**A Rare Breed**

 Among the many attractions of Tendonchi, one of the most popular ones was the Sanpyon District. The district was the home of many bars and host clubs where people could have fun over a drink.

 Daikarin, one of the best singers of Tendonchi, actually used to work at a bar in Sanpyon before she left Botaun forever to train Team Starkiller after they lost the Cookie Crumble Match. Her former presence there indicated the hidden talent that was hidden within that district.

 Though bars were pretty common, the Sanpyon District was also popular with host clubs and hostess clubs. After all, nothing made a conversation with an attractive male or female much more interesting than a glass of wine or champagne.

 Among the host clubs, there was one that was currently in the lead in terms of popularity. It was a place called Gold Airs. The place was no different from the other host clubs in the Sanpyon District. It was only when one entered inside that people realized the true strength.

 The thing that made Gold Airs the most popular host club at the moment was the presence of a rising star in the host club world. He was a jackal of decent height with black fur. His body was svelte, giving him a soft appearance. He had deep cobalt blue eyes with three white dots under his right eye that acted as his birthmark.

Like many hosts in the club, he had a good fashion sense. He wore a white suit, white pants, and white shoes. It was a good contrast to his white fur. However, he also had suits of blue, gray, and purple when he felt like adding some variety.

The jackal’s name was Hedj, and he was the best host in the Sanpyon District. Everyone was willing to bet that he’d be the best host in Tendonchi in the span of a year. The jackal had a full package that made him a good host.

His good looks naturally attracted the attention of many female admirers. And his personality gave him a dignified air. He was suave and stoic, acting like a gentleman who accommodated any client willing to pay for his time. His clients always praised him for having that “tall, dark, and mysterious gentleman” aura that he pulled off with such naturality.

Hedj was currently sitting at a table, entertaining a party of flirty and bubbly rich women. The normal service was for hosts to entertain one or two clients at the time. A host had the responsibility of satisfying his customers. If there were more than one customer, he had to split his attention between his clients to make sure that they were equally satisfied.

Very few hosts in Gold Airs were capable of servicing two women at the same time. But Hedj was in a different league of his own. He could literally talk with parties of women, giving them equal shares of attention, and making them leave with a smile on their faces.

Right now, a woman was celebrating her birthday. She was a cougar between 20 and 30 years old. 27 to be exact based on the reservation that he got. He personally talked to her over the phone and requested a special cake from an exclusive bakery.

“How are you enjoying your birthday, Madam Mary?” Hedj gave her a curt smile.

“This cake is simply divine,” Mary swooned as she took the slice of cake that Hedj served her, the taste being sweeter when she recalled what he said to her earlier.

“A lady like you shouldn’t handle knives on her special day,” Hedj had told her. “Let me cut you the biggest slice I can give you.”

All of Mary’s friends squealed in delight at his words. They even asked him to cut slices for them as well. Not only did Hedj cut slices for them, he had special lines for each of them that increased their attraction towards him.

*Everyone’s satisfied,* Hedj thought as he used a fork to cut a morsel of cake and used it to feed Mary, who was swooning happily. *The birthday girl is getting the attention she deserves. None of the guests are being neglected. All I have to do is keep it up for a few minutes until my shift is over.*

“You’re a good host, Hedj,” Mary swooned happily. “I’ve never had someone pamper me like that in my birthday. And I had rich parents who spoiled me every year on my special day.”

“Birthdays are more than just gifts, madam,” Hedj gave her a charming smile. “They are an occasion when people show their gratitude and happiness at having you exist. So I am happy to serve you in such special occasion.”

“You flatterer!” Mary giggled at his words.

“It is the honest truth,” Hedj told her. “A birthday is a time of celebration. And that’s what we should do.”

“I don’t think you’re the type of person who should sing me a birthday song,” Mary teased. “The lyrics don’t suit your baritone voice.”

“But the melody does,” Hedj nodded as he started humming a song for her.

Once again, Mary and her companions were charmed by his service. After he finished humming the song for her, Hedj smiled as the timer went off.

“That was a productive party,” Hedj stated. “You had your friends come over. You had the cake you wanted. Everyone had fun. Was it everything you hoped to be?”

“It was,” Mary batted her eyelashes at him. “I hope to celebrate my birthday here again.”

“I’ll be delighted,” Hedj nodded.

“My birthday is in a couple of months,” a wolf girl stated. She was the youngest of the group at her late twenties. She approached him and gave him puppy dog eyes to get his attention.

“I’ll take you up on that, Suki,” Hedj gave her a curt smile.

“Excellent,” Suki beamed as she gave him her phone number. “Call me when you are ready to talk to me.”

All of the women cheered for her daringness.

“I’m afraid I can’t have this, madam,” Hedj told her. “For if I were to have it, I wouldn’t be able to resist calling you.”

The girls were stunned and Suki blushed.

“Besides, your phone number should be for a worthy man, not a host,” Hedj gave Suki her phone number back. “Do save this document for someone worthy enough to spend the rest of his life with you. The kind of man who will treat you and only you like a queen forever.”

“I will,” Suki promised as she took back her phone number with a blush.

One by one, the clients left the table, thanking Hedj for his services. Once they were out of the host club, Hedj took a deep breath and stared at the time.

*Another good day of work,* Hedj thought with satisfaction as he made his way to the backstage to relax with his friends.

Hedj made his way backstage.

“WOOOOOOOO!”

The black jackal yelped as he was met with a standing ovation. All of the hosts of Gold Airs and his boss were present to greet him. Hedj put a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beating beneath his palm.

“I thought I told you guys not to give me surprise ovations,” Hedj sounded annoyed as he tried to regulate his heartbeat.

“You make it hard not to cheer for you,” Yuta stated.

He was an arctic fox wearing a blue suit and black shoes. He smiled happily at Hedj as he was clapping at his best host to congratulate him on his achievement.

“Sir Yuta,” Hedj acknowledged his boss. “You don’t have to celebrate my accomplishments. I am just doing my duty.”

“Your duty is just to be a good host,” Yuta countered. “But you go above and beyond what is expected of you. Do you have any idea of how hard it is to be a host to more than one lady? It’s very hard. But you can do it with a whole party of women. That’s a legendary achievement.”

“It’s nothing that remarkable,” Hedj sounded dismissive.

“It is a good deal,” Jolo pointed out.

He was a falcon with brown feathers, red suit, red pants, and no shoes to expose his talons. He was one of Hedj’s best friends and one of the top hosts there.

“A good host can do anything,” Hedj pointed out.

“I’m the second-best host here and I can barely service three girls at the same time,” Jolo reminded him. “Even Gine needed our help to service two girls at the same time. We had to chime in to help him when he was getting overwhelmed.”

“I wasn’t that nervous,” Gine blushed angrily.

Gine was a brown timber wolf with gray suit and shoes. He was the third best host of Gold Airs, but it was clear that Jolo and Hedj had a good advantage over him.

“Nobody is making fun of you, Gine,” Hedj calmed down the wolf. One of the plus sides of working as a host was that his social skills were better than the average. Granted, he wasn’t trying to charm Gine as much as calm him down and make him focus on having a good time. “Jolo was pointing out how much you progressed over time.”

“Sorry about that,” Gine apologized. “I’m still trying to level up as a host.”

“It’s not a competition, Gine,” Jolo gently chided him. “At the end of the day, the true winners are our clients, not us.”

“Speaking of clients, how can you rake so much in tips and money and still turn down your regulars?” Gine asked Hedj. “I know you have a policy about dating clients, but it’s clear those girls want to know you outside of work.”

“Doesn’t’ feel right for me to be in a relationship when my work involves me sweet talking other ladies,” Hedj sounded a bit apologetic.

“Aren’t you interested in dating someone else?” Yuta asked. “You clearly have the skills to be a good boyfriend. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were to marry in less than a year.”

“Well,” Hedj blushed a bit as the theme of love came up. “I know it sounds strange, but I am waiting for the right woman to show up before I can consider love.”

The answer got Jolo and Gine to exchange glances. They heard of Hedj’s desire to have love a few years ago during his second year working as a host.

The duo approached Hedj as he went to his locker room to pick up some stuff.

“Hey, Hedj,” Gine called out to him. “Do you wanna hang out?”

“Sure,” Hedj nodded. “I am just picking my stuff from my locker before we move. Which bar are we visiting this time?”

“Actually, we are not going bar hopping tonight,” Jolo clarified.

“Are we going to a restaurant then?” Hedj inquired.

“We are gong to a soapland,” Gine winked at him.

“A soapland?” Hedj stared at the pair.

“It’s an odd request,” Jolo admitted. “But it’s not what you think it is. There’s a Combagal signing event going on in an hour near a soapland named Monyan. We wanted to take you there so that you can have a look.”

“I don’t think I should go,” Hedj apologized sheepishly. “I never followed furry fighting.”

“Really?” Gine stared at him incredulously. “You don’t follow furry fighting? It’s the national sport of Concatta. You can’t walk without seeing a commercial or seeing a poster of them.”

“I don’t like the idea of ladies fighting each other,” Hedj shrugged his shoulders. “I’m a bit old-fashioned about it.”

“But you have to go, Hedj,” Jolo pressured, something that intrigued the jackal since he was never that pushy. “Nubia will be there.”

“Who is Nubia?” Hedj stated. “I am sure I heard that name before?”

“She’s the Sonachi Champion,” Gine grinned. “I was there when she took the crown. You have to meet her, Hedj!”

“Fine,” Hedj rolled his eyes. “Can you tell me more about her?”

“We’d rather surprise you,” Jolo and Gine exchanged smiles.

“Lead the way,” Hedj sighed as he prepared to meet that Combagal.

*It’s just a little meet and greet,* Hedj thought. *I don’t think it’s going to be a big deal.*

Little did Hedj knew that his life was going to change forever that day.

“I can’t believe we are doing this,” Nubia sighed as she watched her manager Eskel make the preparations. He was leading some men to put on tables in the corner of the street next to a soapland named Monyan.

“You’re the Sonachi Champion now, Nubia,” Eskel told her. “We need to make the most of this privilege. That’s why we’re having meet-and-greet sessions across the districts of Botaun. And we’re starting with Tendonchi since it’s the closest one to our agency.”

“But why did we have to establish our booth near a soapland?” Nubia demanded angrily as she crossed her arms.

“It’s a good spot with great demographic,” Eskel puffed his chest proudly.

Nubia stared at him silently. Five seconds passed until Eskel deflated.

“Fine,” Eskel sighed. “I tried to get more spots, but other Combagals were renting them. This was the only spot available.”

“How can this be the only spot available?” Nubia spread her arms angrily.

“Many of the new champions live in Tendonchi,” Eskel pointed out. “Seriously, I know that this district is populous, but I never imagined that most of the district champions would live there.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Nubia crossed her arms. “Lugale is the only champion who doesn’t live in Tendonchi.”

“Well, even with Sephario’s return and Face Turn, Kalandesians are still unpopular,” Eskel pointed out. “So she won’t be able to leave her district Ganjia anytime soon.”

*Then again, she’d probably be able to leave if she didn’t act like an evil Kalandesian stereotype to get Heat,* Nubia thought with disapproval.

As a Wild, Nubia understood what it meant to be discriminated for being born different. That being said, she knew that making a better world required her to be the bigger person. She wasn’t going to pick fights to antagonize her oppressors. She was going to fight to show them that she could achieve greatness despite being a Wild. That was the right course of action that Lugale was supposed to take rather than reinforce stereotypes.

“Are you okay, Goddess Nubia?” Samaria intruded, noticing that the black jackal was contemplative.

“I am fine, Samaria,” Nubia told her with a curt nod. “I was just thinking about my next opponents.”

“You’re a champion now,” Samaria reminded her. “It’s going to take a long time before you get a new challenger.”

“I know,” Nubia sighed. “That’s why I’ll have to get Pop by other means. I had you and six other Combagals from Golden Nile be in this meet-and-greet to promote my agency.”

“I won’t let you down, Goddess Nubia,” Samaria bowed her head.

“Good,” Nubia nodded in approval. “Now I want you to get dressed immediately. Put on your Combagal costume right away. I’m already wearing mine.”

“Yes, Goddess Nubia!” Samaria nodded her head and went to change to the limousine that Eskel rented for them.

It was a golden limousine with black windows. The gold attracted the attention of the onlookers and the black windows denied them the satisfaction of seeing the Combagals get naked to change into their costumes.

“Hard to believe that you’ll have them start their champion roads soon,” Eskel told Nubia as they watched Samaria enter the limousine.

“If we are going to make an impact in furry fighting, Golden Nile needs to have more than one champion Combagal,” Nubia declared. “Take a look at the Cyclone Crushers. Nyarai is the Masato Champion. And we have Bolouma and Skully as the Tendonchi Champions.”

“We’re going to have to prepare ourselves should a member of the Cyclone Crushers go get your belt,” Eskel warned the black jackal.

“I’ll be more than happy to face such elite Combagals,” Nubia gave him a smile worthy of a warrior that made Eskel feel confidence.

Five minutes passed, and then the meet-and-greet started. Eskel made sure to lay a few ground rules before started.

“No contact with any Combagals,” Eskel told them. “Other than the handshake rule, any contact needs to be reciprocal. Selfies are allowed, but you cannot ask weird requests. No vulgar language will be accepted. Combagals can and will fight back if you try to harm them. Am I left clear?”

Nobody answered Eskel, but they all nodded, understanding the rules.

“Okay,” Eskel smiled at them. “It is with great pleasure that I will introduce to you the Golden Nile Combagals.”

The fans cheered as they saw the Combagals. Each one of the took different lines as they went to greet them. There was a table for each of the eight Combagals. Each of them had a table with merchandise. They also had a pen that they were going to use to put their autographs.

To Nubia’s satisfaction, all of the fans who attended were well-mannered. Nobody asked her intrusive questions. They all settled with a handshake. Their selfies were taken without invading her personal space.

*This is a good autograph session,* Nubia thought with satisfaction. *It’s bearable. But it’s only the first step. I have to go to the other districts once a week to make my appearances.*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Goddess Nubia.”

Nubia stared ahead to stare at a teenage girl. She was a rottweiler dog. And she was dressed in white bandages, white robes, and golden tones. This girl was dressed with a replica of Nubia’s first furry fighting costume.

“Nice costume,” Nubia’s smile was small, but it was a lot more genuine compared to the other smiles she gave the previous fans.

“I’m a fan of furry fighting with a knack for fashion,” the rottweiler beamed. “I loved your first costume so I wanted to make it. Did I get it right?”

“You have an eye for fashion that rivals my Goddess Eyes,” Nubia gave her one of the best compliments she could give a stranger. “It looks a lot like the costume I wore during my first matches. I admire the hard work that you must have put up for this.”

“It was a lot of hard work,” the rottweiler girl smiled. “But I wanted to be properly dressed before I asked for your autograph.”

“To whom do I owe the pleasure,” Nubia took the sheet of paper.

“My name is Dana,” the rottweiler’s tail was wagging. “I want to have a career in furry fighting. If I am not cut out to be a Combagal, then I want to try to make furry fighting costumes.”

“How old are you?” Nubia asked.

“Seventeen,” Dana replied. “I want to graduate from high school before I take furry fighting. I also plan on taking college classes.”

“You are free to try furry fighting at the Golden Nile when you are ready,” Nubia told Dana with a stern smile. “Do make sure to work hard. The life of furry fighting is a hard one. And I look forward to seeing what costume you will make for yourself.”

“Thank you very much, Goddess Nubia!” Dana beamed as Nubia gave her an autograph.

The rottweiler’s tail wagged happily as she left the file so that the next client would take her place to meet Nubia.

The meet-and greet lasted for over an hour. And it was a hot day for Nubia. Even with her revealing mummy outfit, she was feeling a bit hot. She could go to her limousine to cool down with the air conditioner and then drink something to rehydrate herself. Not only that, but the fan lines were now focusing more on the other Combagals.

*I guess I can take a little break,* Nubia thought as she took a sign and wrote a message on it to indicate her absence.

***“I WENT TO GET A DRINK. WILL RETURN IN FIVE MINUTES. WAIT PATIENTLY FOR MY RETURN IF YOU WANT TO MEET ME.”***

Satisfied with leaving the message clear, she put it on top of the table so that any new fan who visited her would understand her absence. She even addressed them to wait for a bit so that they weren’t going to get desperate. The black jackal gestured at Eskel to come to her.

“I’m taking a break,” Nubia told him. “Can you supervise everything while I am absent.”

“I will,” Eskel promised. “Besides, you have nothing to worry about. Nothing weird is going to happen while I am here.”

“I’ll hold you up to that,” Nubia gracefully walked to the limousine and entered the vehicle to take a long-deserved break.

The black jackal sighed and took a bottle of mineral water. She drank slowly, enjoying the taste of the drink and closed her eyes.

*Such a fruitful endeavor,* Nubia thought happily. *If this goes on like that, then I can see the bright future ahead of me.*

Little did Nubia know was that the future had different plans for her.

“I can’t believe we arrived an hour late,” Hedj voiced his disapproval.

“Well, we can’t show up to meet Nubia with empty stomachs,” Gine told Hedj. “Imagine that your belly starts rumbling when you talk to her. We can’t have our best host make a blunder like that. It will send our reputation crashing.”

“I hate to agree with Gine on that,” Jolo sighed. “But we are making good progress. We made sure to only eat what we needed. We avoided carbonation, so there won’t be any gas. And we even brought lots of mints too.”

“Are you guys meeting Nubia?” Hedj asked his friends as he popped a mint inside of his mouth.

“No,” Jolo shook his head. “I have my eye on a couple of Combagals.”

“And there’s a hottie that I like,” Gine smiled. “Her name is Samaria. And she’s cute.”

“I heard that the Combagals that Nubia selected are the strongest and most popular ones in her repertoire,” Jolo pointed out. “I keep track of their matches, and they are all very good even by Golden Nile standards.”

“What’s Golden Nile?” Hedj asked.

“That’s Nubia’s agency,” Jolo explained. “It’s one of the highest agencies in Botaun. They’re not as strong as the Cyclone Crushers, but they have good fighting records. Rumor has it that Nubia intends to surpass the Cyclone Crushers as the strongest Combagal agency in Botaun.”

“I don’t know who the Cyclone Crushers are,” Hedj stated. “I don’t follow furry fighting.”

“They’re the hostesses of Club Nighthawk,” Gine rolled his eyes.

“The Cyclone Crushers are hostesses of Club Nighthawk?” Hedj asked, shocked about them.

“Yeah,” Gine grinned. “There’s this leggy cheetah Nyarai who kicked a hippo so hard that she literally booted him out of the club for groping her breasts. Quite a spectacle.”

“And Nubia is one of the few Combagals who are strong enough to face her since both are district champions,” Jolo finished. “But I believe that discussing facts will bore you. I’d rather show than tell.”

“Fine,” Hedj saw a line of fans at a corner of a soapland named Monyan.

The black jackal went to the bottom of the line.

As Hedj lined up, he hard a gasp. He saw a rottweiler girl dressed as a mummy. She stared at him for a while before he gave her a nod. The rottweiler girl blushed a bit and then turned away.

“You know how to reject girls without a single word,” Gine teased him.

“I just nodded a greeting to her,” Hedj corrected him. “Besides, I am not going to flirt with a girl dressed as a mummy.”

“That wasn’t a mummy costume,” Jolo informed him. “That was a faithful replica of Nubia’s first furry fighting costume.”

“So she’s a cosplayer?” Hedj asked.

“Yes,” Jolo nodded his head. “Some fans like to dress like their favorite Combagals to voice their admiration towards them.”

“That’s kind of cute,” Hedj chuckled.

“And you’re gonna find Nubia cute when you arrive at her table,” Gine grinned at him. “I promise you that this will all be worth it.”

“Fine,” Hedj crossed his arms and waited until the line moved forward.

To the black jackal’s surprise, it took him fifteen minutes to be able to reach Nubia’s table because of how many fans attended.

During those fifteen minutes, he noticed something odd. He noticed male and female fans staring at him and whispering stuff that she couldn’t’ hear. It wasn’t a shock for him to see females mesmerized by his good looks. However, they looked more shocked than pleased. And the males were also stunned. As he got closer, he noticed that the number of looks increased. And then he saw that the Combagals were giving him the same kind of look that the fans gave him.

*Something’s going on,* Hedj thought. *People has been staring at me weirdly for all the fifteen minutes I’ve been in line.*

The black jackal took out a pocket mirror and used it to check himself. He had no food on his teeth. He had no stains on his cheeks. He had no facial imperfections. He kept a pleasant and dignified expression. And yet, he felt that the attention the people were giving him was because there was something odd about him.

*It must be my imagination,* Hedj thought as he reached Nubia’s table and waited for her to arrive. He noticed a sign stating that she was on break, which made him feel nervous. *Still, I need to worry on the real issues here. What am I even going to say to her? I know nothing about furry fighting. I am going to look like a fool if I say the wrong thing.*

As Hedj pondered what was going on, a cat was walking towards Nubia’s table to check what was going on there. He noticed the three hosts on Nubia’s table. One of them was Hedj, who turned his back to the table to ponder what he was going to say. The wolf host next to him was trying to give him a pep talk. And a falcon host was staring straight ahead.

“Do you gentlemen need anything?” Eskel asked them with a smile.

“We would like to have a chat with Nubia,” Jolo nodded at Eskel.

“Sorry,” Eskel shook his head. “Only one client at a time. So you three will have to take turns talking to her.”

“Well, we would like to know the rules when meeting Nubia,” Jolo asked politely. “And our friend knows nothing about furry fighting. Can you give him some pointers on how to act around Nubia?”

“Sure,” Eskel focused his attention on the mystery host. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Hedj replied as he turned around. He couldn’t see the cat because Gine was blocking his view with his body.

“There are a couple of rules here,” Eskel crossed his arms. “The first thing you have to do is remember that Nubia is a champion with a busy schedule. So you need to keep it quick. Also, no inappropriate touching. Only handshakes allowed.”

“I understand,” Hedj replied as he tried to move Gine out of his way. “It’s the same rules when being a host.”

“Good,” Eskel stated as he started eating a sandwich. “Not move to the front so that I can see you. It’s hard to give you the rules when I can’t see your face.”

Hedj moved into the way. As soon as Eskel saw him, the cat started choking on his bread, making Gine come behind him and pat his back until he coughed down the chewed bread into the ground.

“Are you okay, pal?” Gine asked as Eskel finished spitting out his bread.

“Sorry,” Eskel apologized. “I was surprised when I saw the face of your friend.

“I appreciate the compliment, sir,” Hedj smiled politely. “But I can assure you that my preference is towards females.”

“No,” Eskel shook his head. “I was stunned because you look like…”

“ESKEL!”

The cat froze when he heard Nubia’s voice. She was coming out of the limousine carrying a bunch of posters in her hands that obscured her face. The black jackal slammed the posters on her table before confronting Eskel. As soon as he saw her, Hedj was left stunned.

*She’s a black jackal just like me!* Eskel thought in shock. *I thought that I was the only one who lived here in Botaun. How could I didn’t notice until now?*

“How many times have I told you not to eat and talk at the same time?” Nubia scolded her manager.

“Only a couple,” Eskel pointed out. “And I didn’t eat and talk. I ate and then coughed. There’s a difference.”

“It’s an unbecoming sight, Eskel,” Nubia scolded.

“I couldn’t help it,” Eskel rubbed his lips with the back of his hands. “I saw something incredible and that made me choke. Look at the man in front of you.”

“What’s so impressive about the man in front of…” Nubia paused when she realized that she was staring at a male black jackal.

The two black jackals were left stunned by the sight of each other. Nubia dropped the remaining merchandise on the ground, landing by her feet.

The Combagal moved around her table to approach Hedj. The host just stared at her with the same shocked expression on his face.

“Is that Nubia’s twin brother?”

“Maybe he’s another black jackal.”

“I thought Nubia was the only black jackal around here.”

Everyone started taking pictures and talking loudly. Even the Golden Nile Combagals were just as shocked as the fans. The difference was that they were talking in whispers out of respect for Nubia to avoid drama.

“Hi…” Hedj lifted a greeting hand to Nubia. “I’m sorry for the awkwardness. I never thought that I’d meet another black jackal in my life.”

Nubia nearly felt herself tear up when she heard those words. She felt the loneliness in his words while also recalling the loneliness that she felt at being the only person of her species that she knew. The validation that she wasn’t alone tempted to make her weep with joy.

*I have to control myself,* Nubia thought desperately. *I’m the Sonachi Champion. I can’t make a scene in public. I need to show that I am worthy of my belt by interacting with him as I would with any other fan.*

“I thought the same thing,” Nubia spoke emotionlessly. “I assumed that I was the only black jackal in the city states. I am happy to see that I was wrong.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you then,” Hedj let his host training kick in to regain his composure. “I never expected to have such a…memorable encounter.”

“Likewise,” Nubia spoke with a stoic yet civilized tone to keep up appearance and regain control of her emotions.

“I believe it’s time for us to leave,” Jolo told Gine with a smile.

“Yeah,” Gine grinned. “I’m going to get my Samaria autograph now.”

The two hosts left the scene to meet the other Combagals. They wanted Hedj to have as much privacy as he could get this moment.

“My name is Hedj,” the male jackal told Nubia.

“And mine is Nubia,” the female jackal replied in kind. “Though I am sure that you already know who I am.”

“Nubia,” Hedj repeated her name. “Such a beautiful name. I think it means ‘gold’ in the old tongues of our people.”

“And I see that you know how to flirt,” Nubia crossed her arms and gave him a smirk. “As expected from a host.”

“How did you figure out I was a host?” Hedj asked, amazed by Nubia correctly guessing his profession.

“Your attractive looks, your manners, and your manner of dress are all hints of your occupation,” Nubia stated. “Hosts and hostesses are very popular in Tendonchi. Your company also helped prove my hypothesis right.”

“You have quite the perceptive skills,” Hedj genuinely complimented Nubia.

“I was born with good eyes,” Nubia smiled genuinely at him.

“They’re quite a lovely pair of eyes,” Hedj stared at those golden eyes that sparkled like the sun, admiring their beauty. The eyeshadow also made them look impressive. It was as if he was staring at a pair of prized jewels gleaming at him.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Nubia crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “So, what brings you to my table? Is this some way to get clout by coming to my event? Or are you coming here to get my autograph?”

“Neither to be honest,” Hedj admitted.

“What?” Nubia replied, shocked by his answer.

“I don’t follow furry fighting since I am focused on my career,” Hedj admitted. “My friends brought me here, saying that I had to meet you. They didn’t elaborate either. I was just as surprised as you when I realized that we were the same species.”

“Is that so?” Nubia asked ambiguously. A part of her was relieved that he didn’t meet her to increase his popularity. But another part of her felt disappointed that he didn’t come here to meet a fellow black jackal.

“Yes,” Hedj admitted shamefully. “I regret my lack of awareness. Had I known that there was another black jackal in Botaun, I would have supported you out of solidarity.”

“You can start supporting me now,” Nubia told him as she led him back to the table where she met him. She picked up one of the posters and signed them. “It would be a pleasure to see you in one of my future matches, Hedj.”

“And it will be a pleasure to talk to you someday,” Hedj smiled as he read the autograph.

*“A great pleasure to meet a kindred spirit. I hope that our fates can intertwine once more. Lots of gratitude, Nubia, the Sonachi Champion.”*

The two jackals said their goodbyes and then they parted ways.

 A couple of hours later, Hedj took his friends to a nearby diner. It was one where customers were allowed to reserve rooms to have private conversations. The trio of hosts went into the room, ordered a variety of dishes, and then waited for the waiter to return.

 Taking advantage of the waiter’s absence, Hedj finally expressed what he was feeling to his two best friends.

 “You inconsiderate jerks!” Hedj yelled at Jolo and Gine.

 “What’s with the lack of love, Hedj?” Gine asked, sounding offended by the jackal’s outburst.

 “We’ve known each other for four years and you guys didn’t think to tell me about another black jackal living in Botaun?” Hedj asked angrily. “Do you know how much that would have meant for me?”

 “We only found out about Nubia this year,” Jolo explained the situation to prevent Gine from escalating him.

 “And why didn’t you bother to tell me when you had a whole year to inform me about a female of my species living there?” Hedj demanded.

 “Because we didn’t know if it was the right time,” Jolo explained.

 “Right time?” Hedj asked, processing what the falcon was trying to tell him.

 “Look, we’ve known you for four years,” Jolo reasoned. “We talked with each other about our hopes, dreams, goals, and insecurities. And we heard how much you wanted to meet a fellow black jackal.”

 “Then why didn’t you tell me about Nubia right away?” Hedj demanded.

 “I didn’t want to give you false hope,” Gine sighed. “Let’s say that you learned about Nubia. How would you have reacted if you had not been able to meet her?”

 “I…” Hedj was left stunned with that answer. He frowned sadly and didn’t reply until the waiter returned with the plates. “I have no idea how I would have reacted. To have a fellow female of my species so close yet so far. I don’t think I would have been able to endure that agony.”

 “You wouldn’t have,” Gine was cutting his meat and chewing it. “And it’s not like you could have used the excuse that you two are from the same species to meet her. You would have looked like one of those entitled creeps who wanted to use stupid excuses to spend time with their idols.”

 “We did want you to meet her, but we couldn’t find the right time,” Jolo admitted. “We could have brought you to a match, but you would only be able to see her from afar, unable to talk to her face to face.”

 “Luckily for us, we discovered a while ago that she was doing a meet-and-greet event on this date,” Gine grinned. “We couldn’t throw a chance like that. So we pressured you to meet Nubia and there you had it.”

 “You could have just given me a summary,” Hedj took a spoonful of soup.

 “We wanted to see the look on your faces when you met each other,” Gine was putting salt and pepper on his steak. “We wanted to make the first meeting extra special.”

 “You two are the worst matchmakers that I ever met,” Hedj deadpanned as he took another sip of his soup.

 “And you are the most distracted guy I ever met,” Gine countered. “How come you didn’t notice Nubia? Do you even see the news or watch commercials?”

 “I had to take care of my grandfather,” Hedj countered. “He was the only black jackal that I knew.”

 “Taking care of your family shouldn’t be an excuse to ignore the world around you,” Jolo countered as he was eating a plate of risotto.

 “You’re right,” Hedj sighed. “A host should be aware of what’s going on around the area where he lives. I can’t imagine how my reputation would have been affected if one of my clients was a fan of furry fighting.”

 “Well, our clients are girls who want your undivided attention,” Jolo reminded him. “Talking about other girls, even if they are their idols, more or less undermines the purpose of hanging out with a host.”

 “I kind of wished one of my clients had talked about furry fighting so that I could have had an excuse to learn about the sport,” Hedj lamented. “Maybe that way, I would have found out about Nubia much sooner.”

 “No case crying over spilled milk,” Gine shook his head as he was licking the plate. “All that matters is what are you going to do now.”

 “What do you mean what am I going to do now?” Hedj asked.

 “We are wondering if you are going to pursue a relationship with her,” Jolo put it on simple terms to ease off the idea into Hedj.

 “I barely know her,” Hedj explained.

 “But you want to meet her again, and I’m sure that she wants to meet you too,” Gine countered as he pointed at the autograph that was lying in the corner to prevent the food from staining it. “She said that she wanted your fates to intertwine. That’s love poetry flirting.”

 “It’s not love poetry flirting,” Hedj blushed.

 “When have you ever heard someone use the word ‘intertwine’ in a platonic way?” Jolo joined on Gine’s argument. “It’s clear that she’s interested in you.”

 “You are reading too much into an autograph she gave me,” Hedj avoided looking at his friends.

 “Maybe,” Jolo finished his risotto dish. “Maybe nothing’s gonna happen between the two of you. But I think that you should pursue this chance. Even if she’s not the woman of your dreams, it would be nice knowing that you are not alone.”

 “It would be nice,” Hedj smiled sadly. “The thing is I’m not sure if we’ll meet again. I didn’t tell her where I work.”

 “But you can find out where she works,” Gine smiled at him. “Nubia spends most of her time at the Golden Nile Agency. You can try your luck there.”

 “You want me to go to meet her at her workplace?” Hedj asked.

 “Not right now,” Gine pointed out. “But you can try to visit her the next time she wins a match or send her a letter.”

 “Today was just supposed to introduce you to Nubia,” Jolo explained. “You don’t have to rush to meet her right away.”

 “Take your time,” Gine advised her. “Watch some of her matches. Get to know her as a Combagal.”

 “But I don’t want to know her as a Combagal,” Hedj protested. “I want to know her as a woman. I want to know her as a person. I want to know her as a Wild. I want to know her as a black jackal. I want to know everything about her.”

 “Guess our number one host just fell in love,” Gine teased, making Jolo laugh.

 “Quiet, you two!” Hedj scolded them.

 “Do you have any plan on how to talk to her?” Jolo asked.

 “Maybe she’s back in Monyan,” Hedj mused. “I can try talking to her after the event.”

 “I suggest that you meet her at Golden Nile,” Jolo suggested. “I don’t think you should start a conversation with your possible soulmate outside of a soapland.”

 “Fair enough,” Hedj sighed and then smiled. “Maybe we can converse in a more casual setting at some point in the future.”

 “To the future then,” Jolo raised a glass.

 “To the future!” Hedj and Gine joined the toast.

 Having vented enough, Hedj finally focused on his meal. Once he was done, he took his poster, returned home. Though his mind told him to wait until tomorrow, the image of Nubia in his head didn’t stop haunting him. Against his better judgment, he got out of his house and returned to Monyan, hoping to meet Nubia along the way.

 It was 7 PM by the time the meet and greet ended. As Eskel predicted, the event was a success for everyone. Nubia got Pop across Tendonchi, reminding them that she was the Sonachi Champion. And her best Combagals also had her own share of Pop as well.

 *Just a few more matches and I can send them to capture the other districts,* Nubia thought with a satisfied smile.

 “Thank you so much for your service, girls,” Eskel congratulated the other Combagals. “The meet-and-greet was a success. Would you like me to return you home?”

 “I’m okay,” Samaria shook her head. “I could use the exercise.”

 To Eskel’s shock, all of them refused to be carried to the limousine. They wanted to travel on foot to maintain their physical fitness.

 “That’s some serious dedication you put into those girls,” Eskel told Nubia.

 “Furry fighting is all about surpassing your limits,” Nubia stated as she started packing the remaining merchandise. “Take the next meet-and-greet in Masato. I want to sell more than we did in Tendonchi.”

 “To be honest, we did sell quite haul,” Eskel pointed out. “All of the remaining merchandise is what we will sell in the other six districts. Besides, Tendonchi is the largest district, so there’s no way that we can get bigger sells in the smaller districts.”

 “We won’t know until we try,” Nubia stated with that confidence that made her look divine.

 “I’ll take care of the packing,” Eskel instructed Nubia. “In the meantime, I want you to enter the limousine and get changed. Put on your casual wear outfit.”

 “Sure,” Nubia nodded and then entered the limousine. She removed her bandages and robes until she was fully naked. Then she put on a special one-piece dress. It exposed her navel and the top of her back. It was a gold colored dress that matched her eyes.

 The black jackal stared at her reflection in the mirror. For some reason, there was something on her face that she didn’t like. She removed her makeup and put it back on again. Then she started brushing the fur of her face until she felt confident with herself.

 “Much better,” Nubia nodded before she got off.

 Since Nubia was only going to use her furry fighting costume and then return to the penthouse at the fourth floor of Golden Nile, she didn’t even bother putting on her high heeled sandals. Instead, she just went barefoot.

 The black jackal, rather than wait inside the limousine, just opened the door and saw Eskel still in the middle of packing. The cat gasped when he stared at her.

 “Is there something wrong?” Nubia asked.

 “Sorry,” Eskel apologized. “You just look beautiful. As if you were going on a date or something.”

 “A date?” Nubia repeated the word as if it offended her. “Don’t be ridiculous. I put on this dress so that I could wear it after the meet-and-greet. I didn’t put it on to impress Hedj since I didn’t know about him at the time.”

 “I didn’t mention Hedj,” Eskel pointed out.

 “You were implying him with that date commentary,” Nubia pointed out.

 *What’s wrong with Nubia?* Hedj thought to himself as he continued packing. *Did meeting a male black jackal affect her thought process?*

 The cat stared at the black jackal. He noticed that her body language was not as regal as it normally was. It looked more insecure compared to her normal poise. And then there was the nervousness in her eyes. He noticed that they weren’t as sharp as they normally were. Something was bothering Nubia.

 “Do I look beautiful, Eskel?” Nubia suddenly asked.

 “You do,” Eskel pointed out. “Why do you ask?”

 “I felt self-conscious when I entered the limousine earlier,” Nubia stated. “This morning, I had no issue with my makeup. I got out of Golden Nile with the same confidence that I always show. But this evening is different. I felt unprepared. I felt sloppy. I actually removed my makeup and put it back on from scratch.”

 “Really?” Eskel asked. “That’s odd. You’re a perfectionist. You’re not the type of woman who doubts herself or thinks that she’s made a mistake.”

 “I know,” Nubia sighed. “And it wasn’t all. I actually brushed my fur again. For some reason, I thought my cheek and head fur looked bad, so I gave it another brush.”

 “That does feel out of character from you,” Eskel pointed out. “You’ve always taken care of your appearance since we met. That was your work when we worked for the sumiguza. And it’s one of your responsibilities when fighting as a Combagal. Is there something that’s bothering you?”

 *I have an idea of what’s bothering her,* Eskel thought. *It’s that black jackal Hedj. But I can’t just point it out. I have to make her admit it with her own words. If I push it, then she will try to deny it.*

Nubia thought of the whole day. Truthfully, she had a lot of fun today. The meet-and-greet was successful. She personally took breaks on the limousine to cool down her fur and groom it to prevent an indecent appearance. The only thing that caused her distress was the appearance of Hedj.

 He was an attractive male of her species. The only male available. And he didn’t know anything about her. Would he be interested in meeting her? Would he like to know her? What if he was superficial? The last thing she needed was to be rejected by the only male she ever met because he didn’t like the idea of a female being stronger than him.

 “Are you okay, Nubia?” Eskel asked.

 “No,” Nubia admitted. “I’m not okay. I haven’t been able to think clearly since I met Hedj. I’ve been self-conscious about meeting another male of my species. How should I treat this encounter? Was it fate or just a coincidence? Should I try to meet him or just ignore him? I don’t know what to do. It’s like my Goddess Eyes have deserted me.”

 *The thing about love is that it’s blind,* Eskel thought with a sigh. *I don’t think that she can use her Goddess Eyes if she’s too infatuated with the person that caught her interest. I better do something to help her back to normal.*

“Would you like me to find out more about Hedj?” Eskel asked.

 “What?” Nubia asked.

 “I have private investigators at my disposal,” Eskel reminded her. “I could ask them to find a black jackal named Hedj who works as a host. They can figure out where he works in a day. Then we just arrange a meeting and that’s it.”

 “I’m a Combagal, Eskel,” Nubia huffed angrily. “I can’t just go to a host club.”

 “You’re not going to date him, Nubia,” Eskel corrected her. “You’re just going to chat to form a bond with him. Talking with a kindred spirit is a good experience. The type of sensation that removes all stress of your body and feels it with energy.”

 “I don’t need you to play matchmaker for me, Eskel,” Nubia dryly remarked. “I can manage my own romantic life.”

 Eskel wanted to remind Nubia that her romantic life was fairly tragic. He wisely chose not to say anything. Instead, he thought about what words to use to make her see reason.

 “Hosts are not always about romance,” Eskel reminded Nubia. “You don’t need to visit him as a female who wants romance. You can talk to him as a person who needs someone to listen to their problems. And he can probably understand how lonely you were when you thought you were the only black jackal who lived in Botaun.”

 Nubia thought about the alternative. In a way, she didn’t want to rush into a relationship with Hedj. Nonetheless, she wanted to meet him as a person. She wanted to see fi she should get close or remain away from him. It was the kind of choice that she couldn’t ignore or she was going to regret not taking it for the rest of her life.

 “I’ll think about it,” Nubia promised.

 “Good,” Eskel finished packing the merchandise into the limousine. “We can discuss this at the Golden Nile. I’ll make the chefs prepare you something good and light so that you can sleep better and think about what to do with Hedj.”

 VRRRRRR!

 The ears of the cat and the jackal stood up when they heard the screeching of wheels. They turned around to see three parked vans. One of them was parked in front of the limousine. The other was parked behind the limousine. And the other on the other on the side. The vans were perfectly parked to ensure that the driver wasn’t going to get out of the parking zone.

 “Oh no,” Nubia muttered in annoyance. “We’re dealing with another sumiguza kidnapping.”

 “Not again,” Eskel lamented. “I’m still recovering from the last one we had years ago.”

 The vans opened to reveal several suited men. Another one stood in front of the van that was pointed at them. His entire body was obscured by headlights. He was staring at some picture that he was holding in his hand. He took a look at the picture, then at Nubia, and then at the picture again, comparing the image that he was holding on his hand with the female in front of him.

 They mysterious figure pointed a finger at Nubia. And then all of the figures of the van started moving to the pair.

 “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Eskel moved in front of Nubia. “I am more than a manager to this Combagal. I have connections with the…ugh!”

 Eskel’s threat died when he was tasered by one of the men.

 “You monsters!” Nubia charged at the men. They all pointed their tasers at her, but she was not afraid. They dared to hurt her manager and friend. She was going to make them pay.

 “Black Sandstorm!” Nubia started sending punches and kicks to the bodies and limbs to the opponents. She aimed side kicks to the stomachs to knock the air out of them. She punched throats to stun them. She kicked down the sides of their knees to cripple them. And she slammed her palms into their noses to drown them in their own blood.

 PEW!

 Nubia felt something hit her leg. She looked down and noticed that it was a sleeping dart. She tried to move away, but she felt her legs getting heavier.

 BBTTTTT!

 The black jackal couldn’t scream as a tasered was jabbed into her back. She felt an intense pulse of energy running through her body, making her fall to the ground.

 “We got her,” one of the men shouted as he grabbed Nubia in her arms and led her inside of the van where the leader was.

 “It’s been a long time since we last saw each other, Nubia,” the leader of the kidnappers spoke from the shadows.

 He took out a syringe and put her on her arm. Nubia knew that he intended to force her to sleep to prevent her from knowing where they were taking her. The black jackal tried to fight back the darkness enveloping her consciousness.

 As she fell into the darkness, she saw the face of a panda. It reminded her of her old boss. The sumiguza who tried to rape her. But there was something odd. It was younger and skinnier. But it held the same hatred and depravity than the panda who used to own her.

 *I can’t fall asleep,* Nubia thought desperately. *I mustn’t let them take me.*

The black jackal bravely fought. She used her strength as a Combagal. She reminded herself that she was a champion. All it did was delay the inevitable for about a minute. Eventually, her thoughts turned groggy. And she fell asleep, not knowing what was going to happen the next time she opened her eyes.

 Hedj was walking alongside the streets of Tendonchi. Though he was one of the few people who worked at day during Tendonchi, Hedj was still familiar with the nightlife there.

 The black jackal surveilled his environment, hoping to find Nubia walking down the streets in case she left Monyan. He was also trying to find a parked golden limousine in case she decided to spend time at a restaurant.

 *I can’t believe it came to this,* Hedj thought with frustration. *I’ve never been that desperate to meet a girl since I feel in love for the first time.*

Hedj sighed, thinking about what he was going to say to Nubia when he saw her again. He couldn’t invite her to go on a date with him. Maybe he could ask her if she knew another black jackal person that she could meet. Maybe with an intermediary, he could find a way to hang out with Nubia without causing her to be weird out.

 “This is hard,” Hedj thought with frustration.

 VRRROOOOMMMMM!

 Hedj turned around and saw that there were three vans driving into the streets. All of them had some sort of strange logo. He seemed to recall seeing it in the past. He took out his phone and checked an app that Jolo invented. It was a symbol and logo library to allow people to figure out what they meant in case they ever felt curious.

 The black jackal was not someone fond of logos, but he promised Jolo that he’d used the app in the future. He checked on the library of logos and searched for it as he made time to reach Nubia.

 He found the golden limousine, making Hedj gulp. He walked slowly towards it, expecting to see Nubia again. His excitement and nervousness turned into horror when he saw Eskel lying down on the floor, twitching and in agony.

 “Hey, are you okay?” Hedj ran to the cat, kneeling down next to him and putting a hand on his back. He felt the cat twitch under his hand.

 *He got tasered,* Hedj concluded, recalling a time when Yuta was forced to use one when the abusive ex-boyfriend of one of his clients made a scene at Golden Airs.

 “Are you okay?” Hedj asked Eskel, feeling concerned by the cat.

 “Nubia,” Eskel muttered, catching Hedj’s attention.

 “What happened to Nubia?” Hedj asked, panic showing on his voice.

 “We were attacked,” Eskel grunted, tears forming on his eyes from the pain and the impotence that he felt at being unable to defend his friend. “The kidnappers…I think they were sumiguza. They looked like them too.”

 “Did they take Nubia?” Hedj asked, feeling something burning on his chest.

 “Yes,” Eskel sounded like he was about to cry. “All that I remember was some logo on their vans as they took her away.”

 Vans with logos. The words made Eskel take out the logo app that Jolo made and then showed it to Eskel. He looked through the logos until he found the logo of the vans that passed near him.

 “Is this the logo of the vans?” Hedj asked him.

 “Yes,” Eskel’s eyes gleamed as he recognized a clue.

 “That’s all the information that I needed,” Hedj stated as he checked on the logo and saw some information about it. “Apparently, the logo belongs to an out of date shop that’s close to here.”

 “Is that where they took Nubia?” Eskel asked.

 “Probably,” Hedj told him. “Give me your phone number right now. I need you to have your phone in hand by the time I call you.”

 “What are you going to do?” Eskel asked Hedj.

 “I’m going to save a Goddess,” Hedj replied.

 The earnestness of his answer made Eskel feel something. The electricity in his body was no longer bothering him. The cat forced himself to stand up as he gave Hedj his phone number.

 Hedj typed Eskel’s phone number on his phone. Having the phone number of his ally, Hedj nodded his head and ran into the night, ready to save Nubia or die trying.

 Nubia woke up an hour later. Her head hurt. Her muscles ached. She couldn’t see anything because of what happened. As she opened and closed her eyes, her vision was blurry. It was going to take about a minute before she adjusted.

 *I can’t believe that I got captured by sumiguza,* Nubia thought angrily. *Not even when I started my career were they able to abduct me. Now that I’m a champion I let them have the glory of taking me down. This is what I get for being insecure. I got sloppy and I’m paying the price now.*

The black jackal closed her eyes and visualized the fight. She imagined the moves that she should have used to face them. Looking back, it was obvious what kind of techniques she should have employed.

 But she didn’t think. And her Goddess Eyes didn’t warn her about the movements of her opponents. It was like she was limited with just normal sight. It was like her Goddess Eyes had been turned off by something. But what could have caused her to act like that?

 “You were really hard to catch,” a voice spoke from the darkness. “I can’t believe that you took down most of my guys on your own. Still, champion or not, there’s no way that a Combagal can take an army of thugs with guns and tasers.”

 *I could have taken you all down if my Goddess Eyes had not forsaken me,* Nubia thought bitterly, disgusted at the cowardice of her assailant.

 “What’s going on?” Nubia demanded as she tried to look into the dark to find out who was talking to her. “Who are you?”

 “Don’t you remember my voice, Nubia?” the man taunted from the dark. “I guess I can’t blame you. It’s been years since we last saw each other. Maybe this will refresh your memory.”

 CLICK!

 The lights turned on. Nubia was able to see. And what she saw made the blood drain from her face as she recognized the man who was speaking to her.

 She recognized the face of her attacker. It was the man who led the kidnapping. It was the man who gave the finishing blow by tranquilizing Nubia with a syringe. But, above all else, he was someone from her past.

 “Sadogan,” Nubia muttered in fright.

 Back when she worked as Hudergan’s eye candy, Nubia had to deal with many indignities. She had to tolerate people eyeing at her as if she was a piece of meat to be eaten. She had to endure people talking about her behind her back as if she was a cheap whore. She had to sit on Hadergan’s lap as if she were a concubine.

 The worst nights were the ones where Hudergan wanted to have lively parties. He invited everyone and had a room full of strippers to dance. Among the many he invited, the one that Nubia recognized the most was Sadogan, the younger brother of her former boss.

 There was an age gap between Hudergan and Sadogan, but it was clear that they were both horny pandas who made her uncomfortable. Even after many years, Sadogan looked the same as he did when they first met, only having a slightly rugged appearance. His face was more similar to his brother than before compared to the cute and jovial face he used to have years ago.

 Though Sadogan was the younger brother of Hudergan, it wasn’t his blood relationship to her former boss that made Nubia remember him. It was the way Sadogan was always putting the moves on her. Even when she was the eye candy of his brother, it didn’t stop him from trying to hit on her, even suggesting his brother to share her.

 The statement revolted her. And Hudergan laughed. She didn’t know if Sadogan was making a joke or if Hudergan was considering sharing her with him. Regardless, Sadogan was one of the many things that made Nubia realize that working with Hudergan was a mistake.

 “What are you doing here, Sadogan?” Nubia demanded angrily.

 “I was just back in the neighborhood after a sabbatical,” Sadogan joked. “I figured I’d swing by for a quick abduction. Gotta say, time and fitness seemed t have made you age like wine in a fine vintage.”

 “And I see that age has made you uglier than you used to be,” Nubia spat back at him.

 “Sharp tongue as ever,” Sadogan joked. “How about you give me a kiss for old times sake? I heard that you’re single now that you left my brother. So how about we do something more than the obligatory cheek kiss? Something with more tongue and teeth.”

 “You pig!” Nubia forced herself to stand up. She was going to walk towards him and pummel him until he let her go. Sadly, she didn’t have the force to continue as she fell on her knees.

 “Is that a no?” Sadogan teased.

 Nubia growled.

 “I’ll take that as a no,” Sadogan rolled his eyes. “Hard to kiss when the electricity and tranquilizers prevent you from moving your body like you want.”

 “What do you want from me?” Nubia stated. “Why did you come back? And why did you attack me and my manager? Answer me!”

 “Never realized how bossy you could be,” Sadogan scoffed as he got a chair and put it in front of her. He then took another chair and sat down in front of Nubia’s chair so that the two of them could converse without any issue. “But I guess that’s what happens when you forget to discipline your woman to just stand there and let a man do the job.”

“As if you or your brother knew how to treat a woman without using your money to buy them or your men to hold them down,” Nubia snarled, making him glared at her with disdain.

“Sit down on this chair so that I can talk to you,” Sadogan ordered with venom in his voice.

Seeing no choice, Nubia walked towards the chair, one step at a time. She used her hands on the top of the chair to balance. She walked around the chair slowly and then she lowered her bottom until she was sitting on it.

“What do you want, Sadogan?” Nubia repeated her question.

“What do I want?” Sadogan mulled the question sarcastically. “Let’s see. My big brother was brutalized by you. And that was the start of a series of unfortunate events that destroyed his life. I wonder what I could possibly want?”

“I heard that your brother was exiled from the sumiguza,” Nubia stated, remembering hearing that news from Ran Shion’s father before the match for the rank two of Sonachi.

“He was,” Sadogan frowned. “And it happened because of you.”

“Hudergan was a bastard,” Nubia snarled back. “I have no regrets about what I did. I wasn’t going to let that man rape me like that. The only thing I regret was not smashing his testicles when I had the chance.”

“Do you even realize what you did when you brutalized my brother?” Sadogan stared hatefully at Nubia.

“Illuminate me,” Nubia challenged him.

“After your assault, Shun Gonfano discovered what happened,” Sadogan trembled, remembering the horrors that his brother faced that day. “He brought Hudergan before the higher ups of the sumiguza. They took your side, telling him that he was a disgrace. They also accused him of laundering funds behind their back.”

“I already know that,” Nubia stated. “That was Eskel’s job. I can’t count how scared Eskel was that the laundering was going to be discovered if he wasn’t careful. He was happy when he no longer had to risk his neck to launder that dirty money.”

“My brother was excommunicated,” Sadogan glared at Nubia. “And he lost one of his wandering eyes as penance for his actions.”

Nubia frowned in sympathy. She hated Hudergan and believed that he deserved what he got and more. But the idea of getting an eye removed was distasteful to Nubia, who didn’t like the idea of eye gouging since she relied on her Goddess Eyes for everything.

CRASH!

With a scream, Sadogan stood up. He grabbed his chair and threw it against the wall, shattering it upon impact. Nubia reflexively closed her eyes as she saw the impact. She had a brief memory of Hudergan screaming when she dared to slap him after he tried to get her in bed with him. That was how the rape attempts started.

Sadogan approached Nubia, who was trembling slightly from the memory. H

“My brother was left with nothing,” Sadogan stalked forward. “His own family-our mother and father-turned their backs on him. They couldn’t stand the sight of him.”

*I’d disown my own son if he ever dared to try to rape and abuse a woman,* Nubia thought bitterly, as she was unable to vocalize her scorn with her trembling body.

“I went behind my parents’s back to stick by my brother,” Sadogan stated. “I tried to cheer him up as best as I could. I was even willing to give up on the sumiguza lifestyle to give him a better life until you happened?”

“What did I do?” Nubia asked. “I never saw Hudergan again after that night.”

“But he did see you,” Sadogan countered. “He saw you rising up to the Sonachi Champion after all the years of misery he endured. Everything that he built was given to you. The sight of you being successful at his expense drove him over the edge. He turned mad…and then he ended his life.”

“Hudergan is dead?” Nubia asked, surprised that her old tormentor was finally gone.

“Yes,” Sadogan sounded defeated. “It took me a while to find the right moment to get you alone. And I finally did it. I thought that it was going to be hard. I thought that it was going to fail. And here you are in spite of everything.”

Nubia remained in her seat for a while. She was processing what Sadogan told her. And then she said the first thing that came into mind.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Nubia offered her condolences. “I can see that you loved your older brother despite his flaws. But I will not apologize for my actions. I defended myself. I endured. I survived. And I thrived. If the situation were to repeat itself, I would do it again.”

WHAM!

Sadogan grabbed Nubia by the throat and forced her to stand up. He then dragged her across the room until she was pinned against a wall. The black jackal couldn’t fight back because of her injured body. She had to endure.

“I don’t want your apology,” Sadogan growled angrily. “I want my brother back.”

“That’s something that you can’t get back,” Nubia choked.

“I’m going to keep you here,” Sadogan grinned evilly. “And I’m going to ransom you for every cent that you owe my brother. And while I wait…” he glided his hand across her thigh, making Nubia groan with disgust. “I will take what I’ve wanted from you for so long.”

WHAM!

The door was knocked open when one of Sadogan’s bodyguards sailed flying from the previous room. And out of the open entrance came up Hedj, who was still neatly dressed. From the outside of the door, the unconscious bodies of the bodyguards could be seen.

“Hedj!” Nubia exclaimed, shocked that the black jackal host when to her rescue.

“Who the hell are you?” Sadogan demanded angrily as he stared at the male jackal.

“My name is Hedj,” the black jackal said as he calmly removed his tie and blazer. He rolled up his sleeves and stared at him with calm fury. “I’m the Top Host of Gold Airs Host Lounge for four consecutive years now. And I’m about to kick your ass.”

Nubia stared at Hedj’s body. Though he had a svelte frame, she could see the hard and toned muscles beneath his shirt. Those weren’t just the muscles of someone who indulged in fitness. They were the muscles of someone who practiced martial arts.

“You think I am scared of some host,” Sadogan dropped Nubia as he stared angrily at Hedj for interrupting him. “I’m a sumiguza. A pretty boy like you has nothing on me.”

“All that I see is some punk who lets his subordinates do the dirty job for him,” Hedj taunted Sadogan.

“You little shit!” Sadogan walked angrily towards Hedj. “I’ll teach you how dangerous a sumiguza can be.”

WOOSH!

Sadogan threw a big swing.

PAM!

Hedj just leaned his upper body back and swung it forward, slamming his fist into Sadogan and making him step back in pain.

“You little bastard,” Sadogan choked angrily.

“You fight like a hooligan,” Hedj chastised him. “With all that money, I expected you to have some martial arts training.”

“I’ll show you martial arts,” Sadogan started throwing a barrage of punches.

WOOSH! WOOSH! WOOSH! WOOSH!

Sadogan tried using boxing punches. As Nubia watched the fight, she noticed that Sadogan’s punches were sloppy. He didn’t know how to relax his body to increase the speed of his jabs. His stance was unbalanced, meaning that he was going to trip if he threw a huge swing. In a way, watching him fight was an embarrassment.

The only plus side was watching Hedj fight. The black jackal was moving with grace, dancing around his opponent as he criticized his technique.

*I never imagined that he was properly trained,* Nubia thought as a smile spread on her face, finding the male to look attractive as he dominated his opponent.

“I’m getting tired of this,” Hedj muttered impatiently.

“Then show me what you can do, punk!” Sadogan demanded angrily.

WHAM!

Hedj said nothing. He preferred to let his actions speak louder than his words. He slammed a side kick into Sadogan’s diaphragm, forcing him to bend.

CRACK!

With blinding speed, Hedj pulled back his kicking leg. He grabbed the bag of Sadogan’s head with his hands and pulled it downwards as he slammed his other leg up. His knee collided with his snout, making a fountain of blood erupt from his wounded nose.

 “Ugh,” Sadogan groaned as he fell to the floor, blood running down his nose. He tried in vain to stand up, but he lacked the strength to do so.

 “Don’t even bother,” Hedj coldly told him as he planted his shoe on Sadogan’s throat. “The police will be there at any minute. I gave Eskel the address of your hideout as soon as I found him. He made the call to the police and told them where they are while I took care of the rescue.”

 “You little bastard,” Sadogan choked angrily. “Do you know what you’re doing? I’m a sumiguza. I can rain down the most lethal retribution on you for this stunt.”

 “Oh sure,” Hedj remarked snidely. “Tell your sumiguza friends that you got beat up by a host. I am sure that will not affect your cred.”

 Sadogan bleached when he noticed the flaw of his revenge plan.

 “And that’s not counting how you went behind their back to kidnap an influential Combagal champion too,” Hedj increased the tension of his shoe on the throat of the panda. “I can imagine how angry they’ll be when you show up on the news.”

 Sadogan was choking louder.

 “You are suffering for what you did tonight,” Hedj grounded Sadogan’s throat. “And if you ever return for Nubia, I can guarantee that I’ll finish the job tonight. Am I made clear?”

 He didn’t get an answer. Sadogan passed out of fear and lack of oxygen.

 Calmly, Hedj got away from Sadogan and approached Nubia.

 “Are you okay?” Hedj asked her.

 “I’m fine,” Nubia replied nervously.

 “Let me help…” Hedj offered his hand.

 “DON’T TOUCH ME!” Nubia shouted, making him flinch back. “Sorry. I…I don’t feel ready to let someone else touch me.”

 “Can you walk?” Hedj asked, understanding that Nubia needed her space.

 “Yes,” Nubia nodded her head.

 “Then let’s leave,” Hedj pointed at the door.

 The two black jackals walked out of the building. Nubia was left stunned when she saw how many bodyguards Hedj defeated on the way there. The male was full of surprises. And that increased her interest on him.

 As soon as they got out of the building, they were surprised to see a bunch of police cars. A bunch of cops came out of the cars and stormed the building.

 “Nubia!” Eskel came out of one of the buildings. “Are you okay? I was worried so much about you. Did they hurt you?”

 “I’m fine,” Nubia put a hand on his shoulder to calm him down.

 “I have the limousine ready,” Eskel told Nubia. “If you want, I can take you to Golden Nile so that you can rest.”

 “You may,” Nubia stated.

 “I am glad that you are safe, Nubia,” Hedj smiled at the female.

 “And I am grateful that you arrived,” Nubia admitted. “How did you find me?”

 “I wanted to talk to you about being a black jackal in Botaun,” Hedj admitted. “You’re the first member of my species that I met in a while. I wanted to talk to you, so I went to Monyan and discovered you were kidnapped. So I searched for you until I found the kidnappers and rescued you.”

 “He saw the vans of the kidnappers and connected the dots when I told him about how you were kidnapped,” Eskel added. “As soon as he heard about it, he used an app to recognize the logos of the vans to find out where they took you.”

 “That was impressive,” Nubia beamed at him.

 “My friend Jolo made the app,” Hedj smiled. “I never thought that I was ever going to use it until now. I am glad that I had it on me.”

 “Say, would you like me to drive you to your apartment?” Nubia asked.

 “It will be my pleasure, Madam Nubia,” Hedj nodded.

 Giving him a grateful smile, Nubia and Eskel lead Hedj into the limousine and drove back to their homes, ready to leave this bad night in the past.

 The following morning, Hedj got a call from Eskel.

 “Good morning, Hedj,” Eskel greeted him during breakfast.

 “Good morning, Eskel,” Hedj replied. “How is Nubia doing?”

 “I slept on her couch to keep guard on her,” Eskel told her. “Need to make sure that she’s not suffering any trauma from this incident. She’s fine so far.”

 “I’m glad she’s okay,” Hedj seemed grateful.

 “Speaking of fine, she wants to talk to you,” Eskel sounded pleased. “She wants you to go to the Golden Nile today. At what time will you be available?”

 “I’ll be available in the afternoon after lunch,” Hedj sounded surprised by the invitation that he was receiving.

 “Good,” Eskel nodded. “Go to the fourth floor to reach Nubia’s penthouse.”

 “I will,” Hedj promised.

 The black jackal male finished his breakfast and went to the host club. He worked diligently for hours until his shift was over. Once he was freed from his duties, he made his way to Golden Nile to meet Nubia.

 As he entered Golden Nile, Hedj caught the attention of the staff, visitors, and clients.

 “Is that a black jackal?”

 “I thought only Goddess Nubia was the only black jackal of Botaun?”

 “Maybe he’s her long-lost brother?”

 *I’m starting to see why the people at the line were so surprised by my appearance at the meet-and-greet event,* Hedj thought as he ignored the comments and made his way up across the building. He climbed the stairs to the third floor and then he took the elevator to the fourth floor.

 Once he reached the penthouse, he was surprised at how classy her home was.

 *I knew Nubia was a celebrity with great taste, but I never imagined she lived in such luxury,* Hedj thought with awe as he admired the architecture of the place.

 “What do you think of the place?” Nubia asked as she approached Hedj.

 “You live in a palace,” Hedj remarked.

 “I had a hard life before, so I want to make up with it via luxury,” Nubia admitted. “I got all of this through my hard work, I hope you like it.”

 “I do,” Hedj nodded. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

 “Can you tell me where you come from?” Nubia asked. “I want to know more about the other black jackal of Botaun.”

 “My grandfather raised me and passed away two years ago,” Hedj frowned sadly. “Sadly, it’s just been me since then.”

 “So you’re alone in this world, working as a host,” Nubia observed.

 “I’m not alone,” Hedj shook his head. “I have a good boss and many friends. But I feel that there’s something that I am missing.”

 “How are the wages of your job?” Nubia inquired.

 “The stand and the clientele are good,” Hedj admitted, feeling grateful of his host job. “But I could stand to make a better living and move to a bigger apartment.”

 “Good,” Nubia smiled as she left for a minute and returned with a contract. “Then how about you take a part job working as my personal assistant?”

 “You want me to be your personal assistant?” Hedj asked, shocked by Nubia’s petition.

 “Yes,” Nubia stated. “Consider it a thank you for saving my life.”

 “What kind of work am I expected to do?” Hedj started reading the contract despite his confusion, tempted to sign without reading it.

 “Your duties is to cater to my needs when Eskel is unavailable,” Nubia explained. “You will act on the instructions given to me should I be busy. You will provide additional protection in signing events to prevent another kidnapping. And you will act on my stead should Eskel and I will be unavailable.”

 “Sounds like a good job,” Hedj smiled as he now was interested in finishing the paperwork. “Any other thing I should know.”

 “You may have pull with me, but Eskel still outranks you,” Nubia clarified him. “He’s been my manager and best friend for years, so don’t assume the personal assistant job will get you special privileges over him.”

 “Sounds like a job with many responsibilities,” Hedj pointed out. “Being the personal assistant of a champion Combagal sounds like hard work.”

 “You will be compensated handsomely for your services,” Nubia stared at him in the eye.

 Hedj stared back. Golden eyes met cobalt eyes. As they gazed each other, Hedj could see that there was interest and conviction in her gaze. She wanted him to stay. She wasn’t going to let him leave like that. And, above all else, she wanted to know him the same way the he wanted to know her.

 “I’ll accept,” Hedj smiled as he started signing the forms.

 “Then welcome to Golden Nile, Hedj,” Nubia smiled at him with genuine happiness. “I look forward to having you by my side.”