



SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
BILLY JOHNSON'S BASEMENT

"You know, no matter how much you stare at her, she's not gonna suck your dick."

My temporary roommate finally stopped trying to eye-fuck my robot and scowled, as if I had interrupted something sacred to him.

"I was *not* staring."

Billy insisted, the pimples that decorated his cheeks growing even more red and angry than usual. God he was such a loser. I had only been living in his basement for a few weeks and already some of the things I'd seen had got me seriously questioning my life decisions.

"Sure."

I glanced over at N0R4, who was sitting silently in the corner of the room. She was in the midst of a system update, and fortunately did not have to smell the basement, which was filled with pizza boxes, dirty clothes and cans of Monster Energy.

"You thought she was a sex bot, didn't you?"

"Did not."

Billy swung around in his chair, trying to ignore me and focus on his next game of League of Legends.

"Bro, it's ok, you're a virgin, I get it..."

"Can you shut the fuck up Tyler?"

I rolled my eyes and flopped back on the bed, again questioning how I had let my life spiral to the point where I was living in the basement of a LoL player. There wasn't really much I could do. After being kicked out of my apartment and spending all my money to visit Tamako, I really didn't have many options left financially.

ST0RM, the leader of my own personal fan club, had managed to get me this place. Apparently she was friends with this loser, I wasn't really sure how. At least he had some good snacks.

"Dude I told you to call me CYPH3R, remember?"

I said, chomping on a flamin hot cheeto.

"I mean, you're not really him anymore, are you?"

Billy's mechanical keyboard clicked and clacked loudly, an irritating noise I'd become all too familiar with.

"The fuck do you mean?"

I spat, popping another cheeto in my mouth and chewing loudly to match the volume of the keyboard.

"Do you know why I don't have a poster of you in the wall?"

"You're too much of a Lissie Hope stan."

The...frequently used...body pillow which lay on his bed was proof of that. As was the near-naked poster of her that hung above said bed. It was one of several that lined the walls, featuring wrestlers ranging from SEB to Vhodka Black. But somehow he had forgotten that I was as good as, if not better, than a lot of those losers. So my iconic face was absent from his shitty little collection.

"No, it's because I took it down."

"The fuck? Why?"

Billy lowered his head, in what I could only assume was a sign of shame.

"Because you went to prison for kidnapping a kid."

"Oh who hadn't ever had a brush with the law? Plus that wasn't even why I-"

"It doesn't matter. I mean, you got out and then you never even apologised to that kid. Don't you think that makes you a shitty person?"

Now the guy who lived in his mom's basement was gonna lecture me about being a good person. Who the fuck was this guy to give me shit? He should be honoured to even be in my presence.

"No, I don't. Not that I need to explain myself to you, Billy..."

I sent a cheeto sailing into the nerd's greasy neck which he then swatted away.

"But I'll let you in on a little secret."

I rolled off the bed and huddled close to his ear.

"I don't give a fuck. If Thad wanted me to apologise, he would have come knocking. Then I would consider it...maybe. And that's a very fucking generous maybe."

"You really didn't learn anything from prison, did you?"

The snide tone from Billy was starting to get on my nerves. What did he know? He was just some obese glutton who never had a real job in his life, let alone been to prison. Those months had been hell, so much that most of them were blocked out from my memory.

"Yeah, I learned that living like you sucks," I said, casually pressing the power button on his shitty tower.

The screen on Billy's computer monitor shut off instantly. As if I had ignited a fuse deep inside him, Billy freaked out. For a big boy, the kid moved fast. Before I could react, I was on the ground, the nerd on top of me.

"I never asked for this!" He screamed, his hands clawing at my face, "I never fucking wanted you here, you asshole!"

But Billy, in his rage, had forgotten that the person he'd just attacked was a pro wrestler. I may not have been the best grappler,

but I knew how to throw a strike. I pushed him back, giving me an opening to drive my knee into his gut.

The kid ground to a halt, his eyes bulging out of his skull. I felt his whole body seize up, then his face went a slightly green colour.

Fortunately I realised what was about to happen and managed to roll out from under him, moments before he was painting the floor with the contents of his stomach.

"God that's gross," I staggered away from Billy, the stench of his vomit making my eyes water.

"I'm gonna go get something to clean that up, just...stay there."

Desperate to get out of the now rank-smelling basement, I quickly made my way to the stairs, but Billy's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"So...you're just beating up...on little kids again?"

"Billy I swear to god if you don't shut up I'm going to kick your stupid face off."

The kid brushed some chunks off of his bottom lip and got to one knee.

"I get it, I'm a loser. But you know what? At least I care about this stuff," Billy gestured to the posters.

"I'm passionate about wrestling. You used to be, too, but somewhere along the line you stopped caring."

I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah right, that's why I'm signed with multiple companies right now, because I 'don't care'."

Billy finally stood up, grabbing tissues to wipe his vomit off of his grimy Johnny Bacchus T-shirt.

"You don't care because you have a match this weekend, and instead of preparing you're sitting on the bed eating cheetos and beating me up."

As much as I wanted to tell him otherwise, the kid wasn't exactly wrong. My highly anticipated (trust me) return to the ring was scheduled for this weekend. XWF's Last Blood Battle Royal. A match that was packed with friends, foes, and every jacksss in between. Why was I wasting my time here?

"You're right," I conceded.

"About the fact you're a shitty person and need to do better?"

Pulling my hood over my head, I went about collecting my things.

"No, the other stuff. This isn't going to work out, this isn't where I should be right now," I pulled open the chest of draws next to my bed and began taking out clothes and stuffing them into a bag.

"You're leaving?" Billy actually sounded disappointed, to my surprise.

"Yeah, well, temporarily."

"Oh," he mumbled.

"I'll be back dude, don't you worry," I reassured him, placing the bag on my bed and zipping it up.

"Where are you going?"

"Japan."

The decision was kind of already made for me. I needed to get back into shape, otherwise I wasn't going to last very long at all against 29 other wrestlers, most of which haven't had the handicap of spending the past nine months in prison.

I had to get back on my feet, start training, but with who? Most of the people I would have hit up were either not talking to me or busy with their own stuff. But there was one avenue that, although I hated to truly consider it, kind of made sense.

Sarako Jaeong was my nemesis. My girlfriend's employer was also her tormentor. She had been verbally and physically abusive towards Tama the entire time she'd been making outfits for her. But because of Tama's kind nature, she had never really stood up for herself, and had continued to work and manage her.

So yes, Sarako was all a horrible human being...but she was also a seriously good wrestler. One of Miracle Galaxy Pro's rising stars, she'd recently won the ENDVR Championship - with a big assist from Tama, of course. All he had to do was call Tama and let her know, and she would probably even pay for his flight.

It was a win-win-win, he would get to beat up Sarako, Sarako would have the opportunity to try to do the same to him, and Tama would get to spend more time with her boyfriend and other client.

"How long are you going for?" Billy asked as I reached the top of the stairs.

"Long enough for you and Lissie Hope pillow edition over there to get well acquainted."

"And you're not taking NØR4?"

The robot still sat in the corner, updating. I considered it for a moment, but maybe it was best to leave her to keep an eye on Billy. Just in case.

"Nah, but remember, *not* a sex robot."

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TOKYO, JAPAN

SARAKO'S PRIVATE TRAINING FACILITY

The air in Sarako Jaejong's exercise gym had none of the typical gym smells about it. It was the first time I'd walked into one and not been immediately assaulted by copious amounts of AXE body spray and the sweat of at least a dozen different macho men all trying to out-lift each other. It actually smelled nice...somehow.

The gym itself was huge, dominated by a wrestling ring that sat in the middle. It was completely the right size, with turnbuckle pads that featured Sarako's very punchable face and mats on the outside. Beyond the ring were all sorts of different exercise machines, each one more sleek and modern than the last.

Tamako clutched my hand tightly. In the ring was "Princess" Jaejong, carrying a baseball bat filled with nails that shone underneath the lights. She was dressed down, compared to her usual outfit, just a pair of gray exercise shorts and a blue workout top. Her pink-haired trainer Lorelei Claiborne stood on the apron, excitedly bouncing from one foot to another.

"What's wrong Cypher? You look a little pale, like more than usual," Sarako burst into a shit-eating grin.

I scoffed, "Bruh, you're the one who brought a weapon, clearly you're worried I'm gonna dumpster you."

"Oh this?" Sarako brandished the baseball bat in the air, "This is for later, I was thinking that the loser gets 10 lashes. What do you say?"

"Isn't that so exciting! What a generous offer from Princess Jaejong, you should be so grateful!" Lorelei beamed.

"I'll even let little miss traitor over there watch as I skin you alive."

Tama scowled at that, "I am NOT a traitor, I just manage him too. You know this."

"Whatever, are we gonna do this or not?"

I answered Sarako's question by shrugging off my hoodie and handing it to Tama, "Just make sure that pixie girl over there doesn't interfere."

Tama nodded, gave me a quick kiss, and whispered "good luck" in my ear.

I felt a level of apprehension as I climbed onto the apron. Nine months had passed since the last time I had stepped foot in the squared circle, and even though this was just training, it was still daunting. But I had to focus, especially if I was going to avoid taking 10 lashes.

Sarako was quick off the mark. No sooner had I readied myself for the fight than she had wrapped her legs around my head and flipped me over with a hurracanrana. The world spun, I felt dizzy, and I landed on my ass on the mat.

Ahh, the joys of wrestling.

I knew Sarako was going to be fast, so when she took to the ropes for a lionsault, I managed to roll away in time. But instead of smacking into the mat, she somehow landed on her feet. I was helpless as Sarako flipped a second time, landing flush on top of me and driving the air out of my lungs. Suddenly my leg was hooked and a hand was hitting against the mat.

"One!"

"Two!"

I propelled my body off the canvas and quickly rolled away from my opponent. I raised an eyebrow at Lorelei, who was now wearing a striped referee shirt.

"Wait...you're the ref?" I said in disbelief.

"Yup!"

"How is that fair?!"

Lorelei pouted, "Aww, is widdle CYPH3R feeling overwhelmed?"

I shook my head, "No, it's just-

Sarako slammed into me like a missile, and again I was almost in a daze. She was small, but she packed a punch. The lariat had almost taken my head off, and the iron taste of blood was now filling my mouth. Sarako was giving me no time to think or plan, she was just moving too fast.

Off the ropes, she came at me again. Knowing I had to slow everything down, I went to ground. She leapt over me, as I thought she would, and I stuck out a hand just in time to grab her foot, tripping her. Tama burst into cheers from the sideline, drawing a glare from Sarako.

"Cmon babe! You got this!"

"Shut up!" Sarako growled, the deep rooted jealousy beginning to rear its head.

Then a thought came to me. This calculated recklessness that Sarako was showing may have been effective so far, but it was a double edged sword.

She turned and charged again, but this time I brought my leg up, jamming the sole of my boot into her stomach. Sarako doubled over, and without even thinking about it, my knee came up to meet the bridge of her nose.

Finally, some muscle memory was coming back.

"My fucking *nose!*" Sarako screamed, flying into a fit of fury, but the only thing she collected was a boot to the jaw.

BOOM, HEADSHOT!

Again on instinct I grabbed both legs and hooked her as deep as could onto the canvas.

"One....."

The one count that lasted as long as a full three count gave Sarako ample time to kick out. I glared at Lorelei, who simply shrugged and stuck her tongue out. I felt anger boiling beneath the surface, ready to spill over.

"The fuck are you doing?" I spat, getting into Lorelei's face.

"You better back off hacker boy!"

The trainer shoved me backwards and Sarako capitalised. A shotgun dropkick left me dazed, and then she was off the ropes, flying through the air with a springboard enziguri that landed flush on my jaw. I looked up at the roof, expecting to see birds flying around like those stupid old-timey cartoons.

I could vaguely hear Tama shouting at me from ringside, but it felt a million miles away. I was safe here. Screw the battle royal. I'll take the 10 lashes and get the hell out of here. I wasn't cut out to restart my wrestling career.

I had failed.

All I could do now was just lie and wait for it all to be over. Billy's words came back to me as I closed my eyes.

"At some point you just stopped caring."

The mat shook, but I felt no pain. I opened my eyes to see Sarako laying next to me, clutching her back in pain. Tama was on the apron, cheering for me to get up, while Lorelei scolded her. Maybe I wasn't done just yet. I'd forgotten that now I had Tama on my side - someone to fight for.

This time I answered her pleas, climbing off the mat and hauling Sarako into a fireman's carry. The spoiled princess kicked and screamed like a child, but I laid a solid elbow into her jaw, then raised her into the air, bringing my knee up to smash her in the face.

GAME OVER!

I covered her, and Lorelei reluctantly counted.

"One..."

"Two..."

"Three."

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DECEMBER 2023

[Dial Tone]

"Yo, this is CYPH3R."

...

"Bruh, no cap this is actually you."

...

"So what are you calling me for? If it's about that leak I can explain..."

...

"What leak? Yeah, exactly!"

...

"So you want me to stick around?"

...

"Huh, well that is a tempting offer dude. But you know, there are a lot of other sharks circling..."

...

"Cmon man, you can do better than that. Those are rookie numbers."

...

"I'm an established superstar bro, you saw what I did for OCW right?"

...

"I guess we could meet in the middle, but if you want the no-hack guarantee, it would be best to add a little extra. Just for peace of mind."

...

"That sounds reasonable."

...

"Ok, I'm in."

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"When it feels scary to jump, that is exactly when you jump, otherwise you end up staying in the same place your whole life."

- A Most Violent Year (2014)

Just under 12 months ago I was convicted of revenge porn and sentenced to two years in prison. I thought I would never see the inside of a ring again. It felt like my career was over. So when I negotiated a deal to get out and was thrust back into the industry, it was a little daunting.

The landscape had changed a lot while I was gone. OCW, my former home, had fractured into three, and the best of the best were now fighting for a piece of the illusive TRIAD. So in summary, everything was about triangles and I didn't get it. Even though TRIAD had four teams. Whatever.

The point is that it was hard to know where I belonged in this new era of wrestling. So when I heard about the XWF's Last Blood Battle Royale, I jumped at the chance. A free hit at a bunch of XWF's low to mid carders and maybe a few top stars thrown in? Sounded like a no brainer.

But then...eeeeeeveryone decided that my idea was so good that they just had to follow suit. And Theo Pryce welcomed them with open arms. Soon the entrants list resembled a who's who of CYPH3R despisers.

Johnny Bacchus. Jason Cashe. Sloane Taylor. Matt Knox. SEB. Well maybe not SEB to the full extent, but I know he would just love to punch me in the face. Unfortunately for you, Sebastian, your empire is slowly crumbling, brick by brick. A failed relationship led to a championship loss and now you're being cucked by Cashe. The foundations are shaky.

Sure, you're still a world champion, but it feels like you lack the kind of passion for the business you once had. Maybe I'm wrong but I wouldn't be surprised if you walked away. I wouldn't blame you, either, it's about time that vets like you made way for the new generation.

On the other hand, Sloane, I don't think you lack passion for this business at all. You were the little girl that dared to dream, and accomplished great things in your time. But that was then, and this is now. Now it seems you've spent more time answering questions about who's dick is bigger on Twitter than you have training for this match. Which is a shame, because I know that your best is as good as anyone else's in this match. But you're distracted, preoccupied, still trying to sell your one night stand cum wedding to your parents.

Speaking of Jason Cashe, I hope you're going to be ok with other people laying a finger on Sloane. You've been so protective of her I'm beginning to think she's actually connected to you by strings. I wonder how you'll be able to protect her when there's 28 other people in the ring. Personally I can't wait to find out. I also can't wait to kick your head off your shoulders and spill your blood on the canvas for all the shit you've said. I'm not sensitive, Cashe, you just really piss me off. You reek of someone who's used to saying whatever you want without being punched in the throat.

It kinda makes sense when you're aligned with The Raven though. For such an accomplished wrestler, multiple time world champion yadda yadda, you sure do have the ego of a frat boy so desperately afraid of not impressing his dudebro friends, Knox. That is to say, fragile at best. Rather than focusing on something important - this match for instance - you devote your time and energy to going after a clout seeking rookie. You're becoming exploitable in your old age, Matthew, and in a match like this...that can be fatal.

Meanwhile Johnny Bacchus seems to be the one ducking me. I couldn't even get on your shitty little top 10 list, what a shame. Maybe you're still a bit emo because I dumpstered your ex girlfriend way back when. But apparently even that wasn't enough to get the attention of the great Johnny Bacchus, who's insults are taken exclusively from the pages of a thesaurus. You think by dressing up your shit talk you can make it sound like some kind of amazing burn, but really you're just saying the same shit as the rest of us, just in different words. I also find it hilarious that Tama bothers you because she's too

bubbly...I mean have you seen who you're dating bro? Yeah, your hypocrisy is showing.

Of course there are plenty of people I haven't mentioned. This match is really a cross-section of talent from all over the place. You've got the TRIAD breakouts like Dadbod and Dickie Watson, the XWF vets in Centurion, Mark Flynn and Doctor Louis D'Ville and next generation in Dick Drizzle and Enigma, the multi-company superstars of Spencer Adams, Jmont and Sean Parker, and the people that nobody likes - Crash Rodriguez, Thunder Knuckles, Bobby Bourbon and Corey Black. In a match that's packed with talent, I don't think many are going to be looking at me, which is an advantage. Staying out of sight will help with preserving my time in this match.

But at the end of the day this match isn't really about substance or style. It's hardly even about wrestling. Nah, it's about spilling blood. It's about straight up violence. Theo wants to weed out the pussies from the chads. I don't have any doubts about which category I'm in, but if you needed any convincing, I got my start at a fed called Murderhaus.

Terrible, shitty place, really, but I am glad for the experience. I learned not to fear pain, and instead accept it. It also taught me to be ruthless, leave whatever feelings I might have about my opponent at the door, and not be afraid of shredding their face to pieces. Be it with barbed wire or a cheese grater, you had to be out for blood.

This time I've got someone special on my side. Few of the guys in this match are aware quite how much of a difference having a manager in your corner can make, but I'm sure they're going to find out. Tamako Ito might be a cute face, but she's just as deadly. My comeback would not have been possible without her. She has given me the confidence I needed to get back in the ring and start a new chapter.

XWF's Last Blood Battle Royal represents my first match since losing the only title I had ever won in OCW and being locked up for past mistakes. It might be intimidating to jump back into wrestling, but if I don't jump now, I risk being stuck here forever.

