**Elegance of Combat**

The Golden Nile Agency was a lot of things. Besides being Nubia’s agency and home, it was also a personalized restaurant. The premises were located on the first floor. In a way, it was the perfect greeting room for everyone.

Fans got to eat meals the kind of meals that only Combagals could eat. Visiting Combagals were able to keep their diet. Managers and rivals were given a good reception while they tried to get into a match with Nubia.

And then there was the time of celebration. It was a rare occasion since Nubia barely celebrated anything, but she was feeling festive tonight. With the amount of progress that she was making at Sonachi, the jackal Combagal thought that she deserved a little party, considering how hard the road ahead was going to be.

As a sign of good will, she invited the Cyclone Crushers to her restaurant to share stories about matches. All members of the team arrived on their best clothes. They wore dresses that showed their figures, some even put on make-up, and a few even brought gifts for Nubia.

Shun Gonfano personally led the entry, offering his hand to both Nubia and Eskel.

“Congratulations on starting your champion road, Nubia,” Shun Gonfano greeted her with an affable smile. He offered his hand to Nubia, who shook it, knowing that Nubia would only give handshakes when it was given as a social greeting.

“Just promise me that your Cyclone Crushers will behave, Mister Gonfano,” Nubia stared at Shun calmly, earning a laughter from the sumiguza.

“I can assure you that I already warned my Combagals about improper behavior,” Shun gestured at a couple of them to surround Bolouma to prevent her from getting drunk.

“It’s a pleasure to talk to you again, Shun,” Eskel offered his hand. “I am proud of you for being the manager of such a promising Combagal.”

“I am just a man whose job is to help a friend whose job made her famous,” Eskel chuckled in good nature. “The success comes from Nubia. I just arrange her matches.”

“It’s still a major achievement,” Shun patted Eskel’s shoulders, showing his junior his support. “It’s kind of lonely to be the only sumiguza who has champion Combagals as his clients.”

“Nubia is still not the Sonachi Champion yet,” Eskel pointed out as a fact rather than an insult to the jackal. “It’s still too early to celebrate. We have a hard road ahead of us.”

“Indeed,” Shun smiled at them and then turned at the girls. “Alright, girls. Nubia has reserved the first floor restaurant for all of us. Choose your tables. Be nice to the waiters. Don’t make a scene. And try to have a conversation.”

“Yes, Shun,” the Cyclone Crushers nodded their head. They all moved to their own different tables to talk with the waiters.

From the corner of her eyes, Nubia could see all of them. The Cyclone Crushers sat in couples on the tables. The only exceptions were Nyarai and Sephario, who sat at different tables. She also noticed that Freydar wasn’t present in the group. It was a bit disappointing since Nubia was interested in talking to the only Combagal who had the potential of defeating Donkizari. Regardless, she still considered talking with Sephario to be an honor. She just needed to find a chance to chat with her later tonight.

As everyone chose their tables, Nubia and Eskel sat alongside Shun, trying to talk about the past. Shun proved to be just as cordial as a guest as he was as a host by engaging the manager and the Combagal in an entertaining conversation.

“How is business going?” Shun asked. “Are you having trouble helping Nubia now that she’s got into the champion road? It’s very hard to keep up with promotions as you climb up the ranks. Even I had some issues when I had to promote Skully and Bolouma.”

“We have a steady income,” Eskel stated. “We’ve been building it up since we started furry fighting together.”

“Indeed,” Shun stated. “The last time that the two of us had a proper conversation was when the three of us were in lower positions in the ladder.”

Shun’s statement made Nubia and Eskel frown. The last time that the three of them spoke as equals was when Nubia and Eskel had a sumiguza for a boss. Shun was a rising star, so he didn’t have enough pull to help them out. Needless to say, the two of them considered those the darkest days of their lives.

“Please refrain from speaking about those times, Shun,” Eskel frowned disapprovingly at his senior. “Neither Nubia and I like to remember those days.”

“My apologies,” Shun shook his head. “My intention was not to open old wounds. That being said, I was pleasantly amused when I learned how Nubia and you took control over your lives.”

Nubia and Eskel shared awkward looks. To be honest, Nubia had to take control of her life. Her old boss wanted to have his way with her. If it wasn’t for Nubia learning martial arts to defend herself against perverts, she would have been defiled. And Eskel was quick to bet everything on Nubia the moment he saw the boss that he hated so much get the punishment that he deserved for so long.

*No matter how much time passes, I will never be able to forget that feeling of helplessness,* Nubia thought with a sigh. It didn’t matter if she beat up the man who tried to rape her or if she became the Sonachi Champion. The scars were still there and lingering. It was the reason why she got mad when someone touched her. The feelings of that night were going to haunt her for the rest of her life.

“My apologies,” Shun bowed his head. “I think I said something inappropriate.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Eskel extended a hand at his senior. “We just have some bad memories.”

“If you’d like, I can move to another table,” Shun offered. “I think that Nubia would do fine talking with her fellow Combagals.”

“But who will talk with me?” Nubia asked Shun.

“Just talk with Combagals who already went to the champion road,” Shun replied with a curt smile. He stood up and told Nyarai something.

“What do you think that he’s telling Nyarai?” Eskel asked, knowing that Nubia had a better ability of reading the room that he did.

“Maybe he’ll try to get her to sit with us,” Nubia guessed, trying to see how the conversation between Shun and Nyarai was going on.

The cheetah groaned in annoyance and then approached Sephario, telling her to go to her table. Due to her size, Sephario had to grab her own table and put it near Nyarai’s table so that she could talk with the cheetah. Meanwhile, Shun talked to Skully and Bolouma, having them sit on Nyarai’s table.

Once the four Combagals were sat together, Shun approached Nyarai.

“I arranged all of my champion Combagals to sit in one table so that you can talk to them about your champion road,” Shun pointed at an annoyed Nyarai surrounded by three of her teammates. “While you learn the way of the champion, I can talk with Eskel about what it means to manage a champion.”

“Sounds like a good compromise,” Nubia stood up and went to see the champions that Shun arranged for her to meet.

“I’ll try to learn as much as I can about managing from you,” Eskel promised as he remained seated on the table.

Nubia and him exchanged glances. With nothing left to do, the manager and Combagal separated to learn more about the perks and troubles that a championship had to offer.

*This is an opportunity that I cannot ignore,* Nubia thought as she moved across the restaurant. *I will become the Sonachi Champion soon, so I need to know how the world looks through the eyes of one.*

*If I am to help Nubia, then I will have to know how to manage her once she becomes the Sonachi Champion,* Eskel thought with resolution.

With their desire to become better motivating them, Eskel and Nubia prepared to have the most important conversations of the night.

As Nubia realized, being a champion didn’t change people that much. Maybe it was because she already met most of them back when they were champions or when they were about to become champions.

The first thing that she noticed about how championship life didn’t change anything was how Bolouma was getting drunk by drinking the bottles of alcohol that none of the girls were drinking.

*I can’t believe that she’s one of the Tendonchi Champions,* Nubia thought disapprovingly as the panda was drinking from Skully’s glass. The bat, even when wearing a blindfold, was staring angrily at Bolouma. It was unknown to Nubia if she did it because she was angry at Bolouma taking her drink or if she was mad at her partner for her irresponsibility.

Nyarai didn’t seem to be keen on interacting anyway. She sat with her legs crossed and focused more on her manicure. Though Nubia didn’t hate her, she and the cheetah didn’t have much of a positive relationship. There was a bit of respect for each other’s fighting prowess, but that was the closest thing to friendship that the two of them had.

The only one who seemed different was Sephario. It felt weird to sit alongside the formerly biggest Heel of Concatta. Nubia didn’t believe that Sephario caused Trilamity Day, but she did see the snake Combagal fight on the ring. Her fighting style was easily one of the most brutal ones that Nubia ever saw, using her large size to her advantage.

To Nubia’s surprise, Sephario was the most educated member of the group alongside Skully. Granted, she was a bit on the quiet type compared to Skully, but it was clear that she was respectful on the few times that she spoke.

“Took you long enough to start the champion road,” Nyarai’s toes twitched as she curled and uncurled her legs.

“I don’t like to rush things,” Nubia replied. “I like to take my time and see my surroundings. It’s better than taking fights without knowing how strong your opponents truly are.”

“Burned!” Bolouma shouted, heavily intoxicated.

“My apologies for my partner’s behavior,” Skully bowed her head to Nubia. “She gets a bit…improper when she drinks more than a few drinks.”

“More like she’s getting easier to intoxicate,” Nyarai snorted. “I think it took her just a couple of drinks to get drunk.”

“I’ll get her some water,” Skully stood up and led Bolouma to the bathroom.

“I feel bad for Skully for being partnered with that drunk,” Nyarai rolled her eyes.

“She’s a nice girl when she’s not drunk,” Sephario remarked. “She works hard just like you do and she’s a good fighter in sparring matches.”

“Can’t believe a Combagal of your caliber is praising Bolouma,” Nyarai rolled her eyes at Sephario for complimenting Bolouma in spite of her drunken antics.

“I may be a new member, but I am still the oldest Combagal here,” Sephario reminded Nyarai with a glare. “I believe that I know about the worth of a Combagal when I see them in action.”

“Sephario is right, Nyarai,” Skully arrived after having Bolouma drink water from the water fountain. The panda was still drunk, but the bat Combagal was hopeful that getting water on her system would get rid of the intoxication or diminish it enough to prevent the panda from making a fool of herself. “Not everybody is perfect. You do give yourself a bad reputation with your brutality.”

“Excuse me?” Nyarai stomped a foot angrily, finally uncrossing her legs and keeping them straight.

“In contrast, Nubia already has the attitude of a champion,” Skully pointed at the jackal, who was surprised at the compliment. “You are professional, you care about having a positive image, and you always strive to become better.”

“That’s just my personality,” Nubia stared at Skully, partially moved by the compliment from one of the Tendonchi Champions. “But there has to be a change when you transition from the average Combagal to a champion of the district.”

“The difference is the weight on your shoulders,” Sephario explained. “Once you proved that you are the strongest Combagal of a district, you feel a great expectation. You have to be strong to keep the title and honor everyone who fought you or saw you fight. At least that’s what it feels to be a champion to me.”

“That’s nothing but a bunch of sentimentality,” Nyarai snorted. “To me, being a champion is proving that you are the strongest Combagal around and remaining there until you get something better.”

Nubia observed silently as Skully, Nyarai, and Sephario started a conversation about the responsibilities and lifestyle of a champion. Nubia barely said anything other than a few comments as she wanted to focus on the three Combagals. The one who got her attention was Sephario.

The Kalandesian Combagal was easily the most awarded Combagal. She won many belts back when she was active and she even qualified for the Queens of Fighters Tournament, with her facing Donkizari in the finals. If there was one person among the Cyclone Crushers who could tell Nubia how to be a champion, it was Sephario.

“Are you feeling okay, Sephario?” Nubia asked once she felt the conversation was no longer going anywhere.

“I am feeling fine,” Sephario replied. “Thank you for your interest.”

“It was mainly curiosity,” Nubia admitted. “You barely said anything since you arrived here, so watching you converse caught my interest. You are a lot more honorable and mature than I expected.”

“I still find it hard to not be hated,” Sephario sighed. “I admit that being adored for the first time in years feels nice. But after two years of being blamed by Trilamity Day, it feels odd to have people speak to me with adoration in their eyes rather than fear and hatred.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I never believed that claim that you caused Trilamity Day in the first place,” Nubia comforted her. “It seems counterintuitive to destroy the place where you work, even more so to admit your guilt.”

“It was a publicity stunt to provide Concatta with catharsis,” Sephario admitted, looking depressed as she remembered how much pain she and her agency endured back then. “I never expected the citizens to take it so badly or treat my words as if they were the truth.”

“You don’t have to feel bad, Sephario,” Skully raised her head up to the enormous snake Combagal who was big enough for a whole table. “You are a Cyclone Crusher now. And we will treat you with the respect that you deserve.”

“Thanks,” Sephario smiled genuinely, appreciating the respect that Skully was providing her. “I appreciate your kindness. After years of being hated, this is a refreshing change of pace for me.”

“I won’t lie,” Nyarai declared. “I never expected Freydar to hire a member of the Donkizari Generation. As much as I wanted Cookie and her Combagals to leave Botaun, even I was surprised at how far Freydar went to get rid of them.”

“I was actually surprised as well,” Sephario admitted. “I actually looked up to Freydar before Trilamity Day happened. I was actually looking forward to facing her. It’s a shame that her career got cut short. I am sure that she could have defeated me, Scalitor, and Donkizari if things had not gone bad for her.”

The Combagals at the table dedicated a moment of silence for Freydar. Though she was alive, it was clear that none of them were ever going to see her fight in the ring again. The thought itself was depressing. A talent like hers deserved to show up more often.

“Are there any Combagals from the current generation that impress you?” Nubia asked, wanting to end the solemnity of the moment to focus on something more optimistic.

“I can say that the current generation does have its charm,” Sephario eyed the Combagals of the opposite table. “It’s a pleasure to see Combagals like you and the Cyclone Crushers who strive to move up the ranks and going for the gold.”

“Lots of Combagals are coming into furry fighting recently,” Skully observed. “They are making a lot of progress in the span of a year.”

“Tell me about it,” Nyarai rolled her eyes. “I became the Masato Champion at my debut match.”

“You can’t forget the Doable Dolls becoming the Ankyono Champions in a year,” Skully reminded her.

“Team Starkiller made a lot of progress in a few months,” Nubia remarked. “They did defeat Nyarai and gave Sephario a good fight.”

The mention of her defeat made Nyarai snort, crossing her arms and turning her face away from the conversation. For her part, Sephario spoke about the fight that she had with Muko and Kalita.

“It’s a shame that Bolouma and I didn’t face them,” Skully lamented. “With the skills that they had, they could have easily completed the Tendonchi Challenges and faced us right away.”

“Speaking of the new generation, I have a question to ask Sephario,” Nubia stared at the snake Combagal. A part of her wondered if this was a good question to ask, but she already voiced her intention to question her.

“What is it that you want to ask me about the new generation?” Sephario asked politely.

“What do you think about Lugale?” Nubia asked. “I know that you weren’t present at the Fury in Concatta match, but I want to know what do you think of the actions of the first Kalandesian Combagal to show up in Concatta since your return.”

The question made everyone at the table silent. Nubia and Skully stared at Sephario, trying to see what the giant Combagal had to say regarding that event. It was no secret that the Fury in Concatta was one of the most brutal fights of the year with the way that Lugale brutalized Snuggly and Sleepy to win the match. If it weren’t for Leona Manehart getting in the way, the match would have been a disaster for everyone.

“I knew this question was going to come my way sooner or later,” Sephario sighed, her tone of voice made it clear that she didn’t want to talk about it, but it was overshadowed by the responsibility of answering as a Kalandesian. “I don’t condemn Lugale’s actions. It’s clear that she’s motivated by her respect for me. She hates what Concatta did to me and our fellow Kalandesian Combagals.”

“But aren’t you worried about the anger and hatred that she used to fight?” Skully questioned her. “She’s already the Ganjia Champion. And all of the Combagals that she defeated will most likely never step in the ring again.”

“I know,” Sephario sounded disappointed of Lugale for her actions. “I am worried about her. I am afraid that Lugale will destroy her reputation and make things worse for the citizens of Kalandesia. The people of Concatta are easily malleable. They’ll find and use any excuse they have to hate Kalandesia to make their continent feel like it’s the best place in the world.”

“Nationalism is a problem of Concatta,” Nyarai spat angrily. “To them, anything born outside of the seven city-states doesn’t merit any respect. It’s the main reason why Wild discrimination exists despite us being born in the same continent as the city folk.”

“Indeed,” Sephario agreed with Nyaria, surprising the cheetah. “I hope to someday talk to Lugale about her path. There is a better way to honor Kalandesia without declaring war on Concatta.”

“That’s assuming if one of the other Combagals gets to her first,” Nyarai reminded Sephario. “With the way she’s going to the Queens of Fighters Tournament, I can assure you that there will be many city-states champions who want a piece of her.”

“That shall be a conversation for a different occasion,” Nubia declared, wanting to change the topic to something more festive. “We shall focus on new horizons. In a few months, the New Year will arrive.”

“It will be interesting to see how things will be in 1998,” Skully voiced her opinion. “A lot of things can happen in a year, especially in furry fighting.”

“I want us to look forward to years ahead,” Nubia smiled at the bat. “I don’t want to settle for 1998. I want to settle for the year 2000.”

“I can assure you that furry fighting will go hard that year,” Sephario pointed out with a smile. “From 1999 to 2001, the fights will be much more intense.”

“I intend to become the Continental Champion by the years 2000,” Nyarai proposed with a savage grin.

“You will have a lot of competition for that rank,” Skully reminded her. “And that’s not counting that you will have to face Donkizari once you defeat the competition.”

“The path to greatness is paved by the number of enemies that you defeat,” Nyarai took a sip of wine, enjoying the flavor on her lips.

“That is the nature of a combat sport,” Nubia raised her glass of wine in the air, offering it to her fellow Combagals. “A toast for the New Millennium.”

“For the New Millennium,” the Combagals bumped their glasses of wine on Nubia.

With the toast made, Nubia finished her drink and then started a conversation with the three Combagals in front of her.

It had been an hour since the Combagals toasted to the New Millennium. By that point, Bolouma returned to the table. The panda had been in a cycle of drinking as much water as she possibly could and then going to the bathroom. It was a dirty process to consider, much less a conversation topic, but it was a good strategy to recover sobriety.

“How are you feeling, Bolouma?” Skully asked Bolouma.

“I am feeling…nice,” Bolouma admitted.

The panda’s face was a bit flushed, but she wasn’t bumbling around like she normally did when she was drunk. The flushed cheeks were not that evident on her red fur, making it seem like she was wearing make-up. And her diction was coherent, albeit slow.

Bolouma heard about the toast and was offended at not being included. Because of that, the champion Combagals and Nubia had to make another toast to the New Millennium with Bolouma. The difference was that Skully mixed water with Bolouma’s wine to prevent her from relapsing into drunkenness.

As Nubia conversed with the champions, she noticed the entrance of the restaurant at the corner of her eye. Though the restaurant was closed down and reserved for her and the Cyclone Crushers, she noticed that there was a group of people at the entrance.

The first thing that she noticed was an elderly peacock dressed in traditional robes. He was wearing a blue yukata that complemented his green feathers. He walked around in geta sandals to increase his size.

Flanking him were two clouded leopards dressed in black suits, shoes, and glasses that acted as his bodyguards based on their stances and muscular frames. The duo moved in harmony with their boss, making sure that he was within their field of protection. Nubia could see that they were professional fighters, even feeling that they were watching her from behind their sunglasses as she was watching them too.

Behind them was a female liaison. She was a secretary bird who wore a white shirt and a black skirt. Her long legs walked with grace and her talons were perfectly pedicured. She walked with a calm and professional posture. Nubia felt like she was a fighter by the way her legs moved. She could easily imagine the secretary bird throwing powerful front kicks and axe kicks to anyone who got in her way.

*Who are these people?* Nubia wondered. *I am sure that I made my bodyguards lock the doors. Did they beat up my security or somehow convinced them to open the doors?*

It had to be the first choice, Nubia tasked security to call her if they ever faced an opponent that she couldn’t beat. She even promised not to fire them since they were supposed to be the first line of defense on Golden Nile.

That left the second choice. Security refused to let anyone pass without Nubia’s permission. The only exception were truly dangerous people who shouldn’t be antagonized as Nubia addressed. As a former lady of a sumiguza, Nubia knew not to antagonize the criminals needlessly or she was going to have a dangerous enemy for life.

*They have to be sumiguza,* Nubia thought with dread. *But what are they doing here? I cut ties with the sumiguza after I left my old job. The only one that I know is Shun.*

Nubia’s long ears twitched as she heard the peacock talk. Though she had incredible vision thanks to her Goddess Eyes, her hearing was still good enough to hear conversations across the room.

“This woman named Nubia is someone worth admiring, my dear Aoi” the old peacock pointed out as she watched him admire the architecture of the restaurant. “She hasn’t hit thirty yet and she has achieved all of this. It can make an old bird like me admire the joys and passions of youth.”

“She is indeed remarkable, sir,” Aoi pointed out from behind the bodyguards. “And I think that I see her sitting with the Masato Champion, the Tendonchi Champions, and the Kalandesian Threat.”

“Looks like it will be an interesting conversation,” the old peacock noticed. “I better go introduce myself. Need to make a decent impression.”

*He’s coming my way,* Nubia thought nervously. *I have to make a decent impression. I have to receive him, but I also need to let him know that he cannot barge in unannounced. But what words should I use?*

“Looks like we’re having guests,” Skully pointed out as her ears twitched. “Did you invite them Nubia?”

“No,” Nubia shook her head. “But the fact that they were able to enter my private party without invitation means that they have strong connections. I know because I made the security protocol to keep my agency safe.”

“From the look of his clothes and the presence of a bodyguard and secretary, I can tell that he’s also a sumiguza like Shun and Eskel,” Sephario pointed out. “We have to be on our best behavior.”

“Just be sure not to kick him, Nyarai,” Skully warned the cheetah with a stern expression. “The last thing that we need is to have a bunch of sumiguza at our doorstep because you let your paw prints all over their boss’ face.”

“I’m not dumb enough to hit a sumiguza,” Nyarai glared at Skully. “And you are one to talk. You are the one with a drunken partner right now. Try to keep Bolouma away from him if you don’t want any issues.”

“I can assure you that Bolouma is safely under my supervision,” Skully turned around to grab Bolouma’s shoulder.

Her arm felt nothing. Her ears didn’t hear Bolouma’s breathing. The panda was away from her. She probably left to get more alcohol.

“Hey!” Bolouma’s slurred voice echoed across the restaurant. “Who invited this old chicken here?”

Nubia felt her blood freeze when she noticed that Bolouma was talking to the peacock sumiguza. From the dark blush on her cheeks, Nubia realized that Bolouma was drinking again while the group was distracted. The panda somehow managed to slip by Skully and drink enough beverages to intoxicate herself again.

“Damn it, Bolouma,” Skully slapped a palm against her face.

The clouded leopards approached Bolouma, but the peacock extended his arms to them to prevent them from touching the panda.

“There’s no good image to hurt a young lady who had too much to drink,” the peacock lectured his bodyguards.

“Are you lost, sir?” Bolouma asked. “I can take you to a table. My name’s Bolouma. And I am one of the Tendonchi Champions.”

“BOLOUMA!”

The sudden shout caught everyone by surprise. The person who spoke wasn’t Skully. It was Shun, who was running alongside Eskel to approach the panda and the peacock.

“Shun and Eskel,” the peacock pointed out as both cats arrived to the scene. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you two.”

“My apologies for my Combagal’s behavior,” Shun bowed his head in apology, a gesture that Bolouma imitated even if she didn’t understand what was happening right now.

“What brings you here, Mr. Shion?” Eskel asked as he also bowed his head.

“I’d like a conversation with you, Eskel,” the peacock explained. “Sorry for breaking in like this uninvited. I am sure that this Combagal wouldn’t have been so intoxicated if she knew who I was and why I was coming here.”

“I’ll lecture her after this is done,” Shun promised as he drove Bolouma to the table.

“I am sorry for not keeping track of her,” Skully bowed to Shun.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Shun had Skully grab Bolouma. “I feel like I should have predicted that this was going to happen. He always had a thing for crashing parties.”

“Who is that peacock?” Nubia asked respectfully. “Is he a member of the sumiguza?”

“A high-ranking one,” Shun pointed at the table that he and Eskel shared. “I suggest you sit on the table with Eskel. Your manager will introduce you to him.”

“Very well,” Nubia stood up from the table and bowed to the champion Combagals. “I appreciate all of the advice that you gave me about being a champion.”

“I wish you good luck talking to him,” Sephario nodded at Nubia.

“Just give him a fake smile and everything will be okay,” Nyarai used her fingers to put on a fake smile.

“My apologies for the damage that my partner may have caused,” Skully looked regretful even with a band covering her eyes. “I shall scold her for her irresponsibility as soon as this party ends.”

“It’s okay,” Nubia sighed. Though annoyed at Bolouma for getting drunk even before the sumiguza appeared, Nubia also blamed herself for not taking into account the panda’s tendency to get drunk despite already knowing her. “As a host, I should have predicted this event was going to happen.”

“Don’t be so…hard on yourself,” Bolouma slurred. “Lots of surprises happen at a party.”

“Get her out of here,” Shun groaned at Skully in frustration.

“I shall, Shun,” Skully dragged Bolouma out of the restaurant. A waiter offered to package the meals that she and Bolouma ordered, causing Skully to take a pause so that she could carry the packets on one arm while she dragged Bolouma away with the other.

“Follow me,” Shun instructed Nubia. “And make sure to not antagonize him. He could easily destroy your agency if he felt like it.”

The information only made Nubia feel more tense. Everything that she worked so hard for build in these last few years could be taken away by that old peacock. She was sweating from the stress. She had to take breathing exercises with each step that she took.

*I have to calm down,* Nubia thought to herself. *He’s not like my old boss. If I humiliate him, he won’t run away. He will ask for compensation. I have to fight him like a civilized woman by using words against him. A sumiguza relies on his image, so I have to use that image to ensure that he won’t hurt me.*

Upon arriving to the table, Eskel stood up and moved the chair so that Nubia and Shun could sit. Nubia threw Eskel a grateful look while Shun nodded approvingly. With Nubia sitting, she was facing the peacock who entered her party by surprise.

“My apologies for crashing your party,” the peacock bowed his head at Nubia. “I had some circumstances that required me to speak with you immediately.”

“I am no expert at sumiguza despite my association with them,” Nubia admitted to sound demure and humble in spite of her intelligence. “However, I can recognize that you are a sumiguza of high caliber if Shun and Eskel are feeling pressured to accommodate you.”

“You are astute,” the peacock laughed in good nature. “My name is Yamato Shion. I am the head of the Shion Clan, one of the biggest sumiguza organizations in Concatta.”

“What brings you here?” Nubia asked.

“I’d rather keep this a private conversation,” Yamato stared at Shun. “Can you get your Combagals to leave here for a while?”

“I can do that,” Shun stood up. “Besides, they have to train for their next matches.”

It was a lie based on the way he spoke. Shun was always calmed, but his words felt slightly slower than before. Shun clapped his hands, earning the attention of the Cyclone Crushers.

“Attention, girls!” Shun called out. “It has been a good celebration, but we need to cut things short. I got a call from Freydar telling me that you need to sleep early. You will have a harder training tomorrow morning.”

The Cyclone Crushers exchanged glances. They could tell that Shun wasn’t being sincere with them, but they still obeyed their manager.

“Thank you for the party,” Jowdie smiled at Nubia. “I hope that we can continue at Club Nighthawk if you ever need to cheer up.”

“I shall consider the invitation,” Nubia promised.

Jowdie gently grabbed Shun by the shoulders and led him away of the table.

With the Cyclone Crushers gone, it was just Nubia and Eskel facing against Yamato and his entourage. The air felt heavy for the Combagal and her manager as they faced the highest-ranking sumiguza that they ever met.

“Quite an ambitious fella,” Yamato remarked as he stared at the door where Shun left with respect. “I got my position by inheriting it, but Shun will reach my rank through hard work and intelligence. He’s one of the underdogs that you have to respect for their tenacity.”

“He’s my senior,” Eskel responded proudly. “He helped me and Nubia when we started furry fighting together.”

“May I have some tea?” Yamato asked a waiter who Eskel gestured to stand near him. “I don’t like to have important conversations without tea.”

“Yes, sir,” the waiter nervously took Yamato’s order and went to get a cup of tea.

“What brings you to Golden Nile, Mr. Shion?” Eskel started the conversation.

“The two of you are interesting to me,” Yamato admitted as he got his cup of tea. “I’ve been putting an eye on you since I heard that a lady beat up one of our sumiguza leaders and went on to become a Combagal.”

Both Eskel and Nubia paled when Yamato mentioned how their career started. Though Nubia did what she could to survive, it didn’t change the fact that she beat up a sumiguza, essentially insulting the whole organization with her defiance. Her becoming a Combagal was rubbing her victory all over the face of the organization. Their first days were filled with fear of possible repercussions, but they got over it with Shun’s support. Now, it appeared as if they were going to get punished.

“He left me no choice,” Nubia spoke defensively. “I did everything that he asked me to do. I dressed beautifully. I stood by his side as a symbol of power. But…his last order…I couldn’t put up with it. I was already used to be treated as a thing, but my womanhood was something that I could not throw away.”

“I am aware,” Yamato frowned. “Your former boss went to demand compensation for the humiliation that you bestowed upon him. Needless to say, he only got further punishment for his trouble.”

“What?” Nubia asked, surprised that she didn’t get punished despite her defiance.

“Your boss was a disgrace for a sumiguza,” Yamato muttered with disgust as he took a sip of tea. “We are organized crime. We are supposed to keep the streets clean by using crime as a way to control the criminal underground. If we succumb to our base desires, then we are no better than petty criminals.”

“Is that why you never bothered to punish me all these years?” Nubia asked.

“Well, there was an uproar on the sumiguza regarding your fortune and the stunt that you pulled,” Yamato groaned as he remembered the discussion on whether to punish Nubia or letting her get away. “Shun believed that supporting you will benefit the sumiguza as a whole, especially since Eskel over here could be your manager.”

“He actually did that?” Eskel asked, surprised at Shun facing a large amount of sumiguza higher-ups to stick up for him and Nubia.

“Personally, I supported Shun,” Yamato admitted. “I am old and will pass away soon. I didn’t like the idea of my daughter being surrounded by a rapist. If anything, you fighting back against him gave me a good reason to get rid of him.”

“Thanks,” Nubia said, unsure of why she was thanking him. It was hard to tell between sparing her from the wrath of the sumiguza or getting rid of the pervert who tried to rape her so that he wouldn’t get revenge on her. Despite her confusion, that simple word of gratitude escaped her lips.

“You have no reason to thank me,” Yamato shook his feathered hand at her. “This matter was settled long ago. If anything, you should aim your gratitude at yourself. You displayed great courage and strength to protect your virtue. As an old-school sumiguza, I honor these traits. It’s the main reason why I was one of the many who refused to seek retribution against you.”

Nubia sighed in relief. This was the most stressful conversation that she ever had in her entire life. For a few minutes, she didn’t feel like the strong Combagal that she was today but the scared young lady that she used to be back then.

*Deep breaths,* Nubia thought. *I am no longer the weak woman who needed to use her wiles to make a living. I am a strong woman. I will never feel like that again.*

Both Eskel and Yamato noticed how tense Nubia was. They respectfully waited until the jackal was feeling emotionally better before they continued the conversation. The conversation resumed once Nubia spoke again.

“Why are you here if you are not going to pursue retribution for my actions?” Nubia spoke in her regal style of talking, albeit a bit more careful and submissive.

“I didn’t come here to talk about your past with the sumiguza,” Yamato finished his tea to stare at Nubia. “I came here on behalf of my daughter, who wants to meet you at our estate to discuss your upcoming match.”

“Is she a fan of mine?” Nubia asked.

“You can say so,” Yamato chuckled. “She’s been reviewing your matches since the moment that you decided to pursue Sonachi. But I think that she already had videos of you from before your fight Kayru.”

Nubia stared at him with confusion. Why would his daughter want to meet her to talk about her upcoming match? It wasn’t like she could help Nubia to prepare for the next match simply from watching videos.

No. There was something else. She was already the number three contender for the Sonachi Championship. She had a decent amount of Pop to merit a fight with the number two contender. Despite her high ranking, she never got a letter of challenge from the Combagal above her and Eskel wasn’t able to find her either. It was then that she came up with a conclusion.

*Could it be that the number two contender of Sonachi is Mr. Shion’s daughter?* Nubia asked herself. *It’s a bit far-fetched. This is just a theory. I need to verify it first.*

“Is your daughter a fan of furry fighting or an aspiring Combagal?” Nubia asked curtly, trying not to pry.

The question earned a chuckle from Yamato. And not just him. His bodyguards and his secretary Aoi were also chuckling. Somehow, that laughter made it clear that her question was answered.

“My daughter is more than an aspiring Combagal,” Yamato laughed. “Her name is Ran Shion. And she’s the number two contender of Sonachi.”

“You are the manager of the next contender, Mr. Shion?” Eskel asked.

“Not really,” Yamato shook his head. “I apologize for this non-prompt response, but the agency of my daughter is…unconventional. My liaison Aoi acts as my daughter’s onscreen manager.”

“I am her manager, trainer, and bodyguard should these clouded leopards fall in battle,” Aoi addressed Nubia with a nod. “My client wants to meet you tomorrow. She admires your ascent across the Sonachi ranks ever since she saw your fight with Kayru.”

Nubia and Eskel exchanged glances. It was intimidating to have a high-ranking sumiguza like Yamato Shion invite them at his manor. However, if Nubia was going to become the Sonachi Champion, she needed to defeat Ran in a match.

“I would like to meet your daughter,” Nubia addressed Yamato with a polite smile. “And I look forward to facing her on the ring.”

“Excellent,” Yamato stood up from his chair. “Thank you for your hospitality. I appreciate the welcome that you gave me despite barging in uninvited.”

“Thanks for coming all the way here to have this contender match,” Nubia stood up and offered her hand for him to shake.

“My pleasure,” Yamato beamed at Nubia. “I will arrange for a limousine to take you to my family’s private estate.”

“Thanks,” Nubia bowed her head and watched as Yamato and his entourage left the restaurant.

Once the sumiguza left, Nubia collapsed on her chair.

“That was intense,” Nubia acknowledged.

“Tell me about it,” Eskel groaned.

Nubia gestured at the waiter.

“Tell the staff that the party is over,” Nubia instructed him. “Thank them for the cooking and that they should take the day off.”

The waiter nodded his head and left. For her part, Nubia stood up from her chair and made her way to the fourth floor. The jackal didn’t bother to change. She just lied down on the bed and fell asleep.

The following day, Nubia woke up and got dressed. Since she was visiting a sumiguza estate, she made sure to put on a golden kimono over a basic Combagal costume made up of a white leotard that let her arms and legs bare. That way, she could get rid of the kimono and be free to fight if the situation turned violent.

“You look beautiful,” Eskel remarked on the first floor.

Just like his Combagal, Eskel was also wearing traditional clothes. In his case, he wore a blue, green, and pink yukata that resembled cherry blossoms in the field.

“And you look fancy,” Nubia chuckled.

As the two left Golden Nile, they saw a limousine waiting for them. The jackal entered the vehicle and closed her eyes in meditation. Meanwhile, Eskel sat next to her.

“I heard that the estate is far,” Nubia told Eskel. “You don’t mind if I meditate a bit?”

“Sure,” Eskel told her. “But try not to fall asleep.”  
 “I won’t,” Nubia sounded annoyed as she closed her eyes and resumed her meditation.

It was hard to not fall asleep when clearing her mind as she tried to visualize how her encounter with Ran Shion was going to be.

She spent an hour meditating until she was awoken by the driver.

“We arrived to the Shion Clan Compound,” the driver told Nubia and Eskel. “Let me open the door for the two of you.”

The door was opened and Nubia got out after Eskel did. The jackal was amazed with the living conditions of the Shion Clan. The entire setting looked like a mixture of a mansion and a castle made to fit for an influential family. Surrounding the building was a cherry blossom orchard that added a natural beauty to the estate.

“I can’t believe that I am at the Shion Clan Compound,” Eskel remarked. “I was never high-ranking enough among the sumiguza to earn a visit here. It’s more beautiful than what I imagined.”

“You are the manager of a soon-to-be champion,” Nubia winked at him. “I think that’s a good substitute for a high rank among the sumiguza.”

“Try to be careful,” Eskel frowned with worry. “They are very traditional. You need to watch how you act around them.”

“I have experience dealing with sumiguza,” Nubia reminded him of their past. “Now, I want you to wait at the limo. Use the portable television to watch a show and relax while I take care of my meeting with Ran.”

Eskel wanted to protest, but Nubia’s gentle smile deterred him from doing so. It was the rarest smile that Nubia gave him. It was reserved for those close to her. The smile told him that everything was going to be okay. He just needed to trust her.

The cat sighed and returned to the limousine, closing the door to wait for his Combagal to return to him. With Eskel out of the way, Nubia adopted her calm and professional expression.

“Lead me to where Ran Shion is, please,” Nubia told the driver.

“Follow me, ma’am,” the driver gestured at Nubia to follow him.

The two walked slowly. For the driver, it was one of the rules of the Shion Clan Compound. Running was not allowed since it was seen as action of attacking and retreating in the clan’s most sacred haven. The walk allowed Nubia to appreciate the architecture of the place.

*Such a wonderful place,* Nubia remarked. *Maybe I should make plans about my retirement home once I leave furry fighting. I could use a place free from the city to live in peace for the rest of my days.*

The best part of the walk was the tour across the orchard. It was filled with cherry blossom trees. And next to them were a bunch of flowers. The grass was neatly trimmed to form a road on which Nubia and the driver walked. That way, they ensured that none of the flowers were going to be trampled.

*This must be the work of a gardener,* Nubia thought with awe as she admired the natural road. *I am sure that he must slave himself all day to make such a beautiful scenery. I feel like he must earn millions of Moni as compensation for this work.*

“We have arrived,” the driver pointed at a field of flowers that was circular. On all four directions, there were trimmed roads of grass that lead to a little kiosk at the center of the garden.

Ran Shion was an elegant and attractive peacock woman. She had snow white feathers with some light blue feathers running down her body, ending with indigo highlights and tips on her feathered fingers. She had light blue eyes that made Nubia think that she was staring at the sky. Her hair was styled in a loose ponytail with parted bangs, making her resemble a samurai warrior.

She was dressed in a white and red silk kimono. She had a serene expression as she was practicing tai-chi among the trees. Nubia could tell that it was tai-chi from the way she moved her hands and waist in a pushing and pulling movements. Her movements were relaxed, using wings, talons, waist, hips, shoulders, and knees to make the movements.

“Lady Ran,” the driver announced. “I have brought Lady Nubia here. I hope that you have a pleasant conversation with her.”

“Thanks for your service,” Ran stopped her tai-chi and gave the driver a curt smile. “You may leave now.”

“Thank you, Lady Ran,” the driver bowed to the peacock woman and left.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Ran smiled at Nubia. “My name is Ran Shion. I am the first-born daughter of Yamato Shion.”

“So you will inherit the Shion Clan once your father passes away?” Nubia asked.

“It was supposed to be my destiny,” Ran approached Nubia. “But I didn’t want to be dependent on my father’s legacy. And I don’t like how the sumiguza organization operates in Concatta.”

“Is that why you decided to become a Combagal despite living in a life of luxury?” Nubia asked, finding a contrast in the peacock.

Ran was a woman who had everything since birth, but she wanted to prove her worth and independence by earning a fortune through her own merit. Nubia was alone and sold herself to a sumiguza pervert for the chance of living in luxury, ultimately deciding to achieve riches by her own hand.

“Yes,” Ran nodded her head. “Despite my lineage and social position, I have no desire to cause trouble in Concatta by controlling crime. I intend to forge my own legacy by becoming a champion Combagal. I prefer to let managing the Shion Clan to my sisters.”

“That’s admirable,” Nubia stated in amazement. The old Nubia would have enjoyed her position as a sumiguza heir as much as she could. But Ran, who had everything a woman could do, was taking the hard road to achieve her own happiness.

“I heard a lot about you a while ago,” Ran smiled approvingly. “You worked as a trophy woman for one of our subsidiaries until he tried to rape you. And then you defended yourself with wushu.”

“I did,” Nubia nodded her head. “I heard that your father protected me from the wrath of the sumiguza and had him executed. Thank you for ensuring my safety.”

“Believe it or not, your actions motivated me to keep furry fighting,” Ran smiled at Nubia. “As a young woman, my father had me be trained by martial artists from a monastery in martial arts. They taught me Cai Li Fo and Choy Gar to defend myself, but I didn’t like to be limited to sparring matches.” Ran stared thoughtfully to the sky, as if she was thinking of flying despite her species not being gifted with the ability to travel in the sky. “I became a Combagal to use my skills, but the cheers of my fans made me want to stay. It wasn’t until I heard about your story that I became truly motivated to abandon the family business in favor of furry fighting.”

“I was only surviving,” Nubia explained, staring at the side to explain how she started her career in furry fighting. “I had nothing but my good lucks and my ability to read body movement to read the minds of others. I only got into wushu in case my boss didn’t have enough influence to protect me from criminals. I never expected to use my skills on him, but I don’t regret it one bit.” Nubia closed her fists and stared at Ran with determination. “That night is what shaped me to be the woman that I am today.”

“Do some tai-chi with me,” Ran told Nubia.

“I will,” Nubia nodded.

The peacock and the jackal stood side by side. They were moving with their feet angled with bent knees. One foot was straight and the other pointed at 45 degrees. They were taking bow steps to warm up.

“You and I are kindred spirits, Nubia,” Ran told the jackal as they were making laps across the kiosk. “Though we both have ties to the sumiguza, we both seek to carve our own legacies.”

“I know,” Nubia smiled at Ran with the same affection that she showed Eskel as the two of them were making pushing and pulling motions. “I admire the way that you go so far to make a life for yourself on your own merits. Most people would have settled with the family business, but not you.”

“I see that my words reached you,” Ran smiled as she stood on one leg and had the other raised and chambered in a rooster stance.

“They did,” Nubia stood with a slight bent leg while the other was slightly stretched until her foot rested on the tip of her toes to make an empty stance. “But I don’t believe that you called me here for small talk. Can you tell me what you want to talk to me about?”

“It is a very important conversation,” Ran sighed as she stopped the tai-chi and gestured Nubia to follow her across the orchard. “As the number two contender in Evelyn’s reign, the contender above me and I were tasked with halting your progress to the Sonachi Championship.”

“You mean Evelyn Nydelig?” Nubia asked as she followed Ran. “I heard about her. She’s the Sonachi Champion, right? Are you and the other contender trying to stop me to protect her?”

“Yes,” Ran nodded her head. “But make no mistake. I don’t do this out of respect for her. I do this out of duty as she was the first Combagal to ever defeat me.”

“A contender’s duty is to prevent the challenger from rising up the ranks,” Nubia elaborated. “But I don’t understand what this has to do with Evelyn.”

“Let’s just say that Evelyn has a type of pull that no champion should have,” Ran spoke calmly, but there was seething anger in her voice. “You have my unconditional support in your champion road, Nubia. But my duty requires me to fulfill my obligation.”

“I understand,” Nubia nodded her head. “When do you want the match to take place?”

“In two days,” Ran remarked. “I even had the driver give you copies of my latest matches. Since I already researched you, it’s fair that you research me.”

“It’s a bit too soon,” Nubia remarked.

“Neither of us needs the time,” Ran smiled at the jackal. “If it were up to us, we’d have our match right here and now. Alas, our professional duties require us to make the match as publicly as we can.”

“I understand,” Nubia bowed at the peacock, who bowed back to her.

Ran returned to her training while Nubia returned to the limousine, where she found Eskel watching a samurai movie.

“How did it go?” Eskel asked, quickly shifting his attention to Nubia.

“Match is in two days,” Nubia summarized. “She already has the driver with videos of her fight. And she’s a lady with integrity.”

“That’s our Lady Ran for you,” the driver smiled as he handed Eskel some videos for them to watch at their agency. “Let me take you both to a bistro to make up for your breakfast.”

Feeling hungry after their travel, the jackal and the cat shrugged their shoulders and let the driver take them to the bistro.

For the next two days, Nubia spent her time training in her penthouse at the fourth floor of Golden Nile. Since Aoi made sure to fill the paperwork for Eskel, the cat had a lot of free time to watch the fight with Nubia.

“I think that whoever trained Ran is from the same temple where you learned Wushu, Nubia,” Eskel remarked as he saw Ran grabbing the arm of a Combagal by the wrist with one hand and then pressed the elbow with the other arm. Ran followed her attack doing a twisting motion with her waist, driving the rival to the ground as she painfully applied pressure to her arm.

“That’s her Cai Li Fo,” Nubia stated. “It’s a combination of Northern and Southern martial arts for striking, grappling, and joint locking. Hard to defend against and one of the best fighting styles to deal with multiple enemies at once.”

“What about her Choy Gar?” Eskel asked.

“That’s there,” Nubia pointed at another match happening on a split screen. “Look at the low stance that she uses to balance herself so that she can strike with her arms.”

“From the research that I got, her fighting style is more suited to fight against numerous enemies and it also applies when fighting in crowded spaces,” Eskel remarked as he pointed out an analysis that he wrote on his laptop.

“I have to be extremely cautious,” Nubia crossed her legs and studied all of the matches of Ran that she could see with her Goddess Eyes. “This will be my first time fighting against a fellow martial artist from the same temple. She may be my equal or better, so I need to use every advantage that I can find.”

“You should be careful of her tail,” Eskel pointed out at the peacock opening and closing her tail. “The blue and indigo hues of her tail provide a distraction since they resemble an aurora in the sky. However, she can also use it as a fight limb for striking.”

“It’s the perfect counter for my Goddess Eyes,” Nubia pointed out, noticing that she got momentarily distracted by the colors of the tail. “I need to find a way to ignore my eye reflexes to prevent myself from being distracted.”

Nubia spent the next two days. She restarted her martial arts training from the start so as to prepare herself for her duel against Ran. And then she started to practice with her Goddess Eyes by having her watch high-moving objects, learning to focus on which objects to see and which to ignore.

After the two days passed, Nubia and Eskel drove their way to Sonachi. They made sure to bring along Nubia’s assistants to prepare for the entrance. Once she got dressed and met with Eskel at the hallway, Nubia sat on top of an elevated chair.

“Onward, my servants!” Nubia pointed at the ring as the strongest males in her agency carried her to the ring.

“And the Goddess arrives in a chariot!” the announcer of Sonachi yelled on his microphone. “Look at her go! She’s too important to touch the ground. Only the ring is to be blessed by the touch of her feet.”

Nubia waved politely at the audience. She had to maintain her stoic expression, but she was brimming with joy inside. Her subjects put her chair inside the ring. Then Nubia stood up slowly. She raised her leg and daintily held her foot above the ring. And then she stepped out and waved at the crowd.

Her subjects lifted the chair out of the ring and stood besides Eskel.

*We made a good entrance,* Eskel thought with satisfaction. *Now let’s see how Ran will make her entrance.*

And then it was Ran’s turn to enter. There was the sound of a string instrument being played. From the sound of it, they could see that it was a shamisen that was being plagued by a bunch of female birds surrounding Ran. The one leading the playing was Aoi, who remained at Ran’s side as she played the most expensive looking shamisen out of the band.

She was dressed in the same red and white silk kimono that she wore on the orchard, but this time it was longer than before, especially at the back to cover her tail.

Little by little, the attendants stopped playing their shamisen, with the exception of Aoi, who moved in circles around Ran as her attendants removed her kimono.

Now that there was no kimono hindering the view of Ran’s body, Nubia could see that Ran had a shapely hourglass figure with some nice trim muscles. It was perfect for fanservice while still bringing functionality as a fighter.

Her Combagal uniform is a sleeveless silk kimono with floral patterns on it. The length of the kimono went to her knees and was cut in a way to allow perfect unhindered movement, revealing the golden ankle bracelets that she wore over her bare talons.  Her tail was highly colorfully patterned and was much longer than the tails of a traditional peacock.

As Ran moved into the ring, she showed her dexterity by unfolding her tail and snapping it shut with amazing control and speed. She then went a step further by manipulating her tail exceptionally well, partially opening, swinging it around, and fluttering it.  Her tail feathers were also far studier than they looked in the video, implying that they got stronger thanks to years of training.

Nubia frowned a bit jealousy as Ran got the cheer on the crowd. Meanwhile, Eskel felt a bit guilty and inferior at not contributing to Nubia’s entry the same way Aoi did with Ran’s entrance.

*Focus on the fight!* Nubia thought to herself. *The key to this fight is restriction. Ran’s style is all about free flowing and efficient striking. If I limit her movements, then she won’t bring her full power. I also need to be careful of her tail since she can use it to strike at me besides distracting me.*

“The number two contestant, Ran Shion, made her entrance. She takes the geisha approach for her entrance. Now that the two Combagals are in the ring, they are ready to fight.”

Nubia and Ran approached each other. They said nothing. They only nodded. That gestured was more meaningful to them than any other word that they could have shared at the moment.

As Nubia approached her corner, she looked up and noticed the VIP room. It was rare for them to be filled because of how expensive they were. And she didn’t have time to look up to see them because she was focused on the incoming match. But this time, she looked up and noticed that the VIP room was occupied.

The person that was occupying the VIP room was Evelyn Nydelig, the Sonachi Champion that Ran told her about two days ago. She was a mink with plush white fur, baby blue eyes, and long luxurious raven hair that was styled in a sultry wavy fashion.  She was a very attractive female with the dangerous curves of a model and the toned build of a fighter.

She wore an expensive red dress with golden finery. She stood up from her chair and waved to a bunch of adoring male fans, blowing kisses at them.

*Did she come to our match because she wants to see her future challenger or she just wants to show up for her fans?* Nubia thought angrily. Though fanservice was an important part in a Combagal’s job, there was a limit to when it was allowed. Doing fanservice when there was a match between other Combagals was a definitive no-no in her opinion.

Evelyn stopped signing autographs as she sat down. Her gaze changed from seductive and playful to a predatory one. She was intent on watching the match now. The mink was definitely worried about being challenged. And Nubia was going to show her how strong she truly was.

“Are you ready for the match, Nubia?” Eskel asked.

“I never set foot in the ring unless I am ready,” Nubia told him.

“This may be one of your hardest fights yet,” Eskel told her. “You can’t let your guard for a single moment.”

“I know,” Nubia nodded her head. “I can’t let the color patterns of her tail distract me or my Goddess Eyes will work against me.”

“Just remember your training and everything will be okay,” Eskel told her.

“I will,” Nubia promised.

The jackal moved to the center of the ring to meet Ran again. The two of them stared at each other, waiting for the bell to ring.

DING! DING!

The match started with both of them going into the offensive.

Nubia threw a palm strike at Ran’s beak. The peacock countered by craning her head back, grabbing Nubia’s wrist, and then throwing a palm uppercut with the other arm.

WHAP!

Ran’s feathers hit Nubia in the jaw, but the jackal knew that she was going to get hit first, so she retaliated with a low kick to Ran’s leg. The peacock squawked as she jumped back.

“It’s a mutual exchange between Nubia and Ran. The Geisha of Shion lands the first blow with a palm strike uppercut, but Nubia retaliates with a low kick. We are seeing high-level martial arts here.”

“Your skill was something to be expected,” Ran smirked at Nubia. “I can see that you received training from that kung fu temple outside of Botaun.”

“So did you,” Nubia rubbed her jaw.

“Not me,” Ran assumed a low stance while she slowly approached Nubia. “I was homeschooled. But my mentors did go to that temple.”

“I knew it,” Nubia approached Ran with the same low stance.

The onslaught begun the moment that they got within striking distance.

Once again, they collided by using all of their offensive and defensive techniques to try to land the next blow. Their flurry of attacks was fast. Their limbs collided, blocked, and redirected in an attempt to see who was going to strike first. The exchange ended when palms met feathers, resulting in a lock-up.

“Such high level of martial prowess between our Combagals. This is the type of exchange that you only see in a kung-fu flick! Enjoy it while you can, citizens!”

“Why are you trying to gauge up my skill?” Ran asked as she tilted her head. “Do you think that you’ll change the result if you prolong our match?”

“Yes,” Nubia smirked at the peacock. “I was just seeing how strong you are. Now, are you ready to crank it up?”

“I am,” Ran returned the smile as she jumped back, giving her and Nubia the chance to start another flurry of attacks. This time, they used their own personal moves.

“Black Sandstorm!” Nubia shouted as she threw punches and kicks to Ran’s limbs, intending to weaken her body before pummeling her.

“Dance of the Lotus!” Ran threw her own flurry of punches and kicks.

At first it looked like an even match, but the difference of skill became more apparent as she was using her feathers to slap away the punches, her slender legs to block the kicks. Her neck was used to dodge attacks.

WHAM!

Nubia’s foot hit something soft. But it wasn’t the face of Ran as she intended. Instead, her foot was pressing against the tailfeathers of Ran, who used her tail and spread it like a fan to block the kick.

WHAP!

Ran closed her tailfeathers so that Nubia could see her talons flying in an elegant arc for a roundhouse kick. The sole of her foot struck Nubia across the cheek, she backstepped away from the peacock.

WOOSH! WOOSH! WOOSH!

Her tail was flung to Nubia’s legs in an attempt to trip her. The jackal stepped back to dodge the three swipes.

WHAM!

A palm uppercut cut her attempts to escape.

WHAP!

A kick struck Nubia in the gut.

Nubia gritted her teeth and then attacked with Black Sandstorm again. This time, she stopped her attacks and fought more defensively when Ran attempted to distract her with her tail again.

The peacock managed to land more blows on Nubia, but the jackal wasn’t as affected by them. She fought back, even landing a few strikes on Ran’s legs and shoulders.

WHAM!

Ran’s dainty leg struck Nubia with a side kick, sending her crashing into the ropes. The jackal used the momentum of the attack to catapult herself at Ran.

“Sobek’s Jaws!” Nubia somersaulted in the air and spread her legs, intending to trap Ran’s neck between them. With a slim neck like Ran, it was clear that strangling was the best way to defeat her.

“Dance of the Serpent!” Ran coiled her long legs and somersaulted above Nubia.

With her Goddess Eyes, Nubia was able to see Ran above her. However, since she was in midair, Nubia was unable to defend herself against the upcoming flurry of punches and finger strikes.

WHAM! BAM! BAM!

The rain of blows altered her course. Nubia landed on the mat.

“So much happened in so little time! The Black Sandstorm of Nubia collided against the Dance of the Lotus. But with Ran specializing in footwork for dodging and rapid strikes, she took the lead. Nubia attempted to use her Sobek’s Jaws to strangle her, but she retaliates with her Dance of the Serpent to pummel her while they were airborne.”

“Keep fighting!” Ran approached Nubia.

WHAM! BAM! POW! POW! POW!

Ran slithered across the ring, running circles against Nubia. She aimed finger strikes at Nubia’s throat, punches to the kidney, kicks to the ribs, and other debilitating strikes.

WHAP! BAP!

Nubia used a downward palm to block a kick to the gut and then followed with a spinning elbow from the other side. Even as she was being pummeled, she was studying her enemy’s attack patterns.

*Not good enough!* Ran jumped over Nubia, landing behind her.

“Heavenly Fan!” Ran attacked Nubia with tail strikes. They moved in horizontal swipes, hitting the head, neck, and ribs.

WHAP! BAP! POW!

Nubia was pummeled by the tail. As she kept getting hit, she realized that Ran had no intention of using her other limbs anymore.

*She’s looking down on me!* Nubia thought angrily as she attacked.

WHAP! PA! POW! BAM!

She attacked with palm strikes, punches, and kicks. But her hands and feet were blocked by the tail. Then the tail flashed in front of Nubia’s eyes. Her kinetic vision worked against her as she paid attention to the patterns. She then got suckered with a punch in the nose.

“That’s gotta hurt. Ran stops using her Dance of the Serpent. She’s using her Heavenly Fan instead. She’s telling Nubia that she can beat her by only using her tail. Such a humiliation is hurting Nubia’s pride as a Combagal. And take a look at her snout. She’s bleeding from the nose. For the first time in her career, Nubia is bleeding!”

Nubia’s nose hurt. She placed a finger on her snout and saw that it was covered in red. It was her blood that was tainting her fingertips red. She didn’t remember when was the last time that someone made her bleed. Was it during her training in martial arts? Or when she was being mistreated by her former boss? It had been so long that she’d forgotten about it.

“Is that all?” Ran crossed her wings. “I came to the ring to fight The Goddess. You are better than this.”

“How were you able to bypass my Goddess Eyes?” Nubia asked as she took a fighting stance more out of reflex than conscious choice.

“Your Goddess Eyes are the perfect weapon for countering,” Ran advanced to Nubia as she took another low stance. “However, you are lacking in terms of developing them.”

The answer got Nubia to chuckle as she solidified her stance.

“You are not fighting me, aren’t you?” Nubia asked, finding humor in the situation. “You are training me as well.”

“I am glad that you finally noticed,” Ran smiled as the two moved in circles.

“Why are you doing this?” Nubia asked. “You are risking your rank for the chance of helping the woman who is trying to dethrone you.”

“Everything that I told you at my home is true,” Ran told her. “My respect for you is the only reason why I won’t allow you to leave the ring until you reach the next step.”

WHAP! BAM! POW! PA! BAM!

The two Combagals started another slugfest. Once again, Ran was having the upper hand, blocking an elbow strike with her feathers, a kick with her leg, and a knee with her tailfeathers.

“You can be faster than this!” Ran scolded as she used her tails to spin Nubia around.

WHAM! WHAM!

Ran’s talons slammed into Nubia’s stomach, making her lose some air. And then it was followed by her talons striking her in the nose, increasing her nose bleeding.

“Once again, the Geisha of Shion is getting the upper hand. Will The Goddess make a comeback, or will she be bested once more?”

“You are far too reliant on just your Goddess Eyes,” Ran pointed out. “You depend so much on your physical abilities that you neglect your fighter’s intuition.”

“My fighter’s intuition,” Nubia repeated, considering what Ran was telling her. “Will this allow me to finally master my Goddess Eyes? I’ve been trying to find an answer since my defeat against Skully. And I thought that I found my answer with my match with Kayru.”

“You nearly understood your potential in your fight with Kayru, but I noticed that you didn’t use it on the latter fights as you climbed through the ranks of Sonachi,” Ran adopted her low stance to prepare for another round. “You could have defeated Olympia with less trouble had you mastered your ability by then.”

Nubia panted as she saw Ran preparing to attack her with another flurry of blows. She took her own stance and prepared to fight.

WHAM! BAM! POW! PA! BAM! CRACK!

Nubia’s limbs moved automatically. Rather than attacking, she focused on defending against Ran’s attacks. She couldn’t risk another exchange because losing would mean being defeated the next time Ran landed a blow on her. Nubia needed to understand her Goddess Eyes if she wanted a chance to defeat her.

*I have to remember how I felt when I fought Kayru,* Nubia thought angrily as her limbs were getting slower and sorer.

WHAM!

A kick knocked her to the mat. Her life flew by her eyes. She remembered the training, the night where she defended herself, and all of her career. She saw each and every match in her mind’s eye. And then she saw her match with Kayru. And that’s when she remembered how she was able to use her Goddess Eyes to track Kayru in spite of her high movements.

*I understand it all now!* Nubia thought as she saw her fight with Olympia. *My Goddess Eyes are not just good kinetic vision. They are the foresight of reading the movements of my opponent. The reason why I defeated Kayru was because I used my intuition to visualize her movements before she made them.*

Her eyes were focusing now on the present. Ran was looming above her, ready to stomp her throat with her foot.

WHAM!

Nubia rolled out of the way to prevent Ran from giving her a finishing stomp.

“Have you learned anything?” Ran asked as she took a fighting stance. “If you learned nothing, then I might as well finish you rather than force you to advance when you are not ready yet.”

“I am ready,” Nubia spoke calmly. “Now that you helped me unlock the True Goddess Sight, I am confident that I can win.”

“True Goddess Sight,” Ran repeated with a smile. “Sounds promising. Let’s see if it can handle my Dance of the Lotus!”

WHAP! BAP! POW! POW! BAM! POW!

The jackal and the peacock shared another exchange. The main difference was that the exchange was in favor of Nubia this time. She moved faster to land blows on Ran. She was using timing to properly counter Ran’s moves, even making brief pauses in front of the tailfeathers to predict the next blow and counter it with a blow. As all of Nubia’s punches, palms, elbows, kicks, and knees landed on Ran, the peacock was showing heavy signs of damage.

Ran jumped back, trying to escape Nubia. However, she didn’t leap far away, as Nubia managed to catch her.

“Black Sandstorm!” Nubia shouted as she pummeled Ran.

WHAM! BAM! POW! POW! CRACK!

Nubia’s blows were stronger and faster. They knocked Ran across the ring. But Nubia was not going to give up now.

“Ra’s Judgment!” Nubia flew in the air with her legs spinning at Ran.

WHAM-BAM! POW! WHAM!

Nubia’s feet struck Ran, one after the other, with a butterfly kick. As Ran was staggered, she received a front punch to the stomach. And then she was knocked down on the ground with a front kick to the face.

“Incredible! Nubia shows us why is she is called The Goddess! She pulls back a miraculous comeback by countering the Dance of the Lotus. And then she knocks down Ran with a combo of Black Sandstorm that transitions into Ra’s Judgment. Will this be the end of the Geisha of Shion?”

Ran stood up. She placed a feathered hand on her beak, noticing that blood was staining her feathers.

“This is the first time that someone made me bleed in my career,” Ran pointed out. “Not just that. It’s the first time that someone made me bleed in my life.”

She stared at Nubia. The jackal looked exhausted. It was clear that the damage she took and the energy that she spent on her comeback was too much for her. Under normal circumstances, Ran would have taken a chance. A punch or a kick to the jaw was all that she needed to win.

But she was battered as well. Birds were fragile. Their bodies were not meant to handle as much damage as a mammal would. She stared at her feathers, curling them into fists. She made a choice.

“I surrender,” Ran declared as she fell back to the mat. “I can’t fight anymore.”

“WHOOOOO!”

The crowd roared in shock.

“Incredible! Ran just surrendered to Nubia. It appears that she already reached her limit. She’s struggling to stand up as she uses the ropes to balance herself.”

“Wait,” Nubia wobbled at Ran. “This isn’t how our fight should end.”

Her objection was cut short by Ran putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I would have lost either way despite your exhaustion,” Ran pointed out. “Besides, I did say that I wouldn’t leave the ring until you improved.”

“Thanks,” Nubia hugged Ran, more out of gratitude than to keep the balance.

DING! DING! DING! DING!

The bell rung. The match was over. Nubia was now the number two contender for the Sonachi Championship. And the public approved.

From the corner of her eye, Nubia saw Evelyn leave in a huff. Somehow, erasing that smug look on the mink’s face made Nubia feel grateful.

“You have to be wary of Keiko,” Ran whispered into Nubia’s rear. “Unlike the others who came before me, Keiko has never failed to guard her position since she became the number one contender.”

“Thanks,” Nubia nodded as Aoi and Eskel entered the ring to help the Combagals separate from each other. “You are free to visit Golden Nile to have a cup of tea with me.”

“I’ll be delighted,” Ran smiled gratefully at the jackal.

Nubia stood on the ring, watching as Yamato greeted Ran at the corridor. He started to tend to his daughter’s injury, but Ran reassured him that she was fine.

“Are you okay, Nubia?” Eskel gave Nubia a cloth to wipe the blood from her snout.

“I’m better than ever before,” Nubia smiled at her manager. “After tonight, I wonder what I will be capable of doing now.”

“Maybe you’ll become the Sonachi Champion,” Eskel smiled at Nubia.

“Only one way to find out,” Nubia grinned triumphantly. “Find anything about a Combagal named Keiko. We’re going to face the number one contender.”