

## **Greatest 201**

### **Chapter 201 - Merrymaking Time I**

After the chat with Coach Johansen, the night proceeded in a way Zachary could not have envisioned. It all started with Mikael and Nicki suggesting that the team check out another happening place to continue having a good time right after the coaches' departure. At the urging of the majority, Zachary and a few other teammates that were initially against the idea, of course, went with the flow. That marked the start of a wild night.

After coming to a consensus, the squad made quick work of the remaining slices of pizza. They finished eating within fifteen minutes and headed to a more popular pub called Familien on the team bus.

On reaching there, Zachary was surprised by the long queue they encountered at the entrance. It was a dazzling sight, beginning at the entrance and extending in one long stretch all the way to the far boundary of another block. Zachary was about to suggest finding another place rather than waiting in line to enter the pub. It seemed like a good excuse for him to ditch his peers and head back to his apartment to grab some sleep. Despite agreeing to check out the pub, he still had reservations about partying immediately after a match.

But, unfortunately for him, both the bouncers and the people waiting in line recognized that it was the Rosenberg squad that'd just arrived almost immediately. What followed were a few moments of turbulent excitement at the entrance of the Familien Pub. And Zachary could no longer escape.

"Shalalalala Oh Rosenberg... Shalalalala Oh Rosenberg..."

"Zachary, nice play in today's game..."

"Nicki, nice goal..."

Among the party-goers in the long line, there seemed to be a good number of Rosenberg fans. Those fans soon started chorusing Rosenberg's victory chants and yelling out the names of some of the players. Some even decided to leave their places in line to get closer to Zachary and his teammates. It became increasingly chaotic at the front of the bar to the point that the bouncers had to wave Zachary and company—inside right away—to prevent the situation from escalating. The bouncers didn't even ask for identity cards before letting them through the entrance.

"Did you guys notice that Zachary was with the group of Rosenborg players that just entered?" A short black young man close to the back of the queue at the Familien Pub entrance asked his two counterparts. He was Kasongo Paul, and with him were the two brothers, Paul and Kendrick Otterson, all Zachary's former flatmates and teammates back in the academy.

"I think that was him, certainly." Paul Otterson responded, his voice tinged with astonishment. "That tall frame that looms above everyone else, plus his Afro hair and brown skin—that's Zachary."

"Did the sun set in the East today?" Kendrick asked, smiling. "How is it that Zachary is at a nightclub? That's a miracle in itself."

"My thoughts exactly," Kasongo replied, grinning. "He must be super excited after scoring that hat-trick. Maybe that's why he's out to celebrate tonight."

"I doubt that," Kendrick said, shaking his head. "Zachary is the sort of person who would celebrate his hat-trick by adding more hours to his training sessions. He wouldn't go to a nightclub just because he managed to bag three goals in a match. It has never happened before. I'm pretty sure he would rather be doing yoga right now instead of being here at Familien."

"Have you forgotten there'll be a break in the Tippeligaen fixtures for the next few weeks," Kasongo said. "Since he's got a lot of free time on his hands, maybe he decided to celebrate with his teammates."

"Or maybe, he's here for a girl," Paul chimed in, grinning like a rogue. "Hot girls are the only thing that can make intense players like him break their habits."

"Zachary here for a girl!" Kendrick said, giving his brother an arch look. "That's even more unlikely."

The others laughed at that.

"So, do you guys think we should change places since he's already inside?" Paul Otterson queried, furrowing his brow.

"Why?" Both Kendrik and Kasongo asked, fixing their gazes on him.

"Of course, to avoid him, silly," Paul replied, shaking his head. "If we run into him here, he may start lecturing us on how we're ignoring our own training and instead choosing to club all the time? So, I suggest that we find another place for today."

The other two fell silent for a moment, seemingly giving earnest thought to Paul Otterson's proposal as the queue at the pub entrance continued moving forward.

The three of them had just made it onto the under-19 team two days prior. They'd decided to go out and celebrate that Saturday. But they didn't expect to come across the Rosenborg senior team, which had just played an away game against V?lerenga in Oslo only a few hours prior.

Moreover, Zachary, their former captain, who they had also taken as a role model, was among the players that'd just entered the club. Since they didn't want to come off as party-goers neglecting their duties as athletes, they were considering switching to another discotheque like Downtown or Studentersamfundet to avoid running into him.

"So, guys," Paul Otterson said after a while. "What do you think? Should we go somewhere else? You guys need to decide quickly because the line is moving forward fast."

"Nah," Kasongo replied, smiling and shaking his head after a while. "After giving it some thought, I don't think we should change places. Moreover, I'm sure Zachary won't judge us solely based on our going into a club to celebrate our advancement to the under-19 team. Instead, he'll be happy for us and might buy us a few drinks."

"I think so too," Kendrick echoed. "Avoiding a friend just because we don't want him to think badly of us is simply childish. We should instead be looking forward to seeing him when we get inside. It has really been long since we last saw him."

"Okay, then," Paul said, sighing. "But if he asks whose idea it was for us to come here, we shall all say Kasongo. We have to agree on that, at the very least."

"Relax," Kendrick said, patting his brother's shoulder. "He isn't our coach. So, will you cut down on the pressure and relax?"

"Guys," Kasongo said from in front of them. "It's almost our turn to enter. Get ready."

"Okay."

"Okay."

## Chapter 202 - Merrymaking Time II

Immediately after setting foot within the Familien Pub, Zachary's eyes widened in wonderment as he was encompassed by the vibrant mood within. There were hundreds of conversations going on in loud voices, each competing with the pop-electronic music that dominated the atmosphere. Everyone inside was swimming in the music like happy rainbow fish. For a few moments, Zachary stood close to the entrance, transfixed by the scene before him.

"Come on, Zachary," Nicki yelled, trying to make himself heard over the loud music. "Don't just stand there. Let's find some seats and get this night started by ordering some drinks."

Zachary nodded and followed after him, his physique helping him push through the thick crowd with little effort. He concluded that the DJ for that night was at the top of his game. She/he, whoever it was, was doing a good job mixing records — based on the vibrancy of the crowd. A good number of people, including beautiful girls in skimpy clothing, were already on the dance floor, wriggling their bodies to the rhythm of the electrifying beats.

As Zachary moved through the crowd of party animals — following after his teammates, he noticed that there were even a few couples that'd already melted into each other's arms. Despite it being so early in the night, they rocked their bodies against each other, performing dances that were clearly not safe for viewing by anyone below eighteen. They were enjoying themselves and didn't give a damn about anyone around them.

"Well," Nicki yelled again from in front of him once more. "We're quite lucky. It seems Mikael already instructed the staff to save us some seats in the corner. Let's head there."

A minute later, the whole entourage of players took up more than five tables at one end of the pub. Everyone started to order drinks, and Zachary followed suit by ordering a non-alcoholic cocktail. And as part of his initiation ritual, he ended up being the one to cover the entire bill for the team.

It wasn't much since he had more than 5 million Norwegian Kroner in his account from just the Audi endorsement deal. So, he didn't even flinch in the slightest as he swiped his card and ended up spending more than 10,000 NOK just a few minutes into the night.

Immediately after that, his teammates applauded him and mouthed out-of-sync welcomes to the Troll Kid family. They toasted to his hat-trick against V?lerenga before downing their drinks. That was how they started the festivities for the night with a bang.

In the beginning, Zachary thought he would be bored and end up leaving early. But then, the DJ continued doing a good job, so he remained seated, swaying his head from side to side, and immersed himself into the captivating music. As the minutes clocked by, the sounds of the crowd become part of the happy center of his brain, reaching in and pulling out the joy within him. He enjoyed the vibrant atmosphere of the place for sure while occasionally sipping on his non-alcoholic cocktail and observing the people going crazy on the dance floor. It was a refreshing adventure for him to experience the nightlife of Trondheim.

An hour into the night, a few brave girls approached their tables and then started warming up to some of the players. Most of the players responded with positive attitudes to the advances of the beautiful girls. Some got up and headed to the dance floor, accompanied by their new acquaintances of the fairer sex. However, Zachary remained seated as the straightforwardness of the party-going girls was a very new concept to him. Their ferociousness in flirting with his teammates was beyond what he would categorize as sane.

Occasionally, his ears would pick up phrases like: "Dear! Should we leave this place and go get wild somewhere private?" That made him uncomfortable, and he kept on rejecting their advances, choosing to remain a spectator for the night.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

Zachary felt his phone vibrate as he was still seated, observing the party-goers around him. He fished it out of his jacket pocket and glanced at the screen. He was surprised after noticing that it was Kasongo who had sent him a message.

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'Hello, Zach,' the message from Kasongo read, 'Where are you at the moment?'

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'Why are you asking?' Zachary typed a reply, glancing around. 'Are you also at Familien? It's quite weird that you're sending me a text right at this time.'

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'Hehehe!' Kasongo replied almost immediately. 'Good guess. Look to your left, across the dance floor, towards the DJ's Booth. You'll be able to see us there. Come, find us there coz the bouncers have stopped us on multiple occasions from approaching your table.'

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'Okay! Just wait a moment. I'll be there.'

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Immediately after typing the response, Zachary stood up and excused himself from his teammates. He pushed through the crowd on the dance floor and trekked towards the DJ's booth, where he found Kasongo and the Otterson brothers waiting.

"Hello, Zach," Kasongo was the first to greet him. "Congratulations on scoring your first hat-trick today."

"Thank you, Kasongo," Zachary replied, patting the short guy's back. "How are you guys doing?"

"We're doing okay," Kasongo replied, grinning.

"And you, Paul, Kendrick!" Zachary said, turning towards the Otterson brothers. "You seem abnormally quiet! What's the matter?"

"We're fine," Paul said, smiling at Zachary. "But man! You have grown way too tall. You're almost double the height of our friend here." He added, patting Kasongo's back.

"I eat well," Zachary replied, grinning. "But aren't you guys supposed to be having an academy training session tomorrow since it will be a Sunday? Why are you here instead of resting to prepare for the session?"

The three friends exchanged glances and smiled on hearing Zachary's question.

"Guess what!" Kendrick was the one to reply after a short while. "We're no longer academy students. We got promoted to the under-19 team just this week. So, we're budding professionals now."

"Oh," Zachary said, smiling. "I guess congratulations are in order then."

"Thank you," the three fellows replied, more or less in unison.

"So, when do you start playing the under-19 league?" Zachary probed. "I would love to come and watch your debut game."

"Our first game is in two weeks," Kasongo replied excitedly. "It would be great if you could come."

"Too bad," Zachary said, shaking his head. "I'll still be in Congo by then. So, I won't be able to watch your game."

"You're heading back to Congo during the break!" Kasongo exclaimed, eyeing Zachary with surprise.

"Yes, of course," Zachary replied matter-of-factly. "Why do you seem bewildered? Does my going back surprise you that much?"

"That's because you've never desired to return ever since arriving here in Trondheim," Kasongo countered, grinning. "I almost thought that you were thinking about changing your citizenship status and becoming a Norwegian resident for good."

"Stop joking," Zachary said, shaking his head. "Guys! Do you think we should settle down somewhere before continuing our chat?"

"My thoughts exactly," Paul chimed in. "Let's get ourselves some seats. Zachary! Maybe, you can also buy us drinks to celebrate our reunion. This is the first time we've seen you since you started playing professionally."

"That's okay," Zachary replied, looking around. "As long as it isn't anything alcoholic, you're free to order whatever you want. I'll meet the cost."

"Great," Paul said, rubbing his hands excitedly. "Let's try to get ourselves some seats."

"Maybe, you should return with me to my former table," Zachary suggested, glancing around. He'd already noticed that almost no free tables around the whole pub. So, it would be hard for them to find a seat at that time of the night. "I can see that the section reserved for the Rosenborg players is the only section of the pub with a bit of breathing space."

"That's a no," Kendrick responded, shaking his head. "We'll only embarrass ourselves if we try to get near your table. Haven't you noticed that aside from the bouncers, waitresses, and a select few beautiful girls, there's no one else that can approach your tables?"

"Now that you mention it, that seems to be the case," Zachary said, glancing around. "Let's squeeze ourselves somewhere there." He added, pointing to the tables just beside the DJ's booth.



"That's okay."

They immediately headed over to the table closest to them. Without any problems, they managed to acquire some seats and order some non-alcoholic drinks soon after.

"So, how are you finding life as a pro, Zachary?" Kendrick asked after a while. "Is the training as hectic as that in the academy?"

Zachary smiled, placing down his glass on the table. "I wouldn't say that training is more hectic. The team training sessions only last a few hours and are shorter than those we used to go through at the academy. But after the team sessions, most of the players go through their own personalized training to maintain their fitness. Some even have their private coaches to help them train. So, they will end up doing significantly more work than what the average academy player is used to."

"Oh, that's interesting," Kendrick said after taking a sip from his glass of non-alcoholic wine. "So, one has got to be self-motivated to survive at the pro-stage, then."

"Exactly," Zachary replied, nodding. "You can't depend solely on the team sessions to keep yourself fit. Those aren't enough to keep any player in top match condition. Since you three have become pros, you've got to endeavor to work hard by yourself during your free time. Otherwise, you'll lose your fitness and drop out of the squad only after a few weeks. The competition among the pros is quite fierce."

#### Chapter 203 - Running Into An Acquaintance

"Zachary," Kasongo chimed in, yelling a bit to make himself heard over the loud music. "Will you be playing the World Cup qualifiers for our home country?"

"I don't know yet," Zachary replied, shaking his head. "The coaches haven't yet contacted me. So, I guess I might not be on the squad."

"What!" His three friends exclaimed, eyes widening.

"If you're not on the squad, then who is?" Paul said, shaking his head. "If it so happens that they don't invite you by the end of this month, you can think about changing citizenship and playing for Sweden. I'm sure our coaches there will welcome you with open arms." He added jokingly.

"Paul," Kasongo said, punching the Swede lightly on the shoulder. "You do love yourself a lot. You're even starting to poach my country's players even when you're not yet on the Swedish squad."

"But it's a viable proposition," Paul said, grinning. "Since he hasn't officially played for DR Congo, he can successfully change citizenship. Moreover, that'll increase his chances of winning the World Cup and other international competitions later. That way, he'll cement his status as a great player."

"And who says that Zachary can't win the World Cup with DR Congo?" Kasongo countered, frowning a bit. "For your information, we do have a good number of players playing in Belgium, France, Turkey, and other top leagues in Europe. So, winning the World Cup is not an incomplete impossibility."

"Hahaha," Paul laughed and took a sip on his drink. "That is surely almost an impossibility. If I might ask, when did Congo last qualify for the World Cup?"

"1974," Kasongo replied.

"You see," Paul said, shaking his head. "That's way before we were even born. I've got nothing against your home country. But I'm just being realistic here and saying that it will be hard for your national team to qualify for World Cup. It'll be even much harder to put up good performances in the competition if they do qualify. A team like that would hold back Zachary's rise to the top of skilled footballers if he committed himself to play for them. Do you see my point?"

"Nothing is ever set in stone," Kasongo intoned, sighing. "You never know. Maybe, Zachary's participation might be the spark that lights the way for DRC's ascent to the top rankings of the football world. Do you remember Senegal's first participation at the World Cup in 2002? The Senegalese managed to reach the knock-out stages after defeating France, the reigning champions, in the group stages. They then went on—to beat Sweden, your home country, in the round of sixteen and managed to qualify for the quarter-finals. In the quarter-finals, they managed to put up a good performance. Turkey only managed to defeat them after scoring a golden goal during extra time. So, who says teams new to the World Cup can't put up proper performances? Senegal is a good example of a team that was only a few minutes from reaching the semi-finals on its first appearance."

"Had they qualified, they would have come across either Brazil or Germany," Paul Otterson observed. "They would have still gotten eliminated, nonetheless. So, they had no chances of winning the World Cup."

"Then, let me remind you of another example," Kasongo said, placing his glass back on the table. "Do you remember the Greece team in the Euros of 2004? The Greeks managed to defeat big teams like France and Portugal to emerge as European champions after the tournament."

"That was a once in a century occurrence," Paul countered. "Moreover, Greece was a well-known competitor in the football world. It wasn't obscure like your home country."

"When will you, guys, stop discussing this issue?" Kendrick chipped in before Kasongo could reply. "Moreover, I doubt that whatever you two say will influence whether Zachary will play for his home country or not. So, you're boring us with the topic."

"Well said," Zachary added, leaning closer to his three friends and lowering his voice. "This is a sensitive topic that we shouldn't be discussing in a bar. If we're not careful, the sports headlines for most blogs tomorrow may turn out to be something like: 'Zachary to abandon his home country as he searches for better prospects to win the World Cup.' I really wouldn't want to handle the backlash from that sort of news, especially when I'm about to return to Congo."

"Oh," Paul said, smiling sheepishly and scratching at his chin. "Sorry. Please forgive us for being so inconsiderate. But please do consider my proposition if you wish to contest for the World Cup."

"You're still as playful as ever, Paul," Zachary said, shaking his head. "Anyway, since you guys have graduated from the academy, where are you planning to live now? Have you searched for apartments yet?"

"Not yet," Kendrick replied. "But we'll start looking for one next week since SIT has already informed us to vacate our Moholt apartment by the end of June."

"So, you guys will continue living together, or you're thinking of getting separate apartments?"

"Of course, we'll continue living together for the time being," Kendrick responded. "Our wages aren't that much to warrant us to rent individual apartments. So, we have to continue sharing until we rise to the senior team. I do hope that that will be soon."

"Don't fret," Zachary said, smiling at him. "As long as you continue working hard, you'll make it to the senior team in at most a year. I've confidence in all your skills."

"Thank you," Kendrick replied, grinning. "So, we were all wondering how you ended up coming here. I would have never pictured coming across you in a pub."

Zachary sighed, shaking his head. He went ahead to tell his friends the entire series of events that led to his arrival at the Familien Pub. After that, they continued making small talk, discussing mainly sports until it was almost 2:00 AM in the night. By then, Zachary was feeling quite tired and starting to doze. So, he was about to excuse himself and head back home to rest for the night. But then he felt a slight tap on his shoulder.

"Hello, Zachary," a sweet feminine voice, colored by a Russian accent, said from over his shoulder. "Long time no see. How have you been?"

Zachary winced slightly despite himself after hearing that voice.

"Oh, my!" Paul Otterson whispered from across the table. "What a hot lady! Zachary, how did you manage to get acquainted with such a beauty?"

"Don't be rude, Paul," Kendrick chipped in, slapping his brother's back. "She can hear you, silly." But he also kept on stealing glances at the girl standing over Zachary's shoulder.

Zachary ignored his friends' reactions and slowly turned his head around while maintaining a polite smile on his face. He felt his heart start to race when his gaze settled on a perfect oval face adorned by the most captivating eyes he'd ever seen in both his lifetimes. They were emerald-green and seemed to brighten the entire pub when he gazed into them. [What a beauty!] Zachary sighed inwardly, standing up from his seat to greet the lady he'd last seen at the Audi showroom at Møller Bil Trondheim.

For the first time, he couldn't help but become conscious of the fact that she was surprisingly tall for a woman. Her lean body stood almost at shoulder-level with him—giving rise to an enchanting figure that could rival that of any supermodel out there. She was the true definition of flawless beauty in her short black party dress.

"Hello, Camilla," Zachary said, going into porker face mode right away. "I've been well. What about you?"

"Sad and feeling less confident about myself these days," Camilla replied, pouting a bit and giving him a one-armed hug.

"Why?" Zachary queried, deciding on going with the flow and returning the hug.

"You took my number, but you didn't even send me a text—not even once," Camilla said, leaning closer into Zachary. "Am I that unappealing that I totally failed to catch your interest? Why didn't you keep in touch?"

"Have been busy," Zachary chose to go with the age-old excuse. "The training at the professional level doesn't leave me with much time to do anything else. For instance, last year, I ended up forgetting my birthday because my schedule was too hectic."

Camilla chuckled at that. "But now your schedule should have freed up since you're going on a break," she said, her face blossoming into a charming smile. "So, would you like to share a drink with me? We can find a table and maybe even catch up on some business. You know, I'm supposed to be your contact person with Audi. Or have you already forgotten?"

"I would love to have a drink with you," Zachary said, smiling wryly. "But the problem is I'm with my friends right now. So, I can't abandon them and leave with you at the moment."

"Zachary," Paul Otterson's voice called out to him as soon as he'd just finished voicing the excuse. "Some of our teammates are here, and they're calling us to join them right now. So, we have to leave you for now. But since you have company, I hope you won't mind that."

"You're leaving now?" Zachary said, turning away from Camilla to face his three 'unreliable' friends.

"Yes, we've got to go," Kasongo hurriedly replied, grinning. "Hello, there," He added, ignoring Zachary's frown and waving to Camilla.

"Hello there, guys," Camila replied, waving back at them. "So, you're Zachary's friends. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all ours," Paul Otterson quickly chimed in, bowing slightly at the waist. "But I'm afraid we can't get better acquainted since we have to leave right away."

"Oh, too bad," Camilla said, tone regretful. "I would have loved to interact more with Zachary's friends. But since you've got to leave, I guess that can't be helped."

"Well, then, Zachary," Kasongo cut in. "We've got to say our goodbyes now. We shall talk tomorrow." He added. The three of them stepped away from the table and disappeared within the crowd a few seconds later.

"So, can we get ourselves some seats and have that drink?" Camilla probed, hooking her arm with that of Zachary's. "I would like to get to know you better."

Zachary sighed in resignation, blaming his situation at that moment on his friends who'd abandoned him at the first sign of trouble. "Okay. Let's find ourselves some seats," he said after a short while. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Great," Camilla said, leaning closer into Zachary as the DJ started playing 'I Need Your Love' — a recently-released catchy song by Calvin Harris and Ellie Goulding.

## Chapter 204 - Relaxing

After buying Camilla a drink, Zachary was surprised to find out she was fun and easy-going. That wasn't typical of other gorgeous girls he had ever met. She was very proactive throughout the evening and dictated the entire flow of conversation. Her personality was charming. She kept initiating discussions about different topics and kept the atmosphere lively.

They talked about almost everything, including sports, endorsement deals, the business world, and life in general. They occasionally whispered sweet nothings to each other while enjoying the catchy music blaring on the speakers. Time flew as they spiraled deeper into their own world and kept the

conversation flowing like water. A while later, they headed to the dance floor and got wild – their bodies swaying in sync with the beats of the viral hits the DJ was playing.

It was a refreshing experience for Zachary. He simply enjoyed himself and forgot about his hectic daily life. But, the very idea of diverting himself from his career also scared him. He was momentarily struck with the fear that he would fall back into old habits of his previous life if he got too used to having fun. But a while later, he reckoned that enjoying himself for a single night wouldn't hurt his progress as an athlete by a great deal. So, for the first time in a long while, he totally let loose and surrendered himself to the ecstasy of the Trondheim nightlife in the company of a beautiful lady.

When it was close to clocking 3:00 AM, Camilla hinted she was tired and wanted to leave. Zachary immediately offered to escort her out of the bar. He, too, was feeling exhausted after the long day and hoped to head back home and rest for the night.

But circumstances spiraled out of his control right after they stepped out of the pub. Camilla became even more straightforward in her advances. He quickly discovered he didn't have the willpower to resist the allure of a dazzling, charming beauty throwing herself at him.

Since he was but a normal man, he, of course, slipped. Very soon, he was at the mercy of her whims.

One thing led to another, and soon, the two of them were making love on the king-sized bed in Zachary's apartment. It was an intense session with very few words exchanged between them. But Zachary enjoyed it nonetheless. He immersed himself in the intimacy and only ended up getting to sleep close to 4:45 in the morning.

"Dingdingdingdingding! Dingding!"

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"

A chaotic blend of the persistent ringing of the doorbell, intermingled with vibration from his phone, roused Zachary from deep slumber a few hours later.

He awoke suddenly, every thought in high definition. His eyes took in every ray of light from the morning sun. Without a doubt, he knew he'd slept a lot longer than he'd initially intended. His ears could already pick up the bustling noises of the city's inhabitants getting on with their day outside. The clamor beyond the walls of his apartment was already in full swing, traffic seemingly heavy on the roads.

He propped himself up using his elbow and cast his eyes upon the lean and alluring figure lying beside him, covered only by a white silk bed sheet. For a moment, the scenes from the previous night replayed through his mind as he admired the well-proportioned outline that could easily tempt the most steadfast of men. He couldn't help but smile. He had really enjoyed Camilla's company.

"Dingdingdingdingding! Dingding!"

But the next moment, the doorbell began ringing once more, breaking him out of his reverie.

"Who is that ringing the doorbell so persistently so early in the morning?" He heard Camilla ask from beside him, her words colored by her delightful exotic accent. "Are you expecting company this early?" She stretched and shifted like a lazy cat beside him. In the process, the bedsheet covering her slipped slightly to the side — and a shy fraction of the alluring figure beneath came into full view under the morning light in the room.

Zachary felt his heart starting to race, his imagination running wild, as he took in the morning optical nutrition. His body started reacting as it should. He even forgot to respond to Camilla's question as more scenes from the previous night began flooding his thought process.

"Should we just ignore the doorbell and continue where we left off last night?" Camilla probed, batting her eyelashes after noticing his gaze. "Whoever's at the door will surely go away after a few minutes. So, we don't have to mind them."

"No, we can't do that," Zachary responded, shaking his head and forcing his eyes away from Camilla's captivating frame. He'd just recalled that he was supposed to be traveling to Bergen with Kristin to visit her granddad. So, most likely, rather than not, it was Kristin that had been ringing the bell repeatedly. So, he couldn't just keep on ignoring it.

"Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!"



That time around, it was his phone that began vibrating once again. He acted immediately by jumping out of bed and wrapping a towel around his waist. He immediately started searching for it. He checked every pocket of the clothes he'd thrown haphazardly across the floor the previous night in the throes of passion. A few seconds later, he managed to find it in one of the pockets of his leather jacket. After glancing at the screen, he couldn't help but smile wryly and shake his head when he confirmed that it was indeed Kristin calling.

"Excuse me for a moment," he said, glancing over at Camilla. "I need to take this right now."

"The caller seems really persistent," Camilla said, giving him an arch look. "Could that be your girlfriend calling?"

"Of course not," Zachary replied matter-of-factly. "If I had a girlfriend, I wouldn't be here with you. It's just a friend that I had an appointment with this morning. So, I have to take the call." He added before walking out of the room and leaving Camilla to her own devices. He firmly closed the door behind him before pressing the accept button.

#### Chapter 205 - The AI's Suggestion I

"Hello Kristin," Zachary spoke into the phone as he walked into his living room. "How is your morning?"

"My morning is terrible," Kristin was quick to reply in a flat voice. "We are supposed to be traveling to Bergen together today. Why haven't you been answering your phone or even your doorbell?"

"Are you still at my door?"

"No. I returned to my apartment when you didn't answer the door. I was about to try contacting your agent as I thought that something was wrong with you."

Zachary winced slightly on hearing that. "Sorry," he said, tone apologetic. "I went to bed so late the previous night after spending some time at a get-together arranged by my teammates. So, I was still in deep slumber and couldn't hear my phone vibrating. If you hadn't rung my doorbell, I would still be sleeping."

"So, has the plan changed?" Kristin probed, sounding frustrated at the other end of the line.

"Not at all," Zachary replied hurriedly. "We're still heading to Bergen today. But that will have to be a bit later so that I can first prepare a few things. And to make it up to you and apologize for the inconvenience caused, I'll pay for our plane tickets."

"So, what time should we be leaving, then?"

Zachary first cast a glance at the clock hanging on his wall and noticed that it was just 9:13 AM. "I would suggest we depart for the airport at midday. That way, we can be on the 1 o'clock flight and be in Bergen by 2:15 in the afternoon."

"And how long will you be spending in Bergen then?"

"I can spend the night there," Zachary replied. "That is if your grandpa wishes for me to stay longer."

"Then, that's perfect," Kristin said, her voice finally regaining its usual warmth. "We shall go with your plan. But this time, let it be midday, please. Don't be late. Okay?"

"Okay," Zachary confirmed. "I'll start preparing right away so that we can leave at midday. Sorry once again for the inconvenience caused."

"Then see you a few minutes to midday," Kristin said. "And goodbye." She then cut off the call.

"DING"

A system notification sounded within Zachary's mind as soon as he finished removing his smartphone from beside his ear. He couldn't help but do a double-take on noticing the translucent bluish system screen manifesting before him. His heart immediately started racing with growing anxiety. Without any dilly-dallying, he immediately wheeled around to cast a glance towards the bedroom door. He only let out a pent-up breath of air and relaxed after noticing that the door was still firmly locked into place.

"The user doesn't have to worry," the system AI intoned, seemingly deducing what was on his mind. "There isn't any other party paying attention to the user at this very moment — that is whether by utilizing conventional or supernatural spying methods."

"Are you sure?" Zachary queried, stealing one more glance at the door to his bedroom.

"Of course, the system is sure," the AI said in its apathetic feminine voice. "There isn't any entity spying on this living room at the moment. That's unless the other party is omniscient."

"Okay, then," Zachary said, finally fully relaxing.

Ever since playing the Riga Cup back in Latvia, his base instincts had always been screaming at him not to let any other soul know about the system. Because of that, he'd grown paranoid with time. He was sure that any slight exposure of the system's functions would bring him endless trouble. It might even lead to his end since the system products like the elixirs were miracles that would surely elicit greed from endless parties.

That was why he'd resolved to never summon the interface when in the presence of another soul. That's even if the other party was his closest relative. Only by doing that would he keep himself safe and keep the system a secret throughout his football career.

"Does the user wish to listen to the new notifications now?" the AI questioned after a while. "Or does the user wish to wait until he's totally alone?"

"Please go ahead and bring up the notifications," Zachary replied, walking towards the large window and drawing the curtains to let some light into his living room. Since it was almost the official start of summer, the morning sunlight was quite bright. Zachary couldn't help but smile as the beautiful radiance accompanying the change of seasons warmed his skin.

"Congratulations," the AI's responded after a short while. "The user has managed to complete two hidden system missions. One: the user has finally bagged a hat-trick for the first time—ever at the professional stage. Two: the user has managed to raise his X-factor to the A-grading for the first time in his career."

"The user has thus earned 1000 Juju-points and a 1-month dosage of B-grade physical conditioning elixir," the AI continued after a slight pause. "The user should continue putting up more incredible performances to unlock more hidden missions."

"Oh," Zachary exclaimed inwardly, feeling his mood becoming much brighter all of a sudden. "My X-factor has finally broken into the A-grading. System AI, please bring up the data for my X-factor stats."

"DING"

"Command received," the AI intoned. "X-factor stats coming up on the interface right away."

Zachary turned his gaze away from observing the outside scenery through his window to focus on the translucent bluish screen before him.

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#### USER STATS

-> X-Factor (Av. Rating: A-)

Consistency Factor: A+

Luck Factor: A-

Supernormal Factor: D+

Match Winning Factor: S-

\*\*\*\*

Zachary smiled on noticing that his Match Winning Factor had broken through to the S-grading. The high grading for that specific stat indicated that he'd performed excellently during his past few matches. That was proof enough he was on the right track to becoming a great player.

However, he also hoped his supernormal factor would likewise breakthrough into a higher grading soon. That would unlock more abilities and enhance his effectiveness when on the field of play.

"System," he communicated to the AI mentally so that Camilla, who was next door, wouldn't overhear him. "Aside from elixirs, are there any other methods I can use to improve my supernormal factor and unlock the zone ability quickly?"

"There is one method that the user can try," the AI replied, its apathetic voice sounding directly within Zachary's mind. "But it will require the user to face extreme risk."

"There is!" Zachary exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. "Which one is that?"

"The user can try placing himself into extremely—dangerous situations repeatedly," the AI responded. "That will induce an adrenaline rush through the user's body system. If lucky, there's a chance that that will trigger the unlocking of the zone ability."

"You mean like constantly placing myself in life-threatening danger?"

#### Chapter 206 - The AI's Suggestion II

"Exactly," said the AI. "One way to go about it is by trying out extreme sports. A person doing those sorts of sports cannot afford to make even a single mistake. For that very reason, that individual's mind will be in a very highly focused state to establish total control over their faculties. That, coupled with the adrenaline rush, have a chance of catalyzing the strengthening of that individual's mental capacities."

"In the user's case," the AI continued explaining, "There's a good chance of triggering the zone ability since the user has already experienced being in a state similar to the zone before. Moreover, the extreme danger element involved could also help the user develop a greater connectedness with his inner sense, with nature and surrounding environment at a given moment, and his own sense of existence. That'll also quicken the development of the user's mental abilities. So, it's worth a try."

"If I go ahead with this method, will I unlock the zone ability for sure?" Zachary probed, stealing a glance at the bedroom door once more. "Or is there a chance that I'll still fail?"

"The method will surely help the user grow his mental attributes," the AI responded. "For instance, the user's composure and mental strength will grow after constantly doing extreme sports. But there's a chance that the user will still fail to unlock the zone ability."

"Then, I don't want to try out that method," Zachary replied quickly after listening to the AI's explanations. "I would rather wait for my abilities to grow on their own than risk my life on something that might not work. Is there any other method that's less risky?"

"Negative," the AI answered. "The user must understand that with the mind, the riskier the method, the more the rewards one can reap. So, the best way to strengthen the mental aspect is by facing difficulties over and over again. There's no way around that."

"Then what about the mental-conditioning-elixir? How is it that the elixir managed to enhance my mental attributes without exposing me to any risk?"

"The conjecture of the user is wrong," the AI responded right away. "The mental-conditioning-elixir works by inducing a certain level of stress and tension deep in the subconscious — and that is by enhancing the emotions associated with specific stressful memories in the recipient's mind. For effectiveness, that process has to be bolstered by a few artificially synthesized hormones that boost the growth and fortification of the mental aspect. That's how the mental-conditioning-elixir works. So, there's still a risk of experiencing depression, mood swings, and even insanity if the user takes a highly graded dose of the elixir."

"Oh," Zachary exclaimed, his eyes widening. "Was that the reason why I was always in a bad mood after my mental attributes had broken through previously?"

"Yes," the AI replied. "Mood swings and surging emotions are some of the side effects of the mental-conditioning-elixir."

"Doesn't that mean that I'll go insane if I ever take an S-grade mental-conditioning-elixir?" Zachary inquired, recalling the ordeal he went through after previously taking a B-graded mental-conditioning-elixir. At that time, he'd even thought that he was re-experiencing anger episodes similar to the ones he'd always—battled during his past life.

"Negative," the AI replied after a short while. "With the help of the system, the elixirs will never have any considerable negative effects on the user. So the user should not worry."

"Let's hope so," he mumbled, still troubled by what the system's AI had just disclosed. But just as he was about to ask a follow-up question, his ears picked up the sound of his bedroom door opening. He closed the system interface right away and turned around. As he'd expected, he found Camilla standing in the doorway, her captivating figure wrapped in a white bed sheet.

"Are you still on the phone?" She asked, smiling at him.

"No. I've just concluded the call."

"Is everything okay? Have you managed to resolve things with your friend?"

"Yes, everything is fine and resolved," Zachary replied, flashing her a smile. "But we need to prepare and have breakfast as quickly as possible. I've got a flight to catch at around noon."

"Are you heading back to Africa today?" Camilla probed, raising a brow.

"No. I'm traveling to Bergen to see the scout that brought me to Norway to play football. I'll be heading to Africa probably the day after tomorrow."

"Oh," Camilla said, pouting a bit. "I was really starting to enjoy your company. Why are you leaving so fast? And here I thought we could have a little more fun this morning."

"It's not like I'm going away forever," Zachary said, grinning. "I'll be returning to Trondheim in a few weeks."

"Then, can you promise to call me when you return?" She said, strutting across the room and walking up to him. "I'll be eagerly waiting." She added, using her forefinger to trace circles on his chest.

"Sure," Zachary replied, glancing into her liquid green eyes. "I'll call you immediately when I return to Trondheim. But let's have breakfast first so that I won't be late for my flight. Okay?"

"Okay, then," Camilla said, matching his gaze. "But we can do that after having a bit more fun. Isn't that right?" Her exotic accent gave flavor to her words as she drew closer to Zachary — until there wasn't even an inch of space between the two of them. And by then, Zachary could no longer resist the spell cast on him.

"Did you finally manage to get a hold of Zachary?" Monica R?nning asked Kristin when she saw her lounging on the couch in their living room with a suitcase beside her.

"I managed to talk to him on the phone about an hour ago," Kristin replied, sighing. "But he says that he slept very late after attending a get-together arranged by his teammates last night. So, we have to delay our trip until midday since he said that he needs a few hours to prepare."

"But that should still be fine, then," Monica said as she settled in a position beside her flatmate on the couch. "At least he didn't cancel on you. That would have been very disappointing."

"If it weren't for my grandpa pestering me to bring Zachary over to him, I would have already canceled the trip," Kristin said, shaking her head. "I feel like I'm forcing him into something he clearly doesn't want to do."

"Why say that?" Monica probed, giving her friend a sideways glance. "Hasn't he already explained that he attended a get-together with his teammates? If it were you, would you be able to wake up early and travel after partying the night away?"

"I would never go to a party when knowing that I have to travel early the following morning," she said before standing up and moving towards the window covering an extensive fraction of an opposite wall. "Did you go for training today morning?" She asked, wishing to change the topic.

"Yes, I did," Monica replied, standing up and trailing after her friend. "But we did only physicals and didn't do any skiing today. What about you? Did you play your match yesterday?"



But no response came from her friend even after waiting for a while. She immediately noticed that Kristin was intently gazing out of the window, probably into the streets below.

"What are you looking at so intently?" Monica asked, taking a few more steps and standing beside Kristin to have a proper look at what'd captured her friend's attention. She then noticed that Zachary was escorting a lady to an Audi convertible parked in the street below. Even from a distance, Monica could tell that the lady was gorgeous to the point of being otherworldly.

"Could that be his agent?" She queried, her voice lowering slightly. "If I recall correctly, his agent is a young lady about that age."

"I don't know," Kristin replied in a hush. "But at least now I know the reason why he couldn't wake up in time for our trip. Anyways, let's get away from the window. I don't want him to notice us staring. That would make things awkward."

"Oh, okay," that was all Monica could manage. She was at a loss of what to say since she couldn't figure out what was running through her friend's mind.

## Chapter 207 - Meeting Mr. Stein Once Again

Zachary was able to keep his promise to set off at exactly noon with Kristin from their apartment building. The two of them took a taxi and made it to V?rnes Airport only forty minutes later since the traffic on the roads was less boisterous on Sunday afternoons.

From V?rnes, they traveled on a Norwegian Air flight as business-class passengers to Bergen. Kristin was especially quiet that day and often seemed lost in her own thoughts. She was not her usual charming and fun self. Consequently, the trip was dull from Zachary's perspective. So, he focused on getting a few minutes of sleep in — and only managed to emerge from slumberland when the plane was touching down on the runway at Bergen Airport.

"So, where are we headed from here?" Zachary asked Kristin as soon as they walked out of the airport's sliding doors with suitcases in tow.

"The Fjellsiden neighborhood," Kristin replied in a flat voice without slowing her step. "It's about twenty kilometers from here." She added and continued pulling her suitcase, moving away from the sliding doors. She didn't bother to pause and hear him out.

"Will we be traveling by taxi, or will we be taking a bus?" Zachary probed, trying his best to ignite a conversation between them.

"Someone will be picking us up," she replied crisply once more. "We're going to meet them in one of the parking spaces. Just follow me."

"Okay, then," Zachary said, matching her step. Within a few minutes, they descended to a lower floor on an escalator. Kristin continued to be quiet and off-handish throughout their short trek to the parking space. She kept on giving brief answers to Zachary's questions without putting any effort into maintaining the flow of conversation between them.

After a couple more minutes of walking in almost total silence, Zachary couldn't stand the stiff atmosphere between them any longer. It had inexplicably devolved into something dull and awkward. So, he decided to find out what was going on with his traveling companion. He sorely missed the usual easy-going banter between them.

"Is something wrong?" He probed, giving her a sideways glance as they finally started marching through the spaces reserved for parking at the airport. "Why are you so quiet today?"

"I'm just a little tired," Kristin replied, quickening her pace. "I'm not in the mood for talking right now. But I'll be fine once I get some rest. Please don't mind me."

"Oh, all right," Zachary said, wondering whether she was mad at him for rescheduling their morning trip to later in the day. But after some deliberation, he doubted that was the case since she had seemed fine when he'd talked to her on the phone earlier that day. She'd seemed to be in quite a good mood towards the end of the phone call. So, he was totally at a loss to explain what was wrong with her. Perhaps, she was indeed tired, as she'd said.

"It seems my grandpa is very eager to meet you," Zachary heard Kristin say as he was still mulling over the cause of her unusual mood.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he didn't send the driver," Kristin replied, a soft smile outlining her face for the first time since they began their trip. "Instead, he came to pick us up, himself. That's him over there talking with the guy dressed in a white jacket, next to a black SUV. He's wearing a sun hat and a Khaki shirt." She added, pointing towards the distance.

"Maybe, he was missing you, and that's why he made the trip," Zachary said, looking up—ahead to follow the direction of her finger. He immediately noticed that it was indeed Mr. Martin Stein standing a couple of dozen meters away — just next to an M-Class Mercedes Benz. He was deeply immersed in conversation with a short, stocky guy and didn't even notice their approach.

"Grandpa," Kristin shouted, spreading out her arms for a hug as soon as they reached his position.

"Kristin, you've finally arrived," Mr. Martin Stein said, smiling. He returned her bear hug. "How is my beautiful granddaughter doing today?"

"Fine, but just tired," Kristin replied, still in her grandpa's embrace. She seemed to have returned to her usual cheerful mood.

"That's good," Mr. Stein said and finally turned his gaze towards Zachary. "I'm very excited to be in the presence of the most dazzling star in the Tippeligaen for the month of May. It has been a long time Zachary. How have you been?"

"I'm doing well," Zachary replied, grinning. "It's quite fun playing at the professional stage, especially for Rosenborg. I'm grateful to you for bringing me to Norway."

"No need to be so formal and serious, Zachary," Mr. Stein said, waving his arm about him in a dismissive gesture. "I'm glad you're happy at Rosenborg. But, you should continue working hard and make sure you don't relax. If you stay focused on what is important, I'm sure that you'll be among the best footballers playing in Europe in just a few years."

"Thank you for your advice," Zachary said humbly. "I'll try my best to meet your expectations." x

"That great then," Mr. Stein said, finally pushing Kristin away from his embrace. "Ever since I first saw you play in Lubumbashi, I've had great confidence in your raw talent. I'm sure that the sky is your limit."

"Ahem, ahem," it was then that the stocky middle-aged, with broad shoulders and a square chin, gave a light cough, drawing everyone's attention.

"Oh my," Mr. Stein said, face-palming. "Where are my manners? I even forgot to introduce my friend here." He added, patting the stocky man beside him on the shoulder.

"This is Fredrik Helge," Mr. Stein continued. "He is one of my closest partners in the scouting world and sports agency business. Kristin, I'm sure you recall him from when the two of you met a couple of years back in Trondheim."

"I think I do remember him," Kristin said, taking a few steps forward and extending her hand towards Fredrik. "Good afternoon, sir!"

"Good afternoon to you too, Kristin," Mr. Fredrick returned the greeting and shook her hand. "You've grown a lot taller since the last time we met. Are you still chasing your dream of becoming a professional scout?"

"I'm trying to," Kristin replied perfunctorily. "But things are not all plain-sailing. I'm starting to realize it's easier to make a living as an agent rather than a professional scout. So, I'm thinking of pursuing both careers simultaneously."

"That's a good idea," Mr. Helge observed. "You can be both a scout and an agent at the same time. That would even increase your effectiveness, given the current state of the sports industry. It requires versatility on the part of those involved."

"That's the idea," Kristin said, nodding and stepping back.

"Zachary!" Mr. Stein chimed in. "If you need any help with anything sports-related, you should consider seeking Fredrik out. He knows the Scandinavian sports industry quite well. He'll be able to aid you in solving almost any concern in the football industry."

"Oh," Zachary said, nodding and turning towards the stocky middle-aged man. "How are you doing, sir?" He greeted, extending a hand to the other party.

"I'm terrific," Mr. Fredrik Helge replied in a cheerful tone and took Zachary's hand for a firm handshake. "Your reputation precedes you, Zachary. It's a great pleasure to meet you."

"Are you a Rosenborg fan?" Zachary inquired after seeing how passionate he was in his greeting.

Mr. Helge chuckled on hearing that. "Sorry," he said, still smiling. "I grew up in Drammen. So, even though I enjoy watching you play for Rosenborg, I'm still a hardcore fan of Strømsgodset Toppfotball."

"Then, I guess you'll enjoy our match right after the break since we'll be facing your team, Strømsgodset," Zachary remarked.

"Yep," Mr. Helge said, nodding. "I even intend to watch it live at Lerkendal. And, this time around, we'll defeat you since our team has been on form since the start of the season."

"Is that so?" Mr. Stein chimed in before Zachary could give a response. "Don't be too sure about that. Rosenborg's current squad is very versatile — to the point that it can even compete on the European stage. So, you can forget about any chances of winning."

"Have you forgotten that we're the current table leaders?"

"That doesn't mean anything since you're only a single point ahead of Rosenborg. You'll lose the top position after the next fixture."

"Gentlemen," Kristin chipped in before the two men could continue bickering. "I think we should first head home before the two of you continue the discussion. Some of us are quite tired after our journey."

"Oh," Mr. Stein said, smiling sheepishly. "Please, go ahead and put your suitcases into the boot so we can head home. Zachary! That's a massive suitcase! How long do you plan on staying in Bergen?"

"I'm only here for a single night," Zachary replied, pulling his suitcase towards the back of the vehicle. "I prepared this much luggage because I'm heading back to Congo directly from here tomorrow."

"That explains everything," Mr. Stein remarked. "But why head back in the middle of the season? Why not wait until the end of the season so that you can return home for the Christmas break?"

"I'm feeling a little homesick," Zachary replied, lifting his case and placing it into the boot of the Mercedes. "I haven't been back even once ever since I arrived here in Norway."

"Well, that's understandable," Mr. Stein commented, adjusting his sun hat. "Fredrik, we have to part ways for now since I've got to take these kids home. I suggest we link up on Wednesday to continue discussing business?"

"That suits me best," Mr. Helge replied. "By then, I'll have sorted out things on my side."

"That's perfect." He extended a hand to the stocky man. "See you on Wednesday, then."

"Okay." Mr. Helge smiled, taking the proffered hand.

"Zachary! Kristin, it was nice meeting you," he said right after. "And Zachary, please do get in touch if you need help with anything sports-related. Here is my card." He added, handing out a business card to him.

"Sure," Zachary replied, taking the card and shoving it into his shirt pocket. "In case I need anything, I'll let you know. It was nice meeting you." He also extended a hand to the stocky man for another handshake.

"The pleasure is all mine," Fredrik said. "Hopefully, we'll meet again soon."

After Fredrick departed, the three of them got into the vehicle. Mr. Stein navigated it out of the airport parking space and eased it slowly onto the highway. Soon, they were well on their way to the Fjellsiden neighborhood of Bergen in the comfort of Mr. Stein's luxurious M-Class Mercedes.

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"That's perfect." He extended a hand to the stocky man. "See you on Wednesday, then."

"Okay." Mr. Helge smiled, taking the proffered hand.

"Zachary! Kristin, it was nice meeting you," he said right after. "And Zachary, please do get in touch if you need help with anything sports-related. Here is my card." He added, handing out a business card to him.

"Sure," Zachary replied, taking the card and shoving it into his shirt pocket. "In case I need anything, I'll let you know. It was nice meeting you." He also extended a hand to the stocky man for another handshake.

"The pleasure is all mine," Fredrik said. "Hopefully, we'll meet again soon."

After Fredrick departed, the three of them got into the vehicle. Mr. Stein navigated it out of the airport parking space and eased it slowly onto the highway. Soon, they were well on their way to the Fjellsiden neighborhood of Bergen in the comfort of Mr. Stein's luxurious M-Class Mercedes.

#### Chapter 209 - Mr. Stein's Proposition I

Zachary wasn't surprised when he found out Mr. Stein lived in a modern four-story wooden house situated in a cozy, old alley on the Fjellsiden mountainside. He already knew the old gentleman was affluent and owned a number of businesses — including a sports agency, gyms in Trondheim, and several retail stores.

So, he wasn't the least bit startled by the fact that the old scout was literally living in a mansion by Bergen standards. However, what shocked him was Mr. Stein mentioning he lived alone in the massive house.

"Does he really stay alone here throughout the year?" Zachary asked Kristin, his voice toned down to a whisper when Mr. Stein stopped to answer his phone. They were right in the middle of removing their suitcases from the boot after the twenty-eight-minute trip from the airport.

"Yes," Kristin replied, sighing. "He has lived alone since he separated from my grandma several years ago."

"Oh," Zachary said, at a loss for words, as he lifted Kristin's suitcase from the boot and placed it on the paved ground — besides the SUV. "Where is your grandma, then?" He asked after a short while.

"She lives in Oslo with an uncle of mine," Kristin replied in a hush. "But my grandpa's situation is not as bad as it seems. Before last year, he was constantly traveling. He only used to spend the occasional free weekend here. And, on those rare occasions, I would visit him to keep him company."

"So, why did he stop traveling, then?" Zachary probed, also lifting his suitcase from the boot. "I remember he looked okay when he found me in DR Congo. What changed?"

"He became ill, and the doctor recommended that he stop traveling for some time," Kristin said, her voice tinged with a bit of frustration. "Up to now, he's still in recovery."

"Oh," Zachary said, sighing. "Sorry to hear about that. I wasn't aware of his condition."

"It's okay," Kristin said, waving a hand about her in a dismissive gesture.

"You should find him a nurse at the very least instead of letting him stay alone while he's still recovering."

"He is totally against having to stay under the care of a nurse, or anyone else, full time. But, there is a medic who checks on him from time to time to see how he's doing."

"Guys," it was then that Zachary heard Mr. Stein calling out to them. He had just completed his conversation on the phone. "Can you bring the luggage up into the house?"

"Yes, grandpa," Kristin replied. "Just a moment."

"Better hurry and clean up cause I would like to take you out to a good place for dinner," Mr. Stein said, walking towards them. "And Kristin! Don't forget to prepare one of the empty rooms on the second floor for Zachary."

"Okay, I'll do that," Kristin replied, tone humble. "Don't worry, grandpa."

"Good."

"Zachary," Kristin said, turning towards him immediately after. "Follow me. I'll show you to your room." She pulled her suitcase and led the way into Mr. Stein's residence.

On walking through the front entrance, Zachary immediately felt at home. The house had a cozy and welcoming atmosphere about it — despite being almost devoid of any human presence. The floor was an old-fashioned parquet with a blend of deep homely browns, and the walls were the greens of summer gardens meeting a bold white baseboard. All that blended with the opulent furniture to birth a well-maintained antique-styled interior that was a wonder to behold.

Upon the walls hung photographs of children of varying ages, couples, and men and women — probably related to Mr. Stein in one way or another. In one of the photos, Zachary noticed the old scout standing next to Nils Arne Eggen, Rosenborg's longest-serving coach. It seemed to have been taken in front of the club's head offices at Brakka.

"So, what's the position of your grandpa in Rosenborg Ballklub?" Zachary asked Kristin as the two of them began ascending the stairs to the second floor.

"He was a scout and one of the executives a few years back," Kristin replied while laboring to pull her suitcase up the stairs. "But he's now retired." She added after a while, seeming out of breath.

"Can I help you with that?" Zachary said before taking a few steps and grabbing the suitcase with his free arm. God! It was heavy to the point that he almost missed a step. He couldn't help but wonder whether Kristin had added a few stones. But since he was a professional athlete with a sturdy physique, he quickly acclimatized to the weight. Without expending a lot of effort, he helped Kristin carry the suitcase up the stairs — while also bringing along his own.

"Thank you," Kristin said, smiling after they'd reached the top of the staircase. "You can take the room at the end of the corridor. There are towels and bedsheets in there. Make yourself at home, and feel free to ask if you need anything. But, we need to hurry and clean up since my grandpa is probably waiting for us downstairs."

"Okay, thanks," Zachary replied, smiling back at her. "I will try to hurry." He then started to pull his suitcase towards the bedroom Kristin had allocated him.

"Just a moment," it was then that he heard Kristin speak just as he'd taken a few steps. He immediately turned around and noticed that she was still standing in the same position, observing him.

"Can I ask you something, Zachary?"

"Yes, go ahead and ask," he replied, wondering why she looked like she was treading on pins and needles. "You don't have to be so formal."

"Is your agent in Trondheim?"

"Not at the moment, I think," Zachary responded. "If she didn't alter her schedule at the last minute, she must have left the country yesterday morning. I'll have to call to confirm whether she traveled. Why do you ask? Would you like to meet her to get some advice on how to make it in the sports agency business?"

"Yes, that's the case," Kristin replied in a hush.

"Well," Zachary said, smiling. "I'll call her and let her know that a friend of mine wishes to talk to her. You can then arrange and meet when you're both in Trondheim."

"Okay, thank you," Kristin said. "I've got to go and clean up now. So, see you later." She then opened the door closest to the stairs and disappeared through it without another word.

[Why does she seem moody again?] Zachary wondered. But he pushed the thought to the back of his mind a moment later. He assumed she was tired and in need of some rest.

Without any more dilly-dallying, he headed into the room allocated to him and quickly cleaned up. After donning a fresh tracksuit, he descended the stairs — only to find Mr. Stein already waiting for him in the living room below. The old gentleman was no longer in Khaki shorts. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a light jacket, seemingly ready to head out and enjoy the evening.

"Are you done?" he asked as soon as Zachary walked into the room.

"Yes," Zachary replied, flashing him a smile. "I've finished all my preparations. I'm ready to head out."

"Let's go then," Mr. Stein said after glancing at his watch. "We need to go early and come back early."

"What about Kristin?" Zachary queried, looking around. "Isn't she coming with us?"

"No," Mr. Stein replied, raising a brow. "She says she's tired and also needs to prepare for the trip with you to Africa. I thought that she'd already informed you. Didn't she?"

"No. I was in the shower. Maybe, that's why."

"Okay, then," Mr. Stein said, half-smiling. "It will be just us. But, don't worry that I'll bore you. I'm quite an interesting person, you know." He added jokingly.

"Of course, I'm not worried," Zachary replied, grinning. "As long as there's good food, I'll certainly enjoy the evening. Where are we headed, by the way?"

"A good place called the Horn of Africa," Mr. Stein replied, grinning. "They have some good African dishes there. I have already booked a table for us there."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Zachary said excitedly. "Let's go."

"Good."

## Chapter 210 - Mr. Stein's Proposition II

Thirty minutes later, they were seated opposite each other in the cozy restaurant with their meals set before them. They had already begun dining on their pick of the delicious African dishes, including spiced lamb, vegetables, and various stews that Zachary couldn't identify.



"This food is really delightful," Zachary said after swallowing down a piece of lamb. "It reminds me of home."

"That's why I selected the place," Mr. Stein said, looking up from his plate and fixing his gaze on Zachary. "You seem to really miss your home."

"Home is not what I miss, to be exact," Zachary said, shaking his head. "Rather, it's my grandma that I miss. She must be living alone in Lubumbashi, and I feel guilty for leaving her there."

"Don't worry about her," Mr. Stein said, sighing. "I'm sure that what makes her happiest is seeing you succeed rather than keeping her company. I'm saying this from experience as a parent who's also a grandparent."

"I hope that's the case," Zachary said, forking another piece of lamb and placing it in his mouth.

"So, have you gotten any endorsement offers since starting your career?" Mr. Stein asked after a short while.

"Yes, I got one from Audi," Zachary replied. "Their representative who dealt with my agent seems to know you. She's a lady called Susanne Berdal."

"Oh, I know Susanne," Mr. Stein said, smiling. "Going by her character and usual way of doing things, she must have come to you with a good offer."

"Yes, she did," Zachary confirmed after sipping on his juice. "That's the very reason I accepted Audi's offer right away."

"Audi is a good partner, especially in the Scandinavian sports industry," Mr. Stein remarked. "If you handle them well, you'll reap plenty of profits from them in the near future."

"That's what I'm targeting," Zachary said. "Let's hope they remain good partners."

"So, have you thought about investing part of the money you're earning?" Mr. Stein probed, matching Zachary's gaze. "You know that if you invest adequately, in a proper way, you'll surely lead a good life."

"I just signed my first professional contract about three months ago," Zachary said. "So, I haven't thought seriously about making any investments yet."

"Oh, that's not good," Mr. Stein said, shaking his head. "May I present you with a business idea? You can first listen and then decide whether it's worth investing in afterward."

"Please go ahead," Zachary said, placing his fork to the side. Of course, he wouldn't refuse to take advice from one of the people he respected most in the entire world. Moreover, he had a feeling that pitching the business proposal to him was probably the main reason Mr. Stein had invited him to Bergen.

"Since you're from Africa, why not think about starting a sports agency and talent development center based there?" Mr. Stein asked, his voice low but steady. "I'm sure you'll continue growing as a footballer with time. In a few years, you'll most likely be world-famous. By then, your name alone will be able to market your agency, and a lot of young talented players from around Africa will flock to your organization. Coaches around the continent will want to work for you and bring more players to your agency."

"With that, you will be able to kill two birds with one stone," the old scout continued. "One: you'll help many talents around your home country develop their skills and get some exposure through your agency. And two: you'll make a lot of money in the future after having done all that good."

"Can such a business really be profitable?" Zachary asked, his tone skeptical. "Why do I feel like I'll make losses if I implement your idea?"

"I'm quite sure that you won't be making a loss," Mr. Stein said assuredly. "Think about it this way. You'll be able to make a profit even if you're only able to discover a single gifted player — among the young talents at your agency once every five years. Moreover, you can even employ high-profile scouts to move around and search for talents all around the continent. That way, you'll never make a loss."

"So, if my agency manages to discover a talented player once in a while, I'll be able to make good money?" Zachary asked, feeling his heart start to race.

"Yes, of course," Mr. Stein affirmed after taking a sip on his wine. "If one of your scouts discovers a gifted player, you'll go ahead and invite them to your talent development center. And since you're most likely going to turn into a highly skilled world-famous player, those talents won't reject your offer."

"Your reputation alone will force those prospective talents to fight for places at your academy," he continued. "What you'll do is train them for some time and then connect them to professional clubs afterward — that's for a fee, of course. You can even have your agency represent them to make more money off them. That's a simple business idea that I've always wanted to implement for as long as I can remember."

"That seems like an incredible idea when you put it like that," Zachary said after a moment of deliberation.

He'd just recalled that since he'd clear knowledge of the future, he could use it to find a lot of the soon-to-be-famous talented players that were still rising in the ranks of their home leagues. If he could create an agency and represent them, maybe he would make good money when they became high-profile stars in the near future. But there was only one problem, though.

"Mr. Stein," he said, sighing. "I like your idea. But the problem is that I'll have to wait until I make some more money before thinking about implementing it. I'm sure that building all the associated facilities, hiring staff, and even the marketing — all need a great deal of capital. I don't think I'll be able to raise that sort of money any time soon."

"That brings me to my next point, Zachary," Mr. Stein said, smiling amiably. "It's understandable that you don't have enough money to make such a huge investment at the moment since you've just started your career. But what if I helped? Would you be willing to think about implementing the idea?"

"What do you mean?" Zachary asked, leaning forward to plant his elbows on the table.

"What I mean is simple," Mr. Stein stated after sipping some more wine. "We could partner up to start the business. Going by my initial estimates, such a project would need approximately 80 million NOK to launch. That's slightly over 7 million Euros — if I'm doing the calculations right. So, my idea is to contribute the startup capital of approximately that amount. We shall then go ahead and go through all procedures with the aim of starting the implementation at the beginning of next year. What do you think?"

Zachary could not help but let out a breath of pent-up air after listening to Mr. Stein's proposal. "I'm overwhelmed," he said after a short while. "That's quite the big-money project you're proposing."

"Please, don't get overwhelmed by the figures," Mr. Stein said, smiling kindly. "I'm sure that you'll be able to make that kind of money in only a few years. Just take a moment to think about the proposal as you enjoy the food. You don't even have to give me a response now. There's no pressure."

Zachary nodded and took a sip on his juice as he mulled over the matter. "If you provide the startup capital," he said, "then who'll be the owner of the business after it's registered?"

Mr. Stein smiled on hearing that. "As I already explained, we cannot successfully implement the idea if we lack a renowned football star to boost it up. And that football star is, in this case, you. Because of that, I cannot start the business alone. So, I'll only request that you let me own 45% of the business — the reason being that I'll be providing the startup and bringing my experience to the table. And for you, who will be the sole attraction of potential clients, can own 55%. I think that's a good offer. Don't you think so?"

Zachary smiled wryly on hearing that. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure that I can make a rational decision about your proposal right away. I don't have any experience starting up a company and don't know what to make of your proposal. So, I'm requesting that you give me a few days to think it over."

"Sure," Mr. Stein was quick to reply. "Take your time and do some research when you head back home. There's no pressure. You can give me a response when you return to Trondheim after the break."

"Okay, then," Zachary said, smiling. "Thank you for your understanding."

"One more thing," Mr. Stein said, his tone turning somber. "Please do take note and avoid accepting endorsement contracts from non-reputable companies. Don't just accept any endorsement contract just because they are offering you some good money. You'll fall in trouble sooner or later if you keep on doing that. Okay?"

"Oh," Zachary said, creasing a brow. "What kind of companies are you referring to?"

"Some betting companies which are not reputable for one. There are also shell corporations without active business operations or significant assets. They may not affect you directly but can tarnish your reputation if they use your name for questionable purposes. To avoid falling prey to them, you can always consult your agent and hire some experts to review the endorsement offers for you. Mr. Fredrik Helge, the guy we just met at the airport, can especially help you with that. That is because before joining the sports industry, he was a forensic accountant."

"Okay, then," Zachary said, nodding. "I'll take note."

"Good." Mr. Stein smiled. "Since the business discussions are over, let's get back to enjoying some food."