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When Julia climbed down the stairs at dawn, she noticed a lack of clamor from the kitchen. Usually, her mother would be cooking breakfast by now or cleaning the house. However, even their ancient radio—a family heirloom from the 1980s—mutely perched on the shelf. A familiar buzz hummed under her skin as she wondered if there was something wrong. Just as she was about to walk past the wall separating the dining area and the staircase, she heard someone speak up.

“If I borrow some money, I could pay the water bill for this month” her mother’s low voice mumbled. “And if the people who owe me pay up today, that would take care of the kids’ school allowance for the next month and this week’s grocery budget.”

Julia remained rooted on her spot as her mother paused then added, “Manay Litay, don’t worry. I’m just worried. Our electricity was cut off this dawn because we didn’t pay the bill last month. There’s also the remaining hospital bill from Julia’s Hunos implant. Where am I going to get all the money we need? If only nurses were paid more. Maybe I should’ve listened to you and went abroad, too.”

Julia waited until everything fell silent again before crossing the threshold. Upon making eye contact with her mother, she greeted as if there wasn’t a weight on her chest, “Good morning, ‘Nay. I heard you talking to Tiya Litay on the phone.”

“Good morning, Julia” her mother replied as she put down the rectangular device on the table, the edges of her lips were tight in spite of the bright smile she sported. “Well, she was just asking how we were and I ended up sharing a little too much like always. By the way, there’s pandesal and scrambled eggs for breakfast.”

“I heard we still have things left unpaid though” Julia brought up, glancing at her mother before taking a hot piece of bread from the brown paper bag. “Did our bills go up again? I thought my salary was enough to cover it all?”

Her mother sighed, slumping a little. “Well... the twins started applying for colleges.”

“No,” her mother shook her head upon noticing her daughter freeze in the middle of cutting up the egg, “you don’t have to do anything, dear. I can handle it. Save up your money instead. You could go back to college if you earn enough—”

“But we’re in debt!” Julia interjected as her knuckles turned white, fingers still latched around the fork handle. “There’s already too many expenses to keep us busy! I just want to help—”

There was a familiar prickling feeling in the back of her eyes before her vision blurred. She drew in air with a sharp inhale. It was no use. Her nose was already stuffed. Was she still breathing? She wasn’t sure. She couldn’t exactly hear herself over the voices that chanted in her head, *‘This is terrible. Quick, do something!’* There was also a painful tightening in her chest, coupled with a searing heat rising upwards. Just as she felt that it was about to completely block her throat and send her heart into full throttle—

It stopped.

Her mother had pursed her lips, her eyes a little too wide and glassy as she witnessed Hunos take effect. While she tried to relax once it was done, Julia wondered if her mother was

ever disappointed in her and her inability to control her emotions and feelings without the help of the implant. Why did she even feel this way? Why did the tiniest sign of financial trouble send her spiraling everytime? No matter. There was no time to think about anything else when there were more pressing concerns.

“I’ll try to pay the electricity bill today, the day after tomorrow at the latest” Julia told her in an indifferent tone, ignoring the way her mother averted her gaze and hung her head low. With the clarity granted by her Hunos implant, Julia forced herself to think of possible remedies to their current dilemma. “Realistically though, it would probably take me until tomorrow before the power goes back on. I have some emergency cash on hand in case the twins need it.”

“Okay.”

The conversation died down after that, the empty calmness following Julia as she went to her workplace. Happy Face Dental Clinic welcomed her inside its sterile walls, the absence of noise reminding her once more of the eeriness she woke up to that morning. She rolled her shoulders, trying to loosen the sudden tension that settled there as her mind fixated on what could happen if she didn’t address her problem right away. How and where should she get the money? What would happen if she still didn’t have enough after she tried everything? Worse, what if her efforts were in vain and there was no financial help to be found?

... Or maybe she should start from the ground up, work her way through her options. She didn’t notice when she stopped moving and just stood in the middle of the hallway with her shoulder slumped forward. Rationality kicked in now as a slight tingle appeared on her nape. There were times when she felt the Hunos implant doing its job, like now, which usually meant that her stress and anxiety levels were higher than usual. The secretion of the chemical regulators were calibrated based on past tests that checked how she reacted to various triggers and stimuli.

The implant's function was supposed to be undetectable, especially with the nanotechnology aiding it. However, in moments like this, the sensation was somewhat like saliva suddenly flooding from under your tongue after having a dry mouth for a while.

Sometimes, Julia wanted to rip the Hunos implant out, or wished it had an on/off button just so she could properly react like any normal human being in the situations she found herself in. Having a clear mind meant she had to think of a solution and put it into action because otherwise, what was the use of having the implant? Nonetheless, the brief respite allowed her to settle on asking her coworkers first if they could loan her the amount she needed. With that, she started her work for the day.

“Eight months after the suicide epidemic related to Hunos implants, the Department of Health has yet to identify its cause. In the meantime, President Maria Abanes ordered extensive research on this medical technology while the manufacturer insisted on—”

The sliding of the door on its pocket distracted Julia. She paused from pulling out the metal box from the autoclave and looked over her shoulder. Confirming that it was only her coworkers clocking in for her shift, she continued her work while trying to listen to the news. Compared to the old relic they had in her home, the radio in the clinic was the latest model in the market. It was an inch-thick, disk-shaped metal powered by batteries and featured a touchscreen display on the sides in exchange for channel and volume dials while the top functioned as a speaker. When she realized that she couldn't hear the reporter's voice anymore, she glanced again behind her only to see that it was unplugged already. Sighing, she contented herself with focusing on her task. At the same time, she started thinking about how she should ask her coworkers to borrow money from them.

As she transferred the box to the other counter, right beside the sterilization machine, one of the assistants piped up, “Good morning, Julia! You look deep in thought. Is everything alright?”

“Huh? Oh, I guess?” she scrambled to reply, her mind trying to catch up to the interaction happening now. “Just the usual thought on earning money, like everyone else.”

“Ah, I get that. Everyone’s always chasing the best way to earn more.” Julia didn’t mind talking to this particular person, considering she was one of the few who tried. The others probably thought her workaholic nature was too rigid for idle small talk. “Are you thinking of getting into the homemade kakanin business, too? It’s getting trendy again with the ‘tangkilikin ang sariling atin’ movement lately.”

“No, I don’t have the time or the resources for that” Julia replied, although she entertained the idea for a bit. If only she could, she might’ve had the privilege of conducting business from the comfort of her own house. Despite the risk, it had the potential to bring in more profit than being a minimum-wage worker. She let herself dream a little longer, imagining herself delivering food containers full of sapin-sapin, suman, kutsinta, puto, and other delicacies to her entire neighborhood and feeling hard, cold cash on her hands, the textured surfaces of papers and the grooved sides of coins.

Banishing the thought, she turned back to the person she was talking to and added, “I actually wanted to borrow some money from you guys. Only if you’re able to spare some, of course. I understand that we’re all struggling to get by, some more than others. I’d appreciate it if you could help me out, though. My family hasn’t paid the bills and we don’t have enough savings to cover them.”

Someone among her coworkers chimed into their conversation, “You’re broke? Really? You can afford the Hunos implant. Why can’t you afford to pay your electricity bill?”

Julia thought it would’ve hurt less if she was stabbed instead. Her gaze zeroed in on the other’s smile, recognizing his face as one of the newbies. He came in as a favor since his parents were close friends with Dr. del Rosario. His logic probably made sense in his head when he probably never experienced a life such as hers. She would bet her Hunos implant that he had never tried to make sure a week’s worth of finances could be stretched to two weeks if needed, just in case something happened. How easy it must be to joke about what someone could and could not afford when you had the power to choose both. For a moment, Julia envied his privilege, wishing their places were switched at this very moment just so he understood how aware she was of her own inability to do anything else than to beg for scraps and some mercy from others who could afford to do so. Perhaps, he would be able to comprehend as well how people who are living as burdens really had nothing to lose, not even pride. That wouldn’t feed her family, neither would anxiety. That was why Julia had the implant in the first place. Society said it would help people like her. Now, she was numb and nearly six feet under accumulating debt. So, how dare he make a joke when he can’t even begin to empathize—

She witnessed how the upwards quirk of his lips suddenly dropped. Julia wished she could see guilt flashing on his face but there was only confusion. She wasn’t sure if that was worse or if it just didn’t matter now that she only had the fading wisp of her indignation, her heart beating steadily again in her ribcage. This time, there was a dull ache in the area where her Hunos implant should be. It was probably exerting more effort again to keep her neurotransmitters and hormones at optimal balance.

Based on how relaxed her face was, she must be poker-faced right now, making the situation awkward for not laughing and playing along. Her suspicion was proven true when the newbie mumbled, “Why? Did I say something wrong? It was just a joke, though.”

“Can you just—” Julia turned towards the woman she spoke to before this whole mess. She wondered if the apologetic look on the other’s face was because she understood how unkind the jab was or if she felt guilty for now doing anything much other than shutting him up. “Sorry, Julia. I can’t really lend you money. I’m a bit tight on budget, too.”

The other assistants echoed her, which Julia accepted with a nod. “It’s okay, I understand. We all have our own circumstances after all.”

Even as she said that, Julia thought herself fake for having no emotion, not even hopelessness. The world wouldn’t stop for anyone. She continued putting the dental equipment and instruments inside the sterilization machine, her mind already making a list of who to ask next.

Her efforts were fruitless in the face of unsuccessful attempts at loaning from the people she knew outside of her job. After a long day at the clinic, Julia sighed as she entered her house, dragging her feet on her way to the kitchen. The steady hum of functioning appliances remained absent. Her mother probably couldn’t do anything to pay the overdue bill. She hoped there was at least some good news for today to ease the stress of worrying about their finances.

She thoughtfully touched the long, thin bump of raised skin on her nape. In this day and age, people hailed the Hunos implant as the cure for mental health illnesses. Once you’ve undergone the insertion surgery, you were guaranteed a life free of mental struggles with your own self. It was more convenient than the traditional oral psychotropic medicine, which must be

bought and taken on a regular basis. With Hunos, the time and energy spent on this could be directed towards better things.

Julia recalled the day her family convinced her to get Hunos. She knew her mother was concerned about her increasing bouts of insomnia and panic attacks after dropping out of college to help earn money for their expenses. It reached the point where it affected her daily life, frequently gritting her teeth and ignoring how overwhelming everything was in an attempt to function like everyone else. Even if she didn't know why she had the intense urge to run whenever she thought of their debts, she pretended the feeling didn't exist because it didn't help anyone. Worse, it would've been shameful when her mother had been carrying the burden alone before Julia stepped up to do her duty as well.

Everyone said the Hunos implant would help her live a better life because she wouldn't be inhibited by her excessive worrying anymore. The only thing that mattered to Julia was that Hunos could give her the clear-headedness she needed to be a reliable provider for her family. Recently though, she could feel the implant struggling to keep up with her own anxiety if the frequency of the tingling was anything to go by. If the Hunos failed, what would happen? Would it be Julia's fault or the implant?

"Ate Jhu?" Julia turned around, focusing on the adolescent boys staring at her. "Um, when is the electricity coming back?"

"... Maybe tomorrow or the day after that" Julia mumbled, shifting on her foot and hoping they didn't find it weird or alarming that she stood in the middle of the room and stared into nothing for who knows how many minutes. "Nay and I are trying our best to pay the bill as soon as possible. Why?"

“It’s just...” Mark, the taller twin, glanced at Matt. The latter just shot him a deadpan look and nudged his side, hard enough for his brother to yelp out loud. Julia watched their interaction, confused but was enlightened soon enough when Mark continued, “I have to submit some requirements and college applications online.”

“Me, too. Plus, we’ll be having a paid team-building seminar for one of my organizations” Matt added. He pursed his lips and looked at the ground, the only sign that he felt bad at the situation they were in on his otherwise expressionless face. “I just wanted to let you know so we could set aside some money for that. Don’t worry, the seminar is not that urgent. I don’t even have to go.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You just told me earlier that your adviser said you could lose a lot of extracurricular points if you don’t attend” Mark grumbled, glaring at his twin. “That might help with college applications.”

Julia felt a pang in her chest. “Okay, I understand. How much do you guys need?”

Once the money was handed over to the twins, Julia took a moment to observe them. She wondered if they had dreams and if they were limited by the financial situation they were in. Much as she wanted to give them the best of everything, she knew it was highly improbable, if not impossible. Just making sure their basic needs were met was a feat with the measly amount she and her mother got paid for their work.

“I’m home! Good thing I bought candles or we would’ve spent the night in complete darkness” her mother’s voice rang out, moving close as she approached them. “Sorry, I couldn’t pay the bill today. Only less than half of the people who owed me paid up today. I’ll try to borrow from some friends tomorrow. I tried asking for another salary advance too but apparently,

I'm still repaying the one I requested for the Hunos insertion surgery. Oh well. Boys, put this bag on the table and help your Ate Jhu to organize the groceries."

Julia sighed but at least had an idea now that her mother mentioned the salary advance. She knew what she would do next. Yet, even with the knowledge, her limbs were leaden and her movements were sluggish as she did the clinic's opening routine alone again. However, the sensation was gone after a few minutes, replaced by an uncharacteristic energy that was comparable to drinking a few cups of coffee to get that caffeine rush. Julia tried not to think about what that implied, not when her Hunos was mostly calibrated for calming her down because of her anxiety.

"Hunos Pharmaceuticals has decided to compensate families—"

Julia perked up, staring at the tiled floor of the sterilization room. She paused and backtracked, holding the clean rag they used for wiping down the dental chairs. Immersed in the news report, she didn't notice the breath she was holding.

"—affected by the suicide epidemic related to their implants. However, only those who have availed their latest model are qualified as the company asserts that the older ones are safe to use. The Department of Health demanded—"

Julia frowned and glanced up when the flow of sound was cut off. An index finger pressed on the smooth LED display and when she drew her eyes up to the owner, she ended up making eye contact with one of the assistants that just came in. When he saw Julia looking at him, he reeled back a little before stammering, "Oh, sorry, were you listening? I thought someone left the radio on and forgot it like usual. I could turn it back on."

"No, don't worry. It's fine" Julia told him, the newfound information still rattling around in the back of her mind. "Just help me with the opening routine."

In the lull that followed after they finished their tasks, Julia's feet led her to one of the consultation rooms. She already checked their schedule and knew that the first appointment wasn't until eleven in the morning. With some time left, she knocked on the door three times and prepared herself for the worst.

"Come in" a voice called out. Dr. del Rosario's face was neutral as Julia walked inside the room, the door clicking shut behind her. "What is it?"

"Hello, Dr. del Rosario" she greeted, ignoring the irritation on the older woman's face. Julia noticed the ledger spread out on top of the table. The dentist was probably checking again how much profit her clinic made. "Sorry for disturbing you. I just wanted to know if I can ask for a salary advance."

The dentist looked past the rim of her glasses, pinning a piercing gaze on Julia. The young woman could feel the tips of her fingertips starting to go numb at the expression. A calmness traveled throughout her body in response, just in time for her to focus on her superior's reply.

"You're still paying for the X-ray machine's repair after you broke one of the scanner arms, remember? It was before you got your Hunos implant. You had a panic attack and pushed on it too hard when you knew it was fragile." Julia winced at the reminder. "I don't think it would be a good idea for the clinic to approve your salary advance from a business perspective."

"But you can still deduct it from what I receive, right? And the policy said there's a six-month repayment window with a 2% interest rate for advances—"

"Miss Jimenez, I really don't think the clinic could afford approving your request at the moment. Sorry."

Julia would've believed those words if it weren't for the almost-bored tone directed at her while Dr. del Rosario leaned back on her chair. In her mind, she was screaming at the dentist to check the ledgers first before giving her verdict. Couldn't she see how desperate she was? If only there was some other way to live without driving her family to bankruptcy. If only she earned more than she did now...

However, her implant didn't waste another second to let her feel her indignation, leaving her hollow and a little like a candle that ran out of wick to burn, her emotion only existing in her memory now. Still, she couldn't help but wonder: was there really no other way? The payment contract for the machine repairs only required her to surrender half of her salary. Deducting three-quarters of her salary was just a slight change. It wouldn't matter much and Julia wouldn't have felt it that much, not when all of it goes to her family's expenses anyways. At this point, there was really nothing left to do except to show she wasn't an ingrate and risk offending her superior. Julia spewed out a "thank you" that she didn't mean before slinking out of the room.

Maybe she shouldn't have gotten the Hunos implant since it was just an added expense that didn't even deliver its promise to make her life better. The overwhelming emotions were replaced by a void within her, expanding with each passing moment that she had to rely on Hunos to not collapse into a pathetic, sobbing mess. Why did she even feel this way in the first place? She didn't know. No one ever bothered to ask or try to examine the cause. However, Julia heard of therapy as another option to treat mental health issues, although it was more expensive than Hunos and required more time and effort, even more than the traditional psychotropic medicine. It was only mentioned once during her first checkup when the doctor presented the option of figuring out what caused the inexplicable fear that gripped her from time to time,

especially when it came to money. However, when they visibly balked at the price of availing the service, it was never brought up again.

What else could she do? There was no one left to borrow money from and even the salary advance didn't work out. What other possibilities were available to her, given the situation?

Then, Julia remembered the morning news on the radio. The Hunos compensation sounded like a wild idea, never mind the qualifications needed before being granted. Even as she thought that, Julia entertained the idea: what if she took her own life? Logically, the compensation would be high enough to buy a family's silence to prevent further damage to their reputation. Perhaps, it could be used to pay the remaining hospital bill if they didn't consider it null and void, leaving just enough money for her family to live comfortably for a few months. She'd probably have to ask for the cheapest funeral and burial option out there to minimize the expenses.

It was absurd and morbid to contemplate her own suicide in exchange for an improvement in her family's finances. Yet... Julia couldn't deny that she wasn't tempted by the possibility of doing it. Was it too extreme? Maybe but what other choice did she have that would solve her problems right away? It was exhausting to be mentally ill, even more so if you were unfortunate enough to be poor. Why did things turn out this way? She just wanted to help as much as she could and to stop thinking of the worst outcome every time they were a centavo or a thousand pesos short on their budget.

As she tried to focus on work, hoping that her mother had more luck with getting the money they needed, Julia pondered. Would she have to feel this way if they were rich instead? However, as she mulled over it, she decided they didn't have to be drowning in wealth. At this point, just a pay raise would be enough to at least make their daily lives more bearable. What

would it be like to stop wondering if today was the day there would be no food on their table?

Julia blinked hard, her drifting attention focusing back on the dental surgery room she was cleaning. It might be just in her head but for the rest of the day, it was as if the Hunos implant in her nape absorbed the weight of the world and pressed down on her..