**Kitchen**

A sense of complete satisfaction courses through my body as I sit back down at the kitchen table. Mara made braised pork belly and bok choy, a mouth-watering Chinese dish served with white rice.

Having not eaten since dinner yesterday, I found myself able to eat bite after bite until, unfortunately, there was nothing left.

Mara: Thanks for washing the dishes.

Pro: I mean, you did all the cooking so…

Mara: Hehe. That’s a good attitude.

She sits down across from me, having eaten her fill as well.

Mara: I’m glad I found that recipe. It’s kinda addictive, don’t you think?

Pro: Yeah. Where’d you get it from?

Mara: Sometimes I get recommended cooking videos, so most of my recipes are from those. Although this one was given to me by my dad.

Pro: Your dad?

Mara: Yeah. Apparently he ate this somewhere and wanted me to give it a try, or something like that.

Mara: Don’t really remember.

Pro: I see. Um…

Pro: How are they doing? Your parents.

Mara: …

I regret asking the question as soon as it comes out of my mouth. We usually skirt around touchy topics like this, and seeing the worried look on Mara’s face drives a needle through my heart…

Mara: They’re fine. Pretty normal.

Pro: Oh, that’s good to hear. Um…

Pro: …

Pro: Sorry.

Mara: Hm? Why?

Mara: You have nothing to apologize for, so don’t apologize okay?

Pro: But…

Mara: No buts.

Smiling gently, she leans across the table and pinches my cheek lightly.

Mara: Good boy.

Mara: We still have a lotta time before evening, so what do you wanna do till then?

Pro: Dunno. Anything’s fine.

Mara: Anything, huh…

Mara: Let’s study then.

Pro: …

Pro: Anything but that.

Mara: Huh…?

Mara: I bet you didn’t do anything yesterday, though. And don’t you have a big test coming up?

Mara: Are you really gonna be okay?

Pro: Um…

Pro: I had Lilith tutoring me, so…

Mara: So suddenly you’re gonna do well without any additional work?

Pro: Uh…

She’s right. She’s 100% right, as much as I don’t want to admit it…

Pro: Fine, fine, let’s study. Where, though?

Mara: How about the library?

Pro: Huh? I thought we were gonna study, not read manga.

Mara: H-H-Heh…

Mara: How about a café or something, then?

Pro: A café, huh…

For some reason Lilith appears in my mind, and the one spot that I associate with her…

Pro: Actually, there’s a place I wanted to show you. Why don’t we go there?

Mara: Hm? A place you wanted to show me?

Mara: What is it?!?

Pro: You’ll see, you’ll see.

Pro: Are you ready to go? Let me get changed and we can head out.

**Coffee Shop**

We open the door to the scent of freshly made coffee and aged wood, an odd but surprisingly charming combination. Mara peers at everything excitedly as we pick one of the many empty tables, satiating her curiosity with obvious enjoyment.

Mara: Wow, I’m surprised you knew of a place like this. It’s very…

Pro: Rustic?

Mara: Yeah, that’s the word. Rustic. And classy.

Mara: Since you’re the epitome of non-classiness, it was really a shock…

Pro: Huh…? What’s that supposed to mean?

Mara: Nothing, nothing. Don’t worry about it.

Slowly realizing that I’ve been insulted, I sigh and decide to let it slide for now.

Pro: I didn’t find this place myself, Lilith introduced it to me. While she was tutoring me and Petra. She frequents it, I think.

Mara: Oh?

With a mischievous glint in her eye, Mara turns around and scans the vicinity for any hint of blonde. Apart from the server at the counter, though, we’re the only ones in the shop.

Mara: Maybe if I come here frequently enough, I’ll run into her.

Pro: If you wanted to meet her, or anyone else at my school for that matter, you could’ve asked you know.

Mara: Huh? I don’t really want to talk to her. It’s more like…

Mara: Mmm…

Mara: She’s really pretty, so I’d just wanna look at her from a distance, you know?

Pro: …

Pro: Huh?

True, I can’t imagine Mara and Lilith interacting. Like at all. They have such different personalities, it’s a little difficult to picture them having a coherent conversation.

But at the same time, what Mara’s saying is a little weird…

Pro: Isn’t that kind of, um, creepy…?

Mara: It is, but don’t all humans like looking at pretty things? Like flowers, or sunsets.

Pro: I guess…

Mara: And when there are pretty people in anime or manga, don’t people make fan art and post them online for thousands of other fans to see? Forget about manga, actually, don’t people look at real life celebrities for fun?

Mara: So who wouldn’t sit here and wait for a beautiful, blonde enigma to show up?

I gawk in silence as Mara’s dead serious expression…

…melts into a laugh.

Mara: I’m pulling your chain, don’t worry.

Mara: I’m just a little curious, you know? About your friends at school and what they’re like.

Pro: I’m pretty sure you’ve eavesdropped enough to tell, though.

Mara: Hehe. That’s true.

Mara: To be honest, I kinda want to meet them for real, though.

Pro: Why don’t you?

Mara: Well…

Mara: It’d feel like I’d be interfering, you know? And besides, my time alone with this Pro guy…

Mara: I treasure it. And I wouldn’t want anything to bleed into it.

Mara: Oh, our coffee’s coming out.

Completely forgetting about the topic at hand and the bomb she just dropped, Mara turns her full attention to the small cup in front of her.

Mara: Wow, it’s so fragrant. Definitely a few levels above the instant stuff we have at home, or even the cups you get at most cafes.

Mara: It’s a bit more expensive, though.

Pro: Yeah…

Not unlike a sommelier with their wine, Mara takes a deep sniff of her coffee and swirls it around before taking a sip. Her eyes widen once she tastes it…

…but then she remembers that she hates black coffee.

Mara: Ugh…

Mara: Well, we have everything we need now, so let’s start studying.

Mara: No more chatter until you finish a hundred problems, okay?