



**SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
TAMAKO ITO'S DREAM HOUSE**

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees, casting shadows off of the stylish furniture inside the open-plan living room.

“And this is what I like to call the *main event* of this wonderful home,” the real estate agent buzzed, a little too happy with himself for that wrestling reference.

“Omigosh, this is so *cool!*” Tamako Ito yelped, practically bouncing off the walls.

“Isn't it, baby?”

Try as he might, CYPH3R couldn't quite match Tama's enthusiasm for the trendy house. It wasn't that he didn't like it. He just didn't have the same passion that she did for finding the "perfect" house. Pretty much anything was better than the places he'd had to call his home recently.

"Yeah this sure is...something," he remarked, causing Tama to pout.

"You don't like it?"

"Oh it's great."

Tama pressed him, "Tyyyyyllllerrrr..."

He sighed, "It's just, do we really need this? Did prison really rot my brain to the point where this shit seems excessive??"

"Prison?!" The real estate guy exclaimed, ogling CYPH3R in horror.

"Oh...yeah that's what I used to call the dump I used to live in," he said uneasily.

"Not like...actual prison...or anything."

An awkward silence followed.

"How much is this, anyway?" He asked, gazing through the windows, which provided a stunning view of the city.

The agent flashed what he no doubt thought was a charismatic smile, "Oh it's very affordable, though we're not quite done with the tour. We should probably wrap that up before we get into financial matters..."

"The tour! THE TOUR!!" Tama squealed in excitement, following the agent into the next room without a second thought.

He was about to reluctantly join them when his phone buzzed in his pocket. An incoming call from Sebastian Everett-Bryce! One of the few people who had stuck by him

"You coming babe?" Tama's voice was faint from the other room.

"I'll be right there!" He yelled back, before quickly answering the call.

“Sebastian!” CYPH3R greeted him, “Sup dude?”

“Is now a good time, Tyler?”

“Good as ever, I mean I’m in the middle of checking out this house that’s probably gonna be way more than I could ever afford.”

“Do you remember what we discussed on Twitter?”

He did, though the details were lacking. SEB wanted him to hack something for him, and he had promised to pay him, too. Which was good, because ever since getting out of prison, he’d been hesitant to do any more unpaid favours.

“I do, what is the deal with that, by the way? What kind of debauchery are you trying to get me to unearth this time, SEB?”

“Well I’d rather speak to you in person about that, but it seems like you’re a busy man these days. You’re in California one day and Tokyo the next,” SEB scoffed.

CYPH3R stopped pacing and looked out at that incredible view once again.

“Well I might be staying put soon,” the words came out of his mouth before he could stop them.

“I mean, maybe,” he quickly covered, “Anyway I’ll be around for the next few weeks, at least, so we can hang sometime”

“Great, well I’ll leave you to your house hunting.”

Before caught SEB just before he could hang up.

“Before you go and stuff yourself with crumpets, or whatever, I gotta ask you something.”

“..yeah?”

His match with Sloane Taylor, SEB’s ex, was only days away. The TV title was on the line, but this match was about much more than championships. In a way it seemed like the two of them eventually coming to blows was inevitable, having been set in motion by CYPH3R’s betrayal two years ago.

Once upon a time, Sloane, SEB, Thaddeus Duke and his wife Sahara had been closest thing to friends that he’d had in the business. That had all changed when he

took a job he would live to regret. Folding to the almighty dollar, CYPH3R helped facilitate the kidnapping of Thad's child in exchange for a sizeable sum from Easton Alexander - the two feuding in OCW at the time.

Of course Thad was never supposed to know, but really he should have known better. Once he had sniffed out what CYPH3R had done, things were never quite the same. Shortly after they all cut ties with him, and he ended up in prison. Upon his release there were many...mixed...feelings among his former friends. SEB had been the most willing to forgive him, while Sloane has been on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Still, no one knew Sloane better than SEB, even if they weren't on speaking terms currently.

"I need some advice, you know I've got this big match coming up at March Madness."

"With Sloane," SEB said curtly.

"Yeah with Sloane, and I was thinking well, you would know her better than anyone, so I thought you could give me some tips on how I can beat her ass on Sunday."

An exasperated sigh came through the other end of the phone.

"I mean you could even consider said advice part payment for my services," CYPH3R added.

"I'll be honest, I don't really want to help you, Tyler."

SEB's tone was cold.

"Why not?"

"Because I know what you're doing, you're trying to take advantage of me. You know I'm in a tough position emotionally with Sloane and you want me to rat on her out of spite, just so you can win a match."

This was why he didn't often get close to people. You spend too much time around them, and they begin to predict your behavior. At this point, SEB knew him a little *too* well for his liking.

“Bro chill, I’m not telling you to empty out her god damn Eras Tour diary, strictly just in ring shit. I don’t need to know her deepest fear or all-time celebrity crushes, just wrestling strategy,” he mused, flopping back on the luxurious couch

“The only thing I can tell you, Tyler, is to be careful. Too many people underestimate her and end up paying the price. If you don’t want to look like a bellend in your first XWF title match, I’d recommend you take her seriously.”

CYPH3R blew a raspberry, “Pshhh, yeah yeah. Sure, I’ll take her as seriously I take unranked games of Valorant.”

“Ha ha,” SEB’s voice was dripping with sarcasm, “Then I’m sure you’ll be totally fine.”

“Even if you don’t wanna tell me anything , bro, I’m gonna mess her up. You should tune in, I’m sure it’ll be good viewing after she dumped your-

SEB cut him off, “Don’t.”

“Oh come on it’s been ages...you can’t deny you wouldn’t enjoy seeing her getting put on her ass right in front of Cashe!”

Once again, an awkward pause followed.

“Not like that...” he clarified, cringing internally.

“I’m hanging up now.”

*Click.*

Disappointed, but not quite surprised, CYPH3R pocketed his phone.

“Man, he’s still touchy,” he murmured to himself.

It had been quite some time since the break up, and he just wished that SEB would show a little fire. He felt like he was the only one who still thought she deserved payback for the whole one night stand marriage with Cashe in Vegas. But voicing his desire for revenge had only served to get him in trouble, even if he felt like it was coming from a good place.

His phone vibrated once again, this time a text from SEB.

“Btw, you really should apologise to Frankie.”

He was about to type out a witty response when he felt Tama's arms come around his shoulders.

"Hey sexy," she planted a kiss on his cheek, "You missed the rest of the tour."

He grinned, "Is it everything you ever wanted?"

She plopped down next to him on the couch and nodded enthusiastically.

"Uh-huh, but...what do *you* think?"

It was true that he did feel the upper class digs were maybe a little much, given what he'd been through recently. But this wasn't just about him anymore. He often had to remind himself that Tama's needs were as important as his own. He was still getting used to this whole "committed relationship" thing.

"You know, I could get used to this," he said nonchalantly, but prompting an ear-to-ear smile from Tama.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She squealed, and the two shared a kiss, falling back onto the couch.

"*Ah hem.*"

The moment was cut short by the agent loudly clearing his throat. They quickly separated, Tama apologising profusely while CYPH3R just smirked.

"I think that should wrap things up today, are you interested?" He asked impatiently.

They looked at each other, then turned and nodded.

"Well you'll be happy to know it's a *very* affordable \$10 million..."

CYPH3R's eyes went wide.

**"WHAT THE FUCK?!"**

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## **MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA AN AVERAGELY-COSTED HOTEL ROOM**

Tama had promised to pay the lion's share from her seemingly endless savings account, but the cost still bothered him. On one hand he wanted to make her happy, on the other all he could think about was how many gaming PCs he could buy for that amount.

Still there were more pressing matters, in particular gearing up for his match with Sloane. He just wished there was some way he could get inside her head, to really know her strengths and weaknesses. Then, it hit him. What about virtual reality? He had been meaning to test NOR4's capabilities as an AI. Could she create an informative program based on Sloane's profile?

These thoughts were whizzing around his head and he arrived back at his hotel room for the weekend. He didn't really have much else to do tonight, so he decided to try and make his vision a reality. Pressing a button on his smartwatch brought the AI's face up on the screen.

"Hey NOR4...i'm gonna need your help."

## **A FEW HOURS LATER...OK MORE THAN A FEW HOURS...I LOST COUNT**

CYPH3R woke with a start, and immediately started to feel *very* weird. He actually knew this feeling all too well. It only happened when he has fallen asleep while wearing his VR goggles...except, as he reached up to try and free himself from them, he found nothing.

But how could this be real? He wasn't even in his hotel room anymore. Instead a beach stretched out before him, pristine ocean lapping against miles of white sand. Curious, he started wading into the water. After a few feet he hit an invisible wall that prevented him from moving any further.

"Huh...so I am in a simulation," he surmised, before returning to the shore.

Suddenly the sounds of a large vehicle filled the air. He turned to see a jeep bouncing out of the bushes towards him, an older man with a monocle and pipe behind the wheel.

Making a sharp turn as he reached CYPH3R, the strange fellow caused a cloud of sand to temporarily engulf him.

After he had finished choking and spitting out little clumps of dirt, CYPH3R looked up at the driver, who was wearing a purple three-piece suit but had dark, soulless eyes.

“Uhh...the fuck are you?”

Those empty eyes suddenly came alive, and the would-be your guide spoke, “I’m so pleased you could make it Mr...Ty-ler Nor-rie.”

His voice was normal until it came to the part where he said his name, then it became robotic all of sudden.

CYPH3R looked him up and down, “Are you the tutorial guy?”

He beckoned for CYPH3R to join him, “Come, let us go explore the wonders of Sloane Land!”

“Sloane Land? Damn could I really not think of anything better than that?!” He cursed as he hopped into passenger seat.

Ignoring his words, the man extended his hand, “Doctor Brian McGuillicuty, it’s a pleasure.”

CYPH3R took it cautiously, and they shook, the Doc’s grip so tight it felt like he was trying to squeeze the last drops of tomato sauce out of a bottle.

“Sure, whatever, just call me CYPH3R.”

“CYPH3R it is! Now lets get you up to speed so you’ll be in tip top shape for all the challenges that lay ahead.”

Suddenly they were speeding away from the beach and into the forest. The vehicle bounced over the rough terrain beneath, forcing CYPH3R to cling on to the armrest for dear life.

“Where are we going?!” He shouted over the Jeep’s noisy engine.

“You’ll see!”

A huge rocket whizzed past them, narrowly missing the side of the vehicle. He could have sworn it had Sloane’s face on it. The missile slammed into a tree, and the huge explosion that followed caused it to start falling...right in their path.



“HOLD ON!” McGuillicutty yelled, flooring the accelerator.

CYPH3R did so, and the Jeep lurched forward, narrowly avoiding the falling tree, which crashed behind them. He turned around to see a line of men all clad in black riding motorcycles. A couple of them collided with the fallen branch and were thrown from their bikes. As their bodies collided with the ground they immediately ceased to exist. Their physical forms just disappeared into the air.

The remaining bikers managed to leap over the log, and were followed by an armored buggy that effortlessly plowed through it. But it wasn't the fact that a four-wheeler was chasing them that caused him to groan loudly. It was who was standing on top, clad in a sparkly jumpsuit and clutching a rocket launcher.

“Is that...*Taylor Swift*?!”

The feminist icon and award winning singer-songwriter bent down to load another Sloane Rocket™ into her RPG.

“You can't outrun us, Tyler! Misogynists always get what's coming to them!!” She yelled, aiming the rocket launcher at the Jeep.

CYPH3R turned to McGuillicutty, “Bro what the *fuck* is going on?!”

His guide cursed under his breath, “They must have been tracking us! I thought I'd have more time to prepare you...”

“Wh-what are we gonna do? She's got a fucking rocket launcher!”

Just as CYPH3R said that, two of the motorcyclists pulled up next to them and pulled out handguns. Then, several things happened all at once.

1. The bikers opened fire, causing both CYPH3R and McGillicutty to duck and the windows of the Jeep to explode.
2. Taylor screamed “THIS IS FOR SLOANE!” and fired another Sloane Rocket™ at the Jeep.
3. McGillicutty grabbed CYPH3R, whispered something in his ear, then practically threw him out of the 4WD's broken window.
4. At the last second CYPH3R managed to land a mid-air kick on the biker, sending him tumbling off of his bike, and allowing the hacker to land on it.

5. The rocket slammed into the Jeep and it exploded in a ball of flame.

CYPH3R had barely had a chance to catch his breath, but immediately he had to focus. He couldn't linger on what had just happened to his tour guide, he was now an even easier target. Not to mention, the other biker was still there, gun pointed at him.

Thinking fast, he swerved close to his adversary and stuck out his foot, kicking the gun out of his hands. It flew into the air and without a second thought, CYPH3R effortlessly snatched it out of the air. He fired, the bullet slamming into the biker's chest. He recoiled, then vanished, just like the others had when damaged.

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, CYPH3R screamed "WOOOOO!!"

But the moment was short lived. He looked behind him to see Taylor gaining on him, another rocket locked and loaded.

She narrowed her eyes, "Game over, Tyler."

But just as she was about to fire, the buggy beneath her suddenly swerved. Still going at full speed, it took out the remaining bikers and plowed directly into a tree, sending Taylor and her rpg sailing into the air. She landed hard on the ground, a few feet from CYPH3R, who had pulled over and was now smirking.

He was holding a phone in his hand - a phone McGuillicutty had slipped him just before he had met his untimely end. One that has allowed him to hack the buggy and steer it right into a tree.

As he approached, Taylor's form began to glitch. She crawled towards him, her voice becoming warped and distorted.

"Well done, Tyler. Unfortunately, you're too late. I've already infiltrated your silly little program. Consider this a message from Sloane - she's not as dumb as you think."

Everything slowly started fading away, first Taylor — or whatever she was — then his surroundings, and finally his own body.

"Oh shit oh shit..."

Before he could completely fade away, he reached up, and this time found the headset. He quickly ripped it off, and suddenly he was back in his hotel room.

He gasped, looking over to see that the headset had been connected to N0R4, who was laying there next to him. Questions fell out of him one after another.

“The fuck? How come you didn’t let me out earlier? And what was with the Taylor shit, I didn’t program that!”

But something wasn’t right. N0R4 wasn’t responding. He turned over and pulled a chip out of her neck area, then popped it into his PC.

“Oh shit...”

The code was completely corrupted.

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They say the devil was a fallen angel.

I always found that interesting. That despite being constantly demonised by the very religion that he supposedly exists within, he was once a pure being. It made me wonder if he was the only one. Are there other fallen angels? Are they demonised as well?

When I think of what one might look like these days, I think of you, Sloane. “Oh nooo she’s an angel” I hear you all protest. Sure, if you’re like every other fan with a selective memory. Need I remind you, this is the same person who dumped her alleged soulmate, because he was too focused on wrestling, and then married Jason Cashe a few weeks later. I mean jfc, Sloane, the ink had barely dried on the Google Doc!

But you have the gall to tell me who I should apologise to, and when. Fuck off with that shit, you broke up with one of my best friends to marry a guy with the intelligence of a pineapple. Did SEB get a sorry? Or even an “oopsie”? But noooo, I’m the bad guy. I’m the devil. I might be a lot of things, but I’m not stupid.

I see how everyone babies you, Sloane. They all treat you like a princess or queen. Yass slay! They squeal, as you betray your closest friends. Congratulations, at least you found someone who is even dumber than you. Tell me, what do the long term prospects look like with a guy who is tattooed from head to toe and bragged about being the first of your friends to get in your pants?

You just can’t accept that I’ve moved on from all the shit that went down. How long has it been? Do I look back proudly on the shit that happened with Frankie? No.

Have I done my time for it — yes, more than most people charged with the same thing. But sure, keep demonising me. I know that deep down you're not as pure as you pretend to be.

So let it out, show your true self. You're the curse breaker, right? You want me to respect you? Ditch the act. Bring out your bad side, because I promise you — I'm not going to pull any punches. I still consider you a friend, but just like in the Battle Royale, I won't hesitate to ruin your pretty face, and show everyone who the real fallen angel is.