



SOAPMAN

# SoapMan

**Created by Peter Volpone**

**Chapter 1 / You Are Dead- Continue?**





You Are Dead

CONTINUED?  
YES & NO

We glide up to the gates of Tucoco, a wooden archway some twenty feet high, carved with the town name. One of my favorite tracks from Big Bill's bag is rocking our ride- The Cheesecake Battle Rap by Water Squatter. The playful beat is arranged from various meal sounds from clinking forks to pouring water.

EATING CHEESECAKE  
FOR PETE'S SAKE  
UMM GREAT  
DON'T BE LATE OR I'LL TAKE IT FOR LATER  
CONSUMPTION  
UMPH THIS FLAVOR'S BUMPIN  
MY TASTE BUDS WITH CREAMY CHEESY LOVIN

AND DON'T FORGET THE BLUEBERRY  
RASPBERRY BLACKBERRY TOPPING  
PARRYING YOUR PREDICTABLE RYHMES  
WITH OCTOPUS GUILF  
I'M POPPING YOUR STYLE  
YOUR ASS IS ON TRIAL  
LIKE BALLOONS AT THE SHOOTING BOOTH  
OOH THIS CAKE'S THE TRUTH...

"You sure have an eclectic taste," Shake criticizes.

"Think what you will, but this guy spit his opponents under the table back in the day.  
Didn't matter the topic, even dessert," replies Bill.

"I like this one," I add as we drive into the town's shadow.

“I wonder what cheesecake tastes like?” asks Sack. We are silent in contemplation. There’s no dessert in the desert.

Tucoco is a well-known outpost thirty miles from The SUHS. Like our city, it’s formed under part of the Ceiba Mundi, a fallen branch rather than roots. The colossal piece of deadwood looks like a curled hand playing a piano but the fingers are jagged, anchoring the wood deep into the sand. It forms six columns around the town that suspend the branch above ground. The column limbs cast long, vertical shadow strips over the town given the sun’s position. The heart of Tucoco resides in the wide shadow of the branch’s palm, which towers several hundreds of feet over the people. From the palm, the branch arches at a wrist shape and slopes down towards its home, cut off from its parent tree. This forearm functions as a roadway to upper Tucoco, a second town atop the wrist, but our business is on the ground.

Legends say this limb fell from above the dead leaf, the cloud of brown leaves that obstructs our view from higher up the tree. The wood is celebrated as sacred and Tucoco’s culture centers on death parade: when we go back to the tree.

As we drive in, I take in the atmosphere of lower Tucoco. It is an old west style town where the buildings are set up in rows that face each other, separated by dirt roads. The buildings, however, are decorated in elaborate lighting, reminiscent of a Day of the Dead festival. Glowing stars are strung across the townhouse rooftops and colorful streetlamps line the roads. Today, the roads themselves are packed with people, humans and Oris alike. There is a sort of open market, everyone is bustling to and from stands of different foods, crafts, and products. That must be why we are here, to sell our soap.

A lot of passersby are glaring in our direction. We are one of few vehicles crawling through a town of walkers after the market is well underway. My fault that I overslept but we we couldn't have predicted the bandits. Got to plan for this stuff if you want to be punctual. The Cheesecake Battle Rap still booms from our truck.

WORKING THE SLAVE GRIND  
TO MAKE A DIME  
IN THREE WEEKS TIME  
I'LL HAVE A FAT PLATE OF MINE  
KEEP SMILING  
THAT CHEESECAKE PILE  
IN INFINITE SUPPLY, OH  
YOU DEFINITELY IN DENILE  
IF YOU THINK MY RAPS WEAK  
AND YOURS ON FLEEK  
MEET ME OUTSIDE FOR A SLAP ON THE CHEEK...

I'm beginning to hate this song.

We park the truck in a gap between two vendors, Cosmic Candles and Plastic Tree Trade. The back of the truck flips down and the three of us jump to the hard ground below. Shake steps out of the front and pulls the beat-up cushion liner from where we sat. Underneath lies flat our Ceiba Soap company sign which he grabs and flips up to stand on the sides of the vehicle.

"Well, Bob you made it to Tucoco, now live your dream and do things at this place," orders Shake. Sack laughs. I take the light-hearted approach.

"Yes, and you fulfill your fantasies too, my friend," I say in a mimicking monotone.

"Dreams are for the birds."

“Cacaww,” I sing, flipping him two birds as I walk toward the stream of consumers bouncing from shop to shop. As I pass by Big Bill, I throw my comforter to him, revealing my business uniform- a short black tie, a sky blue short sleeve button down shirt tucked into grey high-water slacks that dangle over a pair of striped fuzzy socks, and muddy plain toe shoes. Bill and Sack remove their covers too, Bill’s muscular frame is squeezed into a sharp red button down with long sleeves, black dress pants that cover his ankles, and a black tie. Sack has a dandelion yellow button down with the sleeves rolled up at the shoulders, showing off his unique forearms, a black tie with a flat end, and beige slacks. They begin to set up the shop at the truck while I shift into my cartoon salesman persona, the one that got me the job instead of an early end.

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A month back, there was a night I was piss drunk during an existential crisis and stumbled through The SUHS streets. It wasn’t a bad day or anything, I was just an alcoholic loner on a typical weekend and the crisis was my empty wallet, a big tab, and a disgruntled bouncer. I stumbled in and out of light beams painting North Street with yellow lamp light. In my childish stupor, I hopped back and forth between the golden air and the black abyss created by the light poles, amusing myself until lightheadedness took over. Like a cat, I clawed my way up a nearby root wall, scrambling twenty feet to the top with drunken reflexes. I fell onto my back, shirt riding up, absorbing the grainy wood into my exposed skin, becoming one with Ceiba. I tilted my head up to see The SUHS as a galaxy of stars against the murky shadow of space. Full of love, I began rolling around, hugging myself and singing primal melodies aloud.

Suddenly, I fell. Floating like a piano dropped from a window, the universe was beautiful for a moment. Then, crash. I landed on Shake from my twenty-foot drop, smashing him into the

ground. Dizzy, I wasn't expecting his claws around my neck in the next moment. I was still seeing stars but the hole I had fallen into amazed me.

I was inside of the root I had climbed, hollowed out by the founders of Ceiba Soap-Sensei Slang, Shake, and Fire Keeper. The walls gleamed an ivory white. Oblong shapes dripped and froze into ornamental, enormous egg-like structures clinging to every surface. The room was blinding compared to The SUHS's night sky. The wall sap was crafted in places, such as the artesian staircase leading up to a throne like a melted candle. At the base of the steps roared a majestic fire, the one used to carve out this hidden dreamscape. A voice echoed through the room.

"Tell us why my friend here shouldn't gouge out your eyes." It was a snowy furred, ape-like Ori in a white karate gi over a bright pink spandex suit that squeezed his skull. I laughed hysterically at his aged face bound in his pink skull cap, yet he stood chest out atop the stairs despite his eccentric appearance. I caught myself and shut up. Survival instinct kicked in, I wasn't going to die here, but I wasn't about to fight my way out of this mysterious gang hideaway.

I licked Shake's hand, causing him to recoil so I could wiggle free. Then, I stood tall, summoning a voice to challenge the questioner.

"You will not kill me because cleaning my blood from your spotless floors would be a pain in your ass, and my life isn't worth your trouble." The Ori looked confused, I had caught him off guard with my confidence and quirk. Time to put the pressure on. I walked slowly past Shake towards the fire like a methodical presenter on stage. A bear like Ori in a turquoise headdress emerged from behind the flames, holding a torch staff like a royal guard. I acted



unfazed but I couldn't help but shutter within. I paused, taking a meditative breath before speaking again.

"This place is the most beautiful place I've ever seen, everything down to the lavender smell titillates the senses. I feel like I'm in a grand cathedral from the old world. You may not welcome me as a guest to your domain, but I believe you should. Beauty such as this cannot be kept secret to the three of you. Imagine a world where SUHS citizens are free to soak up this sap chamber. I believe the world would be a slightly better place."

"You're saying we should kill you outside?" asked the leader.

"What's a court without a jester?" I bluffed, beginning to brown out. With a single leap from the top of the staircase, at least forty meters long, he crashed directly in front of me with a boom to fill the hall.

"Efficient," he spoke, his fangs like icicles growing from his gums. I stuck out my hand.

"Name's Bob. How may I address your majesty?" I caught him off guard again with my drunken fist of conversation.

"They call me Slang," he pulled back but refused to take my hand.

"Slang. Forgive me if I don't remember, I'm terrible with names, usually need to hear them twice."

"Slang! And you will show respect in my home," he roared, ready to strike me dead.

"OK. Sensei. Sensei Slang, teach me your way of slaying stray cats who raise a racket and refuse to respect your well-maintained sap chamber."

"The fuck?"

“I lyrically apologize and would like to stay the night, might you let slide my crimes oh wise one?” He was hesitated for two seconds. I could see it on his face, aged with years of hard life, that he had never encountered such a fool. I knew that I had won.

He ended up dropping his guard and letting me stay the night. He interrogated me in the morning and decided to take me on as a salesman, considering I talked him down from killing me to hosting me. Since that night, I have learned how to tap into my drunken fist negotiator when I’m on the job.

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I snake through pockets of space between people on the bustling street, keeping my eyes open for potential customers. My gaze falls to an old white man in grey sweats, bald and sporting a thick umbrella mustache that conceals his lip. How is he not dying in this heat? Definitely an interesting mark. Anyway, I might have an in with a fellow ‘stache connoisseur.

As I approach, I can’t help but notice his round head reflects the hanging lights around his shop. He converses with a customer and I see a fair layer of wrinkles about his face, but his skin is still tight, I’d guess he’s early to mid-fifties. I’m getting mixed signals, like he doesn’t give a fuck, but also cares a lot. He must have something or someone worth getting out of bed for.

The shop is a B.T. Slick’s Mobile Mecha Garage for the sale and maintenance of automated machines, housed in a large tent. Slick’s a well-known brand and probably pays their employees well. Could be a high roller, we’ll see. I meander around the shop until the patron walks off holding a robo-pup in her hands. The old man takes a seat on an old car engine and begins to count his earnings. As he slips bills into his waist pouch, I slide up to his side.

“Nice weather, ain’t it?” I start coy. He coughs, nearly choking in surprise, quickly folding the rest of the bills and throwing them in a lock box next to him. He takes a moment to find his center, examining the startling stranger.

“It sure as shit is a hot one,” he gruffs, “Can I help you, sir?”

“No need for formalities, Gramps, just looking for a simple conversation.”

“The name’s Dave, jackass, and I ain’t one for small talk. If you’re not talking money, then scram.”

“Bob,” I reply with my own name, “And there are things to gain from sharing a chat besides money.”

“Well I ain’t interested.” He grabs his lockbox, stands, and turns toward his tent. It is a pine green tarp on stilts wide enough to house a whole garage concealed by tall curtains that hang an inch from the bare earth. I follow him inside and find myself among numerous mecha creatures, from bipedal companions to talking motorbikes. It’s a sight of spray painted metallic shapes cut against the softly illuminated green ceiling and orange of the sand floor.

In the back of the shop, there are two younger women, probably late teens, early twenties. One tinkers at a mecha with a wrench the size of her forearm. She has short black hair that spikes out the top of a visor that shades her eyes. She sits on a small crate, her purple blouse and mango shorts are touched with oil stains. The other girl also has black hair, neck length in a ponytail that drapes over her shoulder, with far paler skin. She sits cross-legged on the ground in a striped long-sleeve white shirt and black jeans, absorbed in a videogame. They could be sisters.

“Get out,” the old guy blocks me from going any further into the tent.

“That’s no way to talk to a customer Gramps,” the tinker girl says, “How can we help you sir?” She looks up and gives me a smile but quickly turns back to her project. After a moments consideration, I decide it’s best to focus on my target and not worry about the others. Time to work my magic.

“I’ll cut to the chase Gramps, I’m here to offer you a fantastic product that you can’t miss out on,” I use my rehearsed opener, an attention grabber before I start my freestyle salesmanship, “What I’m selling is near magic. It is harvested straight from the sap of Ceiba Mundi, carrying our god’s life blood within. It will clean not only your body, but your mind and soul and leave you smelling natural as branch of fresh green leaves,” He looks grouchy but attentive, this line is a wringer because nobody on the ground has ever smelled green leaves, a complete fantasy to my customers, “Your skin will shine bright as the illustrious desert sun, drawing the eye of all who pass by. On top of these benefits, this product will allow you to inherit the knowledge of Ceiba straight through your skin...”

“I ain’t buying no pansy lotion, get lost,” he interjects.

“Nah, he’s slinging dope,” adds the gamer, still transfixed by her virtual adventure.

“Ooh, let’s split a Q,” cheers the other, tightening a bolt on her mechanism. It appears to be drone or something.

“I don’t want no dirt neither,” says Gramps before putting back a fresh soda can. He downs the whole drink, then crushes the can, tossing it on a small desk cluttered with scrap metal and odd ends.

“Close but not quite. What I’m offering you today is simply soap. Ceiba Soap. A genuine, natural product, each bar crafted with absolute care, hand carved from within the roots of our great overseer. Incredibly healthy and good for the environment, just don’t eat it.”

Gramps stares for a moment.

“Why would I need soap? The town barely has water to bathe.” Valid point, although something I had considered.

“Oh, but this soap can be heat activated. Melt it, then apply it like a rub. I once bathed in the soap alone, just lying under the sun, tanning with a bar on my bare chest. By the time I was done, a thin coat of love protected me from the sharp rays.” Bullshit, but I swing it.

“Interesting... Well, I’m in the seller’s market,” He paused. Nice, I broke through his exterior, but now I must parry his pitch. “Are you sure I can’t interest you in a B.T. Slick Mecha?” Humble and straight forward, not bad old man but I’m broke. You’re playing a losing hand. “These state of the art mechas are designed by the genius robotic scientist B.T Slick.”

“Never heard of him? He supposed to be someone important?” I jest, having encountered the man in person in the past, but that’s a long story.

“It seems you don’t get out much. He’s an up and comer on The Axis, just broke into #8. The top 10 are a famous bunch. You know about The Axis, right? It’s on all the TV’s.” Despite collecting TV’s as a hobby, none of them were current or functional, so I was out of the loop on that front. But word spreads and from what I understand, The Axis is a sort of contest for upper tree folk who seek to appease the gods.

“Oh, that deity stuff? I’m not really into it, seems kinda whack to me.” No lie there.



“Preaching to the choir son, it all seems like a bad deal to me.”

“Not inherently, it’s more of a misuse of power,” I offer, trying to appear optimistic and avoid being a kiss ass. Keep the dominance in the joust but stay on his good side.

“Yeah, making the most of a bad situation, or at least that’s the central belief. But when you’re making the most, greed creeps over.” And now he’s agreed with me twice. I can see the sale on the horizon.

“You’re alright Gramps.”

“Told you already, the name’s Dave. Nice to meet you, eh... Bob, right?” Time to press in again. Got to always keep them on their toes until they don’t know what they want. Then you remind them.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t want any soap? You could push your bots better if you smelled nice.

“Haha, you are ruthless. If you need to make a buck, why not do it with a mascot. We’ve got a fine assortment of cleaning mechs.” Offer ignored. This guy is tougher than I thought. Must be a business vet.

“Buff out your mechs with my squeeze? I’m sure they’ll shine like your head.” Like a game of volleyball, he returns my bump.

“Take Ozzy here, Ozzy Clean the washing machine,” he makes a grand gesture to one of his larger bots, “I guarantee you’ll double your sales with Ozzy at your side. And I’m sure customers prefer to deal with a machine to your sandy mustache,” he smirks, stroking his own stache. I quickly finger my lip hair, he beat me to the power stance. Ozzy is polished white

washing machine unit with three large light bulbs on the backboard, arranged in an upside-down triangle, resembling eyes and a mouth. It has two round shoulders bolted to either side of its body, with skinny pole arms jutting out into cartoonish glove hands.

It raises and arm and salutes me.

“Greetings friend, Ozzy Clean at your service!” I’ve never been greeted by a washing machine before, I’m not sure how to feel.

“Hi there Ozzy. Name’s Bob.” The tent is silent is tension for a moment. Like a game of chess that is about to erupt into a slaughter of pawns. Who will act first? Who will make the risky play and sacrifice their footing in hopes of gaining the edge? My mind races for the next approach but this machine thing is like a shield.

“Do the... do the song Oz,” Gramps whispers to the machine.

“Which... which one?” It whispers back, holding a hand to its mouth as if its voice is emitting from a lightbulb. Gramps leans back and cross his arms. Ozzy nods.

Ozzy flashes to life, pops open his lid, revealing a record player. He spins the vinyl, opening fat beat.

UH, UH BEE-TEE, OZZY HAS A DREEEAM  
ROLLING WITH THE TIGHT CREW  
SPITTING ON THAT MIC FOR YOU  
SPINNING VYNS, SLINGING RHYMES  
BEAT BOX BOOMING AND GRAMPS CHARGING FINES  
FOR THESE FINE BOTS IN FINITE SUPPLY  
QUIET NOW SO I CAN DROP THE NITROUS ON MY FLOW  
INFINITY AND BEYOND YOU KNOW WE GOT TO GO

SALE, SADLY TO NO AVAIL  
 ALONE AND BROKE, CAN'T MAKE BAIL  
 BROKEN HOMES, FAILING TO MEET OUR QUARTERLY LOANS  
 DON'T MOAN MOMMA, YOU LOOKING FRAIL AS A KALE CHIP  
 PRAYING THAT THE NEXT DIP INTO SAVINGS  
 WON'T DEPRAVE HER BABY FROM CHASING HER DREAMS  
 WHO'S GONNA STAND FOR THIS? NOT ME!

LIVING IN A FREE LAND BUT OUR FREEDOM SOLD FOR UNREASONABLY  
 CHEAP, FAM. OLD BROTHA DAVE PINCHING PENNIES TO STAVE OFF THE GRAVE  
 AND SAVE FOR THE FUTURE OF HIS GRAND-K'S, WORKING FOR DAYS WHILE HIS  
 BOSS PUSHES K'S FOR PLAYING ON THE TELEVISION SCRANE. HELL, PRECISION  
 SLANG TO SPEAK THE TRUTH, OZZY ON THE MIC LIKE A PREACHERS BOOTH,  
 TEACHING YOU TO LOOK PAST THE RUSE, DON'T ABUSE HUMAN RIGHTS, LOOSE  
 MOUTHED MOTOR BOT. POWER. BARS. WASABI & QUESO. PEACE.

Ozzy tosses the mic over his shoulder and the record scratches. The tinker slow claps. I  
 just stare. What? WHAT? Did they just pull my lyrical distraction tactic on me? I go back to  
 simple.

"I thought Ozzy was a washing machine?" I ask, pointing to center as it packs the record  
 player back into itself.

"A multi-purpose instrument," shrugs Gramps, "A one of a kind. Would be a shame to let  
 him slide through your fingers."

"Oh, but Ozzy is more than an instrument, aren't you Oz?" I ask the robot. "There was  
 some real heart to those rhymes."

"Uh, of course. When Ozzy's on the mic, it's pure spirit," boasts the metal creature,  
 referring to itself.

“Well if you’re into spirit, Ceiba Soap connects you straight to Ceiba Mundi. It’s got roots man.” Time to activate my trap card. “Free sample?” I offer, extending my open briefcase to the pair players. They are unsure so I press once more. “Think of the connection to every being on the planet, being one with the people and the stars.” Ozzy generates an imaginative smile in his bulb mouth, he’s sold. Directly at Gramps, “Don’t let your boy Ozzy down. It’s a free sample, won’t hurt to try.”

“Fine, I’ll bite,” Gramps concedes.

I hand Gramps a wrapped bar of soap. He examines the packaging for a moment, then breaks the seal to smell his sample. Rookie mistake.

“That’ll be \$9.45,” I chime. His face zips to a sour expression, brows furrowed in discontent, lips receding under his nose bush, forehead wrinkles prominent.

I point to the paper on the underside of the lid stating Ceiba Soap’s mission statement.

“You don’t get the free one unless you buy one. Fine Print, Company Policy,” I summon a gruesome smile. Checkmate.

“You’re a god damn pirate. That was savage kid. Well played, well played.”

Gramps grabs my hand and violently shakes up and down. He tosses me some cash and I toss him another bar of soap.

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The day passes by as I scrape together money, one customer at a time. The market winds down as the sun passes over the town, setting on the other side in a magenta and fuchsia mural. After reporting back to Shake and the crew, Big Bill and I decide to grab a drink in town before

heading to our campsite where Shake and Sack are calling it an early night. It's a weekend event, so our team is staying overnight in Tucoco. We're too poor to get a room anywhere, so the plan is to make do with our comforters and the truck.

Bill and I settle on Diablo's, a day of the dead style saloon at the center of town. Inside, a seedy orange lighting coats the wood paneled walls, hung with decorative skull masks. It's mostly barren, despite the market's traffic. Must be a shitty bar, but I gravitate towards the quiet places. We sit at splintered forest green bar carved with various names, dates, and doodles, putting back beers. Opposite the bar, across the room, a thin man in a large cowboy hat bares his soul on electric bass guitar. I'd call it psychedelic blues, but he is rocking hard. His voice cut rough and deep.

SMOKEY RUSTIC SKY TONIGHT

PASTEL CHALK BILLOWS FROM BRICK PIPES

SMOKEY RUSTIC SKY LIGHTS

IRON SMUDGED THE PLUM NIGHT SKY

SMOKEY RUSTIC SKIES ARE DRY

A GHOST ALONE FOR MOST MY LIFE

SMOKEY RUSTIC SKIES

SMOKEY RUSTIC SKY

The song sounds intense, but I try to focus on the story Big Bill is telling me.

"So, this dude cleans me out, bought the whole case off me and I'm like, are you kidding me?" It's a story of a job before my time. "I just drove six hours to get to this outpost and you're going to buy all I got in the first five minutes I'm there. I could have just shipped it to him. Damn, and I had to entertain Shake and Sack the whole way, that gets old real quick."



“So, what’d you end up doing?” I ask, polishing off my second beer, a bottom line hoppy brew.

“Well I was curious about this dude and had nothing else to do so I decided to track him, you know, see what he does with the buy. At first, he’s just running errands. Picking stuff up, dropping stuff off, but then he goes to a laundromat- one of those high-class establishments where you can wash your shit. And I’m thinking he’s a high roller, but still, no big deal. He opens the box and tosses the soap into the machine, starts that jones, then dips.” He pauses to drink. “And you won’t guess what happened to the stash.”

“What happened, it disappear?”

“Exactly. Fucking weird man. Like the thing was a portal or something. But that’s probably the weirdest thing that happened to me on the job.”

“Hahaha, damn, you got punked. How long have you been working for The Sensei?”

“Only a year, the company’s new, Sack and I were the only salesmen til’ you came crashing through the roof.” He pauses to crack his back, “That reminds me, I wanted to ask you about your answer, back in the truck.”

I can’t remember what he’s talking about, I furrow my brow and motion towards the bar tender for another beer.

“How do you want to spend your time?” he asks.

“I like getting plastered in shitty bars and digging through trash, but it’s not what I want to like to do. You feel me?”

“I think so...”

“Like, when I wake up in the morning, I have this feeling, like this pit in my chest that no matter what I try, everything is eaten up by this void inside me. I want to do things, go on adventures, explore the world, meet new people, fall in love, and sing, but I can never seem to leave the pit.”

“Ah. I knew it. We’re the same.” We clink glasses.

“Why don’t we go together, to the top?”

“You mean, climb the tree?”

“Yeah, we’ll have each other’s backs, make sure we don’t slink back and give up.” I consider his proposition for a moment. I imagine the two of us looking down on The SUHS like an anthill from the top of Ceiba Mundi. The air is crisp and fresh, leaves rustle in a chorus of clapping feathers, and I am strong- strong enough to stand tall and be proud of myself. I think everybody has that dream.

“It sounds fun, but...”

Just then, Gramps stumbles up to the bar. He’s drunk.

He hollers at the bartender. “Hey, pretty lady. Another whiskey for old Davey here.”

Our bartender is a shriveled pale lady in a cumulous cloud wig too big for her head. Her face is baggy, masked in rosy blush and sky-blue eyeliner. For an older woman, she rocks a pink dress with confidence, showing off her bony arms from the shoulder down and wrinkly legs tucked into red heels. Looks like Gramps is thirsty for more than a highball. Then he notices me.

“Ayy Soap-Man, well played before. A true prodigy. Better watch your back using tactics like you did. If I was younger I would have beat the suds outta ya.” He’s stumbles, grasping the

bar for support. “That stuff you sold me earlier- what did you say it was again. It ain’t like any soap I’ve ever used.”

“It’s made from the sap of Ceiba,” I answer. The bar tender slams the whiskey on the bar and stares at me with a cold eye. Then, she switches to a sweet smile.

“Anything else for you dear?” she asks.

“How about some digits,” interrupts Gramps. She ignores him, gaze fixed on me.

“No, thank you ma’am.” She holds her attention longer, then goes back to her job.

“What the fuck?” Bill mumbles.

“Anyways, that shit is strong, I took a whiff and I felt like I was on top of the world for a minute. Think I could get another bar?”

“Sure can, Gramps.”

“Only my grandkids get to call me Gramps.”

“You’ve got kids?” asks Bill.

“Had one, now just grandkids. Twins but polar opposites. Couple of little devils all the same.”

I click open my briefcase, revealing the last few bars of soap from the days sales. Suddenly the bartender is back, leaning across the counter, in my face.

“Where’d you find all that sap darlin?”

“I suggest you not ask so many questions,” Bill stands, blocking her from me.



Just then, the bar door flies open and three figures draped in shadow enter.

























