**Kitchen**

After dinner, however, Lilith works us without mercy, relentlessly pressing us to memorize and apply concept after concept after concept…

Lilith: To solve this one, you have to apply the quadratic formula.

Petra: …

Petra: Ah, quadratic formula this, quadratic formula that…

Petra: I’m sick of it. I don’t wanna do math anymore.

Lilith: You say that, but if you wanna stay in school then you’ll have to at least pass…

Petra: Then I won’t pass. I’ll fail and drop out, and then I’ll live the rest of my life as a NEET.

Lilith: …

I do my best to keep an ironic smile from forming on my face, but unfortunately it manifests as a smirk so I look away.

I can’t say that my feelings are quite that extreme, but I definitely understand Petra’s sentiment…

Lilith: Um, Pro…

Lilith: Are you alright?

Pro: Huh? Oh, yeah.

A bit embarrassed, I return to my worksheet, but it’s already done.

Lilith: Finished already?

Pro: Yeah.

Lilith: That was your last one, right? Let me see.

I tentatively push it towards her, unsure on how well I did. Lilith takes it and reads through it intently, her expression still, as always, almost completely unreadable.

It’s bad for my heart…

Lilith: Well, there are still a few things you need to work on…

Lilith: But you’ve definitely improved.

All the tension dissipates from my body, and I let out a sigh of relief as Lilith returns her attention to Petra.

Lilith: You, on the other hand…

Petra: Huh? Me?

Petra: You must’ve realized my true potential as a prodigy. What can I say? It’s hard being naturally talented.

Lilith: …

Petra: Hehe…

Petra: At least I’m consistent, right…?

Lilith: It’s almost unsettling how little you’ve improved…

Lilith: If it weren’t for Pro, I might’ve started doubting myself.

Petra: Heh…

Chuckling to herself in a defeated and almost manic way, Petra slumps back into her chair.

Petra: I wonder if I’ll actually fail…

Lilith: Probably not. As long as you’re studying, it should practically be impossible to.

Petra: You say that, but…

Petra: …

Petra: I wonder if we’ll actually use any of this stuff later in life. Like, what type of job would require knowing how to solve a stupid algebraic equation…?

Lilith: Who knows. But if you wanna play baseball…

Petra: Baseball?

Petra: ...

Petra: Oh. Right.

Petra: I guess there’s no getting around it, then…

Lilith: Yeah.

Lilith: Let’s finish here for now, though.

Mom: Oh, are you guys done?

As if she were listening in, my mom appears.

Mom: I was gonna make tea for you guys, but I guess it’s already dark outside.

Petra: Oh wow, you’re right. What time is it?

Pro: Almost 9:00.

Petra: Huh?!? Oh, shoot, my parents are gonna come pick me up soon…

Mom: Do you still want tea? I can put it in a thermos for you.

Petra: Uh…

Petra glances at me, her eyes asking if she should accept. Not seeing the harm in it, I nod.

Petra: Yes please, then. Thanks.

Mom: You’re welcome.

The three of us pack our things while my mom starts boiling water, a small smile on her face. She’s probably happy that I brought home friends, and that she was around to meet them. It’s a selfless happiness, one that makes me feel warm inside but also a little scared.

Her calm demeanor won’t last long once Petra and Lilith are out of earshot, after all.

Petra: Oh, I think they’re here. Sorry, I should probably get going.

Mom: Alright. Here, your tea.

Petra: Thank you. I’ll return the thermos to Pro tomorrow at school.

Mom: Sounds good.

Petra: Thanks for everything, Pro’s mom.

Petra grabs her bag, moves towards the door, and puts on her shoes.

Petra: I’ll see you guys tomorrow.

Pro: Yeah. See you.

And with that she trots out the door towards the car waiting outside. My mom shuts the door as she leaves, and after making sure she gets in safely she turns back to Lilith and me.

Mom: What about you, Lilith? Are your parents picking you up as well?

Lilith: Oh, no. I’ll walk home.

Mom: This late?

Lilith: I’ll be fine, don’t worry.

Mom: You say that, but of course I’ll worry.

Mom: You’re still a high school girl, after all. And no matter how strong you are it’s still unsafe to be by yourself at night…

Mom: Pro, after you and Lilith drink your tea, why don’t you walk her home?

Pro: Oh, um...

I blink twice, knowing that Lilith would probably be the one protecting *me* if something went wrong. Walking a timid girl like Prim home is one thing, but Lilith…?

Pro: Sure, I guess. Are you okay with it, though?

Lilith: …

Lilith: Yeah.

Relieved, my mom places two cups of tea in front of us.

Mom: Here you go.

Mom: I’ll be going upstairs now, but when you finish you can leave the dishes on the table.

Mom: Have a good night, Lilith.

Lilith: Oh, you too. Thanks for having us.

Mom: You’re welcome. Please come again.

Mom heads back up the stairs, leaving Lilith and me alone. Before she makes it out of sight, however, I notice the small, mischievous smile forming on her face.

Of course.

Lilith: Your mom’s really kind, huh?

Pro: Yeah.

Lilith: Do you, um…

Lilith: …

Lilith: Is it just you and her living here, or…?

I freeze instinctively, Lilith’s question having took me completely by surprise.

Lilith: Oh, sorry, um…

Lilith: I don’t know why I asked that. It just came out.

Pro: Um, it’s alright…

Pro: You’re right, though.

Lilith: I see.

Without saying another word, Lilith reaches out for her cup and peacefully takes a sip, enjoying it with a refinement I once might’ve found bit contradictory considering her slightly delinquent appearance and apparent fondness of baseball bats.

However, although she has a few traits that may make her seem like a intimidating at first glance, from what I’ve seen she’s anything but that. She’s smart, cool, mature, and seems like she’s always in control…

…but I’ve started to realize that sometimes, like right now, she gets this strange look in her eyes. It’s subtle – her expression barely changes, and it’s not a particularly happy or sad look. Instead, it seems like…

Like…

Like she’s far away.

Lilith: Pro? Are you okay?

Realizing that I’ve been spacing out, I snap back to reality.

Pro: Sorry, sorry. Yeah, I’m fine.

Lilith: I see.

Lilith: Um, I’ve finished, so whenever you’re ready…

Pro: Oh, right.

I grab my cup and quickly drain the liquid inside of it, spluttering a little bit I gulp it down. Embarrassed, I do my best to regain my composure, but despite my efforts Lilith notices.

Lilith: Um…

Pro: Not a word, please…

Lilith: Oh. Alright.

My cheeks unusually warm, I stand up.

Pro: Let’s get going, then.