t even know if you like…”

Nico stiffens in the seat next to her, but doesn’t say anything.

Nozomi taps her chin. “How peculiar of you to say.”

Maki looks down at her lap. Maybe they shouldn’t have come after all.

“Hey, Maki-chan?” Eli starts, “how have you been? You seemed really out of it last time I saw you.”

“Oh. Well… to be honest I wasn’t doing so great. It’s not so bad anymore but I’m still… working on it.”

Nozomi winks. “Maki-chan learned a bit about herself since you were here last, Elicchi. And a bit about Nicocchi too.”

Nico shoots up and shoves Maki’s arm. “About me? Did you talk about me? What did Nozomi
“Nothing bad.” Maki offers.

“Maki-chan realized she’s a lot more like you than she thought she was. Past you, anyway.” Nozomi elaborates.


Maki looks down at Nico. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that actually.”

“You’ll have to be more specific, Maki-chan.”

“Remember when we followed you home that one time?”

Nico shivers. “I try not to.”

Maki stirs her coffee idly. “We never really did get an explanation for that. Like, about… about the lying. Nozomi didn’t say anything bad about you, but what she said about me reminded me of what you did back then. I thought maybe if you had an explanation…”

“That it might help you figure something out?” Nico finishes carefully.

Maki nods and Eli and Nozomi look at Nico fondly. Maybe they already know - Nozomi seemed to be more aware of it than anyone else anyway. Who else would Nico have had to confide in when they first got together? Certainly not her aloof opposite.

“W-well, you know what happened with my first idol group right?”

Maki bites her lip. “They quit.”

“Yeah. Up until then I’d made a big deal about the whole idol thing, practicing every day at home and staying as late as I could after school with the other girls. It was a big change for me, because until then I’d always had the responsibility of taking care of my siblings instead of doing…well, anything else.

They really looked up to me, because I was all they had. Mama was there too, but when you only have one parent you miss out sometimes. I guess you could say I was a role model to them. They even got to come to one of my first performances, halfway through my first year when I had Kanata and Akiru with me.”

The names don’t ring any bells for Maki. “Who?”

Nozomi leans into Eli’s side. “Nicocchi’s friends. The first members of the Idol Research Club.”

Nico cringes. “I don’t know if I’d call them my friends. They were the closest thing I had at the time I guess. But that’s not important. The kids went to my first show, and… you should have seen them. They loved it, and it made them so happy. It made everyone happy, especially when I did the Nico-nico-nii.”

Maki has to roll her eyes at that one.

“We only did one more show together before Kanata and Akiru quit. I don’t know if it just wasn’t for them, or maybe I was too intense, who knows. I was committed and they weren’t. So I tried to keep going solo, but it was so hard. The kids cheered me on though, and I didn’t really want to let them down. I became something bigger and more important than just Nico Yazawa, more than just
“So I stood outside for hours handing out flyers, trying to get people interested again. Rain or shine, didn’t matter. I kept training and I practiced singing in front of the kids when Mama was out at work all day. I didn’t have time for anything else, and it wasn’t long before I was really dragging my feet. Halfway through my second year I was still alone and I knew nothing would change.”

“I regret not talking to you then, Niccochi. It’s the only thing I’ve ever felt regret for.” Nozomi says sadly. Maki remembers Nozomi talking about this before, how she used to watch Nico struggle to keep her group alive from a distance. She was too far away.

Nico inspects her nails. “Yeah yeah, I told you it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. We needed all nine of us for it to work. Anyway, I didn’t really know what to tell my siblings because I didn’t want to let them down. At the time, the easiest thing to do was lie about it. Who’d tell them anyway? My nonexistent friends?”

Maki shifts uncomfortably. It would definitely be easier to hide your shortcomings if you had nobody to hide it from. Covering up the truth without the added grievance of actively avoiding everyone that cares about you.

“I know now that it wasn’t actually the easy way out,” Nico continues, “but after growing up the way I did it felt so much better to lie rather than disappoint anyone. Then I met all of you and I had so many regrets, all at once. The end.”

Maki leans back. “I feel like that isn’t the whole story.”

“Sure, but that’s the only part that applies to you. You think I haven’t drawn my own conclusions? I know exactly what I did and why I did it. I felt like I wasted two years of my life.”

“Wasted?” Maki questions.

“Yeah, wasted. And then Honoka comes along and does what I wanted to do but nine times better.”

“Something tells me I’ve missed something here,” Eli says, looking to Nozomi for guidance.

Nozomi just shrugs at her. “I don’t think anyone truly has the full story except them.”

“Does it have something to do with the fancy shopping bag?”

“Woah wait a sec,” Nico steps in, “you mean Nozomi didn’t tell you?”

Eli blinks in confusion. “Tell me what?”

Nico looks at Nozomi with something akin to surprise on her face, but Maki can see something accusatory in there as well.

Nozomi smiles mischievously. “You know how Elicchi is, remember the graduation party? She’s not very smooth at all. She doesn’t even know this is a double date.”

Eli’s eyes widen as she looks between Nico and Maki, and her jaw drops a little. “A double… you’re dating?”

Maki drops her fork when Nico’s head hits the table with a resounding thump, narrowly avoiding the utensil basket. A muffled string of curses floods from her mouth.

Maki struggles to keep her composure, because at least one of them has to. “We live together for real
Eli turns to Nozomi, awestruck. “What else have I missed?”

Nico looks up, cheek still squished to the surface of the table. “Maki-chan’s parents don’t know. School sucks. They think she’s dating some dude from sucky school. Homophobic dad. Nico has to change her name and go into hidin-”

“Dating someone from school?” Nozomi asks, voice laced with curiosity. “How did this come about?”

“Testing the waters,” Maki summarizes. “They got the wrong idea. I’m… introducing Nico-chan to them on the 19th.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” Eli says flatly.

“Yeah thanks, nobody asked you,” Nico seethes. “There’s more to it than that. You missed a lot.”

Nozomi taps the top of Nico’s head with her nail. “Everyone missed a lot. Nobody quite knows the extent of your troubles, but we trust you both to figure it out. Right, Elicchi?”

Eli nods, expression serious. “Of course. I have to leave at the end of the week, but we’re both still here for you. Just not at unreasonable times.” She glares at Nico, who ignores her.

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t bother you again,” Maki adds, “but thank you both. I’m sorry I haven’t been more…honest with you. It’s difficult.”

Nozomi smiles softly. “You’re still growing up. Sometimes you do things you don’t want to do because you think it’s right. And maybe it is. I suppose we’ll find out soon, hm?”

“Yeah…” Maki trails off.

The rest of dinner is filled with discussion about Eli’s choice to leave university and Nozomi’s most recent film gig, shooting some commercial for gum. Throughout the whole thing, Maki’s mind is spinning and she’s feeling even more lost than before. It definitely had something to do with the window display and Eli’s odd dream, but she couldn’t pinpoint where exactly the feeling was coming from. Too much thinking when she has so much else to worry about, maybe. Even Nico seems worn out, slumping in her seat and pushing her food around on her plate.

When they part ways, Eli mentions meeting up with them again before she has to go back to America, but Maki already knows they won’t find the time. She’ll be back in Japan soon enough anyway.

When they get home, Nico passes out immediately without even changing her clothes, so Maki does her best to remove anything that might get wrinkled or creased overnight, and pulls out her pigtails. Maki couldn’t blame her for tapping out early - Nico probably has a lot on her mind now too. In a moment of bravery, Maki calls her parents to let them know about her unfortunate grade and it goes about as well as she expects it to when her father answers the phone.

Unacceptable. You don’t have time to spend with others if you haven’t spent enough time on your schoolwork. Be more like a Nishikino. Don’t fall behind. Don’t forget about your future.

Maki has a mental checklist now. Things that disappoint her father; things she’s going to think about non-stop for the next few days. The only thing that surprises her now as she hangs up is that she doesn’t care. Maybe a week ago she would have cried about it after having such a nice day out, only
to sink right back to the bottom of her metaphorical sea, a pit of self-despair and constant reminders that she isn’t good enough.

She just doesn’t care anymore.

When the lights are off and the night has finally settled, Maki hugs Nico to herself from behind and thinks about what she wants to do. If she’s going to drive everything headfirst into the ground in only a few short weeks, then what’s the point of hiding anymore?

Time isn’t going any slower, and something has to give.
Wanting

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two days.

A mere forty-eight hours left until Maki walks through the gates of the Nishikino residence, a hopefully composed Nico in tow. Only a few weeks ago, she’d decided she just wanted everything to be over, resolved, swept under the rug; but now that it was almost time… she wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.

One week until final exams. Not that she hadn’t been working hard, but she was still well beyond caring what her parents thought about that anymore. When did that change, anyway? Maybe she was just scared enough that what they might say didn’t matter, even though she kept telling herself it did. It wasn’t anything Nico had said specifically that brought about the change - definitely not. It was something inside of her, an empty and hollow feeling that twisted her stomach and clawed at her lungs every time she thought too hard about the potential consequences of her actions. It was easier to ignore all the negatives instead.

So what had Maki learned from the girl lying on the floor in her living room, playing with her phone only a few feet away?

It was a lazy day for Nico Yazawa, who was still dressed only in another one of Maki’s shirts (she’s pretty sure they’re all disappearing into Nico’s closet now, one by one) and not much else, dark hair splayed about her and hands busy with some mobile game. Maki herself was sitting at the kitchen table pretending to read her textbook and instead fretting over every possible thing her father might say to her upon stepping through the door.

Maybe he would tell her to leave, or maybe just tell Nico to leave and tell her she would have to move back home, or maybe - maybe they would just have a fight about it, right there in front of the rest of her family, because Maki wasn’t quite sure she would be able to control her mouth if anyone were to attack Nico or accuse her of anything scandalous. If anyone was at fault it was Maki, so she would deal with any repercussions on her own - at least, as much as Nico would allow.

What would the other Nishikinos think, anyway? She didn’t know many of them very well, and she didn’t even know who would be there. She’d considered calling to ask about it, but at this point the thought of speaking to literally anyone about anything related to her birthday only served to rekindle the torturous flame of anxiety that still hadn’t gone out.

“You look miserable,” Nico comments, still entirely focused on her phone.

“You aren’t even looking at me,” Maki mutters, looking down and thumbing the next page of her textbook.
Nico stops for a moment, putting her phone down next to her and cracking her knuckles. “Yeah, you’re so miserable I can tell without even looking at your dumb face. What’s up?”

“I need a vacation,” Maki sighs. “A long one.”

“I hear death looks pretty good this time of year.”

Maki shakes her head. “That’s a little too permanent for me, but thanks for your input.”

“Yeah, looks like you’ve been there and done that already anyway. Seriously Maki-chan, your bags are showing again and you look paler than me. That’s saying something…”

Maki prods at the tender skin below her eyes. She had been skimping on the makeup as of late, choosing instead to trade that time for more note reviewing. She had also started going to bed after Nico, so she wouldn’t really have any way of knowing how much sleep Maki wasn’t getting. Even when they did go to bed at the same time, Maki found her thoughts plagued by what Nico called “their impending doom”, a completely unhelpful subtitle for the dinner from hell, part three.

“I’m just stressed,” Maki finally concludes. “Aren’t you?”

Nico rolls onto her side, facing Maki. “Not really. Just worried about you.”

“Is that why you keep coming to the campus every day?”

“I just like to walk you home. And bring you lunch. And look at you…” Nico trails off cautiously.

Within the last week, Nico had started showing up outside of whatever Maki’s last class of the day was, or coming around at lunch to drop off something from the cafe. Maki was already tired of cake, and of other students watching them and whispering to each other whenever they walked around the campus together. It went against every precaution Maki had been prepared to take, in case everything went south. She wanted to stay on the down-low, and to remain subtle at the absolute most, when it came to public affection. Ludicrous as it might be to imagine word getting around to her father before she was ready, Maki also had to accept that she and Nico used to be famous. Maybe they still were, in the eyes of their most dedicated fans.

With notoriety came both the good and the bad, and the bad mostly consisted of things like relationship scandals and dubious commentaries on physical appearance. Nozomi had once found her way to the front page of one such gossip magazine thanks to an offhanded comment she made about Eli in an interview, though for the life of her Maki couldn’t remember what it was. Nico had made a big deal about it, but nobody else gave her the time of day.

After all, Nozomi and Eli were both steps away from retiring as school idols at the time, so it didn’t really matter what anyone had to say about them. Nico persisted as best she could, scolding them and even coming close to begging Nozomi to keep her big mouth shut, even if she just gave cryptic hints about her relationship status in her interviews with second-rate media outlets.

Maki now knew why Nico had been as annoying as she was about it, because that incident had definitely happened after the part where her father said some very inconsiderate things about people like Eli and Nozomi (and now, Nico and herself). Maybe Nico had been scared, or just incredibly nervous. One wrong step could land her in a position where finding an agent - and by extension, becoming a professional idol - would be impossible.

Nico was scared. As in, she definitely wasn’t anymore, judging by the way she hung all over Maki at school now. She seemed fearless bordering on shameless, plastering herself to Maki’s side and openly flirting with her in ways Maki found to be much too suggestive for a public setting. And yet,
she never told Nico to stop. Things like that, embarrassment and all, made their relationship feel normal.

Maki hums quietly to herself as she drifts back into the waking world.

“Hey, are you even listening?”

“Huh?”

Nico is sitting up now, legs still splayed out in front of her from when she’d been starfished on the floor. Maki immediately realizes she can see directly up the baggy shirt Nico is wearing, and turns appropriately crimson.

Nico raises an eyebrow. “Are you looking up Nico’s shirt? You could always just ask for a peek, you know.”

Ignoring the implications, Maki narrows her eyes. “That’s my shirt.”

“I can contest that,” Nico says, “but really, did you hear what I said?”

“No. I tuned you out.”

“You’re way too good at that,” Nico mutters.

Maki smirks and props her chin up on her hand. “I’ve had years of practice. What’s your excuse?”

“For what? Tuning you out? Sometimes you’re just boring.”

Maki’s smirk turns into a frown, and she considers going to her desk to study instead.

“C’mon Maki-chan, don’t look at me like that! I’ve got important things on my mind.” Nico whines. She leans backwards slowly until she’s lying on the floor again, picking at the floor mats with pastel pink nails.

Maki settles down in her seat and goes back to pretending to read, knowing Nico will start talking whether she answers or not.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about us lately. Like really thinking.”

More silence. Everything suddenly feels heavy, or perhaps foggy - Maki can’t tell. She feels increasingly sensitive as she turns the page, the crinkle of the paper sounding much louder than usual. She swallows, but feels the sensation of something trapped in her throat - the way she feels before she’s going to cry or scream into a pillow, or lie around in bed for days like she did before.

She and Nico could have been thinking about the same things. She silently wished, for the millionth time, that she wasn’t so emotionally stunted. How could she vocalize what she was feeling? Where did the feeling come from? Why?

She felt like she was going to burst.

“I don’t like staying so low-key, I guess. I still feel like I’m hiding.” Nico explains. “Like we can get away with things because from the outside maybe it looks like we’re just really good friends. But I don’t want people to think like that.”

Maki doesn’t look up, but finally finds it in herself to say something. “Is that why you’ve tried being more open recently?”
Nico continues inspecting the ground. “Sort of. I just wanted to see when you’d tell me to stop, but you haven’t said anything. It’s like nothing is different.”

“You’re different.” Maki observes.

“But is it the good kind of different?”

Maki decides that deflecting is better than answering at the moment. “What about you? Aren’t you supposed to be single forever or something?”

“Idol contracts are archaic. Nico is going to rewrite the rules.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Leading by example. Are you still scared?”

Maki sighs and looks up from the words she wasn’t reading in the first place. Nico is still lying on her side, but now she’s watching her. How nerve-wracking.

“Of course I am. Aren’t you?”

Nico puffs out her cheeks. “I was, but not really anymore. I told you, I’ve been thinking about us.”

“And what conclusion did you come to?” Maki asks, genuinely curious.

“That I don’t care what anyone thinks. Why should we waste our time being stupidly cautious when we could just be normal, like everyone else? Don’t you feel like you’re missing out?”

She did. She felt like she was missing out every day and every hour that she had to pretend to be anyone other than who she was. Not physically someone else, just metaphorically. Or emotionally. It was still a little confusing.

“But I have to care, Nico-chan.” Maki says sternly, “I can’t be sure of anything. I haven’t been sleeping very well.”

“I know, you always come to bed super late. You think I wouldn’t notice?”

Maki bites her lip. “No, of course… I’m not keeping it from you. I’m anxious.”

“So am I sometimes. You’ve got enough anxiety for the both of us, though.”

Maki rubs her eyes. She can feel her heart pounding away in her chest, along with a dull ache - a longing to do something. She doesn’t know what it is, or what will fix the draining sensation. Maybe it’s a side effect of trying not to care about her problems rather than actually worrying about them - wouldn’t that be nice, if it were that simple? - but it’s like a burning itch that she doesn’t know how to scratch; it’s a heat that makes her hands sweat.

“You’re the good kind of different,” Maki concludes. “I don’t want to stop you. But…”

Nico continues to watch her from where she’s lying, eyes drooping a bit. She yawns, a remnant of having slept for too long, in contrast to her sleepless partner. “But what?”

“I-I don’t think we should yet. We’re so close to telling my parents, and if things go well then you can do whatever you want. I promise.” Maki’s voice is shaking though, a stutter here and there. “If everything is okay, then we can be whatever we want to be.”
“If?” Nico asks sharply. “What’s the alternative? You want to keep being like this forever just because someone tells you ‘no’?”

“No, Nico-chan, that’s not what I meant. I-I don’t know what I mean. I try to think about what’s coming after, but my mind just goes blank.”

“Is that what’s making you sad? That you don’t know?”

Maki thinks, but only for a few seconds. “Mad. I think I’m mad about it. Mad at my parents and myself and everyone and…”

She stops herself as she feels her hands balling into fists, sweaty and stiff. There’s a pretty girl lying there on the floor; one who wears Maki’s clothes, cooks for her, and sleeps next to her. A girl who comes home to her, and kisses her, and holds her; a girl who fights with her, and holds her hand, and combs the tangles out of her hair in the morning. And still, Maki can barely go a day without being haunted by her demons; the fear that lurks under the bed and around the corner, and on each new horizon. It’s not fair that she can have so much and yet feel so little.

It’s not fair to Nico either, but she’s still here. Maki wonders if Nico feels as desperate as she does herself.

Maki’s eyes follow Nico’s hair, sliding down her shoulder as she shifts and props her upper half up on her elbows. The dark strands are still free and tangled, shining softly in the light coming through the window. When exactly Nico transformed from annoying to mesmerizing, Maki didn’t know, but sometimes she swears she can see Nico’s heart in her ruby red eyes - a reflection of sincerity and at the right moment, passion.

Nowadays, Nico looks at Maki, and Maki feels like she’s the entire world. She can barely handle it.

“But I love you. So you don’t have to worry about it, okay?” Nico says, like it’s obvious.

Maki can hardly feel herself moving, but she hears the thump of her textbook hitting the floor as she stands up. She’s up so fast that her chair nearly falls over, but she’s gone past the table and into the living room before she can even think about it. There’s a hotness on her cheeks, and she might be crying but it doesn’t matter whether she is or not. She’s been doing that a lot lately - Nico should learn not to say such impactful things at the exact moments Maki needs to hear them. It’s embarrassing to cry in front of someone, after all.

Nico is barely moving to get up, reaching out for Maki when instead she finds her arms full of a sad and tired Nishikino, red locks brushing against her chin and a nose buried in her shoulder. Nico collapses backwards, and Maki feels arms close around her waist as she adjusts her knees to straddle Nico’s slim hips. It’s not really comfortable, but there’s nowhere else she’d rather be right now.


Maki kind of wants to laugh, because Nico sounds a little mystified and it’s silly to feel so strongly about someone that you don’t know what to do with yourself. There’s something about hearing those words, about knowing that Nico genuinely means it. To think they spent so much time being stubborn and prideful that they’d missed out on this for so long. Idiots, the both of them were. Maki was fine with admitting that.

They lie there for a while, until Maki’s arms start to fall asleep and she forces herself to sit upright. Nico’s hands come to rest on her thighs and it makes Maki wish they were somewhere else, closer, on her bare skin or down her shirt or all over the place.
“I love you too, you idiot.” She wants it to sound at least a little romantic, but she’s still sniffing and rubbing at her eyes, and she doesn’t really mean that last part.

“Wow, thanks Maki-chan. You’re a real charmer.”

Nico sounds disgruntled and annoyed, but she’s still grinning ear to ear as she says it. Maki has a brief flash of nervousness before she shoves it aside and leans down to shut Nico up in the most enjoyable way possible. She can feel Nico’s hands tangle in her hair, pulling her closer, deeper, everything at once; and her bare legs lock around Maki’s back.

Every time they do this, Maki can’t describe it as anything else but thrilling. Everything else around them vanishes in an instant, and nothing lingers on her mind except the way Nico smells, or what she’s wearing, or the sounds that come from deep within them both. Despite a reluctance to admit it, Nico is right when she says there’s no reason to care about what anyone else thinks of them. This is all that matters now.

As she takes Nico’s bottom lip in between her own, Maki inches her fingers under Nico’s shirt and brushes her hands across soft heated skin. Nico pulls on red hair harder the higher her shirt rides up, and it isn’t long before Maki is reminded that her partner isn’t wearing anything underneath it. Nico pulls away with closed eyes, whining and pushing herself up into Maki’s touch. The sound is enough to send Maki’s mind reeling, and she pulls herself up just as much as she needs to, reaching for the hem of her own shirt. Nico’s hands stop her half way.

“H-hey, Maki-chan.”

Maki pauses, skin warm and heart pounding. Her clothes feel way too tight, and Nico’s shirt is still bunched up around her neck, resting just below her reddening cheeks.

“I’m just taking my shirt off,” Maki says, eyes glued to the girl beneath her.

“Yeah, that’s great and all. Nico really wants you to, but Nico also has to go to work in thirty minutes and she’s not even dressed yet.”

Maki considers asking Nico to quit her job.

“In fact,” Nico continues, “Nico is less dressed than she was five minutes ago.”

Maki can’t help but grumble as she lets her hands fall to the floor. She feels like she’s pouting, but that’s pathetic. Maki doesn’t pout unless she’s making fun of Nico.

“You’re pouting,” Nico observes. “Trust me, I’m just as pissed as you are, but why’d you have to pick today to decide you want to do something like this? Maki-chan has terrible timing.”

“I-I… I didn’t…”

“You can have Nico all to yourself later, but right now she’s gotta go.” Nico pulls her shirt back down and squirms a little, gesturing for Maki to get up.

“But… that’s not fair…” Maki mutters sadly, moving to get up anyway.

Nico stands quickly, readjusting her shirt and running a hand through her hair. “Life’s not fair, but you live with me. You can get some of this,” Nico gestures to her entire self, “like, any other time.”

Maki feels like she should say something witty or snarky about that, but she’s too busy feeling cheated to come up with anything. Is this what Nico feels like when she’s sulking? How miserable.
“Why don’t you go hang out with someone? I know you’ll just sit around with your dusty old books all day if you don’t.”

“Like who?” Maki asks as she drags her feet back to the kitchen table, righting her fallen chair and picking up her textbook.

Nico shrugs as she pops into the washroom, coming right back out with a brush and her hair ties. “We have friends, you could always talk to them for once? Maybe they’ll help you do some thinking of your own.”

“Well, I tried to call Umi for advice the other day.”

Nico freezes, brush caught in a particularly nasty tangle. “You called Umi? About what?”

Maki starts flipping through her textbook, trying to find the page she left off on. Not that it mattered anyway. “I thought I should ask someone what they think about our plan.”

“So you called Umi?”

Maki shivers. “I was too scared to call Nozomi, and Hanayo didn’t pick up.”

Nico returns to untangling her hair. “That’s fair, I guess. What did she say?”

“Well, I asked her what she would do in my situation. She told me to make a PowerPoint presentation.”

Nico stops again, gives Maki a confused look and mouths ‘what the fuck’. “I won’t pretend I know how Umi works, but it probably makes sense to her.”

Nico bunched up her hair and works on tying her bows in, staring straight ahead as if she’s lost deep in thought. “Do you… do you think she did that? With Kotori’s mom?”

“I don’t think I want to find out. Hey, shouldn’t you put real clothes on before you tie your hair up?”

“…Shit.” Nico drops her second ribbon halfway to her head. She disappears into the bedroom and leaves Maki alone for a moment.

Okay, so maybe talking to Umi about it wasn’t the best idea, despite how supportive she was. Maki just appreciated that she had a head for logic, but sometimes she was too logical even for Maki to comprehend. How did Kotori deal with it? Their friends probably wondered the same about Nico though - maybe Maki was only built to handle one type of person. Abrasive. Egotistical. Sickeningly cute. Definitely her type, she supposed.

“Hey, so about the big day,” Nico begins again, this time fully clothed and hair up, “I just wanted to let you know I’ll be on my best behavior. I won’t even serenade anyone with my wonderful catchphrase.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll try not to say anything… stupid. Nothing Nico says is actually stupid, but you know, sometimes Nico gets carried away. Nico knows what she’s about.”

Maki blinks and shakes her head. Nico? Behave?

Nico sits down across from her and checks the time on her phone. “Probably shouldn’t mention the
idol thing either. Your dad still thinks it’s stupid, right?”

Maki can hardly believe what she’s hearing.

“Nico-chan, just be yourself. You’re fine the way you are.”

“But won’t that make it harder for you to convince them we’re like, meant to be or something? Calm and composed Maki Nishikino sitting next to me at her parents’ dining table? I know I’m difficult, you can say it.” Nico says nonchalantly.

Maki laughs. “Calm and composed? I think if you ask our friends, they’ll say I’m just as bad as you.”

“You mean as good as me. We’re the best.”

“The best at what?”

Nico smiles. “Just in general.”

It seems Nico is especially infectious today, because Maki is smiling too and she really doesn’t want Nico to go to work right now.

Nico stands up and grabs her bag and her shoes by the door.

“I’ll be Nico then, on your birthday. The most Nico I’ve ever been.”

Maki nods. “Good.”

And she means it. She feels better now. Trust Nico to carry her through the gloomy mire of negativity that Maki frequently strands herself in. Now it’s back to wondering why she should care about what happens, just like Nico. A vicious cycle.

“Later, princess.” Nico says with a wave, and she’s out the door before Maki can say anything about the stupid pet name.

Maki returns to her textbook yet again, barely making it through a paragraph about liver malfunction before whipping out her phone and dialing up Hanayo. Going out will probably do her some good.

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Maki ends up going out to meet Hanayo (and by extension, Rin) in Ikebukuro at an American style diner for lunch. Hanayo herself had been out and about hunting for some idol related merchandise promotion rather than studying for her own exams, so at least Maki didn’t have to feel bad about ripping her away from anything important.

“I-I think it’s sold out everywhere…” Hanayo mumbles sadly from her seat next to Rin.

“What were you looking for?” Maki asks, poking at her omelette.

Rin looks just about as sad as Hanayo does. “New A-Rise concert Blu-ray, nya. Rin wanted to get it for Kayo-chin while she was busy with class, but…”
“Rin-chan got called in to Otonokizaka to sub in for the track coach, so we both missed it. The special edition sold out this morning, I guess…” Hanayo says meekly.

“I’m sorry Kayo-chin!”

“It’s not your fault, Rin-chan!”

“Rin wants to cry!”

Maki taps her glass with her fork. “Hey, you don’t have to worry, okay? Honoka gets those things for free from Tsubasa, and Nico... borrows them forever. I’m sure we can find you one.”

Now that Maki thought about it, couldn’t she just buy them herself? Maybe then she would feel less guilty about enabling her obsessive girlfriend. She would have to draw a line somewhere though, because now she has to sleep with a Midnight Cats poster looming above the bed (literally above the bed - Nico taped it to the ceiling). There needed to be rules for this kind of thing.

Hanayo looks like she’s about to cry. “Aaah, thank you so much Maki-chan! Are you sure it’s no trouble?”

Rin’s personality flips right around just as quickly. “Maki-chan is the best! Kayo-chin is so happy now!”

Maki tries and fails to fight off her blush, waving her hand dismissively. “Yeah yeah, I know. Other than the idol stuff, how have you two been?”

Hanayo, back to her smiling self, pats Rin on the shoulder. “I’ve been busy with school, but Rin-chan has been apartment hunting. We’re looking for somewhere close to campus so it’s easier on me.”

“Rin’s been working on call for school sports teams!” Rin adds. “And there’s a lot to do lately, so we haven’t found anywhere yet…”

“Someone moved out of our building a couple weeks ago,” Maki says. “Maybe you could check it out?”

Rin turns excitedly to Hanayo, clapping her hands. “Rin wants to be neighbors with Nico-chan, nya!”

Despite how much she loves her friends, Maki quickly has second thoughts as she imagines Nico and Rin teaming up to pester her for eternity. They’d always been good at coming up with completely awful ideas when they were in high school, and Maki had no doubts that Rin was still likely to do anything Nico told her to do. Nico wasn’t above blackmail, either.

It’s too late to turn back now though, and she made a mental note to apologize to Hanayo later.

“We’ll go look after exams are over, okay?” Hanayo smiles. “Anyway, Maki-chan said she wanted to talk about something important today. Is something wrong?”

Maki sighs. “A lot of things are wrong. I’m telling my parents about Nico-chan in two days and I don’t know what to do if everything goes downhill.”

Hanayo and Rin look at each other. Maki feels a little bad for dragging an otherwise positive conversation into such heavy territory, but it must be done. Maki needs every alternative, every possibility worked out. She needs to fill in that blank that comes up every time she thinks about the
day after.

“What exactly could go wrong, nya?” Rin asks, a bit quieter than usual.

“I don’t know, to be honest. I’ve read about families breaking up, kids getting... disowned. What if Papa hates me after? We’re really not on the same page.”

“Has it really become that bad? That sounds terrible.” Hanayo glances at Rin.

Maki looks at her plate. “It could be. Even after all of this, I still love my family. But I’m also mad at them. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about it.”

“Some people have to choose.”

Maki looks at Rin blankly. “Choose what? Between my family and Nico-chan?”

Rin gives her a sad look. “Sometimes it happens, Rin knows it. Rin was scared too, but Kayo-chin and I are lucky.”

Hanayo nods. “Maybe we seemed very obvious to you and everyone else, but Rin-chan and I waited a long time before we said anything to our parents. We had no idea what would happen either, but we took the leap together.”

Rin leans into Hanayo’s shoulder. “It was Nozomi-chan that really pushed us to do it. She said we could never be happy dwelling on it for so long, that we couldn’t ever move on. Rin didn’t want to be stuck forever, she just wants to love Kayo-chin.”

“I’m not as… open as you are though,” Maki says. “And my father already doesn’t like Nico-chan very much. Look, let’s assume it doesn’t work out and everything goes to hell. What should I do?”

Rin taps her chin. “Well, Maki-chan loves Nico-chan right?”

Maki’s cheeks heat up, but she nods forcefully.

“Then just keep doing that. No matter what happens, you’ll always have her.”

“And us,” Hanayo adds. “We’re your family too, don’t forget.”

Maki’s lip wobbles a little and the uncomfortable feeling in her throat comes back. “You make it sound so easy.”

“As awful as it is, it’s only going to be as difficult as you make it for yourself.” Hanayo says softly. “No matter what happens, you have to know what you truly want.”

Maki puts her head in her hands. “I want everything to work out.”

“But you have to decide what to do if it doesn’t, nya. Do what’s best for yourself.”

Maki peeks through her fingers. “What if I make the wrong choice?”

Hanayo reaches across the table and takes her hand. “You won’t. Rin-chan and I spent three years getting to know you, we promise you’ll do the right thing.”

“Maybe Maki-chan needs a push?” Rin suggests.

“A push?”
Hanayo smiles softly. “Like the one you gave me all that time ago. Without you, maybe I would never have joined μ's. I was so scared to do it!”

“But this is more serious than that.”

Rin cocks her head sideways. “Is it really?”

“It could be life changing, just like μ's was for me. For all of us. It’s up to you to work with what you’re given, even if it means you have to give something away in return.” Hanayo retreats back across the table. “Nico-chan’s given you a lot, hasn’t she?”

Despite the dreary topic, Maki feels the corner of her lip twitch upwards. “More than I knew I was asking for.”

“I’m sure if we asked Nico-chan, she’d say the same about you.”

Maki nods. She probably would, even if Maki didn’t think so. But Nico had her own way of looking at things, a perspective that maybe Maki herself should adopt eventually. It wasn’t that they didn’t have to care anymore; they just had to care about the right things. They had to keep moving forward, and they would, come what may.

It was Maki’s choice, in the end. How much guilt was she prepared to carry, should anything change for the worse because of her actions?

Maybe Nico would be the push.

“Do you think you’ll do what you’re doing forever?” Maki asks them both.

“What do you mean, nya?”

“Like sports, and the teaching thing.”

“Hm,” Hanayo ponders. “Probably. At least I’d like to anyway. I guess I can’t predict the future though. Maybe I’ll change my mind later.”

“Rin wants to run forever!”

Maki smiles at her friends, because she’s genuinely glad for them. How nice it must be to have so many open doors, and nothing to hide.

“We heard Eli-chan was thinking about coming back and doing dance again.” Hanayo says.

Maki nods. “Nico-chan and I met up with her and Nozomi during her break. I guess linguistics wasn’t for her… I was surprised she found it so easy to think about doing something else after working so hard. I remember her complaining about the entrance exams.”

“It does seem like a big change, doesn’t it?” Hanayo sighs. “To go all the way to America only to come back. There’s no reason to continue doing something that doesn’t truly make you happy though. Not if you don’t want to.”

“Is Maki-chan having doubts?” Rin all but whispers.

“No, no. I’ll probably finish my schooling no matter what happens. What else would I do?”

“Whatever you want, nya.”
“I want it to be done,” Maki groans. “Or this year at least. Maybe next year will be easier.”

Hanayo giggles. “I think we all wish we could just skip the hard parts. If only…”

*If only.*

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Lunch had ended on a low note, but Hanayo and Rin were making a clear effort to cheer her up as best they could. Instead of going back home to be by herself until Nico came around, Maki followed her friends in and out of arcades and did all she felt she could do: provide Rin with more change to win things shaped like cats.

She remembered the last time she’d been in an arcade with Nico vividly, because putting a ten thousand yen bill into the change machine had been enough to spark another argument. Nico, of course, insisted that she, too, frequently changed ten thousand yen bills in arcades, and she knew UFO catchers like the back of her hand. Maki had stood there watching her until she changed a single thousand yen bill with a scowl, much to the humor of their friends. She hadn’t been lying about her catching skills though, and at the time her room had been decorated in her winnings from multiple trips out with her siblings.

That was probably the last time Maki had even been in an arcade at all actually, so it was nice to revisit the memories. Rin wasn’t as good as Nico, but she played until she won something for Hanayo anyway even though Maki paid for most of it. Time flew by in a blur of stuffed toys, hundred yen coins, and window shopping.

Eventually Rin and Hanayo had to head home, but more so Hanayo, who had her first exam the next morning. She didn’t seem the least bit stressed about it which Maki had a hard time comprehending, but maybe becoming a teacher is significantly easier than becoming a doctor. Or a surgeon. Whatever the goal was.

Maki finds it hard to think about it on the train home, because it’s almost dinner time and she knows that when she walks in the door, Nico will be there working her culinary magic like clockwork. What did people without a Nico do when they had to eat something? She couldn’t imagine returning to her old conbini diet; even the thought of it turned her stomach over.

What she didn’t expect to see when she opened the front door was two screaming children, one of them immediately clinging to her leg and the other one yelling about composition and stage presence.

“If you’re gonna be an idol, you have to act like one!” Cocoro says to Cocoa. “You can’t just jump on people, you’re supposed to be on the stage!” She points to the kotatsu, which Cotarou is lying under.

“I told you both not to stand on it! You’re gonna break it.” Nico says from the kitchen, a ladle in one hand and a pot lid in the other. Something smells delicious.

“Bye!” Cocoa shouts suddenly, letting go of Maki’s leg and running full speed in the direction of the bedroom.

“Hi Maki, where did you go?” Cocoro asks, still behind her camcorder.
“Uh?”

“Oh, Maki-chan! Welcome home! The kids wanted to come over for dinner, so uh…” Nico pauses for a moment before checking the rice cooker. “Dinner’s ready soon, in like minutes. Where’d Cocoa go?”

“The bedroom.” Maki replies, still a little stunned.

She looks down at the floor where only hours ago she shoved her hands up Nico’s shirt. Cotarou is lying there, half under the blanket and looking about as energetic as usual.

“Maki,” he says, pointing at her. “Missed you.”

“They missed you.” Nico reiterates.

“I can see that.” Maki says as she eyes Cocoro. She hasn’t even taken her shoes off yet. Five people definitely do not fit in their apartment.

“Cotarou, can you pull the kotatsu over? It’s too close to the TV,” Nico says as she spoons something onto a plate, and then another plate, and another. “Cocoro, tell Cocoa she’s not allowed in the bedroom and also it’s time to eat.”

Cocoro nods and does her duty with diligence, saluting as Cocoa wanders out of the bedroom wrapped in a bright pink blanket.

“Cocoa!” Nico shouts. “Are you serious? Put that back!”

“Tomato.” Cotarou says quietly.

After a short tussle and the unfortunate loss of Nico’s ribbons (pulled out by Cocoa, it was an accident, she swears) everyone is finally sitting down at the kotatsu in the living room rather than at the tiny kitchen table. Maki can finally see what Nico’s made - it’s her favourite curry. Really, everyone’s favourite. There isn’t much room left, but Nico moves over and sets a plate down beside hers.

Pillows are everywhere, there’s an open bottle of nail polish next to the TV, and Maki is pretty sure there’s paint on the wall in the corner but she can’t be completely sure. The kids are loud, talking amongst each other and whispering about their sister, and probably about Maki too. It’s warm inside and everything smells wonderful.

And Nico, still in her apron, smiling happily at Maki, who is still standing at the door like an idiot.

Maki can feel it; the pounding in her chest and the echo in her ears, something she’d experienced much more frequently as of late. The longing; the pining; the nights she’d spent lost in her dreams, imagining better days. Days like today, sights like this; where even under the guise of normalcy she can see Nico shining.

Maki swallows and clenches her hands. She hasn’t even been home for five minutes and Nico has already captured her heart all over again.

“Are you coming or what? They’re gonna eat yours too if you stand there all night,” Nico gestures to her siblings.

Something clicks.
There’s a sensation, something cool and calm that spreads from her head to her toes and covers everything in between. There’s no room for trepidation anymore; nothing left to eat away at her. Relaxed. She feels relaxed. Safe.

Maki smiles as she sits down to eat with the people who love her unconditionally, and she doesn’t stop until she’s too tired to keep going.

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“I’m glad you went out with Hanayo and cat girl; you seem a lot happier. Work some things out?”

Maki is standing behind Nico, watching her squeeze toothpaste onto her toothbrush in the mirror.

“You could say that. They’re both really insightful.”

“Eben Rinb?” Nico asks around her toothbrush.

“Especially Rin. There’s no beating around the bush with her.”

Nico spits into the sink. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Hm” Maki sighs contentedly and leans forward, wrapping her arms around Nico’s waist. She’s wearing one of Maki’s shirts again. She considers pointing out that it’s her old training shirt from when she was a first year, but bruising Nico’s ego isn’t on her agenda for the night. It doesn’t really matter what she’s wearing.

Nico pats her arm. “You sure are touchy-feely today. Got an itch you need to scratch?”

“Is that supposed to be some kind of metaphor?” Maki mutters into Nico’s neck. Jet black hair tickles her cheeks and bunches up around her, but she doesn’t pay any mind.

“I don’t know, do you want it to be?”

Maki lifts her head and spins Nico around, stepping forward to press her against the counter. She doesn’t say anything - she just stares into Nico’s eyes, gathering everything she feels and willing her to understand. She’s searching for something, like what she saw before when they were sprawled unceremoniously on the floor. That glimmer in the red, or maybe a spark.

There’s something mischievous in the way Nico stares back at her. Like she knows something. She knows a lot of things, as Maki has learned, and she’s definitely no stranger to the tension settling around them right now. It’s deep and heavy, and it only presses Maki further.

Nico reaches up and cups Maki’s cheek in her hand, thumb gently sweeping over flushed skin and setting Maki on fire. Eyes half closed, Nico leans in until her lips press against the very edge of Maki’s ear.

“Bedtime.” She murmurs, before slipping away out the door. Maki goes after her blindly, only a step behind, and yet not close enough.

She follows Nico into the bedroom and flicks the light off behind her, leaving nothing but the glow of the lights outside shining through the open drapes. She hears Nico climb into bed, and watches her
arm reach for the blankets bunched up at the foot. She licks her lips, suddenly feeling parched and wanting in the most wonderful of ways. There are only two people in the world right now, Maki thinks, and nothing else matters. How could anything else matter right now? Impossible.

Maki reaches out, but Nico is ready.

Before she knows what’s happening, Maki finds herself flat on her back and pressed into the mattress, a weight settling low on her hips. Nico is looking down at her, and Maki wastes no time pressing her hands into the bare skin of Nico’s thighs. Just like before, though now of course Nico is prepared. She always did want to be in charge of things, after all.

Nico leans down for a minute to capture Maki’s lips, and she can’t help but gasp when she feels teeth pulling gently at them, nipping and taunting and minty.

A second later, Nico is back up and staring down at her with half-lidded eyes.

“All you need to do is ask, you know. But Nico knows you’re shy about it.”

Maki’s eyes widen as Nico lifts the hem of her shirt and pulls it over her head in one smooth motion, tossing it into a corner.

“Isn’t it nice to get something you want?” Nico whispers.

Maki reaches up and wraps both arms around Nico’s neck, drawing her back down. There’s a tenderness she’s never felt before as she brushes stray strands of dark hair behind Nico’s ear, and there’s a coil winding up inside her that she wants to release so badly...

“Yes.”

Maki pulls and Nico pushes, until there’s nothing at all left between them.

Chapter End Notes

umi in this chapter was a nod to the umi in NERV’s story. go have a read! it’s hilarious and touching, all at once.

new note 10/04: seems some people want me to go full M rating with this one! i hadn't even intended to include the scene at the end, nothing was in my original draft but my writing naturally went in that direction. i'll be writing out the missing scene and including it in a collection of side stories. might edit this chapter to include it down the road, but i didn't intend for it to surpass the T rating i originally gave it. thanks for your enthusiasm!
On her birthday, Maki wakes up to a stream of sunlight pouring in from the window and warm breath on her ear. She doesn’t have to look at a clock to know it’s much too early, and she can barely lift an arm to rub at her eyelids, uncomfortably stuck together.

When she finally cracks her eyes open, she sees a head of messy black hair splayed out across her chest, arms spread out to either side and bare skin disappearing beneath the pastel sheets - a familiar sight that sprung from what developed over the last couple of days. Things are still a little hazy, but in a good way, like some kind of afterglow. The skin of Nico’s back is glowing in the warm rays; soft, perfect, warm and cool at the same time.

As she lifts her hand to caress said skin, Maki realizes she’s turned into a huge love-struck sap with little to no room in her thoughts for anything other than the petite girl sprawled across her. This must be what it means to be in the honeymoon phase, forgetting about everything else and struggling when they’re apart for any length of time at all - a pretty concise summary of the period between pushing Nico up against the bathroom counter and now. It was a little weird to find herself becoming so incredibly clingy in such a short span of time, but Nico definitely didn’t seem to mind it.

Maki still wanted her to quit her job, though; it didn’t feel particularly appealing to watch her walk out the door when even Maki knew she’d much rather stay home and lie around together. She’d been so lost that she hadn’t even bothered to study, or even to return the books she’d borrowed from the library nearly four weeks ago. Late book fees didn’t mean much in the grand scheme of things anyway - she had much more pressing matters to consider.

Specifically, whatever was uncomfortably stuck to her back. Something itchy.

Maki carefully arches her back, making sure not to disturb the still-sleeping Nico. She twists her arm awkwardly underneath herself and pulls out a scrunch-up piece of fabric. Red and silky, with irritating lace bows.

“So now you want to look at Nico’s panties?”

Startled, Maki flings the offending article to the foot of the bed and blushes furiously - a completely ridiculous reaction, she knows, considering they’re both naked.

Nico laughs as she shuffles the blankets around until she’s sitting up in Maki’s lap, looking down at her. This is familiar; the joke Nico had made about topping more than the charts all that time ago turned out to be fairly accurate, much to Maki’s surprising delight. She learned new things about herself every day.

“Nico bought them especially for last night but you barely even looked at them. My bra even matched…” she trails off, glancing around the room. “Where did that go, anyway?”

Maki can still feel herself blushing, but she puts her hands on Nico’s bare hips anyway, gently pressing her fingers into newly familiar skin. “I don’t know.”

“That was expensive…” Nico mutters.

“I’ll buy you a new one.”
Nico sticks her tongue out childishly. “Or you could be more careful with my nice things.”

Maki eyes her slyly, looking her up and down. “It was in the way.”

Hands traveling to rest atop Maki’s, Nico rolls her eyes and smirks. “You’re so spoiled.” She spares a glance at the clock on the bedside table. “It’s still early, wanna go again?”

Maki is about to say yes when her phone starts ringing. This time, it’s Nico’s turn to hold in a laugh when she hears herself echoing around the room. “Nico puri? Really, Maki-chan?”

Maki groans and shoves Nico’s arm. “Shut up and help me find my phone, I have no idea where it is.”

Nico huffs and rolls to the side, wedging herself between Maki and the wall. “Seriously? You can’t just let it ring?”

“It might be important.” Maki stresses, sitting up and looking from left to right as if doing so will magically reveal her phone’s whereabouts.

They both pause to listen for a moment before Nico concludes it’s fallen down behind the short headboard. Luckily Maki has long enough arms to reach, because Nico has definitely lost things to the void behind the bed and she’s way too lazy to move her furniture to rescue anything.

Nico watches Maki fish around for a moment.

“I found your bra,” Maki says plainly as she pulls it out from the gap, tossing it at Nico’s head. She quickly reaches back down and grabs her phone, still playing the obnoxiously loud ringtone. Nico mutters something about tact and Maki ignores her to answer the call.

The mood turns from playful to horrifically awkward as Maki starts up a conversation with her father in perhaps the most poorly timed phone call in history.

He wants her to come home - to her parents’ house, she mentally corrects herself - later in the day so she can greet her relatives and get all dressed up for dinner. Something about her mother wanting to do her hair, and her grandfather on her mother’s side wanting to give her something special. All she could do was agree, having become uncomfortably cold and rigid as she spoke with the source of her biggest problem while Nico was lying right next to her, pressed up against her side and oblivious to the conversation. She was too busy glaring at the sizing label on her bra, as if it had wronged her in some way.

When she hangs up and Nico asks her who it was, she doesn’t really know what to say, because now the whole meeting was going to happen kind of backwards. Instead of showing up confidently and together, Nico would have to come on her own and hope no doors were shut in her face. Metaphorically speaking of course, but Maki wasn’t about to rule anything out. It could turn into a real disaster.

“That was Papa.” Maki says quietly as she moves to lay back down.

“Oh.” Nico pales. “Well… he needs better timing. It’s like seven in the morning.”

Maki turns her head to the side to look at Nico, who is already looking at her after tossing her lacy ensemble somewhere. They’re close enough that Maki can feel the heat of her partner’s skin on her nose.

Maki breathes in.
Today, everything could change - would change. Today, she has to be brave and finally stand up for what she wants, for who she is; who they are together. Across from her, Nico still looks like a bit of a mess from the night before, with tangles in her hair drawn together by Maki’s fingers and a slowly darkening mark above her right breast (Nico was very strict about that one, citing her dress measurement and flicking Maki in the forehead when she went for her neck). In hindsight it was sort of embarrassing, but equally worth it.

“I have to go over there early, without you.” Maki explains. “I didn’t want to say no to him. I think it’s more for my mother anyway.”

Nico scrunches up her face. “Great. Perfect. And if you’re there, how exactly am I supposed to come over all dressed up? Gonna send your driver to pick up your girl friend?”

Pressing her lips together tightly, Maki weighs the options. “I could pay for a taxi?”

Her suggestion is met with a pout. “Not as glamorous as I imagined, but it can’t be helped. Are you gonna be okay going there by yourself though?”

“Probably not,” Maki admits, “but I can manage. Just look nice and show up on time.”

“I can do that, easy.”

They lie there for a while again and Maki starts to play with deep black hair.

“I’m nervous, Nico-chan. I’m going to be nervous all day.”

Nico gives her a concerned look before pulling at the blankets and shoving Maki over as far as the bed will allow. She sits up for a moment to adjust herself and the quilt, and then lays it down gently over the both of them, wrapping herself around Maki as best she can. Maki pulls her close.

“We’ll just stay here all day then,” Nico concludes, “until we absolutely have to get up. Nico will give you a massage.”

“That sounds nice.”

“But fiiirst,” Nico sing-songs as she rolls back on top of the reddening mess that is Maki, “Nico is still in the mood, though you should try not to be so loud this time. Do you think we woke up the neighbors?”

There’s a shout and a thump as Nico hits the floor, dragging all of the blankets down along with her pride.

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Maki stands in front of the mirror in her old bedroom, one hand playing with her phone and the other gliding smoothly across the surface of the pendant around her neck - a birthday gift from Nico. Maki had insisted she didn’t need anything but Nico was big on cheesy romance, and that apparently meant giving her something with their names engraved on the back. At least it wasn’t tacky, just a simple silver treble clef that Maki had commented on while they’d been out in Ginza.
Her phone lights up and vibrates in her hand. She looks at herself once more and swishes her glittering dress from side to side. Once again she discovers Nico is right; the colour really does bring out her eyes, and she thinks she looks good.

Flashing across her phone screen is a text message from Mrs. Yazawa (and the kids) wishing her a happy birthday and not to let her anxiety get to her. It was easier said than done, but the sentiment was nice.

The doorknob turns, and Maki shuts her phone off and throws it on her old bed before her mother walks in.

"You look wonderful." She says cheerfully. "Shall we put your hair up? Or maybe a braid?"

Maki smiles at her as best as she can, clutching her hands together behind her back. "Up is fine. Just how I usually do it."

Her mother nods and pulls out the desk chair, gesturing for Maki to take a seat in front of the mirror. Maki gathers her dress and sits down while her mother fetches a brush and some hairclips.

Oddly enough, she feels fairly calm about the occasion, all things considered. Part of her expected that she’d end up curled up in a corner somewhere, inconsolable and spouting every truth she’d hidden over the last few months as the dam finally gave way. Back in the fall she’d sort of felt that way, like one day she’d just burst and never recover. Nico always told her she needed to give herself more credit these days; that she’d come a long way from the depressing lump that had lived in Nico’s bed for two days straight.

Even though her mother was there, along with a significant portion of her family, she still did feel a bit lonely.

“So today’s the big day,” her mother begins as she runs her hands through Maki’s hair. “How are you feeling?”

“A little overwhelmed.” Maki admits. There are too many Nishikinos, too many aunts and uncles from both sides, and only one cousin much older than her from her mother’s extended family. She’s the youngest one. “I wasn’t really expecting any gifts, either.”

“Hmm, we thought you be a little excited about it at least.” her mother tuts.

Maki tries not to slump in her seat as her mother runs a comb through her hair. Her grandfather (mom’s side, the same place her now-officially-inherited money came from) had handed her the keys to a sleek convertible parked around the back of the house shortly after she walked in the door, congratulating her on the start of her “career”; another chip off the block in a long line of highly regarded medical practitioners. But she didn’t need a car, much less one that looked as expensive as she assumed it was. She had no reason to even learn to drive.

Her mother laughs softly behind her. “I understand it’s been a little over the top so far, but you’re the baby of the family. Everyone’s looking to spoil you.”

“I don’t need to be spoiled.”

Her mother sighs. “I know. They don’t know what you’re like, and I couldn’t tell them no. You can leave anything you don’t need here.”

Maki can feel the pins sliding into her hair, tickling her scalp. She glances at the clock on the dresser. Nico should be there in half an hour, and then everyone would know. Why did it have to be
everyone? She could barely handle two parents, never mind half her extended family.

She decides to scope things out. “Mama... what exactly have you and Papa told everyone? About... you know?”

Her mother continues to style her hair. “I tried not to say much, but your father is... excited. We both know how closed off you can be, so he’s still a little surprised I suppose. Did you know your father was the first person I ever went on a date with? We never once doubted each other.”

“Is that why he’s fine with this whole thing, even though I hid it from you? He thinks we’ll be like that?”

Her mother gives her a sympathetic look. “I think he thinks you’re still as naive as you used to be. Shy and guarded. He didn’t watch you grow up the same way I did, but he trusts you despite everything. I always try to remind him how stressful things were when we were in school but I think he forgets from time to time.”

Maki tries not to frown, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes as her mother finishes tying her hair up. Hopefully Nico likes it. That’s all that matters.

“Hey...” gentle hands come to rest on each of her shoulders. “I just want you to know, no matter what happens tonight, I’ll always be here for you. I know that you’re safe.”

Maki’s eyes snap open and she turns slowly to look at her mother. How curious.

“Are you sure?” Maki whispers. “No matter what?”

She’s met with a confident nod, but there’s something else there too in the way her mother is looking at her. It reminds Maki of herself; of her own sad eyes staring back at her in the mirror after struggling to get out of bed and convincing herself she had to keep going. Maki looks away.

“Dinner should be ready soon. Just try to stay positive, you’ll do fine.”

Maki nods and stands up as her mother walks out the door. She makes her way over to the bed, intending to send a reply to Mrs. Yazawa, when the echo of their overly extravagant doorbell makes her hair stand on end. Nico is early and it’s terrible.

She lunges for her bag at her bedside, digging out her heels and struggling to slip them on her feet. The room is suddenly too warm, her skin is too cold and her heart is beating too fast. She’s not ready; this meeting was a mistake. No, not a mistake... she doesn’t have time to think about it properly - she has to get to the door before her parents do.

She flings herself out of the room, dress billowing behind her as she runs as fast as her footwear will allow. Down the hall, around the corner, down the stairs and past the kitchen where the family chefs are busy making something Maki doesn’t care about. She nearly trips on her way into the foyer and the butterfly feeling in her stomach is almost unbearable.

Her parents are already there, standing at the door.

Her mother glances back at her and nods with a smile. Maki breathes in and smooths her dress as best she can. Her father reaches for the doorknob.

As the door opens, time slows and everything rushes through Maki’s mind at once - every little thing she can remember: Talking around a campfire at her mountain cottage, sitting together on the piano bench in the music room, joining hands and spinning across the stage for an encore performance of
Magnetic Today. A flash of darkness as they walked together in the park at night, the sun setting on an abandoned beach, and tears shed at an empty station. Small hands stealing her sunglasses, throwing themselves around her neck, and running down her thighs.

A silhouette.

She breathes out.

In one fleeting moment, Nico is the world. She stands there at the threshold clothed in soft pinks and glimmering reds, surrounded by a halo of light in the darkness of the evening. Her hair is down and curled, her bangs are uneven, and her sharp red eyes look just as charming and mischievous as ever. She can see and feel it, though; the tension easing away just as swiftly as it set on her. Nico is looking at her too, in a way that makes her heart soar and leap and pound untethered. The adoration, the dedication - it’s all there in her eyes. It doesn’t matter where they are or what they’re doing, or what happens next. Maki has nothing to give but her love and overflowing admiration.

Nico smiles at Maki, the most glowing and genuine one she’s ever seen. She can’t help but smile back, the words Nico had spoken to burned into her memory.

**But I love you. So you don’t have to worry, okay?**

Reality returns as Maki notices her father turn to look at her out of the corner of her eye. She doesn’t have time for that; she needs to bring Nico inside and introduce her to everyone. Her family needs to see how lucky she is to have found someone who cares for her so; someone who can make anyone smile no matter what. The fear slips away, replaced by fierce determination.

She steps forward just as her mother starts speaking.

“How lovely to see you again, Nico-chan. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“The same to you, Mrs. Nishikino.” Nico is about to bow, but Maki steps past her mother and takes her hand, pulling her inside. She doesn’t think twice as her palms find Nico’s waist, and she leans down to pull her into a gentle kiss. It takes Nico a moment to realize what’s going on, but she settles in quickly.

Maki pulls back after lingering a little too long.

“Excited, aren’t we?” Nico smirks. “Couldn’t even wait for me to finish being all formal.” She puts her hands on her hips and Maki feels like she’s at home again.

She takes Nico’s hand in hers and turns them around to face her parents. Her mother looks like she’s hiding a smile, but her father’s expression is unreadable.

“I-I know you know her already, but… this is Nico-chan.” Maki stutters.

“Nico Yazawa. Pleased to finally meet you.” Nico says as she gets to bow at last. They step forward a little, together, and Nico holds her hand out to Maki’s father.

“I don’t think we’ve met before, Mr. Nishikino.”

Maki can see him thinking, hesitating, but eventually he shakes Nico’s hand. “We haven’t.” He says. He sounds flat and sterile – insincere, even. It doesn’t seem to bother Nico though, and she keeps on smiling like she was born to introduce herself to Maki’s cold fatherly parental unit.

Maki’s mother beckons to them. “Everyone is waiting in the dining room. We’ll come in behind
“You.” She nods to her husband. “Nico-chan, do you like steak? Roast duck?”

They start walking out of the foyer, Maki’s mother making small talk with Nico and her father lingering behind. He deserves to be speechless, Maki thinks to herself.

When they walk into the dining room, absolutely everyone turns to look at them. She worries for a split second that it’s Nico’s turn to be overwhelmed, but Nico is an idol - social, entertaining, able to roll with the punches.

She elbows Maki and doesn’t bother lowering her voice. “You’re so pretty that they don’t know what to say. Nico thinks you should have worn a tiara though, that’d really round out the whole princess thing.”

It’s easier than Maki thought it would be, to ignore the uncomfortable gazes of her relatives. She heads towards the middle of the long mahogany table, where there are two empty seats waiting for them. “Are you ever going to stop calling me that?”

“But it’s true,” Nico insists. “Doesn’t she look great?”

Maki pulls out chairs for the both of them, pointedly ignoring her father who has finally caught up. The silence is killing her.

“She does. You both do.”

Maki looks across the table at her mother as she and Nico take their seats. Slowly, the family around them, dressed to the nines and still obviously surprised, begin to murmur in agreement. A compliment about her dress; another about her hair, among other things. Some of them don’t say anything, but she finds she isn’t bothered. Her mother and father sit down across from them, and the silence fades to typical family banter. Her aunt asks Nico where she got her dress, and her only cousin tells Nico how lovely her hair looks and that her short heels compliment her dress wonderfully.

As dinner is served, Maki takes Nico’s hand under the table and the last of her fear melts away. Nobody is screaming, nobody shut the door on them, and Nico is evidently a natural when it comes to family dinners. Her parents - her father, specifically - is no doubt prepared to dig as deep as he can into Nico’s personal life. She can only hope Nico has an answer for everything. But who was she to doubt the number one idol in the universe?

“So, Ms. Yazawa.” The clattering of forks dulls and the chatter around them diminishes. Maki sits up in her chair, posture perfect and a far cry from what she looks like slumped over a desk on any other day. Nico looks at him intently, confident.

“What are your intentions with my daughter?”

Maki desperately wants to roll her eyes at the most stereotypical question he could have possibly asked, but Nico doesn’t flinch. She is simply herself, as Maki told her to be.

“Well first I want to teach her how to cook literally anything.” Nico quips. “After that she needs to work on her laundry-hanging. She didn’t clip her sweatshirt up properly last week and it fell three floors down into a bush.”

“Nico-chan!” Maki’s head whips to the right and muffled chuckles travel down the table.

Maki is only slightly mortified; she did ask for this after all. She looks back at her father, who doesn’t seem to have reacted at all, and picks up her glass. Better than anything negative, at least.

“‘I see. Are you still in high school?’"

Maki chokes on the water she’s sipping and struggles to catch the streams running down her chin with a napkin. Nico pats her back sympathetically but otherwise doesn’t move.

“‘I’m twenty.’ Nico says flatly.

More laughter and quiet snickering make their way to Maki’s ears. She wants to laugh too, she really does. It’s almost too much; she has to go for it.

“Surprising, I know. Someone thought she was my younger sister the other day.” Maki deadpans.

Her mother laughs at that, glancing at her husband out of the corner of her eye.

“I apologize, Ms. Yazawa,” Maki’s father says, otherwise unaffected. “Can I ask where you go to school now then? Are you at the university with Maki?”

Nico pouts a bit, still wounded. “Nico never went to post-secondary. She has better, more important things to do.”

Maki’s father looks a bit perturbed. “And that would be?”

“Looking after this nerd. She’s a like a little kid sometimes, I swear.”

Maki frowns. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nico shrugs. “It means what it means, princess.”

“You know what, you can sleep out-"

“Excuse me,” Maki’s father cuts in, “but would you both mind finishing the conversation I’ve started?”

Nico and Maki look at each other before giving their attention back to the Nishikino patriarch. How embarrassing they must be right now. And yet, it’s so natural. What was Maki scared of again?

“So,” her father continues, looking at Nico, “you haven’t gone to school. What do you do for a living? Do you have a career in mind?”

Her eyes light up at that, and Maki can’t help but feel charmed. It’s so easy to get swept up in Nico’s passion for her craft, as obnoxious as she might be about it.

“Nico works full time at a bakery cafe. But… she’s also a full time super idol.” Nico says excitedly.

“...Pardon me?”

“An idol,” Maki reaffirms, “the number one super idol in the universe.”

Nico practically jumps out of her seat. Maki knows what’s coming as she stands up and raises her arms above her head into her signature pose. At the absolute least, her family should know what they’re getting into.

“Nico-nii-nii! Nico will send a smile straight to your heart!”
Most of the table laughs as she sits down, but Maki’s mother claps. At least they have one ally tonight. Maki is still grinning when Nico looks at her, clearly satisfied with herself.

“What do you think? Nico is super cute, no?”

“Of course.” Maki assures her, leaning in to peck her cheek. How such an awful catchphrase could be so endearing still remained a mystery. It was nice to hear it sometimes.

“Nico is a professional.” Nico says to herself, more than to anyone else.

“Why do you talk about yourself in third person?” Maki’s cousin - she still doesn’t remember her name - asks from further down the table.

Nico huffs and her eyes narrow. “Because it’s cute. Nobody understands…”

Maki’s father continues to look stern and unimpressed.


More light laughter flows around them. Maki nods a little - she can’t help but agree. It’s probably the toughest crowd Nico’s ever had to deal with.

“I think I’ve heard enough.” Her father says.

Good, Maki thinks. Such a stick in the mud.

They continue to eat and everyone returns to casual conversation, her mother suddenly extremely interested in Nico’s career. Her own daughter quit being a school idol in favour of the medical field after all, so she’s probably curious. Nico seems happy enough answering every question in between bites, sampling nearly everything in the spread. For the most part, Maki herself is quiet, acutely aware of her father staring at her, or at Nico. More than a couple grumpy faces look in her direction, some of them still seemingly confused about everything transpiring right in front of their eyes. Her father probably said things that prepared them for a different scenario, one in which she met someone in the same field who was an ideal candidate for continuing the Nishikino name. Perhaps someone she bravely overcame her emotional awkwardness to be with.

Instead, it’s just Nico.

“What do you want to hear embarrassing stories about Maki?”

Maki whips around, glancing between her mother and Nico. This must be what it’s like whenever she teams up with Mrs. Yazawa. She can still save the conversation though.

“Is it more or less embarrassing than when we found out you convinced your siblings you lived on your own in a waterfront apartment?”

Nico mock gasps and covers her mouth. “Maki-chan! How could you accuse me of doing something so childish?”


Nico’s eyes narrow again, ignorant of everyone now watching them. “Yeah well at least I didn’t catch my microwave on fire. You’re so clumsy, Maki-chan.”

Maki groans. “When are you gonna let that go? It was an accident!”
“Just like when you dumped the laundry water all over the kitchen floor? Your weak noodle arms couldn’t even get it to the washroom.”

“At least I don’t have to ask someone to reach the rice from the cupboard every time I want to cook something.”

Nico leans forward on the edge of her seat. “Hey, you put that up there on purpose! At least I can cook, you can barely make a salad!”

Maki blushes. “I can too make a salad.”

“A bowl of tomatoes doesn’t count as a salad, you idiot.”

“It counts.” Maki insists, crossing her arms with all the gusto of a five year old.

Nico crosses her arms too, equally as petulant. “It doesn’t.”

They glare at each other, and everyone watches them. At exactly the same time, they both burst out laughing and everyone around them looks even more confused than before. Maki’s father looks like he wants to leave.

It takes them a little while to calm down, but eventually they return to conversation amongst each other, content to avoid any odd looks sent their way. Maki feels as normal as ever - a nice change.

At some point, her father stops trying to pester Nico with questions about everything from her family to her finances, and she gets a chance to put in a request for dessert. Eventually her aunt and a few members of her mom’s side strike up conversations with Nico about this or that, at least seeming unfazed by the charismatic girl sat next to the Maki they barely know anymore.

Everyone stops chatting again when dessert arrives. It’s a proper birthday cake complete with candles and “Happy Birthday Maki” written across the top. The few members of her family that care to speak say a few things about her, mostly about her work ethic and dedication to her studies, because it’s all they knew her for when she was in high school. She feels a little guilty about it, but also a bit put off that they don’t know much else. Then again, she was pretty good at being closed off and stubborn to nearly everyone anyway.

“I asked for strawberry cheesecake.” Maki says as her mother hands a slice to Nico. “I know it’s your favourite.”

“You tryin’ to get on Nico’s good side? You’re coming on a little strong.”

“I’m locking you out tonight.”

“What? No, Maki-chaaan!”

Things progressively lighten up and just as Maki feels totally at ease, her mother gives her a look from across the table and gestures in the direction of the old music room. Nico nods and waves her off as she helps herself to another slice of cake, lost deep in a conversation with another nameless relative.
Maki’s mother slides the door shut behind them and Maki takes a seat on the piano bench. She fiddles with her pendant again.

“Am I in trouble?”

Her mother shakes her head. “No.”

Maki stays quiet as her mother walks around the room, observing the many photos of Maki gracing the walls. One for each school year, ending with her final year at Otonokizaka. There are also a few articles and magazine clippings up, about μ’s.

Her mother comes to stop in front of her, standing there in a pale white evening gown and her shawl. Maki takes a shaky breath.

“You’ve grown so much…” her mother says softly.

“I’m sorry,” Maki blurts out, “about Nico-chan. I should have -”

Her mother holds her hand up.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Maki purses her lips and tries to search her mother’s face for an explanation.

Her mother smiles, a strange mix of happy and sad. “I knew when we opened that door… I knew that Nico would be there.”

Maki’s eyes widen and she licks her lips. Her hands fidgets with her dress. “Y-you... you knew?”

“Well, not exactly. I couldn’t be completely sure, but I expected her above anyone else.”

“How could you know? I mean, I didn’t… I didn’t say anything, did I?”

Her mother shakes her head. “I had a very revealing conversation with Mrs. Yazawa on the phone quite a while back.”

Maki flinches. “She told you?”

“No, nothing specific. It was very vague. I was calling around looking for you that day, and Mrs. Yazawa let me know where you were and that you were as safe and sound. As mothers do, we got into a conversation about our children.”

“What did you talk about?” Maki asks meekly.

“Everything, really. We got on the topic of relationships and I mentioned you hadn’t taken an interest in anyone yet, and that your father found it a little strange. There are girls that plan their weddings before they’re twelve, but you hadn’t expressed the slightest interest in anyone…”

Maki blushes again. “Do you really talk about that stuff?”

“We do! And it was something Mrs. Yazawa said to me that really got me thinking. Just a passing mention… she said Nico hadn’t brought home any girlfriends yet either.”

“Oh.”

Her mother smiles at her. “The conversation carried on like any other. She also mentioned that we
should really talk more, her and myself. Motherly gossip is hard to resist.”

“Was that it? That’s what gave it away?”

Her mother steps forward and leans down, slipping a stray strand of red hair behind Maki’s ear. “It seemed like every time I called you, you were with Nico. Mostly at her apartment, which is where I assume you were living long before you told me about it.”

The guilt inches its way back into Maki’s mind, heavy on her heart. She really did know the whole time.

“I made sure that I was the one calling after you as much as I could. I understand why you were so reluctant to say anything. I was there when he said it too.”

“You mean… about Eli and Nozomi?”

Her mother nods. “I remember Nico was there as well. I just wonder… how long did you feel that way? How long did you have to hide it?”

Maki looks away, thinking. Too long, is the answer she wants to give. Any amount of time was too long.

“Since my first year at Otonokizaka. Her too, but I tried to talk myself out of it. Repressed it. It hurt a lot.”

Maki involuntarily sniffs. She brings her fingers to her cheeks and realizes she’s crying. She’s been doing too much of that lately; it would be nice if it would stop. “It hurt so much,” she cries, shoving her palms to her face.

Her mother is next to her in an instant on the bench, pulling her in and stroking her back. For a while, they just sit there while Maki lets everything out.

“I’m so sorry, Maki-chan. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything, that I couldn’t bring myself to help you. I didn’t know what to do.”

“N- neither did I.” Maki blubbers out. “I’m s-still not sure I know.”

Her mother keeps stroking her back, and pulls a handkerchief out to wipe at Maki’s tears.

Maki eventually finds the courage to ask what she’s been wondering all night.

“W-what does Papa think? Is he still the same?”

Her mother sighs. “I tried to ease him into the idea, but it’s just not something he would ever consider. Nothing I hinted at got through to him, and eventually he got the wrong idea. You know that part.”

“So you don’t know?” Maki sniffs again.

“No. I suppose we’ll both find out later. I think that for now, you need to clean yourself up and go back out there. Nico-chan is all on her own with Papa.”

Maki shoots up in her seat. “You’re right, what am I doing?” She takes the handkerchief and wipes her face clean. There will be time to cry about it later.

Her mother stops to adjust Maki’s rumpled dress before they head out the door. “I meant what I said
though. I’ll be here for you no matter what happens.”

Maki couldn’t ask for anything more.

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The dinner ends and turns into something more like a traditional party as everyone moves to a sitting room Nico hasn’t ever seen before. The couches and a single table are quickly shoved up against the walls, and Maki’s grandfather pulls out some old records to put on. It’s the kind of music Nico might call boring and that Maki might sit down and play at the piano if she still had one.

At some point Nico sweeps her up from a fancy old armchair to dance, though her movement doesn’t really match the tone of classical piano. Maki still finds herself having fun though, even when Nico tries to show her cousin the steps to Cutie Panther with Schubert playing in the background. It’s entertaining until Nico begs her to put Wild Stars on and sing with her.

“No, I don’t think we should do that…” Maki mutters.

Her cousin and her aunt seem interested though, and admit to Nico that they never really paid attention to Maki’s brief stint as a school idol. This, of course, means nothing but opportunity for Nico, who needs to show them what being an idol means right this moment. In the end Maki gives in, and performs a shoddy duet version of Wild Stars in a dress not made for the movement with a Nico who is made equally as clumsy by her outfit.

It’s been so long since she’s sang anything, but she remembers the words and the dance as if they’d been on stage that very evening. Perhaps her experience as a school idol would be ingrained in her forever and she’d wind up humming her own songs to herself while performing cardiac surgery in the far-off future. What an oddly morbid thought.

As the evening turns to night, Nico makes her best effort to win as many hearts as possible by embarrassing Maki as often as she can. Maki has enough material to fight back at least, and it’s relaxing for her to do something so familiar. Relaxing to argue… what a concept. She had no doubt that her mother was right - she had grown up a lot in such a short time, and Nico had changed her for the better.

At some point, the family guests begin to trickle out into the darkness after saying their goodbyes, shaking Nico’s hand on their way out. There’s no missing the reluctance involved in said shaking for some of them, but it could always be worse.

The tiredness sets in when only her cousin and her aunt are left in the sitting room, chatting over tea. Maki’s father is nowhere to be seen, as he was for much of the evening. Maki decides it’s time for them to take their leave, but she feels anxious about saying anything.

Thankfully, Nico is more forward than anyone else tonight.

"Mrs. Nishikino? I think Maki-chan and I are gonna head home.”

Nico holds out her hand to Maki and waves to the last of the guests with the other. Maki finds she can barely hold back her yawn, hiding it behind her fist as she takes Nico’s hand. Her mother gets up and nods to Maki’s aunt (her sister, as Nico learned tonight) and that one cousin, offering to walk them out to the car. Maki mentions taking a taxi, but everyone insists they utilize the driver, whom
they’d carefully avoided beforehand.

After popping upstairs to grab her bag, Maki and Nico say their goodbyes. How strange it must be to meet someone like Nico for the first time, someone so... unique. Maki barely remembers meeting Nico herself, but she does remember shutting the club room door in her face from time to time.

The night air is somewhat chilly, but Nico’s hand is warm. They walk to the front gate, with Maki’s mother following not far behind.

“The driver’s around back,” she says to them, and they walk around the high wall, down the narrow street.

When they round the corner to the back of the house, Maki remembers she has a car now. They stop to look at it.

“Whose is that?” Nico says, pointing at the crimson hood. “Looks fancy for something parked down an alley.”

“It’s mine.” Maki says absently.

They look at each other, only vaguely aware of Maki’s mother still standing behind them.

“...do you want a car?” Maki offers.

“I need to go lie down.” Nico grumbles, lifting a hand to her forehead. “What am I going to do with you?”

Maki shrugs.

“I can’t even drive it...” Nico whispers, mostly to herself.

Maki looks up at the car in question and sighs. “Me neither.”

Nico turns around to look up at Maki’s mother. “I’ll have to get a parking spot rented. Can we leave it here for now?”

“Of course.”

Nico puts her hands on her hips and turns back towards the convertible, shaking her head. “I can’t believe this.”

The driver pulls around seconds later.

“Thank you for coming, Nico-chan. It was wonderful to host you.” Maki’s mother says to them through the window.

“Thanks for having me. Sorry I made people confused.”

“On the contrary, you were quite straightforward. I don’t think there was anything to be confused about.” She winks.

At this point, Maki is almost tired of feeling relieved, but the revelation that her mother knew about them still felt foreign, as if the whole encounter in the old music room had been a dream. It was never something she considered, for all the thinking she did.

Maki can barely keep her eyes open on the ride home.
“That went well.” Nico says as they walk in the door. “I think I made a good impression, don’t you?”

“You definitely made some kind of impression.” Maki deadpans as she removes her heels.

“Hey! The only people who didn’t appreciate me were all the grumpy old Nishikinos. Guess I know where your dad gets it from now.” Nico mutters as she kicks her own heels off.

“If it makes you feel any better, those weren’t Nishikinos. Nishikino is my mother’s name.”

Nico gives her a quizzical look. “So it’s your mom that owns the hospital?”

Maki nods. “That’s where the inheritance comes from. And the car. Unusual, but they chose to keep that name because of their practice.”

“Guess not everyone is a stickler for tradition.”

They both head for the bedroom and Maki begins to pick the pins out of her hair. “We certainly aren’t. At least some of them didn’t seem to mind you.”

“I was really nervous,” Nico says as she sits down on the bed. Maki remains in the doorway, running her hand through her hair. “I thought your dad was gonna kill me.”

“Dramatic, but not impossible.” Maki grumbles. “But what he thinks isn’t important. I’m not so naive anymore.”

“That’s good to hear.” Nico says genuinely. She looks tired too, but happy all the same.

Maki sits down next to her.

“My mother knew, you know.”

Nico’s eyes widen. “What? Really? Oh, can you unzip me?” She turns around so her back is facing Maki.

“Well, more like she had a hunch. I’ll have to thank your mom later.” Maki explains as she pulls on the zipper.

“She’s got the Yazawa touch. Gifted in dealing with stubborn redheads.”

“My mother isn’t stubborn. Can you get mine too?” Maki turns to the side.

“Just play along, will you? Anyway I guess that’s what you must have talked about when you left the room with your mom. Nico was scared, left all alone to entertain people who wouldn’t even shake her hand. So cruel.” Nico shivers.

She stands up and pulls her dress off, carefully hanging it up in the tiny closet.

“C’mon, bedtime. No more talking about today. Now you’re old and you need your beauty sleep.”
Maki narrows her eyes as she shrugs out of her own dress. “You’re older than me.”

“Maki-chan is old. Soon she’ll need a walker because she spends so much time hunching her back over her desk.”

“I’m sure you’ll give me plenty of early grey hairs. It’s only a matter of time.”


After a minimal tidying of their formalwear and brushing of teeth they don’t bother putting anything on in the way of clothes, instead opting for cool sheets and warm skin.

Maki can barely believe that it’s over, that they’ve done it. What comes after? Will life continue on just as it always had? Earlier that morning it had seemed like an impossibility. After her birthday, there would just be nothing. A mysterious void.

“So how do you think it went, all things considered?” Nico asks her sleepily.

“I don’t think it matters, but...I have a good feeling about it.”

“No more worrying?”

“No more worrying. Not about this, at least.” Maki says, sleep creeping into her voice.

“Good,” Nico mumbles into her skin. “Now we just have to... work on that promise…”

“The... the what?” Maki whispers, barely there.

“It’s okay... Nico is patient... she can wait…”

Maki drifts off at the same time Nico does, and this time when she dreams of herself sitting at her piano bench, she isn’t alone. How wonderful it is to finally be free.

Chapter End Notes

finale to come on april 19th.
The morning after her party, Maki wakes up and immediately feels a prickling sensation in the corners of her eyes. She struggles to swallow and her lip trembles, but there’s nothing she can do to stop the tears from welling up. The music room, her mother… there hadn’t been enough time for them to let everything out. She’d had to hold her brewing emotional breakdown in and go rescue Nico from her own family, but it all came back at once like a swift kick to the stomach. It wasn’t as if she felt completely terrible or anything; it was just a rush of bottled up emotions all pouring out at once, all over Nico’s pillow. Or her pillow. Did everything belong to her by extension now? They should figure that out.

Nico of course, shoots out of bed faster than Maki has ever seen her move before, with her hair all over the place and her socks half on.

“Maki-chan! What’s wrong? Did Nico do something? Did she kick you in her sleep?!”

Nico rushes around the room, trying to find the tissue box she remembers elbowing off the bedside table a few nights prior. She barely avoids tripping over Maki’s backpack, instead slamming her foot toes-first into the side of the desk.

“Gah! Who put this here?! Uhh, Maki-chan, do you know where the tissue box went? I’ll get it for you, just stay there okay? Then you can yell at me and-”

“N-Nico-chan,” Maki blubbers, wiping at her tears with the heels of her palms, “y-you didn’t do anything. Just…”

Maki reaches out, beckoning Nico back to her because she can’t manage anything else. She’s at Maki’s side in an instant, pulling her into her lap as best she can and wiping at the tears with a sleeve pulled up around her fist. Maki just keeps going, burying her head in Nico’s neck and muttering apologies as she soaks the front of her shirt.

They sit there for what feels like hours, Maki crying and Nico rubbing her back in slow circles. Eventually the tears run out, and Maki leans back to look at Nico with sore, red-rimmed eyes.

“I didn’t get to cry with Mama, not like this,” she says to Nico, “so I guess I’m doing it now.”

Nico nodded at her, but Maki knew she didn’t completely understand what was running through her mind. Though, even Maki herself didn’t quite get it. Emotions are fickle things.

It was the thought that she’d repressed her feelings, or at least attempted to, that twisted her heart so. How could she have doubted her own mother all that time? Nico had insisted last night that she had no way of knowing, and Maki knew that her mother understood, but the thought still lingered. The worst of it was over, and for that she could be thankful, despite the mental aftermath.

“It’ll take time.” Nico says to her. “We’ve got plenty of that.”
How simple, yet effective. There was no rush to come to terms with everything.

The following weeks are a blur.

It was as if her birthday had never happened, and instead she was just another year older and another year wiser, though Maki still wasn’t completely sure about that last one. As reluctant as she was to commit any time at all to her studies, she resolved that she was almost there anyway, and so she did her best to finish off her first year of university with as much effort as she could muster. What was one week of hell, compared to the months she’d willingly put herself through?

Exams were very much still in the way, so everything that wasn’t exam-related was shoved aside, including Nico’s fancy lingerie. She wasn’t incredibly impressed by that, but sacrifices had to be made. Soon, Maki would be free.

And so she’d sat at her desk pretending to care about what she was doing, periodically fending off an irritable Nico. They still had their differences when it came to how much time Maki spent behind her laptop (an agonizing time for Nico, because there wasn’t anyone around to pay attention to her) but all Maki could do was promise her over and over that there was only one week left, and then after that they could do whatever they wanted for as long as the summer would allow.

Oddly enough, Maki hadn’t heard a single word from either of her parents. She hoped it had something to do with her mother - something positive - but she really had no idea what to think. She was still trying to accept the fact that her mother had known about everything to begin with, and that she had tried to her best to ease Maki’s worry without revealing anything to her father. It felt strange to know that her family was somewhat divided, keeping secrets from each other and in some cases pretending Nico didn’t exist. It was likely she’d never have to see those relatives again if she didn’t want to though, and that was a relief she didn’t know she needed.

In the meantime, Nico busied herself with housework, her job and complaining about higher education. There really was no compromising with her, even now.

It was still too quiet on the family front, though. It seemed kind of strange that she hadn’t heard anything, and she hadn’t said a word to her father since that night. It was a loose end she was determined to tie up, for better or for worse.

At least Maki now had the answer to her question. What came after? Before, all she could envision was a vast and empty whiteness, a huge blank spot that she just couldn’t seem to fill in, try as she might. But now she knew.

Life carried on, just as it always had.

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“Maki-chan! Over here!”

Nico’s shout turns the heads of everyone in the general vicinity, which might have embarrassed Maki in the past, but now it only served to entertain her. Nico was there for her, and nobody else. They were missing out.

Her final exam had ended in the middle of the afternoon on a day where the sun was shining and the grass was greener, a day brighter than any she’d seen in awhile. Past Maki would have meandered
about, slowly packing her back and perhaps asking an extra question or two before finally making her way outside. Present Maki was much happier to leave as soon as she could, because the weight of the world had finally tipped off her shoulders and there were better things for her to be doing right now.

Like seeing her friends. At long last, she could look forward to telling them everything - or mostly everything - and proving to them that she and Nico had in fact survived the encounter with one Mr. Nishikino. Well, less proving to them and more proving to herself that it had actually happened, and that it was over. She could finally be with Nico the way she'd wanted to be from the start; the way she’d imagined as a blushing and stubborn first-year at Otonokizaka. She had no reason to show Nico off to anyone, but she wanted to now that there wasn’t anything holding her back. The skeletons, for the most part, were out of the closet.

She got a few weird looks here and there as she made her way through the halls at a brisk pace. It was as if they’d never seen her smiling before. Because they hadn’t… what a sight she must have been, a once famous school idol with nothing to smile about. Did she look grumpy all the time? Worried? Was that why nobody approached her until Nico had made her way onto the campus, loud and oh-so full of herself? No matter, anyone who cared enough to lurk would be getting an eyeful in a few minutes.

She soon found herself outside, surrounded by students coming to and from exams, watching Nico interact with some starstruck girls at the end of the tree-lined walkway. Nico, ever observant when it comes to things she wants, spots her immediately and yells her name.

The breeze is soft and gentle on Maki’s bare arms, and her school bag feels lighter than it ever has before. The temperature is perfect, exactly as warm as Maki wants it to be, and the sky above is a crisp and clear blue for as far as the eye can see, the odd cloud a brilliant white in the shine of the sun. Everything is so vibrant, especially the red ribbons adorning the shining dark hair of the person calling for her. Nico looks like she’s dressed for the summer, in smart white shorts and a grey and white blouse. The butterfly shaped hair clips holding her bangs in place look a bit childish, but still cute.

The chatter of the students around her dissipates as she walks farther away from the red brick building, away from the study hall that ate away at her life for so long. She’s overcome in the moment by a happiness unlike any other, like the time they’d stepped out all together on the stage for one last song… one final encore. She wants to sweep down the walkway in a flurry of blooming flowers and the song she still dreams of composing, to lift Nico up with her and step out into the open sky, where the rest of their days await them. She wants to know so badly what will happen next; what the next chapter of her life is. She hopes Nico feels the same.

“Maki-chan!” Nico says her name again, “How’d it go? Did you sweep the floor with it? You better, after all that time you wasted sitting at your desk without me.”

The girls Nico had been talking to step back a bit and look towards Maki, each clutching what is obviously more autographs from the one and only Nico Yazawa.

“Can I have your autograph too?” Maki asks her.

Nico puts her hands on her hips. “Nico knows Maki-chan is her biggest fan, but does she really need an autograph?”

Maki laughs. “I suppose not. This will have to do.”

She reaches out, grabbing one of Nico’s hands from her waist and pulling her in. Nico looks
surprised at first as she’s drawn closer, but her expression changes to one of smugness in the seconds it takes for Maki to close her eyes and lean down.

Maki can’t help but smile into the kiss as Nico’s arms wrap around her neck, hand brushing across her skin. Maki just wants to pull her closer and keep going, but Nico pushes herself back after a short while.

“Nico can only stand on her toes for so long. Did you grow again?”

Maki shrugs. “Maybe you should just get taller.”

She remembers that there are people watching them, and it’s not as bad as she thought it would be. Instead of embarrassment, all she feels is pride, like she deserves to stand out, to show off. The girls who had been talking to Nico look a little stunned, but don’t say anything otherwise, instead looking between each other.

“See you next semester,” Maki says happily as she takes Nico’s hand and leads her away. Nico lets go and instead loops her arm around Maki’s.

“Are they your friends? Did you make friends?!” Nico gasps as they walk between the trees.

“No, I don’t know them. I still don’t really know anyone.”

“Some things never change.” Nico says wistfully.

They decide to cut across a grassy field, walking roughly in the direction of the campus hospital. There are some students lying about in the sun, some reading and some writing, and it looks more like a park in the summer than a place of higher learning in late April.

“Things look a lot brighter when you’re happy, don’t they?” Nico observes, as if she’s read Maki’s mind.

Maki nudges her lightly with her elbow. “What makes you think I’m happy?” Maki asks her, more playful than serious.

“Nico knows these things,” she says matter-of-factly, “and it’s all over your face. Anyone could tell with the way you’re smiling like an idiot. Didn’t you just have like a three-hour exam or something?”

“Yep. But now I get to see you and everyone else.”

“Maki-chan just wants to show me off. I deserve to be flaunted though, so that’s fine.”

Maki rolls her eyes, laughing all the same. “Does the great Nico-nii flaunt me too?”

“Hm,” Nico taps her chin with her free hand, “Nico is waiting for the right moment. There’s a time and a place.”

Maki stops and pulls Nico’s arm away from her, turning to stare into deep red eyes. She holds out her hand, in the middle of the grassy clearing and surrounded by dozens of other students minding their own business.

“Is now good?”

Nico looks at her hand, considering it for a moment before taking hold of it.

Maki pulls her in and spins her around, and Nico catches on as soon as she does. They look
completely out of place dancing around each other, but Maki couldn’t care less. The time they’d spent singing and dancing in front of the guests at the Nishikino household had planted something inside her that she hadn’t had the chance to release yet, and this was as close as she felt she could come. The audience was welcome, even if Maki nearly tripped over a backpack trying to dip Nico as suavely as she could.

“Who are you and what have you done with my Maki-chan?” Nico asks through a smile as they swing around.

“I haven’t gone anywhere,” Maki replies, “I’ve been here the whole time.”

“You’ve just been hiding.” Nico says as they slow down where the grass ends and the walkway begins again. She loops her arm around Maki’s once more. “It’s nice you’ve come back out now.”

Maki nods, and they keep walking, until they’re well off the campus and into the tight alleyways of Kanda.

“About the whole flaunting thing,” Nico breaks their silence, “like, I’m an ultra-cute super Idol, the greatest one the universe has ever seen, and you’re gonna be some big name doctor saving lives and curing diseases, right?”

Maki’s eyebrows raise. “Well, that’s not how that works, but sure.”

“Yeah, so we’re both totally amazingly beautiful girls with promising careers and incomparable talent.”

Maki nods slowly. “Alright, let’s go with that. What’s your point?”

Nico puts her other hand on her cheek in contemplation. “Which one of us is the trophy wife?”

“Trophy… what?”

“The trophy wife. Does it make more sense for you brag about me, or for me to brag about you? This is important.” Nico looks at her seriously.

Maki stares at her as they continue walking, narrowly avoiding a collision with a recycling bin.

“N-no, I know what you mean, just, the wife part…”

Nico blinks. “Oh, too soon? I just meant as like, a figure of speech, you know?”

Maki continues to stare. “Yeah, figure of speech. That’s right.”

Nico begins inspecting her nails. “We’ll have to get married in America or something anyway.”

“N-Nico-chan!”

“What?”

---

They aren’t home for long before heading back out to the restaurant they’d met everyone at before,
during the holidays. Once again, they were the last to arrive and everyone moved over two spots
around the sunken table to accommodate them.

Rin takes a moment to launch herself from her seat into Maki’s arms before she can sit down.

“Maki-chan!” she shouts, “You’re alive!”

Maki nearly falls over, and Nozomi snaps a photo of the spectacle on her phone from beside Nico.

“Rin, get off!” Maki glances at Hanayo for help, but the soft-spoken girl only giggles at her.

“Rin-chan was so worried about you. We never got to hear what happened!”

“I’ll tell you if you let me sit down! Rin!”

“Nyaaaou better tell us everything!”

It takes a few more moments of wrestling for Maki to finally free herself and take her seat next to
Nico. As it turned out, word had quickly spread amongst their friends about Maki’s birthday and
what she’d intended to do on said day, and neither she nor Nico had said anything to anyone since.
Kotori and Hanayo had at least been busy with finals and exams of their own, but as usual Maki
hadn’t spotted either of them when she was dragging herself around the university. Everyone had
questions, but if Maki was going to be honest with herself, she didn’t have all the answers. It was, in
fact, still somewhat confusing, because she hadn’t heard a word about the results of Nico’s
introduction from the receiving end.

“Maki-chan’s dad just asked me all these questions that don’t really matter. I felt like he was judging
me.” Nico mutters around her chopsticks.

“He was judging you,” Maki says, “that was the whole reason you were invited.”

“That was his reason. You invited me so I could be your glamorous and charming date for the
evening.”

Honoka slams her palms on the table, and Maki is thankful they have a private room. “Did you
dance? Did you kiss? Was it romantic?”

Maki blushes. “We-”

“Maki-chan left me alone with her old man,” Nico interjects. “I thought I was gonna die.”

“Oh my.” Kotori gasps from the other end of the table. “Was it that awful?”

“You almost died ?!” Rin shouts, slapping her hands on either side of her face.

Maki rubs her eyes. “Can we not…”

Everyone gives her a sheepish glance, except Nico, who looks satisfied now that Maki is thoroughly
embarrassed.

“Maki-chan can tell the story,” Nico says, “she knows it better than anyone else.”

Maki looks up from her plate.

“There isn’t much to tell. Some of my family kind of approved and some of them didn’t, and my
father hasn’t spoken to me about it. My mother knew about us though.”
“It’s nice that you had that support, at least.” Nozomi smiles.

“I didn’t expect it,” Maki nods, “but it made dealing with everything a lot easier. I already decided before I went how I would feel about everything.”

“What do you mean?” Umi asks.

“Well, I was so afraid of what my parents might say, or what they would think of me. Or, more what they could say to Nico,” Maki looks at her girlfriend, “but I realized that it didn’t matter what they thought, because it wouldn’t change how I feel. Nothing is going to change that.”

Eli rests her chin in her hand. “Sounds like it was easier than you thought it would be.”

Maki twists her hair around her finger, giggling. “Definitely not.”

“You have no idea,” Nico says from beside her, “Maki-chan had so many things to worry about all at the same time. Nico was worried too.”

Maki puts her arm around Nico’s waist. “I finally understood what matters most. To me, anyway. Nothing anyone says or does is going to change how much I love her.”

Maki realizes what she’s said a split second after closing her mouth, feeling a new bubbling warmth well up inside her. The butterflies again.

Kotori sighs cheerfully and nudges Umi’s arm, and Rin and Hanayo lean happily into each other.

“You’re so embarrassing,” Nico laughs, but she snuggles herself into Maki’s side anyway.

Maki chances a look into Nico’s eyes, expecting the same smug look from earlier today. Instead her eyes look like they’re glowing, overflowing with something Maki wants to see every day, something that makes her feel like she’s the only person in the whole world that matters. Nico’s smile is contagious, and Maki can feel her own lips turning up immediately. For how long is it okay to look at each other before everyone else starts feeling uncomfortable?

“I don’t think I’ve seen you look this happy in ages,” Nozomi comments. “Isn’t it wonderful that you’ve finally sorted it out?”

“Mhm,” Maki hums, barely aware of what Nozomi even said.

This time it’s Nico who pulls her down for a kiss, hands tightly clenching the front of Maki’s cardigan.

Maki is barely aware of a whispered “shameless” and Honoka’s excited clapping. It’s nice, she thinks, that their friends are so happy about them. It feels wonderful.

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Their early dinner carries on well into the evening as everyone catches up with each other about life and work, and eventually Nico finds herself wrapped up in conversation with Nozomi. She’s finally peeled herself from Maki’s side, bored by the conversation said girl was now in with her fellow university students. Vague mumblings of a vacant apartment, something about apologizing to Hanayo… Nico tuned it out ages ago.
“So things are looking up, aren’t they Nicocchi?”

Nico eyes her friend suspiciously. “What’s your game, Nozomi?”

Nozomi grins at her. “No games this time, just a genuine observation. There’s nothing left for you to admit, after all.”

Nico sinks a little in her seat. “You were right the whole time. Are you happy now?” she mutters.

“So gloomy all of a sudden. I truly am glad for you. I can’t help but remember what things were like for you when we first met…”

Nico’s face softens. “Yeah… I-I... look, Nozomi, I’m sorry I was so... sharp with you. Can you really blame me though?”

Eli peers around Nozomi’s shoulder. “What are you talking about? Nozomi?”

Nozomi reaches out for Nico’s shoulder. “You know I was never going to make you do anything you didn’t want to, right?”

“Is this a grudge thing?” Eli asks. “Or did Nozomi wrap your shoes around a telephone wire again?”

“It’s nothing.” Nico mutters. “Eat your food.”

“Hmmm,” Nozomi taps her chin, “sounds to me like Nicocchi is asking for a punishment.”

Nico covers her chest defensively. “These are private property now! No touchy!”

Eli hides a giggle behind her hand. “Private property?”

“Maki-chan will sue,” Nico threatens as menacingly as she’s able to, “she likes them a lot.”

“Don’t tell lies, Nicocchi!”

“I’m not! She even said—”

“What were you talking about earlier?” Eli asks, returning to the previous topic before Nico can dig herself an even deeper hole.

Nico looks away and grumbles. “Nozomi knew something and held it over my head forever and now she’s being super smug about it.”

“Only because I care. I spoke with Maki-chan too, not that long ago. She was very thankful for what I had to say.”

Nico turns back to her, looking a bit guilty. “I… I know. She told me about it. I just… you used to make me so nervous all the time, you know?”

“About what?” Eli questions curiously.

“I found out about her little crush before anyone else did, that’s all.”

Nico’s eyes narrow. “You kept saying you were gonna tell her. I don’t even know how you found out!”

Nozomi shrugs. “I didn’t find out, you told me yourself.”
“Huh?”

“Remember when A-RISE was helping us right around graduation?”

Nico pauses for a moment, putting two and two together. “The music room?” she gasps.

“Mhm.” Nozomi nods, turning towards Eli. “Tsubasa was helping Maki-chan with some compositional issues, and Nicocchi was spying on them through the window.”

“I was not spying. I was just… checking on them. To see if they needed any help from the great Nico-nii!”

“Tsubasa got really close to Maki-chan, and all Nicocchi could do was watch! She had her face all pressed up against the window and everything. All I did was imply something, and she confirmed it for me right there on the spot.”

Nico grips the hem of her shirt. “I didn’t confirm anything! All I said was-”

“It’s nothing.” Nozomi finishes. “But look at you now! I’m so proud of you…” Nozomi clasps her hands together. She does look genuinely happy for her, Nico has to admit. She’s still annoying though.

“You were spying on me?”

Nico whips around, only to discover that everyone else had been listening to Nozomi’s story, including Maki.

“No!” Nico shouts.

Maki looks less mad and more entertained by the idea that Nico had been concerned enough to watch them through the window. “I think I’ve spoken to Tsubasa maybe twice in my whole life. Did you seriously think…”

“Look, let’s just forget all that. We’re here now, right?”

“Would anyone like to hear more?” Nozomi offers. “Once when Maki-chan said she had a private study session with -”

Nico shoves her hands over Nozomi’s mouth. “Yeah good story, great! Oh, look at the time, we better head home now, right Maki-chan?”

“Actually, you’re right. I was hoping to stop somewhere on the way home anyway, before it starts getting too dark.”

“Okay, let’s go-” Nico is half way up before Nozomi grabs her and pulls her down into a hug.

“You did it, Nicocchi. You should be proud of yourself for coming so far. Don’t forget where you started when you’re big and famous, alright?”

Nico stops squirming and rests her hand on Nozomi’s wrist. She smiles. “How could I forget? You’re never going to let me.”

A few goodbyes and a swipe of Maki’s credit card later left her and Nico standing outside beneath the fading blue sky. Now they could go home and do whatever they wanted forever - or at least, until Maki had to go back to school in the fall. That was a problem for tomorrow’s Nico, though.
“You should head home,” Maki says to her. “I don’t know how long I’ll be, but I have something to do for myself.”

“Are you sure?” Nico asks. “Where are you going?”

Maki looks up at the clouds. The setting sun has them all wrapped in soft reds and bright yellows, and it would be nice to walk home with Nico beneath the cover of the coming night. She needs something though, and she feels confident that she can get it today. Closure.

“I’m going to my parents’ house. I’ll be fine.”

Instead of arguing with her, Nico nods in understanding. “You do what you have to do. Text me when you’re on the way home and I’ll make tea?”

“Absolutely.”

When they’ve finally parted ways, Maki takes a deep breath. She has a lot to say, and her father is going to hear her out whether he likes it or not.

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Her mother answers the door.

“Maki-chan? What are you doing here?”

Maki stands there on the porch, hands in her pockets and trying to remain as cool and collected as she imagined she would be.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call before coming over. I’m here to talk to Papa.”

Her mother’s mouth opens a bit, as if she’s about to say something. She licks her lips instead and nods at Maki, waving her in.

“He’s in the living room,” her mother says, “do you need me there with you?”

Maki shakes her head, hastily taking her shoes off at the door and not bothering to place them on the rack. “You can listen if you want.” And she walks off down the hall. Everything she wants to say runs through her mind again at a thousand miles a minute. Is it right to do what she’s going to do? It’s better than sitting in silence, passive and too accepting of everything forced upon her like she used to be. Tonight is about choice.

“Who was at the door?” Maki hears her father ask as her footsteps grow closer.

Just like that, she’s standing in the doorway, looking at her father reading a newspaper on the couch. He finally looks at her, and Maki’s gaze hardens. There’s a silent battle going on between them, and the winner gets to carry the conversation. It’s no matter, because Maki will voice her thoughts either way. She steps into the room and walks in front of the couch, turning to face her father with a blank expression. There’s no point in sitting down. He can sit there and listen to her for once.

“What are you doing here?”

Maki clenches her fists in her pockets. “Exams are over and I still haven’t heard from you. I thought I
may as well stop by while I’m out.”

Her father puts the paper down beside him on the couch. “What exactly were you expecting to hear? I have nothing else to say to you besides that I’m disappointed.”

“And why exactly are you disappointed?” Maki presses, noticing her mother leaning in the doorway out of the corner of her eye.

“You know why,” her father snaps, “I thought it was a joke. I really did. The girl you brought to my door.”

“My girlfriend?” Maki corrects him.

Her father shakes his head. “I don’t know what made you think I would approve. And to know you lied to me… what am I supposed to think?”

“I don’t need your approval. All I wanted was your support, and I was too scared to be honest about her for reasons I’m sure you understand. I regret that, by the way. Being too scared.”

Her wrists feel a little shaky, but her voice remains steady, void of aggression. She’s not here to start a fight, but… she wonders if her parents have fought since that day. He must know how his wife feels about everything.

“My support for you in high school wasn’t enough? You know I didn’t want you distracted by your club, yet I let you use our vacation homes without a second thought. I gave you a second chance when you nearly failed an exam because of it. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Maki frowns. “So where do you draw the line then? When do you think it’s fair to cut me off?”

Her father crosses his arms. He’s red in the face already, something Maki hasn’t seen very often. It’s too hot inside.

“I don’t want to cut you off from anything. You’re my daughter and I love you, but you need to reconsider what you’re doing. You need to think about your career and what your name means, and the future of your name.”

Maki can feel the anger pooling inside her, but she does her best to tuck it away. “I’m still going to become a doctor, or a surgeon. Whatever you want. Nothing about that has changed.”

“You’re an only child,” her father raises his voice, just slightly, “you can do simple math, Maki.”

“And you’re shallow if you think all that matters is where your grandchildren come from.”

“It’s more than that!” He yells at her.

“I work at a hospital. I hear about all kinds of people like you - people who struggle to get visitation rights, people who can never have children together, who can’t get married. That’s how it works, and it isn’t going to change. It’s not natural-”

Maki’s fists rip from her pockets, her nails digging into her skin. She thrusts them down to her sides and her eyes narrow. “It’s not natural to love someone? Why do you get to decide what’s natural and what isn’t? What do you mean people like me!?”

Maki recoils a little at her own fury. She didn’t think coming here would be like this, that it would make her act out beyond what she considered to be reasonable. All she felt was anger and an aching
sadness.

“I didn’t decide anything. That’s how life works, Maki. We don’t always get what we think we want.”

“I know exactly what I want, and I have it all except for you,” she points accusingly. “I have amazing friends who understand why I hid from them, who worked with me to help me overcome everything I was afraid of. I have an amazing girlfriend who dragged herself through the dirt for months just to take care of me when I couldn’t take care of myself. I have Mama, who helped me in her own way when she could, because she loves me for who I am. But I don’t have you, and I wish I did.”

“Maki, you don’t need to make this into something it doesn’t have to be. You need to think about what you’re saying and what you’re doing!”

“What are you going to do about it?” She hisses. “I don’t rely on you anymore. I have more money than I know what to do with. What can you do to hurt me more than you already have?”

At that, her father quiets. Because Maki knows, there isn’t anything he can do, and nothing he says will make her reconsider what she’s chosen.

“What’s left for you to do?”

Her father puts a hand to his forehead. “You were never like this when you were younger... I was going to wait until you snapped out of whatever this is before saying anything.”

“Of course you were.” Maki says coldly.

“I thought you’d met someone worth my time, I was so happy for you. I thought, my little girl finally came out of her shell, finally found her way. I was wrong, and I regret giving you the freedom we did.”

Maki looks down at him. “I did come out of my shell. This is me. And you know, you can say what you want about me, but don’t talk about Nico-chan that way. She did her best to make a good impression in front of someone who already hated her and all we got was your cold shoulder. She doesn’t deserve to be put down like that.”

“Maki, I can see that you just don’t understand...”

“No, you don’t understand. You’re never going to, I get it now. I guess I just came here to confirm what I already know.”

Her father is about to speak again, but Maki beats him to it.

“I’m done here. I’m going home.”

And with that, she turns on her heel, puts her hands back in her pockets, and heads past her mother for the door. Her father doesn’t follow.

“Maki-chan,” her mother says behind her, “I’m so sorry. I tried to talk to him after, but he wouldn’t have it. I thought I could convince him, I-I...”

Maki turns around at the door. “It’s okay, Mama. Thank you for trying.”

She looks at the floor. A small part of her really did hope that she was wrong, that her father would
have a change of heart and then her family would welcome Nico, and everyone would get along the way she always wished they would. It hurt, but not as much as she expected it to.

Maki looks up again, at her mother. “What about you? Will you be okay?”

Her mother nods. “It’s been an exhausting few weeks. Your father and I are fighting, I won’t lie about that. But… you’re absolutely worth fighting for, alright? Nico as well. Don’t let anyone make you think differently.”

Maki smiles sadly. Life isn’t kind, at the worst of times.

“Nico-chan also wanted me to say thank you for her.”

“Oh? For what?”

Maki opens the door and steps outside. “For treating her like a person. She still had a good time, even though… you know.”

Her mother’s lips turn up at the corners, just a little. “I’ll make sure to come visit you. Once everything’s blown over. I have things I’d like to thank your Nico-chan for, in person.”

“You’re always welcome. Papa too, if he ever learns.”

With that, Maki steps out into the night, and goes home.

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Late into the night, long after their tea is gone and they’ve climbed into bed, Nico asks Maki about what happened at her parents’ house.

Did she fight with her father? It wasn’t really a fight though, and it had ended in a stalemate. Was it even worth talking about?

Maki pulls the blankets tighter around them. “I feel bad for leaving Mama there, honestly.”

“Oh,” Nico says quietly, “are they… are your parents fighting now?”

Maki sighs, turning over to face Nico. “I guess they are. I don’t know what to do about it.”

Nico takes her hand under the covers. “You don’t have to do anything. You’ve been through enough and I’m sure your mother knows it.”

Maki’s eyes drift closed for a moment. “She does. I’m lucky.”

“Hm…” Nico hums softly.

The silence weighs upon the room again, nothing but a faint trace of light from outside cutting through the darkness. Something eats at Maki though, something she didn’t expect to hear her father say to her in the midst of their heated debate.

“Nico-chan? Papa, he… well, even after everything he’s said to me, he still told me he loved me. I don’t know if he was lying or not. I can’t stop thinking about it for some reason.”
Nico looks considerate for a moment. She sits up a little, leaning on her elbow and looking down at Maki.

“You don’t believe him?”

Maki blinks. “I don’t know. It just seemed so out of place after the way he treated me. And the way he treated you…”

Nico smiles at her, like she always does, but there’s a hint of seriousness in it as well. “I’m sure he does love you, just like your mother does.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes good people do bad things. Or they have really terrible and wrong opinions, like your dad does.”

“Do you really think that’s true?”

Nico looks thoughtful. “I don’t know for sure. I mean, I guess your dad did a lot for you. Made sure you grew up… comfortably, and everything. If you ask me, you came out pretty good even if you do pick on me all the time.”

Maki bites her lip. “Now you’re just making me feel bad for being mad at him.”

“No, no!” Nico shouts suddenly. “You can be mad at him! Even I’m mad at him. Just because someone does something good for you doesn’t mean you have to be eternally thankful forever or whatever. He could have been a literal saint for the last eighteen years, but now he’s wrong. Sometimes people change for the worse.”

Maki picks at the bed sheets. “And how have I changed?”

Nico lies back down and reaches out, brushing her hand across Maki’s cheek.

“I don’t think you’ve changed at all. You’re still the same super smart, mildly stubborn, unfairly attractive person you always were. You’ve just found your way, that’s all.”

“Unfairly attractive?”

“It should be illegal.” Nico confirms. “And also, you have me now. So just be who you want to be. It’s never wrong to feel the way you do, okay?”

Maki breathes out through her nose and flashes Nico a smile. “When did you get so wise?”

“Nico has always been wise. Maki-chan finally started listening.” Nico says seriously.

Maki can’t help but laugh, wrapping her arms around Nico and pulling her in. “Whatever you say, Nico-chan.”

As Nico drifts off to sleep in her arms, Maki can’t help but think about what’s yet to come. So much had happened in so little time, and she felt almost as if she were an entirely different person than the one that walked out of Otonokizaka almost exactly a year ago. She still remembered the moment Nico had come up to her, clinging to her arm and inviting her over for cake with just the two of them. Her diploma, her acceptance letter; it was all so far behind her.

What came next?
More tests, more textbooks, more lectures, most likely. This time though, it would be easier. Now she could keep moving forward the way she wanted to, with the people she loved and a lighter heart.

And yet still in her dreams, the music persisted. An unwritten song echoing through the back of her mind, louder than she’d ever heard it before. The thrill of the dance, throwing herself wholeheartedly across the stage and shining alongside her friends like she never knew she could. Tonight in her sleep, she sits once again at the bench she still tells herself she doesn’t long for. In front of her, the ivory keys and a reflection of herself in the black glossy surface of the piano she’d long abandoned.

There is someone next to her, playing alongside her and acting as her right hand. Together, they weave a song Maki will forget before morning, as she always does. This time though, before they’ve finished, Nico stands up from the bench and takes her hand. They walk together wordlessly through a dark hallway Maki has never seen before, behind velvet red curtains and beneath shimmering stars.

Maki knows this place. The smell of old wood, the dull chatter sneaking in from the other side of the soft crimson wall. She remembers now that this is where she belongs. What had she been doing again, instead of making music? There’s nothing else more important than where she is now, and the girl beside her.

“Are you ready?” Nico asks her.

Maki nods. She was born for this.

The curtains part, and together they step into the spotlight.

~End of Part One~

Chapter End Notes

well! i suppose that's that. thanks for sticking around to read and comment for 20 chapters of whatever this is.

as you may notice, this is the end of part 1, and part 2 will be making its way to Ao3 shortly after i take a small break. i'm hoping to start publishing the second part around may 15th, so keep an eye out for "Paradiso". we'll be picking up almost right where this left off and going into the second arc, which will likely be about half as long as this one, but things could deviate from my completed outline as i write.

i'll also be starting up a self-indulgent supernatural AU that will be slower to update and less serious (i tell myself this, but i know i'm lying) and you'll be able to find that under the title "A Cure for the Night". i am going to try to pace myself with Paradiso though, because i feel that i have a lot to improve on in my writing and various things i can work on were pointed out to me by some helpful anons. slower updates could prove to be much more helpful, leaving more time for revision and re-working where i'm not excelling. i'm first and foremost an illustrator, so writing takes a back seat. buuut i'm really enjoying fanfiction again (thanks love live) so i'll do my best to improve as much as i can for my next work.

lastly, i wrote this primarily for myself, but also for everyone out there who might find
themselves in maki's place. i have my fair share of friends who went through this, and still go through it. you'll find your nico someday, i promise.

thanks again! feel free to keep up with my shenanigans/love live related travel/and love live merch giveaways on twitter (@nidofeathers).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!