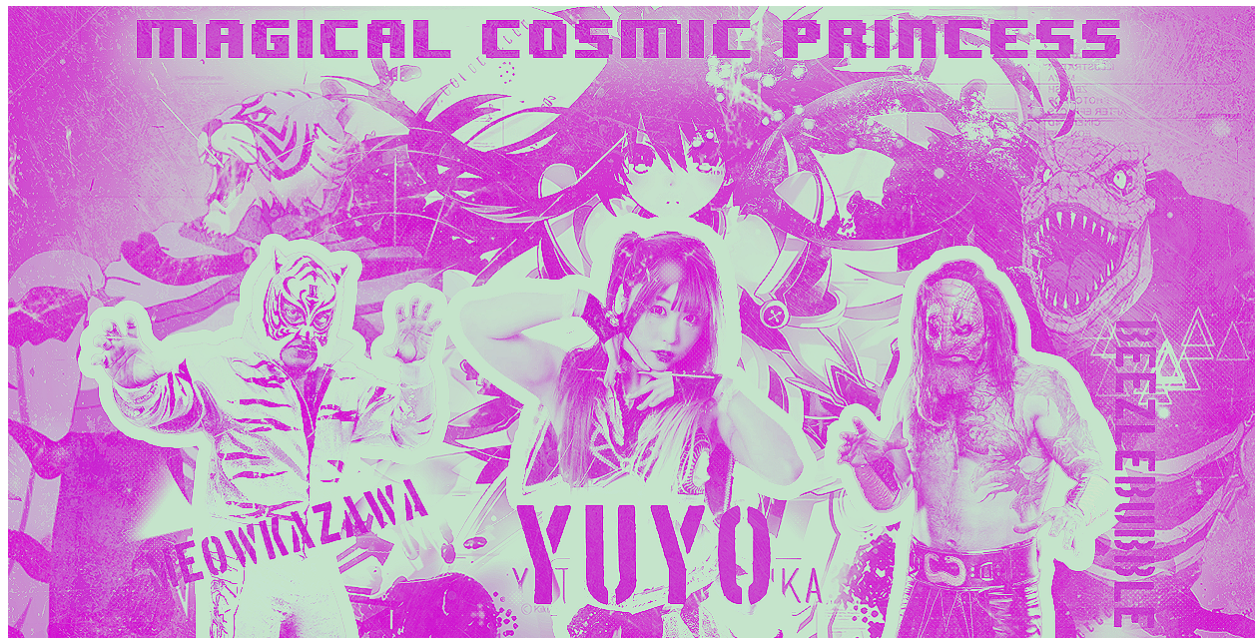




The sound of children's laughter and the squeaking of the aging swing sets filled the air. Kids ran, kicking up woodchips, while they pursued each other in a tag. Others twisted and turned on the jungle gym, doing their best monkey impressions. One even hooted. A group of older students played basketball on the court. In the corner of the blacktop, three girls played with a jump rope, chanting a count. The after-school life for grade school students seemed carefree to Yumi. She didn't want to lower herself to call the sentiment she felt envy; however, there was some bitterness in the fact that while they danced around in their school uniforms, she used to have to go straight to the dojo for another wrestling lesson. Tradition ran strong in her family.

Yumi dressed to fit in. They said she looked young for her age. She couldn't pass as an elementary school student, but at least as a high school. She basically cosplayed as a high school student. Yumi donned a white button-up blouse paired with a dark grey pleated skirt that stopped a hair past her knees. A purple sweat vest tightened down her chest. White socks shot out of black flat shoes to the knees. When she looked in her hotel room's mirror, Yumi knew she pulled off the disguise perfectly. Unfortunately, on her walk to the train station, her attitude garnered unwanted attention from perverted office workers. Some even offered her money to spend the afternoon in a love hotel. There was something wrong with the area where she decided to book a hotel—too many hentai.

"Yu-Yumi, is that- is that you?" Meowkazawa stuttered. She approached him with a skip in her step. Since Yumi was in costume, she thought, why not act the part of a bubbly schoolgirl? He refused to don his mask publicly, especially not for this expedition. Something about being too afraid that the police will arrest him on suspicion of being a molester. Again, given the country's current culture, Yumi understood his concern. Still,

it didn't help that his eyes leechously undressed her as she stood before him in a schoolgirl uniform.

"YUYO sweats to the power of the cosmos that if you don't get your mind out of the gutter, YUYO will smack some morality into you," **Yumi said. That made Meowkazawa almost jump out of his business suit. She admitted that at least he dressed up for the public. She worried he'd come in weeks-old clothes, with stains and an unshaven face. He cleaned up. He wanted to impress his daughter.**

"Hey! I just didn't expect you to dress like that!"

"I wanted to fit in. Go incognito. What, you expected YUYO to dress properly? YUYO doesn't want to draw too much attention. She's a celebrity, and that might get in the way of the mission," **Yumi explained. She rolled her eyes. In Japan, she was famous. She conquered the highest level of women's wrestling. She appeared in fashion magazines. There were a few times she promoted shows on news programs. Her face was recognizable. And if she wore her regal attire, that would draw commotion. A mob would form. She would have to run away.**

"What should I compliment your look without coming off as a pervert?"

"You don't say anything. You focus on the mission. Lusting after your princess was how you got into this spot in the first place. Remember? BAKA!"

"Right! Sorry! The mission. We can't forget the mission!"

"It's your daughter we're abducting."

"Wait--- abducting? No, we can't kidnap her. We are only having a nice chat with her—a coincidental encounter, if you will. We're not taking her from the playground. That's going to get us in hot water with the law," **Meowkazaw protested. Yumi tossed her bag onto the ground. Then why did she buy so much rope? She only planned on using bondage as a last resort. She preferred not to hurt Meowkazawa's daughter.** "You understand? We have to do this the right way."

"Let me ask you something."

"What's your question?"

"What do you think will happen when we roll up on her? You're not wearing your mask--- the mask you've worn her entire life. If you think she will come willingly with a strange man and his high school sweetheart, then you have another thing coming," **Yumi said. Meowkazawa shrugged at her concern. Yumi sighed a frustrated cry and shoved Meowkazawa for being so dim-witted. At this point, a police officer approached them. He tilted his thick-rimmed cap in their direction in a friendly manner. But behind his neighborly smile, the police offer shot Meowkazawa a suspecting glare.**

"What a fine day it is! Is anything the problem?" **The police officer asked.**

"Wonderful weather, huh? Hahaha," **Yumi responded. She elbowed Meowkazawa to signal that she was going to take the lead. They couldn't afford to have their cover blown.**

"Nothing's the problem. It's just me and my pa going for a stroll by the park. Nothing to see here. Nothing out of the ordinary or devious. Nothing. Everything is as wholesome as it can be."

"Right..." **The police officer brought his hand to his chin. He narrowed his eyes at the two.**

"I sure love my daughter. She is the best thing to ever happen to me. Yep, yep!" **Meowkazawa interjected. Something inside him snapped when he had to refer to her as his daughter. The age difference between the two already bore a significant burden to his mind, given his attraction towards Yumi. Meowkazawa knew she was young enough to be his daughter, but pretending that after some vigorous nights of pretending with her in a more intimate manner made him sick. Meowkazawa might indeed be a pervert, but he wasn't a sicko.**

"Can you step away from your 'daughter,' sir? I want to have a word with her."

"Of course. Anything you ask, officer!" **Meowkazawa gulped loudly. The officer didn't buy their story. Knowing Yumi, she could easily make matters worse. The officer became suspicious of them right next to a playground. A million thoughts raced through Meowkazawa's panicked mind. Sweat started gathering on his face as the officer took Yumi aside.**

"Is he really your father? Come on, tell me the truth. You're safe now. If this man is---," **the police officer cut short.**

"YU- I am telling the truth. He's my father!"

"If he's threatening you in any way. You can come with me. I can protect you. You're safe now. No need to keep up the lie, miss," **the police officer continued. Yumi shot a look over at Meowkazawa. The devil inside her, locked up by a magical seal, wanted to have fun at Meowkazawa's expense. She could so blow him right now for being a pedo. Seeing Meowkazawa being dragged down to the station for some questioning would be hilarious.**

She sighed. "Unfortunately, he is my father. And unfortunately, he makes me go on walks with him after school."

"I wanted to make sure. There's been some creeps around here. Be safe."

"Thank you, officer. May justice prevail!"

"Yeah--- that," the officer said. He tipped his cap one more time towards Meowkazaw before continuing his patrol. The two regrouped on a park bench. They both released relieved sighs as they threw themselves back against the bench. Their cover was almost blown. Yumi nearly caved to her dark sense of humor. Still, they have yet to fail the operation.

"I thought you were going to get me in trouble. I don't know what you would say, but you would say something to convince the police I'm a danger to society," **Meowkazawa said. Meowkazawa ran his hand through his black hair and faced the sky with dark eyes. Yumi patted him on the shoulder and leaned in with a grin. That smile scared Meowkazawa.**

"Oh, I was tempted. You better have erased your browser history because they would have gone checking it if I told them what I wanted to tell them."

"Not funny."

"What? You don't use incognito mode."

"Don't ever threaten me like that again, Yumi. There are some things you must not discuss, and one of them is a man's browser history," **Meowkazawa warned. He formed a tent with his hands and sighed. He shuddered with what could have been life-ending embarrassment. He was too young to die and didn't want to commit seppuku. Thankfully, he lived to see another day.**

"But YUYO didn't! See how much YUYO has grown! YUYO prioritized I placed the mission before my own selfish desires," **Yumi touted. She hummed with pride at her self-control. Meowkazawa buried himself deeper into his hands. He needed to remember that Yumi's sense of direction was far different than most others. Her moral compass was in disarray. That was why she needed him to keep her in check.**

"So with that obstacle out of the way... what's next?"

"You point out your daughter. We'll ambush her. I'll cut off any escape. You engage in a full frontal assault."

"Why do you make it like we're barbarians? We're not resorting to violence."

"Just point her out already! YUYO promises to behave," **Yumi said. Meowkazawa stared down at Yumi with skeptical, dark eyes. He cleared his voice. In all the confusion, he didn't locate his daughter. He entered the park, sidestepping a loose ball. He hopped over a diving child. Meowkazawa's catlike reflexes came into play as he avoided the obstacles with his eyes vigilant for signs of his daughter. Yumi followed, skipping along. She almost tripped over the ball. Then she nearly stepped on the diving kid. Yumi raised her fist to admonish the child but thought better of it. Yumi needed to remain graceful since she was a magical cosmic princess, after all.**

Himari stood alone. She wore the stereotypical sailor uniform, with a navy square collar extending to her shoulders. A red ribbon tied tightly around her neck. The pleated skirt and the shirt's cuffs matched the collar. Her chestnut eyes stared blankly at the bright blue eyes. Meowkazawa would argue that there wasn't anyone in the entire universe as adorable as his Himari. He knew she killed time in this park after school. Perhaps because after he was divorced and his wife sent him packing, he stalked his daughter. Well, stalking bore a negative connotation. It was more like he protected her from afar. Meowkazawa was too scared to approach her, thinking if her mother found out he bypassed her, she would turn to the law to eliminate all visitation rights.

"Himari," **Meowkazawa called out.**

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Excuse me, young lady. I'm your father. And I don't think I ever taught you to use that language."

"My father is some damn weirdo that wears a cat mask. You don't have a cat mask; therefore, you can't possibly be that asshole," **Himari responded fiercely. She stuck out her tongue and lowered her bottom eyelid with her middle finger. Her attention then turned towards Yumi. Her eyes widened, and she turned back to Meowkazawa.** "Except you are hanging out with that homewrecking bitch."

"Hey! YUYO stands for love and justice! She's not anti-love! She doesn't ruin marriages," **Yumi said. She clamped her hands on her mouth but lowered them as she knew she had already blown her cover. It didn't matter. Himari recognized her somehow.**

"I knew that was you, bitch. My mom keeps a picture of you on the dart board. She likes to throw knives at it to relieve the stress of being a single mom in this fucking economy," **Himari stated. Her every word came out as a hiss and bore the same venom as a snake's bite. Meowkazawa shook in disbelief. His precious angel had turned into a delinquent. His broken home had spoiled the precious fruit of his loins. He didn't want to look anymore. How could his little girl look so sweet and innocent with those pigtails only to have such a filthy mouth?!**

"YUYO thinks you're mother is a horrible person for attacking her image like that. It's sacrilegious!"

"You're a horrible person for stealing my stupid father!"

"YUYO only borrowed your father with every intention of returning him when she was finished using him!"

"That isn't how it works! Families were destroyed because of your fucking selfishness!"

"Meowkazawa! Your daughter is beyond saving. We should abandon this cause and take up a better purpose. This is not worth the effort." **Yumi turned to Meowkazawa. Meowkazawa's jaw dropped as Himari lunged towards Yumi. Yumi reacted fast, extending her arm and blocking Himari's swipes. She yawned mockingly as Himari attempted to attack her with all her might, swinging haymakers, each missing by mere inches.**

"Hey, look! Some high schooler is picking on Himari!" **A nearby kid shouted.**

"And that adult is not doing anything to stop it!" **Another kid spouted.**

"We should leave. We're making a commotion," **Meowkazawa said. A small legion of children started to gather. Meowkazawa didn't like the look in their eyes. They seemed rabid. They thought Yumi attacked one of their own and planned to go on the attack. Meowkazawa yanked on Yumi's shoulder, separating the two girls engaged in mortal combat.**

"Unhand me, you knave!" **Yumi shouted at Meowkazawa. She hissed at Meowkazawa.**

"We need to run away. We're about to be assaulted by an elementary school here."

"I'm a heroine! Brave and strong, and all of that jazz. YUYO can repel the attack of the mob."

"You're going to make matters worse for me. Tactical retreat--- now!" **Meowkazawa audibled. He snatched Yumi's small wrist and dragged her away, leaving her daughter behind. He heard her insults and curses but drowned them out. His sweet, innocent girl had transformed into a monster. This display of vulgarity was the result of a divorce's effect on a young, impressionable girl. He sniffed and wiped away a single tear. Meanwhile, Yumi rolled up the sleeves of her white blouse. She huffed. She puffed. She looked like Popeye rearing to get back into that melee. She was twenty-three and picking fights with someone a third her age.**

"Let YUYO at that goblin."

"That's my daughter you're speaking of! I'm not letting you hurt her!"

"One good smack would be all YUYO needs to knock her back into line."

"She's a child! Have some mercy! Think of the scandal if the news outlets caught wind of this fiasco!"

"YUYO doesn't care!"

"She should! SCW won't hire a child beater!" **Meowkazawa said. He placed both hands on Yumi's shoulders. He slowly sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. "Look, Yumi. I appreciate it. It's obvious now that the rift between Himari and I might be insurmountable. That's**

on me. I'm sorry to blame you. I need to take responsibility for my actions. So let's leave it. Maybe one day, circumstances will change."

"No. We can't give up. Your daughter might be a snot-nosed brat. She might have the personality of an orc. But she's your daughter!"

"It's fine."

"No. It's not! She called me a homewrecker! I am very domesticated. I don't ruin homes! As a magical cosmic princess, I am supposed to bring lovers together. Not divide them!"

"My actions had consequences. I was given ample opportunity to change my ways. I didn't. This is the price I pay for my dishonor. Let's go," **Meowkazawa said. He wiped one last tear from his eye. The two, deflated from this rout, walked down the street to the train station. Yumi hung her head at a sharp angle and clenched her fists. She felt powerless. Things weren't supposed to work out these ways for someone special for her. At that moment, she didn't feel extraordinary. Instead, the sense of inadequacy overcame her. Her subject needed her the most right now to work a miracle, and she came up short.**

No, she wouldn't give up. Yumi raised her chin. Giving up wasn't in her genetics. She was born a Yoshida, after all. Her ancestors breathed strength and determination into her being. The will of the samurai! The fighting spirit that her clan became known for. She represented that essence. On top of that, what kind of anime heroine would Yumi be if she gave up now? No! She needed to call in reinforcements. Tap into her network. Pull some strings! If she couldn't handle Himari due to the girl's mischaracterization of her, then Yumi knew who could.

"What is this? YUYOs trust you alone for over a year, and you've let yourself go!" **Yumi jabs her finger into Sakura's side. Sakura Watanabe cried out her embarrassment. Yumi pinched the meat. Meowkazawa pinched his nose; while Sakura wasn't thin like Yumi, she wasn't chubby. She possessed curves. Meowkazawa understood Yumi lashed out at her number one fan and apprentice due to one critical difference between the two ladies: bra size. Sakura, codename SAWA, carried curves. Her seductive body betrayed her youthful, innocent face.**

"I'm sorry! I've been hitting the gym every day. I have tried every diet! I'm sorry!" **Sakura profusely apologized. Yumi frustratedly tugged on the sailor uniform, trying to conceal Sakura's stomach. Already, the shirt popped its top button. The uniform that Yumi forced Sakura into was two sizes too small; Meowkazawa was surprised that the fabric didn't tear at the seams. He wanted to look away, given that Sakura's uniform reminded him of the adult videos he kept on his computer at home. She didn't look remotely like an elementary school girl but a porn star that was cast because of her girlish appeal.**

"YUYO gave you the honor of being my apprentice! Her lady-in-waiting! YUYO showed you the path to virtue. Do you spit upon my ways, SAWA? Have you forsaken the scared name that your incredible master blessed you with?!" **Yumi shook Sakura. Sakura whined, shaking her head**

'no,' looking like she was on the verge of sobbing. Meowkazawa debated whether to intervene; however, he became entranced with his depraved nature every time he looked. His lust knew no bounds. This was why he was in this situation. He considered his circumstances divine punishment for his weakness.

They gathered at the park's entrance again. Yumi wore her high school uniform again. Meowkazawa picked out a different suit. He still left his tiger mask at home. He kept an eye out for the police officer, sensing that he wouldn't be able to talk his way out of this one. Yumi directed Sakura towards the park and pointed out Himari, who idly sat on a swing. Her frail hands gripped the chain leading up to the bar. She kicked the dirt at her feet. Yumi decided that maybe Sakura would be a better diplomat than she was. After all, Sakura did possess the same naivety as an elementary student. Yumi called her a puppy, but Meowkazawa would repeat that to Sakura. He respected her too much to do that.

"Now, agent SAWA. This is your mission, if you will accept it--- and you have to accept it as part of your special training. You have to convince that girl, codenamed Hobgoblin, also known as Himari, to have dinner with her father, also known as him," **Yumi instructed. Before any acknowledgment, Yumi shoved Sakura forward. Sakura almost tripped up on her feet but regained her balance. Sakura looked back meekly, nervous about the task entrusted to her. Yumi raised her thumb. Sakura nodded and ventured out to meet the beast.**

"I have a bad feeling about this," **Meowkazawa said.**

"You're always so premistic! That's your problem, Meowkazawa! You have to have faith, especially when it comes to my plans! YUYO's a genius, after all!"

"Sorry, I can't help but feel like we're sending a poor lamb to the slaughter."

"SAWA needs to toughen up. This is good combat experience for her," **Yumi said. Sakura approached Himari. She reached back to her braided hair and tugged on it nervously. Himari leaped off the swing and did a superhero landing in front of Sakura, startling the nineteen-year-old. Himari spotted Yumi and Meowkazawa immediately and offered them a sinister grin and a middle finger before turning her attention to their representative. "You raised her with such manners?"**

"No, because I've been busy caring for you instead."

"If you were around more, acted a little more stern, maybe she would be a good little girl."

"You do know that I resent that statement coming from you."

"Blasphemy!"

"Here she comes, crying!" **Meowkazawa stated. Sakura ran towards them, her arms flailing, tears flying. The horror of her sobs failed to match her beauty. She latched onto Yumi and**

buried her face into Yumi's chest. Yumi went to say something harsh but thought the better of it and patted her on her back.

"Now, now."

"She's so cruel! She called me a bitch! We have only just met!" Sakura's muffled voice vibrated. She removed her face from Yumi to wipe some snot from her nose with the back of her fists. She looked up pitifully at Yumi. "She also called me fat!"

"You're not skinny. That's for sure!"

Sakura erupted into another deep sob.

"YUYO knows. She expected too much out of you. This isn't our standard enemy we're dealing with. This is an Eldritch Horror. It's too high a level for a magical apprentice. You fought courageously." **Yumi hummed her approval. That compliment seemed to stop Sakura's crying. She rubbed the rest of her tears away, showing a smile. Yumi gave her a consolatory pat on the head, which, if Sakura were indeed a puppy girl--- her wiggling of the butt would have suited her. It was like she was wagging her tail for her master. Meowkazawa looked away, ashamed of the mental image forming in his head. He had seen an OnlyFans of a white woman in yoga pants acting like a dog, which aroused him in a way he didn't want to admit.**

"If you thought it was too much for me to handle, then why did you send me in the first place?" **Sakura asked the all-important question.**

"Beezlebubbe and I don't talk anymore. And NEMO is AWOL. You were the only option we had."

"So I wasn't even the first choice for the job?"

"You were the third. Be delighted at such an honor!"

"Oh. If you say so." **Sakura lowered her head in disappointment. Meowkazawa wanted nothing more than to hug her. Even wounded, she appeared adorable to him. Instead, he restrained himself to avoid getting himself in any hot water with Yumi or the law. Speaking of which, he became too distracted with the situation to notice the same officer from before rolling up onto their group.**

"Ahem," **The policeman greeted him.**

"Officer! It's so nice to see you again!" **Meowkaza released a weak laugh. He hoped that didn't come off suspicious. Wait, the officer's eyes narrowed at him. He was suspicious of Meowkazawa! And that was understandable as he stood right next to Yumi and Sakura.**

"We received a report the other day about a businessman causing a disturbance in the park. Supposedly, he was bothering some schoolgirls?"

"Officer, it is not what it looks."

"Would you like to come down to the station?"

"Wait--- you're going to arrest me?!"

"I have only a few questions. Come along. No need to make things difficult," **the officer said. Meowkazawa's heart sank into his chest. Was he going to jail? Meowkazawa shot a pleading look at the girls. The officer tipped his navy cap to the girls before grabbing Meowkazawa's arm. "Come on. Let's go."**

"Girls, come on. Explain to him the situation. Yumi, don't be quiet! Wait--- Yumi! Come on! Don't give me that look!" **Meowkazawa called out as the officer dragged him away. Yumi feigned to be frightened. Sakura didn't know what to do. She fidgeted in place, shooting glances between Meowkazawa and Yumi. She wanted to help but didn't want to upset Yumi.**

"Officer, stop! That right there is my lawyer!" **Yumi called out. She had fun; however, if Meowkazawa went to jail over a misunderstanding, that would be highly inconvenient. She marched up to the officers. She removed the pigtails from her light brown hair and latched onto Meowkazawa's arm. The officer and Yumi started a tug-of-war, with Meowkazawa in the middle.**

"The other day, you told me he's your father!" **The officer pulled back.**

"He's both! We're here on official business!" **Yumi leaned all the way back to put her entire weight behind her effort. A light bulb appeared above the officer's head before he decided to release Meowkazawa. The Meowkazawa jerked forward, toppling over Yumi, who was off-balance with her bid to wrestle control of her manager.**

"I'm warning all of you. Whatever you're up to, this kind of play is inappropriate for the public. And if I see any of you around here, there will be some consequences," **the officer decided. Meowkazawa rolled off Yumi and sighed in relief that he wasn't going to jail that day. The officer scanned the group, giving them a dirty look. Meowkazawa shrank. Sakura shrieked. Yumi bared her teeth. "Now move along."**

"Time for another tactical retreat," **Meowkazawa decided. He took both Yumi and Sakura by the hand. He didn't delay their exit by a second.**

"Wait! Where do you think we're going? We're not finished!" **Yumi called out.**

"You heard the officer. We're not welcome around those parts. If we stay any longer, we're going away."

"You're hurting me!"

"You're hurting SAWA!"

"I'm sorry. She's not dressed appropriately. You don't act appropriately. We need to hightail it out of here!" **Meowkazawa shouted. He did loosen his grip on Sakura's hand. He planned on apologizing for his roughness later after he placed distance between the cop and Yumi's party. After a few hundred yards, Yumi dug her heels into the pavement. She forced herself free of Meowkazawa's grasp.** "Yumi, come on. This is not the time to be defiant. We need to leave."

"We're not leaving your daughter behind!"

"We figure out another way."

"YUYO is not giving up! Never! You tell him, SAWA!"

"NEVER GIVE UP!" **Sakura echoed.**

"No more. You've done enough! I'll wait until she's ready to have a relationship with me. Time heals all wounds, right? I appreciate all that you have done. You won me over. Now, let's head home. We'll regroup. We make plans for your career. We need to go," **Meowkazawa pleaded. It wasn't the legal ramifications that he feared; the more he thought about the situation, the more convinced he thought leaving Himari alone was the better option. Yumi didn't want to give up for his sake. He recognized that. She cared about him. She tried to do the right thing but was too stubborn to see that not everything can be fixed by sheer willpower. Some things needed a delicate touch. A concept that Yumi failed to grasp.**

"I can't believe we're back. We're so getting arrested," **Meowkazawa lamented.**

"Jail?! My parents will disown me! YUYO!" **Sakura cried.**

"Stop ya fucking whining. We have a mission here. And I won't fail. Yumi entrusted me with this mission, and I will succeed no matter what. Old man, be fucking happy that I'm here to deliver you your daughter," **Neko Mori said. She wore a black gothic dress with lace at the edges. Neko had dyed red in a tone that resembled blood. She matched the color with her choice of contacts. Neko scared Meowkazawa. She existed as a demon spawn with a late growth spurt since they last crossed paths, making her look less like a child and more like a bruiser. Neko stomped her combat boot onto the sidewalk, making Meowkazawa and Sakura jump.**

"See, we're going to succeed no matter what. NEMO speaks the same language as your daughter, Meowkazawa. Be grateful for her services," **Yumi said. Everyone decided on regular clothes for this expedition. Yumi passed over her high school uniform. They no longer stuffed Sakura in that sailor girl uniform. Meowkazawa even donned his tiger mask, given that he concealed his identity in case a police officer showed back up.**

"Point the cunt out."

"Please refrain from calling my daughter that word," **Meowkazawa said.**

"Huh? You say something, old man?" **Neko stepped up to Meowkazawa, raising her thick eyebrow. Her dark eye shadow ran long across the sides of her face. Hidden in her aggressive expression, Meowkazawa found a particular element of beauty. Her magnificence represented the M in S&M. Meowkazawa imagined her wearing leather and bearing a whip. She embraced that kind of edge.**

"Meowkazawa, you need to stop being so sensitive. She's only being blunt. Honesty is a virtue. It's hard to find in today's world with all its political correctness!" **Yumi said. She slapped Meowkazawa on the back hard. Meowkazawa braced himself, almost colliding with Neko. That was the last thing he wanted to do. Neko scared him to the core. Neko and Yumi have been friends since childhood. Even when Neko came in a smaller package, she always came off as a firecracker. She was Yumi's enforcer on the playground. They had a falling out the last time they banded; however, when Yumi begged for Neko's assistance, Neko came. That meant Neko still considered Yumi her friend.**

"Now, show me the goddamn target. We're wasting time here."

"That's her. Over there at the jungle gym. Careful, she's mean!" **Sakura pointed towards Himari. Meowkazawa sighed. His daughter always seemed alone. While the other kids her age played games together, Himari kept to herself. Himari kicked the metal bars of the jungle gym idly. Meowkazawa wanted nothing more for her to be happy and surrounded by friends. Since that didn't seem to be the case, he wanted to hug her.**

"Let's go. We'll finish this here and now," **Neko decided. He herded Meowkazawa towards his daughter. He attempted to resist her, but that only made her grip tighter, to the point that she was hurting him. Yumi and Sakura followed. Yumi pushed from behind. The docile Sakura kept her distance. Her brief interaction with Himari psychologically scarred her.**

"What the fuck are you doing back here, Dad? Haven't you had enough? Or are you truly a masochist? Look at you, surrounded by women! You're a shitty husband! A shittier dad! To bring these tramps----" **Himari started to unload, but Neko silenced her with a slap across the face. Himari blinked, shunned at the sudden disruption and the influx of stinging pain. She held her hand up to the spot on her face that continued to grow red from the point of impact. Neko knelt to get into Himari's face. "You fucking hit me. I'm a child!"**

"I'll hit you again, you little shit."

"What? Who are you?"

"I'm the one adult that isn't going to take this crap from you, ya hear? You're a fucking kid; respect your fucking elders. Your dad is my friend, and you've been disrespecting him. I don't

like that. I be damn to let me friend be mistreated by his little shit of a daughter," **Neko explained. To Himari's credit, she didn't start crying as one would expect from a child on the receiving end of the smackdown Neko carried out. Instead, her dark eyes glistened as her mouth lay agape.**

"You're such a bitch."

"Damn right, I'm a bitch. I'm the toughest bitch you're ever going to meet. Now, the important thing here is that you give your father a chance. He's been trying to make amends with you. He loves you. Fuck, some people don't have a father. It pisses me off when I see people don't give their parents the time of day, ya know? I wish I had my parents still. You do your dad right here. Cherish that, god damn it," **Neko continued. Any moment, Meowkazawa readied himself to intervene. Neko was being too harsh on the girl. If Himari started crying, as would be expected given the situation, Meowkazawa would have no choice but to step in. He didn't care if Neko hurt him. He wanted nothing more but to protect his child.**

"You're so right," **Himari responded. Meowkazawa's jaw dropped.**

"You're damn right. I'm right."

"I never knew my dad dated a cool woman like you."

"I am not dating your dad. I might like older men, but fuck, he's ancient!"

"Yeah, he is! He's almost senile! You're so fucking awesome. Will you be my friend?" **Himari said. She seemed eager. Meowkazawa's daughter took a backhand to the face and stood defiant. Where did she inherit such a fighting spirit? Now, she wanted to become friends with Neko?! He didn't understand!**

"Of course! You have grit for a kid. That always fucking awesome in my books."

"Damn straight!"

"Now, will you do me a favor?"

"Anything!"

"Go grab a bite to eat with your father. Spend some time. He might be the lamest asshole on the planet, but it's damn important to spend time with him while you still can. Trust me," **Neko said. Himari contemplated for a while, giving Meowkazawa a glance for the first time in the entire conversation. She nodded. She ran to Meowkazawa.**

"As long as you keep that damn homewrecking bitch away and bring this lady around, we can be friends. Okay, Dad?" **Himari declared. She stuck out her tongue at Yumi. Yumi went to lunge at Himari; however, Sakura locked her arms around the waist. Yumi struggled while Neko stepped in between Himari and Yumi.**

"Done deal. Let's grab a burger. You still like burgers."

"I love fucking burgers!" **Himari responded.**

"We so need to work on your language," **Meowkazawa** muttered. **He cringed at her vulgarity. No wonder Neko and her connected. They both scared the piss out of him. Meowkazawa sighed a breath of relief and offered out his hand. Himari stared down the offer before relenting, intertwining her fingers with his. Meowkawawa waved to the team before walking away towards the closest McDonald's.**

"I'm sorry to hear about your parents. I didn't know," **Yumi said once Meowkazawa and his daughter walked out of sight. Neko released a sinister snicker. Sakura stepped back, afraid of what that evil laughter might mean.**

"I lied. Kids are so stupid. So easy to manipulate."

"You lied!? That's so wrong! You should never lie about a death in the family," **Sakura protested.**

"It worked, didn't it?" **Neko countered.**

"YUYO knew she could rely on her best friend!" **Yumi said. She went to embrace Neko; however, her childhood friend sidestepped her. Yumi almost fell face-first onto the gravel below. Worry flashed across Yumi's soft face.**

"Best friend, eh? Don't get confused. We have some issues, you and I."

"NEMO?"

"We'll work things out another time. For now, enjoy your victory. Remember, you owe me," **Neko said. Without another word, she turned her back and started to walk away. Yumi watched her friend leave, confused about what she meant. Sure, they had a falling out, but Neko still came. She thought that whatever Neko's problem, she got over it! But now, Yumi didn't know what to do or say. She wasn't any good at solving these types of conflicts.**

"You're going to let her leave like that?" **Sakura asked.**

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You could say sorry!"

"YUYO doesn't know what she would be apologizing for. If YUYO only knew what she did wrong, then she would. Sincerity is important when apologizing. Even I know that." **Yumi turned towards Sakura. She tried to be strong and offered up a weak smile to her protege. Sakura, sensing that Yumi was in distress, glomped her. Yumi almost fell over; however, she stood her ground and accepted the enthusiastic embrace. Yumi found**

solace in brushing her hand through Sakura's dark, silky hair. "Thanks, Sakura. I needed a hug."

"Hugging is the one thing I'm good at!"

"One day, SAWA will be known for being amazing throughout the entire world. With YUYO's guidance, you'll be truly awesome!"

"Yesh!"

Meowkazawa whistled merrily as he strolled down the street with his daughter. They did it! They reconciled. He knew this was where the hard work would begin; he thanked Yumi for being persistent. He gave up all hope of spending time with Himari. These were some of the most critical years of her daughter's life. He glanced over at his daughter, lifting her tiny hand with fingers interlocked with his. Himari seemed to be in good spirits as well with the development. Somehow, Neko Mori broke through to her. He needed to thank her later for this gift.

As they turned the corner of a busy intersection on their way to the nearby McDonalds, Meowkazawa skidded to a stop. Standing before him, gripping a baton, was the police officer who had come around the past few days. He was safe. He wore a mask. He wouldn't recognize Meowkazawa. Meowkazawa attempted to play it cool, resuming their walk and giving a wide berth to the police officer. As he passed, he winced. The officer snatched Meowkazawa's arm.

"There have been reports of creeps around here. And if I ever saw a creep preying on school girls, you'd fit that description with that mask," **the police officer said.**

"Officer, please. I'm on a walk with my daughter. I'm no creep."

"Is this really your daughter? I had a man earlier this week who tried to use the same excuse. I'm not buying it."

"Officer, please. We're on our way to have an early dinner."

"We'll discuss that at the station. Now come along, you two."

"No!"

"You tell him, papa. You tell that fucker off!" Himari started. Meowkazawa's eyes widened. He wished his daughter didn't act in this manner, especially not towards a member of law enforcement. Meowkazawa raised his hands apologetically. He went to bow as a plea for forgiveness; however, he heard the loud click of the handcuff being slapped on his wrist. He was so close to having that meal with his daughter, and this had to happen!

Why is this happening?!

YUYO's party was greeted by the warm glow of paper lanterns that hung from the ceiling, casting a soft ambient light over the wooden interior of the sake house. The savory scent of grilled seafood hung in the air. Groups of friends and business colleagues sat on the tatami mats on the floor, huddling around the low tables. The explosions of laughter drowned out the traditional Japanese string music played lightly in the background. The music competed against the animated conversations of the intoxicated patrons. Hiro Tanaka chose this place for their meeting.

Past navy linen curtains, a table waited for them. Hiro Tanaka sat cross-legged at the table; he already held a sake glass to his soft lips. He savored the hot beverage. He wore a grey business suit with a black tie, fitting right in with the salarymen who frequented the joint. YUYO pushed past the curtain and dropped right in front of Hiro Tanaka. She bowed before her sensei while pushing forward the helm of her white dress. Behind her, Meowkazawa and Sakura filed in.

"Master, YUYO has returned with Sir Meowkazawa as you requested. YUYO has finished the quest you entrusted her."

"I can see that. Meowkazawa, nice to see you again."

"Likewise, Tanaka." **Meowkazawa offered a weary smile.**

"Sit. Sit. Tonight, we drink except for you. You seem too young," **Hiro said. He pointed at Sakura. Sakura's flowing pink dress stretched past her knees, and tall white socks concealed any view of her legs. She dropped down across from Hiro Tanaka defiantly, puffing out the cheeks on her youthful face. "Are you even twenty?"**

"I can drink anyone under the table. It's one of the few things I'm good at!" **Sakura challenged.**

"Fair enough. I'll have the waitress fetch us a round." **Hiro departed from the private room and entered the fray of the main dining area. Meowkazawa leaned over the table, giving both girls looks. YUYO bounced up and down, excited at the opportunity to drink with her master. Meanwhile, Sakura maintained a determined look, wanting nothing more than to impress everyone with her drinking abilities. Meowkazawa sighed, sensing this could be a recipe for disaster.**

"Now, girls. We'll humor Hiro with a few rounds, but after that, we'll go. Remember, we're not here to drink. We're here to get you back in SCW's good graces," **Meowkazawa said.**

"Okay!" **Both girls sounded off in unison.**

"I said, only a few rounds. Remember that----"

"KANPAI!" Meowkazawa made the rally call. He lifted the small glass of sake up into the air. YUYO had long since wrapped his tie around his head, keeping his tiger mask secure to his face. All four members of the group raised their glasses and echoed his warcry. Meowkazawa downed the drink before stumping back over the low table. He was somehow in the worst shape of the four, including the two more petite women. Sakura was the only person who didn't have a blush on her face and sat stoically in her own sense. Both Hiro's and Yumi's faces were both scarlet red. They leaned on each other for support.

"Now, master. YUYO did what you say. Now, it's your turn."

"Yumi. Young Yumi. What is an adventure without adversity?" **Hiro shot up straight, nodding. He pulled at the hair on his chin.**

"Do you know how difficult it was to enlist Meowkazawa's help? His daughter is a demon spawn. I had to reconcile the two. YUYO's surprised that Meowkazawa survived his visitation in one piece," **Yumi replied. After spending the evening at the police station, Meowkazawa's ex-wife clarified the misunderstanding. In a moment of mercy, she allowed Meowkazawa supervised visits. That meant as long as he paid for dinner for both Himari and her mother, Meowkazawa could have visitation. He came back from the dinner a little worse for wear. His ex-wife was as brutal as always. Meowkazawa released a depressed groan. Yumi reached out across the table and patted him on the arm. "There. There."**

"Have you learned the importance of giving? To be a true ally, a real friend, you must know when to give and when to take. It's a two-way street, Yumi. And I believe before, you've not recognized that truth," **Hiro stated. Yumi glanced at Meowkazawa, who now buried his head in his arms. Then, at Sakura, who offered up a big smile towards her idol. Yumi turned back to Hiro and bowed.**

"Then what must YUYO do for Hiro Tanaka, her master?"

"You must honor my teachings, young one."

"I thought I have always embraced your lessons."

"You represent my school, Yumi. And the things you've done in the past have stained my school's reputation. You've missed shows. You've acted dishonorably—childish behavior. If you want my blessing to return to SCW, then you must promise me to correct your ways. Even with Meowkazawa at your side, you must know to stand firm and tall," **Hiro said. Yumi winced at the list of grievances. She also accepted that his harsh assessment was fair. She acted like a child when Meowkazawa left to return home to Japan. Yumi hummed her understanding, prostrating before her master.**

"Master, YUYO plans on being an adult."

"Good. There's one more thing that I ask of you. I will put your name in for the Taking Hold of the Flame battle royal."

"Really?!"

"This is by no means a SCW contract. This is a one-night affair; however, it is the perfect opportunity for you to impress the powers that be. The real decision-makers of SCW will be watching, and if you show up and show out, Yumi--- they will no doubt be interested in bringing you back," **Hiro explained. Yumi faced him, tilting her head up to show off her sparkling black eyes with wonder. She tasted opportunity. Yumi understood what this meant.**

"I won't only show up. YUYO will win!"

"I'm not asking you to win, Yumi. While I won't say it's impossible, I will say it's improbable. Winning the battle royal has eluded some of the best. What you need to focus on is doing your best. I know for a fact that will be enough to earn your spot back on the SCW roster," **Hiro said. Yumi nodded in understanding. She raised her head and thumb to convey her commitment to this new mission that her sensei had set out for her. The Taking Hold of the Flame attracted the best from around the globe to compete for the opportunity to challenge the champion at the biggest wrestling show of the year. Yet winning it alone was a great honor.**

"Nu-uh! YUYO is going to demonstrate why she is the most awesome, magical wrestler in the whole wide world!" **Sakura slammed her fist onto the table.**

"SAWA..." **Yumi turned towards her apprentice.**

"I know you're a wise man, Hiro Tanaka. But you, of all people, should know YUYO's potential. She is the chosen one. She will lead SCW one day, and what better day to do so than at that event," **Sakura continued. She hammered her fist again on the table, making the sake glasses hop. Hiro Tanaka gauged the youngest of the group before proceeding to nod in agreement.**

"SAWA!" **Yumi exclaimed. She would have given Sakura the biggest hug if she could reach across the table.**

"Then prove me wrong, Yumi. Go out there and give it your best shot. Win the entire thing if you can. Winning will prove that you are indeed the future of this sport! And well--- it would be quite magical to see," **Hiro said. He slapped his pupil on the back, and she took that as a sign of doing a pose. Yumi struck the best magical girl pose she could rip off an anime, tapping into her actual being. This felt natural. This felt fantastic! She pressed a victory sign across her right eye while placing her free hand on her hip. Sakura leaped to her feet and mimicked the pose. Both girls started laughing manically.**

"And if there's one thing YUYO is, she is magical!"

"YAY!" Sakura followed.

At that point, the waitress popped her head into the room. Her face soured at the sight of the two women, who she assumed to be drunk, doing a funky pose straight out of a cartoon show. Hiro offered the waitress a grin in an attempt to disarm her; however, that seemed to backfire as he probably came off as a creepy old man. Meowkazawa would have commiserated with Hiro's misfortune if he wasn't already passed out from all the booze.

Sakura noticed the waitress. "Another round, please!"

"We drink to commemorate Yumi's ascension to stardom!" Hiro announced.

"KANPAI!"

The London Eye slowly rotated while serving as a quiet sentinel to the banks of the Thames. Riverboats passed underneath the historic bridges, crisscrossing the mellow waters. SCW chose a relatively isolated spot by the banks of the river for some promotional content for the upcoming Taking Hold of the Flame pay-per-view. A walkway stretched for as far as the eye could see. Park benches offered travelers respite. The occasional broad-leafed tree added greenery to the scenic trail in one of the world's largest cities. The gentle lapping of the water against the shore resonated with Yumi. She missed her riverside strolls when she used to live in London while wrestling for EMERGE. London had become a second home to her. The curry was to die for in this city.

YUYO and her party waited for their turn to use the prepared venue. As the sun started to lower on the horizon, the staff brought in soft lighting to create a cozy and intimate atmosphere. The majestic cityscape was still visible through the camera's lenses. Meowkazawa stepped forward, adjusting the yellow and blue striped tie on his light blue business suit. He donned the tiger mask, a requirement set forth by Yumi. He didn't mind for business purposes. Keeping his anonymity became something of import to Meowkazawa. The cameraman signaled him the go-ahead with a thumbs up.

[REC]

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Mister Meowkazawa. I am the royal council, the chancellor if you will, for your Highness --- the magical cosmic princess, YUYO. I represent her in every aspect of her life. I manage her kingdom's food stores. I ensure her taxes are paid. I even do the dishes when she is too tired to clean up after herself. But most importantly, I am her advisor in all matters involving her career," **Meowkazawa started. He adjusted his mask and cleared his voice. He should have properly introduced himself to the SCW audience in the past. They saw him frequently with his client; however, he needed to provide the voice of reason required to promote Yumi properly. That changed now.**

"The last time you saw YUYO in action, you might have written her off. Let's be honest, she struggled---"

"Hey! You're supposed to praise YUYO!" **Yumi shouted off-camera.**

"Supreme Championship Wrestling gave her opportunity after opportunity to prove her mettle in the ring. They saw enough in YUYO to grant her title shots at the Television and Underground Championships. Yet, in each instance, she came up short. Plainly put, My Highness failed to capitalize. We could come up with a hundred excuses for why she failed; however, YUYO is not an individual who is pitiful enough to stand on excuses. She lost. Better women ruled supreme in those days. And after Kimberly Williams cracked her head open with a vicious steel shot, YUYO went away for a while," **Meowkazawa paused. He lowered his head to show his dismay. He wasn't going to explain the whole story to the fans. They didn't need to know the immaturity that led to Yumi's exit from the company. He simply needed to bring them up to speed.**

Meowkazawa lifted a single finger. He continued, "But YUYO is back. Your Highness has returned with the fiery spirit of her ancestors. Back from the ashes, she raises. You see, there is no doubt potential in the young lady. That is why the match schedulers in SCW didn't shy away from placing her against the likes of Selena Frost, Asher Hayers, and Bree Lancaster! And while she fell short against each, she showed the world the extent of her abilities. She isn't some veteran. YUYO has been wrestling since the age of 7. Fast forward fifteen some years later, and YUYO is posed to conquer this company. But this time, she isn't some naive girl looking to make an impression."

"NO!" Meowkazawa threw his arms across his body to form a giant 'X.'

"Your Royal Highness, the Magical Cosmic Princess, she will not take any prisoners. She isn't going to show any mercy—no more Mrs. nice girl. In her time away from this company, YUYO has learned that she belongs on the biggest stage the galaxy has to offer. In Japan, she was unstoppable. She did it all. She held the country's top championships. YUYO has beaten the nation's top names. But that isn't enough. Only SCW is where she can indeed be recognized for her talent. And that is why she is back. That is why, on June 2nd, here in the grand city of London, England, YUYO is entering the Taking Hold of the Flame battle royal. That is where her quest to become the pinnacle of professional wrestling in the universe renews. That is where the entire world gets to understand the sheer awesomeness of YUYO's magical might!"

"You might be asking yourself? What has changed?" **Meowkazawa allowed the hypothetical question to linger in the air.**

His mistake as Yumi interjected, "No, we're not! YUYO's always been extra!"

"Your Highness might be too humble to admit that she underwent a dark journey in the past year. Since she and SCW parted ways, Yumi Yoshida went through a journey of personal growth. She explored the world. She sought out whether there were other avenues she could take in life. Maybe she could save lives by becoming a doctor. Perhaps she could blow things

up as a rocket scientist. YUYO does love her explosions; however, she came to the sole conclusion that wrestling is her life. It's in her DNA. Her ancestors wrestled. Anything else is profoundly lacking in fulfillment. So the princess asked herself, 'What must I do to come back stronger?' She dedicated herself to returning to this company better than before. Because the next time she meets the top guns of SCW, she will shoot them down. She'll be the Red Baron, the ace pilot of the skies. No one will be safe from her."

"Can YUYO get a hallelujah!" **YUYO shouted.**

"Hallelujah!" **Sakura obliged.**

"This is why, despite her tiny skies, the prospect of thirty-nine other elite wrestlers doesn't intimidate her. Your Highness is steadfast in her resolve. YUYO will not be satisfied until she gets to the apex of this sport. And what is the quickest way to the very top other than the Taking Hold of the Battle Royal? Sure, there will be the world's brightest competing in that ring. Sure, there are going to be legends making their surprise returns. Sure, there are going to be other blue-chippers rearing to make a name for themselves in the match. But this is an even battlefield, where everyone is duking it out to punch their golden ticket to Rise to Greatness. It doesn't matter if it's Xander Valentine or Selena Frost. YUYO doesn't care. YUYO only cares about one thing: fighting the best with all her magical spirit and taking them down. To prove herself the sole ruler of that ring. And on June 2nd, ladies and gentlemen, we will anoint the magical cosmic princess, YUYO, as the future of professional wrestling," **Meowkazawa finished. He exhaled as he used up all his stamina, cutting that promo. He tugged on the bottom of his mask. He turned to Yumi, who raised her hand to tag in. He said what he thought he needed to say. Now, she could have fun with whatever nonsense she planned on spewing.**

Yumi donned her ring attire. Her six-pack is on display underneath a glittery princess vest. On this day, she chose tight shorts, cut off to show off her thighs. Her clothes matched the usual purple and white color scheme and possessed sparkles everywhere. Yumi even doused herself with glitter across her chest and cheeks. The outfit featured a lot of lace, frills, and odd bells, rattling whenever she moved. YUYO raised a finger gun to the sky before lowering it towards the camera.

"It is !! IT IS YUYO! The defender of justice! The guardian of peace! The protector of love! YUYO stands for all that is right in the world! For the good in everyone's soul. YUYO is the beacon of light in the darkest of times! Fear not, SCW. YUYO has returned to fight for you!" **Yumi squealed. Yumi planted her hands on her wide hips. She hummed in agreement with her statement, nodding. Her pinned-up brunette hair bobbed with the movement.** "It has come to my attention that a curse has been cast upon the wrestling world. SCW is no longer pure! SCW is stained with the illness brought forth by the powers of corruption and sexual deviants!"

"One only needs to look at the crown to see all that is wrong with the world! Selena. The woman who YUYO once respected! The Snow Queen has tarnished and become possessed by some

demonic entity. She is no longer the woman I idolized. YUYO spent years emulating her, modeling herself after her! No more! The hero has fallen. The hero has lived long enough to be the villain! The SCW World Championship isn't the only hostage she has taken. She has taken this entire company to be her slave! No longer does she fight virtuously. No, she had fallen to the dark side. But fret not, SCW, YUYO has returned to be your guardian angel, your savior!"

"Your magical cosmic princess hereby pledges to right the wrongs. To purify this poisoned world cast into the eternal night! YUYO hasn't come alone. She will bring fellow crusaders along with her to fight this battle. We will win through valor. The gods will shine upon us as he fights against this wave of tyranny. And the battle begins June 2nd when YUYO enters the melee. You say 39 others dare oppose me? HA, I fear not. Fret not, SCW. Such numbers are only appropriate for your heroine to go up against! The odds might not be in my favor, but I have something that every entrant lacks: a burning fighting spirit and magic!" **Yumi shouted. She turned towards a bench nearby and propped up her leather boot. She looked like an anime version of Captain Morgan with her pose. A breeze lifted the small cape on her back at that moment as if timed perfectly.**

"YUYO dares anyone to try and stop her from fulfilling her sacred duty! YUYO pities the fool to think they can step in between a magical cosmic princess and her fate! Selena! She is going to go down. Taking Hold of the Flame is going to be my rallying cry! I will gather the forces of good, and we will march on Rise to Greatness! We will meet the horde led by the tainted queen with the wind at our backs! For now, I say---- Take arms! En garde! YUYO will come out Taking Hold of the Flames with her magic wands blazing, and she's kneeing every bad guy in the face until no one is standing! EXPLOSION!" **Yumi hopped onto the bench, throwing her arms all the way over her head. She then backflips off the bench before turning towards the camera. She offered a thumbs-up with a smug smile on her face.** "YUYO will finally convince all you non-believers that she is magical. I will be sending men much larger than me in the air, over the top rope! YUYO will be showing off her mad skills. And then SCW will have no choice but to hire me back full-time! They will have no choice but to allow YUYO to start this magical revolution!"

"Taking Hold of the Flame is mine! Mark YUYO's words!"

[/END]

Yumi ran off the set and embraced Sakura. She never thought she missed cutting a promo. The words flowed freely and sparked something inside of her. This was her true calling. Screw school. That wasn't for her. Professional wrestling was where she belonged. Sakura nuzzled Yumi in the chest while Yumi squeezed with all her might. Yes, this was her new beginning. Taking Hold of the Flame was the first stop on her rise to greatness. She understood the battle royal was an uphill battle for everyone involved. There could only be one winner. But her confidence didn't waiver. She could pull off a miracle. She just knew she could! Yumi flashed an undeniable smile. This was her time.