

As far as Nico was concerned, she had nothing to be jealous of.

After all, Tsubasa was a member of A-RISE, and therefore not as important as the μ 's girls - right? Her cheeks puffed out in frustration as the other singer approached Maki. Nico didn't know what Maki was working on (she hadn't really had the courage to ask), but she didn't like the fact that, of all people, Tsubasa was helping her. She stood close to Maki, and Maki sat at her bench in front of the piano, fingers poised elegantly over the keys.

Nico pressed her cheek to the small glass window of the door, but it didn't really let her hear much. Maki's eyes had fluttered closed, and her lips parted in a slight laugh. Tsubasa said something, something that Nico didn't catch, and her hand came to rest on Maki's shoulder. Nico's eyes widened. *The nerve.*

She didn't know why she was jealous, or even if she was. Maybe she was just feeling bitter about the fact that A-RISE were continuing after school, unlike μ 's. But she wasn't upset about the fact that Tsubasa and Honoka were friends. She groaned under her breath, pressing her cheek even closer to the window, if it were even possible. "Maki, come out here," she whined, standing up even higher on her tip toes.

And then, the piano music started. Nico never grew tired of hearing Maki play. μ 's had been built on Maki's musical abilities, and if it wasn't for her, they wouldn't have gotten as far as they had. And for that reason, and maybe others, hearing Maki play warmed Nico's heart.

But then she started singing. Nico felt as if she might melt into a puddle on the floor right there. Maki's voice was easily her favourite of the other eight girls - aside from her own, of course. It was a song that Nico had never heard before, maybe one that Maki had been working on. And she was showing Tsubasa first?!

Nico couldn't stop herself from bursting into the room. "Maki -- " Maybe she should've thought of a reason first, she realized a little too late.

Maki's fingers on the keys froze, and she looked up at Nico with quite the unamused expression. "Can I help you?" she asked, eyebrows raised. Tsubasa, on the other hand, looked like she might burst into laughter at any moment. Nico tried to keep the scowl from her face. Only Maki could laugh at her.

Nico blinked. Uh oh. "Yes." Her lips set in a firm line in an attempt to look as serious as she could. Her hands came to rest on her hips, and she wracked her brain desperately for an excuse, any kind of excuse.

"I'll leave you two alone," Tsubasa said with a laugh. She patted Maki's shoulder before leaving the room, much to Nico's delight. That was much easier than she'd expected it to be, she thought.

Maki tilted her head to the side, eyes narrowing as she scrutinized Nico. Nico paled under the redhead's gaze, and she swallowed thickly. "What was that song you were playing?" she asked finally.

The first year wasn't fooled, that much was obvious. Nico could have sworn she saw a look of amusement flicker across her features. Maki shrugged. "A new one. Tsubasa was helping me write it. I'm kind of stuck." She reached out to put the lid to the piano down, then rested her elbow on it. "Is that what you needed so badly that you burst in here like that? Surely, you could've said something before I started playing, since you were standing there with your face smushed against the window for quite a while."

Nico's eyes widened. Oh. "Well here -- let me help you!" she insisted, immediately claiming her spot on the piano bench next to Maki. Maki moved over to make room for the older student, and strangely enough, didn't seem to begrudge the fact that Nico wanted to help. Maybe she was just indulging Nico by not arguing, but Nico wasn't going to argue with that. "Are you having trouble with the words? Or the piano part?"

Maki let out a soft sigh. "Both," she said quietly, resting her chin against her fist. Her expression became serious. "It never used to be hard for me to write songs for μ's... but now, I just can't do it."

Nico didn't see Maki this serious very often. She was never the most energetic of μ's, not by any measure, but she wasn't usually somber. But everyone was tense, knowing that μ's was technically broken up. Nico was graduating, as were Eli and Nozomi. μ's would be apart for the first time since they got together, and that was a fact that all of the girls found it hard to accept. And Nico really didn't like the thought of being away from Maki.

"Maybe you should take a break?" Nico suggested, tilting her head to the side. Truthfully, she herself knew nothing about writing music. She didn't know how to remedy the problem that Maki was happening, but she wished that she did. This might be one of the last times that she would see Maki, she reminded herself. They couldn't end on bad terms. "Don't force yourself to do anything!" She plastered on the brightest smile that she possibly could, leaning in closer to Maki. "Just relax! You look so stressed."

Maki laughed quietly, and Nico couldn't help but notice how sad the laugh sounded. She hadn't realized just how much of a toll this was taking on Maki. "I'm just... sad. Because we're going to be apart. You, Eli, and Nozomi will all be graduated, and I don't know when I'll see you guys again." But her gaze fixed on Nico.

Nico's hopeful heart led her to think that Maki would miss Nico the most. Because Nico would definitely miss Maki the most. "You think you're going to get rid of Nico?" Nico gasped, as if it were the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. "Of course I'm going to come and see you all the time! Everyone will think that I failed the year and I'm back in school, I'll be here that often!"

That brought a laugh from Maki, and she reached up to cover her mouth with the back of her hand. "You better do that. Don't tell me that and then keep me hanging," she said, eyebrows narrowed. Her tone was joking, but she looked concerned. It was obvious that she was worried about losing everyone.

Nico wished that there was more she could do to reassure Maki that she wasn't going anywhere. If anything, Maki was the sole reason that Nico planned on hanging around the school even though she had graduated. "I never go back on my word," Nico promised with a nod of her head, making a cross over her heart with one finger.

"Thanks, Nico." Maki looked relieved, and Nico felt selfishly proud. She didn't like that Maki was concerned, but she knew that she had been at least part of the reason that Maki felt better.

But what Maki did next surprised Nico. She leaned forward, resting her forehead against Nico's. She averted the dark haired girl's gaze, but Nico didn't pull hers from Maki. She felt like her heart had jumped into her throat. "Maki...", Nico murmured, and a pensive silence fell over them.

Maki swallowed thickly, thin form trembling as she moved to press a hand to her mouth. "I don't want to lose you this year, Nico," she whispered shakily.

It only took those words to make Nico wrap her arms tightly around Maki. She wasn't very good with situations like these - Nico was a notoriously light-hearted person, so conversations like this completely caught her off guard. She didn't know what to say, and so she stayed quiet, hands rubbing up and down Maki's back.

Maki sniffled, her free hand reaching up to brush the tears from her eyelashes. "I'm sorry." She cleared her throat, pulling herself away from Nico.

But Nico wouldn't let her. She pulled Maki closer, partially to make her feel better, and partially out of the selfish notion that now that she had Maki in her arms, she didn't want to let her go. "I'm not going anywhere. I may be graduating, but I'll always be by your side." Even those words sounded strange, rolling off her own tongue. Nico had never promised such a thing to anyone before, and had never really seen herself doing such a thing. But with Maki, she didn't think twice about it.

The words didn't seem to do much to soothe Maki. The younger girl burst into tears, arms reaching around Nico's neck to pull her closer. She'd never heard Maki cry before - she'd always seen Maki as the strong one, the one who didn't let emotions get the best of her. Even though Maki was two years younger than Nico, Nico always thought of Maki as more mature than her. Seeing her weak like this was strange, but more than that, it hurt.

Uncomfortable with the serious air about them, Nico did what she could to diffuse the situation. She started singing. "Nico purin ~ Nico Nico!" She put on the highest, noisiest voice that she possibly could, eliciting a tear-filled laugh from Maki. It was obvious that Maki was trying her hardest to stop crying.

She smacked Nico's shoulder lightly. "You're so annoying," she muttered, but Nico could just barely make out a smile across Maki's lips. She lifted her head from Nico's, their gazes meeting.

"Thank you," Maki whispered, and leaned forward to press a feather-light kiss to Nico's lips.

Nico wasn't even given an opportunity to react. She hadn't been expecting that, not even a little bit. She felt her cheeks warm up, and she pressed her hands to them. "I--" She couldn't really even find the words to answer the younger girl.

"Thank you so much," Maki repeated, tears still rolling down her cheeks. She offered Nico a sad smile before wiping her eyes. "And by the way... next time you want to interrupt me and Tsubasa, you don't have to burst in like that."

"I-I wasn't trying to interrupt!" Nico spluttered. Maki knew her way too well.

Maki reached up to affectionately brush her thumb across Nico's cheek. "Sure you weren't." She rose from her seat, fingers still carefully brushing at her still-moist eyelashes. "I'm going to go and find Tsubasa now. But... meet me back here after class, okay?"

Nico nodded, still completely dumbstruck. Maki had *kissed* her. The moment had been so fleeting that Nico hadn't truly gotten a chance to enjoy it, but her lips still tingled with the taste of Maki. She bit her lower lip as if to savor it.

She would be there after class if it was the last thing she did.