

## **Saving Death**

*by Julian Jeremy Teodoro*

-I-

Graduation rites will no longer be held in compliance with social distancing measures.

Just when I thought I had won would I be told that what I crossed was not the finish line but merely a checkpoint.

Students are advised to wait for further updates on the resumption of school operations.

I was summa cum laude back then. I attribute this success to my photographic memory which made it very easy for me to remember terms used in human anatomy. More than my knack for passing exams, I was more driven by my fear of my parents. I would rather fail a test—which has never happened to me—than disappoint them. Aside from being able to masterfully explain the inner workings of the heart and recite the name of every bone that we have in our skins, I also knew very well what I wanted in life. When I told them that I had wanted to be a soldier instead, my parents froze in their seats which interrupted their first bite at the carbonara during Noche Buena last year. What could I expect? I am the son of a chief of hospital and his wife who heads brain surgeries.

My parents laid their forks down on their plates almost synchronously as if they had a preplanned retort to this unexpected revelation.

“Remember, Kean,” my father firmly started while retaining his usual poker face, “the hospital will be yours once you become me.”

“We are a family of doctors, *anak*,” my mom added with a worried expression complemented by her gentle tone. “We don’t want you to be a black sheep here. If you don’t become a doctor, who will continue our legacy?”

Instead of talking back, I decided to let silence continue the sumptuous meal that I accidentally spoiled. After all, I am the only child whose destiny they could steal. I could enumerate almost every disease that humans are capable of contracting, but I did not know how to assert myself. I had always been afraid that when I got out of this cage, I would not have anywhere else to turn to. I had lots of acquaintances who came and went so frequently that they couldn't become friends who would let me sleep in their beds. I couldn't even rely on my uncles nor aunts because they also have the same expectations for my cousins. They may not expect all of us to become chiefs, but they want us to make a career out of medicine. Just by thinking about it, I was beginning to envy my classmate who had dropped out.

Like me, Leo was also pressured by his parents to tread the healer's path. Unlike me though, he fearlessly ran away from home to pursue mechanical engineering. Well, he's lucky to have met a bachelor friend who was willing to fund his education in exchange for the young man's body. Upon hearing from him in the first week of quarantine, my envy subsided when I found out that he became a person under investigation after his sugar daddy had tested positive for COVID-19.

When I reached med school, I became close—that close—to fulfilling my parents' dream. To my relief, I was just as close to abandoning it. As I scrolled down my Facebook and Twitter feeds, I reacted to virus memes and laughed at TikTok posts. While secretly enjoying my imprisonment, I could not resist reading shocking shares of COVID-19 news via Messenger whether or not they were fake. Was it cruel to celebrate at a time when more people died each passing day? Probably it was foolish to celebrate too early. Didn't the email read "deferred" and "wait"? It meant nervously spending more days in my sando and shorts while awaiting my execution—the day the Hippocratic Oath would take my life.

Another email shattered my hopes: "Postponed Licensure Examinations". Despite my parents' opposition, they agreed that they would let me do what I wanted if I acquired the legality to write Kean T. Lim, M.D., on any prescription sheet and served as Chief of

Hospital until someone else from our family succeeded me. This was the only escape that I knew which did not involve sex slavery—but the pandemic blew it.

I have always wanted to save lives, to protect other people though not with a scalpel but with a gun. It's better to keep them safe right from the start rather than wait for them to be critically ill and be able to only do so much until they never wake up again. This mission remained impossible until I found a way to save my very own.

I needed a break.

As my thumb was already poised to touch the sign-out button, one unread message popped. I was determined to spare myself from any more sadness, but it came from a unique sender:

Dear Fellow Doctors,

Let's do something good, and at the same time, use this opportunity to test our skills.

Following the rising number of confirmed deaths among doctors and other healthcare workers in the frontlines, the Department of Health has allowed medical graduates with no license yet to succeed our heroes who have been killed in action by this virus.

To those interested, please fill out the attached application form made accessible via this link: [bit.ly/COVID-19frontliners](https://bit.ly/COVID-19frontliners)

Kindly wait for a separate email containing further instructions from a DOH representative if you get waitlisted.

In the spirit of healing,  
Cedric Rey L. Dionisio  
President, Cardio Circle

I let my phone rest in my right hand for about five minutes more, forgetting the strain in my neck since an hour ago. The funny thing about chasing goals is that when you're far away from them, you feel very excited; but, when it's already within your reach, that excitement turns to "How did I get here?"

My head was overflowing with so much biochemistry, lab apparatus, and procedures. The problem was I could only use these to shade the right circles in an exam paper. Blood doesn't scare me, but I just can't stand the agony in the OR. Recalling the last weeks of my internship when I was made to scrub in one day and declare a patient's time of death during a failed surgery, I got slapped on the right cheek after telling her husband that our team had done everything we could to save her. I couldn't blame him though since before the operation, I had assured lolo that he would get to kiss his wife hello again.

I decided to stick with the longer path. I wondered if it would hurt to wait for another five years before I got to wear combat boots. I figured that I should start studying for the licensure exam.

"Kean, dinner's ready," Manang Emmie called as she knocked on my wooden door.

"Yes, I'm coming..."

Chop suey, rice, and some leftover mooncakes from my father's brothers were served on the round dining table.

As I took my seat, I examined the seemingly happy expression of my father. It's a miracle to see his eyes puff that way while staring at the food.

My mother maintained her usual anxious look. Her furrowed forehead above her round eyes hinted her preoccupation with the most recent calls she got that afternoon. I bet she had enough of explaining several times why she had postponed most of her patients' surgeries.

“Any news about school, Kean?” dad asked.

“We were advised to wait for further announcements,” I replied.

“My notes and books are just in my study. You can at least brush up your medical knowledge while we’re under lockdown.”

I reached out for the glass of water and took three sips. I was thinking about how I should start the next conversation on my terms instead of how many scoops of rice I should consume for the night. My appetite for talking was indeed greater than the one for eating.

“Have you thought of your specialization yet? I suggest you pursue neurosurgery. It’s such a rarity in hospitals to find a doctor who can fix people’s brains.”

I may have been lucky to remain clothed and fed in that house even at a time when many others lost their livelihoods, but the people I saw on TV struggled to fulfill the most basic of all needs outside while I mulled over being trapped within those walls.

*Manang* Emmie had just placed beside each glass of water a white cup of hot herbal tea.

My urge to drink prevented me from thanking her like what I always did whenever she initiated these small things. It’s obvious that she noticed I was starting to get agitated. From the kitchen counter, our eyes met. She smiled as if to empathize with me. She was the only one in that household who understood. I simply looked at her and merely turned away since my face was too rigid to reciprocate the gesture.

“Just a few more months, I can already retire without having to worry about leaving. Having you as a son does not give me any reason to be afraid,” he finished then took a sip of some tea.

I couldn't deal anymore. I was more than willing to give up the prince's life to get away from the nausea. I must become Leo. No matter where I went and whether or not foster families existed beyond the doors of that house, I would eventually land somewhere. A quarantine pass wasn't enough. I had already been deprived of freedom when I was just crawling inside mom's womb. If I got arrested, at least I could sit marveling at the rusty bars and tell myself that for the first time I have finally chosen my own prison. Why was I wasting more time?

"I—I want to be a soldier," I said standing up with all the courage I could muster.

The silver iPhone beside her plate rang; my mom had to go out again for another round of absorbing complaints from the very same people who had been pleading to have their relatives brought to the operating room right away.

My father just scooped more rice from the serving bowl to his empty plate.

"I want to join the Philippine Military Academy, and I am no longer taking the exam," I continued but with much more clarity and less haste.

He stuffed with his spoon some rice mixed with corn and cauliflower to his mouth then chewed as if I was not trying to disappoint him again. The movement of his Adam's apple signaled that he just finished swallowing.

"Kean, I thought we had already talked about this—"

"No, don't ever tell me again!" I yelled while retaining consciousness of my quivering lips and right index finger pointing at his nose. From my peripheral vision, I saw *Manang* Emmie scurrying back to the maids' quarters in the back of the house.

"All my life, I did what you have always wanted me to," I said and took two deep breaths, exhaling heavily through my mouth. "I earned high grades in school to please you! You'll never let me do what I want until I reach the goal you have imposed on me."

“I’m just doing what’s best for you.”

“Being used to keep your hospital alive and beating? You’re doing this to save your reputation. That is not the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

I approached him like a predator and grabbed him by the collar of his white shirt. “I’m going to be a soldier.” I drew my face closer to his dazed eyes. “And I don’t need your approval anymore,” I ended with my voice dropping to a whisper and my hand abandoning the grip on the man whose arrogance appeared to have quickly left him.

I am a risktaker, but I am not reckless. I knew I should be able to get out of that house and wander the streets innocently. Fortunately, I had the means to do it. At that time, I had to go through the one and only window I had been given if I wanted to be successful. I opened my Mac then signed in to my school email to find the invitation from Cardio Circle. I filled out and submitted the application form. Afterwards, I took a screenshot of the reference number that appeared onscreen. I lay in bed for only about ten minutes until I heard a notification. I checked to see that I got a message from the DOH. That was quick, I thought. I was told that hiring processes are usually slow, but this one’s an exception most likely due to the crisis. It was time for me to pack my things and wear my surgical suit.

When I was about to push open the maroon door whose knob I already twisted, I stopped and turned to take a last look of the place I had once called home. My eyes scanned everything horizontally from the left starting with the dragon-clad couch to the right which had the marble staircase. I saw my mom come out of the bathroom just below the stairs. She was in her white coat.

“Where are you going?” she asked as she secured on her right shoulder the lace of her red purse.

“Like you, I’m off to save lives.”

“What? You are not allowed to leave without a quarantine—”

I raised my right palm at her and said, “I know, okay? Look, I’m almost out of time. I can’t waste this chance. The reason you’re clueless now is because all you ever talk to are your patients needing surgery. Well, guess what? I’m just as in need of repair as they are. Since you can’t be both a doctor and a mom to me, I’ll have to do self-care.” I finally walked past the door with the wheels of my navy-blue trolley containing my diagnostic tools, some medicines, and various articles of other clothing. I knew I could no longer go back even if the sound of her purse having been dropped to the floor from behind made me want to stop what I thought was the whimper that would come right after.

-II-

“Where are you headed, Sir?” an officer in black slacks and white shirt inquired when I reached the checkpoint.

I took out my phone then showed him the screenshot and invitation letter sent by the DOH. I thought I had to endure the titillating sensation of body frisking and the drudgery of opening my trolley for some bag inspection. To my pleasant surprise, he nodded and immediately raised his right palm wide open in the direction of where I was about to head.

The screening site for the reserved medical team I was about to join was in the public high school five lots away from the hospital where I had my internship. I continued walking with my trolley towards the long line leading to a series of brown tables that looked like had been smuggled out of a faculty room.

“Three lines, please!” called a nurse in her blue gear.

“To those who have earned their doctor’s license, please stay on my right. To those who have graduated but have not taken the exam, line up in the middle. As for those who

have completed their programs but have not acquired their diplomas yet, the left spot is for you.”

My line was the longest among the three. I could not believe that I was meeting many people who like me were half-qualified for the job.

“Invite?”

I could sense that the attending clerk in her green-apple gear had asked that question for more than the hundredth time on that day. Maybe I would someday acquire that numbness and weariness in the field when I experience the pain of failing to save a life on that frequency.

“Are you here to apply or simply look at my eyebags?” she asked.

I got out of my pensiveness. “Oh, sorry. Here,” I said while handing her out my phone that still had enough battery life to flash the letter from the DOH.

“Proceed to Conference Room Five,” she instructed when she looked away from the screen to focus on recording what seemed my reference number.

“Thank you,” I uttered recalling what I should have said to *Manang* Emmie last night.

I wasn’t officially accepted yet. I had to pass the interview with the coordinator who would manage the team of unregistered doctors like me. I sat down on a white plastic stool with the other applicants waiting in line to rest my legs after the excruciating pain of standing. I got off my seat then walked to the very end of the hallway to make sure I was going into the right room. The brown wooden door on the left was where the interview would happen. The scratches and illegible vandalisms on its surface below the sign that read “Conference Room Five” stung my eyes. They were more reliable in telling the story of scarcity than the opinion articles I had been reading online. I turned around then went back to my seat.

When I made a list of possible questions in my head, I had never thought this was going to be scarier. I knew in myself that I was doing this for a noble cause—or maybe I was also too arrogant to admit that I needed the offer merely to forget the restriction that was to blame for my pent-up ambition. I had to remember the consolation that there were still thirteen people in front of me. That gave me more time to think about my answers.

After about 15 minutes of waiting, the door opened. It was then my turn.

A guy in his personal protective equipment—or PPE as they call it—stood outside the room holding some files.

“Kean Torres Lim?” he read off from what seemed my printed application.

I stood up then followed him inside.

“Have a seat,” he gestured at the green monoblock chair that was positioned perpendicularly against the brown teacher’s table.

“I’m Doctor Alvin Velasco, and I lead the emergency medical team that will be deployed to Manila.”

I was astounded by his youthful face despite the few strands of gray hair above both sideburns. He looked like he was already in his 40’s, but his virile voice decreased him to being just 30 or 29 even. I was more interested in knowing how he was able to preserve his vigor than why he became a doctor.

“You completed your internship at Mary Magdalene Hospital?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ah. The one near this school?”

“Yes.”

“And graduated from Mother Teresa College?”

“Yes, Doc.”

“In Makati?”

“Yes.”

He was typing something on his laptop while intermittently reading something from my forms.

“Is your student number ‘201534448’?”

“That’s right,” I replied reassuringly.

“Graduated?”

“Yes, though I have not received my diploma yet due to the suspension of school operations.”

“Great then. You’re hired.”

The terseness of our conversation betrayed my rehearsal. Why didn’t the word emergency register with me right away? Of course, they would skip the more formal interview questions that demand beauty-pageant responses. What mattered at that time was the proof of my residency at Mother Teresa.

I got out without being able to shake hands. It's something that I needed more time to get used to as I had never failed at social niceties. This is my disease—always beating myself up for leaving strangers with a mediocre impression.

-III-

I arrived in the capital city. Traveling to my area of deployment took me about just twenty minutes to get there. It's not that I had known the route but because there was almost nobody taking it. Aside from the non-shaking of hands, the novel emptiness is another reality I had to get used to.

My senior internship numbed the excitement that I once relished as a former junior while staring at the black naked man ready to offer his body to those needing purification. The motionless figure accounted for its enduring glory that carried the institution's distinction. I had always been told that this hospital was an ideal place for internship since there was a variety of cases in its emergency and operating rooms. My disillusionment with the health system as told by those blemishes on the classroom door suspended the rise of my expectations as powerfully as the rain that could heavily and swiftly drench the hair of someone without any umbrella nor windbreaker.

I entered what seemed the holding room for the emergency medical team. I looked around and saw people in their blue PPE's while others in civilian attire just like me. I dragged my trolley toward one vacant corner where I could pretend that I had not noticed those investigative eyes.

“Were you about to march onstage as well?” a woman asked. She was small and slightly chubby. Her voice sounded like she had known me.

“Yeah. You too?” I had to respond in a friendly way. The strength of a wolf comes from its pack, not its fangs.

“We were classmates, Kean.” She smiled as she immediately withdrew her outstretched arm for a handshake. She flinched but maintained eye contact despite the embarrassment about forgetting the no-handshake rule.

I looked intently through the plastic mask and recognized the face. “Leah Superable? The one who reported on the misdiagnosis of a cancer patient?”

“Yes, that’s right!” she confirmed excitedly.

“You were supposed to continue in the next meeting. Too bad I couldn’t hear the whole story.”

The glass door from which I entered opened then showed Dr. Velasco. He walked towards me and said, “Excuse me.” His manly voice was accompanied by an indifferent tone.

I stepped aside. I realized I had been blocking his way to the table where he laid his laptop beside the portable projector. He was preparing a PowerPoint presentation of some sort.

“Everybody, sit down.”

We all seized those empty monoblock chairs assembled in three rows. Leah and I sat in the very last one together.

The words “Briefing for Emergency Frontliners” flashed on the white wall in the very back of that room.

“Who could tell me why you’re here?”

Silence pervaded the audience.

“Why are you here?” He really insisted that we said something.

“You, in the back.”

I turned my head to Leah. Her gaze was fixed on the interrogator, and she merely rolled her eyeballs towards me. “It’s you, not me.”

I pointed to my chest for verification then Dr. Velasco nodded sternly.

“I’m here to save lives.”

“That’s the end result. I want something more basic.”

During the interview, he was casual like everything I said was okay. In that moment, however, I was in another thesis defense with him being a panel member. He could have asked this question in that classroom when I had been more prepared.

“Um...” I was groping for answers as if they were floating invisibly in the air.

“Who could help Dr. Lim?”

Another teammate in the second row from the far right raised her hand. “It’s to sharpen our skills so that we could effectively do the job of the frontliners who were killed in action.”

“Yes, exactly.” He clapped twice in approval.

“This is the bunch that has not received their diplomas nor taken the licensure exam, right? That makes it too early for you to say that you’re here to save lives. How could you do that if you’re not well equipped?” He clicked on his pointer to show the next slide containing a schedule.

“You already know who I am, so we’ll skip to the timetable of activities. I will have you immersed in a medical bootcamp where you practice standard health protocols observed during this pandemic. It’s not going to be an easy ride, however, since you would most likely encounter stuff that you may not have learned in your internships. This crash course is specially designed for treating COVID-19 patients.”

Specializations here were irrelevant. The only thing that we had to get good at was to defeat a new enemy. We were asked to focus on that notorious virus. What I learned about pumping hearts became irrelevant. I needed to recall the fundamentals of human respiration and immunity. I had to be open to other forms of remedy which were only being applied then as short-term solutions in the absence of any tried and tested vaccine.

“For today, we shall study the polymerase chain reaction test—PCR for short. Aside from that, you’ll be practicing with each other. It’s also the perfect opportunity to confirm your physical fitness.”

After the one-hour lecture, he put a small black device near his mouth. “Dr. Coronel, we’re done here.”

After about a minute, a woman who had long black hair entered the holding room. She wore a white lab coat just like mom. “Hi, I’m Dr. Coronel. Please follow me.”

We followed her through the wide door until we found ourselves walking a long hallway. I couldn’t help but subtly watch the movements of those busy hands and feet covered with blue overalls beyond the glass windows. What even caught my attention was the look of those people in wheelchairs. Most of them were old.

When we reached the very end of the spacious hallway, I saw three white doors on my left then another three on my right. Dr. Coronel started assigning rooms as she distributed black pagers to each of us.

“Dr. Lim and Dr. Gomez, you are sleeping in Room Five.”

My on-call room was through the farthest door on the right.

“When this vibrates and flashes red, kindly return to the holding room for your first training session,” she gently reminded us.

Inside, Dr. Gomez and I agreed that I would take the upper deck of the bed since I had more agile legs. He was about the same age as I. He was tall but a bit shorter than six feet. Since he had been in his PPE when we got here, he must have found it inconvenient to sit.

“I suggest you give yourself some more time before you wear this thing. You could no longer scratch when it starts to itch,” he said while he remained standing beside the door.

“Thanks for the reminder, Dr. Gomez.”

“Just call me Nick.”

“Oh. Okay, Nick.”

Our small talk covered topics like our frustrations about the disruption of our medical programs and our expectations.

Nick studied in St. Agnes Institute of Medicine, the sister school of Mother Teresa. He had already started his senior internship in pediatrics when the lockdown happened.

“I was that close to achieving that dream.”

Hey, that’s my line.

“Was that decided by yourself?”

Our pagers beeped.

“You have to put on your PPE now. I’ll go ahead,” he said with a sense of urgency then dashed outside.

Nick was right. I had a burning sensation in my torso, but if I tried to reach it with my fingers, I would wreck the delicate suit. We were standing in a circle that enclosed Dr. Velasco and Dr. Coronel with her seated in a wheelchair.

“For example, Dr. Coronel who is a suspected carrier is asymptomatic. That means, we need a tool to find out if she is infected or not.”

A nurse gave him a transparent bag that was filled with unfamiliar instruments.

“You see this?” he asked as he held a transparent stick about eight inches long in front of us. “This is the thing that we stick into a patient’s nose so that we could collect the samples we need.” He inserted the semi-elastic material into Dr. Coronel’s right nostril then paused. After about five seconds, he slowly pulled it out then placed it in a tray filled with small tubes containing the other samples. “Compared to the rapid testing that you see advertised almost everywhere, this one yields more accurate results. This hospital is endowed with the necessary facilities to conduct PCR’s. The only challenge here is that we need to wait for seven days or more before we find out if it’s a positive or a negative since the number of testing tools we have right now is not enough for efficient processing.”

We were instructed to pair up with our roommates and receive our respective testing kits. I partnered with Nick. In our station, we had to decide the turn-taking.

“Who shall play patient first?” I asked.

Without a word, Nick sat on the white stool then removed his mask.

“My nose is yours,” he said.

I took the swabbing tool from the tray a female nurse was holding. Afterwards, I inserted it into Nick’s left nostril.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“No, no. Just keep going,” he said with a nasal tone.

I kept going further down until Nick snorted.

“Ugh!! Get if off me now!”

“Oh, sorry!” I immediately pulled the stick away.

Nick fell off the stool.

The nurse quickly helped him get up.

“What happened here?” Dr. Velasco failed to miss the scene.

“It was my mistake. I’m sorry, Doc,” I explained with my head bowed down.

My teacher asked for the swabbing tool in my hand which I shamefully surrendered. Dr. Velasco placed it on the tray Dr. Coronel had been holding. He whispered something to her ear then nodded. He turned to look at me. “Follow me,” he commanded.

I went with him to the exit leading to the long hallway of rooms. I entered the asylum for patients. As I walked, I stared at the rows of beds on both sides like it was a field trip.

There was an empty bed in between each occupant. I reached the last bed on the left row.

“Excuse me, Dr. Nuñez.”

A stout doctor who appeared to be in his mid-thirties turned around. “Yes, Dr. Velasco?”

“Could I borrow your patient for just a minute? I need to collect his sample for PCR.”

“That is just what I was about to do,” Dr. Nuñez replied curtly.

His black pager sounded.

“A second thought, she’s all yours. Dr. Coronel’s paging me.” He left us all alone—me, Dr. Velasco, a male nurse, and the young woman sitting on the bed.

“Observe carefully,” Dr. Velasco said. He accepted the transparent stick from the nurse then inserted it into the left nostril of the lady. “Imagine that you’re knocking on the door of anyone you know,” he added, “then it opens on the third knock. You exchange greetings. When that person lets you in, release it...” He pulled the stick out of the woman’s nose then made the viscous fluid flow into the small tube. “That technique comes in handy when numbers don’t work for you.”

I was knocking on the wooden door of our house. When it opened, I saw my dad.

“Good to have you back, son.”

I just stared at him while feeling the tightness in my core.

“Why don’t you come in?”

I snapped back to reality.

Dr. Nuñez came back. “She accidentally pushed the button! There was no trouble there. Tell your resident that the next time she will need my services, she has to page me five times before I decide to leave whatever is in front of me.”

“Everyone makes mistakes, Doc,” Dr. Velasco said winking at me. He patted my shoulder then walked briskly back to the holding room.

We were seated once again in three rows. I looked around to find Nick, and I saw him in the monoblock chair nearest to the speaker. How relieved I was to know that he recovered.

“Most of you did well today,” he began. “Just remember this protocol when you deal with real patients. On the succeeding days, you shall find out the results randomly. I don’t mean to be rude, for we are merely following guidelines. Whoever shall be confirmed positive for COVID-19 will be confined in an isolation room until future tests say otherwise.”

I could hear murmurs gradually getting louder. Dr. Velasco raised his right index finger in order to reduce it to an abrupt silence.

“Go eat dinner. Remember to respond immediately when your pager beeps.”

When all of them left, I approached Dr. Velasco. “Doc, I haven’t had my PCR yet.”

“Let’s go to that booth,” he quickly instructed.

I could tell that he was tired, but his energetic frame hid his weariness. He made me sit on the white stool where Nick had fallen off then stuck a stick inside my left nostril. After about five seconds, he withdrew it steadily and slowly still then dropped my samples into a test tube.

“Thank you and sorry, Doc,” I uttered when I stood up facing the ground.

“Let’s hope that the results will allow you to continue swabbing. I have more to teach you.”

-IV-

“I’ll have that one,” I said to the server.

He took from the upper compartment of the metallic counter a plate that already had a cup of rice. Next, he put one leg of chicken on it. “The gravy is on the other side, Sir,” he mentioned as he placed an empty condiment cup beside the plate.

After filling my cup with gravy, I turned around to see where I could sit. I saw a group of middle-aged medics eating and chatting together on my left. I continued looking till I saw Nick and Leah alone at the vacant seats nearest to the window. Holding my tray, I walked towards them while forcing myself to ignore the thought of receiving intermittent glances from the older generation’s table.

“Welcome to the Millennials’ squad!” Leah exclaimed who seemed to have deciphered my paranoia.

I sat down at the small round table then looked at Nick. “Sorry about earlier. I—”

“It’s okay, bro,” he said dismissively then took a bite at the protruding coleslaw on top of the ham in his sandwich.

“Why did you stay longer in the holding room with Dr. Velasco?” Leah asked probingly.

“Oh, I just needed to have my PCR. I wasn’t able to have myself tested during the drill,” I said while waiting for the right time to initiate the next conversation with Nick.

“So, was it your decision? To pursue peds, I mean,” I finally was able to ask him again.

He took his time to swallow. “It was both mine and my parents. I have a sister who’s suffering from polio, and since she’s going to need close monitoring, I volunteered to give up my other pursuits for her.”

“Which were?”

“Music school.”

“Do you play or sing?”

“I sing death metal while on an electric guitar.”

He had a better reason for being here. What added to the humiliation was that he hadn’t been caught up in moving away from anything.

“How about you? Why did you pursue—what did you say your specialization was?”

“Cardiothoracic surgery,” I sighed then ate my first scoop of rice mixed with chicken skin covered in gravy.

“Was it your decision?” Leah humorously interjected.

“I wanted to join the army, but my parents didn’t allow me. They want me to inherit our hospital as its next chief.” I said chewing.

“I guess you are obliged to be here too,” Nick concluded.

I drank my bottle of water to help me swallow.

-V-

Seven days had passed; still, our results weren't released yet. Add to that the fear inspired by the news about Dr. Coronel's removal from Dr. Velasco's service after being confirmed positive.

"She underwent PCR about a month ago," he explained, "but because of several backlogs, she got the results only this morning."

"What about you, Sir? Have you gotten tested?" asked a female teammate with short dark brown hair that's obviously dyed.

"All doctors regardless of rank had undergone PCR when you were being interviewed. Just like yours, our results will be released at random."

Our mentor never wavered in his composure.

"I need you to remain focused especially we are one member down. We can still function even without the definiteness of our results. If we can't honestly continue, our bodies will speak for themselves. Withdraw only if the symptoms show up like what I said on day one."

We were assigned in different booths. Leah, Nick, and I seldom saw each other starting from that day. If Nick's duty time became my free time—which was always the case—I would find myself sharing Room Five with no one. It was different from my internship in which there was a definite number of hours a student had to complete, no more no less. In this deployment, our shifts were dictated by how many cases we had for each day. It didn't matter if we skipped a meal, worked overtime, forewent bathroom breaks, or lacked sleep. The PPE that was hard to wear and take off plus the long hours of swabbing and waiting were more than enough to keep our lives filled. The rare exception that allowed small reunions in the canteen was when we did not have any swabbing to do and that all results were pending in the labs.

"With what we're doing," Leah began, "we could all test positive."

“It’s precisely why we’re called heroes,” Nick said. “Have you watched TV last night? They even composed a song just for us.”

I continued munching the crackers from my locker.

“Kean, is that your dinner?” Leah asked. Her face reflected the kind of compassion that even skepticism itself could not have resisted.

“I have to save the remaining allowance I have left from my parents. Salary isn’t until next week, right?”

“Here, you can have my other sandwich,” Nick offered.

“I thought we were not allowed to share food?” I asked to hide my shame while holding a piece in between my index finger and thumb.

“Screw the rules. Protection from the virus does not guarantee freedom from hunger. Besides, I haven’t touched it yet. It was just there lying in my tray.”

It was only then that I realized I was no longer in my first prison. I thought that I wouldn’t be able to find any foster family that would take care of me if I decided to break free. Meeting these two, I learned that I could have parents who are not married and not pathetically bound by disempowering tradition. I would never run away again.

-VI-

“From now on,” Dr. Nuñez began, “you’ll have to answer to me.”

“What happened to Dr. Velasco?” Leah asked.

“He’s confined together with the other doctors until another test confirms that he’s negative. He won’t be back until he’s fine.”

I couldn’t believe that I would cross paths with him again.

He scanned the entire holding room like he was some pimp. “You seem like a bunch of little kids who only love to play with pagers and swabbing tools.”

I wasn’t sure if the cause of the tension in my pelvic floor was my bladder being full or the possibility of him having known about my mistake during the drill with Nick.

“I’m actually surprised that one of you was actually allowed to go inside the isolation room considering that it was just your first day.” His icy stare looked as if his eyes were solely on me even if he was addressing all of us. “With me though, nobody is going there again for as long as I remain accountable for your blunders.”

He reviewed the folio-size paper in his folder then poised to read off our names.

“Gomez, Lim, and Superable. You take Booth A,” he bellowed. After reading the next swabbing assignments, he gave us a stern warning. “Be sure to follow even the most basic of protocols like proper handwashing; otherwise, I’ll kick you out of here. Remember, I’ll be watching you like a hawk.”

Even though he called us by our surnames without the honorific—which was very unlike Dr. Velasco— I appreciated the fact that I got to work together closely with Nick and Leah again.

-VII-

It was already the Monday of our fourth week doing swab tests. Upon closing the door of my on-call room, I chanced upon a fast walking Dr. Nuñez.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

I merely stood in wonder.

“Head for the testing center in the west wing for your PCR results. Until you find out you’re negative, you are not doing any swabbing,” he instructed then went to knock on the next door.

To test or be tested? I let the question linger in my head as I walked toward the testing center. Determining other people’s lives was way more bearable than I thought. Not knowing my destiny, on the other hand, burned all the more as I pushed my way through the steel doors.

“Omiping.”

A lean guy with sideswept bangs went inside the lab. After about a minute, he got out with the technician.

Through her gestures, she appeared like she was instructing the guy to go somewhere.

The guy was holding what seemed the report that determined his fate.

“Gomez.”

Nick’s eyes seemed to ask for a good-luck sign from me and Leah.

I simply nodded then he turned around to continue his entrance.

“Superable,” a nurse called out from another lab.

Leah abruptly scurried toward the door half open.

“Lim.”

I went inside my lab.

A guy in a white PPE stood near the cart of tubes containing the other samples. He handed me a piece of yellow paper that was horizontal in orientation, about the size of an invoice. The hospital seemed to have invested so much in its testing capacity—the black text had a clearer output than the printer back at home.

I thanked him then left.

-VIII-

There was the uncertainty of receiving another free sandwich. I had been so accustomed to forbearance all my life that abandonment made the old burden seem lighter. To be left behind by the strangers I love, or to be kept by the parents I hate? That was the real inquiry.

Not only was I robbed of the work I had always wanted to do. I also had to admit that the wide floor where I had the privilege of running around for the first time actually provided no liberty. I had been so desperate for a way out that I did not care about any trap I would fall into. Since I had already escaped, I no longer cared if what I held was a scalpel or a gun. All that I saw in that moment were the blue curtains that engulfed my frail body.

“Dr. Lim,” a familiar voice from my right called.

It took me about three seconds before the source registered with me.

“Dr. Velasco? Is that you?” I tried to talk louder despite my sore throat.

“I...” he coughed loud. His voice was not as strong as it had been before. “I’m sorry.”

My photographic memory served me for another time. He did not wear his mask when he conducted my last-minute PCR test that night. As if that mattered—I wasn't going anywhere for a while.

I could hear a rush of footsteps and the moving of curtains about a meter away, this time on my left. I did have another companion with me.

“Time of death, 20:56,” a voice that sounded like Dr. Nuñez declared. “Hello, Dr. Gomez?” he paged. “Please find out the background of our patient. His full name is Ferdinand G. Lim according to his ID. We need to contact his family.”

I waited for the perfect chance until no more feet were visible below these curtains. I had flu, but I had enough strength to get off this bed. I staggered toward the curtains then made my way out of my station. After a few strides, I finally reached the other bed. I opened the curtains and saw the pale skin of my old man. I could only cough in pain. I closed the curtains then headed back to mine.

I got back under my sheets then reattached the cords to my system. As I lay in uncertainty, I listened closely to every beat of the monitor beeping beside me. I watched the green glow on the black screen. Will it be a finish line this time?