

Poached:
A Singu-La Story

by Mike Wirsch

Please do not take this literally, buddy.

-Bük-Wan, Deesh-Wan Translation, 1:1

This is an allegory, lady.

-Bük-Wan, Dat-Wan Translation, 1:1

1.

There was an old saying in Singu-La about there being two kinds of people. A *frütfrütmaus* was the kind of person who would help carry your groceries. A *chukchukmaus* would cut a hole in the bottom of your bag. But Hana did not know anyone who would carry groceries for free, and if there was a hole in the bottom of your grocery bag, you probably did something to deserve it. Most people Hana knew were more like the punching bag she hammered in the gym, neither *frütfrütmaus* nor *chukchukmaus*, and hard enough to put up a fight just by getting hit.

Tiny jewels of blood began to form on Hana's knuckles, as red as her irises. She stained her sparring pads with every blow. It was time to stop training. The sun would be rising soon anyway, cooking the streets and any unfortunate souls who happened to be caught walking on them.

BUH! BUH! BUH!

Three blasts from the morning horn alerted everyone in the gym they had thirty minutes until the celestial source of all life killed everything with its solar radiation. The gym began to clear out.

“Your body is more resilient than you think it is,” Camel said from beneath his mask. His mother had made it specially for for him, with a fabric that breathed and kept his disfigured face cool in Singu-La's harsh climate. The lower part of the mask separated into squid-like tentacles that allowed him to speak, eat, and drink without fully exposing the thing he called a mouth. It left something to the imagination, and Camel hoped people imagined a very nice mouth. This particular mask was black, but Camel had an entire collection in Meanie's immobile home. He claimed he wore them to spare others from having to look at his face, but Hana knew he was also sparing himself from their judgement.

“But it's still better that we get to Meanie's before sunrise,” Camel finished, his voice deep, wheezy for a man of thirty-six years. He tossed Hana's blood-stained sparring pads next to his satchel. As long as only she used them, no one else was at risk. She had been irritable since her diagnosis, and the gym offered a place for her to vent her frustrations and bury her fear. A heavy punching bag spun lazily from the ceiling. Hana attacked this bag every day, but she was the one who bled, never the bag. The bag was fine. She gave it a goodbye kick, and it folded a little in the center. Its support chain rattled, and it bobbed goodbye. A couple young men looked up at the noise and nodded their approval at the compact girl in the corner with the red eyes. She wiped her face with a rag and sat on a bench.

Camel rummaged through his satchel for a poultice. Hana insisted on sparring gloveless, like her hero Benni “The Dagger” Dagsson, who had fists like cinder blocks. Hana told Camel she wanted harder bones and leathered skin on her knuckles, but he suspected she just enjoyed the pain and the distraction it provided. When she was nine, a friend tattooed a dagger on Hana's forearm, just like Benni's. At least she was not into drugs, Camel figured.

Hana's bloody fists were as lethal as Benni's, but they delivered death in a slower, more horrifying way than through jabs and hooks. A deadly virus lived in her blood, and the open wounds on her knuckles were disease vectors. Hana was convinced she could also kill a person with a quick rabbit-punch if the occasion called for it, but Camel insisted that was not the point of their gym visits. Training was for self-defense, protection, and survival. It also slowed the spread of her disease, which is part of why it took so long for symptoms to manifest. The gym acted as Hana's temple of sorts, and Camel as her priest and sponsor. It was a place of alchemy, where anger and stress were churned into sweat and exhaustion. Hana would train until she could not lift her arms, or feel her hands, or *think*. Anyone watching would assume she was perfectly healthy. Hana showed no weakness, but heart would only get her so far.

Everyone in Singu-La felt ill, from lack of sunlight; or lack of sleep; or lack of clean air; or too much sunlight; or too much sleep; or if they lived in the Egg, from too much clean air. But Hana did not *feel* ill. Hana *was* ill, though she had not been officially diagnosed, not by a licensed apothic, at least. Hana had never seen a licensed apothic in her life, and no self-respecting apothic with a license would see someone like her. She would not even know about her illness, were it not for Camel's intuition. But that intuition led to some tests, and those tests confirmed the worst.

Neuraquaxia was a sexually-transmitted virus that began to spread some years before Hana was born. Her mother must have been a carrier, and she passed it along to Hana. For most of her life Hana was asymptomatic, but little by little the symptoms showed. First, the floaters in the eyes. Strange for a teenager, but she assumed it had something to do with her ocular history. After all, Hana was the only girl she knew with red irises. They were products of eye surgery, and so too were the floaters. Or so she thought. Then her fingernails began to brittle. She figured that had to do with her diet. How many vitamins were in Cuppa-Meat and Powder-Aid? Her frequent bloody noses could be explained by the dry air. Nothing a humidifier could not fix. But a humidifier could not fix the truth. The disease would take years before it eventually cooked her brain into chili. Some wit gave it the euphemistic nickname the "Slow Clap," and it stuck. Hana had the Slow Clap.

Camel squatted down and wrapped her hands in a poultice of cool, wet leaves from his satchel. He was not worried about contracting her illness, as he had taken measures to protect himself. His private apothicary was dedicated to curing the Slow Clap, or at least making the Slow Clap slower. And Camel had successfully developed a holistic pre-exposure treatment that would lower his chance of becoming infected. He offered this treatment in pill form to anyone in the Immobiles who wanted it, as sort of a public service. He even gave out detailed instructions

on how to make these pills from scratch. Unfortunately for Hana, these pills only protected people before exposure. They could not cure her.

Hana looked around the gym. Most people had exited, but a few guys moved towards the back and opened a cooler. They drank bottles of Powder-Aid (the blue kind) and began to clear equipment from the gym floor. Some guys set up goals at either end of the gym, and Hana heard the echo of rubber bouncing on concrete. The sound portended an after-hours game of gentleball, a game much more violent than its name implied. The guys finished their Powder-Aids, and each side armed itself with cudgels for beating the gentleball ball, or colloquially, the “nad.” A team scored when a player used his cudgel to beat the nad between his opponents' goalposts. If a player missed a shot and hit the back wall, that player would become a target for the other team until he successfully touched the wall himself. Half the guys removed their shirts, revealing purple welts from where the nad had pelted them in previous games. Gentleball played like a melee with a dash of sport peppered in, and very few rules. One of the guys, a large, tattooed fellow named Kosta, invited Hana to play every time they had a game, but she always declined. She hated team sports, and she hated relying on others. Besides, the cots at the gym did not look very comfortable, and tagging on to a gentleball game this late meant spending the day trapped inside with the other gym rats. Hana wanted to make it home before sunrise. She wanted to sleep in her bed one last time before she and Camel set out the next night.

The guys set the nad in the middle of the gym floor and assumed their positions at either side of the converted court. By now their body temperatures had basically dropped to normal, or what was considered normal in Singu-La. Everyone in Singu-La felt the heat, choking them like a sweaty hand on a stress ball, but no one *saw* it the way Hana did. She visually detected the slight change in infrared light leaving their sweaty bodies, a phenomenon that manifested as a deep brownish-red layered over top of the visible world's usual color scheme. Her ruby-red eyes

were capable of actually seeing heat, and in Singu-La, there was always plenty of heat to see. This helped Hana call bluffs during card games, but beyond that it was kind of a nuisance.

She pulled her hood over her oily, fried hair and put on her goggles. Camel did the same and tossed his satchel over his shoulder. Like most people in the Immobiles, they dressed in beige.

“Bye,” said Hana to the guys. They waved and nodded, and Kosta gestured as if to say, “There is room for one more.” Hana forced a smile and pulled the gym door open. The poisonous predawn light stabbed through the space, and the guys squinted. They were not really her friends, but they knew her face, and they were always polite. Maybe because she always trained with a large, threatening man in a mask, or maybe they all assumed she was carrying a gun, because everyone in Singu-La carried a gun. What none of these men knew was that Hana had the Slow Clap. And none of them knew that at sunset tomorrow, Camel and Hana planned to change that.

The Slow Clap was not incurable. In fact, it had a well-documented cure. But if Hana and Camel wanted it, they would have to take it. A whistle blew, and the gentleball game began.

“Let's go home and get some sleep,” said Camel. “We have an early evening tomorrow.”

2.

“Here, you want a ride home?” Camel asked, bending low for Hana to climb on his shoulders. When they first met six years ago, she always said yes. Now Hana left Camel half-bent and waiting.

“I can walk on my own,” she said.

“Come on, you're tired,” said Camel. “Make me feel useful.”

Hana's muscles ached and shivered the same way they did after every workout, the kind of weakness that eventually led to strength. Camel lowered to one knee, making him Hana's height. With a half-smile, Hana shook her head and climbed onto his shoulders. Camel stood, and suddenly Hana was ten feet tall.

“I guess this is why they call you Camel,” she told her human pack animal. He did not answer, but Hana could feel him smiling. The sun still hid below the horizon, but its deadly rays crept up like light gleaming off a razor. Overhead, the Singu-La sky maintained its usual orange glow, the color of sweaty cheese left on a plate after a party. It dulled the graffiti spray-painted on various buildings: mostly narcissistic bubble signatures left by the artists, with the occasional penis sprayed over top for variety. The only good graffiti was the patchwork painted outside the gym. Portraits of lost loved ones, impossible landscapes, seascapes, and funky psychedelic patterns all came together in a mesmerizing collage. And somehow no one ever painted a penis over it.

From her roost on Camel's shoulders, Hana watched the buncum junkies crawl to their shady places: abandoned homes, underground tunnels, buncum trailers. She identified them by the green powder caked around their nostrils, an erroneum byproduct more potent than hocus, but with a much shorter high. Hana only sold the drug when she was desperate, and she had not been that desperate since Camel came into the picture. And she never tested the product. Scabs

covered the buncum junkies' faces, and she did not think it a good look for her. Camel continued walking the bone-white street, being mindful of the potholes and cracks.

“Someday I'll buy a pair of hover-shoes,” said Hana.

“Buy? Not steal?” Six years Camel had known Hana, and though she was only seventeen now, he had a hard time shaking her of old habits. Camel called her a thief, but Hana found that too narrow a label. She preferred the term “hustler.” After all, thievery only made up part of her income. She also sold buncum, traded autocab parts, gambled, and occasionally did legitimate, boring work.

“Yes,” she said. “I'll buy the hover-shoes with the money I steal.” Camel laughed. A woman in a belly-shirt passed them, wearing the expression of someone debating whether or not to spit on Camel.

“Which one was that?” Hana asked.

“I don't know. I get them confused.”

“Are they still trying to kill you?”

“No,” said Camel. “I am no longer a baby.”

By now the sun kissed the horizon, so Camel picked up the pace. Fortunately the residential section of the Immobiles was not far from the gym. Just on the outskirts of Hedge City, the homes rose up out of the dirt like the reanimated corpses of dead trailers, half-buried and half-exposed. In theory, burying the lower halves of the homes was supposed to regulate their temperatures, but Hana had no idea if it actually worked. The difference of a few degrees would not make Meanie's home a winter wonderland. From Hana's vantage point on Camel's shoulders, the homes looked even tinier than usual. Every home was off-white, but each one had its own personality. Graffiti decorated some of the homes, the Singu-La flag waved in front of others, and fake plants lined the borders of certain properties, marking the territories of barren,

sandy dirt patches the residents called home.

A man lay on the side of the street, his nostrils crusted over with green powder. Even from her perch on Camel's shoulders, Hana smelled the rot steaming from the man's pores. Camel lowered her to the ground and pressed a boot into the man's side. His stomach raised and lowered with his breath, but he did not open his eyes.

Camel sighed, gripped the man under his armpits, and began to drag him into the shadow of an alleyway. The man stayed completely limp, except for his jaw.

“What the fuck are you doing? Hey! Fuck you, you piece of catshit! Mind your Wandamn business!”

Camel dropped the man in the alley and left him there, safe from the approaching daylight. He and Hana walked away while the man continued his diatribe, his incoherent litany eventually being replaced by the gentle tinkling of metal-on-metal as the pair approached Meanie's unit. The sun had beaten the color out of her rainbow wind-chimes, but they still sounded nice when the rare breeze moved them. Hana and Camel walked down the slope to her front door, until the walls of dirt on either side climbed about a meter high. Hana looked at Camel and wrinkled her nose.

“You better scrub those hands with bleach.”

BBBBBBUUUUUHHHHHH!!!!!!

The sun peeked over the horizon, and Hana's eyes detected the immediate rise in heat. It was time to go inside.

3.

“Where's the hot party this morning, Denyse?” Ruth asked her fresh-faced coworker as they clocked out of their reception jobs in the Wellness Unit.

“I don't know. We work tomorrow.”

“So? *I just wanna groove, I'll be drinkin' all the booze, getting' boom-boom in my room, then I'll do it agaaaaaaiiiin...*” Ruth sang the lyrics to the hit UTI song, “Boom-Boom Drink Party.” Her coworker showed no expression.

“Night, Ruth.”

Ruth took the elevator down to the affordable housing units on Floor Minus Sixteen and walked to her apartment, a good size apartment for one person, with enough room for her bed *and* refrigerator. It even had a separate bathroom, which made it a little more expensive than some of the other units.

The lighting would have been harsh, had Ruth not taken the time to adhere rose-colored tissue paper over all of the bulbs, a trick she picked up from her favorite Appendage video star, BlessedByGrace. It gave her home a peaceful glow, which she needed after a ten hour shift. It was a fire hazard, but serenity was worth the risk. And tomorrow she would take a risk greater than home décor. She inhaled deeply and tuned out the muffled sounds of a couple's argument seeping through her walls. Lower frequencies still managed to bleed into Ruth's personal space, even with the sound-proofing her son, Tau, had installed years ago when he also lived in the Egg. At least she could no longer hear the Underbelly clanging and clacking directly below her. The complex's powerhouse was located on floor minus seventeen, the Egg's lowest level before the parking garage, and it was *loud*. Ruth popped some Cuppa-Meat into her microwave, lay down on her bed, and turned on her Appendage. On the screen, BlessedByGrace commented while watching a tutorial: “What To Do When I Accidentally Get Too Tan?”

A framed image of an island paradise hung over Ruth's bed, with a panel of glass laid over top. It was better than a window, because she could change the view whenever she wanted. For now, the palm trees and tranquil sea in the frame reminded her of happier times. Only a thin panel of glass separated her from this island bliss.

Below the window she hung a needlework quote from Bük-Wan: “Love makes more love.” She couldn't remember if it was from the Deesh-Wan or Dat-Wan translation. She always got the two sects confused, which probably made her a bigot. Still, the sentiment was nice. Pretty sayings filled both translations of Bük-Wan, and Ruth appreciated the text. She did not hate the Deesh-Wan or Dat-Wan people like her son's father did, although she had plenty of reason she should. Then again, “Most things happen for a reason,” went the Bük-Wan quote, and Ruth could not argue with that kind of cause-and-effect logic. She had not thumbed through her pocket copy in a long time. It sat on her bedside table underneath a half-finished container of pills designed to make her vaginal fluids taste like juniper berries. They were incredibly expensive, but Malcolm had given them to her as a gift, probably more for him than for her. Who knows if they even worked anymore?

BlessedByGrace spoke over the tutorial.

“...You should be careful with tanning, because you do run the risk of overdoing it...”

An old-fashioned, paper photograph of Ruth and her sons rested on her bedside table. Malcolm was not in the picture when it was taken, and he was not in the picture now. But she could not be angry with him after all he had done for her and Tau. Her sons smiled, watching her while she watched BlessedByGrace watch the tutorial.

“You might think, 'If I look good after five minutes of tanning, I'll look fabulous after ten minutes...”

Beep!

Ruth's Cuppa-Meat was ready. Boiling hot with an ice-cold center of course, but if she stirred it enough the temperature would even out. Balance. It would practically taste the same as real meat.

Ruth sporked some into her mouth and burned her tongue on the first bite. She sucked an ice cube past her lips and exhaled in short bursts before sitting back on her bed.

“...There are a bunch of different un-tanning pastes out there, but my favorite brand is –”

Ruth turned off her Appendage. She bit down on her ice cube, barely missing her tongue in the process, and looked at the picture of her sons. Colin was okay, she knew that for a fact. But Tau... She had not seen Tau in six years. And she knew the nasty things people said about him were not true. Lazy parents used him as a threat to get their children to behave.

Go to sleep, or the Camelman will get you.

They saw what they wanted to see. Everyone saw what they wanted to see. She opened a drawer in her bedside table and felt the newly-finished mask she had been sewing, this one with powder blue tentacles. She would give it to the man tomorrow to give to her son. Maybe she would even get to see her son for herself. *And if not*, she thought, *most things happen for a reason*. For instance, anxiety was the reason Ruth was wide awake, and the well-being of the so-called “Camelman” was the reason for that anxiety.

Go to sleep or the Camelman will get you.

Ruth stood up from her bed. Malcom Thistlemouth was the reason Tau still lived, and Ruth thought it appropriate to pay him a visit.