



SOAPMAN

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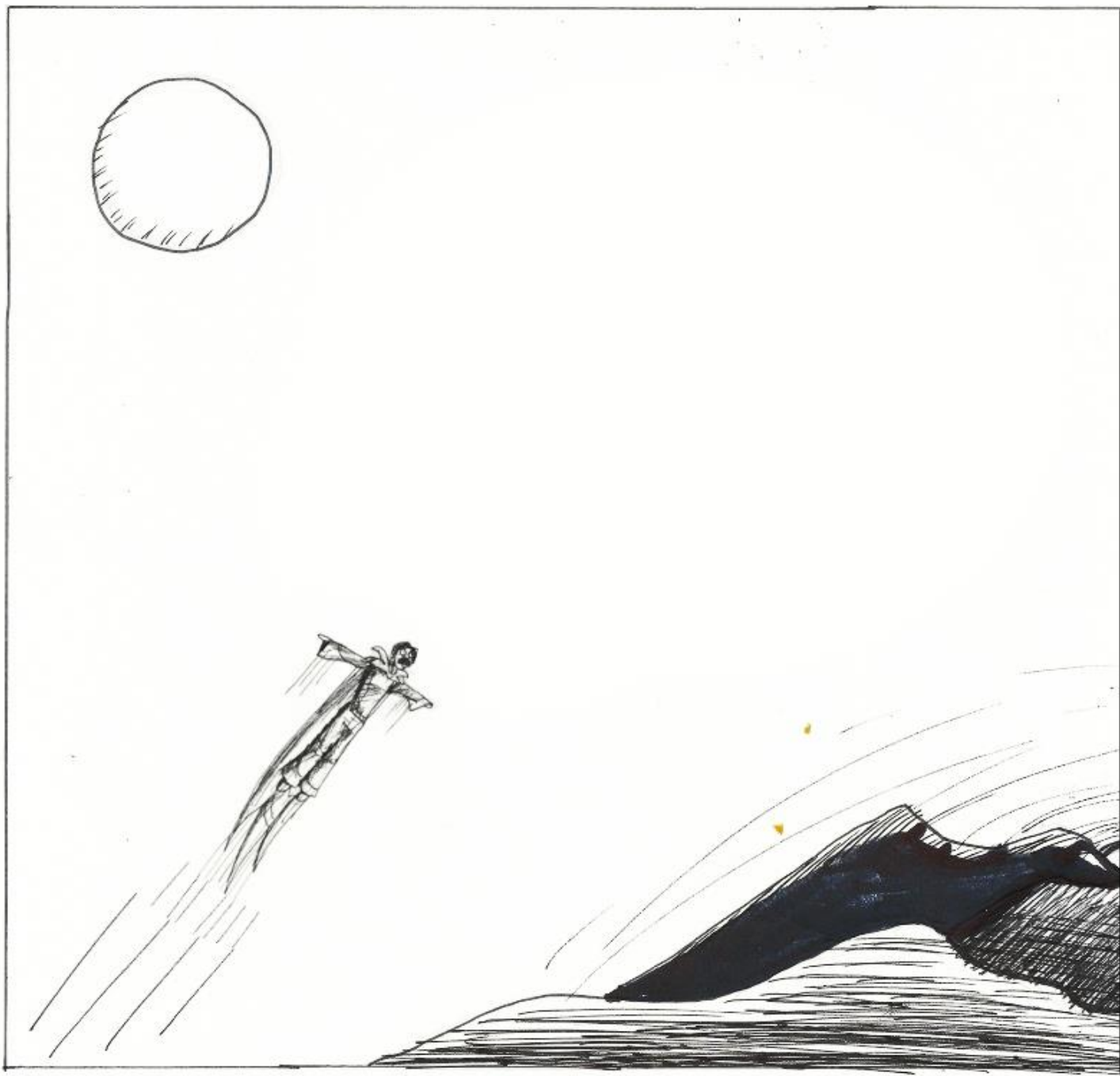
Created by Peter Volpone

Chapter 0 / LOADING

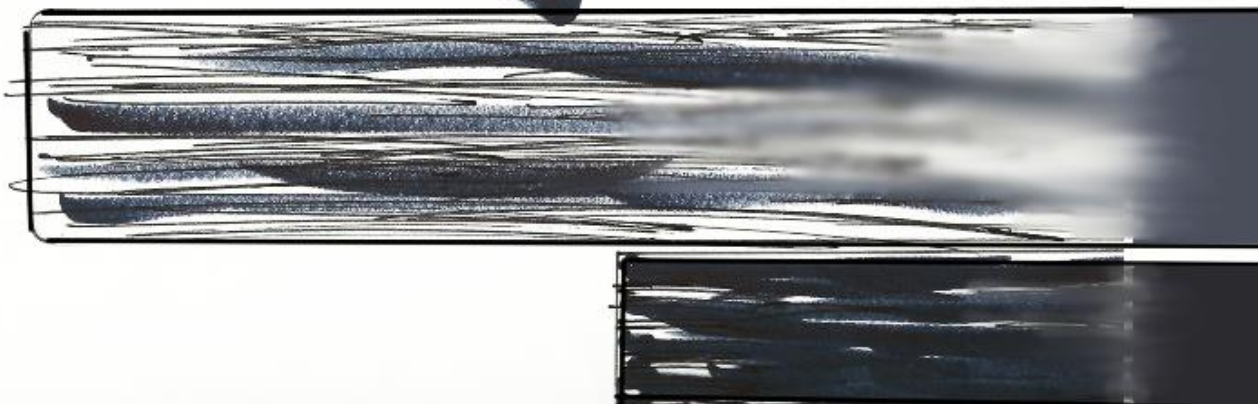








Introducing



Peter Volpone

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So on

I wake from an adrenaline dream when the boot of life kicks against my bedframe. Bed is a generous term, I sleep inside of a 42-inch CRT television, one of those giant boxes from the past people used to watch *The Matrix* and old Disney movies on VHS. A few months back, I found a trove of the things junked by an alley dumpster and kicked out the largest screen. Sleeping took some time to get used to, it's cramped but when I roll myself into a ball it's alright. So far it's been a good shelter from gutter drippings; nothing is worse than waking up at 3 AM to sludge water plopping on your forehead, and nowhere is safe without an overhead. I stacked the smaller guys around to build a makeshift tower. In my free time, I've been collecting abandoned televisions and growing my trash castle.

Still in a groggy transition state, I notice the boot of life is leather and belongs to Shake, my manager from the Ceiba Soap. It's an independent company created by a man known as Sensei Slang. He hired me two weeks back. We have a job today.

"Get up," Shake grouches. I am rarely awake when he arrives to pick me up, so our relationship is rocky. As 'manager', he makes sure the guys and I make a profit and get home safe. Really, he is our body guard. I haven't seen him in action yet, but he's an old partner of the Sensei- the two allegedly survived many deadly adventures in the past. Peeking my head between jagged shards of screen glass, I see his brown leather jacket, the one that has rings on either side of the chest that look like metal nipples. I wonder if he's ever noticed or cared. Alongside his jacket, he wears faded grey jeans that he's rolled up at his boot necks and a cross-armed pose of no BS. Four long fangs punctuate his infamous grimace, hanging from his protruding nose. His whole head is covered in pale orange scales, emphasizing his thick brow structure, adorned by vertically split third eye in the middle of his forehead. He is smaller in size but tough as tidal wave. I'm not sure his age, but I'd guess mid-thirties.

He is an Ori, an original creation of our new world, born from the Earth unlike humans who are still made the old-fashioned way. We have long dominated the planet, exhausting all other animal species, but the world works in funny ways. Once we were all that was left, the planet began generating new forms of intelligent creatures: bipedal thumb-wielding dreamers like us, just with extra physical attributes akin to old animals. I think Shake resembles a reptile or a snake, I guess that's where he gets his name.

He slams his boot into the side of my home again then turns without words.

Behind him I see my usual co-workers, Big Bill and Sack. Big Bill smirks,

"Sorry to interrupt your dreams." An amusing jab because I space out constantly. They all give me shit for it. Sack waves high above his head but gives a mellow,

"Sup." I meet it with a friendly grumble and hoist myself out of my plastic cage. Turning back to check myself in the largest screen stalactite, my reflection shows I still have smooth dark hair, tan skin, and a chevron mustache, all pretty much in place. Showering is a luxury, so I settle on finger brushing. Twenty-five with bags under my eyes, an old soul showing signs on my young face. I dust off my one-piece comforter, draped from neck to toe, designed with a peacock feather print. It's basically a sleeping bag-cape so you can walk around or pop a squat. They're great for protecting against the city chill and the desert sun, plus you can sleep wherever you want. Functional and trendy by design.

Anyways, I grab my brief case, my only valuable possession, out from my TV with a swoop and head to the hover truck. It's a beat up, big bed pick-up with no roof that floated on electromagnetic plates where traditional wheels would be. It was once bumble bee yellow, I

assume, but now it's faded with rust. I think the company has used it since the beginning. I hop in the back with my boys and settle into the ratty cushion lining the sides of the truck bed.

Big Bill hits play on our ancient jukebox, produced thousands of years before our time. It's a wonder it still runs. He's a music fiend who has an assortment of collector CD's and tapes, so we let him DJ our commutes. The mix starts with a lo-fi hip hop track. A simple beat plays over a haunting synth melody.

THOUGHTS CAN'T SOLVE PROBLEMS
Y'ALL GOTTA BALL, TOSS IT
FUCK PASSIVE, TAKE ACTION
YOU'RE IN CHARGE
MAKE IT HAPPEN WITH THE PASSION
OF A SUPERMASSIVE STAR...

"Argh, this shit?" groans Shake

"Yo, it's No Bone Snake, this dude's a cut-throat," defends Sack as a fan of Bill's taste. Bill just smiles, focusing on the song over the critique.

"Ha, I'd like to meet him," Shake slams on the gas and we we're off.

BUT WE'RE ILL, SEEKING REMEDY
TO LIFT US OUT OF OUR HOLE
HOLEY GHOST HAS WORN THIN ON ME
HARD TIMES POKING OHS
IN MY DREAMS LIKE SWISS CHEESE SHEETS
PRESS PRINTED IN GREEN
ENVY AND GREED CUT AND SOLD ON THE STREETS...

I zone out. I'm not sure where Ol' No Bone Snake was from but it must have been like here. We live in The SUHS, where our legitimate buildings are crafted out of cardboard and our skies are lined with intricate gutter systems that funnel down what we believe is water to run our soggy city. The only light we get is from the surrounding desert at sunrise and sunset due to the cloud of darkness above us.

The SUHS flashes by with twinkles of electric shop lights, windows of multi-story cardboard apartment complexes, and the beat-up hover cars and bikes we pass on the road. Few people are awake at this hour, but I can see some sleeping on sidewalks and benches. The air glows cool hues of purple. I'm not sure where we were going today, the desert is a safe bet.

Big Bill was rocking to the beat so I tune back to the song.

CHASING THE DRAGON'S TAIL BUT FAIL
TO RELIVE MY LIFE
STRIVING FOR A HIGH
LIGHT TO GUIDE ME RIGHT
CHAINED BY THE LACK OF CHANGE
PROFESSOR BENJAMIN CHANG
COOPED ORANGUTAN GOING INSANE
EATING TV ON REPEAT
RERUNS FOR FUN CUZ I CAN'T BEAT THIS REPEAT
CYCLE OF DAYS
DEFEATED AND DAZED
FEEL LIKE IM CRAZY
MAKING A MENTAL MAZE
A FLAVORLESS FACADE PERFORMED FOR GOD
AM I LIVING?

“You don’t have something else to bump?” Shake is pained. I kind of lost myself in the word spiral. Big Bill reluctantly cuts the track and searches his bag for another tape.

We ride to the silence of the engine for a minute, until we pass under the “Now Exiting The SUHS” sign. I am stunned by the flash of fluorescent pink sunrise peeking over the horizon. The sky is blown up with soft warm tones. I forget to breathe for a second. The god tree behind us draws my attention, the roots are massive, dwarfing us like bugs. The SUHS, our home, a city thriving in its own destitution, is nestled in a nook formed under the intersection of two dragon like roots that move perpendicularly into the desert and over the horizon. I wonder if there are other civilizations around the base of the tree.

Legends say a journey around the base would take over a year’s time by car. Some more spiritual folks travel it by foot, searching for the great answers to life, although I’ve never known anybody to take it. The tree, itself, Ceiba Mundi is our world. It’s called the god tree because it shoots high past the point of comprehension. One bushel of brown leaves parachutes around the base, blocking the sky for miles, to the point it is night at noon. Most people dream of climbing the tree one way or another. Explorers are still fighting to climb to the very top, nobody has discovered what is up there yet. Some hope for power or enlightenment, others crave the adventure and discovery. It’s that hope which keeps the people on the ground going but we rarely leave the surface.

I notice Sack and Bill lost in a similar gaze, wide eyed with a smile. I am smiling too. Everyone is in their own world for a moment.

Big Bill, is a large shouldered half-Ori reminiscent of a lion with dark skin who shaves his mane tight around his face except for the crown of his head, which poofs up into a ball of

fuzzy black hair. For the most part, he looks human; his face and eyes are angular but relaxed in thought, his nose is broad, small fangs poke out from under his lip, and his ears pointed up and out. White bushels of hair sprout from his ears and eyebrows. Like Sack and I, he wears a walking comforter which is pale blue with large sky-blue diamonds of various sizes printed all around. He fixates on Ceiba Mundi and doesn't see me staring. We call him Big Bill because he is bigger than the rest of us, no story there. I like him alright, he is an introvert like myself around my age and usually says something insightful when he speaks, if he isn't harassing any of us.

Sack is also an Ori, something like a younger frog guy, late teens early twenties, who has a round apple green head and a sharp jaw that goes right into his neck. When he relaxes, he scrunches down so his shoulders meet his chin, giving him a Sack like appearance, at least that's my guess to his name. His ears are large round caves on the side of his head. His eyes are striking, black irises with neon blue pupils framed by orange rings around his eyelids, that casts a mesmerizing gaze. Above his eyes large half-circle orange eyebrows printed flat against his forehead. He nestled into his rich yellow comforter that has an off-center orange circle printed on it. Another unique trait he has are his lack of hands, or I guess his giant hands. Basically, his hands and forearms connect without wrists, rounding off at stubby fingers. They are great for punching but lack finesse.

Once the road turns to sand, Shake hits the gas and we fly into the open desert: no man's land. There are small outposts here and there, but this is a lawless territory. Ori's and humans fight for survival in any way they see fit.

Sack loses interest in the tree and looks bored, so he turns his attention to Bill.

“Still staring at the tree Big Bill? You know it’s the same every day.” Bill turns his gaze down to Sack in disappointment.

“Sack, you ever hear the word ‘sublime’?”

“It means super chill, I think.” Sack can be dense, so I chime in with,

“It’s like the mixture of awe and fear that you get when you’re dwarfed by nature.”

“Well good morning sunshine,” replies Bill, surprised to hear my voice.

“Sublime, Sunshine. It’s all the same to me,” says Sack, resting his chin on one of his massive palms, “We pass by this stuff every day. At least a couple times a week.” As he says this, the truck passes by a man smoking a jack a large rock next to his desert three-wheeler. We call them trikes, sand vehicles that drag themselves by a large front tire with two low riders on either side of the back for support.

Sack finishes his thought, “I don’t feel anything special.”

“Really?” Bill replies.

“Let me try harder. FEEEEEEL!”

“Try living a little instead. You’ll die young with that attitude.”

“We all die sometime,” interrupts Shake from the driver’s seat.

“True dat,” reaffirms Sack, flexing his arms above his head.

“You don’t get it,” sighs Bill, losing gravity in the conversation.

“Don’t get what,” jabs Sack with his strange enthusiasm, “We work till we croak. Always on the clock.”

“The fact that we die is what makes our time valuable,” says Bill in all seriousness.

The drone of a motor dampens the conversation. I see the man from the rock racing after us on his trike on my side of the truck. I turn back to see two more trikers approaching the truck from behind Big Bill on the driver’s side. Bill’s eyes are on me but I am lost as to why.

“Well, what’s your say Bob?” asks Bill as if the conversation is still happening. I try to remember what they were talking about, something about time. I wing it with a question.

“How would you spend your time? You know, no restrictions?”

Suddenly, Shake slams the breaks and the truck screeches to a halt. There are a fourth and fifth triker standing directly in our path. The truck is surrounded at a stop. One of the two in front steps forward. He has on a metal bike helmet that covers his face, chubby head to fat nose, from which sprouts a comically large, ungroomed mustache that grows upward towards the dark shades over his eyes. A bombastic v-shaped crest adorns his helmet unlike the other four, it must mean he’s the captain. He swaggers towards us in his bright red leather jacket, bouncing a machete off his shoulder with each step.

“Hello, hello!” he bellows. Shake steps out of the truck to meet the threat.

In another world, Big Bill and Sack are lost in thought about the question I asked.

“Oh, I know!” exclaims Sack, “If I could do anything I wanted, I’d do two chicks at the same time.”

“Ayy, some things never change,” Bill laughs. How are they so aloof right now?

“Classic,” adds Shake, stepping right into the captain’s space unafraid.

“Are you dumb?” shouts the trike captain, annoyed that he is being ignored, “Behold and tremble before the might of the terrible Red Coat Trike...”

“What’s your business? Make it quick.” interrupts Shake. The captain’s face puckers in frustration.

“Well, we’re protecting this fine road here, and to be quick, we’ll be needing a cut of your rib. You know, for protection.”

“I appreciate your hustle, but my colleagues and I are headed to the market, so I’ll be quick too: move or be moved.” The captain is in Shake’s face studying his unique features.

“You fool, do you not realize the...” Before the captain could finish his boast, Shake slams his forehead into the man’s nose with a powerful headbutt. The captain sinks to the sand, nose gushing, barely conscious. Shake has a killer expression of disinterest on his blood splattered face. One of the other trikers screams a wild,

“HOOOO!” and leaps at Shake with two machetes. I am on the edge of my seat. Shake is really fighting for his life right now- our lives. Suddenly, Sack yells for my attention.

“I changed my mind Bob. If I could do anything, I’d rule the world!” He shouts, throwing his bulky hands high above his head. Was he joking again? Was he even paying attention to our situation?

“Rule the world, eh? How you gonna do that Sack?” Big Bill humors him.

“Well I’m going to work for the company until Sensei kicks the bucket. By then, I’ll be cut from years of manual labor. Once I’m a big shot business man, I’ll cash in my profits and woo some upper tree girl who can’t resist my charm and rippling muscles. Soap will once again

be a household item and the company will be a family name that operates from the top of the tree. I'll start making my moves on the government when I own a significant part of the media through advertising. Then I'll find a second wife who has some military connections and get some troops under my lead. It's a long-term project."

That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard someone say with hands on hips and head held high, cheesed with an ear to earhole smile. I can't help but be sarcastic.

"Wow, I didn't think you were so ambitious."

"What can I say, I'm a complex guy," he grins. Sack is dumb, but he certainly has his charm. He looks to me and Bill, "Well what about you guys?"

Just then, the triker that attacked Shake goes soaring through the air and crashes onto the hood of the truck, unconscious. Droplets of his blood splatter the windshield. Shake took him out during the conversation and is facing the next one. I want to watch the battle but Bill begins to talk.

"I don't have any sort of grand goal like Sack, but I'd climb the Ceiba Mundi. I'd see what's beyond those dry leaves. And hey, maybe I'll see our new world leader at the top someday." Bill looks dreamy eyed in picturing his future.

"Woah! You'd be just like Sensei and Shake did all those years ago," Sack is amazed. My eyes widen in respect as well. I didn't think either of these guys had any ambitions. Ceiba Soap salesman isn't a reliable job, with the drought on the ground, people rarely bathe so nobody buys the product. The starting pay isn't great either, I am still shy of renting a cardboard apartment. "Wait," Sack asks, "Don't you have to be super strong or rich to climb the tree? What's your plan there?"

“I’ve given it some thought,” contemplates Bill, “I’m not helpless on either front. But, I’ve got to save enough for me and Laney both. Can’t leave my girl behind.” I forgot that Big Bill had a girlfriend, he mentioned it before, but I never asked about her. He looks at me. “Anyway, you asked the question Bob. What would you do with no restrictions? What will you do with your time?”

I look downward, searching for an answer. I don’t have a pipe dream like ruling the world, let alone a goal for my future. I try to stay alive, stay low so I am not killed in the streets of The SUHS or fry to death in the desert sun. The only thing I put my free time towards is scavenging garbage for broken TV’s to add to my home. I guess I’d like to live in a castle, one that’s not built from trash, but that’s impossible for someone like me with no skills or drive. I’m a hopeless, worthless trash man who will probably die alone and forgotten.

“Well don’t keep us in suspense,” encourages Bill. I look up and see the two eagerly waiting my response, and behind them, a triker soaring through the air with two blades ready to take their heads off. The scene renders itself in slow motion. He will lop off both their heads in a clean swoop, then I’ll be left defenseless. Skewered by blood soaked blades, I’ll be tossed into the golden ocean, clawing for something to grab onto until everything turns black. My body will decompose to carbon and I’ll be reincarnated as a scorpion or something if I’m lucky.

Without thinking, I grab the handle of my briefcase and jump out of the truck bed, past Big Bill and Sack. With both hands and feet, I use it as a shield. Bracing myself against the briefcase, I block the assailant’s twin strike. The shock jolts through my limbs as I fly backwards to the rough sand of the desert floor, right on my spine while my briefcase bounces out of reach. I struggle to pick myself up as the triker stands over me, but my body is numb from the blow. His helmet is decorated with little spikes. I am about to be killed by a thug who thinks little

spikes made him look tough. Then, a low roar catches my ear and quickly grows to a deafening tone. The triker hears it too and whips his head in the direction of the noise.

Shake comes flying at him, riding one of the gang's desert trikes at full speed. He smashes into my attacker, whose body bends in an unnatural curve around the front tire like his bones are gelatin. Shake doesn't slow and powers over the man. I hear two loud crunches and the body flops into the blank desert before me. His neck is twisted upside down, his eyes stare blank at me from behind shattered sun glasses. He is dead. I am queasy and bite my lip.

Shake had crashed the trike over so one of the back wheels was up in the air and smoking and is walking towards me slowly. He gives me a look of assurance. I don't know how to respond so I remain motionless, hands pressed to the ground, sand sifting over my fingers.

"Let's move," he says calmly. His favorite phrase sounds surreal when it's not growled. "We've still got some miles before we reach Tucoco."

He staggers a step but catches himself. As he passes me, I notice a gash across his back through a deep tear in his leather jacket, oozing red over his scales. He must have taken a hit from a machete. One Ori defeats five armed men and can still walk. Incredible. He settles back into the driver's seat as if our morning was like any other. I follow his lead and pack myself back in the truck across from Sack and Bill. We drive.

All are silent for a few miles. The truck hums as we glide under the rising sun. The sky is an orangey pink glaze over a caramel brown ocean of sand, but early blues are showing themselves. I almost died just ten minutes ago, instead, the other guy was got. I can still see his upside-down head, eyes radiating lifelessness like staring into the void. I shiver.

Sack tries an icebreaker.

“Those were some smooth moves out there, Bob.” I don’t have anything to say so I force a smile, barely raising my head.

“Yeah, right before I had to save your sorry ass,” taunts Shake. I don’t have room to talk back, he did save my ass. “But, good job. Bob, you were surprisingly present. You’re usually off in dream land. Try taking action more often, it’ll do you wonders.” Shake has always been cold to me, this was a new side of him, a cold compliment.

“Speaking of dream land,” says Bill, “We told you ours, so what’s your dream?”

“I... Um...” I still don’t have an answer, I forgot there was even a question.

“Don’t mumble. You’ve got to have some gusto when you exclaim your heart to the universe!” encourages Sack. I remember Shake’s advice: act. No thought. I stood up in the back of the truck. Imitating Sack from before, I put my hands on my hips and tip my chin to the sky. With a goofy grin, I say,

“With all my time left alive, I want to go places and do things and never be bored!” My comforter blows dramatically in the wind, slapping Big Bill in the face. He and Sack give me a blank stare.

“Bwahaha!” Shake laughs from the driver’s seat.

I sit back down and turn to the sand to avoid eye contact with the others. Bill starts the music again. A bombastic beat hits me in the chest when a baritone rapper spits fast.

SWAG RAP ATTACK

SWAG RAP ATTACK

IMMA BUST THIS NASTY ASS LAUGH TRACK

LIKE PINK EYE IN YOUR PILLOW CASE

LIKE STACHE AN O IN YOUR BACKPACK
CHASED BY K9'S AND POPO, CUZ
POP POP NEVER CAUGHT BY THE FUZZ
SO PACK YOUR THINGS AND GO HOME
IT'S CAPTAIN SWAG ROLLING SOLO...

“Oh yo! It's Captain Swag,” Sack vibes with the hype. Big Bill has his eyes closed, watching the music. Even Shake sways at the wheel. I guess this is a day like any other for the Ceiba Soap company.

We pass a large wooden sign that reads, ‘Welcome to Tucoco.’

We are at our destination.