

Once Upon a Time in Tittybong 2: Catch My Disease

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Chapter 1

“JJ, you’ve got a customer.”

Krusty held open the front door of the house and a young blonde woman flashed him a smile as she walked into the lounge room to find JJ crumpled up on the couch in a posture that resembled a pile of clothes with a wig thrown on top. His face was scarcely visible beneath his shoulder-length mouse brown hair which was normally pulled back behind his ears but which now formed a kind of curtain through which his nose protruded like the snorkel of a scuba diver. The girl stood a few metres away from the couch and waited for signs of life but none were forthcoming. Krusty cleared his throat and closed the door extra loud as if that might wake his friend. When he saw that it didn’t, he walked over to the couch and prodded JJ with his foot the way a would-be customer might kick the tyres of a second-hand car.

“Oi! Anybody home?”

JJ emitted a sound that was part murmur, part grumble and part gargle. He turned himself over so that his back was now facing the room.

“Hangover?” asked the woman looking towards the couch with a measure of pity.

“Worse,” said Krusty.

“Drugs?”

Krusty shook his head.

“What then?”

“Girls.”

“Oh, right. Amber,” said the girl as the slow dawn of comprehension spread over her face. It was quickly replaced by a querulous look.

“But they broke up ages ago.”

“Over a month,” said Krusty.

“And he’s still heartbroken? Awww, that’s cute.”

“Pathetic is what it is,” said Krusty loudly in the direction of the couch.

“How did they break up?”

“She dumped him. Dumped him like a sack of potatoes.”

This finally got a rise out of JJ who turned over into an upright position on the couch. He looked like he hadn't slept for days and his bloodshot eyes would have been more fitting on a Friday night smoking some of Krusty's produce rather than a Monday morning.

"She didn't dump me," he said rubbing his hands over his face as if trying to wake himself up.

"Yay, he's finally up and about," said Krusty clapping his hands in faux enthusiasm. "That's the most energetic I've seen him in a month."

"She didn't dump me," repeated JJ.

"Ok, fine. She didn't dump you. You've got a customer, bro. Look, it's Phoebe."

JJ lifted his eyes and the blank, distant expression gave way to a flash of recognition.

"Hi, Phoebe," he said feigning a smile.

"Hi," said Phoebe waving and smiling in an uncertain fashion as if JJ was a wild animal who might do something unexpected at any moment.

"What are you after?" asked JJ hauling himself up from the couch and lumbering towards the bedroom at the front of the house which constituted the storeroom for his inventory.

"A phone. Pink, if you've got one," said Phoebe.

Mobile phones were JJ's stock in trade but he also sold televisions and stereos as well as various computer parts and other random electrical gadgets. The last of the electrical goods stores had shut up shop in Tittybong two years prior but it wasn't until the department store in the neighbouring town of Bong Bong closed that business for JJ really took off. To buy a new phone or television, a resident of Tittybong now had to travel over two hundred kilometres each way. Even if they had the patience for such a trip, there were few people left who could afford the luxury of buying new. A second-hand gadget was all most people could expect and JJ had rightfully earned his reputation for quality. His main point of differentiation from his competitors was the simple fact that he knew his way around a soldering iron and had the basic tools and knowledge to make things work as opposed to the shady characters on street corners who could barely be bothered to plug a unit into a wall socket to check that it was functional before flogging it off to the highest bidder. Between the sales of functional second-hand devices and the repair of existing ones, JJ had grown himself a thriving business quite by accident and, although the operation was in what you might call a grey zone from a legal and taxation standpoint, the powers-that-be had so far left him alone and his customers even included some local notables who, for reasons of propriety, sent their business through intermediaries. Phoebe was one of his long-term customers. She had a nice habit of losing phones and breaking devices and she came from a wealthy family in the city which meant replacing them was not the financial burden it might have been for others.

“All I’ve got are hot pink or this kind of pinky-purple,” said JJ emerging from the bedroom and holding up two phones.

“I’ll take the hot pink.”

JJ handed her the phone and Phoebe inspected its condition.

“The crack in the screen here is pretty big,” she said pointing to the bottom left corner of the phone.

“I don’t have any non-cracked screens in that model,” said JJ curtly. “I can give you a different phone with a better screen but not in pink.”

Phoebe thought about it for a few seconds.

“Alright,” she said letting out a long sigh. “I’ll take it.”

“That’ll be a hundred and twenty dollars. I’ve taken thirty off because of the screen.”

“Right. Well, that’s the other thing I needed to talk to you about,” said Phoebe looking at JJ with a sheepish expression. “The problem is, I don’t have any cash.”

This time it was JJ who let out a sigh. In his line of business this refrain was so common that he’d installed a sign on the wall of the lounge room. It was one of those old novelty signs and it read “CA\$H ONLY”. He pointed to it as he spoke.

“Sorry, Phoebe, we don’t do credit here.”

“No, no, no,” said Phoebe anxious to clarify. “I’ve got the money. I just can’t get hold of the cash.”

JJ hadn’t heard this particular excuse before. He furrowed his brow trying to parse its meaning and Phoebe could see that she needed to explain further.

“As you probably know, the government in Sydney has put a freeze on the bank accounts of all public servants. Well, it’s not really a freeze. It’s just that they can no longer withdraw cash. All receipts and payments have to be made electronically from now on. Apparently, they’re going to do the same to everybody’s account in about six months.”

“I’ve heard about this shit,” said Krusty who had been rolling himself a joint by the kitchen table. “They’re trying to get rid of cash. That might be a problem for the, ummm, thingo.”

Krusty made a vague gesture towards the CA\$H ONLY sign before flicking on his zippo and taking a long toke on the joint.

"I don't understand what a cash freeze on bureaucrats in Sydney has to do with selling a mobile phone in Tittybong," said JJ.

"I get most of my money from my father who works for the government. If he can't get cash, then he can't send me any cash," said Phoebe.

"Well, can't he transfer it somebody else's account and they can send you the cash?"

"The government is tracking all transfers now so they can follow where the money is going."

"Again, I don't see how this is my problem."

"It's going to become your problem soon," said Phoebe. "In six months, there's not going to be any more cash. They're starting with the public servants but they are going to roll out the cash ban to everybody. How are you going to run a cash only business when that happens?"

JJ realised Phoebe had a point. Even in the short term, the cash ban on public servants would be a problem as many of his customers could only afford luxuries like mobile phones due to money sent from relatives in the city. This would mean a sharp drop in sales which would only be exacerbated once the full cash ban came into effect. The more he thought about it, the more he realised a cash ban represented an existential threat to his and Krusty's livelihoods. Krusty's main business was weed and that was all cash too. You certainly couldn't put *dope* down in the description of an electronic transfer.

"When did all this start?" asked JJ.

"About two weeks ago," answered Phoebe.

"So, that's why business has been slow lately," observed Krusty.

"I didn't notice."

"That's cos you've been lying on the couch dreaming about Amber," said Krusty.

JJ let out a long sigh and began pacing up and down the room.

"Alright, well, let's think about the situation. If people can only transfer money electronically, then I guess we need to get a bank account. But even if we could find a bank that would give us an account, any transfers to it would leave a paper trail and that's not going to work for our line of business."

"Don't you have, I dunno, *associates* or something that can make paper trails disappear?" asked Phoebe.

"Money launderers," suggested Krusty.

"Exactly. Do you know any money launderers?"

"I don't think so," said JJ.

"Dude, of course we do," said Krusty.

"Who?"

"Macbeth."

"Woah, you guys know Macbeth?" exclaimed Phoebe.

"We don't know him," said JJ, "but we do business with the Macbeth Corporation."

"They must do a lot of money laundering, right?"

"Dude, their whole business would have to be laundered."

"Ok. But that doesn't mean they will launder our money."

"It's worth finding out, isn't it?" asked Phoebe.

"What I don't understand is how this is going to work for the broader community," said JJ continuing his pacing. "I mean, doesn't the money supply come from the government? If the government stops providing the money, how is anybody in Tittybong going to get cash?"

"It depends on what the federal government does with all the cash that's not in use in the cities. Will they burn it? Will it they allow it to be released outside of the cities?" said Phoebe.

"Dude, we should totally start our own bank," said Krusty taking one last toke on his joint before putting it out in the ashtray on the kitchen bench.

"That's a brilliant idea," said Phoebe. "There hasn't been a bank in Tittybong for years."

"We'll call it The People's Bank of Tittybong."

"Hah! That's a great name," said Phoebe giving Krusty a high five.

"I think you two are getting a little ahead of yourselves. We don't even know if we can get any money yet and you're already starting a bank," said JJ grumpily.

"Well, let's go and see Snake now, bro," said Krusty.

"Who's Snake?" asked Phoebe.

"He's our main contact with Macbeth. We can ask him about the laundering idea."

JJ gave another long sigh. He didn't like the sound of the idea but he didn't have any other ideas that were better.

"Alright. It can't hurt to go and ask the question," he said finally.

"Excellent," said Krusty slapping JJ on the shoulder. "We've finally got you off the couch and back in action, bro."

JJ muttered something and went hunting for the keys to his motorbike.

"Hey, what about the phone?" asked Phoebe who held up the hot pink phone she had chosen.

"Oh, yeah. Tell you what, I'll let you take it for now while we organise payment," said JJ. "But just this once and only for you. Don't tell anybody else about it."

"Thanks, Jay," said Phoebe giving him a kiss on the cheek as she headed for the door.

"Gimme a call when you know what's happening with the bank transfer," she sang out as the screen door slapped shut behind her.

Krusty walked over to the sideboard and picked up a set of keys which he threw over to JJ.

"Let's hit the road, bro."

Macbeth's full name was Pickles Macbeth, although it is to be doubted that this was either the moniker bestowed on him by his parents or recorded on his birth certificate in the unlikely event such a document existed. What little was known about Macbeth was entirely transmitted via gossip and innuendo. Some people claimed to have seen him but no photograph confirmed his existence, a strange fact given that mobile phones with cameras were still ubiquitous throughout most of Australia including the no-go zones outside the big cities. Rumour had it that anybody caught in possession of a camera around Macbeth could expect a quick and not necessarily painless demise. Such a threat was credible. Macbeth's operatives were everywhere including the big cities. In fact, a large part of Macbeth's business was facilitating the black market trade between the cities and the rest of the country.

Macbeth's business had grown in direct proportion to the withdrawal of government from large parts of the country. This process had been happening for some time as politicians focused on integrating the cities with the globalist network that linked most of the western world while leaving the rest of the country to its own devices. The effect was felt firstly in the lack of services provided. Little things like libraries and recreation centres disappeared. Then there was a lack of money for things like police and medical personnel and finally a

lack of governance altogether. This all happened so slowly that nobody really noticed but the process had created a void and into that void had stepped a number of entrepreneurial souls providing the functions formerly fulfilled by the state. One of those entrepreneurial souls was Pickles Macbeth. Among the services offered by the Macbeth Corporation were “transportation”, which was less about trucking and logistics and more about ensuring the contents being trucked and logisticked actually arrived at their destination. Debt collection was a booming business as were the traditional staples of the mob boss: money laundering and drug trafficking.

It was the latter which had brought JJ and Krusty into contact with the Macbeth Corporation about a year earlier. Some of Krusty’s homegrown weed, which was already legendary in the Tittybong area, had found its way to Sydney where a Macbeth associate had been so impressed with the quality that he ordered an investigation into its origins. A couple of days later, two large men on motorcycles pulled up in front of the rundown house where JJ and Krusty lived and offered to buy as much weed as they could produce. For JJ and Krusty, newly graduated from school with no job prospects to speak of, it was an offer too good to refuse. The success of the drug enterprise later expanded into JJ’s electrical goods business. Another of the Macbeth Corporation’s verticals was second-hand (read: stolen) goods and JJ began on-selling these to people like Phoebe. The two businesses proved symbiotic. They would transport Krusty’s weed to Sydney and return with used mobile phones, televisions and the other devices that JJ would then fix up and offer for sale in Tittybong. This had proved lucrative enough that JJ and Krusty now owned motorbikes and it was those bikes which rumbled into the front yard of an old factory on the outskirts of Sydney near the suburb of Liverpool. The factory was one of Macbeth’s main distribution centres and was Krusty and JJ’s primary point of contact with the Corporation.

They parked their bikes and walked into the office via the glass door at the side of the factory. An old brown leather couch, a couple of plastic chairs and a raggedly wooden coffee table constituted a small waiting area to the right as you entered. Immediately to the left was the reception desk behind which sat a young woman dressed in the style of what would once have been called *punk rock* which had become the de facto standard among Macbeth Corporation associates. The bottom part of her head was shaved revealing several small tattoos which the long jet-black hair emanating from the top of her head did not hide. There were more tattoos to be found lower on her body. In fact, the entire area from the side of her head, down her neck and to the end of the arm was covered in them creating a rather confronting appearance which was offset by the friendly smile she gave the two young men as they entered.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my favourite country bumpkins.”

“Is that all we are to you, Ciara? Bumpkins?” said Krusty walking over to the counter.

“Nah. Sometimes I think of you as just plain old rednecks.”

“Well, I love you too. And just to show how much, I’ve bought you a present.”

Krusty hoisted the large black plastic bag that he had carried into the office onto the small table beside the reception desk.

“Another batch of Krusty’s Special?”

“Five kilograms worth,” said Krusty patting the bag.

“I suppose you want me to process this for you now?”

“If you don’t mind, sugar plum,” grinned Krusty.

Ciara gave an involuntary chortle as she got out of her chair and picked up the bag.

“Back in a minute, *darl-ing*” she said as she lugged the bag down the small corridor to the left of the counter.

“Hey, Ciara. Can you tell Snake we want to see him”.

“Alright. Take a seat and I’ll see if he’s free”.

Krusty flopped himself down on the couch and JJ sat in one of the plastic chairs.

“Whaddya think of Ciara?” asked Krusty turning his head to JJ.

“She’s cute,” said JJ.

“Reckon I’d be in with a shot?”

“Sure.”

“I might ask her to come for a drink later. Hey, maybe she can bring a friend along for you.”

Krusty slapped his friend playfully on the thigh but JJ was staring off into space.

“Don’t tell me you’re still thinking about Amber.”

“No. I’m thinking about the future of our town and the future of us,” said JJ turning to his friend with a stern look. “You do understand the gravity of the situation, don’t you? We might be out of business soon and who knows whether Tittybong will even exist in a year if there’s no money supply.”

“C’mon, bro. It’s not that bad. We’ll figure something out. You just need to have a night on the town. Let’s go into the city and check out that pub we went to last time. What was it called, The Goat’s Horns?”

“The Ram’s Head,” corrected JJ.

“Yeah. Let’s go there. Have a few beers. Meet some girls. Take your mind off the worries of the world for a night.”

JJ was about to respond when a man appeared at the end of the small corridor walking towards them. As per his name, he had a large snake tattoo on his forearm and was dressed in the black leather motorcycle gear that was common for Macbeth associates. This was partly a fashion statement but mostly a practical necessity as the motorcycle was the preferred method of transport in the Corporation. Although Snake was only in his mid to late twenties, he was known as one of Macbeth’s closest advisors and was the manager the distribution centre among other things. He carried a manila folder in his hand which he threw onto the coffee table in front of JJ.

“I assume this is what you’re after, Mr JJ,” he said.

JJ looked at the folder with confusion which was briefly replaced by recognition and then a kind of embarrassment. He started to lean forward as if to collect the folder and then changed his mind preferring instead to try and change the subject.

“Actually, Snake, we’re here about another matter...” he began before Krusty, with an infallible sixth sense for the discomfort of his friend, sat up on the couch, swept up the folder and began leafing through its contents.

JJ jumped up and attempted to snatch the folder away but Krusty turned his back leaving his friend helplessly lodged between the couch and the coffee table in a fruitless attempt to reach over Krusty’s shoulder. To make matters even worse, Ciara returned to the room just in time to see the kerfuffle.

“What’s all this?” she asked.

Krusty held up a large A4 photograph. It was a close-up picture of a scantily clad pretty young blonde woman taken through what looked to be her bedroom window. Ciara took a step forward and craned her neck to get a better look.

“Who’s that?” she asked as Krusty weaved around JJ’s flailing outstretched hand to give her the photo.

“Wow. She’s beautiful,” said Ciara studying the picture.

“That’s JJ’s ex-girlfriend Amber. The one he’s still pining over.”

“I can see why.”

“I’m not pining over her,” said JJ who made another lunge for the folder that Krusty was holding only to knock it out of his hand and have the contents, perhaps thirty photos in total, spill out over the floor. The photos showed Amber in various locations including her bedroom, drinking a coffee at the local café and working out at a gym.

“That looks less like pining and more like stalking,” said Krusty and as he watched JJ scramble to gather up the photos.

“One of our agents in Sydney has been doing the stalking on his behalf,” said Snake. “Just another little service offered by the Corporation.”

“What he needs is a dating service,” said Krusty.

“That’s one thing that we don’t offer,” said Snake. “There’s more money in stalking.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Don’t listen to them, JJ,” said Ciara who handed the photo of Amber back to JJ. “I think it’s sweet that you’re in love with a girl enough to pine for her. None of the guys around here would do that.”

“I’d pine for you if we broke up, Ciara,” said Krusty with a wink.

“In order to break up, we’d first have to be going out.”

“Oh?”

Having finally sorted the photos and papers back into the folder, JJ threw it down on the coffee table with a thud as if to bring the discussion to an end.

“This is not what we came here for,” said JJ turning around to face Snake with a flushed expression on his face.

“So, what did you come for? Apart from dropping off another bag of Krusty’s Special.”

Snake gave a respectful nod in Krusty’s direction who returned the favour.

“We came here because we want to know if one of the other services you offer is money laundering. We want to be able to have money transferred to a bank account and then withdraw the cash without the authorities tracing it.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the new cash ban on certain accounts in Sydney, would it?” asked Snake with a knowing grin.

“Maybe,” said JJ not knowing whether it was better to tell the truth or not and doing neither and both at the same time.

“You’re about tenth person today to call looking for cash, my friend. Unfortunately, the rules have now changed within the Corporation due to the change in circumstances and we are no longer able to be so liberal with cash payments. Speaking of cash payments, here you go K-man. For the weed.”

Snake threw a small wad of cash to Krusty who caught it with a smile.

“Thanks, bro.”

“So, you’ll still be paying in cash?” asked JJ.

“Of course. The cash ban is just for government employees and, in case you haven’t noticed, the Macbeth Corporation is not a part of the government.”

“But what about when the cash ban is rolled out to everybody in the city. Will you still be paying in cash then?”

“That’s classified information, I’m afraid. Let’s just say the Corporation will be making arrangements to ensure business can still be conducted so you’ve got nothing to worry about there.”

“That’s fine for the corporation,” said JJ, “but what about Tittybong? What about other towns like Tittybong? How is the money supply going to work in those kinds of places?”

“That’s your problem,” shrugged Snake.

“No, it’s an opportunity. There are three and half thousand people in Tittybong alone. All of them rely on cash in one way or another. That’s an awful lot of cash moving around that somebody can profit from and last time I checked the Macbeth Corporation was interested in profit.”

JJ left a pregnant pause and allowed the rising intonation of his final sentence to serve as an invitation to continue.

“Alright, I’m listening,” said Snake.

“Here’s how it could work,” explained JJ. “Almost everybody in town will still need to transact with banks in the city. So, we’d need to have a single account that we can tell them to transfer to. The systems would need to be conducted in such a way that the transactions cannot be traced but I’m sure the Macbeth Corporation knows how to do that already. For providing these services, we charge a fee on a per transaction basis. It would be just like a bank.”

“The People’s Bank of Tittybong,” interjected Krusty.

“That’s a great name and a great idea,” laughed Ciara.

They looked over to see what Snake’s reaction was and, after a few seconds of deliberation, he nodded his head sagely.

“Not bad. Pretty good for a couple of hillbillies.”

“We prefer to be called bumpkins, dude,” said Krusty flashing a cheeky smile at Ciara.

“So, what do you think, Snake? Can we make this happen?” asked JJ expectantly.

Snake looked JJ and Krusty up and down like a bank manager evaluating a customer for a loan.

“Alright, here’s the deal,” he said finally. “The cash thing is just the tip of the iceberg. There’s a whole raft of changes coming soon that are going to upend pretty much everything about the status quo in this country. I’ll give you just one example. The walls of Sydney,” Snake gestured to the north where only a couple of kilometres away the large sandstone wall that had been under construction for about ten years stood, “they’re going to be closed permanently to external visitors starting in two weeks. Oh, and the general cash ban, that’s not happening in six months. It’s happening much sooner. They’re gonna pull the whole thing off in one go.”

“Who’s *they*?” asked Krusty.

“The Global Council.”

“The global what?”

“You don’t know the Global Council? You two really are a couple of hillbillies.”

“I know the Global Council,” said JJ glumly. “Amber’s father is a member.”

“That’s right,” said Snake. “Which is what made it so easy to get photos of your girlfriend, Mr JJ. We already had a couple of men watching her father.”

“Hang on, you were dating the Prime Minister’s daughter?” asked Ciara.

“I didn’t know she was his daughter until we broke up,” shrugged JJ.

“Does anybody wanna tell me what the Global Council is?” asked Krusty.

“The Global Council are the peak international governing body. They pretty much run this country now. Well, they run the cities. They’re not too interested in the countryside. That’s why they’re bringing in the cash ban and the closing of the city walls. They reckon it will make thing easier to manage,” said Snake.

“What does it mean that the city gates are closing?” asked JJ.

“Only registered travellers with permits will be allowed to enter and leave.”

“This is bad. All the people in Tittybong will be cut off from their family in the city.”

“Fear not, my friend. The Macbeth Corporation will be offering a new service to get people in and out of the cities. For a fee, of course.”

Snake gave a wink.

“Well, what about a fee for the bank idea. Can we make that happen? It would be worth your while financially, wouldn't it?”

“That's what I was getting at. The Macbeth Corporation is aware of what is going on and we have a plan to deal with the developments including the cash ban. I can't tell you what the plan is. That's top secret. But I can tell you that part of the plan involves an alternative supply of cash.”

“Including for Tittybong?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“As I said, I can't reveal any details.”

“Then just let us handle the Tittybong part of the business. You'll need somebody to run it, won't you?”

“As I said earlier, the rules around this kind of thing are tightening up. Only certified associates of the corporation will be allowed to run something like that from now on.”

“Then make us certified associates of the corporation.”

“What he means is, you'll need to become fully initiated members of the Macbeth Corporation,” said Ciara. “It's not just some form you fill out. It's a little bit more, ummm, physical in nature. Is that something you are willing to go through with?”

“Are you a member, Ciara?” asked Krusty.

“Sure am,” said Ciara pointing to a spot just below her shoulder where a tattoo of the Macbeth insignia was placed.

“Well, then sign us up, dudes.”

“It's not that simple. You have to agree to the rules of the corporation including strict loyalty to Macbeth.”

“Fine by me,” said Krusty.

“And there's an initiation process to go through,” smiled Ciara.

“As a way to prove your loyalty to the Corporation,” added Snake with a grin.

“Is it long?”

“No. In fact, it’s very short.”

“Short and, errr, *sweet*.”

“We could do it this afternoon,” said Ciara.

“That quickly?”

“There’s just happens to be an all-Corporation meeting this afternoon. We normally do inductions as part of that. What do you think, Snake?”

Ciara raised a querying eyebrow towards Snake who still looked unconvinced.

“This is all a bit quick for my liking. But I will admit these boys have shown initiative and have been reliable contractors of the Corporation for some time. Not to mention the fact that we do need some new members to run these new programs. I want to be very clear, though, if you agree to come this afternoon you will witness secrets of the Macbeth Corporation that are never to be spoken about with anybody else. Even the likes of Amber,” Snake gestured towards the manila folder. “Even your own mother. Am I understood? This is not the Boy Scouts you’re joining here. The punishment for breaking the oath of silence is death.”

Snake’s tone of voice which, until now had been light hearted and jovial, took on a deep and deadly serious resonance that, combined with a piercing gaze from his pale blue eyes, caused JJ’s stomach to twist. Krusty, however, seemed unperturbed.

“Sure, bro. We can keep a secret.”

“JJ?”

“Just give us a minute to talk it over,” said JJ as he motioned to Krusty to follow him outside where he led him away from the office door and over near their bikes.

“This is not the kind of thing we should be rushing into. We’re talking about joining the mob here not the local football club,” he said in a hushed tone even though there was nobody else around.

“Yeah, and you heard what Snake said about the cash ban and other stuff. Shit’s getting real, bro, and it’s about to kick off in a matter of weeks, not months.”

“I’d rather have some time to think about it.”

“We don’t have time. Besides, if the money is about to run out, wouldn’t you like to be the one holding it rather than the one begging for it? Those are the options in front of us, bro. Unless you’ve got a third alternative?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Dude, we’ve just hit the jackpot. We’re about to become the fuckin’ bank. Couple of percent per transaction just for moving money from A to B. We’ll be rolling in it.”

“I don’t like the sound of this initiation ceremony.”

“Like Snake said, it’ll be quick. We’ll probably just have to pledge allegiance to the flag and all that shit.”

JJ thought about it for a few more seconds but realised that Krusty was right. It did seem like a better idea to be the ones handling the cash at a time like this.

“Alright,” said JJ letting out a long sigh. “I don’t like it but I think you’re right. Let’s do it.”

“Good decision, bro.”

They walked back inside where Snake and Ciara were looking at something behind the reception desk.

“I just wanna confirm one thing, Snake,” said JJ. “If we join, you’ll let us run the banking for the Tittybong area. Can we make that part of the deal?”

“No problem, Mr JJ.”

“Ok. Count us in.”

Snake gave a nod to Ciara who walked over and opened the top drawer on the other side of the desk. She removed two pieces of black cloth and walked over behind JJ from where she proceeded to strap what turned out to be a blindfold around his eyes tying it securely behind his head. When she was satisfied that it was on properly, she walked over behind Krusty and repeated the process.

“Are you gonna tie me up too or does that happen later?” asked Krusty.

“Only if you’re lucky,” giggled Ciara.

“What’s involved in this initiation ceremony?” asked JJ.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” smiled Ciara as she stepped away from Krusty and confirmed that the blindfolds were attached correctly.

“Alright, gentlemen,” said Snake. “We’ve got about a half an hour drive ahead of us. From this point forward you are bound by the rules of the Macbeth Corporation and any transgressions of the rules will be punished so I suggest you keep those blindfolds exactly where they are and sit tight until we reach our destination. It’ll all be over before you know it and you’ll soon be the newest Macbeth associates. Let’s go.”

It was when the large man in the black leather outfit showed up holding a pink dressing gown and matching shower cap that JJ knew things were about to get weird. They had already heard the chanting and cheering through the metal walls of the meat locker in which Snake and Ciara had left them about an hour earlier. It resembled a distant football crowd. Snake and Ciara had now returned with the large man. They wore the kinds of silly grins on their faces of people who are about to play a practical joke but are trying not to give the game away. Snake told JJ and Krusty to strip down to their underwear and put on the pink bathrobes and shower caps. After a period of grumbling, they had acquiesced to the command. The large man then handed them the final piece of the outfit: a pair of pink slippers with fluffy white bonbons on the front.

“Absolutely outstanding,” laughed Snake as the two men in pink stood before him with scowls of disapproval on their faces. “Alright, gentlemen, follow us.”

Snake and Ciara walked ahead and JJ and Krusty followed them out of the room into a wide hallway with concrete floors and painted white walls that reflected the neon glare from the fluorescent lights above. They passed several rooms identical to the one they had just left before exiting the corridor into a large open space that had the feel of an underground pub or club. There was a bar over by the wall to their left, a couple of pool tables in the middle and some pinball machines on the right. Straight ahead was the large crowd that had been making all the noise. There must have been several hundred people clad almost entirely in black leather. They were standing in front of a large stage with PA system. Snake brought them to a halt at the back of the crowd just near the pool tables.

Somebody was talking on the stage and whatever they said caused a cheer from the crowd who all raised their right arm with the index finger pointing straight to the sky which seemed like some kind of symbolic gesture. As the crowd put their arms back down again, JJ got a glimpse of the stage for the first time and realised that the voice coming through the PA was from a young girl who was talking into a microphone. She had brown pigtails hanging down from either side of her face and was wearing a long black dress. The expression on her face was of intense seriousness and when she spoke it was with an authority that belied her age and the high-pitched tone of her voice. It was as if an army general or a police commander had been transported into the body of a small girl.

“Who’s that?” asked JJ turning to Snake.

“That’s Macbeth,” he replied.

“What the fuck?” exclaimed Krusty.

“That’s Macbeth?” said JJ. “The infamous crime boss who controls the black market in half of the country is a young girl?”

“You didn’t know that?” asked Snake with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now you know. Pipe down. She’s coming to the end of her speech and then it’ll be your time to shine.”

Macbeth removed the microphone from its stand and began prowling the stage like an angry panther.

“There are other logistical changes that you will be informed about in due course. For now, I wish only to impress upon you, comrades, the importance of this moment which represents a decisive turning point in our fight against the globalist scum. They no longer even pretend to govern this country. They are happy to leave anybody outside of the cities to fend for themselves. Their single purpose is to extract from this land what they want with no care for culture or the good of society. Their greed is our strength, comrades. Their weakness our opportunity. We will plant our flag where they fear to tread and we will pick them off from within while we build our forces without. When the time comes, and come it will, we shall strike the final dagger into their dark hearts and vanquish the evil from this land. Are you with me, comrades?”

A boisterous cheer went up from the audience – “yeah!”

“Are you with me comrades?” intoned the diminutive figure crossing to the other side of the stage.

“Yeah!”

“It is time, comrades. What is it time for?”

“Slay Duncan!”

“What is it time for?”

“Slay Duncan!”

“One more time, comrades!” shouted the young girl lifting her right index figure to the sky.

The crowd lifted its right index figure to the sky and at an earth shaking volume intoned – “Slay Duncan!”

The crowd broke out into delirious applause and Macbeth stood at the front of the stage with a satisfied look on her face. After a time, she put the microphone back into the stand and the noise gradually tapered off.

“Dude, who the fuck is Duncan?” asked Krusty.

“I dunno,” shrugged JJ. “Maybe he’s one of the globalists or something.”

“There is no Duncan,” snapped Snake, who had overheard the question. “Slay Duncan is the slogan for the Corporation and in future you two will need to join in the chant instead of standing there slobbering like a couple of lost dogs.”

“We weren’t slobbering.”

“Quiet. It’s almost time.”

There was a large chair which JJ realised was actually a throne in the centre of the stage. Macbeth jumped on it and swung around so she was seated with her legs dangling down over the front. A man walked over to the microphone.

“Comrades, we will now move to the final order of business for the evening. An initiation for two new members who wish to join the Corporation.”

The audience, seeming to know the drill by heart, immediately began to part in the middle forming a corridor which led straight back to where JJ and Krusty were standing. JJ’s heart began to beat faster at the several hundred sets of eyes which were focused on him as he stood there in his pink bathrobe, shower cap and slippers.

“Let’s go,” said Snake giving JJ and Krusty a nudge on the shoulder to signal for them to walk in front of him through the middle of the crowd. A sea of faces, some bearded, some tattooed, mostly smirking and many leering greeted JJ who resolved to look straight ahead and try not to pay attention but this just made him realise that he was shaking in the knees as if one little push would be all it would take to send him crumbling to the floor.

“Got some fresh meat, have we, Snake?”

“Lambs to the slaughter.”

“Better get the meat hooks ready.”

These were some of the more family friendly taunts that rang out as they made their way through the crowd. Snake acknowledged the joviality with a ceremonial nod and led JJ and Krusty to the front of the stage and then over to the right where they ascended several stairs up onto the stage proper. He placed them on the right hand side a metre or two back from the front. JJ surveyed the leather-clad crowd. It consisted mostly of men you wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley at night. There seemed to be more tattoos than skin on display and there were quite a lot of weapons tucked into leather holsters. One positive, at least

from the point of view of a young man, was the rather high proportion of women in the crowd although they were not the kind of girls one would meet in Tittybong. They followed Ciara in having a strong attachment to piercings and silver jewellery as a complement to black leather and their hairstyles alternated between short and spiky and long and complicated. The crowd was young. They were mostly around JJ's age with just a couple of older folk in the room.

Without any overt signal from anywhere, the crowd began chanting and the chanting got gradually louder as another man ascended the stage from the stairs on the side opposite JJ and Krusty. JJ looked over to see that he was dressed in an identical outfit except rather than being pink, his bathrobe, shower cap and slipper combination was a bright yellow. The man was one of the older people in the room and would have been in his fifties or sixties with a large beer belly not hidden by the bathrobe and a long white beard. He looked a little like a yellow version of Santa Claus and he held a clipboard ceremonially in his right hand as he took up a position at the front of the stage opposite JJ and Krusty. The yellow Santa Claus held up his hand to the crowd and the room became silent before his bellowing voice, which did not need any further amplification from the PA system, rang out like a town crier.

"Comrades, do you see these vile, scum-sucking vermin here before you?" he said gesturing to JJ and Krusty on the other side of the stage.

"Yeah!" shouted the crowd.

"Do you see these two despicable low-lifes, these repulsive, revulsive, abhorrent and obnoxious abominations?"

"Yeah!"

"Let us enquire of these odious, nauseating wretches, what is their purpose here."

There was silence in the room as all faces turned to JJ and Krusty who stood with mystified looks on their faces as the crowd eyed them off expectantly.

"Dude, are we supposed to say something?" whispered Krusty out of the corner of his mouth.

"I dunno," said JJ under his breath.

"Vermin, why are you here?" screamed the man in yellow this time turning his head towards the two to make it clear who he was referring to.

"Umm, we're here to join the Corporation, bro," said Krusty.

"Do you hear that, Comrades? These puss-eating skelfs, these dung-munching nudniks want to join the Corporation. What say you to this request?"

The crowd erupted into booing and whistling. JJ once again felt his knees weaken as pointed fingers, waved fists and angry tongues were hurled in his direction. He wondered whether he and Krusty were about to be eaten alive. After a time, the man in yellow once again held up his hand for silence. JJ looked over and realised that he was reading off a piece of paper on the clipboard.

“The crowd has spoken. Who here speaks for the vermin?”

“I do,” said Snake from the side of the stage and he lifted his arm in the familiar gesture with index finger pointing to the sky.

“What say you in their favour, comrade?”

Snake began to speak and JJ noticed that he too was reading from a script but one that he held in a small bit of paper in his hand.

“Comrades, these two who stand before you are the most repugnant, loathsome and detestable worms on the face of this earth. These yucky, yellow-bellied yahoos have been retrieved straight from the pits of abomination and brought before you tonight. I abhor, detest and despise them. I disown them.”

Having played his part, Snake took a step back and tucked the paper into his pant pocket. The crowd proceeded to once again go apeshit until the man in yellow called for silence. He held up his hand as if trying to placate the angry mob.

“Comrades, we are here on a mission of mercy. These miserable wretches, now disowned by their only friend, throw themselves upon the bosom of your charity. Will you accept their desperate cry?”

This time there was no response from the crowd.

“Comrades, will you offer these strays a cup of the milk of human kindness wherewith to quench the thirst of their desire?”

A handful of shouts that sounded more of less positive and a smattering of clapping were heard from the audience.

“Will you accept these into the corporation?” shouted the man whose tone had become a kind of pleading as if all of sudden he was hugely in favour of the idea.

The applause and cheering grew.

“I can’t hear you,” shouted the man in yellow.

The noise increased.

“Louder!”

The audience erupted as one in cheering, whooping and hollering every bit as loud as it had been during the booing and cussing just a few minutes prior. The yellow man allowed this to continue before raising his hand for silence one last time.

“Very well. You have convinced me. I will need two volunteers to consummate the ceremony.”

A number of hands went up from the crowd and the man in yellow selected two who skipped up the stage enthusiastically and stood directly behind JJ and Krusty, so close that JJ could feel the man’s breath on his neck.

“What’s the consummation?” JJ asked him.

“You’re about to find out, sweetheart,” grinned the man.

“And I’ll need eight enforcers,” announced the man in yellow.

Again, many hands went up and the man chose the allotted number.

“Dude, what does he need enforcers for?” said Krusty who was even starting to sound a little worried.

The eight volunteers, all large men, ascended to the stage and took up a position so that they formed a square around JJ and another around Krusty.

“Disrobe them,” commanded the man in yellow.

From behind him, JJ felt the belt around his pink bathrobe be untied and then the robe itself pulled down violently from his shoulders forcing his arms downwards. In perfect unison, as if they had practiced the manoeuvre before, two of the enforcers grabbed an arm each and twisted in such a way as to force JJ to the ground whereupon the other two fell on his feet and pulled back so that before he knew what had happened he was lying on his back with arms pulled back to the side and above his head. He looked across to see that the same had happened to Krusty with the exception that he had managed to pry one foot loose and was flailing his leg about like a wild horse.

“Fuck off, bro!” he shouted as the man finally got the foot under control and thrust an elbow downwards into Krusty’s thigh as punishment.

The crowd began a chant that started quietly and then got progressively louder – “Hail Macbeth. Slay Duncan. Hail Macbeth. Slay Duncan” – it rang out over and over.

From his position on the ground looking up at the ceiling, JJ saw the man tasked with consummating the ceremony take a step forward such that his feet were about level with JJ’s chest one foot on either side of his body as he faced towards JJ’s feet. From this unusual angle, JJ struggled to make out what the man was doing. Was he scratching his stomach? Or

tucking his shirt in? It wasn't until JJ caught sight of the tail end of the man's belt that he realised the man had undone the belt and was in the process of undoing the fly on his jeans and, just as the true horror of the situation became apparent to JJ, he saw - *it* - and no sooner had he seen - *it* - than he saw a stream of light yellow fluid coming out of *it* glimmering off the lights of the room and twinkling down onto JJ's bare midriff. It wasn't so much the sensation on his skin as the knowledge of what was going on that that caused JJ to begin writhing around like a cut snake.

"Fuck off," he shouted but he could barely even hear his own voice above the chanting "Hail Macbeth. Slay Duncan."

"Hey, stop squirming. You're getting piss everywhere," shouted the man who was holding his left arm.

"I'm getting piss everywhere!?" cried JJ hysterically as he looked over to see that two extra men had run over to help keep Krusty pinned to the floor while the same thing was happening to him.

That made a total of six men who looked like they were trying to wrestle a crocodile and only just winning.

The whole thing seemed to go on far longer than the physiology of the human bladder should have allowed, but finally the flow of yellow fluid stopped and the consummators zipped up their pants, did up their belts and took a step back. The four, or in the case of Krusty, six, enforcers pulled JJ and Krusty to their feet and presented them to the crowd who broke into wild cheering and clapping like it was the end of the last song at a rock concert. The cheering went on for some time until the man in yellow, the colour of which now made more sense to JJ, once again beckoned for quiet at which point JJ and Krusty were turned around and led over to stand in front of Macbeth who had sat there during the whole ritual with a stern and uncompromising look on her face like the statue of an ancient goddess. She gazed upon them for a few seconds with this look before suddenly bursting out in laughter. She stood and clapped her hands together.

"This always cracks me up," she giggled. "Alright, the ceremony is consummated. Go and hose them down."

The enforcers dragged JJ and Krusty back to the meat locker from which they had come. Snake and Ciara were already there with hoses in hand. The men pushed them to the middle of the room and a burst of cold water hit them like a slap in the face. After a thorough drenching, they were thrown a towel each.

"Dude, what the fuck was that?" said Krusty once he had recovered from the shock.

"Welcome to the Macbeth Corporation," grinned Snake. "A baptism of fire, isn't it."

"Pretty sure that wasn't holy water," said JJ ruefully.

“Well, if you two stop whining and get yourselves dry we’ll take you out for some proper holy water.”

“What’s that?”

“The final stage of the initiation,” said Ciara.

“What, you’re gonna make us drink piss now?”

“Yeah, but not that kind of piss.”

“It involves a lot of vodka.”

“You did well,” smiled Ciara as she took the towel from Krusty and handed him his t-shirt. “I’ve never seen six men needed to hold somebody down before. You must be *really* strong.”

It might have been the tone of her voice, it might have been her lascivious smile or the fact that she was running her hand down his bare chest, but Krusty’s anger evaporated and before long both he and JJ were dressed and walking back to the main room to meet their new comrades and drink a toast to the newest associates of the Macbeth Corporation.

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