

“Congratulations! I’m so happy you made it in!” Kemi wrapped him in a hug, after tucking her phone into her pocket, that he returned with reluctance. She smelled so much like ginger and soap. “Not that I ever doubted it, but still. Oh my gosh, I’m so excited for you!”

With the clouds overhead and only his car in the parking lot, the warehouse looked far eerier than it had a couple of days ago. The boarded-up windows and the spray-painted walls made the whole thing look like a post-apocalyptic book cover.

But the top was only for show.

When he told Kemi, during his interview, that this didn’t look like a YouTube studio and, instead, looked like a mass murderer’s playground, she said: “I know, right? But, don’t worry, that’s by design. The more your channel grows and, believe me, it’ll grow, you don’t want people hanging around. Who would think famous YouTubers worked in a place like this, right?”

Baker didn’t hear much beyond her saying his channel would grow. Nothing else mattered. The ad he replied to asked if he wanted to be a successful YouTuber, but that put it mildly. He *bled* YouTube. No one took YouTube more seriously than Baker did. But, before responding to that ad, his channel didn’t grow. Despite putting all of his attention into the videos, they floundered at less than a hundred views.

Then came the ad and his way to realize every dream he ever had.

Leading him around the side of the warehouse to the two metal slabs that opened like a book cover, Kemi flipped a switch and the solitary light bulb, dangling on a thin wire, revealed the cobwebs and deep green moss growing on the stone stairs. She didn’t hesitate and Baker didn’t either. The last time he did - after all, wasn’t he supposed to refuse going into basements with strangers? But Kemi wasn’t a stranger. Not anymore. She worked for the Incubator House, the illustrious organization of YouTube creators that promised Baker a career. A dream career.

But why did the internet know nothing about the Incubator House? No articles, no videos, no Reddit threads. Nothing.

But did that matter? This was Baker's chance to finally launch his channel. After all, when he graduated in a few months, what else was he supposed to do? While his classmates posted about their dream colleges, countless Instagram stories of acceptance letters, he didn't even apply anywhere. YouTube was his dream, so this would be his college.

Not that he told his mom that. She wouldn't understand, anyway. She didn't even know he had a channel.

"What kind of videos do you make?" Kemi asked as she moved down the stairs with grace and confidence. Baker plunked along behind her, testing every footing. How would it look to literally trip his way into the Incubator House?

"Gaming, mostly."

"Oh, for real? Dope. What kind of games do you play?"

"A little bit of everything, but racing games are my favorite."

Every time Baker talked about his channel, he felt blood tinge his cheeks red. Why? Sooner or later this channel would be his career, would he still be embarrassed to tell people about it? With only 131 subscribers, no one in the real world had to know what he did. Sort of like his own secret obsession, he never told his few friends at school about it. They probably would have laughed at him or called him stupid for thinking he could turn it into a career, but when it was successful, they couldn't laugh.

"I always sucked at games. That's why the world needs people like you, to show those of us who suck at it what it's really like." She smiled and Baker chuckled, more because she looked so beautiful than because of anything she said. He had to chuckle whenever beautiful girls spoke. That's the rule.

"Do you have a channel?"

"Oh yeah. I mostly do makeup and fashion and stuff. Nothing you care about, I'm sure."

He chuckled again. "I'm sure it's great."

“Yeah, thanks to the House. They really helped me take my content to the next level and my fans *loved* it. Complete game changer. I honestly can’t wait to see what it does for you.”

Baker had been here before, but the contrast between the desolate, dark warehouse on top and the YouTube studios underneath stunned him again. When Kemi scanned her card on an almost invisible black box, bright light and cold air flooded the staircase from the open door. The light, the smell of lavender and citrus, the artificial air, all of it contrasted with the cracked pavement and overgrown weeds in the parking lot.

The door teleported them into another world. The entryway, basically a small garden, held a few potted trees, shrubs, and colorful flowers. Bright lights illuminated the one hallway that snaked away from the entry foyer. Even though he had seen it all, it still made Baker’s jaw drop. Kemi, with her hip cocked, smiled at him. Artwork, bushes, a fountain of water, YouTube subscriber plaques on the walls. This place had everything!

Surrounded by a few couches - more comfortable than any Baker ever sat on, that was for sure - a large fountain dumped gallons of water into a basin. Unbelievably clear, the water rose and shined as if infused with thousands of crystals, before cascading into the bowl with gentle ripples.

They walked down the hallway and similar doors, like office cubicles, lined the walls on either side. Perfectly straight and symmetrical, Baker knew the rooms contained YouTube studios designed to mimic bedrooms. Seeing the one they made him for him had to be the most surreal experience of his life.

“Are you pretty good at games, then?” Kemi asked as they walked.

“Some of them, I guess.” He shrugged though she walked a few paces ahead of him and couldn’t see it. “But it’s not really about who’s good at it on YouTube anymore. It’s more about being funny and stuff.”

“Right, but I’m sure being better than most people is a huge advantage.”

“I guess.”

Finally - but not long enough, he quite enjoyed following and talking to Kemi - they stopped in front of a thin wooden door. Other doors just like it stood to the left and right, and all along the shallow hallway, but this one had a soft light in the cracks. It was his bedroom, but not really. The posters, the bedsheets, the computer - all of it was the exact same as his real room. Even that dent mark along the back wall where he threw a ball a little too hard. If he woke up here, Baker wouldn't know it wasn't his room. But all of it, according to Kemi, had been built by the Incubator House's team of set designers and modeled after the background in all of his videos.

It wasn't his real room, he knew that, but Kemi was the prettiest girl to ever step foot in any version of his room. Suddenly, he felt the urge to straighten up a bit, though the set builders didn't add in any of the usual clutter. Feeling the blood rush to his cheeks, he turned and focused on the poster above his bed as if seeing it for the first time. But it was the one he saw every morning when he woke up. Not a copy, the exact same one if he had to guess. Down to the small tear in the bottom right corner. This was amazing.

Not for the first time, Baker felt a tinge of anxiety. What was this place? A random warehouse that completely recreated his room down to every imperfection and every single mark? Something about this situation stank. But they promised results. How much weirdness could he endure to watch his channel grow?

"What do you think?" Kemi asked.

"Still amazing." And he meant it, but he wasn't sure in what way.

"Dude, I could not possibly be more excited for you. I cannot wait to see what you're going to do here."

Baker saw the genuine joy on Kemi's face and couldn't stop himself from smiling as well. "I'm excited too."

In that moment he felt it. The lingering shreds of doubt, anxiety, and worry vanished as he saw Kemi bouncing in front of him. Above them, the desolate parking lot with only one corner

lit by a flickering lamp post, and the worn-down warehouse guarded this beautiful world before him. His future, the promise of riches and fame, the inclusion into the illustrious lists of top-notch YouTubers. A verified checkmark on Twitter. All of that dangled on thin wires before him. If he could only reach out a little further, they'd all be his. And he was going to reach every single day for the rest of his life.

"I'm going to have you meet with Lily Rose, she is excellent, you're going to love her." Kemi punctuated each word with a wave of her hand. "She's going to be, like, your liaison or whatever they call it here. Whatever you need, she'll get it for you."

"Oh. Nice."

"Right? Kinda cool to have that level of help always available, isn't it?"

Baker followed Kemi back into the hallway and they passed a room with a buffet-style trough and round tables with plastic chairs. The cafeteria, as Kemi explained on the tour last time. It looked like a miniature version of his school's cafeteria, complete with the white speckled tiles and harsh lights. A fridge in the corner whined, but they passed the cafeteria and walked farther along the hallway, passing more identical doors. How many studios did this place have?

They stopped in front of a heavy wooden door with another card scanner and a button. Even through the thick wood, Baker heard the bell chime inside the room when Kemi pressed the button.

"Come in!" said a high pitched voice hidden behind the door.

The room was darker than the hallway, with only a single table lamp in the corner. The walls were deep red and lined with bookshelves drooping under the weight of hardcover books. The room seemed to be decorated after the style of a grandmother's sitting room with old, large rugs and random paintings next to the shelves. Music played in the background, quiet enough for Baker to not hear the song.

Behind the desk, a woman, roughly the same age as Baker's mom, sat and typed on a brand new laptop. Her glasses rested on the tip of her nose and she lifted her chin to stare

through them. Her hair, black with streaks of grey like a skunk, rose high on her head in a tight bun and wrinkles hung from the corners of her eyes. With a sharp chin and bright eyes, she permeated an air of severity and seriousness. Baker shuddered as he stepped into the room and those cold eyes found him. But she smiled and a little warmth brightened her features. Maybe for the first time in her life.

“Welcome, Baker!” She rose and extended a hand that looked too breakable to shake, but Baker grabbed it anyway.

“I’ll leave you guys to it,” Kemi said as she closed the door.

It felt like a dream, standing in this small room with a woman who could have been a librarian with soft music playing in the background like an elevator. What could she know about YouTube? Could she really help him? Would this meeting be the pivotal moment in his life? For several uncomfortable seconds, she smiled at him and stood behind the desk without saying anything. Was she waiting on him to start?

“How are you finding everything?” she asked. She slid her glasses off as she took a seat and waved at him to sit in the plush red chair in front of the desk.

“Um, yeah. Everything is good. So far, I mean.”

“Have people been nice to you?” she asked.

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve only talked to Kemi, but she’s fantastic.” Fantastic? Did he have to use that word? She’s been great, nice, cool. Any other word than fantastic. But thinking about Kemi put a weird buzzing in his brain.

“Great, great. I’m sure you’ll meet others momentarily.” Again, she paused and her smile lingered on him as she steepled her fingers under her chin. “My name is Lily Rose and I’m so happy to help you on this journey. Think of me as your portal to everything the Incubator House has to offer. Anything you need, you come to me and I will help you get it. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, that sounds cool.”

“You’ve seen your studio?” It sounded like half a question.

“Yes, Kemi showed me the other day.”

“Great, great. Now, from time to time the House may ask you to subtly push certain things, to drop information about products or services in your videos and encourage your audience to check it out.”

“So like ads?”

“Exactly. Think of them as sponsorship opportunities. I’ll tell you when we would like for you to drop these tidbits and, more or less, what to say. Of course, you are encouraged to add your own, unique spin. Does that sound like something you’d be willing to do?”

“Sure.”

“Great, great.” She smiled again, but this time it didn’t reach her eyes. They stayed ice. “Do you have any questions for me right now?”

Plenty. But none that he knew how to ask. What was this place? Was it actually legit? What did it look like to be a part of this group? No one told him much of anything, but what if asking too many questions and pressing too many buttons got him kicked out? He couldn’t risk this amazing, strange opportunity by forcing irrelevant issues. After all, what else could possibly matter compared with turning his YouTube channel into one of the biggest in the world?

“No, not really.”

“Great, great. I’ll send you back to your studio and let you get recording!” She stood up and reached across the desk again. “I’m so happy you’re here, Baker, and I can’t wait to help you reach all of your goals.”

Kemi leaned against the wall and slid her phone into her pocket as he closed the door behind him.

“How was that?” she asked.

“Pretty good. She seems nice.”

“Oh yea, she’s the best. I told you you’d love her, didn’t I? Come on. I’ll take you to your studio and let you try out what you can do!”

When they got back to the studio, Baker couldn’t believe the similarities this fake room had to his actual room. Would he ever get used to that? Before he left the house, Baker punched a small hole in the wall above the baseboard behind his computer. Of course, it wouldn’t be in the fake room, that’d be ridiculous. This wasn’t a clone of his room at home, it was a recreated studio space. Still, he checked. No hole. In a strange way, that calmed him. This whole thing was so crazy, it was nice that something made sense. Of course that hole wouldn’t be there. And it wasn’t. Things were right in the world.

“I’ll let you get to it.” Kemi slid a different phone, this one smaller and blue, out of her pocket. “Here is a special Incubator phone for you. It’s got Lilly Rose’s number in it. If you need anything at all, give her a text.”

She paused in the doorway. Her nails, painted purple, tapping against the doorframe. “Oh, one other thing. Try not to mention that you’ve joined the House in your videos quite yet.”

“Why not?”

“We like doing a big announcement on our official page. So while we’re planning that, we want to keep it a secret. Make sense?”

“Of course.”

Kemi left him in an eerie silence. Like a tomb, this studio blocked all noise in or out. The door was so thin, how did they do that? The silence made it feel like bugs crawling across his skin. Pulling up Spotify, he only felt momentarily surprised that his account was already logged in. Why wouldn’t it be? This was his room and his computer. The music helped. It stilled the thoughts racing through his mind, the monster saying this didn’t add up roared to life, but the music pacified it.

What could he even record? He already made a video today. It wasn’t possible to get back into that gaming mindset, the very thought made him want to bore through the wall.

Instead, he swiveled in his chair and watched the shadows in his room. Shouldn't he get some sort of handbook or something? Or someone to tell him what was expected of him? Did they pay him? Did they expect him to make a certain amount of videos a week?

Pulling up YouTube, he replied to Stephen's comment on his most recent video.

Stephen.

The only fan his channel actually had and the only person who ever commented on a video. As expected, it wasn't important. Stephen's comments never were. Somehow, it felt like his whole life had changed in the matter of a couple of days. He was still making the same videos in, basically, the same room, but it all felt different. Replying to Stephen's comment was a rope tied to his past life. The life that made sense. He hit send on the reply and took three deep breaths which calmed his heart and eased the tightening sensation in his throat. Everything would be fine. More than fine. This was a great opportunity that so many people would kill to have. He had to make the most of it.

But he couldn't make a video right now.

Baker pulled out the new phone - for some reason, he didn't even think to use his old phone, so he didn't notice that it wasn't in his pocket - and typed out a message to Kemi. "Hey! I think I'm going to head home. But I'll be back tomorrow to record a video if that's cool. Thanks for everything!"

A young man with straight black hair and a few pimples on his chin typed on his laptop and grimaced when Baker rounded the corner into the foyer. His dark eyes followed Baker and the grimace turned into a scowl. Baker ignored him. Whatever issues the guy had could be dealt with later. Too much had happened already to heap drama on top of it. Though drama was good for YouTube views. Maybe they could play that to their advantage.

With thoughts of taking over YouTube racing in his mind, Baker didn't notice that the door wouldn't open at first. He pushed harder and it remained shut. With a step back, he examined the door as if that would do something. There could be a button or a lever he needed

to push. What did Kemi do the last time she let him out, after the interview? It was such a thick door, maybe he needed to push harder. For good measure, he tried once more, with all of his strength, and the door didn't budge.

"Never gonna work," the young man said. His eyes found his computer and he started to type again.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're stuck here now. Same as all of us. Welcome to Incubator Hell."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Baker's heart exploded in his chest and tried to crawl up his throat.

"You've been kidnapped, buddy. There's no leaving. You're stuck here. Can't make it more plain than that."