

The clouds swirled restlessly in the monstrous skies above—a flash of lightning followed by a crack. The flash illuminated the facial features of the robed figure standing atop a large rock in the middle of the field. Before him knelt the followers in matching purple robes. David looked upon his congregation, itching the stubble of his neckbeard. He snorted triumphantly. The storm's moisture moving through the valley might have fogged his glasses; however, though his vision might be blurred, he saw his flock clear as day. They were obedient. They withstood the wind lashing at their bodies, the rain soaking their linens, and for what? To show their dedication to the Church of YUYO! The sect of EXPLOSION!

All rise for the Princess!

David designed the retreat to test their faith. In SCW alone, there were many false idols. Selena Frost came to mind; however, the masses soured on her, recognizing that she wasn't the one true paragon of virtue. Selena might have said she fought for justice--- but all she was, was a bony self-righteous bitch, who thought that the SCW World title made her better than YUYO! The profound sacrilege was an understatement! David threw up his hands in frustration at the thought. His zealots followed suit. They threw up their arms before bowing down to the ground. They shared his anger telepathetically. Through the power of the EXPLOSION, they were linked spiritually. Their souls cried their anguish in unison. Their ultimate waifu, the Goddess YUYO, united them in a splendid brotherhood.

David grunted with religious fervor, fist-pumping; however, he slipped on the wet rock and almost flew to the ground below. He recovered--- not gracefully, but he managed to stop himself from taking a five-foot drop into the mud below. A gust of wind almost finished the ground. David decided to sit down on the stone monolith and hang his legs off the edge of the rock. His bright green crocs clashed against the purple of the robes. The rain had drenched his socks. He stretched out his hands before him.

"Brothers..."

"Sir David!"

"Brothers!"

"Sir David!"

"We gather here to show our commitment. Our Goddess might not be here physically to see us withstand the elements; however, she can sense the power of our faith! I come to you as her representative; her voice--- but I come bearing a warning. There are snakes in this world! And there are serpents looking to sink their fangs into our holiest of waifus, our YUYO! And one of these men claims to be her most trusted advisor, her right-hand man! And this man is nothing but her Judas! He dons a cat mask, but he is nothing more than a rogue seeking prey on the

kindness and compassion our Goddess shows to all living creatures!" **David explained. No one spoke while he spoke. David hid his smile underneath his hood in the darkness of the storm. He trained them well. His soldiers dedicated themselves to the cause; YUYO would have to reward him when David presented his finished product. He shall be her prince. Together, they will rule the wrestling universe. "His name is Meowkazawa!"**

"Down with Meowkazawa!" **One of the partitioners yelled.**

"Let's kill him!" **Another member of the flock suggested.**

**David waves his arms to calm them down. He continued his speech:** "In due time, I will dispatch this enemy of the Church. This agent of evil will be met with no mercy from me, your Lord Knight. Brothers, I will champion the cause. I ask for your unyielding support. Days. Nights. We witness her glory! Her spectacle! Her splendor! And you have committed yourself to the path of the Explosions. But we can all do better, can't we? When we return to campus, please consider how much you can donate to the cause. Every dollar counts. Great things are costly! Don't cheapen your faith. And soon, I'll deliver you to the promised land and present you, my flock, as her kingdom to our Goddess! She will smile upon you all! Can I have an amen!"

"Amen, Sir David!" **A voice called out.**

"Amen!" **The whole group followed suit.**

"Brothers, I am proud of you! I am proud of your dedication! It brings tears of joy to my eyes. Together, everything is possible. Together, we will see that our scared idol, our Highness, YUYO, is recognized as the one true champion of the cosmos! Now, boys. Let's---" **CRACK! A thunderclap left David thunderstruck. He leaped from his rock as a nearby tree lit up. He fell over and landed face-first into the mud at the base of the rock. Everyone else huddled before the awesome display of nature. Wiping the dirt from his face, he said meekly, "Let's get inside."**

**MEANWHILE...**

"I don't like that boy. There's something seriously wrong with him," **Meowkazawa commented. He sat on the couch in the living room of the Shrine. Beside him, a basket of laundry waited. He folded Yumi's clothes nearly into a stack. Why was he doing her clothes? She had left the clothes in the dryer five days ago, and he finally became tired of reminding her to tend to them. Neko complained to him. Neko scared him. Meowkazawa acted in self-interest, not for Yumi's benefit.**

"You're not YUYO's dad. You shouldn't be warning YUYO about any boys," **Yumi responded to Meowkazawa's concern. She laid belly first on the floor in front of the big flatscreen. She held tightly her Nintendo Switch. She became addicted to Stardew Valley in recent weeks. So much so that Meowkazawa hid the console from Yumi a few times so she would go to**

bed. Her immaturity posed a risk to her career, especially now, given that she was on the cusp of greatness. The biggest match of her career came at Rise to Greatness. Yumi held the chance to become SCW Adrenaline Champion by knocking off a headliner in Bree Lancaster. So how did she prepare? By playing video games! Meowkazawa wanted to slap her upside the head.

"I'm not trying to act like your dad. I'm just saying. Something's off with the boy."

"Are you jealous? You wished you were knighted! You wish YUYO brought you to your knees and---" **Yumi started.**

"No! I'm not jealous!"

"I see the way you leer at the Maidens! You undress us with your eyes... HENTAI!" **Yumi threw out the accusation. Meowkazawa admitted that Yumi's choice of clothes sometimes caught Meowkazawa's attention. He was a man, after all. Even today, her outfit played to his imagination, his dark male machinations. Her lavender short shorts allowed for her ass to hang out just slightly. When she turned to look at him, her white tank top revealed cleavage and failed to conceal the fact she wasn't wearing a bra. She acted like they didn't cohabitate. Yumi pretended that Meowkazawa didn't exist. He knew she was half his age. But still, he was a man, damn it! A man with needs! And he didn't get any release because he was busy folding her damn laundry! He did all the chores. Meowkazawa balanced the checkbook. He made all the necessary phone calls. By the time he finished his days, he was far too spent to relieve himself of his sexual frustration.**

"It's just the way he looks at you. If anyone is leering at you, it's him."

"Sir David is a gentleman. He's a scholar. YUYO would not have elevated to the prestigious status of being my knight if YUYO wasn't confident his intentions were honorable."

"I don't mean to question your taste in character; however, first, you picked up Jack. Now, you hang out with a guy who doesn't look to have showered in weeks," **Meowkazawa replied. Meowkazawa shivered, believing that it might be the case. The grease in David's hair seemed to rival a frying pan after he cooked some bacon. Yumi pressed pause. She kicked her legs and nipped up in one fluid motion. She marched over to Meowkazawa and placed her hands on her hips. Meowkazawa watched her legs, knowing she was prone to kicking when unhappy.**

"You do not bully Sir David!"

"Am I saying these thoughts to his face?"

"Sir David is the reason why YUYO returned to wrestling! He made YUYO see the light!"

"And I think your Sir David has ulterior motives, my dear Yumi."

"Maybe David does have feelings for YUYO? It's only natural that a magically wonderful woman like myself attracts the opposite sex. One look at my virtuous ways and boys melt! YUYO is mind-melting! And don't you tell me otherwise because there is nothing wrong with having a very positive self-image!" **Yumi wagged her finger at Meowkazawa. Meowkazawa returned the folded clothes to the basket and rose to his feet. He tugged on the collar of his yellow dress shirt. He admitted that he did find her self-confidence to be refreshing. He dealt with his ex-wife's insecurity for too long; with Yumi, she lacked insecurities. It was like her delusion was an immaculate remedy for whatever insecurity she might have had growing up.**

"There's a difference between having a crush on you, Yumi and having an unhealthy obsession. He just looks like---" **Meowkazawa started.**

"Stop judging a book by its cover. Give him a chance!"

"You're right. You're right. Maybe my eyes are deceiving me."

"Your eyes are old. They are blind!"

"I think he has a point, Yumi," **Neko's voice called out from the entrance hall. Neko stepped into the room. Her platform shoes clicked against the hardwood floor of the living room. Neko returned from the outside, folding up a red umbrella—some rain splattered on her black tank top. A cold front came in furiously, but she came prepared. "You tend to be too trusting. You think everyone has your best interest at hand. You're going to get burned thinking that way. Especially in the profession we have. It's a dog-eat-dog world. You're setting yourself up for heartbreak."**

"Traitor," **Yumi muttered.**

"The boy's obviously into you. At best, you're leading him on. At worst, you're letting him get the wrong idea that you're dating."

"YUYO DATING HIM? HIM? OF ALL PEOPLE, HIM?"

"What was that reaction? Now, aren't you being harsh?" **Meowkazawa probed. Yumi's face blushed crimson, flustered at the thought of dating David. After her staunch defense of the boy, the mention of dating him sent her into a spiral. Who was being superficial now? Neko set her umbrella at the door and returned.**

"It's just--- we're friends, that's all! YUYO doesn't see anything romantically inspiring in him. He's no Prince Charming. He's no knight in shining armor. He's Sir David! Just Sir David!" **Yumi attempted to explain.**

"But didn't you just knight him? Isn't that sending him the wrong signal?" **Meowkazawa pointed out.**

"He probably thinks he has shot with you," **Neko commented.**

"No! No! NO! You two need to stop double-teaming YUYO---"

"Phrasing," **Neko interjected with a chuckle.**

"YUYO and David share a pure relationship of friendship! Love, but not that kind of love! He understands his place!" **Yumi threw down her fists to her sides. She puffed out her cheeks, directing a nasty glare towards Neko and Meowkazawa. Neko scratched her head, surprised that Yumi could be so naive. While Neko debated how to explain how boys operate to her, Meowkazawa decided to get out of dodge. He lifted the basket and went towards the stairs; however, Neko blocked his escape by extending her arm.**

"Oh no, you don't. You're not leaving me, wise man. You're supposed to be our advisor on EVERYTHING," **Neko said. Meowkazawa attempted the puppy dog eyes on Neko, but she bared her teeth. He recoiled, set the basket at his feet, and returned to the couch. "Mister Meowkazawa, do you not harbor feelings for Yumi?"**

"Of course not! She is like a daughter to me!" **Meowkazawa waved his arms at the accusation.**

"Be honest! Daughter or... more like, step-daughter! Spit it out, old man!"

"Step-daughter," **Meowkazawa whimpered in his response. Neko grinned her triumph before turning towards Yumi. Yumi continued to give Meowkazawa the stink eye. Her dark eyes burned with disgust. She was right about him and his leering!**

"Men want one thing, Yumi. They might have good intentions at first. They might believe they can keep things platonic; however, if you're attractive like you are, they will start falling for you. It's just a fact of life. Meowkazawa is old enough to be your father, and there's still a part of him that wants to bonk you," **Neko said. Meowkazawa cried out in frustrated embarrassment. He did his best not to react when he folded Yumi's underwear. He really did try! Yumi shook her head, not wanting to believe Neko. She didn't say a word; instead of addressing Neko's argument, she returned to the Switch and turned her back. "Really, Yumi?"**

"I'm not listening!"

"You can't run away from these things. It would be best if you addressed matters firsthand," **Neko said. She turned towards Meowkazawa, searching for support. Meowkazawa**

**shrugged; he spent years convincing Yumi to take responsibility for her actions. Regardless of his pressure, she did what she wanted to do.**

"YUYO doesn't run away."

"All Yumi does is run away."

"YUYO is brave. Courageous! Did you not see her come to your aid? Scary guys came to attack you, and she rushed to help! That's bravery!" **Yumi paused the game again. She almost threw the Switch down onto the floor. Neko's questioning touched a nerve. Yumi nipped up to her feet; her purple-tipped hair flew everywhere. With a crazed look, she marched up to Neko. She stabbed Neko's chest with her index finger. "Acknowledge YUYO! Acknowledge her valor!"**

"I appreciate the gesture on Breakdown. I really did."

"And... keep going."

"However," **Neko gripped Yumi's finger and twisted it slightly. Yumi's face distorted in pain.** "I'm talking about Yumi. Not YUYO. I'm talking to you directly. YUYO is some sort of escapism. Cool. Got it. You can have this false bravado, but all I see is my friend trying to hide from reality."

"You're not making any sense."

"We've been over this."

"Please let go. You're hurting me," **Yumi squealed. Neko released her hold, and Yumi stepped back. She sucked on her finger as she pouted towards her childhood friend. Neko flipped her vivid red hair over her shoulder and leaned against the wall. She crossed her arms, trying to formulate the words to reach her childhood friend.**

"There are two reasons why I came to America. First, I couldn't turn down the opportunity to work for SCW."

"And second, you couldn't turn down the opportunity to work with YUYO!"

"And second, I wanted to save my friend from herself. Look at you. You're on the precipice of doing something awesome. But you're here, in your pajamas, playing games. You should be in the gym, sweating buckets and training your heart! You think you're some anime character; you're not even acting like one. Where's the goddamn training montage?" **Neko unloaded. Yumi continued to suck on her finger. She growled at Neko's accusation. Was she poking fun at Yumi's condition? Wasn't Yumi's fault that she was an anime character born into another dimension? Friends didn't mock identity issues.**

"I've been trying to tell her. For the entire time I've managed her, it's been an uphill battle to get her to prepare for her matches," **Meowkazawa said.**

"It's almost like she doesn't care about wrestling."

"YUYO does care! Wrestling is her life! How dare you two question YUYO's commitment?" **Yumi cried out.**

"Then why aren't you behaving like a contender? You're about to go against Bree Lancaster. Do you think she's not hitting the gym every day? You think she's not studying the tape. You think she's not preparing herself, trying to place herself in the best possible position to keep a hold of that title. You're a joke, Yumi," **Neko pressed. Yumi clenched her fists at her sides. She shook angrily at the barrage being lobbed her way. Tears started to well in her eyes. Why were they ganging up on her?**

"You're being so unfair to me!"

"That's unfair? Let me tell you something about what's unjust. Do you think I didn't need to make sacrifices in Japan to survive as a wrestler? I didn't have the Yoshida name to fall on. I didn't have family connections. You've been given opportunities in this sport from day one because of the family you were born in. So stop acting entitled. You might have earned a shot at Bree and her championship, but until you win something significant in SCW, you're nothing but Uncle Eyeyoshi's silly niece. A god damn nepo baby," **Neko continued to unload on Yumi. Yumi's grimace stretched her face. She listened to every word her friend spoke but needed help accepting them. Was this how she really felt? Yumi sensed resentment. They went so far back, and for things to end up like this? Yumi looked into Neko's eyes, hoping this was a cruel joke. No, honesty glared back at her.**

"Fine. Maybe you're right. Maybe YUYO's slacking."

"Maybe?"

"Okay! YUYO's definitely slacking! You want to see fire in YUYO's eyes?! You want to see her fighting spirit?! You want one big training montage. You got it! YUYO will deliver the best training montage ever. You won't be able to doubt her anymore. She is committed to be the very best, like no one ever was! To catch them is my real test!" **Yumi started humming the Pokemon theme song to convey the seriousness of her declaration. Yumi stomped her feet towards the door. She swung her arms robotically.**

"Where are you going?" **Meowkazawa asked.**

"To train!"

"In this weather?" **He followed up.**

"You want dedication? You want commitment! No silly storm clouds are going to stop YUYO! YUYO will make her training so epic, Bree will faint at the sheer awesomeness of YUYO's might!" **Yumi opened the door. A gust of wind picked perfectly to send a sheet of water onto her, soaking her tank top and shorts. She shuddered, wiping the water from her face. Yumi looked over at Neko and Meowkazawa, hoping she could backtrack her statement. Neko gave her a cold stare. Flustered, Yumi drove headfirst into the storm.**

"Won't she catch a cold?" **Meowkazawa asked.**

"She's too stupid to catch one," **Neko commented.**

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**A stout wall surrounded the Yoshida compound, a bludgeoning property with lush trees, gardens, and ponds. A wooden engawa veranda formed a perimeter around the main house buildings. A cedar frame holds thatch roofs that house multiple generations of the Yoshida clan living behind the property's paper doors. Some doors had been slid open to let in the morning sun, exposing the family's daily life. Wrestlers, by trade, have established themselves in the wrestling world as a dynasty. The family shaped the sport through its presence in the highest echelons as bookers, main eventers, and faces of the sport. They were the royal family of wrestling in Japan. Yumi's great-grandfather, the Great Yoshida, pioneered the sport, introducing it to the Japanese audience. The tradition stayed alive, most prominently in the dojo, located centrally on the property. The grunts rang out from the building, which was the beating heart of the mansion complex. A wrestling ring was erected like a shrine on the far side of the large hall. At any given time, a dozen or more grapplers occupied the space. Some practiced moves on the mats. Others trained with speed and heavy bags as if they were boxing practitioners. Body calisthenics seemed popular among the groups. A row of young men planked off the side. The elder Yoshidas coordinated all of the dojo's activities under their watchful eyes. They decided to step away from active competition to train the next generation of wrestlers, specifically those of their blood; however, they did accept students from outside the family. Some came from across the globe for tutorage.**

**The sight of a nine-year-old girl might be considered an oddity among everything. While a few women amongst the men were partaking in training, no one was as young as the girl doing jumping jacks dead center of the dojo. Pigtails diverted her flowing black hair in opposite directions. A white t-shirt with a purple star embroidered on the center showed sweat stains. Her purple gym shorts seemed baggy on her thin legs. The morning was routine for Yumi Yoshida. She had been a part of the beehive since she could walk. What started as basic rolls and exercises has transformed into a complete workout. Her grandfather would find time to take her aside and bring her into the ring. She was already trained up enough to take on an opponent when her time finally came.**

However, the day deviated from the norm. A red ball rolled in from the opened door and stopped at Yumi's feet. The ball sparkled in the sunlight that bathed the dojo from that opened door that morning. She stopped her exercise. Yumi knelt and inspected the ball. It wasn't like she didn't know what a ball was. She had seen them on limited television shows and in the illustrations of the few children's books she owned. Yumi lifted the ball with both hands. She looked guilty before bouncing the ball against the floor. A loud twang rang out. Yumi quickly scooped the ball back up. A face peered back at her from behind the door frame when she looked up.

The face popped back around the door frame. Yumi slowly approached the entranceway to the dojo. The face sprung back out before she rounded the corner to the outside. Caught off guard, Yumi fell onto her ass. She rubbed her butt in pain and grimaced. A hand extended to help out. A girl her age presented herself to Yumi. A scarlet tank top and white shorts stuck to her petite frame. She kept her jet-black hair cut short. Yumi accepted the hand; however, the girl struggled to get her to her feet. Yumi still smiled at the gesture. She looked at the ball in her other hand and handed it to its owner.

"Hi there. I'm Neko. You must be Yumi," Neko greeted her. The warmth in the introduction surprised Yumi. She was her age. She knew her? Yumi didn't realize she was famous. Sure, her classmates talked about her in school. They referred to her as an oddball because of her reserved nature. Yumi kept to herself. She went to school and then to the dojo. Her only social interaction came at dinner with her immediate family (if they were home) or in the ring with her grandfather. The simple greeting tapped into some desire for socialization. Yumi thirsted for more.

"I am indeed Yumi Yoshida. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"You're funny, Yumi. You're so formal."

"Formal?"

"We're kids. No need to act like you're a princess talking to nobility or something."

"I'm sorry. I'm not following. Isn't that typically how people introduce themselves?" Yumi only recalled making introductions to her class at school or to the grown-ups that her family brought around. Was she being too formal? Yumi's face contorted with a puzzled expression. That look prompted Neko to throw the ball right into Yumi's chest. Yumi reacted immediately by catching the ball, showing off her catlike reflexes.

"Catch," Neko said after the fact.

"Aren't you supposed to say that before throwing the ball?"

"Probably."

"See how it is!" **Yumi threw back the ball. While she might have been skilled in catching the ball, she needed to be more talented in returning the ball. While Yumi aimed for the chest, her jaw dropped when the ball bounced off Neko's face. Yumi leaped to catch the rebound; however, Neko knelt, holding her face in pain from the impact. "Catch?"**

"Now that's mean. You aimed for my head!"

"I didn't intend to! Don't be angry! I'm sorry!"

"Give me that!" **Neko popped back up from her shell. A red mark showed where the ball struck her forehead. She ripped the ball from Yumi's hands and stepped back. Yumi bowed apologetically. She sincerely felt sorry for the mishap. To her surprise, Neko spiked the ball off the top of her head. Her strength behind the act sent the ball launching high into the air. More shocked at the behavior than hurt, Yumi looked up, confused. The ball landed harmlessly in the nearby pond. "We're even."**

"What was that for?"

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

"I told you that I didn't mean to hit you in the face. I have bad aim."

"That doesn't matter! Bad aim or not, you still shot me in the face!"

"Now, you're acting like I had a gun," **Yumi muttered. She didn't get it. Why did all her interactions with her peers end in misunderstandings? Was she that socially inept? Yumi frowned. She hoped that things would turn out differently this time. People in the dojo acted friendly towards her because she was family or a Yoshida. Yumi didn't know where Neko came from; however, she hoped she discovered something she sorely lacked: friendship. Yumi pondered how to reverse her fortune while Neko collected the ball from the pond. Neko reached for the ball; however, the ball was just out of arm's reach. A lightbulb went off over her head. She marched over next to Neko. She offered her hand.**

"Hold me. I'm going in."

"What?"

"Don't let me fall. Hold my wrist. I'll get the ball."

"By all means," **Neko said. Neko snatched Yumi's wrist. Yumi leaned over as she reached for the ball, getting onto her tiptoes. The ball floated before her, taunting her as she struggled to grab a hold of the ball. Koi fish danced around underneath the surface of the**

**water. They seemed entertained by Yumi's athletic display. Then Neko's grasp slipped, sending Yumi headfirst into the water. The koi fish were no longer amused that some stinky human disrupted their environment. "Sorry! You were sweaty! My hand slipped!"**

**"Ugh!" Yumi cried as she stood up in the pond. The water came up to her waist. Since she was wet anyway, she waded to the ball and captured it with her hands. Yumi returned to the side of the pond and flopped out onto the lawn like a beached whale. This time, she tossed Neko the ball softly to avoid hitting her in the face.**

"You're drenched."

"It's okay."

"If my mom knew the trouble I caused you, she wouldn't let me hear the end of it!"

"Your mom?"

**"You probably know her. She's one of the maids. I probably shouldn't even be here; however, my dad's moving out of the apartment, and my mom wanted me out of his way," Neko explained. A flash of despair crossed Neko's face. Yumi nodded; she sat up, wenching out the water from her shirt. She needed to change immediately; however, given the summer heat and the fact she was halfway through her morning workout, the dip in the pond refreshed her. Yumi's cheeks buzzed. Her heart raced.**

"You won't get in trouble."

"She's a severe lady. You don't know how strict my mother is."

**"I won't tell anyone what happened. If anyone asks, I'll say I dove in on my own free will." Yumi grinned, sticking her thumb up. Neko responded with a sincere smile. Yumi stood. Then, her sixth sense kicked in. Someone towered over her, blotting out the sun. Neko's smile vanished. Her almond eyes widened. Yumi slowly rotated, knowing very well the menace that waited behind her. The gorilla of a man with hairy knuckles yet suffered from a balding head flared his nostrils. "Grandfather. I can explain everything!"**

"Yumi, is this where you ran off to?"

"I was---"

"You're supposed to be training. I only have so much time to get you in."

**"I am sorry. I accidentally kicked Neko's ball into the pond. It's only natural that my duty is to return the ball," Yumi explained. Neko cringed at her lying. The corner of her lip twitched while she fabricated the story. Yumi also shuddered before her grandfather. How could**

**someone be that intimidated by a loved one? Neko witnessed her father's yelling. Even then, Neko didn't think twice about standing up to the jerk. Yumi seemed to fear her grandfather's wrath.**

"You want to be a wrestler, don't you?" **Her grandfather asked.**

"I do! More than anything!"

"Then you should know this is not the time to mess around."

"Look here, old man. Catch!" **Neko raised her voice. She threw the ball and blasted Yumi's grandfather in the face. Again, the ball hurtled away. This time, up onto the roof of the dojo. The grandfather glared at Neko for a moment. He huffed. He puffed. Neko decided to take the moment to talk.** "I distracted Yumi from her training. She was doing her exercises, and I came along and bothered her. Don't be mean to her. Yumi was only being nice to me."

"Yumi, who is your friend?" **Yumi's grandfather demanded.**

"We just met, so I don't think she's my---" **Yumi started.**

"I am Neko, Mr. Yoshida."

"Yui's daughter, huh?" **Yumi's grandfather narrowed his eyes. He burst into laughter as he finished his staredown with the adolescent. Both girls didn't know what to make of the older man's outburst. Wasn't he angry a second ago? Yumi's grandfather stepped in between the two girls, wrapped his arms around them, and pulled them into a huddle.**

"Yumi's first friend. Such a sight brings a tear to my eyes. Usually, I would scold Yumi for neglecting her training; however, children your age need to experience friendship! Today, I allow playtime--- however! Yumi, there is a time and place for such fun. Make the proper arrangements in the future so it doesn't interrupt your training!"

"Yes, sir!" **Yumi saluted. She beamed at her grandfather's abrupt leniency.**

"Neko, keep an eye on my granddaughter for me. Won't you?"

"Okay," **Neko responded. She didn't know what that curtailed; they were the same age, so Neko doubted Yumi would be a handful. Yumi seemed like a very polite and respectful individual. Some might even consider her too mature for her age. Yumi's grandfather backed away from the girls. He crossed his arms and nodded, giving them the go-ahead to continue. Neko scratched the back of her head, feeling like she needed to say something to fill the void.** "Thanks for having me, Mr. Yoshida."

"Ho-ho-ho, Yui would make rue the day if I was ever rude to her daughter."

"There's someone out there that scares you?" **Yumi asked, amazed at such a fact. Yumi pondered what lengths she needed to take to reach that status. Her grandfather headlined events and faced off against the toughest fighters in the world! And somehow, a maid intimidated him! What power!**

"Sweet, innocent Yumi. If you have only met my mother," **Neko commented.**

"I was inspired to scare my grandfather with such awesome power one day. I would very much like to meet your mother."

"You kid!" **Yumi's grandfather barked a laugh. Yumi didn't respond. She maintained a determined look.** "You kid, right? Anyways, girls! Have at it! Cherish your youth, for soon you'll be old like me."

"Kay!" **Neko responded as Yumi's grandfather walked away. Yumi processed his sage advice: what did it all mean? Yumi spent her entire childhood in the dojo. She crawled on the mats. Yumi took her first steps in that hall. Her mother kept her on her lap while she watched her father train. Now that changed because Yumi met someone her age? That didn't make sense. Yumi turned to Neko, wondering what was to come. Neko snagged Yumi's hand and pulled her towards one of the buildings. "Let's go!"**

"But what about your ball?"

"It's a lost cause. Let me show you something awesome!"

"What?" **Yumi noticed excitement swelling in her chest. What surprise did her new friend want to show her? Then, the ultimate realization dawned on her: She now had someone she could consider a friend! A smile plastered on her face wouldn't budge.**

"It's my favorite manga. It's about a girl who discovers she has magical powers and uses them to fight for justice!"

"What's manga?"

"You don't know what manga is? How deprived have your childhood been?" **Neko responded. Magical Princess Mio Mouse was born on an asteroid orbiting the Earth to the royal family. One day, the kingdom's scholars determined the asteroid, invisible to the residents of Earth, was sinking towards the planet. The reason? The holy gems within the crown lost power. The magical energy of the gems stemmed from the hopes and dreams of the people of Earth. As the Earthlings lost faith in humanity, so did the crowd that maintained the magical properties of the Kingdom of Illusura. The King and Queen sent their only daughter to Earth to inspire them. Posing as an elementary school girl, Mio transformed into an adult and spent her nights fighting crime and saving lives using her magical prowess.**

Neko turned each page to reveal another sequence of action and romance. They lay on the veranda's floor, belly first, huddled together over one of the volumes of the manga. Yumi had never witnessed such art. The story gripped her. The characters moved her. She wanted nothing more than to be like the girl in the frames. She even wished she had a crush that fawned over her every action. Yumi rolled away for a break, overwhelmed with an imagination gone wild. She never experienced such a high before! The manga was much better than the picture books they kept in the family's library. Why did her family hide such a treasure from her?

"She's so awesome!" Yumi exclaimed.

"I told you so!"

"The way she just stood up to the bad guy! Like she wasn't scared at all!"

"Why would she be? Mio has magical powers!"

"I wish I had magical powers."

"Don't we all?" Neko pointed out. That didn't stop Yumi from picturing it now. Somehow, the image of her being a magical princess from another planet felt right! For her entire existence, wrestling was her life. Now, she could feel her calling to be a magical girl! Yumi rolled off the veranda onto the lawn. She shot her arms forward and yelled, imagining a torrent of magical energy pouring out from her palms.

"EXPLOSION!" Yumi called out.

"Keep dreaming, Yumi! Maybe one day you'll have magical powers!"

"Yes! Just you watch! I'll be a magical cosmic princess for sure! The world will witness my awesome powers as I fight for justice! Peace! Love! I'll be the defender of the world! Watch me!" Yumi proclaimed, giggling. She fell over onto her side and held her chest. Her heart thumped loudly. Yumi watched as cotton candy clouds passed overhead. She never thought she would be so inspired. Yumi almost wanted to believe she was born in the wrong universe. Her body was that of an average kid; well, as normal as it could be for a child who has been trained for wrestling since age three.

"You're funny. Just wait until you lay eyes on the anime."

"What's anime?"

"You gotta be kidding me! It's as if the manga was turned into a movie! And it's all colorful and stuff! Your mind is going to melt! Next time I come, I'll bring a Mio DVD!"

"Next time, huh?" Yumi muttered. There was going to be a next time, wasn't there? Neko planned on coming back to the residence! That made Yumi's heart flutter. The sensation tickled like butterfly wings passing over her skin. Yumi sat up. She fist pumped. She did make a friend. And the fact her grandfather seemed to encourage her in the pursuit made maintaining the friendship seem likely! How long had she desired such company? She always wanted a pal. Now, she had one. Someone to show her what she had been missing out in life! "Next time! We'll watch this anime. I am prepared to be amazed. But in return, I'll show you something equally awesome."

"Like what?" Neko probed.

"I don't know; however, be prepared to have your mind blown!"

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The iconic Gateway Arch reached for the darkened, cloudy night sky—the black waters of the gigantic Mississippi River slithered by. Bright lights illuminated the Arch, and the reflection could be seen on the river's surface. The national park located at the foot of the monument featured maintained lawns and rows of organized trees standing watch over the Arch. While the location was a cliché choice for a promotional shoot for Rise to Greatness, Yumi refused to choose any other area. In her eyes, the Gateway Arch was a portal to another dimension. Magical energy flowed underneath from a different realm into the current universe. The closer she stood, the more her mana supply replenished, enabling her to beat Bree Lancaster.

Yumi showcased her Rise to Greatness attire. Like the Shining Maidens, they invested in a special outfit for the event. Purple and white streams hung from the bottom trim of her glittery princess vest. The vest buckled together by a gold heart. A gold chain covered her short white skirt, covering even shorter purple trunks that would definitely challenge a PG rating on the attire. The rings of the chains were shaped like hearts. Her boots ran up her entire leg, past the knee. Gold laces strung the white boots tightly together. The right boot featured her name; the left bore the Japanese kanji in Explosion with all lettering written in purple. YUYO upgraded her magic staff, Gríðarvölr. The metal rod is purple; however, a golden orb like a mace's head caught the reflection of the set's lighting. A gold chain holding a heart-shaped pendant dangled from the tail end of the staff. This was Gríðarvölr's ultimate form! This was YUYO's ultimate form! The power surged through her; she felt the energy coursing through her veins!

Yumi stood like Captain Morgan on her backpack. Her hands on her hips. In front of her, her trusted manager, Meowkazawa, stood flattening his golden tail. He donned a grey suit that evening. In the background, cast in the shadow of the Arch, the Shining Maidens gathered together. They didn't wear their ring attire; instead, they wore their street

clothes, looking as if they planned to head to a nearby bar after this shoot. Yumi planned on going as is. She couldn't care if people talked! Yumi had style!

[REC]

"Ladies and gentlemen, as by now, you know, I am Mister Meowkazawa. I have the distinct honor of being the royal council, the chancellor for Your Highness--- the Magical Cosmic Princess, YUYO! By all accounts, I am the sage advisor for all matters relating to her career. I speak on her behalf," **Meowkazawa introduced himself to the camera. He patted himself on his sides as if he had a jolly stomach; however, Meowkazawa was lean these days, having to survive on instant ramen for the past few weeks due to overspending on the special ring attire for Rise to Greatness.** "In less than forty-eight hours, Supreme Championship Wrestling, the premier wrestling promotion, the top wrestling company in the entire world, will put on its annual marquee event, Rise to Greatness. It is our privilege- nay, our honor to be a part of the card when your Highness, YUYO, challenges Bree Lancaster for the SCW Adrenaline Championship!"

"Yay!" **Sakura shouted in the background, jumping into the air with one fist. Neko placed a hand on her shoulder to settle her down. YUYO remained stoic as she stared into the camera as Meowkazawa continued to speak.**

"YUYO earned this opportunity. At Taking Hold of the Flame, YUYO stunned the wrestling world when she survived until the final three! It took two former SCW World Champions, Hall of Fame-caliber talent, to remove her from the battle royal. No one that evening outshined her heart. Her passion convinced SCW officials, including the famed CHBK, to give YUYO a second chance in SCW. And they have not regretted that decision for a second. Merchandise sales of YUYO and Shining Maiden gear have brought in money by the truckload! But forget about the business side; let's discuss the sports side of YUYO's emergence. At a time when Walyon Creek, Leroy Adams, the Engima, and Eavan Maloney have stepped forward as the new generation of SCW talent, YUYO has appeared to become the face of that youth movement. The only thing that is lacking is proper coronation. And for that, YUYO needs a crown, and there's no better crown than the SCW Adrenaline Championship," **Meowkazawa said. Yumi motioned around her waist to signal that she wanted the title. Meowkazawa clapped his hands together, proud that Yumi had refrained from any outbursts that ruined the moment.**

"The only thing that stands in the way of YUYO getting the moment she so deserves is Bree Lancaster. And this is where many might say that Bree's time in the sun is over. That's a foolhardy statement if I have ever heard of it. Bree's time is now. Regardless of this match's outcome, I am confident that Bree Lancaster is a pivotal member of the SCW roster. Her career is far from over. And the crazy thing about Bree Lancaster is that if she calls it quits today, many would already have placed her in the Hall of Fame. She's a supreme champion at such a young age. That speaks volumes to her ambition. Her drive has made her one of the fiercest competitors in the locker room. There's a reason why championships and Bree Lancaster go

together. And to hold onto such a prestigious title for six months now is a testament that her fighting spirit is not waning soon," **Meowkazawa's voice bellowed passionately. By all means, there was respect for Bree's accomplishments. Meowkazawa eyed Yumi to see if she carried herself with a severe expression on her face. For a moment, he thought he saw an eye roll from her.**

"But Bree Lancaster hasn't met someone like Your Highness, YUYO! If we want to talk about the power of will, go no further. YUYO defines resolve. To get to this point, YUYO went through a grueling gauntlet of matches weeks ago. She knocked off Ravyn Taylor, a famed wrestler and a Supreme Champion in an upset. In two consecutive weeks, YUYO routed Marie Jones. The very same Marie Jones who challenged Bree Lancaster at Taking Hold of the Flame. The very same Marie Jones who pushed Bree Lancaster to her limits. YUYO has a rocket strapped to her back, and she's going to the moon. Bree might be sitting back and thinking that this is going to be an easy match because my client likes frills and lace--- because my client has odd mannerisms and a certain quirkiness, but don't be fooled, because when that bell rings... all the fun and games go poof, and YUYO turns the ignition to let the jet engines roar," **Meowkazawa paused for a moment. He suspected that YUYO was about to make a jet fight noise. He saw her mouth twitch. She held it together, though, standing tall on her backpack. Meowkazawa continued:** "So what do we have here when two individuals with all the momentum in the world crash together? Physics tells us whoever has the most inertia determines that course of history. And there isn't anyone on this planet who has more force before her than YUYO. She is a shooting star hurtling towards impact, and Bree Lancaster is about to find out the hard way that a new era is here!"

"This is the Era of the EXXXPLLLLLOSSSSSION!" **YUYO called out.**

"Sunday, in St. Louis, America---- nay, the whole wide world will watch as the Magical Cosmic Princess takes the next step in her fabled journey to the top when YUYO lays claim on the crown that is the SCW Adrenaline Championship. She is going to prove all those who have regulated her to the role of the underdog as fools. The proof is in the pudding; for the past two months, there has been no one as untouchable as Your Highness, so bow before her and recognize her as your Magical Cosmic Princess," **Meowkazawa threw up his hands and turned to point over at Yumi. Yumi breathed into her fist and rubbed her shiny princess vest. But she threw out the staff and stepped forward. This wasn't part of the plan. Yumi promised to let Meowkazawa do the talking. What was she about to say? Meowkazawa cringed.**

**Yumi pointed the staff at the camera and began:** "Bree! Don't you think YUYO has forgotten about you—our past. Our history is deeper than most people think. Over a year ago, you humiliated YUYO! YUYO was supposed to become the Champion of the Television! But no--- you conspired against me. And on that day, I understand that you will do everything in your power to thwart me. You don't care about love. You don't care about justice. You definitely don't care about peace. No, the greater good doesn't even figure into your wicked machinations. All you care about is yourself! Your career! And that is why you and YUYO are not the same. I'm

fighting for so much more than myself. For the fans! For the sanctity of all, that's good in the cosmos! That's my duty. What is yours?"

"YUYO sees right through you. That's right! YUYO sees it all with her all-knowing eye that the Gods have blessed her with! You're willing to do everything in your power to keep control over the SCW Adrenaline Championship! You wouldn't be surprised if you were in cahoots with the Shinigami Foundation losers! You villains all stick together! You're afraid of justice! When will you learn that love conquers all? That good always prevails! You might maintain this air of dignity and masquerade as this champion who keeps things in the ring, but we all know that wasn't always the case! Some people don't change; they learn to hide their flaws better. YUYO suspects you fall in the latter category," **Yumi accused Bree. Meowkazawa face palmed. What was she going on about now? Yumi tsked loudly, wagging her finger as if she had caught Bree red-handed in her deceit. A gust of wind picked up and blew aside a strand of her purple-tipped hair.**

"But YUYO has changed! She is no longer a naive little girl. YUYO no longer takes her opportunities for granted! When we last faced a year ago, YUYO wasn't prepared to meet such a mighty foe! But she has gone on a journey, and as a result, she has returned stronger than ever! It took YUYO to lose everything for her to appreciate the opportunities she had in SCW. YUYO has the skill. She has the power! She is magical! All she needed was to have the right attitude and EXPLOSION! YUYO is on fire! YUYO is taking over! You're witnessing the dawning of a revolution! YUYO is the spear tip that will be thrust into the heart of the beast. Because you stand in my path, I will run you through without hesitation. You are my enemy, Bree! You're a villain. I just know it!"

"Rise to Greatness! That is when YUYO will undergo her ultimate metamorphosis! The stage is set for me to cement myself as the bright future this world desperately needs! YUYO will overcome the villainess named Bree Lancaster and hoist the SCW Adrenaline Championship, and her win will become a beacon for the entire world to rally around! We'll push back against the tides of darkness and reclaim what's ours! Who is with me! EXPLOSION!" **Yumi thrust the staff into the sky. Sakura let out a squeal of support behind her. Both Neko and Meowkazawa left, shaking their heads in disbelief.**

**[/REC]**

"Come on, guys! You were all supposed to say it with me!" **Yumi turned towards the Shining Maidens.**

"Say what exactly?" **Neko asked.**

"Explosion! And if not that, do what Sakura does, shout 'yay!'" **Yumi answered.**

"YAY!" **Sakura shouted.**

"Say Yumi. I really don't think accusing Bree of working with the Shiningami Foundation was a smart idea. You have no evidence. She has no reason---" **Meowkazawa raised his finger. Yumi shushed him. She marched over to him. Her being armed frightened him. He didn't want to get whacked by the staff.**

"Shush! It's all one big conspiracy! That's how bad guys work! Duh!"

"But Bree seems sincerely a legitimately good person these days!" **Meowkazawa argued.** "A real fighting champ!"

"That is what she wants you to believe. I can't believe how she got you fooled! She's good. She's really good! The spells she has cast are more potent than YUYO expected! Fret not! YUYO is the true wizard here!" **Yumi declared, pointing towards the Arch with her staff. Yumi breathed in the energy coming from the monument. This match was her time to shine. She just knew it! Bree Lancaster might be her most formidable challenge since returning to SCW; however, she understood that the stage was set for her to steal the show and the Adrenaline Championship! Everything was going to plan as far as she was concerned.**